



NIKÒLAOS THE MAN OF DREAMS

AND THE LEGEND OF SANTA CLAUS

ARMANDO LAZZARI



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**Nikolaos The Man Of Dreams ...and
The Legend Of Santa Claus**

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Lazzari A.

Nikolaos The Man Of Dreams ...and The Legend Of Santa Claus /
A. Lazzari — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

St. Nicholas: A man who has the power to manipulate dreams by travelling in the dreamlike dimension. The story of his heroic adventures and how fate will give him the nickname of Santa Claus. "Year 336 A.D. and Constantinople is the capital of the Roman Empire. On the throne reigns its founder Constantine I, engaged in palace intrigues and war against the barbarian invasions. Nikolaos, Bishop, protector and spiritual guide of the city of Myra, fights against the evil Pelznickel, a demon who threatens the peace of the city and the whole world through his Krampus. Blessed by God, Nikolaos has the power to manipulate dreams and to travel in the dreamlike dimension, where he will face a thousand dangers and dangers to thwart the plans of his arch enemy before becoming the hero of children, the one who brings gifts and hopes on Christmas night".

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Armando Lazzari
Nicholas The Man Of Dreams
...and The Legend Of Santa Claus
Translated by
Fatima Immacolata Pretta

May St. Nicholas guide the helm of my life in this stormy sea and with his wisdom illuminate
the path that leads me to God...

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

This novel is a work of pure fantasy. Any reference to names of persons, places, events, historical facts, whether they really existed or existed, are to be considered only literal expedients to make the narrative plausible.

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Author | Armando Lazzari

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Dedicated to:

To my sons Alexander and Nicole

&

To my wife Alessandra

A special greeting to Johnny J., so similar to Santa Claus both in appearance and for his big heart... my friend, give me an opinion from up there, commenting with your smile and your accent from Bologna that I will never forget...:

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Roman Empire, Anno Domini 337



Map Turkey



Constantinople



Commercial routes and Via Variago-Greece



Introduction



In our imaginary universe, everyone knows who Santa Claus, or Sinterklaas, is. Few, however, know that before becoming the famous big belly dressed in red, which on the night of December 24th crosses the globe on a sleigh pulled by reindeer carrying gifts to children, in about 300 BC, he was the Bishop of the city of Myra (now Demre, in southern Turkey) and his name was Nicholas.

Blessed by God, he was a man of imposing physique, strong, just, ready to help all those in need, both with his sharp wit and, if required by the situation, to the sound of slapping and thrashing.

What I will tell you here, are the deeds and deeds that made him famous among the people of that time and that prepared him to become the character we know today.

His most special gift? To make dreams come true...

Prologue



In the village the noises had been gone for several hours and the silence of the night would not be interrupted for much longer at least until the roosters gave their consent the day to rise.

But that was not one of the usual cold winter nights. It was decreed by a chilling howl that broke the quiet.

Everywhere large and small suddenly arose with their eyes wide open and their hearts throbbing with terror. Then chaos!

Those who had dared to look out from the dark, had seen their nightmares incarnate and walk the streets, sweeping and raging everywhere, taking possession of everything they encountered as they passed. The glow of the high moon in the sky left no doubt: those hideous monsters that raged through the streets were Krampus! Hairy and cuckolded demons, as invincible as they were cruel.

Merciless and swift as the worst storm, they grabbed almost all the supplies and disappeared swallowed up by the darkness of the woods from which they had come, leaving the poor inhabitants only the terror still nestled in their minds and the hope of a mild winter to survive.

Beyond the woods, on a hillock far away among the low grass of a clearing, the loud laughter of a group of men made their way through the crackling flames of a bonfire. On the ground, piled up, worn and shabby furs were thrown, painted black and red, adorned with chicken feathers, while some terrifying masks of horned demons were performed in mocking ballets.

"Did you see how they shit their pants?" said one.

"All whimpering and calling out for Mummy!"

"It was like seeing a bunch of chickens flying crazy in the yard! Cluck, cluck!"

The parody of frightened people generated even more hilarity than the imitation of the animal that man exhibited to his audience, no doubt due to the large quantities of wine swallowed. The least sober of all was also the only one to notice the anomaly.

"It's okay that I'm used to seeing double, but weren't we thirteen? Who the hell is that?"

Then the eye slipped where it shouldn't have.

"Look at his legs! He has legs shaped like a goat's hoof!" he shouted bewildered.

Everyone stopped celebrating and turned to the hooded figure who hadn't yet taken off his mask.

"Exactly... you mentioned me, my name is Pelznickel!"

Having discovered its face, the being showed its true horrifying nature and so, trembling with fear, men understood that what they saw was not a human being, but a demon.

"I've been watching you guys for a while. You've done a fine job in the village, I'm glad you did, and since your souls are black enough, I decided to give you a gift."

One of the scoundrels, a chubby little dark-skinned, sniffing out the imminent danger, tried to sneak away, but a bewitched hand, made of smoke appeared from the demon's body, was quicker than he was, and stretching too far, took him up unnaturally.

The man, incredulously, wavered furiously suspended in mid-air begging for help among the petrified glances of the others, who remained motionless.

"Let me go, let me go! "Please don't hurt me, I didn't even want to come tonight! They told me there'd be drinks and I'm just a drunk by vocation!" he begged.

"Don't worry, I don't want to hurt you, on the contrary, you will join my special army: real Krampus!"

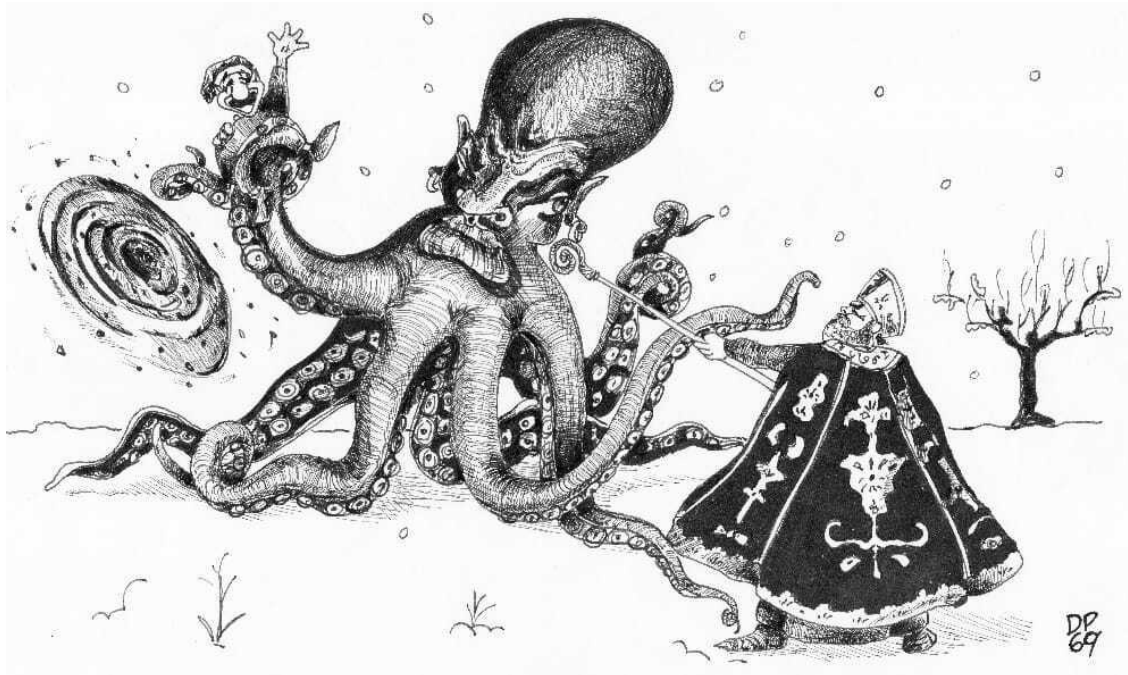
Other twelve other offshoots, similar to the tentacles of a gigantic octopus, came out from the supernatural being to grab each one its victim and creep into its mouth.

From that moment on, those men stopped being such and their eyes became as black as the night that had enveloped them.



Part I

The abduction of the three children



Chapter 1



Myra, Turkey.

Two hooded men moved swiftly through the cobbled streets of the city. One of them seemed highly doubtful.

"But are you sure this holy man can help me?"

The other, now fed up with the paranoia of his traveling companion, replied annoyingly.

"Again? I've told you countless times! When he was in captivity by order of Diocletian¹, his hands were wounded by blessed irons. It seems that these chains were nothing less than those that imprisoned the Nazarene before the crucifixion. From then on his soul was deprived of the ugliest part, and he was transformed into a holy man. If anyone can help you, it's him!"

"You must know that a few years ago there was an onerous matter nagging the blacksmith day and night. In fact, he had promised his three beautiful daughters in marriage to three brave young men from good families. The boys were over the moon because they were madly in love and couldn't wait to fulfil their dream and live a peaceful life together. The blacksmith was so happy, his thoughts so high that, alas, he forgot a cloth near the fire in the workshop. The flames, spreading rapidly, destroyed the place, reducing the blacksmith to misery and desperate for the impossibility of offering his daughters a decent marriage. At that point our dear benefactor came into play, who having always been his client and good friend, decided to help the blacksmith. He was so disinterested in his work that he wanted to help him without people noticing and admiring him, or as he says: *'that your left*

doesn't know what your right does'. He therefore wanted his action to be known only to God and not to men, for if it had emerged and had the honours of men, he would have lost the merit.

The man listening kept nodding with his head as if he had understood well, but in reality he still missed the meaning of the speech.

"He had great financial means and decided to act in the favour of the night, so he took some gold coins and enclosed them in a cloth, went out of the house and reached the dwelling of the unhappy maidens. As he approached the house, he passed his hand through the window grille and dropped the large bag on the ground. The sudden noise woke up the father who, having discovered the treasure sent from heaven, picked it up and organized the wedding of his eldest daughter."

"Well, I admit it was a very nice gesture..."

