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AEON ROSS
AND THE TRAIL OF DREAMS

Translated by Fiorella Spreafico

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*Time wins,
and it will always win on Human People.
Its passage is always visible
in tracks on their faces.*

FREE EXCERPT

*To Fernanda and Giovanna.
They will never end surprising me.*

FREE EXCERPT

FREE EXCERPT

Antecedent



HE boy was dead. His body rested on the cold black cement. The ocular orbits were empty like the darkness of the night and they showed an anxious expression of amazement. The wrap of life, that holds him, became useless. His suits vanished as soon as flames wounded him and his juvenile beauty, his smooth and white skin was now devastated by the fire, rolled up and hardened as sandpaper. The blinding flash of lightning had overwhelmed him completely, suffocating his last breath, breaking his reason and deleting forever his identity while the traveller, unaware, was too far in order to do something. He hadn't realized anything and at the moment nothing would have been able to start the engine up again; something was damaged,

the heart had exploded and nobody knew which mechanisms and circuits of the device could be repaired.

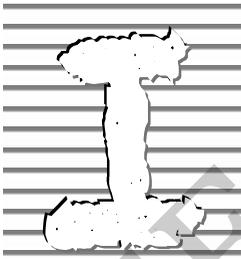
He had to contrive something. There was nothing else to do now. Coming back was impossible and now it was late.

Too late.

FREE EXCERPT

1

Aruja



INTO the snow his footsteps were smooth and light, but the anxiety of that quite expected convocation grew in him while he was approaching the destination. The scrunch of the ice under his feet that he usually found pleasant echoed in his ears as a worrying warning, a signal of imminence which required rightful attention. What would have happened shortly thereafter?

The motivation had to be serious.

Any Sifri, especially so young, could never meet the *koldumnia*, the venerable spiritual guide of the village. She lived isolated from the rest of the people, confined into the sacred tent and perpetually busy in meditation. Only the elderly of upper rank could meet her, speak to her and ask her to intercede with

the spirits of the Ancestors to grant the prayers of her people. If she had made him call, it was sign that something serious was happening and almost certainly the nature of these events was more than deadly.

Perhaps she had perceived something. Perhaps she had understood that he was radically changed and that he knew a lot of things now, more than the law of his people allowed him. And this was not good.

It was well-known that the secrets of the ancient virtue and the Trail of Dreams had not to be announced to young people; this was what the law required. And for every self-respecting Sifri, law represents everything: it's life, it's ancient knowledge and base of experience. A *meshta*, a fifteen and a half year-old apprentice doesn't possess it sufficiently, he cannot understand it and therefore he must not dare to learn it. But he had dared and perhaps he had been summoned for this reason. Or maybe because of what happened during the rite of his initiation? Or both the things?

It has been snowing continuously for days.

Thirty scattered huts were located close to the water reserve and seeped through into the nearby forest.

The village was completely submerged by the white substance fallen from the sky. Around and farther there was only the Siberian steppe: ice, snow and arctic land attacked by a tenacious wind that hissed without breath from sunrise to sunset. Besides this, a few days now, it was enveloped in an impenetrable and icy fog so that the *Caelthirr* couldn't be seen anymore. They were the sentinels, the gigantic wood warriors built centuries ago around

the extreme borders of the village in order to protect its inhabitants from hostile raids and from wild animals. Certainly since several decades a feud among rival ethnic groups didn't verify and fairs, bears and wolves had become more bashful and timorous and by now attacks were rare. Season after season, year after year, animals of the taiga had migrated north, toward inaccessible moors and they had almost entirely lost contacts with human. Did it belong to the cycle of life or was something catastrophic rising on the horizon?

These were dangerous matters to treat.

Nobody could freely speak about them because people and above all the elderly survived thanks to tradition and they believed that those giants really hold off the strength of evil. All this was part of the sketch that the spirits of Ancestors had in mind for the universe and tradition belonged to the law, too.

The same for his ritual of initiation. It was also part of the tradition and the boy submitted to it without hesitation, just like other fellows his own age did before him and for generations all the others would have done it after him. Loner like the bear which hunts in the cold iced places, for a long time he had inhaled the icy aroma of the night in winter solstice. He had tasted the strong smell of the death and expanded his own feelings out the material body to enrich his own spirit and let him fatally meet what he was waiting for. Through the absolute fasting and the sacrifice, supporting the cold and overcoming every temptation over human limits, he should had known the secret of life and of his destiny; but in his case, precisely during

the ritual of passage, something unexpected happened, something that prevaricated the habit, the tradition and the law.

Before his departure toward the Lowlands of the Beginning and of the End, pregnant mothers of the village had undressed him, carefully had washed him with oriental essences, had sprinkled his perfect adolescent body with precious essential oil which merchants of the east had brought them. They had perfumed and wound him in the *phaelnel*, the ritual mantle, the only garment that the initiated could wear during the rituals of passage. There were lots of stitching on it, because of its constant use and mending operated by women. They also had gone over the lines of the Great White Crow again with natural stones of kaolin and of coal made from new wood. After that, this symbol of the initiation and means of transportation from the world of the living toward the one of the dead had a radiant aspect. On the fore side a bear was portrayed to symbolize the independence, the cycle of life and also the awakening after the long sleep of infancy.

He was alone, sat in the cold snow perfectly in the middle of the vast lowland. The great *Moon-Rising mountain* was behind him and the *Sun-Rising hill* in front of him. He bowed his head between his knees and inhaled the intense aroma of *leafcrest* extract. Warmed by the heat of his chest, it gave off a green penetrating smell that filled his nostrils and entered him as far as his spirit.

