

PART TWO

AL-NITAQ

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Young Joska woke up in an unknown place and stood up. He didn't know if his eyes were open, or if the image they were sending to his brain was only the formless mist that is seen with eyes closed, as the place was covered in fog, and he had a general sensation of immateriality. From the presence of a constant buzzing noise, like that of distant flying insects, he deduced that he was awake, but his skin wasn't sending him any sensation, for the moment. Then, a sharp pain in his legs made him try to scream, but only steam came out of his mouth, his throat was dry, or numbed. He fell on his back, on some kind of grass, soft, oily and viscous; his eyes pointed to the smoke-covered sky and through the fog he could see a glimpse of the night stars, they were not like those pauper stars visible from Earth, but a mind-blowing dance of giants.

Another stinging wave of pain then from his feet made him expel steam through his mouth again, that time accompanied by a barely human squeal. He looked at his feet and they were being devoured by a creature that vaguely resembled a scorpion and a snake, though its eyes were unmistakably human.

"I have died, I am in hell," he thought.

Joska tried to kick the beast, which was the size of a dog, with a dozen legs coming out of its torso, but it also had hands, black and emaciated, a stingless tail moving in its back and the remnants of devoured legs; devoured just like the beast was then trying to devour Joska's legs. Its face was covered in scales, and its eyes were sad, deep, and piercing, while its teeth were sharp and white.

Kicks didn't work. Joska sat on the grass and with his left hand he tightly grabbed one of the beast's right legs, then bent it clockwise with all his forces. He broke it, the beast yelled, with a voice reminiscent of the cry of a human baby and it receded from Joska's feet. The blood flowing from its broken leg was black and stinky. The spawn ran away and Joska thought: "That is the soul of a damned man", recalling something undefined from the back of his mind.

Joska stood up and advanced limping, searching for some reference. A dozen yards away, lights danced on the mist. As he approached, noticed that the lights were gathering around some sort of shrubs. But those shrubs had faces, some of their branches remembered fingers, hands, arms; disfigured, stiff, and black. The fog seemed to come from those shrubs. The lights were emanated by horrible beetle-like insects that melted with the shrub's flesh, whizzing tenderly, intoxicated by blood, and shining in the dark. One of those horrid beetles fell on Joska's forehead, the sound of its jaws cutting and sucking horrified him, to such an extent that he ran aimlessly, forgetting the pain from his feet and desperately trying to remove the vermin from his head. Finally, Joska managed to squeeze the beetle and crush its entrails; the pieces fell on the oily grass, turning into ash and mixing with the fog.

Joska looked back, towards the bright shrubs and only then he noticed that they formed rows as if someone had planted them there, like some sort of park or square. Then he remembered

a square outside an old mansion where he used to live. Nocturnal gaseous lights gave colour to small and wide trees, also planted in rows on that square. He remembered a night, when in the cold air between those trees, three boys and a girl were playing with a ball made of garbage, tied up with a crude black ribbon. Joska watched them through the stained windows of the mansion, unnoticed. Basic memories were starting to return to his mind, like his name, his life, and his pains. He recalled how that night, moved by the vision of game and childish joy, he went down the stairs of that mansion, hoping that the door would not be locked up, as it was some nights. His desire was not in vain and the door opened as he turned the handle. He came out, reaching the night's fresh air, advancing like a spectre in black clothes, which mingled with the blackness of his long hair and contrasted with the paleness of his face. He approached slowly, his footsteps were quiet while the children screamed and ran in immature chaos. He watched them for minutes without being noticed, hidden in a shadow next to the bushes. Somewhere in his mind, the fact that he was the same age as those children appeared as an impossibility, an aberration. Suddenly the ball jumped to where he was, the children turned to him, and became mute, petrified. Seconds passed and their stupor did not dissipate. The looks of strangeness in their faces became horror as they deviated their childish eyes from him and looked a little further behind Joska, to his left, to who had come to get him. They ran through a wet street escaping from that view, leaving the ball at Joska's feet.

Alix took Joska from behind by his hair, pulling him to the ground and dragging him back to the mansion.

"Grandmother?"

"I'm not your grandmother."

They entered the mansion and Alix closed the entrance door with a dry blow behind them. She left him laid on the floor while she looked for something in the drawers of the mansion's old furniture.

"You're my mother's mother, aren't you?"

"It's not that simple," then she found a curved knife inside a drawer and took it.

Alix grabbed him by the hair again and dragged his humanity through the stairs, to the second floor. She was carrying the knife in her left hand and Joska did not emit any sound.

When they arrived at Alix's room, the old lady lit some candles, which she disposed on the floor forming an uncomplete circle. With chalk, Alix drew non-Euclidean symbols inside the circle, she sat Joska on the floor completing the circumference and facing its center, then she made him hold a lit candle in his hands. Alix's wrinkled face took horrible forms in the gloom, her white hair almost reached the ground and looked like the tentacles of a jellyfish. Her venous, stained hands looked like the claws of a vulture and she had two fingers less in her left hand. She stood in the middle of the circle facing Joska and raised the knife with her right hand.

"Don't move and don't release the candle."

"I just wanted to play with them."

"This is not punishment. It has nothing to do with those children, it's just time to do it."

Alix recited verses in an unhuman language, created to be spoken by creatures glowing in the chasms. Nevertheless, Joska understood every word.

"I am a shepherd from those born without sin, my shadow lengthens to the stars and what is in between, they look at me, the bright of their eyes burns my soul and renews my body, I offer this sacrifice to the unseen, until the dying star erases us all."

Alix inserted the knife in the basin of her left eye, taking it out without emitting a sound. A fine stream of blood slid down her cheek.

With her remaining eye she looked at Joska and said, "Open your mouth."

The boy obeyed and the old lady put her left eye inside his mouth.