"Yes, but that's not the end of it!" he interrupted the other one to resume. "In fact, seeing that the girls' father had made good use of the money he had given them, he decided to repeat the gesture. You can well imagine the blacksmith's joy when he discovered a precious bag again. Thanks to these coins he arranged the marriage of his second daughter. Intuiting the benefactor's plan and therefore the possibility of a third gesture of charity, in the following days he tried to remain vigilant during the night. He burned with the desire to meet the one who had saved his honour. It wasn't long after that, one night, he heard the sound of the third bag falling down making the classic tinkling noise of coins. When the blacksmith spotted a silhouette that was fleeing quickly, he started chasing it and once he reached it he recognized it instantly. But he made him solemnly promise not to reveal it to anyone. Do you see what kind of man he is now?"

"Yes, yes, admirable... although I suppose the blacksmith's promise wasn't kept, otherwise it doesn't explain how you know about it, but surely you had to make a similar promise, didn't you?"

"Details, details... now, hurry up, we're almost there!"

The holy man was kneeling before the altar, immersed in the silence of prayer.

Although he was genuflected, his great size was evident: much taller and stronger than average, it seemed that his muscles were used to work hard, rather than prayer. The well-groomed blonde beard and long wavy hair, together with his ice-blue eyes, made him look more like a northern barbarian than a citizen of the Empire.

The haste that had guided them until then seemed mystically disappeared in the face of the solemnity of the moment, or more simply, neither of them was so bold as to interrupt it, especially because its enormous bulk, accompanied by the fame of those who know how to use their hands well, aroused fear even before respect.

After what seemed like endless minutes, one of the two sketched a simple cough, just to discreetly notify their presence, but the attempt did not bring the desired results.

The two of them, exchanging glances in agreement, gestured to encourage each other to try again with more emphasis. Thus they delivered ever more violent blows, until the Bishop was obliged to pay them attention.

"Brothers, do you need warm milk and honey, or did you want to tell me something important?"

The one who had addressed the needy lowered his head and clutching his hat tightly in his hands began to babble awkwardly.

"Yes, Excellency, it's like you say... I mean no, we don't need honey, although I agree that milk with honey is a great remedy for coughs and that's why I always keep some in the pantry... honey I mean, because milk after a while becomes sour and it's not good for cheese either, while honey..."

The other, seeing that his friend had become bogged down, decided to intervene to stop the river of absurdity that, overflowing, was uselessly flooding the ears of the holy man.

"I need your help! Last night, demons broke into my house, plundered everything, and before they left, they took the souls of my three children!"

The giant, grasping his eyes so much that it almost seemed as if his orbits were about to come out, rose up and, grasping the heavy bishop's staff with one hand, swirled him whirling in the air, thundering his disappointment.

"What? What were you waiting to tell me? Come on, lead me in haste to those children, and on the journey pray to God that he will come in time to save them, or I will vent my wrath upon your empty and useless heads with this stick!"

In a hurry the three of them left the temple, while the Bishop, still incredulous of the stupidity of the two peasants, grumbled with narrow teeth.

"Unconscious lunatics! There are children in mortal danger and they get lost in useless shackles!"

When they reached their destination, signs of devastation from the raid were clearly visible. The hiccups of the mother of the children could be heard distinctly, bent over their bodies lying in thatched beds and immersed in a deep sleep.

"Here they are, Your Excellency. They are wrapped in an endless sleep..."

The Bishop bent over the children and, as he did, unfortunately, those who had already seen such symptoms began to examine them.

"It's just as I thought... the souls of the boys are relegated to limbo halfway between life and death, we must act soon or... the worst will prevail."

The door suddenly opened wide and sneering monstrosities appeared on the threshold, maliciously peering at them.

"Oh my God, the demons! They're back!" cried the man.

Everyone gasped and fled back in terror. All except the holy man, furious at the mere sight of intruders. Foreboding what was going to happen, he grabbed his stick and prepared himself for the fight.

The monsters, whose leader of the pack was supposed to be the biggest, came boldly and showed the worst intentions.

"Nicholas! You finally fell into the trap! The time has come for you to pay your debts to our master, with your blood!"

The other hideous creatures, snickering, foolishly echoed their leader's last words.

"Eh! Eh! Trap! Trap!"

"Your blood... your blood!"

Nicholas, revealing his perplexities, frowned upon his forehead.

"And you think a shabby bunch of Krampus can really bother me?"

"You're a regular loudmouth! However, while we will tear you to pieces, the souls of the little angels you wanted to save will fly straight to the lands of my Lord, slaves for eternity, and you will not be able to avoid it!"

Anger took hold of Nicholas and the hand guided her.

"No more words!"

Swirling the stick in the air, he struck a violent blow on the muzzle of the first Krampus, who, unfortunately, had inadvertently crossed the threshold of safety distance. The jaw, broken on impact, distorted the creature's face in a comical grimace. The creature, pirouetting on itself, headed at great speed on the opposite wall. The others, without further delay, threw themselves screaming at the enemy trying to knock him down, those with nailed clubs, those with spears or sharp sickles. Every attempt to hit him generated skilful parades and quick responses that at first disarmed and then inflicted painful blows. Nicholas alternated the use of the crosier with his fists and slaps, settling them with great satisfaction and with all the power that his enormous bulk made available to him. Whenever one of the evil creatures was put out of action for good, it would dissolve, leaving a greyish dust and disappear forever into the limbo of evil. Much of the furniture was destroyed in the fight, used mainly by Nicholas both to defend himself and to put the enemy out of the game. During the clash, the Bishop had the impression that this group of Krampus was not particularly trained for

battle, given their lack of ability to coordinate with each other, and it did not add up. This was also confirmed by the ease with which he disengaged from attacks and how easily he managed to bring them down. One after the other all eleven demons were sent into the underworld, leaving only their wounded and crawling head in the corner of the room under the threat of the giant's coup de grace.

"You think you've won, don't you?" the Krampus insisted.

"Correct me if I'm wrong: you're alone, unarmed and on the ground, what do you think?" replied the man with the confidence of the winner.

Panting despite his condition and panting for his wounds, the creature spat a blackish mush into the ground.

"I may disappear from this world to the underworld, but you, dream man, will never find the way to bring the children back in time!"

The Bishop bent over the demon, grabbed him by his lapel, lifted him up to threaten him more closely.

"Indeed, I believe you will lead me down the right path."

In a grimace the being expressed all his hatred.

"I wouldn't swear to it, Your Excellency!"

Pressing a claw on the abdomen, the Krampus self-inflicted the fatal blow and dissolved in the hands and astonished glances of those present, while a last malignant giggle echoed in undefined points of the room.

"No! Damn him!" he yelled at Nicholas.

While not fully understanding what had happened, others did not escape the concern that appeared on the Bishop's face. Breaking the silence created, the father of the children dared to express his fears.

"Your Excellency, can you still do something for my boys?"

The holy man, although he sought concentration by squeezing with his thumb and index finger the area between the bridge of the nose and the eye cavities, had to surrender to the evidence of the facts: he had fallen into the trap! That group was only sent to slow him down.

"I... I'm sorry, but that thing was right, I don't think..."

As he was about to announce his defeat publicly, the unexpected solution arrived from the front door: a last Krampus burst in, upset by the long wait.

"So? How long does it take to... to..." the little dark demon abruptly suspended the sentence when he entered the room. Noting the absence of his companions and the presence of the Bishop towering imposingly, he sensed that something had gone wrong and decided to improvise.

"...to sell those branches? Yes, good cleaning branches! But I can see you're all very busy, so if you don't mind, I'd like to get out of your hair and..."

Nicholas' heavy stick fell to the ground a few inches from the demon, as a clear warning not to move.

"The next shot will go straight to your ugly face."

The black leprechaun began to sweat cold and, swallowing with difficulty, tried to pity the man with the furious look by kneeling at his feet.

"I beg you, Excellency, show mercy and magnanimity for an unfortunate being who begs for mercy! I'm a simple, pointless mistake! I shouldn't have become a Krampus, I'm too cowardly and incapable, think that they never let me take part in any armed confrontation!"

The master only recruited me because there was one missing to form the group of thirteen and I was looking for mushrooms that day. It's the truth, I swear!"

The giant grabbed her by the lapel of his shirt and gnashed his teeth like a furious mastiff and pulled against his face.

"No one can become a filthy Krampus unless he has first soiled his soul, but you're right, leprechaun, your gaze is that of a coward. Relax, your arrival was providential, and I need you, so I won't eliminate you. Not yet at least..."

"Oh, thank you, mighty and wonderful lord, I will do anything you command me, you'll see, you'll trust me, I'm just a lost sheep and..."

"Now, little monster, you must sleep" he warned him.

"Huh? I beg your pardon? Sleep? I don't mean to be irreverent, but I'm having trouble sleeping at this hour..." he tried to apologize for not understanding, but he knew there was nothing good in those words.

"No problem, I'll gladly help you," the bishop made clear in his own way.

