

Chapter VII. The Superelephants

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the humans of this era. They were, as in other centuries, cowardly and greedy: cowardly enough to kill or die on a master's orders; cowardly enough to sacrifice, on a master's orders, the miserable treasures of their crazed hearts, the false goods for which they routinely sacrificed their lives and those of others.

Very civilized, heavily laden with clothing, jewelry and weapons, they built palaces for their masters vaster than those of Nineveh, Babylon or Persepolis and castles for those among them whom their masters distinguished, but the multitude crowded together in narrow and filthy hovels. Truly, why talk about them? Do we not already know more about them than we want to know?

Perhaps the beings that had terrified the Immortals so much will be more of a novelty.

Amours and Immortals were not the only superhumans that had succeeded in separating themselves out during the recent geodesic troubles. A third species had realized a monstrous and magnificent dream of power. These animals were often designated by the name of Superelephants. They preferred to call themselves Dominators, Masters or Gods.

These preferred names described their social situation. "Superelephant" described the essential features of their bodies accurately enough. Vaster than our Asian elephants, they almost matched the stature of the ancient mammoth—but they had two trunks.¹ The one on the left remained the most adroit and strongest of prehensile organs. The one on the right had, if one might put it thus, something human about it; its extremity, opening like our mouths, afforded a glimpse of teeth, a tongue and a throat of sorts. An articulate language emerged therefrom, which a fortunate proportion of labia and teeth and a restricted employment of guttural rendered almost harmonious, when it deigned to soften itself so as not to roll like thunder.

The left trunk trumpeted in fury, or when, without explaining anything, the Dominator wanted to terrorize. The tusks were replaced by two large hollow bones with toothed edges, in which the root of each trunk was lodged, and in which the retracted organ could take refuge in case of danger. Hidden in that citadel with menacing battlements, it became ungraspable.

From the same shoulders from which the anterior legs descended sprang two arms and hands, similar in form to the upper limbs of humans, but almost as powerful as the unbreakable pillars of the legs, possessed of gigantic proportions. A thick and hairy but retractile hide could cover or uncover those heavy but delicate arms at will. If necessary, they were weapons and sledgehammers, but more often organs of joy, over which ripples and frissons of pleasure ran.

The Dominators grouped together in the center of the valley. The crowd left a wide space around them, hollowed out by respect. Within that empty space a few men clad in rich priestly garments were moving, swinging radiant and odorant incense-burners in front of the masters.

These priests were singing the glory of their Gods. The worshipful murmur of the crowd occasionally repeated a few words of the hymn or corroborated it with pious responses.

"O Dominators," the priests were saying, "the Earth is yours."

In the valley and beyond, the immense chorus of humans repeated: "The Earth is yours, O Dominators."

The orison continued in a broad plainsong:

"The Earth trembles beneath your feet, O Dominators, as does the human heart beneath your gaze. All nature obeys you. Life is a privilege that you grant and which serves you. The being that refuses to worship you becomes unworthy of existence and dies beneath your strength or our pious hands. O Dominators, you are the only Gods."

The ardent and humble host repeated: "You are the only Gods, O Dominators."

¹ This detail recalls the conclusion of J. H. Rosny Aîné's story "Le Voyage" (1906; tr. as "The Voyage", included in the Black Coat Press edition of *The World of the Variants*), in which the discovery of a remote African enclave in which humans live in submissive symbiotic harmony with elephantine protectors convinces the narrator that if elephants had only had two trunks, they, not humankind, would have become the dominant species on Earth. Ner met Rosny in 1889 or thereabouts, and they remained lifelong acquaintances, though never close friends, eventually sharing the presidency of *Les Compagnons de la pensée*, an organization established to campaign for the protection of the French language, in the mid-1920s.

Then the circle of priests, turning to the immense army, asked: "Humans, why have you come to Earth?"

The multitude, with a noise that extended like a tide, and which, like a tide, rose and repossessed, threatening to invade space, replied: "I have come to Earth in order to know the Dominators, to love them and to serve them."

One trunk was elevated, in an authoritarian manner. A religious silence spread, which seemed broader and deeper with every passing second. When the Dominator spoke, it seemed as broad and deep as the sky.

The voice of the God filled the vast silence; the extent was a bronze urn, which resounded. The extent itself seemed to proclaim: "Dread, the beginning of wisdom; justice and respect, the centers of wisdom; love of the powerful, the summit and accomplishment of wisdom, make all men into our willing slaves. These noble sentiments—listen, Immortals, it is to you that my words are addressed—are no less appropriate to superhumans. The Dominators are not superhumans, as you perhaps believe, insultingly; they are the Gods of humans and superhumans alike."

The Immortals were listening and watching through well-concealed cracks. The thunder of the Dominator's voice and the things he said were making them tremble. Here and there within the rock, the nearest and keenest human ears heard a strange faint noise, like clinking metal.

