

Methodius Buslaev

The Midnight Wizard



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Аннотация

В Книге Судеб записано, что Мефодий Буслаев пройдет лабиринт Храма Вечного Ристалища в день своего тринадцатилетия. Мальчишка, родившийся в минуту полного солнечного затмения, впитал тайный страх миллионов смертных. Именно тогда в нем пробудился дар. Благодаря своему дару, не осознавая того, он аккумулирует в себе самые разные энергии окружающих: любви, боли, страха, восторга, злости – и трансформирует их в абсолютную магию. Его дар и то, что он вынесет из Храма Вечного Ристалища, нужны стражам Тьмы, нужны и стражам Света... Как, сделав выбор между Светом и Тьмой, остаться собой? На этот вопрос Мефодию придется искать ответ самому...

Содержание

Prologue	4
Chapter 1	21
Chapter 2	51
Chapter 3	81
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	99

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Prologue

Tibidox. Office of Sardanapal.

Three years after the birth of Tanya Grotter and seven years before her appearance on Buyan Island.

A fire was blazing in the fireplace of Sardanapal Chernomorov, the head of Tibidox. The pithecanthropus Tararakh was sitting by the fireplace and roasting *shashlik* threaded on a sword. The meat was sizzling tastily and intermittently shooting drops of fat. “Of course, it’s not bad mutton, but no comparison to mammoth nonetheless, some tears!” Tararakh grumbled. “And what am I roasting with? Seven magicians in the school, all smart – horror, one is even an academician – and you’d think at least someone could find the time to conjure up a normal skewer. Thankfully, Two hundred years ago I took away Marshal Davout’s sword. A good sword – just right for twelve pieces.”

Tararakh did not exaggerate. In the office of the academician were actually all seven Tibidox instructors – Sardanapal himself,

the Great Tooth, Yagge, Slander, Medusa, Nightingale O. Robber and Professor Stinktopp. Moreover, they were in a situation, which could not be called pleasant in any way.

Sardanapal's moustaches intermittently trembled hopelessly. A gold clip firmly kept their rebellious tips at the back of his head. This was a sure sign that the head of the Tibidox School was disposed to a serious manner. "I have two pieces of news: poor and abysmal. Which one should I begin with?" the academician asked.

"Sardanapal, take pity on an old woman. Begin with the poor. I'm finishing knitting a cap for Yagunchik. If I make a mistake now, I'll have to take apart a lot," Yagge remarked carefully, raising her eyes from the knitting needles.

"No-no, don't be over-modest! Don't age the old folks, they're younger than fine young folks! Has she forgotten how to charm knitting needles so that they knit by themselves?" the Great Tooth smiled.

"My Yagunchik doesn't like conjured caps. He said that his ears cannot find room in them," objected Yagge. Little Yagun, lively like mercury, was the pet of Granny and a big problem for the rest of Tibidox. He could not stay in one place at all. They had removed him several times from the vacuum half way to Bald Mountain, and once they found him by the Sinister Gates, which he was trying to open with a nail, using it like a master key. A minor detail prevented him: the nail turned out to be a centimetre short. "Yes, Yagunchik's ears are rare. I won't be

surprised if the boy plays dragonball well. They'll allow him to decrease flying speed rather well, gradually and smoothly, and make sharp turns," nodded Nightingale O. Robber.

Sardanapal reproachfully gave a cough. "This morning I finished some calculations. In three days, at 5 p.m., there will be a total solar eclipse. It will last seven-and-a-half minutes – the maximum astronomically possible duration for solar eclipse. Here, on Buyan, we will see nothing. But then Moscow will find itself to be completely in the dark shadow. From one outlying district to another. For seven-and-a-half minutes the city will be submerged in darkness..."

Tararakh licked the fat off a finger and examined the meat. "In my life I've seen a number of eclipses. And never anything... Except somehow during Palaeolithic times a brisk young fellow from a neighbouring tribe took advantage of the panic and robbed me of an outstanding rock axe."

"Tararakh, the eclipse, which I'm talking about, is not ordinary. Even The Ancient One warned about it. And The Ancient One was not inclined to senseless panic," said Sardanapal.

"As far as I understand, the eclipse – it's also the promised bad news. And now I'm beginning to get a bad feel!" Medusa said.

"Really. He will be named Methodius Buslaev. He will appear on Earth two minutes after the sun is hidden. The Ancient One was convinced that the boy will have *the gift*."

"Many babies will knock on the door of the world in those

seven-and-a-half minutes. It's possible someone else will have *the gift*," Medusa objected reasonably.

"No, Medi. I'm convinced that precisely he will have *the gift*. There are too many coincidences. The arrangement of the stars, place, and time of birth, the eclipse, and, most importantly, the blood. Among the boy's kin were numerous magicians. In the Middle Ages they burned one of his great-great-great... at the stake. With a look she inflicted the plague on her neighbours and did this more often than normal courtesy required."

"And is there any hope that Methodius Buslaev will not become aware of his *gift*?" Medusa carefully asked.

"Hope is eternal. However, in the given situation it has passed away even before the appearance of the boy in the world," the academician joked darkly. Sardanapal got up and, not looking at anyone, began to walk around the office. "White magicians? Wonderful! Black magicians? Remarkable! But we have forgotten those, whose power exceeds our sorcery and incantations many times! Those more ancient than the Egyptian pyramids! The guards of Gloom! The guards of Light! Here are the ones who need his *gift*!" he said with conviction.

"But Sardanapal! You are probably exaggerating. It's possible the guards of gloom and darkness know nothing about Methodius Buslaev," the Great Tooth carefully said.

Slander Slanderych and Professor Stinktopp exchanged ironic glances. "Zey know eferyzing about ze boy, if his gift is vorz at least one kopeck!" Stinktopp muttered.

The clip came off Sardanapal's moustaches, and they began to jump, conducting an invisible orchestra. "Yes, Professor, yes and again yes! In the last centuries, we were all criminally negligent! Magic books, incantations, dragonball, fights with ancient idols not wanting to calm down – it has become our world. But this..." here the academician lowered his voice to a whisper, "why deceive ourselves? On the day when the boy is born, the accursed spring again will begin to turn, so that in thirteen years... I don't even want to think about this."

"The guards of Gloom..." Medusa said thoughtfully. "Only imagine that there was a time when I didn't see the difference between magicians and guards. But later I understood. Magicians – white or black – do not depend on moronoids. Their world exists separately from ours. We don't interfere in its history and only strive to keep moronoids from finding out about us. The guards of Gloom are a totally different matter. They need the moronoids... Their thoughts, their feelings, especially their eide..."

Slander looked at her sombrely, "Exactly, Medusa! There is a monstrous difference between simple magicians, such as us, and the guards of Gloom... Like between chickens and turkeys. Some fly, and others... others fly..."

"It's because we, even the darks like Stinktopp and Deni, are not injected with the power of eide," said Docent Gorgonova.

"If we put aside morals, the renunciation of the use of eide has its minuses. The gift of each magician – white or dark – is

assigned primordially. It's possible to learn to manage it, to learn several hundred incantations, but the gift itself will not become bigger with the years, just slightly more polished. Take at least our students. Among them are strong magicians, but also such, who only know how to force a stool to grow buds and to bloom. And we are also forced to take them!" Yagge beat around the bush.

"But a ring? An artefact? Really, don't they intensify the gift?" Tararakh naively asked.

Nightingale O. Robber began to laugh, "They strengthen. But only until you master them. An artefact is like a club for a pithecanthropus. Does it make him stronger?"

"You bet! Indeed, I know! Especially if a good one appears. Entirely smooth, even, and with a bulge at the end. With a twig or something there also," Tararakh assured him. Nostalgia clouded his eyes. "In my opinion, if you strike a sharp blow with the club, it won't seem like anything. But what's with eide here? What is it in general?"

"Eide are what the guards of Gloom strive to keep in their darc in order to become stronger!" the Great Tooth explained.

Tararakh minced words, "Great! I adore you, Deni! You have the ability to analyse and pigeonhole so understandably. Imagine, I don't know what such a thing as a 'mouse' is and I ask you. You answer, 'Dear Tararakh, they catch a mouse with a mousetrap.' 'And what is a mousetrap?' I ask. 'A mousetrap is what you use to catch a mouse.' Now I understand why your students dread

your lessons.”

“Eidos, which guards of Gloom hunt for, is this nucleus, the essence of spiritualization of material, the ticket to eternity, the key to immortality, the soul. The most essential and important thing there is in each moronoid, in you, and even in Yagge, although she’s also a goddess. Everyone only has one eidos. One that can’t be counterfeited or copied with the help of magic. A moronoid who has lost his life and body but preserved his eidos loses nothing. But a person who has lost his eidos loses everything even if his body, reason, and life are out of danger,” explained Sardanapal.

“Hmm... And how does it look?” Tararakh asked.

“Almost not at all. Eidos doesn’t have a weight, a form. Or it has. Magicians have been arguing this already for several thousand years. Absalom the Flattened considered that eidos is an invisible precious stone thousands of times more valuable than any diamond, even the largest. Ekril the Wise was certain that it’s the second, the main heart, which governs the beating of the first heart. Hugo the Sly foggily asserted that eidos is ‘that *is*, which is *not*.’ In other words, eidos does not exist until each concrete individual is aware of its existence. Only then will it appear. However, the majority of scientists, including your humble servant, concurs that everyone has an eidos, independent of whether he is aware of it or not. An eidos is like a small bluish spark or a grain of sand. This spark has enormous incomparable power, precisely attaches us to eternity, and doesn’t leave after

death of the flesh that rots. Eidos is the eternal element of existence, in a word, a part of The One who created us. It can't be destroyed by either a division of gargoyles or nuclear explosion or loss of the Universe – nothing. And even one eidon has this power!

“Specifically, this is also how guards of Gloom earn their living. The more eidon in a guard's darc, the greater his ability and, therefore, the higher he stands in the hierarchy among his own. It troubles the guards not in the least that they take away eternity together with the eidon from the moronoid. To them it's the object of the hunt, nothing more.”

“They take eidon away by force?”

“Eidon cannot be taken away by force. But it can be voluntarily given away. It's possible to present it as a gift, to sell or exchange it for a diamond, an empire, a bite of an apple – whatever one values it at. There is already nothing to be done about this. For hundreds of years millions of moronoids have already parted with their eidon migrating to the darc of the guards of Gloom,” said Sardanal with sadness.

“And the guards of Light? They don't need eidon?” the pithecanthropus asked.

“Guards of Light are summoned to protect the eidon of mortals and not to steal them! They don't obliterate someone else's eternity. The Ancient One, however great he was, never encroached upon a single eidon. Although now and then it seems to me that he was not simply a white magician. I do think that...”

“...he was one of the guards of Light?” Slander finished for him.

“Possible,” Sardanapal answered evasively. “Guards of Light rarely shout about themselves in everybody’s hearing. They respect the freedom of choice and prefer the role of observers.”

“But why is this boy so dangerous, Sardanapal? Why must we fear Methodius Buslaev?”

Sardanapal sat down at the table and, after dipping a goose feather into the ink, made an intricate flourish on the paper. “What do you know about The Ancient One? Not as the wisest magician, the founder of Tibidox, but about the man of flesh and blood? Not much, right?”

“Very little. He didn’t like to mix business and private life. And generally, when I was acquainted with him, he behaved like he was out of the body. He could pass by a half metre from you and not even notice you. It seemed that all the time his thoughts were somewhere in astral,” said Medusa.

The academician nodded, “Approximately how the matter stood. Especially in the last years, when The Ancient One reached such enlightenment, when he saw both the past and the future. And when you see both the past and the future at the same time, the present somehow comes up short. And you, of course, didn’t know that The Ancient One had a son?”

“I, no,” said Medusa.

“But I knew. However, what became of him is unknown to me. The Ancient One never mentioned it,” announced Yagge.

“It happened on a fall night in the last year of the magic wars,” remarked Sardanapal. “The world was so overcrowded with evil that it already began to tire. The Ancient One and his son were returning after some meeting. It so happened that the two of them found themselves in a remote forest. Suddenly they were attacked. Evil spirits and guards of Gloom surrounded them forming a continuous wall. They could not teleport or summon aid or use incantations – the attackers foresaw everything and provided themselves with strong artefacts. Then The Ancient One plunged his sword deep into the tree. The magic of his sword, the magic of the tree, and the magic of the earth, which the tree was connected to with roots, joined together, and a narrow ring of light was formed around the tree trunk. The Ancient One and his son stood in that shining circle, around which crowded the attackers. Evil spirits swarmed, climbed onto each other, crushed the ones in front, but could not force their way inside the circle. The guards of Gloom were smarter. They got up to a certain distance and, without attempting to force their way in, stood calmly, and awaited their hour. They knew that all the same, they could not force their way into the circle and the wisest thing was not to expend energy in vain. So passed two days and two nights. There were more and more evil spirits all the time. They covered the circle on all sides, even swarmed below, underground. All the time the guards of Gloom were still there. They quietly sat on the ground and waited. All their best soldiers were there – the hunchback Ligul, the swordsman Ares,

Horse, and others. They hoped that their time would come. The Ancient One and his son slept in turns, racking their brains over how to send a signal for help and call the remaining powers of Light. Then on the third night, already near dawn, when The Ancient One, on duty till then, fell asleep, the swordsman Ares insulted the son and challenged him. Ares swore the inviolable oath of Gloom that they would fight face to face and if the son won, then they would let him and his father go. The son of The Ancient One, very young and passionate, accepted the challenge. He pulled his father's sword out of the tree, not noticing that the tip broke off and remained in the tree, and took a step from the circle..."

"And here the evil spirits attacked him?" Tararakh asked anxiously. Forgetting about the *shashlik*, the passionate pithecanthropus waved Marshal Davout's sword, splashing Professor Stinktopp with hot fat. "You out of your mind! You zrow your bad *shashlik* at me!" Stinktopp began to squeal.

"No. I think that the battle was actually honestly fought. There was no point for Ares to violate the oath, and it's also not his principle," continued Sardanapal. "While Ares and the son were fighting with cold steel, a tired Ancient One was sleeping inside the circle, seeing and hearing nothing. I think that his sleep was intensified by witchcraft of the Gloom magicians. The son of The Ancient One handled the blade well, but nevertheless not as good as the best sword of the guards of Gloom. A minute had not passed when Ares beheaded him and spilled his blood on

the ground... The evil spirits, sensing blood, completely broke loose. They went for the sleeping Ancient One, but could not kill him because the magic circle though weakened, nevertheless sustained; indeed the tip of the sword had remained in the tree trunk... After a day, a detachment of white magicians, having gone through the entire area, found The Ancient One. I was also there, in that detachment. The Ancient One was still under the power of the sleep spell. None of the serious guards of Gloom was there. Only the evil spirits, whom they drove away sufficiently quickly, and whom, rumbling, crawled away along the burrows and the ravines... The Ancient One buried what the evil spirits had left of his son. In complete solitude he dug out the grave with a dagger.”

