

SHEFKI KARADAKU

THE FROZEN KISS

-novel-

Tirana 2021

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Published by STREHA Publishing House on 2021



ISBN: 978-9928-367-01-3

INTRODUCTION

The “Frozen Kiss” was initially conceived and written between the 1989 and 1990 of the last century, on the verge of the big democratic overthrow of the Albanian society. I should state that the prolonged communist dictatorship had impressed indelible traces in the exhausted memory of its people. This influenced on the movement’s alacrity and force. The novel, which was written under an understandable emotional burden, embraced the drama of two young people’s love, Rrok and Zibel. The first was a vanguard painter, rebel and obstinate in his western taste, while the latter, a girl who derived from one of the eminent communist families of the time, incurred the same fate as Rrok and, at the time when her father dramatically lapsed from the peak of a cruel power, was anathematized in a forlorn prison cell. Internment became an obnoxious experience for both of them. Precisely in this almost apocalyptic time, the insane idea of a dangerous escape emerged.

The events in the novel reach their climax when, at the heart of this horrible anabasis of a false war, Zibel is killed right in the end of this difficult escape. This

closure gives to the novel the notes of a Shakespearean Balkans scene.

The novel was published on 1994 and was immediately warmly welcomed by the readers who were bored of an almost devoid of identity literature of the socialist realism. The first copies circulated at light speed and were subsequently included in the literature obligatory curricula of the time. This continued till the change of power. Due to some fatal errors of the inexperienced democracy, the left arm that won the elections silently set this loved by the readers novel aside. This silence persists even now when I'm writing this sad and mortifying introduction about the bad luck of the "Frozen Kiss".

Tirana, 2020

AUTHOR

I

They made love again, as if it were the first time.

Zibel was lying down, tired and afraid, next to Rrok Dalia. Tantalized by her naked arm and shoulder, Rrok placed his still lust burning cheek next to her, amazed at Zibel's thrilling and sultry body. The sensation was like touching a soft sponge warming under the sun. Desire stirred up in him again and he turned to kiss her as she lay on a heap of clothes, the black wool dress Zibel had unbuttoned when she invited him close. This time, however, she could not resist his renewed fervor and let him spend his ardor until he fell onto the grass, breathing heavily. Rrok felt a slight surge of irritation at her suspicious detachment but remained silent, looking at a pair of baby eyes sparkling with subtle irony.

- Don't, - Zibel said when his hand, as though accidentally, dropped between her full thighs.

The words froze on his lips. He thought about asking her to lie down again. But, regretting the impulse, he lowered his head and rolled his tongue as though to savor the fiery tang of her silky skin. His lips could still

recall the joy of her throbbing excitement, how it awakened inside the self, like a pot of milk scalding over the fire. Exhilarated, still thirsting for that which flowered inside her, he tried to hold on to her luscious hips but she slipped through his hands and sat down behind the rock. Rrok saw her milky white arm hastily reach for the clothes thrown in disarray on the ground. She started dressing herself. In the quiet night, hazy and seemingly empty of all sounds, he could hear the slip of her shirt and bra over the body that only a few moments ago had surrendered to the heightened play of the senses. Rrok was astonished at how quickly the body of a woman in love could change. From ecstasy to forbidding silence, there stretched a wide ocean full of suspense and yearning which made him languish with unquenched passion.

- Zibel! – he said, almost unconsciously.

- What do you want?

- Come a little closer. I promise I won't bother you.

Her girlish outline was visible over the craggy rock. She slid over with a smile in the deafening silence and sat next to him. She could feel him still breathing heavily from the exertion. Her own heart started beating faster, nostrils flaring, and a hot surge of blood rushed through her veins. But, she rapidly restrained herself and her outward

expression turned into cool detachment. The first roosters were crowing. The day was dawning, a grey expanse following the midnight. The stars still glistened intensely, like ten million eyes of tiny sorcerers in the sky. She caught a glimpse of a scurrying dark shape and nervously drew closer to his half naked body. As she placed a hand on his wide shoulders, Zibel heard Rrok's insouciant laughter.

- Are you scared? - he whispered, nearly breathless.

Zibel said nothing. She realized she had been startled by an illusion. The dread of being discovered had twisted her figure into what she feared lurked in the terrible darkness. She had good reason to be so distraught, however. In the city of Nag, what she was doing was forbidden and punishable with exile. She pressed her head more insistently into his muscular shoulders, which were now slowly cooling from the night's passion, like a patch of ground forsaken by the sun.

- Aren't you cold?

Rrok nodded his head as though he was waking up from a dream. She helped him to put on his clothes. He knew they had to leave before daybreak; otherwise, they risked getting caught by the vigilant night patrols. Nag had a curfew forbidding any civilian movement past midnight. For people

under surveillance, people like Rrok, getting caught was tantamount to a few years in an isolation cell in Bushtrima.

- Let's stay a little longer, - he asked her.

He wasn't ready to face being alone again in the barren existence of his empty room. Two decrepit chairs, a bare table, and a cramped bed only served to deepen his depression. He didn't own a radio, a television set, or a tape-player and had to content himself with a few local newspapers - subscriptions was mandatory - although he could barely stomach their cloying words and distasteful themes. He hugged Zibel's warm body tightly. She responded with warm tenderness, a willing sacrificial offering, like all women in love. His head full of curls rested on her left breast, the nipple rubbing against the soft brassiere.

- What is going to happen next, Rrok? - she asked him, trying to dispel the tired images of their fleeting lovemaking.

Rrok wavered in indecision for a moment, caught off guard by her question. Yet, he grasped the real meaning behind the question Zibel was asking; what would happen with her, with their hidden love.

- It's going to work out somehow, Zibel, - Rrok said - we must have hope.

He paused briefly and then asked his delicate question, the one that had troubled him while they made love, but he dared not

ask for fear of upsetting her needlessly.

- How is Zurba doing?

She was silent for a minute, as though she was tearing off a piece inside herself. That nervous, unconscious anxiety that besieged her every time her father talked about their city's politics, now assaulted her again. She could feel her spirit crumble, as if the glass bridge connecting the harsh reality of Nag with her vulnerable feminine world was shattering. Zibel always hid behind an impenetrable curtain, unwilling to permit any insult to her ego, which encompassed her ideal balance and happiness in a life fraught with anxieties. But that flimsy bulkhead couldn't last forever. A man walking through a blizzard knows the futility of staving off what's coming.

- My father? I don't want to trouble him with my problems, Rrok. He has enough of his own. Besides, I'd be too ashamed to tell him when I see how much he is suffering.

- From Pigal?

Her eyes darted around in panic.

- Do not call out like that - she implored him, - around here, even the walls have ears.

- We only die once, - he said with a tone of resigned fatalism in his voice.

- Do not torture me with your unbridled fatalism, Rrok - Zibel snapped at him.

The woman felt truly worn to a frazzle. That familiar disquieting feeling was

gnawing at her again; the endless worries that were relentless even in her sleep. Rrok's bravery and courage added fuel to her internal fire, stoking up the flames of that persecuting fright, a nightmare from which she could never escape.

- We bought a new color television, - she said, trying to change the conversation from the uncomfortable topic.

- A gift from the community, as usual.

- Yes - she admitted candidly - but my father only watches Nag's TV channel. His conscience wouldn't let him do otherwise. But, Beta told me she knows some people in the community use special antennas so they can watch TV channels from all over the world. I told my dad about it but he became quite upset and said: "This goes against the spiritual principles of Nag. We have pronounced all foreign TV channels to be surfeit."

- Zurba is an incorrigible fanatic, - Rrok said mercilessly, feeling a little angry at her naiveté. - He believes in every dark shadow created by Pigal's sick fantasy. They are always trying to chain everyone's thoughts with the links of their own making.

- Oh, Rrok, how pitiless you are! - she sighed, with dawning understanding that he was right.

- Please, be a little more forgiving toward Zurba. He keenly feels the power he

has over other people. Like him, I am also convinced that this fanatical ideological commitment will save the city from certain destruction.

- Zibel, are they afraid the world is going to swallow us? - Rrok asked inquiringly.

- It's not just about getting overwhelmed by the world, it's about our continued existence; like a crab's hard shell, our fanaticism gives us the upper hand in the daily struggles against our adversaries.

- I think I've mentioned it before, the world is neither a Hydra nor a Salamander to devour us whole. It's merely one of Pigal's tricks, trying to scare Nag with his ghouls. This anxiety is slowly grinding us down, like water drops chipping away at granite.

Suddenly Zibel shivered, as though coming out of a reverie.

- I have to go now, Rrok, it's late. I'm afraid if they see us, they will banish us to Bushtrima.

Indeed, the day was growing brighter. They could see the sharp angles of the cathedral's spires and towers, the only house of worship in the city, abandoned by the friars long ago. Behind the trees lining the street, they could make out the contours of the drab public buildings with their flags still at half-mast in honor of Gulak Sena's death, one of the most able members of the community. Perched on the branches of a

lonely pine in “Pigal” Square, the sparrows began chirping as Apollo’s rising chariot beamed over the world.

Before leaving, he embraced her warmly in his strong arms. He breathed in deeply the clear, heady scent of her shampooed hair while loose strands caressed his lust fired cheek. He could feel that looming anxiety that preceded their separation, an act of torment that played itself after each failed encounter. Rrok had a premonition that he would never meet her again, that something would prevent him from seeing her, as countless such dramas happened every day at the whims of a power that jealously guarded all its subjects for signs of spiritual rebellion. Yet, their meetings kept coming, the old anxieties were thrown aside, and optimism reigned again as he forgot himself in their sensual games, each time a little different than before.

II

Rrok Dalia walked all around “Pigal” square.

He did not wish to be caught during these days, right when he felt at the height of his love for Zibel. He had begun to act more cautiously, to be more careful with clerk Betin, the official observer of his life,

and he often dreamed of escaping the traps that the city's police authorities had laid for him. Today he had gone too far with Zibel. At this rate, he might end up harming her, or himself, or maybe even hurt Zurba Sina through her. He felt surprised that his nightly escapades from his isolation room had not been detected yet by the ideological tracking unit, a subordinate of Pignal's political power. He knew his own head was at stake. An accidental mistake, a surveillance report, an anonymous letter would be sufficient for them to send him to the fathomless correctional rigs of Bushtrima, that bleak alpine plateau.

Behind the palace of the Fine Arts he checked his hurried pace. He could hear the faint sound of a car, sliding softly on the wet asphalt of "Dok Zojzi" boulevard. Rrok bated his breath in fear. His heart started beating fast and loud as he heard the siren of a patrol car passing by. He placed his hand reflexively over his chest to calm his leaping heart, hoping that it would help, but his heart wasn't quite accustomed to these nightly perils. It kept beating with the same outrageous pace as at the first shock.

Rrok could not see the car from the dark corner he was hiding in but he felt its turn into "Butag" street. The first wave of alarm now subsiding, he slipped quietly through the cobblestoned street and almost leapt through

the door at the “Red Carnation” boarding house. It was only when he was safe inside his room that he realized how distraught he had felt outside. Feeling slightly relieved, he approached the darkened window and looked inquisitively at the large, elegant contours of Pigal’s villa. The building was encircled by high walls and decorative oak trees and it wasn’t too difficult to notice the silent tableau of ice-cold shadows cast by the security guards. Then, his eyes quickly scanned the next boulevard with its row of community leadership offices, the Palace of Ideology, Arts, and Culture Inspectorships, the various ministries, scattered haphazardly over a wide square interspersed with private residential homes. Behind the Ministry of Forestry, the two movie theaters’ glassy roofs were visible although their doors were closed most of the time as fewer and fewer foreign movies were imported. Ticket sales had dropped markedly, except on days showing the old archival favorites, featuring stories of romance and adventure. Two or three weeks earlier, one of the theaters had screened the movie “Kiss me, for I love you” which truly surprised everyone with its erotic undertones. The scandal that followed was unforeseen. The anathema to the community came on the second night. The movie was censured and removed from the theater and a notable critic was made

to resign due to his tolerance and lack of moral firmness; the director that had dared to purchase the movie was sent to the re-education mines of Bugu. This campaign of political actions was swiftly followed by a great spiritual revulsion. A great many hopes for greater ideological freedom in the arts had dared to rekindle but were quickly extinguished; although, it was said, perhaps an influential member of the community had remarked to someone, that the current harsh climate would soften up soon. The movie theaters were silent again. Instead of new movie posters, the same tired and old placards went up again. No one stopped to look at them, except the occasional leisurely passer-by, who, with no more than a passing glance, expressing neither curiosity nor joy, moved on down the narrow sidewalk and past the abandoned gas pump.

Around four o'clock, there were steps heard coming down the corridor. Basri Mema entered the room, rigid and shriveled, as though entombed inside his coat with its missing top buttons. Only his thin, crooked nose was visible with a bead of water perched on its tip. "Ugh", - he groaned once, feeling relieved from the crippling cold and wet mornings in Nag.

- That was a torment tonight, - he said, carelessly throwing his coat on the disheveled bed, - I was freezing. As if I

hadn't had enough, one of the officers of the public law and order kept busting my chops. He came three times to check up on me. "You are a failed painter, he told me, trying to get on my nerves; quite aside from the fact that the whole world is a failure at painting, with Picasso as the chief failure. In my opinion, the real painters must only copy nature's landscapes, like Gareb does. Have you seen Pigal's portraits? They are hand painted by Gareb Kola."

- You, I suppose, stayed silent, - Rrok teased him, his eyes still picturing Zibel's portrait, stretching languidly and nude on the dry ground.

- What should I have done, according to you? - he burst out in the middle of the room like a madman, nervously igniting the kerosene stove. - Should I have told him that I think Gareb is only good for painting walls?

- Why not?

- Stop it, you cretin! How dare you criticize me when you still haven't had the courage to go out openly with Zibel. If you have the guts, try marching around with her in the city. They will grab you and slam inside a cell, or they'll banish you back to Bushtrima, like someone trying to deny that the war of the classes is real.

He placed the teapot on the burner then sat down on a stool and stretched his hands towards the burner' metallic frame and its

flickering blue flames.

- Do you want some tea? - he asked without looking at his friend, who still stood with his back turned.

- No! - Rrok said, shaken by these last words.

He wished he had a glass of cognac. It paired so well with coffee! But the stores hadn't carried any kind of alcohol for days; even basic foodstuffs were on short supply and were being given out in rations. He couldn't stand tea, which seemed to him like a kind of Chinese drink, only marginally acceptable when there was nothing else at hand to drink.

- It's not for me to drink that, - he said to Basri, who was thirstily sipping the scorching hot tea - besides, you've been boiling the same leaves a hundred times, do me a favor and throw some fresh twigs on the pot, if you please!

- A painter that is being re-educated through labor must not ask for much. Besides, these days it is fashionable to express one's patriotism through the conservation of all resources.

- Spare me the conservation efforts. Did you hear the latest news? Pigal bought his third "Ford" after his first two "Cadillacs". What's the use of your saving a couple of tea leaves. Yesterday, Mek's daughter went by in front of our offices. She was going to

the airport, maybe headed to the beaches of Lake Cud.

- I've had enough of all that! - Basri said in disgust. - Do you know what, Rrok? Sometimes I wish I were a little bird, so that I could fly over Lake Cud to the other continent. Do you know what burning desire torments me? Take a guess, please!

- To have dinner with Monmater.

- No. I want to sleep with a mulatta.

Rrok laughed heartily.