That night was colder than usual. Obstinate a light, frozen and tedious breeze kept on hitting his face; his body was shivering with cold and also the pale reflexes of far stars and

galaxies with albino glow that lifted from the snow waved intimidated by the arctic wind. He knew that he would have to fight, to oppose the cold with all his strengths, to resist and find out his body the energy to be entitled to enter the following phase of life. That energy had to come from a dream, from a natural image in which he would have located his driving spirit, but he had to be careful. The risk to be trapped in the *Tir Na nÓg*, the land of the eternal youth, was always present.

He could follow the wrong light, the wrong voice, the wrong intuition and he would have lost in the Trail of Dreams. So he concentrated with double strength on his limbs, on his physical, on every single muscle and cancelling it from his thoughts, he became pure energy.

He became sound and music.

Then he perceived a new heat, deep like the fire of a candle next to the body he had abandoned. He had never known anything like it and, when he succeeded in tracing its limits in the forms and in the substance, he saw a small lit sphere with a weak and friendly blue light. He went up to it and wrapped the light with his energy, with his heat. At once this seemed to withdraw and to be weaker, but when he imposed his hands on it the light regained its strength and it shined of an astral intensity.

The light revealed a name to his mind through a telepathic message: *the Caeldron*, the Keeper.

Its voice was deep but thin like the stem of a flower. It told him the history of a city of metal in the cold moors of the west, after lots of moonrises. It told him another history inside the first one. The history of a little boy who dreamt, of a nightmare, of an

end and of a beginning and it revealed him the most secluded secrets of the Trail of Dreams. He listened to every thing, without speaking, respecting the devoted silence that the ritual of initiation imposed him; but what was revealed upset him in such a strong way that his body, abstained from the food of the life for many days, fell back in the snow.

For ten days and ten nights he was irresponsible, convinced to be captured by the *Tir Na nÓg* and there was no way out. Then, in the dream he saw the sunrise; he woke up and immediately felt that something inside him was fatally changed. He had seen every thing. He had scanned, learned and understood what was even unimaginable for the *meshta apprentices*. A teaching he knew he should have to guard in the depth of his heart with strong defence. The ancient wisdoms, the same fabric of the tradition was frayed in front of him; those mysterious recesses of the shaman's practices, allowed only the *koldùmnias* and the Elderly, were revealed to his mind and became even elementary.

And this was not good.

Given him up for dead, when he returned all the Sifri of his village looked at him as he came from the quarry of the dead. He arrived from the main road without any garment, covered by his long black hair moved by the wind and the light of the *Caeldron* that shined really at the centre of his breast. His body was changed. He wasn't a young teen-ager anymore, but he showed new virtues: the regality of the tiger, the courage of the wolf and the dark and vibrating strength of the candid bear. People saw him and called him; the same did the sacred mothers who had prepared him for the initiation. But he had decided he wouldn't

answered to his little boy name anymore even if he had been proud of it till now. He had forgotten that name; he had dismissed it from his mind in the time.

Ignoring whoever addressed him and rejecting who tried to stop him, he proceeded up to his hut, he lied down on his straw and animal skin bed and there he fell asleep for over two days and two nights.

When he waked up again, at the feet of his bed he found new suits, more suitable for his new body. He got dressed and immediately he felt a new energy entering inside him. He found a goat skin water container and he drank, he found a basket with some food and he ate, then in a corner of the hut he saw his old fiddle. He remembered that it had always been an important object for him and that he had always loved to play it. Then he gently took it, checked its tuning and started to keep in rhythm with the bow a music sometimes warm and sometime playful.

Every time he touched the strings, they changed colour.

He had just begun to play when someone entered his hut.

“We screamed out your name but you don’t answer. Why?” the warrior who he had always called brother asked him.

“I have watched over you sleeping since you returned, but I have never succeeded in waking up you!”

“I thank you Shedner” he answered without interrupting his music. “I didn’t answer you because the name you used is no more my name. Now my name is Grekor!”

“Grekor?! Very well. I have the duty to inform you that Aruja wants to see you as soon as possible.”

“Aruja? Are you sure of it?” he answered with a certain amazement.

“Absolutely! The elderly told me she has been waiting for you for days!”

Grekor had a moment of uncertainty. He lost his equilibrium and he curled up on the earth as if its legs didn't hold up his weight.

“Don't you feel good? Perhaps do you still need some more rest?” Shedner asked grabbing him under an arm and helping him to rise. “Do you want I say you can go and visit her tomorrow?”

“Don't worry! I am very well” he said redeeming himself. “If it is as you say I will go to see her immediately because I won't be here tomorrow!”

Shedner saw him walking toward the exit of the hut. He didn't tell him anything, but attentively he listened to that happy music which clashed with the surrounding environment.

At that time he felt he wouldn't have seen him again for long time.



It was reasonable Aruja had realized something as the spiritual guide of the village knew every thought, every dream and every vibration of her people. Apart from the good Shedner, what really surprised him most was the persons who, up to few days before, called him friend and now observed him timorous,

as if the symptoms of an infectious disease were visible on him or a wicked spirit nested into his body ready to instigate some sore.

Walking among the huts he could hear their whispered comments and this made the thickness of the law fail, the same law they had always taught him and that, deep down in his dreams, he had seen to be very thin, almost a personal opinion or a superficial answer to a complex question nobody had formulated before now. So when Grekor entered the *koldùnnia* Aruja's hut, his tension and her expectation were at the peak.

The fire burned bewitched, plentiful, in the fireplace at the left side next to the *naahewn*, the sacred carpet on which the elderly, gathered by the *koldùnnia*, sat. A brazier burned to her side and a light smoke came from it, transparent and intensely fragrant of herbs. She was kneeling down in the centre of the room on a carpet made of many coloured animal skins. She was very old, but her sure ancientness couldn't fade her beauty at all: the features of her face, markedly Asian, were marked by deep wrinkles of the time and her eyes certainly had that melancholy expression of whom alive in the memory of the past, but the serenity on her face radiated a feeling of abysmal calm and peace all around. She wore jewels, coloured stones of extraordinary brightness and transparency and small artefacts of bone or wood, coming from memorable beating or job of thin artisans.

