

UNGODZ – The Impious Journey

by Marco Taddei

translated by: Bruno Letizia

www.hollow-press.net

Chapter I - Ruins of the City of Madness

where the Dardans meet Helenus, the prophet who teaches them how to find their way in such desolation; Aeneas seems to go mad, but then with difficulty comes to his senses.

It was as if we had always been there, but without any memory of having been born there.

We quickly realised that nothingness is the keystone of this universe and that there are no corners of this universe in which peace does not walk alongside the obscene step of a glassy and insane death.

The mountains are reddened by fires and purple flames. Dense fumes rise in a sky that is as black as the deepest of pits. Will there ever be a sun or a moon beyond this gloomy blanket of shadows? What we can see in the distance is just more darkness, where only ancestral monsters can make their lair, certainly not the beautiful stars embroidered by the ancient gods, who made sacred the history of Troy and its defenders.

We had ships, which had become sinister to us, as if spirits had taken possession of them.

Now, we were in a sort of silent hell. Among the black sands of an endless desert, we realised that we had before us only dangerous exploration of a bitter land.

Why were we there? What had we done to deserve such desolation around us?

We all have killed, destroyed, raped. Perhaps this is the cavern where an ungodly warrior finds his final refuge? Aeneas, the first among us, wondered about this, but did not address us. He spoke to himself, as if shipwrecked in madness.

Our leader was the last of our line. We carried him as one carries a madman, trying to reassure him at every step.

We looked at our dementia-ridden leader and blanched. The idea that each one of us was alone, leaderless, in that land, almost made us scream in terror.

We moved among ruins that seemed to mark the boundaries of an ancient city.

Someone said: - This place looks like Troy after the Achaeans destroyed it palm by palm.

We silenced him, after all that time it could not be that we had returned to the place from which we had fled in despair.

Around us there was only endless desolation. In all that vast place, there was not a single human to ask for help or mercy.

Fortune is a bizarre creature. She is bald but has a long braid of hair so that one can somehow catch it. She came for us and Aeneas, for some impenetrable reason, recomposed himself. The terror seemed to have

receded from him and in a grotesque manner his warlord's shrewd gaze reappeared.

He wanted to stop and count us, like a phalanx about to attack.

He spoke to us conscientiously. He said that we were in a new and unexplored land and that if this place was the one indicated by the gods and the Sibyl of Cumae, then it would become our home, by force and without reason.

At those rigorous words many of us trembled, but no one was unprepared. All agreed that one cannot resist the pushing force of destiny.

Someone shouted - Over there!

We all turned around in search of a presence, but we found only that beside us, horribly close to our steps, was a grey, half-charred skeleton, wrapped in long, threadbare robes. It was sitting on a blackened stone. It asked us to come closer.

We all stood with chilled blood, no one had the heart to move a single finger. Only Aeneas dissuaded himself and approached the damned man.

Our prince asked: - W-where am I?

The blackened skeleton answered: - You are in the city that is called Madness, it has been burning for centuries and nothing can extinguish it.

- Madness - what place is this? Why am I here?

But the damned pulled Aeneas's arm:

- Help me look for them.

- What do you seek, old fool?

- I... my eyes - The skeleton chuckled, as if he had said something witty.

- It's easy to find them... They're round, you know... Ahahah... - He laughed even more

- They have seen my whole life of deeds and glory and now who knows where they sink in the dirt.

Aeneas, dazed by the speech, takes a step back. He sinks into a pool of ashes and mud.

He falls.

- Where are you going? Already running away? I was a great oracle, you know? I was called Helenus. Everyone wanted to listen to my voice, invite me to banquets, lie with me, but now I celebrate only with the worms that suck my bones.

The half skeleton rambled on, with slippery melancholy. - Let's find my eyes... They have seen my whole life of works and glory and now who knows where they sink, in what filth. Let us save them...

- Who inflicted this miserable punishment on you?

- You mean life? We arrive... we hope... we lose everything... we die...

- No! Shut up! I meant, this derelict seeking of your eyes... Who did this to you?

- A treacherous, powerful lord. He mocks all visionaries... poets, seers, dreamers... because he thinks he is the greatest among them... Fate, however, has cunningly deprived him of the most precious thing, which is sight. And so, when he meets someone like him, he praises him before tearing out his eyes, with such a swift gesture that there cannot be a more rapacious one.

- What is the name of this torturer demon?

- Never mind... Before it is too late listen to what the oracle Helenus has to say.

And he went on to say: - Whatever your name is, wherever you come from, nothing is like this place. If thou shalt be thirsty, thou shalt find nothing but blasphemy to cup thee. And death shall tend thee your meal, in a bowl of copper, when you are hungry. At the same time, fear not. I feel that the distant gods are stretching coils of horror over thee. Perhaps you may be at ease in such madness.

Aeneas, pale, only managed to say: - Is this the underworld?

- What are you talking about? This is only a ruin, you will see what awaits you! Seek my eyes! Or seek the meaning of what I am about to tell you! Moving forward, you will find four palaces that you will have to cross whilst keeping your flesh attached to your bones and your spirit attached to your heart.