“I knew nothing. Strange that it was never talked about,” said Medusa.

“Only the closest students and friends of The Ancient One knew this. He made us take an oath to keep silent about this. I would not have violated the oath even now, if I did not see an urgent need,” said Sardanapal.

“Indeed? What’s here with the son of The Ancient One and this boy Buslaev? What connects them?” straightening her glasses, Dentistikha asked.

The academician looked at her with reproach, “You’re rushing it, Deni. The ties of the magic world are too complex to be possible for understanding by a superficial look. The sword of The Ancient One was lost. The hunchback Ligul, who was there

with Ares, picked it up from the ground and took it away. This Ligul, once a close friend of Ares, was already beginning to envy him then and little by little became his fierce enemy. But he also remained a friend to some degree. Man has this variation on a theme called ‘cursed friend’. Some time later Ligul found the means to turn the strongest artefact of Light into an artefact of Gloom. For this reason, he brought the sword of The Ancient One through many transformations, in each new transformation making it slightly worse and darker than it was before. However, this occurred so gradually that the sword itself didn’t notice the changes. It became a spear, a fiery whip, a stirrup, a ring, and a dark dagger. In its entire embodiment, it sowed death and took away many lives. But these transformations of the artefact were only partly the way. In the finale, it will again become the sword of The Ancient One, but a sword converted into its own opposite. As a sword of Gloom... I don’t know, has the sword passed all the transformations and who has it now? It’s possible that Ligul still has it. Indeed, does the hunchback not hope to go with its help into the Temple of Eternal Skip, located in Middle Earth, between Eden, where dwell the guards of Light, and Hades, where the Chancellery of the guards of Gloom is? But hardly this even with the power of the sword of The Ancient One.”

“The Temple of Eternal Skip... The temple, over which neither Light nor Gloom has any authority... The Temple is so ancient that all the civilizations of Earth are only sand at its feet,” dreamily repeated Yagge. “Indeed, indeed, I was there.

Frightfully long ago. Then there wasn't even a trace of Tibidox, and Buyan only just stuck its top out of the ocean... Middle Earth, somewhere between Eden and Hades! A foolish moronoid taking it into his head to find them on the globe would only spoil his eyesight, and meanwhile Middle Earth is much more real than all their continents. Imagine an enormous plain – sand bleached by the sun, greyish islets of soil with dozens of stunted trees, and rocks jutting from the ground at unthinkable angles. The rocks stand tight together, precisely forming a corridor. You go between them like in a spiral – there is no flight magic there – and suddenly your sight stumbles upon columns. And you understand that before you is something more ancient than magic, more ancient and wiser than even Light and Dark. Something such that no one among the living now has any authority over.”

“How about Egyptian pyramids?” Nightingale O. Robber asked. Although he played dragonball excellently, he travelled little, and in the previous years even stayed put completely in his native Mordovia, catching passers-by in the forests.

Yagge sneered, “Egyptian pyramids in comparison with the Temple of Eternal Skip – it's such a sick fantasy along the theme of a vertical coffin... You go along for a few hours, and no time does the Temple get any nearer, or it approaches so gradually that you don't notice it. Then suddenly – no less surprisingly – you find yourself beside it. The doors of the Temple are always open. You can approach very near and see the floor – black and white marble squares. Another door is visible in the distance, slightly

opened but not so that it would be possible to see what's behind it. But the temptation is great. Certainly it strikes you that there, on the other side, lies something awfully important, some such thing that all present and lost artefacts pale before it... Some such thing, for which those who lived before Gloom and Light, those for whom magic was as natural as breathing, even built this colossal Temple."

"Can't you simply approach and have a look? Or use remote sight?" Medusa asked.

The knitting needles in Yagge's hands traced a reproachful semicircle. "Medusa, dear, although this happened awfully long ago, I was already far from a naive girl and knew enough magic. What variations didn't I try! Teleportation, flight, all forms of sight, remote intuition... Useless."

"You vere unable to but Mezodius Buslaeff vill know how?" inflating his cheeks, Professor Stinktopp asked.

Sardanapal compassionately looked at his rat waistcoat. "It's possible, Ziggy... Everything is possible. Methodius Buslaev, who will become aware of his *dark gift*. Who, after receiving a cloak, will go to the labyrinth of marble slabs on his thirteenth birthday, will go through the slightly opened door and, after taking what the ancients had left there, will give this to the guards of Gloom. The relative equilibrium between Light and Gloom will be disrupted. Gloom at once will cut its way through all cracks like water oozing through the bottom of a rotted ship. Thousands of eide, which Light is protecting now, will be stolen

by Gloom. Everything depends on whether Methodius Buslaev will be able to control this darkness that is primordially placed in him.”

The fire in the fireplace blazed and went out. In complete calm, the heavy velvet curtains puffed up like the sails of a ship. Two ancient black magic books began to rush about in the cage and, having suddenly turned into ashes, crumbled through the bars onto the carpet.

Yagge raised her eyes from the knitting needles. “Well now, I knew it! The loop was torn. And indeed I’m almost finished,” she said with regret.

“Methodius Buslaev! He hasn’t yet been born and Gloom is already in premonition of his birth!” Medusa said.

“Methodius Buslaev... We’ll try to influence him somehow? To get into contact with him? To bring him, eventually, into Tibidox?” the Great Tooth asked huskily.

Sardanapal’s beard did a wavy movement. “What’s with you, Deni? This boy – into Tibidox? With his gift? No, the road to Tibidox is forever denied him. We won’t even be able to interfere, since the matters of Light and Gloom are not subject to us, elementary magicians. We’ll observe the boy from a distance – no more. In such matters there’ll be a little bit of caution... And remember: no one in Tibidox, besides us, must know anything about Methodius! NOT ONE STUDENT! In the next twelve years in any case! I demand, I insist, I, finally, order everyone to take an oath!”

“Sardanapal, what precisely is the boy’s *gift*? I know what a dark gift is, but how will it appear this time?” Tararakh asked. “We know that its forms are infinite!”

The head of Tibidox stared back at the pithecanthropus’ ardent Asia Minor gaze. “I don’t know exactly, Tararakh! I can only surmise. And if it’s what I think, then it’s terrible. So terrible that I prefer to be silent. And now swear! Well! I want you all to utter *May lightning strike me down!*”

Several sparks blazed – red and green. Slander, Medusa, Yagge, the Great Tooth, Professor Stinktopp... Sardanapal, attentively following so that everyone without exception would make a vow, let out the last spark. Tararakh, not having a ring, did it without a spark, limiting it to a simple utterance of the oath. The gold sphinx on the office door tucked its paws under and became like a wet unhappy kitten. So many *May lightning strike me down* in one office in something like a minute – this was a lot even for a sphinx that had seen sights.

Chapter 1

The Lunar Reflection

Edward Khavron thoroughly squeezed out the blackhead on his cheek and, after stepping back, admired his own muscles. He was standing naked to the waist in front of the mirror, and inspecting himself like a doctor from the military registration and enlistment office would inspect a draftee. “Well, am I really not an athlete? Really not a handsome man? I would simply fall in love with myself, but I must go to work!” he said complacently.

“Eddy, don’t pull in your stomach!” Zozo Buslaeva shouted from the room. Even through two doors, she knew all her brother’s tricks.

“What’s with the stomach here? It’s just that I have such bulging solar plexus. But generally you can’t see it under a coat,” Eddy was insulted; however, his mood was destroyed. Oh, indeed these sisters of one’s own! It is necessary to put up with such things from them that one would drown any outsider as Gerasim did to Mumu.

Having thoroughly cleaned his twenty-eight teeth – according to statistics, thirty-two teeth exist only in a third of humanity and in the imagination of writers, who adore indiscriminately endowing their heroes with superfluous wisdom – Edward Khavron made his way to the only room of their apartment. The

apartment was misplaced so far in the outskirts of Moscow that now and then it seemed as if Moscow did not exist at all. But the Moscow Ring Highway with its endless cars was visible from the window like on one's palm. Not without reason they were living on the topmost, sixteenth floor.

The room was partitioned off into two unequal parts by a dresser standing sideways like a screen. In one part – the larger – dwelled Zozo Buslaeva (Khavron before her married life) with her son Methodius. In the other – the rather fine Eddy with his family of suits, twelve pairs of shoes polished to a lustre, and a bar, on which two twenty-kilogram weights tingled despondently at night.

When Eddy Khavron entered the room, Zozo was dejectedly thumbing through a magazine of dating ads, occasionally encircling the most interesting ones with a felt-tip pen. In her passport, Zozo Buslaeva was Zoe. However, Zozo did not like her passport. The pages of the passport contained too much excessive information. In the opinion of the owner, it would be completely sufficient if it would simply appear there: Zozo. Nice, brief, with taste, and allowing room for imagination. Her son Methodius was sitting at the table and already for about forty minutes glumly simulating the writing of a composition on literature. So far, he had given birth to only one phrase: *In my opinion, the books are average and not very*. With this, his creative juice ran low and now Methodius dully slaved on. Having pensively stomped around in the middle of the room, Eddy Khavron set off to his

side behind the dresser and began to get dressed, hypercritically scrutinizing shirts and even for some reason sniffing some of them under the arms.

Methodius considered his own uncle to be like a monkey. Eddy even had hair on his neck. From there it ran down like a snake and in the region of the chest transformed into an untidy reddish lawn. Furthermore, from the point of view of the same Methodius, Edward Khavron was terribly old. He was twenty-nine years old. Unfortunately, in spite of decrepitude, the old age home still would not take Eddy for the time being. Therefore, the wretch had to work as a waiter in the fashionable restaurant Ladyfingers. In his free time, the might-have-been pensioner courted visitors of his institution, preferring rich ladies expressing maternal instinct. "If I would be like Eddy in my old age, I'd jump out the window!" Methodius decided. He slammed shut the notebook with the composition and without any inspiration moved to his chemistry textbook. The day had somehow gone awry.

Zozo Buslaeva crossly nibbled the felt-tip pen and, drawing a horn over one of the photographs, decorated it with dozens of pimples. "Oh, look, what a cad! I'd kill such a man on the spot! What he writes! 'Lady with apartment and car, I will serenade you on your balcony! Your pussy. Age – 52. Weight – 112 kg. Phone the Bumble Bee Restaurant on Tsvetnoi Boulevard between 9 and 10 p.m. Ask for Victor.'" she exclaimed with indignation.

“I know this Bumble Bee. Such a cheap dive. The last time they washed the glasses was on opening day. Since then the glasses are sterilized only if vodka is in them...” Eddy said capriciously.

“Are you finished?” Zozo asked. She was up on how Eddy adored criticising strange restaurants.

“No, I’m not! And the prices at Bumble Bee are not rounded up. How’s this for price? Sixty-two fifty or a hundred and seven eighty? What fool will add all this up? The higher class the institution – the more the prices round up. It’s easier for a client to be in the mood for generosity, but here he mechanically reaches for the calculator, mechanically starts to count and becomes mean as a result!” the voice said from behind the dresser.

Zozo yawned.

Methodius occasionally fiddled with the chemistry textbook in his hands, moved it aside, and, listening to his internal state, touched the history textbook with a finger. He touched it very carefully and again listened to his sensations. No, again not that... Not one string trembled in his soul. Neither desire nor even a half-desire to be occupied with anything. Why is he like this today? “Interesting, could a lunatic weighing a hundred and twelve kilos break a balcony?” he asked.

“We don’t have a balcony!” Zozo said.

“And no car either! Otherwise, it wouldn’t be necessary for me to catch a taxi eternally. I only have a cell phone, a pile of clothing, and an honest noble heart!” Eddy added.

“What’s that about you having a heart? Did you say something?” Zozo again asked inattentively.

“I said that I’ve had enough of everything. Especially your good-for-nothing with his tricks!” Eddy was offended. At last, he finally decided on a shirt and appeared from behind the dresser. Now in order to become a waiter thoroughly, he only lacked a bowtie. But he usually put it on after being already at work.

“My good-for-nothing? What complaints do you have against Methodius?” Zozo exerted herself.

“He knows what! My complaints are as big as a whale and as serious as a gangster’s family!” Edward unexpectedly leaned over and firmly took Methodius by the ear. “Listen here, victim of an intoxicated midwife! You take any small change from my wallet again, I’ll break you like a hot water bottle, and it’ll be nothing to me! I have the white slip!” he affectionately turned to Methodius, baring teeth as small as a polecat’s. Edward Khavron was simply a pathological skinflint. Now and then, it drove quite a wedge into Eddy and he would even begin to draw lines with a felt-tip pen on toilet paper, placing his signature on the lines. Fortunately, this did not happen more often than twice a year, when he had lost all his money at cards or at the arcades.

“I did not,” Methodius said.

“Don’t you think that I’m a fool. I’m only a fool in profile! How many buttons were done up on my wallet this morning? Two! But I always button only one! And I never zipper to the end in the partition for small change!”

“Look after your buttons yourself! Mom, your relative is killing me! I’ll be one-eared and... ah... deformed!” Methodius reported, after puckering from the pain. The uncle was digging his nails very painfully into his ear. Possibly, they gave the white slip to him lawfully, though also took 300 bucks for it. “Here I’m an ass! The second button! Had to be nabbed for such nonsense,” Methodius thought.

The nails clamped down like pincers on his ear. “Have you understood everything, shorty? What about the take?” Eddy hissed.

“Ah! Leave me alone, twerp! Buy yourself an inflatable doll!” Methodius snapped.

“What did you squeal? Well, repeat it! Repeat, say it!” Khavron raged.

“Boys, boys!” Zozo interceded conciliatorily. “Perhaps we’ll stop fighting for no reason? So, shake hands and make up?”

Khavron unwillingly let go of his nephew’s ear. “Shake! Only let him remember: I catch him again – I’ll break him!” he repeated.

“Like hell you’ll catch me again!” Methodius said in an undertone. Lucky for him, Eddy was no longer listening. After jumping into a pair of his beloved boots, with a brush he whisked away from them a speck invisible to the world, and rushed into the big city on the hunt for tips and success.



Methodius and his mother remained in the apartment. Zozo Buslaeva put down the magazine and pensively looked at her son. A normal twelve-year-old adolescent – in any case, he appeared normal: skinny with narrow shoulders. He was also not noted for his height. He was ninth in line at gymnastics among fifteen boys of his class, but at the same time somewhat adroit. He played soccer well, ran not badly. When it was necessary to climb up a rope – here he was generally the first. Unfortunately, being ninth in line, more frequently he had to reach up to the rope.

