

The greatest sinner ever

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Chapter 1

“Brrr, it’s so cold in here!”

“Stop complaining, Mercury; only thirty-one days till you’ll be turned around.”

“Who’s there?”

“I am Hermes, your higher self.”

“Hermes, your visit is timely because those boring turns around my orbit are driving me stark-raving mad.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, Zeus has decided that your assignment is almost done. You only have to be of the flesh for a while before you get to shine.”

“And how do you know all this?”

“I am the fastest one in the Milky Way, and I put my ear to the ground here and there, so to speak. Besides, it’s my job to relay messages.”

“How much longer do I have?”

“Until you’re lined up with the Sun and the Earth, so not much longer.”

“Hmm, at least it’s a change from being a dead planet. My only diversion is causing shock waves and sun baths.”

“You might well come to miss this simple existence, my material brother, but please be patient just a little longer.”

A month later, an extraordinary birth took place on planet Earth. A person with unprecedented prophetic gifts was born. The astrologer’s birth in the village took place at the very beginning of the Renaissance, in the French town of Saint Rémy de Provence. In a stately mansion behind the market halls where the merchants had been hawking their wares for some time, the contractions had started. Reynière de Nostredame had carefully calculated the date of birth, but the onset of labor still came unexpectedly. The little one probably had a slightly earlier birth in mind in order to meet the optimum position of the planets. The noticeably large mucus plug, which closes off the cervix during pregnancy, had just come out. This was the sign that showed the end of the pregnancy was nearing. Reynière lost some blood and asked for her father, Jean de Saint Rémy to come; her father was the court physician of the Good King René, the former count of Provence. She lay on the bed, perspiring, and her husband, Jacques, who had risen to the status of notary public, hurriedly entered along with her father. The contractions were now coming regularly and were becoming more painful, until, at their peak, they suddenly stopped. Her father looked worried and felt his daughter’s belly with a professional touch. Relieved, the physician established that the unborn child was still moving and that Reynière was losing amniotic fluid at a normal rate. Regular contractions returned and the membranes broke; labor was now well underway. Slowly but surely, Reynière’s body made an opening for the baby to move through. The cervix, which during pregnancy is drawn tight, was now

gradually opening. The peculiar newcomer was fighting as if his life depended on it and the expulsion stage was exhausting. The labor would take as many as ten hours. Finally, the little head emerged, the wide-open eyes critically taking in the world. Jean and Jacques were amazed and looked at each other with great joy. The shoulders were next, after which the rest of the little body slid out, without any problems.

“Michel!” his mother proudly welcomed the wet little bundle. Jean carefully picked up the slightly bloody baby, who was still attached to the umbilical cord, and put him on the mother’s belly. The boy was born with a caul*. Michel de Nostredame appeared at exactly high noon on December 14 of the year 1503, with the church bells of Saint Rémy loudly ringing in the background. His parents were overjoyed with their first child, who would have a safe future as a Catholic. Jacques and Reynière were both descended from old Jewish families, but several years earlier, all Jews had been forced, under pain of death, to convert to Catholicism. There was still a menorah on the table, however, symbolizing the Jewish festival of lights, Hanukkah, that was being celebrated that month. For these special holidays, the tradition was secretly honored and Jacques always read from the Talmud. This time, he ceremoniously addressed his newborn son, surrounded by the entire family, and told him that the Talmud speaks about the wonder of Hanukah. Michel, securely wrapped in swaddling cloths, only heard some paternal sounds.

When the little one, crawling and later walking, began to discover the world, he showed himself to be a very curious little boy. He wanted to investigate everything in sight and examine every object. He enthusiastically attacked visitors and sometimes liked to play with their hair. He quickly expanded his boundaries to outdoors, where he ignored the other children his age. He thought they were playing aimlessly round and round. Once, he extinguished the fire in the fireplace with water and sat there looking at the clouds of steam with great fascination. During his first visit to the market, his gift came to light. The family was walking past the booths displaying wares. Because of his limited height, Michel was amusing himself with what was going on underneath the wooden tables: fish remains, rotting fruit, blood waste, broken jute sacs, an occasional rat chewing on things, and countless shuffling feet. His mother was keeping a close eye on him. The De Nostredame family stopped at a booth with glassware and wanted to buy something pretty for the holidays. In the previous century, one only saw drinking glasses among the socially elite, but nowadays glass was being produced on a larger scale, which made it more affordable. The eager market merchant quickly grabbed the most delicate bowl between his teeth, trying to impress the young mother.

* with the membranes wrapped around the head: clairvoyant children

“You know, Madam, pottery and wood and tin dishes are functional, but very ugly. Glass dishes are all the rage now.” Reynière cheerfully listened to him, while keeping her child close by.

“There are several types of glass drinking cups available,” he continued. “Look at this: gorgeous cups with hollow, funnel-shaped stems, and low chalice-type glasses with tall, graceful stems. Behind them are cylinder-shaped cups, decorated with polka dots.”

“And what type is this?” she asked.

“Those are Berkemeiers, Madam, drinking glasses with a funnel shaped cup and a finely ridged foot ring.”

The merchant took everything out of the cabinet because the family looked like they had money to spend. Jacques thought the ridged one were quite nice.

“The ridged ones are very popular,” the merchant repeated immediately, “besides the low drinking bowls, cabbage stalks and Berkemeiers, of course.”

“What are those ridges for?” inquired Reynière.

“The ridges or polka dots ensure a better grip on the glass.”

“And which ones do you sell most of?” asked her husband.

“The glass drinking dishes sell especially well. Pouring devices, such as bottles, are very expensive.” The specialist apparently was the only person in the area who possessed a grand collection of glassware and he proudly brought out his most beautiful bottle. The family was getting completely entranced by his products and Jacques asked the man if he could look at the bottle more closely. Little Michel had been behaving himself in a most exemplary fashion all this time and was quietly looking at the half-filled boxes under the table. Above, Jacques grabbed the glass showpiece clumsily and it immediately slipped out of his grasp. The expected crash, however, surprisingly didn’t come and everybody’s startled attention focused below. There, their son had just effortlessly caught the very expensive bottle. He put the heavenly gift to his lips, whereupon the owner quickly grabbed it out of his little hands. After many apologies, the disillusioned family went home without buying anything. When they got there, the father, who got away with just a scare, was full of praise for his son.

His parents left the boy’s upbringing to his grandfather. With the erudite Jean, he was in good hands. The former court physician and astrologer taught his grandson not only mathematics, but also ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew as well as the preliminaries of astrology. Jean often took him outside the village at night, so they could lie in the field together and look up at the stars. There, he told him that you can see the northern sky better in the winter and the southern sky in the summer and that the winter constellations, such as the Canis Major and Canis Minoris, can be easily found, using the star Orion as a guide.

“When I grow up, I want to be a star too,” said his grandson.

“Funny you should say that. I was just thinking about the story where someone gets punished by being put in the sky as a star. It’s about Orion, who was chasing his seven sisters, the Pleiades. The sisters felt threatened by the chase and prayed for help, which caused the goddess of the hunt to come to their rescue and she killed their brother with one of her arrows. Then Orion was placed in the sky as a star. But I don’t know if that’s possible for people made out of flesh and blood too, Michel. Although, I just remembered, there is some mention of it in the old scriptures. So, who knows? By the way, the Pleiades are visible with the naked eye. Look, they’re right there,” and Jean stretched his arm toward the black sky. “Those stars look like they’re touching each other,” the boy remarked. “Yes, it does look that way, but in reality they are very far away from each other.”

When spring came around, Grandpa showed Michel the stars Arcturus, Regulus and the sparkling Spica, the brightest stars in the spring sky, which together formed the Spring Triangle. That summer, the stars were not very clearly visible and it wasn’t until autumn that grandfather showed the winged horse, Pegasus, which is often difficult to find, because it is up-side-down. Through these little excursions, Michel got to know the constellations and his parents kept grumbling that he and his grandfather came home so late at night.

One clear evening, when Jean had once again taken his grandson out, the weather suddenly changed and turned gloomy. No celestial bodies were visible and Michel cursed the dark clouds that were gathering. That night, the little rascal was tossing and turning in his bed, which was separated from other sleeping places with long curtains, and couldn’t sleep. He was still angry and disappointed, when suddenly, the window shutters blew open and a furious tornado pulled him out of his bed. He just managed to grab hold of the window sill, with his body dangling outside. Reynière was woken up at that very moment by maternal instinct, shook her husband awake and together they ran to the child who was in mortal peril. Together, the two of them pulled the child back into the room and shut the window tightly. Not really realizing what had happened, they went back to sleep, and a short time later, the window was pulled open once more. Again, the whirlwind directed its energy toward the gifted child, with a seething fury, but his parents were there in a heartbeat and defeated the catastrophe before he was sucked out of the room. The shutters were nailed shut permanently. This was a lesson their son would never forget. No more cursing anyone or anything, he resolved.

One day, a message arrived from Pierre de Nostredame, Michel’s paternal grandfather. Pierre and his wife lived in Grasse and invited the whole family to come and stay with them for a few weeks. Pierre had also been a court physician, in the service of the son of the Good King René. After his patient was murdered in Barcelona, Pierre settled in the developing

perfume town. Jacques and Reynière decided to accept his invitation. Many preparations had to be made for the trip, because Grasse was not exactly next door and they had had four more children through the years; all boys. A busy household. A few weeks later, they were ready and they all climbed into the rented carriage which was pulled by a team of horses. Father, mother and three sons. Jean stayed home with the two youngest ones. After a few days, they reached Cannes, and from there a path lead them inland toward Grasse. The landscape was surrounded on all sides by lush tree-covered hills and invited them to take a break. It would have been better if they hadn't, because little Hector immediately disappeared and it took three hours to find him in a crack in the rocks. And guess who found him? Of course: Michel! Hector got a cuff on the ear and they continued on their way. Behind them, they could still catch an occasional glimpse of the Mediterranean Sea. There were not many flowers blooming in the perfume region. Summer was coming to an end and bees were looking for the last of the honey. Finally, they saw Grasse, situated against a mountain slope, surrounded by fields that would only display their flowers again in the spring. When they entered the wealthy trading town, the boys were very excited by all the sights. There were all kinds of tanneries, which, their father told them, used to spread a terrible stink not too long ago. In order to dispel the penetrating scent of the leather, the Grassois got the idea to saturate the leather with a mixture of animal fats and flowers. Necessity is the mother of invention and in this way, perfumed handbags, gloves and belts turned into a true fashion rage. The carriage bumped along laboriously, past the many shops with displayed leather wares, but finally, they reached Place aux Aires, where their grandparents lived. Bertrand passionately flung open the carriage doors to get out as quickly as possible and start horsing around, but his father stopped him.

"First you're going to greet your grandparents, young man," he said. Meanwhile, Pierre came walking up, swaying, and immediately began to lug the suitcases in. Despite his advanced age he was very vigorous and he still worked for the physicians' guild. After kissing Grandpa, the three brothers ran off into the perfectly unknown but oh so alluring city in great ecstasy.

"Just let them play for a while," Reynière said tiredly to her husband, "that will give us a chance to unpack our bags in peace." The children, meanwhile, were parading past the many perfumers, soap-boilers, distillers and other merchants. Grasse was a dazzling but also very dirty town and the open sewers could barely handle the mountains of waste. Nevertheless, it smelled wonderful in the streets. There were cases, bags and balloons full of flower water, oils, wine, lavender soap, herbs and scented leather, everywhere. Eleven-year-old Michel found himself in a virtual paradise for the senses and was soon enchanted with a specific scent that pulled him into an alley.

“Where are you going now?” Bertrand and Hector exclaimed, surprised. But Michel wouldn’t say and followed the narrow lane toward an archway that led outside of the town. Beneath the stone arc he stopped for a moment, closed his eyes and smelled. Here, the scent was at its strongest. He deeply inhaled the peculiar odor, which was sweet and dark at the same time. A few minutes later he returned, fulfilled, and found his brothers playing in the square. The days flew by in this fantastic town and tomorrow would be extra exciting: they were to visit a well-known perfumery. Grandfather Pierre was friends with Amalfi, the proprietor of the factory. She had promised him that his family could have a tour. That morning, they went among the potential buyers who had flocked from far and near, and Amalfi personally gave them a guided tour. The distinguished people all saw Hector elaborately picking his nose and Father chastised him. Amalfi, meanwhile, told them all about her famous line of scents.

“These azure flasks hold various types of eau de toilet and Soliflores for women.” After her introduction, the group shuffled towards the next table, while the other son started to be troublesome. Bertrand tried to surreptitiously open the flasks.

“Don’t touch those, Bertrand,” his father warned. The madam fortunately didn’t notice and continued: “Soliflores are scent water made from only one type of flower, plant or fruit.” After an elaborate listing of the assortment, the guests followed her to another room, where ingenious devices were set up.

“These are our distillation alambics. Distillation was developed by the Arabs.” While attentively listening, Michel and his grandfather heard Hector whining at his mother that he needed to pee. It distracted the factory owner from her story and she coughed agitatedly.

“Okay, go outside quickly, but be quiet!” Reynière commanded her child.

“Jasmine originally comes from India and Spanish sailors introduced the flower in Grasse via North-Africa not long ago. Maître Gantier managed to get a monopoly on it,” continued Madam.

“This is a good opportunity to buy some perfume,” Reynière whispered to her husband. Jacques idly agreed because he was completely caught up in taking care of the little ones. Fortunately, they were hanging around Pierre and were behaving themselves for the moment. Father even managed to catch the last part of the story.

“When I compare it to jasmine from abroad, I always notice that Jasmin Grassois has more depth and volume. Oh, I could tell you so much more about our perfumery, but it is time to finish the tour. Are there any questions or comments?” Unexpectedly, Michel came forward with panache and asked if he could say a few words. Father was starting to get a headache from all the unpredictable behaviors of his youngsters, whereas Madam Amalfi was quite charmed with the childish request and agreed. Michel’s heart started to beat faster. The little prophet squared his shoulders and with great force pronounced his first prophesy.

“Some day, this perfumery will be very famous. This will be because of a student with an exceptionally good nose. His name is Montesquieu and he will produce three amazing scents. At the height of his career, he will create a bizarre perfume for himself with the scent of recently killed bodies of young girls. After his death, the success will decline.” With this, the pre-teen ended his oration and walked back to his parents with dignity. Everyone was dumbstruck and even Amalfi didn’t know how to respond. Jacques decided not to chastise his son, because the boy had followed all the rules of proper conduct. No one mentioned the dark prophesy again; they could not make any sense of it. A little embarrassed about the behavior of his strange grandson, Pierre thanked the owner for the fascinating outing and the family returned home. Soon the vacation came to an end.

Grandpa Jean was very happy with their return, especially because of Michel, with whom he had developed a special bond. When the carriage rode into their street, the Rue des Remparts, the two immediately sought eye contact. Hector and Bertrand were dead-tired from the long trip and went straight to bed, but Michel was still excited about his performance. Feverishly, he discussed his peculiar prophesy and his urge to speak out with his grandfather. The strange scent in Grasse had awakened something in him, the pre-teen reported. Jean took him seriously and suggested that he would share all his insights relating to astrology with him, but now Michel had to go to bed. It took hours before the sparkle in his mind diminished and he finally fell asleep. A few months later, Grandpa found a suitable moment to further his eldest grandchild’s education in astrology. He decided to tell him all the ins and outs of it and took him up to the attic. This was his personal domain and no one was allowed to snoop around in there uninvited. Especially not children, because he was afraid his delicate instruments might get damaged or his papers lost. From his easy chair Grandfather told Michel that he had managed to pick up an ingenious piece of equipment in Paris a while back. It consisted of two polished lenses in a pipe, through which you could see very far.

“Thanks to this invention, a whole new world has opened up for me,” he said, “and in my mind, you are now old enough to enter into this world. I foresee a great future for you. You have exceptional mental capacities and that is why I am now going to tell you everything I know about astrology. Up till now I have never allowed anyone to be in this room without supervision, but for you I am making an exception. I hereby give you permission to use all of my instruments and books anytime you want to.” His grandfather got up and retrieved a large object from underneath a dusty cloth.

“Using this spy-glass, young man, you can see the planets so closely that it seems like you are right there. But first, I will give you some theory, before we explore the heavens.” His grandson was looking at the exciting device, his eyes like saucers.

“Astrology looks for the relationship between events in the cosmos, on earth and in humans. But haven’t we already talked about this before?” Michel shook his head “no.”

“My memory is not what it used to be, my boy. Through this research we are able to use information about one moment to trace a series of events which follow it. In other words: we can predict the future from it. This is much more difficult than it seems. Since time immemorial it has been accepted that the Sun, the Moon and the planets influence our lives here on Earth.” Grandfather got up again, opened the attic shutter and placed the spy-glass on its stand.

“Come and stand over here. The sun has just set and we will probably be able to see several planets. Let me see if... there it is! Look Michel, just above the last rays of the sun: Mercury, the planet of the intellect and mental capacities.” His grandson looked through the device and discovered a pink planet that was twinkling. Jean continued.

“As you know, the Earth rotates around the Sun in one year and not the other way around as the Church claims. They’re also still insisting that the Earth is flat and that you can fall off it. Poppycock! They just prefer to keep their followers ignorant.”

“But doesn’t the Sun also make a circle every year?”

“Yes, but not around the Earth, but along various groups of stars. Those groups all together are called the Zodiac. For example, there is Gemini, Aries, Taurus, etcetera.”

“I’m a Sagittarius.”

“Undeniably true, my boy, but it will take some time before the Sun will pass by there, because we are not currently living in the age of Sagittarius.”

Grandpa peered through the spy-glass again and continued his tale.

“Mercury is always near the Sun and for that reason it not always clearly visible, but tonight we are lucky,” and he passed the device over.

“That planet’s not very exciting,” said Michel, while he peered through the lenses.

“Well, you should see the Moon,” and Jean serenely looked up the celestial body in the cloudless canopy. There was genuine love between grandfather and grandson. Perhaps because they were so much alike. They both had the same interests and they were both of slight build. Only the youngest one still had his life stretching out before him and Grandpa obviously didn’t anymore.

“This is what you want to see,” said Jean and stepped aside.

“Wow!” exclaimed Michel and gazed at the gigantic Moon, full of craters, mountains and crevices.

“Someone is walking around on there, Grandpa.”

“Ha-ha, that’s funny. Even if that were possible, it is too far away to be able to see such details.”

“I really do see him,” the boy insisted. “He is planting a flag with red and white stripes and stars.” Jean made an unbelieving face and took over the

spy-glass. There was his familiar Moon, much too far to be able to see a person on it.

“I don’t see what you’re seeing, Michel.”

“Maybe it’s something that will happen in the future?”

“Anything is possible, my boy, but I can only talk about matters that I know something about. I still wanted to explain to you how to cast a horoscope,” and they let the heavens be and sat down on the bed.

“To calculate a horoscope, you need a number of particulars, namely the date, time and place of your birth; but the most important thing is the birth date. Let me show you your own horoscope as an example.” Grandfather looked through a drawer in his desk and brought out a piece of paper covered with strange symbols.

“Is that mine?”

“Let me see, born in Saint Rémy, on December 12, 1503. Yes, this is yours.”

“It is actually the 14th.”

“The 14th? I must have written it wrong at the top, because I always check everything three times. Must be old age,” and Grandpa apologized. “In any case, you have a heavily loaded horoscope with three outer planets: Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Because of this fierce configuration, you will need iron discipline in order to control the creative power. If you don’t succeed in this, the power will turn destructive.”

“You mean, like Samson, who made an entire temple collapse?”

“Hmm, that’s not such a good comparison. In any case, you will have to learn to channel your energy. And always remember, that in every person there is as much good as evil,” and Jean brought his attention back to the horoscope.

“This picture here shows the twelve houses and...” But his voice suddenly faltered.

“I’m tired,” he wheezed, “but if you want to learn more, everything is described in that massive volume over there,” and he pointed towards a bookshelf. Grandfather was no longer approachable.

As time went on, Jean and Michel became more and more devoted to each other. They often spent the entire day at an old convent* that lay hidden a few miles south of Saint Rémy. They spent hours reading original bibles. Michel learned, above all, to pray to the Christian God and effortlessly followed the Catholic scriptures, despite his Jewish background. It is, after all, the same God as the one from the Old Testament, he thought. Jean always hummed while they prayed, at least when no one else was around. From the priory, when the weather was fine, they foraged about in the surrounding lavender fields, where they had found a mysterious, half caved-in pyramid-like structure. His well-read grandfather could comment on just about anything.

* The later institution where Vincent van Gogh stayed in 1890

“From ancient Greek times,” he said about the structure while at the same time using it to take a rest. Michel, by contrast, was full of energy and went exploring in the area while Jean took his customary little nap. One day, the boy came back excitedly.

“A little ways over there, there are all kinds of holes hacked out of the cliffs, Grandpa. Come and see!” But Jean quietly stayed where he was and coolly explained that long ago, goatherds had made those holes for their goats to protect them from predators. Apparently, he had discovered them before. One time, he could barely get up and Michel had to literally drag him home.

During adolescence, the young man began to notice girls and this was a good opportunity for his mentor to speak about the marriage of two souls. He explained how the male and female souls can merge together and the male/female principle is represented everywhere in the universe.

“You mean there are male and female planets too?” asked Michel.

“The planets are, in principle, all female. That’s why they call our planet Mother Earth,” answered Jean.

“And do we men have anything to say, in the cosmos?”

“Well, the stars are male, in contrast with dust and darkness, which are female. These eternal polarities are also the essence of alchemy.”

The boy spent the majority of his childhood outdoors with his grandfather and his parents didn’t see much of their rapidly developing son. They only got together at mealtimes. It was not only Michel and Jean’s fault they saw so little of each other; Jacques worked at the notary’s practice all day and Reynière, besides running the household, had her hands full with the youngest children. Seven-year-old Antoine was a particularly challenging case, because he always exhibited recalcitrant behavior. For the rest, Michel got along well with his little brothers, but play with them? No, there was little chance of that.

The seasons flew by very pleasantly, until that one sad day. They found dear old Grandfather in his quarters. He had died of old age. Michel had been watching him deteriorate for a while and knew the end was in sight. Nevertheless, it was a devastating event.

It was drizzling on the day of Jean de Saint Rémy’s funeral. They took turns keeping vigil with the body in the house, until it was brought out for the burial services. All the family members were there. Old Pierre and his wife had come all the way from Grasse, as well as Jean’s three sisters and cousins from near-by Marseille. The Catholic prayer service took place in the church of Selongey. The families walked to the church, where the coffin had been placed. Michel’s grandparents were walking so slowly, that he had plenty of time to carefully observe the fancy houses with turrets at the Place des Halles. Finally they arrived at the church, where many friends and acquaintances had gathered. At the entrance, a large man with reddish hair accidentally bumped into Michel. His shoes were covered in paint. He was apparently not an invited guest, but he wanted to

go in. Michel didn't pay any attention to him and the funeral procession slowly moved through the gate with the imposing round arch door. Jacques and Reynière were the first ones to stride past a row of pillars in the church and they were followed by Michel and his four brothers in chronological order. Reynière was overcome with emotion and shed a tear for her father every now and then. The public was seated at the wooden benches in the main chapel where the coffin was set up in the center. The church of Selongey had various chapels, which were all lit by windows with blood-red divisions. Way up high was a painting of an apostle. The last visitor had found a spot and Priest Bergé, who was wearing a faded red shoulder covering, began his sermon. The funeral service was, as everyone knew, aimed at the purification and eternal rest of the soul of the deceased.

“When someone has died, this means that he has irrevocably taken his leave of this world. This person will then be with God. This is not an ending, but a new beginning. Those who have lived good lives will go to heaven, and those who have lived sinful lives will go to hell. The transition from life to death is often not a harmonious passage. But the Lord protects us all, because he understands the complicated lives of humans and accepts everyone as he is.” The Priest then awkwardly leafed through his Bible, from behind his lectern and began to read a long drawn-out passage in Latin. Michel looked around and recognized the metal holy-water font, an up-side-down church tower, in which one of his friends had once almost drowned. Candles were burning everywhere; there were so many that even the tomb of the founder of the church in the front chapel was lit up. His engraved image was visible at the entry. Jean had long ago managed to interest his grandson in art and culture and they had visited the church of Selongey together a number of times. Michel knew the interior well and would have rather examined the murals than to have to listen to the droning sound of Bergé's voice. Or the armor-plated vault in the sacristy! Of course, he couldn't. Though he knew it would be perfectly fine with Grandfather. “Life before death,” he had always said. Finally, God's servant praised the deceased for his charity, in ordinary French and the visitors sat up straight again. Michel saw the carillonneur, who was hard of hearing, get up. He was dying to get to his forty-eight church bells and start ringing them and began to climb up the stairs in the turret. Meanwhile, the priest was sprinkling the body with holy water and scenting it with frankincense. This was to indicate that the body of the deceased was in a state of holiness before God. The acolyte said a few more prayers asking for forgiveness for Jean's sins. After the hymns, the priest and his helpers strode out of the church and the pall bearers followed with the coffin. All those gathered walked behind them. The church bells were ringing and they all approached the cemetery in silence. Family, friends and other interested people who had joined, gathered around the grave that had been prepared and the pall bearers slowly lowered the coffin into it. Reynière quickly put a few flowers on the lid

before the priest, who was standing at the head, silently blessed the grave and said an "Our Father." After he finished the prayer, he threw a small amount of soil onto the coffin, with the words, "Earth to earth; ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Then everyone said goodbye to the jovial Jean by adding their own scoop of soil onto the coffin and Michel watched his deceased friend slowly disappear. Finally, Jacques thanked all those present for their sympathy and the family sadly returned home.

After the mourning period, Michel and Mother visited Grandfather's hallowed place up in the attic. Still feeling sad, Reynière opened the shutters to let the light into the room and then they took an inventory of the estate. Memories drifted up and her son stared, unseeing, through the attic window for a while, feeling depressed.

"This attic is so lifeless and desolate now," he grumbled, when mother was unexpectedly called downstairs by one of her children.

"I'll be right back, Michel," and left him there, alone. From the attic window he had a good view of the town. He discovered a new home about half a mile away that had been built without his noticing. One of its windows was open; it was a glass one. Unprecedented, but it was too far away to see it very well.

I know, I can use Grandpa's spy glass, he suddenly realized and soon he could see every speck of the house. Then the youngster could not resist the temptation to sneak a look inside. He saw a tall man with short, dark hair, who was passionately working at a painting easel.

Why would anyone imitate sunflowers? Michel wondered in surprise. The unknown person was standing in front of a canvas and repeatedly dipped his paint brush into the paint. At one point, he picked up another brush that he used for painting in finer detail and again glanced at the real sunflowers, which were arranged carelessly on a table behind it. Suddenly, the artist felt as if he was being observed and he turned around with a start. The voyeur was startled out of his wits, feeling caught, although he couldn't possibly be seen, he thought. Still, it looked as though the stranger was staring at him, albeit with a friendly look. Only then did Michel realize that this was another peek into the future. The other world dissolved almost instantly after this. The house was also completely gone. Too bad; no one to share my daydream with, he thought sorrowfully.

Chapter 2

A few months later, Michel, who was sixteen by now, went to Avignon to study astrology. His parents had reluctantly given him permission to make this unusual choice for his university studies. Avignon was only twenty miles away from Saint Rémy, so he would be able to easily visit his parents and brothers. Avignon was a very important town, because the Papal Palace was situated there. From 1304 on, there had been a series of French popes and these religious leaders all went to live in Avignon, because their chance of survival in Rome was not great. The French town and its surroundings had been papal property ever since. Jacques had heard from a client that Mrs. Plombier, whose husband had died of the plague six months earlier, was moving to Avignon with her daughters, to live with relatives. Michel could get a ride, provided that he would help the widow with her household goods. That was no problem for him and they set a date. Mrs. Plombier had been cleaning her house that last week and all her possessions were packed up and waiting for her young fellow traveler. Michel knocked on her door on the day of departure, and began to fill up the old, rickety wagon according to her instructions. With the next-door neighbors unexpectedly rolling up their sleeves as well, the whole lot was quickly loaded. The madame then took her place on the driver's seat and, with the two girls, they drove to the Rue des Remparts, so their companion could say goodbye to his family. They were all anxiously waiting, while the widow, who was not very experienced, brought the horse to a halt. Michel jumped down from the wagon and embraced his father and mother. The latter was looking very sad.

"It seems like saying goodbye is becoming a regular occurrence", Reynière lamented with tears once again streaming down her beautiful face.

"I'll come and visit soon," her son promised.

"You'd better," said Father, who gave him a hug. When the brand-new student had said goodbye to his brothers too, it was time to leave. Everyone waved until the horse and wagon had disappeared from sight. Not far outside Saint Rémy it began to pour. The rain was coming down in buckets and it got dark so fast it was scary. The female driver, fortunately, was prepared for rain and with Michel's help she stretched a canvas over the wagon. When lightning struck, the horse became restless and the widow kept control of it with great difficulty. Her daughters, aged five and seven, were hunkered down deep beneath the canvas. Soon, the path became barely passable because of the abundant amount of rain water and it looked like they might be in trouble. Half-way through the journey they could see frightening fires on both sides of the road. Bodies were being burned. The plague, the greatest disaster in the history of mankind had once again exacted its price and the horrifying disease raged through all of

Europe. Madame already knew, as no other, what those fires were for. Her husband had been cremated not long ago in order to prevent the plague from spreading more. But she bravely held on, and kept driving. Suddenly, they heard shrieking in the distance, someone seemed to be calling for help. They decided to ignore it and to keep going. It kept raining unusually fiercely and to make matters even worse, a vicious wind began to howl. The horse could scarcely get the wagon to move forward anymore and continually slipped in the mud. It was getting tired and every meter was a victory. Gradually, a violent storm developed and there were branches and shrubs flying across the road.

“Hell and damnation,” Madame could occasionally be heard saying to herself. They had to stop many times and then Michel would drag the debris off the path. After many hours of beastly weather, they reached the papal region. They were exhausted and completely drenched. One more obstacle had to be faced: crossing the Rhône River. With a strong head wind, they arrived at the famous bridge of Avignon. So far, Mrs. Plombier and her traveling companion had been taking turns on the driver’s seat, but once they arrived at the bridge, where the wind was dangerously powerful, the widow preferred to keep control of the reins herself. She was just about to encourage the horse to cross the angry water, when Michel suddenly shouted “Stop!” She immediately pulled hard on the reins which caused the horse to neigh and the wagon to come abruptly to a halt. The youngest girl began to cry and her sister tried to comfort her.

“What on earth is the matter?” their mother asked with astonishment. De Nostredame didn’t say a word, jumped off the wagon and landed in the mud. Then he plodded fearlessly through the storm to the bridge, with his long coat flapping in the wind. When he arrived at the stone connector, he stood for a moment, his eyes on the road. He felt how the greatly swollen river streamed past the piles and walked back again.

“What are you up to?” Plombier called out.

“All the stuff has to be loaded off the wagon” he answered, barely audible through the volatile wind.

“Are you crazy?” Michel climbed up on the driver’s seat and explained himself.

“The bridge is about to collapse!”

“You idiot, wagons have been crossing it for years,” she said, irritably. The student jumped down from the wagon in protest and sat down in the mud with his arms folded across his chest. After a short deliberation, she decided she might as well obey.

“All right, as long as you’re willing to do the work,” she demanded, upon which the young man began to drag the suitcases to the other side right away. Mother, meanwhile, retrieved her children from under the canvas and clasped together they followed their peculiar traveling companion. On the other side of the river the little family looked for shelter beside a cliff, while Michel went back to the horse and wagon. When, after much plodding, he had brought over all of the household belongings, he tied a

long rope to the horse and walked to the bridge with it. Above them, threatening clouds rushed past and the horse refused to come along. Michel spurred it on with firm tugging movements. Hesitantly, the frightened horse stepped forward and the wagon slowly began to move. They approached the age-old bridge, which looked totally solid and showed no sign of any defect, and the student led the horse and wagon across it. After the very smooth crossing, Madame made a sour face and refused to say another word to him. After the wagon had been loaded up again, the journey continued. Finally, they were approaching the big city. They arrived just before sundown and not much later they were sitting warm and safe in front of a crackling fire with the Plombier family. After a good meal and a night's rest, their paths would separate. The youth expressed his thanks for the hospitality and carrying his things, he started to walk towards the university. In the city center, the mayor was announcing some hot news and the student joined the gathering crowd which was flocking near. The announcer theatrically unrolled a parchment. "The bridge of Avignon has collapsed," he began. "Seven people were killed tonight. The bridge was once destroyed, in 1226. As you can see, the Lord does not wish this bridge to be here. Our bridge builder, Bénézet, from days gone by has wrongly been declared a saint." It was now completely crowded with people and many of them blocked Michel's view, but he had heard enough and strolled away.

A harsh atmosphere pervaded in Avignon, whose history started high on the cliff by the river. The city, once the center of a Celtic tribe, hated visitors. His grandfather used to talk about the mercilessness of the Avignois, a long time ago. "In Paris they argue, in Avignon they will stick a knife in you," he had said. Avignon was situated on the well-known Via Agrippa, the main road between Cologne, Lyon and Arles. In the Parc des Papes Michel sat down on a park bench to calm his mind. He concentrated on the old oaks in front of the university, before his initiation into it. The freshman had been having a lot of dreams lately and sometimes he couldn't tell his dreams from real life anymore. He would have to find some technique to create clarity in this. Maybe his astrology studies would give him the aid he sought. After his small indulgence in navel-gazing, he went to meet his teachers and at their advice he moved into a small room in the Rue St-Agricol, a little street not far away. From that day on, he walked to the school building every day, through the inner city. From the Rocher des Doms he had been able to map out the city quite well. The Rocher des Doms was the cliff that stuck out above everything and from which the city was easy to explore. Michel usually preferred to saunter along the large boulevards, because there he could ponder his studies better. He got along well with a number of students, although they were soon often jealous of the exceedingly intelligent young man. At the esoteric school he gathered useful knowledge for the first few months. He learned that man possesses various bodies, a total of seven: the physical,

vital, astral and mental bodies and, at a higher lever, the causal, buddhi and atma bodies. He was taught that these represent seven levels of consciousness and that the planets and stars are also made up of them. All of these bodies are connected to each other and are present in every person, in at least a dormant form. The visible material body is the crudest type. The vital body holds the material together and provides the energy required. The astral body is connected to the emotions and reveals itself primarily in the dream world. The mental body represents thinking and the causal body only develops itself when thinking has completely plumbed the depths of cause and effect. Buddhi is understood to be the state where a person truly awakens and atma is the breath of life, a condition that is achieved when a someone becomes One with the All-that-is and the individual aspect is dissolved. It was an exciting theory, but there were no practical examples.

One day, the industrious first-year student went to the Place de l'Horloge around five o'clock in the morning to do his exercises. The square was still pristinely clean at that time of day and there was no one there to bother him. After finishing his exercises, he walked through the streets in good spirits and had arrived outside the city wall, when several carriages with guards surprisingly came driving up. A mysterious stop-over took place, because several large men hurriedly began to exchange the used-up horses for fresh ones. Moreover, inside one of the parked carriages sat a small fat man, decorated with many badges, who was wedged tightly between two solid-looking guards.

That guy must have committed some kind of crime, the student understood. The convoy had obviously arrived so early so as not to attract any unwanted attention. The changing of the horses and stocking up of provisions took some time. Meanwhile, Michel was looking at the prisoner with fascination. That man must have illusions of grandeur: he exuded the air of an emperor. Suddenly, there was a great commotion. Hordes of Avignois rushed from the Porte St. Lazare upon the carriages, wanting revenge on "the small corporal from Corsica." The city guard tried to control the riot, but there was no stopping the furious citizens and they surrounded the carriage in the center. They called the decorated prisoner every name in the book. Other insurgents threw rocks at him or threatened him with their swords. A few minutes later, several people jumped onto the carriage, climbed inside and started to tear off his badges of honor. An officer who arrived in a hurry managed to calm the heated tempers, after which the last horses were quickly hitched. The besieged carriage with "the small corporal" managed to escape, after a guard succeeded in pulling a few fanatics off the wheels. The rest of the carriages had been left alone and were able to follow their course uninterruptedly. Afterwards, the student was reflecting on the event.

"Hey, asshole, are you growing roots there, or what!" a workman suddenly swore.

"Didn't you see that riot just now?" asked Michel.

“I only see a stranger, and we don’t like those here,” and he continued on his way, rolling his barrel. It was the old Avignon mentality. And the strange riots* turned out to have been nothing but hallucinations.

After the first trimester, the teachers were full of praise for the young De Nostredame. That was very nice, but the gifted student was not learning very much from them. His grandfather had already taught him so much about astrology that it was impossible for his teachers to add much to it. The disappointed Michel therefore didn’t expect them to expand his knowledge much. Fortunately, there was a three-storey library that was the most beautiful one he could ever imagine. He liked to pass the time in there and examine the ancient texts. The teachers encouraged the genius to research related areas. They instructed Mr. Grimbart, the librarian who, due to some illness, was always shivering, to gather together a list of books for the student. Grimbart has set up the literature in a separate part of the library where the young man could go about his business without being disturbed. Michel devoured the stack of documents in a short time. Aside from a few works by Grandfather, the only book he had studied in depth was the Bible, and the change of fare was very welcome. In the end, there was really only one manuscript that really spoke to him. This was an essay about alchemy. It seemed like a cliché, but who didn’t see images of an old, bearded wizard, performing strange experiments in a dusty old lab when they heard the word alchemy. The book contradicted his preconceived notions and he wanted to go more deeply into the subject matter. In the manuscript in question, it said that alchemy was introduced in Spain by the Arabs after the crusades, and so he scrutinized the Spanish department for days on end. During his search he came upon an eye-catching article, written by Artephius in the twelfth century, entitled: “The art of increasing the lifespan of man.” The Spanish article was written in Latin, which he was familiar with. Curious, he began to read it.

“I, Artephius, have learned all the arts in the magical book of Hermes. During my long life, I have seen people who wanted to perfect alchemy. However, I did not want to write down anything that would make the laws more accessible to a broader audience, because they may only be revealed by God or a master. It is therefore useful to read my book only if one possesses broad knowledge and a free spirit. I once was like others: jealous. I have now been alive for about a thousand years, ultimately by the grace of God alone.”

That man is as old as Methuselah! Michel thought, excitedly. He was determined to read those two books, but indefatigable as he was in his search, he did not find them.

That one by Hermes probably doesn’t even exist, he thought, and he consoled himself by reading all the alchemical literature he could find. In one of the works, he read that metal can be changed into gold, using a

*1814 the dethroned Emperor Napoleon, nearly stoned in Avignon

mystical object, the so-called “Philosopher’s Stone.” The stone had been sought after for centuries, but was never found and in the thirteenth century, most alchemists had given up on it. Another manuscript told that alchemy can have a medical effect. If one ingested exactly accurate proportions of salt, sulfur and mercury, it could have a positive effect on one’s health. The Greek philosophers Thales and Aristotle believed that earth, water, air and fire were the basic elements from which everything material could be created. Another essay spoke about a fifth basic element: the essence. But for now he had read enough and he put the books away.

“Thanks for your help, Mr. Grimbert, see you tomorrow.” Another day had flown by and the tired student went back to his austere room in the Rue St. Agricole. After cooking and eating some warm mush, he meditated on the book of Hermes, without any effect, and then tried out “the philosopher’s stone”, but unexpectedly fell asleep. That night his desires were fulfilled. The searching soul was touched by something magnificent and powerful and with a shiver he sat up straight in his bed.

“Michel de Nostredame, I am the one you are looking for, I am Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia, the daughter of Atlas, one of the Titans.” Right before him sat a radiant, powerful, athletic being, wearing a winged hat and holding a golden staff entwined with snakes. Hermes continued: “I am the leader of the three worlds. I was born in a cave in Arcadia. I am the fastest of all the gods and the god of thieves. The Egyptians call me Toth. The Romans call me Mercury. I am Hermes Trismegistus from Genesis. I am “The Hope of the Stones”, “The Philosopher’s Stone” and “The Emerald Tablet.” My material brother, your fate has been determined. You will play a role in the cosmic drama that will unfold on earth during the coming millennia. But for now, until the Moon is mature, you will go in another direction in order to allow your slumbering knowledge to be awakened by Black Death.” Hermes vanished as quickly as he had appeared and left behind an enormous emptiness. Michel could not cope with the powerful, supernatural confrontation and collapsed. He did not wake up until the next afternoon. Feeling awful, he got up and, stumbling, picked up his school bag so he could get back to studying. But it was much too late to go the university and feeling confused he sat back down on his bed.

“I feel so wretched,” he groaned. With great difficulty, he reconstructed the message from Hermes, but he could not absorb it all. Meanwhile, his father - driven by higher powers - was in Saint Rémy, worrying about the less than practical education of his son. Although astrology had become an acknowledged science, there was not much you could do with it. He discussed it with Reynière, who initially stayed supportive of Michel’s choice. But Jacques kept harping on the fact that there was no future in it and she finally had to admit that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages. They wrote a letter to their son, in which they expressed their concerns and suggested that he consider a study in the field of medicine; after all, both of his grandfathers had been physicians. Michel received

their mail the next day and read their suggestion to change the course of his studies. He was pleasantly surprised and thought about Hermes, who had spoken about a change of direction.

So medicine is my destiny, he concluded. The next day he carefully approached his teachers, because he did not want discredit them in any way. During the parting discussion it turned out that they sympathized with his parents' arguments and he left his studies in Avignon on friendly terms.

After a short stay with his family, he left for the next university, in Montpellier.

"Welcome, Mr. De Nostredame", the caretaker greeted him most charmingly when he came in. "I will take you to the lecture hall right away, because you are the last one to arrive," and the stout woman got up from her stool with some difficulty and showed him the way. They walked through the main hallway and turned a corner at the end.

"The lecture will begin momentarily and will be given by Dr. Hache," she informed him. The lady brought him to the back room, where she showed him a spot at a table beside a young man with extraordinarily lively eyes. Professor Hache, unlike the caretaker, did not take the trouble to welcome his students, and began his lecture without delay.

"Thousands of years ago, the first doctors tried to cure their patients by drilling a hole in their heads," he said. François, the person seated next to Michel, pointed to his forehead condescendingly.

"Precisely, that is where that gesture originates," said Hache, who noticed, "but it really wasn't such a crazy idea, because in this way, they wanted to allow the evil spirits, which they thought were the cause of illness, to escape from the body. This was also called trepan." A student from Toulouse put up his hand.

"Questions may be asked at the end of my lecture," the professor said.

"Later, in ancient Greek times, a sick person would go to a temple and make animal sacrifices to Aesculapius, the god of healing. Afterwards, the patient would drink healing water as well as bathe in it, and then follow a strict diet." The same student again raised his hand.

"What did I just tell you?" said the teacher.

"I'm just trying to let an evil spirit escape from my arm," clarified the student, trying to be funny.

"Please leave!" Hache said, unexpectedly strict. The student got up, crestfallen, and left the room.

"Stupid jokes are not tolerated here," and the professor continued his speech. "In four hundred BC, the Greek physician Hippocrates lays the foundation for our scientific medical science. He says that illness is not caused by sorcery, but by nature, and can only be cured by her." His pupils were now keeping close ranks and no one dared make another sound.

"Around two hundred AD, Galenus, also a Greek physician, taught us that the body contains four types of fluids, or humors: blood, phlegm, yellow

bile and black bile and that they must be in balance with each other. That's it for the introductory history. Now is the time to ask questions, but briefly." The students hesitated for a few moments.

"Do women have the same amount of blood, phlegm and bile as men?" someone asked.

"We're not exactly sure about that, but when these humors are out of balance, men and women both get sick," he answered.

"My mother sure spews a lot of bile anyway," a Basque fellow commented.

"She must be sick," Hache supposed

"Not really, she's as fit as a fiddle."

"In any case, I can't make a diagnosis from a distance. Fortunately, we have advanced far beyond Galenus and we conduct scientific studies by cutting open human bodies, among other things. So, if your mother is nearby..." The blood drained from the Basque's face when he heard his teacher's serious-sounding suggestion.

"You mean you cut open live people too?" he asked.

"Certainly, but that happens only rarely. We primarily study cadavers and make elaborate drawings of them. Due to these studies we have gained innumerable insights and many people can be cured of present-day diseases."

"What methods currently exist to cure diseases?" Michel now asked.

"For instance, with medications, that are processed into liquids, powders or tablets," the lecturer answered. "Unfortunately, there are many quacks, herbalists and witches who pose as pharmacists. Another very effective method is phlebotomy or bloodletting, which allows the disease to drain out of the body; this is my specialty." Question period came to an end and there was an afternoon break. After this, Hache lectured uninterruptedly until sundown. In the evening, after a cheap meal in the cafeteria, Michel and his classmates left the university building to go home.

"Feel like walking through town?" someone who caught up to him at the Notre-Dame-des-Tables church called. It was François Rabelais, the student with the lively eyes who sat next to him in class. It sounded like a good idea to Michel and they walked through the town and quickly became friends. François turned out to be a masterful story teller who wore his heart on his sleeve. Everywhere they went he named everything in such a frank and unusual way that many would have blushed just listening to it. The rebel literally had no qualms about discussing anything: he talked about heretical matters, painful emotions or body parts that people usually avoided mentioning. And when he found that Michel responded too seriously to something, he suddenly acted like a little child or became surprisingly obscene. François, for his part, was deeply impressed by Michel's enormous amount of knowledge. The student from Saint Rémy seemed like a walking encyclopedia. In a pub, Michel told about his Jewish background, his education from his grandfather and, finally, about the interrupted studies in Avignon.

“Then we’re both in the same boat,” said François.

“What boat?” his classmate asked, surprised.

“Well, Jews and Kathars are both considered a threat to the Catholic religion. You’re a Jew and I’m a Kathar.”

“How can you be Kathar? Kathars were the last Gnostics.”

“Of course, his Lordship would know,” François grinned. “We, as true Christians, no longer practice our religion in public but underground. In Montpellier there are actually quite a lot of fellow believers. My father runs a restaurant over there, where meetings are held once in a while, in secret of course. I’ll bring you there some time if you want.”

“Sounds interesting. I’m curious to know what you people preach. Gnostics always had a very well-founded argument because of their thorough study of the Latin Bible, among other things.”

“Right, and that’s why the Catholic leaders hate us so much,” the Kathar added.

“Is that the only reason your religion is prohibited?”

“No, we are individualists and our Holy Books have been translated directly from the Gospel. The foundation of the Church, on the other hand, is based on power and their message is about the original sin.”

“Oh well, popes, bishops and priests often interpret the Bible to suit their own purposes, but in principle, we all believe the same thing,” was Michel’s opinion. Rabelais cast some doubt on his findings.

“We have our own laws and we don’t believe that one single being created all good and evil, like the Catholics do. Furthermore, we are for individual freedom, equality of women and against any form of violence. They’re not!”

“I was talking about the original Greek Bible,” Michel clarified. “In there, such points of view are not refuted.”

“Hmm, that may be. I’m not as learned as you are.”

After the foundation course at the medical university, the two friends effortlessly passed to the next grade. The class had shrunk to thirty students by then and today they were to have their first practicum. Professor Hache was standing on his platform and was wringing his hands in anticipation.

“Gentlemen, we always begin the second year with a practical demonstration of blood-letting. This will be performed by me personally on a person who has been declared incurably ill. Don’t worry, there is no Black Death involved.”

“What is the Black Death?” asked Michel pointedly.

“It’s a nick-name for the plague, my dear fellow, but don’t keep interrupting me. I hope for all of you that you won’t faint, because it is a bloody business. I’ve gotten used to it.” His colleagues carried in a woman with a seriously yellow complexion, who was tied to a chair; she was too weak to sit up. The patient could no longer look straight ahead and her eyes wandered in all directions. For the rest there was not much to her and

she was uttering uncontrolled sounds. She was a poignant case and a commotion started in the room.

"I understand you feel compassion for her and you undoubtedly think I'm being somewhat heartless," said the professor, "but this experiment is in the service of science and the end justifies the means. Moreover, I assure you that this lady will receive some financial compensation." The bully moved closer to the guinea pig and picked up where he left off.

"There are two ways we can perform bloodletting. The first one is to cut into a blood vessel," and he pointed to a suitable spot on the patient's forearm. "The second method is to place leeches." He took a number of glass pots out of his pockets and showed various specimens.

"Today, I will demonstrate only the first one; these little creatures are already sated anyway. For the first method, the patient needs to squeeze a stick in his fist. This causes the veins to swell and speeds up the process of the phlebotomy. Unfortunately, this lady is too weak for this and we will have to cut deeper," and he brought the lancet out of his doctor's bag.

"Are there any volunteers to try this with me?" he asked. No one dared say yes, so he appointed someone.

"Mr. De Nostredame, would you be so kind?" His student obediently got up and walked towards him.

"Make a cut right here, lengthwise," his teacher commanded while handing him the blades.

"Shouldn't I wash my hands first?" Michel asked.

"Wash hands. What for? If you're afraid to do it, I will do it myself."

"Sir," François bravely interrupted, "what my study partner means is that if the monk, the flabby kind, does not work the land, the farmer will not guard the land. As doctor he does not teach or preach to the people, so the warrior does not heal the sick. Do you understand?" Hache didn't understand a word of it.

"Um, right," he lied and he viciously made a deep cut into the forearm himself. As expected, little blood flowed out and he skillfully collected it in a glass bowl. Michel just let him be and returned to his spot. After staunching the wound, the woman still served as an overview for the arteries, which had to always be avoided. After this, she was removed. When closing the practicum, the professor looked around with satisfaction and asked if his students had any speculation about the future of medicine. Michel was the first one to put up his hand.

"Ah, the inquisitive but frightened student, go ahead," Hache teased.

"I could see people using body parts in the future," his student proposed.

"I thought you were a serious kind of person."

"Yes, I am."

"Apparently not," the teacher denied.

"I do try to be," Michel insisted.

"No one is interested in unsubstantiated nonsense stories."

"Obviously, I can't give a scientific basis, sir, but you were asking for speculations, weren't you?"

“Okay, that is quite enough. Leave your rubbish out of my class from now on,” the teacher said, insulted. After school, Michel asked François what he meant when he was talking about the monk of the flabby type.

“Oh, nothing really, I was only trying to test the thinking capacity of that ogre,” he said, carelessly.

“Gee, you can be mean!”

“Sure can,” Rabelais laughed, without being the least bit embarrassed, and on the way home they discussed the usefulness of hygiene.

One evening the two friends were being treated to a plate of mussels by François’ father in his restaurant. The place was filling up with fellow believers and they were fervently chattering with each other. A little later there would be prayers in the back room and the Jewish student had been invited to join in. François meanwhile confessed he has been busy translating Italian medical letters.

“That’s ambitious,” Michel said.

“And that’s not all. I am also writing my debut novel: *Les Horribles et Espouvantables Faict et Prouesses du très renommé Pantagruel*.”

“An impressive title. Perhaps a bit long though,” his friend opined.

“Maybe I’ll just call it *Pantagruel* then. But, to change the subject, are you someone who indulges in self-gratification?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you masturbate?” De Nostredame surreptitiously looked around to see if anyone was listening.

“Now you’re really going too far, François. That’s none of your business,” he said angry.

“Hey, I only wanted to prepare you for the mystical lesson you’re about to hear.”

“What are you talking about?” Michel asked, confused.

“Well, there is not only going to be praying, but gnosis or holy knowledge is also going to be revealed and this time it is about sexuality.” They were interrupted by the noise of the mixed company that was moving to the back room. Apparently it was time for the gathering and the two young men followed to the private room, where everyone was taking place on thick carpets. After a short prayer, a volunteer stood up to give the lecture and he brought out a stack of papers.

“Tonight, I will be speaking about the Hermes Cups,” he announced.

Holy cow, Michel said to himself, the son of Zeus and Maia, the messenger of the gods. The man showed a mystical image of the human body to clarify what he was talking about. In the head there were two symbolic overflowing cups and from the sacrum a pair of snakes crept up around the spine towards the opened wings at the height of the heart.

“As everyone knows, the old scriptures teach us to treat our sexual powers with great care. But why have we been taught for ages to behave chastely? The answer is different from what the Church deludes us with. Go forth and multiply, it preaches. It’s easy to get new recruits among your own

offspring. Eager for power, the church leaders have obscured and twisted the Gospel in order to keep the real reason hidden. The old scriptures only say “Do not lose any seed.” In other words, never allow it to be lost, not even during the act of love.” Michel looked at François in surprise. So that’s what the funny guy had been alluding to.

“The holy objective of gnosis is enlightenment of the individual,” the mystic continued, “and the coming home of the soul to the divine nature. This drawing shows the sexual transmutation of the *Ens Seminis**. This delicate knowledge is only taught at mystical inauguration schools, such as the one in Montpellier. The pharaohs of the old Egypt were some of the people who were instructed in this. The technique requires the utmost self-control of sexual powers during lovemaking between man and woman. Especially for the man. By withholding the semen during the melting together of the two souls, a divine spark can be created, which can be compared to an actual ignition. “Ignatius” in Latin, which is where the word “gnosis” originated. The spark is created by the induction between the male and female sexual organs and produces a supernatural power, which rises up along the spinal column. Hence the two twisting snakes. The re-born energy reaches up to the top of the so-called caduceus of Mercury through these channels and there opens the wings of the spirit. The energy, or kundalini, can rise further, up to the Hermes Cups, but only if there is true love. If this is present, the cups are gradually filled. When they are full, they overflow and the energy slowly flows down the front to the heart. After repeating this process seven times, man is completely developed.” The mystic put the drawing away.

“Now I ask you all to rise.” The believers all stood and started to recite the standard prayers. François sang along with full conviction. Finally, after fifteen religious mysteries had been contemplated, the service was completed and tea was served. At the end of the evening the two students evaluated the material in the now abandoned room.

“I thought you had stooped to obscenity again, before the service,” Michel apologized, “but I was truly fascinated with what they were saying.”

“I knew you would find it interesting,” François answered.

“It sure was, but it does make life seem like punishment.”

“Well, the fruits can be picked during one’s lifetime, and if you apply this technique properly, you can cultivate special powers. Nature will listen to you.”

“You mean I could talk to a horse?” the invited guest asked frivolous.

“For instance.”

“Are you serious, or are you playing with me?”

“No, seriously; the Red Sea opened for Moses, didn’t it?” Rabelais indicated.

“Then everyone should apply that technique as soon as possible.”

* the human sperm

‘Better not; hardly anyone is pure enough and you can create a lot of havoc with bad intentions. Those are the Brothers of Darkness. Watch out for them!’ Michel let everything sink in for a while.

‘Are children still conceived among practitioners of this technique?’ he then asked.

‘They are still being delivered by the stork.’

‘Oh great, the stupid jokes are back,’ and, making a long face, Michel got up to leave.

‘Sorry, sorry, I’ll answer your question seriously. Ordinary mortals are having enough babies to preserve our population. Besides, very advanced children are often born of initiates.’

‘I suppose the transcendence of lust is the basis of this,’ his guest speculated.

‘Indeed, once upon a time, Eve ate the forbidden fruit and ever since then man has been banished from paradise. Now we have to move mountains to repair her mistake.’

‘Forbidden fruit?’

‘Forbidden fruit is symbolic for male sperm,’ François explained, drinking a last cup of tea. ‘But do you play with yourself, or don’t you?’ His friend shook his head sadly and walked out of the room. Incurable, that Rabelais!

After several years of intense cramming, Michel got permission to establish himself as a physician. His studies were not completed yet, but he definitely wanted to go and help the plague victims in the country. In the back of his mind he always held the thought that the Black Death would awaken his dormant insight, according to the message from Hermes. The nineteen-year-old physician told François about his intention, who regretted it, but agreed that his friend was ready for the real work.

‘And what will you call yourself?’ François asked.

‘Just Doctor De Nostredame.’

‘You know that scientists embellish their names with a Latin ending, don’t you?’

‘Yes, but ...’ Michel hesitated, not wanting to be vain.

‘It’s important to make an impression, you know. What do you think of Nostradamus?’

‘Sounds great!’ his buddy laughed, submitting to the idea. A few days later, the two friends bade each other farewell and promised to keep in touch.

Michel returned to his parents’ home, so that from Saint Rémy he could offer his knowledge in the surrounding areas. They were very happy with the return of their son, and Father spontaneously offered him Grandpa’s attic.

‘Shouldn’t you discuss that with Julien first?’ Reynière cautioned her husband.

“Julien only studies up there, but Michel is going to be bringing in money”, he retorted.

“You’re just walking all over that boy,” she disapproved.

“All right, I’ll ask him what he thinks.” Julien, who was studying law up in the attic, had no problem with making room for his eldest brother, as it turned out, and he moved back into his former room, along with his books. His older brother’s presence was good for him too; he could now help him translate texts. All’s well that ends well. Michel was happy to see his family again; his last visit had been a year ago, and he observed the familiar goings-on with a broadened mind. His little brothers had grown into strapping lads and were about to leave the nest and go out into the wide world. Bertrand wanted to be a carpenter. Most of the woodwork in the house was made by him. He definitely didn’t want to be a notary like his father, “because he has a deformed forehead from all that brainwork”, he claimed. Father did indeed have a strange forehead: it was flat, high and stuck way out. His hands, by contrast, were exceptionally nicely shaped. In addition, Jacques was a bit stuffy; he always considered everything in the minutest detail. His wife was more in touch with her intuition. Michel noticed for the first time what an attractive woman his mother was. She had a great figure, beautiful, warm eyes and long shiny brown hair, which she usually wore up. It was a pity that she was a bit too trusting with strangers; a few times, money had disappeared in her presence. Father, on the other hand, had a healthy dose of suspicion in that regard, so the two completed each other quite well. The other brothers, Hector and Antoine didn’t know what they were going to do yet.

“I know: I’m going to make some matzo,” Reynière said breezily in reaction to all the heavy plans for the future. “Want to help me, Michel? Then you could tell me what you’ve been up to in Montpellier at the same time,” and the young physician willingly went with her. In the kitchen they mixed water with some flour.

“Okay, tell me,” she commanded, and her son began to tell her all about his student days.

“Oops, I still have to stoke the fire in the back garden,” she interrupted him. “You go ahead and start kneading; I’ll be right back.” A few minutes later, she returned, covered in soot and Michel continued his narrative, as if he hadn’t noticed anything. Many college stories later the scent of the unleavened bread filled the whole house. Father cut the crunchy matzo at the table and in this way they celebrated the homecoming of their successful son.

“Would you visit a sick acquaintance of mine?” Jacques asked afterwards.

“That’s the city surgeon’s job, isn’t it?” Michel asked.

“Well, I don’t have a lot of faith in him. Mr. Delblonde’s health is steadily declining.”

“Okay, I’ll go and have a look,” his son promised.

“By the way, the municipality of Arles is looking for a physician,” Reynière just remembered. “You should go and apply there.”

“I will Mother, thanks for the tip.” The next day he visited Mr. Delblonde, who had been in the medical care of Villain for some time. This surgeon took care of your wounds, cut away swellings, performed phlebotomy, pulled teeth, prepared herbal remedies and cut your hair or shaved your beard. The long-term patient had had the misfortune not to qualify for free treatments. His illness had been dragging on and on and he had been obliged to sell the one family heirloom he possessed, a root wood wardrobe, in order to be able to pay the bills. Only people who were completely destitute were eligible for free services and the municipality covered these cost. Michel’s suspicions were confirmed when he entered; Villain was of the old school. Delblonde was completely exhausted due to laxatives and various fontanelles. The patient was lying in bed in critical condition with a sister by his side. Nostradamus introduced himself and the old man thought he remembered him from the past. Half delirious, he began to talk about the old days, but his sister put a stop to it right away.

