

## CHAPTER I

It was one of those mornings of the ages when renewals renew after the general oblivion and extinction of everything.

The spiral of life is reconnected up above by passing back through its point of apparent death. Out of the end, the beginning comes again... And, after an immeasurable nighttime, came an immeasurable morning...

A huge, muddy, volcanic continent was floating on the fuming sea.

Along the shores, the liquid element was still thick, the earth still almost fluid. They became differentiated from each other slowly, painfully and arduously, decanting their mixture along with the initial androgyne that gradually withdraws one of its joined parts from the other, to split in two and fall, to the left and to the right, into the place of the separation.

The unity of the Cosmic Wedding gave way to the wounded opening, the fissure, the differentiation, the solitude.

Cries, rage, fear and fury had manipulated the elements, then the immeasurable upheavals had grown relatively calm, moving on from widespread disasters to localized earthquakes. On this continent, vast regions were becoming safely habitable. The animals here, to a certain extent, were losing that constant distress that had kept them migrating.

Starting already in age-old generations, the Giant Men had settled their nomadism far inland, on peaceful lands where they built enormous cities.

They barely remembered their ancestors who, before the Time of Fear, had lived along the sea, only to flee afterwards, for generations on end, hounded by the horrors of the sky and of the earth, endlessly hounded and decimated...

Although the interior lands had grown peaceful, there were still large zones, especially coastal areas, where volcanoes continued to vent their fury. There were still storms on high and in the depths, still rumblings underground, and at least during the calmest periods, there persisted an incessant purr. The borders of these perilous zones were recognized by the fact that no one could walk there without feeling a shudder in their heads, emitted from below. There it was "like Before."

Tormented by ancestral fear, the Giant Men had banned these places. They never visited them. They never talked about them. And the west was both cursed and sacred.

There, faults continued to open, swallowing up trees laden with birds. And it happened so quickly, sucked into the chasm in one big gasp, that they could not even spread their wings! There, the mountainous ramparts split in two, releasing mighty rivers that had been held back up to that time, while other mountains, opposite, rose up as dams. The liquid masses poured in, destroying virgin forests, drowning all animals—a rolling deluge! The subsequent earthquake closed the access to these gaping mountains. The rivers resumed a modified course beyond, once again sloping down to the sea, leaving behind the region completely transformed into a stagnant lake.

This lasted an excessively long time, deserted and silent, sleeping under the white sun or storming with the winds. From the floating foam, aquatic plants were created, then veritable woodlands with deeply sunken roots. Forms lived in the water, fighting one another. Packs of eggs clustered together. Slimy animalism emerged, painful, random births, imprisoned by steep walls... Then, in one convulsive night, new chasms sucked in all the water and closed up.

So, a swamp, filled with putrid silt, carcasses and rotting wood, evaporated in the flat light. The ground oozed. Watercourses snaked around. This lasted as well. A time and times.

Little by little, the animals repopulated. The air streams carried seeds, dust, pollen and insects. Then came the ravenous birds with their fertile droppings. When the savannah became tall and luxuriant, large reptiles appeared, attracted by the abundant growth. Would they get out of the mud? Were they stuck in their protective burrows by lethargy? The predators came later to this rich hunting ground.

This lasted. A semblance of symbiosis created a balance in this part of the world... But then the land dried up and there was no trace of water. The animals left. All the aquatic creatures had already perished. The rest died of thirst, strewn hither and thither, because the way to a fluke spring was long...

And, during time, during a time of nameless duration, it seemed that it would never rain again. Everything turned into dust, the ground turned from black to gray, then even paler, almost white,

changing into rancid powder tossed about by burning winds. Strangely, fire would sometimes flare up and scorch through like a passing snake, devouring this powder. Big bones and barren trees tangled their ruins. They crumbled with a ghastly noise... then, suddenly, the center of this desolation gaped open a purple seam of lava!

For a long time, for ages, the volcano was active. Its smoke covered everything. Its pasty lava flow spread out, boiling with large bubbles. Slag and ashes built up along the edges. The crater rose up... It never rained... Then, it rained. Another deluge! This lasted. Still another age. The fire and water warred with dreadful hissing, the explosions of opposing planets.

Then the volcano, drowned up to its yawning mouth, turned back into a little lake, set very high in a mineral ring, looking down over a liquid region where it rained gently, gently, for ages...

And this went on until it was named, in the memory of the Old Giants, "The Land of Eternal Rain"... Like it had been named before, deep down in their memory, "The Land of the Fire that Never Ends"... Or, according to the secret of the ancestors, "The Land of the Dead Dust"... And far, far back there was another name that could no longer be pronounced.