"Swallow."

When the eye reached Joska's stomach, a suffocating heat invaded the room. A blue flame came up from the center of the circle, under Alix's feet, and consumed her clothes and flesh in seconds. A statue of charred black crust stood before Joska, although it emitted no smell. The child remained in his place, with the candle still lit in his hands.

One arm began to move and broke the black crust, releasing a soft white hand, with two fingers less. The other arm released the torso and together they removed the head scab. A young woman with long dark hair looked at Joska with a mild smile, as she liberated her legs. Her left eye was missing and Joska stood visibly upset.

"Why did you take her form?"

"Her form?"

A loud laugh followed as Alix grabbed her bare stomach to contain it. They blow out the candles and lit a lamp. Alix took out a red sleeveless lace dress she hadn't worn in decades from an old closet and put it on, feeling beautiful and young again. On her neck she put a choker with a blue cat eye in its center. She searched through the drawers until she found a glass eye that she put in her left basin. It was a little darker blue than her right eye, but with that light they seemed almost the same colour. Joska didn't notice at first, but his biological growth stopped that night.

"This should last a little longer, than when I made you eat my fingers."

Leaving behind the fog shrubs, Joska wandered in the brume for an indefinite period, days, or months, he could not say. Stars rose to the sky and went down in multiple occasions, but the flow of time became unapparent for Joska; he fell asleep on the oily grass for decades without noticing. When he woke up, he thought that he had only took a nap and kept wandering through the mist.

On top of a mount, Joska noticed a dim light and approached it, still slightly limping. When the distance allowed him, he was able to distinguish a dark humanoid silhouette, whose nose shone reflecting flashes in crystal discs floating among the ubiquitous fog. He continued walking towards the silhouette and stopped a couple yards from it.

Still looking up through the crystals aligned over his head, the humanoid figure asked Joska, "You're coming with her, aren't you?"

Then he looked at Joska, who then had a clear vision of the metallic nose of the being. The rest of his body was misty and volatile, moving between visibility and transparency.

"I guess... but I haven't seen her."

"She's not happy."

After an awkward pause, in which they stared at each other, Joska asked, just to make conversation, "What's your name?"

"I don't remember."

Joska bent his head to a side as a sign of disbelief and the being invited him to look at the sky through the crystals. Joska accepted and observed in detail two giant blue stars through the ethereal telescope. There was something strange near them, like a planet with rings, but its shape was reminiscent of a reptile foetus.

"That's Mantaqah, double star of Orion's belt... I was recently able to identify Al-Nizam and if am not mistaken, the three blue giants rising from the east are Al-Nitaq, 'the lace'. This planet is part of their system..."

He said that with an enthusiasm he couldn't hide, but Joska seemed more intrigued by the reptile aberration orbiting Mantaqah.

"What is that by the side of the blue stars?"

The humanoid looked at Joska, a little amused.

"You tell me, that's why you're here."

Joska looked down, a little embarrassed, Alix never explained him anything.

The astronomer added, "Its name is Vadállat, it has been..."

Then a familiar feminine figure appeared behind the astronomer, took his head with both hands, twisted, and separated it from his body, which fell to the ground and vanished into the perennial stream of fog, leaving a thin crimson crust on the corrupted grass. Her hair was white, she had no eyes, and two fingers were missing from her left hand. Then she put the unfortunate head of the astronomer on the ground, tore off its metal nose throwing it to a side and took out both eyes of the stargazer with her long fingernails. They were just bluish crystal spheres, without iris or pupil, she kept them. Then she raised her head towards Joska, and her empty eye sockets seemed to look at him.

Then Joska remembered how Alix made him eat her other eye.

It was 1836, they were inside a small tower at the highest part of a cathedral. A window allowed light to enter profusely from a beautiful evening. The rejuvenating effects of the previous sacrifice remained in Alix's face that had only a few wrinkles on her soft skin, but not in her hair, that had decayed over the decades, it had turned white with gray stains and was so long that dragged on the ground behind her. Her hands were in an intermediate state, showing veins all over them but not as many wrinkles as they should. Her glass eye had lost most of its colour and was just a white marble with shades of blue in her left basin. She was wearing her red lace dress and a short black fur coat on top. She was nervous, Joska had never seen her like that before.

Alix drew a circle on the floor with her blood, sat Joska outside the circle facing its center and the window across the room. Alix stood in the center of the blood circle, turning her back to the sun and looking at Joska, with a curved knife in her right hand, which slightly trembled. She looked terrified and anxious.

"You've done dozens of rituals before, Grandma, what's the problem?"

"Not like this, it is a trick you can only do once. We've been preparing for this since the day you were born."

Joska bent his head to a side, he was going to ask something when people started screaming outside of the cathedral. The sun went dark, leaving the city in gloom when it was still several hours before nightfall. A sudden, unpredicted eclipse, or at least that was the most suitable explanation for the phenomenon, set the scenario for Alix's last ritual on Earth. Her silhouette became a shadow against the dark-red ecliptic sky; she raised the knife, and took out her right eye from its basin, then she stretched her left hand out of the circle, towards Joska, offering her severed eye to the boy.

"Eat it."

Joska obeyed and swallowed it. The blood on the floor shone red and a dot of light appeared a foot over Alix's head.

Her face, illuminated by the shining circle of blood, showed Joska a terrified smile, then she said, "Remember, you must enter the circle, take the knife, and kill yourself too; then you would avoid a horrible death."

Joska stopped breathing for a few seconds, while Alix recited in the tongue of the chasms, "Láthatlan, I am the shepherd, my shadow is yours, my hands are yours, and my eyes are no longer mine; carry me to the lace of light, where gods will be born, young and mindless, let me warm the nest so they can reach the suns, until the dying star erases us all."

