

They went upstairs, to the second floor that was actually much higher than the first. An unknown contractor had sandwiched it in between the dimly lit twenty-second and the exceptionally roomy fifty-fifth, either for fun or as a publicity stunt. As they walked up they saw through the big windows an embarrassed town changed very much by the linear perspective, refracted here and there as if seen through a huge quivering prism, scared, shiny, dark-cornered. One of the corners folded up and the rain flickering along the horizon trembled there like piano strings.

The starry heaven gaped over the clouds. The constellations and shiny dabs of galaxies wheeled there, shivering with their own beauty. Seeing this, a lady with a tame cobra around her neck frowned and strained herself to unlock the door. She was long-legged and purebred like a Great Dane.

"Savior, hold it, please," she said.

She handed him the pensive cobra, and made her hands free for a two-handed key. Savior took the snake. The cobra shook its head as if rousing itself, then squashed his hand, smiling quite cheekily and glistening as if it were smeared with stale grease. Savior put the snake into a pot with a cocoa palm and it immediately, with rumbling stomach, muzzled into the soil rich in fluoric limestone.

"Shouldn't have done that," said the lady. "Now she'll gnaw the roots. She's a snake, a predator. Understand?"

Savior presented her with a bunch of red folios, and she gave him a condescending nod. They entered.

The boss sat at a round table elongated enough to receive lots of victuals, which formed a slanted turret in the middle of it. Steamed crab legs, made of wild sardine scale, crowned the turret. A few nonentities with indiscernible faces sat nearby, so the table was empty to the right and to the left as well.

A security guard with such a muscular neck that the muscles dangled below his shoulders slept at some distance. A dog, extremely lean and long, romped on a leash staying aloof. The pet was so attenuated by hunger that you had to have a really trained eye to distinguish it from the leash. It licked off its sweat reducing the environmental pollution. Very far away three moneychangers, small end evil like avian flu viruses, played cards for curtseys with a coal-miner. A buffoon played the pipe and sold doves.

Savior froze, stunned. He had expected to see something unbelievable here, but this impossible world was anti-believable, and it had a hypnotizing music of its own at that, a shrieking sort of music that can sound inside a happy lunatic's mind; it jammed a low, quiet voice of conscience Savior had been always listening to. This world looked him over with button eyes, grinned, let him in.

"I don't believe in it," Savior whispered.

"What about getting paid?" the world asked.

"Oh. It would be nice."

"Got dyspepsia?" the lady asked and Savior started.

"No, I was just thinking."

"Yeah, thinking gives me gas too," the lady said in a brain-shrinking voice.

"Hi," the boss said, "Savior? The one? Welcome."

He held out his hand with five nails, and the Savior shook it, feeling prone to cringe.

"Well, well, I know," the boss said. "Heard much about you, you're that tough guy who cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and even overthrew the tables of the moneychangers. It's my house! Ye have made it a den of thieves! Piss off everybody! I can appreciate such things. But, you know, tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis. I mean, times change. Just in case, if you forgot Latin. Today wine maketh us merry: and money answereth all things. By the way, want to drink? No? Pity. I know everything about you because my people never lie, though I don't believe them of course. So want to hear it from you. From the horse's mouth, ha-ha. Don't be modest. Position yourself. Can fly? Or walk on water?"

The boss took from the table a forty-three-barreled cigarette lighter.

"Yes," Savior said.

"Cool. Will you fly if I throw you out of the window, right now?"

The boss brushed Savior's cheek with his fingers, quick and spidery, incompatible with his plump face.

"No, I'd be killed. The ability to fly, uh...comes to me, from time to time. I can try, though. Maybe, if not very high..."

He flew up and hovered for a minute above the table. The lady was busy putting on her nose a layer of absolutely transparent powder. The coal-sweep had already lost the game and given out all the curtseys. Being sick and tired of everything, he pressed his stained face to the wall and charcoaled a self-portrait there. Savior was hovering. His face wore a dreamy look necessary for flights.

"That wasn't bad," the boss said. "Be my friend. Meet this girl. She's Denise. A female variant from Denis. And don't meet the others. They are morons."

The lady with the key slowly winked; she was aristocratic like an oyster in spinach. Then unscrewed a stiletto-heel and picked her teeth with it.