Fog covered almost all the land. The layers of clouds, very dense, very low, did not lift, barely moved. Over almost all the valleys loomed a dreary twilight, a funereal aura. Leaf-eating monsters led a downtrodden life there, lumbering on when they exhausted their pastures. And the intense humidity, good for vegetation, hastened regrowth. So much so that these monsters just had to walk in circles, and they thrived effortlessly.

Moreover, they were inoffensive, silent and lacking in intelligence. They didn't see much with their big, white, bulging eyes that could move independently on each side of their muzzle with its drooping jowls. The milk produced by their females was drinkable and so abundant that it flowed freely. Other creatures followed the white trails of this excess—insects, reptiles and all the parasitic animals lapped it up.

The Giant Men who inhabited this world hated the fog in both the chasms and on the peaks. But they loved the milk! So, they went into the valleys only on short expeditions to hunt or to milk. They never stayed, convinced they would fall sick, despite their vital power. They said that certain plant intelligences and certain hidden stones fed on human lives there by a kind of absorption of desire.

Apart from these tasks, which were honored because they were dangerous, the Giant Men preferred to live on the High Plains, in their tranquil lands, far from the volcanoes. These plains got sun and the fog never rolled in except during the bad season.

In this populated region, there were still some those odd mountains, black and shiny as jade, on which nothing grew and to which they attributed a celestial origin; The Sun Sleepers, or in the language of the Giants, the R'Lil.

They also said they were the condensed seed of the sun, drops fallen from the summit of the origin, sleeping creatures whose sanctity lay in their sleep. They adored these harsh jewels of nature, despite looking like gloomy mausoleums. Traditionally, they considered the region a very propitious area. They knew that their oldest migrations would not have stopped and built for posterity except in the vicinity of such landmarks.

Were these the very same Sun Sleepers to which the successive waves of ancestral exoduses had once come? They did not know and did not look for the difference, satisfied with being there, with having built.

The R'Lil, the guardians, the guarantors of longevity.

All day, these black mountains sparkled, reflecting countless fires onto the polished ramparts of the colossal city of metal and stone on the High Plains: Kobor Tigan't.

I, Kébélé, was living there too, in my way, already old, always old. The lives of the Giant Men were longer than those of the oldest trees. But still they marched by me without a wrinkle on my body changing. I was so insignificant that no one noticed me. In my immutability, I always incarnate the negligible amount.

Moreover, sometimes I would go away for long periods of time. Therefore, people had plenty of time to forget a figure that was so easy to forget for anyone not interested. In such cases, my face never is just a dull, gray, shapeless mist in the poorest memories. And when necessary, every trace of me is completely erased. I am not an historical individual.

For whom I am responsible, I am more like a state of being, a meeting place, a balancing point, a nurturing environment, a rest for perfection or, in some cases, a mysterious door opened for a mysterious two-way trip for knowledge. I am inseparable from the effect I produce. And this effect, in the memory of those who have benefitted from it, remains so striking that it completely obscures the memory of my presence, however potent it may be...

Over against the Sun Sleepers, there was another mountain, the tallest of all, one of a kind, covered with flowers and fruit trees, rife with easy game, veined by beautiful rivers, honored by birds, a paradise of sorts.

It was bursting with colors and so fragrant that, from a distance, you could recognize its scent among a thousand others. Built up from the base between the natural ramparts that rose only a third of its height, it stood out for its gigantic mass. It dominated everything with its size, shape and spirit. In the distance, it seemed to stand in isolation, welcoming the first ray of the morning sun at the tip of its cone—an extraordinary white flash, almost tragic, that sprang violently over the horizon like a weapon being unsheathed...

Under the moon, which was very low and very fat and really blue, the mountain turned into sapphire, adorned with a flight of phosphorescent nocturnal butterflies.

It watched over a certain point of the land beyond which the Giant Men had never ventured or, at least if they had, they had never come back.

It formed a border that was known on only one side. Nothing was known of the other. Some people claimed that the mountain was completely different on the other side, dark and barren, ragged, dangerous. These were sad people who were the butt of jokes since most people believed the contrary, saying with obvious pleasure that the mountain was even more beautiful on the other side, inhabited by a population of large white birds with golden heads who played with lightning.

The name of this mountain was Kah'B'La.

I often preferred to stay in the city. And I saw both sides since I was no more involved in the taboos of that time than the cloud floating overhead, watching...