Then she cut her own neck so deeply that her head almost got separated from her body. The blood soaked her fur coat and her red dress, reached the floor, and shone in the dark. Nevertheless, she remained standing, evidently dead, like if the bright particle over her head would be holding her body in the air. A fog came out of Alix's eye sockets and travelled to the light particle, which

disappeared after that. Alix's body collapsed to the ground and immediately started to decompose; some parts became black ash and flew away. The knife fell to the ground, Joska rushed into the circle and took it. The boy put the bloody knife in his neck and hesitated. After a few seconds, he threw it away and crawled to a corner of the room. The sunlight shone again, and prayers for mercy were heard across the streets.

Huddled in the corner, covering his eyes from the blinding sun, he heard a murmur; a heavy, low, and distant vibration; like the nearly imperceptible noise that precedes an earthquake. The noise became louder, like the steps of a gigantic beast approaching; Joska was unable to identify its origin or direction. He stood silently, a deep hum began to accompany every period of vibration, and he realized it was coming from the wall opposite to the window. He put his ear on the wall; he knew the sound of time and space tearing apart, so he understood that Láthatlan was coming to get him. He walked away from the wall, looked around trying to find the knife that he had thrown, but fear had already taken his mind.

The wall imploded with a dry noise, without leaving any debris or dust, just a big crack on the concrete; only darkness and fog could be seen on the other side of that crack. A point of light identical to the one that had appeared over Alix' head, came out of from that hole in the wall, floating ten feet above the ground, blinking each two seconds like the luminous eye of a cyclops. A metallic sound, as if a gigantic spider would have stepped on the room, caused a shiver down Joska's spine, but there was no visible creature coming from the abyss, only that blinking spark. Joska panicked, he turned around and jumped through the window breaking its crystals, to a hundred and eighty feet fall.

Impacting the ground with his right side, on a narrow cobblestone street next to the cathedral, Joska broke his right arm in four parts, his shoulder got dislocated, the collarbone split in two and popped out next to his skull, which got crushed and flattened an inch, causing a profuse bleeding from his right eye. His right lung burst as well as his liver. His right knee and ankle suffered a minor sprain because he leaned slightly forwards in the last moment. "At least now is over" he thought, but an intense pain, of broken bones and torn organs, enough to kill him or at least make him lose consciousness, seized him. "Why haven't I died?" he wondered and let out a scream of pain that frightened the passers-by who had gathered around him. Something or someone clearly wasn't letting him die so easily. A noise of broken glass over his head, reminded him what he was running from. The crowd around him, looked up to the tower from which he had fell, and were unable to see who or what was breaking the glass, then the walls around the window started to burst from the inside. A point of light appeared in the gap. Debris impacted near Joska and he tried to stand up, but his right leg did not respond properly, and he fell to the ground emitting another howl of pain before the stupefied gaze of the crowd. Someone helped him and he stood up, then the flashing point began to fall from the tower; four people were crushed on the ground under a huge invisible beast. Then Joska, limping and internally shredded, desperately tried to run away from Láthatlan, Eye of Light, Carrier of Sacrifices and Carrier of Souls, on a beautiful evening of pre-industrial Bohemia, after an unexpected eclipse.

Some passers-by simply looked at the scene, incapable to comprehend what they were seeing, petrified in the inability to discern what their eyes were communicating to them. Others screamed in shock, like children facing the deep abysses of the universe. Joska limped and wheezed, blood ran

down his face, chest, and legs, leaving a trail on his path. Cobblestones trembled behind him under invisible steps, sometimes they were torn apart exposing the bare earth beneath them. Joska fell from a blow that shattered his right leg, which was never visible again, and then the lower part of his body suddenly disappeared, leaving him lying on the ground with entrails coming out of him. What was left of his body floated twelve feet high, suspended in the air as the point of light slowly approached his head. His screams went from guttural and desperate to groaning, as if a gigantic hand would be squeezing and choking him. When the bright point was right above his head, Joska disappeared leaving a small swarm of black ash, which was strewn in the wind and got lost from all memory. From those who saw the scene, some went crazy, some others chose to slowly forget, but all of them had Joska's face in their nightmares until the day they died.

Joska groped his body remembering the pain of his own death and looked at Alix.

"I'm whole, but..."

Alix stood up, with her empty eye basins fixed on Joska.

"There are things that you do to your body and things that you do to your soul, sometimes they get confused."

Joska receded while Alix slowly approached him, moving her hands in circles. A web of black, oily worms trapped Joska's body from chest to feet, immobilizing him. The web was emanated from Alix's hands.

"But you don't need to be confused, I'll do this to your soul."

She pounced on him and threw him down to the grass.

"Don't tremble, I'll be gentle."

"But you can't see."

"I can see through your eyes."

Her pointy fingernails were three inches long and she took out both Joska's eyes with them. Then she soaked them with her saliva and plugged them inside her empty eye sockets. Seconds later they aligned, and she saw the spectral landscape in detail for the first time. Then she took the astronomer's eyes, cut a gash in her wrist, and poured blood all over the bluish orbs. The stargazer's eyes assimilated her blood and became violet crystal balls, with red and blue stains but without iris or pupil. Then she put them in Joska's eye basins.

"You'll be able to see enough with those."

She swung her left hand and the black oily web imprisoning Joska disappeared in ash. They stood up and Alix started walking, so Joska followed her. The old witch admired the misty lands before her as she walked, mesmerized, but not by its strangeness, but by its familiarity.

She stopped near a forest and said to Joska, "This landscape reminds me of my childhood."

"You grew up in ... Wallachia?"

"Moravia."

Then she took Joska's left hand and bit it. She severed his little and ring fingers with her teeth, spat them from her mouth and saved them in a pocket of her coat. Joska grabbed his left hand, then looked at Alix with an expression of childish pain and irritation but said nothing.