- Why do you aim so far away? You could find one here. Some of the gypsy women in "Dok Zojzi" boulevard have no higher aspirations than the mulatto girls.

- Oh, who would pay any attention to a guy like me, Rrok? I envy you, honestly! Zibel is such a fine piece. Did you do anything tonight?

- What kind of talk is this! - Rrok cut him off sharply and immediately closed in on himself. He dreaded Basri's cynicism.

- Ah, yes, you have a soft spot for her, - Basri said more gently. I only ask because I like hearing about various erotic adventures. That's why I adore Picasso. If I had a television set, I would manage to find a tape filled with love and sex.

- You're such a wicked Epicurean!

- Why hide it, like some people do? For instance, clerk Betin has two declare lovers, besides his wife. Yet, in the public

eye he acts as if he were Saint Michael. He keeps on preaching about a pure and sterile morality. It's strange, but that man is ruthless with those who smuggle in pornographic magazines. Yet, I'm sure that in his personal library there must be countless sex filled mags.

- That is known. We live in a city fraught with contradictions.

"Zibel" Rrok sighed with his face against the window. He missed her already. A drizzle of fine rain began outside, adding more gloom to the atmosphere of spiritual despondency in Nag. The headlights of the authorities' cars crisscrossing "Pigal" boulevard sliced like golden scalpels through the ceaseless trickle of rain, full of radioactive sludge leftover from nuclear weapons testing in Asia and in the Peaceful Ocean. The first urban transit buses could be heard clanging in the streets, with their broken windows and overloaded with people. Two patrol cars drove through like lightning toward the periphery leaving behind long dizzying tracks in the wet asphalt.

Rrok looked at the clock. It read six minutes after five. He hadn't slept at all. He had met with Zibel at ten o'clock, which meant not even a second of sleep; nonetheless, he didn't feel at all tired. His spirit, however, was hanging low. Particularly on days like this, full of rain and smoke, Nag became a

shabby mess. It seemed to take on the grey shades of clothes unwashed for a long time.

What was she doing now? Perhaps combing her hair in front of the mirror before going to the university? Her long hair turned the color of bronze polished by a wool cloth. Her delicate profile, pale in the reflection of the massive mirror, expressed the turmoil of her age. Her firm breasts bounced lightly under the thin nightgown, still unbound by the silk brassiere, like the divine Artemis. But maybe Zibel's best features were her thighs and buttocks. "Oh, God! My mind is muddling up again. She is the only beautiful creature, the only brilliant radiance in this chaos dominated by harsh laws, verging on the irrational when it comes to tolerating something that was intended to offer humanity something close to happiness."

III

Indeed, Zibel Sina stood in front of the mirror.

She was getting ready to go to her classes. She stood there calmly, swaying under the demon of love, which appeared as a white dove on the smooth surface of the mirror. She could feel someone's weight over her, almost taking her breath away, yet thrilling her with sudden kisses. Her thin

nightgown quivered over her full and well nourished body. She could not easily forget the figure of that man, doing something wonderful on top of her, while her breath caught gently, with each tender shiver of release, in the ether surrounded by the angst of the body's mysteries.

- Wear the grey blouse, - her mother said from the wide corridor, bright with the profuse light coming from the chandeliers, - it's raining and it's cold outside.

As soon as her mother left, Beta appeared with the breakfast dishes on her hands. Tall, thin, and somewhat indifferent toward what she saw and heard at the villa, she nonetheless felt a real attachment to Zibel Sina. She understood the light-hearted concerns of her age, even gave Zibel encouragement when she noticed her struggle with some of the usual stuff, advising her to use more eyeliner when she came home with blue circles under her eyes from her unfettered love with Rrok Dalia.

- Do you want to eat breakfast, Zibel? - she asked sweetly.

- No, Beta. I have to go to lecture.

The corridor was empty and deserted once again. Zibel was getting ready absentmindedly. She didn't notice her father walk down the stairs and come to stand next to her. Zurba's face glowed every time he saw his daughter. In this world full

of troubles, she gave him hope that a man still could enjoy some goodness in his life. He had a broad and healthy face, his eyes somewhat bewildered as the result of his daily pressures. He cherished her beauty as a perfect work of art. He boasted about her in the halls of the governor's palace, and Zibel's pictures were always to be found in his wallet, stuffed with money and dubious papers.

- Did you study? - he asked her as he gave her a gentle kiss behind the ear.

- Yes, father. We don't have any difficult subjects, except informatics.

- How do the teachers act now?

- As usual, with servility.

He laughed candidly, as he liked being feared everywhere. He had always enjoyed that, and it didn't even have to take any effort on his part.

- Of course, everyone knows they are really paying the respect due to the office, - he added, trying to blunt the edge in his reply.

- It's more than that, father, - she said as she threw her arms around him warmly - they are scared of you and afraid of them all, although they wave it away with a show of enthusiasm and servility.

- You are being harsh today, Zibel, - he interrupted her but without being angered by her words, which, indeed, were true to

reality for the most part.

- Realism above all else! – she declared with a trace of irony – who was it that said that quote, father?

- Cicero.

- Bravo!

- What's worse is that, this isn't precisely correct today, my dear.

- At least, I respect it to the very end.

- That's how it should be. But the truth is often made prettier than it should; they dress it up in colorful clothes, like circus clowns.

- Pigal is the first to do that, father, isn't it? – she said timidly, not wishing to hurt his feelings in some way. – He always disguises his threats with sweet words.

- We must not really blame him – he looked on with a false indifference down the dangerous empty corridor suffused with light. – It's an Oriental tradition, to say something different from what they really mean.

- Pigal is causing us so much trouble! – she sighed.

- No, not this time, Zibel. I have the impression that things will become more lax in Nag. Yesterday there was talk in the community that no one is helping us. I believe that something will change, but let's keep this just between us, I haven't even told Artemis about this.

- I swear it! – she cried out gleefully.

He helped her put on her white petticoat. He did this with such care and delicacy that it made Zibel laugh.

- I am certain, father, that you too must have had a hand in the slackening of the conditions.

- To some extent, Zibel. But that is not enough. It's as if we were shut off inside a jar and everything that we do bounces around and causes us vexing problems. It's like tripping yourself with your own foot. And it's always him doing that.

- Pigal?

- As usual. The paragon of experiments.

They both laughed again while Artemis stuck her head out of the kitchen a little enviously. Zurba rarely spoke with her. Artemis was eating chow with her son. She also laughed without malice and asked her husband:

- So, when is the feast, then?

- The day after tomorrow, but only if we have good weather, of course.

- That's enough frolicking, you should let Zibel go, – she said and shut the door.

Zibel looked at her father and flashed a wily smile.

- Take my car – he called out after her, as she dashed down the stairs covered with Persian carpets, – it's raining and you'll get soaking wet.

- That's good, father! Which car should I take?

- The "Ford", take the "Ford", I want to drive the "Cadillac" myself. I have to run down to Bushtrima, there have been a couple of small incidents again.

- A hot mess?

- No, it's just a little heat around the corner. I'll tell you later.

IV

It was the insurrection of Kanad Dika all over again.

That man has always caused us trouble, Zurba Sina thought to himself, while he looked on with indifference at the grimy and damp scenery flashing rapidly in the window glass of the fast moving Cadillac. He stood in the backseat, his legs covered with a woolen blanket which he always kept in the car. He wasn't feeling comfortable even though the car's heater was cranked to the maximum and Berti was listening unobtrusively to a tape recording of Verdi's "Nabucco". Berti adored classical operas and had recorded them with admirable patience. Zurba enjoyed them, too. They seemed to fit every kind of weather and emotional state. Zurba wrapped himself tighter in his comfortable seat and started thinking

about Kanad Dika's rebellion again. Kanad's revolts always brought unending hardship to the city. His personality was irrepressible, always going against the stream, inspired by thoughts of otherness. Last year he had sent an open letter to the annual community meeting where he underscored the urgency of breaking their self-imposed isolation. It had sent everyone into a panic. In the tense confusion that followed, which had included even Pigal, Mek Doda had suggested that the letter be put into a safe, whereas Kanad Dika should be placed in temporary isolation or should be sent for re-education grounded on new spiritual therapeutic principles. Fortunately, Kanad didn't have anyone close to him, a solitary man with no great popular following, or this affair would have gained notoriety. He lived by himself in his small villa where he was under surveillance day and night by two professional watchmen. A few days later Kanad fell sick unexpectedly. The cause of his illness was unknown, but he lingered on his bed for a long while with only a young niece to help him with his urgent needs. Despite Pigal's somber predictions, he slowly recovered until he could stand up again, energetic and defiant, as if he had drunk something from life's fiercest elixir.

- May we go a little slower, Mr. Zurba?
- Berti, red-cheeked, asked calmly, - it's been raining and this stretch of the road is terrible.

- You know what to do, Bert, - he answered gently.

The landscape was still as gloomy as in the morning. The agitated birds hopped around aimlessly and fell right under the wheels of the "Cadillac". They were passing through a couple of desolate hills dotted with small houses and dilapidated courtyards on the bleak hilltops. Then they passed a row of wet poplars, poorly visible in the dimming winter light. Bushtrima was still far but he could make it out from here, how it stretched and twisted on the face of the mountain, eroded by rain and torrents. Where was Kanad's house? Just a little further past the plane tree with the fallen branches, the house covered with darkened stone tiles. His hand instinctively squeezed the letter that Mek Doda had given him the previous night. Now he was on his way to deliver the news of woe to Kanad. "The fool, - he thought angrily - he is incapable of telling black from white yet he persists on writing one petition after the other. This is his third petition in the last three years. All three were locked away in Mek's safe, vanishing without notice, like objects destined to perish without ever seeing the light of day again. Now he has gone too far and they'll send him away to Bug, twenty kilometers farther away than Bushtrima. Let's see him draw up new petitions now if he has the guts, if

there's even a hint of rationality guiding his life. Otherwise, let it be upon his head, then. One doesn't simply play around with Pignal and Mek Doda."

Suddenly, it began to snow upon the barren hill. Strange, Zurba mused, it's still warm in the field, yet here winter is knocking on the door. He enjoyed the steady and gentle snowfall. It looked as though it would clean out the natural scenery from the dull rust of the rain, which was an almost daily occurrence in Nag. It crossed his mind that along with more rain there came more troubles. Many people became increasingly more unruly. The lack of food contributed to the dwindling morale in the city, already weary from isolation. Ah, yes, indeed, Kanad was the first to oppose the imposed isolation. But he was an illogical philosopher, almost abnormal, and Zurba had never liked him as a person, whereas he himself harbored only minor reservations concerning the self-isolation. "Don't! - he looked carefully toward Berti. Do you want to sacrifice yourself, like Kanad, at Bug?" He closed his eyes rapidly, afraid that his secret desire might be revealed in his retinas whitened by the snowy landscape.

Even Berti, it was impossible to know these things, might be working for Mek. A hint of rebellion, a dissenting thought casually mentioned, would be sufficient for

the elegant villa along with everything else to vanish, everything that symbolized the antithesis of poverty.

What was Kanad Dika doing now? Surely, he awaited the desired reply to his proposed statebuilding reforms. Kanad had always liked to play the great reformer. He recalled that his first memorandum to come to the community long ago included, among others, even plans for two major communication highways with the world beyond Lake Cud. That by itself had been reason enough for Pigal to sign the order for Kanad's first public ostracism. But, deep down in his subconscious, Zurba had anticipated Kanad's proposals with a certain hope. It would not be a bad thing for Nag, finally, to connect with the wider world. Zurba knew that this created stress fractures in the gloomy spiritual world of Nag's highland inhabitants. These fractures were not visible yet, but his trained eye was not deceived by superficial appearances, pumped up by the endless stream of articles in the "Man" gazette and by Mek Doda's honey-laced speeches.

What a utopian joker that Kanad Dika! Certainly even now he waits, as the zealot he is, the reply to his third memorandum. The poor man doesn't even imagine yet that Zurba is the bearer of bad news about his banishment to Bug. Zurba felt a little

ashamed that he was always the bearer of such tidings. But he lacked the courage to defy Mek Doda. The smallest hint of discontent would send him to Bushtrima, as it had many others. Oh God! He would always find himself between two unpleasant fires, both equally dangerous, between appearances and what could not be seen, but which was expressed by the undisciplined motions of his true thoughts.

- Are you cold? - Berti asked him fondly. His beautiful blue eyes with their black eyelashes had always been pleasing to Zurba when they looked upon him with such fondness.

- Not at all. Thank goodness it's snowing. This endless rain was rotting us.

- Is it really true that one of the bridges over Fan has collapsed?

- It's partially true. Now, Bert, we are completely isolated.

Suddenly Zurba shivered visibly. He had expressed in Berti's eyes that which had been gnawing at his soul for a long while. But the driver pretended not to notice what he had said. He smiled, like a man who takes no interest in the double entendre sayings by city officials.

- We will repair it quickly, Bert. Pigal is taking greater steps to extend the tracks all the way to Lake Cud, - he said, attempting to cover up the unconscious gaffe he had just

made.

- They've been saying that for years, but so far there's nothing in the bag. - The score was now even. There was no reason for him to grow pale. Berti had delivered into his hand the very weapon with which to defend himself, in case he was accused at the watchmen council. "Oh God!" - he sighed, weary under that emotional burden. With each passing day, a growing nebulous anxiety was grinding him down further.

V

The harsh scenery around them was growing whiter with a swiftness no one in Bushtrima expected.

This early winter had caught Kanad Dika completely unprepared in his old, solitary house, poorly erected on a slope behind a stone breastwork (God only knows what his great grandparents were thinking! Weren't there plenty of fields only a little further down?). The house was exposed to the winds blowing from all quarters and Kanad's mother, while she was still living, had always hoped they would move permanently to Nag. Yet, they remained in Bushtrima. Not that it was a particularly bad place or that the people there were, in essence, a bad sort, it was just that life there

had nothing to recommend it. The solitude was all-embracing, like a quilt sown on the reverse, except perhaps those few minutes that Kanad spent reclusively at the “Bazaar Pass” café. Even during these moments it’s not as if one was eager to chat. They were afraid to approach and engage him in conversation because there would always be one of those surveillance agents around to nail them in place with their icy and taunting stares. Why take the chance of being punished for no good reason, like Garub Kuta. Garub was known in Bushtrima as a headstrong case, always defiant towards the authorities, the inspectors, and the watchmen of the public order. He lived his life on his own terms, like a kingdom that didn’t obey anyone. His conversation with Kanad began one day while they were having their usual shot of Raki in the morning, spurred more out of curiosity rather than sympathy. Slowly, he began to enjoy their conversations together. He got in the habit of saying to his family: “I am stopping by Kanad’s place.” But, would Garub Kuta listen to what those alarmists would tell him? “Where did he think that ship was sailing to, couldn’t he see for himself that that man was a complete outcast, already sleeping in his own coffin? He would do well to mind his own business, why did he insist on telling the whole world how things should run anyway, as though

he himself was overburdened from such an abundance of intelligence."

"Poor Garub! He copped it over nothing, merely for a friendship undesirable to someone. It only earned him an undeserved exile to Bug. Now, he probably toils in the salt mines like all the others, probably still cursing the moment he laid eyes on me. He had been an intellectual man, a seeker of the truth in that confused tangle of thoughts and total fear. But the truth could not be discovered so easily, as Garub the altruist had hoped, because they kept it hidden in tenebrous pits. Sometimes they would unearth one piece of it or another, in order to support something to the contrary of what they had said, only to bury the pieces again. Poor Garub, he probably curses me now, but he still remains a man worthy of respect."