My travels also took me occasionally to the western coast, along the edge of the vast sea. Volcanoes crowded around there. No one except for me ever went there. This could have been a result of the persistent earthquakes, which made it dangerous enough. But the real reason had deeper roots because the ancestral dread was connected to the west.

The Giant Men called the region: The Great Over There or, if you prefer, in their language, the Great Va-Hôh.

Without knowing anything specific about it, without wanting to know anything, they passed down the horror through tradition, like a racial imprint.

For them, the west was the region that they could only give the name Va-Hôh, in itself a source of discomfort, unseemly, almost an insult to morality, above all synonymous with one of those unspeakable and permanent threats that might be warded off by alluding to it as little as possible. There are things like this that grow stronger in the thoughts of men.

Every time the storms of the bad season returned, they caused panic in Kobor Tigan't because the winds carried with them sounds and odors that supposedly came from the Great Over There. To remedy this, they burned scented herbs on the terraces and wore strong perfume while horns and drums drowned out the noise of the west wind.

In the Great Va-Hôh, I used to sit on a rocky bluff in the middle of a half-circle of mountains facing the sea. From there, one could see far in the distance.

The breeze, which often changed direction, ferried thick fragrances, sulfur or iodine in turn, followed by an inseparable trio of scents: rotted soil, ashes and, strongest of all, the bitterness of the volcanic fire, visible in almost all of the fissures.

The light, sometimes blinding, sometimes so faint that it was nothing but a bit of filtered daylight, would carve out or wipe away the faces of gods or demons on the rocky outcrops. The color of the rocks, red mottled with green, as shiny as if they had been polished, and spontaneously organized into indecipherable architectures, added deeply to the feeling of solitude and hostility, of Elsewhere.

This was the secret theatre of that devouring femininity to which we owe the beginning of every race and which demands the timely return of extinctions. This was where the dreadful genitals converged, whence the first-born came and whither the last dead inevitably returned to be swallowed up.

She who reigned there said, "I spawned you. I reabsorb you. But I am different from you."

Yes, this was the fief of the Different Woman... The true identity of that power was veiled from my clairvoyance by a kind of gleaming magnetization. But I knew her well and I knew what I was dealing with. The obvious sign was to be found at a certain distance...

Around my bluff, noises and movements all over the place kept it in a permanent state of catastrophe. The underground commotion spread to all things. The turmoil below ground shook the peaks. Down below, the soil, black or yellow depending on the location, rippled occasionally. The chasms gaping everywhere bellowed. Water, steam, sulfuric mud and lava, poured out. On the smooth surfaces, holes suddenly opened up. Almost everywhere, ashes fell and stones bounced around. Heavy falls, one after the other, distorting the savage tones.

Although there was no trace of man, there was also no trace of animal or plant life. Sterile, virgin, without generation, nothing but the land, unstable rock, the heights doomed to collapse, a sky full of conflicting clouds and the colorless sea, which a blinding white light turned even whiter. A great, ponderous sadness loomed.

The terrestrial putty had not reached its definitive state. It was preparing other things than what was already there. It would not rest for many cycles of stars. It needed a long time to be kneaded, dried and re-moistened, a long time for its architectures to crumble, to sink its ruins in the sea, the mud, the ash and dust so that higher, more ephemeral peaks might once again grow out of the grueling gulfs. Rise, fall, turn back, open, close, for a long time, passively, as if hopelessly in search of a supremely distant perfection. Ruins upon ruins, constantly decomposing, building the mysterious future.

Along the shore whose contours changed continually, the sea, thickened by the volcanic ashes, steamed, barely disturbed by heavy folds. Its apathy contrasted with the terrestrial activity. It did not flow freely, only coming to life in open waters. Far off, it foamed in infinite motion, with bright, flashing clusters. The diamond line of the horizon sparkled.

On the shore, no sand, nothing but a beach of yellow mud, riddled with bubbles and boiling in places near the lava flows. The light burned hard. The stones turned white, flaked. Their edges standing out against the sky shined like metal. The water evaporated; the mud cracked into vast geometric plates. The odor of the subterranean fires rose up. Around the volcanic craters the fires buzzed like a billion swarms. Sparks and flames flew out of all the cracks. Sizzling, answered by sudden flashes shooting up in all directions. A panic, a clash of undisciplined forces.