“Let’s not waste any time, doctor,” she said and she told him that her brother had gotten much worse after the incisions in the skin had become infected. Villain was trying to release an excess of humors this way. Michel examined the patient and gave his diagnosis.

“I don’t think that the cause is serious, but the medical treatment is. If you want your brother to stay alive, those incisions must be closed and you must get rid of those purgative drinks,” he insisted. The despondent sister realized that it was time for a change and she agreed. Michel immediately removed the iron tubes from the dozens of fontanelles and cleaned the wounds with water.

“Also, give your brother fresh fruit and vegetables every day,” the doctor advised as he was leaving, “as soon as he is a bit stronger, I will be back.” At city hall they were furious when they heard about this “illegal practice.” They instructed the police to pick up the charlatan, but he showed them his papers which proved that he was an acknowledged physician and that he had every right to treat any patient in France. The city council members were still going berserk and were claiming that there was room for only one chirurgien in Saint Rémy, but Nostradamus held his ground and there was nothing they could do about it. Within a week, Mr. Delblonde began to regain his strength and the controversial physician told him he should now start to take short walks. The patient did as he was told and walked around the town for the first time in months. His health continued to improve by leaps and bounds and everyone in town witnessed his surprising cure. The city chirurgien as well as the council members looked like fools and Michel’s name as physician was established. Within a few days, sick people started to knock on the De Nostredame’s door and the miracle doctor treated all of them with good results. After Villain, in the course of time, had made a few big blunders, Michel was appointed as the official new physician of Saint Rémy. The swearing-in ceremony had barely taken place when there was a sudden massive outbreak of the plague in the Camargue. The District Council reported that there were

thousands of victims in the area and the brand new surgeon was now facing a huge challenge. The pestilence was extremely contagious and if you had a family member who had the disease, the same fate, as a rule, was awaiting you. Within two to six days, you could be dead and buried. Dogs, cats, chickens and even horses were also its victims. But the young physician was resilient and thought he was immune. Fortunately, Saint Rémy had not been hit with an outbreak of the plague as yet. But the nearby village of Sainte Doffe had been and public life had come to a grinding halt there. Dead bodies were rotting in the streets or tossed into hastily dug graves by shattered loved ones. The unbearable stench of rotting flesh hung in the air and people were burning fragrant pieces of wood in an effort to dissipate it. Many villagers had kicked their family members out of their homes to try to save their own lives. Others had fled elsewhere. Michel visited his first plague patient in this plagued village and was brought to a deathly ill child in a little clay hut. The little boy was spitting up blood, had big black spots and lumps as large as eggs all over his body. His mother was sprinkling the floor with vinegar to freshen the air. The brave doctor examined the child, but truth be told, there was really nothing he could do. No remedy had yet been found for this disease. At the university they were advising to perform bloodletting, but Michel wanted nothing to do with such backward practices. Just to give the family some hope he placed a piece of devil's dung around the child's neck; an herb that was used in exorcism. He wrote down the symptoms of the extremely contagious disease and left without being able to do anything substantial. During the days that followed, the physician visited several plague sufferers, who were initially taking shelter in spiritual peace with God. Wherever he came in, there was always some anxious priest who would be taking confession and promising the patient a place in the hereafter. Medical help, unfortunately, took second place. Ignorance is a cardinal sin, Michel realized more than ever. However, the abundance of superstition, the abuse of power and the ignorance stimulated him to attempt to discover the cause of the disease by using his common sense and to find a solution for it. He distinguished two types of plague: the one with lumps forming on the outside of the body and the one affecting the lungs. After examining the symptoms of the disease, he could see the importance of hygiene, which, in the Jewish religion had been traditional for centuries. An interesting case in Milan confirmed his findings. The archbishop had ordered to brick up the first three houses that had been attacked by the plague, with the residents inside. As a result of this, Milan was protected from a further outbreak. This harsh management had shown that contagion was being passed on invisibly. Nostradamus began to introduce quarantine for new cases, during which time no healthy citizens were permitted to have any contact with the patients, who were still being provided with food and water. This method began to yield some good results. The researcher also had the idea that the disease could be carried by the wind and he therefore distributed masks among the population in a

neighboring village that had not been contaminated with the plague yet. The residents were spared from the epidemic and Michel began to suspect the existence of bacteria. He then began to advise everyone to take a bath in warm water once a week if at all possible and to wash their hands with soap before each meal. He also stimulated them to regularly brush their teeth, for example with chewed up licorice root, to rinse the mouth with honey water or wine vinegar, to clip their finger nails and cut and wash their hair, moustaches and beards. Everyone also had to change their clothing and thoroughly clean it by washing it, preferably in hot or boiling water. Despite the essential pioneer work, he nevertheless remained a voice calling out in the wilderness, until Pope Clemens VII heard about the willful plague fighter and invited him to his private quarters in Avignon. The pope asked him how he should protect himself against a future outbreak of the plague and Michel advised him to at least withdraw into his residence. When the epidemic reached the neighborhood of the religious leader about a month later, he spent several weeks in solitude. Because of the isolation he stayed alive and Nostradamus gained some fame. The plague, meanwhile, was raging through all parts of the country and exacted a terrible toll in all of Europe. The overpopulated areas were hit the hardest. Armies of well-trained, strong soldiers fell apart after a few days of the epidemic, and local wars were lost before being fought. Quacks tried to take advantage of the panic situation and make a quick fortune. The young doctor worked day and night and treated thousands of people. After four years, the plague had finally spent its fury and Nostradamus returned to Montpellier to finally complete his studies. François had graduated by then and, surprisingly, had left France. The caretaker told him strict measures had been taken against the reformed, the humanists and all dissidents. Even scientists with sharp tongues were no longer welcome in the country. In spite of this, François had the good fortune to be employed as a physician by the viceroy of Piemonte. Michel once again attacked his studies, but he came upon a lot of incomprehension among his former teachers regarding his progressive ideas. His theoretical and practical knowledge was so impressive, however, that the teachers could not deny him his doctor's title a year later. The unconventional physician gave lectures at this university for a short time, but his treatment methods ultimately caused too much consternation. The director-in-chief took action; the culprit was admonished and thereupon left the university. Tried and tested, Michel returned home to Saint Rémy and there decided to resume his practice.

Chapter 3

“There’s no place like home,” Jacques said, after the umpteenth return of his son, but Michel didn’t respond to his corny remark.

“You’ve changed, boy; you’re so quiet.”

“I’m getting older, father,” he replied tersely. Michel had completely outgrown his parents, but he didn’t want to hurt their feelings and didn’t say anything else. There had been extra space in the house for a while, and the physician decided to once again move into the abandoned attic. Julien was now studying law in Aix-en-Provence and Bertrand and his wife were living in a house he had built himself at the edge of town. Hector and Antoine were still living at home and were hoping to hear new stories from their worldly brother, but he didn’t seem to be in the mood to talk. Michel had been through a lot and his mind had become too heavy and too powerful for wasting time. In fact, it had become so heavy and forceful that it was getting cloudy. The mystical veil protected his higher bodies in their development and it made him inaccessible. And when anyone pulled this blanket off him, his look could burn you. The learned family member badly needed rest and resigned himself to the character changes in himself. Today the fearless physician went to visit some patients in nearby Arles. After a pleasant little trip through the sunny scenery, the carriage stopped in front of a yellow house near the town center. Nostradamus knocked and waited, but there was no response. The shutters were open and he glanced inside

“The doctor’s here,” he called out in a clear voice, but there was still no sign of life. He decided to try knocking loudly on the front door one more time before climbing in through the window, when suddenly he was approached from behind by a scrawny man with reddish hair. The man, whose shoes were covered with paint, carelessly pushed him aside and entered the house.

“Whoa, wait a minute, I’m visiting a patient here,” the doctor said, but the man, who was missing his left ear, seemed deaf and mute and rudely slammed the door shut in his face.

Well, that’s never happened to me before! Michel thought, feeling somewhat humiliated. I’m being treated like dirt here.

Still in a funk, the generally well-respected physician walked through Arles, which possibly was one of the most beautiful cities in France. Nostradamus had some extra time because of the strange incident, and ordered a cool drink at Place du Forum, which was littered with cafés. Sitting on a wicker chair, he observed what was going on in the street while he quenched his thirst. The provincial town was known for its cultural manifestations and was visited by many wealthy Italians and Spaniards. The foreigners were noticeable because of their expensive clothing and different looks. It was an enjoyable spectacle and drew a lot

of attention. A little while later, an Italian lady walked towards him from a shopping street, and he was instantly taken with her. He guessed her to be about twenty years old, a few years younger than himself. The Italian woman had a small, beautiful head, a long neck and sparkling eyes and she moved very elegantly. The physician stared at the charming lady, who looked to be high-born and he was unable to avert his gaze. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and his heart was pierced by Cupid. Most people did not show off their beauty, but Italians did; the lady was walking around wearing very conspicuous clothing. She was wearing a purple velvet gown with puffed sleeves and an open white collar. The Venetian-style garment flared from her waist down to the ground, held up by hoops. Dozens of them! In addition, her black hair was bound on top of her head as an ornament, decorated with jewels. Around her neck she wore an expensive-looking pearl necklace. While the breathtakingly beautiful lady was walking towards Michel, her dress majestically dragged on the ground and the longer he looked at her, the more unearthly he began to feel. When the Italian woman walked past him, chatting with two gentlemen and a matron, she suddenly gave him a candid look. A spell was cast. He melted like wax, under her unexpected gaze, and he felt as if his life was now just beginning.

“Good heavens,” he stammered, totally rattled. And while he kept staring at her he was shaking like a leaf. He suddenly felt very small and more vulnerable than he had ever thought possible. After years of only visiting patients, he had completely forgotten about love and now the sun was beginning to shine in the crevices of his soul. During the heartbeat that their eyes met, she was also struck by a love arrow and she blushed as she continued on her way with her companions. Michel’s heart was aflame and he determined he absolutely must court this woman. The love-struck admirer jumped up, threw some money on the table and ran after the Italian woman. He followed the little group from a distance and feverishly tried to think of a way to approach her. The lady sensed him behind her, but did not dare to turn around and look and finally entered an establishment. The unsteady physician almost started to panic.

Now what? he wondered. A serving girl happened to be leaving the same place at the same time. He noticed and called out to her: “Miss, could you please tell me when that last group of people leaves, because I have something to discuss with them.” The servant looked at his neat appearance and responded as he had hoped: “You are an acquaintance of the De Vaudemonts?”

“More or less,” he twisted the truth. She became talkative and told him that the company would be returning to the Lot en Garonne that coming Saturday. He had the information he wanted, thanked her and returned to Saint Rémy on cloud nine. There, he began to make plans to meet the woman of his dreams. During lunch, a changed housemate sat at the table. “You’re in a good mood,” Father remarked.

“And I’ve never seen you look so handsome,” his mother added, “you’re positively beaming.” Michel just smiled sheepishly, but didn’t say a word about it; he kept his heart to himself. But Reynière had an idea.

“I think I know what’s going on,” she said mischievously and when her son asked for a mirror the next day, she was sure. He must be in love!

“Is it on account of a lady that you’re so out of sorts?” she asked.

“Um, yes,” he admitted.

“Well, I’d better give you a few tips then. You may be learned, but when it comes to women’s business you’re better off listening to me.” Mother had seen through his secret and the diligent physician looked at his mother expectantly, like a small child.

“Women like it when you pay them compliments,” she told him. “Is she from around here?”

“No, she’s from Italy.”

“Ah, the country where fashion comes from. Then we’d better do something to improve your image.” And that same day, Mother bought a trendy suit and fit it on him personally. Hector and Antoine were curious and came to see what was going on with their brother in the living room.

“Mother is dressing Michel?” they scratched their heads. Reynière unpacked the new red jerkin and pulled it on over the buttoned up shirt with ruffles. On top of this came a black over-frock.

“I want one of those too!” Hector shouted enthusiastically, when he saw the expensive velvet overcoat with long, split sleeves. A few minutes later, Father came home from work.

“Michel, I have some mail for you,” he reported, looking on in wonder.

“I can’t use my hands right now, Dad.”

“I’ll put it in your desk for you,” Jacques offered. His wife, meanwhile, kept pulling on the various pieces of clothing.

“You’re slight and this makes you look broader,” she said, fidgeting with the coat.

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” her son answered and kept standing as still as a statue.

Soon he started to hop from one foot to the other, because his mother was trying to put a pair of knickerbockers with a zipper on him. Then she put white stockings on his feet and wide slippers made of cowhide.

“I think those shoes are beautiful,” Antoine said.

“They sure are,” his fancy brother said, looking down. Finally, Reynière placed a hat with a feather on his head, and the result was charming indeed. He looked both distinguished and stylish, everyone agreed, and their love-struck family member paraded through the living room for them.

“Goodness gracious, you look like a king,” said Father, who came in again, shaking his head.

The next day, the physician, who had taken a day off, happily set off to Arles, wearing his new outfit. Once there, he loitered around the boarding house he had seen the beautiful lady enter before, for about an hour. He

repeatedly looked into all the windows of the building, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but she was nowhere to be seen. A hunchback, who was advertising bullfights in a most irritating way, came and stood right next to him. The lover slunk away and sat down at the same terrace where had been two days earlier. He had just ordered a drink to calm himself, when the beautiful woman suddenly appeared out of nowhere and walked past, by herself. His disappointment disappeared like snow in the sun and he bravely hurried towards her. He had not been mistaken: she was so beautiful, so elegant and fine. Irresistible! The Italian woman got butterflies in her stomach when she saw him trotting towards her and for a moment she didn't know what to do. On top of that, her face turned scarlet when she saw his modern clothing, which was perfect in every detail.

That must be meant for me, she thought, feeling nervous and honored at the same time.

"Mademoiselle De Vaudemont," he stammered, "as a physician, I must point out to you that the waist of your dress is too tight. This is bad for your circulation." How stupid of me, he thought, I meant to give her a compliment.

"I mean, it could harm your beauty," but there was no reply; The Italian woman didn't know what to say. I should just express myself freely, he decided.

"To be honest, you have made a profound impression on me and I had to see you again," he said. That broke the ice and she smiled at his candor.

"Do you practice here in Arles?" she asked, still a bit stiff, but in flawless French without a trace of an accent.

"Um, no, although, yes sometimes, but I am from Saint Rémy and I work there too." The unnerved physician introduced himself and invited her to sit down and have a drink with him, after which they both walked to the terrace where his drink was still waiting for him. It was quite a feat to maneuver her hoop skirt between the tables, but finally they were sitting down.

"You look truly fabulous," he complimented "Yolande", "but how can you get through the day wearing that dazzling but heavy dress?"

"I only wear this dress when I'm parading through town; as soon as I get home, it is removed," and she nervously thanked the waiter for the anise drink. Bystanders meanwhile, were openly staring at the enchanting couple. The two were completely oblivious to this public attention, however, and the physician tried to think of topics of conversation.

"It's not possible, is it, to deal with such a dress alone?"

"The matron helps me with it," she answered, and then there was a pregnant pause. Michel again searched for words, but he couldn't find any and ordered another drink instead.

"I've heard it is quite a heavy load to study for physician," Yolande commented.

"Oh, five years of university."

“Well, that is very clever; there are not many who could accomplish that,” she praised him and slowly but surely, something beautiful began to flow between them.

“What brings you to Arles? It looks like you’re journeying through on your way somewhere else,” Michel asked. Yolande told him that her family owned a castle in the Lot and Garonne, to which they were traveling and that she was from a noble lineage.

“I suppose the castle belongs to your parents?” he commented. She confirmed this and started to warm up, talking about her father, Count Ferry VI de Vaudemont, and her mother, Queen of Naples. Her parents had nine children, including herself. The chill had completely left the air and the chemistry between them started to manifest. The spark between them was palpable. It was true love and time had never flown by so fast. They were both over the moon when eventually said goodbye to each other and left the scintillated public behind. Yolande promised to write him as soon as she arrived in the Lot. Back in Saint Rémy, Mother immediately inquired how it went for him.

“It was positive,” he answered coolly.

“Positive? Is that all you have to say? You are beaming, my man!”

“Oh, all right,” he laughed out loud, “but first I’ve got to get out of this monkey suit.” And while he was running up to the attic, he shouted out: “She is going to be my wife!” A week later, he received the first letter from his beloved, in which she expressed her desire for him. After a few more letters it was evident: the fire kept burning and the two were meant for each other. In the last letter Yolande requested him to come and visit her in the Lot soon. Jacques and Reynière were overjoyed that their eldest son had finally found a woman, and one from a wealthy, noble family no less.

“You’ve caught a big fish, Michel. I hope you’ll put us in your will,” his father, the notary, teased.

“Certified idiot,” his son replied unusually lightheartedly.

“I guess you’ll get to live in that beautiful castle,” his mother supposed.

“That’s a bit premature Mom. First let’s see how this visit goes.” But her intuition told her that her son was about to leave the village for good.

Not long after, Nostradamus left to go and see his princess. He was going to rescue her and in his mind he saw a beautiful drama unfold. Love really did have a blinding effect, the lucky devil realized while making the long trip in the carriage, by way of Toulouse. And on the way he found himself possessed by a longing for Yolande that would - he thought - burn eternally. In the Ariège, the carriage passed the historic Mount Montségur, where the last of the Kathars were murdered en masse centuries ago, and he remembered his old university friend François Rabelais. The scenery was now getting a lot greener and he began to see vineyards everywhere. Picking grapes, he fantasized right away, just to pick grapes with her would be enough, and he looked at the blooming vineyards stretching to

the horizon, intoxicated by his love for her. When dusk began to fall, the silhouette of Castle Puivert loomed in the distance: it was the castle that belonged to the De Vaudemonts. The castle was beautifully situated on top of the hill and Orion shone above it, seemingly symbolically. The coachman had planned the trip well, because they arrived at seven o'clock and he parked his vehicle in the twilight. The keyed-up lover got out and looked for a sign of life. Abruptly, the portcullis in the massive entrance tower was raised. Michel took a deep breath and walked to the opened gate with his luggage. While he was looking around, he caught a glimpse of his beloved behind an open window. Nervously, he walked through the portcullis and across an enormous courtyard, while the gate slammed shut behind him, to keep out intruders.

"Good evening, Mr. Nostradamus," Count De Vaudemont greeted him, smoothing out his drooping moustache. Yolande's father kept his distance and a servant rushed to take the bags of the visitor.

"So you are the young physician my daughter has been so enthusiastically exclaiming about. Did you have a good trip?"

"Indeed I did my Lord, but my body is craving some movement now," Michel answered and demonstratively started to stretch his limbs. Yolande arrived, elated, but was unable to exchange one word with her lover, for he was taken to his quarters immediately as ordered by her father.

"Tonight during dinner, you will have plenty of chance to speak to him," he whispered to his daughter. It was repugnant to the castle lord to see her following the newcomer like a panting deer. Such nonsense! And the count disappeared into one of the rooms with a disapproving look on his face. The guest was taken to a donjon that was twenty meters high.

"You'll be staying on the top floor," the servant mumbled, carrying an oil lamp and slowly ascending the stairs. A thousand steps higher, the tired traveler was left in a room with a four-poster bed that was guarded by the sculptures of eight musicians. After a short nap, Michel decided to explore his immediate surroundings. In the dark, he climbed a narrow, wooden staircase to the roof terrace, where he had a great view of the area. The full moon was shining onto the village of Puivert which was situated on a tranquil lake. Some commotion in the courtyard caught his attention. Several well-groomed guests were there, waiting for dinner. Michel hurried back to his room to get changed and then joined the group, which was just starting to go in. In the large, fancy room stood a gorgeous dining table with matching chairs. The kind of furniture belonging to the avant-garde. A servant showed the physician to a place across from Yolande, but between Ferry VI and the queen of Naples. They would put this serious candidate for their daughter to the test. The sweethearts were looking expectantly at each other, but were also a bit unsure about the parents' verdict. Yolande was wearing a brilliant turquoise gown and her hair was coiffed in a low chignon this time. She sent a restrained smile to her friend, who subtly answered. The dining table was set for royalty. There were glass dishes with golden trim and hand-painted replicas of the family

coat of arms. The linen and cutlery were also decorated with it. The emblems were everywhere. The staff, meanwhile, had started serving the entrees. In addition to the count and the countess there were five sons, four daughters, three in-laws, several grandchildren and a handful of guests. During the rich meal, the turtle doves could not take their eyes off each other and they began to flirt.

“You’re not the only ones at this table, you know”, a son-in-law said, irritated. In any case, one thing was clear: the two were in love.

“You seem to have built up a good reputation in the Provence,” the count remarked, while his drooping moustache just missed his soup.

“I do my best to cure the ill,” the physician said, “but I’m glad the last outbreak of the plague has run its course, because I have very little control over it.”

“We’re very fortunate to not have experienced that terrible disease here,” the queen of Naples said.

“But did you actually graduate?” the count suddenly asked.

“I already talked to you about that, Father,” Yolande defended her beau.

“I will bring you my certificate after dinner, my Lord,” Michel promised.

“Please do, I am very interested in seeing it. I’ll be expecting you in my room shortly then. I happen to have some excellent cognac there as well. I’m sure you understand that I only want the best for my daughter.” Ferry VI remained suspicious and was not in the least embarrassed to go through a list of questions that should determine if the physician was qualified as a son-in-law. The questions were about random topics; Nostradamus was able to give an impeccable answer to each one and slowly the mistrust began to diminish. After the dessert the count had a brief private consultation with his wife outside of the dining hall and then returned. It seemed the couple had decided that the prospective new husband was good enough for their daughter. After that, Michel could do no wrong. After Ferry VI had spent some time with him in his room, the lovers finally had a chance to be together and they quietly took a walk outside the gate. They seemed to understand each other so well, that words were superfluous. Behind a chestnut tree they furtively kissed, and the touch was like magic. After a week at the castle, Michel asked for Yolande’s hand in marriage, and she accepted only too happily. Her calculated father gave his permission that same day; after all, the candidate met all of his conditions. A dream was coming true and Nostradamus felt as though he could take on the entire world. The physician, who had been freed from his melancholy, informed his parents of the coming wedding at Puivert, but they sent a message that it would not be possible for them to make the long trip, due to their geriatric ailments. Only his brother Hector would be able to attend. Their eldest son requested them to send his personal possessions and promised to come to Saint Rémy with Yolande as soon as possible.

The auspicious day arrived and countless prominent ladies and gentlemen gathered to make it a splendid occasion. And it was a spectacular wedding party. When the newly-weds were finally alone, they could not get enough of each other.

"It is a like fairytale to be married to you," Michel swooned, while they were lying in his four-poster bed, kissing.

"It is a fairytale," she replied softly and they continued to melt together with the climax as the grand finale. The eight sculptures of the musicians had been turned to face the walls. After the celestial wedding night, they got down to business right away; they decided to settle in Agen. The guild there was looking for a licensed physician and they had accepted Nostradamus for the position. The influential town was not far from Puivert and so the young couple was able to be independent as well maintain contact with the family. The blissfully happy pair went on a house hunt and quickly found a suitable residence, situated on the town square, which had a beautiful fountain. While decorating their new home, they enjoyed their freedom, the summer days, and especially each other. One sultry night, the lovers scampered to the fountain and danced under the spraying water to their hearts' content. They sat down on the edge, dripping, and laughing with glee.

"Close your eyes," Yolande requested and she put something in his mouth.

"A cherry!" he uttered.

"I have something else for you."

"Another fruit?"

"Yes, I am pregnant," and they continued to kiss ecstatically.

Aside from his work, Nostradamus set up a small perfume factory, where concentrated oils for medicinal use were manufactured. A dozen employees distilled plants and herbs into ethereal oils there and their master would develop a recipe for every ailment. In the meantime, the married couple was starting to feel comfortably at home in Agen. In the Rue du Soleil, there was a special book store, in which Michel decided to nose around one day.

"Are you finding what you want?" the owner called from the back.

"I'm just browsing. I'm not looking for anything in particular," the visitor answered. The bookseller, who had a long beard, walked towards him.

"Aren't you the new doctor?"

"That's right!"

"I'm Abigail. Nice to finally meet another well-read person around here. In that regard, it is slim pickings in this little town."

"I don't know the people here very well yet," Michel apologized.

"Of course, a book is much more expensive than a loaf of bread and almost no one can afford to buy one," Abigail qualified his comment, "but if you're ever looking for medical literature, I will certainly be able to help you. I have good connections with publishers in London, who are progressive in that area."

“Possibly later, when I have more time,” the busy physician said. “I’m afraid I have to go already, goodbye,” and he went on to see his next patient.

After the doctor had acquired a decent collection of medical works in the course of time, their first child was born. It was a son: Victor. And while he was still in diapers, his mother got pregnant again. His father, meanwhile, had become friends with the bookseller, who one day had a mysterious bundle set aside for him. Nostradamus was pleasantly surprised when he saw the work, which had the word “Kabala” written on it in Gothic letters. Of course, he had heard of it a long time ago, but he had never studied it. Amazing that he would now completely unexpectedly receive it from Abigail.

“How much is it?” he asked, reaching for his wallet.

“This book won’t cost you anything,” Abigail answered.

“Well, thank you very much.”

“It’s not me you should thank, but a secret admirer of yours.” The doctor shrugged his shoulders in surprise and accepted the gift. At home, Victor was fast asleep in his little bed and his father had a chance to recuperate in peace from his long work day. Yolande poured her husband some jasmine tea and they enjoyed each other’s company, sitting in front of the fire. The successful physician looked contentedly at his beautiful wife, gave her a kiss and laid his hand on her swollen belly; the unborn child was already kicking a bit. When he’d finished his tea, he decided to read his new kabala book and took it down from the shelf. “The bestowal of mystical knowledge”, was the sub-title. While he made himself comfortable, nestling close to his spouse on the carpet, he opened the book and found a card in it with a name and address on it: “Julius Scaliger, 15 Avenue de Lattre, Agen.” This must undoubtedly be his secret admirer.

“Yolande, do you know someone named Julius Scaliger?”

“Scaliger, that is a famous fellow townsman who is causing quite a stir as a writer. He is highly praised everywhere as a humanist,” she answered.

“Why don’t I know that?”

“You can’t know everything, darling, but why are you asking?”

“He gave me this book. Look, here’s his card,” and he gave it to her.

“Why would he do that?” Yolande asked, surprised.

“Darned if I know.”

“Wait a minute, he’s a physician too,” she suddenly remembered, “court physician of the Bishop of Agen. That must be the link. Maybe he knows you from the medical university in Montpellier?”

“No, definitely not,” he said. “Let’s see what kind of book he gave me,” and he began to read.

“Besides the written tradition of the Bible, there is also the tradition of the Kabala. This mystical knowledge is based on Genesis and is passed on primarily from teacher to student. The Tree of Life is the prescribed model and this form is the key to the mystical reading of the Bible. We are

speaking here of the four worlds, which symbolize the different levels of consciousness in the story of Creation, and this knowledge is deepened with the aid of meditation. The Kabala was originally a Jewish mystical tradition used to reveal secret messages in the bible, but is now also used in scholasticism. The Kabala is practiced in esoteric schools and by individual magicians.”

Michel closed the book and painfully had to acknowledge that on the spiritual level he had been at a stand-still for years. This book was a gift from heaven. After changing Victor, the three of them happily went to bed.

“I’ll have to pay this Scaliger a visit soon,” said Michel, while their son’s eyes were slowly closing.

“Take your time, sweetheart. Scaliger’s not going anywhere; he’s been living here for years,” his wife whispered.

A few days later, the doctor knocked on the door at number fifteen in the Avenue de Lattre. A hefty servant opened the door and claimed that his master was not in, but a gaunt little man came walking down the stairs. It was the court physician himself.

“Oh, doctor, I have a terribly sore throat,” Julius Scaliger joked, but his humor went right over Nostradamus’ head.

“I’ll have a look at it in a minute, but allow me first to thank you for the beautiful book you gave me,” he answered, seriously.

“No problem. To tell you the truth, it was Abigail’s choice.” And the two gentlemen proceeded to the drawing room, which was decorated with many portraits of scientists and philosophers.

“Impressive; you know them all personally?” the visitor inquired.

“Not all of them, but the portrait you’re looking at right now is of Erasmus, with whom I have been arguing by correspondence lately. They call him the greatest thinker of Europe, but I think there are quite a few gaps in his line of reasoning,” and Julius sat down in an easy chair.

“I’ve heard of him,” admitted Michel. “But what exactly is the reason you sought contact with me?” en he sat down in a chair too.

“Your name comes up on a regular basis,” his host explained. “A physician who doesn’t care about the religious authorities is rare. I am attracted to recalcitrant scientists and since I also studied medicine, it seemed to me a good idea for us to get to know each other.”

“I feel honored,” Michel replied, while he looked around the interior.

“It is such a coincidence that you moved to Agen of all places,” Julius continued, “especially with that beautiful noble flower, who makes my heart skip a beat.”

“Aha, so that’s why you sent me a present!”

“Who knows; everything plays a role. You’re very lucky to have such a beautiful wife.”

“Indeed I am. And who is that?” Michel asked, pointing to a portrait.

“That is Cardano.”

“Hmm, Cardano. If I’m not mistaken, he is a mathematician and astrologer.”

“But also a fraud,” Scaliger said, scornfully. “In his book *De Subtilitate*, he speaks of demons, but the passage was taken word for word from my writing.”

“Plagiarism is a nasty business,” his guest responded. “And what kind of humanist works have you written?”

“Many, but my most important work is the summary of all of the literature that has been published everywhere, far past our borders. Furthermore, I am considered to be one of the great thinkers of this century, along with Erasmus,” he boasted.

“Of the entire century no less?”

“I can’t stand false modesty,” his host declared, and Michel had to smile at the self-willed humanist. The scientists were well matched, and spent some time discussing medical documents by Aristotle. They hit it off very well and decided to visit each other more often. During the next few months, the bonds of friendship grew between them and one day, Julius showed his secret library. Secret, because many books were seen as a threat by the Church.

“Look Michel, the revolutionary document by Copernicus with “The sun as the center of the universe.”

“Actually, mystics and astrologers see the sun as one of the stars,” his friend commented. “But I suppose a scientist wants to see proof and what can he do with these kinds of pipe dreams?”

“On the contrary, dreams can be very useful,” Julius answered. “Why don’t you write them down some time. You’ll see that your personal development will benefit from it.”

Isabelle was born. She shone like the sun and grew rapidly. The girl seemed to be the center of the universe and Victor was her constant companion. The maid, who didn’t have any children of her own, liked to pretend the beautiful baby was hers. While the family grew and blossomed, something sinister was beginning to happen in the outside world. Agen had been spared from the plague so far, but fate now struck. After the first case became known, public life immediately came to a grinding halt. Terrified of being infected with the disease, everyone avoided contact with each other as much as possible. And rightly so, because soon there were more victims. The progressive city doctor immediately set up quarantine for various districts of the city, where hundreds of dogs and cats already lay rotting. Notradamus was working overtime, rushing from one patient to the next. The tough physician gave the authorities orders to bury the bodies of both humans and animals between layers of lime, in order to prevent infection. He also ordered everyone to burn their garbage, so that nothing would be left to feed rats and fleas. After this, there was a constant smell of smoke and fire in the air. He told the plague victims who were still alive to rub a cream made

with garlic and aloe on their bodies. The doctor kept stressing the importance of hygiene and good food and most of the townspeople supported his method. Some didn't trust him, however, and were looking for a scapegoat for the disaster. Riots began to break out in the town square; exactly where the Nostradamus family was living. The overworked physician heard the noise, walked to the window and was amazed to see that a fire stake was being prepared next to the fountain. In no time at all a huge crowd had gathered around it and two men were led towards it. The Agenois were furious and shouting at the top of their lungs. Michel realized that the townspeople were playing judge and jury. Things were getting out of hand.

"God almighty, they've got Abigail," he suddenly called out. One of those poor bastards was his friend, the book seller. He was being called all kinds of names and the doctor's anger began to boil over. Yolande came to stand beside him, alarmed.

"You will stay here, won't you?" she said, frightened, but her husband didn't listen to her and ran into the street, seething. His common sense told him just in time to keep his head cool and he pushed through the crowd in a somewhat controlled manner.

"Those rotten Jews are the cause of all this evil, burn them!" some of them yelled, full of hatred. Yolande looked on helplessly.

Please, don't argue with them, she thought, stiff with fear. The two Jews were tied to the poles and someone tried to ignite the stake.

"Stop!" Nostradamus screamed. The compelling order silenced the crowd and people moved back to make way for the physician, who, after all was married to one of the Vaudemonts. He coldly ordered the last of the instigators to move aside and climbed up on the stake. With great determination he wrenched off the ropes that tied the unfortunates to the poles. The rescuer focused his attention on his old friend Abigail for a moment. Abigail looked at him, filled with faith and a light began to shine in his eyes.

What is happening to me? Michel thought. And for a minute the intense beauty of those eyes unbalanced him.

No, don't show any vulnerability in front of the wolves, and guarding against a possible change in the crowd's mood, he turned around resolutely and spoke strongly to the people.

"The plague is not caused by the Jews. If this were true, it would first have to be irrefutably proven. You have all been whipped into this frenzy by fear and fury. Go home and return to your senses and don't disturb the public order again." The heated crowd turned around, deflated, and the square emptied out. Yolande was finally freed of her intense fear when Michel was safely back in the house.

"Don't you ever do that again!" she called out, still shivering.

"I couldn't very well have left them to that rabble!"

"Your family needs you alive!"

“I am alive,” he teased, which made Yolande mockingly attack him with a pillow. The plague, meanwhile, continued to rage and the doctor worked around the clock during those days.

A few weeks later fate knocked on the Nostradamus family’s door. Yolande and Victor got sick. Michel was confronted with it when he came home from work, late in the evening. As white as a sheet, he diagnosed them with the feared disease.

“It’s the damn plague,” he swore, when he was alone in the kitchen and punched the walls with his fists. It was a horrible concurrence: the plague fighter defeated at the home front. Deeply upset, he broke the bad news to his wife.

“All my attention was on my patients instead of on you,” he lamented.

“Michel, please don’t blame yourself and promise me that you will go on living with Isabelle.”

“I don’t know if I can live without you!”

“A higher power will come through for you, darling,” she tried to comfort him. He washed their wounds as they appeared, prepared the best food he could think of and hoped for a miracle up to the last minute, but to no avail. His flower quickly faded and died in his arms. He watched the last glow disappear from her eyes, and saw her spirit leave her body. The next day, Victor also left his life and while he was kissing his son goodbye, he heard his daughter calling him. Isabelle had been locked up in her room to keep her safe. The devastated physician left his daughter in the care of the servant for a day and brought the remains of his family members to Puivert. His wife had wanted to be buried in the family grave. The De Vaudemonts, watched in horror as a wagon carrying coffins approached. Of course, they understood what had happened, but out of fear they left the gate shut.

“This is killing us,” the count called through a window, “but there are others here that I love too.”

“I understand. Can someone help me dig a grave at a safe distance?” the son-in-law asked.

“No, sorry. Good luck,” the count heartlessly ended the conversation and closed the shutters. Bitter and alone, the widower buried his wife and child in the family grave, which was just outside the gate. His wife’s family secretly watched from the castle. Back in Agen, the doctor took charge of his daughter, who forced him to go on with his life. The first lie about him began to spread through the city: Yolande, buried by her own father. That evening, the maid knocked on the door. A heavily depressed Nostradamus opened it as asked what was the matter.

“Doctor, I came to warn you. The De Vaudemonts have set the townspeople against you. They are accusing you of purposely letting your wife die, so that you can run off with the dowry. It is also being rumored that you are a friend of the Jews. I had to tell you, sir, because I know you are a good person,” and she ran away. Michel bolted the front door,

walked around the house brooding and then took some precautionary measures. Upstairs in the bedroom he looked at Isabelle's carefree little face as she lay sleeping peacefully. Finally, he was able to cry and the wind, blowing through the open window, brushed his tears. Then the silence was broken and all hell broke loose. Enraged townspeople carrying torches and shouting malicious battle cries began to gather in front of the house in great numbers.

"Murderer," they shouted, "you deserve the death penalty." Michel looked with one eye, from behind the curtains, and saw the crowd.

"Let's get him now," he heard someone say. He knew that this time he would have to leave. The locked front door was creaking with the effort of the brutes trying to break it open and then a burning torch was thrown into the house, barely missing him. Quick as a wink, Nostradamus picked up his daughter who woke up with a start; he tied her onto his back and ordered her to be quiet. Behind her bed, he wrenched open a drawer in a bureau, grabbed a bag of provisions out of it and threw it over his shoulder. Then he ran up the attic stairs with Isabelle. The bedroom curtains were already in flames and a few minutes later the whole house was ablaze. The hooligans finally managed to break down the front door and started to search for the evil magician on the main floor, but because of the towering flames, they didn't dare to go up any higher. Meanwhile, Father, with his child bound onto his back, was climbing onto the roof at the back of the house and jumped onto the next roof, out of sight of the rioters. In this way, he was able to leave the burning house behind him via the adjoining houses. Fortunately it was a pitch-black night and the insurgents couldn't find him. But half-way there, that same darkness caused Michel to slip and almost fall off the roof. Laboriously, he reached the last house, where he climbed down onto a balcony and from there used a vine to get down onto the ground.

"There he is!" a shifty character, having discovered his shadow, suddenly called out. The rebels, who were still screaming and shouting in front of the house, also caught sight of him and came in for the chase right away. The limber physician jumped onto the ground and ran off. He managed to lose his pursuers in the maze of lanes and alleys and fled the city as fast as the wind; far away, into the hills and forests. A short while later, they gave a sock belonging to the doctor to a pack of tracker dogs to smell and they quickly found the trail. The chase was resumed.

"Why are they so angry?" Isabelle asked.

"They don't like us," said Father, who thought they had escaped them.

"But why not? We're good aren't we?"

"Yes, but they have a different opinion," and then, to his horror, he saw a group of hunters in the valley. He increased his speed, pushing on through the forest. Up on a hill, the plateau suddenly ended and a gaping chasm prevented them from fleeing any further. While he paced back and forth on the edge of the cliff, he frantically searched for a solution. The sound of the barking dogs was getting louder; he had to think of something quick.

Okay, I'll have to go down that impossibly steep cliff, he decided. Michel placed his hands on the edge and swung his legs over. He felt around with his feet for a place to put them, while his hands were threatening to start slipping. They found something and using the utmost concentration, he began the impossible descent. Isabelle was terrified, looking down into the ravine from his back. Their pursuers were making rapid progress and soon reached the same chasm. They discovered Nostradamus, who was covering the last part of the sheer cliff twenty meters below them and then disappeared into the shelter of the trees and bushes. The moon disappeared behind the clouds and they could no longer follow him with their eyes. The conspirators didn't dare to try to go down the same way, especially because it could not be done with their dogs. Some of the pursuers, who knew the area like the back of their hands, pointed to some nearby passages. The group split up and carried on with the chase. Miles ahead, Michel had to choose between two paths: One going up and one going down. Because of the tall trees, he couldn't really get a good impression of where either path led, and he took a gamble and chose the path going down. Following the chosen route, he soon arrived at a passable fissure which separated two plateaus from each other. A group of pursuers, who had taken another route, had now found the same trail; the dogs could once again be heard. Michel's strength was beginning to diminish; he had traversed an enormous distance and would not be able to keep this up much longer. The moon came back and lit up an opening in the rocks that was within reach. Almost feeling the townspeople's hot breath on his neck, the doctor decided to hide in the cave. Who knows, with a bit of luck...? But the pariah was discovered again.

"There they go!" someone called out. Underneath the stone vault, Michel frantically searched in his shoulder bag. He took out a candle and, quick as a flash, lit it with a firestone. Light was indispensable here and carrying his valuable load on his back, he strode through the cave, which led to an underground network of paths.

"Damn, the flame is going out," he swore, "walking too fast." He lit the candle again and continued on his way. He suddenly heard screaming behind him.

Good heavens, they're here already, we're sure not having any luck at all, he murmured to himself. The enemy entered the cave and the dogs' barking now became frighteningly altered. This disoriented the beasts and made it harder for them to keep following the trail. The attackers, however, were not discouraged by this and immediately split into smaller groups. After all, there were only a limited number of passages, one of them knew. Divided into various groups, they continued on their way. Nostradamus heard them come closer and tried to make as little sound as possible. At one point, he saw a tunnel with shallow groundwater. This would be his one chance to get rid of those dogs. They would completely lose the scent here. Father felt around to make sure his daughter was still firmly tied to his back and then began to wade through the tunnel.

Although she was only two years old, she understood the seriousness of the situation and was keeping as quiet as a mouse. The water level began to rise at an alarming rate, however, and Father was beginning to fear the worst, while the townspeople were right at their heels. He desperately went on. The water was now reaching to his waist and his daughter was shivering with cold.

It's over, he lamented, just another few moments and I will have to take Isabelle off my back.

The water was already up to her lips.

Maybe I should surrender, he considered. Maybe they would let my little girl live? But who would raise her? No one would want the child of a magician whose family died of the plague. Especially after those accusations by my in-laws.

And despondently, he kept wading. Suddenly, the ground disappeared from under his feet and he was forced to start swimming. Michel said a quick prayer, while the candle extinguished and sunk to the bottom.

May the Lord be with us... Are those bastards never going to give up?

And he swam towards a treacherous black hole and then hit his head on the ceiling. But wonder of wonders, they were both still breathing and the walls were slowly beginning to recede. There was more room to move and with big strokes he swam on in the underground lake.

No one is following us, he noticed. Then he felt ground under his feet and with some difficulty, he slipped and slid up the slippery slope.

"I believe we are going to make it, Isabelle," he whispered, feeling hopeful again and, thoroughly drenched, they reached the bank, where he listened for sounds for a long time. It seemed that the villains had really given up the chase, because there was still no sound to be heard. After resting for a little while, he took a new candle out of his bag and the damp wick soon took flame. A gigantic cave with innumerable holes and tunnels lit up and Michel hurried to find his way. The limestone layer down here had been worn by precipitation for centuries and turned into a labyrinth.

This cave could be millions of years old, he contemplated and promptly discovered walls covered in mythical drawings of live animals.

"We're not the first ones here, Isabelle," and he looked around in wonder. Running horses, and taut deer, drawn in black red and yellow, seemed to be ready to leap off the glistening walls. The mysterious images were full of action and movement. Just past a round vault, a purple-colored foal with black manes looked you right in the eye, and a white cow was jumping playfully across the ceiling. A little further, in a gallery of jumping and falling figures, a pregnant mare who was hit by an arrow was shown. It somehow reminded him of Yolande and he quickly turned his head.

"Prehistoric drawings!" he mumbled. He was at the end of his rope and he looked for a place to spend the night.

"Achoo!" Isabelle unexpectedly sneezed and the sound echoed through the cave.

I hope no one heard that, Father thought, feeling afraid again. He took his daughter down from his back and laid her down in a hollow in the ground. Our clothes will just have to dry on us, he concluded, after feeling his jacket. He blew out the candle, after which they both fell into an exhausted sleep. Michel soon woke up to find some stones painfully pressing into his ribs. Isabelle was still asleep.

Too bad. It was not a nightmare, he sighed. He felt around for the last candle and lit it. He saw water dripping down a rock-face, and caught it in a cup. His little girl woke up a few minutes later and he gave her some water to drink. There was some bread and dried meat in the bag, and they used this to still their hunger for the time being. Their clothes were a bit dryer, and it was time to start looking for an exit. He tied his child onto his back again and began to search for the light. After an hour they had still not found an opening and the last candle was getting frightfully small. They just kept on wandering around, when suddenly the flame started to pull to one side. In hopeful expectation, he waked toward the breath of wind and soon discovered a ray of light, shining through a hole in the ceiling. He could see the blue of the sky. It was a sight for sore eyes after that prolonged darkness.

But there's nothing for me to pull myself up on, he thought, discouraged, while he examined the steep walls.

"Wait a minute..." and he took a knife out of his bag, thinking he could carve out hand and foot-holds. The limestone was brittle enough and it worked well. When the job was done, he carefully pulled himself up to on the carved out crevices, with Isabelle on his back. After a super-human effort, he reached the opening and sticking to the wall, he put his hand outside for a minute. The sun shone on it.

The star that makes everything visible, he thought, humbled. And after enlarging the opening, he crawled out and found himself on a grassy plain, where he immediately scouted out the area like an eagle. There was no human in sight and he breathed a great sigh of relief.

"Isabelle, we made it, it's all behind us now," and he took his daughter down from his back. The girl was finally standing on her own two feet again and ran around through the landscape, where there was no house anywhere to be seen.

"We've got to get ourselves cleaned up, little one," said Father, who suspected there might be a river or stream up in the hills further on. He put Isabelle up on his shoulders and after a short walk they reached a valley with a small brook running through it. The river water looked clean and they took a drink from it. Then they took off their shoes and dangled their feet in the clear water. After they had washed their faces, Michel gave his daughter a piece of bread from the bag, which also held a small fortune. Over three hundred francs; the De Vaudemont dowry.

That should get us through the next few years, he estimated and he began to think of a strategy for the future.

Going back to Agen was not an option. First leave the area on foot and then hopefully find a carriage to take us to Saint Rémy. That seemed like a good plan. A little further on grew some plum trees and the ripe fruits were easy to pick. After eating their fill, they started to recuperate a bit from the exhausting witch hunt. Isabelle already cried out in glee at a butterfly that fluttered by.

Truly, life goes on, Father observed, wistfully. Perhaps she really will make my life worth living...

That day they traveled over hills and dales and by sunset they discovered a small, dilapidated, stone house that lay hidden in a woody area. The hovel proved to be deserted and they chose a spot in its shelter. Here they could safely spend the night. Charcoal remains on the floor told of fires that had been lit there, probably by hunters. After eating some dried meat and a few more plums, it was time to go to sleep. Father curled around his daughter to protect her from the wind, which freely blew through the ruin. In the middle of the night the wind became more intense and howled through the little wreck of a house. It woke Nostradamus up and he checked to make sure his little girl was still beside him, before he went back to sleep.

It was late the next morning when a magpie woke him up, by loudly singing on the roof. His daughter, however, had not made a peep yet.

"Isabelle," he whispered and he touched her. Why is she so quiet?

And he bent over her with a dreadful premonition.

"God, no!" he shouted as he recognized the black spots on the child's face with great horror. His screaming woke up Isabelle and she opened her eyes and indicated that she was not feeling well. This confrontation with the plague was too much for him. Something inside him snapped and in a daze, he sat and held his daughter, gently rocking her. The next day she died and with her died his motivation to stay alive. He just sat there staring off into space as a haunting scene began to play in his mind.

"You can leave those two together; one can't survive without the other," the French officer ordered. The inseparable duo Bruno and Yves was dragging the heavy cannon on its mount to the front, through the mud, with great effort. The abundant rain had changed the dusty ground into a brown muck and their blue uniforms were getting covered in it while they worked.

"Pull to the left, you blockhead!" Bruno reproached his companion.

"I thought you'd take care of the job with the powers of your mind," Yves sighed. They finally got the cannon in the right spot and Bruno started to tamp down the gunpowder, while Yves placed the cannon ball into the top of the barrel. The trick was to get the missile to backfire on the ground right in front of the enemy so that it could then penetrate the lines at man's height. The whole artillery was brought into position and General Ney stood ready to give the signal for attack.

"Fire!" he commanded. The French cannons thundered and the alliance brigade suffered visible losses. The artillerymen then watched the Battle of

Waterloo* progress, while four of their divisions marched to the Mont Saint Jean. Two enemy brigades' cavalry unexpectedly rode into the marching French soldiers, who had to beat a hasty retreat. It was now all hands on deck and the cannons were reloaded as quickly as possible.

"Hurry up, Yves, throw that ball in!" The entire supply of ammunition was used up in no time, but the English were beat to a pulp. When trumpets heralded the attack, the French riders galloped through the slush to deal the alliance the deathblow. But suddenly, completely unanticipated, thousands of Prussians shot out of the forest to help the others and they completely trampled those roosters. To save their lives, Bruno and Yves crawled underneath the cannon and in the midst of the chaos aimed their guns.

"I wish we were still in the Provence," Yves said, dreamily, while some of their officers kicked the bucket right in front of their eyes, with their sabres in their hands. Bruno didn't get a chance to respond, because he was hit by an enemy cannon ball at the same time. His arms and legs were flung through the air and only his head stayed beside his buddy.

With a start, Nostradamus jumped back into reality. After all those horrific dream images, he saw the partly decomposed body of this daughter, lying beside him, surrounded by a swarm of flies.

"Get out!" he yelled like a madman and swung his arms to disperse them.

The father had grown wild; he didn't know how long he'd been sitting there. He rose and picked up the remains of this child and buried them in the open field.

"Rest in peace, my little girl," he said, calming down a bit. "You were only given a short life. Now I must take my leave and say farewell to you. Life goes on." After he had placed a cross made of branches on the little grave, he picked up his bag and began to walk. After he'd taken a few steps, he turned around and looked at it one last time. From then on, the cast away physician wandered.

*1815

Chapter 4

*Pau, Nay, Loron, more fire than blood
Swimming in praise the great flees across the water
He will deny the magpies entrance
Pampon and Durance keep them imprisoned*

Late one night there was an unexpected loud banging on the front door of an inn, somewhere high in the Pyrenees. The owner reluctantly opened it and was startled by the scary-looking person on his front step. The sinister visitor was wearing a dirty black cape with a hood and had a wild beard. He had an evil look and his face looked like tanned leather.

“Um, sorry, we’re closed,” the innkeeper said, frightened.

“Then why is the door open,” the stranger objected; then he gave him a franc and obstinately walked in.

“I want to stay here for a few days,” the traveler continued. It seemed pointless to argue with him.

“I guess we do have a room,” the landlord stammered, “but may I ask you what your name is?”

“You may call me Discute,” he answered, and the owner showed him to his room.

“I would like something to eat and drink before I go to sleep,” his guest let him know, and again pressed a franc into his hand.

He sure is generous with his money, the host thought greedily and he quickly put a jug of beer in front of him before he hurried to the kitchen to prepare a meal. After a little while, he served the weird fellow some hot mush. The ill-at-ease innkeeper wanted to go to bed, but thought he’d better stay alert for the time being.

“Mister Discute, did you see the beautiful sky? Even in these mountains it is rare to see so many stars in the heavens.”

“No, I didn’t notice,” his guest answered and stoically continued to eat.

“You can even see the planet Mars,” the owner continued.

“With the naked eye?”

“Yes, of course, what else?”

“A spy glass!” the stranger declared, who wiped his mouth and then drank his beer in one gulp.

“I’ve never heard of that,” the owner stammered.

“I once had one,” his guest claimed, who had finished his plate and was now getting ready to go to sleep.

“Well, goodnight then, and please forgive me for denying you entrance before,” the inn keeper said, finally feeling it was safe to leave him. The visitor entered his room and hung his cape on a hook. Then he walked over to the closed window with a heavy gait, opened the shutters and

looked out at the unusually clear sky. Mars was indeed visible with the naked eye.

People come and people go, but stars and planets always remain, he thought, while he looked at the sparkling Spica. It was long ago, Grandpa, when we used to look at the sky together. Michel took his wallet out of its holder, put it safely under his pillow and lay down in the musty bed.

Tomorrow I will walk through the mountains a bit, he thought. Then he stared out the window. A little while later, the waxing Moon came into view and the wandering physician looked at the planet of maternal feeling and uncertainty. The Moon kept getting bigger and seemed to want to be the center of attention. Michel slowly fell into a trance. Imperceptibly, it had become white everywhere around him and where ever he looked was the moon. He suddenly realized he was no longer lying in his bed, but floating in space. He turned around and looked for the familiar Earth, but it was far away. He started to panic because of the enormous empty space around him, after which he returned to his bed with a bang. Covered in cold sweat he realized that he had had an out-of-body experience. A very unpleasant one.

I think I'll hang around on Earth for a while after all, he thought. When the next morning, he was walking outside in the rarefied air, he discovered to his great surprise that the blinders had fallen from his eyes. The whole world was suddenly open and naked, and the previously thin mountain air was pregnant with a myriad of ideas which formed the material world. The ideas were born out of stagnant material and in both atmospheres time had become a three-dimensional phenomenon. It was a wondrous reciprocal creation. Innumerable causes and effects were also revealed to him and due to the many impulses he weaved about like a drunk on the mountain path. It seemed as if his causal body had become functional.

Before the Moon has finished waxing, your slumbering knowledge will awaken, but first the Black Death will lead you to repentance, he now remembered the words of Hermes.

But that means that my family has been sacrificed for me, it occurred to him. Is that what they mean by the naked truth: truth that is not bearable for a human? And he cringed in pain with the ghastly realization.

Does God have no mercy? he moaned. And if my family was just a pawn in this game, then what am I? Then we are all just marionettes in a play. They were cutting insights and for a minute he felt an enormous resentment towards the almighty Creator.

But who am I to hate Him? he quickly reconsidered. I am but an insignificant link in the chain, and he let go of his hatred.

I will play my role and let the chaff be sifted from my wheat, he decided and with determination the re-born seer climbed to the mountain top. The brief streams of information, which continually changed their nature, were overwhelming for his sixth sense and he couldn't get a grip on it yet. He let it run its course and turned around on a jutting cliff to view the beautiful landscape, which stretched north of the city of Pau, but again he

caught a shred of information: Pau, Nay, Loron, more fire than blood. Pampon and Durance keep the greatness imprisoned. The riddle was unfortunately interrupted by new symbols and images, which made him reel.

I'm going to have to learn to walk again, he determined with surprise.

The next day, Nostradamus left the Pyrenees and traveled to the city of Pau to inquire about the names of Pampon and Durance at the town hall. A local government official received him in his office and the shaggy physician showed him his doctor's title to be on the safe side.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you with your search," the officer said. "Maybe the mayor has heard of these names. Take a seat over there for a moment." Michel sat down in the reception room, where someone was making a statue out of clay. He followed the creative process from a distance, but soon padded over to the artist for a chat.

"What's it going to be?" he asked.

"The Holy Virgin Mary," the man answered, without passion.

"And what will it be cast in?"

"Bronze." Michel sat down on the waiting bench again and after a while, started to feel annoyed about the dutiful execution of the Virgin Mary statue. He finally got up, restlessly, and again walked towards it.

"At this rate, it will look more like a devil than the Holy Virgin Mary," he nagged. The workman was very insulted.

"I will have to report your comment," he barked, but his squabbling left Michel cold. The mayor finally showed up and invited the unknown scholar into his office.

"Pampon and Durance," he said, thinking hard, "the latter is the same as the river. But I will have to look in our archives. Come back next week and I will probably have more information for you."

That week the outsider was suddenly grabbed by the collar in the town hall, because the authorities were charging him with blasphemy. Nostradamus had to appear in court. In the court room he admitted that he had made the critical comment to the workman, but he defended himself with the fact that he was only commenting on the ignorance of the artist, not about the Virgin Mary herself.

"Do you have a witness?" the judge asked.

"Unfortunately I don't!"

"Then your argument is not convincing. I hereby sentence you to one week in the Nay jail. And I am being lenient." Michel was led away in handcuffs. As it turned out, the house of detention in Nay was under renovation and the convicted man was therefore transferred to the jail in Loron.

"I've never locked up a scientist in here before," the warden said.

"You'd better give me some water and bread, before I escape," Michel responded dryly. The warden laughed.

"In three days Pampon will be here to relieve me. I will miss your humor."

"Humor is not my strongest side, but may I ask you what your name is?"

“Durance!”

After his release, the rejected scholar found himself sauntering along a forest trail, somewhere in the Charente, thinking about the symbolism of all the messages he had been getting from above.

What if I combine the information with astrology, he thought. Then I should be able to accurately predict the date of the predictions within one or two days. And he was just about to bend down to pull up his baggy pants, when a beech tree told him that one of its kind was about to fall down. On his guard, he carefully took one step at a time, when a chestnut tree smashed down on the path, right in front of him.

“Are you trying to inspire me?” the oddball foolishly asked. After stepping over the obstacle, he pondered the prediction that had come true, argued with himself about its purity and compared it to previous cases.

Short-term prophesies are showing courser energies, he discovered, but in order to penetrate the symbolism, I need more knowledge about the subject. Too bad I didn’t record the lucid dreams in my youth.

From now on he would record all predictions in a journal and occasionally make connections.

After wandering for some time, he heard from a traveling trader that the monastery in the coastal town of Fécamp in Normandy had a nice guest house. The monks there were very compassionate; it sounded like a good place to retreat for a while. He decided to follow these recommendations and joined the monastery, which was situated at the bottom of the chalk cliffs. The order of the Benedictines reigned here and they followed the rules of their spiritual leader from the fourth century after Christ. Nostradamus demonstratively threw his duffle bag on the ground and brother Mabillon walked up to him and asked him how he could be of service.

“I would like to stay here for a while,” the visitor indicated, while a flock of monks in black robes very slowly walked past behind him.

“That is fine. We do expect our guests to strictly follow the rules. In other words: to sleep, eat and work with us.”

“That’s perfect for me, because I am in dire need of some regularity,” Michel answered airily.

“Don’t think it will be easy,” the monk commented. “Everyone is expected to work hard from seven in the morning till seven-thirty at night. After that, everyone still has to attend a lecture. And a short prayer is said on every even hour. All of this is seven days a week. Oh yes, and breakfast is at six o’clock.”

“Excellent!”

“There are some portions of the day where you can choose your own activity,” the monk continued. Benoit Mabillon then assigned a room to him, after which they all sang the twelve o’clock mass. Late in the evening there was a recreational hour and Michel got to see the other side of

Mabillon. Benoit showed himself to be a fun monk with rebellious tendencies.

“Our leader, Benedictus, shunned worldly riches and temptations,” he chatted. “We do too, of course, but you really ought to taste my herbal brew. It has a good amount of alcohol added to it.”

“I can’t wait...” When they arrived in his quarters a few minutes later, the jolly Benedictine poured him some of the home-made drink.

“This is great,” his guest said, after downing it.

“That’s what I think. I have incorporated twenty-seven rare plants and herbs from all over the world into it,” Benoit said proudly.

“It is a rich infusion; I’d love to learn from you. I could probably use your knowledge of herbs later for combating diseases.”

“No problem. Tomorrow after the vespers you can come and take a look in my kitchen. We pray for the whole world; not just for ourselves. In the same way, our knowledge should be shared.”

Gradually Benoit taught his friend to recognize and process herbs and Michel helped him to decipher old writing styles.

“Look, here is a text about astrology, your territory,” Benoit said, when they were looking through a collection of books together. The connection with the warmhearted monk had come just at the right time. After a miserable period in his life, the physician began to heal somewhat. He decided he would stay and adhere to the strict rules of the monastery until the end of the winter.

During a free hour, one afternoon, Michel was sitting high up on the cliffs, staring out at the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean. The British coast was not far.

The fascinating city of London must be somewhere over there, he knew. But you could see nothing but waves, which drifted steadily towards the Straits of Dover. Shrieking seagulls caught his attention. They were following fishing boats that had pulled up their nets. Suddenly a prediction came to the observer, from England. A sad event would come to pass on the island. But what? He didn’t know yet. In a document borrowed from Benoit, he checked the astrological tables for it.

The current position of the stars and planets will not repeat itself until 1666, he calculated, while the wind ruffled the pages. Holding his pen in his hand, he again reflected on the coming disaster, which was still unclear.

I will have to buy the right measuring tools, because the time calculations are very broad this way.

Next, he wrote down the concepts and put the calculations next to them, in code.

If this falls into the hands of those accursed religion judges without any disguise, I’ll be in big trouble. I’ve already learned that lesson.