Around her there was the big council, the five most elderly men of the village, ancient fortresses of wisdom and courage. They looked at her with deference while they were listening to her every word. When Aruja noticed the newcomer, she made a

gesture to all the others inviting them to go out and to leave her alone. Grekor saw the five men passing coldly next to him without saying a word. Up to that moment Aruja had held her eyes closed; then she opened them and she attentively scrutinized him hesitating as abducted from a strong perfume.

Then she closed them again.

“Are you the young Aryll of Asjanhir?” Aruja asked amazed.

“That name doesn’t mean anything for me anymore, venerable Aruja!” Grekor responded.

She reflected an instant and looked for in the energy’s meanderings transmitted her by the fire.

“I see! Now you are Grekor of Asjanhir, child of the snow and the wind, incandescent blue metal forged in the lowland of the time.”

“Yes, our *koldùmnia!*”

“Let me see you, boy” she said inviting him to go near her and to show his new aspect. “For a long time I have only seen the hoary faces and the flabby and wrinkled bodies of the Elderly of the village and to admire a vigorous youth is always a pleasure. But you have seen only fifteen times the *Moon of Jade* and you should have the aspect of a boy; on the contrary you returned from your initiation deeply changed, in the spirit and in the body.”

“Yes, *koldùmnia* Aruja!” Grekor answered staying still there where he was.

“However, inside of you, you are still a young inexperienced and immature *meshta*. Why are you then in the presence of the

koldùmnia of the Sifri? Why are you here, in front of me against the law of your people?" she asked.

"You have summoned me!" he quietly answered.

Aruja bent the head to one side, lifted and lowered one of her hands inviting him to sit in front of her.

"Indeed?" she asked astonished showing for a moment a smile of approval.

"So it has been reported to me!"

"If it is as you say, if a boy has seen the night stretching out his claws it means that...." she interrupted as if something had distracted her. "Just a moment!"

Grekor felt a light anxiety for that change.

"You!" she yearned pointing him out. "You are in front of me, yet you aren't completely here. You are thinking about the city of metal, aren't you?!"

Grekor winced and didn't answer. He understood the old guide had summoned him not only to have a confirmation what happened during the rite of his initiation, but also to question him, to appreciate his preparation. Suddenly he felt his mind and his thoughts had become like transparent and brittle crystal and a mind was trying to look through them at all costs.

"Foolish!" she admonished him by surprise. "You think about the brittleness of the crystal like one of its defects and you forget it is one of its best merits. Free your mind from banal customs!"

"You know my thoughts" Grekor said.

"I know them and I understand them in the exact moment in which you formulate them! But you can't scrutinize mine neither enter the Trail of Dreams."

“As you know about..... “

“Your thoughts belong to me, as they are mine. They reach me like the heat of a flame to which I have approached my hand. I know everything and I am able to perceive everything, boy.”

“I have also learned a lot of things, *koldùmnia*.”

“Oh, indeed?” she laughed incredulous.

“I reached the Mah’Erun!”

The *koldùmnia* gave a short but incisive laughter.

“It is not possible! You are too young and you cannot know the *Rhoj*, the levels of conscience of the Sifri!”

“They are five!” Grekor quickly answered.

Aruja smiled as if the answer was exact, but incomplete. Then she took two handfuls of sand and threw them to his feet, and then she grabbed a little stick found at her side.

“Teach me them!” she said handing him it.

“Teach you them?”

“So I have ordered you” she confirmed phlegmatic. “You say you know them, don’t you?! If you know them you can teach them!” and saying that she shake the little stick inviting him to grab it.

Grekor, a bit hesitant, drew near to her. He wondered why he had to do it since Aruja perfectly knew his thoughts and she could read very well his mind and if he was saying the truth or a lie. However at the end he convinced himself of that and, without touching her hands, he gently took the stick of pointed wood and bowed before her. Slowly he traced on the sand a symbol:



“*Suran* is the first *Rhoj*, the first level” he explained once he had traced the sign.

“Go on!” she ordered resolutely with sour tone.

“In the first level there are all the animals and plants which are able to dream and to overcome a dream recognizing it as such, not belonging therefore to the real life.”

“Do all the memories remain?”

“The dream is never remembered! At first level the greatest part of the creatures doesn’t remember which dreams have dreamt” he answered with increasing safety.

He traced another sign.



“It is *Dhaar*, the second level, the one of the memory. The dream is subject in the memoirs and becomes certainty and the dreamer is not able to distinguish the real reality from the dreamlike one anymore.”

“Great! Go on boy.”Arujia said stimulating the fire by a handful of spices which brightened up the flame and scattered a good flavour in the air.

Gently Grekor traced another sign above the precedent one



“The third Rhoj is called *Jitan*. The dream lives as a river in flood clasped among its coils and the dreamer modifies its course and recalls it as he likes it. It is a direct experience and everything he decides in the dream, it happens, but exclusively in the context of the dream.”

Overlapping his words, Arujia whispered with him while Grekor’s hand traced a fourth sign.



“To the *Mah’Erun*, the fourth level; only the *oneironauts*, the Navigators of the Dreams, come there. The sleeper’s conscience

is involved into the oneirous reality that he can modify and the dreamer's reality is modified by the dream."

"This is the level that you have reached" Aruja affirmed. "And the fifth level?" the old woman asked with a strange smile of complicity on her face clearly detaching her voice from Grekor's one.

"The fifth *Rhoj* is a level without name!" he said adding a new sign that contained all the previous ones.