And outwardly... outwardly, perhaps, not without charm. The edge of a front tooth chipped off to a third, long light-brown hair gathered at the back into a ponytail. The uniqueness of the hair was that they had not given Methodius a haircut since the moment of birth. At first Zozo did not do this because the child kicked, fought, and shouted like he was wounded, and then the grown Methodius began to assert that it was painful for him when scissors touched his hair. Zozo did not know whether this was true or not, but once, about five years back, when she attempted to clip off a piece of modelling clay stuck to her son's hair, she saw blood on the scissors, not knowing where it came from.

Zozo Buslaeva was frighteningly afraid of the sight of blood. This was left in her from childhood, when, after cutting her hand with a kitchen knife, she decided that she was bleeding to

death. Her parents were not at home. Little Zoe, losing her head, hid in the closet and, whimpering from the horror, hundreds of agonies coming alive in her imagination, sat there for one-and-a-half hours until Mother returned and threw open the sobbing door. The cut turned out to be minor; however, the horror did not go away and, having once settled in, had arranged for permanent residence. Now then, attempting to cut Methodius' strand with the modelling clay, Zozo heard that terrible resonant and persistent sound when something drips onto the linoleum. Closing her eyes tight, she stood in the middle of the kitchen and felt how the blood was pouring onto her woollen socks. When, after getting a grip on herself, Zozo nevertheless opened her eyes – the scissors were completely dry, if we do not consider the small brown speck.

Besides the hair, there was something else in Methodius, which in no way fit into the scheme called “twelve-year-old adolescent.” And these were the eyes: slanting, not quite symmetrical, and of completely indeterminate colour. Some considered that they were grey, some green, some black, and a couple of people were ready to swear under oath that they were blue. In actuality, their colour changed depending on the illumination and the mood of Methodius himself.

Now and then, especially when her son began to be angry or was agitated by something, Zozo – if she happened to be beside him – felt a strange vertigo and weakness. It seemed to her that she was in an elevator descending infinitely into a tight dark

mine. She almost saw in reality this elevator with the dim light, the flat iron buttons, and the boldfaced inscription of a marker: "Welcome to Gloom!" She saw and in no way could shake off the hallucination.

She experienced the worst shock when Methodius was still a child. Then a dog violently frightened him. This was a foolish sheepdog that adored rushing silently, even without a growl, at people and, without biting, knocking them down with its paws. Then for some time the sheepdog would stand over the victim, sowing horror and delighting in the produced effect, and would run away afterwards. However, three-year-old Methodius did not know this. In his belief, the dog was attacking in earnest. A bewildered Zozo did not even *hear* how Methodius yelled. She only *understood* that her son shouted and fixed his eyes on the dog. The sheepdog ran up to Methodius, knocked him down, and then suddenly, by itself with a kind of absurd comicality, fell down sideways and remained lying so, with a thread of saliva gleaming on its canine teeth. Later in court, they said the sheepdog had unexpectedly had a heart attack.

For long afterwards, Zozo could not come to her senses. She was unable to forget the dark flame flaring up for a moment in her son's eyes. This was something impossible to describe, commonplace words like "glow," "tongues of flame," "fiery jets," and so on, would not even come close. Something simply appeared in his pupils, something, which, even she, his mother, could not recall without a shudder.

But in the end Zozo discarded everything from her head. Fortunately for her, she was particularly frivolous. She constantly attempted to arrange her personal life, and this took away all her time and energy. Methodius only knew that at first there was papa Igor. Then life rolled papa Igor up in a rug and dragged him off somewhere. Now he appeared once every two or three years, grew bald, threadbare and worn-out by destiny, brought a nosegay of three carnations for the ex-wife and Chinese pistols for the son, and bragged that everything was fine with him. He had a new wife and a firm engaged in repairing washing machines. However, Eddy Khavron, knowing everything, asserted that papa Igor's business was only so-so and it was not his firm but he himself that repaired washing machines. Sometimes Eddy Khavron branded Mr. Buslaev Sr. with the insulting term "an inferior one-man operation."

After papa Igor in the life of Zozo and Methodius there were Uncle Lyosha, Uncle Tolya, and Uncle Innokentii Markovich. Uncle Innokentii Markovich hung around for a long time, almost two years, and earned Methodius' objection. He forced Methodius to hang up pants, wash his own socks, and call him by name and patronymic. Then Uncle Markovich vanished into thin air somewhere, and Methodius no longer memorized the names of the remaining uncles in order not to overload his young memory heavily. "Choke up the cells of your brain with any nonsense, and then there won't be enough space for lessons!" he reasoned.

Zozo Buslaeva scratched her forehead. She vaguely felt that what happened should not be abandoned so simply. That Methodius got into Eddy's wallet was extremely serious. She, as a mother and a woman, must now stir up something pedagogical in the spirit of what the wise Makarenko devised. To punish perhaps, or in any case, to be strict. Here the only problem was that Zozo completely could not conceive how to be strict. She herself was even a slob in life. "Ahem... Son, I want to have a talk with you! You'll not take more of Eddy's money?" she asked.

"Do you know how much I took from him? Ten roubles and fifty kopecks! It wasn't enough for me to get to school on the shuttle. I didn't manage the bus because I overslept," Methodius said unwillingly.

"But why did you not ask me?"

"You weren't here. You met that German, who turned out to be a Turk, and set up a date at eight in the morning at the subway," Methodius said.

Zozo blushed slightly, "You can't talk like that to your mother! I wanted it so myself! But couldn't you ask Eddy in words? Really, he wouldn't give it?"

Methodius hesitated, "Our Eddy? In words? Have to ask him with a brick instead of words. He would give a thousand lectures. Like: 'I've worked hard and sweated since seven years old, and no one gave me nothing. And you're already almost thirteen, yet you're a bum, a retard and a fool. You smoke on the sly and always go stuffing your face.'"

Zozo Buslaeva sighed and gave up. Actually, her brother began to manifest business wit early. Maybe not seven, but at seventeen he was already selling nested dolls and army hats on Vorobev Mountains subway stop, for which he was repeatedly beaten up by bad competitors. True, soon Eddy tired of standing under the open sky, catching the wind and head colds. After spending three weeks for checkups in the crazy house, he was discharged from the army and settled down in a restaurant. His wide shoulders and the passionate gaze of a conventional schizophrenic, crowned with the appropriate certificate, brought forth in the visitors of Ladyfingers an unhealthy appetite and a desire to repeat a double coffee with liqueur. "Met!" Zozo summed it up. "It's possible you're right and Eddy is a pain in the neck, but promise me never again..."

"Never, so never! I'll go to school on the exhaust pipe of a shuttle!" Methodius promised.

Zozo sighed and was about to go into the kitchen, but suddenly some late thought overtook her and lightly nudged her in the back. Zozo stopped. "Kiddo, this evening I'll have a... eh-eh... guest... Wouldn't you like to go somewhere? For example, to Ira's," she proposed with the look of a cat digging with its paw in a tray of sand.

"And not be under foot?" Methodius specified with understanding.

Zozo thought for a bit. When you are fighting for your destiny and trying to arrange your life, a twelve-year-old son is already

compromising material clearer than a passport. "Something like that. Don't stick your head into the kitchen, don't gurgle in the bathroom, don't go for all kinds of nonsense every minute, and don't be under foot. Exactly!" Zozo decisively repeated.

Methodius gave it some thought, estimating whether it was possible to bargain in this matter. "And how about my enormous desire to do homework? Soon the quarter will end. I officially warn you that I'll grab a railroad carload of threes for the year," he stated. In general, he had already grabbed it, but now appeared an excellent occasion to find some other guilty person. To miss it would be a sin.

"This is insolent blackmail! Maybe you'll do homework now? Still lots of time till the evening," Zozo said helplessly.

It seemed to Methodius that he saw a weak lilac glow, which Zozo threw out into space. Turning pale, the glow began to extend to the boundary of the room like a drop of paint on wet paper. Methodius, as usual not having any idea how he did it, absorbed the glow like a sponge and understood: mother had yielded. "No. I don't have the inspiration now. My hour of triumph begins precisely in the evening. In the daytime I don't get into the theme," Methodius said. The most ridiculous thing was that this was the truth. The nearer to night time, the clearer his brain began to work. His sight became sharper, and the desire to sleep, so strong in the first morning classes and in the daytime, disappeared completely. Now and then, he felt sorry that school did not start with sunset and last until dawn. Instead, in the

morning he was usually sluggish, thought badly, and generally moved on autopilot.

At ten to eight, Zozo decisively escorted Methodius from the apartment. "Go to Irka and sit at her place! I'll call you when the uncle leaves!" she said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Aha. Well, see you later!" Methodius said. He had already left mentally.

"I love you!" Zozo shouted and, after slamming the door shut, rushed to freshen herself up. She concentrated, like a general before the main battle in life. In the next ten minutes, she had to make herself ten years younger.

For a while, Methodius aimlessly lounged around on the landing, then summoned the elevator and went down. Walking out from the entrance, he watched as, from an automobile parked by the house, an unpleasant copy of the masculine sex stepped out with a large bouquet of roses and a bottle of champagne, which he held with the kind of care that a militia would give to ammunition. Although theoretically the individual could be a guest for any apartment, Methodius instantly grasped that this was Zozo's new worshipper. It was not even an assumption. He simply knew this and that was that. He knew by a whole hundred percent, as if on the man's forehead was the sign: "I'm going to Zozo! I'm her type!" Thickset, with grey stubbles, a double chin, and almost without a neck, the new uncle resembled a pylon, through misunderstanding or because of genetic failure, born as a man. Methodius stiffened, looking him over. He did not even

consider moving away from the entrance door.

“Why are you in the way? Don’t hang around here, young man! Quick!” the example of masculine sex said, after making a vain attempt to go around Methodius.

“Are you talking to me?” Methodius asked with hatred.

“Yes, you. Now get away from here! Take off!” the example bellowed and, having unceremoniously pushed Methodius aside, forced his way into the entrance, while the door did not yet have time to close.

Methodius calmly looked around. Then he found a rusty nail, approached the automobile, glanced back, and thoroughly shoved its tip into the rear tire cover with the calculation that when the car made a move, the nail would enter deeper and pierce the tire. For a while, Methodius contemplated his work, experiencing a feeling of creative dissatisfaction. One nail seemed to him too little. He found the bottom of a broken bottle and settled it under the front right tire, and put a balloon onto the exhaust pipe, tying it with a wire. Pity he will not be here when the balloon begins to inflate, and then it will break. Well, no matter – let someone else take pleasure from this spectacle. “It’s you who shouldn’t be under foot! Understand?” Methodius said, turning to the car. He experienced not the least pangs of conscience. No one asked this hog swimming with fat to come to his mother with a broom of roses.



Severnyi Boulevard slowly immersed in the embraces of evening. Shadows shrouded its stone sides. A corner house had become mysteriously crumpled and it moved away deep into the shadows. Proportions were playing tricks. A sudden wind gust lashed Methodius in the face with a crumpled newspaper. An empty beer bottle was rolling behind the newspaper, recklessly jumping and attempting to catch up. For some reason this simple event seemed terribly important to Methodius.

“If the bottle rolls first onto the road, mother will drive away this character!” he quickly proposed, dashing right after them. But, alas... a torn portion of the newspaper was first on the roadway and instantly fell under a truck. The bottle rolled out immediately after it and shared its tragic fate. “Rotten trick! She won’t! Unless he takes off by himself!” Methodius growled. He stared at the newspaper with such irritation that... no, for sure, it only appeared so to him. The newspaper could not flare up without any reason. Moreover, the wind immediately took it away, so that it was not possible to say anything for sure. Methodius discarded all this nonsense from his head. He crossed the road, jumped over the cast iron barrier of the boulevard, and made his way to Irka.

Irka was his good friend, precisely a friend. The word “girlfriend” gives birth to unhealthy associations in the unhealthy

mind of people, whereas the words “female acquaintance” or “lady friend” smack of something rotten. They talk this way about someone they are not sure of. Irka was exactly a friend, moreover with a capital F. Irka lived in the neighbouring building, and it was possible to appear at her place at any time of the day without phoning first, which, you must agree, is especially useful. Even at midnight, since Irka lived on the second floor and the tenants on the first were so kind to fence off the world with very convenient figured latticework. Irka’s grandmother posed no obstacle. She adored Irka so, that every desire of the granddaughter was for her not even a law but an order to the subdivision. The parents... But, about this a little later.

It was still not so late. A light was burning in the window beyond the porch of the first floor. It was visible through the open curtains that a moustached woman of grenadier build was standing by a cabinet and rearranging something on the shelves. For this reason Methodius decided to use the dullest of all the existing methods of guest appearance – namely to do this through the door. It is extremely unpleasant when they knock you down with a mop through the figured lattice.

After getting up to the second floor, he rang and almost immediately heard tires rustling in the hallway. This was even not rustling, but a light yet distinct sound of the inflated rubber outer-tires momentarily sticking half-heartedly to the linoleum. “Ir, it’s me, Met!” Methodius shouted so that Irka would not have

to look through the peephole.

The lock clicked, the door opened. Methodius saw the dark corridor and the bright yellow spot of light shining through from the wide open door of the room. In the luminescent spot, a wheelchair was standing with a small stooping figure in it, a rug thrown over the legs of the figure. "Hello! Hop in!" Irka invited him in. She deftly turned around in the narrow corridor and dived into her room. Methodius followed her.

Irka's room differed from the remaining ones in that there was not a single chair in it. Bright metallic handrails stretched along the walls at different heights. Irka hated to call her grandmother when it was necessary to get in or out of the wheelchair. The computer monitor twinkled by the window. Irka was in a chat room before Methodius' arrival. Books and magazines covered the dying sofa. Irka was eternally reading twenty books at once, not counting textbooks. Moreover, she did not read consecutively, but pieces from different places. Strange that with such chaotic reading the books did not tangle up inside her head.

"Why are you standing like a lonely jerboa? Clear a place for yourself and sit down! And I'll be right with you! Just have to tell people that I'm not home," said Irka, nodding towards the bed. She rolled up to the computer and quickly typed:

Ciao, all! Gone to the front! Me.

"Well now, politeness, first of all! Otherwise people will think that I was hijacked," she said, turning to Methodius.

He was going to sit down on the bed, but somehow he did not.

As if there was a perpetual motion machine in the lumbar part of his spine. “Better let’s go to the kitchen. I’d like to get a bite of something,” he said.

Irka snorted, “Don’t frigging petition to me! Go to Granny. All I know about the refrigerator is that its door opens.”

“Well, are we going?” Methodius repeated.

“It’s you ‘go’ and I ‘ride’. Indeed I’m a race car,” explained Irka.