That night he went to bed feeling content. Well before the start of lauds, he was rudely awakened from his sleep. At least, that’s what he thought.

“Fire!” someone screamed and thick clouds of smoke floated through his room. Michel was so startled, he fell out of bed, and took off, running down the stairs. The ground floor was going up in flames, and it looked impossible to extinguish the fire.

“Isabelle, where are you?” he called, confused, but then it slowly dawned on him that his daughter was no longer alive. On the ground floor, a cracked stone oven was visible through the dense smoke. It was white-hot. There were also broken bags of flour everywhere.

This is not a monastery but a bakery, he realized. I am dreaming! Big flames suddenly moved his way and interrupted his train of thought. While he ran away, he saw through his automatic behavior and wondered if the dream body would be able to get burned. He bravely turned back and put his hand in the fire.

“Ouch!” he screamed in pain, and fled outside.

I still think this is a dream though, he maintained. The enormous sea of flames was spreading to the other buildings and Nostradamus watched from a safe distance. He was curious to find out what city he had ended up in. Across from the bakery was an imposing bridge, which he thought he recognized from pictures. It was the Tower Bridge in London.

“Don’t just stand there! Come on, help us!” an Englishman suddenly called out.

I have no trouble understanding him, Michel thought, surprised. I suspect that in dreams, the language of the heart is what is spoken.

But the French observer had no notion to help. He was a time traveler, not a Londoner. The fire was spreading rapidly through the packed wooden houses on the waterfront, where lightly flammable things were stored. Fire fighters were rushing onto the scene by now, but the earlier destruction of the waterwheel next to the famous bridge had cut off the water supply. The fire could not be conquered. The never-ceasing wind blew the fire deeper into the city and the riverbank, along with the many districts along it, was getting completely devoured. The dreamer wandered behind the sea of flames, following it to the city center where the rich neighborhoods were threatened. Fire fighters began to demolish adjoining houses - due to lack of water - , in an attempt to contain the fire. Finally, more than half of the city had gone up in flames and the magnificent cathedral of Saint Paul came down. Then the wind died down and the biggest fire in human memory slowly went out. The old center of London had gone up in smoke.*

One year later in Strasbourg. It was raining cats and dogs and Nostradamus, who was still roaming around, entered an establishment where people were playing folk songs. Workmen were waving beer pitchers to the music and singing at the top of their lungs: “Drunk, crazy and foolish, I bit into my beer, I drank a pint with René, I drank a barrel

*1666. The Great Fire of London

with Renaud.” The gloomy widower could not suppress a smile upon seeing so many cheerful though tipsy faces. The musicians were playing various instruments. There was a portative organ, a flute and a sackbut. The next battle song had a tambourine in it.

“Let’s have another drink,” someone blustered. Michel sat down at a table with people who were heartily indulging in the beverages and for the sake of solidarity he ordered a large pint. A new song was announced: “The Thirsty Sounds.” After an hour or so, the mood of the music changed. A viol gradually transported the audience to rapture and the sounds became sultry. Then some women of easy virtue showed up and began to seduce the male guests. The men leered at them, but Michel, though sitting with them, was as cool, calm and collected as they were excited. This barely interested him. At the other side of the bar he saw a distinguished gentleman, whom he thought he recognized. The gray-haired old man, wearing a beret, was having a discussion with his companion, a young nobleman. Unfortunately, their faces were not clearly visible in the sparse light and, curious, he decided to have a closer look. When he got closer, he was still not sure who it was, until the old man suddenly looked at him. Then he knew.

“Do you want something?” the man asked. Combed curls peeped out from under his beret.

“I think you are Erasmus!” Michel answered. The Dutch scholar was pleasantly surprised,

“Nice to be recognized. And who are you?”

“I am Doctor Nostradamus.” That’s funny, he thought at the same time, the great thinker has a squeaky little voice.

Erasmus looked at him thoughtfully, but he did not recognize the name.

“This is the Marquis De Florenville,” he introduced his companion.

“Have a seat,” the marquis said. Michel thanked him and sat down.

“Aha! Now I remember,” Erasmus cried out. “I think I heard about you during one of my trips to Italy. Aren’t you that doctor who saved the Pope’s life by advising him to lock himself up in his house during an outbreak of the plague?”

“Yes, that’s me. And I had the opportunity to admire your portrait at the house of Julius Scaliger.”

“Oh, Scaliger,” Erasmus sighed. “I still have to answer his letter.” The conversation between the two scholars was just getting started when two ladies of pleasure came to their table. They noticed the surly Nostradamus and tried to seduce him. The loose women impudently sat down on his lap and stroked his beard. The people around them gaped at the conspicuous encounter. Michel’s table mates were also curious to see how he would react.

“Apparently, you are attractive,” De Florenville joked, but the former plague fighter stiffly stared straight ahead. The women were now kissing his forehead and provocatively pushing their breasts in his face. Only the viol could still be heard and everyone was sitting at the edge of their chair.

The practiced ascetic, however, had no intention of giving in to any lustful demands and whispered something in their ears. After that they ran away, screaming. Everyone was speechless and a painful silence ensued in the previously festive place. The owner knew what to do though. He ordered the musicians to let loose and the party atmosphere was soon back in full swing.

“What on earth did you whisper to those ladies?” Erasmus and De Florenville asked very curiously.

“That they will die of a professional disease within a week,” their table companion answered dryly. Erasmus burst out laughing.

“Nothing is as piquant as to treat silly things with such a serious expression on your face that no one notices it is just a joke.”

“It was not a joke,” Michel explained. The marquis was shocked to hear that and considered the remark very off-color.

“You really can’t do that as a physician. What you just said was not a diagnosis but a curse.”

“It was not a curse, but a prediction that will come true. I only speak the truth,” the seer replied.

“Indeed? The Christian doctrine forbids those kinds of practices,” De Florenville sneered.

“Then I’d like to point out the following passages from the Bible to you, Mister the marquis! In Joel it says that God believes that people receive the gift of prophesy and visions. In Amos it is stated that God shows his decisions to the prophets. In Deuteronomium it is written that God condemns all forms of occult practices, with the exception of astrology. In the Letter to the Hebrews it says that everything is naked and open. Would you like me to continue, Mister the marquis?” The conceited ass shut up.

“I’ve been having visions since my youth. I also studied astrology,” Michel emphasized. The marquis was hoping for some criticism from his learned friend Erasmus after such boasting, but he was unmoved.

“I can’t say anything about that,” he told them. “I don’t have the ability to predict the future and I can only speak about my own experiences.” De Florenville stared ahead with a sour look on his face.

“Finally, someone with an open mind,” the physician mumbled.

“Women have a soft spot for the religious order,” Erasmus said, “because they can find a sympathetic ear among civilized people and can pour out their hearts about their husbands.”

“Well, I’m not going to curry any favor with women,” Michel denounced, “all that gossiping!”

“The ladies misjudged you. You are the exception to the rule, but not the worst kind. Where did those ladies go anyway?” Erasmus asked. The departed ladies were back and having their fun, but they did not come close to the cursed table anymore.

“Ignorance is bliss,” the humanist continued. “A simple remark is all it takes to make them happy again and they share their fortune with many.” The conversation changed to another topic. The thinker from Rotterdam

turned out to be seventy years old, an unheard of old age. The average lifespan was around thirty-five. He also told the physician that he was on his way to Bazel.

“So you’re only in Strasbourg to take a break?” Michel supposed.

“Partly. I am going to be honored here tomorrow at city hall for my entire humanistic body of work. Also, I know Mister De Florenville from the circle of the humanistic scholar Jacob Wimpfeling, with whom I have had the pleasure to engage in many discussions.”

“Strasbourg has become an important center of the literary arts because of Wimpfeling,” De Florenville, who was coming out of his funk, informed him.

“Certainly, and that is how we met,” Erasmus agreed. “We’ve kept in touch ever since and Mister De Florenville is my willing host whenever I visit this city.” The three table mates conversed until late in the evening. Finally, the owner told his guests that it would soon be closing time and the three men had a last drink of beer. Once outside, they said goodbye under a dry sky. The ancient Dutchman indicated that he would like to see the clairvoyant physician again some time.

“There is little chance of that,” Michel said. He foresaw that Erasmus would die that summer. The old humanist got the hint and was faced with his mortality, after which they gave each other a warm handshake. Surprisingly, De Florenville invited his new acquaintance to stay at his castle for a while. Nostradamus had no responsibilities of any kind and accepted the invitation. After all, he was on this earth to experience life.

A week later, the seer, traveling in a distinguished-looking carriage, was on his way to the Château De Florenville in the Lorraine, a region near Strasbourg. It took the coachman a while to find it. The castle lay hidden in a remote, dark forest. At the entrance to the vast estate was a gatehouse, where he announced his arrival. The gatekeeper opened the tall gate without any questions and let the carriage with the expected scholar through to the forecourt. A few minutes later, the castle became visible through the trees. It was situated on an island that was surrounded by a moat. The carriage went across a drawbridge and came to a halt in front of the steps leading up to the castle. De Florenville came out right away.

“Doctor Nostradamus, how nice you’re here,” he feigned. It was obviously still bothering the marquis that he had been humiliated by him in front of Erasmus.

“Shall we take a stroll through the castle garden first?” he suggested.

His guest felt ready to stretch his legs and agreed. De Florenville, meanwhile, pretended everything was a-okay and took him to a maze that was made out of beech hedges.

“Your place is magnificent,” Michel said. While the marquis thanked him, a nasty little idea struck him and his mind floated along with the wind.

I’ll have some fun with that supposed clairvoyance of his, he thought cunningly. I will expose him in the presence of all my guests. The men

walked through the labyrinth, where a small statue of Marco Polo was set up in the center and functioned as the end point at the same time. After that, they proceeded through a turnstile into the orchard, where several types of fruit trees grew. De Florenville then showed him the vegetable garden with all kinds of exotic plants. There were some sheds next to it, with pigs in one of them; a black one and a white one.

“Doctor Nostradamus,” the host suddenly spoke up self-importantly, “you claim to be clairvoyant. Can you predict for me, which one of these two pigs will be served for dinner tonight? You have my word that I will not say anything about this to my cook.” It smelled like deceit, but Michel answered without hesitation: “We will have the black swine for dinner tonight, because a wolf will devour the white one.” Back at the castle, De Florenville made a beeline for the kitchen an immediately broke his word; he ordered the cook to slaughter the white swine for dinner. The cook slaughtered the chosen pig and put it on a spit. While he was busy in the kitchen, he called his galley boy: “Grenouille, would you get some herbs from the garden for me?” and, receiving no answer, started looking for him. But Grenouille was nowhere to be found and so the cook went out to pick the herbs himself. Right at that moment, an observant wolf happened by, snuck in through the open kitchen door, grabbed the white pig and made off with it. When the cook returned and saw what had happened, he was very upset and decided not to tell his master. He just went and got the black pig, slaughtered it and managed to prepare it just in time. Meanwhile, the prominent guests were chatting with each other in the drawing room.

“Have you read any of Wimpfeling’s works yet?” a nobleman asked.

“No, I have been occupied primarily with scientific dissertations,” Michel answered.

“Well, I highly recommend him...”

“Thank you, I will take your advice to heart,” he responded politely. The marquis welcomed his guests and invited them to take their places at the table. During the first few courses, all manner of subjects were discussed, until the lord of the castle asked for everyone’s attention, right before the main course.

“In order to reach the required profundity on this beautiful evening, I would like to quote my friend Erasmus: ‘True happiness exists only in illusions we create about it.’ Although I greatly esteem his motto, I would like to add an amusing sideline to it. Tonight, let us leave dreaming to the fools, because momentarily a delicious dish will be served which will make our mouths water. It will approach true happiness. Speaking of dreams, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that we have a prophet here in our midst tonight.” The guests all looked at each other in surprise, wondering who he was talking about. Michel was sitting at ease; he knew right away what De Florenville was up to: trying to make a fool of him.

“It is Mister Nostradamus,” the host revealed. The noblemen were all on edge, noticing his critical tone of voice and regarded the physician dubiously.

“And this afternoon my guest made a prediction about our main course. Now, I personally don’t believe in such hoopla, but we shall see if he was right. Again the key question, Mister Nostradamus: will a white or a black swine be served for our dinner tonight?”

“It will be the black one,” he stood his ground. The marquis then gave the cook the sign to put the covered dish on the table, and at the critical moment, he lifted off the lid. To his dismay, he saw that it was the black pig.

“Is this not a black-baked white swine?” he asked despairingly, but the honest cook confessed his mistake and told him that this was indeed the black swine, because the white one was taken by a wolf. The party then heartily laughed at the marquis who had ended up playing a trick on himself. He did not look at his intangible guest, who received praise from everyone, for the rest of the evening.

The popular physician had no problem relaxing on the estate for several weeks, enjoying the opulence, until his host could stand it no longer and ordered him to leave. The next day the scholar left the castle in the air behind without any regrets.

After all that luxury and extravagance it was time for some purification and Nostradamus decided to visit the mountains. He went to the Alps to appreciate their pure mountain air. The majestic nature of the Swiss Confederation was quite an experience and he found his heart expanding more and more. His insights also increased. The growth was painful and difficult at the same time, because suffering and enjoyment are so close together.

“Why is it that people have to suffer before they can enjoy?” Michel asked out loud, while he was crossing a quiet mountain lake by himself. But the lake stayed veiled in silence, while he steadily paddled along on the barge. Oh well, I think I know. We have frittered away our talents in our youth and now we have to fight to re-conquer that quality, he convinced himself. “Mountain gods, tell me, why is a baby still one with everything, only to be kicked out of paradise afterwards?” But the mountains would not give up their secret and he only had his ego to explain the mysteries of life. He felt somewhat jealous of the plants and animals, who can better serve the Creator by simply being who they are. But he comforted himself with the thought that quality is only a quality if it is self-created and he longed ardently to observe the naked truth by the strength of his own power some day. Little by little he began to enjoy life again and with each ascent of a mountain, he sang its praises. His reward on every mountain top was a clear mind and a beautiful panorama. At one point he crossed the Rhone at Wallis.

“Now I know where I’m being led,” he put his spiritual search into perspective. “To Italy!” And in pleasant solitude he continued his journey to the land of the mighty Church. Weeks later, in the vicinity of Perugia, he ran into a group of monks in a mountain pass. He could tell by their impoverished appearance that they were Franciscans. The monks, wearing grey robes, were followers of the Holy Francis of Assisi, who preached poverty as a means to get closer to God. As they approached each other, the Frenchman stepped aside to let them pass and respectfully bowed his head. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of one of the Franciscans and spontaneously uttered a cry of admiration. He knelt and brought his head down on the feet of the surprised monk. Michel was taken aback by his own devotion and understood that he had met his superior.

“Come on, I’m nothing special,” the young monk responded, but the seer could see it crystal-clearly in front of him and said: “I can only bow down to your Holiness. You were once a poor swineherd, you are now a simple monk, but some day your name will shine in gold letters on the highest place of the Saint Peter’s dome in Rome. You are the future Pope Sixtus V.” The surprised monk looked at his brothers inquiringly, but they didn’t know what to think of it either.

“Many roads lead to Rome, my dear friend. And may the Lord be with us all,” he said and the Franciscans continued on their way. After his long self-castigation, the traveler sought refuge in the opulent city of Venice, because a change of scenery could do no harm. The city had passed its Golden Age and kept losing more and more conquered ground. Nevertheless, he was curious to see the greatest harbor of the western world. It was the city where the renowned Marco Polo and Columbus had grown up. The latter had just discovered America. A small fishing boat brought Michel to a gigantic harbor, where dozens of ships were mooring or anchored. Some of the exotic loads of silks, spices and strange jewelry had been en route for years. He jumped ashore with his luggage and walked past bags and crates with Chinese and Arabic lettering, which were piled high.

“There seems to be quite a bit of action around here,” he chuckled to himself. Venice was shrouded in a thick layer of fog and the numerous palaces, churches and canals were scarcely visible. Michel soon found some moderate lodgings and stored his belongings there. He decided to take a tour through the city and climbed down the worn steps of the rooming house.

“Sir, you forgot your key,” the landlord called after him.

“I don’t need a key,” the scholar replied in good Italian, “for I have trust. But can you tell me how I can get a gondola?” The Italian suggested that his nephew would probably like to give him a tour. A little while later, Michel was in a gondola, touring the many canals that were connected by as many bridges.

“Passing through?” the nephew asked.

“Yes and no. I think I may stay a while,” the Frenchman answered.
“Then you must be very privileged. There are not many people who have time, money and independence.”
“You’re right, but decadence is a distant prospect...” When they were going under the Bridge of Sighs, the gondolier began to complain.
“My dreams are still not coming true. Last night I had another nightmare...” But his customer didn’t feel like listening to his moaning and directed his attention to the busy water traffic.
“This is the main canal: the Canal Grande,” his guide told him, returning to his task at hand, “and over there is the Rialto Bridge.” After some time, Michel had seen the most beautiful places and he asked to be let off at the Ducal Palace.
“Soon there will be a carnival, perhaps you’d like to go,” the gondolier suggested at the conclusion.
“No, that will be of no interest to me,” the tight-lipped foreigner responded as he put a coin in the bag and then disappeared behind the palace from which the Doges ruled the city.

There was music in the streets and Nostradamus decided to leave his books alone.

I think I’ll indulge in a diversion, he thought, and left his upstairs rooms to observe the festival from close-by. Crowds of Venetians were proceeding among the hubbub outside and had decorated themselves festively. Their faces were covered with elegant masks, which depicted different characters, mainly a parody of the universal scholar, the posh merchant, the harlequin and the provocative maid.

And tomorrow they’ll be complaining about nightmares, because this certainly doesn’t do anything to clear the mind, the seer grumbled. On the Plaza of San Marco, the dream-like spectacle was in full swing. It was packed full of merrymakers and the music filled the grand square. To get away from the jostling, Michel shuffled along the waterfront and after avoiding a tall pillar with a lion, he arrived at the somewhat quieter Piazzetta, where he saw an unusual lady. She was wearing a Star of David around her neck and was surrounded by little children, who were playing around a butterfly made of colored glass. It was the Gnostic butterfly. Interested, he walked towards here.

“What a beautiful butterfly!” he called out, but it was too noisy to make himself heard. The woman saw him approach and, without saying anything, handed him a mask of the devil. The gesture probably meant that he should fit in with the partying folks and he willingly put the mask on. Just when he wanted to ask her if she thought it looked good on him, the intriguing woman and all the children had disappeared as if by magic. He looked in all directions, but the many party goers were blocking his view. He was surprised to discover her once more next to an age-old library and she beckoned him to come closer. Speechless, he pushed through the crowd, but when he got to the library, she was gone again and he felt

embarrassed. He saw her again, with the children. They were dancing through the Gate of Paper and he elbowed his way to the central building. But when he arrived at the inner courtyard, all he saw were the statues of Mars and Neptune. He hastily looked around everywhere. There she was, running up the Stairs of the Giants; she was obviously playing a game with him.

“Is this some kind of carnival ritual?” he called after her, but the sound was drowned by the noise all around them. He decided to follow the mystery, was lured into alleys and found himself in a quieter district. The mysterious lady was now dancing with her kids on a wooden staircase and disappeared into one of the old houses, which were casting long shadows because of the setting sun. He came to an overgrown courtyard with a water well, but there was no sign of the woman or the children.

“Anybody there?” he asked, but there was no response. Behind the courtyard, he noticed a door. He opened it and entered a narrow lane that led to another courtyard, that had several doors.

Where am I being led to? he wondered. On the first entrance, the word Shalom was written, and he opened the door. In the room stood a table with a seven-armed candleholder placed in the center. He well remembered the menorah from his youth.

“Hello, anybody home?” he called, but there was no answer. The woman and the children had vanished into thin air. Suddenly he heard a loud trumpet blast from the city and he unsuspectingly walked outside to see what was going on. In the lane that he had just come from, there was nothing to be seen. The shrill trumpet sounded again. It seemed to be coming from the San Marco square and he decided to go back there. On the way there, he noticed that all the streets were surprisingly empty. The city seemed deserted, except for a few costumed townspeople, who were running away in fear. He stopped one of them and asked why they were all running away.

“The carnival has been prohibited by decree,” the man dawdled.

“By the Doges?”

“They don’t exist anymore,” and the Venetian took off. The scholar hurried along and reached the San Marco square, where there were only traces left of the carnival. Alarmed, he looked around. Even the pillar with the lion was gone. In its place stood a new statue, a rearing horse with a heroic figure on its back. His name was Napoleon Bonaparte.

“Grab that man with the mask!” someone suddenly shouted. Michel turned around and saw a group of French soldiers who were heading towards him. Instinctively, their fellow countryman jumped into the air and managed to avoid the guard by flying. Within a short time, there were soldiers everywhere and they pointed to the alleged partygoer, who was staying just above the roofs.

“He won’t be able to stay up there very long,” an officer said and had several streets in the area blocked off. Nostradamus saw the growing danger and tried to flee towards the ocean, but unexpectedly, gravity got

hold of him and he began to descend. A company of soldiers rushed to the wharf to grab the lawbreaker by the collar. The situation was getting awkward and Michel floated down, gritting his teeth. Just in time, he managed to turn his fall into a glide-down and finally splashed into the harbor water. The soldiers tried to catch him, but he dove deep into the water and then hid among the moored boats.

The next morning the traveler reflected on his confusing dream situations in the leafy park of Zan Zanipolo. This time he had completely lost touch with reality and he didn't even know from which day. The dazzling city had confounded him.

Napoleon, he remembered. But it will be several hundred years before this emperor will actually come into power, he estimated and made a note in his journal.

It is truly miraculous to think that everything and everyone is already in existence, waiting for a chance to manifest. And that intriguing lady: was she trying to offer me some kind of insight, or was she trying to protect me from the French danger? In any case, the danger had passed. Flying was something that Nostradamus had done often enough in his sleep, but never before into the future. Too bad he still had so much ego. At the most crucial times he blew it and sank down again.

"Tomorrow is the first day of the carnival, sir," a gardener suddenly mentioned. The scholar gave him a friendly nod.

Just imagine if those followers of Napoleon had succeeded in grabbing me, he pondered while cut branches fell down around his feet. I wonder what would have happened then? If I want to be safe in the future, I will have to be more conscious in my dreams, because the higher I go, the harder I will fall. The gardener, who was up in the tree, trimming the branches, warned him to get out of the way of a large, falling branch.

When did reality shift into that dream? Michel continued to muse, and he decided that from then on he would jump into the air every day to test gravity. In the higher worlds there is barely any gravity, he knew. The higher the world, the less gravity there was. The scholar got up, brushed the leaves off his clothes and left the park. So far, location had been what provoked his prophesies, but he thought it must be possible to some day be able to visit the entire world from one place.

After a few months in Venice, Michel started to crave change; he wanted to travel some more. He had checked in with a shipping company and would go on the first ship that would leave the harbor. Three days later he packed up his stuff and went to the three-master that had just arrived and was moored next to the shipyard. The Dutch merchant ship, commanded by Captain Pelsaert, was usually used for trade, but this time there was little cargo and paying passengers were welcome. Michel zigzagged through a group of carpenters to the schooner, which had a sailor on guard at the ramp. "Providence" looked slender compared to the grotesque and

clumsy ships of the previous century. A fever for discovering the world had broken out among the Portuguese and the Spaniards and the shipbuilding industry had been making rapid progress.

“Ahoy, passenger Nostradamus” he greeted the sailor on watch. The seaman gave him a surly look, checked a long list of names and then began to speak in Dutch. Michel motioned that he didn’t understand, to which the crewman responded, “No Nostradamus.” Michel asked him for the list.

“See, that’s me,” he said, pointing to his name and pronouncing each letter. The Dutchman sniffed loudly and made a money gesture: “*Blijckende penning, ping ping.*” The Frenchman paid him the traveling costs in advance and stepped up onto the ramp of the sailing vessel.

“Smart-aleck treasurer,” he mumbled scornfully while he jumped aboard and walked towards a handful of passengers who were awaiting instructions by the main mast.

“Are you going to Malta for business too?” a pushy chap asked, to which the scholar gloomily shook his head. The Venetian understood that he was not going to get anywhere with this guy and began to jabber at a lone lady.

“Nice ship, isn’t it Madam? It took three months to build.”

“That long?” she asked. Then the fellow went into an elaborate explanation about sanding the wood, before Captain Pelsaert asked for everyone’s attention. He welcomed the passengers in Italian and told them that they just brought a load of Delft porcelain to shore and were now taking spices to Sicily. The ship was from Amsterdam, the city that was becoming enormously popular. The Dutchmen traded in pepper, nutmeg, cloves, Chinese tea, coffee, sugar and, of course, cheese. The captain was called away by a crew member during his little speech and walked away. Where was that rotten smell coming from all of a sudden? Apparently, the tide was right for departure. They cast off and the schooner was carefully guided out of port by some rowboats. Out at the seagate, the jib was set as the first sail and the ship went into the open ocean assisted by a light breeze. Nostradamus put his belongings in his cabin and again he caught a whiff of a nasty odor. One of the crew members pointed out to him that the ship had transported slaves in earlier days. The smell of destruction was intolerable below deck and Michel hurried back outside to the fresh sea breeze, where the passengers were bidding a sentimental farewell to a fading Venice.

I prefer to face the future, he thought, pleased with himself and sauntered across the landing to the front of the ship. At the prow, he thoroughly enjoyed the grand view, while the bow whipped the ocean water into foam.

It almost feels like you’re a bird flying over the ocean like this, he imagined. After relaxing for a while, he returned to the poop deck. He saw Pelsaert standing on the forward deck, where the helmsman was just taking over the wheel from him.

A good time to meet the captain, Michel figured, and he padded towards him.

“Are you coming to check if we’re keeping the ship on course?” Pelsaert asked.

“Absolutely. We will soon sail past an island with sirens and I am curious to see if you can completely resist them.”

“Been reading *Odyssey* by Homers?” the captain supposed.

“Yes, but only in Greek!”

“Well, well, we have a scholar aboard. I can read too, you know, but I don’t have much time for it. Reading maps, of course, is something I do regularly. Do you feel like coming to my cabin and seeing my collection of maps?” Michel accepted the invitation and they chatted while they walked to the largest quarters on board. Pelsaert had incredibly foul-smelling breath and his entire cabin was permeated with the odor. The physician was about to advise him to rinse his mouth with alcohol, but he stopped himself.

Maybe at our next meeting, he thought. The captain spread a map of the Adriatic Sea on the table in front of him.

“See, this is how we’re sailing around the boot of Italy,” and he traced the route for him. “Right here we have to watch out for pirates.”

“Nice map,” his guest commented.

“By the Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator. I have some more of his,” and he proudly brought several land and sea maps out of a trunk.

“These are the best ones there are,” he continued. “They’ve been developed with a new projection method. There are a lot of mistakes in the old maps and they say that that’s why Columbus got onto the wrong route when he was trying to find an alternate way to India.”

“Pretty handy, those maps,” Michel agreed, “but the position of the ship can be measured much better using the stars.” Pelsaert laughed, self-assured: “Absolutely, without the Jacobstaf we would be lost,” and he took a strange-looking instrument that could measure stars out of a drawer.

“See, besides the tilt angle it gives the number of degrees of the latitude,” he explained.

“The device must be pointed towards the pole star?” his guest supposed.

“So, you know something about stars as well,” Pelsaert said, as he was putting away the Jacobstaf.

“Some, yes, I studied astrology for years.”

“And what do you think about this?” the captain asked, placing a bearded-man jug on the table. The face on the jug was supposed to be a likeness of himself, but it didn’t look much like him.

“Um, I’m not crazy about it,” Michel answered in all honesty. Pelsaert reacted a bit grumpily and let it be known that it was time for him to get back to work, but not before he tried to impress his guest with a collection of silver pennies. The silver pieces were indeed beautiful. The scholar thanked him for the interesting visit and then spent a bit more time standing outside in the wind. When it got dark, everyone went to their

berths, while the ship lightly bobbed up and down. During the night the waves got a lot bigger and the schooner surged violently. It kept Michel from being able to go to sleep. After a while he felt seasick and the versatile man blamed himself. After four days they finally sailed around the boot of Italy and Sicily was on the horizon.

Maybe I should go ashore here, Michel considered. I'm never going to have sea legs. That night the passengers were served a bizarre mush for dinner in the galley; it was called hutspot.

"Good to keep the sea monsters away," the ship's cook said and gave everyone a generous portion.

"Are there sea monsters around here?" someone named Giuseppe asked, frightened.

"Certainly, a month ago we had to flee from the Cracken. A gigantic sea monster that can capsize the whole ship."

"And hutspot protects us from that?"

"Sea monsters don't like hutspot," the cook clarified and the dish was immediately devoured by Giuseppe after that.

"Nonsense," a catholic priest, on his way to preach on Malta, interrupted, "Did you personally see this monster, who supposedly doesn't like hutspot?"

"Well, no actually, I was in the galley," the cook defended himself.

"It's all based on stories, exaggerated by fear and ignorance," the priest continued and the group of table companions breathed a sigh of relief.

"The Cracken, isn't that some kind of giant octopus with enormously long tentacles?" Nostradamus then resumed.

"Yes, exactly, see, I was right, our scholar even says so," the cook happily responded.

"I think I may not travel through to Malta tomorrow," Michel promptly announced and the little group of passengers again became nervous.

"But you know, there is a much greater chance that we could be attacked by pirates," the cook mentioned.

"Okay, that's enough scary stories," the priest reprimanded him, "there is a lady in our presence." Long after dinner, in the dead of night, the ship sailed into the bay of Syracuse and the anchor was dropped. Michel was dozing in bed with a high fever and wondered what was wrong with him.

Am I seasick, or was it the hutspot? he wondered. The Dutch meal lay like a rock in his stomach. A traveler in the same cabin heard him moan and informed the ship's physician. He came waddling in half asleep to check up on the case. The captain, who couldn't sleep, also came by and his foul breath blew all over the patient.

"Rinse with mouthwash three times a day," Michel suddenly raved deliriously.

"He's talking gibberish," the ship's physician observed sadly. "He will have to be taken ashore as soon as possible. He will be better off getting treated on land." Early in the morning the patient was brought ashore in a

sloop and taken to a hospital in Syracuse. Providence resumed her trip to Malta that same day.

After days of illness, the Sicilian doctor still couldn't figure out what was wrong with his French patient, who was shaking like a leaf.

Better do some bloodletting, to let the evil juices flow out, he thought.

"No!" Nostradamus protested loudly when his arm was grabbed. The Sicilian was startled and refrained from the treatment. Despite some moments of clarity, Michel was having a hard time getting his thoughts straight. It took a lot of effort and he kept passing out. The high fever continued and the local physician again decided to resort to bloodletting, until an Arab unexpectedly tapped him on the shoulder.

"I want this man to convalesce at my house, because it is too noisy for him here. I will take full responsibility for him."

"Oh, Mr. Al-Ghazali!" the physician exclaimed, snapping to attention. The patient was transported to a splendid house on the ocean, where a mild-mannered woman nursed him with great devotion. The care, the seawater and the quietude did wonders for him and the fever finally started to abate. A few days later, he was standing on his own two feet and his mysterious benefactor came to see him.

"I see there is some progress," the man with the dark brown eyes said.

"Yes, absolutely, but who is it who has helped me so unselfishly?"

"I am Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali*, but my wife, Fatima, is the one who did all the work. I only ordered to have you brought here."

"Well, you saved my life," Michel thanked him. His rescuer was ingratiatingly silent, while the surf sounded pleasantly in the background.

"We are both not of Sicilian origin," Abu then remarked.

"Yes, I agree, I am from France, and you?"

"Baghdad, Persia," the Arab, who was dressed in wool from head to toe, answered.

"How did you end up on this island?"

"My wife and I settled here, because there is a sense of free spirit here. But I must leave you now, because it is time for our prayers. We will meet again soon." The Muslim left the room and the patient focused his attention on the ocean and followed the action of the waves. The next day he was strong enough to share the midday meal with Al-Ghazali and his wife.

"The beautiful thing about Sicily is that the Arabic and Christian cultures can meet here," Abu said, in passing. His guest nodded in agreement, while the humble Fatima placed some bowls on the table.

"Are you homesick for the Provence?" the Moslem man continued.

"No, not really, I left there many years ago and now I travel all over the place."

"I think you are following the path of the heart..."

* European name: Algazel

“You have quickly understood me,” Michel replied, surprised. “And what is it that keeps you busy?”

“I try to live according to the insights of Sufism, a mystical movement within the Islam. I also publish works in my mother tongue.”

“Too bad I don’t speak Arabian, or I would have loved to study them. But maybe you could tell me something about your books.” Abu thought for a minute, while his wife was bringing in a hot dish.

“*The elixir of bliss* is the title of my latest work,” he then gave as an example.

“Oh, I thought the Islam was based on subjection,” Michel said.

“No, not at all. Many Muslims probably do believe this, but the Koran and the strict rules of the Sharia are only outward appearances. Allah’s true message is love.”

“So that is the message that saved me from a precarious fate?”

“You must be blessed, my dear friend.”

“I haven’t noticed much of that in the last few years,” his guest grumbled.

“Well, life is not always what it seems and always gives us difficult tests. But perhaps a woman will soon come into your life who will soften the way for you somewhat.” Fatima, meanwhile, served the soup and the Arabic couple began to eat in silence. Due to their restful presence, there was no urge to speak anymore and their guest peacefully enjoyed his meal with them. After a week, he was feeling great and it was time to travel on.

“Is the eagle about to fly again?” Abu asked when the recovered physician wanted to see him. The latter smiled meekly.

“How can I thank you?”

“Live, that is enough,” the Moslem answered from his heart. Michel embraced him and offered him some money, but Abu declined absolutely. The Frenchman thanked his wife too and then he was on his way; alone again.

The southern part of Sicily consisted of picturesque plains, but when you looked to the North, you could see Etna, the largest volcano of Europe, threateningly rising up out of the landscape. In the town of Syracuse, Nostradamus found out that the area around the volcano had been hit again by earthquakes. For the past year, a big plume of smoke had already been visible above the top, which was covered in snow. His interest in the mountain was awakened and he proposed to himself to plan to climb it. He thoroughly tested his physical condition for the risky undertaking.

Everything seems to be functioning properly, he decided with his last knee bend and he bought an old officer’s hat as protection from the burning sun. During the walk to the volcano, he spent his nights at hospitable farms. When he had crossed many plains, the level of the land seriously began to rise. The trip was getting heavier and Etna was getting bigger. The soil around the foot of the volcano had become very fertile. The Sicilians grew citrus fruits, olives, grapes, figs, wheat and barley there. The volcano

apparently took and gave life. Michel visited one last farm and inquired about the situation with Etna.

“You’ve got to be nuts to climb that mountain for your own pleasure,” the farmer frowned.

“I crave danger.”

“Well, it’s your life,” and the farmer explained the best climbing route to him. The next day the eccentric left civilization behind him. He soon came to some pine trees growing around the rocky giant. He orientated himself, ate an orange and resumed his trip through the forest, which quickly changed into a bare rock face. The ground was now getting significantly steeper and the adventurer had to stop to catch his breath. In the distance he discovered the bay of Syracuse. The ships looked like little pinpricks.

So small and vulnerable; reminds me of humans, he philosophized and he got ready to put his pack on his back again.

I am so lonely, he suddenly lamented. I miss my family and even my own country. And suddenly feeling terribly homesick, he hung his head.

Okay, this is no time to get sentimental; hanging from a steep mountainside. And, determined, he continued his journey. On his left he could see a hole with lava and water vapors were wafting up from it.

Fire, earth, water and air. Maybe that’s why I’m here; to experience the building block of life.

Etna seemed safe enough. According to the last farmer, there hadn’t been a new eruption for years. Nevertheless, the volcano spread a lot of smoke, which was visible everywhere in the area.

“You’re going to keep quiet, aren’t you?” Michel kept climbing, but the blood drained from his face when he heard a loud bang as a cloud of ashes was ejected. The volcano dust spewed out of one of the side walls, but it was not an eruption of the central cone.

All’s well; false alarm!

After a lot of endeavor, he arrived at the snowy part, where nothing grew, except the odd thorn bush. The loner looked down into the depths and saw rivers of magma flowing out of several flanks.

That looks scary. Am I just being foolhardy? he wondered. But the weather was fine and it must be possible. He finally reached the top and the mighty crater emerged. Once he had climbed onto the side of it, he was overwhelmed with an icy fear. He lost his balance and almost tumbled into the crevice. Just in time, he planted his foot and grabbed hold of the ground. His officer’s hat fluttered down into the abyss.

“That was a close call!” he mumbled, relieved, while his hat lay hundreds of feet below him on the bottom of the crater.

Why was I suddenly gripped by fear, I wonder. I had chills running down my spine. Is it fear of heights or is it from the thin air or the sulfur vapor?

He really had no idea. Recovered from his fright, he carefully continued on and managed to enjoy the extraordinary beauty of nature. After spending some time at the top, the climber started to feel chilled and began his descent. Once he had safely reached the foot of the volcano again, he

decided to head towards the north. That choice would cost him dearly, because it proved to be an incredibly difficult path, which went along jagged mountain ranges. It took weeks before he finally reached the harbor town of Palermo, utterly exhausted, and there he just moped around for a while.

All this traveling is not exactly warming my heart, he thought, dejectedly. And when he happened to be upon a Normandic cathedral and attended the mass, he knew for sure: he wanted to go back to France.

Michel found a Portuguese ship that would take him to Marseille. After three days of sailing, the imposing limestone cliff of the French naval town appeared and the stately forts of Saint Jean and Saint Nicolas were still protecting the area. The ship slowly sailed into the harbor, where part of the wharf was under water because of an unusually high tide.

That could cause problems for the Rhone, the scientist pondered, looking over the railing. After disembarking, he found a place to stay in the Canebière, a centrally located district of Marseille. Then he decided to celebrate his return to his fatherland in one of the many seafood restaurants around the harbor.

Soon I'll be visiting my family, he rejoiced, while he sat down at a terrace on the wharf that had stayed dry. A waiter came to take his order.

"Good afternoon. What can I get for you?"

"Do you have any sole on your menu?"

"No problem, as you can see, they swim right in here," the waiter joked.

"Okay, I would like one fried in butter please. I'm starving."

"Anything to drink?"

"Yes, I'll have a beer," the lone guest decided, feeling in a celebratory mood.

"I'm probably wrong, but aren't you that famous physician from the old days? Um Notre, or Nostre..."

"Nostradamus! Yes, I am. Nice to be recognized after all this time. I've been abroad for ages and I've just arrived back today."

"Then you are just in time," the waiter said, suddenly serious.

"What's going on?"

"Well, the greatest floods of our history have been happening. The entire Rhone delta has been flooded due to weeks of rain in the Alps and the surplus of river water has nowhere to go because of the extremely high sea level. To make matters even worse, a case of the plague has been identified."

"Wow, that could be a disastrous combination," Michel understood and immediately thought of his family in Saint Rémy, which the Rhone flowed past.

"Many people have already drowned," the waiter elaborated. "The survivors have been robbed of all of their possessions and almost everyone is homeless. The roads have been washed out and the cattle is floating dead in the rivers."

“Has Saint Rémy been hit?”

“Undoubtedly. The entire Camargue has flooded and the area is barely reachable, if at all.”

“But that means that people no longer have access to safe drinking water...”

“I don’t know about that, but the disaster is being handled by the provincial government now, and they’re looking for people with medical experience. They desperately need a doctor of your caliber.”

“Well, I will roll up my sleeves,” Michel said. “You’d better just bring me a simple meal, instead of that sole, because I’m no longer in the mood for a celebration.” A little while later, he presented himself to the local authorities and immediately had two assistants assigned to him.

After the water level had started to go down, the three of them left for the disaster area, on horseback, to assess the situation and offer First Aid.

“Men, just to refresh your memories: again my plan of attack,” Nostradamus told them. “The only thing we can do for people at this point is to convince everyone that the usual water is not suitable for consumption, not even for washing. Safe water is boiled water or rainwater that has been caught in clean barrels. When we get back, we will make rose petal pills and then distribute them to as many victims as possible.” The two men listened carefully. They reached the Rhone before noon and already spotted several bodies, floating in the water, and the horses began to act mulish. So they dismounted and tied the animals to a tree.

“Let’s see what killed those poor souls,” the doctor said, and together they walked to the bank, where they poked a body with a stick, that was floating along the edge.

“Try to turn it around, then I’ll be able to see it better,” the leader requested. After a bit of fumbling, his helpers succeeded in turning the body over and they saw a face covered in horrific abscesses.

“Black death!” they shuddered.

“We’d better keep going, the horses will get used to it,” Michel said grimly. The first flooded village they reached, with great difficulty, turned out to have been hit simultaneously by a flood of the plague. The streets were flooded and dead human and animal bodies floated in the puddles. The calamity tidings were beginning to take shape and Nostradamus feared that this was the greatest catastrophe he had ever experienced in his life. It was painful for them to have to look at the broken down villagers, but after giving them their information about the water there was nothing more they could do for them, and they continued on their way. Between the Grand Rhone and the Petit Rhone, were pools of death and the horses continually refused to go on. In all of the next villages, the situation proved to be the same. The Grim Reaper had done his work, and the only choice was to die either by drowning or the plague. In the village of Ulain, fear reined and some of the survivors clung onto the three riders in

desperation. Michel had the greatest difficulty keeping control over his mount and ordered them to let go.

“What are you guys doing here then?” they called in desperation.

“Bringing you advice about how to use water!” the doctor answered.

“You’re only bringing us words?”

“Yes, but if you follow my advice, you have a good chance of staying alive.”

“Get lost,” another villager scoffed and they suddenly began to throw rocks and sticks. The mounted trio hurried away. After having rushed through dozens of villages, they reached the fork of the river, where the Petit Rhone split off from its big brother. Michel knew this area like the back of his hand and they would soon be riding into Saint Rémy, his place of birth. The population proved to be decimated.

I wonder if I’ll see a family member alive, he thought sadly and he left his men behind and quickly rode to the Rue des Remparts, where his parents’ house was, looking deserted. He dismounted anyway, hoping to catch a sign of life. But he found no one and decided to go to the town hall for information. The only official there knew that one of his brothers was propping up a house that was about to collapse at the edge of the city. Nostradamus immediately jumped back on his horse and raced over to it. A moment later, he saw Bertrand standing there holding a wooden pole in his arms.

“Michel, you alive,” his brother shouted, recognizing the rider right away, and threw his pole on the ground. They flew into each other’s arms and allowed their tears to flow freely.

“Father and Mother?” Michel asked hurriedly.

“They haven’t been alive for a quite while,” Bertrand sobbed.

“And what about my other brothers?”

“Hector drowned and I haven’t heard anything from Julien. He lives higher up in Aix-en-Provence. Antoine is still alive and is working at the municipality of Arles. So we actually survived the flood relatively well. But why haven’t we heard from you for so long?”

“Oh, too much has happened to be able to tell you all right now. But to make a long story short: after the death of my family, I went crazy for half a year,” Michel answered.

“We had to hear the terrible news from the municipality of Agen back then.”

“I still feel guilty, Bertrand: the plague-fighter’s family killed by the plague,” he said, briefly lapsing back into that other time. “So, you’re repairing houses that are collapsing?”

“Yes, and there is an awful lot of work to be done, as you can see.”

“Well, we’d better get back to work then; I have a few mountains to move myself. But I’ll be back for a visit soon,” and each went their way.

When the worst of the flood and plague was past, Nostradamus settled in the town of Salon the Provence, where the general population welcomed him with open arms. He decided to stay there permanently. After one year

he had built up a new practice at the Place de la Poissonnerie. Besides this he made ethereal oils and home remedies again and published some booklets about cosmetics and hygiene. It was the beginning of a prosperous time. The only thing that was still missing was a woman.

Chapter 5

*Alone in the night during secret study
Resting on a copper tripod
The flame from the void ignites that success
Where frivolity is sinful*

A herd of white horses ran as the wind and a flock of flamingos rose up and then descended again a little further on. The doctor on his mare galloped through the Camargue, the stretch of wilderness where he found strength and peace in his spare time. It was so enjoyable to be able to ride through this beautiful countryside full of lakes and lagoons; a wonderful place for water fowl. He left the swampy heath behind him and steered his horse in the direction of the dunes. A black stork-like bird nervously darted off. On top of the dune he stopped and stared at the sea's horizon for a while. The Camargue was like an island, divided by the Mediterranean Sea and the river arms of the Rhone. The age-old sediment of the river water with its tidal activities had given the landscape a special character. It was constantly changing and every time he came here there was something new to discover. The only stamp humanity had been able to place upon this watery plain were the perfectly straight tracks from a distant Roman past. He led his mount to the wide sandy beach and let the wind blow away the many impressions left by his patients. In the distance, he saw the dark profile of a bull disappear behind a hill. He was urging his mare on, hoping to discover more wild bulls, when he heard a horse trotting behind him. He turned around and saw a woman on a jet-black stallion. The rider, wearing a red headscarf, passed him without a greeting and disappeared into the dunes.

It looks like she's following something. I want to investigate this, he thought and he spurred his horse on in the same direction. His curiosity aroused, he observed from a dune top what that the tough woman was doing. She seemed to be racing like a maniac after a group of wild horses, leaving great clouds of dust in her wake. Seagulls, cormorants, birds of prey and others of their ilk, all dispersed at once.

She's herding wild horses! he determined, astonished. I'd better give her a hand, and he rode down the hill and brought his horse to a gallop. Several flamingos, with plankton in their beaks, were startled by the unexpected visitor and immediately stopped feeding their young.

"Excuse me," he nodded pleasantly. After he had crossed a wet part, the ground became dryer and he was able to bring his mare to full speed. Meanwhile, the she-man was screaming at the wild horses and she sped after them like one possessed. High above her, groups of white/yellow herons flew in formation in the blue sky, at a safe distance from the noisy

scene. Michel managed to catch up to her while calibrating the direction of the untamed horses, which were fiercely being kept together by her. A number of the animals threatened to get away to the right and he quickly cut them off. She noticed, but continued her activities without any acknowledgement.

I've never seen such a presumptuous woman, he chuckled to himself. She rode around on her stallion, completely self-possessed and despite her masculine inclinations she had a nicely proportioned body.

But what kind of woman would wear trousers? Michel, meantime, did what he could to keep the animals together, but he was not a very experienced rider and kept floundering. She was still ignoring him. Some of the horses now tried to escape through the smaller, woodsy areas, but they didn't stand a chance and were driven back by both of them. This game continued until he again tried to control the animals on uneven ground but had to give it up. His mare stumbled and he fell, with a thump, on the ground. He hurt himself considerably and the dragoon rode up to him to see how serious his fall had been. The herd of animals dispersed.

"I'm sorry I ruined it for you," he said.

"You said it," she grumbled, while she got down from her horse. She didn't try to hide her chagrin.

"All in one piece?" she then asked, a little milder.

"I think so," and he felt his body. "But where do those horses need to go?"

"Nowhere!"

"Nowhere? Then why are we doing all this work?"

"We? I never asked for your help." She had a point there and he introduced himself.

"My name is Michel de Nostredame, and may I ask who you are?"

"Anne Ponsart Gemelle. But let me help you up," and she firmly grasped his hand.

"You are a strong woman," he complimented, while she helped him up.

"Yes, sometimes men are afraid of me."

"To tell you the truth, I've never met such a robust woman. You herd those wild horses just for fun?"

"Yes, I love to spend time here."

"Exceptional for a lady of any standing. I'm from Salon de Provence; I work there as a physician. And where are you from?"

"From Istres, near the lagoon of Berre, and I must say, I have heard of you before, Dr. Nostradamus."

"Please call me Michel. Shall we ride a bit?"

"All right!" And they mounted their horses. While they were riding through a green landscape, Anne began to thaw a bit and talked about their surroundings.

"Sometimes there are bears in these woods."

"Bears? I've never seen a bear here," and he surreptitiously studied her form. Aside from her wide shoulders, her body was actually quite feminine, he now saw. She also had a beautiful face with even features,

and her thick, golden-brown hair stuck out from under her headdress. When they were crossing the salt plain, Anne - relaxed now - told him about the waterfowl, and pointed out several species. They enjoyed each other's company and he wanted to know more about her.

"Do you have a love in your life?" he asked, deciding to be straightforward. But that was a bit too direct for her.

"This place has a great supply of salt," she answered, avoiding the question. He pushed on.

"A healthy, young woman like you must have a husband?"

"I'm a widow," she explained irritably and he didn't say anything else for a while. They reached the beach and slowly walked along the coast, back to Istres.

"Been a widow for long?" he carefully asked after a while.

"Nearly three years."

That's good timing, he thought and when they had arrived at her house, he decided to invite her over for dinner. The invitation was received positively and they set up a time.

His maid had given the house a good cleaning and Michel was making his preparations in the kitchen. When everything was ready for the afternoon, he put on his best clothes and waited for his female company to arrive. Finally she knocked and he nervously opened the door.

"Good afternoon Mrs. Ponsart Gemelle."

"I thought we were on a first-name basis," she answered contrarily and stood in the doorway somewhat awkwardly. The tough woman from Istres was wearing the same garb as before.

Not particularly elegant, he thought, a little disappointed, and he felt a bit uncomfortable.

"I think I've overdressed for the occasion, but please do come in." Anne entered the living room and he caught her scent. She smelled nice anyway and her clothes had at least been washed.

"Well, Michel, I hope your cooking skills will be acceptable."

"If you don't trust them, you are welcome to assist me in the kitchen momentarily. I see you're still wearing your work clothes anyway," he said sharply. Anne was surprised at her host who seemed to know how to put her in her place.

"I'm going to change into something more comfortable. Go ahead and have a look at what I have prepared so far," he continued, and proceeded up the stairs. She walked to the kitchen and poked around a bit. She saw a variety of cut vegetables, cheese, fish, eggs and squares of dough on the counter. Just above all this, she discovered a rack with dozens of spice jars. In a cupboard she found containers with dried mushrooms. Besides these, there were rows of pots of marmalade, each made with a different kind of fruit, according to the labels. The iron griddles above the fire were glowing hot and ready to be used.

Wow, he's really going all out, she realized, I think I may have underestimated him. Michel returned, wearing more casual clothing and had a stack of paper in his hand.

"Look, my cookbook *La Traite*, essential for anyone who wants to know more about exquisite recipes."

"You wrote a cookbook?"

"Yes, but it hasn't been published yet. But roll up your sleeves now. See those pieces of dough over there? You can brush them with a beaten egg and then sprinkle it with some sesame seeds. I will grease the baking tray." And while they were working, they talked about their lives.

"Do you still miss your late wife?" she asked a little later.

"Yes, sometimes I do. She will always be in my heart. Stir that cream cheese very gently, Anne, and mix some chopped capers in with it."

"Are these the capers?"

"Not much of a domestic goddess, are you?" Meanwhile, he baked the puff pastry till it was golden brown and poured the melted cheese sauce with vegetables over it. His guest was mesmerized, watching him place little pieces of smoked salmon on top of this and then cover the whole thing with squares of crispy baked puff pastry.

"All done. Let's sit down."

"I've never seen anything like it," she said, her eyes widened.

"Supernatural," he grinned and carrying the plates, they walked to the dining room where he poured a glass of red wine for each of them.

"It tastes absolutely fabulous," she informed him. "I apologize for underestimating you."

"Thank you. You're a good equestrian. You have an amazing horse, by the way; you must be rich."

"My husband had a salt factory."

"Ah, that's why you mentioned salt when we were riding around in the Camargue. It must have been a successful business."

"Yes, very much so; the salt is exported to many countries. The Camargue is the largest salt extraction area in Europe. My husband, Jacques, had a fatal accident in his own factory and so I felt I had to sell the company."

"That's sad," he said.

"What kind of stool is that?" Anne asked, looking at the strange object in the corner of the room. He got up and picked up the copper tripod.

"It is an occult instrument I use for my meditation."

"You're a funny guy," she laughed. Suddenly a flame ignited out of nothing, only to extinguish itself just as quickly, in the same corner.

"Bon sang!" he exclaimed.

"What on earth was that?" Anne asked, startled.

"I don't know. It seemed like magic..." They let it sink in for a while and then resumed eating.

"Are you coming with me? Let's make the Pommes Dauphines," he said after the appetizers and they went back to the kitchen. Half an hour later, the steaming hot main course was on the table.

“Did you cook for your husband much?” he asked while he shook some nutmeg over the entrée.

“No, not really. I think I’m just too careless for it. But that doesn’t mean I can’t learn.”

“If you want, I can show you the ropes some time,” he suggested. When they had finished the potato dish, the chef still had a delicious dessert in store: halved peaches with whipped cream and shredded almonds.

“If you’re trying to impress me, you have succeeded,” Anne praised him after she tasted the dessert. After dinner, they cleared the table and then amiably did the dishes together in the kitchen.

“Pretty, those pots of marmalade,” she said while she put away the dried glasses.

“That’s jam. Marmalade has little pieces of peel in it; jam doesn’t,” he explained.

“Oh, I didn’t know that. How do you make it?”

“Wash, dry, cook and add sugar.”

“Is it really that simple?” Michel nodded.

“Well, I guess maybe I should develop my female side,” Anne said.

“You’re fine the way you are,” and they left the clean kitchen behind.

“I had a wonderful afternoon, but it’s time for me to go home now,” she said at last.

“You’re welcome to spend the night, if you’d like. It’s a long way back and it will get dark within the hour.” Anne thanked him; she said her purebred would only take half an hour to get her home. At the door she unexpectedly kissed him on the mouth and was gone before he had a chance to recover. Smiling, he walked back to the living room, cast a glance at the place where the mysterious flame had appeared, and spent a few moments enjoying the memory of the pleasant time spent together. Then he waddled upstairs and happily crawled between the sheets.

A narrow, high mountain with a steep side, was silhouetted, and the top looked like an opened calyx. A castle was perched on its edge; it was shaped like a ship that looked as though it was ready to sail away. A bit lower, someone was climbing a rocky path to the fortress, which seemed like a link between heaven and earth. He approached some soldiers, who were standing guard at its entrance.

“Nostradamus, is that you at last?” a young man with a halo, who was just joining the guards, called out. The dreamer didn’t know what to say, and the man read his discomfort.

“You’ve arrived at a higher state of consciousness. You have met the right woman,” he clarified.

“How so?” Michel asked.

“You have been awakened by her!” The visitor took a minute to let this sink in.

“But where do you know me from?” he then asked.

“We’ve been watching you on earth for some time now,” the man, whose name was Tristan, answered.

“Once your spirit has penetrated to these higher regions, you automatically become a member of the Brothers of Light. Hosanna in Excelsis. But let’s not tarry. Come with me. We’re just preparing the Manisola and I will show you what we’re up to.” They entered the castle, which had many rooms and corridors, and which was built with the positions of the sun in mind. They passed large groups of transparent people who were busy preparing for the coming festival.

“Look, the Druid room, filled with flowers,” Tristan said, while scanning the crowd. “I want to introduce you to my friends, but I don’t see them just now.”

“Are these all people who have fully awakened, like me?” Michel asked.

“No, these are servants. There are very few like you and I,” and he stopped someone. “Where is Isola?”

“I don’t know,” the passer-by answered.

“If you see her, tell her we have a special guest. Oh, and they need your help at the banquet.” Then the two proceeded towards the main room where drinks, snacks and flower arrangements were being placed on a large, round table. The priests were making sure everything was running smoothly.

“This reminds me of the last Kathar fortress on the Montségur,” Michel commented.

“It is,” Tristan agreed.

“But that means that everyone here will soon be killed by the Catholic armies,” the visitor concluded.

“No, not at all, you haven’t arrived in the twelfth century after Christ. Time does not exist here and our ritual festivals and initiations go on eternally. Really, it is safe here. Ah, there is Isola!” An angel-like woman with long, blond hair and blue eyes appeared in the midst of the activities. She had a divine aura and was the picture of purity.

“Isola, I want to introduce you to Nostradamus.”

“How wonderful to meet another pure spirit,” she said. After the introduction, the newcomer was shown around some more and they visited the Occitan room, which had an impressive floor mosaic. In its center, there was an image of Mary Magdalene with a dove on a crescent moon, and underneath, a snake twisted with an apple in its mouth. While Michel was taking it all in, some worshippers, carrying bowls of raspberries, blackberries, currants and other kinds of fruit walked past them. Then the pair walked outside, to wait for the opening of the festival on the surrounding terraces. In the meantime, they looked at the foothills of the Pyrenees.

“I just saw people from every continent,” Michel mentioned. “Do they all belong to the Kathar community?”

“It is more a Gnostic society,” Tristan indicated, “which welcomes Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Islamic and other believers. Converted atheists are also received here with open arms.”

“It looks like it’s not causing any problems...”

“No, it doesn’t here, but our free, spiritual outlook is often seen as a threat elsewhere, and that was the reason why the last Gnostics to be out in the open were murdered en mass. But they only left a physical shell behind.”

“Why did they not flee?” Michel continued to ask.

“Our predecessors made a holy vow, a long time ago, to allow the Catholic armies to kill them after a conquest of the mountain, knowing that their liberated souls would go to the higher worlds, where God manifests himself in the purest form.”

“I would choose life.”

“We’re not all cut from the same cloth. The self-sacrifice was meant to create this eternal place. A place where we can continue our sacred work unseen. Without them, this would not have been possible.

“Is self-sacrifice not too much to ask?”

“It was a free choice. I have also vowed not to let myself be subjugated by earthly matters. But come, I see the festival is about to begin.” They walked back to the main room, where hundreds of initiates and followers were already waiting.

“Do you see that man over there?” asked Tristan. “That is Parsival, an exceptional being. I will introduce you to him.” They proceeded towards the man with the heroic appearance.

“Your first time in the grail castle?” Parsival asked.

“Yes, and it is quite a revelation to me,” Michel admitted.

“I used to leave this castle as ignorant as I was when I arrived, in the beginning,” he warned.

“I assume you have found the way since then.”

“Certainly, but I first had to live a life of hardship.”

“You are from the age of chivalry,” the newcomer continued. “During that time, everyone was always looking for the Holy Grail. Did anyone ever find it?”

“Many have. The Grail is actually a symbol for the space where God has mixed the materials of the creation with sunlight. The searching soul has to fight his way through this barrel of paradoxes to reach the eternal life.”

“I meant did a tangible Grail ever exist?”

“Wait and see,” Parsival said, smiling. Then one of the high priests at the round table asked for everyone’s attention and stood up to address them.

“Today we are celebrating the Manisola, in honor of Jesus Christ, the son of God, and his wife, Mary Magdalene, the priestess of the goddess Isis. With this celebration, we are commemorating the Last Supper, where Jesus drank from the chalice of the holy water of life. After his crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea collected his holy blood in that self-same cup. The servant passed it on to Mary Magdalene, who took it with her on her journey. She was carrying Jesus’ child and to ensure his safety, she moved

to France. She finally gave birth to the child, here at the Montségur. We Kathars are therefore the descendents of Jesus Christ. We are the keepers of the inheritance of the culture of the Essenes, which was the culture that Jesus and Mary Magdalene came from. She later founded mystery schools in the Languedoc; wherever she went, therapeutic springs spontaneously appeared. We have been celebrating the Manisola for centuries, but this time is a special year. A soul has come to us by his own power, and for this joyful occasion we have brought out the Holy Grail. We have prepared a drink, which can give him access to the Most High.” A servant handed the priest the Grail, which was filled with a liquid.

“Nostradamus, would you step forward please?” he then asked. The newcomer was amazed as he walked up to the round table.

“You are our beacon of light on Earth and we wish you all the power and wisdom to complete your mission,” the priest continued and then he offered him the chalice. Michel took a drink from the Holy Grail and a shimmering energy took hold of him.