Aruja saw him drawing that fifth symbol and looked at him with eyes of fire.

"It represents a no-entry and no-exit path, an inverse labyrinth, an eclipse of light. Whoever comes there, he breaks the barrier of the Dreams and the matter itself isn't united anymore. The sleeper becomes metal, the metal becomes water and the water becomes time and anti-time. The time that shrouds the universe modifying the destinies. The sleeper can create, destroy, kill and obviously be killed. The frontiers are cancelled, the margins disappear and what imagination conceives, it achieves."

"Very well!" Arujia said satisfied and she was going to say something else when Grekor surprised her once again.

“There is also a sixth *Rohj*.”

The *koldùmnia* had a shiver.

“You are wrong!” she exclaimed. “There isn’t any sixth level!”

“Yes, there is! But only the *Yennan Yandhra can* enter there.”

he said with the maximum calm and while he was telling it, he began to trace a sign, but Aruja prevented him sweeping away all the sand with a hand and cancelling everything.

“Do you dare to name the Prophet of the Dreams?” the old *koldùmnia* hissed, literally puzzled. She breathed inhaling deeply from the coloured smokes of the spices for a long time. “The fifth level of conscience isn’t revealed to anybody who is not worthy of it and however never before he has seen thirty Moons of Jade; and only the *koldùmnia* and the shamans are informed about the existence of a sixth level. How do you know these things?”

“I know them because I exist!” he answered laconic.

The *koldùmnia* extended her hand on the boy’s face. Some grains of sand were still on her hand and Grekor felt them when she put it on his face. She put her other hand on his chest, really at the centre of his heart and at that time the flame burning in the brazier gave off an icy fire.

“Do not hesitate!” she reproached him thundering. “Hesitation is a sign of torment, the torment is a sign of restlessness, the restlessness is a sign of fear, and the fear is a sign of failure. Whoever is afraid to undertake a challenge, he defeats himself even before the inflaming conflict. Now answer to my question: How did you dare to learn?”

“I didn’t want it, Aruja. It happened; this is important!”

“What you want is irrelevant and what happens can be a disaster if nobody checks the flow of the events!” she thundered. “It is really important what you must know and you shouldn’t know what you are saying to know. This gift could not be for you; how did you dare to venture into the Trail of Dreams and to scrutinize the fifth level of conscience without knowing what you were doing?”

“A serious danger threatens us, *koldùmnia*” Grekor revealed trying to transform his certainty in a suitable answer.

“What makes you sure you aren’t that danger?”

“I feel the danger is out of me!”

“And do you think this is enough to justify you? You knew what you were doing, yet you ignored your conscience. Certainly it spoke to you.”

“Yes, it spoke to me” he interrupted her.

“And why didn’t you stop?”

At that time Grekor felt the need to play his cards right. Answering in kind would have put him in a bad light, but he had to reveal what he felt, everything that his heart had absorbed from that experience. He could not deny the reality neither forget those facts had not happened.

“Something has gone beyond my conscience!” he finally answered.

“I know. The *Caeldron*, the Keeper, the fire of the life has appeared in your initiation and it has talked to your memory.”

“It has done a lot more than to appear and to speak to me, *koldùmnia*. It revealed me that there is nothing, apart from the

law, which prevents the oneironauts *meshta* to violate the barrier between the quarter and the fifth level.”

“Nothing apart from the law?!” she repeated opening her eyes wide. “Law is everything!”

“It’s a legend!” he screamed at the top of his voice. “It has been written only to hold our minds closed, to prevent us to fly up and to challenge the dream. Nothing is more interesting than the exploration of a new world, but to hide behind a word and not to act, not to do it is the best way to trace the road toward habit which puts up the void.”

“You must be crazy, Grekor of Asjanhir. I had heard a clean vibration in the continuum space-time. The spirits got upset, they frightened and now the this terrorizes me, too. You are the danger that you dreamt! The *Caeldron* cannot want you as his follower!”

“You are wrong! He is my follower” he bravely added. “Why do I now read envy in your mind, Aruja?”

“Don’t you dare to read my mind and don’t deny *koldùmnia’s word*! It’s a sacrilege!”

“Now that I have seen, now that I know, I dare everything Aruja and I am not afraid of the sacrileges! The *shaman* goes over the sacred since he makes sacred the earth he treads with his feet. I must face a long trip, toward west, toward the City of Metal, there where is the danger and the *Caeldron* will help me.”

“Perhaps your body is that of a *shaman*, but your age, fifteen moons of jade, is that of a *meshta*!”

“Stop to judge me by my aspect but look in the depth of my mind.”

Aruja waved, trembled worried and she still threw sand in the brazier.

“That danger you are speaking about” she answered forcing herself to keep calm “doesn’t overhang us, my boy. It doesn’t concern the Sifri, but the people of the west! That city of metal and... that little boy! Oh, for the spirits of the ancestors there is also a boy, a young *not-Sifri* who obsesses you!”

“What are you speaking about?”

“You are looking for that little boy?! You, your mind, it isn’t possible! Two premonitions in one.” She stopped and she still threw sand in the brazier. “Grekor, remember that metal and flesh don’t get on well! This search won’t get you anywhere, *mestha*! Any snowflake falls in those places without being cursed by ancestors’ anger and there is no silence in that city of metal: a noise, a deafening delirium of sounds and lights kills their perceptions, darkens their minds and their visions. False and impure emotions get out from their spirits and those people’s dreams are much colder than the metal of the walls which surround them. They are naked dreams, without the coverings of the joy, of the hope and of the love for life.”

“But I feel that I must go there, Aruja.”

