

Pierre Béhel

Human gods

Novel

H u m a n g o d s

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

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

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

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Prelude

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

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

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

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

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The old man suddenly became aware of their appearance. He was a little deaf, a little blind, but not totally. He turned to them and greeted them with a smile.

The young people who were looking at him answered him with the necessary respect. The others, seeing their comrades acting, turned to the old man and saluted him as well. So the old man saluted a second time, to the attention of the latecomers.

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

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

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

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

"Maybe."

"Who else would have created what surrounds us?"

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

"How to live without certainty?"

"By living, simply."

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

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Book One

Shaad

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Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

Over time, the Shaadins' domain grew. They would dig and always find a cave after a while.

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Many of these caves were dark and uninteresting. Sometimes they were used to store souls. This is what the Goddess called the creatures that came screaming out of the lava.

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

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

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

In fact, the souls hardly ever stopped screaming, except when they were sleeping in the caves where they were stored. They were either screaming because they had just come out of the lava, or they were screaming because the Shaadins

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were tenderizing their meat. And even when the Shaadins finally cut the souls into pieces and ate them, they still screamed.

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

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

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

Then the theologians had prayed to the Goddess. And the Goddess answered. The souls came from the world of origin of the Goddess. They were of the same species. But these souls had

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misbehaved on this world. Shaad was in fact a place of punishment for them.

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

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

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

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Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

The road that the little group was following went through the many fields of the area. It turned into a small wood. The knight redoubled his vigilance. But it took him less time to cross the dark place than it took to recite an Our Father.

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

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

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

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

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

"Whoa, gentlemen. Who goes there?"

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

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

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

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

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"Messire le Comte awaits you, my companion will notify him of your arrival."

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

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

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

By reflex, Father Bernardo de Novara signed himself as he passed the statue. He had

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

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

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

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

So he addressed the three visitors without hesitation.

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

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

Count Eudes smiled. He was in fact mostly pleased with the announced brevity of his guests' stay, each guest being quite quickly ruinous.

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

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

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

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

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

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the service of Norman lords during this war against the Mohammedans.

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

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

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Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Spontaneous combustion?"

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

He saw the witch without her noticing him at first. There was a child running around the house. The peasant grabbed the child and took her with him, preventing her from screaming. He probably thought that the child had been kidnapped by the witch.

But then the witch saw him and went after him. When he arrived at his house, in a clearing not far from the succubus' house, he locked the child in a small room until he could bring him to

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

"Well what, is a torch thrown on a thatched roof magic?"

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

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

Bernardo de Novara took him back: "I understand that the knight is more interested in violent manifestations but you will allow me, me, not to underestimate the cases of seduction. Seduction, especially by a succubus, is the first weapon of the Evil One. Let us not forget that, in the form of the Serpent, he seduced Eve who, in turn, seduced Adam. And since that moment, women were the first to succumb but also the first to relay the evil seduction. No, let's not neglect this seduction. Could we meet one of the seduced?"

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

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

Knight Stephen approved the request.

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

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

"My tormentor had little opportunity to use his talents with him. His tongue loosened spontaneously."

To kill a witness before he was properly questioned! This shocked Knight Stephen as much as Bernardo de Novara. Count Eudes was indeed a fool. But that the condemned man spoke without difficulty was good news.

The dinner then drifted into banalities before, finally, the three visitors could go to sleep.

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Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cassandra smiles.

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

"It's already done, Mom."

"Will you ever take me there?"

"Maybe."

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Chapter 5

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

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

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

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

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The man straightened his head when the priest returned to his last home and threw himself at his feet.

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

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

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

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

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

Bernardo de Novara then showed the prisoner Stephen von Kirchburg.

"My son, my companion and I are not operating for the Count but have been commissioned by Monseigneur l'Evêque and Monseigneur le Duc. We want to know all about this witch who lives in the woods and whom we were told you had met."

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

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

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

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

The prisoner stopped. He hesitated to continue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go on, son."

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

The prisoner was silent.

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

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

The executioner bent down inside the dungeon and, addressing the two visitors, became imploring in his turn.

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

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

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

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

"No, Father. I had no attraction. I was afraid. But she made me lie on the ground. Although I had no further intention of tricking her, she succeeded by her curses in obtaining my seed."

"Did you feel pleasure?"

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

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

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

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"It is quite possible that she is a witch. For the time being, I believe that Messire Comte is expecting us all. Let us be punctual."

The prisoner clung to the robe.

"Absolve me, Father, absolve me!"

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

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

The Count and his sons were waiting in the front row of the crowd that was beginning to gather, enjoying the show in advance. A good part of the population of the village must have been present according to Knight Stephen's estimation. Adso de Ley had mingled with the crowd and would not have missed the opportunity to witness the hanging of a brigand for anything in the world.

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

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

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

The prisoner looked at the priest with supplication.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tamara?"

"Yes, mother?"

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

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

Human gods

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Across the street, Cassandra glared at her, her fists on her hips. She didn't have that much to do.

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

The woman gasped. A thin, frightened voice answered.

"Don't you know?"

The witch shrugged her shoulders.

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

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

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

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

Cassandra placed the money and the handkerchief containing the plants on her

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

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

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

The woman nodded.

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

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

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

The woman turned to face him.

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

Cassandra burst out laughing.

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

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"What can you offer me?"

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

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

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

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

The bourgeois didn't even hear a body collapse in the undergrowth. But Cassandra wanted her clients to be happy and go home safely.

Human gods

Chapter 7

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

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

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

What an affair this arrest of a witch was! After all, a woman, even a witch, could be subdued

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by two guards at most. What was the point of asking the duke and the bishop for help? Eudes de Heulbec was a fool and a coward. The knight did not change at all in his first judgment.

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

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

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

The procession finally left the village through the main gate of the ramparts. It headed towards the forest, in the direction of the witch's house. There were no more onlookers on the sides of the road. Only a few peasants stopped working

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in the fields to watch what was a spectacle for them.

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

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

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Eudes would sign himself off sharply. A good Christian, he feared the Devil and his creatures.

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

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

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

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Chapter 8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tamara, what happened?"

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

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Using her softest voice, she repeated her request.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you really think so, Mom?"

"But yes."

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

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

Human gods

Chapter 9

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

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

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

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

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

"It's this way, sir."

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

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

Stephen von Kirchburg appointed one of the Count's soldiers to guard the mounts with Adso. The two young men looked at each other and smiled. Not having to face the witch was rather good news.

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

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

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

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

Giving short orders, he sent the three available guards around, keeping some distance from the cottage. Each would take a position on one side of the house. Once each participant in the expedition was in his or her place, they would look

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at the knight and begin to move forward with him. The one placed on the other side of the thatched cottage would give the signal by looking at his two acolytes on his right and left.

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 10

"Mom, people are coming."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

H u m a n g o d s

The rest is on the web
<http://www.pierrebehel.com>