"Stay here, I have business in that forest."

She walked into the forest, made of trees with blue leaves. Feeding on the trees, bright red worms, five to six feet long, crawled on the trunks and chewed on its branches. Thirty yards inside the forest, a black-haired woman was taking worms from the trees and eating them, her mouth was stained red with worm blood. She was dressed in a long white fur coat, her limbs were mechanical, except for her right arm. Her right eye was a black crystal ball, her left one was a green cat eye, and she had no eyebrows. Her black, slightly curly hair was long to reach her mechanical feet, which were bare. Alix approached her, the woman opened her right hand with its palm facing the ground, then a spear made of the black skull and spine of a humanoid being floated to her hand. The skull in the spear had horns, they shone for a moment but apparently, they weren't functional anymore, so their gloss faded.

Only then the woman turned and looked at Alix, who knelt before her and said, "Your weapon is unfit for an Empress, your Majesty, but you'll have no need to use it against me."

"Have you come to mock me, witch? Stand up, I'm Empress of nothing now, and this weapon was improvised, it did not last long."

Alix stood up and continued, "I've come to trade with you."

"I have nothing to trade."

"I only want one of those eyes, that you keep inside your belly."

The Empress looked at Alix in silence, calculating the outcome of a fight between them. She had no idea who Alix was, or the extent of her powers, she could only sense that she was some sort of witch.

Then she said, "I can't give you that, and besides, there's nothing you can offer me in exchange that can equal its value."

"I have something that you desperately need, even if you don't know it yet."

That said, Alix took Joska's fingers from her pocket and soaked them with black oil emanated from her hands. The fingers transformed into two black centipedes, that she offered to Empress Ninkurra Drekkva.

The former monarch looked at them with distrust and asked, "Why would I want those?"

"One will allow you to see beyond the vanishment of your soul, the other will allow you to change the cycle in which you're trapped."

Alix looked to her left, and added pointing in that direction with a finger, "It seems that you have already taken my offer."

Empress Ninkur looked to her right, and a dozen yards away she saw a spiritual image of herself between the blue trees, in a white lace dress and without eyes; the phantasm lingered less than a second and disappeared in the fog. It was real, Ninkur knew it. She introduced her right hand inside her belly, through clothes and flesh, without cutting on damaging them. Then she took out an eye with blue sclera; on its front side, instead of iris and pupil it had a dark-blue eight-pointed star and a vertical white line crossing the star from the tip of its upper ray to the tip of its lower one, passing

through its center and therefore through the center of the eye. They exchanged eye and centipedes, Alix put the blue eye in one of her coat pockets.

Ninkur looked at the vermin in her hand and asked Alix, "How do I use them?"

"Just swallow them, they will know what to do."

Alix made a reverence and walked away. Ninkur put one centipede in her bloody mouth, and it crawled inside her through her throat. She made the same with the other one and felt irresistibly somnolent; she sat under a tree and fell asleep. She dreamed of past wars, as if they would be yet to happen.

Between those dreams, she heard Alix's voice whispering to her, "It will be your pity, not your rage that will erase us all at the end".

Alix found Joska sitting on the grass, made him a sign to stand up and they continued walking through misty valleys until they found a cave on the side of a mountain.

Alix and Joska entered the cave and found a white-haired woman pouring green water from a thick bottle into an electronic device. It was a power cell, and she was feeding it with sea water; one gallon of brine was sufficient to energize the cave's equipment for about a decade. The woman left the bottle on the ground and approached them. Her white hair was made of jellyfish tentacles and it had bluish stains, it was long to her knees. She was wearing a white and green floral print dress; her feet were covered with rags; her eyes were light green and she had eyeglasses. She had a red stigma in her left wrist. Alix made a short reverence and Joska imitated her.

The woman stood in front of them and smiled, then she regained a serious face and said in the language of the chasms, "You were expected here decades ago."

"My apologies," replied Alix.

"It's not a problem anyway, due to the experimental nature of your work, the desired outcome is likeably not to be needed in a long time. Even so it would be... appropriate, if you take a look at our system, so you can have an idea of how it's been done so far."

That said, she led them deeper into the cave until they reached a dimly lit chamber. Inside, there was a boy sat on an armchair full of cables and hoses. His hair was blond and long to his waist, there were cables and hoses coming out of his nape and his eyes were black crystal balls; he never blinked. A bundle of cables from his head reached up to a massive electronic mainframe, eight feet wide and five feet tall. Another bundle of cables from his skull connected him with the brain of a twenty-five feet tall Osmógreh.

The Osmógreh were colloquially known as "spider-octs", enormous cephalopods, similar to octopus with eight arms, six tentacles and between them, eight spider-like arthropod legs. They also had lace wings like those of a moth, but foldable like vulture ones, on the sides of their round heads. In the front they had five green eyes; two small ones to each side; and a big one, the size of a human fist, in the middle. The Osmógreh slightly moved one of his tentacles, the boy made an undefined grin and the beast trembled for a second, then became immobile again.

The woman, whose name was Crossandra, showed them the connections and basic equipment usage. Alix was ecstatic, she knew the theory but had never seen any real electronic equipment. Joska was bored and didn't seem to understand a word of what Crossandra was saying. After a couple hours, Crossandra gave them some final instructions.

"Your equipment is waiting for you in a cave on the other side of this mountain, near the ocean to facilitate your interaction with Szárnyfej. Once his development is complete, we will assist you by bringing Vadállat closer to the planet, otherwise infection would be impossible."

"I understand, we will let you know when that moment comes."

That said, Alix and Joska abandoned Crossandra's cave and walked around the mountain to reach the ocean shores on the other side. There they found a much bigger cave, filled with equipment, and Alix started assembling electronic hardware right away.