“Long live Nostradamus!” everyone in the room cheered.

“And now, let’s have a great festival,” the priest ended his speech. Harpists began to play celestial music and the revelers spread out into the decorated rooms, where they enjoyed the displayed delicacies. Some people chose silence and went to the surrounding terraces. The weather was cooperating and everyone had a great time.

It was late in the evening, when suddenly an alarm was sounded by the guards. The castle was under a surprise siege and the soldiers who were standing guard were attacked by a shower of arrows. Panic ensued and the followers, due to lack of orders, ran in all directions. Some tripped over kneeling priests, who wanted to surrender to their destiny. Several high priests, with a horde of guards in their wake, rushed up to Parsival and Tristan.

“We want you to pass on the religion. Quick, there is an escape route!”

“But we have vowed to stay here eternally,” they resisted. The high priests urgently pointed out to them how important it was to preserve the existence of their religion. The communal interest was first and foremost and thanks to the intense pressure and chaotic situation, Parsival and Tristan reluctantly agreed. Michel had been observing everything, until they called out to him too.

“Please, go with them. You are very important. You are going to hold up a mirror for humanity, so they can see what will happen to them, so that their eyes can be opened and the light can prevail.” He didn’t know what to do, other than to agree. The head of the guard was instructed to show them the way and to raise barricades behind them if necessary.

“Farewell and keep our memories alive.” The high priests said goodbye and looked on with heavy eyes.

“Come, there is no time to lose,” the guard commanded and he dragged them along to a remote part. At the same time, a loud bang made the castle shake on its foundation. The enemy armies had managed to enter the hall

and Kathar soldiers had to seal off the central room in all haste. The followers who were left behind in the conquered area were slaughtered to the last man. Meanwhile, the three chosen ones were taken to a landing, which was finished with extraordinarily beautiful cedar woodwork. The guard stopped there and carefully studied the wooden paneling, which consisted of various diamond shapes. He began to meticulously feel along the seams with his fingers. At a certain spot, his hand rested and then, as he pushed the diamond, it gave way. A secret passage opened up.

“Get in,” he ordered. Tristan, Parsival and Michel hastily entered the hidden crawl space. The guard followed them and shut the wooden diamond behind him, rendering it once again invisible. He then lit a lamp and a narrow passageway came into view.

“Make haste, we don’t have much time,” he summoned, and the trio hurried along.

“At the end of this passage, turn left,” he whispered a few minutes later. The next corridor was a dead end; a ball the height of a man, which had a hole in it, became visible. The battles in and around the castle could be heard here and Tristan contemplated staying behind for a moment.

“Crawl in here,” the guard sternly commanded, seeing his hesitation. The three of them obediently climbed into the rescue device, but had no idea what was about to happen. The contraption, which was made of twigs and animal skins, was exactly the right size for three adults, and they each found a spot to sit down.

“There are some handles and footholds to hang on to,” the guard said. They had barely settled when he slowly put the capsule into motion. The ball began to roll under its own power and the underground tunnel quickly became a vertical track. The vehicle ended up in a free fall and its occupants dropped hundreds of meters in a few seconds, until the ball jerked onto some kind of ground and then began to roll very fast. Nostradamus lost consciousness and did not recover. In the twilight zone, time flew by and everything was there. Or did time stand still and there was nothing? At the end of the tunnel there was a light. With an unbelievable number of forms and at least as many colors.

“I am with you,” he heard someone say. Powerlessly he opened his eyes and to his great surprise, he saw Anne’s face. Up-side-down and with her golden-brown hair right up to his nose.

“I’ve been holding you for hours,” she continued, worriedly, “you were freezing cold and I thought you were dead.” Michel pinched himself for assurance. Yes, he was back on Earth.

“How did you...” but he was too weak to finish his sentence. She understood and explained it to him.

“At home, I was suddenly wide awake in the middle of the night and something told me you needed me desperately. I immediately got my horse out of the stable and rode over. When I ran into your bedroom and saw you lying there motionless beside your bed, I was afraid I had come too late. But, fortunately, you were still alive. Then I managed to get you

back into bed and warmed up your body, until your temperature was back to normal.”

“Oh, dear Anne, thank..,” but she interrupted him by laying her fingers on his lips.

“No need to thank me,” and she kissed him.

She sure is the right woman, he thought, deeply moved, and tears of happiness filled his eyes. When he tenderly touched her, the steel frame around his heart suddenly began to melt. The pain from the last so many years disappeared in a flash and his soul was enraptured.

“Will you marry me?” he asked, beaming. Anne smiled from ear to ear, and immediately said yes.

Love between a man and a woman, the most beautiful kind of love there is, moved through him and they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Michel woke up late in the morning and realized he was alone in his bed. He jumped up, tied a cloth around his waist and hurried down the stairs.

“Anne, are you still here?”

“Yes, I’m in here!” He went into the kitchen and, to his surprise, all the drawers were open and there were pots everywhere.

“I needed something to eat,” she explained, with a bowl in her hand. “You can forget about that wrap, by the way; it’s not like I’ve never seen a naked man before,” and she continued to eat. He was looking straight ahead.

“I see you ate my truffle too,” he finally said.

“You mean that black thing that smelled a bit musty?”

“Yes. That black thing happens to be worth its weight in gold and is very difficult to find.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t know that.”

“Never mind, I’ll find a new one.” Was this really the right woman? A woman with eating binges! he thought, scornfully.

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing,” and he assessed the rest of the damage.

Chapter 6

*A captain of the great Germany
Makes it to king of kings
With false help and support from Pannonia
His revolt causes rivers of blood*

After a modest wedding party, Anne relocated from Istres to Salon de Provence to move in with Michel, who lived in a leaking house of fading glory. She decided to take care of the overdue maintenance and her stallion Salé was housed in the stables of a friendly neighbor. After she had put away her things - on their first day together - she lustfully jumped on top of her husband without warning.

“Hey, watch it, I’m a delicate scholar, not a butcher’s boy”, he said, while she had him pressed between her legs.

“My late husband never had any problems with it,” she answered, surprised.

“I’m not your late husband. Come here...” and they took off the rest of each other’s clothes. Gradually, the two got used to each other and one day Anne announced she was pregnant, for the first time. Their lives started to develop a nice rhythm and, a number of months later, when Anne was trying to sell some of her husband’s cosmetic products, Paul was born. His robust mother began to relate more to her feminine energy and it was visibly good for her; her demeanor softened considerably. After seven bad years, now the good ones had clearly started and every Venus year they would be blessed with another offspring.

One day, after the third child was born, Nostradamus was sitting on the veranda behind the house, enjoying spring. There were flowers blooming everywhere, spreading their sweet fragrances and the trees were full of singing birds. A girl from the neighborhood was walking by the adjacent gardens which were alive with buzzing bees. He could tell by her basket that she was going to the nearby forest to gather some wood.

“Hello, lassie,” he called to her. The girl knew him well and returned his greeting politely. Anne, meanwhile, was in the attic with some workmen, renovating the space into a study. She had finally convinced her hubby to only absorb himself in matters that were truly dear to him. This meant predicting the future combined with astrology. Her financial fortune enabled him to do this without worries; treating patients only for the sake of making some money was something he had finally stopped doing, at her insistence. Michel bent over his books on the occult, while the sun was pleasantly shining on his back. He was working on some predictions that would take place during the coming year. Suddenly he got hit on the

forehead by a pea, which then fell onto the page in front of him with a splat.

“Okay, that’s it, Paul,” he warned his son, who was playing with a catapult he had made himself. Just like his fertile marriage, his creative efforts were also bearing their first fruits. He had recently been asked by the local council to make a Latin inscription for the public fountain at the Château de l’Empéri. And his cookbook *La traite des fardemens et confitures* had finally been published by Volant in Lyon. This morning he was concentrating on his first almanac with general prophesies in poetry form, which related to all of Europe. The work would consist of twelve quatrains. This afternoon, his brother Antoine, who had survived the disastrous floods, several years ago, was coming by for a chat. Antoine had lately been working as a tax collector in their birth place Saint Rémy, which was situated not far from Salon.

“Michel,” Anne called from the window above, “would you come and have a look please?” Her husband hurried into the house, but in the living room he had to be careful not to trip over his progeny. César was lying on the floor and was being held in a choke-hold by his brother and sister. At the same time they were practically tickling him to death. Father negotiated the obstacle and climbed up to the top floor, where he looked at the custom-built book cases in which his green, red, yellow and blue bottles had been placed to keep them safe. The luxurious new desk stood in front of the enlarged window shutter, so the scholar would be able to get plenty of fresh air. Special chests for his geometrical materials had also been purchased and the looking glass that had been bought in Marseille was placed neatly under the traditional roof shutters.

“Ah, my first impression is that I can’t complain. I see my measuring cups have all survived,” Michel responded happily and he began to inspect the carpentry work.

“I do have a few comments though,” he said to his wife, a little later, and he explained to the workmen exactly what changes he wanted. The church bells, meanwhile, were chiming twelve o’clock and they heard Antoine calling. He was very prompt in sharing the midday meal. The brothers had been seeing each other regularly since the water calamity. Anne hurried downstairs to set the table on the veranda, before the maid came with the serving dishes.

“Have a seat, Antoine,” Michel requested, while he grabbed an extra chair. Madeleine and César had to sit beside their uncle and mother served out the pork sausages.

“Those are not kosher,” Antoine remarked.

“Neither am I,” his oldest brother said.

“Paul, dinner!” Anne called for the third time. Paul didn’t want to come and glared at the intruder from up in the tree he had climbed. He kept a close watch on the taxman. While enjoying the sausages with vegetables, the brothers exchanged some local news.

“Everything okay with Bertrand?” Michel asked.

“Yes, excellent; Bertrand had started his own small building company.”
“Wonderful. Too bad Anne just had the attic renovated. Otherwise, he could have done it.” Antoine wanted to burst out laughing, but he controlled himself.
“What kind of woman gets involved with renovations?” he whispered to this brother.
“I heard that,” Anne said, unexpectedly. “Do you want me to slap you now or later?”
“Sorry Anne, no offense intended.”
“We complement each other perfectly,” Michel confessed. “She is the man and I am the woman.”
“You two are an exceptional couple,” Antoine murmured, feeling a bit confused.
“My husband speaks for himself, because I feel like a woman, one hundred percent. Madeleine, stop that snatching,” she suddenly screamed. After that ungraceful display towards their daughter, Michel had to laugh too.
“You’re right, Antoine. Don’t ever pick a fight with my wife. I will have to polish her up a bit.”
“Wait a minute, Mr. professional student,” she protested, “it’s me who’s enabling you to make a big splash. So who’s polishing whom?” and she angrily left the table.
“It won’t be easy to tame that little horse of yours,” Antoine predicted. He had to leave. After seeing his brother to the door, Michel got settled in his work chair and again picked up his writing book. In the late afternoon, the same girl from that morning was walking home and her basket was filled with gathered wood.
That’s funny, he thought, she looks more mature now than she did this morning.
“Hello, young lady,” he called out to her. She waved at him and giggled about the word “lady”, because just that morning he had called her “lassie.” It was cooling off and he decided to have another look at the renovated study. When he was entering the house, he bumped into his wife. She was still furious about the comment he made earlier that afternoon. Apologies didn’t help and that day the pots and pans went flying through the house - from Anne’s side.

One night, the scientist discovered a group of shooting stars with his new looking glass. In astrological circles, it had already been known for some time that pieces of stone or iron would sometimes penetrate Earth’s atmosphere, partly burning in the process, but these insights had not been acknowledged by society. Michel had read once that in a distant mythical past, meteorites with a diameter of several kilometers had created enormous craters in the terrestrial globe and that this had radically changed the Earth’s climate. He was planning to write a letter about it to

the governor of the Provence, who was known for his open-mindedness and interest in science.

The governor will certainly read an essay by a respected astrologer, he surmised, and knowledge must be shared. But in the back of his mind, the idea was brewing that perhaps the viceroy would be able to help him along. His estimation was correct. The governor wrote him a letter in response, thanking him for his scientific insights. He also mentioned that he was very appreciative of his almanac with predictions for the coming year, 1555, which has recently been published in Lyon. He had been recommending the predictions in higher circles and the work was now selling well, all over France. The door to success had been opened and Michel decided to publish an almanac every year. He also thought of a more virtuous task: to discover what the future of mankind looked like for the next millennia. This work would have the well-fitting name of *The Prophecies*. Happy with this state of affairs, he came down to the living room and saw his wife defiantly standing on top of the dining table. Surprised, he looked around to see what was going on. Madeleine was on top of a cupboard, Paul was hanging from the ceiling and César was crawling on his knees.

“Is this a conspiracy?” he asked.

“No, we’re playing a game, come and join us!” Anne called out excitedly.

“What’s the game?”

“Feet off the floor.”

“I’d rather keep my feet on the floor.”

“Oh, you’re always so serious,” she sighed. This kind of hurt her husband’s feelings and he turned around and went back to his study. He always had things to do there, even if it was just organizing some of his stuff. Feeling a little melancholy, he was thinking about his grandfather Jean, who understood him so well, when Anne came into his room.

“My dear husband, I love you, even though we often collide with each other. My love for you really never changes. But maybe you could try to explain to me what goes on in that head of yours,” and she sat down.

“I don’t know if you will believe this,” he began, hesitantly, “but I have a mission. It is my life’s work to show humanity what disasters will befall it, if it doesn’t come to its senses and sees the truth. And my path weighs heavily on me.”

“Hmm, I guess that kind of explains that gap between us, but, well, that’s just the way it is,” she replied empathetically. “I actually didn’t realize your work was so serious; so that’s why you can’t play with the children.”

“I am constantly receiving dismal images,” he continued.

“How awful for you. But is that mission more important than your family?” and with that, she, of course, hit a sensitive nerve. He stared at her, feeling somewhat ashamed.

“Maybe. Once my task has been completed, I hope to once again be one with God,” he confessed.

“I think we all want that,” and she stroked his cheek and left him in peace.

Nostradamus soon finished the first part of *The Prophecies* by using the dreams and visions he had been collecting for years in his journals. He had picked out the most important predictions and had dated, classified and re-interpreted them, using astrology. He called every chapter a century. Not to signify an actual century, but because each chapter contained one hundred quatrains. The four-line verses were virtually unintelligible by anyone else, due to their obscure style and because he used a mixture of French, Provençal, Greek and Latin. He had to disguise his messages in this way, because the inquisition was becoming more and more powerful. And on no account did he want to be convicted again for blasphemy or magical practices while he had a family.

Just to be on the safe side, I will also mix up the order of the quatrains, he thought, and spread the filled pages out on his desk. My secrets can only be revealed by an initiate or only solved after the prediction has come true, and he mixed everything together. Once he had created a random order, he put the work aside. After a bit of navel-gazing, he sighed, running his fingers through his hair. He often still thought about his initiation into the higher worlds with Tristan and Parsival, and he would love to know if they had survived the fall of the Montségur. His vision had been fading again. No answers had been coming to him from the source and his dreams were not helping either. A few weeks later, however, the planets were in a unique position and it was likely that they would offer relief at this time. In the attic, the inspired mystic brought out the copper stool with its mysterious powers. When placed at a particular angle, the metrically designed stool had a connection to the celestial bodies. After determining the correct position, he placed a container of water nearby on the floor. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, he moistened the feet and the seat of the tripod and then put in head on it. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the fallen angels who had broken their promise not to flee. And lo and behold, it seemed the time was ripe and by fits and starts, he left his body.

He was floating in a residential room, on whose ceiling hung a beautiful chandelier, which could not have existed in his time; the candles in it were not made of wax, but were little glass bulbs that flared up all by themselves. The high-ceilinged room was furnished with red plush sofas, mahogany coffee tables, some more ingenious lamps and a gigantic mirror with a gilded frame. He heard the sounds of some grand orchestral music, accompanied by choirs, but oddly enough, there were no musicians to be seen anywhere. The sound seemed to be coming from a box in which a round, black disc was turning around all by itself. In a corner of the room was a life-size statue of some hero to be admired. The marble statue was made with technical perfection and it depicted a muscular demigod who was proudly brandishing a sword and radiating victory.

The artist must be obsessed with victory; this statue is dripping with pathos, Michel thought. A German in uniform, his hair cropped close to

his head, entered the room and walked to the box with the horn. The bombastic piece of music was repeated and while the man was reveling in emotion, he called out to someone.

“Magda, where are you?” He didn’t get a response, and he called again, louder, and then got a response.

“Here I am!” a voice sounded in the distance and a few moments later, his wife walked into the room.

“That’s the sixth time you’re playing Parsival by Wagner,” she complained, and her husband quickly turned off the record. Meanwhile, the intruder was realizing that this glorification of the age of chivalry was the reason for his presence here and that again there was no language barrier.

“Helga has a stomach ache,” Magda continued, “but why were you calling me?”

“I’m going to be terribly busy in the next few weeks. That’s why I don’t have time for the children; and I need you to help me with my speech for the foreign press,” and Joseph picked up a folder.

“Okay sweetheart. By the way, did you know that four hundred years ago someone predicted that in 1939 we would be at war with France and England over Poland?”

“Ah, so you read Kritzinger’s book *Mysterien von Sonne und Seele*,” he supposed. She confirmed this.

“Anyway, some members of the Party told me about it, but I haven’t read it yet.” His wife magically made the controversial book from 1922 appear, and thumbed through it to find a specific passage.

“Look, this quatrain seems to predict both the cause and the date of the war. You can check it against the French original; it is shown below it,” she said.

“French?! We are about to attack France! Surely you don’t think I’m going to absorb myself in that language?” But Joseph let her convince him to read the German version and the couple bent over the book, while the author observed them from above.

It must be mine, the latter concluded, surprised. Incredible that I am coming across my verses in the future; a future whose content I don’t even know, and he watched, dumbfounded.

“Here is a striking quatrain, which you can certainly use for your speech on Reichstag*,” Magda suggested and her spouse read it out loud: “Somewhere in the far reaches of Europe, a child will be born from poor parents and great numbers will be seduced by his speeches. He will cause transformations to a larger Germany.”

“The Führer will love that,” she said.

“I will give it some thought, darling. Maybe if I give Kritzinger as the source. The Führer and the German people are not going to want to listen to prophecies from a Frenchmen from the Middle Ages.”

* the parliament buildings

“From the Renaissance,” she corrected.

“Oh, don’t be such a perfectionist. A message doesn’t necessarily have to be true. It must be simple and repeated loudly and often enough. Truth is what I decide is true, Magda, but thanks for your interesting contribution. Who knows, it may have some value for propaganda*. But will you please listen to my response to the Crystal Night for the press conference now,” and he began, but was interrupted by a tinkling sound. Joseph picked up a horn from a device, listened to someone for a minute and then hung up.

“Magda, the governess wants you to come and pick up Helmut and Hilde,” and his wife immediately left the room. Her husband walked up to the big mirror and started practicing his speech for the journalists.

“All the stories you’ve been hearing about so-called plundering and destruction of Jewish possessions are dirty lies; the Jews have not been harmed in any way.” He emphasized each word with a grand gesture, until he felt that the statement came across in the way he wanted it to. He paced up and down the room for a while and then returned to the mirror to convince himself one more time.

“The great and absolute truth is that the Party and the Führer are right. They are always right.” Suddenly he turned around and asked someone: “Or would you dispute that?” Michel looked around the room for another person the orator could be addressing, but he didn’t see anyone.

“Well, would you?” the German repeated in a harsh voice.

Who was he talking to?

“Don’t think I can’t see you,” Joseph said, looking straight up now.

Yikes, the man has discovered me! ...for one moment everything seemed to freeze.

“I often see things that other people don’t see,” he continued, “and I never talk about that with the Party or they would think I was nuts. But what are you doing here, ghost? Are you here to help or hinder me?” Michel was astounded and didn’t know what to say.

This man must be highly gifted, he thought, he can see ghosts and is not the slightest bit afraid of them. Joseph now began to practice his speech in front of his one-man audience.

“We, nationalistic-socialists, will act only for our voters. We are entering the Reichstag to avail ourselves of weapons from the weapon room of democracy, which have been fashioned by this disposable form of government. We are not entering as friends or neutrals, but as enemies. Well? How does that sound?” he asked forcibly. Another silence followed and Michel felt very much put on the spot.

“Sorry, I can’t follow you,” he finally said.

“Oh dear, an undeveloped little spirit. Permit me to teach you something. I don’t know where you’re from, but you have arrived in the Third Reich. The empire that is lead by my Führer Hitler, half plebeian, half god. Possibly the new Christ or at least a John the Baptist. He has everything it

* 1940 The Germans spread fake Nostradamus prophesies of war in France.

takes to be king, this born tribune of the people and soon-to-be dictator. My love for him is great. And let me not be falsely modest, ghost, I am playing one of the most important roles in this mightiest kingdom on Earth. I am the brilliant minister of propaganda, Herr Doctor Joseph Goebbels, doctor of philosophy and Germanics. Do you realize what an important person you have stumbled upon here?"

"I sort of understand what you're saying," Michel answered. He just couldn't ignore Goebbels' energy.

"What I'm doing," Joseph continued, "is to sell an idea to the masses in such a penetrating and all-encompassing way that they will completely accept the range of ideas and can never again escape it. I do all this to please my Führer. I am usually more nimble with my choice of words, but you are only a ghost. You're obviously not someone who will make my speeches known world-wide, so this is my chance to air my heart."

"Are there many people who are enthralled with that leader you are speaking of with such admiration?" Michel asked, while flying around the chandelier.

"Ha-ha, you are clearly a time-traveling ghost. Yes, millions of country fellowmen worship him. My wife also adores him. She even wanted to be his wife, but she didn't succeed so she married me, the man who is closest to the Führer."

"That Hister must be an impressive person," his visitor assumed.

"Hitler! Yes, he certainly is. What our leader wants to attain is the purity and the idealization of the Arian race. In this way he stimulates the ideal German model family: white and blonde. *Ein Kind für den Führer*. My seven children, Helga, Hilde, Harald, Helmut, Holde, Hedda and Heide all have blonde hair and blue eyes and are particularly suitable for our propaganda. See, this is a picture of the Führer," and he held up a portrait of a man with a small mustache. Michel was getting fed up with the know-it-all attitude of the minister. The professional orator kept trying to win him over, even from his height.

"How should I imagine the purity and idealization of the Arian race?" the seer asked. He was dying to teach him a lesson.

"Goodness gracious, our house ghost can think. How charming! Well, I will explain it to you: in life there are high quality people and inferior people. Whatever it is that makes gypsies gypsies, or homosexuals homosexuals, and whatever it is that makes people mentally ill, is in the blood, or in the genes. Can you follow this?"

"Yes, of course," he lied.

"All right. The diversity of the people therefore has a biological cause. Now, we have noticed that the inferior people multiply faster than the superior classes. Therefore, it is necessary to segregate the inferior types, sterilize them, or better yet, get rid of them altogether. Otherwise, this unbalanced growth will undoubtedly lead to the destruction of our culture."

This Goebbels character is one of the Brothers of Darkness, Michel understood by now and he had no intention of being bullied by him.

“Is that Crystal Night related to that too?” he asked.

“Shame on you; you were eavesdropping on me earlier, but you are smarter than I thought,” Goebbels said. “The Crystal Night is a step towards the total annihilation of the Jews. Our party members recently made a fool of those miserly *Untermenschen* by destroying all of their possessions, such as synagogues, stores and businesses.”

“I just heard you say that those people have not been harmed in any way.”

“Is that an accusation? I already told you: I twist the truth wherever I see fit. Dexterity and timing are very important in reaching our goal and a lie can be appropriate in such cases. The Führer and I want to give the German people what they crave: a large, pure, Arian kingdom. There is nothing the masses hate more than to look at a matter from both sides.” Goebbels twisted himself out of that one like a snake.

“Aren’t you afraid that the people will discover the truth behind your trickery?” Michel asked. He was just beginning to realize what a great evil he had come face to face with.

“No, not at all, but just as a precaution, the Party has already had 20,000 books by prominent writers, philosophers and scientists burned in public. Scandalous books that lead to moral decadence. Books with un-German spirit. What we are aiming for will be a blessing for our fellow man and our descendents. Finally we will be freed from homosexuals, gypsies, asocial people, schizophrenics and the insane. We have already sterilized between 350,000 and 450,000 people.” The minister kept going on and on. “And in order to solve the immense Jewish problem, we are creating special destruction camps, where our doctors will have the opportunity to conduct experiments on these impure types, for the betterment of the Arian race.”

There’s no talking to this guy, Michel thought, starting to feel quite distraught. “You ought to be sterilized, according to your own standards; you are insane,” he suddenly exploded.

“I see you are not in agreement with me. Too bad; so this is your true face. But not everything that is true is good for the Party,” Joseph continued, unrelenting. “If it coincides with the actual truth, so much the better, but otherwise it will just have to be adjusted.” Michel was burning up by now; the German creep was draining his energy.

“What would you think of a poster, advertising a new kind of soap?” the minister started up again. “Would it be best to point out the high quality of a competing brand? No, even you would shake your head at that. Look at my argument as the same type of political advertising.” His visitor was now looking for a way out. His energy was so depleted that he had get out of there as quickly as possible. He could not keep listening to the propagandist a minute longer.

“If the truth doesn’t serve you, it must be adapted,” Goebbels repeated, and then he turned off all the lights in the room with the flick of just one

switch. Michel was taken by surprise with the sudden change from day to night and began to tumble downwards. He tried to grab the chandelier, but he plunged down and crashed on the floor.

My God, I have met the devil in person, and in a daze he tried to get up.

“That almost always works for disturbing little ghosts like you,” Goebbels chuckled, and then he turned on dozens of lights again. This time Nostradamus got an enormous electric shock and his mental body collapsed. There he lay, beside the stone hero with the raised up sword, and feverishly looked for salvation.

“Conform to our ideal, or I will have to destroy you,” the German said ruthlessly.

“Wait, I can predict the future of the Third Reich for you,” the seer said to buy himself some time.

“*Unseres schönes Reich, so weiss, so weiss and wunderschön,*” Goebbels sang, completely out of his mind and put on another Wagner piece.

“*Tristan und Isolde,*” he informed and again turned off the lights. This new shock caused a paralysis on one side of Michel’s body and his powers of perception began to falter. The phone rang for the second time and this gave him some respite. The minister turned off the music and picked up the horn.

“No, there’s nothing wrong, I’m just playing with the lights,” he answered and hung up.

“Now, where were we? Oh yes, you wanted to predict the future of the Third Reich to me. I am not going to fall for that of course, but I can predict that your future is not looking rosy,” and he again made a sea of light appear. Because of these hard hits, Michel could barely think anymore, his volatile body was trembling dangerously and was on the verge of evaporating. One more attack would have been fatal. Right at that moment, the door opened and Magda came in.

“I picked up the children and they are in bed now. Did you behave yourself while I was gone?” she asked.

“Of course, darling, I’ve been practicing my speech,” he feigned. His wife looked at him closely.

“I want you to stop seeing Irene. It is damaging the Führer’s image,” she said.

“There’s nothing going on between me and her; she is just a great actress that I keep close track of.”

“We both know better than that, Joseph. You want to be a model family, don’t you? Then control your sexual impulses or I will have to inform the Führer.” He sullenly sat down on the sofa and looked past his wife.

“I’m going to bed now and stop playing with the lights,” she commanded and then left the room. Her husband didn’t wait a second and eagerly turned around in order to resume his little game. But there was nothing to be seen beside the life-size sculpture; the ghost had disappeared. Just in the nick of time, he had returned to his material body, which was dutifully waiting for its master.

“That was a close call,” he groaned, the image of Goebbels still burned on his retina. He pulled himself together and put away the tripod. Then he sat down at his desk to write down the perilous adventure. Only by casting my light onto the darkness can evil be overcome, he reflected, while dipping his pen into the ink.

Anne was pregnant for the fourth time and it was only a few more months before the new baby would be born.

“It’s going to be a girl,” her husband predicted, while he was working on his second almanac.

“I don’t want to know!” she yelled and covered her ears.

“Don’t make so much noise, you’ll scare the baby,” he warned, but she wasn’t listening. There was an unexpected knock on the door and Michel went to answer it. He returned to the living room with a dejected look on his face.

“Take the children upstairs and stay there,” he ordered.

“What’s going on?” Anne responded indignantly. “How come I’m being treated like some kind of beast of burden?”

“I’m not going to discuss it right now; I’ll explain later,” and when she had gone upstairs with the kids, he went back to the front door and invited the company in. It was a married couple from Senas. The wife was carrying a hideous-looking new-born child with two heads and four arms. They had traveled from Toulon, without stopping to see the clairvoyant physician. The latter scratched behind his ears when he saw the monstrosity, while the desperate couple looked at him hopefully.

What on earth am I going to do with this? he thought, but he didn’t have the heart to send them away and for the sake of formality he examined the fused twins.

“How did you find me?” he asked, while he looked at the back of the ghastly creature.

“The authorities in Toulon recommended you,” the young father answered. “They told us that you could possibly help us.” The doctor gave them something to drink, after which he briefly concentrated on the essence of the child, which did not look very viable.

“I am sorry, but your child will not live long,” he said, carefully, upon which the mother burst into tears. Her husband consoled her and they left, utterly sad. Anne came down with the children and asked what had just happened.

“I only wanted to spare all of you something so gruesome, that it would only give you nightmares,” he explained. Later, when the little ones were in bed, he lifted the veil of mystery for his highly pregnant wife, just a bit, which gave her the shivers.

A few months later, their fourth child - perfectly normal, fortunately - was born. It was a girl, just as Michel had predicted, and she was christened Pauline. Anne got pregnant again right away. Her husband thought it was

just fine, although the household was getting pretty busy and the crying and screaming disturbed the tranquil atmosphere in his study. The solution was simple: a dividing door was placed at the stairwell and the scholar was able to peacefully get back to work. Aside from ferreting out the events of the coming year and casting horoscopes for all kinds of people, Nostradamus had made several attempts to find out more about the twentieth century, but the trick with the tripod no longer worked. In the occult store in Marseille he found a new instrument, and once he was back at home again, he hurried upstairs with the mysterious package. He carefully unwrapped the delicate bowl and placed it on the floor. Then he ran downstairs again to the garden to get some water from the rain barrel.

“Boy, you’re thirsty,” Anne said, while she hung up the laundry.

“Yes, I’m parched,” her husband said, not wanting to engage in any bickering and he hastily returned to his room with a full bucket. Today he was going to succeed in visiting Hister, the Great German leader who would cause a world war, he was convinced. He sprinkled some water into the bowl and added some oil that had hallucinogenic properties. Then he sat down beside it. After staring at the water surface for a while, he began to relax and when the ethereal vapors slowly but surely began to intoxicate him, he fell into a deep trance. Suddenly, he was attacked from behind; someone jumped onto his back. It was too late to defend himself and he fell forwards.

“Dad, we’ve got something for you,” César cried out, hanging on his neck.

“Damn it all!” he raged, scaring the wits out of the boy. He had never seen his father angry. Father was always calmness personified, but now his eyes were blazing fire and thunder. Michel saw his little boy standing there forlornly and immediately felt regret for his outburst.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper, but you came at a very bad time,” and reached his hand out to him. César hesitated for a second, but then held out his hand, a bit suspiciously.

“Yes, my boy, evil is in everyone, even in your father, and it is good to learn to control that force, which I just failed to do. Fortunately we have a conscience.” They both felt pretty shaken and took a minute to recover.

“Michel, are you coming down? We have a surprise for you,” his wife suddenly called from two floors below.

“Now what!” and in a bad mood he rumbled down the stairs and landed in the living room, where he couldn’t find anyone.

“Happy birthday,” Anne and the children hooted and came out of the kitchen. “Your present is by the door!” Father, who had just turned fifty, started to get a headache and grumpily walked to the front entrance. But he couldn’t see any package and returned to the living room, shrugging his shoulders.

“Behind the door!” they chanted. He went back there again and grumbling, opened the door.

“Ta-ta-ta,” a horn blared. A crowd of townspeople stood right in front of him.

“Doctor Nostradamus,” Mayor Lemerre began, “it is our pleasure to congratulate you on your fiftieth birthday, celebrating half a century.” All Michel really wanted to do was to slam the door in his face, but he couldn’t very well do that to all of his excited fellow citizens or his family, so he had to be tolerant.

“You are a very special person,” the mayor continued, “and very valuable to Salon the Provence. Therefore, the town council has decided to erect a statue of you and we humbly invite you to come and unveil your own image in the town square.” There was no getting away from it, and the glorified scholar was pulled along without delay. The celebrating crowd even carried him on their shoulders and brought him to the square, where his covered statue stood.

“Dear people,” the mayor called out, when they got there. “Our famous fellow townsman has turned fifty today and the council would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to him by making him an honorary citizen, and has erected a statue of him.” Lemerre asked Nostradamus to pull the cloth off the statue and the bronze figure, which was a good likeness of the astrologer, was revealed. A fan-fare orchestra began the play and the town council members hurried towards the scholar to congratulate him. After this deluge of lavish praise, the mad scholar saw an opening and fled around the back. The mayor exchanged a few words with the seer’s wife, while the council members enjoyed the free snacks. Afterwards, Anne walked home, feeling pleased, and let the children stay at the square a bit longer to play ball. Her husband was rigidly waiting for her in the living room.

“I don’t ever want to have another surprise like that again,” he said fiercely. “I was sitting in deep concentration when you sent César up to get me. My heart nearly gave out.” Pauline, who was wrapped up in cloths, began to cry.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” her mother calmed her, “we always have to adjust ourselves to your weird daddy. He seems to think the universe revolves around him.” Deeply insulted he turned away from his headstrong spouse and cursing and swearing climbed up the stairs.

“All you want to do is absorb yourself in all kinds of disasters, all the time,” she shouted after him. “Well, we don’t, we like having fun once in a while.” He knew he had married an unconventional wife, but this time she had gone too far and he locked the door to his attic for good. All day long he stayed and pouted in his room, but by the evening he had calmed down and went to see Anne in the bedroom and told her he was sorry.

“You’re right, I’m far too serious and it must be difficult for you and the children to be with me, but I can’t help the way I am...”

“That’s nothing new. Get over here and take those clothes off,” she said. He crawled into bed with her and they lovingly embraced each other.

“I know you need to fulfill your mission,” she continued, “and I will support you till the end, but at the same time, I want to have a life too.” Her understanding soothed him and they made love.

“I’m so lucky to have you,” he whispered afterwards. The next morning he awoke feeling awful; he felt like his body was burning up. Apparently yesterday had been too much for him. Anne heard her husband moaning and saw that he was seriously ill.

“Should I get a doctor?” she asked, worried.

“I am the doctor, and all I need is rest. And love,” he added. He was sick in bed for days and his wife took care of him, despite her large belly.

It’s always something with my scholar, she thought sadly, while she peeled a boiled egg for him. I just have to give him more space.

It was Christmas, the biggest holiday of the year after Easter. The Nostradamus family, now expanded to five children, celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ in the Saint-Laurent church. It was the first time that a nativity scene had been set up in a church, with life-size statues, and everyone wanted to see it. The children rushed to the front and Paul and César managed to get right next to the manger with the baby Jesus in it.

“Mama, André looks like Jesus!” Paul called, seeing a resemblance to his new-born brother.

“I think André is more handsome,” she answered from behind a row of people. The bystanders looked at her askance.

“That’s sacrilege,” one of them accused her. Anne didn’t pay it any mind and viewed the rest of the Christmas dolls with her husband. Mary, Joseph and the shepherds were considerably less popular and a little further on, the three kings from the East had the least amount of attention. All the church goers were now requested to sit down on the wooden benches, where Nostradamus quickly told his children about Francis of Assisi, who was the one who had started the use of the barn. In this way, the monk wanted to carry out the Christmas message for the illiterate. Unfortunately, the kids were not as philosophical as he had hoped; they were busy looking at the thousands of lights that cast a spell on the room. It was time for the Christmas play. The old arch bishop from Arles, shuffled to the lectern, eager for it to begin.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, Christmas is the promise of the new life that Jesus brings, and this beautiful theme will now be enacted for you. Enjoy.” The actors came onto the stage and the audience leaned forward eagerly. Not all the spectators, because Michel thought the whole event was a bit dubious. Before the rise of the Protestants, such a beautiful Christmas performance had never been organized, and the bishop had never been so friendly and spoken so briefly. The Counter Reformation was obviously trying to win back souls, but any sounds of criticism could not be expected from this parochial public. His innocent children were being brain-washed. He watched the theatrical play with aversion, but as the crowd became more excited he began to yield to the happy atmosphere. To conclude, there were parades with the shepherds and the three kings, which ended at the crib. Despite the impure motives of the church, it had been a pleasant

evening and the family returned home after the entertainment. That night, their sixth child was conceived.

Chapter 7

*The arrow from the sky makes its journey
Death speaks, a big execution
Stone in the tree, a proud race humiliated
Human monster, purification and penance*

“Michel,” Anne called from behind the closed attic door, “I’m going out this afternoon and I won’t be back until tomorrow morning. I’ll have tea with you before I go, if you’d like.” That sounded like a good idea to her husband and he opened the door. She entered with a tray of tea and cookies and placed it on his desk.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m going horseback riding in the Camargue with Jacqueline and then I’m going to stay overnight at her place in Istres. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen my sister.”

“I didn’t know she rode horses.”

“Yes, she just started recently. So, you will have to manage without me for a bit. But the maid will keep an eye on the children,” and she poured the flower tea.

“Does she still work at that sewing studio?” her husband inquired, taking a bite from his raisin cookie.

“Yes, and I’ve asked her to make a long, brown robe for you.”

“Wonderful, thanks”, he said, while he wiped the crumbs from his beard. They finished their tea, and then Anne went on her way.

“Give my best to your sister,” he said, as she was leaving, and they quickly gave each other a kiss. He locked the door, so that no child could jump on his back this time, and closed the windows too. It was now practically completely dark in the room and he sat down in his office chair and took a secret pill box from a drawer in his desk. In this little box he kept an herb that was used for stimulating the third eye. A new experiment! He shook the powdered herb out onto his desktop and inhaled it through his nostril in one big sniff.

“Damn, took a bit too much of the stuff,” he grumbled and his eyes watered with the pain. The room suddenly began to spin and he grabbed onto the armrests of his chair, but lost control.

“Anne!” he squeaked, with his eyes rolling around in their sockets, and his body slowly slid off the chair.

After some time, the mystic, lying flat on the floor, regained consciousness.

This is not my study, he noticed, looking around. He found himself in a huge room and sat up to take a better look at it. The room had an imposing

floor mosaic of a black sun; the image was made up of symbols from various religions. There were many relics in the room and there was only one small window. He immediately went to it and looked out.

I've ended up in a castle, he decided. There was nothing of further interest in the room and filled with curiosity, he walked towards an exit.

I sense a strange atmosphere here that reminds me of black magic.

And he carefully descended a stone staircase. On the next level below, there were more rooms and all the doors were wide open. The first one had "King Arthur Room" on it. In this room there was a round, wooden table with twelve chairs around it.

Inspired by Arthurian times, obviously, he thought. The time traveler walked around, looking at everything, briefly touched the chairs and then visited the next room, called "King Heinrich I Room." Here, the furniture was made of very advanced materials, possibly from the nineteenth or twentieth century, he guessed. There were a desk, metal filing cabinets and a safe. On the wall hung a blueprint with the word *Wewelsburg* in thick letters above it.

That must be the floor plan of this castle, he supposed. The gigantic project took up a city in a half circle of exactly one thousand meters in diameter and the whole thing was in the shape of an arrow, which was pointing due north. He nosed around in one of the open drawers in the desk, and found that it was full of skull rings.

A macabre collection, he thought. In the filing cabinets all the files were neatly arranged alphabetically. Only a folder with very clear images of a Tibetan monastery was lying haphazardly on top. Suddenly he heard voices and he carefully looked around the doorframe. Three men in uniform were trudging up the stone staircase.

"The people of Germany will have a special leader every one thousand years," he heard one of them say.

"You mean me, of course," the man with the little moustache and a terrifying voice responded.

That must be Hister, Michel instantly realized.

"Without any doubt, my Führer," his deputy, Heinrich Himmler answered. "It was exactly one thousand years ago that Heinrich I ruled the German lands and you could well be his reincarnation." The men were now close-by and were preparing to enter the level where Michel was.

"How is the renovation of Wewelsburg coming along?" Hermann Göring asked.

"The castle is as good as ready. Come, I will show you the general's room," Himmler answered and they continued climbing up the stairs. Michel could no longer hear the men talking, but their footsteps sounded through the whole building. After a while, the Germans came down again and their voices became audible again.

"Well, great master of the Teutonic knighthood," Göring teased, "what will be our permanent place?"

“The King Arthur Room,” Himmler replied, “that is where we will meet from now on.” Michel could hear them from the next room, as they sat down at the round table. There was a door between the two rooms and he very quietly put his ear on it.

“Gentlemen, I have asked you come here for a special reason,” Himmler began. “I would like to present to you my magnificent plans.”

“I expect only magnificent plans from you,” Hitler pouted, but his deputy didn’t let himself be distracted.

“Wewelsburg will become the shrine of Europe,” he continued. “The castle must become a center for a new religion. A religion with recognizable gods, myths and even its own Vatican.”

“Based on the Christian model?” Göring assumed.

“No, I want our old Arian roots to become dominant. That is why I want the Bible to be replaced by *Mein Kampf* and all crosses by swastikas. The clairvoyant Karl Wiligut has predicted in the past that this place will be a magical Germanic bulwark.”

“The damned power of the Vatican must indeed be broken,” Hitler agreed.

“Still, there is an aspect of Christianity,” the nation’s second-in-command said, “which endlessly fascinates us all, and that is the Holy Grail.” Michel was listening to all of this with amazement. They were talking about the magical cup from which he had drunk at his initiation.

“For years our Thule Society has been trying to get hold of this grail for us because this was supposed to lead to the ultimate power. Four years ago I ordered Otto Rahn*, the historian, to search for the grail in the caves near Montségur, but he has been searching in vain. Important information can no longer be passed on to any third parties by him anyway.”

“I have heard about other victims during your search,” Hitler commented.

“About a million,” Himmler replied dryly, “but that is of minor importance in what we have in mind.”

“You’re already being called the great inquisitor,” Göring joked and the men all laughed.

“Yes, but listen, here is the thing: I traveled to Montségur myself and searched for several months. One track finally led me to the monastery of Montserrat in Spain, and, gentlemen, I have succeeded. I have found the grail.” Nostradamus heard this incredulously. That Himmler character was even more dangerous than his boss!

“Where is the cup?” Adolf cried out excitedly.

“In the safe in the next room. I will get it momentarily,” and proud as a peacock Himmler walked to the King Arthur Room where the overwhelmed seer quickly hid like a little boy. With bated breath he watched from behind the filing cabinet how the safe was opened and he caught a glimpse of the Holy Grail.

* The German grail searcher died mysteriously in 1939

That's not it, he thought, relieved; the original chalice is smaller and has a dent in it. Meanwhile, Himmler took the relic and returned to his Brothers of Darkness.

"My Führer, the honor is yours," and he handed the supposed Holy Grail to his superior. Hitler examined the chalice suspiciously and then silently put it on the table. Then he began to applaud with conviction and looked at his deputy full of pride.

"Absolute power is now ours," Himmler grinned, "but permit me to place the grail behind locked doors once again. Herr Wiligut* and the officers will be here any minute and I want the location of the grail to be known only to the three of us." Hitler gave his approval and Heinrich left the room to put the grail in a safe place again, while Michel again hid behind the files. Many guards could now be seen in Wewelsburg and soon a group of SS officers arrived. They came in and greeted the Führer. Adolf completely ignored them; he only had eyes for his deputy who he thought might have something else up his sleeve.

"Is Goebbels not coming?" Göring asked his daydreaming boss.

"No, Joseph is working on my speech, with predictions from Kritzingen," he answered indifferently.

"This room," Himmler addressed the expanded group, "will be accessible only to the twelve highest ranking officers of the empire. After initiation, the strictest confidence will be maintained about everything that will take place in this order. The vow of confidentiality will have to be guaranteed by force, under the supervision of the clairvoyant Herr Wiligut." The summoned medium introduced himself and Nostradamus smelled a rat.

"Every member will go into the next room at a set time", Himmler continued, "while the others will focus their thoughts on that person. Due to the influence of the knightly force, the member will not be able to keep any possible secrets to himself. Herr Göring, I propose that you go first." Michel ducked away for the third time and a fraction of second later Göring entered the room and sat down at the desk to wait. The closed SS circle then began to contact spirits of Germanic ancestors, who, along with the sounds of the Tibetan scale were supposed to purify the room. When the sounds died away, there was perfect silence for a while. Göring belonged to the most trusted and he was sure he had a clean slate. Nevertheless, the experiment was making him feel uncertain and he nervously bit his nails. Finally he was readmitted to the room with his colleagues.

"This is not what I expected, Hermann. What are you hiding from us?" Himmler asked, unexpectedly.

"I am hiding absolutely nothing," Göring replied haughtily.

"Well, according to Herr Wiligut, you are..."

"I am a man of honor and decency and I have always been faithful to the Führer."

*Himmler's Rasputin

“Then, there has to be someone else in that room,” Wiligut surmised. “That’s unlikely,” Himmler said, “this complex is being guarded like a fortress.” But just to be sure, he ordered his guards to search the next room.

Oh no! They’re going to catch me, the other clairvoyant realized too late. The soldiers found the intruder and dragged him to the group of conspirators. Their leader rose angrily and looked at him with loathing.

“How did you get in here?” he snarled, but the spy remained silent.

“The Führer asked you a question,” Himmler emphasized viciously, but Michel kept his mouth still shut tightly.

“This will never happen again, my Führer,” his deputy apologized.

“Throw him into the Walhalla and turn on the burning oven. We have ways to make him talk.” The guards took the intruder and locked him up in the cellar, where Michel came to his senses.

I completely forgot that this is just an image of the future, he realized. I was obsessed with the danger.

Feeling somewhat reassured, he looked around the room. Next to the burning oven, which was beginning to show signs of life, was a container filled with shields belonging to dead soldiers. The insignia were ceremonially being burned here.

Fear is my greatest enemy, but I’d better play it safe and not take any chances. You never know, they might burn me to ashes too; the oven is getting hot already.

And he focused his attention on the study in his home.

“It’s all about concentration...” And after he had cooled his head, he gradually dissolved.

“Ah, that’s a sight for sore eyes”, he sighed when he saw his familiar attic.

He walked straight to his desk to write down the events, but was taken aback when he noticed his earthly body, lying motionless on the floor beside the chair. The body was breathing very slowly and he suspected that it was still recovering from the overdose of herbs he had taken earlier. The ghost tried to enter by force, but the material body did not respond.

Now what? This isn’t something you can learn from a book, he said to himself soberly and decided to just wait and see.

The knights from the twelfth century certainly made an impression on those Germans, he thought. I wonder what will become of those monsters.

And before he had even finished thinking that thought, he found himself in a bunker, surrounded by Nazis, who were walking around in panic.

Damn! But fortunately no one noticed him. These dark characters were absorbed in much more urgent matters.

Sometimes they see you and sometimes they don’t. It seems to depend on their mood, he realized, frowning. It seems like real life and then...

A sudden explosion caused the concrete bunker to tremble dangerously and clouds of dust covered the room. The Nazis were being bombed: it was a matter of life and death. A large, blonde secretary was running

around, confused by the upheaval and brushed right past the unobserved visitor.

She is blinded by panic and unable to take in anything else, Michel observed again. Carefully, he examined the complex, where dozens of officers had taken shelter from the battle in the various rooms. Most of them were lying on bunk beds and they looked as if their last hours had arrived. All of the rooms looked in sad shape and were in a state of decay. Pipes were hanging loosely here and there from the ceiling, the walls were cracked and there was junk everywhere. Between the beds were plastic barrels of fuel. In one of the rooms, the time traveler discovered six blonde children with blue eyes.

Those must be the Goebbel kids, he supposed. In the officers' room he found Hitler and his confidants. Again the bunker shook on its foundation while a telephone operator was trying, with great difficulty, to maintain contact with the army. The Führer was trying to rule the remains of his Third Reich from Berlin. The quarters were situated right under the Reichstag and had a fortified roof, several meters thick, to protect the leader from the worst possible bombs.

"The Russians and their allies are attacking us from all directions," Hitler yelled, but it was just not in his character to surrender. Nostradamus had a close look at hatred personified. Every pore seemed to be in the service of destruction.

Kind of funny, that I get to put their leader under a magnifying glass like this, he thought. Himmler was there too. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes despondently.

"Maybe it's not too late to surrender in exchange for our freedom," he suggested.

"No, we will never negotiate with the enemy. We will go on until the final victory!" Hitler rasped, while a German shepherd dog was licking his fingers. His deputy was staring off into space, abandoning all hope. The bunker again shook on its foundation. The bombings were drawing nearer.

"I think we should surrender too," General Berger reluctantly admitted.

"Listen to me: I will never surrender alive!" Hitler hissed in his face. Berger left the room, frustrated.

"So, you're abandoning me, traitor," his leader complained, while continuing to give random orders. His supporters, however, were mollified and resigned themselves to the situation, which was looking more hopeless by the minute. The aggrieved Führer walked to his secretary to dictate his last will and testament to her.

"Write down," he said, "that I, Adolf Hitler, swear that I will rule my Third Reich, even from the grave."

I sure hope that doesn't come true, Michel thought, standing right behind him. The telephone operator came in, bearing bad news.

"The partisans have murdered our ally Mussolini, and have hanged him upside-down," he informed them. Hitler was put out for a moment, but quickly recovered.

“I don’t want the enemy to get hold of my body. Burn it after I die,” he commanded. Traudl made a note of his wish. Eva, the Führer’s girlfriend came in with a bowl of water for the dog, Blondie, who eagerly began to lap it up right away.

“Where is Magda?” Eva asked. She was leaning against a stack of boxes containing important document that were supposed to get burned at the last minute.

“I guess she is with Joseph,” Himmler replied. The contact officer came in again with a disastrous message. The SS seemed to have suffered a major defeat at the edge of the city.

“So my army is definitely deserting me,” Hitler scoffed, turning purple in the face. He nearly had a seizure and had to leave the quarters. He retreated to the living room, where Magda Goebbels was lying on the sofa like a wet rag.

“Why don’t you get those kids of yours to fight for a change,” he snarled at her. She wisely kept her mouth shut and fled from her idol. Adolf’s dream of a super empire was being smashed to smithereens.

“No one will speak to me anymore, only Eva,” he whined and dropped down on the sofa and turned on the Convention in Nuremburg for the umpteenth time. It was the highlight of his life and watching the film relaxed him a bit. His girlfriend had followed him and sat down beside him.

“Adolf, I want to marry you. Today,” she said.

“You know that I am married to my mission,” he protested. But Eva began to stroke him, trying to convince him.

“All right, we will get married for your sake,” he finally agreed. And while she thanked him with a kiss on the nose, the screen showed a gigantic square, where hundreds of thousands of people had one arm slanting upward to salute their leader.

The king of kings, with the support of Pannonia, Michel figured out while he watched. The Führer’s personal servant came running in.

“What is it now?” his boss asked.

“Herr Himmler is gone. He fled westwards through the tunnel system.”

“Send a few soldiers to finish him off.”

“Um, there’s no one left to carry out that order,” the servant answered reluctantly. Hitler stopped the film and stared ahead, looking grim. Nostradamus was curious to find out more about the deputy’s escape and left the living room. After he had searched through the complex, he found a tunnel to the west, through which Himmler supposedly had fled. He was just wondering what to do, when he heard a thumping sound from the adjoining room.

“Well, well, if it isn’t our house ghost,” a familiar voice suddenly sounded. It was the Minister of Propaganda, who could see ghosts and who had already tricked him earlier by having an undermining discussion with him. Goebbels was staring at him from the doorway, with a strange expression on his face.

This time, I must not let myself get carried away by this idiot, Michel resolved.

“Too bad you left so soon the last time,” Goebbels said to him. “I guess you came back to have a look at how we meet our destruction? But he who laughs last...,” and he began to laugh. Hitler came walking up.

“Joseph, I need you as a witness. Eva and I are getting married.”

“I’ll be there in a minute. I’m just talking to someone.”

“There’s no one here, Joseph. You’re seeing ghosts again.”

“But he’s right there!” and he pointed in Michel’s direction. Hitler took out his pistol and fired several shots at the place where the phantom was supposed to be.

“Not anymore. Come along and keep your mouth shut.” Some startled officers were running in with their machine guns and asked what was going on.

“I just shot a ghost,” their leader sneered, pulling Goebbels along with him. Michel, meanwhile, was sliding down to the floor. The bullets had gone right through him.

“I’m dying!” he cried. But his higher body was merely rattled. There were sounds of wedding music coming from the living room. Adolf and Eva were really tying the knot at the last minute. The ceremony didn’t exactly go smoothly; they were interrupted by several serious explosions. The enemy was now laying siege to the city with great force. The German shepherd was frightened by the shooting and lay down next to the collapsed ghost; the only spot to find any comfort underground. This was lucky for Michel, because the animal’s warmth helped him to recover remarkably well. Instead of fleeing, he decided he wanted to see the finale of the war drama. To be on the safe side, he kept away from the psychic Goebbels, as he closely watched the downfall of the Nazis. After the wedding party, the Führer announced that he was going to commit suicide and wanted to be left alone. When he was alone with Eva, he dribbled a few drops of something into the mouth of his faithful dog. Blondie fell down dead and was whisked away to a corner of the room.

He must have tried out a poison, Michel understood. Indeed, the “king of kings” gave some to his brand-new bride and then took some himself. They both fell asleep forever. Then the personal servant entered the room and shot his employer in the head for good measure. The last few followers dragged the two bodies upstairs to the backyard, along with the important documents and burned everything.

“Good riddance,” the seer, who had accompanied them, mumbled before going back into the bunker again to witness everything until the last minute.

Who else is there? he wondered, while he moved through the building. In the children’s room he found more horrors. Goebbels’ six children were lying in bed, dead by poisoning.

I bet father and mother did that, Michel suspected and then he found them, lifeless, behind the door.

Justice has prevailed. However, that evil genius is still on the loose, and he resolutely moved towards the tunnel through which Himmler was supposed to have escaped. He carefully entered the dark corridor, but he soon scraped himself on the foundation.

Damn, this is going to take more strength than I have left, he worried. In the distance he saw some light. It didn't last long, however, because it turned out to be coming from Hitler's secretary, who was trying to save her skin. Defeated, she was walking along the trail with a lantern. He squeezed past her and went on. An underground train station soon appeared and some faulty lamps lit up large groups of women, children and elderly people. They had been hiding there from the battles in the city and were waiting for the end of the war, sitting on the platform. Michel flew past the arches and the despondent faces and left the U-Bahn station behind him. While following the trail westwards, he painfully bumped into the tunnel wall again.

"Ouch!" he cried out, but it was not earthly pain, merely a disturbance and he increased his speed. The next station loomed, and intense fighting was still taking place there. Fanatic SS members were murdering deserted soldiers who had been entrenching among the hiding civilians.

No time to stop, the ghost decided and sailed past the Berliners who were fighting for their lives. The tunnel seemed endless, until the way was suddenly barred. The underground had caved in and a bit of daylight was shining on the heaps of rubble. Michel looked at the ruined ceiling and slid his supple body out through the opening. He came out in West Berlin, which had been flattened to the ground. Huge fires were making black clouds and the odd row of houses was still standing here and there. The Allies were steadily making their way through the last of the streets towards the inner city. Bloody corpses were lying everywhere among the debris and fallen trees. A bunch of droning objects suddenly flew out of the clouds.

"Wow, they've succeeded in building flying machines!" the seer exclaimed euphorically, then reprimanded himself for his childish reaction and concentrated once more on finding signs of Himmler. From the sky, he discovered a British control post, which was obstructing the way of outgoing traffic; some horseless carriages were being inspected. There were thousands of soldiers, but they were all marching towards the city center. He had lost the trail and returned to the collapsed tunnel to look for clues. Eureka! Behind a mountain of debris he spied an officer's hat with matching coat, bearing the badge of the highest rank in the country.

That Nazi got rid of his uniform, he realized, and scanned the whole area. He had flown over the control post a few times when he noticed Himmler. He was just coming out of a barrack and was accompanied by a British commander. Himmler was pretending to be a simple, deserted officer and trying to make a deal. The ghost landed right beside him in the grass and heard him lying. The scoundrel was making up some grand story and was whispering about some great reward. The British commander seemed to

like the idea and was looking around to make sure he wouldn't get caught by his comrades. But chaos reigned and the British as well as the American soldiers only had eyes for the last of the resisters. This was the right moment for shady deals and the men went and stood behind a tree to do their scheming.

"Deal", the Brit finally agreed, and they clinched their bargain just as some dark clouds above them suddenly opened up. The sun broke through the opening and shone exactly onto the dark event. Himmler was lit up; and so was Nostradamus, who unexpectedly became visible.

"Are you the one who will pass the last judgment?" the unscrupulous German asked, when he saw him. The supposed judge gave him a silent but meaningful look.

"I spit on you," Himmler said, without a grain of remorse. Then a mysterious arrow flew from the sky, through the clouds, and pierced his heart. This definitely marked the end of the Third Reich.

Does my presence actually make a difference or doesn't it? Michel wondered.

Chapter 8

*The weakened world regenerates
Long-lasting peace reigns everywhere
People travel by air, across land and sea
Then there will be war again*

The locked door of the study was forced open, and Anne stepped into the room with trembling knees, afraid to find her husband dead inside. After she had arrived home, the maid had informed her that the scholar had urgently requested to not be disturbed for any reason. He was conducting an important experiment. But now she felt it had taken too long. He hadn't been out of his study for days and now it seemed like her worries were justified. She found her husband lying on the floor.

"He's dead!" she wailed.

"Couldn't you just knock?" Michel asked. He was surprisingly lucid. For a moment she was speechless, but then she got very angry.

"You've kept yourself locked up for three whole days! We called you so many times, we knocked, we wailed, and you wouldn't open the door. I couldn't stand it another minute!"

"I'm fine," he calmly assured her.

"You could have been dead," she continued, still very agitated. "I had no choice but to act. And, by the way, the queen wants to see you. I thought you'd probably want to know about that."

"That is good news, indeed! I'll get packed right away," and he started to get up to get ready.

"Don't be an idiot; first you're going to spend a few days getting your strength back. You look horrible," she shouted and her husband promised her he would take it easy for a few days.

"Where did Daddy go?" three-year-old Pauline wondered the next day at breakfast.

"Daddy's taking care of the hereafter," César answered.

"Pass the bread please," Father asked. His son passed it to him.

"I think he was playing tricks again," Paul said, daringly.

"Your father is losing his hair, but not his mischief," Anne agreed. Her husband took a drink of fruit juice and was amused by the banter.

"Your father is going to visit the queen soon," Mother informed everyone.

"Paul, let go of César!" Paul had quite the temper and was often restless.

"I hope the queen is not too pretty. Cause then we would never see Daddy anymore," Madeleine commented.

"I only want your mother," he reassured her. "And anyway, the queen is already married to the king."

“Well, I’ve heard that marriage is just a sham,” Anne remarked. “And there are plenty of mistresses at the court.”

“What are mistresses, Mom?” Pauline asked.

“They are woman who are not married to a man, but love him anyway,” she tried to explain simply.

“Then there are a lot of mistresses around this table,” César joked. His parents laughed and then started to clear the table.

“Would you stay with André a minute,” Anne asked. Her husband, who was back to normal, kept an eye on the baby while she went to shake out the tablecloth in the garden.