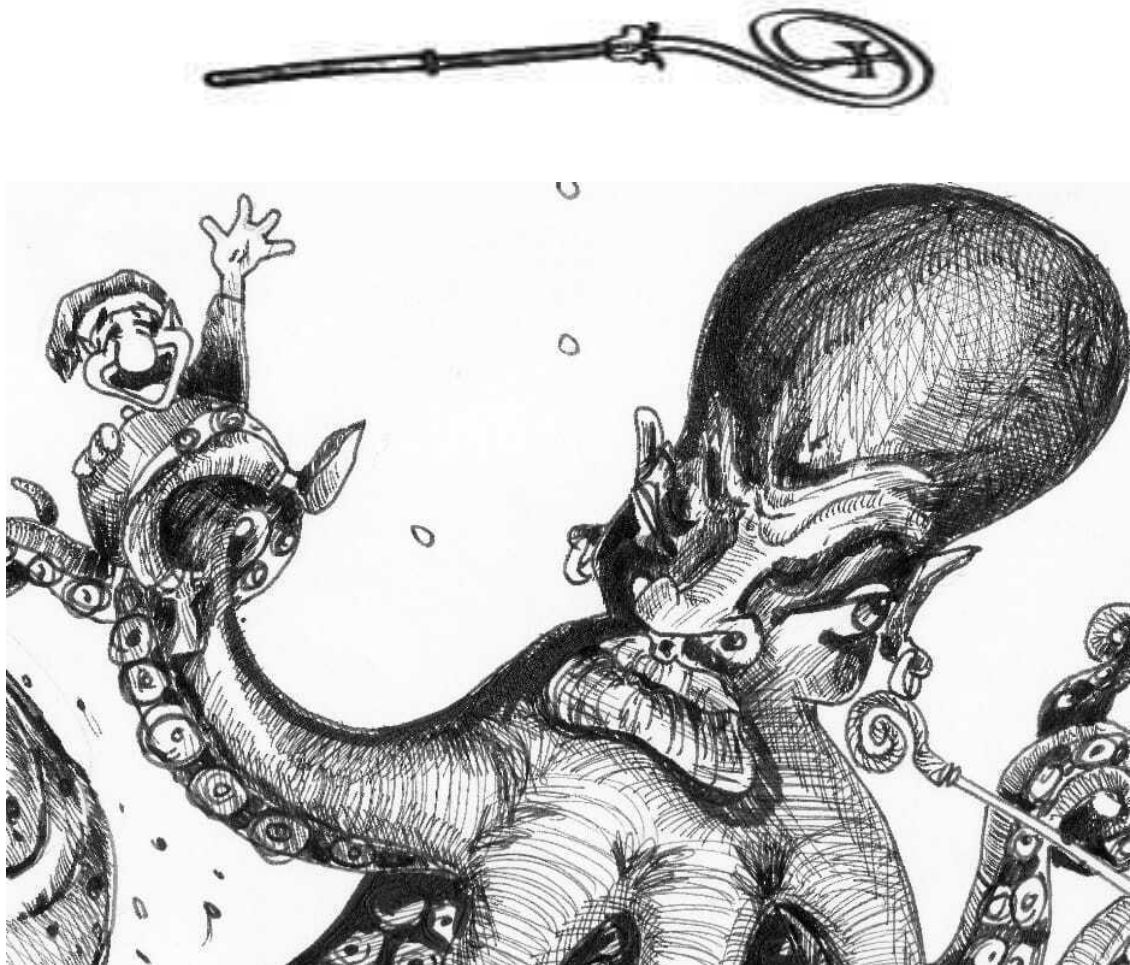
A well-aimed fist in the head was enough to knock the creature out.

"Well, sleeping pills administered, now it's my turn."

Noting that another bed had been set up next to the children, probably for the night vigil of the mother, he lay on his back holding the forehead of the Krampus with one hand and the crosier with the other. A white patina covered his eyeballs: a sign that the journey had begun.

Those present watched in silence without commenting, but confident that the Bishop knew what he was doing. Despite this, however, apprehension and anguish weighed on the hearts of the parents, only partially relieved by hope and prayer.

Chapter 2



What the Krampus saw when his consciousness was activated was a fairy-tale and surreal landscape, however incredibly realistic. With open mouths he contemplated the panorama that surrounded him without the slightest awareness of what was happening to him. He was awakened by

the weight of a large hand on his right shoulder, which shaken him insistently, but it was the owner of that hand that made him grow weaker.

"You're not dead, don't worry. Now, demon, hurry up, we've got a long way to go." Nicholas urged him.

"To go where? Could you be less cryptic and make me understand what's going on, please? If you brought me with you, it means you need my help, but if I don't know what to do, how can I ever help you?" he demanded to know the Krampus.

Nicholas sighed, he had no desire to talk with a demon, but he recognized that necessity required a sacrifice.

"You will be the polar star that will show me the way to reach the kidnapped boys," he acclaimed.

"Sorry to disappoint you, my friend, but I have no idea what you are talking about!" was his sincere answer.

The giant once again showed off his intimidating look on the little creature, sure that he would have all his attention.

"First: I am not your friend. Second: you don't need to know more, just walk in silence and in front of me."

"Yes, but where to? Come on, I have the right to know something, don't I? I don't even know your name. By the way, what is your name? I am Pétros the Moor, in case I want to use an appellation other than: monster, demon, goblin..." I will enumerate.

Nicholas was not accustomed to mistreating people he considered inferior, but that was not a person, but a diabolical Krampus, and that raised a wall of contempt that was difficult to break down.

"Pétros is enough for me. Then I do not judge by the colour of the skin, but by the colour of the soul. Anyway, this is the world of dreams, the infinite roads that unravel can take you everywhere, including the way to Hell, and this is what we are looking for, to recover the kidnapped boys before they reach it. Finding the right path is almost impossible, but you, as a demonic entity, are naturally connected with that path: your nature will guide us without you realizing it".

For the first time, Pétros found himself speechless and continued to walk the path that magically formed under his feet.

"Nicholas launched the bishop on the plate of education.

The leprechaun looked banned the giant.

"Sorry?"

"My name: Nicholas," he said dry without adding anything else.

A smile of satisfaction appeared on the face of the Krampus.

Every now and then, at the roadside, objects of the most disparate shapes appeared, which changed quickly depending on the perspective or intensity with which they were looked at. Monkey-shaped fountains erupted bananas that suddenly became flying cobs that croaked words backwards. Wavy palaces that grew out of all proportion until they were lost above the sky. Streets of coloured pebbles with junctions in every direction, including the sky and the subsoil, or ending in dark puddles.

Pétros walked regardless of where he went, letting his feet lead him, just as he had been told, and at every step the bricks were coloured bright red.

"This place is...crazy! It looks like the delusions of a madman!"

"In reality they are: your mind is unconsciously producing them, they are your fantasies, while I am only a guest."

"Incredible! Are you saying that if I concentrate enough and think about a wineskin, this could materialize?"

"It's risky to make explicit requests in dreams, you have to deal with your emotions: fears, anxieties, hidden desires..."

A large barrel materialized in the distance in the air, only to fall and crumble ruinously to the ground, sprinkling the road with wine, immediately sucked by a gutter that ended the work with a burp.

"Here is an example, if you had been more agitated the risk would have been greater and the fact that this place is a mental projection doesn't mean that we can't die".

The demon watched helplessly the wicked scene he was performing before his eyes.

"I doubt there is anything worse than the loss of an entire barrel of wine..." he found disconsolate.

Pétros' confidence was lost when he came across a fork in the road that led to a dark dirt path.

Nicholas, noting the indecision, thought to question him.

"Why did I hesitate? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know... I feel I must continue along that path, but at the same time I have unpleasant sensations, as if entering there was extremely dangerous, if not deadly..."

The big hand of the man fell amicably on the back of the small being, which for the movement advanced several steps forward and risked falling to the ground.

"Then it means that we are in the right place! Come on, let's take that road and keep our eyes open, from there on we'll get out of your mind and into the hellish meanders!"

"Hell...ish? Listen, I don't think I'm suitable for such a journey, after all, I've done my duty and you've found the way, so my presence should no longer be necessary and I..." he hesitated in fear.

"I still need you. You are an indispensable catalyst to get to our destination, so you will travel the road with me. Come on, move!" he was abruptly exhorted by the holy man.

This time the goblin received a less friendly and more eloquent push than the previous one, which spurred him on to continue in spite of himself.

The surrounding landscape was less surreal than the previous one, there was only a path that crossed a barren and barren area, rarely approached by shrubs and brushwood, immersed in a semi-shade that immediately gave little visibility, and then darkened until it became impenetrable as one looked away.

"You didn't bring flashlights with you, did you?"

"No. I only have my *rod*²."

Reading the misunderstanding painted on the face of the creature, he gave further details.

"The ribbon, the crosier...in short, the sacred stick!"

"Ah! Well, it would have been more useful to have at least a flashlight..."

The Bishop, sighing, tried to cut it short.

"I was in a hurry, I will remember next time, happy?"

"Oh, but you don't have to make me happy, I was just saying, and anyway we could borrow one from them." he pointed.

The man, alarmed, looked in the direction indicated.

"Here is the welcoming committee! I was just wondering when they would arrive." he exclaimed with the confidence of those who knew.

The leprechaun, misunderstood, showed off his best toothless smile.

"Fantastic! Finally, someone to chat with and not spell, this place was becoming a deadly bore!"

Nicholas clutched the crosier and put himself in a defensive position in front of the Krampus.

"Deadly is the appropriate word, if you will try to talk to him!" he informed him.

Now, beyond the torchlight, they heard the galloping of the hoofs as they galloped forward.

They had confirmation of this only when they glimpsed the black cloaks and the scarlet cloaks shaken by the wind.

"Black Sentinels!"

"Something tells me that they won't offer us a drink, will they?"

"As soon as we're within reach of their spears, they'll stick us like piglets ready for the spit. To them we are unauthorized intruders, to be neutralized without hesitation."

"Oh God, but how many are there?" observed Pétros, now that the proximity allowed for a rough estimate.

"A hundred...more or less."

"What? One hundred...you have a solution, don't you? Because you know very well who I am, and therefore you have foreseen what to do!"

"Let's say that for the moment I have an attempt at a solution...stay behind me, don't move, close your eyes, and don't open them until I tell you to do so..." instructed the Bishop, regardless of whether or not the little fellow had put the advice into practice.

The little one promptly obeyed, curled up as much as he could behind the red robe of the Bishop, closing his eyes with his hands, endlessly repeating all the scaramanic words he knew and forging new ones for the occasion.

While the knights proceeded in their frantic and incessant race, Nicholas counted the steps that separated them and prepared himself for the action that would save them or condemn them to a horrible end. Now it was possible to distinguish the features of their faces which, no matter how smoky, clearly expressed the evil that permeated everything in those lands. Mocking them with skeletal snickers, they already tasted the carnage they longed for. In their greed, they waved their brown weapons in the air, shaking them on the scarlet effigies imprinted on the shields and spurring the infernal mounts to accelerate the pace, while the man, with his impassive gaze, did not give in one step to the instinct of escape that would have won anyone else.

Then the right moment came. Nicholas lifted the stick in the air, whispered sacred invocations and vehemently thrust it into the ground. The earth trembled creating cracks that were lost on the horizon and a thunderous roar overcame every noise, while a dazzling light, radiating in the air, overwhelmed and swept away every rider, dissolving him in the ether like ashes dispersed by a storm.