“Whatever you feel will be irrelevant” she burst out “and what you owe to this community is already written in the law which you hate so much and you seem to ignore. Your duty is to hold the sacred flames of the *Sifri* alive, to learn in the respect of the tradition and it isn’t to save the world! You cannot go, Grekor of Asjanhir! Come to your senses! Let’s forget everything we have said today and let’s be alive, in our people’s heart.”

Grekor stopped to think for a long moment. Could everything they had said till now be erased by a simple wish? But in any case he couldn't forget what he had seen, what he had felt and what he had dreamt; especially he couldn't ignore the strong message his heart sent his mind continually.

"My life belongs to me" he uttered. "Is it important what I desire? Have I the right to my liberty?"

"Life and liberty" she answered disappointed. "You, young people, you can't speak of anything else and only when this suits you. However you can't! You cannot determine your life, not as you think. It belongs to your people and how much you desire will be irrelevant if before you don't honour your duty towards who gave you that life. A *meshta* can't wish new horizons in his destiny and to become estranged from the law can be fatal. Reflect upon this, Grekor, there is nothing for you at west, over the Great Peaks covered in snow."

"There is the horizon Aruja. There is the sunrise of an unexpected day, an amazing novelty for everyone who overcomes what the man calls limit and the limit is only a line the nature set among east and west. Nature is boundless, it hasn't cardinal points, simply it exists anywhere, without direction, faintly and it is in the nature to call the nature. I have taken my decision, Aruja: I will go anyway, even against your opinion or against the opinion of all the elderly of the Council or of the ancestors!" Grekor insisted.

"Are you crazy?!" Aruja said opening her eyes wide as she had a vision. "That dreamer, that boy, can't you.... won't you.... you are

crazy Grekor of Asjanhir: you cannot make a little boy of the west taste the blood of the hawk.”

“Yes, oh *koldùmnia*. I can do it and I will do it!”

“Silence!” Arujia shouted lifting up her hand and grabbing a handful of red sand. She brought it in front of her chest, she spat inside it and then threw the sand in the fire which revived in a sour green; she opened her eyes wide, knitted her brows and in an instant she almost lost her whole atavistic beauty. “You are exiled forever from our village! You must go away and look for your destiny elsewhere. Nobody will sing your history, Grekor of Asjanhir and oblivion will follow your name. You have never existed; therefore if you ever regret what you have decided to do today, the law of the *Sifri* is implacable: any exile can return among our people.”

“I will do that, too!” Grekor said assuming a determined air, almost threatening. “I have broken the customs of the dream, of your law, not of mine. I will also break the ones of the exile and the Sifri will see my return.”

“Don’t you even fear the Ancestors? Go away!” Arujia howled trembling.

“Remember my words Aruja” Grekor said “the exile will return!” and while he was standing up for then bowing to her presence, he noticed the old woman quivered with anger, but he also saw that tears ploughed that sweet ancient face.

“Go away, *meshta!*” she said crying.

Grekor lifted the edge of the tent and stopped on the door; turn round and looked at her a last time.

“Aruja!” he exclaimed.

She looked at him a last time.

“What do you want?”

“Don’t call me *meshta*. I am not a *meshta* anymore. I am not an apprentice anymore!” he smiled at her, turned round and he definitely went out of the hut returning in the snowstorm that raged in the steppe.

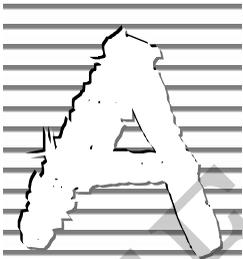
Once alone Aruja studied her hands; then she raised her head and opened her face in an iridescent smile. It was true: Grekor was not an apprentice anymore, he had become a complete *shaman*! She grabbed a handful of sand, mixed it with incenses and perfumed herbs and threw them in the fire, but this time it ignited of a black shade.

“There is another oneironaut along your walk, *shaman*! Be careful and if you really must return, return like a hero!”

When the light of the flame calmed down, Aruja started dancing, oscillating slowly in the white candid smoke and started to tune up the verses of a timeless song.

2

the Candidate



ALL the city appeared him hostile. The air also seemed to be made of consistent material like the lead and it condensed in his lungs preventing him to breathe. The breath froze in his mouth and the smell of the death filled his nostrils, but now he had gone too far, he could not stop. And then, why ever to abdicate? The chase had to end sooner or later, in a way or in the other. It must arrive to an epilogue and those searches had exhausted him by now. Twenty years of hunting, without mentioning last ten months spent in verifications, ambushes, weary comparisons between clues and suspects. But now he felt sure. He was sure he can finally grab his eternal rival and enemy who had succeeded in escaping till now mocking him.

He had conceived a winning strategy.

When he had realized to be on the correct lead, he had followed it all his time in complete isolation, day and night. A feverish devotion, almost maniacal, to risk even his mental health, but, thanks to this, he had found the lead to follow. At his disposal he had only small traces, suspects, details that most of the people would have considered ridiculous, fragmented which could be considered coincidences and pieces of evidence murmured as a whisper in a heap of cries. And with this dust he had to build a wall; the wall of a trap that would have trapped his prey.

The eternal challenge.

Predator and prey. They study each other and in the meanwhile the prey confuse his traces like during a poker game in which he dares the risk of going all-in. They watch each other, they study each other, gambling hand after hand, bet after bet in a game of invisible looks, sharp silences and small changes in facial expressions: a lifted wrinkle, an imperceptible smile, the sudden tic of an eyebrow, all things which can disclose you get a good hand in cards to your adversary and to betray a strong hand. But he was used to it.

His speciality was to capture criminals impossible to grab and he was also paid very well for this. He was prepared in a special way, he was trained to think as a criminal, to understand the crime, to conceive it even in its originality and even to justify it and this last think he would have never admitted with nobody. All this was a weapon without equal in the hands of a guardian of the law. After all if you can't understand completely a criminal mind, how can you catch him? It is necessary to use the

intelligence as weapon of seduction, the prey must think he is safe, his crime will never be discovered, everything is still possible, a way of escape still exists, a secluded place where he can shelter in.