Methodius had noticed long ago that Irka, like many handicapped people, loved to joke about herself and her wheelchair. However, when someone else tried to be witty regarding the same, her sense of humour dried up right there and then. She stretched her hand to the control panel and the wheelchair quickly rolled along the corridor to the kitchen. Methodius barely managed to follow her. After all, wheels will always outrun feet, it goes without saying, if there are no fences along the road.

Everything happened eight years ago. Then Irka was four. The automobile, in which Irka and her parents were returning from the dacha, was pushed out into the oncoming traffic towards a scheduled bus. Irka’s father and mother, travelling in the front seats, perished. Irka, with spinal trauma and two long, almost parallel scars from two pieces of iron gashing her back from the left shoulder down, ended up in a wheelchair. Still, Irka was lucky that she had an energetic and sufficiently young grandmother. Although in this case, it was better not to hint at luck at all. With

such an argument, it was possible to get looks with daggers in her eyes.

In the kitchen *Notre Dame de Paris* was roaring. Grandmother Ann – she was the same Granny – was sitting in glory on a high stool by the microwave. Waiting while the chicken with French fries from Ready-made Food was warming up, Granny was listening to the part of the hunchback and conducting with a chef's knife. Few true grandmothers remain nowadays. They died out like mammoths. For those who think that fifty-year-old grandmothers must walk around in headscarves and spend the entire day working their magic by a stove, it is time to turn in their imagination for recycling.

Granny stared wonderingly at Methodius. Listening to *Notre Dame*, she missed the moment when he arrived. "Hello, Met! Nice to see you!" she said. A pale yellow glow with a bit of green came off her head and spread along the room. "Of course, not quite enthusiastic, but she's glad!" Without thinking how he did it, Methodius deciphered. He waited until the glow ceased to be a part of Granny and had spread along the room, then absorbed it and felt that he had become stronger. Maybe, to something like a millionth part of what he was before, but nevertheless... Again, this happened instinctively, without the interference of reason. Simply Methodius understood that everything was so, but how he did this and why – remained in the background. When we breathe, we do not think about breathing. We breathe even in sleep. We would breathe even without knowing that there is

respiration. In the same way, Methodius also did not suspect that he was absorbing the energy of other people's emotions.

"Met, come here, my little tousle! I'll give you a hug!" Granny said.

"Sure thing! Only please put down the knife!" Methodius said. He loved Granny.

Granny not without interest looked at the knife in her hand. It seemed she had already managed to forget that she was holding it, though very recently she opened the packaging with it. Granny's hair somewhat resembled Methodius' hair, although she was not related to Methodius, and in general they did not even meet. "They say that in spring many lunatics have relapses. Herds of maniacs begin to wander along the streets," she stated thoughtfully.

"Granny, it's already almost May. People go crazy in March," said Irka.

"But don't say that here. You go crazy in March, with me it's every day. Especially when everyone throws on a clearly unsuccessful dress, and the most successful will hang out of sight and dream of moths," Granny said. She had a small studio in a semi-basement, which she loved to call the "House of fashion named after me." Besides Granny herself, two more girls were working in the "House of fashion named after me." One of them was a terrible gossip, and the second was always ill, moreover somehow so cunning that she could never be reached on her home phone. All the time she "has gone to the doctor's and not yet

returned.” “I like the second girl better. With her you don’t get earaches,” said Granny.

“Gram, Met wants to eat!” Irka said.

“Sure,” agreed Granny. “You know where the fridge is. And you know how to work the microwave. I’m going. By tomorrow morning, I’m under orders to think up such a dress so that the investigator, getting married for the third time, will look as naive as the director of the church choir.”

“Okay, Gram, fine! We’ll do it ourselves!” Irka said. She knew better than Methodius that Granny did not particularly like to cook. Instead, in supermarkets she purchased cartloads of yogurts, sausage, oranges, and frozen dinners. Methodius was greatly amazed. For example, it seemed the upper compartments of the freezer were almost half-packed with ice cream, and Granny did not try to count how many portions there were. Skinflint Eddy with his habit of drawing lines with a pencil on toilet paper would get upset if he found out about this.

Granny, singing, left, and Methodius and Irka remained in the kitchen. They warmed up nothing. They confined themselves to extracting from the refrigerator a big tub of ice cream and a large stick of sausage. The sausage Methodius professionally sliced with a knife – picked up from Eddy, who started out as a cook – and then began to eat ice cream, wielding rounds of smoked sausage instead of a spoon. It seemed to him tastier this way.

“Your grandmother is cool,” said Methodius with a well-packed mouth.

“She’s everything to me,” agreed Irka. “Only she cannot stand it when they call her Grandmother. Here a new teacher for Russian came to me – they come to me at home, you know – and said to her: ‘How do you do, Grandmother!’ And Granny was angry: ‘It’s you,’ she said, ‘who’s a grandmother, I’m a person!’”

“And that’s true. Parents are people too. What, are they guilty, perhaps, that they’re parents?” Methodius agreed.

He suddenly recalled how and under what circumstances he was introduced to Irka two years ago. With his one friend – already former – he was passing by her entrance at the moment when Irka was trying to get the wheelchair onto the step in front of the entrance door. Irka, for the first time getting out of the house without the grandmother (afterwards she really got it for this), was considering how she could get out of the tight spot. Possibly, Methodius would have rushed past altogether, not noticing anything, if not for his friend, who began to laugh aloud. He found it very comical that a freak in a wheelchair could not get into the entrance – all the time rolling backwards.

For a long time Methodius attentively, as if comparing them, looked first at the friend, then at Irka, who was pretending with all her might that she had heard nothing, though her cheeks and ears were already crimson, and then very swiftly and precisely he clouted his friend in the chin. This (like the slicing of sausages) was also a lesson of Eddy Khavron, who, until the failure with nested dolls and army hats spent about three years being busy in the boxing ring. “Throw a punch without effort like a stone. The

power of the impact is in the legs and the turning of the trunk,” he taught.

The impact turned out unexpectedly powerful. Methodius almost dislocated his hand. After the punch, the friend settled on the asphalt like a bag of manure. He sat on the asphalt and shook his head. A neigh not entirely quieted down yet gurgled in his throat. After this, he essentially stopped being a friend. On the other hand in the life of Methodius appeared his first true friend – Irka.

They sat in the kitchen and ate ice cream, chatting about all kinds of nonsense. Methodius did not mention Zozo, expecting her hog, escorting him from the house. He could not bear to complain. There is something fundamentally pitiful in someone complaining, even with a reason – this he mastered sufficiently long ago. Irka also never complained – and this united them much stronger than if they on meeting cried on each other’s shoulder.

“And how’s your dream?” Irka suddenly asked.

Methodius tensed up, “You know about that dream?”

“Aha.”

“Well, it happens sometimes. Not very often,” he unwillingly said.

“Always the same one?”

“Yes. But I don’t want to recall this.” However, he involuntarily recalled nevertheless, and his mood immediately crawled down like the worm that did not like the Eiffel Tower.

This was one and the same disgusting dream, which he had

once or twice a month. In this dream, he was standing in front of and looking at a dull closed lead sarcophagus with ancient signs imprinted on it. Methodius did not know what was inside there, but sensed it was something terrible, something he should never look at, something that must on no account escape. But at the same time he could not take his eyes off it. And the most terrible thing was that the lead sarcophagus began to melt under his gaze. However, every time Methodius woke up before what was in the sarcophagus managed to break loose. Once he even yelled in his sleep, waking Zozo and Eddy. Eddy was so astonished that he did not even swear. "I understand you perfectly, buddy! I have nightmares. Somehow, I dreamt that they ordered my foot with vegetable ragout for supper, and at the same time – dig the impudence? – puckered all the time afterwards and asserted that the meat was over-cooked!" he said then.

They talked some more still, until finally, about ten o'clock, Zozo phoned Methodius. "Come home. I'm waiting for you," she said.

"And *this one* has already rolled away on his cart?" Methodius was interested.

"From where did you know that he was not on foot... Everything fell apart." Zozo's voice was quite crestfallen.

"How's this?"

"He arrived a little early. I wasn't ready and in order to gain time, asked him to dash into the supermarket to buy white wine. I hate it when people with nothing to do hang about near the

door and prevent me from putting make-up on. He was about to go, but returned almost immediately – mad like you on Sunday mornings when I wake you up out of habit. Something there with his Audi... Well, I started to calm him down a little, to warm him with sincere heat, and here, imagine, his eyes fell on the wedding picture of your daddy, which Eddy throws darts at. He began to coax and fished out, such a parasite, that I have a son. I didn't violently deny, nevertheless he indeed found out, even showed him some of your photos. Who knows, I think, what if he manages some major male bonding? Play soccer together, share a first cigarette. 'Do you smoke, son? I hope, with filter?' Not frigging likely, didn't come through! He sat for nearly an hour as if on needles, and then left... My life is shattered!" Zozo's voice rose to a tragic Mont Blanc and hung there, intending to break loose into the abyss of hysterics.

"Nonsense, mom! Your life shatters about three times a month, and then immediately grows together," Methodius comforted her. He had already lost count of how often his mother met with second-hand princes from the dating magazine. And each time everything concluded with an inoffensive zero, except one case when the prince at hand dragged away a pathos-arousing bronze ashtray, which Eddy, in turn, had hauled away from the cafe, where he worked before Ladyfingers. The next day this prince returned drunk, drummed on the door for a long time, attempting to have a talk, and fell asleep right on the landing, laying his impetuous head down on the rug. Good that Eddy

returned early and, taking revenge for the ashtray, with well-aimed kicks banished Adam from paradise.

“You think so? Okay, forget it,” Zozo said sadly. Methodius felt that in this very minute she was tearing the fat hog out from her heart, crumpling and throwing him into the wastebasket. “Will you come yourself or do I have to meet you?” Zozo asked. It clearly sounded in her voice that she was too lazy to get dressed.

“With biker escorts,” Methodius said.

“Well then, by yourself. I’ll wait! We still have the trophy cake left,” Zozo said.

“That’s it, you’re going?” Irka asked when Methodius replaced the receiver.

“Aha. Tomorrow I’ll hop over after school!”

“Do, bye!” Irka said with light envy. She had never walked into a school. However, Methodius now and then felt that she, working alone at home and with teachers coming, outstripped him by about two grades, no less. In any case, in some subjects Irka had already passed exams for grade nine.

Methodius crossed Severnyi Boulevard and approached the house – this time, for variety, from the other side. Here his way was barred by an enormous puddle, which absorbed the melted snow of surrounding courtyards and occasionally with delight sipped water from broken pipes. This gave crafty real

estate agents the chance to assert that the house was located in picturesque locality next to a pond. Through the puddle was a caravan path of bricks and boards, scattered at whimsical intervals.

The moon lay like a gold coin on the flat dark surface of the puddle. Once in a while, hardly noticeable ripples passed over it. Methodius looked at the moon – at first in the puddle and then raising his face to the sky – and suddenly a strange feeling enveloped him. It seemed to him that he was absorbing the force of the moonlight – saturating him with its calm power and deathly void. Startled, this was the first time after all, he lowered his eyes and suddenly saw how, obeying his gaze, the reflection of the moon glided along the puddle like a spotlight. Methodius' skin crawled. He decided that he was going insane. To chase the moon like a ball with his gaze! To describe such things to the school psychologist would be extremely dangerous. Methodius again tossed his head up. No... the big moon, fortunately remained on the spot. His gaze governed only the lunar reflection. Met shook his head and blinked several times, breaking off his gaze from the lunar reflection. He succeeded. The reflection stuck and continued to bathe in the black water already by itself. "It only appeared so!" Methodius thought, experiencing simultaneously easing and disappointment. To govern the reflection of the moon was, of course, eerie, but at the same time, it was something difficult to refuse.

Jumping over from brick to brick, he crossed to the other side of the puddle and approached the entrance. A bell began to ring suddenly in Methodius' consciousness. This was the special bell of intuition, which Met had long since gotten used to trusting. Now this bell clearly ordered him not to walk into the entrance. Methodius looked around – everything was somewhat quiet: nothing and no one. However, the bell nevertheless did not break off. “Well then, am I to climb to the sixteenth floor along the balconies?” Methodius thought perplexedly. He wavered for a while, and then approached the entrance nevertheless. He had already typed in the code and even heard the inviting peep of the door, when from behind someone's shadow flickered. A strong hand shoved and dragged Methodius to the gate. He attempted to hold onto the doorknob, but a strong slap pushed him into the entrance. Stumbling, half-thunderstruck, he took several steps.

“Well, finally! I thought you'd never return, puppy,” someone said triumphantly. Methodius already recognized the hog by the voice. In the semi-darkness of the entrance – lights only at the four corners by the elevators and mailboxes – his face seemed greenish and swollen. Methodius puckered from the pain. The strong fingers of the hog sunk so into his collarbone that it was as if they desired to take it with them by way of moral compensation. Methodius almost felt sick from the red waves of fury projected by the hog. They rolled over him, shoved him. Methodius sensed that he could absorb their force, but he involuntarily repelled, deflected, and set up a block – for this

reason the wave also smashed with such sprays.

“Let go of me!”

“Let go? Only from the roof head first! What did you do to my car, piglet?”

“What car? I never saw your car at all! Didn’t see who pierced you tires!” The powerful box on the ear, which jerked his head to the side, burned Methodius’ cheek. He was shaken with doubled fury and dragged along the steps to the elevators. Methodius realized that he had committed a strategic error. He could not but see the hog’s car, indeed the first time they met was precisely beside it. And indeed all the more, being innocent, he could not have known at all that the tires were punctured.

“Well, don’t try to escape! I’ll take out all of your insides and wind them around my hand! We’ll now go together to your devilish mother, and I’ll have a heart-to-heart talk with her! I’ll take from you triple for each tire cover, and if not, I’ll break everything in your home!” the hog wheezed. He was so angry and retained with such fury the breaking away Methodius that he in no way could put his finger on the button to summon the elevator. Finally, he managed it. But at the moment the button lit up with the sad red eye, someone’s calm voice uttered, “Hey you, victim of a printer, leave him alone!”

Chapter 2

The Skomoroshya Settlement

Methodius and the hog turned around at once. They heard neither the click of the entrance door nor steps, but they were no longer alone on the landing by the elevators. Next to the mailboxes, above which the mysterious “NUFA – SVENYA!” was scratched on the wall, a tall, very plump girl of about twenty with ash silver hair was standing. In her hands was a triple-decker sandwich so immense that all double burgers in comparison would seem like pitiful undersized objects with a complex. However, the girl was obviously not a bit disturbed by its size. She was conducting with the sandwich like a maestro with his baton, without forgetting to bite off good-sized pieces occasionally. It is worthwhile to add that the girl was in a thick leather jacket and a short skirt. Completing the outfit were tall boots – one red, another black – and bubble bracelets in the form of lizards with eyes of shiny stones.