Only man knew how long it lasted, because the leprechaun, enclosed in his imaginary isolation bubble, did not even respond to the various confirmations of ceased danger, forcing his protector to extreme measures. With immense satisfaction, he kicked the goblin's ass well placed, making him tumble until his head hit a stone placed between two boulders.

"Point! We should spread this game: leprechaun-ball!" the Bishop exulted sarcastically.

Pétros, apart from a few heartfelt complaints, was relieved that the man's plan had been successful. Having cleared themselves of dust, they set off again.

"Do you think we will run into other knights like those?"

"Certainly not black sentinels, but rest assured that we will encounter far worse creatures."

The answer was not the most reassuring.

The path ended in a narrow gorge that in case of danger would not have left to elusive actions. This worried Pétros.

"Uhm...I don't like it...I don't like it at all..."

"This time I fully agree, but we have no alternative, the only thing we can do is to hurry up and get out of here".

The words started a rumble behind them that was growing in intensity.

"It would seem like a kind of herd gone mad!"

"Run! Run! Whatever it is will soon overwhelm us if we don't manage to get out of here!"

The two of them began to run as much as possible in the hope of seeing the end of the deadly pass, turning from time to time to peek at the situation, but apart from the incessant noise, they were unable to see the appearance of the looming danger.

Only when their legs began to shake and their breath began to break, did they notice that their surroundings were changing. The high walls of the gorge, previously really close together, had now distanced themselves, allowing them to glimpse hope in an illuminated widening just a few steps away.

"Look! We are out!" said happily the Bishop.

Satisfaction was broken like an ear of corn trampled on, at the sight of the impassable cliff that presented itself before him. The deafening noise, though still far away, maintained a worrying and constantly increasing trend. The Krampus, in panic, clung to the Bishop.

"Oh mother! We are doomed! We are going to be smashed downstairs! Help me, I'm still so young to die!" he begged him.

"Take your little paws off me at once, or I'll swoop you in early!"

Nicholas began to scrutinize the surrounding environment in search of a quick solution, which he came up with a dangerously appealing idea. In the sky, croaking furiously, huge brown birds with long sharp beaks and featherless wings were circling. On the head they had a bone ridge and some hooks were coming out from the ends of the wings, while the tail, not particularly long, ended with an arrowhead bone.

The narrow slit red eyes and forked tongue of a snake gave the measure of their wickedness.

The holy man bent down to the ground and grabbed a pointed pebble, leaving the little goblin banned.

"And what would you like to achieve with that?"

"As a child I had little strength, but good aim..."

Loading the launch with the mighty arm, he evaluated the necessary time and the right trajectory to trace, then hurled the bullet towards the flock. The stone described an arc that, if in the ascent phase did not hit any target, in the fallout touched the face of a bird. It was enough to attract the attention and to unleash its warlike nature. Nicholas grabbed Pétros by the shoulders to wave him in the air like a flag. The little demon was first surprised and then, in desperation, he started kicking and screaming expletives, alternating them now against the Bishop and now against the raptor, who swooped down towards him with his mouth wide open in a single chilling scream. When the impact seemed imminent, Nicholas with a quick move through the animal to the side and knocked it down with a fist on the back. The painful beast crashed to the ground, providing an opportunity to grab and immobilize it. When the animal recovered from the momentary shock, it tried to react by struggling to catch its attacker, but the man's muscles continued to press down, preventing him from freeing himself.

Meanwhile the goblin, who watched the titanic struggle unfold, took a look at the road behind them and for the first time he could see clearly what was chasing them: a pack of enormous quadrupeds armoured with spines and equipped with terrifying horns, anxious to pierce them and then throw them into the void of the ravine.

"Whatever you have in mind, do it quickly! They're practically on top of us by now!"

In response the giant limited himself to a desperate gesture forcing with a last decisive effort the animal to surrender. The bird, exhausted, stopped fighting. When Nicholas realized he let go and relaxed his muscles a little too long contracted, enough to notice that there was no more time left.

"Hurry, hold on tight to my belt!" he shouted.

The leprechaun did not let himself repeat it and, clutching himself to the man with all his strength, closed his eyes praying for his salvation.

Nicholas gave a considerable pat to the ass of the beast, who had crouched down tame, awakening its wild nature. The reaction was immediate: the animal rose up and vibrating its huge wings, it flew free again, bringing with it, clinging to its legs, the two illegal immigrants.

The puffing herd arrived just as Nicholas and Pétros were detaching from the ground, so that the Bishop was forced to withdraw his legs in order not to be hurt by the long horns that were trying to pierce them from below. Nicholas, as if he had always been used to rule winged monsters and knew all their secrets, directed the beast to the other side of the ravine, tugging now one leg to turn.

The leprechaun, already anxious about the precarious position, became even more concerned when he met the other birds of the group, visibly annoyed.

"Ouch! Watch out for those! I wouldn't want them to think of us as unexpected snacks!"

In fact, the beasts, as they approached, tried to catch them several times, each time missing the target by a whisker.

Fortunately, Nicholas' improvised skills proved to be valid to avoid the more enterprising birds, while to discourage the more insistent ones, he had to resort to decisive kicks on the muzzles.

When they landed safely on the opposite side, Pétros staggered several steps before regaining his balance.

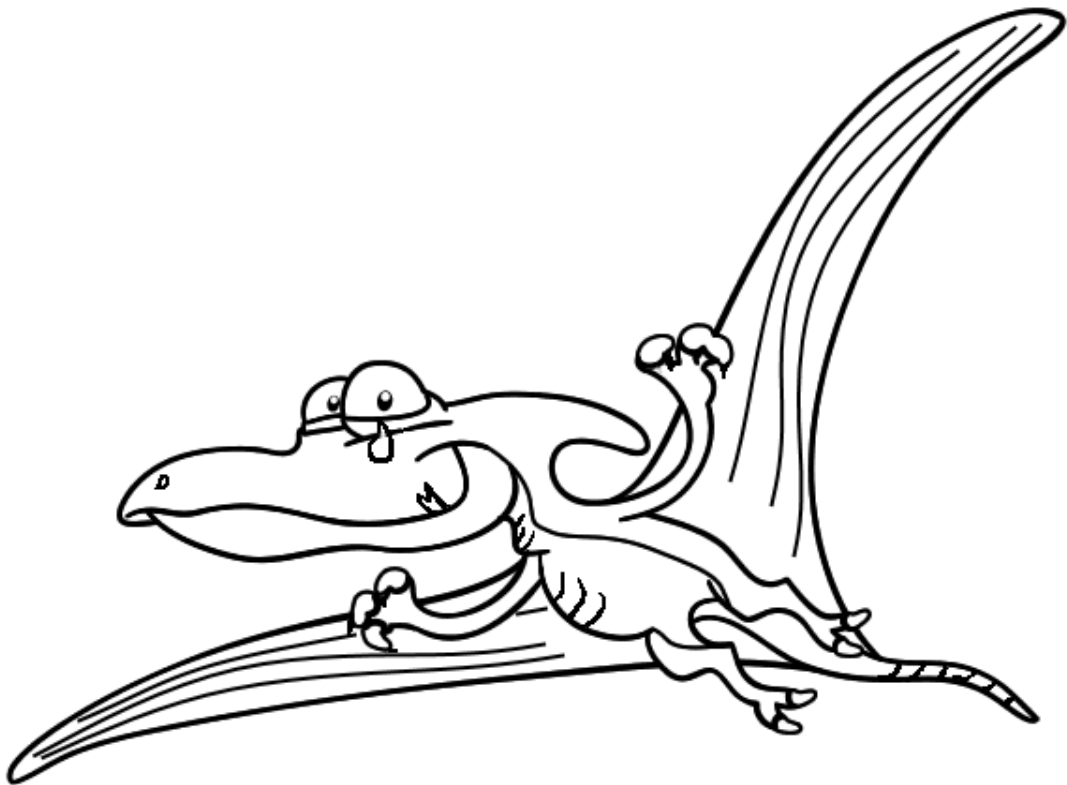
"We did it! Unbelievable!"

"I had no doubts as to the plan, I had more doubts as to whether or not I was going to let you devour yourself...you've done well, go on..."

"Sure! Perhaps, however, the chances of survival will increase if in the future someone doesn't use me as a little worm hanging on the hook!" the little creature complained furiously.

"How many stories, I had calculated all the details".

"Calculated? Damn you, I risked both a heartbreak and being caught and all served on a single plate! Next time, please *calculate* with your own skin!"



Chapter 3



The torrid heat that enveloped Nicholas and Pétros was more and more oppressive in every moment. This triggered a long process of complaints that evaporated in the bishop's indifference.

"Is there much more to be done? If we follow this way, we will arrive in liquid form, as long as we don't spill out on the ground dried up like jellyfish in the sun! This is one of those rare times

when I would prefer fresh and clear water to wine... not good wine, of course, I would still think about that..."

"I always remain with the hope that your tongue will dry out before everything else...anyway, did you want water? There you are satisfied!" he pointed out, incredulously so for what he saw.

The road was interrupted in front of a large river shrouded in a thick blanket of fog which prevented one from seeing the opposite bank. The banks, although swollen with water, gave the impression of overflowing from one moment to the next.

The little creature rushed to drink to satiety, followed more prudently by man.

"Let us only hope that this water is not poisoned..."

"But what are you saying! It's exquisite, try it! And then who would ever poison an entire river of this size?"

"Have you forgotten that we are crossing an infernal region? Everything that surrounds us is hostile..."

A voice that seemed to come from beyond the grave intruded into their reflections.

"The water is not poisoned. The danger is that which dwells hidden within it..."

The two identified a figure hidden by the fog not far away. He was lying on a barge near a pier, the features of his face were obscured by a large cone hat, but the long, filamentous white beard made one assume that the boatman was an old man.

Nicholas approached the ferryman with suspicion.

"We need to get to the other side, can you help us?" he asked him without hesitation.

The figure first emitted a subdued giggle and then raised his head and looked into the eyes of the interlocutor.

"It depends on what you have to offer..."