They spoke of this and that, then the conversation turned to food and stopped at this comprehensive point. The buffoon got tired of selling the lewd doves and, being hungry, sucked at his saliva ejector. The nonentities kept doing nothing. Their gazes moved up and down Denise's legs polishing them to a mirror luster. The words stirred in Savior's mouth, losing taste like a wad of chewing gum.

"They say you can live on spirit," said the boss in a voice of a business executive opening a staff conference. "I hope that's true."

Savior was about to say something noncommercial but changed his mind and answered artlessly. "Sometimes. But I eat, as a rule. Something low-caloric. Austere repast, you know."

"Cook yourself?"

"Yes."

"By a fiat of will?"

"No. Prefer a microwave."

The boss raised his brow as if surprised at such an extravagance. "Now you listen to me, bud," he said. "I want here and now, by a fiat of will. Make for me something really delicious and special to eat."

"I can cook for you cobra's flesh. Is it okay?"

"Go on, man, go on."

Savior took a porno magazine decorating the table and flipped through. One of the women fitted perfectly: snake-eyed and resembling a piece of meat. He decided to make the dish from this picture. Tore it out, crumpled, and placed on the plate. Intertwined his fingers over it.

The boss went out of the room not wanting to wait for at least fifteen minutes. The buffoon was licking the paints off the pictures and shoving them into the proper tubes; the dog watched him with a melancholic rapacity in its heart. Denise played with a gold watch chain and moved rhythmically her wonderful eyelashes, so long and dense that they could shovel humus.

"What else can you do?" she asked and made the moment flinch.

"Everything," Savior said.

"The most difficult, I mean."

"With a single word I can make a man happy."

"It's easy," Denise said, "I can do it too. Hey, guard, I order you to be happy."

The guard woke up and burst out laughing, junked up with official delight. He was prompt to carry out the orders to sob, to fall in love, to go mad and senile, to get prodigious acne, and at last to go to sleep again. The nonentities echoed, though not at all concerned. Savior was talking, keeping his mind intent. He developed some arguments to Denise. She was listening to him with unflinching indifference. He was so carried away that he didn't even notice the sudden appearance of a black car smelling of expensive lubricant.

The guys in the car started shooting, and a bullet plowed through Savior's spinal column. He stooped a little more, trying to remain concentrated, but the smell of the smoldering varnish distracted him. The bullet, which had popped out of his chest, was spinning on the table, before his eyes, a puffing lead corpuscle scorching the polish. Denise fired back with an enviable sang-froid and picked off two of attackers: one of them died in the driver's seat; the other got a bullet in his lung. This one fell out of the car and immersed into the green shag of the carpet. The carpet liana crawled up to him planning to suck out all his fluids except the toxins. Two non-entities were killed immediately; the third tried to flee away but died of fright on the way. The moment wheezed and wriggled on the floor. Time kept going, but away from the penal acts. Time was accustomed to such scenes, it knew what to do.

Security guards came in time splitting their sides with belated laughter, and Denise shut them up. She leaned over the dying man and eyed with curiosity the incarnadine foam on his lips. She looked like a preteen school-girl with innocent buds of breasts under a t-shirt who for the first time pressed her

orbital bone against the ocular of a microscope. Her face shone like a fluorescent lamp.

"Well, now," she said in a voice of a virgin waiting for her first kiss, "we met at last, didn't we? Oh, you want to die so much, no, no, don't cheat me, you're not dying yet, want a drop of water, huh? Nuts to you...Gimme a rag."

A guard gave it.

She moistened the rag in the aquarium where sharky-fish shaggy with algae finned optimistically, and moved it over the lips of the dying man. A drop dropped. The man moved, moaned, and she lifted her hand.

"Nope, no way, no water today," she said in a voice of a yearling jumping around a barn.

The boss appeared at last, sat down at the table, and started peeling a sea tomato.

"What about my meat here?" he asked, then noticed the blood and scowled at that unhygienic nuisance. The blood washed itself off.

"Almost done," Savior said. "Why is she torturing him? Let him die."

"I'd like to, dude, but no. It's personal. He is the Denis. I mean, Denise is a female name made from him. They rubbed shoulders, then, you know how it goes, rubbed not only shoulders; now they're like a dog and a cat. I don't meddle with their lives. If the torture bothers you, make him die."

"I can't make anybody die."

"I can," the boss said in a voice of inborn certainty. "Hey, you there, die!"