Listening to these words, we feel the blood pulsing again in our veins. We all ask: what is the way, what are these palaces, who are their masters, friends or foes?

- Enemies! - said the Incinerated One with a smile, already knowing the depths of our spirits. And we indeed, feel a motion in our souls. Enemies? Well, nothing better than enemies for the warrior race of Dardania!

Aeneas bends towards Helenus to thank him. In reply the Incinerate Ones makes a gesture, as if to eternally banish him. Then he adds, in a voice that comes from his deepest viscera - Man who walks and who still has in his sockets what I have lost forever, I curse you, because the spirit of any man, whose nature is rotten and decayed, would writhe like a snake that remains alive in the flames of the pyre, once blessed.

We turn away in silence. Someone says: - If I were to find the eyes of that horrible presence, I would crush them in the black sand without mercy.

Chapter II – The Palace of Harpies

where the Dardans face the Harpies; they reach treacherous dungeons, where some blasphemous people claim to be the self-imprisoned gods to have nothing more to do with the World.

The first palace stands out among the ruins like a mound on a burnt plain. Its entrance is a narrow and dark whole, without any columns that would embellish it. There is no door. It looks more like a stable than a palace. We are however certain that we are in front of the first palace.

We are anguished as we enter, for we don't know what could happen to us. We are surprised to see that this place is as luminous as the sun, every element made of an effulgent material, preciously refined. It's gold!

The floors and ceilings as well as the niches and columns, everything is made of gold, but in the air there is a smell so pestilent that it makes us think we are inside a cesspool of horrible wormy beasts rather than a palace.

A great table has been laid in the center of the room. The most delicious food lies inside bowls that depict the deeds of ancient warriors. Meat piled on colossal plates and succulent juicy fruit await to be devoured.

We cannot trust that place of which we know neither traditions nor masters, but we have been hungry for days. Our stomachs are suffering the ultimate test.

Yet, the first to transgress the sacred rules of hospitality is Aeneas who, abandoning arms and shield, grabs a pig's head like a beggar whilst at the same time filling up a goblet with fragrant wine.

Few can resist. We lash out at the food, charging as if in battle, body to body. The foul odour that permeates everything and makes every mouthful vile does not bother us, with all our senses we chew and swallow like low inhabitants of sheepfold.

We eat as if it was our last meal, and the more we eat the more our hunger grows. Our hands are filthy with juices and sauces, the mouths salivate and foam, swallowing whole pieces of meat. We seem like caterpillars that devour the earth more than heroes destined for greatness. But the true disgust arrives only

when someone stops and says: What are we eating, companions? Look! This is not food!

In the meantime, behind the columns, someone laughs at our wicked foolishness.

From our hands drips a mixture of sludge and slush, and our mouths are bitter with the most filthy of tastes. We are astonished. We spit and vomit. The ancient floors of gold receive our most impure juices.

Wings beat in the darkness and descend on us as silent as those of an owl. Blood begins to flow. Claws tear the backs of many good heroes forced into the most humiliating of positions. Our eyes are clouded by the fog of our peristalsis and we cannot understand what enemy could catch us so off guard.

Aeneas screams like a madman – They are harpies! They are harpies! - But he gives no orders and so we defend ourselves in a jumble.

It is ironic how screaming warriors get swallowed with the same gluttony with which shortly beforehand they had foolishly devoured chunks of meat from an illusory table.

The face and breast of the harpies is that of the corpse. Some of them, whilst lacerating a helpless knight, enjoy soiling another with their sulphurous spray. Never has a battlefield displayed such a spectacle, atrocious and sickening together.

It is time for redemption. Laden with the blood of our comrades and filthy with hideous slime, with spears, we begin to cut down dozens of them.

Aeneas is safe and with him many of us. Someone says in my ear, -Did you see our leader fighting? I didn't. Did you?

- And so in many of us a bug creeps in. Has he become, our leader, a cowardly idiot? Even the battle was too fierce, we tell ourselves. "Who watched who, I'd like to know?" one admits among us in the troop. Order returns to sanctify our hallowed deeds.

At the end of the first palace, we unearth a narrow burrow from which fresh air comes.

We follow the passage, which narrows and widens many times before we come to an area large enough for us to untie the line. We are inside a large building, that much is clear and, high above us, huge skylights let little light in from a grave sky.

Does the sun exist in this region?

Much of what they say about the subterranean realms is before us, and we glimpse it with living eyes terrified by every shadow. Soon we see on the sides of the walls barred openings that turn out to be prison cells. We see no guards, however, and approach without too much trouble to the prisoners. They are as white as maggots, slender and have almost no hair.

They immediately address us with a futile: - What do you want?

And we, children of forbearance, reply: - We are friends, do not fear

- Friends? Here? Say rather that you are fools....

- We want information... - Aeneas comes forward.

- And you are the craziest of them all, then. We spend our time in these cells tearing our hair and waiting. We know nothing about anything but our punishment. Go away and soon you may find what you

seek or a grave in which to rot forever.

- Wait, listen to us. We are not from this world. We come from far away. We have to get out of this palace and then...

- Are we in a palace? This is interesting...