The place became a glowing forge. The heat grew stronger along with the intensity of the light. All of a sudden, something snapped, turned back in this shimmering universe, some clouds, which no one had time to ever see coming, burst and with a tremendous stench of ozone, let loose a terrible rain, reddish water that flowed down into great gullies, and loosened entire blocks.

In the double thunder of the sky and the earth struck by the falling rubble, everything crumbled, was shattered by the liquid lashing. Swathes of earth peeled right off the peak of the mountain, exploding loudly as they fell onto the muddy shore. Torrents of pebbles went rushing into the sea while waves, so powerful that they leapt over the thick coastal waters, raced in from the horizon, strong and seething, crashed into craters. Under this water, the lava flow let loose shrill hissings as it turned into jets of steam.

The downpour stopped... Had it really happened? Without transition, a kind of dream replaced the violence. It was another world, shapeless, featureless, unlocated. Everything everywhere was smoking, evaporating. Veils of ash, grey powders, the sulfuric layers and all the fumes blended into a fog. A twilight, an opaque time during which nothing could be seen, neither sea nor horizon, nothing solid, nothing but an aural landscape of muted sounds: lumbering flow of lava, purring of underground fires, lapping of muddy bubbles.

A bitter wind blew. The clouds were routed, swept away, shredded. The mists dissipated, strips of fog rolling back in all directions, melting away. The sea rose up all at once, visible as far as the horizon, colorless. The sky was bare, without awareness, the sun stationary, haggard... The wind turned into a breeze carrying scents that wove, strand by strand, a strange composite harmony...

Oh, how far were the High Plains of Kobor Tigan't! Far away from the most sheltered heart of the continent but, especially, far into the past.

For, although this coast of the Great Va-Hôh endured in some way in its genesis, the race of Giant Men came to an end.

It had come from the west in bygone days but it had forgotten, no longer wanting, no longer daring to remember. It wore itself out in that place, incapable of renewal. Of course, the flood that would later carry off its last vestiges, would also come from this anarchic west, from the inexhaustible west.

Thus, the junction of two times, which had become too different, would be accomplished. The new beginning would rejoin the end for a tranquil submersion and the reign of a unified age. Until, gradually, the same differences, the same distances develop, with subtle variations in rhythm. Evolutions that diverge until they are vastly far apart: one stubbornly persisting in a youthful disorder while the other, stemming from it, already weakened, drags along its enfeeblement and does nothing new. It is the offspring that wilts before the old tree. The lineage to which the progenitor does not pass down all the mana, keeping it for itself, and with it, for itself, wild youthfulness. "You came from me. But I am different. I prevail. Because I am the Different Woman!"

This mother earth holds herself back. She lets her sons leave, those innocents who believe that by leaving her they are going far away from her! Without moving from her chaotic bed, she measures how fast they go. She knows it well, this mother, since she circulates in their blood. They constantly move faster, farther. She persists in her magic, not aging as they pass on, reaching the end of themselves after their denial of her. For, they no longer want to know her. Their race dies advanced and lost. They can go no further.

Then, the beautiful cruel mother sets out. The Different Woman reaches her old sons. The intelligent head of this serpent rejoins her absurd tail, sees herself in her own distance. She clamps down and bites and is renewed, heir to her own fruit.

Flood, earth and sky mixed up! Two ends of a single formation that seemed always separated from each other are brought back to the same point...

The middle lands where the Giant Men live are protected behind a defense of mountainous barriers. It was not impossible to make one's way from Kobor Tigan't to the Great Va-Hôh because there were natural passages. But, of course, it would have been necessary to leave the hospitable heights and be ready for a journey full of physical hardships, mental constraints and dangers of the three worlds.

Any determined or independent man would certainly have succeeded. But only if he forgot the tales of the old Huge Mothers, those druids of a sort, those bards: the B'Tah-Gou, who hold sway over public opinion.

That was the hardest part of the undertaking because these old women wielded an almost magical influence on the brains of the males.

They told of such things, so persuasively, that they froze the blood of the proudest of men, removing any vague desire for adventure. Moreover, by a kind of deeply imbedded mental depravation they grew indulgent. They asked for more because it was finer to have one's personal B'Tah-Gou. It was an indication of caste, a sign of intellectualism, a refinement.

They chose B'Tah-Gou in youth, either by joining a group or finding one on one's own. They went to hear her in the evening and get advice from her—they started thinking through her. The Huge Mother became the Brain. They brought bosom brothers to drink in her words, in a drunken binge of oddities. Groups occasionally visited each other. The most successful meetings turned into collective delirium because the Storytellers had highly developed gifts of invocation. They were the storerooms of racial myths and a real armory of secret words, of verbal formulas.