But Alasdair Ross had located it, too. He had found the place where everything had happened, where everything happened and where everything might still happen if he didn't remedy. He had to go hard at this mission, even if this would have meant to lose one the most important moments of his life. In fact his wife Helena was admitted to the hospital for a few days and she was having a baby after several failed attempts. They had tried everything, but that beloved baby had never arrived. That was a challenge too, a poker game, but God is a silent and imperceptible player. It is very difficult to understand which cards he has got in hand, but this time, if everything had gone as expected, Alasdair and Helena would finally have triumphed.

In any case he had decided that would have been his last mission and after the birth of his child, he would not accept any hunter role anymore, but a more comfortable and profitable job in office at the central archives of Scotland Yard. After all, from that night his existence would be changed radically and he would had thought to another life, a new life, a new child who only asked love. However, this last time, he felt indebted to that part of himself which asked justice. He felt calm and sure that the notorious killer of Saint Michael had few hours of life left.

He was called this way because he kidnapped little boys and for a mysterious reason he brought them in the bell tower of the old cathedral. Out of the human consortium of Acheron, where

the electronics doesn't work and neither the new improved flyers, made by *sendrite* and with muonic propulsion motor, could rise. Down there, where the nature is winner, the murderer won. Nevertheless, what really happened in that room of the horrors, was still a mystery; yet nobody knew what the *killer* did of those abducted boys as they disappeared and they returned like dead bodies different years later. Charred dead bodies, smoking carcasses of flesh, deprived of identity except for the one referable to the installed identichip under the skin.

Already once, eleven years before, the detective was near to save one of them: it was Liam MacLeod who was found dead, few days before those events. Therefore it was important that someone succeeded in disclosing that dilemma and keeping under lock and key the author of those crimes.

The small boy, frightened and chilled, was at the foot of the great cogwheel and was still alive. Tied up, gagged, bandaged and God-only-know-what-else, but he was alive. His jailer was a few steps behind him. Then the detective decided it was the perfect moment to come into operation.

"My good old Alasdair" the kidnapper's warm and resonant voice said. "Lately I missed you, but I thought that you had given up chasing me. I started to feel alone."

"You will feel very alone when you are in Her Majesty's Prison."

"Oh, no. You will ruin everything if you haven't a dialogue. You all are exactly the same."

"Why? Because we are honest?" Alasdair said with ill-concealed acidity.

“Come on detective, I am not speaking of negligible divergences of opinion and then, honesty is the coherence with oneself or not? Do you think I am deceitful only because I am a criminal? But this means to make the crime banal or to depreciate the honesty. I perpetrate crimes more consistently than many paladins of the law follow it. The corruption also exists in the police, doesn't it? Well, who is criminal and who is not? Believe me, the line which separates crime and holiness, is thin and fragile like a hair. No, my dear friend detective, I said you are exactly the same because you always don't think with your head, but according to evaluation method they have inculcated you: the man abducts a boy, the boy is a victim and consequently his kidnapper is a maniac!”

“Isn't it true?”

“Sure it is!” he answered laughing. “But not today and not here! Misdeed and worth are only different ways to see the faces of a same coin.”

This continuous speaking by metaphors started to bother him, so Alasdair decided to enter the vast room. Great immovable gears, sinister creaking and a blue light pervaded it.

“Then I must infer you have abducted this boy only to offer him the opportunity to have a nice sightseeing of Acheron from the top of the bell tower?” he asked approaching to the little boy still gagged and taking aim at his prey.

“Now I am offended. I didn't touch a hair on his head.”

“You haven't had time for it. Neither you will, be sure!”

“Oh, this conversation starts to be boring” he grumbled showily yawning. “I don't want to hurt him if you are thinking of

that. I only use him to my purpose; then you will take him with you!"

His interlocutor spoke as if that boy was an object, a property, not a life.

"And the boy who died eleven years ago?" he asked. "You didn't want to kill that boy too?"

"Are you speaking about Liam MacLeod?" the killer asked.

"Why? Are there other boys?" Alasdair sighed invested by the suspect that the crime committed eleven years before had not been the only one of the killer of the cathedral.

"Ten to be precise, at least till today; but in that case, it was only an accident" he answered phlegmatic after a brief moment's thought. "Only an unlucky accident. Usually the little boys don't die!"

But he didn't give any other explanation and the detective didn't understand completely because he was busy in loosening the ropes from the boy. When he was completely released from the bandages which blinded him, he attended he recovered.

"Then let's set this one free, what do you think about?" Alasdair suggested.

"Let's do what you want!" the other responded laconic. "You are armed. As you can see, I don't bring weapons!"

For a moment Alasdair turned for his attention to the little boy who, terrorized, trembled curled up.

"What's your name?" he asked him.

The little boy lifted his eyes, very beautiful and pure of the infancy and stared at him piercing his heart.

"Willibald Holst!" he said in a weak voice broken by the tears.

“Can you move?” the detective asked.

The little boy nodded and slowly started to stand up. He was weak, but he could certainly walk.

“Well, go as far as possible from here” he added pointing out him the exit over the bell-well, over the great wheel of the Sleeping Sun.

“Well, don’t believe this can disturb my plans!” the killer protested.

“I’m not interested into your plans” the detective roared. “I only care the young boy’s life. It’s enough for me to know he is safe. What will happen to you and me only the destiny knows?”

The killer moved sideways and began to laugh.

“A mediocre thought but in any case only mediocre people grasp a laser gun and then they say to believe in destiny. Great ones create their destiny without weapons, day by day, breaking the chains of custom and habit, fighting for an ideal.”