- You don't even know where you are? This place terrifies us.... Tell us what you know! We will we will set you free!

- Don't you dare! We don't want to get out, you are the prisoners in our eye. We have been incarcerated in here for the sole purpose of knowing nothing more of the outside world, we are in here for a wise reason, we want to die there.

- But who are you? What has driven you to this remedy?

- We, my friend, are the ones you all pray to, liberate and worship. We are the gods who are tired of being the gods.

- What do you say? It is sacrilege!

- We are we, we are we! Those who dwell for you on the summit of Olympus! It is indeed us, the gods to whom you ask for intercession, and we have imprisoned ourselves in here to listen to you no more! To hear no more of your whining, your barking, your grunting, you stupid animals! Curse you! Curse you! A thousand times cursed!

We could not respond to these insults because they started spitting on us, horribly.

That coven of madmen disturbed us and it is true that they seemed, rather than divine, like many monkeys screaming dully, without pain, charged with a hatred that could tear the flesh from our faces without even touching us. Whilst seeing that distorted scene, we retreated.

- Is it really possible that these mentally ill men are the ones who control the honour and dishonour of the heroes? - someone asked, with tears of terror in his eyes. We were leaders who had commanded the fiercest massacres without batting an eyelid but once put in front of this idea we were naked and helpless, and we understood how the pain of the mind can be more exhausting than a wound in the belly.

- Don't give in to those scoundrels, they are fools who believe things that don't make sense, keep running, we have to get out of here! - These words helped the most terrified, even if they were pronounced by someone whose heart did not believe them.

Many of us saw Aeneas running away crying choking in sobs, but we did not tell the others, the younger ones, so as not to wear them down.

In an empty cell we found a light and a burrow from which fresh air blew. Cracking stones and slipping into the narrowest crevices we found a way out of that miserable fortress.

Chapter III - The Palace of The Erinni

where the Dardans meet the king Latino reduced to a beggar, they face the horrible sons of the Erinni's genii Aletto and Aletto himself.

We finally saw something similar to known things. Tall trees swollen with foliage, an undergrowth of happy mosses and bushes, yet without the virtuous ferment of the forest around us. Everything was patched, as if in pain.

In those woods there was an ancestral virginity, corrupt and impure as if the seed of that world had been dipped in dirt instead of fat earth. We could not explain the bewilderment that assailed us as we moved

through a land at the same time so alive and desolate.

There were waters, but they were fetid. A rotten river flowed between twisted roots of distressing trees. No beneficial salamander approached the surface, which leached like gangrene.

The march was haunted, on our necks we felt the cold cut of a phantom dagger. An oily sweat began to dampen our already exhausted bodies.

Even the blades of grass seemed to somehow disturb our spirits and throw us into discouragement.

Aeneas, shivering like a leper, led us and seemed the least oriented among us. Silent, we ruminated our painful thoughts: what horror would befall us this time?

Along a road, which we finally found, we met a beggar. His head was bowed in the mud. Our leader offered him some of the bottom of his water canteen and we sought from him some knowledge of where we were.

- Who are you?
- I no longer have a name. I beg, but once I was king of this land.
- A king reduced to this state? What ever happened to you? Did a frog swallow your crown?
- Not a frog, O traveller, but a snake. Further on you will find my palace, usurped by Aletto, Queen of Agony. She devoured the whole horde of my soldiers and my people.
- Come with us then, avenge with the Dardans your enemy!
- I will not. I mourn my fate.
- That's no way for a king to speak!
- Soon I shall die devoured by the same disease that dissolved my bloodline.
- Come with us then and seek death in direct combat!
- I will not! I want to spend my remaining time with my head in the mud and hope that...

It was a moment. The commander's blade plunged deep into the mud after passing through the wretched man's slender neck. It was a gesture of supreme magnanimity. For an instant, Aeneas seemed like the ancient prince who had slain so many Achaean heroes. But then he lost himself again in some recess of his mind.

We spotted a black tower, above the treetops. We saw the castle of the Latin king and no doubt the theatre of our new, tragic trials.

Aeneas made us gather. We never heard more foolish orders: - There is no sense in acting with caution. We have weapons. Let us storm the palace gates, and he who falls, shall fall.

Yet his desire for battle concealed the terror of waiting for the moves and arcana of that fearsome place, and we too were in no condition to be patient.

The doors gave way and we found ourselves in a hall lit by faint braziers. The marbles of the floor, illuminated by the flicker of a flame, played strange tricks on our eyes and we did not understand exactly where we were stepping. Never was silence more profound.

Someone lit torches on the braziers and we took a closer look around. There were bas-reliefs. Faces and bodies of sylvan sovereigns, illustrious warriors who sharpened their swords on the stones of lazy rivers, motionless princesses whose enigmatic faces were marked by circled earrings that radiated the cursed

magic of forgotten peoples. Names flowed beneath those effigies. Names of lineages unknown to us: Latino, Lavinia, Amata, Turno. Perhaps they belonged to an incongruous past or, someone said in a trembling voice, they belonged to an incoherent vision coming from the future.

At the end of the hall stood a dark throne.