Once Alix had the mainframe connections ready, she sat Joska in a wide metallic armchair and tied him to it. She introduced a long needle in the back of his neck and plugged a rubber hose at the end of it. The hose was connected to a machine that pumped a transparent liquid into Joska's brain. He lost all sensation of his body but kept consciousness and sight. Then Alix made a hole in Joska's skull behind his left ear with an electric drill. Then she introduced small metallic pincers into the hole and took out an ounce of coagulated white fluid. After that, she introduced three sharp electrodes into the hole, of about an inch of length each. Then she placed a small electronic card inside Joska's skull and sealed the hole with silicone leaving three cables connected to the electrodes and a hose connected to the card coming out from it. The cables branched out into a dozen wires each and were grouped in two bundles, one of them connected to the mainframe along with the hose and the other one free to be connected to something else. Then she untied Joska and turned the mainframe on. Moving levers and pushing buttons in a console, she made Joska clumsily move a hand. Then she turned the mainframe off.

Joska looked at her and asked, "If it's not that simple, why don't you explain it to me?"

"About the whale?"

"No, about my mom... why I'm not your grandson... and why did you kill her?"

Alix sat on the cave's floor in front of Joska, she had such bitterness in her face that it could even be confused with sadness.

"It became part of the ritual; I misjudged the age at which she would have her metamorphosis and let her grow too much. Then she put an egg and from the egg you came to the world. She wasn't prepared to do what I do, so I had to eat her; that way the connection between you and me would be stronger, more direct."

"Did she have a metamorphosis?"

"Members of our coven are born transmuted. The egg is asexually conceived via natural transmutation, so we have potential powers over matter and thought, we just need to train those powers. We are born male, but at age sixteen if our growth is not stopped, we build a silk cocoon and sleep there for a month, after that, a female emerges from the cocoon. A year later an egg is naturally conceived in our wombs and the cycle repeats."

"Then you are not my grandmother because you, my mother and I..."

"Yes, the three of us are the same person."

"Now I understand why you never explain anything to me."

Then Alix stood up and went out of the cave, to the ocean shores, letting Joska digest the truth of his nature alone. She sat on the sand and looked at the sky. The three blue giants had set, so the other stars dominated the night. Then she noticed a bright yellow dwarf dawning from the east, she

smiled and thought about all the things that she knew and the few that she didn't. She also thought about that distant day when her soul would have to die right there in those shores, and how it seemed impossible for her to change it. Then remembered that she had a lot of work to do before that.

Alix took off her fur coat and left it on the sand, then took the blue eye from one of the coat's pockets and soaked it with black oil coming from her hands. The white line in the eye shone, four thin and long arthropod legs came out of its sides and it walked like a spider across her left forearm. She made an incision in her skin in front of the arachnoid eye with her nails. No blood came out. The eye stretched the incision with its legs and entered the wound mixing with Alix's flesh. The witch stood up and floated four feet over the sand, a pair of black vulture wings appeared in her back and a black mole emerged under each of her eyelids. She flapped her wings and flew a couple miles over the ocean, then dove into it like a seagull and used her wings as fins to reach the abyssal depths where her preys lived.

Down there in the dark green water she spotted an enormous jellyfish, which head had five feet of diameter and its tentacles reached half a mile of length. Its body sparkled in tones of green and blue. Alix hid behind a rock and made a cut in the center of her left palm with a fingernail. Blood came out of the wound like a string and advanced in the green darkness. The blood string silently reached the jellyfish's head and entered its transparent body. In seconds, the whole jellyfish body lost its bioluminescence and turned red, becoming almost invisible in the abysmal gloom. Alix closed her eyes, and the giant medusa obeyed her thoughts, it went deeper into the chasm, until it found a lonely, twenty feet tall Osmógreh feeding on rotten eels, it was a female specimen that had lost her herd. Unnoticed, the jellyfish approached the spider-oct from behind and pierced three of its tentacles in her nape. A mild electric discharge passed from the jellyfish's tentacles to the Osmógreh's brain. Alix started controlling the Osmógreh's movements through the jellyfish. The medusa clinched to some of the Osmógreh's arms and the three of emerged to the oceanic surface, then they flew to the shores near the cave.

Alix guided them inside the cave and placed the Osmógreh by the side of Joska. She took the free bundle of wires coming out of Joska's brain and plugged their sharp ends in the same spots on the octopus's nape where the jellyfish tentacles were still pierced. Then she turned the mainframe on and used the console to move the Osmógreh's tentacles remotely, through Joska's brain, as a test for the system. Alix left the mainframe on and made a circular movement with her left hand, the jellyfish unpierced its tentacles from the octopus's head and used all of them to embrace the Osmógreh's arms, tentacles, and wings, rolling up its tentacles around her like a straitjacket. Alix knew that that security measure would not be enough at some point, but she couldn't understand why.

Alix searched in the equipment left for her in the cave and found beaked masks like those used during the black plague. She put one on and protected Joska's face with another. Outside the cave there was a metallic container, ten feet high, eight feet wide and six yards long. She opened it and inside she found several white fleshy cocoons of approximately four feet of diameter. She kicked them and they woke up. They were repulsive thick worms rolled on themselves. Their sad faces denoted that they were once humans. They immediately started hissing and secreting foam from their mouths. From the foam, a cloud of spores dispersed into the air and some of them tried to

enter Alix's mouth, nose, and eyes, but were stopped by the mask that she was wearing. The worms squirmed as Alix took a couple of them and dragged them out of the container. By the side of the container, there was a four feet high transparent cubic tank with wires and hoses coming out of it, connected to a power cell. The upper side of the tank was open, so Alix put a worm inside it. With a curved knife, she eviscerated the worm alive, let it bleed to death there and took out its liver. Then she threw its body away, leaving only the blood and the liver inside the tank. She repeated the procedure with other five worms. She pressed a switch in the power cell, and powerful electric arcs cooked the mixture of bile and blood. After some minutes of electric stimulation, thin and long larvae, similar to tapeworms appeared in the crimson liquid. She then covered the upper side of the tank with a metallic lid and took the end of a thick hose connected to it with both hands. She walked towards the ocean dragging and unfolding the hose until the green water covered her knees. The hose ended in a gross needle, almost two feet long.