This time it was the detective to start laughing.

“Give yourself up, mister ideal. There is no way out” he summoned him.

“There is always a way out, detective Ross” the other hissed. “And my ideal is really this: to know you have been chasing me for many years and you must wait for many other years before grabbing me.”

“This is your thought!”

“No! You are wrong. There will be a moment in which you cannot take me anymore...” the killer said approaching him boldly.

“What do you mean?” the detective asked sincerely surprised for that meaningless sentence. But his only answer was to bring a hand to his cloak that covered his shoulders and to push back the hood showing his real face to the detective, up to that moment concealed by the shade. Then he began to sing:

*Back and forth the swing goes
Laughing Sun then full Moon rose.
Dream my boy, dream at last
About your future, about your past.
Every time you blink your eyes
Someone born, someone dies.*

Alasdair didn't bear that song, those words and above all he didn't bear his rival come near him. Yet he was sure to have heard that music other times in his life. He looked up and when he saw his rival's face as it was his one reflected in a mirror, his legs trembled, his strength faded away and his courage wavered. It couldn't be true, he couldn't be him. He was not the killer, but a detective. It could be a dream, but how could it be if experience seemed so real? That little boy he saved was real!

He felt a noise behind his shoulders.

A noise of someone who was struck on the head. He felt the sound inside his skull then he perceived his body to fall on the ground and to whirl into space, in a storm without wind, in a space without limits occupied only by sounds and noises without

meaning. They seemed voices, at first acute and strident like those of preadolescent children, then low and deep like calls of the earth.

Suddenly he was sure to have opened his eyes. He was sure to have looked around and to have seen something meaningless. There was a door in front of him, populated of flashing, warm, immense, candid light. He was sure to see it, then he wasn't sure anymore. He was sure of standing up because he felt his legs lifting his body, then he saw something at the foot of the great cogwheel: a statue with the eyes turned on of blood and fire.

And a moment later he wasn't sure of nothing.

3

Incubus



HE 11-year-old Aeon Ross woke up suddenly with a smothered cry in the middle of the night. He was out of breath as if someone had tried to strangle him. Before his eyes he still saw engraved the clear images of that nightmare which by now from over two months every night almost came to visit him. As repeating a ritual, he removed the covers and sat up. The pyjamas clung to him and he perceived one cold, icy grip to the throat and between the testicles. Between one breath and the next, he brought a hand at the base of his neck, but he felt only the contact with the crucifix pendant hung just below on his slender and smoothed sternum, hooked to a thin gilded chain. Then he stands up and undressed completely. He grabbed the towel he was used to hold next to his bed, dried himself and

wound it round him, then stroked his body to develop the necessary endorphins to take heart. He remained in that position for a long moment, gasping, in ecstasy, lost between the day and the night gazing into space, embracing his sharp shoulders, biting the towelling and drenching it with saliva.

A lightning crossed his mind and then he ran to the computer which buzzed in a corner, not far from his bed. His mother didn't want he spent much time in front of it, especially in *his birthday suit* - as she usually said - when MacHover's field was active. There was always the danger that someone saw him through the net cam and even though Aeon knew his system and he was sure such an eventuality would have been impossible, there was always a light margin of doubt. And it is known, mothers are in their element in that margin of doubt, if they want to make a remark.

More times he wondered, but he had never found an answer, whether someone had photographed him completely naked in front of the computer, what he would have used a photo like that.

Innocence!

He liked to stay there for a precise motive: the CMH, initially conceived only for multimedia applications, for musical productions and for dynamic experiences in the world of the domestic entertainment, sent forth a lower potential electric charge which redounded on his whole body and strangely relaxed him. He had discovered it once, returned home early from school, he had a shower and before dressing, he sat under the sensory bell of his computer. He had found those feelings deeply pleasant, even if in a way he didn't understand entirely

and therefore he could not tell to be sorry to sit completely naked in front of his workstation. Besides criticizing him continuously for this, his mother had also begun to make him as strange as weary speeches on sexuality and on so many other things he didn't understand and he found them extremely boring. What he understood was that the suits would have isolated him from that experience and he didn't want this happened. He had also made searches and there were no side effects, therefore there was anything to worry about.

Brightening up, he wore 3D glasses, a small crash made of light plastic equipped with two great black lenses. An intelligent air pad expanded to suit perfectly to his cranium. Even if it wasn't of last generation, that device allowed an acceptable resolution of image. Unfortunately that particular model of helmet didn't transfer the emotions to the other four senses. For a long time he has been asking to his mother to have the *Sensoglasses*, but she kept on refusing because, as many other people, she also believed those glasses were the forehead responsible of the SURIV known as the real identification syndrome of the virtual world or syndrome of the century. Particularly the Vr-Uzis were, above all, the most diffused among the teen-agers and they were really those which Aeon desired.

Who contracted the syndrome of the century, he didn't succeed in detaching from the simulation anymore and a paranoiac reality took shape and brought to fry the brain, to cerebral death and then to the inevitable physical death. The scientists had been studying this problem for a long time now, but as it was feared or it was wished more probably, the thing

was going on and on, perhaps for the consistent economic affairs at stake. Nevertheless the manufacturing society denied every debit resolutely and it exhibited, whoever asked for, data and statistic information on the goodness of their product and on the lack of direct interactions among the illness and the electronic device. For the time being, nobody had resolved the case or had tried seriously to do it.

It was a quarter to three in the night at the clock of the system in the corner and it was 30th December. He had slept few less than two hours and now it seemed too late to be night and it was certainly too soon to be morning. A shiver along his backbone brought him to the nightmare he had just lived. Petrified, he rolled up as a spider tightening as strong as he could his thin diaphanous legs to his chest and leaning the head in the middle of the knees he let out a command in a weak voice.

“Drawing!”