A B'Tah-Gou did not move around, did not touch anything, she simply spoke. But with such art! It could be said that she possessed the Word. The tone of her voice was altogether special, very deep, very low, very hoarse. A B'Tah-Gou was appreciated because she made the air vibrate when speaking. And those listening felt the physical effect deep in their chests.

A whole ritual of respect surrounded the Storytellers. For example, you could never touch them. The slightest touch was improper. You stayed three steps away. You greeted them, spoke and looked at them freely.

They did not hold conference in the morning, only in the evening. Each in the back of her dwelling, they started speaking at nightfall, often without even waiting for their listeners to arrive. They could be heard chanting from outside. The men entered, in silence, one by one, and sat in a semi-circle. The incantation of the legend grew and led unerringly along the winding thread of an imagination that never was at a loss. The listeners rocked in place, contributing throaty hums at times, marking the rhythm, participating with short responses. The night passed. They would forget their bodies. The B'Tah-Gou bore away their minds.

The Storytellers lived to be very old, their art increasing with age. The more decrepit their bodies grew, turning gray and grainy like stones, the more alert their minds became.

Those fortunate ones who possessed the oldest B'Tah-Gou wore belts that set them apart from others. They ranked higher than the other men and walked ahead of the other groups.

Spouses and mothers hated the Storytellers for the hold they had over husbands and sons and also because they were sterile women, a dreadful blemish in their eyes.

Nevertheless, this single activity of the mind was not enough for the men. There were brave ones among them, in particular the collectors of Dongdwo eggs who went down from the High Plains into the Calamitous Valley for this harvest.

Many superstitions surround this Valley. The B'Tah-Gou take pleasure in adding to them, but they are careful not to cast the slightest prohibition since they love those eggs and know that there is nothing more pressing for the men than to offer them some on their return.

But, apart from that, truly, this Valley is in a bad place. So deeply hollowed out between such steep walls that the fog never lifts. Everything there is damp. Everything is hazy. Everything is as if swollen with a secret mental existence, a diffused intelligence, floating everywhere.

People have to travel through it with no bearings, walking on a spongy soil that never holds any traces of previous expeditions. Every time someone goes there, it is like the first time. The last victory is of no use. Travelers have to start all over again, undergo a new trial against which they cannot prepare a defense.

Although men only go there out of necessity, animals and insects, on the contrary, never go there at all. The entire place, therefore, is strangely silent. The farther you go, the more the silence you drink in through your pores builds up in you, runs through your chest, stays there, swells, weighs you down bit by bit, as if to moor you there forever, enchanting you with a melancholic fatigue and an almost delectable disgust. The effort required to walk becomes harder and harder. The fog is full of fumes that make you drowsy.

All that is found there are wild plants, a vegetal madness with thick, translucent stems and limp leaves, wide as wings. Touching them is like touching dead, cold flesh, a little sweaty. They are not plants but presences that grow there, anchored with stubborn roots. They have a bitter attitude and accuse you, the guilty one! Soon, you believe it is true. Farther on, you question yourself under your breath...

The darkness at the heart of it seems to have sowed chaotic seeds here. Like a tangible sadness, a bad memory, a restless sorrow that stretches arms out of the ground. Arms and more arms! Vehemence and testimony!

These plants, being weak and strong at the same time, are called the Widows of the Moon or the Vindictives or even the Desolates. Their real name, which no one likes to utter is the Aâz.

Men fear them and rightly so. They grope and feel you everywhere, like the blind. They recognize you! They tell one another! You feel as if the news spreads everywhere! And then you too, suddenly, you recognize them! In front of you, you see the part of yourself that had always been hidden: the unsettling stranger, the psychic vegetation that you weed in vain! It is there, overgrown, it knows, it accuses, it holds you!

To vanquish these plants, you must trample on them, move them out of the way, break them off. They only break off after they have been stretched out, then they turn into a runny sap with an intoxicating odor. But more often, instead of breaking off when pulled, they are torn out of the soil whole, in a shower of white roots. And still, they do not let go! You have to keep walking, dragging them behind you.

Young men have gotten lost in this valley. They went mad, going round in circles without ever finding their way out. They believed they were dragging a corpse behind them...

It is a sad lot, all the more absurd since the race of Giant Men normally have an infallible sense of direction. But the Vindictives, the Widows of the Moon, cloud this sense if you are not careful. Can the traveler allow himself a short rest, a slackening of his energy, even a simple doubt? Then it is over: the two interior directions on which he relied, the starting point and the goal, disappear from his consciousness. He loses any notion of them. He will never find them again... They know that only pure young men with strong minds can withstand such confusion.