The being was not a man, but a dried woody creature that stared at him through two dark and deep cavities. The beard was actually made up of myriads of threads woven and woven by insects similar to silkworms that moved creeping through the holes scattered on the talking trunk.

If the Bishop was surprised, he did not give him the least bit of notice. What was different instead was the reaction of the elf.

"And what freak of nature would you be?"

The being did not resent the insult and slowly moving his neck he stared at Pétros.

"I am the solution that you are looking for, but I have a price: I want the stick held by man.

The indignation exploded from Nicholas' lips.

"Forget it! This is a sacred symbol, ugly, putrid pile of wood! Ask me something else, and I will see to it that you are satisfied."

The Krampus, feeling himself backed by the giant, echoed.

"Yeah! Or give us a good reason not to make a bonfire with your roots and take your ramshackle boat. I'm sure that a nice bonfire would brighten up the environment!"

The menace did not break down the being at all.

"In that case, even if for a short while, you would clearly see both the ravenous beings jumping in the waters ready to devour you, and the insidious reels that in a few moments can swallow you into the deep abysses. Without my knowledge of the river you would never get to the other side. I have watched you well and you possess nothing, except the stick, that might interest me, therefore..."

Pétros decided to continue on the path of threats.

"I'll bet you I'll cut your arms into little sticks that are only good as toothpicks, until you decide to take us to the other side"?

The being lifted the long arms, which were submerged. When they came out of the water they showed their true nature: they were the oars themselves to move the ferry.

"Am I wrong, or did you use the word bet? Has it been a long time since I played *aleae*? How about betting a passage? If you win, I'll take you to the other side without asking anything in return, if I win, I'll only take you in exchange for the stick".

The Krampus approached the bishop's ear to whisper his idea.

"We accept and leave it to me, master! With the dice I make real miracles!" he strutted his stuff.

"I am not your master! And then, do you realize what is at stake? I can't afford to lose the win, it's not just any old stick!"

"Yes, I understand that, but trust me, I never lose! Trust me, it'll be a joke, I have my tricks, and when I play, I just win!" he tried to persuade him while Nicholas watched him silently.

"Does the damnation of your soul concern the game?"

"Unfortunately yes. Let's say that the game component played a fundamental role... the fact is that I ask you to trust me!"

The security of the being convinced the Bishop to give in, also because time was running out and that was the only way to cross the river and reach the boys before it was too late. Then, if things had gotten really bad, he would have remedied it in another way. He certainly had no intention of complying with the absurd request of a demonic entity.

"All right, I accept, he will play for me," he declared.

The boatman simply nodded his head.

"Excellent decision, master! Well then, you've got a jumble of fireplace logs, what are the rules?" Pétros informed himself.

From one arm of the rower developed a secondary branch that generated another arm. From one of the woody nodules of the hand, dice were formed that rolled to the feet of the challengers.

"Mine. Three dice, two shots: the opening shot and the shot of fate. The first roll is preparatory and has no value, the second is the one that decrees the winner. Whoever gets the highest point wins".

Pétros mockingly picked up the dice and shook them in his hands ready to roll.

"The set design was a bit crap, but suggestive, however, it's all clear. If you don't mind I'll start..."

"One moment! To preserve the integrity of the game we will use the *turricula*!"

Also from the fingers, a small dark wood tower was formed decorated with an opening at the top, shelves tilted in the middle and an exit hole at the base.

The leprechaun remained forbidden for a few moments.

"Well, I didn't expect this, and it certainly complicates the matter a little...but it won't be a big problem...at least I hope so...let's do this, you do the honours: it's your first shot!"

The being with phlegm picked up the dice and let them fall into the cavity of the turracula, which swallowed them ravenously, and then, after a series of jingling due to the collisions on the descent, spit them out on the way out.

"Six, four, four... it's your turn."

Pétros, before throwing the dice, tightened them in his fist, blew gently on them and invoked a past love as a good omen.

"Beautiful Planesia, my love, guide my gestures!"

The dice rolled inside the turracula and came out shortly afterwards to be promptly read by the entity.

"One, one, one. It's the Dog's shot: nothing you want will come true. It is not a good omen.

The Bishop's furious look was more than eloquent.

"Traitorous female! Don't worry, master, it was just a warm-up and then his shot is not as good as he wants to make it look, he foreshadows the advice to abandon the elaborate project!"

Without delay the wooden being made his shot of fate.

"Six, six, two: success, but not without difficulty. I made a good shot, you'll have to try harder than before if you want to beat me".

"Mind your own business, you peacock bonfire subspecies, or I'll use those ridiculous little legs of yours as ladles!" Pétros insulted him in order to make himself great, and then he continued his superstitious rituals.

"Be that as it may, there is only one woman who has never betrayed me and who will help me to win: Mother, your son is calling for your support!"

The three dice, thrown in unison with an elegant movement, were channelled into the ebony structure by going through the three inclined planes and then they appeared on the doorway, slowly showing each one the face chosen by destiny.

"The stroke of Venus: six, six, six! Take this and take it home, a pile of sawdust gone bad!"

Nicholas himself was incredulous about the result.

"Yes! I knew that Mother would not abandon me!"

The Krampus staged a ridiculous ballet in honour of the result and in contempt of the being who contemplated the point silently, without betraying any emotion.

"I admit the defeat. I will ferry you without compensation, get on."

The Bishop was constrained to take by force the goblin who did not stop dancing.

The river, as big as it was, looked almost like a sea and the boatman skilfully moved the boat avoiding dangerous eddies. From time to time large dark silhouettes jumped out of the water and then plunged back into the abyss with powerful thunders. When the shore was seen in the distance, the boat stopped, leaving the two perplexed. The explanation came with the emergence of some clawed hands that, anchoring themselves to the raft, tried to surrender, while the boatman, stretching his wooden tentacles, had immobilized Nicholas and tried to take away his crosier. From the water, in addition to the webbed hands, also the scaly busts of the beings who were trying to get on board emerged. The heads were those of green fish with large mouths equipped with long and ravenous teeth. A dark slime covered with light-coloured sticky slime dripped from the snout.

Pétros kicked the creatures' snouts, preventing them from getting on board.

"This could also be a fun game, the difficult thing is to find lots of ugly heads ready to be broken!"

"Do something! This vile creature is trying to steal my crosier!" rebuked the Bishop.

"If you haven't noticed, I am doing something too! A little patience and I'm coming..."

The boat, tugged by aquatic beings, waved dangerously.

"The Pastoral is the only chance we have left before those things chew us up!" emphasized the Bishop.

Grasping the concept, screaming, the pixie jumped directly onto the root wrapped around the stick.

"You wretched, scrappy player, let go of the bone!"

With his teeth he began to gnaw the wood until, with a firm tug, he was able to tear it permanently. In doing so he lost his balance and found himself tumbling towards the edge of the boat, risking falling into the waves. Luckily, or skill, he managed to grab the bishop's leg just in time, remaining hovering with his legs immersed that debated furiously in terror of being devoured by the abyssal monsters.

"Ah! Hurry up! I don't want to become a stump!"

"Hold on tight without fidgeting, I'll take care of it now!"

Grabbing the stick with both hands, I will strike a single precise blow to the head of the boatman, detaching it cleanly and sending it far away in the waves.

"I'm sorry, but you asked for it."

The roots that imprisoned his ankles suddenly unwound, giving him freedom of movement.

Nicholas grabbed the panting pixie and returned him unharmed to the centre of the raft, while repeatedly thanking him. Then he noticed five threatening fish heads resurface.

"Get down as low as you can, I'll teach you a good shot for your new game!"

With a single blow, rotating the stick 180 degrees, he hit all the facing beings in the face, pushing them back.

"Damn, in my game you would have surely won! Now do you have any idea how to get to the other side?"

"To tell the truth, yes... ready for the grand finale?" Nicholas winked at him.

As he lifted up the wingman, he dropped him dead on the surface of the water. At first contact there was a glow, followed by an explosion that generated a tidal wave.

"Hold on tight!" he shouted.

The powerful thrust pushed them on the waves with the speed of an arrow.

The air blew impetuously on their faces, distorting them funny, pulling hair and cheeks backwards and channelling itself between their teeth to freeze them. At the same time, sneaking into their half-closed eyes and clothes, it generated adrenaline shivers throughout their bodies, thrilling them like never before, until they arrived on the opposite shore.

The raft finished its run on the ground, sticking into the ground and shattering into a myriad of pieces.

The two were thrown out with violence, but fortunately they ended up on a soft sandy beach.

Intact, they brushed by the sand that had slipped in a little bit everywhere and they recovered from their sense of bewilderment.

Pétros was the one most enthusiastic about the incredible crossing.

"Wow! That stick will never cease to amaze me!" he commented, staggering again.

Chapter 4





Nicholas and Pétros, moving away from the beach, found themselves in a completely changed environment, shrouded in a bitter cold in the middle of an unexpected snowstorm.

"Now there is also the snow on the beach, you can't see a damn thing! Master, I don't know how much longer I will last in this cold! But how long until the goal is reached? I don't even understand if we're going around in circles".

"Get it over with this master, or I swear to you that I'm leaving you here! We cannot stop: we would freeze in an moment! But you're right, we must be careful not to lose our way and to understand if we're going in the right direction".

By sticking the crosier in the snow, Nicholas carved a furrow that was not covered by the new snow and remained clearly visible even from a distance.

"And you are only doing this now?" complained Pétros.

"Next time, instead of rambling on about it, you come up with an idea!" the Bishop replied, disappointed.

"Have you given him a name? All famous swords have a name," asked Pétros, pointing to the winner.

"Ah, yes? In what book did you read it precisely? If you know how to read."

"I know how to read my name, and I know how to do a lot of things that would amaze you..." Pétros pointed out in a raucous manner.

"And in any case it is not a sword, but a sacred stick, and the wood with which it is made...it is even more so than you can imagine!

"But you wield it like a weapon."

"Only in necessity. If you want a name we could call him: *the exterminator of chatty goblins and cheaters*."

"Hey, you offend me! I may be chatty, but I'm not a cheat!"

"Really? And the dice game?"

"Skill! With turricula it's almost impossible to cheat!"