A light buzz of approval and shortly after in front of him the candid virtual screen appeared; then Aeon moved his right hand in the visual space to the search of a file. He moved in various directions folders and other memorized images opening a passage the one he was interested to; then, once visualized the corresponding icon, keyed in the air a code of access and activated it.

“Open and show!” he ordered.

There was still a light buzz of approval from the computer, and then a three-dimensional diagram appeared. It was a scheme formed by a complex series of mechanical devices, dense and tangled. He rotated the image to the right and to the left various

times, then backwards and forwards until he didn't locate a point in which some important details were missing. There he added new details: cogwheels, geometric forms, pulleys, shafts and levers whereas there was the void. With increasing impetus, as if his hands were possessed, he hastened to complete whole sections of it. He enriched the details with shades which made even more tangled its already complex architecture, then.....

He stopped!

The small bloodless hands, that up to that moment had moved excited in the void with so elevated rapidity and mastery, trembled now uncertain, suspended in the air, incapable of continuing. He made a memory effort, but in the memory shade a dark figure revealed him, an illegible detail as a black void that concealed good part of the scheme making vain any attempt to complete it.

He closed his eyes for a moment and he concentrated with great intensity. He saw something. There was a long path.

.... a communication trench, a labyrinth.

There was a thick net of narrow passages which conducted to unexplored places, inaccessible and although he tried to walk he didn't succeed in going beyond that shade. It was stronger than him, more determined and he didn't move. Suddenly he trembled and he found himself confined in a metallic, narrow, oppressive cage. The weight of that cage crushed him. Then he felt a tragic dark void under his feet. He slipped toward the abyss and by instinct he tried to grab at something, but his hand missed the grip, so he felt himself falling down toward the absolute black.

Aeon woke up again with a leap.

“Damn!” he exclaimed feeling his heart running like a million beats a minute for the excitement. The computer sent back a signal.

“WRONG ORDER! CAN YOU KINDLY REPEAT?” it said him. The voice, kind, calm and reassuring, was that of an asexual teen-ager. Aeon chose it as he didn’t still appreciate too much female voices and, according to him, the masculine ones were too much ambiguous.

“No, nothing” he politely said caressing an arm numbed by the pressure of his head. He rubbed a smear of saliva on his forearm. He had to fall asleep for a few minutes, wrapped up in him, on the armchair in front of the console. The nightmare didn’t release. It had attacked him, once more.

He scrutinized the screen and his face expressed his satisfaction. Now it was notably enriched and interesting, stimulating details could be seen, apart that zone of shade he had not succeeded in deciphering yet.

“Backup!” he ordered in a low voice.

“BACKUP DONE! DO YOU WANT THAT I MAKE A COPY OF IT ON YOUR OPTIBOOK?” the computer asked him a few instants later.

“Yes, please” Aeon responded. “Make a copy on my *nanotech*, too.”

He heard the beep of his optibook still closed in his school backpack at a corner of the room, and this meant the two computers were conversing and exchanging data. Then, from a slot close to the screen, a pin that could be long two inches at most, appeared. Aeon took the crucifix that he wore around his

neck, pulled one of its arms, detached a long and tightened part of it and set it inside the pin at the centre of the slot. The *nanotech* was microscopic and it could be hidden into any personal object like a pendant, a watch or the lace of the shoes; but there were also others smaller and very expensive, thin like a hair.

When he inserted the *nanotech* the pin moved back and after few seconds it came out again.

“BACKUP AND COPY COMPLETED! YOU CAN TAKE THE CHIP!”

Aeon took the device of memorization off and inserted it again at its place inside the crucifix.

“Thanks!”

“IT’S A PLEASURE, AEON!” the computer responded. “OH, I FORGOT, THE UPDATING CLAD IS AVAILABLE FOR THE OPTIMIZATION OF THE GRAPHIC ARTS IN THE FORMAT.CARD! I KNOW YOU ARE VERY INTERESTED IN IT SO...” the computer said.

“Is it free?”

“OF COURSE!” the computer confirmed.

“I know it is a quite long operation and I wish to try to rest just a bit. Would you mind to do it tomorrow morning?” he asked, but immediately he realized to have used that adverb improperly as it will take about two or three hours at sunrise. But the computer was also programmed for managing these lexical irregularities and it perfectly knew that the human tomorrow morning is the same even if midnight is spent.

“ANY PROBLEM, AEON!” it answered. “I WILL DO IT WHILE YOU ARE AT SCHOOL.”

“Thank you!”

"IF I CAN AFFORD TO ADVISE YOU, YOU SHOULD TRY TO SLEEP A BIT. YOUR MOTHER WOULD BE HAPPY" the computer suggested. Aeon nodded.

"WELL, GOOD REST!" the computer concluded.

Aeon definitely got up and removed the virtual helmet. Immediately the computer deactivated and put itself to rest and blue cobalt lights, which illuminated the unit MCH, weakened sensitively.

Now he had gone out from the warm virtual environment, he perceived the real cold around himself and he began to tremble. Oddly he felt he also liked it. A strange pleasure, unknown, incomprehensible. He went up to the great window and looked outside. Blades of sharp ice were condensed on the misted glass. He inhaled deeply up to fill his belly and then he slowly released the breath.

"Aeon Ross, my good friend" he told to himself amusing "I believe that you are becoming crazy!"

He fleetingly looked at his image reflected, and then he rummaged in a drawer extracting old blue pants that he wore just in time before hearing the door of his room opening behind him.

"Aeon, good heavens! Are you well?" his mother asked. Helena, all ruffled with half open eyes and with the pyjamas untidily worn, caracoled into his bedroom for a short walk stopping at the bottom of his bed. She fixed his child with a perplexed air and asked him why he was all naked in front of the window.

The usual, she thought.