Three guards died and the long dog turned his heels up. The fourth guard jumped out of the window trying to escape his master's anger. The buffoon got stricken by paralysis. The remote coal-sweep escaped with severe fright. In faraway Bonzibar an epidemic of crayfish distemper broke out. The carpet liana painted itself on the carpet simulating a black and white imprint. Sharky-fish, being deaf, didn't care a cuss.

"It wasn't for you, idiots," the boss said. "I was talking to Denis. Denis, die!"

And Denis died.

The boss touched Savior's jacket and shirt. The holes were real. The flesh had already healed the wound.

"Nice," the boss said. "Very nice. The rumors were true. Those guys in the car worked for a rival firm; they wanted to blip you off. They thought I could use you. But you are so difficult to kill, aren't you? Denise is also a cool wench, good for her."

"But if they'd killed me?"

"Then what's the use for me to buy you?" the boss said. "Well done, see? Have killed three birds with one shot. Checked you up, wiped their dirty nose, and Denise gave vent to her feelings. But you're a sly guy; they knew you're worth shooting at."

Saying this, the boss looked so piercingly that he cracked in the meantime the Bermuda Triangle mystery, and eight other mysteries, not as big as that one.

"Well. How much am I supposed to pay for you?" he went on.

"Seven hundred curtseys a week... Pre-tax," Savior breathed out.

"Pre-tax, well, may be," said the boss. "But first thing's first. Where's my dinner? Cobra's flesh."

Savior raised his palms. The dish looked well-roasted and smelled delicious. The boss waved to one of nonentities who waddled nearby.

"You try it first."

The nobody tasted the dish. "Ummm," he purred so melodically as if he had practiced over night at a Karaoke hall. His flesh got pimples with goosebumps. He smiled with delight, opening his mouth like a dead lizard.

"Enough." The boss tried a bit, and chewed it with concentration. "Well, it doesn't taste like glue."

He paused, busy with chewing and swallowing. His fork stirred the convolutions of noodles.

"My people can cook better," the boss said slowly, with moments of leaden silence inserted between the words. "You've put too much salt in it. Why?"

"For the lack of concentration, maybe. The noise, the shooting, I was wounded..."

"Give him seven hundred curtseys," said the boss in a voice of an electric meat grinder revving up, "and get rid of him right away. Drop him somewhere outside. You think, boy, you are the only one so omnipotent at my disposal? I receive eight guys like you a day. The very archbishopissimus is at my command! Lack of concentration, did you hear that? Well, I think it's the next savior at the door. Just in time. Let him in."

The door opened and bent low.

The second savior entered and presented Denise with a bunch of red folios.

"I have a talent, a wonderful thing!" the second one sang out cheerfully, positioning himself in the proper way.

"Don't take it too personally," Denise said to the first Savior, "you were a wonderful freak. But we are highly competitive, you know."

The bodies had already vanished; the cobra's flesh was eaten. The boss wiped his glossy lips.

"Savior? The one? You're welcome."

But the last guard was still falling outside. In the very beginning, he had a hope to save his life because he was an all-round diving-into-shallow-reservoirs champion who specialized in puddles. The rain had just stopped and there were lots of puddles in the streets. He flew poising himself with his long hair. But half-way down a cooling breeze gently kissed him, saying goodbye, turbulencing the hair just enough to sweep him to the concrete wall. In a few seconds, the guard hit against the wall and turned

into a wet blotch.

"Sic transit gloria mundi," he mumbled instructively in the end. Thus passed the glory of the world. But no, the glory did not pass with him: the sunset, dense and heavy like a red-hot stone block, glared over the town. The town floundered in this light like a blowfly in sunflower oil. Only this light was real; the disheveled policemen scared of anything real fired into the sky with their authorized slingshots. They closed the left eyes at that, or both, for additional bravery.

Savior saw that as he walked downstairs. At first he thought to save the falling guard but then changed his mind: right now he didn't feel like saving anybody. There's something wrong about this world, he thought, or is it just me? Millions of people live in this flat universe as oblivious as moth-eaten scarves to what is going on. No, I'm being too picky. Where has the glory of the world gone? Or am I just an interesting freak?

He went out into the street, looked up at the blackening sky, and saw the last drops of rain, which caught the light of street lamps; they were falling slowly like confetti. Then, on buying a cheap advertiser for a half of curtesy, he started perusing the columns. But in vain: saviors were required for unqualified and poorly-paid work. To gnash their teeth off-screen in dental prosthesis commercials for example.