Alix verified that sea breeze was strong enough to keep the spores away from her and took off her beaked mask. She closed her eyes and the moles under her eyelids shone red. She stood that way for almost fifteen minutes, until the waves grew a little higher and the beast Szárnyfej came out of the oceans. Szárnyfej was a modified whale, of a breed created by a sorcerer from Constantinople, it reached two miles of length and had a thickness of a hundred feet. It looked like a giant tapeworm, long and thin to a repulsive degree. It had long lateral fins, three hundred yards long, and a dorsal fin, coming from its head reaching a length of two hundred yards. The dorsal fin looked like a black lace wing. Szárnyfej had no exterior eyes.

Szárnyfej stopped his advance half a mile from the shore and resting his long lateral fins in the sea bottom, he elevated the anterior part of his body over the ocean reaching a height of two thousand and seven hundred feet. Once in equilibrium, he opened his fins like wings forming a gigantic cross with his thin body. His mouth opened wide pointing to the sky and a black proboscis came out of it. It was like the head and neck of a reptilian vulture, with a serrated beak and red slanted eyes. The vulture head bent down to look at the shore, at Alix, and then it howled in a deafening mix of white noise and whale singing. After that, the beast collapsed forwards and his head impacted on the shore sands ten yards from Alix's position. The witch put her beaked mask back on and approached Szárnyfej with hose and needle in her hands. She buried the entire needle in the beast's flesh and went back to the transparent tank. She pressed another switch in the power cell connected with an electric pump. The reddish liquid and the tapeworms inside it were pumped through the hose to Szárnyfej's blood stream.

Once the process was finished, Alix turned off the machines, unpierced the needle from Szárnyfej's head and folded the hose back. She locked the remaining worms inside the metallic container, waited for the spores to spread away and die in the mist, and then took the beaked mask off her face. The moles under her eyelids shone again and the nightmarish beast Szárnyfej woke up, flapped with his long fins, and went back to the depths of the green ocean. Alix felt exhausted, she laid down on the sand, and slept for three days in a row.

For the next two hundred years, she repeated the process every month, having a constant supply of infectious worms from her sponsors, to whom she only got to know in dreams. Alix installed three massive electrodes in the beak of Szárnyfej's proboscis, as teeth, connected to fifty

electronic cards embedded in the beast's brain. Over that period, Szárnyfej grew to reach two hundred miles of length and four hundred feet of diameter.

Crossandra put a metallic crown with magnets and naked wires on her head. From the crown came a bundle of cables connecting it to the mainframe. She sat on a chair stuck to the ground inside her cave and fastened a seatbelt from the chair to her waist. She closed her eyes and so did the blonde boy, tied to a chair next to the mainframe. In the space between them and the blue giants, a beast called Szörnnyet, approximately of the size of Mars, woke up and travelled towards Vadállat, the scorched and unconscious celestial monster orbiting Mantaqah.

Szörnnyet was a planetary size black cetaceous with red stains in his back. Curved fangs came out his mouth and he had long centipede legs at his sides from eyes to tail. His tail had the length of Earth's diameter and had three clawed tentacles in its tip; it could easily reach beyond his head when bent forwards. His eyes were black and had three stars each, as pupils.

He reached Vadállat's position in fifteen hours. Vadállat was a four thousand miles reptile, whose skin and flesh had been severely burned in past battles. His scales had peeled off from his wounded body and had formed a ring around him, leaving his raw meat showing in the cold void. Unable to feed, he had adopted a foetal form to survive his wounds. His eyes were white, as they had been blinded.

Szörnnyet grabbed Vadállat's body with his tail and towed him towards the misty planet where Alix and her spawns were waiting for him. The planet's name was Qatra and was one of the few things that Alix did not know.

Alix sat on a chair and fastened a seatbelt to her waist in her own cave. She put a wired crown in her head and closed her eyes, so did Joska. In the green ocean, Szárnyfej felt possessed by a force that he could neither understand nor resist. He crossed the ocean in seconds and reached the peaks of a mountain range that looked like sand mounds under his forty-mile-long fins. Leaning on them with his fins, he raised his head sixty miles over the surface of Qatra, beyond the stratosphere.

The blue giants shone in Qatra's zenith, so the sky had a bluish-green tone, when Vadállat's scabbed body appeared on the firmament. It covered half horizon and the faint shadow of Szörnnyet could be seen behind him, holding his body. Gravity in that hemisphere of Qatra was severely altered by the colossal presence of the beasts, some small creatures floated to the dark emptiness and died frozen in seconds. Sea level rose a hundred feet and reached the entrances of the caves, wetting their stone floors.

Szárnyfej took momentum and jumped towards the burnt reptile. His exterior layer of skin froze, but as his real head was protected inside his exterior mouth, he endured the voyage of ten seconds from Qatra's surface to Vadállat's face. Szárnyfej entered Vadállat's left eye basin, squirming his way through a side of the reptile's left white eye. Once inside he crawled through the optic nerve and reached the brain. Then, like a tapeworm, Szárnyfej pierced the electrodes in his proboscis in Vadállat's pineal gland, rolled the rest of his body around the medulla oblongata and nested. Vadállat's eyes became black and Joska howled in pain, feeling the burnt flesh of the celestial reptile

as his own. In that moment, Alix could perceive all thoughts inside the minds of Joska, Vadállat and the Osmógreh. Nevertheless, there was something in the cephalopod's mind that she could neither understand nor recognize, as she had never felt anything similar, maternal instinct.