In uncertain darkness, we saw coils moving slowly around our shoes. Hisses and eyes glittered like green thunderbolts in the darkness and suddenly we realised that the marbles were covered with the coils of enormous reptiles.

Glassy eyes locked on us. Toothed jaws like those of the crocodile. You could have called them snakes, but those beasts had nothing of the humble creature hiding underground. They were as fierce as lions and they bit hard.

Disproportionate mouths swallowed their victims, sliding them inside with a lightning strike of a snake's head. They closed their eyes slightly, they seemed to enjoy devouring human flesh. Their sinuous bodies were endless and where we struck a black jet would spurt out, but their jaws would not stop attacking us.

Smaller snakes spawned from the bigger ones, many-headed and even more ferocious. Reptiles we had never seen before, with many or no legs, emerged from the darkness as if attracted by the smell of our blood and of their fellows species.

Aeneas is lost. We hear only the fury of his weapons whirling in the darkness.

Great flames suddenly ignite, just as the creatures seem overwhelmed. Braziers blaze and illuminate the bowels of the palace. A giantess now sits on the dark square throne. She clasps her hands on the marble of the throne as if she wants to cleave it with the strength of her nails alone. Her eyes are empty and the beasts that attack us pour out like a waterfall from her mouth crowned with purple swells.

She is the Queen of Agony, the most furious Erinni, Aletto. Aeneas shouts - We will have to pierce her head with our spears to get out of this trap!

Once again we are forced to witness the slaughter of so many heroes. Reaching the old hag means crossing jaws, poisons, coils as thick as the vegetation of the forest from which we came. Many comrades, too many, fall, and hardly we manage to make our way towards the source of catastrophe.

Forked tongues snap like whips in the air and the heads of our comrades fly off their necks, and again we are on the verge of succumbing, not so much because we lack strength, but because of panic and horror.

Aletto doesn't seem conscious and just keeps vomiting up her horrid children. And she creates them bigger and bigger, more and more bitter, more and more hideous to behold.

In the end, however, her big head is pierced by all the spears of us Dardans. She suffocates in her own blood, the infamous Aletto. Her snake-like eyes, as she dies, stare at all of us, one by one. We feel the chill, it sinks into our bones and robs us of so much of our courage that we all take a step back.

Suddenly, the titan's body is gone, and the head that was previously crossed and torn by our pikes disappears. No one can carry the trophy of the Erinni and none of us knows whether Aletto has been defeated or not. The throne itself has now changed. It is a staircase that goes down towards the roots of the world.

Chapter IV - The Palace of Arms

where the Dardans descend into caves, arrive at gigantic forges, conquer the Cyclops armour and confront Camilla, at the Virgin in Arms. Aeneas loses credibility in the eyes of his people.

We walk through large caves lit brightly by flashlights of all kinds and shapes, under our feet we feel a vibration, as if the earth is pulsing like the heart of man.

The further we go the stronger the pulsing becomes, pregnant with eerie predictions.

We finally reach a spot where, between two spurs of rock, a wall of sharp, black stone is embedded. A sinister mysterious clangour of metal could be heard. No one had ever heard such a clangour, it was as if thousands of iron flashes were striking the roof of a bronze house. Only a small door indicated a passageway.

The door was hot, as if liquid fire flowed through its fibres. Too mighty, however, to strike down.

- It is the abode of Hephaestus, someone whispered, - the horrible smith of the gods.

Another became so immiserate that he raved, - It is the fire that after all this time lingers still on the walls of the lost Troy, our home, which we have abandoned!

Someone else, more practical: - Here is a lock.... Whoever can pick a door, come forward.

In the troop there was no shortage of swindlers, and soon the door was open.

The noise increased. An immense forge was throwing steam and heat. Hammers of all kinds were descending on dozens of anvils where the iron, still malleable, hurled sparks and lapilli all around. An erupting volcano would not have put us in awe as much.

That huge forge seemed animated by ghosts, as if everything moved without the presence of a single blacksmith.

Gritting in our teeth curses against the most malignant presences, we advanced into that treachery, between narrow burning tunnels and flows of white lava.

Aeneas, in that sorcerous abode, seemed at ease, and, dodging and leaping, he thrashed about in that machinery like a monkey among tree branches. Suddenly, he stopped. When we caught up with him, he was talking to a metal mask stuck on a wall smooth as marble. We marvelled, and listened a little apart.

The mask was that of a maiden, armed to the teeth, with dozens of spears and as many helmets. Spearheads, axe and sword blades, and sharp arrows sprouted from every crevice of that wall. It looked as if an arsenal had been melted into it. She said, in a voice of metal, that her name was Camilla.

- Who are you, O Camilla?

- Me, I am the survivor of all the battles of the world. I am chaste, and my chastity I vowed to the weapons, so Fate has decided to grant me this transformation into a machine, to eternally create weapons to be poured into all the wars that are waged in heaven and on earth.

Then, looking better at how we were reduced, she added -Are you the defenders of Troy, the Dardans? Come closer, blessed sons of the finest warfare that has been waged in this age!

Aeneas said - Yes, it is us, those who remain from the fall of that capital of glory and beauty.... And I am Aeneas, the ill-omened leader of this crew of broken men....