“Hey you, slammed by a scanner! It seems I ordered you to let go of the boy! If you don’t, I’ll stuff you inside the cable of a busy phone! I’ll have you wandering from one beep to the next! I, Julitta, am telling you this!” the girl repeated, brandishing the sandwich threateningly.

The hog began to snuffle, digesting the complex threat.

A whole wrestling match of motivations was launched in his small cranium; however, in the ring the desire to get even with Methodius flattened the possibility of putting in her place the insolent girl with the strange name. "Don't be in the way! This young criminal punctured two of my outstanding tires!" he growled, shaking Methodius like a pear.

"A whole two tires? Oh, Gloom! My condolences in connection with the loss of the mechanical relative!" Julitta was horrified.

"What???" the hog did not take it in.

"Build yourself a supernatural monument! The road surface will not grow over it!" the girl continued. She was clearly mocking the hog, Methodius, and herself at the same time. Here was some round of shooting.

"The prince's" scanty eyebrows, angrily wandering towards each other, formed on the forehead a fold like a bulldog. "Go away, fatso!" he bellowed, taking a threatening step towards her. It was not worthwhile to do this, because immediately the girl took a step towards him.

"Who's a fatso, me? Why are we, heavy people, eternally obligated to listen to this filth? They attempt to vulgarize our kingly proportions by the meanest means! And the main thing, whom do I hear this from? Apollo Belvedere? The handsome man Prometheus? The jock Heracles? Not in the least! From the pitiful crossbreed of a pig with a computer keyboard! A walking cemetery of cutlets! The drain tank for beer bottles, who greases

the folds on his diathetic belly with cream!” Julitta was insulted.

The hog started to grunt angrily. The girl, by some mysterious means, had gotten to his sorest point. Dragging Methodius behind him, he threw himself at Julitta. Showing how frightened she was, the girl began to tremble and, after collapsing onto her knees, began to wring her hands. “How horrifying his glance is! What terrible thoughts are concealed under this low pimply forehead! Mammy-nanny, where’s my stiletto? I want to stab myself! At the same time grab a bucket of poison, if the knife, like last time, breaks against my stone heart,” theatrically howled Julitta. She wanted to drop the sandwich for an increase in effect, but she looked at it and thought better of it. “In short, I’m tormented by melancholy and I’ll die in terrible spasms! Consider this an expression of my reproach!” she explained in an ordinary voice.

“What, are you batty, yes? A hysteric?” the hog fearfully asked. His fingers, never closing over Julitta’s hand, gathered empty space. The unpredictable behaviour of the strange person overloaded his grey matter. Must admit, Methodius was not a bit less astonished, although in this match the girl was clearly playing on his team. On a most heart-wrenching note, she suddenly got up on her feet and, having spat with disgust, cleaned her knees.

“How barbaric! You play for them, you try, and you’d think that at least someone would clap! At least one pig! This also concerns you, Buslaev! I’m also a tragic adolescent! Mephistopheles from kindergarten!”

“Buslaev? Where does she know my name from?” Methodius was surprised, hurriedly attempting to recollect whether he had met the girl in school or in the courtyard. Of course not, hardly. Indeed the interpretation that he could simply not pay her any attention faded immediately. Such loud and substantial individuals do not hide behind a cactus, although now and then they take refuge somewhere in a dark corner of an auditorium, concealing a fashion magazine with their knees.

The elevator that arrived with strain threw open its doors. The hog began to push Methodius forcibly into it. The boy attempted to break loose and earned a good punch in the ribs by a fist from behind. “Who are you beating up, support for a bald spot? Are you generally well-informed on what I’ll do with you now?” Julitta asked grimly, and the elevator doors slammed shut much faster than usual. The hog looked around. “He mutilated your car?” Julitta continued. “And, Xerox not finished? Excellent! So I’ll add something still!” Not postponing her threat, she blew on her palm. The sound of broken automobile glass distinctly reached them from the courtyard. Complaining to fate, the alarm began to cry. “Poof! Oh-oh-oh, what vandalism!” Julitta was horrified and blew on her palm again. This time – judging by the sound – it had reached the windshield.

For some reason Methodius did not experience the least surprise. He only thought that if Julitta, instead of blowing on her palm, had made the movement of catching thrown keys and at the same time moved her shoulders in undulation like in Indian

dances, the car would flatten in the manner of a hippopotamus-suicide jumping onto it from the Crimean Bridge. “Magic of motion” – it seems it is called. After thinking this, Methodius wondered slightly about his own knowledge.

By then the hog was simply in shock. He glanced with distrustful horror at Julitta, and then, towing the resisting Methodius after himself, he rushed to the street. The glass splinters had barely stopped jumping on the asphalt. The alarm no longer howled, but was only sobbing quietly. The face of the hog changed three or four colours. He was frightened, lost, and enraged. Everything was in disorder in the Oblonsky home. “It’s you... it’s all you, trash! I knew it!” he began to roar.

The ashen-haired girl, who lazily came out after them, made a face, and touched her ear with a long nail, “Calm down, darling! Don’t tempt me unnecessarily with a return of your tenderness! Better to say, cut the cackle!”

“WHAT?! You... you!! I’ll finish you off!!!”

Julitta shrugged her shoulders, “Turn down the sound track, citizen! Of course, it’s necessary to speak up, but not so loud! Well, me, not me – what’s the difference? Is it worthwhile to go into details? From a philosophical point of view it’s all irrelevant!”

The bull was shown a new red rag. The hog flung Methodius away and took a step towards Julitta. His bulging eyes became malicious and wild, as if an entire battalion of scum microbes was lapping in them. “I... Yes you...”

“Calm down, daddy! Heart attack on alert! Oho, it seems they are going to kill me on the spot! Perhaps you’ll kiss me before death, eh, uncle Desdemon? How about a fiery caress? To both burn and sear? Eh, old fax? Or did the battery die?” Julitta lazily asked.

“And do you understand whom you’re dealing with? Whom you’re teasing? I’ll rip out your heart!” the hog croaked hoarsely.

“Ah, if only there were something to be ripped out...” Julitta said quietly. It seemed to Methodius that incomprehensible melancholy flickered in her eyes. But this did not continued for long at all, only up to the moment when the hog, turning, croaked the most overused and worn phrase ever heard, “You have no idea what I’ll do with you!”

“Sounds very promising, pappy! But I already thought that you love to beat up only the young!” The female purred huskily and suddenly, although Methodius was ready to swear that she had not taken a step, she turned out to be right next to them. Her chubby hands with some kind of icy force lay on the unhappy fiancé’s shoulders. “It’s been a very long time since someone among the living has declared love to me! How do you relate to female vampires? I hope they’re to your taste?” Julitta asked with strange significance. Chubby lips moved apart. The hog, like a blind man, sensed wild horror filling his body.

Methodius did not notice what was there beyond the lips, but the auto-maniac started to wheeze and somehow immediately went morally limp. He became like the pig, to which a pensive

butcher with a camomile behind the ear arrived at the pen. Smiling bewitchingly, Julitta pulled him to herself, persistently and mockingly demanding a kiss, to which the victim of a fax answered only with a pitiful whimper.

“Look, Met! It seems not everything is well in the Danish kingdom,” she giggled, turning to Methodius. “Every time when I attempt to kiss him, he begins to shake. Stop thundering with your bones, I said! This prosaic detail oppresses me! What, are you deaf, can’t hear?” The auto-maniac despondently bleated that he could hear. The courage left in him was no more than the juice in an empty juice box.

“Then memorize something else in case we meet again some time. Rule number one: don’t be rude to me. Rule number two: my requests have to be received like orders, and orders like natural calamity. Rule number three: my friends are a part of me, and they don’t offend me... Rule number four... Never mind, you won’t be able to violate the fourth rule, because you won’t live till that moment! Go away!” Julitta, with disgust, unclenched her hands. The hog attacked the porch and, without losing time, ran on all fours to the car. Ten seconds had not even passed when the motor roared, and the mutilated automobile dragged itself from the courtyard with the speed of a traumatized tortoise.

Methodius turned to Julitta. The feeling that he had flipped did not forsake him. Reality faded like an old newspaper, and in its place, complete phantasmagoria decisively forced its way with its elbows. Surrealism in the spirit of Salvador Dali.

“Poor devil! I understand him! To see how a witch’s eyeteeth slide forward is not a sight for the nervous. And this regardless that I never frolicked with pure vampirism – I simply met one vampire and learned the technique. It’s not very complex – basic question in the modification of the bite.”

“And did it take long?”

“No, not particularly. I learned to advance the teeth in a month or two! At first it was dreary to train, and then it’s alright,” the ashen-haired one informed him. “Well! Let’s get acquainted!” Julitta stretched out her hand, and Methodius touched her fingers indecisively. He for some reason expected that the hand of a witch would be cold, but it was warm and, perhaps, encouraging.

“Methodius!” he said.

Julitta nodded. “Yes, I know, I know... Good at least that you didn’t say ‘Methodius. Methodius Buslaev!’ One of my acquaintances in glasses, who is now having a ‘great love’ with a certain Russian photo-model, would present himself precisely in this sequence.”

“You know me?” Methodius wondered.

Julitta burst out laughing. Methodius already noticed that she moved from one mood to another with surprising rapidity. If she was not in all of them simultaneously. “Oh, we’re already on informal ‘you’! What can be better than being informal? Treat me with familiarity as much as you want! Okay?”

“Okay,” Methodius said. He again felt uncomfortable. It was not everyday that lady-vampires fell to your lot and asked you to

treat them with familiarity.

“I know you, Methodius, and very well. We have been observing you every day of your life. However, only now, when you’re more than twelve, can you learn the truth about yourself. Up to this moment, your consciousness simply could not sustain it. You could die of horror, scarcely finding out who you are and why you came into this world,” Julitta continued with an air of importance.

“A so-so announcement to me!” Methodius thought sourly. Until now, he was certain that he had come into this world without any special purpose. The type: “Hello! May I drop in?”

“And you? You didn’t die of horror? Are you indeed a tiny bit older than me?” he asked without irony.

Julitta’s face suddenly became serious and sad. As if the pain, which Methodius’ question involuntarily caused her, forced her for a moment to remove her mask. “I’m a special case. I had no way out. They cursed me immediately after birth. Besides, the one who did the cursing, his curse had special power... But we’ll not talk about this,” she said and turned away, showing that the conversation was finished and this theme would not be developed further.

“Did you come specially in order to protect me from this character?” Methodius refined his question.

Julitta glanced at the place where the car had been standing very recently and burst out laughing. “Are you serious? To protect you, the very Methodius Buslaev, from this slug?

Something I'll not understand: is this is a funny ha-ha?"

"But he was indeed stronger. And generally he was somewhat malicious," said Methodius.

Julitta snorted. "Malicious? Him? And what about you, very good perhaps? Who started to puncture the tires first? And as for who is stronger... Delirium! Memorize from this minute and until your brain tissues harden: physical force is nothing in comparison with mental power! You yourself would also have managed if you would exert yourself slightly. You haven't yet managed your gift by yourself, but this doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Simply this evening was favourable for my appearance. Look, how many coincidences! A lunatic who wants to knock your brains out. The reflection of the moon in the puddle, which you chase with your eyes like chasing a ball. And finally your dream, about which you recently recalled."

Methodius shivered. He was unpleasantly startled that Julitta knew about the puddle and the dream. He looked around at the empty courtyard, the entrance door, through which already for a very long time – so it seemed to him – no one had entered or left. It was sufficiently absurd, especially if one considered that at this hour dogs would normally fill the grass plots by the building. "Strange... Everything is very strange! It's possible to think that all this is a plot. As in the theatre," thought he.

Methodius noticed that the zipper of Julitta's jacket was undone approximately to a third, and an unusual adornment – a silver icicle on a long chain – had broken loose outside.

In passing, he thought that if Julitta now attempted to do up the jacket, then the zipper would cut the chain in two. Such happened to Zozo repeatedly, without considering the stupid incident when Eddy accidentally swallowed her earrings, which she placed in a small vase with candies. Methodius mechanically stretched out his hand in order to repair the adornment, but, after touching the silver icicle, for some reason held it in his fingers. He suddenly noticed that the icicle was behaving extremely strangely: it changed shape and colour, attempted to come over his hand to clothe his palm like a glove, and something elusive inside, more like a cigarette flame glowing in an empty dark room, lit up.

“Hey, what are you doing there with my jacket? A forward type and all that?” Julitta giggled. She looked down, but, after seeing what Methodius was holding precisely, she began to squeal shrilly. Methodius perplexedly let go of the adornment. He was shaken. It seemed to him that the witch, with such skill getting rid of the hog like a soccer ball, would not squeal this way at all, especially over such trifles. Julitta issued two or three additional trills, and then, breathing heavily, took a step back. “What’s with you? This is darc!” she said with horror.

“Well, so?” Methodius asked.

“What do you mean so? DARC!”

“Well?” Methodius asked.

“You don’t understand what this is?”

“Ne-a! An icicle.”

“You’re losing your mind! To touch a darc! So casually take and touch someone’s darc like this! Lunatic! Nuts!” Now, when Julitta had calmed down slightly, admiration was definitely detected behind the fear in her voice.

“And what’s this darc? Why is it necessary? I thought it’s simply a trinket on a chain and some such,” said Methodius.

“Darc – it’s not a trinket. Darc – it’s darc... I don’t know how to explain it! But what you did is more dangerous than if you touched a rattlesnake! Understand?”

“Sort of,” said Methodius.

“Say, how long did you hold it?”

“Not long! Well, about three seconds, maybe five,” Methodius estimated.

“Five sec-conds?” Julitta drawled. “But it’s wildly painful!”

“Painful for you? Sorry!” Methodius apologized.

“No, not for me! It had to be wildly painful for you! You should be rolling on the ground and attempting to bite off your hand in order that the new pain somehow muffles the first! It’s MY darc, you understand? And a STRANGER, i.e. you, touched it! And with naked hands: not a staff, not a sword, not magic. With your hands! Have you considered? Darc can only be removed from a defeated enemy, and not by tearing it off, but by felling him, cutting the chain! And you felt nothing?”

“No... Well, almost. It was not painful, in any case,” refined Methodius, honestly attempting to recall what he had experienced. Curiosity – yes, but there was clearly something

else. Something reckless and slightly evil. Something like what he felt, say, when he succeeded in crushing a fly on glass.

“Hmm... The great Methodius Buslaev! Then I, perhaps, understand why...” Julitta began, but, after recollecting, changed the theme. “Well, it’s unimportant... Let’s switch over to business. I came to you not entirely by myself... That is, I came by myself, but they sent me. Someone wants to meet with you personally. How about tomorrow night? Say, 1 a.m.?”