The first part of *The Prophecies* had been a big hit at the king’s court, and Queen Catherine de Medici requested the immensely popular astrologer to come to her palace to give her a consultation. A greater honor could not be bestowed, and Nostradamus granted her wish. Because Paris was a long way off, he would have to be away from home for about a month. He said goodbye to his family with a heavy heart.

“Here, guys, forget-me-nots,” but his kids were already running outside, because they were busy with other things. Father loved them all, no matter what they did, but he felt most connected to César, a bright boy, to whom he might be able to pass on his knowledge some day.

“Be careful. There is always a lot of hate and envy at the court,” Anne pressed upon her husband.

“I’ll stay out of it all,” he promised and after a big kiss, he picked up his suitcase and climbed into the waiting carriage. The guest to the royals would take the opportunity to visit his publisher, Chomarat, in Lyon too.

He arrived two days later. His publisher shook his head in disbelief when he saw the famous writer walk into his office, unannounced.

“I will have to get the guest room ready,” he stammered.

“Great, thanks. I’m only staying for one day, though, because I’m on my way to Paris.”

“Then I will show you around the office right away,” and he gave him a tour of the Maison Thomassin. The topographers were also taken aback by the surprise visit and awkwardly made room for their exalted guest. At the printing press, their boss began to speak nervously.

“Your success is partly due to this invention,” said Chomarat, holding on the revolutionary device tenderly, as if it was his own child. He asked one of the workers to put some ink on the template for the cover of *The Prophecies*. He did as he was asked.

“Now I will show you how it works,” Chomarat resumed and he placed the inked form on top of the bottom plate. “And then we place some paper on top and you may make the print yourself...” Nostradamus started to turn the plate down with a winch.

“I wish being under pressure was this easy,” he said, jokingly, but before anyone had a chance to start laughing, the publisher cried out in pain. His thumb had got stuck and his guest quickly turned the plate back.

“Let me have a look at that,” the latter requested. Moaning, Chomarat showed him his wounded thumb.

“Do you have some bandages?”

With his face twisted in pain, he pointed to his office. They went there and after a bit of searching, found a small piece of bandage.

“You won’t be able to write by hand for a while,” Michel said, as he bandaged the thumb.

“I’m a printer, not a writer,” Chomarat grumbled. He had now recovered from the shock and the men went back to the work floor. Once there, Nostradamus turned the plate down again, so that it was firmly pressed against the piece of paper and then turned it back again.

“Botched up work must now be a thing of the past,” he chuckled and then had a look at the wet print.

“Marvelous! But what’s that little devil doing there on the last line?” Chomarat was surprised and came over to stand next to him and also saw the irregularity.

“What rascal made this change?” he said, angrily. But no one on the staff seemed to have done it. Their boss ran to the supply of his client’s books. For a minute he had visions of thousands of reproduced devils, but thank god, all the covers were okay. They corrected the print template and after all the commotion, the litmus test was passed. The author was very happy and looked at his own work again, which was getting published here in several languages. His books were being eagerly received all over Europe. Afterwards, he and the publisher went to a restaurant and chatted a bit more about improvements to the current version.

The next day, the journey to Paris was resumed. Everything went smoothly and three days later they drove past Fontainebleau. It wouldn’t be long now. Suddenly, a group of horseback riders surrounded the carriage and forced it to stop.

“Bandits!” the frightened coachman called out, but it turned out to be police officers and, reassured, he followed their directions. An officer soon explained to the passenger what was going on.

“Your route has been changed; you will be escorted to the palace in Saint Germain en Laye.”

“Why the change?” Nostradamus wanted to know.

“The royal couple changes residence every so often.”

“So, we have yet some distance to go.”

“My apologies for the inconvenience.” Officer Morency sat down beside him and they continued on.

“People sure do a lot of traveling these days,” the police officer began to harp, while he was taking off his riding boots. “The world is flourishing after those dark ages and is now making rapid progress.”

“See those migrant birds up there, flying north?” Michel interrupted.

“Yes, why?”

“They can do it ten times faster than we can.”

“So what are you trying to say?”

“That I was born in the wrong time period...”

“I still don’t get it,” Morency said.

“Oh, don’t mind me; I’m just feeling a bit grouchy. Probably just tired,” the scholar apologized.

“I will leave you alone, Doctor. I suppose everybody pesters you all the time.”

“Well, now that you mentioned it, I must say, the intrusiveness is getting worse every day. In my own town, I can’t even go out in public anymore. But, you go ahead and keep talking, because pleasant hours fly fast.” Morency spoke about his career and his retirement coming up.

“You will be arrested and jailed before your career is over,” the clairvoyant suddenly said. The officer looked at him, crestfallen.

“What are you saying? Right before I retire?”

“Keep your chin up. A peace treaty will give you your freedom back.”

“I don’t know what to make of all that, but I will keep it in mind. Amazing you can see those things!”

“Well, events just kind of hang in the air and I observe them, the way a bird feels a storm coming. Except, humans, in contrast to animals, usually cause their own miseries.”

“Unbelievable. Do you see your own future too?” the officer asked, impressed.

“Personal matters, unfortunately, cloud my vision.”

“Well, I appreciate the warning. Are you Catholic?”

“Yes, why?”

“There is political battle going on here between the Catholic House of Guise and the Calvinistic House of Coligny. The queen has chosen the Guise’s side. So, you’re in the right place. But beware of the Parisian courts, because they are fanatic and look for the slightest excuse to convict anyone. And I am thinking particularly of your publications.” A rain shower, just starting, was tapping on the roof of the carriage and the men chatted till the end of the ride.

There it was, finally: Saint Germain en Laye. The town that kings enjoyed so much because of the pleasant climate and which was surrounded by huge forests. The minute the carriage came out from underneath the foliage, the weather cleared up. Then they bumped alongside seemingly endless royal gardens under construction.

“The gardens will have terraces with a view across the Seine,” Morency remarked.

“It looks like it would take a whole day just to walk through it,” Michel responded.

“Yes, about that and then there are about five thousands hectares of forest. Henry II is a fervent hunter.” The carriage was now moving past the new palace, which was still surrounded by scaffolding. Cartloads of materials were moving to and fro and groups of workmen were working on the construction. The guest, however, was taken to the old castle, situated just behind it.

“I wonder how many rooms this place has?” he asked, when the colossal palace came into view.

“Over four hundred. The new one will have even more,” his companion answered. The police officers on horseback veered off and the carriage stopped at the entrance. The men got out and walked towards the towering entrance doors, which were opened by two valets. They entered the magisterial entrance hall, where two spiral staircases were elegantly entwined.

“My job is done. Good luck!” the officer said sincerely. The scholar said goodbye and sat down on a gilded sofa and examined the interior while he waited. Wherever he looked, every spot was decorated with the utmost care. Even the ceiling was decorated. And to think that the new castle was to become the real showpiece...

A head valet asked him to follow him to the throne room, where the guests were generally received. The royal couple were waiting for him on their golden thrones. Between them hung a striking painting of a woman with a mysterious smile*.

“Nostradamus, so glad you are here,” Catherine de Medici spoke resolutely, and her guest bowed deeply, as custom demanded.

“Henry, this is that famous astrologer from the Provence, who has been causing such a commotion,” she informed her husband. “He used to work as a physician, and saved many of our subjects from the plague.” The king gave the illustrious countryman a sidelong glance. His white countenance contrasted sharply with his black wide-brimmed hat with the brown feather.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, for form’s sake. Another one of those intellectuals, well, he’s your visitor Catherine, you take care of him yourself, he thought to himself. Michel saw right through his pretenses; what the king really wanted to do was to go hunting.

“I’m very curious about your talents,” the queen, who was wearing a leather cap, resumed, “and I would like you to come to my private living quarters tomorrow morning at eight o’clock, to further discuss it.”

“Certainly, Your Majesty.” He thought she was a lot more intelligent than her husband.

“On Monday next week, there will be a feast,” she continued, “in honor of the marriage of the Duke of Joyeux and the Lady De Vaudemont, and tonight there is a banquet. We invite you to attend both.” Michel’s heart skipped a beat when he heard the last name of his first wife.

De Vaudemont; unbelievable. The bride must be a sister or niece of Yolande’s. My former relatives will not be happy when I show up there, he thought. An inevitable confrontation hung in the air. The king passed gas and was wriggling uncomfortably on his golden seat.

“Thank you very much for the invitation, Your Majesty. I will be sure to attend.”

* The Mona Lisa, collection of King François I

“Our guests are expected to join in with the court dancing, after the performance. Do you know these dances?” Catherine asked.

“Not at all, Your Majesty.”

“Then our ballet master will teach you the required steps, some time in the next few days. But tonight we shall see each other at the banquet,” and she ordered her valet to see the astrologer out of the throne room. The summoned dance teacher promised to start with dance lessons that same day, but first the guest would get the opportunity to take some rest.

Somewhat recovered from the heavy trip, Nostradamus walked to the ballet studio, where Balthazar was waiting for him.

“Still travel-worn, Sir?”

“A little, but some movement won’t do me any harm.”

“I will also teach you some courtly skills, since these are inextricably connected to the dance.” His guest thought that was fine and started by taking off his over-frock.

“For the court dance, clothing actually must be impeccable,” the young ballet master giggled, “but in any case, it looks like you are looking forward to your first dance lesson,” and he put the coat back on.

“Do you know anything about the dance?”

“Dance is the female hunt and hunting is the male dance,” the scholar answered.

“Well, I will hang that proverb above my bed,” Balthazar giggled again. He was an easy fellow to get along with.

Slippery as an eel, Michel thought, on closer inspection.

“Okay, we’d better get started, because the De Vaudemonts will be here in two hours; they are my next students.”

“Do you know the De Vaudemonts well?”

“No, I only know that they belong to the nobility. Our queen uses every opportunity to organize a party,” Balthazar said unabashedly, and he began the lesson.

“A courtier must have a general education, but above all, he is expected to be able to move elegantly. Everything that is done at court must be done gracefully and effortlessly. Stiff movements or visible exertion are considered sinful.” The gentlemen moved to the dance floor.

“At the ball, the dancing will follow set patterns. For example, like this,” and while the ballet master counted the beat, he demonstrated a few steps.

“At the same time, you have to follow the social rules. Follow me, please,” and Michel copied a Pas de Bourré.

“That’s quite challenging,” he said when his legs got all tangled up together.

“I will give you a series of exercises on paper, which will help you control your motor functions,” the instructor suggested.

“Good, that will give me something to do. I suppose ballet is Catherine de Medici’s favorite activity?”

“You’re right. Nobility can be recognized by one’s posture, according to your queen. Unfortunately, her husband disagrees with her, and it was she who brought the refined manners to the French court. She brought a varied company of cooks, artists and musicians back with her from Florence, after the wedding. You will get to meet them,” and they continued dancing. Just when Michel thought he got the hang of something, he got all mixed up again and the affectionate ballet master would take him by the hand. In closing, they practiced a figure dance, after which the first lesson was over. Tomorrow they would continue.

It was late in the afternoon and Michel walked outside to get some fresh air. He walked through a park, where several gardeners were planting shrubs. In passing, he looked at the development of the new castle up ahead. Behind a flower bed stood a courtier, who suddenly began to wave wildly at him.

Well, well, if it isn’t that marquis De Florenville. My past is once again coming to haunt me.

It was indeed the castle lord who had tried to trick him in the past and the marquis excitedly rushed over to greet him.

I guess he’s reformed now that I’m famous, the astrologer thought scornfully.

“What a privilege to see you again,” the blue-blood greeted him.

“Yes, it’s been a long time.”

“Yes, it certainly has, and we haven’t gotten any younger, have we?”

“Do you still go to Strasbourg?” Michel asked.

“Lately I’ve been staying primarily at the court, for political matters,” De Florenville answered, while the sun disappeared behind the horizon. It was getting colder now and the scholar indicated he wanted to go back inside.

“What kind of political matters are you occupying you?” he asked, when they entered the palace together.

“Well, that’s a long story...”

“We’ve got an hour before the banquet starts,” Michel said, and the marquis began to talk.

“My friend Erasmus, whom I’m sure you remember, felt that certain parts of the Bible were not translated correctly from the Latin,” he told, while they walked through the corridors. “He then translated the Greek New Testament and had it published. The German Luther elaborated on this and his Protestant movement blew over to France. A few Huguenots from Strasbourg asked me to represent this movement in Paris and I could not refuse them. Hence I am here. Have you ever heard of the Colignys?”

“Yes, I heard about them recently. But doesn’t that make you the political enemy of the royal family?”

“From a formal point of view, yes,” De Florenville agreed, “but the king does not bother with politics and Catherine thinks that the Guises are too powerful. She actually tries to get closer to us. That wicked witch, pardon my French, set the Guises and the Colignys up against each other.”

“I didn’t know there was such inclination towards Protestantism,” Michel said.

“Well, it is growing on a daily basis, especially in Northern France. There are even some supporters among the royal family. But tell me something else; what are you doing here?” and the marquis looked at him expectantly.

“The queen has asked me for a consultation,” the seer revealed.

“Ah, and what were your findings?” the politician asked, fishing for spicy details.

“I am not going to speak to Her Majesty until tomorrow, and I am not at liberty to discuss the content of the consultation with anyone. Professional confidentiality. What I can tell you is that the king is not interested in astrology.”

“Well, everybody knows that!” the marquis waved off his comment. “Henry II happens to be interested in absolutely nothing. But it has been whispered that he has taken possession of all of the church treasures to build the extremely expensive chateau. See, that’s the trouble with Catholics, they’re so hypocritical. Except for a few good ones, of course. Stealing from the Church is not a problem for me; I think it is far too powerful anyway...” The scholar was becoming quite well informed about the political snake pit through all this gossip and he felt he had heard enough.

“I still need to get changed. See you at the banquet,” he cut off the conversation and then climbed up the central spiral case to his room on the third floor.

A little while later, the groomed seer entered the dining room, where a grand banquet had already begun. Two long, exorbitant tables were set up, with about five hundred guests seated around them. The celebrity was escorted to the royal couple’s table by an usher. The two were each seated at the head of the table, so there was quite a distance between them. The other table was for members of the lower nobility, which was where the marquis had also taken place. The astrologer was seated across from the De Vaudemonts, surprisingly, and when they saw their former family member, they stiffened. They nudged each other in astonishment to alert each other to the arrival of the calamity prophet. They were Yolande’s brothers and sisters. Although they had become old and grey, they were easily recognizable. Their parents had probably died. The bride turned out to be Elise, the daughter of Désiree, and by her side was Duke de Joyeux. They still hated Michel and his presence spoiled their feast. All kinds of delicacies were being served, in the meantime, and the summoned astrologer managed to enjoy them, despite the sour faces across from him. The queen now proposed a toast to the future bride and groom and everyone unanimously raised their glasses. Only the king didn’t, because he was too busy amusing himself with some of the ladies-in-waiting. Michel was able to discern from bits and pieces of conversations around

him that Catherine was descended from a rich bankers' family and that the French royal family would be strengthened by this. Henry II was cleverer than he seemed. After the guests had eaten their fill, boredom set in and the conversation became caustic and repressed. The subject changed to politics and with lots of Guises and Colignys in the room, the tension began to mount. During one fierce dispute, Nostradamus was asked to predict the religious future of the royal house. There was a great deal of interest; everyone wanted to know what the explorer of the heavens would say about this.

"In eighty years," he spoke eloquently, "I see a sun king being born in this palace."

"But will he be a protestant?" pressed De Coligny, the leader of the group with the same name.

"He will be a Christian anyway," the seer answered cautiously. Nevertheless, things got out of hand after that, and a shameless argument ensued. Michel decided he had had enough, after the dessert, while the queen looked on despondently.

The next morning, he visited Catherine de Medici in her private quarters. She had clearly decorated the room according to her own personal taste, because it was full of paintings of rich ancestors, posing in front of their residences in Florence.

"Come and sit beside me," the queen ordered, and Michel sat down on the sofa.

"Would you like a treat?" she asked, while she held a bowl of candied fruit in front of him.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," and he picked out one of the exquisite candies.

"And are you enjoying your stay here, so far, aside from that quarrel last night?"

"Well, I am certainly impressed with all the grandeur and magnificence."

"That's the idea. A lot of money is spent on seemingly useless matters, such as parties, triumphs and palaces, but this is how we attempt to impress foreign ambassadors, so that we can do better business. And with the money earned, we can strengthen our army."

A cunning woman, he understood. I'm sure she leads the country from behind the scenes.

"I have requested you to come here," she resumed, "because I would like you to draw up a horoscope for me. Everyone is talking about you and I am very curious to find out what the stars have to say about my life. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, I certainly can, but I will need the exact data of your birth." Catherine immediately ordered a valet to go and get the birth documents.

"How many hours will it take?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, it takes several weeks; I don't have the necessary equipment with me and I can only work properly at home."

“Well, that is a misunderstanding on my part then, but okay, I will have to be patient. Is there anything you could tell me now?”

“I will first have to concentrate, Your Majesty.”

“Go ahead,” and Nostradamus closed his eyes. He soon entered other worlds and his head began to nod.

“I see... I see that the court ballet will experience enormous development because of your efforts. Special academies for dance will be founded.”

“That is good news. I adore the ballet. Do you see anything happening during my lifetime as well?”

“Something about Rome is coming through...”

“That’s quite possible. The late Pope Leo X, who was established in Rome, was my second cousin, Giovanni di Lorenzo de Medici.” The queen was sitting on the edge of her chair by now.

“Hmm, ruling is in your blood,” he mumbled.

“Do you mean that I will rule the country?”

“Yes, that’s coming.”

“But does that mean my husband will no longer be alive?” she asked, startled. Michel nodded sympathetically.

“Henry and I have a marriage of convenience, but I sincerely hope that this will not come true.”

“Nothing is written in stone, Your Majesty; everything is subject to change. But the divine ideas are revealed to me and every idea is true. It is only a question of how and when. If the seed of a beech tree receives little water or light, the beech will possibly never appear, but it will never be an oak.”

“Could you tell me what will happen to my husband? Maybe we can do something to prevent it.”

“It is not clear in my mind and I also don’t want to unnecessarily discredit your husband. But if your husband wants me to, I could look into it more deeply.”

“Slim chance of that,” she said, and then suddenly changed the subject; Catherine suddenly stood up and let her dress drop to her feet. Start-naked, she looked at him seductively.

“And, do you think I’m attractive?”

“Well...” he stalled, cautiously.

“Yes, I’m no longer a slender maiden.”

“For the real boss of France, you look very good,” and he bent towards to her.

“Hmm, and you smell nice,” he said, pressing his nose against her waist.

“I air my body every day,” she explained.

“I wish everyone was so wise. Alternating hot and cold baths is very good too,” and he stroked her buttocks. Catherine coquettishly enjoyed his touch.

“Well, your health is excellent,” the doctor said then. “You can put your clothes back on.”

“Gosh, you are almost as crafty as I am,” and, amused, she put her dress back on. The valet came back in with the birth documents.

“Our wish is for a strong, stable France and the maintenance of the power of the royal House of Valois,” the queen resumed, with a serious look on her face. “Can you advise me how my husband and I should handle the politically religious fractions in order to achieve this?”

“I will first draw up a horoscope for you, Your Majesty. After that I will give you some insights into your strong and weak points, after which you will have to put the knowledge into practice yourself. You see, I am not allowed to lead the life of another, no matter how much I want to satisfy your wishes.”

“Bon, I appreciate your integrity. We will leave it alone for now then. We shall see each other next Monday at the ball,” and she ended the conversation.

It was eleven o’clock in the morning, the time the theatre spectacle in honor of the wedding of Duke de Joyeux and Elise de Vaudemont was to start. Wearing his simple knickerbockers, Michel walked into the gigantic ballroom and paraded through the extremely dolled up guests, some of whom he had already met in the palaces. All the ladies looked like works of art: very wide dresses with extravagant head dresses. The gentlemen too, were wearing fabulous hats or expensive wigs, and both sexes moved through the room with exaggerated formal movements. Someone pressed a program into Michel’s hand.

“Let’s see what it says,” he mumbled and opened it. The famous astrologer had, of course, been noticed already and three eager ladies-in-waiting rushed up to him.

“Mister Nostradamus, how nice that you are here,” they called out, “and you like the ballet?”

“Well, I can’t really say I’m fond of it, but I am certainly curious to see the performance of my dance instructor in the piece *Ballet Comique de la Reine*,” he admitted.

“But the *Ballet Comique de la Reine* is the name of the company,” Angelique, the lady in the blue hat corrected him.

“What are they performing then?”

“*Circe* by Homer.”

“Ah, one of the best-known pieces from the *Odyssee*,” the scholar knew.

“De Beaujoyeux also did the choreography,” Collette, the lady in the pink hat butted in.

“I am not familiar with that one,” Michel said.

“It’s in the program,” she continued.

“I hadn’t had a chance to look at it yet, ladies,” and again attempted to look at the paper, when the third lady imposed.

“There will be singers, dancers, musicians, animals, circus artists and more,” she informed him. The room, meanwhile, had filled to the brim with thousands of courtiers and guests from the entire country.

"I suppose this is the first De Medici party you have attended?" Collette asked.

"Yes, indeed, this is my first time," he acknowledged.

"You'd better brace yourself then," Angelique warned. "The ballet alone takes four hours."

"Four hours of ballet?"

"Don't worry; during all the performances you can freely walk in and out," Collette reassured him.

"I should probably help you familiarize yourself at the court," Angelique offered.

"I know my way around here much better than she does," said Collette, not letting her friend bully her.

"I think that his lordship would prefer to practice discrimination," the third lady-in-waiting outdid her competition. The ladies suddenly couldn't stand each other anymore.

"I'm happily married and I have beautiful children," the astrologer asserted.

"Good day, ladies!" He tipped his hat and continued on his way. The audience was on three sides of the performance area. Partly in the galleries, where the king and queen and the wedding couple sat and partly below, where Michel joined the crowd. The performance started and an impressive set mechanically moved into place. A dance choir performed an aubade for the newly married couple and acted out an allegorical treatment of conjugal love. After the modest tribute, the atmosphere became exuberant and colorfully costumed actors paraded back and forth. After some time, a cry of delight went through the room as a real elephant stepped out of the wings. All stops were pulled out. Various exotic animals trotted past, followed by hordes of marching soldiers, imitating a battle. The audience gazed at the spectacle in admiration and it raised the king's spirits to see his armed forces. Henry II even rose from his chair for a minute when the captain of his personal guard entering into a duel with a Scot.

"Look before you leap," Montgomery called out affectedly to his enemy. The two militia men stood and faced each other on the stage with full arsenal. The Scot began the attack, brandishing his sword at the captain, but he skillfully warded it off with his shield. It was an electrifying performance and the captain prepared for a counterattack. In all the excitement, the king forgot it was just a play and spurred Montgomery on from the balcony.

"Get him, Captain," he shouted through the room. The audience decided to choose him as their favorite and loudly cheered him on.

Darn, now I know what will kill the king: a practice duel, Michel suddenly knew. Montgomery was distracted for a moment by the frenzied audience; the Scot cleverly took advantage of his confusion. He tried to viciously pierce the captain with his sword, but it glanced off his helmet.

"Missed!" the spectators shouted with joy.

“I think I’m going to have to lead my own guard,” the king grumbled to his wife. But Montgomery now took the lead and after a collision between the two warriors, the Scot fell down on the ground, after which the captain raised his sword over the head of his victim in victory. A red curtain fell in front of the stage and the possible deathblow was left to the imagination of the audience. While the set was quickly changed, everyone had the opportunity to get something to eat and drink. The political games still continued. De Coligny, who was standing in front of Nostradamus, gave an obvious signal with his hand, which caused several party members to silently leave the room, which was noticed by some of the Guises.

What a bunch of idiots, the scholar thought and paid no further attention to them. The entire stage again turned around spectacularly and the set for the *Ballet Comique de la Reine* appeared. The audience sat down again and saw the ballet master jump onto the stage first. Balthazar was playing the role of the sorceress. The story was acted out by the dancers, in pantomime. The ballet took a long time indeed and the courtiers regularly walked in and out of the room. Half-way through the performance Mercurius descended; the messenger of the gods was brought down with a winch.

It almost seems like Hermes is following me, the astrologer contemplated. Among a lot of noise, the dancers interrupted his reflections about the signs from above and then Balthazar showed off a ballet tour de force.

Oh dear, soon I will have to put my best foot forward, and Michel mentally went through the dance steps he would have to put into practice after the performance. When *Circe* by Homer was over, all the dancers jumped down from the stage and requested everyone to join them. The nobles streamed onto the dance floor, while the rest of the audience watched with interest. Michel also joined in with the bassa dance, which incorporated a lot of bows and turns. However, because of the geometric patterns and the tight clothing, the participants looked more like marionettes than like people dancing. The king and queen had come down from the balcony and were ceremoniously striding across the floor with the De Vaudemont family following in their wake. Catherine’s cone-shaped dress was so large that five grown men could have fit beneath it. Her husband wore long shoes, whose points were so long they kept everyone at a distance. After the basse dance, the queen got up to speak.

“Dear friends, please move to the side for a moment; I would like to request the bride and groom to come onto the dance floor and start the figure dance.” Elise de Vaudemont and Duke de Joyeux came forward and the couple began to move elegantly to the courtly music. One couple kept getting added and the dancers formed long rows, which then formed into circles or triangles. Michel followed the figure dance from the sidelines. The dance was an especially esthetic pleasure for the spectators. The De Vaudemonts’ attention was now completely absorbed in the dancing wedding couple and they lost track of their sworn enemy.

I wonder when that low point of the evening will happen? the seer thought to himself, because the hidden tension was very perceivable to him.

“A danse-haute please,” Catherine suddenly ordered the musicians, as if she had heard his thoughts. It was the dance where everyone had to continuously switch partners by taking a little jump.

Aha, this will be the collision: a duet with one of the female De Vaudemonts, Michel smiled as he stepped onto the dance floor. Despite her enormous dress, the queen was also participating, and after changing partners a few times, she arrived in front of Nostradamus.

“I feel like we’ve know each other for years, Doctor,” she said coquettishly. Her favorite guest looked at her with a little twinkle and gracefully turned her around.

“My compliments!” she exclaimed, afterwards. “You really have the hang of it,” and she jumped to another dancer. While the scholar received a new lady, he saw that Elise would be his next dance partner. The bride had just come to the same painful conclusion and was desperately trying to make eye contact with her family members.

A loony girl, just like the rest of her family, Michel assessed. She’s not going to play along. I wonder if she’ll bow out altogether?

The eye-catcher of the day was furiously looking for ways to get out of the dance, but finally, she couldn’t really do anything but take the customary little jump and ended up in front of the seer.

“May I have this dance?” he asked, with a piercing look in his eyes and Elise pretended to faint. The people around them reacted emotionally when they saw the bride falling down and the musicians stopped playing. Duke de Joyeux, much to his dismay, saw his wife lying on the dance floor and rushed over to her. His in-laws were suddenly riveted to the spot. “Someone get the court physician,” he called out, panicking. The queen decided otherwise and resolutely walked to the place of the incident.

“Mr. De Joyeux, there is already a physician present,” she said quietly.

“Dr. Nostradamus,” she continued, “as a physician, surely you can tell us what is wrong with the bride?”

“I don’t immediately see any objective changes, Your Majesty.”

“Please have a closer look at the lady,” she requested, and he bent over Elise and checked her heart beat, just for show.

“I’ll wangle it for you, girl,” he whispered and after performing a few more little tests he addressed the groom: “Your wife is suffering from a Vasovagale Synkope.”

“Oh, and what does that mean?” the duke stammered.

“It means that she fainted, and she will soon come to. She was probably just feeling a bit overwhelmed.” The king was interested in the incident now too and came to take a closer look at the slumped bride.

“Well, that’s not uncommon around here,” he remarked. At that moment Elise began to pretend-cough and started to make gestures of trying to get up.

“Can someone please help?” her husband asked anxiously. Family members rushed forward and helped the affected celebrant off the dance floor, where she was assisted onto a chair. Catherine ordered everyone to continue the party, and the festive atmosphere was restored. During the popular suites, the king unexpectedly got into the spirit of them and did a dance with his wife.

“You’re in a good mood today, Henry,” she said.

“Falling girls are good for me,” he joked and they turned around to the beat of the music.

“They’re not partridges,” she replied, when she faced him again.

“You are right, my dear wife. Shooting down partridges is much more exciting.” The suites came to an end and the De Vaudemonts left the room, sending one last murderous glance to the evil magician. After the festivities, there was a closing banquet, but Michel also decided he had had all he could take and left so he could get some sleep. It had been quite an eventful day.

The next morning, the scholar took leave of the queen, before going home. A valet saw him into her quarters.

“Is everything as you wish, Doctor?” Catherine, who was just meeting with her council men, asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty, but I am here to say goodbye; I am leaving shortly.”

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that. On the other hand, you will be doing my horoscope,” and she ordered the councilors to leave the room for a moment.

“I wanted to praise you for your actions last night,” she continued when they were alone.

“You mean that incident with Elise de Vaudemont?”

“Yes, indeed. You solved that problem very discreetly. Acting is not her strongest point. But why the resentment? It looked as though the De Vaudemonts were ready to drink your blood.”

“That is ancient history, Your Majesty. I was once married to a De Vaudemont.” He said it in a way that conveyed that he had no intention to supply any further details.

“Oh, well, all right. I wish you a pleasant return journey, Doctor. And I’m sure we will see each other again,” and she presented him with a generous payment for the work yet to be done. She said goodbye to him with a seductive wink. Michel had barely sat down in the carriage when he suddenly felt pain everywhere in his body. It felt as though all of his joints were on fire.

It must be gout, he diagnosed himself, worriedly. You will have a sick little bird at home, dear Anne.

During the long journey back, the inflammations kept flaring up and with great difficulty and in a lot of pain, he arrived in Salon de Provence. Feeling broken, he got out of the carriage and walked toward the front door, taking laborious little steps.

Oh, no, not again, his wife thought, as she watched him through the window and saw him struggling.

"I'd like you to go out the back door and go play outside for a while," she instructed the children. They disappeared without argument.

"I'm afraid I can't welcome you with joy," she moaned at the entrance. "I hope they didn't poison you," and she caught her husband as he began to fall.

"No, this is much worse; it is becoming chronic," he said. Anne barely managed to get him upstairs and into bed.

"Please stay and lie down with me for a while, I longed for you so much while I was gone," he requested and she crawled under the blankets with him. He discharged when he felt her skin against his.

"Oh, this is doing wonders already," and he fell into a deep sleep.

It took several weeks before he felt like himself again and then he got busy right away. In his study, he carefully began to draw up the queen's astrological chart.

Let me see. She was born on April 23, 1519. She is a Taurus with a Scorpio ascendant, he understood from the tables.

"Some woman," he mumbled, a little while later, when he was filling the twelve houses with the astrological signs. Calm, strong, shrewd, socially adept and with Jupiter in the fourth house, she is not going to lose her possessions. It is not easy to make her mad, although, with the Sun in the seventh house and the Moon in the tenth house? That will get repressed. She must occasionally get very jealous and when she does, she is not capable of being forgiving. Watch out! It looks like the House of Valois will be in trouble after her death.

After he had completed the queen's character description, he sent the horoscope to her right away.

The smell of food cooking rose up the staircase to the attic. Anne was busy in the kitchen!

I'll have to go and take a closer look at that, Michel thought. He put down his quill and sauntered downstairs.

"The nutmeg is all gone," she said, when he came in.

"I'll pick some up at the market tomorrow," he promised, as he sat down on a stool at the kitchen table.

"Hey, tomatoes!" he exclaimed, sniffing around.

"Ah, my lord is clairsmelling too," she teased. "You'll be getting some Spaghetti Bolognese on your plate in a minute. Probably a more simple meal than what you got at the queen's palace, but it will have to do." Madeleine came in.

"Is dinner ready yet, Mom?" she asked.

"Almost. You might as well go and get Paul and César now," and her daughter ran outside.

"Antoine is coming to have a bite to eat with us too," Anne informed her husband.

“That’s nice. I’ll set the table for the occasion,” he said, and walked into the dining room with the linen. The children came bounding in a moment later, full of zestful energy and ran to the set table.

“Hey, calm down, you guys!” Father warned, and he brought André’s highchair closer. Diane, the smallest one, was still being fed by the maid.

“What’s that weird sound I’m hearing?” Michel wondered out loud.

“That’s André with a rattle,” César said, “Mom bought it for him yesterday.” Father walked into the living room and saw the toddler playing with the tin toy. He took him into the dining room and put him into the highchair. There was a loud knock at the front door. That must be Antoine.

“The door is open!” Michel called and his brother came in.

“Hi Antoine, great you’re here.”

“Well, rising star, any news from the royal front?”

“No, I just sent the horoscope.” The lady of the house, meantime, put the spaghetti on the table and asked her husband to go and get a jug of wine from the cellar.

“Been picking up lots of taxes lately, Antoine?” Anne charged.

“I’ve been promoted to inspector,” her brother-in-law suddenly beamed.

“Well, well, we’re all so lucky, aren’t we? Congratulations. And are you in charge of our district now? Because in that case, we shall have to arrange a private meeting with you.”

“I really can’t treat anyone with favor,” he answered, seriously.

“I was kidding,” Anne explained.

They don’t exactly have the greatest sense of humor, those Nostredames, she thought, and she placed the low goblets on the table. Her husband came back in with the wine.

“Children, you will have lemonade today,” he said and they began to cheer.

“Your brother has just become inspector,” his wife informed him.

“That’s good news. Are we in your district now?” Michel asked, but Antoine wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“I thought you couldn’t cook,” the inspector said to Anne a little later.

“I’ve learned my husband’s cookbook off by heart,” she confessed. “His book *La Traite* is even being published in Antwerp.”

“I would rather go into “retraite”!” the guest yawned. In the meantime, the children were slurping their lemonade and father served out the pasta.

“What is that?” Paul called out, eyeing the strange doughy strands suspiciously.

“It’s an Italian dish, son. Bon appétit,” he wished everyone. Pauline began to carefully separate the strands and her brothers followed her lead.

“It is delicious!” Michel praised his kitchen princess. It didn’t take the children long to discover the possibilities of the silly food and they did a contest to see who could suck up a strand the fastest.

“Don’t play with your food,” Father berated them, and they quickly bit them off.

“They sure listen well,” Antoine commented, taking a drink of spring water. “By the way, did you know that Bertrand is working on a prestigious project?”

“No, I didn’t. Did you, Anne?” But his wife knew nothing about it either.

“Bertrand is going to be digging engineer Craponne’s canal,” Antoine told.

“He is?” Anne said, surprised.

“Yes, our brother has grown into a big contractor. It is a gigantic project that will make him a lot of money.”

“Even when he was little, he was already renovating the house,” Michel remembered.

“The canal is supposed to make La Crau fertile,” his brother continued.

“They have already started digging at the Durance and they want the channel to eventually reach all the way to Salon, but that will take years.”

The maid came in with a crying Diana in her arms.

“Madam, I can’t find the pincers anywhere,” she said, nervously.

“They’re in the top drawer of the chest next to the hearth,” Anne said, and the maid disappeared.

“Michel, what do you think about paying your brother a visit?” his wife asked.

“I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“I happen to already have a meeting scheduled with Bertrand in Saint Rémy tomorrow,” Antoine remarked. “I will tell him you’re coming.”

“I think it will be interesting to see him at work on his project,” Michel hinted. “What do you think, Anne?”

“Fascinating, but it is more than twenty kilometers away and some of those are through very rough terrain.”

“We can do it,” her husband said. “Ask Bertrand if he would mind.”

“Okay, I will,” Antoine promised. The pot of spaghetti was empty by now and the children went to play in the backyard.

“Well, I’d better be going now,” and Antoine said goodbye to everyone. Father sat down on the veranda, to digest his meal and observed his kids from a distance, while they were playing with a ball.

“Dammit,” Anne suddenly shouted from the kitchen and she ran out into the yard.

“Who threw spaghetti up against the ceiling?” she asked, furious.

“Paul,” the children all said, startled, but the culprit had fled the scene.

“He’s going to be in trouble when he gets back,” Mother roared.

A few days later, Michel and Anne went to La Roque, on horseback. Bertrand was digging there with his crew. The kids stayed home with the maid. After a tough journey through the mountainous northern part of La Crau, where the river Durance flowed, they found the excavation site being worked on in full force. They tied up their horses and stepped into the building wagon that was parked a few meters from the activities. An older man was inside, sitting at a desk, writing diligently and didn’t notice them come in until Michel politely coughed.

“My famous brother and his wife!” Bertrand called out excitedly.

“I see you’re well on your way too,” Michel said and they gave each other a hug.

“Sit down,” Bertrand invited them and got a wooden bench for them.

“How are you doing with your life’s work?” he asked, once they were all seated.

“*The Prophecies* are making good progress,” his brother answered, always reserved when it concerned his work.

“Incomprehensible. Where do you get it all from...”

“And how many kilometers are you digging here?” Michel asked.

“Twenty-six kilometers and a hundred and fifty meters, to be exact,” the building master calculated for them. He looked a lot like his brother: piercing eyes, red cheeks, bald head, thick beard, straight nose. Their characters, however, were like day and night.

“You must be thirsty,” and without waiting for a response, Bertrand poured three mugs of beer.

“See, the canal is going to be right here,” and he rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a map of the planned project. And while his well-read brother seriously absorbed himself in the map, Bertrand and Anne had a cheerful toast.

“Cheers to the canal,” she said flamboyantly. One of the workmen came in moments later.

“We found something interesting,” he reported.

“Our archeologist”, Bertrand whispered, and they followed him outside to a dug up pile of rubble.

“Look, various pieces of an old mosaic,” the worker said, and showed them a broken tile that showed part of a snake with an apple in its mouth.

“That must be from Roman times,” Bertrand suspected, “Christians don’t use that symbol.”

“But the Kathars do,” Michel said, as he stepped closer to the dig. While the others were admiring the shards, he looked for clues. He found something.

“At the bottom of the canal, there is a trace of a circular wall,” he called out, and they all came closer to see.

“It probably used to be a well, embellished with decorative tiles,” he continued. “Would you mind if I took that piece with the snake home with me?” he asked his brother. “It fascinates me.”

“Be my guest”, Bertrand shrugged. They went back inside.

“Where do you know Adam de Craponne from? He lives near us in the city; not anywhere near you,” Anne asked, after they had filled their beer glasses again.

“The engineer works with all kinds of municipalities that have recommended me,” Bertrand explained. “He is actually looking for more financing. Would that be of any interest to you?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?” Anne asked, looking at her husband, who looked non-committal.

“I am convinced it would be a good investment,” Bertrand said, persuasively. “Aside from the fact that you would be co-owner, there will be income from the sale of the surrounding land that will be fertilized by irrigation. And the profits will be divided among the owners.”

“It does sound interesting,” Michel responded cautiously. “We will consider it.” When the beer was finished, the builder had to get back to work and he promised to pay them a visit in Salon the Provence with his wife soon.

When they got home, they discussed the attractive investment.

“Maybe something to consider for our old age,” Anne suggested, “when we can’t do anything anymore.” Her husband also thought it seemed like a good idea, and after weighing the pros and cons they decided to invest the considerable sum of two hundred crowns in the project.

“I still have a lot of work to do, darling,” Michel said after that big decision and he retired to his study, where he added the broken tile to his collection of relics. After that he sorted his writing materials and checked his mail. There were two important messages. The first one was from his publisher, Chomarar, in Lyon. He wrote that the king had ordered no less than three hundred copies of the third part of *The Prophecies*. Henry II also asked for an accompanying letter for it.

My book as a relationship present, Michel grumbled at first. The king who sets a good example hasn’t been born yet. But deep down inside he felt honored.

Well, after all, escaping the wheel of Samsara is no small feat, he came around. The other envelope was the one he had been waiting for: the response from the queen. After he broke the seal, he tensely read what she had written. It seemed Catherine was very excited about the horoscope he had sent her with the elaborate character sketch and she asked him to do charts for all seven of her children in the same way. Unless she heard from him, he would get picked up the following Thursday.

There is not even time for a response, he determined, annoyed. After writing an accompanying letter for part three, he leaned back in his chair to think.

No sinecure and another difficult journey, he sighed. A few minutes later, he was telling his wife the good news and his decision: he would meet with the offspring of the House of Valois in Paris.

The next week he was picked up and he said goodbye to his family again. They all waved to him from the front door.

“I think the queen is falling for Dad,” Madeleine suggested when the carriage had left.

“But he’s not falling for her,” said César.

“Let’s hope not,” mother said, and they all went back into the house.

The seven little princes were at Le Louvre, an old, medieval fort, that had been built in the twelfth century to protect the city against attacks from

outside, but that had been used as a royal residence for the last number of years. Nostradamus would stay at Hôtel des Tournelles, which was within walking distance of Le Louvre. As soon as he arrived he walked to the colossal fort to meet the royal offspring, who were being tutored there daily in all kinds of subjects. He would - according to the agreement - spend a day with each of them and that meant that he would leave after one week. A secretary welcomed the expected astrologer and immediately took him to the children's quarters.

"Is the queen not here?" Michel asked.

"No, Sir, the royal couple is seldom in Paris. Do you have a preference to which of the children you'd like to see first?"

"I might as well start with the eldest," he said, and they entered the room of Francis II. The bars in front of the windows showed that this part of the fort had served as a prison in the past. The closed-off room was, however, equipped with all princely amenities. The seven-year-old Francis was sitting on his bed, quietly waiting.

Not a very stimulating environment for a child, the scholar thought, walking towards the boy.

"Say hello to the doctor, Your Highness," the secretary commanded sternly. Francis shook his visitor's hand.

That feels more like a dead fish than a human hand, Michel thought.

"May I walk freely through Le Louvre with the prince?"

"Um..., yes, that would be fine," the secretary reluctantly agreed.

"Let's go, Francis, let's take a walk," Michel ordered the boy, and a court servant immediately began to follow them.

"I would prefer if we could walk alone," the scholar said to him. The glorified babysitter hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should abandon his duty, but then left.

"I will let alert the guards," he let him know.

"Well, Francis, you sure are living in a gilded cage here," Michel said when they were alone. For the next few hours, the two of them wandered through countless rooms with exciting treasures and archives of the French kings from days gone by. Francis looked healthy and everything was there, but mentally, he was weak and he didn't have much energy. After the elaborate visit, the seer returned to his hotel, where he got started on Francis' horoscope right away. The next morning, he visited the second son, six-year-old Charles IX, who, despite the isolated environment, was a lot livelier. Nostradamus got permission to walk through the court gardens with him, where tropical birds and wild animals were kept in cages. While they were walking past the cages, he studied the child's behavior. The lad was throwing stones to the animals and then putting his hand through the bars to stroke them. His companion had to repeatedly snatch him away.

This one's not very smart, he thought. No, Charles would also not make a good king. When they got to the monkey cage, they were unexpectedly surprised by a visit from the queen.

“Doctor, I just had to see you,” Catherine fawned and she suggested the three of them to have a tea ceremony.

“I had just been told that you hardly ever come here,” Michel said as they were walking inside.

“Nonsense, there are state banquets, tournaments and other events here on a regular basis. But how is it going with the study?”

“It’s too soon to give you a report, Your Majesty.” After the short break, the queen left them to go and support her husband with the state visit of Prince Rudolph of Habsburg. On the fourth day, the scholar was taking an early walk around Le Louvre and looking at the disjointed building structure, on which architects, builders and decorators had been let loose for centuries.

Maybe I’ll take the next child outside the gates, he thought, then he’ll finally be able to see a bit of the outside world. And he walked to the secretary to propose his plan.

“Absolutely not!” the secretary said firmly. “The safety of the children is paramount.”

“But they are languishing here,” the physician explained. “At least allow one child to have a look at real life. It would be so good for his development.”

The secretary compromised by sending a message to the royal couple, who were staying somewhere in Paris, and an hour later, permission was granted. Michel was sauntering through the streets of Paris with Henry III the same day and while they walked, they rummaged in the proletarian shops. It was visibly good for the boy. They larked about until they reached the Ile de la Cité and then returned via Pont Neuf.

Too bad, but this child is also not a bright light, he concluded. My findings will not please the queen. After the little prince had been safely returned home, Michel walked to his lodgings in the twilight. So far, everything had gone well, but when he got close to Hôtel des Tournelles, he noticed that someone was following him. He decided to confront the man and resolutely turned around. Startled, the man, who was wearing a long coat with a high collar, quickly disappeared into a dark lane.

It’s more dangerous than I thought here, Michel realized. From now on, no more little princes outside of the gate. The next morning, he had a visit with the second youngest child, who was only two years old. He showed the same characteristics as his brothers, and the day passed uneventfully.

Tomorrow the youngest one and then my job is done, the astrologer happily thought to himself. He was leaving Le Louvre late that night, because he had had permission to nose around in the archives. He left the poor lighting of the building behind him and crossed the square to go home. It was pitch black and the streets of Paris seemed deserted. Suddenly, he noticed three shapes behind him.

Darn, that feels sinister, he thought. Stupid of me to walk the streets so late at night by myself, and he walked a little faster. Just past the new Pavillon du Roi, which was still surrounded by scaffolding, he darted into a lane to

check if he was really being followed. The shadowy figures immediately took the same turn. The light-footed scholar was forced to speed up. As expected, the men behind him began to run after their prey. He tried to get rid of them in the confusion of the dark alley ways. With his adrenaline pumping, Michel scrutinized the stone walls, corners and fences of the Parisian houses. But he couldn't find an escape route and hoped for an inspiration, but his clairvoyance had abandoned him.

It's beyond my control, he decided and looked behind him. An instant later they had him. He called out for help, but all the windows and doors stayed closed. The bandits covered his mouth and pushed him into a dead-end alley. When they pulled out their knives, they heard the sound of horse hooves and turned around, startled. Just in time, some police officers rode into the lane on horseback and attacked the scoundrels, who were now trapped like rats. With their sabres raised, the police attacked and two of them were immediately pierced. The third one managed to escape the sword, but was soon caught and put in handcuffs. While Michel breathed a sigh of relief and was about to thank his rescuers, a carriage pulled up and a dignitary got out.

"Are you unharmed?" It was Morency, the police chief who had escorted him earlier.

"Your timing couldn't have been better. Yes, I'm fine," the seer said. Morency brought him to the carriage.

"You made a number of enemies at the court in a very short time," he told him, "that's why the queen has ordered me to keep an eye on you."

"Who wants to murder me?" Michel asked.

"I can't tell you. Many interests of the court are intertwined with each other. What I can tell you is that the Paris authorities have begun an investigation of your magical practices and therefore I advise you to leave the city as soon as possible."

"But I still have to meet with one more child."

"I think you'd better postpone that agreement with the queen, because you are really not safe here," Morency urged him. The astrologer decided to finish his job, however and got dropped off at the hotel. The next day he met with the youngest royal child, after which he left Paris as quickly as he could.

The visitor to the royals once again arrived home safe and sound, and without another gout attack. And there he showed another side of himself. Not the prophet with a heavy heart, but a joyful father, who put a mysterious, overstuffed suitcase on the table for his family. His wife and children looked at it expectantly.

"What is the magician up to?" Anne asked.

"I brought you all something," he smiled. "Hocus pocus, what is hiding in my bag?" and he took out a folder with seven sheets of paper with painted handprints of the little De Valois princes.

“Souvenirs!” Anne exclaimed excitedly, and her husband handed the pictures out to everyone.

“Be careful with them,” he instructed, “because I can’t ask the princes to do them again.” His loved ones were all very pleased and, curious, they began to compare their royal prints with the others.

“And I have another surprise for you,” Michel said to his wife and he gave her a miniscule pen drawing of Le Louvre.

“Oh, it’s beautiful! I will hang it up above the hearth right away,” she responded lyrically.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” he advised.

During the following weeks he completed the horoscopes of the seven princes and wrote a letter to the queen, saying that her sons would all be kings. He didn’t add that her offspring were all too weak to rule the country and that the title of king would only be a formality. She was smart enough to be able to deduce that from reading the character sketches herself.

Chapter 9

*The great man will fall before the conflict
A significant murder; dead too soon and mourned
Born imperfectly, must swim often
The earth near the river smeared with blood*

The study was in dire need of a thorough cleaning and the new maid opened the attic window to let in some fresh air. Nostradamus nervously eyed his instruments and papers. He didn't like this; another new one. He would much rather clean everything up himself, but he was getting older and his gout was starting to act up. And with her eye on the master, the maid cleaned the room.

"Are you being careful with my test tubes?" he asked tersely.

"You're welcome to wait downstairs till I'm finished, Doctor," she replied, irritated. He reluctantly decided to do so, though not feeling very trusting. He began to pace back and forth in the living room and his son César, who was eleven years old by now, got the brunt of it.

"Put that tinderbox back where it belongs," he shouted angrily. "Or your mother won't be able to light the fire," and the boy hastily put the object back, next to the hearth. It took some getting used to, giving up control.

"Oh, the bed!" he just remembered and he stormed back upstairs.

"Before you leave, I need you to help me get the bed from the garden house," he said, while glancing around at his things suspiciously.

"All right," the maid squeaked. After finishing the clean-up, and dragging the piece of furniture up the stairs, she left and the scholar was free to get back to work in peace. He wanted to use the bed to comfortably get into a trance and he pushed it to where he wanted it.

Just a sheet should be sufficient, he thought. He lay down and thought about his masterwork. During the last few months he had managed to complete two successive Centuries; together they comprised three actual centuries.

The history of mankind is truly one big repetition, he philosophized, getting back up. From one Nero to the next. After every war there is peace and then it's another grab for power. Human will always keep chasing illusions.

It was getting to be night time and Michel sniffed some of the powder that he kept in one of his desk drawers. With his mind expanded, he opened the attic window to observe the stars through his spyglass. The sky was exceptionally clear and he soon discovered a spiral star cluster. In spiral star clusters, the stars show a strong concentration toward the center, in

contrast to open star clusters. The children were banging relentlessly on the walls below him.

“Hey, can you guys be a little quieter!” he called out. It got quiet, except for a bit of whining, but that was tolerable. Father again peered through his spyglass and observed the nebula, which he figured must consist of ten of thousands of stars.

“The stars look as though they’re very close together,” a voice suddenly spoke out of nowhere. “But if you travel at the speed of light, you need at least a month to go from one star to another.” Michel pushed the spyglass away from his eye in surprise and looked around. A small grey-haired man was standing beside him. An apparition!

“Who are you?” Michel asked.

“I am a physicist,” the old man answered and he asked if he could have a look through the instrument.

“The spiral nebulas are some of the oldest object known to us,” the physicist went on, looking at the sky.

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“They’re compact enough to stay stable.”

“I know that this star cluster is called Omega Centauri,” Michel commented.

“Omega Centauri,” the old man repeated, absentmindedly, “misleading, really, that many of these stars are not where we think they are.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand...”

“Well, the light of the stars bends somewhat when it’s near other stars, which causes a curve in space time,” the physicist explained, but the other scholar still didn’t understand.

“A curve in space time?”

“Time is a relative phenomenon, you know. When you’re sitting next to an attractive woman, two hours seems like two minutes, but when you’re sitting on a bed of hot coals, two minutes seems like two hours.” Michel nodded; he got that.

“Where are you from, by the way?”

“That’s a good question and I have several answers for it,” the stranger answered, “but I won’t bother you with my views. I was born in Germany and I later moved to America with my wife. In 1955, I died of heart failure and since then I have had the freedom to devote myself to the science of the universe.”

“America, the land of the Indians.”

“They have since been wiped out,” the old man replied.

“I suppose you moved because of the Nazi regime?”

“Exactly. The Jews were persecuted this time. Hatred and fear rules anew. There are two things that are never-ending: the universe and human stupidity. But I’m not entirely sure about the universe.”

“Short-sightedness is run-of-the mill too in my time, but in the larger scheme of things, we are all humans with defects.”

“You sure hit the nail on the head there,” the old man said. “If only everyone could act from that standpoint. But may I ask what your name is?”

“Michel Nostradamus, astrologer and physician. And what’s yours?”

“Albert Einstein, but you can just call me Albert. So, you’re a famous scientist too, that’s why we get to meet. Your telescope is pretty archaic.”

“You mean my spyglass? Yes, well, I’ve got to use whatever I can get,” and Michel looked at his instrument a little forlornly.

“I’ve had the good fortune that in my time technology was more advanced,” Albert resumed, “and partly because of that, I’ve been able to develop my theories.”

“What are your theories?”

“Well, anyone can have the wildest theories, of course. I always say: if the facts don’t match the theory, change the facts. But to answer your question: One of the things I’ve been occupying myself with is how gravity acts at great distances.”

“Are those complicated theories of any use to the world?” Michel asked. Albert was quiet for a moment.

“You just hit a sensitive nerve,” he said, suddenly dejected. “Well, yes, there are developments that benefit society, but there is a downside too. I should probably have hidden my creativity better.” He was clearly feeling guilty about something.

“Your expression is telling me that you caused something awful to happen.”

“Well,” Albert sighed, “I made a huge assessment error which could possibly have fatal consequences for mankind. I was afraid of the growing aggressiveness of the Germans and thought that the American army needed strengthening. So I enabled other scientists to create an atom bomb.”

“Can you explain to me what that is?”

“Okay. I’ll keep it simple. If you split the smallest part of a chemical element, an enormous amount of energy is released. An atomic fission of specific atoms even sets off a chain reaction which is absolutely devastating.”

“Pandora’s box?”

“Yes, something like that,” Albert agreed.

“And I suppose some malicious people have run off with your knowledge?”

“Perhaps I am malicious myself as well. I also suffer from narrow-mindedness. Splitting prejudices is even more difficult than splitting atoms.”

“Well, at least you are trying to be righteous.”

“Yes, well, unfortunately, the bombs have been used several times with disastrous results, and that was after I urged the president of the United States not to allow them to explode.”

“What are United States?”

“Um, that is part of North America.”

“So, you didn’t really know what kind of damage your research was capable of causing?”

“If I knew what it could do, it wouldn’t be research,” Einstein answered caustically. “But after the Second World War, new positions of power were created amongst nations.”

“America and Russia?”

“Precicely. Russia also gained access to atom technology and an arms race between the two superpowers ensued. By now, both parties have a big enough arsenal of nuclear weapons to destroy the world ten times over. On top of that, both leaders each have a so-called red button within their reach. One push on the button would instantly release all nuclear weapons against each other.”

“The more influence you have on life, the greater your responsibility,” Michel mused.

“Go ahead, rub it in; as if I’m not already feeling guilty enough about it. But once I had gained a reputation, I began to push for world-wide disarmament and equal rights for everyone. Sadly, it’s been in vain, because shortly after my death, the United States and the Soviet Union got into a big dispute over Cuba and now they are on the verge of destroying each other,” and the nuclear scientist nervously twirled his moustache.

“God’s ways are unfathomable, even if you’re clairvoyant,” Michel tried to comfort him. “But who are the leaders of the superpowers?”

“Um, that would be President Roosevelt for the US and Stalin for the USSR. I was even good friends with Roosevelt, and...”

“No, I mean during that conflict, after you died.”

“Oh, after me. That would be John F. Kennedy and Nikita Chroesjtsjov. They are the ones who will determine whether there will be a Third World War or not, and if that happens, the Fourth World War will be fought with sticks and stones.”

“Did you meet those two leaders personally?”

“Well, I did get to meet Kennedy once in the White House, but that was just before he became president. At that time I had free access to the White House. But I didn’t get to know him. And I never met the Russian commander.”

“What is the White House?”

“That’s the seat of the American government. The Russian counterpart is the Kremlin. If you want to, I can take you to the White House.” That unusual offer certainly took Nostradamus by surprise and he had to stop and think about the possible consequences for a moment.

“All right, if you know the way,” he finally said.

“My memories are vivid, come on, let’s go,” Albert said, cheerful again and pulled his new friend towards the stairs. The children were sound asleep on the middle floor and didn’t notice anything as the two scientists descended.

“Do you have some kind of flying machine or something?” Michel whispered, not wanting to wake up his kids.

“We won’t need that,” Albert answered quietly. They reached the ground floor where Anne was looking through a pile of papers, by the light of a candle.

“Is that you?” she asked warily.

“Yes, darling, I’m just going for a walk; I’ll be right back.”

“Nice wife you’ve got.”

“Thanks, Albert,”

“Who are you talking to, for goodness sake?” Anne, who couldn’t see the physicist, asked.

“A colleague,” her husband replied. She left her dizzy husband alone; she knew it was not unusual for him to see ghosts. Einstein resumed walking with confidence and the other scientist was getting quite curious to see where he was being led to.

“We are going to go down one more set of stairs,” Albert let him know and they went down into the dark cellar, where they had to move by touch.

“There’s only wine in here,” the home’s owner protested.

“Just trust me...,” and, one step at the time, the two went forward.

“I can’t see a thing, I should have brought a light,” Michel grumbled, but then the cellar suddenly changed into a lit corridor with white walls and someone was coming out of one of the side passages.

“A staff member,” the nuclear scientist said, acting like he was feeling quite at home.

“Hello Mister Einstein,” the officer greeted him when they passed each other. Albert stopped him.

“Do you know where I can find the president?” he asked.

“I think he is getting some exercise in the swimming pool. You just go straight through and turn left at the end over there and...”

“Yes, thanks, I know where it is,” Einstein interrupted him and the two scholars continued on their way.

“They can’t see you. They’re pretty stupid,” he said, as they turned the corner. They soon reached the covered swimming pool, where an attendant was cleaning the pool.

“Isn’t the president here?” Albert asked him.

“No, he just left for the Oval Office,” and the duo immediately turned around.

“Let’s take the elevator; we need to get to the second floor,” Albert said. A mechanical box brought the two scientists upstairs, where they got out. The nuclear scientist knocked on one of the closed doors and waited for a moment.

“Come on in,” someone called. Einstein opened the door, which gave entrance to an oval-shaped office.

“Hi Albert, here for another visit?” a man in a wheelchair asked.

“Yes, Theodore, I thought it was time for another look.”

"I thought you were taking me to see President Kennedy," Michel commented.

"Have some patience," his colleague hushed, and they looked around the beautiful office, while Theodore remained silent. It was as if he was switched off.

"How come this office is oval, anyway?" Michel asked.

"Because that way you can look everyone in the eyes during a conference," Albert answered.

"You're a funny one."

"No, seriously. Look there's Kennedy." The man in the wheelchair had flown on to other realms and in his place now stood a handsome middle-aged man. Michel waved his hand right in front of the new president's face, but there was no reaction.

"He can't see me either," Albert indicated. Kennedy looked pale and had dark circles under his eyes.

"He usually has enormous charisma," the nuclear scientist resumed, alluding to the seriousness of the situation.

"Max, you're just who I need to see," the president suddenly said to Nostradamus, catching him by surprise.

"Max is his personal physician," Albert explained, "this role is made for you."

"Made for me?"

"Just play along. And good luck!" And Einstein disappeared into thin air.

Come now, I get to do his dirty work? Michel complained. But he shook the president's hand.

"Max, you've got to help me stay on my feet. My back is bothering me so much," his Excellency continued. His voice sounded tired and he sat down gloomily on a couch in the center of the office. Michel sat down beside him to lend him an ear.

"I need more of those pills, Max. They're all demanding the utmost of me. Russia is placing more and more nuclear missiles in Cuba. The situation is getting out of hand."

"Um, I don't have any pills," the medieval man stammered.

"An injection's okay too. Man, that damn corset is crooked again."

Nostradamus was inadvertently drawing him out and the president aired his heart some more.

"Chroesjtsjov is walking all over me. That Russian sees me as a weak leader. It's probably true too. I haven't been taking a strong enough position in a number of important issues. His communist allies also think I'm a weakling," and his head dropped down to his chest in a gesture of defeat.