How much bitterness in that last sentence!

Camilla appreciated that sincerity. Dozens of large and small wheels moved behind her, and soon a grandiose armour appeared behind her. Ruckus and nemesis sparkled in between her wefts.

Camilla added: -I will make you a gift of this marvel, dear Aeneas. It's the armor of the Cyclops, you will never again suffer defeat in battle.

We all remained silent, tense. We were not in a land of abundance and mutual aid.

We waited to hear the price for such a gift.

But Aeneas spoke first: - Thank you, supreme virgin, protector of all the bloodiest militias and wars, such as the one from which we now flee. I accept this gift, as if given from the hands of the mightiest of deities.

Flattered, Camilla smiled: - Aeneas, O ragged prince, I am the mightiest of deities, more powerful than Zeus, Hades or Poseidon. You have accepted and you know well that a gift accepted cannot be refused.

The armour moves! More spectres in that forge temple! We all clutch our weapons, feel the bare scent of combat wafting through the air.

It is now the armour, helmet-less and therefore headless, that speaks, pointing at Aeneas a finger of metal mesh.

- You are not a cyclops, oh Aeneas, only a cyclops can wear my power.

- I am not a cyclops, but I am the most valiant of warriors, second only to Hector, who is lost who knows where now....

- I know this well, friend, but I will not challenge you to an open confrontation. It would be an error of judgment and intelligence even for such an obtuse object as I am.

And amidst a sound of a thousand gears and horrible spinning cogs a pincer appeared from the bottom of the armour.

- Most valiant among warriors, I repeat: only a cyclops can wear me. A cyclops... a one-eyed creature.

By saying so, he meant that one had to pincer out one of his two eyes to become a full-fledged cyclops.

Camilla, silver sun of steel, smiled even more radiantly.

Aeneas' hand trembled as he skimmed the pincer. Having the armour on would have made him the most irrepressible warrior, and we would have had a clear path in any future battle, but his hand was trembling. We could not believe that our Prince could regress to such an extent.

At last, O gods! He took a step back and said: - Someone carry out the orders of the machine!

Never was a clash of swords more horrible than those few words. We were afraid. We drew lots among the most brave and the oldest, who were still many. At the cost of horrible bloodshed, the armour was ours. Aeneas dared not say a word, as all of the rest of us.

Camilla spoke - Bizarre heroes, blessed whoever understands you. You are in the realm of Empiety and stubbornly continue to persevere in the path of pietas. You spit on your gods, spit on your homeland, spit on your lineage! Forget everything that binds you to the world! This is the advice that the virgin Camilla

gives you! And the second piece of advice she will give you is to take up arms! I am in the mood to unwind with you! I will wipe out every one of the Dardans, giant in armour included.

From a prison of shining metal a disproportionate warrior emerges, looking so proud that he could incinerate cowards with only his sight. His weapons are endless. Spikes, armour, overhangs, iron and steel merge into a flesh that is both armour and epidermis.

Arms equipped with swords the size of men flash evil at us.

- This is a beautiful game! He says, and attacks. Even in our ranks, however, we now have a titan, and the clash that follows is unreal. Indescribable as the circle of the sun cannot be described, an energy too powerful to observe with a naked eye.

Force and earthquake, only this we could understand, whilst all around us everything faltered every time a blow came down.

Our champion won and we were safe, at last. We could cross the caves of the invisible smiths as quickly as one would through a vegetable garden or a garden. No other movement was active in that metallic bastion.

All was mute, as if nothing but the twisted branches of creepers and brambles awaited. The reign of Camilla had ceased forever.

Chapter V - Dido's Palace

where the Dardans rest but then have to defend themselves from the Nightmares and where Aeneas asks for forgiveness to the spectre of Dido; Dido, however, takes revenge.

The way came out ahead of us, in the light of a very pale sun. Seeing that vague greyness was a blessing from the otherworld.

We were all thrilled by that vision, all except Aeneas, who was withdrawing into himself, disheartened and wounded in his honour. What could we do for our semi-divine prince, son of Aphrodite? He was untouchable to us and therefore inconsolable.

Meanwhile, a road opened before us, between black ground and grey jaded grass.

We soon saw a wisp of smoke rising from a plateau. We shivered, perhaps there was someone there who like us loved the warmth of the fire and the ease of a warm home.

Here was the house! It looked harmless and had nothing of the wicked fortress or icy palaces we had passed through so far.

Aeneas seemed enraged in front of that small dwelling, he urged us to continue marching.

He almost begged us to leave, as a soldier approached the door and banged on it. Our prince would go so far as to beg us, his servants, to leave!

Meanwhile, no one came to the door, but it was slightly open, and we decided to enter.

Aeneas fell to his knees. Someone helped him up, as one does for an old man or a child with a delicate heart. Many of us looked away to relieve his humiliation.

We Dardans, heroes of Troy, poured into the small space. We were filthy and smelly, ashamed of having to wait for the master of that cozy little house in our state. But we could rest and someone was already throwing himself on the ground, exhausted.

A bluish dimness soon fell, and no one appeared. We felt our spirits breaking down, and we all succumbed to a fleeting sleep, weapons in hand.