Kanad looked at his watch, annoyed by this early snow. He didn't enjoy it now, although as a child he would almost burst from excitement till the first snowflakes fell. Now he had to descend all the way, down the twisting and winding road that led up to the Bazaar Pass where he could have his usual drink of Raki. There was not even a drop of alcohol left at the house. He turned around, took off his large coat from the hanger and put it on, fixed his graying hair in front of the oval mirror, ran his thumbs over his broad brows to flatten them, and

then walked mechanically toward the door. But it wasn't in the cards for him to enjoy his morning drink on that damned snowy day. Behind the outside door he heard the horn of a car. Someone loudly called out his name and, within fractions of a second, he shivered from sinister premonitions which hadn't given him a moment's peace since last evening when he heard they were soon sending the answer to his third petition. Ah, yes indeed, the petition, the concept of justice, of forcing an opening with the outside world, as well as the forced seclusion by the community. They were wild notions whose solutions were yet to be discovered. "Certainly, the answer has arrived - he said bitterly, but something still prickled him. It didn't always augur well when the answer from Nag came by car. It was either a great honor, which seemed unimaginable to him, or it was something fatal, an incorrigible mistake.

"Oh God! - he murmured grimly as the fear of the unknown pressed in on him. Kanad opened the door quickly and headed to the courtyard with the courage of a man that has spent his last bullet. He pushed open the double gate and the first thing he noticed in the white snowfall was the new, blue "Cadillac", its roof growing whiter with each falling wispy, white flake.

- Ah, Zurba Sina! - he hailed, not

without a trace of irony, as he saw his old university colleague standing under the wide shelter, who had now become an important man.

- How are you, Kanad? - the other man inquired.

He was somewhat afraid of Kanad. He felt as though he was making a man drown in a pond. But, he was a paid government executive and, like all government executives, he obeyed the law of murderer and victim.

The shabbily dressed man did not reply. His almost colorless eyes overflowed with irony. He was looking at Zurba in such a fashion, as though he was going to undress him completely, right in the middle of the snow which was dancing in the wind.

I have brought your answer, - Zurba continued, insecure and a little timid by the other man's unflinching stance.

Kanad did not wait to go upstairs but opened the azure envelope where he stood, even though Zurba made a motion to prevent him with a sluggish hand. He read the letter, written neatly in a typewriter machine, as snowflakes gently fell upon it. Zurba could see Kanad's nearly white face start to grow darker.

- Yes, - he said, - I understand, Zurba. You insist on your failed theory. Farewell!

Zurba could hardly believe his eyes when he saw Kanad throw the shredded

pieces of paper, which had been the community's answer, right under the wheels of the "Cadillac". He was surprised that there were still people alive who could do such a thing without being crippled by fear. Finding himself in a very difficult position, he drew back aghast. Would they interpret Zurba's silence before Kanad defiantly tearing the community's reply to pieces as a sign of his solidarity? There was no other place in the world where people could find themselves in more difficult positions than here. "What should I do under these circumstances? Should I protest for Kanad or say something disapproving? The man is a lost cause at any rate; he knows the fate that awaits him, in the best case he is going to be exiled to Bug, in the worst case he'll be sent for correctional work in the salt rock mines." But it was absolutely necessary that he should say something.

- Whatever the case may be, it is not normal behavior to tear up a letter such as this! - he whined softly.

Berti, still sitting in the car, smiled as he heard Zurba and put on the tape player something from "Traviata". "Verdi again", Zurba thought with irritation, disarmed by Kanad's serenity and Berti's meaningful silence, like an innocent and harmless eavesdropper.

- Normal or not, what you are doing

here is nearly insane.

Kanad turned around vehemently and after entering the courtyard covered with a new mantle of snow, like a carpet woven with fine white threads, furiously slammed the double gated doors.

- Come inside the car if you please or you'll catch a cold! - Berti chirped cheerfully, who had gotten out of the car to stretch his legs.

- What a character! - Zurba finally managed to say, more in surprise than in indignation by Kanad's departure.

- A deplorable man! - Berti retorted unperturbed and sure in his words. These types have secured their place in Hell as they're always trying to stir up trouble between governments and their peoples.

"A brave man, nonetheless." Zurba wanted to add but refrained himself just in time.

As they were rounding the final turn before leaving Bushtrima, he turned his head one last time toward Kanad Dika's solitary tower. What was he doing now, in the middle of this white indifferent space and the gathering storm of threats in Nag? To the Devil with this business! Everything spiritual was rapidly coming undone. Just as Kanad wrote in his petition, Nag was exhausted to death by the twenty years of forced isolation, like a man locked up in his own tower. He had

proposed urgent ideological and economical measures, promoting the idea of opening up three wide connecting tracks with Lake Cud, the dissolution of the inspectorate of public surveillance, the liberalization of ideas, of art and literature, to the extent where things could be called by their real names instead of the ones given by Pigal. "Oh God! That's all we needed! The petition of a zealot on the one side and the closed circle theory of Mek Doda on the other. The centrifugal force spinning around a circle can maintain its equilibrium for only as long as a new, attractive force is not created elsewhere. The loss of this balance has started to become a mortal threat to our closed movement. To the hell with him! Mek Doda will always remain an upside down physicist. He confuses the definite laws of physics and astronomy with the laws of human beings. It makes one lose his mind."

He was extremely exasperated.

VI

- A toast to your health and happiness!

Rrok Dalia took in these words with a sardonic smile.

- You don't like health? - the waiter asked with a knowing look.

- It's alright, but there's so little

happiness that it's not worth toasting to.
- The waiter glanced warily toward the reserved corner of the bar, where two men of medium build stood as if frozen, wearing identical black trench coats, like Siamese twins.

- Watch out, they have very long ears - he said eerily.

Rrok shook his head with a forced unconcern.

- We have lost so much, it's difficult to get rattled anymore, what else have we got left to lose!

- Rough times! - the waiter whispered in a low voice and refilled his glass with cognac.

It was around six o'clock. The lights in the coffee shop had been turned on for a while. It grew dark early now, particularly after the snow that fell prematurely the previous day. Many people made the connection between the snowfall and some recent unpleasantness, which were coming around to happening again after a relatively quiet period, excluding the three arrests of the three intellectuals and the collapse of the sole bridge which linked Nag to Lake Cud.

He didn't know why even the cognac tasted bitter today. His tongue felt dull, not to mention his mood was in the gutter. Rrok stood leaning against the counter, his eyes sweeping the nearly deserted road. You

could only see people running late, curled up inside their old clothes, scanning with suspicion the shifting shadows in the empty square. The weak lighting, placed in the more visible places along the road, could barely keep the cold darkness at bay as the night kept gaining nearly unlimited strength. Rrok shuddered at all this lifeless emptiness in the squares, the streets, and coffee shops. He downed the rest of the cognac in one shot and went out quickly on the street, swallowed by the wind. He was dressed lightly and even with all the cognac he had drunk he could still feel the cold shivers dig deeper into his body. He started running as hard as he could command his tired legs. Behind him, one of the men in the black trench coat came out of the tavern.

When Rrok entered his room, he was panting loudly. Basri, who had never seen him so dejected, left his brushes on the palette and approached with a kind of concern in his eyes.

- What's going on with you? - he asked.
- You look like a frightful dead man walking.

- It's nothing. It was just a passing moment, Basri. Like watching a nightmare with vampires.

Rrok leaned brooding against the metallic bed's headrest. He was starting to recover from that sudden dizzying feeling that had seized him when he'd seen the

silent city, cruelly stunted by the reek and fear of loneliness, in the dark night of an undeclared war.

- Here, drink this, it's lemonade! - Basri offered, feeling more reassured by the return of normal color in Rrok's cheeks. - You scared me for a moment earlier, you were so pale.

- A spiritual depression, - Rrok said as he thirstily drank the cool lemonade.

- Do you want some cognac? - Basri suggested with hesitation.

He nodded in approval.

- Yes, of course, I would drink it gladly. We are turning the color of clay masks.

- You're in rare form tonight, Rrok - Robert Lohkamp.

- Close enough! Let me have another glass, Basri. It's the only medicine for the moment.

Basri didn't press him further but after going around the cold room, he stood in front of the tableau he had been working on. His hands refused to go to work again. Rrok's pessimism was contagious. He looked apprehensively at the canvas with plenty of blue hues, with seagulls and women's red buttocks. He stroked his thin, black mustache as to shake himself out of it. "I have to add some grey to it, - he thought bitterly, - maybe a dark grey, something like grey rain."

- Now we have completely lost our

way - Rrok said with his head resting on his bed. He was lying down in oblivion. He was studying the tableau, poorly lit by the dance of fleeting lights and shadows, nearly nude women with their surging breasts contrasting against their shining alabaster and suntanned skin, straddling with vacillation the last boundary of water and earth scorched by flames and longing.

- Even better, - Basri went on, - we are the most isolated place in the world, now that we lack even bridges and communication lines.

- Except for the helicopter pad. I was told that Mek Doda's daughter laughed at the collapsed bridge. "That bridge had always been a source of trouble for Nag, - she said, - now we will be more dedicated to our self-study, like a Chinese monastery." Are you listening, Basri? It's just like one of Graham Greene's novels where you can still find such eccentric characters that have completely lost their minds.

- It's not worth getting yourself worked up over that. She flies beyond Cud anytime she chooses. Even her manicure is ordered in Paris, not to mention the rest of it. Whereas I have to rack my brains over a couple of tube colors for my paintings, she strolls down Champs Elysees in a miniskirt while her full thighs gleam with the masculine contrast of Montmartre.

- What a damned pity! - Rrok burst in, immediately thinking of Zibel. He had noticed an expensive manicure vial in her purse, too, but he didn't mention this to Basri.

- We live in an insane country, - Basri said, his gaze lost in the tableau placed diagonally across his bed.

- With government bureaucratic zealots, yes, but not with an insane country. The country can never go insane; the entire world's hospitals couldn't contain it, Basri. You always have this mania to take things to extremes. In a way, you also are an extremist like Mek, even though you are a less harmful one because of your childish heart.

His friend's laughter was sincere and transparent, seemingly taking his meaning well. He also laughed but it had more to do with his difficult situation. Things really were in a sad way. He worked in a vile office for eight hours straight, poring over useless financial reports until it was time to go up to his room. As far as going out, it was hardly worth the trouble, being as he was followed everywhere by clerk Betin's agents. His comments on the insanity and uselessness of the class struggle had been filed away in the large dossiers which were archived in the palace of the community. It was a systematic process and an ominous portent. Rrok was sure that his files were full of his usual

comings-and-goings, from his coffee house meetings or his library attendance.

Rrok turned his head toward Basri as though to drive away the thoughts that increasingly tormented him daily. He was aware that inside him there existed two completely different people; one who adjusted to the vicious circle in which he lived and the other who sought to violently liberate himself from all paradoxical frills. This struggle took so much effort that it made it impossible for him to live and sleep in peace. Only Zibel could soothe that tormenting duality. Ah, Zibel! He noticed Basri Mema's olympic calmness, admiring a painting with smiling girls, running nearly completely naked, with their thighs and breasts kissed by the sun and light rays.

- Do you like it?

- Very much, particularly the blue colors, as in a Modigliani.

- You see? - Basri continued, - I will cultivate in everyone the idea that beauty cannot be extinguished by any fanatical decrees. Beauty is freedom.

- Do you still really think that you will show it at a gallery somewhere? Or do you want to suffer the same fate as Kanad Dika?

- I've heard they will be more tolerant,
- Basri stressed, holding the wet brush in his hand, - they've pulled the strings tighter than they should have.

- I've heard something similar from Zibel, but I have little faith.

- How is she doing? - Basri changed tracks, trying to get away from the sarcastic tone in his friend's words. He became incensed every time they discussed these matters since he believed in illusions.

- So-so, she has her troubles.

- Oh yeah, I wouldn't feel sorry for her! She's living large because of Zurba and the foreign money exchange. I heard she's going to visit Paris with her father.

- No, not right now. Maybe next summer.

- Well, who knows what can happen until then.

- And what's going to happen? A big nothing.

- Rrok, you truly share in something from Robert Lohkamp. I can tell you without hesitation: you belong to the lost generation. You utterly lack the capability to trust in fate like I do. Maybe I belong to another race of people that feeds on illusions instead of food.

VII

The notice that he was to appear before the inspectorate of surveillance found him in a state of carefree indolence. He still could not believe his ears. He knew that this was

the same thing as being under investigation. Apparently, the gears of power, kept away until now by the calculated care of a cold heart, had begun to turn for him, too.

Rrok put on his clothes in a mental fog. He had the impression that someone had thrown a bucket of icy water on him. Basri's wide eyed stare followed him as he hesitantly buttoned his coat and began examining his conscience, trying to unravel the enigma behind this dangerous turn of events. He knew he had to confront something that couldn't be reconciled with anything normal.

- What do they want with you? - Basri asked, pale faced despite trying to appear calm. He felt somewhat guilty toward Rrok because he had always accused him of severe judgment.

- Only the devil knows! Maybe it has something to do with my retort against absolute isolation that one day in the office.

- You are so careless! Don't you know better than to shut up in that environment! You've always wanted to say what you think, but these days the façade is the preferred mode of expression. A majestic façade, like Western movies.

- What's done is done! - Rrok headed toward the door. - If I don't come back, watch my suitcase, I keep some small items from my mother in there. Wish me good luck!

- They came for Kanad Dika at first but I guess then they kept going after more people like you. This is a complicated business, Rrok. Should I say anything to Zibel?

- No! - he said sharply. He knew that this rigmarole would only cause her more trouble than grief.

- Goodbye ! - he said afterwards.

- Goodbye, dear friend!

Rrok started to feel better outside, where the rain drops landed on his exposed skin. There were a few people coming and going. The street looked filthy after yesterday's snowfall which had melted just as rapidly, casting people in a quagmire of mud and annoying slush. He took the long route, trying to buy some time so that he might discern some possible cause behind this urgent call. He passed through "Pigal" square with a heavy heart, accompanied by the chorus of hungry sparrows. Rrok kept walking with his eyes carefully following the old cars passing by noisily on the wet asphalt. Further away, a girl walked by on the other side of the street, looking very much like Zibel. He waved at her but she did not answer. Turning his head once more he realized that the girl that looked like Zibel was wearing blue jeans. Zibel favored this season's dress collections which were better at showcasing her perfectly sculpted calves. "Good thing it was not her, - he thought with

relief. There are times when a man wants to be all by himself." Rrok confronted himself. He observed his innermost self, trying to get a read in that chaos to determine his chances of emerging victorious.

He entered the waiting room where clerk Betin was expecting him. They had met other times before but hadn't paid much attention to their acquaintance. This mandatory confrontation gave Rrok the chance to study him in the moment of danger. He was a man with nearly extinguished eyes, as though they had lacked the presence of the sun. The features of his bony face seemed thrown together haphazardly. He looked more like an ordinary accountant than a censor. At once, he broke into a pleasant smile like a nonchalant man who had nothing in common with fear, punishments and prisons. Nonetheless, he welcomed Rrok coldly, with gleams of irony and sarcasm in his empty gaze. He was playing with a piece of paper he held in his hand, tapping it with his finger like the skin of a drum. He left Rrok to stand up on his feet for a while, feeling tense and unsettled, while he himself kept reading the lines of a letter written carelessly by an untrained hand.