Methodius was uneasy. He was a contemporary teenager, and a contemporary teenager does many things automatically. For example, he does not trust the unacquainted much. And indeed more so he generally does not go to unknown places on a first summon to a meeting with some unknown person.

Julitta, it seemed, reading his thought, wonderfully understood his fears. The little witch raised her head, squinted and ambiguously blew into space. And immediately Methodius felt like cold fingers were closing on his heart. An invisible icy snake was sliding through his blood into his brain. And in the next moment Methodius’ feet took several steps by themselves. He stared at them with horror – the feet did not obey him anymore. They served an alien will. “So!” Julitta said with satisfaction. “And now this!” She raised her hand to the level of her face and, smirking, lifted her fingers. Methodius discovered that his own hand was repeating the same gesture – it rose and lifted the fingers.

“Ah, stop! Stop! I don’t want to!” he shouted. He tried

to lower his hand by force, after gripping his wrist with the other hand, but the insidious witch suddenly brought both hands to her neck, grabbed herself by the throat, and began to squeeze it. Moreover, she was clearly doing this carelessly, although with the exaggerated grimace of a man hanging. Methodius started wheezing. Spots spread before his eyes. He was suffocating himself and could do nothing about it. Moreover, in contrast to the insidious Julitta, who was barely squeezing her throat, Methodius' own hands were suffocating him extremely responsibly.

Only when he, almost choking, fell onto his knees, Julitta, taking pity, let go of her own throat. "Well, that's it. Enough with you. Get your arms and legs back," she said. The witch smiled, shook her ashen hair, and Methodius again gained control over his own body. Coughing, he got up and, looking at his hands with distrust, began to massage his throat. "Why did you do it?" he asked.

"Ah, why! I only wanted to show you that if I wish, I could deliver you to this meeting even without your consent. And the most disgusting – I'm being nasty sometimes! To play such a trick on Methodius Buslaev himself!" Julitta languidly said.

"But not this time! You couldn't!" Methodius announced simply from obstinacy.

Julitta yawned, "Yes, my dear, yes... Although you're monstrously strong in the magic sense, nevertheless I have more experience. I could force you to do everything I want. Say, to

get up to the roof and take a leap down like a swallow. And not simply to leap but to laugh aloud in flight and sing a song about brave pilots...”

“Stop. What fly of humanism has bitten you today?” Methodius asked glumly.

“None. Just that I want tomorrow’s meeting with the one who sent me to be voluntary for you. No one forces you to go anywhere. And generally, the meeting is necessary not so much to me as to you. Do you finally want to find out who you are? Do you want to learn to manage your own gift? Trust me; you’re several times more brilliant than me in the magic sense! After the appropriate development and faceting, it goes without saying, it’s possible to cut out from your magic dozens of witches such as me... Although, of course, they wouldn’t be so charming. Charm is not a dead person, you won’t dig it out of a cemetery,” thinking for a bit, Julitta said more precisely.

Methodius related with distrust to the girl’s assertion that he had many magic abilities. “She’s mixed up something! To make a magician of me is like turning a live elephant into a stopper for the bathtub!” he thought not without regret. “And who sent you? Who must I meet?” he asked.

Julitta interrogatively looked up suddenly, accurately trying to examine something in the air. In Methodius sprung up a sensation that they were not alone here – that right beside them in the void of the courtyard there was still someone else – terrible and invisible. “No. I can’t tell you this for the time being. He... He

himself will tell you everything. You will come?"

Methodius swiftly glanced at her. The glow around Julitta was a pale pink. Such a normal, calm glow. Usually a lie from an outsider is like a black hole. The person locks his outlines, instinctively tries not to give off any energy and possibly give himself away, even if he behaves calmly on the outside like a professional poker player. Likely it was possible to trust Julitta. Or, at least to trust her to some degree. "Her energy glow is indeed somewhat very at ease. It's possible she understood that I know something about this and took measures," thought Methodius, not devoid of reasonable suspicion. "I'll think for a bit. He – well this person, to whom I am necessary – indeed can't show himself to me?" he asked.

"He can do everything. You even cannot imagine how much he can do!" Julitta said with conviction and even with enthusiasm. "But, alas, the mountain doesn't go to the wise man for a cup of tea. It's necessary for the same wise man to catch a taxi and go to the mountain. And now some details. We'll call them bitter prose of life. Do you know Moscow well?"

"Well..." Methodius began.

"It goes without saying, poorly," Julitta interrupted him. "The majority of Muscovites hardly know their city. Taxi drivers are exceptions. So, tomorrow we'll wait for you at the old Skomoroshya Cemetery. I didn't pick the place; therefore don't be hard on me if it sounds rather dismal."

Methodius shivered. "Somehow he's not dragging me to a

cemetery!” he said.

“Don’t be disturbed! Graves won’t open up and corpses with scythes won’t interrupt their sleep. Everything there will be all neat and proper. We’re not in a bad movie. And there hasn’t even been a cemetery for a long time. A normal house stands there... *Almost* a normal house, to be frank. Our office, our residence, our home – call it what you want. Even then I doubt that besides a couple of skulls, there remained anything of Skomoroshya Cemetery under the foundation,” Julitta calmed him.

“Where’s this?” Methodius asked with quite a bit of doubt.

“In the centre of the city. And at the same time monstrously far from Moscow. You see, when the fifth dimension joins the game, the picture of the world changes sharply. A distant object frequently becomes close-by, and the near-by steps aside. For example, Kamchatka and Kremlin turn out to be almost at the same point, and from your nostril, it’s necessary to go on a train for a week to your eyes... In vain you laugh. I, of course, exaggerate, but not so much as it seems to you.”

“Strange... I thought magic buildings are constructed somewhere far away on islands in the ocean, in towns, in the forest, but not here right in the centre of the city!” Methodius said.

“You see, it’s out of necessity. Good for white and black magicians. Their magic in no way depends on moronoids. But we are guards! Some day – and even very soon! – you yourself will understand everything, and then – he-he! – the aimlessly

squandered years will kick you like a flock of ostriches. So, tomorrow at one in the morning we'll wait for you!" Julitta repeated.

"And it can't be earlier? I doubt that Mother will let me go! She has other plans for me at one in the morning. I should be lying under the blanket and finding out in dreams how to improve my grades," said Methodius.

Julitta looked at him with compassion. "You're a strange person..." she said. "You have so much magic power that if you exert yourself a little, there will be smoking ruins on the spot of your building block. I have much less power, but then you yourself saw what I could do! You wish to go out – no mother can stop you. And with one look you'll chain her to a cliff like Prometheus!"

"But if I don't want to chain Mother? Did this not occur to you?" Methodius asked unhappily. He could not stand a raid that would affect relatives.

Julitta thought for a second, thrust a hand into the pocket of her jacket and took out a small box. "Take it!" she said and thrust it at Methodius.

Methodius took it. The box turned out to be strangely heavy for its size. On the cover, there was an ambiguous and frightening figure. At first glance, it seemed inoffensive – grape leaves of different sizes and a couple of clusters. But the longer he looked, the more distinctly he realized that these were no grape leaves but someone's malicious face with swollen eyes.

“Don’t be afraid, it’s... an ancient Icelandic spirit, which kills thieves and the curious. It’s not terrible for you if you’re actually Met Buslaev and not some namesake. You will find a stone inside, and you will see a rune on the bottom of the box. Try to trace exactly the same on the floor of your room... With what? With the stone! Only see you don’t make mistakes, or it’ll be no end to nothing good. When the rune is ready, its outlines will flame up. All it remains is for you to take a step inside and you’ll turn up at our place in an instant. Grasp the essence? Do this tomorrow night after midnight. But not till midnight...”

“And that’s all?” Methodius asked.

“What, too little for you? Trust me: if you draw the rune poorly, it won’t seem little,” Julitta smiled.

“And what’ll happen?”

“Nothing will happen. There’ll be neither flash nor crash. Everything’s quiet and peaceful. But then what’s left of you, it’s necessary to rake into a coffin with a scoop. And where’s the laughter in the hall? Hey, Kislyandii Anufrievich, you’ll at least imitate a smile, eh?”

“I’m mentally smiling,” said Methodius morosely. “And what do I do with the box?”

“Whatever you want. Put stones back in it or pour copper money into it, and then they’ll turn into gold. If you need it – keep it. I still have more!” Julitta dismissed it.

“And who made it, the box?”

“Who? British gnomes! They willingly sell us their wares in

exchange for a small quantity of preserved moronoid happiness. True, moronoids become a little sadder, but it's only for their benefit. Magiciety writes protests till it turns blue."

Methodius hesitated, "What, you trade with gnomes?"

"You can't imagine how lonely the poor gnomes are underground. All day they hang around in the smithies, search for precious stones in the depths of mountains, and in the evenings sobbed out of idleness like oil-industry workers in the tundra. Not surprising that they're eager for preserved happiness."

Methodius opened the box. On the bottom lay a large white stone, inside which an indistinct white fog swirled. Next to the stone rolled a dark wrinkled fruit resembling a prune. "And what's this for?" he asked.

"Where? Ah, I forgot! This is charisma from the charismatic tree! They made off with half a bucket of these from the Garden of Eden for one of our clients. Eh... a loud politician, who sold his eidos to us. Well, I also pocketed a couple. I was going to eat it, but then decided that I have enough charisma myself... Keep it!"

"A-ah!" Methodius drawled. He very vaguely pictured to himself what charisma was, but decided not to ask. Moreover, Julitta in a business-like manner glanced at the stale night clouds and unexpectedly rushed. "Well, that's it! Till the meeting, great magician! If there are problems – howl!" she said mockingly.

The witch winked at Methodius, turned, and quickly went away. After reaching the corner of the building, she turned

around, waved at Methodius, and very simply dissolved in the air. There were neither dazzling sparks nor incantations of teleportation nor rings nor magic wands, nothing... Everything took place instantly and effectively. Guards of Gloom preferred to manage without excess motions and vivid gestures. True force – economy of force.

A puzzled Methodius ran to the place where Julitta was standing recently. He discovered no trace – neither burnt spots on the asphalt nor the sharp smell of sulphur. Nothing remarkable. An old man's shoe of size forty-three, lying on the glass-plot and snapping an unglued sole jealously at the world, clearly contained nothing weird.

Methodius, trying to digest what had happened, slowly wandered into the entrance. "Someone, who wants something from me, sent her. This someone is undoubtedly a wizard, moreover monstrously powerful. If he wishes to turn up beside me this second – he would do it also without Julitta. That means, it's important to him that I go to the meeting voluntarily and the meeting will take place precisely there, in that house on the spot of the Skomoroshya Cemetery," he thought, going up in the elevator.

Edward Khavron, it goes without saying, was not home. At this hour, he was still catching tips on modest ledger bait using

his brutal appearance in conjunction with reasonable caddish behaviour. This was precisely that Molotov cocktail, which office ladies visiting Ladyfingers especially fell for. Zozo Buslaeva, who had time to cry over her female fate, had long ago washed off all the make-up and was now with appetite eating the trophy cake, chasing it with a crunchy pickle. The gustatory preference of Zozo was slightly off, as if she was eternally in a state of pregnancy. "What took you so long?" she asked her son.

"It's this... Listen, why did you name me Methodius?"

Zozo wrinkled her forehead, "Methodius... Ah, I remember! When we went to register you at the Civil Registry Office, your papa intended to name you Misha. Misha Buslaev and all that. Along the way I argued with him, he jumped into a shuttle and left, and I, to spite him, when I filled out the form, wrote you down as Methodius. You know, how your papa hit the ceiling when I showed him your birth certificate. All the time he was to change your name, but never made up his mind about it. Funny, isn't it?"

"Very funny," Methodius side gloomily. "But why precisely Methodius?"

"Don't know why... Somehow, it jumped into my head. Misha is M, Methodius is M... Well, you're not mad at me, kid? You're satisfied?" Zozo suddenly thought.

"Kid is happy and satisfied!" Methodius confirmed and went into the room.

He suddenly felt enormous irritation. Such irritation that he

was afraid to even look at the wallpapers and the objects in the room, vaguely fearing that they would now flare up. Instead of this, Methodius turned off the light, approached the window, and began to look into the courtyard, at the dumpster illuminated by a searchlight, seemingly tiny like a matchbox from the height. "Excellent! Now we'll check if I have magic power or not!" Methodius said to himself. He decided that if he had the ability to cause fire from this great distance, it would really prove that he had a gift. He concentrated. He tried to visualize the dumpster nearby. Here are the packets, here are tied up ski boots, proudly raised above all kinds of scattered rubbish, a doll without a head, broken wooden blocks, crumpled advertising newspaper...

Methodius exerted himself. Time after time, he imagined how he set the newspaper on fire, and the fire was already leaping over from the newspaper onto the blocks. It was useless. Nothing happened. Methodius got tired and despaired. "From what did I decide this, that there are stumps and newspaper? Obviously nothing! And indeed Julitta mixed me up with someone else altogether! There's less magic in me than in a rotten egg!" he thought, examining the dumpster through the window.

It became unimportant to him whether he had magic power or not. What is the difference after all? Consciousness blanked out and became absolutely lifeless. Suddenly, precisely at this moment of internal devastation, Methodius saw a dancing flame, appearing from heaven knows where and sliding along the arrow of his sight. He blinked in amazement and immediately calmed

down, after understanding that this was most likely the light of distant headlight, licking the asphalt snake of the Moscow Ring Highway, smearing the sky. "Well now! No magic power!" Methodius thought with satisfaction. He drew the curtains, undressed, and lay down to sleep.

He was already asleep when above the dumpster a puff of smoke ascended. The painted blocks burned for a long time. At first, the flame only crackled, but soon the entire container was blazing. Even the ski boots and packages with half-eaten food were burning. It was already towards the morning, when the rubbish had burnt down and the first floors of the building were wrapped in thick fumes, that the fire engine arrived, and for a long time was standing by the container, soundlessly blinking its warning lights.

Methodius woke up around eight. He woke without the alarm clock, but with the unpleasant sensation that no one had cancelled school. The kingdom of dream was reigning over their room. From under the blankets projected the heels of Eddy Khavron, having returned towards the morning. If some reckless author of puzzles tries to find seven differences between the heels of the great waiter, he would be impaired by overexertion, because there were only two differences. One heel was slightly more pink and smoother; the other had a small birthmark and often

shuddered a little in his sleep. “Hey you, newbie, don’t push me with the tray! You smudge the suit, you’ll get a knee in the romance department!!” Khavron distinctly said in his sleep, turning to an invisible collocutor. His noble sister Zozo Buslaeva was sleeping on a sofa bed in plaid, moth-eaten for years. “Met, eat something for breakfast and go somewhere! To school then!” she said languidly from under the blankets.