After a pause, the Dominator resumed: "Soon I shall speak to you again, Immortals, to offer you a choice between the ineffable glory of serving us and the most ignominious of deaths. Think about it for now, for we shall turn away from you, the solemn hour of the sacrifice having arrived.

The priests repeated: "The solemn hour of the sacrifice has arrived."

In the valley, along the mountainsides and in the plain, the host echoed the good news piously, ardently and at length: "The solemn hour of the sacrifice has arrived. It has arrived, the solemn hour of the sacrifice."

At several points, armed men were standing aside, leaving between two ranks a passage bristling with glory. Women precipitated themselves into it, their arms, trembling with joy, clutching suckling infants. As they reached the circle of the priests they surrendered their nurslings, proclaiming: "I give you thanks, Lords, because, your gaze having fallen upon your servant, you have chosen my son to become the fortunate nourishment of the Gods."

The priest piously cut each infant's throat; piously, he had it roasted in a little oven—I beg your pardon!—I mean, inside a portable altar. Each mother watched, kneeling and uplifted by ecstasy; she breathed the perfume of her son's burning flesh, a paradisaical odor. Ritually, in spite of the intoxication and the tears and the stammering of her joy, she repeated the words of glory, adoration and boundless gratitude: "Happy, happy, thrice happy; blissful, blissful, thrice blissful, the loins that have borne the nourishment of the Gods.

The oven—pardon me, the altar—recently perfected by the genius of a priest, cooked the largest pieces of meat in a matter of minutes. It rendered them crunchy, equally penetrated by the fire in every part, as juicy at the surface as the center, tender and tasty, better than the work of the ancient spit.

A table was set up in front of each Superelephant and covered with luxurious lace. A large golden platter supported the well-cooked infant, the meal's main course—or, to be more accurate, the centerpiece of the oblation and the sacrifice. Agreeable preserves and expertly-prepared vegetables were displayed on silver platters; the amber, gold and purple of fruits refreshed the eyes, causing mouths to salivate in anticipation. Exquisite wines transformed bottles into large topazes or vast rubies. Amid sacred words and gestures, between the bending of knees, ejaculatory orisons and fragments of litanies, the priests were hurriedly carving the meat, serving the wines in foaming chalices, raising everything to the two divine mouths.

Periodically, an officiator wiped the trunks with a delicate cloth, which was only used once. Having covered the fine cloth with kisses, the priest delivered it to the kisses of the crowd. Each of these relics would be sold for a high price the next day. The happy purchaser would lock it away in a little tabernacle, from which he would take it out on important occasions. He would receive in this blessed linen the last sigh of a loved one. He would cover a diseased part of his body with it, rejoicing in the hope of a miracle, and would then plunge into an equal gratitude for the miracle granted or the miracle effused: "Let thy will be done in my body and my soul, O Gods who know better than I what my body and soul warrant."

When the Gods had appeased their noble hunger and slaked their adorable thirst, the Dominator who had spoken before resumed:

“Immortals, the hour of our glory or your death has now arrived. The present moment is the hesitant balance. A pan will fall, and everything will be concluded. Emerge from your lairs, then, come and adore our power and our mercy. Hurry, or our justice will bring down an accident upon you. The strength of any one of us could demolish the mountain, and each of our four feet, at every step, could crush two Immortals—but we shall not deign to act ourselves. Pious warriors will bring down your miserable dens with pious cannon-fire. Devotees armed with explosives will blast you apart, scattering your little limbs amid the enormity of the shards of rock. If one of you attempts to flee, a bullet or the blade of a saber will put an end to his immortality. Speak, then. Choose between the glory of serving us or the shame of perishing beneath our divine anger.

Weighed down by terror, buoyed up by scorn for Gods that would die tomorrow, the heartsick Immortals were trembling with indignation and impotence. No retreat could protect them, they knew, against a force as implacable as it was irresistible. The majority hid, but two or three, inspired by the vertigo of danger, slid slowly toward the odious light.

One of these bold tremblers asked: “How can we serve you, we who are so small and frail? What do you want from us?”

The Dominator replied: “Since nature has created Superhumans, it is good, equitable and holy that religious society should make them intermediaries between the Gods and humans. Henceforth, humans shall know our will through the agency of superhumans. Come and give orders in our name.”

“Give orders! Us, so feeble any so timid...”

“Stand tall behind your weakness; divine force will make you redoubtable. You will speak in the name of the Gods and all heads will bow before your words.”

One Immortal objected: “Superhumans ought to be brethren. Any inequality between us would be as odious as...”

He did not finish. A devotee had crushed him with three blows of a crozier.

“Tomorrow,” a Dominator ordered, “that valiant man will receive the ribbon of glory on his noble breast.”

Persuaded by the rapid brutality of the execution, the Immortals emerged through all the cracks in the mountain. Kneeling, with their arms raised, they were imploring the Dominators for mercy—and one of them, the subtle Grintzmar, spoke for his brethren:

“We shall obey you in the emotions of happiness and gratitude. We thank you, O Gods, for having called us, for having brought us close to you, for having taught us at last the meaning of our immortal life.”