It was then that Aeneas, who had been standing outside the house crying, had the courage to enter. Some of us, who were on guard, saw him step into the house like a man wounded in the head. He was staggering, looking for the wall to support himself, a dazed look on his face. He was talking to himself. He was saying - I know you are here.... I know you are waiting for me...

It was the middle of the night when we felt we were out of breath.

We all jolted awake and saw above us horrible beasts, the Nightmares. They were tearing up our clothes and sucking our blood.

They were white, soggy. Never had we perceived an impenetrable grip in a wretched creature. Their claws were like tentacles that gave us the most horrible wounds.

The clash was furious, we destroyed the whole house, reducing it to the dreariest of battlefields. Outside, it was still nighttime and we decided to go back to sleep, this time with the required guard shifts.

It didn't do much good. This was a night cursed by the gods! Aeneas's chilling screams woke us up once again.

The presence manifested itself with a slight quivering of the air. It was a ghost, a tormented ghost that could not rest. Restlessness and pain spread with its diaphanous breath. When her face became more defined, we understood that it was Queen Dido.

Her amber face was no longer embellished with the gems and marks of royalty, yet her deep gaze was enough to instil the reverence of her rank.

She wore a simple robe of mournful white, filled with melancholy and sorrow. Aeneas, furious as a spider on a red-hot stone, immediately flung himself at her feet.

He said: - Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness. He repeated the word as if it had been a shield that could protect him. But Dido would not speak, and nothing could protect our Prince from the vengeance of she who was no more.

Dido put a hand on his head to caress him. After that initial docile move, a vapour began to rise from her hand and then smoke and an acrid smell of burning flesh invaded the air.

Aeneas screamed in unspeakable pain. Dido for a moment had made him try the venomous sulphur on which her body wanders unceasingly between worlds.

His head now burned in green and yellow flames. We all did not take a step forward to help him. His face became a nefarious coal, and our prince thus consumed his mortal

life without his warriors being able to do anything.

Dido watched us, waiting for someone to lift a finger to save the leader, but she knew well that no one would dare to deprive her of her vengeance. Never did we feel more dread.

Dido pulled out of her chest a sword covered in flames, the same sword that Aeneas had left behind while fleeing in disgrace from her palace in Carthage. The woman restored the order of things and handed the sword back to the respective commander: with all her strength she thrust it into the center of his chest.

The carbonised corpse of our prince, vivified by the blow, rose to its feet. He grabbed two of our people by the neck and made mush of their heads, smashing them against each other. With those bodies as weapons he came at us with a shout that made all our hearts tremble.

Meanwhile, the magical arts disguised the illusion. No longer a poor country dwelling but a black temple stretched out around us. We had fallen into a trap again, and this time it was Aeneas, our prince, who was the enemy to put down.

Dido disappeared, happy that her man now became the hideous creature he had been to her woman's heart and wounded queen.

Chapter VI - Parnassus and the Chamber of Truth

where the Dardans do justice and where Virgil, in order to thank them, reveals the true nature of the place they are in.

There's just a few of us left. Survivors moving through the fog of this land of unknown name or location. We are convinced that we are lost in a forest of hallucinations but we cannot convince ourselves to give up. We go downstream like the river, without knowing where we will flow.

Suddenly, amongst mute mists we saw a low rock where, graced by some benevolent god, the sun radiated every surface. It didn't seem real, that hermitage seemed more glorious than Parnassus itself. If it was a new trap, never was bait more attractive.

Soon we were at the feet of the mound. A spring bubbled serene and beautiful, and small green trees spread an invigorating smell of laurel. In the rock, someone had carved nimble steps to ascend.

As we quench our thirst at the fountain, we hear music coming from the top, voices as of a happy symposium, joyful laughter.

We consult. What are we going to do?. Go up and risk a new encounter, perhaps yet another fierce confrontation or continue wandering in the fog? It seemed like a forced decision.

A man then appeared, followed by a cupbearer and a food bearer. Drinking a red wine and pilfering large white grapes, not scared by the presence of warriors, he asked us kindly if he could quench his thirst at the spring and if he was not in our way. He had noble robes and bore the excellent marks of the poet.

In front of such ceremony, we almost took a step back in surprise.

Someone ventured to reply, -Such kindness in such a place is moving, O dear friend... Allow me to reveal

who we are.... Before your eyes here is what remains of the Dardans, led by the late Aeneas. But the man, without bothering with introductions, interrupted us: - What is wrong with this place, my friends?

- We have found it very noxious to life....

- Sometimes our misfortunes depend on the point of view from which we observe events... Climb the mound with me and you will see that there nothing dark will be able to seize you... - and he smiled, pointing the way.

The sun gleamed precious among the many heads of men and women gathered on the summit of that triumphant hill.

Music, food and drink. Rich banquets for the guests. Before we threw ourselves on the laid tables, however, we had to pay our respects to the host. Our guide pointed us to the figure of an old blind man with a white beard.

- He is Homer, famous among the singers of heroes. It will be a great honour for him to meet warriors, even as weary and ragged as yourselves....