“Breakfast on what?” Methodius asked.

“Whatever you want. And, I beg you, don’t depress me with life! I beg you!” Zozo asked and rolled over onto the other side. She hoped to see again in dream the modest young millionaire, trembling with love, shyly open for her the door of the white Mercedes.

Methodius cut a piece of fish and cake – remains of yesterday’s splendour – and left for school. Approaching the school, Methodius noticed not without regret that the school was safe and sound. All professional and non-professional terrorists at night went around it. Sticking out of the doors of the school was the sixteen-year-old forehead with the touching last name of Krovozhilin, having appointed himself to the critical post of person-on-duty, and he was checking the second pair of shoes. Subjects without *smenki* got from Krovozhilin a whack to the back of the head. But then the magnanimous Krovozhilin rewarded all happy possessors of *smenki* with a powerful kick. Simply for historic injustice it is worth noting that Krovozhilin himself was also without *smenki*, but this is already excessive

detail, which must be chased from the prose like a ram from the new gates. As a result a small crowd of seventh- and eighth-graders were standing on the side, patiently waiting until the wind of change would take Krovozhilin away for a smoke behind the school.

In Methodius again sprung up the temptation to verify his magic gift. He stared at Krovozhilin from a distance and thought with concentration, "Away from here! Be gone! Take a hike!" However, Krovozhilin did not think of vanishing anywhere, remaining indifferent to all suggestions. Only about five minutes later, a worked-up Krovozhilin, not making a distinction, accidentally gave a kick to a senior student and, avoiding retribution, dissolved into space like a genie. However, this happened without any magic interference, but particularly on the internal impulse of Krovozhilin himself. "It's useless! I'm without talent like a toilet seat cover! Julitta really simply mixed me up with someone else!" Methodius thought and sadly pushed the school door.

Methodius ran into the classroom three seconds after the bell. The chemistry teacher had a stern disposition. She loved to summon precisely the late ones first. However, instead of the chemistry teacher, the principal Galina Valerevna, like a round loaf getting thin, rolled into the classroom. "Unfortunately, Frieda Emmanuelovna has had a great misfortune. She will not be able to come, since she has to be in surgery," she informed them in a funeral voice. Half of the class issued a joyous howl,

but, after recollecting, they unskilfully transformed it into a sympathizing sigh.

“Frieda Emmanuelovna’s Doberman has twisted bowels. They’re operating at this exact moment,” continued Galina Valerevna. “But I have good news for you. I do not remember which thinker said it, but let’s not lose in vain a breath of our precious life. The girls will tear off the wallpaper in the cloakroom of the old sports hall, and the boys will throw the old linoleum on the scrap heap! And a last announcement. Who thinks that he can manage much more important and interesting work?” Borya Grelkin raised his hand. Methodius, sitting at the same desk with him and having heard the principal’s question, also raised his hand, simply for company. No more hands went up. “Wonderful, Grelkin and Buslaev! The school and our native land are proud of you! You will transfer twelve stumps from the basement into the assembly hall – decoration for the play *Yaroslav the Wise*,” said Galina Valerevna.

Along the way, half of the people sent to tear off wallpaper and to take out linoleum disappeared somewhere. These were the smarter ones, who believed that nevertheless no one would make a note of their absence. But then Grelkin and Buslaev were not going to vanish anyhow. No one called off the stumps, and responsibility was personal.

In the basement, where they were steered, Methodius dourly examined the stumps for a long time. They turned out to be genuine and very heavy. In time immemorial, some fool had

sufficient mind to saw a log, and then even cover all the sawn parts with paint... under the wood. Probably, so that the wood would be a little less like itself.

“Why did you raise your hand?” Methodius attacked Grelkin.

“Huh?” Grelkin was astonished.

“Your hand, I say, why did you raise it?” Methodius almost began to howl.

“Who, me? I didn’t!”

“What? You didn’t? Then who did?” Methodius roared, without noticing how the paint on the end stump was beginning to melt under his gaze.

“Really, didn’t you raise your hand first? My ears are stuffed up from a head cold,” sniffing suspiciously, Grelkin whined.

“Idiot!” Methodius growled. He had already calmed down. It was indeed not possible to be angry with Grelkin – that would be like being offended by a penguin.

Borya carefully sat down on one of the stumps and slowly began to eat a banana taken out of his bag. Grelkin was a sad chubby silent type. He usually inhabited the last desk, yearning sadly, and with incomprehensible significance cast looks at the window, where stood a pot with a withering violet as cheerful as him. Borya answered the majority of questions monosyllabically: “Well?” “A!” “Ne-a!” Teachers neither praised nor berated him. They even rarely called him to the board, simply preferring to forget about him. In a word, Borya Grelkin was one of those, whose presence classmates did not notice even with the largest

magnifier.

“Do you intend to drag the stumps or what?” having calmed down finally, Methodius asked him after about five minutes. He remembered to try to talk softly to Borya if possible so that he would not die of horror.

Grelkin pensively looked at his stomach and shook crumbs off it. “I can’t lift anything. I had a hernia last year,” he informed despondently.

“Then why did you not tell the principal?”

“But she didn’t ask.”

Methodius blinked, finished counting mentally to ten in order not to break Borya into ten small idiots, and began to move the stumps by his lonesome. The stumps were quite heavy, and it was necessary to roll them to the stairs, storming each step. He had had such a hard time with the first stump already that, after rolling it into the assembly hall, he got back down barely alive.

When he again tumbled into the basement, Borya Grelkin had finished pensively licking his fingers. “You know, it’s a somewhat strange taste! But on the whole, generally speaking, trash!” Grelkin uttered a phrase of a length simply phenomenal for him.

“What’s ‘it’?”

“The prune!”

“What prune?” Methodius did not understand.

“There, lying in your knapsack. Your knapsack dropped with a crash from the stump, I began to gather your textbooks, and

there – pop! – a prune. I gobbled it. You don't mind?"

Methodius pondered slowly. What prune! He had already leaned over in order to take the next stump, when suddenly he froze in the stupid pose. The fruit from the charismatic tree, it was in the box! In the morning before school, he hid the box with the stone among old notebooks, and the fruit for some reason slipped into the knapsack. And now it was safely resting in Borya Gelkin's stomach. Methodius stared narrowly at his classmate. No special changes had taken place in Borya Grelkin. Outwardly he was still the same amusing penguin, but already slightly more talkative and with a smile. Probably, basic magical changes were still ahead. Methodius wanted to deal a blow to Borya Grelkin, but this was so not possible, like kicking a chow-chow puppy. Borya emitted such geniality. Methodius spat and rolled from the basement the stump next in line...

Borya Grelkin stroked his own tummy with his hand and uttered several grating phrases, inspirational for the task. His usual caked dirty-white aura rapidly thickened and was saturated with colours, involuntarily attracting and charging those, whose energy outlines were weaker. But Methodius was indifferent to it. His energy outlines were strong, and in his immediate plan, eleven more stumps still loomed.

Chapter 3

The House with a View of Gloom

The day and the evening passed dully, this was, however, completely in the spirit of their family. Eddy Khavron hung out at home and, panting, was lifting weights, not forgetting while pausing to call Methodius a wimp and a sap. The very strong sweaty body of Eddy Khavron smelled of a stable. "At your age... huuu... I was unlike those, who... in short, you're a fool!" he summed it up, lowering the weights so decisively that his sweat pants began to crack.

His sister Zozo Buslaeva had locked herself in the bathroom, turned on the water, and was talking on the phone. Once in a while Methodius heard how his mother laughed loudly and provocatively, even muffling the water. This laughter indicated only one thing: Zozo was concocting for herself a date with the next-in-line example with no understanding of women. Even now, Methodius, in advance, was ready to swear that this was some mothball dolt poured into another mould. He determined this by Zozo's strained laughter, which was heard twice more often than normal. A feeling suggested to Methodius that the collocutor bored mother stiff and she had already mentally written him down as surplus.

Methodius usually endured Eddy's laughter and

commentaries. His patience was wasted if and only if Khavron blurted out, "Listen, I understand that you're doing homework! But could you not write smaller so that the ink in the pen isn't used up so fast?"

"Fine!" Methodius said obediently and thirty times finely wrote on the last page of the notebook: *Eddy is a fat hippo, squared!* "Like this?" he asked, showing the notebook.

"Smart kid! Excellent!" Eddy said with approval. Methodius understood that he read nothing and in general was already distracted from his economic daydreams.

"Ha-ha-ha! You're such a dear! It seems I've known you for a hundred years! No, two hundred years! Ha-ha! Certainly, I don't have in mind that you're so old! For a man the main thing is the soul... What you did say, pardon me, is the main thing? Ah, what a comedian you are! Simply Petrosyan Khazanovich Zadornov!" Zozo trilled from the bathroom and shouted with suffering laughter.

Methodius drew a long thick line and shoved the notebook into the drawer. He was fed up with this delirious pair. He felt that he was ready to throw open the window and take a step directly from the windowsill to the clouds. At this moment he understood that today, he would definitely draw on the carpet that same rune from the bottom of the box. Come what may, but he simply could not remain here any longer. Methodius recollected about the three scoops of ashes, which would be left of him, if he incorrectly drew the rune, but even this suddenly

seemed unimportant. Either he would become a wizard and flee from here, or let them gather him from the carpet.

The genuine Swiss clock of Chinese manufacturing squeaked unmusically and pitifully, indicating midnight. Methodius, getting up on his elbows, waited patiently until the clock finished torturing the small battery. Not so long ago Edward Khavron had gargled in the shower and run off somewhere. Possibly even to work. He would positively not appear until morning. Zozo Buslaeva was lolling about on the narrow sofa. She had an unhappy look even when sleeping. In the morning, she was expected to get up at the crack of dawn and run five kilometres, teasing doggies out for a walk, and jumping over puddles.

She was introduced to the new admirer, the essayist Basevich from the newspaper *Yesterday's Truth*, at the exhibition of auto tires, where the creative person was thoughtfully picking at a Matador tire with his nail, vaguely hoping to scrape up a theme for his new article. Besides work, Basevich turned out to be a health nut. He ate only beets, cooked onions, cabbage, and millet sprouts. Sometimes a couple of cucumbers and a peach. And nothing else.

"A woman, who doesn't drink a glass of untreated spring water on an empty stomach, does not exist for me!" he stated to Zozo in the first five minutes of acquaintance. Clever Zozo immediately

assured him that she drank untreated spring water not only on an empty stomach, but also in place of dinner, and she loved cooked onions only more than beets. She did not suspect that she was a ten. Against a background of mutual love for cooked onions, their hearts rushed towards each other. Moreover, Zozo, never getting up earlier than noon, to the happiness of Basevich, turned out to be a fan of early morning runs. Basevich immediately became happily excited and, while the highly experienced Zozo was turning over in her mind what the deuce attracted her beyond his language, he stated to her that for the first time after his three unsuccessful marriages, he saw not a frivolous female bitten by the rabid dog of materialism, but a real wise woman.

Overall, the romance developed rapidly and was interrupted for two days only by the unsuccessful experience with the hog. Fortunately, the fan of millet sprouts did not find out about it. About that approximate time, he had scorched his vocal chords gargling with iodine, for two days could not talk on the phone, and was only croaking hoarsely. However, even in this state he had sufficient strength to phone Zozo on the previous night and croaked that the next day at six in the morning he was coming on the subway in order to jog a little under the windows of the dear woman. It was necessary for Zozo to dig out her tracksuit urgently from the mezzanine and to take Methodius' running shoes. Luckily, their shoe sizes coincided.

Methodius took out the box and carefully opened it. The bottom of the box was flooded by a deathly glow. The transparent

stone blazed in the darkness. The fog inside stretched out and attempted to take the shape of a rune – the same one as on the bottom. The rune suddenly seemed awfully hideous to Methodius. It was like a crushed beetle spreading half-bent legs in different directions. The centre was a circle.

“It’s time!” Methodius thought. Cautiously looking over at the sleeping Zozo, on whose face the bluish light from the box fell, Methodius hurriedly got dressed, sneaked into the kitchen, and placed the box on the table. He stretched out his hand and decisively took the transparent stone. It was only slightly warm to touch, but, when Methodius, becoming familiar with the rune jumping like a cardiogram, made several strokes in the air, the stone heated up and became almost scorching. The fog inside became a reddish snake, throwing itself to the walls, positively trying to break loose.

“Aha! I can’t even try it out! It’s simply a monumental dirty trick!” Methodius growled and, not giving himself a chance to change his mind, quickly traced the rune on the kitchen floor. This was doubly complicated, since the stone left no trace on the linoleum. It was necessary to draw blindly. Sweat appeared on Methodius’ forehead. Mentally he was already ashes scattered all over the kitchen, soiling Eddy Khavron’s dried shirt, which quivered on the chandelier like a white spectre, chained by a hanger to a bend in the wire.

Methodius drew the last line and stepped back, just like an artist attempting to survey his creation. The stone gradually

cooled in his hand, and then suddenly – without any warning or sign – shattered into a fine glass powder in his palm. In the same moment, the rune flared up. A particularly bright flame was on its bent legs. But the centre, where Methodius with foresight drew a big circle, was much paler. Without waiting until the rune faded, Methodius carefully took a step into its centre. He expected tingling, flash, pain – anything, but what took place. Methodius suddenly understood that the kitchen with the dark-blue photo-wallpaper had disappeared, and he was standing in a completely different place.

Small puddles scattered on the asphalt. The wind, playing, chased the plastic from cigarette packages. The red eyes of traffic lights smashed into pieces in windows and shop windows. The sky, interlaced with cables and billboards, was dusted with stars. Methodius turned around and immediately leaping into his view was a plaque “Bolshaya Dmitrovka, 13,” fastened at the corner of a long grey house, a large part of which was enclosed in safety construction netting for repairs. “Skomoroshya Cemetery my foot!” Methodius thought.

House № 13 on Bolshaya Dmitrovka, solidly but boringly built, had already been staring with its small windows for almost two centuries at the opposite side of the street. House № 13 is so dull and cheerless that even with one accidental look at it, the

mood barometer would come to rest on the “melancholy” point.

At one time, on the same space – possibly the foundation was still preserved – was the Church of Resurrection in Skomoroshkakh. And here, up to the church, solidly buried over the centuries, stretched the naughty Skomoroshya Settlement with saloons, fiery dances, and tamed bears. They led these last ones by a ring in the nose, forced them to dance, and soldiers brought them home-brewed beer in a pail. Robbers played pranks almost every night here, with knives gleaming, clubs brandishing, undressed down to the waist, and even beat to death those who overindulged in drinks.