Fortunately, by walking in the right direction, to the end of the Calamitous Valley, you finally reach other regions where the ranks of the Widows of the Moon thin out. Small, stunted, malnourished by a terrain that is no longer suitable for them, the last ones to appear are covered with spots and wrinkles.

Travelers are pleased to see this. Soon, over large, bare spaces, they are treading on thick moss. The air is hotter, fouler. They start to see more clearly and farther away the natural configurations. At first, they are merely vague shapes, appearing as thicker banks of fog. Then, you can see, on either side, the walls of the gorge that narrow into a sharp turn. The passage grows wider after turning. On one side, an expanse of black water shimmers. On the other a light halo indicates the exit that opens onto another plain. The fog has lifted from the ground. Thinner, but not yet dissipated, since it is still impossible to see the tiniest patch of the sky, it is like a ceiling diffusing hazy light. Above that, the sweltering heat of a hatchery.

The ear picks up hoarse sounds, heavy breathing, neighing, gurgling, belching. The stench, once inhaled, is suddenly replaced by the musky odor of giant reptiles. The ground sinks more and more. Every step makes it ooze water. It is the area around the vast swamp where the last dragons live: the old Dongdwo, whose eggs they eat.

For ages, they had stopped trying to capture the ancient saurian. Vestiges of a mythic time, they were almost sacred. Very old, very weak, they stopped breeding. Still, they were taking a long time to die out, since their lifespan was as long as that of cities. Kobar Tigan't was barely being built when they had already declined to that state, the Last of an Age. Some storytellers claimed that the city would die along with them. This was not certain. They could very well live on for an indefinite time. Other B'Tah-Gou had a more original opinion: "The Dongdwo don't die. For them to disappear, the earth has to swallow them up like it swallowed up their elders who were even bigger!"

The Dongdwo were truly gigantic. From a distance, they could easily be mistaken for hills.

They lived in the middle of the swamp on an island made of solid land where the forest provided them with shelter. They liked the shade and fled from the rays of the sun, fearing they would be burned. The protection of the fog was barely sufficient. They also needed the tightly knit domes of the trees and the vegetal night of thick undergrowth.

Weakened by age, and no doubt deteriorated, they were losing their scales. People harvested them to decorate their hunting shields. Their flanks, stripped bald in places, presented pink flesh. The thorny armor down their spines was falling off as well. What remained of this dorsal crest had atrophied or been paralyzed and could no longer stand up straight.

Some Dongdwos were blind, their visual organs having been reabsorbed. Most could barely see anything anymore. They shook their heavy, lumpy heads in which their yellow eyes with their vertical pupils, once as bright as topaz, now dull, looked like overripe fruits.

Still, all of these old, pitiful dragons had one last power: they could mottle their hides with different hues, depending on their mood. This particularity got stronger the more emotional they got. They whimpered in fear over nothing: a shadow, a noise, an unusual scent. They could not bear being looked at by men without suffering. Even the blind ones felt the contact on their hypersensitive bulk. Incapable of fleeing, they whined and trembled, each wave of shivers triggering a wave of colors over their skin. A pale gray at the first shock of fright, then they turned bilious green, then to yellow, followed by a congestive red mottling their dewlaps while their snout became purple. That was when they would collapse to the ground, unable to bear the tension any longer.

The Giant Men, aware of these characteristics, took pains not to alarm them. It was a matter of not exhausting them since the precious Dongdwos tired quickly, moving about with great difficulty, their knock-kneed legs barely able to support their mass. They could not flee and even less, as they had once done, gallop through whole regions, devastating them like an earthquake. No, those days were over, they never left their island. Had they been tempted to do so, the only practicable way was a narrow rocky peak, jutting out of the swamp on the other side of the island that would have collapsed under their weight, dragging them down into the sludge. On this side, they faced the smooth wall of the High Plains, a vertical cliff, dotted with caves, the bottom lying at the very edge of the swamp.

There, I knew, the place was becoming a cemetery. It was there, from the very top of the cliff, that the big, wrinkled bodies of the nobles or dignitaries among the Giant Men were piously thrown down with their finery and jewels.

During such ceremonies, the usually quite noisy dragons would fall silent. They waited. Then, when the heavy body, at the end of its fall, sank into the swamp, they all howled together, lamentably, and started growling in unison without eating for long hours ahead. It resembled a litany. Inexplicably, the duration of this homage was always proportional to the virtues of the deceased.