"Give me something, Max, I've got to keep going," he begged again. "We can't just accept nuclear missiles that are pointed at the United States from so close by. I've sent all the diplomats to the Russian commander to convince him of this, but to no avail." Kennedy stared ahead with a vacant expression and suddenly collapsed. The big couch caught him and he lay

on it motionlessly. Near the desk, there was a beeping sound and Michel walked up to it to investigate.

“Mister President,” a voice announced from a loudspeaker, “Chroesjtsjov on the line for you.” He listened attentively.

“Hello Mister Kennedy. You are worried about our defense arms at more than ninety miles from the coast of America? Then I’d like to point out to you that your offense weapons have been set up in Turkey, pointing at our territory.” The seer let out a big sigh.

“Or is it your opinion,” the Russian continued, “that it is your exclusive right to demand safety for your country?”

“I’m not who you think you are,” Michel said, but his words were ignored.

“I therefore propose the following,” Chroesjtsjov spoke, unreachable. “We are prepared to remove our missiles from Cuba, and make a promise to the United Nations. Then you must remove your weapons from Turkey and make a similar promise. Do you agree?”

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door of the Oval Office and, startled, the scholar caused a magnetic disruption in the control panel and broke off the connection with the Russian. Vice president Johnson and other top officials entered the office. They were visibly shocked when they saw their leader lying lifelessly on the couch, and rushed to his side.

“He’s alive,” Johnson said, relieved, while he checked his heart beat.

“He’s collapsed a few times during the past few weeks,” one of the ministers said glumly.

“I’ll call Max Jacobson,” the general offered.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Johnson asked. “You know what they call him in Parliament: Doctor Feelgood.”

“Yes, but the president doesn’t want anyone else,” the general said and they decided they’d better alert Jacobson, who was staying in the west wing. Kennedy’s personal physician soon came rushing in and examined his boss.

“He has fainted, due to a shortage of the required substances,” he quickly diagnosed. He rolled up the president’s sleeve and gave him an injection. Sure enough, Nostradamus saw with surprise, that as soon as the substance had been administered, John F. Kennedy slowly but surely came to.

“Thank you, Max. You sure know how to support me through thick and thin,” his boss mumbled, while he sat up, with some difficulty.

“Mister President, we don’t want to disturb you unnecessarily,” the general said, nervously, “but we have extremely important news.”

“Okay, go ahead,” John answered, still feeling a bit dull.

“Well, it is clearly visible on the new photos that the Russian missiles are still being placed on Cuba. The entire army top is of the opinion that we should teach the Russians a lesson and proceed with an attack.” A staff member appeared at the door.

“Mister President,” the employee called, “Mister Sukarno is here. May I send him in?” Kennedy agreed and hastily spoke to his colleagues.

“There is one mediator left who I think stands a chance of succeeding and that is the president of the Indonesian Republic. He is in close contact with the Russian commander.” Sukarno came in and the Americans welcomed him.

“Please, sit down,” Kennedy requested, but Sukarno declined and began to speak agitatedly.

“After the incident with your airplane, the B-25, I am suspecting the American government of wanting to cause my downfall and because I strongly suspect that this room is bugged, I request the president to allow our discussion to take place in his bedroom.” The general took his boss aside.

“Our intelligence is warning against a possible assassination attempt on you,” he whispered.

“In my bedroom? And by him? No... And anyway, I don’t want to lose my freedom,” Kennedy decided and left the office with Sukarno. Michel followed the two presidents, who took the elevator to a higher floor. Once they had arrived there, the two leaders resumed walking, but their pursuer forgot to jump out of the box in time. The elevator doors closed too quickly and he was brought down to the basement, where the doors opened automatically. Not knowing how to operate this transportation device, he got out and came to the same corridor with the red carpet.

I think I’d better get home, Michel thought, I’ve seen enough. He took the same route back and it soon got dark again. After a while, he saw a light in the distance, which turned out to be his own cellar stairs. He stumbled up the stairs, feeling quite depressed.

“Is that you?” Anne asked, still holding papers in her hands. Silently, he padded towards his wife and sat down with her at the table.

“Where’s your colleague?” she teased, while looking at pictures of herbs. Turned inward, he put his elbows on the table and sighed.

“Are you okay?” she continued.

“Anne, sometimes I think I’m going mad,” he said, finally.

“What happened?”

“The world in the future is about to explode. It’s all getting to be just too much for me.”

“Come here,” she asked and he knelt next to her and put his head on her lap. Anne gently stroked his last few strands of hair.

“I just feel so responsible for the fate of the human race,” he complained.

“My life’s path runs right through hell.”

“You’re special,” she said, trying to encourage him.

“Anne, from now on, don’t open to door to all those wretched souls who are constantly asking for help, okay? It’s all just too much for me these days.”

“All right, I won’t. But let’s get some sleep now. Tomorrow is a new day,” and they went to bed.

Michel's depression was the beginning of a new gout attack. It was a big one and he had to stay in bed for a month. His wife answered all his mail for him; requests for reading horoscopes, or for advice about illnesses, from people everywhere. Once in a while there was an argumentative challenge from a scientist about some controversial topic, and she just ignored those ones. For the most part, it was sufficient to send a standard message in French, saying that the doctor was not able to personally answer the letter, due to special circumstances.

"I'll find a clerk soon, to take care of my correspondence," her husband promised, lying in bed in a lot of pain.

"Yes, we certainly do need one," Anne agreed. She was getting exhausted too. André and Diane came in and started jumping on the bed.

"You guys, you leave your sick father alone," Mother ordered testily and she closed the curtains to separate the area from the rest of the room.

"I'm sorry you're having such a hard time because of me," her husband apologized.

"Don't worry, everything will be all right," Anne said, as she sat down at the side of his bed. "But something strange is going on. That big bag of nutmeg is already all gone again!" He didn't respond to that and turned away from her, feigning pain.

"Hey, I don't appreciate that. I want to know what you do with it," she asserted sincerely, but he wouldn't answer.

"What's the big mystery?"

"I just use it for certain experiments," he answered indefinitely. But she wanted to know exactly what he did with it. He did not want to tell her. Finally, he gave in.

"Okay, I inhale it," he confessed.

"Why on earth would you do that?"

"I inhale it because it stimulates my sense of imagination." Anne suddenly turned to ice.

"I refuse to work for an addict," she said, resolutely.

"An addict?" Michel reacted like a hurt puppy and he turned to face her.

"This last drop makes the bucket overflow," she continued.

"Darling, what are you talking about?" and he tried to sit up, groaning.

"We're all walking on eggshells for you, in this house!"

"I thought you said everything was fine?"

"Yes, that's what you thought. But it's not true. You see and feel everything, except your own family. Everything is about you and now this." He let her blow off some steam.

"And that infernal control of yours," she accused him, "you never let yourself go. It would be better if you hit me once in while," and she mockingly pushed him back into bed.

"Temper yourself a bit, please, you'll scare the kids."

"They're always scared already," she yelled, just to make sure they could hear it. He realized he couldn't say anything right, so he didn't say anything.

“We also never have normal sex,” she rattled on. “I thought Jews were good in bed, but you seem more like a statue of a saint. I wish you’d have a normal orgasm once in while, like normal man!” and she walked away, furious. Michel crawled out of bed and limped after her.

“Oh, so his holiness can walk all of a sudden. So I’ve been killing myself for a pretender. I never want to see you again,” and she stormed down the stairs and slammed the door so hard that the whole house shook.

She’s right; I’m addicted, he thought. I want to see images of the future too much and that’s why I’ve maybe become insensitive. I’ll stay away from it from now on, and he crawled back under the woolen blankets.

The fight raged on and on and Nostradamus was forced to answer his letters himself; his usually lively wife refused to do anything for him anymore. In fact, she refused to do anything at all. Fortunately, the kids were old enough to fend for themselves. Still reeling from his gout attack, he wrote a letter to Jean Dorat, one of his admirers in Paris. Perhaps the renowned scholastics teacher had a good student who would be able to assist him. His wife, meanwhile, had retreated to the garden house and the spouses avoided each other for weeks. Until one night there was a banging on the front door.

Another one of those desperados, the healing scholar thought, shuffling towards the entrance.

“Leave me alone!” he called out, but the racket continued and he begrudgingly opened the door.

“Is there something wrong with your ears, or what?” and he looked intently at the supposed needy person standing in the doorway.

“Good heavens, it can’t be true!” The ghost of François Rabelais, his study friend from the olden days, had appeared before him.

“By Jupiter, the devil is playing tricks on me,” Michel swore.

“Calm down, man, calm down. It’s really me,” François said soothingly.

“I thought you would have sensed I was on my way, but apparently you didn’t. Did I come at a bad time?”

“Um, no, of course not; or maybe you did. I’m kind of in the middle of a marital crisis, but come in,” and they hugged.

“Maybe I’m here to help you,” François suggested while they walked to the living room. They sat down near the fire place.

“What are you doing here?” Michel asked. “I thought you were the court physician of the viceroy of Piemonte.”

“Yes, I was, but now I work for the pope in Avignon. Where is your wife?”

“She’s in the garden house,” he answered dejectedly.

“Any kids?”

“Yes, six of them. They’re all asleep.”

“I’m very thirsty. Do you have something to drink?” François asked. And his old study friend went to the kitchen. When he returned with some beer, Rabelais had suddenly disappeared.

Have I really lost my mind after all? he asked himself, in all seriousness. But then he heard an unfamiliar noise in the garden and realized that he had not been hallucinating; François was trying to convince his wife to come out of the garden house.

“So, my husband has sent me a mediator,” Anne sneered, when a stranger entered her living space.

“No, no, you’re wrong. I had a premonition that my friend was in trouble and I spontaneously decided to pay him a visit.”

“Ha, another clairvoyant,” she said scornfully.

“You are speaking to the ambassador of the pope, you know!”

“I don’t care if you’re the pope himself, you arrogant oaf,” and she pushed him out of the garden house.

“Where did you find such a wife?” François asked, his ears burning, when he got back to the living room.

“Found her amongst a herd of wild horses,” Michel grumbled.

“Is that one of those obscure lines from your verses?” But the astrologer shook his head.

“Well, that explains a lot, but let me see you. We haven’t seen each other in ages,” and they looked at each other.

“You’ve still got a full head of hair,” Michel said.

“Yes, it’s still growing every day. And you look fantastic for your age.”

“Thanks, your eyes and tongue are as sharp as ever. Here’s your beer,” and they sat down by the fire again.

“Hard to imagine, you of all people, a free-thinking Cathar, working for the pope,” Michel continued.

“And why not? Your friend is your enemy, though I fully support Pope Pius IV. He is a spiritual leader with a lot of integrity and the bad stuff is happening only at the lower levels.”

“What kind of spiritual position do you have?”

“The pope has me secretly inspecting the inquisitors and bishops to see if they’re applying the teachings in a pure way.”

“Goodness gracious, right in the lion’s lair...”

“Yes, life must be lived on the cutting edge,” François answered.

“I agree with you on that. So, are you living the life of a celibate too?”

“Certainly. If I had chosen to have a family, I would have to pick a different profession. But I’m sure you have your enemies too.” Anne unexpectedly came in and the men looked at her curiously, trying to gauge her mood.

“I’m sorry I was so rude to you,” she apologized.

“Never mind, don’t worry about it. Why don’t you sit down with us?” the uninvited guest requested and she grabbed a chair.

“François is an old study friend of mine. Because of my years of wandering, we lost track of each other,” Michel explained, bashfully. But Anne wouldn’t give her husband the time of day, and only looked at the spiritual visitor.

“So this is the wife who has to offer resistance to the grand master,” Rabelais provoked her.

“Grand master?” she repeated indignantly. “Last week he got his beard stuck in the front door, while locking it. Every passerby had ample opportunity to give him a spanking.” François had to laugh so exuberantly at this, it was almost scary.

“Your husband is a genius when it comes to the inner life of humans, but on earth he can sometimes be a klutz, just like anyone else,” he said, recovering from the hilarity. Anne, however, was not convinced.

“I know he is famous everywhere, because of his publications,” she acknowledged, “but I’m not so sure about his greatness. A year ago, he mistook the mayor for a ghost and bumped right into him.” François had to laugh again.

“How can I explain it? Help me out here, Michel.”

“I just try to leave things alone as much as I can,” he answered vaguely.

“He always shrouds himself in mystery and never tells me anything about his inner world. He’s just like an oyster,” she added.

“Yes, your husband is indeed reticent and my tongue is very loose in comparison, but you know, speaking is silver, but silence is golden.” But Anne was not impressed.

“Good and evil are united in each person,” François continued his argument “and there is no one who knows this better than your husband.”

“Well, I know that. I often show my anger. He never does.”

“If your husband were to show his anger, it could destroy the world. That’s why he must be extremely careful with both words and deeds. It is a matter of awareness and your husband has been given an unprecedented, powerful amount of that.”

“You mean if Michel were to get mad at me, it could really harm me?”

“The average person could drop dead in a fight with him, or get seriously ill, but you are a strong woman who can take a lot. You are Plato.”

“Plato? You’re comparing me to that Greek philosopher?”

“Besides being the name of a philosopher, Plato is also the Greek word for broad-shouldered,” Michel interrupted.

“Oh, I get it. I’m strong enough to be able to take on my husband,” and finally there was a spark of contact between the two spouses again.

“Yes, certainly, but this is especially because he knows how to control his senses with the utmost self-discipline. Because, the bigger the mind, the bigger the beast,” Rabelais said wisely.

“You certainly praise my husband highly,” she said, still suspicious, “but if I’m not mistaken, you’re saying he has to be especially careful to never lose control?”

“Exactly; he really can’t afford to. Even an unguarded train of thought could have disastrous results. You see, thoughts are powers.”

“Can you explain that?”

“Okay, take that chair you’re sitting on, for example. It didn’t just spring into existence. First there has to be a thought or a mental image of a chair,

and that is then followed by matter. In the case of the chair, this is the wood in the hands of the carpenter.”

“Hmm, that sounds kind of like a prediction coming true,” she compared.

“Just see, Michel, your wife has occult knowledge.”

“If he had shared his knowledge with me sooner, we wouldn’t be having this crisis.”

“Yes, it might be a good idea to communicate more with your wife,” François said to his friend.

“I’m starting to see the truth of that,” Michel admitted. The marriage crisis was coming to an end and they celebrated with a beer.

“It’s time for me to leave you now, my friends,” François finally announced.

“You’re welcome to stay here,” Anne offered.

“Thank you, I appreciate your hospitality, but I’ve already made arrangements to stay at The Swan.”

“Before you leave, there’s something I’d like to show you,” Michel said.

“Okay, but first I’ll visit your washroom,” François said, and the seer went ahead to his work room. When Anne was showing the guest where the bathroom was, he whispered something in her ear: “Anne, your husband is very nearly enlightened. Try to let go of him in your heart. Only the individual soul can transcend; and God loves him.” And without waiting for a response, he walked away. The weighty words slowly penetrated and she finally understood that she had an important task to fulfill. In the attic, Michel was waiting to show his friend the broken tile with the snake.

“You might know what this is,” he said when he got there.

“Jesus, a part of the mosaic of Magdalene of Montségur,” François exclaimed in surprise and he carefully picked up the age-old tile.

“That’s not where it came from though. It came from La Roque near the Durance.”

“Well, in any case, take good care of it. But I have to go now,” and he put the tile back. The two men embraced like brothers.

“Be careful. Don’t get yourself murdered,” Michel warned him when they were walking down the stairs.

“And you watch you don’t crash down off your Jacob’s Ladder,” his friend replied cheerfully. When they got to the bottom of the stairs, he said goodbye to Anne. At the front door, the men exchanged a few more words.

“Thanks for everything François, and let’s keep in touch.”

“Yes, that’s what you promised forty years ago too,” his guardian angel answered as he took his leave.

Incorrigible, that Rabelais, Michel smiled with a hint of sadness, as he watched him walk away.

The next day, one Christophe de Chavigny arrived at the station of Salon de Provence. He asked around for the house of the prophet. His request was granted right away; there were many who wanted to accompany the young man from Paris, hoping to catch a glimpse of their mythical

townsman. The cum laude student of Jean Dorat was eager to develop himself under the tutelage of the grand master, and it was the butcher who dropped him off in front of the door, with his cart. With a bag of lamb chops in his hand, the snub-nosed student presented himself.

“Aha, my savior from Paris,” Nostradamus welcomed him, and because the house was apparently too small, he sent his helper, minus lamb chops, to an inn to spend the night.

First I’ll check out what kind of guy we’re dealing with here, Michel thought, eyeing the bag of meat.

Christophe turned out to be a true disciple. He didn’t need one extra word of instruction; he was quick as lightning in understanding what his master wanted from him. He carried out his tasks with such incredible dedication, that it overwhelmed his boss at times. The young Parisian was also familiar with all the latest philosophical trends, including rational thinking, and was just as proficient in the classical languages. Anne, meanwhile, had arranged for a new desk for the clerk and had her husband’s moved into the living room. After a month, the scholar had to acknowledge that De Chavigny’s presence was a blessing for him.

My correspondence has never been so up to date, he observed happily.

He was starting to get old now and had been worried that he would not be able to complete *The Prophecies*. But now he had enough time to be able to tend to it. He had already trained himself in the past to only need four or five hours of sleep at night, but that was primarily because an awake state was the best way to travel to the other side. That night, the pen-pusher had blessedly gone to his own place, a few streets away, and the children were all asleep. Just to be on the safe side, the master locked the door of his room.

I think I’ll change to a different technique, he said to himself and he went and got the copper stool. The stool with the legs that were the same angle as the incline on the sides of the pyramids in Egypt.

I’m staying away from the nutmeg and hallucinogenic oils from now on, he determined. I can’t let myself go mad. And he started to hum, next to the stool.

“No, that’s not working,” he mumbled and decided to try the meditation bed.

Chapter 10

*The two great leaders become friends
Their enormous power will increase
The new country approaches its peak
The number of Reds recounted*

In the middle of the night, the explorer of the skies found himself flying over a modern city, where horseless carriages, with lamps on their heads and tails, were driving around. He descended to have a closer look at this marvel and started wandering around the streets and squares, which were lit up lavishly. After a little while, a mighty building appeared up ahead, which he thought he recognized.

This must be the parliament buildings, under which Hister committed suicide, he suspected. His suspicion was confirmed by a monument in front of it. Berlin had recovered admirably from the enormously destructive war violence that had left behind huge piles of rubble back then. A river ran diagonally across the lit up city and he decided to follow the flowing water, which brought him to a church yard, where someone was trudging along the water's edge. A neglected-looking man was pushing a cart loaded up with junk.

Dead end, Michel thought, and let it be. He rose again, turned a sharp corner and flew back to the Potsdamer Platz.

Flying like a bird is a true joy, he decided and like a young god, he spread his wings. On the grand square stood a stately archway with a Greek chariot on top of it and he boldly flew through it. When he had passed the gateway, he bumped right into some kind of electrical field and the punch of it caused him to tumble down to the ground.

Pride always come before the fall, he rebuked himself for his frivolous behavior and feeling a bit dazed, he tried to figure out what had happened to him. He carefully examined the space, but he couldn't see anything. The fallen ghost got up and tested his flying skills.

Good, that's still intact, he thought, relieved. But what did I bump into? Curious, he moved towards the place where it had happened and looked all around the area surrounding it.

"There's got to be something," he mumbled and unexpectedly his hand touched a voltage field, and made a blue surface appear.

Holy cow, the future is full of surprises, and carefully he walked along the magnetic field, which kept shorting out every time he touched it. It seemed to be an invisible wall, which divided the city into two sections. It was a mystery to him what purpose it served, but he really wanted to know. The people who lived here must know more about this and with fresh impetus he started to hunt down a random passer-by. From high above the city, he

noticed the same hobo with his cart. And because he was the only sign of life around, he dove towards him.

"Hey, you!" he called out, but the Berliner with his crooked hat didn't hear him and just sauntered on. The ghost now landed right in front of him, but the man just kept walking, undisturbed.

He can't see or hear me, Michel understood, and deliberated how to get his attention. He had to hit the right nerve.

"Hey, Napoleon," he tried. That hit the target right away, because the tramp stopped abruptly.

"Friend or foe?" he wanted to know.

"Friend!"

"Wow, finally a fellow countryman. What is your rank?" the poor devil asked. He must have lost some of his marbles.

"Field Marshal," Michel played along.

"Didn't I order you to attack Russia?"

"Yes, but Moscow has been captured in the meantime."

"Excellent. That frees me to deal with cartload of stuff here," and he resumed walking.

"Do you happen to know why that electrical wall runs through Berlin?" the marshal intervened.

"Are you crazy, or what? There used to be wall. It was made of stone, but my brave men tore it down not long ago. I still have a picture of it," and he pulled a newspaper article out of his inside coat pocket. The seer looked at the photo of the dividing wall being demolished, and read the text under it. "Fall of the Berlin Wall* . It has now been exactly two years since the Iron Curtain, the division between East and West fell. A united Germany will commemorate the fall en masse today, with concerts and discussions, among other things. The Wall was intended to stop the flow of fugitives who were migrating to the free West."

So that's why there's a magnetic field running through the city, he understood. Years of frustration must have given the Wall a psychic charge.

"Where are those men of yours?" he then asked.

"I don't know where they are; they've exiled me, but I can show you where they hang out."

"Okay, show me the place," Michel requested. He wanted to find out how the conflict had been resolved. With the tramp pushing his cart again, the two started on their way to the eastern part of the city. After they had crossed the Alexanderplatz, the man stopped in front of a large, ungainly building.

"This is it, the old Police station, where I used to be in charge. You can go in and ask your questions."

"Yes, I will," the seer said. He gave him a franc and then walked towards the entrance.

* 1989

“Nay, Pau, Leon, more fire than blood,” the tramp called after him. Michel turned around in surprise when he heard the line from his own verse, in the wrong order. But the man was looking the other way and a little further on he moodily kicked a streetlight, which immediately went out.

Wow, amazing, my verses are going to be popular in the future, and feeling pleased, the seer entered the dilapidated building. Beyond the entrance was a gloomy-looking room with no one in it and he decided to go up the marble staircase.

Where are those brave guys he was talking about? Upstairs there was some hope, because he saw a few men who were busy doing something. They turned out to be just civil servants though. He went back downstairs and just as he was about to leave the vestibule he heard a loud sound, indicating activity, coming from the big room.

What on earth is happening in there? And curious, he stepped into the room, which was suddenly filled with a large crowd.

I must have spontaneously moved several years back in time, he speculated. He blended in with the crowd and keeping his ears wide open. It was a press conference and hundreds of journalists had gathered to see the topmost party leaders of the communist state.

“What’s going on?” he asked a reporter, who thought he was a foreign colleague.

“We’ve never been allowed to ask questions directly,” the East German answered, fiddling with the flash on his camera, “but it seems that this time Schabowski is bowing to pressure of the people to make an exception. The party is hoping to win back the support of the people through more openness.”

“What if they don’t succeed?”

“If they don’t succeed, our country will simply empty out, regardless of miles of walls and fences,” and he excused himself to wrestle his way to the front. Meanwhile, his colleagues were asking all kinds of questions, but as always, they just got a standard response, until a French journalist addressed the core issue in broken German.

“When will your fellow countrymen be free to travel to the West?” he asked simply. The reporters barely took his question seriously, because they fully expected Schabowski to find some elaborate way to talk his way around it without really answering it anyway. But in the face of the international crowd, the party leader suddenly felt like he was on trial, and he clammed up.

How can I go on telling all those lies? he worried, and breaking out into a cold sweat, he unexpectedly began to open up.

“Today, um, as far as I am aware, a decision has been made. And, um, we have decided... , that ultimately, every citizen will be allowed to cross the border.” The crowd was dumbstruck.

“When will this new rule go into effect?” a journalist immediately asked. Schabowski shuffled his papers a bit, and then looked at his staff members, who had no idea what to do either.

“Um, as far as I know, it will go into effect, as of this moment.” Because the press conference seemed so clumsy, everyone doubted if this was really true, until someone ran outside and shouted out loudly: “The border is open!” The news spread through the city like wildfire and soon the East Berliners streamed to the Wall en masse to check and see if they could really get into West-Berlin. Nostradamus floated along behind them. Amazing what one silly little question from my side can instigate, he thought. From now on, I really must let destiny take its own course.

The Wall turned out to be still locked and thousands of people besieged the border guards in a peaceful way. They were suddenly surrounded by a horde of reporters.

“Am I to understand that the Wall has to be opened today?” the head of the guard stammered.

“Yes, on the order of Schabowski,” everyone chanted. The officer waited for a while to see if he would receive formal instructions, but then succumbed to the enormous pressure and opened the border crossings. Fortunately, the Red Army did not intervene. Overwhelmed, the East-Berliners walked to the other side of the border, where they were met by West-Berliners, flocking towards them and welcoming them with loud applause. The seer happily looked on as total strangers embraced each other underneath the Brandenburger Tor and burst into tears of happiness and disbelief. The Berlin monument with the Greek chariot had been standing in no man’s land for so many years and some people were moved to touch its cold pillars. One of the city dwellers was parading under the gateway like a madman and filled with emotion kept calling out: “*Ich bin ein Berliner!*”

Isn’t that the man from the White House? Michel thought, but he couldn’t be more wrong: it was the future tramp who thought he was Napoleon. The man, who at this point had not yet deteriorated, suddenly began to kiss everyone and the seer also got a big smacker. The border was now definitely open and several strong men had already started to demolish the Wall.

“Souvenir for sale!” one of them joked, with a chunk of the wall in his hand. The French spectator then left the national festival and cheerfully returned to the Renaissance.

Finally, a happy ending, he thought, when he returned to his body. I’d like that to happen more often, and jumped down from the bed. It was the dead of night and he crept down the stairs on his tip toes, to the bedroom.

“Anne,” he whispered, “are you asleep?”

“Yes, I’m sleeping, but come on into bed,” and he carefully lay down beside her and went to sleep.

A new day dawned and the wind blew fresh air in through the open windows. Well-rested, the scholar went downstairs and found his wife ironing in the living room.

“You’re up late,” Anne said, while a cloud of steam rose from the ironing board.

“No guests today. Isn’t that the maid’s job?”

“She’s been sick for two days.”

“Oh, I didn’t notice,” her husband mumbled, leaning against the sewing basket.

“I have a lot of paperwork I have to do with Christophe today, but I’d like to go for an all day walk with you tomorrow,” he proposed.

“I can only go the day after tomorrow, because tomorrow my sister is coming over for a visit.”

“Okay, it’s a date,” he said, playing with the thimble.

“Do you want Jacqueline to sew another robe for you?” she asked.

“Yes, that would be great. But not a black one; brown would be good.”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself; she’ll like that.”

“All right, I will. By the way, I had an amazing experience last night,” Michel said, trying to involve her a bit more into the world of his experiences. “It was a kind of Jericho, except it was in Germany.”

“Ah, the walls that are crumbled by religion,” Anne knew and she placed the iron up on its stand.

“Yes, but not by a belief in God, but by a belief in freedom.”

“That sounds good to me,” and she started to iron the next piece of clothing while he held the seams tight for her.

“I like it when you tell me about your other life,” she said, suddenly shy, and for the first time ever, he saw her blush. Christophe came down from the attic.

“Master, Count Ercole from Florence has still not received your recommendations; I’m afraid the translations have been lost in the mail. Do you want me to prepare new ones?”

“No, just write him that he has to search more carefully in his administration. That shifty character is just trying to avoid my fee,” and both men started to walk up the stairs, while talking.

After Jacqueline’s visit, Anne and Michel jumped out of bed early the next day and took a picnic basket full of treats to the nearby fields and forests. After spending a very pleasant day together, the couple happily returned home with their basket filled with herbs and flowers. When they were nearing their home, they were approached by the priest, who was hurrying towards them.

“Doctor, have you heard the bad news already?”

“No, but I have some idea of what it could be. Pray tell.”

“The king is dead,” the priest said, looking sad. “He had an accident with one of his captains.”

But vanity was his guiding principle, Michel thought.

“You have a special bond with the royal house, Doctor,” the priest continued, “and that’s why I want to offer you my condolences.”

“Thank you very much, Reverend. This is a sad day for all of France,” and they continued their walk home. A crowd of people had gathered in front

of their house and when the mystic and his wife arrived, they all expressed their sympathy. The next day, the death of Henry II was legally proclaimed and that afternoon an escorted carriage stopped in front of the De Nostredame home. While the governor of Provence got out, the townspeople flocked to see him. Christophe opened the front door and as quick as a whip, he informed his master. Nostradamus came out from behind his desk and invited his friend, the governor, to take a seat on the porch.

“You know about the death of the king, of course,” Claude de Tende assumed, as he sat down at the outdoor table. The scholar nodded.

“A lance pierced his golden helmet and went right through his eye and throat; two wounds in one, during a practice duel,” the governor informed him. “But aside from the horror of it and the fact that we will all miss him, the unity of France is now in danger.

“Oh, I don’t think we have to worry about that,” his host opined, while a drop of rain splashed on his face.

“Let’s hope not. You had already predicted the king’s death in your last almanac. Catherine de Medici personally told me about that. For years I only considered your work a nice bit of entertainment, but now your predictions are being eerily confirmed. Do you have any idea what kind of power you could have?”

“I am only too aware of that, and feel very responsible.”

“So why didn’t you warn Henry II?”

“The king didn’t want to have anything to do with astrology,” Michel calmly explained. The governor sighed deeply and was clearly affected by the death, which could even have consequences for his own position.

“Marguerite de Valois, the king’s sister, would like to come and see you for a consultation. She will contact you soon,” he resumed.

“She is most welcome; I will be happy to serve her,” the scholar promised. Claude stared straight ahead, looking melancholy.

“Who’s going to lead France now?” he asked. “The princes are too young and much too inexperienced.”

“The queen will rule the country. She has already been educating herself in the current affairs of the state,” the scholar answered confidently, while stroking his beard. The governor looked at him in awe, realizing that this fellow countryman was someone of very high caliber. The maid came out onto the porch and served tea and the men talked a bit more.

A few days later, Christophe came in with the expected royal letter.

“Fantastic news, Master,” he revealed, and Michel quickly skimmed it. The king’s sister wrote that she was planning to come and see him right after her brother’s funeral, and hoped that it would not be an inconvenient time for him.

One man’s death is another man’s living, he thought, sadly shaking his head.

“Christophe, when the time comes, wear something nice,” and he gave his student a golden ducat.

That Friday, a royal carriage arrived at the narrow Place de la Poissonnerie and some guards kept the curious commoners at bay. Marguerite de Valois swept into the seer's home, dressed in mourning clothes, complete with a black veil. His children were on their best behavior, waiting in the entrance hall. Only Paul was absent; he was busy chasing girls. They all nodded politely and feasted their eyes on her opulent garment. Michel and Anne accompanied her highness to the living room, which had been spruced up for the royal visit. Christophe made a brief appearance by poking his head in for a minute. Anne offered her condolences to the king's sister and then left the room, to give her and her husband some privacy. After a short talk, Marguerite thanked him for his advice to stay out of politics from now on and to go and spend some time on the seashore to regain her strength. The royal procession continued on its way and peace and quiet returned to the square.

One summer evening, Diane couldn't get to sleep and Anne told the youngest child a fairytale. Her husband happened to be just coming down from the attic and heard how she handled her veiled life's lesson.

"Once there was an evil sorcerer, who uttered a curse," she began.

"Is that about me?" he called from the stairs.

"If the shoe fits, wear it," she answered.

I wonder what's eating her today, he wondered and continued on his way to the living room, where he had a chat with the maid. After he had watered the plants in the garden, he decided to go to bed early.

The next day, he finished part six of *The Prophecies* and immediately took the manuscript to the post office to send it to his publisher in Lyon. Christophe usually took care of these kinds of things, but Michel felt like getting a bit of exercise. It was quiet in the street, so he figured no one would be bothering him. After dropping off his package, he was walking past his statue in the city square when he saw a number of young guys shooting arrows at his image.

I've never had much understanding of mischief, he thought, disgruntled. But, wait a minute, isn't that my own son, Paul? He even looked like he was the instigator of the group and he felt like he should admonish him, but changed his mind.

Oh well, never mind. I'll save it for something important; it's just a dumb statue. Long live transience.

A city guard had just come around the corner too, and he saw the rascals desecrating the city's figurehead.

"Hey, you! Come here!" he loudly commanded, but the kids took off very fast. When he saw Nostradamus, he apologized.

"I'll get that riff raff, sir. They won't escape me that easily."

"Oh, don't worry about it; it doesn't really bother me," the honored citizen smoothed the incident over. He would rather not have his own son exposed in a bad light and continued walking. After a few minutes he was overcome by an oppressive feeling and he rested for a moment.

That did not feel natural, he thought, a bit upset. But it subsided, so he continued on his way. But after a while, the horrible feeling returned and he had to stop to recover from it again. Now, every time he moved he was attacked by an uncontrollable force.

I should have known, he thought. The harrowing of hell is manifesting, by daylight! And he decided to go home, where he was in a better position to protect himself from supernatural evil. On the way back he was constantly being besieged from the other world and the battle was taking all of his strength. He repeatedly had to stop and passers-by were looking at their stumbling fellow townsman, who was usually so spry despite his advanced age. He kept on staggering and heard someone ask "Can I help you?" several times, but the silent force was so intense and dark that he was unable to respond and suddenly his knees buckled and he fell down. Several people rushed up to the medium to help him and carried him home. Anne and Christophe, alarmed, took over from there and dragged him up the stairs to his bed. Once there, Michel began to have seizures as Anne sat by his side, feeling scared. Her husband looked like he was losing his sanity. He was defending himself from ghosts and kept yelling: "Mouthwash, three times a day." He calmed down for a moment and she quickly tried to make contact.

"What's happening to you?" she asked, in a panic.

"Somebody wants to kill me," he answered listlessly. He was as white as ghost, the usual blush on his cheeks had all but disappeared and when a heavy attack followed, he lost consciousness. His spirit landed on one of the terraces of purgatory and fell into the hands of evil.

In the dark laboratory stood a table full of test tubes, glass bowls, measuring cups and bottles and Nostradamus was just finishing a dark experiment. Several potions were boiling above a fire and rising vapors concealed his face.

"Abracadabra, any time now, there will be gold and everyone will be at my mercy," he laughed uproariously. Excited, he trickled the last bit of alchemical substance into the liberally filled flask and added some more alcohol just to be on the safe side. Then he brought the liquid with the crumbled lead to a boil, after which he distilled the mixture into solid and volatile components.

"Now a bit of gunpowder," he snickered, while he searched inside a cabinet. He returned to the bubbling liquids, with a glass cylinder in his hand.

"The power will not escape me this time." Suddenly, the door to the shed burst open, which startled him and he dropped the glass cylinder, smashing it into smithereens. He looked straight into the barrel of some terrible weapon.

"Kill the sorcerer!" a mechanical voice spoke, coming out of nowhere. The alchemist instinctively dove to the side and the table and all the glass instruments were completely shot to pieces by a gigantic bullet.

“My super-expensive laboratory, completely ruined, you jerk, whoever you are,” but he swallowed his words, because the barrel of the weapon was pointed at him again. Right at the last second, some muscled guards came to his rescue from outside.

“Destroy the intruder, men!” he commanded, but the guards were killed one by one and he had to leave the room to save his life.

“Bunch of idiots,” the scholar sneered, as he fled down a corridor lit by burning torches. Bang! A bullet flew along the walls. The stranger was right on his heels and fired again. Just in the nick of time, Nostradamus was able to dash into a room where monks in grey dresses were meditating.

Let them take the brunt of it, he thought heartlessly as he mingled in with them. A moment later, his attacker had destroyed all the servants of God who were in his way. The scholar, meantime, roamed through the underground complex and ended up in a grand library, which was lit up by countless fires. He hurriedly bolted the heavy wooden entrance door behind him.

He’ll never get in here, he thought with conviction and relaxed as he walked towards the shelves full of age-old books. The valuable manuscripts were useless, now that he had the golden formula. Just then, the entrance door was shattered with one shot and he flew past the rows of bookcases to hide. His pursuer, however, was unstoppable and shot everything to shreds. A fire started and in the chaos Nostradamus managed to escape through a trap door. He landed in a cave-like tunnel and quickly walked through it. A little further on he stopped to listen whether the creep was still following him. Fortunately, he heard nothing.

That problem is solved, he thought, I’m safe. And after some time, he reached an underground lake. But suddenly, the horrible weapon appeared again and was pointed directly at him. Surprisingly, some bats tried to protect him this time, with distraction manoeuvres, but they all got shot to death.

The alchemist shrugged his shoulders, dove into the lake and quickly swam away. He stayed under water as long as possible, because every time he came up for air, bullets were flying everywhere. With more luck than smarts, he managed to reach the other side of the wide lake, where he triumphantly pulled himself up on the rocks. Then, suddenly, he was shot and he collapsed.

“Want to play another game?” the mechanical voice asked.

“Yes, but first I need a minute to recuperate,” someone replied. “What’s my score?”

“1566 points.”

In the dark laboratory stood a table full of test tubes and measuring cups. Nostradamus was behind it; on the verge of inventing something great. Various potions were boiling above a fire, while rising vapors obscured his face.

The queen will be happy, he rejoiced, and carefully he trickled some vitriol into the flask and added some alcohol. When the liquid with the crumbled lead had reached the boiling point, he caught the distillation into some long-necked bottles.

“Hmm, still not looking quite right,” he drove and rummaged in a cabinet behind him for some additives. Suddenly, the door to the shed burst open and, startled, he dropped the glass jar on the floor, where it smashed to smithereens. He looked straight into the barrel of a terrible weapon.

“Kill the sorcerer!” a mechanical voice sounded. By reflex, Michel jumped aside and the table, along with all the glass equipment, was wiped out in one shot.

My last hour has arrived, he thought, but some guards unexpectedly rushed in to try to protect him. They were all destroyed in a matter of minutes, however, right before his eyes. And in great distress, he recognized one of the victims.

“Grandpa is done for,” he moaned, while he crawled towards him. Jean was lying on the floor, dead as a doornail, after his attempt to save his grandson. He didn’t have a lot of time to think about it, because the weapon was once again pointing at him. Like a bat out of hell he fled the laboratory and ran down an endless corridor. The phantom thundered after him, shooting the whole time. Still alive, the alchemist managed to get into another room where some family members were chatting, not suspecting anything.

“Yolande, Victor, get out of here!” he shouted, but they were instantly destroyed by the rising ghost, in the blink of an eye. Shaky, Nostradamus ran on and ended up in an age-old library, where he hurriedly locked the entrance door behind him. Panting, he tried to catch his breath.

“I have a great book for you,” someone suddenly said.

“Abigail! We don’t have much time!” he answered, in a panic.

“It never pays to rush,” the bookseller said in a soothing voice, and pulled him towards the treasures of knowledge.

“Abigail, listen to me. We really must get out of here immediately...” but his words were rudely interrupted; the lock was shot off the door and shattered into a million pieces. The phantom entered and thought he had his prey in the trap. He immediately wiped out Abigail, however. Michel flew off and hid behind the bookcases. Then the whole library was shot to smithereens and the unique manuscripts disappeared in a sea of fire. Thanks to the chaos, the scholar managed to escape through a trapdoor and he landed in an underground corridor, where lighting was indispensable.

“A good thing I brought a candle,” he murmured, digging into his bag. “Isabelle, hang on just a little longer. We’ll get there.” With a light in his hand and his daughter on his back, he strode through the tunnel. Behind him was a sudden sound.

“Good God, does everything have to go wrong today?” he lamented and hurried on. The phantom, meanwhile, had entered the cave structure with

his blood-thirsty hounds and the barking sounded fierce. The rattled pair soon reached an underground lake, where Michel hesitated. There was nowhere to go! The demon had caught up to them by then and again pointed his weapon at them.

“Isabelle, take a big breath,” Father ordered, but before he had a chance to dive into the water, a direct hit put an end to his attempted escape.

“Do you want to play another game?” the mechanical voice asked again.

“Yes, but let’s go to the next level!”

In the dark laboratory Nostradamus stood at a table covered in test tubes. He was working on a unique experiment.

To make gold is like the purification of body and spirit, he was saying to himself. Then he poured a bit of saltpeter into the boiling brew, which had an unexpectedly intense reaction. A large tongue of fire scorched his beard and brought him out his reverie.

Abracadabra: I am creating by speaking. But look at this hodgepodge here on the table, he suddenly thought with perfect clarity. Someone is playing a game with me and he looked around the room.

This is not my work room, he quickly determined. Suddenly, the door to the shed burst open and he was looking into the barrel of a terrible weapon.

“A denizen from hell,” he stuttered, utterly bewildered.

“Kill the sorcerer!” a voice out of nowhere commanded. The awakened alchemist dove aside and rolled out of the laboratory, while the glass instruments were being shot to smithereens.

How do I get out of this realm? he wondered in agony. But no bright ideas came to him, so he broke into a run. After he had run down several corridors, the denizen from hell caught up to him. Michel managed to hide in an age-old library, just in the nick of time, and firmly pushed the bolts across the gateway behind him.

“A moment of respite,” he sighed, and while he caught his breath he explored his surroundings. The gigantic room appeared to hold an overwhelming number of books.

The Akashic records; the library of all times! The solution must be right here, and he hurried over to the documents. He picked up the first book from the bookcase, which had the words *The elixir of bliss by Al-Ghazali* written on the front, in illuminated lettering.

The Muslim on the island of Sicily, he immediately remembered and he hurriedly started to leaf through the mystical book. The first passage made reference to the seven valleys of the soul. And searching for the right clue, he continually kept his eye on the entrance gate.

Trial, thunder, abyss, hymn, religious celebration. That’s not very helpful, he complained. Let me find it, quick! There was a clattering sound; the denizen from hell was fiddling with the door.

Penance, blockages, curses... That's what I'm looking for. Then the wooden door was smashed into a thousands pieces by an enormous force of fire and he dropped the book out of his hands.

"By Jupiter, stand still, or I'll shoot," the scholar implored, pointing his right index and middle fingers at the danger. The resident of hell froze visibly and Michel moved towards him, stiff with tension. When he got close to him, he peered along the barrel of the weapon to see who was holding it.

"Jesus Christ, a little black boy at the trigger!" he swore and his eyes burned with anger. This startled the Creole boy and he ran away as fast as his legs could carry him. The spell was broken; the hellish terrace disappeared like snow in the sun and a heavy load slid off Michel's shoulders. Then the bedroom was revealed, where Anne was still holding his hand.

"What a vipers' nest," her husband groaned as he returned to consciousness. Then he resiliently got up out of bed and left his wife sitting there, her jaw dropped.

"Sorry, darling," he apologized and he came back to give her a kiss. "Just one question, what were you telling Diane last night?"

"Just a fairytale with a happy ending," she stammered. "Why?"

"I think she fantasized about me. Would you mind singing her a lullaby next time?"

"But she's too old for that now," Anne said, as she got up from the bed.

"Okay, something else then! As long as it doesn't remind her of me," and he walked up to meet his clerk, who was in the attic.

"I'll have to have a word with Paul today," he had to get off his chest when he got upstairs, "otherwise that boy will grow up to be behind bars."

"Are you feeling better, Master?" his helper asked with a quivering feather in his hand.

"I'm a tough cookie, Christophe, although, my damn rheumatism is bothering me a bit," and he wrote down some notes about the virtual world, which had earlier had him in its grip.

Artificial dark land with me playing the lead role, he scribbled in his sketchbook.

"Would you find me all the fairytales that have magical weapons in them, please?" he asked. His secretary promised to do it as soon as possible.

"Some day, children will be in charge of the world," his master explained.

"I sure hope not," Christophe said once he had his pen back under control.

"So don't produce any offspring. It's already too late for me," and the scholar got on with the order of the day.

Tonight I will have to see if it's written in the stars, he thought. He wrestled with a stack of horoscopes for the rest of that afternoon.

Chapter 11

*Five to forty degrees heaven burns
Fire approaches the new city
After big explosions widthwise
So that the northerners will bow*

A heavy gong sounded throughout the entire house and everyone covered their ears. The silver oil lamp, a present from Count Ercole as compensation, almost danced right off the table and the house maid was so startled, she ran into the street.

“You’ve got another new toy?” Anne complained, when her husband came down the stairs in ecstasy.

“I’m testing my new gong,” he said, a bit defensively, “I just got it delivered from Marseille yesterday.”

“You’re not going to use it to play music, are you?” she asked in all seriousness. “Because then everyone in the entire neighborhood would disappear, including your own family.”

“No, no, of course not; you don’t have to worry about that,” he assured her. Then he sat down in his usual spot next to the hearth to enjoy the released energy. Anne was about to do Madeleine’s hair. Their daughter was already waiting at the big table in front of the window, which had a nice view of the garden. While a meager sunray lit up the mother and daughter, Father watched the entertaining spectacle from his lazy chair. He poured himself a glass of wine. An hour later, the last braid was being braided and Mother gathered all the braids together and bound the whole into a crown.

“Just one more minute,” she said to her daughter, who was getting tired of sitting still.

“Okay, all done,” and she gave her the mirror. Happy with the hairdo, which was done according to the latest Venetian style, Madeleine thanked her mother.

“My friends will be amazed,” she said and immediately went outside to show off. The other kids came in and another day flew by. By seven o’clock that evening, Christophe had left the house and the master was taking a break, enjoying the company of his wife on the porch.

“You’re going to have to do without me tonight. The planets are favorably lined up right now and there is work to be done,” he informed her.

“Okay, darling, that’s fine. Join me whenever you want to, as long as you leave that gong alone,” she said and he stole up to his attic right away. The driven seer lay down under a sheet and was surprised to notice that the gong beat was still reverberating in his body.

“That thing sure is effective,” he mumbled, and soon drifted off to other realms.

Slowly, a store window began to materialize in front of his third eye. It had see-through glass from floor to ceiling. Nostradamus gradually landed with his whole body in a shopping street and quickly looked around; his presence had apparently not attracted any attention. He was in a true buyer’s paradise. People from all walks of life were walking around with fancy bags, going in and out of the stores. Aside from many bargain hunters, it was thick with recommended goods, flashing advertisements and immeasurably tall buildings, which touched the clouds. The floor in front of which he had landed, contained extremely advanced products. He saw electric show boxes in all sizes and shapes that showed images of an announcer, actors, sporting events, and, especially, many highly imaginative games. The latter were so-called computer games and the screens showed a colorful collection of action figures which were constantly being shot at.

Those games remind me of that country where I had the questionable privilege of playing a lead role, he contemplated. A river of jungle sounds flowed from the store, which had its doors wide open and he swam towards the sound. In the store, with the deafening music rhythms and screaming animals, customers were looking for strange products, seemingly unbothered by the noise. There was a long line-up of people waiting to pay for the inimitable goods. The descriptions helped him a little bit. He distinguished the audio, television and computer departments and each had a wall full of equipment. It made him feel dizzy. Then he discovered a huge offer of games, on low racks, all of them with warlike titles.

Mostly kids who are enchanted with these dubious games, he noticed, looking around. That murderous little African guy with his hellish weapon is, unfortunately, not the only one of his kind. And he took a closer look at the display. *Blockbuster*, *Space Invaders*, *Battlefront*, he read.

Oh dear, if I see a title with my own name on it in a minute, my future will not look good. And he started to feel queasy thinking about the nasty creeps, venting their frustrations on his image. He noticed that there was information about the designer in small print on the back of the boxes that the games were in.

I’m going to have to remember this place, he thought. You never know. Fortunately, he didn’t see any game with his name on it. Suddenly, an Asian man from behind the counter, which was shaped like the Tree of Life, approached him.

“Can I help you?” he asked. The cabbalist was about to answer him, but the question was not addressed to him, but to a small child in front of him. Unbelievable! It’s that little black monster that nearly destroyed me!

“I’m looking for the latest game of *Fool the magician*,” the boy answered.

“That’s not out on the shelves yet,” the sales person said, “but no worries, I will get you one from the back.” A few minutes later, the boy was paying for the latest game at the cash register.

This means that my persona will be misused en masse, Michel shuddered as the young miscreant left the store.

“Hey, you little fiend, where are you going?” he called out grimly, but the boy didn’t hear him and crossed the street, where there were only yellow cars driving around. The scholar dashed after him, but recoiled in the traffic and the boy disappeared in the crowd across the street.

How can a child be entertaining such ideas? he wondered, as he crossed the street with difficulty. After a while he found the rascal again as he was walking to a bus stop on the sidewalk. A bus stopped and the boy got in, along with a few other people.

The roles have been reversed, buddy, the seer grumbled and he got into the bus in one second.

“May I see your ticket, please?” the driver asked. Michel grabbed his brown robe without pockets and apologized. Again, it turned out the question was not addressed to him, because an old lady obediently showed her ticket. Ghosts from other times were repeatedly overlooked. Everyone here was completely absorbed in the seduction of city life. The passengers didn’t look at anyone and everyone paid attention only to themselves. The little black boy too. He sat down in the back row, next to a Japanese person and started to play a pocket computer game. His stalker sat down in an empty seat nearby.

If I could have a look at that game, I should be able to find out who created it, he thought, and the bus left. Warehouses, cafes, museums and boutiques with the latest fashions whizzed past him. All the streets in the city were numbered, so it looked pretty easy to find your way around here. The bus approached a gigantic city park with cultivated meadows, woods and ponds.

This must be the New World: the land of the northerners, the dreamer supposed, consciously making a mental note of each new insight. He kept looking over at the boy, who was still peacefully sitting in the back.

That little curly-haired kid must not escape me, he thought, with the game in mind. He actually doesn’t look so bad. Either appearances are deceptive, or I have judged him too hastily.

The boy suddenly jumped up and got off the bus, which had stopped. His pursuer hurried after him, this time before the doors slammed shut; he had some experience with these now. The boy entered the central park and walked along a path between blooming shrubs towards a skateboard park, where he was meeting some of his friends. They came riding up to him on little boards with wheels.

“Hey Joe,” one of them called out. “Where’s your skateboard?”

“Oh, something came up. I bought this really cool game,” and Joe got the game out of his backpack. The French ghost circled around it and tried to see the back of the box, but Joe was already putting it back. The kids then

climbed up into an old tree and soon jumped down again. They started walking and crossed an iron footbridge. The seer orientated himself and saw the impressive row of skyscrapers that bordered the park.

This is quite different from Paris, he thought. At the zoo, the boys decided to each go their own way and Joe left the park through another exit. He got on another bus and the ghost followed him again. This bus drove along a boulevard with all kinds of theaters, hotels and nightclubs. The street was full of screaming billboards and the biggest one said “Coca Cola.”

Enough to drive anyone insane, Michel thought, it’s giving me a headache. The boy, meanwhile, was playing with his pocket computer again, with his backpack clasped between his legs. After the exciting trip through the nightlife district with its neon lights, the bus left the crowded island by driving onto an enormous bridge. The seer turned around to catch a glimpse of the magnificent view. The silhouette of the hollow mountains created a sharp contrast against the blue sky.

The city that overflows with abundance, Michel philosophized without losing track of Joe. But the boy was still playing with his computer. After the bridge, the bus turned right and drove along a walkway. At the next stop, the boy got off and trudged to a nearby residential area. A few streets further on he rang the bell at a tidy-looking row house and a woman opened the door.

“You can play outside for a while, if you want to, Joe,” his mother said, “dinner won’t be ready for another half an hour.” Her son sauntered back to the side of the river and sat down on a bench. He took off his backpack and glanced at a stone guard in the distance, holding up a torch. Then he opened his backpack, took the game out and stared at the picture on the box with fascination.

“Turn that thing around!” Nostradamus blurted out, but his words had no effect whatsoever.

I have to do something to prevent this game from being distributed, and he tried to pull the game out of Joe’s hands, but he couldn’t get a grip on it. He had no power in this realm and, discouraged, he sat down beside his former opponent.

I guess I’ll just have to accept the inevitable, he was musing, when suddenly Joe began to talk to him.

“Wow, it’s you!” and he held up the picture on the cover to show the sorcerer. The latter recognized his own face. It was a bit too angular and it made him look very grim, but the resemblance was striking. Someone must have made this portrait of him without his knowledge. Probably during his visit to Catherine de Medici.

“Yes, that’s me, but aren’t you scared of me?”

“No, why?” Joe asked.

“Never mind,” he answered, grumpily. Being scared of ghosts was out of fashion, apparently.

“In the picture you’re wearing a pirate hat,” Joe continued.

“An officer’s hat,” Michel corrected him, while touching his bald head, “but I lost it.”

“You’re not from New York, are you?”

“No, I’m from another world. But tell me, are you looking forward to killing me soon?” Joe was taken aback by this question and had to think about it for a few minutes.

“It’s just a game,” he finally mumbled.

“That’s what you think, but thoughts are powerful, you know!”

“Everybody plays games,” the boy replied doubtfully.

Well, he’s really quite a sweet kid, Michel thought, he’s mostly just lacking in proper upbringing.

“Have you ever heard of karma?”

“No, who’s that?”

“It’s not a person, but a cosmic law. All your deeds, and a thought is also a deed, will have a reaction. An intelligent being, therefore, will never perform any actions that go against the creation.”

“What does that have to do with this game?” Joe asked, not quite grasping it.

“Let me formulate it another way: if thousands of kids start killing me, my heart will become so heavy that I will have to burn in hell for eternity.”

“I don’t want that to happen,” Joe said.

“Me neither,” Michel admitted.

“I could still exchange this game...”

“A nice thought, thanks, but it wouldn’t really make much of a difference, because there are still many more copies.”

“Oh, no!” the boy suddenly shouted, “I’m going to be late for dinner,” and he ran off. The sorcerer was left behind, dumbfounded. He quickly pulled himself together and caught up to Joe.

“Hey, is that how people say goodbye around here?”

“Oh, sorry, but I have to be on time. I can ask if you can stay for dinner,” and they reached the house, where he rang the doorbell again. His mother opened the door, grumbling.

“We just finished eating, son, you’re late. And you got such a nice watch for your birthday.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Well, okay, I’ll heat up your dinner for you,” she sighed.

“Would it be okay if my friend stays for dinner?” he asked, carefully, because it wasn’t really the best time to be asking for a favor.

“What friend? I don’t see anyone.”

“Oh, he was just here,” Joe said, looking around in surprise, and followed his mom around in confusion. A few minutes later he climbed up the stairs to his room, with his hot dinner, and there he found the magician waiting for him out of nowhere.

“Oh, there you are! Where were you?” the boy asked.

“I was there, but you couldn’t see me anymore.” Joe looked somewhat bewildered and offered him a piece of chicken.

“No thank you, I just ate. But you could really do me a favor and show me your new game.”

“You want to play?”

“No, not really; I’m not exactly eager to shoot myself down, but I would like to know who created that awful game about me.”

“Oh, you could easily find out about that on the internet,” Joe suggested, while he finished his dinner.

“Internet? What’s that?”

“It’s the World Wide Web. You can look up anything on it.”

“Oh, do you mean the Akashic Records?”

“Um, I don’t know anything about those, but I will show you on the computer,” and he turned on the device.

“I want to be an information scientist when I grow up,” Joe declared, while he was waiting.

“That’s excellent. But I hope you won’t be inventing any of those murderous games.” But the boy didn’t hear him, because he was now absorbed in the noisy computer.

“I thought you were disturbed before, but actually you’re okay,” Michel said, when Joe stopped working the keyboard for a minute.

“Thank you.”

“By the way, you have a beautiful ship over there on the windowsill.”

“It’s a scale model of the Providence,” the boy said proudly. “It was used to transport slaves in the seventeenth century.”

“Yes, humans are not always kind, are they. *Homo homini lupus.*”

“See, this is a search engine. You just type in keywords to search for stuff,” Joe showed him when the screen came up and he immediately started to type in some words.

“Can’t find anything yet,” he said, after a few tries.

“Why don’t you try “designer, game, magician and fool” all together, Michel suggested, but that also didn’t produce any results.

“Search engines that can’t find anything,” he said scornfully. “Just get the box and let me see the back of it. It’s got to have the information on it.”

Joe got up and got his backpack, which was lying in a corner of the room.

“Crap, the game’s not in here. I must have left it by the river.”

“Let’s go, right away,” the magician said and they ran out of the house towards the walkway.

“We’re too late; the game is gone,” Joe saw as they approached the bench. He began to search the area and suddenly noticed something.

“That guy over there! He’s got the plastic bag with my game in it.”

“Okay, let’s go get it,” Michel said, but his friend’s face had turned white.

“What’s the matter?”

“He belongs to the Crips,” Joe answered, scared, “they’re super dangerous.”

“Well Crip or Chip, I don’t care; I don’t have any choice,” and he pushed the kid out of his way and purposefully started to go after the other guy.

“Hey, aren’t you even going to say goodbye?” Joe called out, but the strange man was already out of earshot and resolutely flying after the youth.

It’s not my day today, Michel complained to himself as he caught up to the gang member. The latter disappeared into the underground and threw a coin into a steel gate. He walked through as it unlocked, while the magician simply sailed through the bars. They came to a platform, where the Crip had to wait. He had a bored expression on his face. He briefly glanced at his loot, malcontented, put it back into the pocket of his jacket and carelessly dropped the plastic bag on the ground. After a few minutes, a train stopped and he got in, along with the ghost. The train began to move again. After a one-hour trip with many stops, where passengers got in and out, he still hadn’t taken out the game.

At least I have time and time doesn’t have me, Michel thought, sitting behind him with incredible patience. Finally, the little scoundrel got out and half-way up the filthy stairs he ran into his friends, who all had a particularly nasty look in their eyes.

If looks could kill... the seer thought.

“Hey Mike! It’s about time you got here. We’ve been waiting for you for ages,” said Enrique, a guy who was covered with tattoos.

“I was chasing some jerks in Brooklyn and couldn’t get here any sooner,” Mike lied.

“So what are we doin’?” Bob, who was wearing his baseball cap backwards, asked. “It’s getting boring around here. No one’s been lynched for like 9 days.”

“But no Bloods in sight since then,” said Mike coolly.

“Guys, the piss smell around here is making me sick,” Enrique complained, “lets get going,” and they all walked up the stairs.

“Long live the Bronx,” Bob cheered when they got outside and the hooligans strutted through the neighborhood which was full of dismal apartment blocks.

I’d better be careful in this underworld, Michel thought to himself. Some evil spirit could easily attack me from behind, because like attracts like.

It was getting to be evening and the three shady characters went into a store to buy some drinks. The cash register was set up at a height of two meters and was being guarded like a fortress. Suddenly, a police car came screaming around the corner with its sirens on full-blast and came to a screeching halt. Officers got out, grabbed a random passer-by and violently threw him onto the hood of the car. The three Crips watched, fascinated while they guzzled from their cans at ease.

“Looks like someone’s getting picked up again,” Enrique laughed. They walked closer to the incident, where a local resident was getting frisked because of some offense or other.

Okay guys; get that game out now, Michel thought, his patience now starting to wear thin. Mike, who still had the game in his pocket, had other ideas though. After stopping at a pub, where the ghost gloomily waited at

the bar, the pals finally decided to go home. One street further on, they entered a shabby-looking apartment complex, where they went up in a rickety elevator. Upstairs, the Crips went into a messy apartment where they dropped down on a worn out couch. Mike took off his jacket and brought the game into view. Nostradamus hurried closer, but all he could see was the boy's long fingers.

"Whatcha got there?" Bob asked, drunkenly.

"Oh, a computer game I found in the street: *Fool the Magician*," Mike answered.

"We only fool Bloods," Enrique blustered, taking the box from him and throwing it out the window.