We calmly cashed in on that unfortunate statement and smiled, while some of us clenched our fingers, whitening our knuckles on our hilts.

The old maimed man who had been referred to us as Homer wandered like a priest among the crowd, composed of noble individuals crowned with the poet's laurel. His servants hovered around him doing his bidding for every slightest action. Some would hand him a fig tree, some a piece of fragrant cedar, some filled his cup and brought it to his mouth.

Such was the presence around him that we were slowed down by it. Before we could be with him, he spoke: - Friends, we are here to celebrate the name of a young poet. He, amongst all of you, is the only one who has really tried to match my talent.

At those words, a subdued hubbub spread on the small and friendly plateau.

- Who can this be, if not Virgil! - said our guide to himself, then adding with a serpent's tongue: - That impure fool!

Virgil... that name, who knows for what reason, made our insides throb. Something in us was rekindled and as we fed ourselves - in fact the long waiting ritual had dried us out and we had stormed the supplies - we began to follow developments with interest.

Homer, with informal gestures, invited his servants to bring him a golden dish, domed with silver. The servant handed him the handle of the cover and he said - Virgil, sacred friend, gave me a sincere gift! - he uncovered it.

On the plate, amid noble reflections, were resting, like swollen tadpoles, two perfectly enucleated eyes. Perhaps it was not the eyes that Helenus, stammering and bruised, was looking for in the dust, but those organs, laid there like vexatious relics, made us immediately realise that the torturer of seers and poets was before us and it was Homer.

Our souls tensed like a bow ready to shoot.

- Now, with these eyes I will be able to see again, my friends! - said the old Poet, and, feeling them abundantly, he took them by the nerves, lifting them up to the height of his dry eye sockets.

Everyone started clapping jubilantly. Only we remained cold at that pantomime. The voices that were rising were of this tone: - Homer will return to see! Long live Homer! Long live the eyes of that dog of Virgil!

And meanwhile a litter was making its entrance, carried by four very young servants who barely could withstand the effort of transportation. On it was a man bound by the feet and hands, immobilised and naked. His face was a veil of congealed blood. He was Virgil, disfigured, without even the comfort of being able to mourn his pain because his eyes had been torn out!

Homer's friends, seeing him, smiled ecstatically and giggled, commenting among themselves in low voices. The litter was deposited before the mighty lord, Homer.

In the silence, someone cleared his throat and recited verses:

Queen, you ask me to renew a pain
inexpressible; you command me to tell how the Greeks
Destroyed Troy, her riches, her kingdom!

Hearing those words, everyone followed Homer and burst into thunderous laughter. We all had a shudder, it was clear that those verses belonged to that wretched poet, who was being mocked.

The old blind man said: - More please!

A chubby-faced and vacuous graduate immediately took up the invitation:

Saying this, he hid his iron in his chest,
furious; and to that the limbs in the cold melted
And life with a groan fled disdainful beneath the shadows.

And again laughter, bigger and more thunderous than before, as if each should show the other how much enjoyment there is in him. Homer, in a choked voice, said, - Forward, forward do not stop!

As when red purple is coloured with Indian ivory,
Or as the blushing of pure lilies, together
With so many roses, these colours the virgin showed in her face!

And again, and again, everyone mocked the verses and with them, we think, its author.

Homer: - O Virgil, what a work thou hast handed down to us!

And now, the stars having fled, reddened the Dawn,
When we see in the distance the dark hills and
Italy low on the horizon!

Here the listeners swelled up like poisoned frogs dying in a puddle before deflating with a roar of laughter. The laughter is so overwhelming that they almost weep. Homer relents, waves for them to stop.

Among us grew the dismay that we had been invited to such a barbaric ceremony. The discontent led one of us to shout: -What infamy is this? That man has seen things never seen to man and sang them with all his heartfelt nobility of soul and you mock him with such torture! You do not seem splendid poets, but

vile rabble to be lashed!

Our guide paled and fled to the Poet, to ask his forgiveness for bringing those evildoers into the gentle garden of their carefreeness. His cowardice was instantly repaid: a servant approached and instantly slit his throat with a short dagger. Homer, blind, did not move a muscle.

- Who wants to go through the trouble to judge us? Who is this vile man? I am the poet without sight! I am the only lord and master of Epic! Virgil, wanting to imitate me, stole from me all the elegance of his verses! And I repaid him in fair coin. If he wanted to be Homer, at least he had to become blind!

What a horrible scene! The group of cantors and poets were drawing long daggers, and in a moment from the noble spirit of those illustrious poets spilled out bloodthirsty demons.

How many noble wits, how many singing throats we silenced in that clash is hard to say. The long peace had kept its leash on their fighting spirit for so long that we had to deal with some real possessed ones, but the lineage of the vati suffocated in blood that day.

At the end, we threw all the heads of the victims at Homer's feet. His acolytes went on the run and he was alone. Faced with that extermination, in the warmth of the spilled blood, he had only this to say: - Truly I owe you a favour, you have erased all annoying competition in one swoop!

We understood that there was nothing noble about that old man and decided to slaughter him instantly, like a thief. An eye thief, in fact.