Up on high, the Giant Men stood still without moving from the place. They would not leave until the Dongdwos finished their song. They believed that their brave ancestors were speaking through the voices of these guardians of the dead.

The Dongdwos ate grass and the steaming rot of the swamp. The females laid their bunches of sterile eggs in the silt, where the Giant Men came looking for them. It was the favorite delicacy reserved for the noble caste who believed this food contained magical and aphrodisiac powers. The most famous of the B'Tah-Gou were always kept well-stocked by their devotees. Ordinary people did not eat these eggs and would never have dared to do so, convinced that it was a sacrilege, that only the nobles could reconnect with the ancestors in this way.

The job of egg hunter was highly honored and, because of the difficulties and the expertise require, it was always held by the best. And they were proud of it. The way in was hard and dangerous but the rest, finding and gathering the eggs in the nest was even more so. Very real perils were awaiting the adventurer. Not that the old dragons were the least bit dangerous, but the swamp itself was toxic, as a result of it being a mass grave. Foul fermentations spoiled the already stifling air. The damp fog steeped their clothes in the stench.

And above all, a sadness, a curse seemed to loom over the region. The breezes whispered quietly; misty shapes crawled about pretty much everywhere. Everything was half deceased, half sunk, grasping for purchase, a solid shore to hold onto. They said that anyone spending too much time there carried inside them forever the melancholy of finite things, the disdain for the destiny of man. This is why they took on this task only during the years preceding maturity, because it required the vital fire of youth to successfully fight against invisible influences.

To get to the swamp the steep cliff of the High Plains was impractical. It was impossible to climb down from them. The only possible access required a long detour through the Calamitous Valley. Then, once the adventurer had reached the swamp, he had to climb up natural slopes through a series of plains to a third way up the cliff where an opening yawned. The men went in, plodded through and climbed back down through a maze of caves and tunnels. From time to time, they caught a glimpse of the void through crevasses. They wound their way over dark terraces, slippery slopes while gusts of wind blasted around them. Finally, they came to a vast cavern that opened out onto the rocky ridge that led to the island through the swamp.

When a man reached this cavern, before taking the rocky bridge, he would blow a horn to warn the Dongdwos who, familiar with the signal, would immediately stop whatever they were doing. Worried, shaking and shivering, they fell silent and, stuffed with uneaten leaves hanging from the jaws, they backed away, very clumsily, to hide deep in their lairs. They did not move again until the expedition was over.

And, while his acolytes waited, a single hunter walked along the ridge and, once on the island, made a methodical tour around it without ever being bothered. If by chance, he spotted the muzzle of a straggler in a bush who was weaker than the others, the hunter avoided laying eyes on the creature so as not to frighten it.

So, he walked along the shore, searching the hollows and under the mounds, to find the hiding places made by the females. From the mud, he extracted clusters of eggs that looked like huge bunches of white grapes and wrapped them in leaves before putting them in a leather sack he carried on his back. Sometimes, he searched a long time before finding anything and occasionally there was nothing to be found.

The eggs were becoming rarer and rarer. Laying was less frequent and less abundant. Degenerate females ate their own eggs. It was always more and more difficult. And, as a result, they were more and more valuable. Furthermore, it was said that the eggs strengthened their quintessence from their rarity. They were more pungent, more fortifying, more intoxicating.

In Kobor Tigan't, the radiance of the royal caste, the beauty of the queen, the vigor of her spouse, the inspiration of the renowned B'Tah-Gou came from the regular consumption of this delicacy.

When the egg hunter had completed his harvest, he went back the same way along the ridge to be greeted joyfully by his companions. Before heading home, they sounded the horn again, releasing the Dongdwos. It was only time they shed their apathy. They recognized the signal so quickly and so clearly that they would all start snorting, sneezing and gurgling in high-pitched unison. Often, as well, while relaxing, a few females would lay eggs right there. When hearing the specific cry that marked the event, the hunters smiled. Next time, they were sure not to return empty-handed!



Apart from the Dongdwo, the egg donors, and the Mouh-Tou, the milk donors, there was another type of domesticated reptile at Kobor Tigan't in a pit under the palace: the Ananou, which people preferred to call the T'Lo when they were renting them individually for personal use. Ananou was their name as a group, T'Lo their name as individuals.