"Hey, you jerk, I'll decide about that," Mike swore, walking to the window to see where the thing had fallen.

This is my chance, Michel thought. He dove through the window and flew down to the game, which had fallen next to a garbage can. But once he got down there he realized it had gotten too dark and he couldn't read the text. Some dreams are just like that, he lamented: everything goes wrong. And he sat down beside the garbage can dejectedly.

I'll just have to wait until it gets light out.

The night passed and early in the morning a garbage truck drove into the street. One of the workers picked up all the loose garbage from the street and threw the game box into the grinder, before the dreamer had even noticed what he was doing. Suddenly wide awake, he bravely dove in after the game and ended up with the crushed garbage. It took hours before the stinking trash was dumped onto a big garbage heap. Then the box finally fell out, virtually undamaged and with the right side up.

"Eureka!" Nostradamus shouted happily and he found an address.

Hmm, somewhere in Manhattan, he understood. The street numbering is easy anyway.

He flew up like a rocket and raced to the crowded island. Once he had crossed the river, he sped over the city towards downtown, where he landed near a coffee house.

I think this is it, and he hoofed it through the entrance, where a crowd of people was waiting for the elevators. Along with the others, he got into the box, which brought them to the 99th floor in less than one minute.

Not as fast as I am, but it will do, and he got out and started to look for the darn office that the game had come from.

"Number 214, 216, 218, here it is," Michel murmured, wandering through the door of the design office like a ghost.

"The predator is pretty limited," he heard someone named Max say to his designer. "It's better to change the characters with biomods, but you will have to pick them very carefully."

"Will that enable him to see his enemies through the walls?" John asked.

"If need be." The two men were sitting at a computer and were studying a picture of a game they were developing.

So this is where evil is sown, the seer contemplated, taking in everything.

"I've gathered some information about the upgrade of Wealth Leech," John resumed. "I'll get the file." He walked to his own work space and returned with a folder.

"Oh great, thanks" said Max, taking the folder from him. "What's happening with the extra download of the magician, by the way?" Michel pricked up his ears.

"I just finished tinkering with that one for a week at home," his colleague answered. "I made Nostradamus more ingenious. Now he can use organic materials from dead bodies to recover."

"The first reactions have not been great," Max grumbled. "Maybe it will be better with these new additions. To tell you the truth, I don't really find him exciting enough to shoot at. Can't you make him look more dangerous, but in such a way that he still looks like a magician?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Yeah, well, you know, kids want violence, not subtlety."

"Of course. I already took out the library, and there are laser beams coming out of his eyes now. But I'll change his appearance too."

"Okay, well, I'll get to work then," said Max, and his colleague left him and walked to his workspace down the hall. After getting himself a cup of coffee, John sat down at one of the computers by the window. An image of the famous seer immediately appeared and he began to deform him experimentally.

"Hey, that's my head and my body," Michel squeaked, looking over his shoulder. Undisturbed, John removed the pirate hat and pasted a wild hairdo in its place. Then he cut off the beard, but after some dawdling put it back on again and made it longer, so it reached down to the ground. He briefly reflected on his new approach, while the lead player was looking at drawings of himself, lying around beside the computer.

This game must absolutely not become a success, he thought determinedly and began to devise a plan of attack. John, meanwhile, had taken off the limbs in order to rebuild the torso. He stretched the cropped body in all directions and let it suffer all kinds of horrible diseases. Finally, he ended up with a blown-up combatant who only vaguely resembled a magician. In the meantime, the desperate ghost was directing all of his powers at the computer, which promptly froze.

"Oh no, not that again!" John complained. A second later, his coffee spilled all over the challenged drawings on the desk.

"This is getting creepy!" he stuttered. He called his boss and told him what was happening.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Max replied caustically. "I'm sure you spilled your coffee yourself and computers just freeze sometimes."

"I never even touched my coffee!" John protested. "Maybe this game is sacrilege?"

"It was your idea! You're the one who wanted Nostradamus as an action figure."

“Yes, because when we did our market research, he was very popular,” John defended himself, while dabbing the spilled coffee with a cleaning cloth. “Oh, well, at least I made some copies and back-ups.” While the two men were squabbling over the existence of God, Michel’s conscience began to gnaw at him. He realized that he was messing with fate and began to doubt the rightness of his meddling.

I really should know better, he realized. I let myself be influenced by fear. I am lacking in faith of the Almighty.

His intuition also told him that there could be some consequences.

“If the roof collapses too,” Max suddenly said loudly, “I will believe you.” It seemed like the devil was playing along, because right at that moment, a big airplane flew straight towards them. Michel saw the monster coming and was totally perplexed.

My God, did I cause that? he wondered, feeling very guilty; but no, it had to be a coincidence. The airplane drilled into the tower right underneath them and the whole building began to sway dangerously with the intense shock. Immediately, all the lights and the computers went out. John and Max, their jaws dropped, stared at what could not be happening and then held on tightly to each other in fear. The seer rushed to the window where gigantic smoke clouds were rising. Below him, debris was flying in all directions, with bodies mixed in. The two designers were now walking around in a daze and suddenly began to cry. When office staff from the floors above them began to stream in from the stairs, they snapped out of it and sprang into action. They ran to the elevators like they were possessed, but they were out of order. Hysterically they scratched at the elevator doors. A series of explosions followed and then a bunch of suffocating smoke, mixed with the smell of blood and burned clothing, filled the room. People were screaming and in desperation started jumping out the windows. A minute later, a second airplane flew into a nearby skyscraper and the enormous explosion caused the building to sway again. It was complete pandemonium; a huge sea of fire cut off the way downstairs and soon both buildings collapsed. Nostradamus was pulled back by the automatic protection of his earthly body and opened his eyes in a state of shock in his own work room. The unprecedented attack was etched into his memory for ever.

Chapter 12

*The antichrist soon destroys the three
Twenty-seven years his war will rage
The unbelievers: captured, dead or banned
The earth strewn with corpses and red hail*

De Chavigny was ready with his pen. His master was about to dictate something to him; he was suffering from gout.

“Okay, Christophe, write down: ‘From the sky will come a king of terror.’” And he diligently dipped his pen into the ink and wrote down the words given to him.

“Oh, wait a minute, change that last part to ‘king of horror’.” The clerk crossed out the passage, while his boss was looking out the attic window at the autumn sky. Christophe waited at his desk for a new line of the verse.

“The great Mongolian leader will arise from the dead,” the scholar continued, and the tapping against the ink pot could be heard again. “No, that’s too clear... Change it to ‘The king of Angolmois will arise from the dead,’” and again he corrected the text.

“In closing: ‘1999, the seventh month. After and before, Mars will rule with happiness.’”

“That will be in over 436 years, Master, if my calculations are correct.”

“No, I’m not making it that simple. The date of execution of this quatrain will be 2012,” Nostradamus invented.

“Oh, not till then?” the clerk mumbled, feeling lost.

“Let’s go and sit on the porch, Christophe. It’s one of the most beautiful autumn days of the year,” and both men went downstairs.

“All finished with your work?” Anne asked. She was sorting out old stuff with the maid.

“No, we’re going to work outside,” her husband answered while he took some letters out of his private desk before leaving the living room.

“Hey, a new rocking chair,” the clerk noticed when they got to the porch.

“Yes, it’s for stopping my thoughts,” his boss explained, sitting down in a wicker chair.

“Christophe, I would like you to reply to this letter from Bishop Méandre today. That man is demanding that I need his authorization before the publication of my next almanac.”

“Méandre is a narrow-minded man.”

“Yes, I agree and apparently I am encroaching on his territory. But write him a polite letter and explain that, unfortunately, I cannot meet his demand for the following reasons: The content of my almanac is not blasphemous and does not harm the Church in any way. Furthermore, I

cannot carry out my work with imposed restrictions.” Christophe promised to take care of it. Just then, Anne came in and interrupted the business talks.

“Pauline is sick; would you mind having a look at her?” she asked, worried. Her husband got up to examine his daughter. Pauline was curled up into a little ball in the corner of the living room.

“Let Daddy take a look, sweetheart,” he crooned and she came out of her cocoon. She was looking pale.

“It looks to me like you’ve just caught a cold. Summer is over, you know! Better start wearing a coat,” and he picked her up and put her down at the table.

“I’ll make you a hot drink and after you’ve drunk it, you’re going to bed until you feel better. Agreed?” The girl nodded timidly. He went to the kitchen and a few minutes later returned with an herbal mixture.

“To the last drop!”

“Yuck,” Pauline complained after the first sip and she pushed the drink away.

“Come on, if you want to get better, you have to make a small sacrifice,” and when she had finished the medicine, he brought the patient to her bed. Back with his secretary, he resumed his work. They spoke extensively about the new almanac, which had to be finished this week.

“Piggy nose, piggy nose,” one of the kids was suddenly teasing.

“André, you’d better leave Mr. De Chavigny alone! He can write English better than you and me together.” The boy came out from behind the shrub and tried to figure out what to do next.

I wonder if maybe I don’t pay enough attention to my kids, Father pondered and had an idea.

“André, would you come here please!” His son came out of the garden.

“Go and ask your brothers and sisters if they feel like having a fire by the river.” The boy ran off happily.

After lunch, Christophe disappeared upstairs and the scholar got ready to go out with his kids in the living room.

“Who’s coming to the Touloubre?” he wanted to know.

“André, César and me,” Paul answered, daringly slouching in his dad’s chair.

“No one else?” But there didn’t seem to be any other candidates.

“Okay, it will be just us men then,” Father determined and picked up the tinderbox from the mantle.

“Why don’t you take some fishing rods,” said Anne, “then we can have fish tomorrow.” Her husband picked up the fishing gear from the shed and the men left.

“You forgot to take a bucket,” Anne called after them, but they didn’t hear her and left town by a secret path, to avoid Father’s admirers.

“Oh my goodness, we forgot to bring a bucket,” he discovered half-way down Sycamore Lane.

“I’ll go back and get one,” César offered, and a bit later he rejoined them with the bucket. They arrived at the river, which flowed south of Salon and squabbled about where the best cast would be.

“The best place is definitely on the other side by the Cypresses,” Paul was sure. They decided to take his advice and crossed the Roman footbridge.

“I’m turning eight next week,” André announced when they got to the other shore.

“Don’t worry, we won’t forget, son, but what are we going to do first, fish or light a fire?” Paul had already cast his rod and they again took his lead.

“Would you put some bait on my hook, please, César?” Father, whose fingers were hurting him a bit, asked and the boy stuck a piece of dough on it for him. The four of them sat amiably at the waterside this way and Paul was the first one to get a bite.

“How come you’re always the first one?” André called out jealously.

“I do this quite often,” his brother informed him.

“Practice makes perfect,” Father agreed and they all stared at their floats some more.

“The guilds are setting up a school,” César commented, “I’d like to go to it.”

“Excellent! I like to see my offspring use their brains. And what do you think of school, Paul?” Father asked.

“Well, it’s okay, but I really like music much better. Got one!” and he pulled out a bass. “By the way, I’m going to play music with Lisette on Saturday in the Tambourine,” he said, while putting his fish in the bucket.

“Isn’t that De Craponne’s daughter?” Father asked.

“That’s right. Lisette plays the viol. She is learning a piece for the opening of the canal, which is being extended to Salon next year.” César and André had also caught a fish by now.

“I’m not getting a bite...”

“It takes a certain knack, Dad,” Paul opined, “you’ve either got it, or you don’t.” Suddenly, Michel’s float disappeared far below the surface and he had to pull on his fishing rod with all his might. A giant squid flew into the air and angrily stretched out its tentacles to him. Confounded, the seer was taken into a stranglehold and fought back in mortal fear. Just when he was starting to suffocate, the monster suddenly vanished.

Tsk, what kind of omen could that be? he thought, while catching his breath and recovering from the mirage.

“That’s enough fish for us, just throw the next one back into the water,” he said under control to his sons, who hadn’t noticed anything.

“Let’s build a fire then,” André suggested and they all put down their fishing rods. A few minutes after they collected some wood and dead branches, they had a roaring fire.

“Can we put a fish on it right away; I’m hungry,” Paul suggested.

“We just ate,” said César.

“We’re going to take all the fish to Mother,” Father decided. “She’ll fry them tomorrow.” When the fire had burned out and it started to get a bit chilly, they decided to start heading back home.

“What are you doing, carrying around that heavy boulder, André?” Paul asked when they crossing the bridge. His brother then dropped the rock into the river. While he was getting splashed, Father was anxiously looking to make sure no angry tentacles were rising up out of the water.

King Winter was keeping the country in its grip. The temperature had plummeted downward drastically in just a few days and it was colder than it had ever been. A paddy wagon, accompanied by gendarmes, arrived at the narrow square in the heart of Salon and stopped at number two. While some of the neighbors were hanging out of their windows with curiosity, the officers got off their horses and the commander knocked on the door with a stern look on his face. Nostradamus, shunning the light, appeared at the window and finally understood the portent of a month earlier.

“Michel de Nostredame, in the name of the law, you are under arrest,” the head officer proclaimed when the scholar opened the door. He was given one minute to collect some clothes and say goodbye to this family. Anne arrived too late and watched with sorrowful eyes as her husband disappeared into the wagon with a duffle bag.

“Michel!” she screamed through the streets. The whole town was up in arms. The much-praised scientist was moved past the townspeople in chains and the strangest rumors immediately began to circulate. The old detainee was taken to the castle of Marignane outside of Marseille and there he was locked up like a common criminal. Later that day, he got a visit from Claude de Tende, the governor of Provence.

“I’m terribly sorry, Michel,” his friend began, looking as white as a ghost. “Bishop Méandre forced me to have you arrested because of your deviant publications. He threatened to take me to court too if I didn’t cooperate. There are a few sensitive issues from my past, which he could use against me.”

“Oh, it was my own fault; I’m the one who’s been so eager to get published. I just hope I get to see my family again...”

“There’s more bad news,” Claude said gloomily. “There’s been an attack on the pope. He survived, but your friend Rabelais didn’t. He’s been murdered.” That was another big hit for Nostradamus to sustain.

I used to be able to foresee these kinds of things, he thought. I was still pure then, but my success has been going to my head lately; I thought I was invulnerable.

“I am a useless seer, Claude,” he said.

“Not, that’s not true. It’s just that the bishop has more power than any of us could have imagined.

“Yes, and now I will have to defend myself against the highest boss of the Church and the outcome is predetermined. The best-case scenario will be a dragged out conflict for years, which will do me in.”

“Well, let’s still hope for a positive outcome, and I assure you again, my hands are tied.” The governor said goodbye to his friend.

While in prison, the scholar did some exercises every day in order to stay healthy, but after a week in the cold, he began to weaken dangerously. His old age and the rheumatism took over and he finally had to succumb and just lie on the bench. He just stared outside through the bars of the window. It was snowing; a rare event in the south of France. A few snowflakes fluttered in through the window and fell onto his frozen hands. It looks like I might perish before I ever even set foot in a courtroom, he moaned. Well, I’d better not waste my time fretting over it, and he gathered his blanket around himself.

Faith, that’s all I can do; just keep up the faith, and due to exhaustion, his spirit absconded.

A caravan was traveling through the desert, towards the snow-covered mountain tops. The dusty wind blowing from the south-west made the journey more difficult for the group, women and children bringing up the rear.

“Getty up!” the donkey drivers repeatedly shouted. Finally, the fugitives left the barren plain with their loaded-down pack animals to find shelter in the foothills.

“We’ll set up camp here,” the leader with the blue turban commanded when they entered a rocky valley. The caravan came to a halt and the badgered tribe got a chance to rest. A few carriers got bottles of water from the packs on the donkeys and passed them out.

“Be frugal with it,” the leader warned, “this has to last us for a few more days.” From high on a red cliff, a mountain dweller was observing the group.

“Beshir, go to that man and ask who he is,” his boss commanded, “it looks like he is a Pashtun.” Beshir, climbed up the rock mass and after a while he reached the man, who was calmly standing there, wearing a long, brown robe.

“May I ask who you are?” the scout asked, catching his breath from climbing the last of the rocks.

“You may call me Discute,” the stranger answered. His thick beard was flapping in the wind, while he himself stood motionless in the sun.

“My name is Beshir and we are Pathanes from the North. We are looking for a save haven in the mountains.”

“Then I advise you to leave this valley immediately, because a hellish rain will destroy this valley within twenty minutes.” The scout looked at him in astonishment.

“I would appreciate it if you could tell my leader about this,” he finally said.

Together they climbed down the rocks and they soon reached the camp, where Beshir introduced the strange character to his boss.

“Have we met before?” the latter asked.

“Not that I recall,” the mountain dweller answered.

“So this valley is on the verge of being destroyed? Where do you get this information?”

“I am in touch with the All,” the mountain dweller claimed. “Over there, on the right, beneath that crevice, you will find a cave where all of you can hide.”

“Is it true about that cave?” the leader asked. Beshir nodded. His boss thought for a moment and then motioned to one of his men.

“Alalaam, immediately take all the women and children and half of our men to the cave that Beshir will show you. The others will continue to set up camp.” Alalaam hurriedly split up the Pathanes and with Beshir in the lead, hundreds of tribesmen went down into the crevice.

“I cannot let you go free,” the leader told Discute. “You will have to enter the cave with us, because we must always be prepared for traitors,” and his men kept him within shooting range. “But if you are right, we will be very grateful and we will richly reward you,” and the so-called prophet was forced to go along.

“There is not much time left,” the stranger said gravely, while they descended.

“We’ll see,” the leader responded, and a few moments later they entered the cave where the group that had left earlier had already taken cover.

“It’s a tunnel going all the way through, boss,” Beshir, who was just coming back called out. “It runs through to the next valley and...” Suddenly, a gigantic explosion made the mountain shake on its foundations and the guards at the entrance were thrown into the cave. Large chunks of rock were falling down from the ceiling hazardously and most people fell down. It got quiet again and the Pathanes got up, feeling shaky.

“That was a major blast,” the leader mumbled, shaking the dust off his clothes. The damage turned out to be minimal: there were just a few slightly wounded. The leader hurried outside with his confidants, to see how his other men were. An unprecedented large bomb had completely destroyed the valley and left it in ruins. There was nothing left of the camp or any of their fellow fighters. The little group went back into the cave and the boss went to look for his guest.

“I haven’t introduced myself yet; I am Osama Bin Laden. You are free to go now. However, I hope that you will stay with us and help us with your special gifts.”

“I help all of mankind, and I will stay with you until the danger has abated,” the prophet said.

“That will be entirely satisfactory to me. Is Mohammad still all right?” Bin Laden asked Alalaam.

“Yes boss, he is repacking his mule.”

“Tell him that we will rest here and from now on we will travel at night,” and his helper disappeared down the narrow corridor, which was full of exhausted escapees.

“The enemy will not catch us!” Bin Laden encouraged everyone. “Allah has just sent us his son,” and all his people cheered. “Now rest, because tonight we will travel on. Yasser, give our brave rescuer blankets and food.” The assistant took Discute into the tunnel and they passed some soldiers who were getting their weapons ready. The newcomer received the necessary articles from a veiled woman.

“Relatively few woman and children,” he commented, wondering why.

“All the women and children are Osama’s,” Yasser clarified. After they had eaten and drunk, the Pathanes rested, except for a few guards at the entrance. Once the sun had gone down, Bin Laden invited his mysterious guest to attend the Jirga. He accepted. They were walking to the board together, when Osama was struck by an inspiration.

“Now I remember where I know you from,” he said. “Years ago I had an inspiring dream, in which an old, wise man beckoned to me from a skyscraper. That was you!” Instantly, Nostradamus regained his presence of mind and he got a view of the whole peculiar situation.

Well, I’ll be... I personally served that chief myself. Just like the genie summoned from Aladdin’s lamp. That Muslim must have some special powers, he thought. And, still feeling a bit foggy, he tried to put the pieces together. A number of wise men were already sitting in the conclave and Osama and his guest joined them.

“Our fighters will continue to engage in holy warfare,” someone named Mullah, whose face was hidden behind a cloth, spoke.

“But how? We are barely surviving and prevalence of the unbelievers is great,” another board member said. The militant Ahmed now moved.

“First we have to get ourselves properly situated in the mountains and then we will strike with the force of destruction,” he proposed.

“Yes, this is good. We all want to continue the fight against the Christian dogs,” Mullah summarized, “therefore, I argue for a decisive last battle and Allah will lead us to victory.”

“No, if we want to win the battle against the Americans, we must escape,” Osama commented critically. “Besides, in military terms we do not even exist.”

“What did you have in mind? Go into hiding in Jalalabad or cross the border?” Mullah asked.

“Yes, I was thinking of Pakistan, where we will be able to plan new attacks against the West on all fronts.” A number of wise men agreed with him.

“What does Discute think about all this?” Osama asked.

“Well, I’m no strategist,” he said, by now realizing that he was not in the company of a bunch of peace lovers.

“Don’t you foresee certain dangers?”

“No, I’m not getting anything at the moment,” he answered cautiously. The board finally decided to cross the border to Pakistan by way of the Khyber Pass. The trek through the capricious mountains was very risky, but once they had arrived in the neighboring country they would be safe

among friendly tribes. Beshir, in the meantime, was waking everybody up, because it was time to be on their way. While the caravan slowly began to move, the clairvoyant went to join Bin Laden.

“Are you a Sunnite?” the latter asked casually.

“No, I’m not.”

“Shiite?” But Discute indicated he didn’t belong to them either.

“But you are a Muslim brother, aren’t you?”

“I behave according to the rules of the Supreme Being. He is called God or Allah.”

“Well, don’t let any of the others hear you say that. In any case, you are against the Americans.” The convoy came to a brief standstill, because the tunnel was too narrow to easily pass through.

“Why are you engaging in warfare?” Discute asked.

“The Americans are permanently in Saudi-Arabia and are defiling the holy land with their presence.”

“Americans? Those are the inhabitants of the New World, aren’t they?”

“Are you stuck in time or something? The crusaders are from far away, yes, but from the New World? The ruined world you mean,” and the corner of Osama’s mouth curled in a cruel sneer.

“Why are the Americans bombing you?”

“We attacked them in order to destroy their power.”

“You mean, like that attack on that skyscraper?”

“Yes, and you gave me the idea, but you’re sure asking a lot of questions,” Osama said, irritated and ended the conversation.

Holy mackerel, it’s the antichrist that’s mentioned in the Bible, Nostradamus suddenly understood. I’ve been allowing myself to be misled by the future son of destruction. It’s truly bizarre, the way I’m getting tested.

Eventually, the fighters reached the outside world and the coast appeared to be clear. The convoy then continued its journey under the open sky across a rocky plane that was bordered by mountain ranges on both sides. The procession did not travel very fast and Bin Laden was getting worried.

“A helicopter! Everyone hide!” he suddenly shouted. In the distance there was a hideous noise that quickly came closer and the fugitives hurriedly hid in holes and crevices and kept completely quiet. A searchlight shone onto the inhospitable landscape and soon disappeared again, after which the leader commanded everyone to resume marching. The weather conditions changed to their favor: the ascending clouds kept the caravan out of sight. After a long trip, Beshir pointed to a cave, where his people would hide during the day. Then it began to rain and the last of the donkeys were pulled into the hiding place. The overstrained Arabs got a chance to catch their breath.

“I’ve got some bad new,” Bin Laden said to his accomplices. “The crusaders are doing a pincer movement and combing through all the caves.”

“Then we are lost!” Alalaam wailed.

“No, these mountains can obviously not be sealed off,” his boss replied.

“I’m sure the Americans will bribe some local tribes and they will give us away,” Ahmed suggested.

“The mountain dwellers are all loyal to me,” the usually silent Mullah reassured them.

“Maybe our friend Discute will receive more signs from above,” Osama said. But Discute remained aloof and was not planning the play along anymore. A few hours later, the guards at the entrance were unexpectedly shot at; some American group had found them.

“Get up and keep walking!” the leader immediately commanded. The militant disciples quickly picked themselves up and went deeper into the mountain. Then some faithful followers blew up the entrance to the cave; the way in was permanently blocked for the enemy and for the moment, they were safe. Beshir led the group through various corridors at great speed and a little later they were back outside. This time they found themselves on a rough mountain ridge where a violent snow storm was raging. They were virtually completely blinded on the slippery slopes, but that did not deter the tough Pathanes. Slowly but surely, they traveled over the rugged ridges. They walked past the ruins of an airplane that had crashed some time in the past. A fellow Pashtun suddenly came out of the snow and after a short discussion with the mountain dweller it was decided to take a different path.

“What’s going on?” Discute, who was starting to turn blue from the cold, asked.

“The usual entrance is being patrolled by enemy Afghans and the Pakistani army is at the border,” Yasser answered. With great determination, the rank slogged on past ravines and granite peaks, ever eastward. Despite the severe weather they managed to reach the other pass to Pakistan and shortly after crossing the border, they took a brief rest. After this, the leader put a select group together, which included his family members, and ordered some hundred remaining warriors to march to the village of Peshawar. Their boss was planning to go into hiding elsewhere, but wisely kept the location a secret.

“Men, our ways must now part for a while,” Bin Laden announced. “If I don’t survive, we will see each other in paradise.”

“Long live Osama,” they chanted.

They are brave fellows, but they will be eliminated in a flash, Nostradamus thought. Their role is finished.

“Discute, I would like you to come with us,” Osama requested, “because you may be able to serve us with your divine gifts.”

“I will accompany you as long as I am meant to,” he replied. The selected group began to walk to the north with two mules, while the majority of the men kept moving south.

“Would it not have been wiser for us to also keep going to the south, where our sympathizers live?” Alalaam asked on the way.

“No, that’s where the Americans will be looking for us,” his boss

answered. After some time, they came out of the mountains and arrived at a steppe, where two cars were waiting at the side of a creek. To be on the safe side, the group hid behind some rocks, after which Beshir whistled a signal.

“Zindibad Osama,” was the answer at the pond.

“It’s okay,” Beshir assured everyone and they went on. At the creek, they jumped into the terrain vehicles and they sped off. After riding for hours on bumpy dirt roads, they arrived at a dilapidated building. It was situated on a bare, deserted plane, surrounded by white mountains.

“Welcome to Bar Chamarkand,” Osama jested. Exhausted, they all got out and entered the house, which had about a dozen eroded rooms. The wind had free reign in it, because none of the windows had any shutters.

Brr, a dreary cottage, Michel thought. The women were assigned their own room and the men took possession of the main space, where they laid down their weapons. They let the children play outside for a bit; they would only mislead the enemy, rather than attract them.

”Here’s a drink for you, Discute,” Mullah, called out. The clairvoyant surprisingly caught the can of Mecca cola thrown to him.

Looks like my spirit power has grown, he observed happily. The exhausted warriors lay down on some mattresses and Discute leaned against the window post. Outside, one of the daughters of Osama was amusing herself with a butterfly made of colored glass. Nostradamus wanted to give some attention to the girl, when suddenly, she was gone. A few seconds later she unexpectedly poked her head up through the window.

“Peekaboo!” she called out, her eyes shining with joy.

“Hello, little girl,” he said, moved. The cheerful meeting was cut short though.

“Discute, come over here and take a look at this,” her father called. He had changed into some clean clothes and was now walking around in army gear. A portable television showed the airplane that had purposely crashed into the skyscraper that Nostradamus had been in at that moment. The men were all watching the images excitedly.

“Osama Bin Laden, the brains behind the attacks on the Twin Towers, has managed to escape from the Tora Bora Mountains, along with other ringleaders,” newscaster was saying. “The Saudi Muslim fundamentalist who made his fortune in drugs, has almost mythical proportions...”

“That’s a lie!” someone shouted in the room.

“The most sought-after terrorist in the world is very popular among the Afghan and Pakistani population, because he supplies weapons, training, food and medicine. The golden tip that leads to the arrest of Bin Laden is worth about twenty-five million dollars.”

“I’ve seen enough,” Osama said and while he walked away, his men saw pictures of him on the screen. Beshir, meanwhile, was hauling some boxes while Discute was watching him and sipping his coke.

These people are not particularly constructive, he thought, when he heard a bang in one of the rooms. Curious, he left the warriors behind, glued to the tube, and went to check out the rooms.

What happened to all the women? he wondered. He saw that some boxes had fallen down in an improvised office. A box that was decorated with palm trees had broken and some documents lay spread out on the floor. He bent over the papers and focused his eyes.

Oh dear, Einstein will not be happy about this...

The information was about how to build a nuclear bomb.

"So, you are an American spy, after all," Bin Laden said suddenly, from behind him, "I should have known," and he called his accomplices.

"Alalaam, lock this traitor up!"

"But he saved our lives!"

"He is trying to infiltrate," the leader said unrelentingly and the false prophet was locked into a storage room, where he could once again think clearly.

Now I should be able to automatically get back to my cell in Marignane, Michel thought; but nothing happened.

My God, my next thought pattern has to be broken.

Then heard the keys jingling and the door opened. In the door opening stood Osama's daughter, wearing a little paper crown on her head. She smiled.

"Michel, you are a free man once again!" the governor of Provence said. And his voice brought him back to the present.

"Thank you very much, young lady," the scholar answered, and got up from his bench with some difficulty.

"You're raving, my friend; I hope you're not losing your sanity."

"It's all right, the tide has turned, thank God," and he hobbled towards him.

"The charge against you has been dropped," Claude explained, while Nostradamus stuck his nose out of the bars.

"Long live the queen!" he called out hoarsely. Claude didn't say anything, but his face spoke volumes.

In Salon, songs were sung for the returned hero, who weakly waved at his admirers from the balcony. The entire city council was among the crowd, flocking towards him.

"Don't stay out there too long, Michel. You're ready to fall over," Anne said worriedly. He promised to keep it short.

"Dear family, friends and fellow townspeople, I am a free man, once again," he began and the crowd cheered. Then they quieted down so they could hear him speak.

"Thoughts, however, can never be imprisoned and in my cell I had many visions, which I will write down and I will publish them, as before. After all, out of the darkness, the light will always shine again. Alas, that's all I

can say right now, because my body needs to rest.” The weakened scholar then closed the balcony doors and went straight to bed.

Chapter 13

*Up to the Danube and the Rhine will come to drink
The great Camel without remorse
Near the Rhône and the Loire violence breaks out
The Cock will ruin him near the Alps*

Tonight would be a good opportunity to give César a tour of the constellations and Nostradamus went to look for his son.

“Have you seen César anywhere?” he asked Anne downstairs. She was soaking her feet in a tub of warm water.

“Well, late this afternoon he was doing some chores in the municipal archives. But I don’t know where he is now. Why?”

“The stars will be shining tonight and I want to initiate him,” he explained. The boy was nowhere to be found, however, and his father decided to get some work done in the attic. He hadn’t been using this room for his meditation for some time; Christophe spent most of his time there. He didn’t really need isolation anymore. His preternatural gifts had been merging into the busy household over the years and the quietude he needed was anchored in his heart. Just as he was putting the finishing touches on a horoscope for a client, his son came in.

“Well, if it isn’t my César,” he said lightheartedly.

“Are we going to look at celestial bodies, Dad?” the teenager asked, while eyeing the embryos in the display case.

“Your timing couldn’t be better, my boy,” and Father closed his book. He stood up, opened the skylight and took the cover off the man-high spyglass, which was set up underneath it.

“You’re already almost as tall as this instrument,” he mumbled, looking at his son.

“Okay, well, let’s see..... There it is! Look César, just above the last rays of the sun: Mercury, the planet of intelligence and mental capacity; over twenty-eight zodiac degrees from the Sun.”

“All I see is a small, pink dot,” César remarked, gazing through the device.

“Small but significant, but I admit, it’s an acquired taste. Boys prefer something more spectacular,” and Father aimed the apparatus at the moon.

“Now look.”

“Wow, that’s beautiful,” César said.

“Amazement is the beginning of wisdom,” Father quoted. And, a little while later, when it was dark, he showed his son all the remote corners of the sky, just like his grandfather had shown him, a long time ago.

In June, there was a festival in the town. Bertrand and his buddies had finally finished digging the Canal de Craponne all the way to Salon, and

the irrigation canal was opened with much fanfare. Once the engineer of the project had personally opened the lock and the water was flowing freely, after a loud applause, a band played a piece of music they had rehearsed for the occasion. Anne wanted to extend the festivities to her home, because her husband had been unable to attend, due to his rheumatism. His brothers Antoine and Julien and their families were invited and of course, Bertrand was part of the party too. In the backyard, long dining tables had set up, because the family had expanded quite a bit during the course of the last few years. The number of children was overwhelming. The resident offspring were running zigzag through the crowd of adults; it was a busy scene. Michel had ordered a barrel of champagne from Reims for the occasion and the four brothers had a toast in honor of the completed project. In the back of the garden, the women were frying chicken.

“Hey, leave some for us, honorable sirs,” Anne called out, while she turned the spit.

“Without us they are totally lost,” she whispered to the ladies, who by now had gotten used to her liberal attitude. Bertrand was telling tall tales with a flourish and the kids could not be pried away from him, but once the chicken was ready, he had to admit defeat. The women brought the poultry to the table and served it to the hungry guests.

“No, thank you,” Michel was the only one to decline.

“What? You’re passing up that delicious meat?” Julien asked. “That used to be your favorite.”

“Yes, it used to be, but now I prefer the scents of nature.”

“Come on, skip a day, Michel, today is a special day,” Bertrand requested.

“No, I have to consider my health!”

“Just a little piece to be social?” Antoine implored, but their learned brother persevered.

“Then I’ll pour you some more champagne, or is that bad for your health too?” Bertrand asked.

“All right, just half a glass then,” Michel said stiffly. And then everyone set about devouring the chickens.

“It’s absolutely delicious, ladies; certainly nothing to be spurned,” the men praised them. A little later, finances became the topic of discussion.

“That was a good tip you gave us, Bertrand, to invest in the canal,” Anne said. “Good interest and the value of the shares has risen. We would like to invest another hundred crowns.”

“That’s great to hear; we’ll arrange it,” the contractor answered between bites.

“It did take nine years before the canal was here,” Michel said, critically.

“That’s about two kilometers a year. A snail would do it faster.”

“Go ahead and make fun of me, brother, the profits are crystal-clear in the book, for all to see,” Bertrand responded, while helping himself to some beans.

“If you guys ever get into a dispute, I can give you legal advice. We’ll keep everything in the family, of course,” Julien joked, playing the lawyer, and lavishing himself with champagne.

“Doesn’t it drive you stark-raving mad, all those people always standing in front of your house?” Julien’s wife, Sabine, asked.

“Yes, that’s the disadvantage of being famous,” Michel answered, as one of the little ones walked into the garden fence.

“Anybody can just climb right over that fence,” Bertrand commented. “I’m surprised you don’t have any intruders.”

“You’re right, we do have to protect the house better, and it’s time we had the placed fixed up and redecorated as well,” his brother admitted.

“Then I have a brilliant idea,” Bertrand said. “There’s a house in Avignon that’s standing empty, which you could rent for a few months. In the meantime, I will renovate your house for a fair price and you will be freed of those pilgrims for a while. Two birds with one stone. What do you think?”

“Aren’t you too busy?” Michel asked.

“Oh, well, there are always projects on the go. But the biggest one, the canal, is done and for my brother the whiz kid, I can make the time. I know where to get the best and most beautiful materials. Just one tip: keep the front simple, so the taxes won’t rise sky-high.”

“I’m sick and tired of those jokes about my work,” Antoine replied to that, unexpectedly fierce.

“Sorry, brother, I’m exaggerating. The taxes are not that bad,” Bertrand placated. “In the big cities they’re even competing about who has the most beautiful building.”

“I think it’s a plausible proposal,” Michel said, finally. “What do you think, Anne? Shall we go and live in Avignon for a while?”

“It’s already written in the stars,” she answered, a little tipsy.

“I’ll come up with a good plan,” Bertrand resumed, “you don’t have to make any decisions until you’ve seen it.”

“Michel, tell us about the future of mankind,” Elise, who was sitting there, feeling a little lost, asked. But he didn’t get a chance, because André knocked over a glass of wine in front of him.

“It’s all part of a good party,” Bertrand laughed.

“Speaking of parties,” Julien picked up the thread, “next month is Shavuoth. Do any of you celebrate it?”

“Not me,” Michel replied, while mopping up the spilled wine. “Any of you guys?” But it seemed that only the lawyer in the family was still keeping the Jewish traditions, secretly, of course.

“Before I go,” Bertrand said towards the end, “I would like to propose a toast to our father and mother. They gave us a lot to be thankful for,” and the brothers unanimously raised their glasses.

Once the building plans had been approved, Bertrand immediately began to renovate the house with his workmen. In the meantime, the De

Nostredames traveled to Avignon by coach and before noon, they were crossing the bridge of Avignon. They rode into the uninviting town, where Father had studied astrology in his younger days. All the streets were still very familiar to him. And, as though Fate was playing with him, the house they were to move into was situated on the Parc des Papes, near his old university, which was now being used for a different purpose. They got out of the coach and carried their belongings into the house. The fancy home was completely furnished and it didn't take for them to feel completely comfortable. Michel had brought only a bit of work and had plenty of time to spend with Anne and the children. The next day he showed his family the town from the Rocher des Doms, the cliff that rose high above everything. After that, all eight of them walked through Avignon and visited several places, such as the Rue St. Agricole, where Father had once lived in an impoverished little room. Now there was a store selling trinkets and toys in that location. The family enjoyed their time in the worldly city, but Father soon developed pain in his joints, which forced him to stay close to home.

My body seems to be decreasing in resilience every year, he grumbled, while he sat down on a bench in the park, which had survived the passage of time. He looked at the old oaks he had known. They didn't seem diminished in their strength either.

"Michel, we're going to the toy store; we'll be back shortly," Anne reported.

"Okay, I'll be fine." Toy store?

While his family was gone, the wind was caressing his aching knuckles and memories of his youth began to float to the surface.

Time has really slipped through my fingers like sand, he reflected. A little while later, Anne and the kids returned with their bags full.

My goodness, they look just like bargain hunters from the New World, he thought, feeling cheerful once more, and they began to unwrap the toys right in the middle of the field. He was curious and stood up, but had to sit down again to button up his shoe.

That damned gout; I can't even hold a shoelace anymore.

"Michel, come and see what we bought!" his wife called.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he drivedled, while he got up. In the meantime, André was jumping through a rolling hula hoop and César was trying to imitate the fancy trick.

"You're too big for that hula hoop," Madeleine screamed, looking up for a minute, before continuing to rummage through the bags again. The scholar had reached his family members and joined them in going through the newly acquired treasures. There were skipping ropes, a ball, dolls, marbles, a kite, glue, felt, too much to take in all at once. Diane was walking around with a chubby Chinese doll.

I wonder how long this will keep them occupied? Michel thought, sitting down in the grass with his wife.

"Will you play with us, Dad?" Paul asked. "We're going to play tag."

“You kids go ahead; your mother and I will watch.”

“Hey, I’m not an old fart,” Anne protested, and she jumped up and playfully chased Paul as he flew off. So the days passed and everyone enjoyed their freedom. After some time, the sons started to get rowdy and the neighbors peevish. Father just let them be, but when one day they were playing butcher and Paul wanted to cut Diane’s belly open with a pen knife, he intervened.

“Okay, that’s enough now. Give me that knife and go to your room!” he said angrily and his offspring quickly returned to moderately good behavior. One day, the seer was recognized by some folks in the street and shamelessly harassed. Soon, they were waiting in front of their house and he decided to spend the rest of his time there indoors. The family played the board game Carcassonne over and over until they were sick of it. The kids had never had so much fun, however. One evening, Michel had some visions of the super-rich West, which would slowly but surely deteriorate. Just then, Pauline padded into his room, wearing a pointed hat she had glued together and a black ribbon on her back.

“Can’t we go on vacation more often, Dad?” she asked.

“When you’re all grown up, you can travel as much as you like,” he replied, “the future Europeans do nothing but.”

It took two months before Anne finally grew tired of the unlimited freedom.

“I’m worn out,” she said, one day. “I’m yearning to be back in our own house; I even miss Christophe.”

“I’m expecting a message from Bertrand any day,” her husband informed her. When the children were playing ball in the attic the next day, the liberating message arrived for their parents. The house was ready. Back in Salon, Nostradamus’ worshippers had grown tired of waiting to catch a glimpse of him and had disappeared. There was no one spying on the house, which now had a new face. Only one person was there: Bertrand, who was waiting for them and pointed at the new façade.

“It’s a master piece!” he said full of pride, when they got out of the coach.

“But our house isn’t as cozy,” the children complained immediately. The whole balcony had been removed to prevent easy break-in, and the bottom windows now all had bars in front of them. The new, sturdy front door had large hinges and a peephole. The house looked a bit like a prison. The windows, however, were quite striking, having been fashioned of genuine glass. They were a delight for the eye and they were the first ones in town. In order to protect the expensive stained glass, the shutters had been left intact.

“Let me give you a tour,” Bertrand suggested and they all went inside. The living room had been redone with dark-red wooden paneling and the walls had been painted a nice beige. The floor now had seamless black-gray tiles and there was an impressive chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Most of the old furniture had been replaced with new pieces. There was a red sofa, for example, and André immediately climbed up on it.

“You’d better get down from there this minute,” his father warned, “that’s not for children!”

“Most of the work was done in the guest house,” Bertrand said, while they went through the garden to get to it. The veranda was now completely covered because of the new premises, which could be reached by an outside staircase.

“Well, I think you’ve done an excellent job,” Anne said, after she’d seen it all. Her husband was also completely positive.

“Hidden beauty,” he summed it up.

Nostradamus threw himself into his masterpiece again, which had reached an advanced stage, and he would from now on receive his visitors on the sofa. It had become quiet in the house, now that the three oldest children were being educated in Arles. Michel shuffled to the veranda with a cup of hot milk and sat down in a dark corner.

“A nice little drink and then see what happens,” he mumbled. When he’d finished the milk, he closed his eyes and concentrated. The information from above immediately suffused his body.

My body might be deteriorating, but at the spiritual level, I’m still going forward, he observed happily, and he gradually became one with the future. Ghosts, who were making the most heinous plans, were flitting past his head. He noticed that one of the ideas had the potential to fructify and decided to follow the process. The catastrophe would take place near Erasmus’ town.

Late one night, a van, occupied by two malevolent individuals, stopped in a village near Rotterdam, just north of the Rhine. They searched the area until they were sure that they were not being observed. Then they drove off the road, between some glass greenhouses. At the end of the ride, they parked the vehicle in a hidden spot and again checked the area for spectators. It was totally quiet and the villagers all appeared to be sound asleep. They carefully opened the backdoor of the vehicle and took out a covered object.

“Jan, be careful!” Mohammed whispered. The men carried the long object across a railroad track and dragged it to the river. When they arrived at the dike, they nervously looked to the other side, where some gigantic oil tanks were set up and perpetual fires were burning.

“There’s no better place than this,” Mohammed said, “from here, you can see almost all of the depots.”

“You’re right, but let’s keep going. It just after five and we’re behind schedule,” Jan replied, while hiding the object in the bushes. They quickly walked back to the locked van and took out a heavy trunk, which they also dragged to the edge of the river.

“The moment of truth has arrived,” Jan said loftily and he pulled the cover off the long object. “A gift from the Saudi prince!” and they admired the missile launcher, manufactured in America.

“Hey Jan, we are doing the right thing, aren’t we?”

“We’re doing this for the true religion, to make it flourish on top of the ruins of the decadent West. This river will flow with the blood of the unbelievers,” he recited. Convinced, Mohammed placed the missile launcher on his friend’s shoulder and took the first grenade out of the box. At the same time, a large tanker was traveling from the sea onto the river and the oil supplies quickly disappeared from sight.

“Duck down; we don’t want the crew to see us!” Jan commanded and they nervously hid behind the bushes. The ship was moving towards an inner harbor further on and a moment later, the storage tanks came into view again.

“I hope you’ve practiced enough,” Mohammed mumbled.

“Have some faith. I’m going to shoot those things to smithereens. This is going to be world news!” and Jan checked the settings of the heavy weapon, while his buddy was on guard. Finally, the Dutch Muslim gave his Arabic fellow believer the sign to get the first grenade.

“Okay, brother, it’s time,” Jan said. While he was down on one knee, he pointed the weapon at the biggest fuel supply in Europe.

“I almost forgot to indicate the temperature of the tanks...”

“We’ve got ten grenades and ten percent can fail,” Mohammed reacted.

“And with a bit of luck, the fire will spread.” His buddy then focused the view finder and saw a few rusty pipes on a forecourt. He aimed a little above them. The right target came into view.

“Michel, where are you?” Anne called, but there was no answer.

“Oh, there you are; I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” The abrupt interruption didn’t upset the seer. Those days were long gone.

“What is it, dear?” he asked, with his eyes still closed.

“André had a little job in Gougnaud’s apple orchard. His helper broke a finger and it seems our son is responsible for this. Now he can’t pick his apples anymore. What should we do?”

“I’ll give it some thought,” he replied dreamily.

“And another thing, I’ll be going past The Papermill. Do you want me to buy some paper for you?”

“Yes, go ahead, pick up a package of sketch paper for me.” Anne disappeared again and her husband again absorbed himself in the attack.

“Allah is great!” Jan shouted and pulled the trigger. The missile fired from his shoulder. Mesmerized, the fighters followed the course of the projectile, and watched how the first tank was hit full-on. They cheered with glee and the gigantic explosion that followed broke the silence of the night. The towering storage place burst open and the oil burst into flames.

“Now we must stay calm,” Jan said seriously, and his friend loaded a new missile. The Dutchman focused and again fired. Again he hit the bull’s eye. The second tank also burst into flames and again they were delighted. Meantime, an alarm was sounding and guards were running for their lives.

“Next one,” Jan dictated, and his buddy placed the third grenade. Again a tank was hit.

“We are being assisted from above,” Mohammed said.

“Undoubtedly,” his buddy replied. The two believers carried out their mission flawlessly and the next storage tank was exploding. The sea of fire was lighting up the whole area, where sparse trees were being scorched like match sticks. Panic had taken over the industrial property and anything that had wheels took off at top speed. The heat was unbearable.

“Yes, the fire is leaping to the other depots!” Jan laughed. Suddenly, a train was coming from their side, threatening to disturb their activities.

“What’s going on? Why is there a train at this hour?” Mohammed stammered.

“We’re just going to finish the job. There are only four grenades left; I don’t care if they see us.”

“But they might stop and grab us!”

“Don’t tell me you never thought of that before?!” But when the train came closer, Mohammed was overwhelmed by fear and ran off.

“Coward! Weakling! I’ll finish this holy war by myself,” Jan raged and grabbed the next grenade. The train soon reached the determined terrorist and the engineer, already shaken up by the big explosions, saw how he was loading his weapon on the side of the river. The engineer decided to keep going fast and try to bring himself and his passengers to safety. Irritated, Jan turned around and aimed his weapon threateningly at the passing train.

“Materialistic pigs!” he hissed. The passengers stiffened with fear when they saw him standing there, except for one man, dressed in a long, brown robe, who seemed to look right through him.

In the name of the Prophet, who is that creepy character? Jan thought and he quickly turned away. The train gradually disappeared into the night. The fighter went back to his work and shot the umpteenth oil tank to smithereens. Six storage tanks had been destroyed by now and the burning oil was trickling into the river.

Michel opened his eyes and pensively scratched his nose.

“That’s what you call throwing oil on the fire,” and he made a note in his notebook. Then he got up with some difficulty, and walked to the kitchen where he heated up some more milk.

Religion without science is blindness, he stated, while filling up his cup, and he sat down at his desk. Christophe suddenly came rushing in.

“I have two hot messages for you, sir!”

“Okay, let’s have them,” the scholar sighed, sliding deeper into his chair.

“What do you want first, the good news or the bad news?”

“You choose, Christophe.”

“Then I’ll start with the bad news. Barbe Regnault from Paris has imitated your first part of *The Prophecies* and published it. He is committing plagiarism by doing this, and I advice you to take him to court in Paris.”

“I’m sure no one takes Regnault seriously. And what is the good news?”

“The queen is taking a trip through the South of France and she wants to come and visit you.”

“That is indeed good news,” his master smiled.

“With your permission, Her Majesty will visit on the eighteenth of next month. Can I send her a confirmation?”

“Absolutely, that will be the crown on my work.”

Accompanied by loud trumpet sounds, the impressive royal procession went up the hill to where Salon de Provence was situated. Hundreds of mounted guards were riding in front of the coaches and a similar number behind them. The city guards had blocked off all the roads with fences and thousands of people had gathered behind these. The parade slowly moved through the city walls and finally, amidst a lot of pushing and shoving, came to a halt at the narrow Place de la Poissonnerie.

“Michel, you’ve got company,” Anne joked, while the children waited, lined up in the entrance hall. Christophe and the maid quickly brushed their clothes off.

Holy smokes, I didn’t know she would come with such an enormous entourage, Michel thought, looking through the window, and with his wife, he walked to the front door. Catherine de Medici was getting out of her golden coach and a throng of courtiers followed in her wake.

“Hello Doctor. If you don’t come to see me, I will come to see you,” the queen greeted him.

“Your Majesty, I am so honored by your visit,” he laughed and he kissed her outstretched hand.

“This must be your wife,” Catherine supposed. Anne nodded and curtsied.

“May my people come in?”

“But of course, Your Majesty,” he answered, upon which the queen and her entire noble following entered the house.

“Psst, Michel, this is going to be a problem,” Anne whispered, “they’re not nearly all going to fit into the guest house.” But her husband wasn’t worried about it at all and sat down in one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace, along with Her Highness. Her retinue gathered around them.

“Francis, please come and sit with us,” Catherine requested. The young king, who had been completely unnoticed until then, obeyed his mother’s wish and a valet brought a chair closer.

“You know, of course, that my son is officially the king, but since he is only fifteen years old, I will have to rule for a while yet.” Everyone looked at the king to see what his reaction would be, but there wasn’t any. Instead, some of the courtiers gave him some compliments about his appearance. The delicate-looking Francis was indeed dressed magnificently. He was wearing a tall beret, decorated with golden tassels and a blue feather, a black and red palace coat and a large white collar.

“I had the honor of meeting Your Majesty a long time ago at Le Louvre,” Nostradamus broke the impasse.

“Um, yes, I remember,” the teenager stuttered.

“We spent the whole day walking through all the rooms,” the host explained. Francis II was absolutely not suitable to rule the country and all present were aware of this, though no one would ever say so. His mother,

however, was a leader extraordinaire. All the ladies-in-waiting had to wear tight corsets in order to radiate more stylishness, but she herself wore a noticeably loose-fitting dress.

“We would like to invite you to a dinner at the Chateau de l’Empéri, where we will spend the next few nights,” Catherine announced.

Phew, that’s one less logistics problem, Anne thought, freed from her worry.

“We gladly accept your invitation, Your Majesty,” Michel answered.

“My father thought very highly of you,” the king suddenly blurted out.

“That’s nice to hear,” the host responded, pleasantly surprised. And who knew, maybe it was even true.

“And not only his father,” the queen said, “your advice was quite significant. Partly due to that, I have been able to preserve unity in our country. The battle between the Guises and Colignys flared up with great intensity after my husband’s death. We are extremely grateful to you and would like to show our appreciation in the form of an allowance and various privileges. Furthermore, we are bestowing upon you two honorary titles and I herewith designate you as royal physician and advisor,” and she handed him the documents.

“I very much appreciate this, Your Majesty,” and he showed his gratitude with a deep bow. After this tribute, the queen and all the courtiers left for the nearby fort with the two tall towers. The legendary procession disappeared out of sight and tranquility returned.

“It’s like a fairytale, being married to you,” Anne said when she was alone with her husband again, and nothing could ruin his day after that.

The last evening of the royal visit had already arrived. Michel and Anne proceeded to the Chateau de l’Empéri to bid a festive farewell to Catherine de Medici. After a scintillating meal with musical accompaniment, the laureate astrologer took a short walk with her through the courtyard.

“I’m already looking forward to our next meeting, Doctor,” Catherine revealed.

“That’s not going to happen, Your Majesty. This is the last time you will see me alive.”

“That makes me very sad,” she responded, feeling a bit shocked. And, very moved, she said goodbye to her special confidant. So ended the queen’s historic visit* to Salon de Provence and life once again returned to normal.

The very first school in town was opened. Paul, César and Madeleine were among its students and learned skills that would stand them in good stead in the future, such as bookkeeping, law and grammar. Sometimes Old Greek and Latin texts were read to them, but for the average student this was very dry and boring and the only one who had any interest in them was César. He was a keen student and was also the only one who loved

* 1564

poetry and recitation. One day he asked his father if he could help him with his speech in English.

"I don't know much English," he answered, "but the main thing is that you have to really believe in what you're saying, otherwise it will not have any potency. Maybe Christophe can help you." The youth immediately went up to the attic, where the clerk was taking care of the international correspondence. Early that evening, Nostradamus was sitting on the sofa, absorbed in thought, when his wife came home after having done some shopping.

"I'm back!"

"I'm busy, my little sunshine," he said, floating in those other realms.

"Okay, I'll be quiet," and she put away some new things in the cupboard. Then she surreptitiously placed a bonbon on the salon table for him.

"I'll put your pastis in the kitchen," she couldn't refrain from telling him.

"Wonderful!" he thanked her from among the information streams he was receiving: "Occult monomaniacs honor the dead and show their powers at the games. Jerusalem again causes dissension."

Hmm, pagan sects and the promised land, but I don't see an agreement yet. His wife, meanwhile, was making some disturbing noises. She was moving the furniture around.

"Anne, has Christophe gone home already?"

"Yes, he's gone. You can go and use his room if you want to." Michel slowly stood up, saw the bonbon on the table and put it in his mouth.

"What are you doing with those armchairs?" he asked, smacking his lips.

"I'm putting them next to the cabinet."

"But why?"

"I just need a change; I don't like things always the same."

"I think you just want to get rid of me," he said bluntly.

"Not at all! I even put a treat there for you."

"Yes, all the more reason, you've got too much energy. Maybe you should start horseback-riding again."

"Absolutely not! I may be twenty years younger than you, but I'm getting older too. And besides, I still have to take treatments from the last time I fell; that time with Angelique." He knew that when Anne talked that way, there was no changing her mind. The grand master started up the stairs, with his tail between his legs. On the way up, he had to stop to catch his breath several times. The images kept flowing through his sixth sense: "His thirst for destruction will increase and his followers spread out over the continent like jumping fleas," bubbled up in him now. The pain in his body had been getting worse lately. His joints felt like they were on fire on a regular basis now, and when he arrived in his workroom he had to immediately lie down and rest on the meditation bed.

My material vehicle can no longer handle my spirit, he observed somberly and then, bang, he was blown out of his body. The pain disappeared momentarily and he was in seventh heaven, but the higher worlds carried him to another destination.

The minister of External Affairs wanted to stretch his legs and pushed his chair back into the sitting position. In the corridor the scent of fried eggs lingered and he decided to walk to the forecabin. In the see-through dome, right underneath the cockpit, his translator was enjoying the view of the Atlantic Ocean, which was steadily sliding past underneath the airplane.

"You had a long sleep," Jim said, when he noticed his boss.

"Yeah, well, I needed it," Donald yawned, stretching his arms. "I want to start the talks in good form."

"You will probably come to a consensus..."

"Yes, probably with the Europeans and the Russians, but we'll have to wait and see about the Arabs. Can you pour me some more juice please?" he asked a passing stewardess. Jim had another coffee and again took pleasure in the view.

"It feels like you're a bird flying over the sea," he said, but Donald's thoughts were elsewhere and he didn't hear him.

"I think I can see France over there," the translator remarked a few minutes later.

"France, oh yes, the ever troublesome little brother of the United States," the minister grumbled. The airplane was nearing the coast and began to descend to just above sea level.

"Why are we flying so low?" Jim asked.

"We'll be above enemy territory soon and this way they won't have time to shoot at us," his boss explained.

"You mean the Muslims?"

"Yes, over here. But in this country, everyone does whatever they feel like doing. Since the rise of that Chyren Selin, democracy has been eroded and the European laws are no longer being followed."

"I sure hope they don't start shooting at us," Jim said, feeling scared.

"Don't worry. This Boeing has regenerating parts that are full of sensors. The micro-electronics ensure that practically every bullet hole is closed within a few minutes. Only if there's a missile impact will we be in trouble."

"Missile impact?"

"Yes, they sometimes fire missiles from the Alps. That's where all the fanatic nationalists are."

"But that won't happen above Bretagne, will it?"

"No, but you never know..." The airplane was now flying above Ile de France and the former light city came into view.

"Hey, that's the Eiffel tower, isn't it?"

"Yes, you got that right. That pile of rust is still standing, despite all the bombings." The airplane slowed down and up-and-down-moving wings, made of self-bending metal, ensured a vertical landing. With a one-hour delay, the jet landed in the safe zone of Paris, which had been completely sealed off from its rebel suburbs for several years. After the wings had been retracted into the plane's body, they taxied to a hangar. In the

movable gangway, the passengers took place on hanging seats in order to be carried to the right exit in the building via a pipe complex. An identification scan ensured that the luggage was automatically delivered to the rightful owner, after which everyone was checked again by a real-live official. The American minister and his colleagues were picked up by the president of France.

“Good to see you again, Donald,” the latter greeted him.

“Likewise, Louis. Have the other delegates arrived yet?”

“They’re already sitting at the table.”

“Any news?”

“No, we’re not going to start until you’ve joined us.” The high officials got into an armored vehicle and rode to the center of Paris with police escorts.

“Isn’t that Le Louvre?” Donald asked, along the way.

“Yes, it is,” Louis confirmed. “Despite the fact that it’s lost its position as museum, it is still well-maintained. In the twelfth century, it was a fort that was supposed to protect Paris from outside attacks. History seems to be repeating itself.” After arrival in the highly protected government building, the group was taken to an underground office, where panoramas depicting waterfalls cheered the walls. The negotiators of the European Union, Russia and Arabic Confederation were sitting at the conference table, waiting for the late-comers. The president of France immediately opened the summit talks.

“We have gathered here in order to prevent escalation of the ever-growing gap between Islamic and non-Islamic population groups.”

“Then you will first have to acknowledge Chyren Selin as one of our leaders,” the Arabic diplomat, Al-Atwa, instantly interrupted him.

“You mean that French Muslim with his three bickering wives?” Ivanov, the spokesman for Russia sneered. The meeting had barely begun and the delegates were already at each other’s throats. Holstein, the chairman of the European Union offered some assistance.

“We don’t mind acknowledging Chyren Selin, but he will have to order his followers to respect our laws first, such as equal rights for homosexuals and women.”

“Our leader is prepared to make concessions, provided that the European-Russian fleet is removed from our holy city of Mecca,” Al-Atwa replied to this.

“That fleet is there strictly because of a dispute with the government of Saudi-Arabia,” Holstein explained for the umpteenth time.

“Gentlemen, please, keep your heads cool. We will all benefit from that,” the American minister tried to calm the parties down.

“As far as you Americans are concerned, the only thing that matters is economic interest,” Holstein decried, “but that’s not what will get us out of this mess. Europe has been torn asunder and anarchy reins in large parts of it.”

“Europe has never been able to take care of itself,” Donald moaned.

“And the US has? They are the ones who impetuously invaded Afghanistan and Iraq way back when. Since that time, there has not been one step towards world peace,” Al-Atwa remarked.

“That was twenty years ago; we’ve learned our lesson since then.”

“Such as?”

“Well, we still support the attack on Afghanistan, because that was done purely out of life preservation. But as far as Iraq is concerned, I admit that the US made an error in judgment. In retrospect, the Iraqi population was not happy with our presence there.” The president again made an attempt to force a break-through and again addressed the Arab delegation.