Suddenly, he raised his eyes and looked at Rrok as if he were seeing him for the first time.

- They accuse you of being a liberal, - he

said in his metallic voice, - you have admitted that you are opposed to Nag's isolation. This letter by our loyal people clearly expresses the essence of your rebellious idea.

- I don't know anything, - Rrok said in a subdued voice. I don't know what I've done or what I have said where. Besides, that's just an anonymous letter. An anonymous letter can contain a thousand and one misdeeds about anyone.

- Enough of your drivel! Listen, here it is written black on white. A little while ago, you went into the library looking for a novel by Kafka, at a time when we had composed harsh but fair restrictions against him, and Camus or Sartre.

- I may have looked for it by chance, - Rrok replied, looking at the inspector with some trepidation, mixed with surprise and caution. - Besides, Mr. Betin, those are really old queries."

- You've babbled enough!

He got up from the chair on which he was seated and went over to where Rrok Dalia was standing, waiting. He was tall, fat, and his heavy abdomen stretched his pants at the waistline, like a large balloon spilling over the rim of a basket. He walked with rapid, small steps like all choleric personality types.

- You imbecile - he yelled when they came face to face - do you know what I can

do to you with these antics of yours? You'll get Bushtrima at the very least, or else it's Bug. Do you know Kanad Dika?

- A little. We have only met once in one of the social circles of Zurba Sina.

After these words, the clerk was silent. He examined Rrok carefully with his empty eyes.

- So, you know him, then?

- A little or only very little.

- Oh God! Have you not a good head on your shoulders? Or do you like chewing on mud like Kanad. Who knows what pastures he is chomping on now.

- The trouble is everyone talks a great deal about him, - Rrok said with a sneering smile.

- Silence! - Betin yelled out in exasperation, a dim light starting to smolder in his white retinas, like a sign warning of a coming storm.

"He's finally getting irritated, - Rrok thought with satisfaction. He hates me just like hates Kanad, Basri, and maybe even Zibel, just because we are a different mold than him. In his view, we should be mere automatons with visible mental limitations."

- Despite that, - Betin continued, piercing him with his eyes, - there are going to be some changes to alleviate the atmosphere in Nag. That is going to save your skin this time, but you had better be careful! The third

time's the charm. Keep this in mind: Pigal is the only one to rule in Nag, and none other. He commands the keys of this world.

- What meaning should I take from that, Mr. Betin? - Rrok demanded sourly.

- You should take it in all its meanings!
- the clerk screamed, exploding with an uncontrollable rage. - This is your last warning.

Their eyes crossed.

"Wonderful" - Rrok murmured with relief, having escaped yet again. It was exceptional to escape from the clutches of the inspectorate of public surveillance. He should turn his back as soon as possible to this mysterious political laboratory, before something else went wrong, which was a commonplace occurrence in these silent hallways. They were hallways with sparse lights, few windows, and massive doors upon which collided the stench of a hidden world. Behind those doors there stood other, heavier gates, behind which some powerful people controlled the lifeblood of the tired city.

When he stepped out into the street he suddenly remembered he hadn't even had his morning cognac yet.

VIII

Zibel laughed, while she was crying.

She had been told on the phone that Rrok was called to appear before the central inspectorate of surveillance. It had seemed to her as though everything came crumbling down. Then, an hour later, another phone call gave her news to the contrary. Rrok had been released, while at the same time there was a running commentary on the radio about Mek Doda's important speech, ushering in the idea of liberalization of life, which was also something different from what was expected. There it must be that the reasons for Rok's release might be found.

She stopped, afraid, in front of the mirror in the long hallway, encircled by luxurious sofas covered in red velvet. She inspected herself with the eye of an envious watchman. Her pupils were slightly dilated and traces of bluish circles outlined under her eyes, barely noticeable, the sign of excessive corporeal delights. But she was still beautiful, with her golden curls and oval face, slightly elongated at the chin, which gave her look a particular flair hinting at the exotic, like those women of the East. She had the look of Rebecca in "Ivanhoe" she recalled one of her classmates had complimented her. She smiled softly, flashing her white and healthy teeth, which were part of her success. She

made a funny face at herself, pleased with her thoughts and entered the kitchen with a great hunger, which came as a surprise even to Artemis.

- What's gotten into you? - she asked with a trace of envy in her voice. She always looked at her daughter with a kind of sincere wonder, while at the same time feeling worried that she might go farther than she anticipated with her physical pleasures.

- Nothing mom, just hungry.

She sat down at the long table with her melting eyes directed at her mother.

- Beta, bring Zibel something to eat, - Artemis called out. Doctor Rrashteri had recently implanted a new set of teeth on her, and now she was chewing on a tasty quail breast, prepared with wine and rice.

- What are we having for lunch, mom?

- Soup, beef steak and potatoes, fried liver, wine and for dessert we have a special pudding.

- Oh, how divine, - Zibel exclaimed, clapping her hands with a childish enthusiasm. Her joy expanded to include Artemis. She looked on with a teasing eye while her daughter ate with great appetite.

Without stopping the flow of food into her mouth, she spoke to her daughter in a worried tone:

- Robert is causing trouble, Zibel.

- He is just acting out his age, mom.

There's nothing more to it. Why do you get so scared?

- That's not really the issue, - Artemis went on in irritation, - if that was the case, great, but he has gotten mixed up with a group of hooligans seeking new political reforms in Nag. They have composed a new memorandum, in the style of Kanad Dika, intended for Pigal.

- Does father know? - Zibeli asked, feeling worried and putting down the half-eaten dessert. Her hand immediately reached for the full wine glass and she gulped down a sip in a lightning flash.

- He knows. Today he went to talk to the surveillance inspectors so they can suspend the surveillance around our villa.

Artemis lost her thread for a moment, like something unexpected had hit her, and then she went on angrily:

- He just finished eating and left. Berti cannot stand it when Zurba chastises him rightfully.

- What is he lacking for, anyway?
- Zibel interrupted in a spoiling mood, showing no tolerance toward her brother on these matters. She had talked to Rrok about these issues, but he, like Robert, treated her position with a kind of indifferentism that made her mad.

- That churlish face! He doesn't care about his father or about us. His head is in

the clouds. He even wants erotic liberties. All he is doing is making trouble for his father. Pigal and Mek have called on him twice. Today, I was terrified when he told me he wants to get out of this country. Have you heard?! Hundreds of people are leaving every night. Soon, only the rocks will be left here.

Zibel stopped after taking another gulp of the wine. Her mother's last words made her tremble with fright. But, she went on to express the opposite:

- There's nothing wrong about that so far, mom.

- You know Mek severely punishes those who smuggle in illegal pornographic magazines. It's like walking around naked in the middle of the city. Yesterday they caught two guys looking at a pornographic magazine. It was horrifying. They sentenced them to fifteen years in prison each. Mek was involved directly in that harsh punishment. His heart truly knows no mercy.

She put away the empty wineglass with disgust, straightened her heavy, round body - particularly heavy at the bottom - and cast her eyes toward her daughter, who showed sincere sorrow in her face.

"Am I going to turn into my mother?" - She anxiously asked herself, while eating the last pieces of the delicious cake and drinking thirstily the last sips of the fine wine.

- Thankfully, they are not bringing in any more television sets, - Artemis continued, as she ordered Beti to make coffee, - it was making people morally depraved, even though their foreign channel receivers were removed. They can only watch Nag's official channel. And a good thing it is that they only allowed one channel. These people must not think too much.

Suddenly, she regained the vitality she had lost earlier.

- Yesterday, while you were sleeping, I saw a movie with Marilyn Monroe at RAI Due. It was fantastic. Something like between a dream and love, Zibel.

But she chose not to tell Zibel that, when she had gotten up to go the bathroom, she had seen Zurba watching a new pornographic movie. It was a mortifying scene of tangled bodies, where you could see the most piquant sexual parts, offering to sight things that distilled all the shame of the world. She had felt stricken numb at the sight of her husband so absorbed in front of the screen, and not wishing to be seen, had returned to bed appalled, as if she had beheld the most outrageous thing in her life. She hadn't slept all night. When Zurba came to bed and put his hands on her body, she had screamed "Vagabond!" as though someone had put a knife at her throat, yet incapable of resisting his brutal strength; she had let

him pull her nightshirt up to her throat, as if to choke her, and she had felt like gagging from this unavoidable torture, something from which no woman in the world could escape. Then he had whispered lurid words in her ear, surely from the Feflini's films he watched at night, or the Boccaccio novels he had read.

IX

Zurba Sina's mansion was located somewhere in Nag's periphery, contrary to the unspoken rule that the members of the community should all live within a single block. Perhaps, this almost negligible recklessness by an authority-wielding member was due to the nearly second-hand position that Zurba occupied in the closed societal circle that surrounded Pigal. He was somewhat reserved at the excessive servility by the others, perhaps his sensibilities were not yet wounded by the excesses of unlimited power, which sought to bend everything under the authority of a single man. Deep down, Zurba felt the sting of this premeditated exclusion but gave no outward sign of it, feeling that even a slight complaint would unleash a world of trouble. He had actually gotten used to the idea of this special kind of emotional torture, delivered

by way of a cold masquerade of negligence. This injustice weighed more heavily on Artemis and Zibel, who dreamed of moving into the privileged location of the block, but which kept being put off with each passing day. In order to compensate to some extent for this loss of Zurba's authority, she had insisted on making the villa as commodious as possible with all the luxuries to meet the eyes of anyone who traveled nearby. She had directed the makeover herself, smoothing over the walls and lining them with special wallpaper from Paris, decorating the front of the villa with a white concrete pediment which cost an arm and a leg. At the main entrance, Artemis had planted two Phoenician palm trees, while the front steps were lined by Italian grass, just like she had seen in the best English designer's catalogues of the day. Everything came out perfect and the mansion earned an envious reputation among Nag's authoritarian circles. Zurba had to endure some tangential remarks in the community concerning over-the-top expenses and an ill-composed public act was put forward, intending to discredit him in front of the public opinion concerning the expenditure of large sums. However, Mek intervened since he did not like for these excesses to become an object of discussion, particularly by the press. Zurba knew too well that Mek did not intercede in order to

salvage Zurba's endangered authority, but rather to avoid the shocking scandal over the almost fantastical expenditures required for the lavish lifestyles of Pigal and Mek himself.

He had always succumbed to the satisfaction of giving himself credit for having built something to be adored and admired. Each day, returning home in his new "Cadillac", casually or deliberately, he would cast an appreciative glance at the metallic fence courtyard and at the façade painted the color of a white swan. He felt a rising desire to affirm to himself that he had created something out of the ordinary, like Caligula.

On that day, he forgot to perform that daily, childish ritual. He had just emerged from an unusual community meeting where he had heard some nearly sensational news. He recalled that Kanad Dika had been severely punished over the same things that Mek was now proclaiming in his unbearably haughty attitude. "How quickly things change, - he thought, - what was considered a heresy until yesterday, becomes normal today. Poor Kanad, how he must suffer in Bug!" With a pang on his consciousness, he recalled that wickedly snowy day in Bushtrima, the solitary tower in the steep slope as though cleaved by a huge knife and the almost crazed look of Kanad Dika as he struggled to comprehend the terrible

subtext of the mandate. Thankfully, things went into this direction. The rope was pulled too tight, and it was only a matter of time – maybe today, maybe tomorrow – before an uprising would cause a world of troubles. The damaged bridge was being repaired at an appallingly slow rate. For now, the only communication with Lake Cud occurred via helicopters, coming and going like dragonflies from an airport very close to Bushtrima.

“There was no other way, - he thought, while the “Cadillac” drove by in front of low, small houses with destitute hay pales around them. - It was the only alternative, the only option Pigal could latch on to. Certainly, he must have borrowed some ideas from the memorandum Kanad wrote, now an outlaw, like a man who offended the authority of the state community. Oh how the same things are flogged and caressed by the same powerful people!” He felt so weary and jaded by the caprices of some people, who played the game of statesmanship as though hedging their bets at a game of cards. The situation was made even more tense by the weariness of nearly complete isolation from most of the world. He couldn’t understand why they had been so passionate about that, while everyone knows that no man can truly live when he is cut off from all others. It was something so abnormal but that had become

a large part of Pigal's and Mek's psychology, maybe even of his. Why not, even he had profited by his silence. Silence had been the equivalent reward for his splendid villa, a "Cadillac", other privileges around his mansion, while the others had to be satisfied with merely breathing the ordinary air. His mouth had been closed shut; neither he nor the others had said a word or tried to oppose Mek yesterday, while Mek held them in check with his probing eyes. "He knew that everyone who was there was thinking about Kanad at that moment. He would crush us if he realized that deep within each of us there exists a very tiny cell of courage, but it is buried so deep that no one, except Pigal, could notice it with just a casual stroke of the pen. But thankfully, Pigal, unlike Mek, permitted men to have their ounce of fat. I couldn't be certain why he allowed this tiny concession, maybe for his rule over them to be more absolute."

Oh God, what silly, meaningless things were gnawing at his mind today! He had been standing like a buffoon in the middle of the courtyard between the Phoenician palm trees, under the bewildered gaze of the gardener, who, as usual, greeted him with a sharp nod of the head. Zurba turned his eyes toward the guard at the gate. He realized that this absent-minded moment could serve in Nag as the subject of deliberate jokes.

They would presume that his standing in the community had fallen or something of that sort, something to do with the fall of an official from grace. How terrible, how his mind always wondered to the worst outcomes of his career! He trembled completely at the fact that his mind always dwelled on the darkest recesses of destiny.

- What's going on? - Artemis asked him, worried by the guilty expression on his face. They met by chance in the hallway. She was on her way to tell Beti to switch the curtains in the waiting room, even though they were almost new and had been purchased at Lake Cud only recently.

- Nothing but good news, Artemis.

- Wonderful! - She looked at him with a smile that touched her eyes. It was the first time they spoke since that night when he almost seduced her with brutality, without realizing that's what excited him.

- Alright, wait, while I go talk to Beti.

She rushed down the hallway, her buttocks wobbling underneath the narrow skirt girdling her rounded waistline. "Where in the devil does she find these slim cut dresses, can't she see she's turned into a cow?" Over time, he found himself less attracted to Artemis as a woman. Perhaps it had something to do with age. He could feel the increasing decline in his own passions for the fairer sex. But, his eyes often noticed

the young ladies. One night, at twilight, he saw a young woman wearing blue jeans, tight around her luscious thighs. He found her figure mind-blowing. He followed her for a few moments, his eyes feasting on her narrow and pointing hips, her slim waist and full breasts, shamelessly covered by just a very thin tank top. He imagined that a single tap of the finger would be sufficient to make her pants burst at the seams and that he would jump upon her, with all the raging strength of a man who has never been fully satisfied, at the magical appearance of a woman savagely undressed.

“I am losing my wits”, - he thought as he sat down on the dinner table which was laid generously, as though for a banquet. Zibeli came in soon after him. Zurba thought she looked very beautiful. He began to worry that she might have started being intimate earlier than was proper. He observed her carefully, with a seasoned eye and noticed, terrified, that Zibel’s eyes were placid and satiated by something undefined, but which is easily discerned in people given to the immoderate delights of the flesh. “I need to speak with Artemis at once, we must find her a husband, or she’ll take to the streets.”

- Hi dad, what’s happening over there at Nag’s pyramid? - Zibel asked, kissing him on his wide forehead, the way she always did before sitting down for dinner or when

going to bed.