They belonged to the crown, which meant that they were well cared for. No one ever heard them screaming. They were quiet and happy to lead a vegetative life, spending most of their time sleeping. A musky odor, strong but very pleasant, was the only indication of their presence. They were given food that enhanced this scent.

The Ananou were the vestiges of an unsettling mystery. When the ancestors of the Giant Men reached the High Plains, where they would later build Kobor, they discovered these strange creatures who seemed to be waiting for them. They made no effort to escape, stayed nearby until people took an interest in their mysterious appearance.

The B'Tah-Gou, who were already teaching, revealed the secret by calling them Creatures of the Error. These beings were the result of the insane matings of the previous race, the race of the "Larger-than-Us", so the Storytellers said.

This race had been overindulgent (quickly turned into a sacrilegious cult) to the tame saurians. Thus, they spawned the Ananou, creatures which, without being truly human, were no longer really animals either. They terrorized all other beasts. As for humans, upon seeing them men were torn between horror of their origin and a curious sense of the sacred, no doubt due to the ancientness and the strangeness of the act. The result of this feeling was their preservation.

The Ananou hated animals but showed adoration for mankind and total submission. The people loathed them. This was not the case, however, for the debauched nobles who paid the crown very high rates to use some of the creatures. They coupled with them in their orgies, proudly pretending to imitate their mighty ancestors and be the equals of the "Larger-than-us". One good reason for this was that the queen did so, too.

These hybrid monsters, smaller than the Giants, had delicate, pink skin covered in places by pearly scales that shimmered in the light.

Most often, they stood upright. Their slim bodies never grew fat, stretching their slender limbs, their movements marked with reptilian grace. Their long, thin necks often tilted to one side or the other under the weight of their round heads, which were totally hairless but the tightly woven scales formed a kind of helmet. The typical flatness of their faces, their cleft mouths, the slight projection of their noses with wide holes, their eyes as golden as the sun, made them look like big frogs. Thin webs connected their fingers. They had no fingernails.

The Ananou were hermaphrodites. They all had double sexuality.

Male or female, anyone who paid to use a T'Lo took such a fancy to it that they could not bear to be separated from it because of a kind of enchantment the creatures possessed. Use quickly turned into passion, then into an irrepressible need. Eventually, except for moments of erotic relations when pleasure was long-lasting and all-consuming, these abuses put them in a permanent state of twilight pleasure. In truth, it was as intoxicating as a drug.

Once out of the pit, the T'Lo attached itself unreservedly to its mistress or its master. It was very gentle, very tender, docile beyond words, tireless, always available. Its sole concern was to satisfy its owner. As a result, it developed an odd intelligence that really only worked on one track, manifesting itself in perverse research and utterly extraordinary amorous inventions. This intuition for the refinement of sensation was their genius.

They were living instruments of love, entirely dedicated to the ecstasy of their human partner. Most of the passionate dramas that troubled Kobor were caused by the T'Lo. Frightful tales of licentiousness or touching examples. The T'Lo had been seen escaping to join their masters in death and commit suicide by throwing themselves into the Dongdwo swamp.

But, since they brought a fortune into the royal treasury, such matters were brought under control. Palace officials were assigned to recover the T'Lo as soon as its owner passed away. It would be captured if necessary. Most often, the family of the deceased individual would bring it back on their own. The creature would be given a special brew that would remove its memory and it would be put back in with the other Ananou. It would quickly find another master because initial training of these creatures took a long time and people preferred to avoid this work by choosing one that had already been prepared.

One could inherit a T'Lo, the mother or the father passing it on to the eldest of their children who thus assumed the noble prerogative. In the best families, tradition required the main T'Lo to wear the ancient jewelry and what was used as a coat of arms. There was no limit to the number of T'Lo a family could have, a mark of how wealthy the masters were since they cost a fortune and were only ever leased out. The crown received its dues on a regular basis.

In the case of an inheritance, the law mandated the T'Lo to still go back down into the pit before being reclaimed. To better preserve everything it had learned, the drink of oblivion would be replaced by a sleeping concoction.

Among themselves, the Ananou never reproduced. They did not even try. There had never been an example of it. Human desire alone aroused them to the sexual life. Their male organ did not fertilize women. On the other hand, rare as it was but often enough to keep their numbers up, the seed from a man could fertilize their feminine side.

But their offspring were always other Ananou. They got no human characteristics other than those they already possessed.

They did not advance, did not improve, nor did they degenerate. Their species remained forever between the human and the animal, a non-integrated link, a bewildering hybrid.

The offspring born in human homes were returned to the royal reserve right after they were weaned.