Szörnyet let go Vadállat's body and together they moved away from Qatra, disappearing from its firmament. They traveled to the gaseous planets of Al-Nizam and devoured them. Gravity went back to normal in Qatra and the oceans receded from its shores. When the beasts satiated their appetite, the witches put them to sleep again, orbiting the blue giants of Al-Nitaq in silent obscurity. The demonic entity known as the Crystal Witch, founder of the Moravian Coven, visited Alix in a dream and congratulated her for the achievement.

A hundred years later, Vadállat was fully recovered from his wounds and looked like a black dragon with red blurs on his back. His claws were a thousand miles long each, and his fangs reached half of that length.

Centuries later, Tigris Báthor was floating in the mist, talking to a point of light suspended ten feet above the ground.

“Értem, meg tudom csinálni,” she said in Hungarian, meaning, “I see, I can do it.”

The point of light disappeared, and Tigris advanced into the woods of Qatra, without touching the ground. She had died at age fifteen but looked twelve as her growth had been stopped for obscure purposes. Her hair was blonde and long to her knees, she was wearing a white sleeveless dress, so basic that it looked as if it was made from a bed sheet. She looked perfectly human except for her eyes and teeth. On both eyes, the sclera was dark gray, instead of iris and pupil, there was a black eight-pointed star, which rays extended to the eye’s borders. Superimposed over the black star, a red vertical line passed through its centre, coinciding with its upper and lower rays. Her teeth were dark blue with black stains. Her fingernails were sharp and three inches long. On the palm of her right hand, a group of wrinkles resembled the closed lids of an eye without lashes. She was barefoot.

Tigris heard a noise and stopped her advance, then poured a dark-blue dense liquid from her mouth into her right-hand fingernails. A twenty feet tall Osmógreh approached her from between the trees to her right side and grabbed her by the waist with one of his tentacles. Before the beast could triturate her, she stabbed her nails in the tentacle imprisoning her waist. The tentacle’s tissue liquated, a black stain grew from it and advanced to the cephalopod’s body. The poison destroyed three tentacles, two arms and a great part of the beast’s internal organs. While the Osmógreh was still alive, but unable to move, Tigris got inside his body and started eating his flesh from inside out.

A Qatrian animal, with the resemblance of a goat appeared in the woods near Tigris, while she was still feeding inside the cephalopod. It was ten feet long; two pairs of curved horns decorated its head, and a pair of black vulture wings came out of its back. Its forelegs had long claws and its rear legs looked like those of a flea, on a scale that made them proportionate with the rest of its body. Its fur was thick, black, and covered most of its skin, also black, its face was like the one of an adult deer, but with black compound eyes. From forty yards away it detected the Osmógreh, agonizing and shaking in its place. Of course, the goat did not notice Tigris, that was inside the dying animal and was responsible for the shaking, as she made violent movements to tear apart the flesh with her teeth.

The goat carved the ground a couple times and then, using its formidable rear legs, it jumped forwards, projecting itself at half the speed of sound, and impacted the Osmógreh a quarter of a second later. Its horns pierced the eyes of the cephalopod and dragged it ten yards until they crashed against a tree. The Osmógreh died and Tigris fainted inside him from the impact. The goat started ripping the tentacles with the claws of its forelegs and cut a slice of Tigris calves without noticing the difference with the rest of the Osmógreh. Tigris woke up and shrugged her legs, then noticed the furred claws digging deeper and deeper into the cephalopod’s body. Then she stretched

her neck and bit the goat's left clawed foreleg, being dragged outside of the Osmógreh as she did not let go of her prey, even when the goat took its limb out of the cephalopod as fast as it could.

The goat looked at Tigris as its flesh liquated with the touch of her teeth. In less than a second, the goat's left foreleg, as well as a good part of its left torso rotted and fell to the ground like black oil. Tigris floated barefoot in front of it and chewed its claws that had become some sort of crisp tissue. The goat tried to run away but its internal organs had started to fail, and it could not jump more than a couple yards; it collapsed on the misty ground and died, as Tigris pounced on it and started to feed on its rotting flesh. She only left the hollow head and the wings, still joint together as a trophy, the rest of the goat's body was consumed by her or liquated by her venom.

Tigris put the goat's head and wings on her head as helmet and cloak. She controlled the wings and could unfold them as she floated over the trees, giving the impression of a glider bird, when she was actually using other means to fly. She was five feet tall, and each wing had a length of more than ten feet, so when she walked on the ground, the wings trailed behind her like the tail of a sick dress. Tigris mental state had always been in a place between indifference and depression; nevertheless, she was aware of her responsibilities, affiliation, and duties in that place; even when some of them were antagonistic. Her knowledge of past and future was as vast, or even wider than the one that Alix possessed, and substantially less prone to imperfection.

Tigris went to the ocean shores, away from Alix's cave to avoid her to see, or even perceive her. She sat on the sand and lit a small fire with her fingernails. The sand under the fire passed upwards through its base to be melted in the flames as Tigris poured blood from her left wrist into it. The sand mixed with her blood and formed a transparent crystal ball the size of a human fist, with red stains inside it.

Tragedy of war can reach the lives and dreams of every sentient being, mutilate their spirits and bleed out the very essence of whatever hopes they keep inside them, no matter if their intentions are pure or filled with reeking decay. So, Crossandra and Alix were not immune to war's hideous calling, on the contrary, even from the warm gloom of their caves, they were soldiers fighting on a first line drawn light years away from them, against an enemy with whom they had much in common and nothing at all. The celestial beasts that they controlled, were sent to destroy planets on the Orion-Cygnus arm of the Milky Way, as the final resource in a war prophesied thousands of years before.