"Exactly, almost..." emphasized the Bishop.

"Apart from the fact that I immediately realized that that creature was infamous and treacherous, we didn't have much choice..."

The Bishop put his hand on his mouth to shut him up, carried him to the shelter behind a rock and whispered.

"This is it... look down there at the bottom."

In the distance, above a promontory, you could see a cart pulled by animals carrying a large metal cage. Inside, one could make out the three children crouching and cold, while outside, standing guard, were two giants who looked like ice. The caravan was mysteriously standing still waiting.

"Here are the children! We have finally caught up with them!" rejoiced Nicholas quietly, so as not to be heard.

"It's about time...obviously now you have a plan to bring those two enormous things down, don't you?"

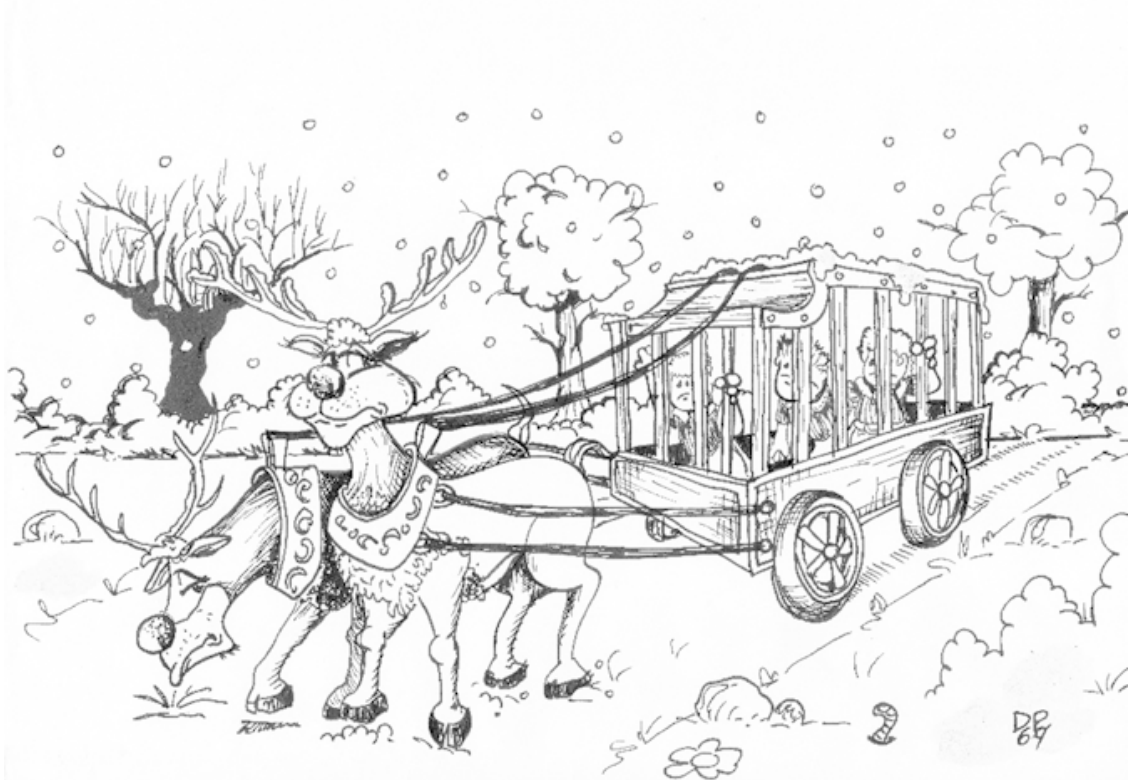
"Are you referring to the Golems? Nothing that a few well-aimed shots of my pastoral hasn't already destroyed".

"You mean you've faced similar monsters before and come out in one piece?"

"Actually the Golems I shot down were made of clay, while those look like ice, but I don't think there is much difference. What worries me is the hooded coachman. From here I don't understand how dangerous he is."

He squinted his eyes to better focus the image.

"So?" Pétros interrupted him.



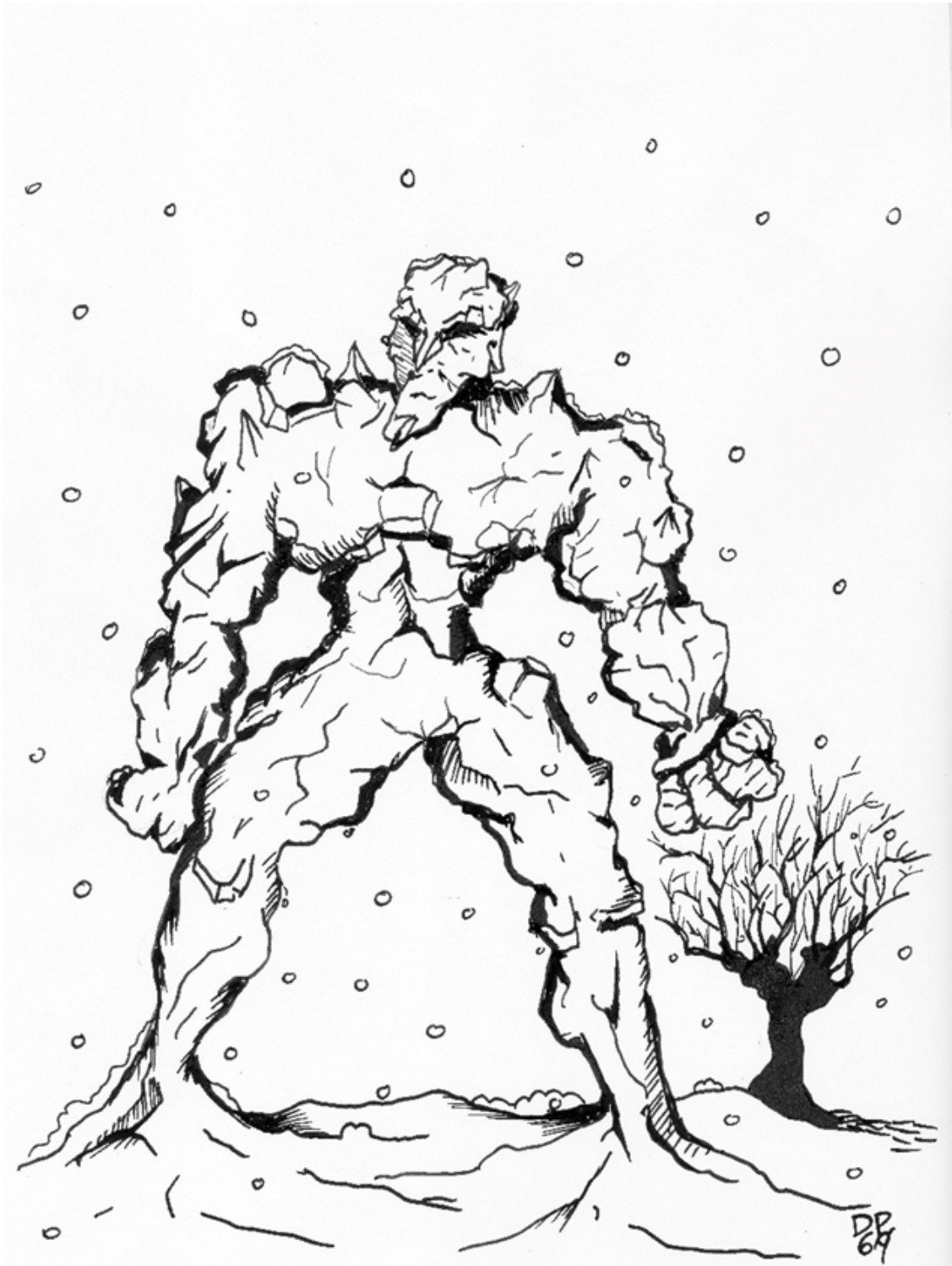
"So we're going to make the most of the surprise factor. The Lord will guide our actions!"

In defiance of danger, the Bishop sneaked up on one of the Golems from behind and beat him with fast but strong clubs on his legs until he fell to the ground. The second Golem, as soon as he noticed him, went towards him and tried clumsily, but at the same time dangerously, to hit the man who managed to dodge the slow assaults. With the first of the giants out of combat and the other one who could not dodge the hammering,

Nicholas felt the victory in his hands. Pétros himself had become swaggering and sadistic by kicking the one on the ground.

"Take this! And this one! Come on, at the end of the day maybe I'll use your ears to refresh my wine!"

"Don't waste any useless time and go and free the boys!"



"The children! Sure, I'm going now!"

As he was about to make his way to the wagon, he felt a frozen grip grasping his ankles and making him trip.

"But what on earth..."

Pétros noticed that the fragments of the broken legs had gathered to form small Golems that were poaching him, while in the original one the limbs were growing back with an alarming hurry.

"Ouch, ouch! This is not good...absolutely not..." he stirred while Nicholas, intent as he was in the struggle, was unaware of the evolution of the situation.

"Will you stop babbling and go to the cage?" he took it up again.

"I would gladly do it if these stupid popsicles would let me go, and if...watch your back!" he shouted.

The downed Golem had completely recovered and was heading threateningly towards the Bishop who found himself surrounded.

"All right, I admit that the ice ones are much worse than the clay ones, but that doesn't make them indestructible!

The more the Bishop inflicted damage with fury, the more quickly the creatures regenerated, bringing discomfort to man. Even the little leprechaun found himself facing more and more mini golems that prevented him from approaching the children.

"At this rate they will overwhelm us! We must find a way to destroy them for good!"

A quick reconnaissance of the surrounding area, made an idea flash in Nicholas's mind.

"The coachman! During the battle he never moved, perhaps he is the summoner, we must eliminate him as soon as possible!"

With a desperate gesture Nicholas rushed close to his companion and freed him with a single blow of the annoying beings that were threatening him.

"Go, you are free!"

He found out too much about the move: so much so that he received a frostbite from the colossus on his back that he threw him far away. His strong constitution allowed him, even if with fatigue and wobbling, to get up and fight again. Surely with his determination he would have resisted long before collapsing, or at least he would have done everything to give the goblin time to stop the Summoner.