- The pressure is coming off a trifle, Zibel, - he said laughing, and his heart warmed up again as he sensed her old candor and affection. - They even have the blueprints for a second road to Lake Cud. They are going to carry out the necessary repairs to the first road, as well.

Artemis started to listen in to their conversation with interest.

- What about the arts?

- There is going to be a gallery exhibit and an art festival, naturally, with greater freedom from censorship.

- I am afraid, Zurba, that this may be a premature move by Pigal, - Artemis cut in, while ladling out the soup in large porcelain plates. - It's almost five years since the last purging campaign and, from what I've noticed, he repeats the cycle every four to five years.

- What do you mean by that? - Zurba asked anxiously, who had often turned over in his own mind these ominous scenarios.

- I am saying you should be careful with Mek; don't make yourself stand out as a ringleader or as the man in the rear. With this move, he is trying to sift out his adversaries; otherwise, they wouldn't stand out while hiding themselves in fear. Did you say anything at the meeting?

- Just something about the benefits of

the new road. I said that it would serve as a starting point for a third track.

- Oh God, you're always such a lubber, Zurba - Artemis exploded with such furor that even Beti popped her head through the unlocked door. - What possessed you to say that? Is Kanad Dika's bitter tongue channeling itself through you?

- Enough of this ear screeching! - he angrily pushed away the plate full of fresh pineapples and drank the whole glass of "Kagor" wine he had just filled. - I am telling you I spoke the least out of everyone there. Should I have said nothing?

- And what did Mek say after that?

- Nothing, he just praised me in front of the community. Whereas Pigal praised Mek, as usual. He was silent on my score.

- And you mother, you are such an alarmist! - Zibeli criticized her, amazed at how much they quarreled over the little things.

- Be quiet please, Zibel! People's heads will roll over things like this, - Artemis blurted out, still puffing with anger.

- And where is Robert? - Zurba inquired after he finished his coffee and felt somewhat recovered from his wife's poisonous darts.

As usual, he does whatever pops in his head, - Artemis complained in a thin voice.

- We will send him outside the country for specialized studies, - Zurba said, annoyed

and resentful by his son's excessive liberty taking. – Mek has given me his word. The sooner he leaves, the better it will be for him and for us. Something bad could happen to him here.

He got up and went to his study. After finishing their coffee, Zibel and Artemis started to chit-chat about the ordinary occurrences of women's daily lives.

X

- Wake up, sleepyhead! Today is Dok Zojzi's celebration.

It was to these words that Basri woke up Rrok on that morning of April the first, having gone to sleep late that night after a new round of fervent lovemaking full of passionate embraces with Zibel. In his half-dreaming state, he was still enjoying the taste of her lips with their pineapple flavor. He was completely absorbed by the power of that physical love, which he felt he didn't deserve. He always wondered to himself, how very lucky he had been when Zibel accepted his advances with a soft "Yes". He had the impression that this entire beautiful affair, almost unreal, would someday unravel into the pieces of abandoned dream.

He stretched with satisfaction in his narrow bed.

- I don't like this particular holiday at all, - he said while trying to light his cigarette, - not to mention I do not like holidays in general. There's something annoying and very shallow about them.

- Cut it out, you halfwit!

Rrok turned his head around to look at the weather. He could hear the mirthful chirp of the sparrows on the window ledge. The noise of a busy day full of bustling activity trickled in the apartment. The orchestra, somewhere beyond Pigal square, was playing Nag's ancient march. As if it could foretell that everything today would be different, the sun lightly pierced through the thick, dirty window glass, reaching Basri Mema's unfinished tableau. It revealed the shapely pair of a woman's legs, lying on an empty, nearly aquamarine beach, seeming more ethereal than real, in a landscaped dominated by the sun, the sand, and solitude. Out of the transparent blue seas there slowly swirled the enchanting plumes of the white waves with their resounding roll. "Basri has done such a wonderful work on this canvas, perhaps it's a masterpiece of its kind". He felt the prelude to that day could not pass by without offering them other pleasures.

- You have outdone yourself! - he praised Basri, after he had finished washing and getting dressed. - Are you going to show it in a gallery? It's something new in its kind,

like a Modigliani or Van Gogh.

- Now that they've loosened up the screws a bit, I might make an exception.

- I don't know what to say. - Rrok carefully combed his thick, curly hair in front of the small mirror hanging over the sink. - I still cannot believe it. I have been knocked down so many times I have a difficult time accepting their first peace offering. It could be that this whole thing is a fake act.

- Did you hear Mek speak on the radio?

- That's precisely why I'm suspicious. I could never trust Mek. He has always been a deceiver.

- Why?

- What do you mean, why? - Rrok asked in amazement. Have they not made enough promises and then followed through with enough lies?

- On special occasions, yes, but only when they had to in order to strengthen their positions.

- You've always been quite the altruist, Basri, so quick to believe things that are never proven to be true.

- Today you are in worse humor than Robert Lohkamp. It's impossible to talk to you. What do you say; must we not hope in anything good? What is there left for us to believe in, then? Should we just kill ourselves?

- That's the wisest move you could

make right now.

- You know what? Why don't we get loaded with some Fernet and coffee? Maybe it'll bring us to our senses.

- You nailed it. That's the most useful thing we could do.

There were only a few people at barkeep Cuta's small tavern. They sat down at a table somewhat out of the way and ordered two glasses of Fernet and two coffees.

- Double shot? - the barman asked cheerfully.

Basri looked at Rrok and nodded.

- It's the best thing you could do today, - he told them, - thank god, we still have alcohol left to help us endure some of our burdens which grow heavier on our shoulders with each passing day.

- Cheers Cuta, the master of Raki!

- Cheers, Basri, painter of the dead!
Cheers Rrok! May more come your way!

The three of them laughed with such an uproar that the other customers turned their heads in surprise. Rrok realized that the tavern, gloomy in the dark, looked different somehow, as though a charming and cheerful broom had swept inside it. The artificial rosemary on the nearly empty shelves, forgotten and turned into dust, imparted the establishment the look of a store forsaken by life. The clean glass behind the curtains glowed, with yellow spots resembling the

sunburst decor at a puppet theater.

Rrok could feel a sensation of pleasant warmth rising up inside him. Alcohol started doing its work of lifting his despondent morale. Something light, fragile shifted inside his tired being, overburdened by the day fraught with trouble.

- You should laugh! - the barkeep encouraged him, - it's the thing for which we pay the highest price, isn't it Basri?

- That's exactly right! Except that we are running out of laughter.

- I don't think we can fall lower than this!

- This man is a born Epicurean, Cuta, - Rrok said in a throaty voice.

Who is this Epicurus? - Cuta asked, his teeth flashing.

- A philosopher who adored the cheerful life.

- Oh, there is a wise man. Let us raise a toast to Epicurus.

When they went out to the square it was daylight all around them. As if it were not late fall, the weather was fairly nice today except for the sweeping panorama of the thin layer of white snow covering the city which was an unwilling reminder of the incipient winter. Suddenly, two luxury cars of the latest models drove speeding through Pigal square, their flashing paint catching the eyes of the casual strollers waiting for the

celebration of Dok Zojzi's Day. A group of children walked ahead, dressed in national costumes. A young woman with a hand portable radio tuned to the city's main radio station smiled mysteriously at someone.

They followed the rest of the crowd up the incline of the hill, perched on the back of the city. It was rare in Nag for so many people to be gathered in celebration of a holiday, the essence of which had caused everyone much woe.

- Look at all these people, Basri, - Rrok said, while looking around attentively so he would not miss Zibel if she walked by. Today, it should have been the opposite.

- Are you talking about Dok Zojzi?

- Yes, that's exactly what I mean.

- It makes you want to pull your hair out. We pay honor to the man that was the first to cut off Nag's communication with the world. That's why things are going so great.

It's actually rather simple, - Rrok said, while he was buying a pack of cigarettes from the vender, - after a thousand years of invasions, the opposite reaction was bound to happen and we would start losing faith at visitors from afar, whether they carried weapons or not. They didn't want a repetition of another potential invasion, like the ones that came before, so they organized the offensive for the demolition of the connecting roads. They demolished bridges,

dams, and passes, leaving Nag to remain in total isolation for ten years, like a sole island in a vast ocean. Nothing and no one could come in and out while the world, struggling through wars, reshaped the structures and institutions of the state. It was Nag's first salvation and, at the same breath, it was its later misfortune. Everyone started to forget Nag. They no longer included it in textbook maps and in the annals of geography, or in the various international conferences. It was a forgetfulness generated by the lack of experience in statesmanship or the by excessive, nervous hastiness of Dok Zojzi faced with the bitter historical past. In other words, we went backwards while everyone else went forward. It was a gradual ruin, which above all else crushed a man's soul.

Rrok sat down on a stone by the side of the road. Basri took out his pencils and a piece of paper and started drawing with confident strokes, sketching out the city haphazardly spread out on the rocky plateau.

- What do you want to do? - Rrok inquired, enjoying the relative seclusion of the place. After he sat down, he took out a bottle of Raki and two small glasses out of his torn coat pocket.

Basri's face lit up when he saw his friend show concern in things he wasn't particularly interested in.

- Bravo! Where in the devil did you

find it?

- Cuta gave it to me. Drink it when you are up there, he told me, it's the only medicine that can whip men like you.

He slowly poured the Raki on the pair of glasses standing on the nearly dry ground. He quickly tossed back the first drink and, without waiting for Basri to finish, filled up his own glass again and gulped it.

- Congratulations! - his friend said enthusiastically. He looked at Rrok with envy and somewhat apprehensively, - people like you, Rrok, always have trouble with alcohol.

Beyond the turn there appeared a line of luxurious "Peugeots". They passed by one after the other. The last car drove up closer to the curb because Zurba Sina's blue "Cadillac" was trailing behind in the next turn. It was the only car in a different color and that detail somehow made it look like it was done out of ill will. A few moments later, behind the unrolled curtains, he could discern Zurba's features, looking somewhat sallow due to the lack of sunlight. He was disagreeable and paid little attention to the two men sitting on the side of the road. Indeed, for a moment he seemed to be taken by surprise, as if he had encountered two people from another planet.

- What was the matter with him? - Basri asked as he was drawing the finishing touches to Pigal square and its central movie

theater.

- He expected us to stand up to our feet. They are accustomed to the attitude that their arrival should always solicit the highest respect. It's one of the rites from the East that has been imposed on our current social cannon. Disrespecting it is tantamount to committing guilty conduct towards the state.

- Just like in Asia, - Basri nodded, - as during the times of Samurabi.

- It's even worse, what we have here is a breeding mixture of Eastern servility with the act of fear of exile or becoming untrusting. Even the lack of the other cars of that same brand is deliberately done with the aforethought of marking him as a target among those who command and obey. They forbid us the use of private cars just to make that divide even more perceivable. As for the cars of the officials, I've heard they have compiled a list of the car brands according to the prestige of the office title, which is rigorously controlled by the surveillance inspectors. The unchanging law of hierarchy rules with a harsh fist even here.

- Only god knows where things are headed with this false authority, even though they keep proclaiming the complete opposite here.

- That's exactly what is eventually going to gradually grind Nag down, Basri,

or better yet, it will cause it to rot someday.

A short while later, a fine autumn rain began to drizzle, compelling the gathered crowd to descend in a hurry down the large slope of the slippery hill. Rrok and Basri started to head down as well. Somewhat inebriated, they took one of the side streets instead of the main road, while their eyes followed with indifference the endless motorcade of the officials' cars, now traveling with their curtains closed, like rolling coffins, towards Pigal square accompanied by a deliberate silence.

XI

Two days earlier, Kanad Dika had returned home after his nearly three weeks long exile in Bug. The order for his return to Bushtrima came at just the right time. He could hardly endure the ennui and solitude of those last few days in that old hut, with a hatch instead of a door and the hungry mice running through it. He had been working in a nearby farm, a tortured man who could no longer endure the toil of that hard physical labor. "Thank God!" - he exclaimed, while standing up next to the window, racking his mind why this exception had been allowed on his behalf. Was this connected to the latest liberal reforms in Nag that

everyone was talking about? Perhaps it had something to do with his memorandum, even though it was poorly received initially. Maybe afterwards it was studied in secret by certain groups in the community in order to glean the essence of the reforms. Certainly this would have loosened up even the tightly wound mainspring in those distant offices, from where the order for his exile came a couple of weeks earlier. So, two completely contradictory orders, separated from each other by a period of punishing rains and wending over those weary roads, which made him form a clear impression of the cynicism that ruled over Nag's entire political elite.

He placed his warm forehead against the glass, as though to cool himself. He felt warm and physically weak simultaneously. To make matters worse, he found the pantry shelves nearly empty, without any kind of food left. Earlier, he had sent the little girl to buy some bread and margarine for him, having given up all hope long ago for a little cheese, eggs, and meat. He had to wait till the end of the week for his rations card. Until then, he had to make do with leftover pasta, rice or beans, the cooking of which consumed a good chunk of his daily life. "That's the reason why you're not even married yet," barkeep Xhixha told him jokingly once, down by the tavern, otherwise you could

have picked one of the girls from Bushtrima, which are fine plums and grooms come from all over the land seeking their hand in marriage, let alone you, who are a native to these parts and a well known professor with a respected degree."

Kanad took the electric burner from the corner of the sink, placed it on an old marble tile and started to boil some water. He wanted to make some coffee, just to get rid of that damned headache, but then he saw there were only a few meager crumbs left in the yellow can, not even enough to brew half a cup. "What a sad business!" It's enough to make a man lose his sanity. One shortage follows another shortage. The crippling torpor began with the empty tables. A little bit here and a little there, it diminished one's abilities by half, extinguishing the urge to examine things to their fullness. "What a sad business!" Kanad repeated to himself as he poured the salt on the pasta boiling over in the good pot.

He breathed in hungrily the scent of the simmering dough. Oh god, a man has need of everything but this spaghetti is next to miserable. This was the opposite of what the community's major newspapers published, which pretended that black was white. They attempted by every means to erect a pretty façade, trying to avoid the misinterpretations which existed in the outside world. Large,

pompous headlines covered the old pasta pots and wrapped up the margarine packages which were a cheap substitute for fresh butter. It was a particular school, copied word by word from the ancient art of the yogis. Perhaps he, too, shared something from the nature of the yogis, with the sparse flesh on his gaunt cheeks, the taut skin on his bony hands where you could count the sinews.

Kanad sat down to eat the pasta he had just cooked, only after patiently washing his hands in the chipped sink. He ate full of appetite. He had not had anything to eat since last evening. His bony jaws patiently chewed the soft pasta redolent of margarine. After he had finished eating, he put the unwashed plate in the sink again. Then, he put the small coffeepot over the fire so he could make that quarter-strength coffee cup. He always liked to drink a cup of Turkish coffee after a meal. On the occasions he didn't have any ground coffee beans, he perforce went down to the Bazaar Pass, at barkeep Xhixha's tavern.

The thick coffee, even though weak, helped to calm down somewhat his frayed nerves. He leaned with satisfaction against the chair. He felt he was being swallowed up again by a stream of torrential thoughts. They came in pieces, from somewhere, sometimes in half figures, other times as fragments of images, as though chopped

up by a commanding hand. "Oh god, - he sighed, as the small, red lashes on his eyelids were closing over his eyes, - like Narcissus, we are chewing on our last ounce of fat with the steadfastness of a self-trumpeted martyr, enchanted by this heroic self-proclamation, which could not possibly serve anyone or anything except to wasted time in the struggle against oneself. What utter weariness! - he whispered, while the afternoon nap gently pinched him. When will this game of playing hide-and-seek with death end?"