Spilled the last drop of blood - that mountain was now dripping it - we heard a voice behind us. Turning around, we caught sight of the sad figure of Virgil. Standing, his blood masked his white face in a frightening tribal effigy. How he had freed himself is not known. He said, in a deadly tone: - Bring me my eyes, Oh Dardans.

He ordered like a great commander, and we executed. One of us brought at that prodigious disembodied horror what was requested, and holding them out to him lowered his head in an attitude of natural respect towards that unexpected commander.

Virgil put them on, putting them back into his empty eye sockets. He picked up from the ground one of the crowns bloody laurel and placed it on his head. He also took a long tunic and dressed himself in it.

- Dardans, I will not thank you for what you have done, since we all wander, blind and sighted, in a world of darkness... but the taste of this day's revenge will ease my pain for a while. I am therefore in debt with you.

- Discovering the truth will not be a concession, but you, noble warriors, cannot live in lies. I will grant you to understand the true nature of this place. You will not thank me, but you will have awareness, the only weapon that can defend us from a world of inconsistency and injustice.

He pointed with his hooked finger at a rock that stood behind us. We examined it, and found that from it protruded a bizarre handle. It was a perfectly camouflaged door.

It was the last concession from our wicked mentor. When we looked back, he had disappeared.

By turning the handle, some device that opened the thick iron door was unlocked. We entered a cold ambulatory. On the walls, instead of stones we could distinguish polished metal panels held together by large nails, a workmanship we had never seen before.

We made our way along countless empty corridors until we came to an incredible wall through which we could see beyond. None of us had ever seen glass so large and so clear.

Flameless torches lit up, and in the room beyond the wall there was immediate light.

We could then make out two objects suspended in midair, held by thick filaments, just like the corpses of flies when they remain emptied on the web after the spider's meal.

We look closer and they appear to be sarcophagi not made of stone or wood, but of a very polished metal. At one end were helmets, these not made of metal, but made of a substance transparent and rigid, like amber, that allowed us to see inside.

In those bubbles we glimpsed the face of a young man and an old man. In those two smooth sarcophagi, then, there were human beings. They seemed to sleep a mute, dreamless sleep.

A voice coming from above through a very thick metal grating that did not allow us to see either the face or the mouth of the speaker, distracted us from the vision. The voice croaked horribly, as if coming from a throat of iron rather than flesh, but it was Virgil's, we were all sure of it.

- Welcome to the Truth Room, bold warriors. It is here that your journey has brought you and it is here that your judgment must be rendered.

Fatal words that sent shivers down our spines. Soon, for better or worse, it will all be over.

One of us became animated and asked - Get us out of this world, Virgil!

The voice continued - Truly I tell you that everything you have suffered up to this moment has all been an illusion, a reverie, a dream.

- You are the protagonists of the dream of the two prisoners you see. Anchises, the old father, and Ascanius, the not yet mature man, have been sleeping for centuries in here and dreaming of you fighting. Future and past together have composed the present you live. An ephemeral present because it is the result of sleep and not of wakefulness.

We frowned at that rant. And some of us, pale and exhausted, exclaimed in terror: - But many of us have perished, Virgil. And many of us suffer painful wounds even now. Each one of us us hungers and thirsts. And we all have a longing, a desire to go home! Virgil, you damn fool, take us home or kill us!

And the calm voice croaked: - Could you tell me how you got to these shores? Could you tell me where exactly is your home and who you have there waiting for you? A face, a name, a description of a dwelling....

- It's... it's been so long that ... we don't really remember ... but ...

- A wish, valiant warriors, can be inoculated into the dream world. But a lifetime cannot.

Tell me who are you Dardans, your names? What deity protects your respective lineage?

Do you know who Anchises and Ascanius are?

At those words we chilled, no one really knew how to answer. Our breath came short, light lacked from our eyes.

We felt defeated, stunned as by the mightiest of hammers. Broken and in tears some, muffled and rigid others. It is here that the lineage of the Dardans ends. It is here that all our vows become smoke.

- Neither restless spectres nor images of the underworld-what are we, then?

Virgil's voice fell silent.

We waited much longer before we heard him speak again.

- Now the choice is yours... and I won't tell you how many times I have formulated this sentence...

A metal panel disappeared and in its place appeared within the wall an object of metal. It had a tubular handle placed upward and two grooves that prominently allowed it to be placed, in reverse, downward.

- If the switch remained upward the two prisoners will continue to sleep, their dream will persist and you will persist with it....

- And continue this horrible life suspended over the abyss? We may go mad...

- Perhaps we have already gone mad and lie in some forgotten catacomb...

- Or we are dead and this choice is the true figure of the afterlife....

So we expressed ourselves, without really knowing what one said to the other.

The voice resumed - If the switch is brought down the two prisoners will wake up and will be free, but you will plunge into bottomless nothingness. Sinking, perhaps, into eternity, as no one knows how dreams end their existence when the mind wakes.

We swallowed and remained silent this time, our thinking had reset, our mind could not calculate the heinous dilemma. We looked at each other as if we had to stick each other's swords in our bellies.

Virgil spoke again, and this time his voice fell like thunder: - To you the choice!

FINIS