During the immense fire of 1812, engulfing Moscow from three sides, the Church of Resurrection in Skomoroshkakh burned down, and soon on its foundation the priest Belyaev built a dwelling. But the clerical estate could not be supported at the cursed place – as if the bones of the *skomorokhi* chased it away. And two decades had not yet passed, when the Versailles Furnished Rooms appeared here, with the sooty tunnel of a corridor, bug spots on the walls, and an eternal smell of cheap tobacco from the rooms. Every evening there were drinking bouts and card games in the furnished rooms, and in the corner room lived a cardsharp, a Pole with dyed moustaches, who played the clarinet well. He lived here for about five years and would have lived longer, had his marked deck not been put on the spot once and a juiced-up artillery major not turned up with a charged revolver.

The Versailles Furnished Rooms were located on the second floor. Setting up shop on the lower floor of house № 13 was the optometrist Milka, from whom Chekhov ordered a pince-nez for himself. From the alley, finding a spot for itself was the little store Foreign News, where high school students bought cigarettes with powder, firecrackers, and frivolous pictures from under the counter. In secret, as if to justify the exorbitant prices, it was reported that the cards were from Paris, although in actuality the thread stretched to Gazetnyi Pereulok, to the photographer Goldenveizer – a sentimental Bavarian and a splendid artistic painter of animals.

In the Soviet times, house № 13 first turned into the Hotel Mebelprom, and then the united archive of Moscow Waterworks Management moved into it. Brisk archivists in sleeve guards made excerpts, and the first chief of the archive Gorobets, a former midshipman of the Baltic Fleet, cut liver sausage on the varnished desk of Milka, who had died of typhus in Kharkov in '21.

This way – with furnished rooms, store bustling, and glossy sleeve guards – day after day and year after year the forgotten altar of the Church of Resurrection in Skomoroshkakh was defiled, until once at dawn two people walked out from a secluded wall of the neighbouring wing of a former military school. One was an ugly hunchback. Traffic lights reflected off his silvery armour, which for some reason seemed splashed with blood. On his belt, passing through a ring, hung a sword without

scabbard. The sword was of a strange shape. It ended in a hook with notches. The blade was covered with cabalistic symbols. The other, a stocky man moody and stern like a pagan idol, was black-moustachioed, with grey streaks glistening like silver in his beard. A red loose garment with black inserts flowed exactly from his shoulders.

The guards of Gloom, emerging so unceremoniously, looked around. The fog, reeking like a damp blanket, was lying in pieces on the asphalt. The black-moustachioed man raised his eyebrows interrogatively and glanced back at the hunchback. "Well, and? I'm waiting, Ligul!" he said, breathing with effort through a broken nose.

"Yes, Ares. This is that same house. A rare place, all energy flows necessary to us converge here. Everything necessary is ready. I have seen to it. Shielding magic, fifth dimension... Agents and succubae have been notified. Tomorrow you'll begin the work: the movement of reports, the sending of eide, and so on. Usual routine work of Gloom. It goes without saying, in the given situation it'll be more distracting; however, it's not worthwhile to ignore it. Eide aren't scattered all over the road. What your primary task will be is known to you," said the hunchback patronizingly.

"Excellent. Well, titan of spirit and prisoner of body, what else do you have to say? What else have you hit upon in those centuries that we did not meet?" Ares asked ironically. The pretentious tone of the hunchback clearly irritated him.

“That traitors don’t exist, instead there are only morally adjusted people,” the hunchback answered in a thin throaty voice.

“Not badly said, my cemetery genius! You’re a poet and a philosopher, cultivated on the sickly soil of the Chancellery of Gloom. In that case, Judas is nothing but an intellectual, acutely in need of a handful of silver coins, deciding to earn extra money... But enough feeding each other a stew of paradoxes. Let’s return to business. You’re sure that the time has come?”

The hunchback jerked his head up. His voice sounded fanatical, “Yes. The day has come increasingly closer when Light and Gloom will again join in battle! And Gloom will prevail! The wizards of Light will cease to interfere with us, will hide in their burrows beyond the clouds, and the eide of moronoids, which we now rip out of them with such difficulty, will gush out to us in an endless stream... Everything that we need – this is the last effort!”

Ares looked at him with badly hidden mockery. “I’m well posted. Very nice that you reminded me...” he said.

Ligul glanced sharply at him. His hand involuntarily slid to his thigh, where the sword was hanging. “Indeed you hate me, Ares? You would take my head with pleasure, with the hook of your sword you would pluck the darc off me and smash it. And would take away for yourself all eide incarcerated in it!” he hissed.

Ares shrugged his shoulders. “Possibly. And you hate me, Ligul. We all hate one another. It’s the usual story for Gloom. Do you want us to fight? Perhaps you’ll be luckier and precisely

your boot will come down on my darc,” he said coldly.

The hunchback fixed his eyes on him with hatred. It seemed lava was boiling at the bottom of his pupils. “Now a fight between guards of Gloom is impossible. Must not kill our own while the guards of Light are in power. But later I’ll meet you and let the strongest one win,” he said.

Ares smiled. His teeth were square and wide, the trustworthy colour of ivory. “Knowing you, I would say: let the most immoral one win. Isn’t that true, Ligul?” he refined.

The hunchback began to grit his teeth, but he got the better of himself. His hand let go of the hilt. “One day we’ll still return to this conversation. But for the time being get busy with the boy! Twelve years have already passed. His gift is necessary to us,” he said in a honeyed voice.

“Gift, gift... It’s necessary to Gloom, it’s necessary to the guards of Light... As far as I know, until now, they haven’t determined in the Chancellery how worthwhile it is for us to trust the boy. And the main thing, why his gift emerged. Or am I mistaken?” Ares smiled.

“It’s not worthwhile to underestimate the Chancellery of Gloom, swordsman... We haven’t determined only because we don’t want to draw hasty conclusions. We’re interested only in what’s known for sure. The gift of the boy is a dark gift, but he’s managing excellently without darc, which is already suspicious in itself. To manage without darc is a quality of guards of Light. He alone among us doesn’t need eide to support and augment his

power. And his power is very significant. He, born at the moment of the eclipse, absorbed into himself the enthusiasm and horror of millions of mortals observing true darkness. And precisely then the gift woke up in him. Without realizing it himself, he learned to amass the most diverse energies: love, pain, fear, enthusiasm – whatever he likes. He makes them his own and can make use of them. The boy works like an enormous storage battery of magic. This side of his gift is completely known to us.”

“That is, our dear Methodius Buslaev is a bio-vampire?” Ares refined with irony.

The hunchback shook his head, sitting so crookedly on his body as if it had been pulled down in a great hurry. “No. A bio-vampire is one who wrings out energy, attaching by suction to the energy aura of man and drinking it to the last drop. A pitiful essence, a jackal. The boy wanted to shrug off all kinds of auras there, although he also sees them. He’s unique; he catches the spontaneous outbursts of energies. A person doesn’t even notice this. He discards his anger into space simply to get rid of it, and that serenely falls into our boy’s storage, the boy doesn’t even suspect this. Methodius can become an irreplaceable soldier in the struggle with the guards of Light. He’ll mow them down by the dozens, even the golden-wings. If we, of course, know how to properly prepare him. A guard of Gloom not knowing how to manage his gift is nothing. But again – the first tasks of Methodius will not be battles. Soon he’ll be thirteen, and you know *where he must be on this day.*”

“One more thought deep as our abysses, Ligul... Today you’re in great form – you speak solemnly of common truths with a speed very much like that of a high school teacher. You would agree, if not for the training of the boy, you would manage very well without me?”

The hunchback grinned, showing small, corroded teeth. “Ares, no one argues that you’re the best of the soldiers of Gloom. I would like to know what method of battle you don’t know. And you know extremely well how to impart your knowledge. However, allow me to remind you of something. Once you were even somewhat related to ancient gods, and the uncivilized glorified you as a god. Next, already in the Middle Ages, after that incident, I’ll not remind you which, you went into exile. Don’t forget where you were until I pulled you out! An unpleasant, dim, cheerless place. It seems, a desolate lighthouse on a distant northern cliff in the ocean? I’m not mistaken?”

Ares broodingly looked at the hunchback. “You’re not. Indeed, you precisely also arranged this exile for me, Ligul. You arranged and you pulled out. An old enemy is more reliable than a friend is already what I always remember about you. And, you know what’s the most amusing? That I also did not forget,” he said quietly.

The hunchback rapidly and uneasily glanced at him. “Well-well, no need for thanks, old chap. What kind of old scores can be here?” he said. “You’ll find the boy, get in touch with him, and you’ll train him! He must become the horror of Gloom, the

nightmare of Gloom, the retribution of Gloom – whatever he wants! This girl, what's her name there... your servant... will help you... Isn't that so?"

"Julitta is not a servant! Mark this on your... hump!" Ares said quietly.

Ligul turned pale. The blow hit the mark. "She's worse than a servant!" he shouted. "She's a slave of Gloom. She was cursed even in infancy, moreover by her own mother, who dealt with black magic. They took away her eidos, leaving only a hole. According to the book of life and death, your Julitta had died a long time ago. And the worms should have eaten the girl long ago! Turned out to be an irregularity, eh? Argue with death itself, which isn't aware of mistakes! It was necessary to finish the girl off, but here you appeared. Why, for what joy? You even gave her some portion of your abilities. If she would at least be a beauty, but only so-so... We gave up on this. A baron of Gloom having lost his mind occupies himself in his deserted lighthouse, what difference does it make?"

"Shut up! Don't touch with your dirty fingers the memory of one whose nail is worth more than you!"

"You have flawed notions about the market cost of nails," the hunchback said maliciously. "Yes indeed, of course... Old foolish Ligul! How would he understand the moral castings of Baron Ares, swordsman of Gloom! Only think, what an original story! When you fell in love with a mortal, breaking our laws, had a daughter with her, and saving this ridiculous

idyll, you committed massive follies... So much happened at the lighthouse. Waves, stones, and wind should have cleansed your brains. And what? Even at the lighthouse, you didn't get some sense into your head. Saved this moronoid girl, whom her confused mother had condemned to death. Interesting, for what joy? Or did she remind you of your daughter, whom you couldn't save? At some point, you'll finally learn that we are immortal, and moronoids and the children of moronoids – they're such expendable material... Pawns in the eternal game of good and evil. Foolish flesh, clay with a flickering flame of eidos, which heaven knows why landed there!"

"You got carried away, hunchback! Perhaps, for variety, you should live your own life for a while?"

The hunchback shook his head. In his eyes appeared some kind of dry, feverish lustre. "Well indeed no! For the time being, yours suits me! I want to understand! Well, tell me, why was that duel necessary to you? Why kill your own while enemies are living? Perhaps they didn't teach you that you always reserve sweets for dessert?"

"I took vengeance upon those, who crossed my path – directly or indirectly. And, what torments me is that I haven't taken vengeance on all. One is still living..." Ares said, looking to the side. The plastering of the neighbouring house, 15 Bolshaya Dmitrovka, began to smoke from his look.

"They wanted much better, Ares... They saved you from the vileness of life. You yourself know that magicians, long rubbing

shoulders with moronoids, lose their magic! Wallowing, like in a swamp, in petty everyday concerns! Such guards are lost to Gloom. Lost forever!” the hunchback said with conviction.

“I didn’t ask Gloom to crawl into my affairs! It’s enough for you that I hate Light!” Ares bellowed.

“Maybe. But you don’t serve Gloom with all your heart. You value freedom, or what you consider freedom, too much. You’re a fool, Ares! You don’t understand that there cannot be absolute freedom. There are only Light and Gloom. That which is not Light is Gloom. That which is not Gloom is Light. By definition, there simply cannot be any half tones. There cannot be evil on the good ledge or good on the evil ledge! You catch the nuances, Ares? You curse what you’re doing!”

Conversing with Ares, Ligul unnoticeably followed him with peripheral vision, ready to react to the first suspicious motion. However, he missed the attack all the same. He even did not understand if it was an attack or if Ares had employed magic. The hunchback only heard how his armour clanked against the asphalt. The next minute he understood that he was lying on the ground and his own sword tenderly, exactly like a razor, scraped red hairlines on his neck.

With the bend of his sword, Ares hooked the chain of the darc and was now coldly examining the hastily changing forms of the hunchback’s silver icicle. “And indeed you have incarcerated numerous eide in your darc. I heard that in recent years you prefer to buy them from agents and not win them in combat? It’s correct:

in all the centuries gold smelled better than Damascus steel.”

“Battles between our own are forbidden, until we’re done with Light,” hissed Ligul.

“A wise and farsighted law! Interesting, who passed it? Indeed not you perhaps, Ligul? Have in mind that the prohibition of duels always led to a drop in morals, obesity, and the triumph of purses! Less blood flows – yes, but instead of blood snot flows... It’s you who wisely made a remark about pitiful essence. A jackal is not a lion, and a beast could never behave like a tsar. You’re a jackal, Ligul. You really think that you’ll know how to bring Gloom under your control?”

Ares moved his hand, forcing the hunchback’s darc to swing like a pendulum on the blade of the sword. “Only think, how simple! One light motion and the terrible Ligul will be deprived of all his magic and become the usual pitiful spirit...” he said pensively. The lips of Ligul turned white. “But something else bothers me more,” continued Ares. “I think about that one eidos, the fate of which nothing is known to me. And sometimes it comes to my mind that it can turn out to be in your darc, then I lose my head and want to cut you up into dozens of little freaks!”

“I’ve said a thousand times! I didn’t kill yours! I know nothing about the fate of your...” Ligul started. The hand of Ares trembled. A long scratch appeared on the hunchback’s cheek. The hunchback lifted his hand, wiped the blood off his cheek and thoughtfully licked his palm.

“Don’t utter her name! It’s too pure for you! Or you’ll part

with your tongue!” Ares said quietly.

Ligul hastily began to nod. “So you patronize the girl because she reminds you of that one... Don’t be angry! You see, I didn’t say the name,” he remarked.

“None of your business! Better think about your darc! Lest you’re deprived of it!” Ares said.

The hunchback shrugged his shoulders. He had already gotten the better of his initial fear. “Silly threat! You’re far from a saint. Perhaps I should remind you how many you have cut down and how many eide are in your own darc?” he asked.

“Not worth it. Everyone I killed, I killed in honest magic battle. I didn’t cut down the sleeping and didn’t kill by stabbing in the back. And especially not children and women,” remarked Ares.

“In honest battle? When one opponent is twenty times more experienced than the other, can the battle really be called honest? It would be honest with an equality of strength!” the hunchback smiled.

“No one prevented my opponents from learning to manage a blade,” Ares said.

“Aha... But at the same time fifteen hundred years as the god of war, participating in all combats and battles, and to acquire the same experience... It’s all demagogy! It’s not possible for another to acquire the same,” growled Ligul.

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