“Chyren Selin, is capable of reigning in all of the Islamic insurgents in all of Europe by giving one speech on TV. He should take that one step.”

“He will do nothing, as long as that fleet stays in the Red Sea,” Al-Atwa repeated.

“That fleet is there only to exert pressure to get Bin Laden handed over,” the president stressed. “We don’t want war with the whole of the Arab Confederation under any circumstances.”

“An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us. But why all that effort? Bin Laden is an old man without any influence,” Al-Atwa said.

“Don’t try to fool us,” Ivanov interrupted, “there are strong indications that he is your informal commander.”

“Why don’t you show us some proof of that then!”

“Please stay calm, gentlemen!” Holstein appeased now. “If Chyren is capable of getting his people to uphold our laws, I think the European Union is prepared to withdraw its ships, but there’s nothing we can do about the Russian ships.”

“Russia will not withdraw as long as Saudi-Arabia does not fulfill its obligations. And we want nothing to do with that French idiot with his three wives,” Ivanov responded stubbornly.

“Chyren is not an idiot,” Al-Atwa said, angrily. “He is the peaceful guardian of Islam. The Christians and the unbelievers, they are the ones who are the idiots; even more than that, they are all criminals. The wounds inflicted by the crusades, colonization and imperialism have not been healed by any means.”

“This is going nowhere,” the Russian mumbled.

“Then we’d better end this meeting,” Al-Atwa threatened, and his colleagues already got up to leave. Suddenly, all the lights went out and the panoramas disappeared.

“It is some attempt to put pressure on us?” the Arabs asked, in the dark.

“Certainly not. There must be a power outage,” the president apologized, and he pressed the intercom button to report the problem.

Strange, that’s not working either, Louis thought, surprised.

“One moment please, gentlemen, I’m sure this disturbance will be fixed momentarily,” and feeling his way, he proceeded to the hall to ask for assistance. To add insult to injury, the entrance door wouldn’t open, due to electronic security and he carefully shuffled back to his spot at the table.

“May I please borrow someone’s cell phone?”

“They’re not working,” Donald answered; he had already tried to make a call.

What on earth is going on here? Louis wondered, feeling totally embarrassed. The Arab delegation was now getting restless.

“It is evident that someone is playing games at our expense,” Al-Atwa concluded.

“Absolutely not,” the president denied vehemently.

“Probably the Americans,” an Arab colleague supposed.

“The Americans are confederates, nothing more. In this country they have no power,” the president guaranteed, having found his way back to his place at the table.

“What we want is to prevent a Third World War,” Donald said.

“What man desires, is not always what happens,” Al-Atwa replied to that. “God’s decisions are unfathomable, quote from Al-Ghazali from the year eleven hundred.”

“On the contrary; God gave us brains so that we can solve our own problems,” Holstein said scornfully.

“I knew it, three against one!” the Egyptian heckled. Then the light returned and the panoramas became visible again. But not a drop of water flowed down the mountain sides anymore.

What kind of joker has been playing with that film? Louis thought, irritated.

A maintenance supervisor came in and rushed to speak to him.

“There’s been a power outage, but we don’t know yet what caused it,” he told his boss privately. The negotiators, meanwhile, were looking at the dried up waterfalls, somewhat surprised.

“Well, gentlemen, the disturbance was temporary, apparently,” the president declared, “but please remain seated, because we still need to talk further about a non-attack treaty with respect to nuclear arms.

“The European Union will certainly support that,” Holstein said immediately. The Americans and Russians also agreed, but the cornered Arabs were not yet ready to cross the bridge.

“What’s in it for us?” Al-Atwa asked, tenaciously.

“What’s in it for you?” Ivanov repeated, annoyed. “No nuclear bombs on Mecca; just ordinary ones.”

“That does it,” the Arab called out, offended, and his delegation had just begun to walk away from the table again when the lights went out once more. No one could leave the room.

“Perhaps an intervention from above, to bring us together?” the president suggested. “A nuclear war would mark the end of human civilization in its entirety.”

“Well, let’s hope for the best then, and that higher intelligence may prevail,” Al-Atwa said, calmed down some. And after the power outage was repaired for the second time and the water was once again flowing

from the cliffs, an intention declaration was signed in which it was agreed not to use any nuclear weapons.

Chapter 14

*The gods will show
That they determine the war
After silence, heaven full of weapons and missiles
The worst damage is on the left*

Paul, César and Madeleine came home late from school and flopped themselves down in various places in the living room, just as Father was passing by.

“Why are you walking with such difficulty, Dad?” they asked. He hesitated for a moment, wondering what to say.

“Your father is old and sick”, he finally had to tell them. They couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

“But you’re invincible!” César protested. But the kids, who were growing up, took a closer look at him and could see that, indeed, there was fragile old man standing in front of them.

“Dinner’s ready!” Anne suddenly called out. They all went to the kitchen, where a steaming pot of onion soup was waiting for them with some bread and butter. Christophe joined them as well.

“Hot dinner tonight?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes, I decided to turn things around for a change,” Anne replied. Her husband was the first one to take a piece of bread out of the basket and laboriously buttered it. The children kept staring at him, observing the stiffness in his movements.

“What’s the matter?” Anne asked, while she was looking for cutlery in the drawer.

“Dad is acting like a sick man,” César answered.

“Your father is sixty-three years old. He is the oldest man in town,” she explained.

“How can a doctor be sick? He can heal anyone, can’t he?” André asked.

“Scientists don’t have a solution for everything, son,” Father answered.

“Although, man will find a technique in the future to prolong life quite drastically.”

“Diane, take those toys off the table,” Mother interrupted.

“How long will people be able to live then, Dad?” Madeleine asked.

“Maybe as old as Methuselah.”

“Well, I’d hate to have to listen to the old school master for a hundred years,” Paul grumbled.

“Or be married to the same old pain in the neck for four hundred years.”

Pauline added.

“Well, I see I can learn something from you kids. But don’t worry; we’re not going to be around to see those things come about.” Christophe didn’t

participate in the table discussion, as usual, and was quietly eating his soup.

"I'd like to be a horse and run through the woods really fast," Pauline fantasized.

"Or fly like a bird," César joined in.

"It's all going to happen, children, because some day, man will be able to travel through the air and across land and water at great speed."

"Through the air? How? Will they glue feathers onto their arms, or something?" Paul asked.

"I think you kids have read the myth of Icarus at school, haven't you? But, anyway, that's not how it will be. Think more of a coach with iron wings, in which the horse is hidden."

"But will the wings be attached to the horse?" César asked.

"Such difficult questions you're asking. No, it will be a machine that will go up in the air, but I'm not exactly sure how. In any case, man will make life more and more complicated, but in my dreams I can fly without any wings."

"Yes, but in the dream world there is no gravity," Paul argued.

"Actually, there is. The more pure you are, the lighter you become. And if you are very pure, you can look around everywhere. Distance, time, high level or low level, don't play any role then."

"Oh, that's why the bad guys are always in the underworld," César understood at once, "they sink down."

"Exactly. Sometimes all the way to the center of the earth. In their sleep, everyone ends up in their own circle and during the day, they again feel the need to look for their equals. A vicious circle, unless man conquers his own ego. You have to find a way to dislodge your anchors in hell. You do this by becoming a good person. Becoming a bad person is very easy and can happen quite rapidly. You all know the story about the fallen archangel, don't you? Lucifer? He fell down very deeply in one second."

"Well, I still think one of those flying machines sounds like a lot of fun," Paul said. Michel liked that little bit of impertinence in his son's character.

"At some point, I will do some research on it, Paul," he therefore promised. The somber mood had lifted and the meal ended on a positive note.

"I'm going upstairs to work for an hour or so," the soft-spoken clerk said to his boss, who was just sitting down in a chair by the fireplace. The kids had gone to play outside, except for Diane, who was looking at a picture book by the window. Anne was giving instructions to the maid in the kitchen and when she was done, she sat down beside her husband.

"Diane, would you mind leaving us alone for a while?" she asked and the girl obediently went into the garden.

"The children were so worried about you. Is there something wrong?"

Michel didn't say anything; just looked at his wife intensely.

"I will not live to see this coming spring," he answered, finally. Anne realized that he was utterly serious, and a big tear slid down her cheek.

“We still have some time before that.”

“I don’t know if I can live without you,” she sobbed.

“When the time comes, you will be able to handle it,” he tried to console her and they held each other for a while. After this moving moment, he decided to get back to work and went up to the attic.

“So, Christophe, what urgent matters are keeping you busy up here?” he asked, while catching his breath from climbing the stairs.

“Your publisher in London has asked me to translate your latest almanac into English. His own translator is making a mess of it.” Suddenly, Nostradamus began to shake uncontrollably.

“What’s wrong, master?”

“No, it’s nothing, don’t worry about me. The Third World War is about to begin,” and he grimly walked to the window.

“You’re doing an exceptionally good job, Christophe,” he said, while looking out at the evening twilight, “but how much longer will it take you?”

“I’m practically finished,” the secretary replied, applying the last few pen strokes.

I can’t see anything going on in the sky yet, the clairvoyant thought to himself.

“Shall I clean up those long-necked bottles?” Christophe asked as he was leaving.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you. I was absorbed in my thoughts.”

“I was just asking if you wanted me to put those bottles away. You haven’t touched them in years.”

“Oh, yes, that’s fine,” Nostradamus answered, while he kept staring out the window.

“Have a nice evening and I’ll see you tomorrow, Master.” And with a few bottles under his arm, the clerk left.

Then the sky was suddenly littered with monstrous inventions and the air turned black. A horrific war was being carried out right before Michel’s eyes. The violence was unprecedented. It was raining milk, steel, fire and pestilence, and many nations met their death. The exorbitant amount of violence even caused earthquakes and rivers extended their courses. World trade completely collapsed and people were suffering from enormous hunger and thirst. The antichrist was not one person, but rather, an automated, cold world, which had now come to an end. The seer could see through all the ages at a glance and everything looked excruciatingly bare. Wherever he focused his vision, all was revealed to him. It would take many dozens of years before life on earth would be repaired enough to create a new world order. Aquarius would begin a millennium of peace, in which man would pay attention to the sky and to outer space. Due to new insights into the relationship between our planet and the universe, the old scriptures would be reinterpreted. Religion and science would finally merge together. Then a coordination government would be installed to rule the entire world and from that time on, people would all cooperate with

each other. Nevertheless, much damage was done to the earth and an irreversible process was set in motion. The planet would be plagued by floods for centuries, and after that by extreme droughts, for just as long.

Michel lit a candle and sat down at his desk. The sun had set by now. He opened his writing book and wrote down all that had been revealed to him. Suddenly, the flame of his candle began to flutter back and forth and he knew that something or someone must have entered the room. He turned around and saw his wife standing in the doorway.

“Would you like to make love with me?” she asked tenderly. The divine request completely softened his heart again. Without answering, he blew out the candle and together they went downstairs to their bedroom. After the enchantment in bed, the next vision immediately presented itself.

The doorbell rang and Ping hurriedly finished putting on her make-up and ran outside.

“Good morning, Miss Lee, please get in,” the instructor, who was wearing a pair of large yellow goggles, requested. She walked around the flying car, which soundlessly hovered above the ground and came dangerously close to the wings, which were moving up and down more rapidly than they eye could perceive.

“Watch out! You could really hurt yourself on those!” the teacher warned, sitting down on the other side.

“Exciting,” she said as she fastened her seatbelt.

“Flying is, in fact, very simple; practically everyone knows how. Is this your first lesson?”

“Yes, Mister Norton, and I don’t know anything about it at all,” while she examined the interior.

“You may call me Unix,” he said, as he scribbled some notes. “You’re in luck, Ping. You are getting your lesson in a brand new flying car and it’s the lightest model. Not counting the water tank, it only weighs four hundred and thirteen kilos.”

“But it is strong enough, right?” she asked.

“Of course. It meets all the regulations,” and when he flicked a lever, the see-through top closed automatically. “We will have to fly out of New Water first, because beginners are no longer permitted to practice in the city,” and using the extra steering mechanism, he brought the vehicle high above the inner city and into the sweltering sky.

“We’ll go to the Bering Plateau; you can make as many mistakes as you want to there.”

“I’m not that dumb,” she responded pertly.

“Standard joke,” he apologized and they flew to the expansive practice area. Once they got there, he brought the flying car to a stop, high above the salt plateau.

“Now I’m switching the controls over to you, Ping. Do you prefer telepathic or verbal instructions?”

“Verbal, please.”

“All right. The most important thing is the control stick. You can move it up and down, in and out and from left to right.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I’m just starting at the beginning. Next to the control stick are the foot pedals. The right pedal is for accelerating and the left one is for a straight descent. If you don’t do anything, the machine will just hang in the air and stay in the same spot. Okay, now you take the wheel, while I take care of the pedals.” Ping moved the control stick forward and the machine immediately tipped its nose downward.

“See?” he said, “We’re just staying in the same place because I’m not stepping on the gas pedal. But now I’m going to, just a bit,” and the flying car began to slowly descend. “Now pull the control stick back, or we’ll have an accident.” She did as he asked and the machine pulled its nose up and found its height again.

“Now turn left and then right,” he ordered. She tried it and made a few sharp turns.

“Now you’re going to step on the gas at the same time,” and his student made the machine fly above the platform by fits and starts.

“Look, someone’s walking over there,” she said suddenly and she tapped the window to point him out.

“Who ever would be walking around here?” Unix wondered, surprised. “He must be lost. You’d better go over there,” and she got the flying car to go in the right direction, albeit a little clumsily.

“You’re learning pretty fast. At the end of this lesson day, you’ll be able to fly,” he praised her. In the meantime, they were approaching the mortal in the long, brown robe, who was making his way across the parched surface all alone.

“Judging by the way he’s walking, he is a Longlife,” Ping guessed.

“You could be right, because an intelligent being would not be walking around in this vicinity. Let me take over the controls from you for a minute,” and he managed to maneuver the soundless machine to right next to the plodding eccentric. Then he slid open the roof so he could call out to him.

“Can we help you?” The loner just about jumped out of his skin, he was so startled, and uselessly began to flee.

“That’s got to be a Longlife, acting like that!” Unix laughed.

“He’s probably from the melting factory at the South Pole,” Ping suggested.

“That’s almost impossible; he would have had to travel thousands of kilometers. Sad that their ancestors had their genes messed with. In the old days they wanted to live forever so badly, they forgot to consider the negative aspects of it. It only became clear after they had kids. Nowadays, the only thing they’re good for is melting ice.”

“And even then, they get in the way,” Ping joked, “except this one...”

“I will alert the authorities of Dutch Harbor,” he said and after contacting them, he continued the lesson. After a few exercises, his student was really getting the hang of flying and it was time for a bigger challenge.

“Now we’re going to look for air currents. We’ll leave the passable flying routes alone for a few more lessons,” and he instructed her to turn around.

“Off to the Pacific Ocean, or what’s left of it,” he joked and they flew southward at a speed of five hundred kilometers an hour. A little while later, the coast appeared.

“There’s a free area with a lot of air currents around the Emperor archipelago,” he informed her.

“Is that what I should fly to?”

“If you can. But look around you all the time, Ping, don’t rely on the radar too much.”

“I never saw any radar yet,” she responded and he had to swallow hard.

“Check all the meters too,” he then urged.

“A red light is on,” she said right away.

“Man, that thing runs out of fuel so fast,” he grumbled. “That light means we’re low on fuel. Go ahead and go down to one meter above sea level.”

“So, I should let go of the gas pedal first, right?”

“Correct,” he confirmed. Ping took her foot off the gas pedal and pushed down on the other pedal to descend. The flying car shot down immediately. When they got close to the sea, she abruptly let go of the pedal and they came to a standstill with a shock.

“Don’t worry, it has an automatic speed limiter,” he reassured her. And anyway, the machine is waterproof.” Unix then piloted the car right down to the water level himself.

“Now press the purple button and the vacuum will do the rest. Incidentally, did you know that starting in January you’re only allowed to put a hundred liters of seawater in your tank?”

“No, I didn’t realize that,” she replied. “I do feel guilty that I’m now going to be contributing to the evaporation of the oceans.”

“Yup, everyone wants his own car and melting ice at the poles is not enough to keep the sea level up. So we’re going to have to be more frugal. After all, what can we expect? With something like a billion airplanes in the air, all burning water for years. And the drought continues. Rain is seen as a gift from heaven these days.”

“I’ve never even seen rain,” Ping said, while the instruments gave a signal that the tank was full again. “Well, just a drop...”

“Too bad for you. It’s a beautiful sight. Okay, now go straight to those islands,” and the flying car picked up speed again.

“We’re robbing the planet down to nothing,” Unix harped on. “People thought burning water for fuel was the solution for the fuel problem, but now we are literally and figuratively drying up.”

“There is a plan for condensing moisture from the air on a large scale,” she commented.

“That will never work! Before we reach that little island over there, I want you to climb to two thousand feet on course 315. The wind is blowing at twenty knots from the north-east and you always have to take the wind into consideration.” Ping translated the technical jargon, pulled the control stick back and stepped on the gas. It seemed to be the right thing to do and he gave her a few more tasks to perform around the group of islands.

“You’ve carried out everything to my satisfaction,” he said, finally. “Let’s fly due north again and increase the rpm to 1800.” And they returned to the Bering platform. The time had flown by and the sun was disappearing into the stale atmosphere.

“Did you hear that Mabus’ space ship is leaving for M’charek next week?” he asked, when they got back over land.

“Yes, of course, I’ve been following every minute of it. A hundred men and women are going and it’s going to take them thirty years to get there,” Ping said, while keeping her eye on the indicators.

“The livable planet is popularly already being called “The Little Prince,” because its circumference is only half of that of the Earth,” he continued.

“Less than half.”

“Yes, a bit smaller. I suppose colonization of M’charek is the solution for our drought problem. Our terrestrial globe is just pretty much run-down. Some pessimists are predicting that we will only be able to be here for another half a century before humanity will perish because of the scorching heat. They also say...”

“I’m getting distracted Unix, I’m tired,” she interrupted him and he took over the controls.

“What do you think about paying a short visit to the Komandorski top?” he suggested. “The space ship is moored above it and we’re going right past it anyway.”

“Great idea,” Ping replied; at least she could relax now. He increased their speed and a little while later they arrived at the famous mountain top on the Ochotsk plain, where a super-tall elevator between the earth and space had been built. The cable stood up straight, due to the centrifugal force. They flew around it for a while.

“From here they will enter space next month,” he said. “I would love to travel along on that sun powered ship with those great sails.”

“I’d rather stay right here on Earth!”

“You don’t know what you’re saying. The whole world is getting bleaker every day; almost nothing grows here anymore.”

“I still love Earth.”

Women are so sentimental, he thought. They flew around the elevator, which reached to outside of the earth’s atmosphere and then turned back towards New Water.

“I see that Longlife is still wandering around down there,” Ping discovered when they crossed the southern point of the salt plain.

“I’ll report him one more time,” he said and they flew up along the ring way.

“Well, it’s more difficult than I thought it would be,” she admitted, when she got dropped off at home.

“You’re doing really well,” Unix praised her again. “But the most difficult part is still to pass the theory exams.”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it, I guess. See you next week!” and she slammed the front door shut behind her.

It was early in the morning and Anne’s bare back was roguishly sticking up out of the blankets. From his side of the bed Michel stared at her strong shoulders, covered by her messy locks, which were still golden-brown. She was still asleep and although she was an enticing sight, he was feeling too restless to stay in bed any longer. He covered up her back and got up. The weather was cold and gloomy and as he walked down the stairs his joints were creaking like an old cart. Downstairs in the living room, he immediately lit the fire to chase the dampness out of the house. While he was rubbing his eyes with his crooked fingers, he heard a dull bang. The sound came from the garden side and the old scientist decided to go and see what had caused it. He walked into the courtyard, across the veranda, behind the living room and saw a sparrow lying on the ground, dazed.

“Poor little wretch, you thought you could fly through the window, didn’t you, but now it has glass in it. Humans are creating confusion everywhere.” He looked at the sparrow for a while. It didn’t seem to be able to pull itself together. Then he went inside and in the kitchen he poured some water into a little bowl and dunked some sage into it. Back in the courtyard he carefully picked up the little bird. He opened its beak and dribbled a few drops of the elixir into its mouth. The bird came to and, startled to see those big human hands, began to thrash about.

“Whoa, I’m the doctor,” he whispered, and placed the sparrow in a corner where it could relax. When he bent down, he suddenly had a gout attack and huge waves of pain shot through all his joints. It was unbearable and he crawled into the house on his hands and knees. Anne had risen, in the meantime, and was just coming down the stairs, unsuspecting, when she noticed her husband sitting curled up on the couch.

“Where is the pain?” she asked, worried.

“Everywhere,” he moaned, “but especially in my left knee.” She carefully removed his slipper and sock, but even the light touch on the rotting leg made him tremble.

“It doesn’t do any good to look at it,” he whined.

“I have to see it for a minute,” and she rolled up his pant leg. Around the deformed knee joint she saw purple, swollen skin.

That does not look good, she thought and she felt his pulse. His heartbeat was extremely fast. She ran to the kitchen, and mixed some painkilling herbs with a good quantity of alcohol.

“Drink this!” she ordered, when she returned. Michel drank the glass down and the drink did him some good. The attack subsided.

“I’m going to go out and pick lavender with the kids in a minute, and then I am going to rub it all over your body,” she informed him. The kids were up now too and César and Madeleine were going to help their mother. They left for the fields with a straw basket to pick the herb that had a healing effect on rheumatism. They had to search for a while, because the herb, with its grey-green leaves, only grew on steep hills during this season. Once the basket was full, they quickly returned home. Christophe had arrived, in the meantime, and together they dragged the scholar up the stairs for the third time. Anne wanted to undress her husband on the bed, but the faithful servant was still there.

“You go now, Christophe,” she commanded and he reluctantly left the room. The old scientist was now lying naked on his stomach and his wife sat down across him. Then she began to rub the calming herb into his body, from the top of his head down to his toes. As she was moving her hands gradually down his body, she came across some gout bumps under the skin, which he had not mentioned before. The morbid growths felt awful. After the massage, she covered him up carefully.

“You might start to feel sleepy,” she said. He thanked her, but she couldn’t understand his mumbling and left the room. During the next few days, she repeated the treatment twice a day and the whole house smelled like lavender. His health was improving. Weeks after the fearsome blow, he was able to move through the house, very slowly and he exchanged a few words with his kids. All was well for about a month. When winter set in, however, he collapsed and he only got through the days with the utmost effort. He hurriedly called a notary public and he secretly made up his will.

The same behavior as my father, he thought sadly, when the official man left, with his wishes on paper. Nostradamus had now retreated permanently to the attic and worked on his main work *The Prophecies* until he was no longer able to.

Just one more verse and that will be it, he thought. When he had finished the tenth Century, he suddenly became unwell and tumbled backwards. There he was, lying on the floor, and quietly, but with a clear mind, he stared up at the ceiling. His life on earth came to an end and lying next to his spyglass, he breathed his last breath.

Chapter 15

*Mabus will die sooner and then will come
A terrible destruction of humans and animals
Suddenly revenge will appear
A hundred hands hungry as soon as the comet strikes*

A desolate plane with a sweltering sky, spread out before him. Is this heaven, where my soul must find peace? Nostradamus seriously wondered. But this really did not look like the promised paradise and he tried to figure out what it was. One thing was sure: his spirit had not left him, because he still had aspirations. It was scorching hot here. The sun was shining brightly and was larger than ever before. In the distance he could see the sea and the innumerable shells in the sand told him that seawater used to flow here in the past. The sea had dried up for miles to the south.

This looks like Camargue in the future, he surmised. Just above the skyline he detected a sign of life. It seemed to be growing. It slowly dawned on him that it was a machine that was zooming towards him, and a few moments later, a flying car stopped right in front of him. The see-through sunroof slid open and a man, wearing large yellow goggles, and a Chinese girl appeared.

“Can we help you?” the man said, in a friendly way. But the seer didn’t get a chance to answer the question because just at that moment a large comet passed the earth’s atmosphere. The three mortals turned all of their attention to the flaming colossus, which was approaching earth with staggering speed. The exhausted earth planet had somehow attracted the comet and it seemed like her congener was coming to help just in time. They all knew that something terrible was about to happen and looked at each other with expressions of bewilderment. Michel estimated that the chunk of rock would hit about one thousand kilometers from where they were. When that happened, the impact was overwhelming and the planet creaked in all its joints. It felt like an assault to one’s own body.

The Flood is coming, they all realized. The catastrophic attack on Mother Earth made them realize who they had to thank for their existence. But it was too late for humility or repentance. The gods had decided to separate the chaff from the wheat and to mow everything down to nothing. The two companions in misfortune, in the flying car, stared ahead blankly and waited for what was to come. The rotating earth, which had been moving around automatically until then, slowed down and everyone held their breath.

“My God, the disappearance of the ice from the poles can lead to unbalance,” Michel murmured. His spoken words came true immediately

and the earth's axis began to topple. The planet began to whirl out of control. Because of the changing interplay of forces on the celestial body, it wasn't long before there were earthquakes and erupting volcanoes everywhere.

The flying car was still zooming steadily above the ground, but the people inside it were looking around frantically. Now it began to vibrate dangerously under Nostradamus' feet and suddenly the sea roared. A tidal wave was coming towards them at breakneck speed. The two aviators sped off in their machine. The seer managed to avoid the wall of water on his own power, by launching himself high up into the air. The sky, in the meantime, was getting murky: the sun, moon and stars disappeared behind clouds of dust, water and fire. It was time to flee to a safer haven.

Soon I'll run out of energy, and I'll plunge into the ocean, Michel worried. My soul is all I have left. What am I saying, I'm forgetting to mention my memories.

And counting his blessings, he flew towards the northern mountains at high speed to take shelter among them. On the way he became aware of the horrific disaster that was taking place on earth. Abnormal storms raged across land and sea, and airplanes fell down like autumn leaves. Towns and villages turned into piles of rubble, and ships were being devoured by sky-high waves. A desperate fear took hold of all the peoples on the earth and many died just from the fear. Nothing and nobody could stand up against this force of nature, and it only kept getting worse. No place was spared. Chunks of the Earth burst apart or bumped into each other with intense force and thick layers of molten stone were forming new mountains and chasms here and there. The forces of the heavens kept moving and an abundant rain, that had been saved up for years, began to fall. In no time, countries that had been drying up were flooded by the rainwater. A handful of space ships were trying to get to outside of the Earth atmosphere with the assistance of a laser beam.

"God, why are you so merciless?" Michel asked, while he watched everything from a great height, and then he was hit by lightning. He fell down many miles, in shock, but landed, alive, in a valley that seemed to be yet untouched.

I doubted Him, he realized, shaken, and, as a snake that had to crawl on his belly as punishment, he fled into the mountains. The seawater kept rising and the valley filled up. In order to keep his head above the water, he had to take shelter on a mountain. He seemed to be safe there for a little while, but suddenly the valley burst open and red magma spewed up out of holes and crevices. The confrontation between the lava and the water caused an earsplitting, hissing sound. Poisonous gasses and glowing hot steam rose up and threatened the hurrying ghost, who had to keep climbing higher and higher.

This is getting to be hopeless, he thought and with the force of desperation, he kept scrambling up the sheer rock walls. Again there were explosions, which this time caused an enormous squall and he had to hang

on to the wall with all his might. With a spark of hope he climbed on. A short while later, a powerful explosion collapsed the sides of several mountains, but miracle of miracles, left his path unharmed. However, he could not see any future for himself and wondered where it would all end up. Defeated, he reached the top, where he watched the end of time on the horizon. The Flood was now at its peak and there was no longer any clear distinction between heaven and earth. Mountain ranges disappeared into ravines, and angry seas shot up into the air. Trails of clouds were sucked through holes, only to spit out again right away.

Why is this mountain the only one that is staying put in this swirling mass? he wondered. Did I become One already? And for a moment he thought he was God's equal.

Oops, mental derangement, that's all I need now, he understood, after some introspection. The illusion had just barely been fought off, when something nasty crawled close to him from behind. It penetrated into all his fibers and a thousand shivers ran down his back.

"Well, are you enjoying the view?" a velvet voice with an iron heart suddenly spoke. The mountain top petrified and the air became bleak. With shaking knees, Michel turned around and saw someone standing there: it was Lucifer, the fallen archangel.

"You have been my best student, so far," he continued. "Many wise people on earth think they can fathom me, but such frivolity is foreign to you." The chief devil radiated an intense black energy and this sucked up the last of the weakened prophet's energy. There were ten horns on Satan's head, but suddenly another one poked through and the others made room for it. He could pulverize his victims effortlessly with his large, bronze claws and iron teeth. Anything left would be trampled under his feet. His strong wings also told that escape would be impossible.

"You have done me some very special favors," he feigned again. "You are the greatest sinner ever." And an enormous glow of pride shone from his eyes, while two crows flew up to land on his shoulders. His words did not really get through to the mortal, because he was just noticing that his own heart felt like a lump of ice.

"You have uttered disastrous curses with your predictions," Lucifer explained, while a piece of a hops plant was growing out of his mouth.

"What? Me?" Michel stuttered, completely flabbergasted.

"Yes, you, even this Flood was started by you. I have had great plans for you from the beginning; your talent cannot be denied. Granted, I had to give you a little push every once in a while," and he bit off the growing plant and chewed on it.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"And as a reward, you get to finally meet your master," Lucifer said, ignoring his question and pointing to himself. "Now, I have a proposal: you worship me and in exchange I will give you all of my worldly wisdom."

"That will put me on the wrong path..."

“What? You think my proposal is not good enough for you?” Lucifer screeched and his voice reverberated all around them. “All right,” and he took a few steps forward. His student, meanwhile, was looking around in a panic, thinking of a way to fly away.

“That won’t do you any good,” Lucifer hissed, reading his thoughts effortlessly. “I always vanquish my enemies. Their power is my fuel,” and the desperate ghost let go of his plan.

“I am supremely powerful. I teased you on top of the Etna and I was suddenly on the cover of your book, or I conjured a nice little flame in your living room. I was always with you everywhere and I know more about what goes inside of you than you do. You want to save souls. But be realistic. No one will help you and you barely have the capacity to fly away. And look around you... You have no choice!” Michel considered for a moment if he could hide in his earthly body.

“Ha ha, forget it; your body is already decomposed. There is nothing left to crawl into,” Lucifer said immediately. Every thought was caught instantly and in silence, the mortal prayed to God.

“Oh, God. God is okay with everything, no matter if you’re alive or dead. I, on the other hand, bring light. Your reputation and your clairvoyance are all thanks to me. If I had not made your previous family die of the plague, you would have been nothing but a local little doctor.” Michel couldn’t believe what he was hearing and seriously considered letting himself be led to the chopping block.

“The only thing I want from you is cooperation,” the light carrier now revealed. “Every little bit helps and together we are strong. Don’t be so sentimental; life goes on, you know. Your wife already has her eye on Claude de Tende, you know, that governor. And your offspring, they’re all happy they’re finally out from under your thumb.”

“In the name of Jesus Christ!” Michel suddenly cried out.

“You want to bring him into this too? You sure don’t learn fast. Jesus will not help you. He’s walking around in circles somewhere, chasing his own tail.” Nostradamus fell onto his knees in misery and brought his predictions into his mind.

Did I really cause all those disasters?

“Yes, but it’s okay. I can turn it back, if I feel like it. Only under one condition though and that is that you surrender to me.”

“I loathe you!”

“All right, I’ll sweeten the pot a little more. What do you think about this: in addition to getting all my insights, you may also return to your wife, with a healthy body?” Michel was being provoked to the nth degree and the temptation was so strong that he almost succumbed, but fortunately he remembered the most important thing.

“Oh, you and that infernal soul of yours. Stop being so small-minded and think bigger for a change,” Lucifer complained, stepping closer. His victim was picking himself up and saw the devil’s face coming nearer. It was so horrific, he involuntarily shrank back from it.

“Have I misjudged you after all?” Lucifer raged. “Is this the gratitude I’m going to get from you? And I even sent Hermes to clean your inner stables of Augias. Are you really such a simple soul, to stay stuck in that petty way of thinking? I could have left that to any of my simple helpers!”

“You only have power on Earth. Humanity will surpass you,” his student suddenly protested.

“Do you mean that handful of idiots that is trying to fly into outer space? A minor flaw; nobody’s perfect. They, however, are doomed to die or to roam aimlessly in space for eternity. You see, a new ice age is beginning here. And I’m getting bored of you, Nos.” The ruler of darkness was standing very close now and looked at him with contempt. Then the holy fire ignited in Michel’s heart. His fears disappeared and he raised his head and said: “If there was ever anyone who always met evil head-on, it was probably me, but I *am* not evil. I will never sell my soul to you.” The two crows suddenly took flight from Lucifer’s shoulders and he bolted towards the apostate and pushed him into the abyss.

“Then burn in hell forever!” Satan called after him and Michel fell down into the red-hot lava streams.

France was in deep mourning after the death of its illustrious compatriot and everyone had their flag out at half-mast. The prominent officers poured into Salon de Provence from far and wide, to pay their last respects to the seer. Under the auspices of the family, the physical remains were buried in the church of the Cordeliers. While a priest was holding the sermon, the coffin was placed into the memorial tomb with the public watching. Anne was standing in the front with her children, nervous about the proceedings. Her ancient brothers-in-law were standing behind her. The memorial tomb had been placed straight up inside the wall, as per Nostradamus’ request, so that his enemies would not be able to step on his throat. After the deceased had been blessed, the tomb was closed and Anne briefly touched the stone lid in which her husband’s portrait was carved at eye height. The image showed him at the age of about forty-nine. His coat of arms was also on there. Then she sadly kneeled in front of the grave and read the text on the marble commemorative stone, which she had written herself and which she had arranged to have placed below it. The words were etched in Latin: *Michaelis Nostradamii Ummortaliiu.* After that, everyone sat down on the church benches and the governor of the Provence spoke a few final words.

“Dear family and friends,” Claude said, with a lump in his throat. “The world has lost a very special person during the last few days. A person who, at the beginning of his career as physician managed to save thousands of citizens from the plague and who later allowed us a glimpse into the future through his unprecedented prophesies. Despite his impertinence, Michel de Nostredame was a very pious man. He was never intimidated by anyone or anything. On the contrary, he walked God’s path with confidence and defied many dangers. But aside from his inimitable

talent and tenacity, he was also a loving father,” and all eyes turned to the six children, who had been keeping very quiet all this time. Claude continued: “I once had to, much against my own will, incarcerate my friend, by superior orders. But when he was free again, he never held it against me. This made a great impression on me. I admired him greatly, and who didn’t.” The governor then addressed his buried friend: “Michel, if there is someone who has shown the right example of what the Lord expects of us, it is you. May your soul find peace.” The widow burst into tears after those last words and Claude went to her to comfort her. Then he offered his condolences to the six children and the brothers-in-law, and everyone followed his example. When the dignitaries, friends and other important guests had all expressed their sympathies, they left the church. Claude and Anne exchanged a few thoughts.

“I’ve been so rude to him,” Anne sniffled, “he deserved a better wife.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself. You really were his pride and joy,” Claude soothed her, laying a protective arm around her shoulder. The rest of the relatives were now also coming out of the church and the children were all standing there, looking a little lost.

“Well, I’d better go,” Anne said, “those six need me. Or else I need them.” “If you need someone to talk to, don’t hesitate to come and see me,” Claude offered.

“That’s very sweet of you, but I’m sure I’ll be fine,” and they all left the church of the Cordeliers, which would be closed for an indefinite period of time.

The next day, Anne received hundreds of letters of sympathy from all over the country, including one from the queen. With the assistance of Christophe she would write a thank you note to everyone. The notary public, meanwhile, contacted the widow and informed her that her late husband had recently made up a will. In the presence of the children, he presented it to her. It turned out that Michel had left his wife the enormous sum of more than 3444 crowns plus an individual amount for each child. In the estate there was also a letter that was addressed especially to his son César. The young man, who was sixteen by now, felt honored to accept the letter and sat down with it on the veranda. Sitting in his father’s rocking chair, he read the emotionally charged letter.

“To my son César. May life and fortune be with you. Your late arrival gave me the opportunity to dedicate many of my night times, to write that which I want to leave you after my passing into the other world. These are my insights about the general purpose and progression of humanity, which the higher authorities have given me. They have been incorporated into *The Prophecies*. I feel I must write this letter, although your delicate mind, due to your tender age, will not yet be able to understand their content. All of my predictions will come about according to the stars, but the adventures of humankind will be uncertain in their balance, because everything is ultimately controlled by God himself. Astrology cannot

determine human fate with any certainty. Only those with divine inspiration can reveal something real. I was privileged to experience this divine inspiration and many of my predictions have come true in many parts of the country. My messages, however, could fall into the wrong hands of future leaders, who could misuse the prophesies or discard them, which would emphasize the opposite. This would undermine the development of mankind and for this reason I have hidden the prophesies in inimitable quatrains. As the old saying goes: do not cast pearls before swine. I have therefore used obscure and disordered aphorisms in order not to damage the small-minded people in the present or the future. Sometimes I wish I could be silent. Yet, I can't do anything but pass on my insights. It would be a sign of carelessness from my side, because the hidden messages will serve the course of humanity by showing them their place. Only initiates will be able to fathom the verses. It is not for the average person to know the given times and moments. In order to lead and protect the common folk, the Creator will repeatedly reveal the secrets of the future and the past to pure knowing ones. Revelations of the divine works that are perfect. The capacity for clairvoyance is received from the tender soul of the fire, which can be touched during the night rest. The insights flowing from that must not be confused with the natural knowledge of the living beings. The supernatural insights originate with the ethereal source and are kept hidden under the arch of heaven. My son, I pray that you will never lend your intelligence to dreams and trivialities that can dry up the higher bodies and allow the soul to ultimately get lost. I have left my work room empty. I have sacrificed my books full of secret wisdom to Vulcanus, in order to keep its dangerous power from the public. When I burned the books, the sky became unusually clear and that showed me it was a good decision. God has favored me and I hope to be able to pass on my inspiration to you in spirit. Your father seems far away now. But I am not removed further from heaven with my senses, than I am from earth with my feet. And don't praise me into heaven; I am a sinner, greater than any other. But considering your tender mind, I will stop myself from wandering further into that subject. What I am leaving you is *The Prophesies*. The predictions in this book are related to the arch along which the moon moves. I have discovered that before the earth is burned, there will be such floods that every inch of ground will be under water. Humanity as we know it will ultimately cease to exist. But don't be frightened by this doom scenario. It will take centuries for that to happen and before that time, I hope to have a chance to explain the verses to you in person. May God grant you prosperity.”

Salon de Provence became a popular place of pilgrimage. Hordes of people annually visited the legendary seer's memorial tomb and every day some buzzing could be heard in the church of the Cordeliers. Only at night did peace return and was there silence, until, 225 years later, two superstitious soldiers would seriously disturb this ritual. One night, during

the French Revolution, Bruno and Yves, who were encamped nearby, were hanging around the big fountain. The inseparable duo was in need of some entertainment and they were talking and drinking.

“You know what I dream of?” Yves blustered, “One of those mounted cast-iron cannons!”

“Brute force,” was Bruno’s opinion, “I think sorcery is a lot more exciting than that.”

‘And the bigger the barrel, the more beautiful it is,’ his friend prattled on.

“You don’t need a stupid canon, man, if you know some magic tricks!”

“What, do you have some supernatural gifts?” Yves asked, while he passed the bottle of wine to his buddy.

“No, but do you have a canon?” Bruno replied, thinking himself smart. His friend shrugged his shoulders and took another swig.

“Did you know,” Bruno continued loudly, “that in Paris the Bastille with its eight towers and one-and-a-half meters thick walls has been flattened to the ground and that it involved not even one canon?”

“Heck, I didn’t know that,” his companion retorted tipsily and while they chattered on, a window opened in one of the neighboring houses.

“Hey, quiet down, you guys!” a citizen of Salon, who was trying to sleep, called out.

“Watch out, or I’ll turn you into a frog,” Bruno brushed him off and the neighbor grumbled something while he closed the shutter.

“Have you ever been to Paris?” Yves asked, extra loudly.

“No, but have I ever been anywhere without you? We’ll get to Paris yet.” The soldiers were bored to tears and were in the mood for some action.

“Yves, you know, Nostradamus’ grave is nearby; want to come see?” Yves agreed and together they ambled towards the church of the Cordeliers.

“What do you want to do there; it’s the middle of the night?” Yves asked on the way.

“I’m going to drink wine out of the skull of the prophet.”

“But why?”

“The story is going around that you could maybe get magical powers if you do that.”

“Oh wow! But you have to get inside first, don’t you,” Yves smirked.

“Buddy, just leave it to me,” and they walked around the church to the back door.

“I’ll be right back,” Bruno whispered conspiringly. Yves waited by the door, until his friend came back with an iron bar. Using this, the door was easily broken open and they snuck into the church. In the front, the two soldiers found the upright tomb of the seer and Bruno had a look to see how to open the thing. They had soon managed to remove the stone lid and between the old boards, they saw the skeleton of Nostradamus. They violently ripped off its skull and a golden amulet fell to the bottom of the coffin, unnoticed. While Bruno drank wine out of the skull, his buddy started to juggle with the bones. Suddenly the brains behind the macabre

plan felt himself being grabbed across the throat by invisible hands and with all his strength, he tried to pull them off. For a minute Yves thought his friend was just kidding around, but when he kept calling out for help and he began to turn purple, Yves ran away, scared to death. Just past the sacristy, a statue of a saint suddenly fell over right in front of him, and he tripped over it and fell on the floor. The mayor had heard the commotion in the church and ordered his city guards to grab the two burglars. They were caught in the act, and offered no resistance to their arrest. Bruno had almost choked to death and was still trying to catch his breath and Yves was lying unconscious on the floor.

“Throw those soldiers into the lockup!” the furious mayor ordered. “We’ll use them later, at the front*”; they can catch the enemy’s bullets for us.” Then he walked over to the damaged tomb and discovered the golden medallion between the remainder of bones in the tomb. When he saw the inscription on the age-old medallion, his jaw dropped in surprise: It had the number of the current year, 1791, on it. He hurriedly put the treasure back into the coffin, which was shut again, with all the bones inside, a few minutes later. The bewildered mayor then immediately ordered his men to transfer the grave to the church of Saint Laurent, where it could be better taken care of. He never spoke another word about it to anyone, ever again.

* See what became of Bruno and Yves on page 49/50

Chapter 16

Henrik Larson was happily walking through his vineyard, under a cloudless sky. Bunches of grapes were hanging from the graceful vines and he pulled one off. He bit the blue fruit in half and carefully tasted it. Yes, it's ripe, he concluded. The sour-sweet juice was just right for the preparation of the deep-red drink and the harvest was ready to be brought in.

Tomorrow I will gather some pickers, he promised himself, and with a feeling of satisfaction, he looked over at his vines in the valley down by the river. The flowing river water sparkled brightly in the late afternoon sun, and he enjoyed the beautiful view. Above the horizon to the south were the silhouettes of the Pyrenees. The mighty presence of the high mountains was palpable here and their energies shimmered in the vineyard.

I'd better get home, he thought, looking at his watch and started to trudge up the hill, behind which was Cave Lagneaux. Despite his Swedish background he had become a popular man in the neighbourhood in just a few years. His open face was an invitation to anyone. The philosophical Larson had landed in the town of Limoux, in the South of France, when, during a purification journey, he had met not himself, but a nice French woman. He had married her and they settled in the sun-drenched district of Aude, with its picturesque villages and narrow roads. They found an old farm that still had an old wine press, and renovated it into its modern state. The house had been furnished with all comforts over the years. Inside the walled-in garden, Henrik had recently built a swimming pool for the children. He walked towards Cave Lagneaux and breathed in the last scents of nature.

Life can be so beautiful, he thought as he went inside.

"Brigitte, tomorrow I want to start picking," he called and looked for his wife on the main floor. He didn't see her anywhere and he was just about to go and look for her upstairs, when a blonde woman came down the stairs. Half-way, they bumped into each other.

"Hello angel, you're so beautiful," he greeted her. It seemed like they hadn't seen each other in ages and they lovingly touched each other.

Every day a new woman, he thought in his head. "Brigitte, I want to bring in the harvest tomorrow."

"Okay, I'll make some phone calls tonight," she said. "How many pickers do you think you'll need?"

"I think five or six should be enough," and they went to the living room to go over the day's business.

"Your father called, he will call back tonight," Brigitte reported, while she picked up an address book.

“I’ll call him now,” he replied.

“Hi Dad!” David called out, rushing out of the laundry room with a cat in his arms.

“Was Mau hiding in there again?” Dad asked. The child nodded and went upstairs to his room, without the cat. The timer on the oven rang and the couple hurried to the kitchen, where Brigitte was trying out a new recipe.

“You haven’t touched your easel in months,” she said, as she pulled the hot dish out of the oven, “do you want me to put it away, or are you going to make something beautiful soon?”

“Just put it away. I don’t feel like painting anymore. In a painting, everything is so trapped; it has no life anymore. No, I’d rather look at nature, or at you!”

She smiled at the compliment, never tiring of his admiring remarks.

“I still think the painting with the sunflowers is brilliant,” she confessed and she poked the vegetable quiche with a knife to see if it was done.

“Oh, it’s a nice picture. Oh, right, I was going to call my father. Where is that cell phone?”

“In the cupboard with the mirror, dear,” she answered and he went into the living room.

“And you’ll call for some workers, right?” he called after her. He found the phone and quickly had his father in Stockholm on the line.

“Hello Dad. I heard you called.”

“Right, I did. Your mother had a sudden unsettled feeling about you guys and asked me to give you a call. The violence in Europe is definitely on the increase.”

“It’s pretty safe in the country, where we are,” his son reassured him.

“Let’s hope so. In any case, we’re glad you’re finally doing so well. You seemed like the eternal martyr there for a while. Everything okay with Brigitte and the kids?”

“Yup, everything’s excellent. Fred is crawling around everywhere. He can almost walk already. And tomorrow we’re going to be bringing in the harvest.”

“Beautiful and grateful work, son. Unfortunately, Sweden is not a wine country and we are too old to come by. But next year, god-willing, we are planning to come for a visit. But we’d better keep this short, um?” They both said goodbye and Henrik turned off the cell phone, the only communication device in the house. He had agreed with his wife that the children should be exposed to as few miseries and temptations as possible until their seventh year. For that reason, there was no computer and no television in the house.

“Dinner is ready!” Brigitte called, putting Fred back into the playpen. David and Lisa came down the stairs. The girl hopped to the eating corner with a pack of markers and quickly made another drawing, while her brother followed her actions.

“That doesn’t look like anything,” he teased and provokingly pulled the paper away from her.

“You jerk!” Lisa shouted.

“Hey, no name-calling around here,” her father warned. He didn’t see what was going on, because he was just getting some glasses from the kitchen.

“Yeah, but David is teasing and he’s always being nasty to me,” his daughter whined.

“And you’re nasty back to him. That’s how you get stuck in a vicious cycle. If you behave properly he’ll stop teasing you, because it won’t be any fun for him anymore.” Lisa had heard the lecture, but she was still angry with her little brother.

“He’ll get run over by a car some day,” she said, quietly, but her father heard her.

“Those are dangerous thoughts, Lisa. Don’t make predictions like that. Don’t make any predictions, in fact; it’s like pronouncing a curse! Boys just act that way, and they eventually outgrow that kind of behavior. But I will keep a closer eye on David,” and he gave his son an intense look. Every once in a while those kids were a pain in the neck, but for the most part they were good kids. After the vegetable quiche had been devoured and the kids had gone to bed, Henrik was leafing through a thick book and making some notes.

“What are you doing?” Brigitte asked, after she had done the dishes.

“I’m giving a lecture about Swedenborg at the Cultural Center next week,” he replied, taking off his reading glasses.

“Any particular theme?”

“Conjugal love.”

“I hope it won’t get too mushy, with all our acquaintances there. I assume you won’t be discussing our love life?”

“You know me better than that!” he assured her. She picked up a magazine and sat down on the couch beside her husband. A few minutes later she was sadly shaking her head.

“There’s been an attack on City Hall in Pau,” she told him.

“Any victims?”

“Three dead, including the mayor.” The climate in the country had been getting harsher during the last few years and they realized how vulnerable their own existence was. But aside from being watchful, they had faith in providence. After Brigitte had made a few phone calls, they decided to go to sleep. Mother picked up Fred from the playpen and together they went upstairs. The little one still slept with his parents.

At dawn, the next day, the group of grape pickers walked to the south-facing vineyard. Above the valleys of the cathar regions hung a beautiful mystical mist that morning. Once in the vineyard, Henrik gave everyone a bucket and a knife to cut down the bunches of grapes. The group consisted of three men from Limoux, a lost Basque and two traveling girls from Denmark. The wooden cart that the full buckets had to be emptied onto was already in its spot.

“Okay, everyone, get to work,” their employer ordered, and everyone quickly went to their own row.

“Oh, and there are drinks for you next to the cart,” he called after them. A little later, the first buckets were being emptied and a drink of water was taken. Around nine o’clock, the boss’ wife brought a picnic and passed out baguettes and an assortment of cheese. Although it was still early in the day, the Frenchmen had a glass of wine with their bread and cheese. The Danish girls preferred simply water. After the short interlude, the picking was resumed. The sun was getting brighter and the mist disappeared. The warm sunrays on everyone’s skin made the work pleasant and they were singing and talking.

“You’ll probably have a sore back for the first two days,” Henrik warned the two ladies, who had never done this kind of work before. But they didn’t take him seriously. By eleven-thirty the sun was so hot, everyone was drenched in sweat. Fortunately, it was getting to be lunch time, and they all returned to Cave Lagneaux, where an elaborate meal was waiting for them. The pickers left their dirty shoes by the door and sat down in the eating corner.

“Which of you will be able to help us for the whole month?” Henrik asked when he sat down at the table. “There is a lot of work to do. The fruit still has to be sorted, cleaned and pressed.” The four men said they could stay on, but the Danish girls wanted to continue their travels. The group started to eat and they had some pleasant table conversation.

“Your husband has gained quite a bit of weight, due to your cooking talents. I remember he used to be a little pipsqueak,” Jules, one of the villagers, said.

“Yes, he sure was. He is finally coming into his own. I guess it’s probably the French cuisine,” Brigitte agreed.

“No, I just reincarnated,” her husband kidded.

“Who wants more to drink?” Brigitte asked, getting up to get an extra bowl of baked eggplant.

“Do you have any grape juice?” the ladies from the north asked.

“Oh yes, we made it ourselves,” and she went to the kitchen.

“Larson makes the clearest wine in the whole region,” Jules informed the company. “There is nothing artificial in his wine.”

“Thanks for the compliment, Jules. It’s true; our wine is pure and natural,” Henrik admitted. Brigitte arrived back at the table with the juice and poured some for the girls.

“Careful, don’t drink too much,” Henrik warned. “You girls have been eating quite a few grapes, I noticed. They have a laxative effect, you know.” Suddenly, Fred started to scream. He was all by himself in the playpen and no one was paying any attention to him.

“What variety of grapes do you use?” one of the men asked. Henrik had just put some food in his mouth and started to choke.

“Pinot Noir and Chardonnay,” he said, coughing, and Jules, who was sitting beside him, pounded him on the back. A little while later, ripening

of the wine became the topic of conversation, and Henrik told them about the age-old wine cellar, which was situated underneath the entire house and which could be reached from the living room.

“After lunch I’ll show it to you. Some of the original barrels are still down there,” he said, passionately. But after lunch, everyone wanted to go straight into the garden to relax for a while, so his invitation was passed up. They all sat in the shade of a large apple tree and ate some chocolate. After everyone had rested enough, they went back to work. Many sunny hours and emptied buckets later, the day was done and the workers took a refreshing shower at the farm. After they got paid, they all went home happy.

That evening, Brigitte had opened all the windows. There was not a breath of wind anywhere.

“It’s so calm and muggy,” her husband said. “It seems like the proverbial calm before the storm.” Tired but happy, he sat down beside his wife in the living room. The children were playing with Lego.

They are such wonderful little treasures, Father thought, as he watched them affectionately. I love them so much, and for a moment he held them in his heart. He felt overcome with happiness. At the same time, the coat of arms from the sixteenth century next to the front door suddenly began to move back and forth and the ominous squeaking pulled him out of his reverie. A deeply hidden insight welled up in him and his hair stood on end.

My God, I have pronounced something terrible, he suddenly realized; I was worshipping my children as if they were gods.

Suddenly a strange wind was blowing through the house. It was the devil’s breath.

“Close all the shutters!” Henrik stressed.

“That wind is scary,” Brigitte said, startled, and she quickly walked to the windows. Within one minute, the wind had grown into a full-fledged storm. While his wife was closing the windows downstairs, Henrik flew to the open windows on the second floor. The wind was howling through the bedrooms and the curtains were swinging in the air. He hurriedly closed the shutters. Back downstairs again he helped his wife with the sliding doors of the storage space behind the house. A true hurricane was traveling through the region and outside the atmosphere seemed haunted.

“The attic door is still open!” Brigitte suddenly remembered and her husband sprinted back up the stairs. Then they crawled away together in the living room while all the windows were rattling hard.

“Something or someone wants to kill our children,” Henrik said, suddenly.

“What, what do you mean?” his wife stammered. David heard his father speak and looked at him intently with his bright blue eyes.

“It’s only going to get worse,” Henrik predicted. “Take the children to the cellar and nail all the doors and windows shut. There is not much time; I have to go now.”

“Please tell me what’s going on!” Brigitte asked urgently.

“Don’t ask me why,” he answered, “I can’t explain it. . . I am being led by something higher.” And he hurried to the front door and looked at his wife and children one last time.

We may never see each other again, he thought, heartbroken. Then he closed the door behind him. In the dark, Larson fought his way through the storm, into the hills and he repeatedly had to grab hold of shrubs and trees. His grapevines were being pulled out of the ground and sailing past him. When he got to the top of the hill he saw how the river had changed into a virulent water mass and was spreading out eerily all over the land. For a moment he hesitated, but then he decided to run away from home as far as possible. Maybe to distract the evil from his family. As he ran through the hills, dark clouds seemed to be following him. After a few miles he stopped to catch his breath behind a sturdy tree and started to worry about his wife and kids. At exactly the same time, a malignant whirlwind tore the roof off their farm and the contents of the entire household flew up into the air. Pots and pans, clothing, books, tables, an ironing board, beds, everything flew up like it was weightless. Even the shutters that had been nailed shut got no mercy and in the living room the chairs were dancing across the floor. The antique mirrored cupboard exploded and thousands of glass slivers showered down in the interior. A short distance away, Henrik was standing still, wondering what to do, and not aware of the disaster.

I can’t let myself be controlled by fear, he reprimanded himself and forced himself to run again. A violent wind soon pushed him over and he hurt himself on branches and rocks. He managed to get up, but was smashed to the ground again right away. In the face of death, he had to think of what was dear to him.

I wonder if my family is still alive? he thought, when suddenly a cross of insight burned on his forehead.

Evil destroys that which you think of, a voice from inside said. Henrik was terrified by these findings and he quickly tried to change his thoughts.

Don’t think, don’t think, he said to himself. The evil weather god noticed his resistance and immediately flared up. Henrik was lifted up and savagely smashed against a tree trunk. His ribcage creaked dangerously and he screamed in agony. With the greatest difficulty, he controlled his thought images, which were nothing more than an escape from reality.

I will have to face a confrontation with that devil. There is nothing else left to do.

It was his last straw, and truthfulness was his weapon, and he used that weapon to break his thoughts about anyone or anything. All hell broke out intensely in response. Henrik tried to grab hold of another branch, but was blown away like a little feather. Finally, he just let himself be taken as an unresisting victim, but he kept his faith in tact. He even obligingly let himself be flogged, which only made the devilish catastrophe worse. His surrender to All That Is slowly caused a turn and, mollified, he became

aware of a figure. The vague form appeared high above him and made a terrific noise. Then the clouds in the sky started to move in circles around it and they subdued the delirious devil, who slowly but surely began to fade. After a last convulsion, the evil thing gave up and dissolved into thin air. The tornado then focused on the knocked-out wine farmer, who could do nothing but surrender. The whirlwind turned out to be benevolent and its power filled him from head to toe. When the last of it had been sucked through his body, the storm abated and nature calmed down. Henrik sat up, speechless, and licked his wounds. Then he saw a dying phantom. The ghost was wearing a robe that hung down to his feet and around his chest he wore a golden band. His long beard was as white as snow and his eyes burned like fire. In his left hand he held a staff with seven stars and his face shone like the midday sun. Amazed, Henrik got up and looked at the wonder. The ghost held out a hand in friendship and said: "I am Michaelis Nostradamus and I've had to wait in purgatory for centuries for an immaculate and pure person who would be able to free me. The seventh valley has been completed and my soul can now finally rest. You were the last key and as a token of my gratitude my light will always continue to shine in you." His voice sounded like a mighty waterfall.

"My prophesies are destroyed as of this moment," he continued. "The genie is back in the bottle. I also only play my role, after all. I was dead, but now I will live forever, for eternity." The apparition began to fade.

"Your family is still alive. They're fine, but I have to go now to say goodbye to my human heart." Very touched, Henrik raised his arms and opening them wide, answered: "The Earth will always remember you, Michel." Nostradamus nodded in agreement, took one last breath in the still air and in closing said: "Time is nothing, longing for love is everything," and slowly, his soul disappeared into the clouds. The sky cleared up and the wine farmer watched. In the heavens, a new star could be seen.

Used quatrains from The Prophecies

C.8.1

Pau, Nay, Loron, more fire than blood
Swimming in praise the great one flees across water
He will deny the magpies entrance
Pampon and Durance keep them imprisoned

C.1.1

Alone in the night during secret study
Resting on a copper tripod
The flame from the void ignites that success
Where frivolity is sinful

C.9.90

A captain of the great Germany
Makes it to king of kings
With false help and support from Pannonia
His revolt causes rivers of blood

C.2.70

The arrow from the sky makes its journey
Death speaks, a big execution
Stone in the tree, a proud race humiliated
Human monster, purification and penance

C.1.63

The weakened world regenerates
Long-lasting peace reigns everywhere
People travel by air, across land and sea
Then there will be war again

C.2.57

The great man will fall before the conflict
A significant murder, dead too soon and mourned
Born imperfectly, must swim often
The earth near the river smeared with blood

C.2.89

The two great leaders become friends
Their enormous power will increase
The new country approaches its peak
The number of Reds recounted

C.1.35

The young lion will defeat the older one
A tournament and a single duel
In the golden cage his eyes pierced
A cruel death by two wounds in one

C.6.97

Five to forty degrees heaven burns
Fire approaches the new city
After big explosions widthwise

So that the northerners will bow

C.8.77

The antichrist soon destroys the three
Twenty-seven years his war will rage
The unbelievers: captured, dead or banned
The earth strewn with corpses and red hail

C.10.72

In the year 1999, seventh month
A king of terror from the sky
Makes the great king of Angolmois relive
Before and after, Mars rules with fortune

C.5.68

Up to the Danube and the Rhine will come to drink
The great Camel without remorse
Near the Rhône and the Loire violence breaks out
The Cock will ruin him near the Alps

C.1.91

The gods will show
That they determine the war
After silence, heaven full of weapons and missiles
The worst damage is on the left

C.2.62

Mabus will die sooner and then will come
A terrible destruction of humans and animals
Suddenly revenge will appear
A hundred hands hungry as soon as the comet strikes

C.9.7

He who will open the found tomb
And will not close it promptly
Evil will come to him and one will be unable to prove
If it would be better to be a Breton or Norman King

All original verses at www.nostredame.info