XII

Rrok and Basri left for Bushtrima as soon as they finished breakfast, prepared on a small enameled pan. The idea to go and visit Kanad after he returned from his exile had been a thorn on their minds for days. They were both convinced that his theory of rapid emergence from isolation should have been implemented a long time ago.

It had been raining again for two days so that the shelters and water drains could barely contain the howling fury of the rainfall.

- It's almost like it's raining out of spite!
- Rrok said angrily, as they stood under the shelter of the bus stop, waiting for the public bus.

- The time is just right, - Basri replied, surveying with indifference the turbulent scenery on the street, - it seems to me that even nature is angry.

They could only leave after more than an hour, having been chilled to the bone under that cursed clay tiled roof which didn't hold back anything from slipping through. They arrived in Bushtrima at noon, nauseated by the road full of turns and jolts. They went inside barkeep Xhixha's tavern and ordered a shot of Raki each. There were only two other elderly men inside the small store with their hats sunk deep over their eyebrows. They turned their backs toward them and eagerly drank the bland Raki, possibly diluted with some wild berry Raki, according to Rrok, which tended to give him a headache. But barkeep Xhixha, vacillating in his thoughts on the other side of the plain fiber countertop, did not fret over what his customers thought about his Raki. They had sent Kanad a note the day before by way of a driver passing through. Had he received it? The tavern was located higher up, in the northern section of Bushtrima, with roofs stacked like balconies, where one might start wishing to leap from one house to the next. The road circling the tavern, paved with grey cobblestone and connected to dozens of other cobblestoned streets, was empty too. The occasional pedestrian, hidden under his

umbrella, walked in a hurry as though each step was being followed.

The two men with the deeply set hats and the blank looks on their faces were surveying them with greater interest.

- Here we are being constantly and poorly observed, - Rrok, who could scarcely endure the heavy silence in the watchmen's eyes, said in exasperation, - that must be why Kanad was hesitant to come here.

- Only the devil knows!

They were finishing the second round of the barkeep's insipid Raki, when Kanad Dika appeared, drenched, even though he was holding an old umbrella with both hands. His long and lanky face brightened up immediately when he saw his old friends. He pretended not to notice the men wearing the dark hats in the most secluded corner of the tavern.

- Are you tired? - he asked in a gentle voice, embracing them with untold longing. - Do you know that I actually miss seeing people like you? God only knows why the people here are so silent and gloomy.

The men with the hats lowered over their eyes suddenly became livelier; a light gleam of curiosity and anxiety slipped over their stony features. Barkeep Xhixha raised his sleepy eyelids and nodded as though approving Kanad's words, then cast a mature and suspicious glance at the two

silent customers before closing his eyelids again.

Kanad was truly happy to meet with them. His distressed eyes were fastened on the two of them with a kind of anxiety and sense of waiting, particularly on Rrok. But he was, inscrutably, somewhat colder toward Basri. This, in Rrok's opinion, constituted that mysterious crux which often brings people closer together or farther away from a certain social circle.

- Anything new going on in Nag? - he asked in a muffled voice.

He had just ordered a glass of Raki. He wasn't too keen on Raki but performed that daily ritual of the men of Bushtrema with a kind of imposed courage. The wind was blowing and the gutters on the tavern roof kept tinkling incessantly, spilling on the stone-rich cobblestoned street an endless stream of rain, filtered through radioactive clouds.

- Something still undefined, - Rrok answered, - sounds like some of the things you wrote have been included in their program for rapid de-isolation. That boomerang is still swinging back to hit them on the head.

- I am not sure why but I have a feeling that this is just a game they are playing. If it were otherwise, they would have started doing this a lot sooner, - Kanad stated

uncertainly.

- What's compelling them to do this now, Kanad? - Basri asked with a grin.

- Only the devil knows! Isolation is their last safety ditch, - he spoke in a whisper, as though through gritted teeth, and the features of the men in the dark hats took on a painful look of desperation at being unable to find out what was being said. - The elaboration of this cruel notion began long ago in the minds of the community leaders, facing the sincere calls from beyond Lake Cud which called for the violent tearing down of the closed gates. But, in order to disguise their hidden worries in a comical fashion, by way of Dok Zojzi, they have turned this hopeless isolation in a false moral taboo. It is their weakest point, upon which they have latched on as a disguise the notions of love for the fatherland, of retribution, and of betrayal, like a randomly patched quilt, the discovery of which gets you exiled to Bug, at the least.

- Cheers then, Kanad! It seems to me that we are going to perish with flowery notions in our heads, like those ships that sink with the cheerful sound of the band still playing, - Rrok said in snide remark.

- Cheers, Rrok! Let's wait and see what unfolds, otherwise we couldn't get a handle on those who hold both the carrot and the stick in their hands.

They pensively drank what was

left in their small, white crystal glasses. Basri ordered three more drinks. The men scrunched up at the other end of the tavern seemed to stir up from their hopeless wait when they noticed the new round of drinks. Their dim eyes, mirroring the hopeless rainy day, opened a little wider so as to let in the unspoken sadness of that day full of twilight and decay. They crinkled eerily over their old chairs, peering across with a glint of hate in their eyes at the small group of men who were drinking and chatting in whispers, making their weary trade even more difficult.

- Anyway, - Kanad whispered again, now slightly inebriated to regain the courage he had rashly lost for days on end, - we must take advantage of every softening in their position. I have heard they are rebuilding the collapsed bridge, isn't that right, Rrok? It's like living under a rock here and any news arrives late and all distorted by the gossip of Pigal's goons.

- They're doing something. But maybe it's only a makeover just blowing smoke in everyone's eyes.

Rrok pondered for a moment. He wasn't sure why he thought of Zibel. It was the only reminiscence that could break through his battered memory.

- Are they going to start building the second track? - Basri asked in a faint voice.

- Hard to believe, - Kanad replied, -

maybe they announced that fact only for political consumption. I think even two major highway tracks would scarcely be enough to bring Nag out of isolation. We are a mountainous city, encircled by cliffs and ancient walls. The world is going to need some time before it can get here.

- How much longer can this ramshackle hut go on, Kanad? - Basri asked in a faltering voice, being more impatient than the other two.

- Perhaps another thousand years, - Rrok replied with a grin, flashing his white teeth. He had made a bitter joke and laughed but he hadn't meant any harm.

- Rrok is only joking, - Kanad continued, - but that depends on certain circumstances which are beyond anyone's control, even beyond Pigal's hands. Coming out of isolation won't happen in a day. That is going to happen gradually in the psychology and psychosis of certain individuals, and then it's going to happen to the rest.

He took a piece of paper out of his coat pocket and drew an ancient city on a mountain, surrounded by valleys, mountains, rivers and forests. Then, his experienced hand drew several giant bridges, as well as a few airstrips for helicopters and supersonic planes. The drawing looked more like a still from an educational film. The only thing missing were the tiny, comical puppets that

would transform it into a magical castle, ruled by hope, joy and verve.

- There has always been a custom, according to which Nag must live in isolation in order to survive somehow. Indeed, a thousand years of invasions have been sufficient to turn it into an unshakable notion. But, while the circumstances are constantly changing, this delicate point has remained the same as it was three or four centuries ago. In fact, the opposite should have occurred.

They got up to leave after an hour. The shadow men curled up like black cats stood up as well. Barkeep Xhixha greeted them with a sharp nod, paying no heed at all to the men behind them. It had stopped raining. Only the rusty water drain pipes on top of the badly slanted roofs still spilled the last of the rain torrents. Rrok and Basri were in a hurry to catch the three o'clock bus, otherwise they would be left behind in Bushtrima and would have to sleep in Kanad Dika's old home.

- I am slightly drunk, - Kanad said as he walked next to them on his shoddily dressed feet and old shoes, - and that'll be reason enough for me to pass a night without any sleep, which you wouldn't wish it either.

- Too much Raki makes me sleepy, - Basri remarked.

- Anyway, it's the only thing that

gives us a little hope and courage, - Rrok continued, while with the corner of his eyes he tracked the careful movements of the men with the hats, who had never stopped following them.

- Rrok is the only Robert Lohkamp to be found in Nag, Kanad.

-Something close to that, - Rrok grinned, - we, in general, are all Robert Lohkamps, or a lost generation, even delayed.

They separated at the narrow turn before the bus station. Kanad almost ran up the slanting street, as though someone was following behind him. They were saddened to see him so worried. They had forgotten to mention the next time they would meet again. Standing there for a moment, their eyes fixed on the man staggering up the white street. Rrok had the impression that he was climbing somewhere, up toward the top of a pyramid whose peak was hidden in the angry billow of rain-heavy clouds, which threatened to inundate yet again the poor and rocky soil of Bushtrima, like a punishment with no end in sight.

XIII

Rrok felt her beautiful head come to rest on his bare arm as she slept. Her dark hair covered a part of her pale face. Her raven black

eyelashes contrasted with the fluid ivory of her skin. She had unintentionally uncovered herself to her waist, feeling uneasy under that heavy bedcover filled with unrefined cotton. Her perfect torso looked enchanting as it moved gently under her rhythmic breathing. He had never seen her quite like that, in that uncontrived pose, now resting in relaxed tranquility in the same place where her body earlier had been writhing gripped by the power of their first lust. She looked like her body had been sublimated by the wave of a magician's wand. "She is tired," - he thought as he admired her insatiably. The doubt stirred again in his mind that this whole scene must be the trick of a whimsical fate. He touched her without being fully convinced that she wasn't a mirage; he felt her warm, voluptuous breasts heave a little, under the thrilling flickering of her small, nearly black nipples, like wild berries that had suddenly sprouted on the soft flesh of a fawn.

Zibeli slept or pretended that she slept.

In the small room, two thirds of which were occupied by the bed and chairs, next to the sink there stood Basri's large canvass decorated by wonderful rows of nearly nude women. Everything in that afternoon twilight had taken on the glow of a peaceful scene saturated by love. From time to time, the glint of the ebbing light amidst the

sparse shrieks of the life throbbing outside clashed on the small and dirty windowpane. The occasional car horn reverberated like a shiver shooting through the anxiety of the short day. The disconnected sounds seemed to come out from inside a deep well, sluggishly and weakly penetrating Rrok's ear, creating the impression that everything in Nag resembled an old museum, weary from the perpetual cycle of life's awakening and temporary downfall. The last rays of the evanescent light suddenly fell in the room shining, casting their slanting light on the finished tableau of the women bathing in the nearly surreal beach. "Perhaps everything in the world truly becomes surreal," Rrok thought not without a twinge of pain, admiring for a long moment the sight of Zibel lying carefree on the pillow. It was something frightening to him to completely grasp what was truly happening with both of them. It was a nearly imperceptible love which ran against the norm, hidden from the sight of hundreds of paid informants, who recorded every new occurrence that disturbed the order of events permitted by the city's harsh laws. "Even we are rather illegitimate," - Rrok thought somewhat annoyed. Perhaps a miracle might happen, but Rrok already knew that Zibel belonged to a different world.

He touched her full, soft arm, not

without some insecurity. His fingers plunged on her white skin, lightly scented by the sun and shampoo. Suddenly, he felt the need to completely lean against her. His vigorous movements woke up Zibel.

- Isn't it getting late, Rrok? - she asked sleepily, with a trace of unquenched desire still in her voice.

She turned away gently from the bed and checked her small watch.

- No, - he said in a caressing voice, - you are still in the laboratory session with professor Krup. As with everything else, Zibel, even in love we are hypocrites, same as everyone else.

She laughed cheerfully and returned toward him. Her bosom, now fully exposed, reflected like an oily surface the city's vanishing twilight. His hands started to seek their way below her waist as though in shock but Zibel suddenly stood up halfway on the bed.

- That's enough for now, Rrok. I feel tired like I've been making love for a thousand years.

- Oh, - Rrok said with surprise and somewhat dissatisfied. At times, she was more self restrained than him and that filled him with the sincere resentment of unsated hunger. - Why, have they placed any norms about lovemaking, Zibel, so that we should be doing likewise?

- What norms? It's just that I'm starting to be late. And then, Basri...

- What does Basri enter into it? - he asked with rising irritation, barely restrained.

- What if he comes in? And then ... I don't like this quickly falling crepuscule. It's a time that makes me sad.

He kissed her gently.

- "What's with you?" - she asked softly and with tenderness.

- I feel like you've encompassed all the radiance of the best women of the world.

Her eyes were focused on Basri's nearly dark painting.

- I don't know why I have this premonition, Rrok, that this whole thing is a dream which will pass quickly, without giving us the chance to last for eternity.

- That just about happens to all genuine things in Nag, - he replied.

- I have the impression, - she paused for an instant, as if wavering when confronted by something she had never openly admitted, - that these will be the last happy moments we experience together, Rrok.

He almost screamed out in terror. Zibel, just like him, suffered under the same welter of fear and anxiety.

- It will pass Zibel, don't worry.

She laughed and stood up to get dressed. Her initial sadness seemed to be receding. Rrok enjoyed looking at her while

she put on her clothes. The white chemise rustled softly, unable to conceal the perfect, rounded curves of her supple body as though rubbed by a waxy medium. She threw on her elegant, blue dress which was tailored by a famous designer from across Lake Cud. "This dress would be sufficient to part us forever," - Rok thought with skepticism, as she threw over her narrow shoulders a white jacket that was somewhat wrinkled from sitting awkwardly on the chair.

- What are you going to do tomorrow, Rok? - she asked him.

- I am going to the art exhibit with Basri.

- Whereas I am sentenced to stay with my mother. It's my brother's birthday tomorrow and, obviously, we are going to toast the occasion with a drink.

- Sounds awesome, like we've got something better to do? Nothing much except to listen to Mek's familiar hogwash.

- Even that has its own importance for us. These days, strung up by all the gossip as we are, the opening of a modern art gallery lets you know that something unusual is happening.

- It is truly unusual, - he affirmed with his eyes still on her, - but I'm afraid, Zibel, that it's a cover for some other new deception.

- We are all accustomed to saying that, - she said somewhat irritated by his sarcastic tone, - but now something good is really

happening. Soon they will be starting the construction of the first track over Lake Cud.

- Why would Pigal allow such a cataclysm while everything else he has done until now has been the total opposite? - Rrok asked her, almost throwing his hands over her full, spry shoulders.

- Well, he is doing it, - Zibel said as she drew closer to face him, somewhat pale, - compelled by circumstances larger than him. But will your noggin ever listen to reason? You're always just the man to spoil my good cheer.

He was about to add something else to the conversation but she placed a hand over his lips.

- Enough, Rrok! You have a gallows sense of humor. We've had it up to our nose with that, don't you think?

- You are right, - he said, picking her up and carrying her almost at a run to the locked door. - I am a first class jackass, capable of infecting the world with just my sick sense of humor.

He planted a long kiss on her lips.

- Do not go outside, - she implored him as he wanted to walk her down the stairs. I have the feeling that they are watching me, Rrok. I've seen a couple of shadows following close behind me.

- Might they be your father's Sherlock Holmes, perhaps? - he asked jestingly.

- I don't believe so, - she said somewhat relieved, - but at any rate, that means you can't walk me down the stairs, you understand that?

He nodded and, before he could kiss her again, she ran down the steep steps.