The more experienced Crossandra team took the lead as Alix was making final preparations for the attack. In her cave, Alix knelt down and said a prayer to a God she never believed in, then she sat on a chair and put the wired crown on her head, closed her eyes and Joska did the same. Outside the cave, a winged figure floated towards the entrance. Wearing her goat souvenirs and gross stains of black blood in her dress, Tigris Báthor entered the cave with a reddish crystal ball in her right hand, while Alix's mind was light years away from there.

Tigris stood in front of Joska and smiled, or at least she thought that she smiled, as he had his eyes closed and her face wasn't visible under the goat's head, there was no difference at all. She untied Joska from his chair, then floated up and positioned herself right in front of the Osmógreh's eyes. The beast had her eyes open but could not see Tigris.

Tigris stretched out her left arm towards the central eye of the cephalopod and made the gesture of grabbing an invisible object with her left hand. The central eye started to come out of its basin and its optic nerve gently got teared and detached from the eye, without shedding any blood. Tigris grabbed the eye with her left hand. Then she put the red-stained crystal ball in the central eye basin of the Osmógreh and the blood inside the ball made an organic connection with the optic nerve. She poured dark-blue venom from her mouth into her right-hand fingernails and stabbed them in the head of the red jellyfish imprisoning the Osmógreh's limbs. The giant medusa turned black, and half of its body and tentacles liquated, letting the spider-oct physically free to move.

Tigris left the cave carrying the green cephalopod eye. Once outside she opened her goat wings and flew away from there, to the misty valleys.

Light years away from Qatra, a ray containing the power of a dying star passed through Szörnnyet's body, destroying it in seconds. In Crossandra's cave, the connection between her, the boy and the Osmógreh went down. She and the boy opened their eyes and looked at the beast. The cephalopod stretched one of its arthropod legs and pierced it through the boy's head destroying the mainframe by his side. The Osmógreh then howled with a voice somewhere between a bear's roar and the cry of an orca. It advanced toward Crossandra and hit her with a clawed tentacle in the face, breaking her eyeglasses and the frontal half of her skull, projecting her against the wall behind her. She fell to the ground lifeless, and the beast ripped her limbs one by one but refused to eat neither from her remains nor from the boy's corpse, although it was starving. The Osmógreh teared apart

the cables attached to its head and left the cave, opened its wings, and flew to the green oceans, where it finally fed on better animals.

Vadállat was then, the last significant asset in the war effort and it worked for a while, until darker powers came into play. His soul was consumed, and its body was dried up in the vacuum, leaving a trail of ash that fell like rain over Saturn.

In Alix's cave, the crystal ball in the central eye basin of the Osmógreh became black, and the connection between the beast, Alix and Joska went down. As the witch and her clone opened their eyes, the Osmógreh regained consciousness. Free from the jellyfish's imprisoning embrace, the beast stretched a tentacle and ripped the cables connected to Joska's head from the mainframe. Alix stood up and the moles under her eyelids shone, but they had no effect before the Osmógreh could hit her in the stomach with an arm and throw her against the cave walls. Alix fell to the ground unconscious and the beast ripped off her legs with its tentacles and threw her ten yards deeper into the cave.

The Osmógreh then took Joska in her arms and tried to comb his hair, that Alix haven't cut or arrange in the last ten years. Joska looked at her with his violet eyes and tried to smile, but he had forgotten how, if he ever knew. The beast emitted a series of low grumps, like the purr of a cat. Then walked outside the cave with Joska in her arms, opened her wings and flew away from there. Their brains were still connected with a bundle of wires.

A day passed and Alix crawled outside the cave, aided by her vulture wings. Once outside, she saw a dark figure approaching her. It was a big black dog, its right eye was bluish white, and the left one was a black crystal ball. Without emitting a sound, the dog pounced on her right hand and ate it. She stabbed its neck with her left hand's fingernails, but the dog endured her attack. Then the canine beast ate her left hand and receded a couple yards away from her. It did not bark at any moment.

Tigris flew down with her goat wings wide open and stood in the sand a couple yards next to the black dog. She stretched her right arm towards the dog with the palm of her hand open and facing him. The eyelids in her right palm opened and showed a red cat eye inside them. The eye shone and casted a red light upon the dog, which disappeared and left a black oil blur on the sand. Then Tigris took off the goat's head and wings from her head and threw them away. Her hair, face and dress were stained with black blood.

She walked towards Alix, sat on the sand by her side and asked, "Do you really want to see it? I could kill you before it happens, but it would be equally painful."

"No, I want to see it," replied Alix, lying forwards on the ground.

Tigris carefully took Alix by her armpits and sat her on the sand, then put an arm behind her vulture wings and grabbed her opposite shoulder, holding her in that position. Sitting together on those misty shores, they saw an artificial star, formed by eight thin shiny rays, appear low in the ocean horizon. It could also be seen from other continents in Qatra.

“Arbela,” said Tigris.

“The Dying Star,” replied Alix.

A white blinding light came from the artificial star.

Joska and the Osmógreh were in the border of the blue leaves forest, eating red worms, when the beast perceived something strange in the sky. She took Joska and flew to the green ocean as fast as she could. She dove with the boy in her arms and hid inside a submarine cave. When the white light came, she put herself between the cave's entrance and Joska, in a desperate intent to protect him. When water started to boil, she understood that it was in vain. Joska opened his arms and hugged her with all his strength. In a split second, a generalized gap between matter and the extradimensional fabric that gives it structure, grew, and disintegrated all atoms in that system. And the Dying Star erased them all.

THE END