When the Krampus finally reached the chariot on the promontory, a deafening noise announced the formation of a large black vortex that was opening right in front of them. The hooded figure, until then silent, rejoiced.

"This is it! The portal has finally opened!"

The face of the being, now in evidence, revealed itself familiar to Pétros, who felt the blood freeze.

"Pelznickel!"

When he invoked its name, the demon turned holding up two clay tablets engraved with arcane symbols.

"So you have recognized me, my little servant..."

The leprechaun looked at him with hatred and repugnance.

"How could I forget who made me what I am now?"

"You were a foolish drunkard and cheat. I gave you the opportunity to be something more, but I see that you have failed miserably... Listen to me, I will be magnanimous and I will give you one more chance: as you see I am currently busy eliminating that puppet you brought along and I can't move, but you can. Take the souls of those three children and throw them into the black vortex so as to send them directly to Hell and do what pleases my Lord. If you do that, I will forget your ineptitude and promote you to general! You will be the servant commander of my servants!"

On the face of Pétros appeared a seduced smile of those who savour power.

"And will I have food and wine in abundance?"

"Wine and food to make your belly explode!"

"And will my orders be uncontested?"

"You will have to obey only me, your supreme master!"

"It's a truly captivating offer..."

He approached the demon with nonchalance, more and more thoughtful.

"Where are the keys to the cage?" asked the goblin.

The being gave him a satisfied smile.

"I knew I wasn't wrong about you! They are attached to my belt, take them quickly!" he exhorted him.

Nicholas, still engaged in the struggle, was at the end of his strength. Even though he hadn't heard, he realized that something was wrong and that the imp was about to make an irreparable gesture, and he cried out with all his energy.

"Pétros! What are you doing? Save those poor boys!"

The Krampus, after having grabbed the keys from the demon's waist, opened the door of the cage, took the terrified boys and led them to the portal among Pelznickel's glances of satisfaction.

"Well done...well done, my slave..."

The Bishop, distraught with pain, watched the scene helplessly.

"No, for God's sake, don't do it!" he implored.

Pétros, having arrived in front of the abyss, gave a strong push to the boys, but not toward the black hole, but far away from it, causing them to end up in the deep, soft snow.

"Quickly! Run!" he cried out to him when he saw them coming back unharmed.

The demon, having realized what had happened, screamed angrily.

"What have you done, you fool!"

To complete the work, the goblin took the two tablets out of the demon's hands and threw them into the portal, which sucked them dry. In a few moments the two Golems shattered into a thousand pieces, falling inert on themselves and finally giving the man the chance to catch his breath.

The boys, recognizing the face of their Bishop, rushed to him in search of help. As soon as he saw them, he hugged them tightly and wrapped them with his cloak to protect them.

Pelznickel, blinded by fury, took on the demonic form of an enormous cuttlefish and with his tentacles he firmly grabbed Pétros, who had tricked him.

"Damn you traitor! You have condemned yourself to the worst of ends, you will suffer the torments of Hell for all eternity!"

"I will be no longer a slave to anyone, better dead than a servant!"

The tentacles lifted him up into the air with the intention of throwing him into the black hole.

Nicholas decided first of all to bring the boys to safety, he held them tight and closed his eyes and disappeared with them.

When he opened them again, he found himself in his bed with the three boys who, although stunned, were safe and finally conscious.

The parents burst into tears of joy as they saw their healthy children again and began to bless incessantly the Bishop who had brought them back among them.

"Feed the children, I still have a score to settle."

Lying down again, he focused, his eyes revolved once again and his mind was once again in the world of dreams. When he appeared there he was right in front of the demon while he was still holding Pétros in his coils. Without thinking twice, he stabbed the monster's stomach, pushing the crosier as deeply as possible. The demon cried out in excruciating pain, releasing his grip. Pétros thus found himself plunging into the void in the direction of the infernal abyss, heading towards a terrible destiny. But just when he saw himself doomed, he felt himself grasped and dragged away from danger: Nicholas had managed to catch him literally on the fly and get him to safety. The rescue action, however, gave the wounded demon time to escape.

The two of them rested in the snow and looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

"Thank you for coming back to save me...boss."

"Well, boss, it's already better, and in any case I would never have abandoned a friend..."

They laughed and helped each other get back on their feet.

"So, when are you thinking of finally getting us out of here?"

Nicholas turned thoughtfully towards the beasts.

"In a moment...I was thinking about these splendid animals...they look like fallow deer, but they have something different...they are decidedly larger, and the colour of their coat is different: thicker and without spots, apart from the strange lightning-shaped mark on their foreheads...they give me the idea that they don't belong to this world, or at least not entirely...they too seem to have been kidnapped and brought here against their will.

"You're right, some of them are undoubtedly females, but they still have horns! And now that you make me think about it, the beings encountered so far all had something diabolical and in any case anomalous about them, while they seem to be tame".

Observing carefully, they noticed that a big chain was sprouting from the snow that held them prisoner.

"This confirms our hypothesis..." Pétros said, lifting it up.

"You know what I'm saying to you? That they deserve their freedom too!" Nicholas said.

In a short time they managed to break the chains by releasing them.

"I don't know where you are going, my friends, but surely any place will be better than this..." Nicholas said goodbye to her.

The beasts, almost as if they understood the words, gave a puff of response and, after giving them a glance of deep recognition, took to gallop and magically flew!

The sight of the animals running free and happy in the air left the two of them amazed.

"Unbelievable! Who knows to which race they belonged".

"I don't know, but from the thick fur I'd say that they were Northern animals. Flying deer...that's what I really missed!"

When they were found in the real world, Pétros perceived a strange sensation of dizziness, and, touching his head, he realized that something had changed.

"But...but...but...my horns! I no longer have horns?"

Nicholas watched him attentively, muttering his thoughts.

"In principle you're right, but in reality you're left with a couple of reddish bumps that aren't very nice to look at...I hope they disappear...in the meantime I suggest you use a nice headgear.

The peasants, still celebrating the happy success of the enterprise, wanted to pay back in some way, offering their saviors every kind of food good: cold cuts, cheese, wheat and a green pointed hat, which in the heat had been unintentionally stacked among the gifts. The Bishop, when he saw it, hurried to anticipate the elf.

"Here is a beautiful hat for you! You cannot refuse: you would offend these good people".

Pétros sighed, put it on and humbly thanked him while he was carrying the gifts and walking with the Bishop.

"It doesn't look bad for you...you could use it as a work uniform."

"Work uniform?" asked the astonished little man.

"Of course, you have to make a living, and my diocese needs a handyman. Do you have any experience?"

"Before that damned Pelznickel enlisted me in his ranks, I was one of the best carpenters in my city, then because of gambling debts I had to do things, let's say...undignified..."

"The past is the past, let's leave it behind us, every man has the right to a second chance and you have earned it. In two days it will be Christmas, I am entrusting you with an assignment: for that date you have to build three wooden rocking horses, I want to give them to those poor boys to try to partially erase their painful memories; don't worry about the tools and the material, I will give them to you when we get home..."

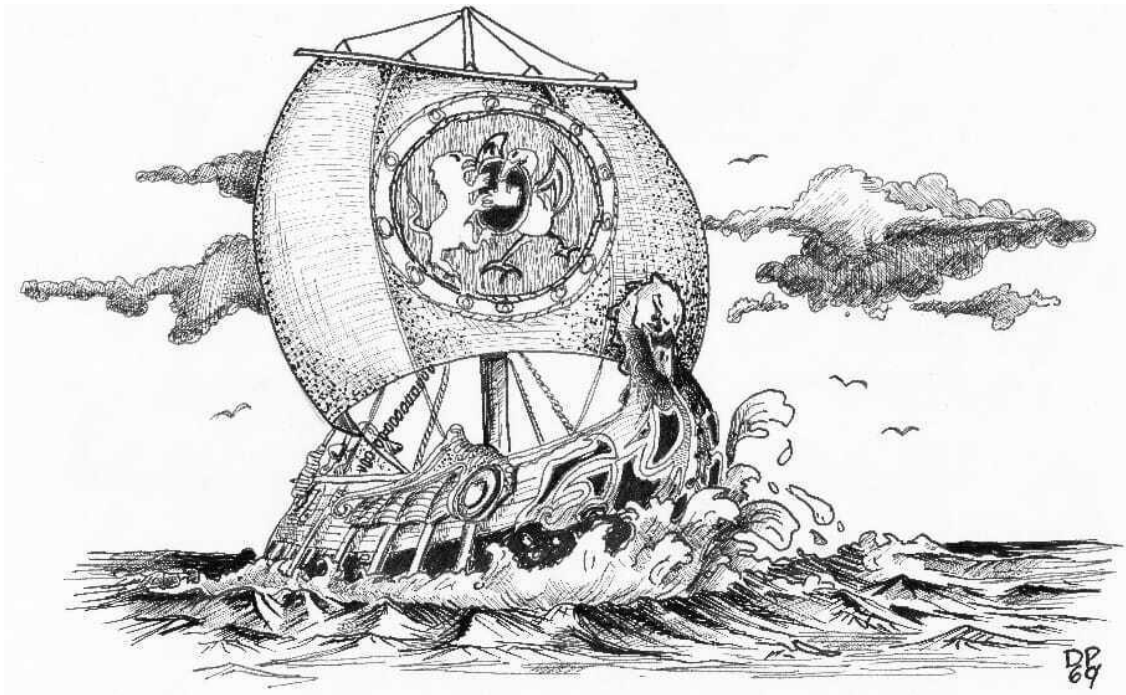
Pétros with a smile repeated that word to himself, savouring it as sweetly as he had not done in a long time.

"Home..."



Part II

The cursed oil jar



Chapter 5



It is when darkness falls that the dark forces love to act, protected from the shadows, to hide their wickedness.

Some monstrous creatures had positioned themselves, according to orders, in the neuralgic points, while others, grinning quietly, sprinkled oil on the fields following in detail the great plan.

None of the inhabitants could imagine what catastrophe would fall upon them, something that would mark them forever...