XIV

Together with Basri Mema, they entered the brightly lit hall of the new art gallery trailing behind the functionaries and the crowd of artists. The new building was rectangular and commodious, with the main space occupied by the large exhibit halls themselves and the two anterooms.

Rrok's emotions were slightly on the edge at how Basri's painting would be received, with its skirting of their requirements, according to a style that the critic Gareb Kola had labeled a "Picasso Imitation" just a few days earlier. That had seemed to weaken Basri's courage a little.

- Mek Doda is expected to attend, too!
- someone exclaimed behind Rrok, his voice ragged with enthusiasm.

- Oh, - Basri whispered quietly and turned his head meaningfully toward his friend, - it must be a big banquet tonight. You just wait and even Pigal might show up. Didn't I tell you, Rrok?

- It's too early to say anything definite about that, - Rrok replied as his watchful eyes kept looking for Zurba in the large crowd of people spread out all over. He spotted him among a group of well-known painters, red-cheeked and extremely excited, maybe hoping for something of importance, as the others were listening attentively.

- He'll arrive at the eleventh hour, - he added after a short while, but without malice or intending to upset his friend, - or better yet, he'll put the final points where Mek had previously laid down the commas.

- You're such a skeptic! Or a Robert Lohkamp, you take your pick. Are you like this with Zibel, too, you poor soul? Do you know that a human being is very much like a delicate crystal vase?

- Be quiet already! - Rrok growled angrily, as he didn't like being teased about his biggest soft spot, - In the times we are living through, even without meaning to, everything turns black with soot, Basri.

- For the love of god, enough already! - Basri implored him.

They heard a loud uproar coming from the gallery's entrance followed by wild, uncontrolled applause and then, suddenly, a quiet which forewarned of another round of enthusiastic approbation.

- What is it? - asked Basri, leaping up to his feet.

- Mek has arrived, - Rrok replied. The ones to whom he gives the fattest cuts of meat are applauding him now. And you, Basri, why aren't you clapping?

- I don't have any reason to do that, - Basri said in a sour mood, a little envious of everyone else applauding vigorously all around him. - These people surprise me, he added, they say one thing in the corridors and they behave in a totally opposite manner here.

- They are just trying to maintain their existence, - Rrok said, feeling that he was being pressed right up against the wall paved with white plaster.

The crowd in front of them suddenly leaned back as though cracked by a whip. Among the heads darting back and forth eerily, there appeared a long corridor spearheaded by Mek's personal bodyguards, framed by rows of clapping hands. Mek passed through the corridor followed by Zurba scurrying behind him, with beads of sweat forming on his plump face.

- He is not in good humor today, - Rrok said, who was following Mek's passage through the crowd with an almost hypnotizing stare, - and would you look at poor Zurba, dashing as though for the finish line. - Rrok sneered lightly and even Basri found himself smiling.

Someone they hadn't noticed until then

turned his head with reproach toward them. His eyes fixed carefully upon Rrok and Basri as though he was surveying something abnormal.

The two of them kept being pushed further and further away from the center of the attention. The photo-reporters kept clicking their cameras boisterously. Rrok, suddenly feeling hot, stood up on his toes to get a better look at the center of the visitors. At that moment, Mek had stopped in front of Basri Mema's tableau. He heard someone in that area calling out his friend's name: "Basri, Basri!" Many in the crowd turned their heads toward the back of the gallery, someone said "He's not here", but it was followed swiftly by the countermanding reply of "No, he is here, over here!" Rrok saw the man who had looked at them suspiciously grab Basri by the sleeve and snarled like a madman: "Go, go, Mr. Mek is asking for you!" And Basri, unwillingly, without fully comprehending why they were asking for him or why he was required there, rushed headlong toward the place the crowd was leading him as it opened up in front of him. Suddenly, the hall fell quiet. Only the click of a delayed blitz was heard. Then, he heard Mek questioning Basri about something but he was unable to make out what it was about. He became all ears. In the void that stretched in front of him, as though emerging from the gaping mouth of

a cave, he heard the trickle of conversation already unfolding between Mek Doda, the official critic Gareb Kola and Basri Mema.

- That's interesting, - Mek stated in an uncertain voice, something altogether different from what our best artists have presented, is that not so, Mr. Gareb?

- Yes, without a doubt, - replied Gareb with flattery, who was nearly fainting from the honor that was being bestowed upon him so openly and publically, - it's something in the Picasso style. Resembles his "Young Ladies of Avignon" or the like, but performed with greater artistic courage.

Mek Doda's face furrowed. Picasso's name had always been mentioned negatively by Pigal and he was aware that unpleasantness always followed when he forgot Pigal's secret dislikes.

- Isn't he the one that until yesterday was considered a heretic?

- He has always been a heretic, Mr. Mek, - Gareb proclaimed. We have placed his recent artwork on the forbidden works list. Nonetheless, we cannot deny his popularity...

- Ah, Gareb, you are such a conservative, - Mek laughed cheerfully. He put an arm around the official critic, as though they shared a confidence, and pulled him closer. - Well now, not everything in Nag has to remain at a standstill. Why should we not

encourage the spiritual outbursts of our youth?

Mek turned toward Basri and patted him kindly on the shoulder, but his eyes were very cold.

- At any rate, your work displays a fine taste, Mr. Basri, the young ladies bathing in the river, beautiful, very beautiful. But I have one piece of criticism I'd like to offer, why haven't you dressed them up a little more? You've portrayed them nearly naked. In that fashion, they rather give you the chills. There's too much sexuality and that might be better suited, perhaps, in a night club.

- Mr. Mek, we should not hide the beauty of the human body, - Basri said rather loudly, having recovered himself somewhat. - Since five centuries ago, Raphael has given us his example in following the laws of truth and beauty, Mr. Mek. I have only duplicated that which we all experience every day before taking a bath or going for a swim in the sea. In other words, without meaning to, we submit ourselves to the apple of love.

- Right, that's right, - Mek replied, displeased but still wearing a perfunctory smile.

Basri was aware of some of his colleagues' approbations.

- Congratulations! - exclaimed Rrok, without giving any hint that the entire exchange had seemed like a sham to him.

You've finally enlisted yourself among Mek's elite. Just wait till they start hanging your paintings on their walls, to be commanded only by Pigal's key.

- Leave me alone, Rrok! - Basri cut him off bitterly. - You should be feeling sorry for me. I have this impression that Mek didn't approve of the painting; he only pretended to like it. He seemed completely blank.

- It's not like he knows anything about the arts! He is just another puppet under Pigal's command. While Gareb's role is to be used as bait. What do you expect from such a pansy?!

- Who said I expect anything? - Basri snarled angrily. - Actually, now I rather regret showing it here.

- You did well. It was a slap in Gareb's face and of the others like him. You showed what a true artist is capable of creating.

- Perhaps! - Basri responded and headed toward the gallery's exit.

He did not wish to stay there any longer.

- Come on, let's toss back a glass of cognac! - Rrok said with concern, seeing his friend looking so downcast and forlorn, - you're neither the first nor the last. Pull yourself together, Basri, you old donkey and failed artist!

- I think I worked in vain, - Basri said grumpily, as he walked behind him with

uncertain steps.

- Are you starting with that again? You've got to put Mek and Gareb out of your mind. They're not worth losing one iota of what little good humor we barely manage to create.

They entered in the first open tavern they encountered. They left about an hour later, when all the lights in the gallery halls across from them had been turned off. They were a little drunk and they swayed lightly. They walked slowly and silently in the semi-darkness of the square without turning their heads towards the nearly snuffed-out gallery.

XV

Zurba Sina did not feel in high spirits on that day.

He stood seated in front of his writing desk, with his eyes toward the window, beyond which there undulated the city's grey landscape. The teal colored steeple of the bell tower, which occupied the center of the landscape, split the sky in equal parts stitched with thick billows of clouds. It was a view that he was accustomed to and he found it relaxing every day.

He had a sort of presentiment that, inadvertently, he was being encircled by a

compulsory lack of attention. Previously, they would not have forgotten about him; now they were neither inviting him nor notifying him about their secret meetings and this sidelining was driving him mad with each turn, unable to unmask that enmity surrounded by a mystery of smiles.

“Perhaps it’s just a nightmare,” – he muttered, his eyelids moist by thin tears that unconsciously made his eyes burn. He had become overly sensitive recently. He took a pencil and paper and started drawing the teal belfry, as though knitting away some of the worries that haunted him. “What is happening, what is happening,” – he murmured plaintively, – “what’s happening here, Artemis?”

The knock on the door covered in blue velvet brought him out of his reverie. “At last,” – he said and his nearly extinguished eyes brightened up. He was being called to see Mek. “Going to see Mek, again,” – he thought somewhat relieved. – At last, they remembered that I am still alive, that even I might have something to say, hopefully to gainsay something, since that would give me the chance and the traction to hang on to a sliver of hope.” He walked behind the ceremonial clerk on the thick Persian carpet that dampened the sound of their footsteps. The clerk was short, formal, and wore a brown suit that was out of fashion,

narrowing at the bottom and wide in the middle; the clerk stood as though frozen in front of him, with only his shadow betraying that he was not leaden but rather made of flesh and blood. "That's all I needed right now to give me the chills," Zurba thought, feeling like the fire had gone out of him.

Mek, brisk and lively, his black eyes scintillating with a shrewd intelligence, was discussing something among a group of well-known functionaries. The critic Gareb Kola flaunting a recently purchased topcoat from the markets beyond Lake Cud (it was being said that he had chaperoned Mek's daughter in Paris and at the Louvre), cheerfully flashed a fleeting smile at a dismayed Zurba. He held a baton in his hand like a conductor. It seemed as if Gareb was going to beat the newly arrived Zurba with it, so rapidly was he twirling it in his hand.

- Ah, and here is Zurba," - Mek said somewhat relieved, - it's a good thing they found you. We were discussing about matters of personal taste and preferences with Mr. Gareb. He is against Picasso whereas I abstain because I think he confounds everybody.

Mek did not wait for Zurba's reply but nodded at clerk Betin who turned off the lights with a sharp movement. The cabinet was engulfed by darkness, like being in a movie theater. Suddenly, the silent atmosphere was pierced by a torrent of

light. They had turned on a projector. On the smooth, white wall, almost at their eye level, there stood the enlarged outlines of Basri Mema's painting "The Bathing Young Ladies." This came as a shock to Zurba as he realized that a new round of objections were now being directed toward him, given that Mek was devoting such marked attention to the study of a tableau. In front of Zurba's clouded eyes, five young ladies seemed to emerge out of the flowing river, nearly naked, wearing only a thin blue loincloth, as though drunk with the water, the sun, vigor, and lust. They were almost leaping on top of each other, so lively and exuberant, their ivory breasts contrasting with their pleasantly tanned skin. Zurba had like that tableau a few days ago, as had Mek and the others, but now it seemed to be on display to face criticism. Zurba could feel his back and hands grow damp with sweat. He realized that the real judge must have been Pigal but, as usual, it would be Mek Doda that would obliterate him.

In the artificial dusk, Zurba saw the upward trajectory of Gareb's baton tracing a curve from the feet to the nubile loins of the young lady, who bore a surprisingly remarkable resemblance to Zibel. He had noticed a certain similarity even earlier but today he noticed the likeness to Zibel more than ever before. The others must have

noticed the resemblance, as well. Standing behind them, Zurba scrutinized their obscure, almost imperceptible, movements as they seemed to focus on the thin baton which closely traced the other Zibel's thighs. He shivered with the realization that this whole act was not just a coincidence. "Oh god, how far will the mind go to drive a man to his death!" - he thought.

- Look here, gentlemen, - Gareb spoke sharply, like a military officer, after he had teased the young lady's mirthfully heaving breasts with the point of his stick, - a striptease dressed up as art. And here there is a head above the water, seemingly cut off by someone. - The critic with a lock of white curls hopped next to the painting's distorted reflection on the wall as though he himself was about to jump into the river. - It's an egregious symbol, gentlemen, and these geometric lines are merely influenced by Picasso.

An uneasy silence fell immediately in the semi-dark room burdened with dreadful misgivings. Zurba could feel the uncomfortable sweat soaking his back and hands again.

- Yes, - Mek Doda affirmed meekly. His voice seemed to shatter a glass placed in front of them on the wall, - as you have illustrated for us, Gareb, it's clear that not every work of art is good for us.

- It's an assault on women's honor and their final mission in life, - Gareb's nearly deadly voice kept impugning Basri Mema's tableau, - it's a call toward prostitution because it incites man's aggressive urges. According to Freud, what we have here is a possibly sordid siege of the subconscious.

- It really is a very complex tableau which can only be decrypted by a dangerous key, - said Mek with his back always turned toward Zurba. - I have the impression that every time we attempt to open up, the countries beyond Lake Cud begin their assault upon us, initially to lower our combat morale. Picasso's incursion is followed by stripteases, then the honor of our women is at stake, the naked body is modeled with the utmost shamelessness, while the opposite should be championed - the warrior women. An attack to quickly vanquish us along with our entire honor.

- Impressionism, jazz, rock 'n roll, pop-art, cubism, as you can see, they're weapons with poisoned treats, and their first casualty is the resolve of being Nag citizens - Gareb nearly screamed out triumphantly, his figure now domineering over all the others. A few days earlier he had sent Pigal a message requesting that art should become part of the collective system, subject to the needs of the community. This would also foster a stock of relatively similar people, which

would be easy to command, in the same way that termites are commanded according to a system centered around their queen.

- Very well, we got the idea, turn it off Betin! - Mek said, suddenly coming around to face Zurba, who had turned deadly sallow. - At any rate, Gareb is right, Zurba. It tragically appears that everyone is attacking us. Being the first to develop the theory of total isolation, Dok Zojzi was right, because, as I understand things, that's the only path that will allow Nag to be saved, to survive.

Mek lit up a cigarette.

- He is a saint, - said Gareb, referring to Dok Zojzi, but not as though he was addressing them, instead as if he was speaking to someone hiding in front of him, under the smooth surface of the white lacquered wall.

- A symbol, moreover - Mek answered with his face turning red, barely refraining from unleashing upon Zurba all the old hatreds.

XVI

Mek hadn't even indirectly threatened him, yet it was precisely this deliberate evasiveness that made Zurba feel that they had already crucified him. This was

the code that even cracked the doubts that had been hounding him lately. Pigal was embarking again on a new campaign of repression against the opposition, through the freedoms from restrictions which he had openly trumpeted recently, perhaps exactly for this covert purpose. Zurba, by accident or design, could become their scapegoat, as he had been one of the first to show his enthusiasm concerning the new ideas of overturning Nag's century-old seclusion by forging connections with the lands beyond Lake Cud. Was he entirely sure about that? Maybe yes, maybe no.

It was as if despair had nailed him on the comfortable seat and only now was he beginning to realize he was standing at the edge of the abyss, like the many others before him, the ones he had treated with cynicism. The "Cadillac" rode slowly through the city which seemed nearly devoid of activity. Only the square seemed a little livelier with the large shop-windows showcasing a few items that people no longer purchased since they had gone out of fashion. Food items were almost absent, except the occasional margarine packs; there were long waiting lines in front of the meat and vegetable stores, the people hunched over in their old frocks and black coats, as though stuffed inside some miserable self-defense bags. Zurba felt his heart sickening. "Is this what we have

worked for thus far? – he mused painfully, - for the waiting lines to grow longer, to empty out the store fronts, to remove the real dramas from the repertoire and replace them with false ones, to fabricate the serial novels of the parasites, to be afraid of a woman's body?"