When a red light suddenly shone in the sky, many were fascinated by the unusual phenomenon, which generated hilarity. In reality it was the signal to unleash Hell. The red abandoned the sky to colour the fields, the fires spread so quickly that any attempt to stem them was useless, the destruction was total and every crop was reduced to ashes and smoke, condemning the population to starvation.

Among the despair of many, who watched the disaster in astonishment, there was a voice that brought thoughts of hope.

"We ask the Bishop for help!

"Yes! That holy man is the only one who can help us!"

"Hurry, let's go!"

So it was that a delegation left for the diocese, hoping that their bishop would not abandon them.

When the loud sound of the clapper finally succeeded in waking up Pétros, some time had passed. With a staggering gait, the little man walked towards the doorway mumbling words almost at random between yawning and yawning.

"I'm coming...I'm coming...but who is disturbing at this time of night? Thank heaven that I open the door, Nicholas would first have beaten you and then, perhaps, he would have asked what you want..."

When he opened the door he was confronted by about twenty men whose faces, blackened by smoke, were illuminated by the light of flashlights.

"Uh...I guess it's not a burnt roast, is it? Nicholas! Nicholas! I think there's a problem!"

The large delegation had gathered in a semicircle in the presbytery around the bishop reflecting, while the little helper walked nervously here and there, causing more than anything else irritation.

"The matter is serious, Excellency..." began one of the group.

"Not a single grain of wheat has been saved, and we don't know how to feed our children..." continued another one.

Pétros rejoiced, happy to have found a solution.

"Found it! We ask the Emperor to provide us with some of his, they have so much of it at the capital that he won't mind giving us a few bags of it!"

Nicholas shattered his dreams like ceramic tiles thrown to the ground.

"They have so much of it precisely because they don't give anybody any, not even an ounce, and then a few bags would never be enough for everyone? It would take at least half a load.

Without losing heart, Pétros brought up another one of his ideas.

"Let's assault a passing ship and borrow the cargo!"

Observing the grim look that the Bishop gave him, the little man became even smaller and tried to make up for it in his own way.

"...obviously without hurting anyone...and then returning the stolen goods...not even that way, is that it?"

"I say: are you stupid, or what? It's called piracy! And apart from the fact that it is immoral and against the laws of God to take possession of the things of others by force, didn't you think that you would then have the entire imperial fleet hunting you down as long as you live? Leaving aside the repercussions for the city! Think before you shoot such idiocies!"

The helper resented the reproach.

"I only wanted to be of help!"

"Well, so you're not!"

"Then say your idea, because you never like other people's ideas! I really want to know how you hope to convince a ship loaded with grain to call at our ports and give us all the goods, in defiance of the imperial laws!" the little man challenged him.

The priest's gaze changed its expression: at first it was absent and vacuous, as if it were dull, then, as if emerging from a long apnoea, it returned to normal and even gave those present a slight smile.

"Finally you said something useful!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"You're joking, aren't you?" replied Pétros, believing himself mocked.

"I never joke when I have visions."

"Visions? What visions?"

Nicholas lied on the ground among curious expressions and unexpressed questions.

"I'll show you, stand next to me and stare at the ceiling. Would you, please, give me your coats as pillows?"

The two of them found themselves with their faces facing upwards. Pétros was embarrassed, but he had witnessed in person the wonders of mankind and was convinced that this occasion would be like the other, then he remembered the last time he had received a handful and his tranquillity suddenly disappeared.

"Boss, can you assure me that I won't receive another punch in the head?"

"The other time we were in a hurry and I didn't know if you would cooperate or not, this time there will be no need, just follow my instructions. Start by relaxing."

The helper took a deep breath of relief and tried not to disappoint the expectations of his principal.

"See that blue dot at the top? Fix it carefully, then slowly open and close your eyes five times. Good. Now keep them closed and think of the sound of the wind blowing through the sails of a ship, along with the lapping of the waves crashing against the hull..."

Pétros did everything he was told, but did not notice any change, at least until, sure of the failure of the experiment, he decided to open his eyes again.

"But where..." he wondered in dismay without finishing the sentence.

What his eyes saw was undoubtedly the wooden pier of a boat and the slight rocking under his feet confirmed it.

"We are aboard the *Ule*, a *muriophoroi*⁴ granary ship docked in the port of Alexandria. They have just finished filling the hold and are ready to set sail for Constantinople, where they will unload the cargo that will end up in the Emperor's granaries," explained Nicholas.

The little guy looked around impressed.

"All right, I don't even want to try to understand how you know these things, but I have to ask you one question: how did we get here?"

"We are not really in this place, but I only projected our minds to it. To be precise, this place is what the captain of the ship sees in his memories while he sleeps".

"Did we end up inside the captain's dream?" asked Pétros.

"In a certain sense...even if this is the initial phase, in which the real world is prepared as a base, to be then remixed with the fantasy of the various memories".

Nicholas tried to capture every single detail in search of something useful, until he spotted it.

"Look at that red glow down there, you can bet it will turn out to be interesting!"

The glow pulsed uninterruptedly and like a flashlight guided their steps towards the target, but when they reached the halfway point, the surrounding landscape began to oscillate forcing them to stop so as not to fall, while the source of light, slowly sinking, was sucked by the axes of the ship.

"And now? What kind of joke is this?" claimed Pétros.

"The captain has entered into the deepest phase of his sleep, and his memories are merging with his dreams...it will now be more difficult to discover the origin of that light.

An imperious wind began to blow against him, becoming increasingly overbearing.

"Boss, is it really so fundamental to know?"

"That's one of the captain's unconscious memories, if he marked it that way it means it's certainly important."

Despite the proximity, the deafening noise of the wind forced the two of them to scream.

"But important for what?" Pétros wanted to know.

"To save the ship from shipwreck," replied Nicholas with ease.

"Shipwreck? Will you stop telling me things as if they were the stew of a stew?" the little guy complained.

"I was referring to the shipwreck which I saw in my vision and which had nothing natural, but seemed to be a malignant work!"

The ship was now moving more visibly, and the water splashes flooded it with every rocking, worrying Pétros.

"So this is the storm that is going to wreck the ship?"

"No, it's only the captain's fears that are agitating his sleep, but which prevent us from discovering the truth." reassured the Bishop.

"So what are we going to do? Do we wait for him to take a chamomile and then try again?"

"We must identify the captain in this place, in his human likeness, and calm him down. Only then can we talk to him and ask him for information before it is too late!"

"I don't know about you, but I don't see a damn thing!" complained Pétros.

"You're right...let's try to create an entrance which will give us the right visibility..."

The Bishop began to wave his stick, describing a semicircle in the air which formed an invisible shield, unassailable by water, which allowed him to see despite the storm.

"While you're at it, couldn't you also create a canopy? I'm soaking wet!"

"The rain is not real, be satisfied and look around you!"

"Yes, of course...as unreal as the golems were, I still feel like my bones are broken!"

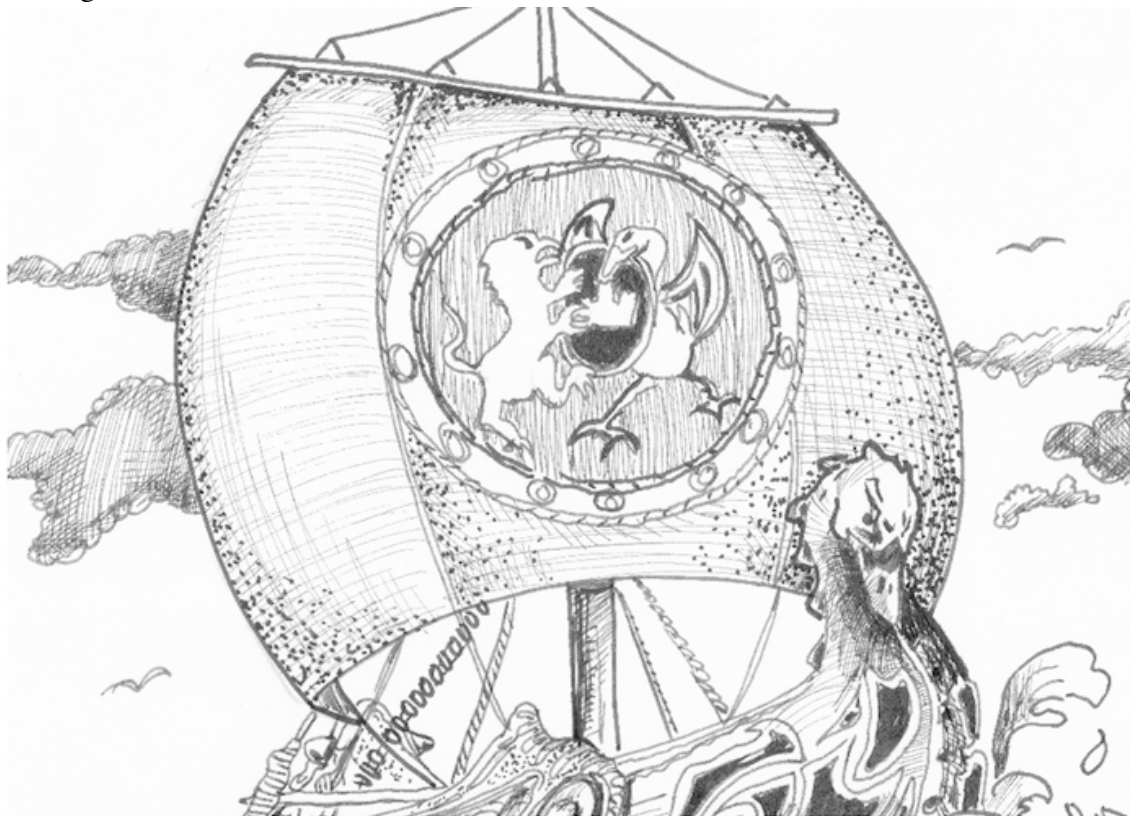
"It's only the unconditional reflexes of your mind, and..."

"Found!"

This time it was the goblin who interrupted the Bishop.

"Over there, I glimpsed the figure of a man!"

With a great deal of effort they tried to approach the aft cabin, on which was the captain intent on tinkering with the *clavus*5.



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