Heavens above! Zurba Sina was shrinking under his large clothes. He loosened his necktie and with his plump white fingers he undid his buttoned up collar. He breathed in and tried to regain his usual clarity to help him evaluate his difficult position.

The "Cadillac" began its first turn after Pigal square. Suddenly, they saw a group of worried pedestrians standing in front of them, on the right side of the sidewalk. Something unusual must have happened because they looked pale, shocked and kept staring with fright toward a pile of dirt and wood planks which covered nearly half of the asphalt road.

- Shall I stop? – Berti asked worriedly, without even turning his head.

- Make it brief, just long enough to find out what's going on, - Zurba confirmed, not without suspicion.

Berti rolled down his window and called over with a nod to the traffic policeman who stood like a dunce behind the others.

- What's happened?

The policeman bent over just enough to peer inside the "Cadillac". When he saw Zurba he smiled obsequiously and whispered confidentially in Berti's ear:

- One of the house facades collapsed. A few bystanders were trapped in the rubble. They say two of them are dead but they haven't found the third one yet.

- What caused it?

- Merely for lack of nails, - the policeman answered.

- Drive off! - Zurba ordered in an alarmed voice. He couldn't stand conversations which told of tragic consequences. Even nails were scarce; wouldn't be long before all the wooden buildings started collapsing, and there were plenty of those in Nag. Then, the only thing standing will be the concrete buildings of the communist block.

Artemis was waiting for him at the top of the stairs with great worry, as was plain to see.

- How did you fare? - she asked in half a whisper, so she wouldn't be overheard by the gardener or by Beta who was standing her with a white towel in her hand.

- Let's talk inside, - he said gloomily and charged inside the villa.

He went straight to the dining room where the crystal chandelier still glared. He turned off the switch instinctively. The room plunged into semidarkness although objects

could be distinguished clearly without straining the eyes. He crashed with an “ugh” in the high-back couch at the head of the table that was already set.

- Do you want to eat? - Artemis asked him and without waiting for his reply called out to Beta angrily, - Come on, and bring the lunch. Don't forget the wine!

Artemis lost all her composure when she noticed her husband so dazed and distraught even though Zurba was trying to hide it from her.

He drank his first glass of wine in one breath.

- Well, tell me! - she urged on.

Leave me alone, I've had it up to here and I can't stand it anymore! - Zurba exploded.

- Did something happen? Go on, talk to me. - Artemis insisted on her track.

- Forget it. Things are in a bad way, I can't rightly explain it, but I can sense that Pigal and Mek want payback on some score with me. They charged me with all the sins of Kanad Dika's de-isolation theory. Or, at least, all the artistic sins.

- Oh god, is that so? - Artemis howled, frozen on the couch.

- Something bad is about to happen. Pigal is planning a new witch hunt. Perhaps he undertook all this liberalization farce in order to root out those he dislikes

because they threaten his power. With this opportunity, he hits two birds with one shot.

He drank thirstily the second glass of "Kagor". It was only afterwards that he realized what he was telling his wife. He opened his eyes and shivered with compassion. Even though he was unfaithful to her from time to time, he was still used to her. He could sense that she loved him in her fashion and wished for him to reach higher stations; she was ambitious for more than she should and so much that she shouldn't.

- What is going to happen now? - whispered Artemis with her hands clasped over the table.

Zurba did not touch the beefsteak or the salmon fillet at all. He wet his parched lips with a drop of wine; it was the only thing that could quell the fire that burned inside him.

- I don't know, Artemis. Better to wait a little while longer. Maybe I frightened you more than I should have.

-I'm more frightened about the children. Berti has started making a lot of absences. I have the impression that he is plotting something. Night after night, hundreds of people are leaving from Nag illegally. They are headed for Cud. It's a new theory Zurba, which has always seduced your son.

It's better for him to go away; I would counsel the same for Zibel. The way things

are going, just wait and we'll see them declare an eternal seclusion, so that no living thing can get in or out.

- What is it that's happening, Zurba? Where are they trying to take us?

- This has happened before with the pyramids in ancient Egypt, - Zurba could feel how the expensive wine was firing up his blood. - After the pharaohs died, all the rest were buried in the pyramid together with them. It was a nearly unnatural collective sacrificial offering. In a few words, the entire empire nearly perished within a day.

XVII

Rrok Dalia finished the last task in his hand and waited somewhat impatiently for Basri Mema to stuff a few old items in his suitcase.

- How is it you always concern yourself with all these small trifles! - he called from the front door, his eyes following his friend's sluggish movements.

As it had been announced, whether today or tomorrow they were expecting the onslaught of a fierce attack from Lake Cud, which in his mind was merely just another bluff by Pigal.

- One moment, dear friend, - Rrok answered.

After a minute, they both started going down the sloping stairs. It was cold in the street. At every turn, their noses were pierced by the all-pervading smell of moldy wet objects. It had been raining steadily for nearly ten days. The old asphalt was dotted with deep, murky ponds which were splashed by clanging busses with glassless windows and cars with rusty fenders.

- I'm bored stiff with this rain, - said Basri as they entered in a small coffee shop away from the main road.

It was a small tavern with five or six tables, with a small front counter holding several old vermouth bottles on a glass stand. Cognac and Fernet were sparse and were only out on rare occasions. Thus, they had found a safe place to drink vermouth. They ordered the first double shots and sat next to the wide window, so as not to sit facing the door which opened and closed frequently. They felt a little safer in that cloistered corner. Lately, the eavesdroppers had grown to such an extent that it impossible not to think that they now worked with very tiny microphones. It was said that once they recorded a newlywed couple that, among the frenzied grunts and moans of sexual intercourse, they had insulted a prominent personage. The next day this couple had been accused of dangerous political gossip and had been deported to the deserts beyond

the Bug plateau.

Instinctively, Basri swept his hand under the table while laughing.

- Hope they haven't put a bug on our trail, - he said, finishing in one gulp the rest of the vermouth in his glass.

- It's like we've all got a screw loose in our heads, - answered Rrok, who ordered two more double shots so that the table wouldn't be empty. He hated drinking glasses standing on completely empty tables.

- How could we not have a few loose screws with all this turmoil we've experienced?

- We were jinxed since birth, - Rrok said, - we were unlucky to live through an isolation period. We are a lost generation in every respect, like Robert Lohkamp or Gottfried Lenz.

- Cheers then, Lohkamp! Long live futility and the empty life!

- Cheers, Gottfried Lenz!

They laughed and tossed back half of their drinks in a flash, not wishing to finish them all at once.

- Even as we speak, we should have at least seen the Louvre, - Basri started to say and then added: the world today has surpassed even the models of Modigliani, Picasso, Braque, while here we cover them with a black curtain. We don't esteem art or individuality but applaud daubers and faint

political veneers instead. We are fashioning our own coffin instead of fashioning the sun.

- We are a lost generation, - Rrok added after a while. Cheers then, you stupid ant!

They ordered another round. The waitress brought them the entire bottle. She placed it on their table with an exaggerated politeness and they laughed at her gesture without malice.

- Better to leave this here, - she told them, - at the pace you seem to be going, you will certainly wind up ordering a third and fourth bottle.

- How divine!

They drank in silence. Rrok kept looking at Basri. For the last two days people all over the town had been talking about his "Bathing Young Ladies" tableau. Now it was being discussed as an ultraliberal piece. They had started to peck at it in the official press after Garb Kola's carping critical review, which had deliberately placed it in the category of works that bring discredit to the honor of the arts. Basri started to get wry looks everywhere and the greetings kept getting colder and colder. Like Rrok, he became surrounded by a total solitude. This common trait drew them closer to each other. They expected to be called again in the community as they had called in dozens of others before. They often thought of Kanad Dika, not without a pang of pain.

- When are you heading for Bushtrima?

- Basri asked him in a thready voice.

Rrok had been considering going to meet Kanad Dika for the last two days, having heard that he was in ill-health. But he was tired and weary. Recent events had made him grow even more silent.

- Today, I think.

- They say he is very ill.

- It's not anything unusual, Basri. A lot of talented people get sick these days.

- Oh god, - whispered Basri and quickly finished the last of the vermouth in his glass, not without good cheer, - just a word out of one's mouth is enough to land a man on the road to Bushtrima.

- Shall we order another round? - Rrok asked.

- No, or else you'll end up getting drunk, - Basri said curtly, who was familiar with Rrok's habit of overdrinking.

- Let me get drunk, then. It's the only thing that we are allowed to do in the way we wish.

- God damn it! My tableau, "The Bathing Young Ladies", deserved something a little better. I'm told they have recorded it on tape and project it on the wall in front of the community council as an heretical work. They have taken it apart piece by piece, like a machine that brings death. They say it displays a lot of pornography and striptease,

whereas the painting truly extols the unadulterated beauty of the human body.

Rrok laughed bitterly, finished what was left in the glass, perhaps the sludge of the vermouth, and licked his lips.

- You shouldn't drink any more, Rrok,
- Basri chided him gently.

The waitress was washing the glassware. Her healthy forearms were steamy. For some reason, an enigmatic smile danced on the thin corner of her beautiful mouth. She was comely, voluptuous, and not indifferent toward the hungry glances she got from men, but she was always sparse in what she gave back. Basri had wanted her to model up in his room several times. He often dreamed of undressing and drawing her for his tableau, as it was obvious she had a very beautiful chest, but she had kindly refused, without getting angry like some other women had. Despite that, he used her head as one of his models, the same way he had done with Zibel's face, while the body lines came from two other women which had been paid beforehand for their work. Rrok had found one of them completely naked in the cold room, lying diagonally in Basri's bed, with her thick legs dropped on the carpet. Her petite breasts, consumed from paid love, lacked the beauty that enchanted him in Zibel. She hardly reacted when he walked into the room, except to sluggishly

cover up her exposed buttocks with a corner of the sheet and looked at him with a pair of almost shameless eyes. Basri displayed no reaction in front of her nude body ideally positioned for love making, except to cough gently and ask her to move different parts of her lithe body, from time to time.

- You didn't sleep with her? - Rrok asked him a little later. - She wasn't bad, I was starting to get the tingles while looking at her in that obviously erotic pose.

- Do you want me to call her? - Basri replied coldly, and, when the declining answer came, he explained that she was just a paid model which didn't arouse the slightest lustful feelings in him. He had slept with her once, when he had been slightly drunk, right on the carpeted floor and he had been surprised at her agility at igniting his passion to exhaustion.

XVIII

Again, the quiet, serpentine road of Bushtrima, perhaps the same unstinting rain again which fell over the entire world. Rrok Dalia held his open umbrella in his cold hands, as did the other passenger next to him. He was mulling over the things that troubled him in order to get his mind off the bothersome journey. Apparently, his

patience was nearing exhaustion as were all the other forces holding the world together. He was becoming consumed slowly, almost day by day, for lack of this or for want of that, so that now that his end was nearing, like a vial of balsam that is used to heal wounds that never become crusted but keep spreading despite his will and best wishes, if not in spite of everything, that he might be dreaming one morning. He couldn't object when he saw things roll backwards, because everybody did the same. Like a self-protective shell, he wore the armor of indifference, which at times he took off in wrath, in order to turn into someone else, until he got called into the offices of clerk Betin, where the icy tongue of word games reigned.

Bushtrima came into view again from the corner of a turn in the road. The motions of the truck broke the landscape into very small pieces jumping left and right; for a split of a second there, the house of Kanad Dika glistened like a white bird in those heights, and, in that instant of the car's acceleration, Rrok could make out the broken fence and the fallen roof.

The other passenger, apparently moving to loosen up his muscles, almost fell down. He placed his hands on the lurching floor and gave Rrok a bewildered look, who had also turned sallow due to the jolting

motions of the truck.

- Damned road! - he said with a forced smile.

Rrok nodded affirmatively. He stopped at the coffee shop at the Pass to check if Kanad was inside, and then climbed toward the solitary house. The courtyard was deserted, abandoned from human care, covered by thorny twigs and the soggy fallen branches of the Judas-tree, which had been piling on top of one another since last autumn. A red cardinal hopped on the branches of a wild rose, twitted melancholy in a metallic chirp and flew toward the great walnut tree in the middle of the yard. Rrok rapped on the door and when there was no reply he gave it a slight push. The door opened with a great gnashing sound and slammed on the wall.

- Kanad! - he called out from below.

The house remained silent like a big, emptied-out ark. The only sounds heard were the slow rainfall on the roof shingles turned black with the passage of time and the incessant trickle of water in the battered rain gutters. Rrok felt the anxiety of something terrible invade his heart. It seemed to move around the deserted house in the form of an abandoned soul. For a moment he thought, not without a twinge in his heart, that they might have interned Kanad again, or even worse, that he would find him dead. The way he lived, almost isolated in this tower, it

wouldn't be a huge surprise if some calamity was to befall him and no one would find out. After his stint in Bug, Kanad was isolated and, even worse, he would not go down to the coffee shop at the Bazaar Pass except rarely, always sunder strict surveillance by two professional watchmen.

He climbed up the stairs which squeaked as if someone was cracking walnuts. Silence and dereliction reigned in the second floor as well. The wind mixed with rain droplets blew in through the broken glass in the windows and soaked the green floor with its broken wooden planks.

Not without hesitation, he pushed open the door in front of him. He saw the faint glint of the blue curtains, unfurled all the way to the floor, the white metallic bed and Kanad Dika's gray haired and withered head, almost mask-like, resting limply and tiredly on the soft pillow. He looked like a corpse.

- Kanad! - Rrok called out more to himself.

The recumbent man opened his eyes. Relieved, Rrok turned on the light switch.

- Do not trouble yourself, Rrok, - he heard Kanad's frail voice, which sounded like it came from inside a deep cave, - they've cut off the electricity, just like they've broken my window glasses, the roof shingles, and the doors.

Rrok sat down, shaken. His hands fell tiredly on Kanad Dika's gently clasped hands, which now were cold, feeble. Only in his eyes could he still detect some of that old flame remaining which hadn't been spent yet. They were in every way Kanad's eyes, with a sprinkle of irony on top, and a touch of subtle melancholy.

- You look in terrible health! - Rrok said finally.

- It's not that bad, - Kanad replied smiling, as though to give heart to his friend's distress, - it's a little different today because my niece isn't here. Do you feel sorry for me, eh?

- I do, Kanad, - Rrok admitted gently. - I don't have much else left to say. I have become the enemy of the soothsayer Circe.

His words fell like a whip on Kanad Dika.

- We shouldn't play games with what happens to us, - Kanad continued, now more vigorously than before, perhaps moved by the optimism which never abandoned him. - That which is black, remains black, Rrok.

From the other end of the nightstand, he took out a pitcher of Raki along with two small, wide footed glasses and slowly placed them on the nightstand.

- Have a small drink, Rrok, or better yet, let's have a drink together. What does Basri call you, Lohkamp? You, my friend,

truly have an air of Remarque's heroes. Like them, you are too honest and too loyal, or too tired by what is happening all around us.

He took a sip of Raki and seemed to feel a little better.

- How are things going over there? - he then inquired in a more lively tone.

- The same things as before, except worse and more backward.

- That bad?

- That goes without saying, Kanad. At first, they started implementing some ideas from your theory of de-isolation, but, as always, they employed them to their opposite effect, to isolate their adversaries.

- It's an immediate strike because they will try by all means to hold on to what they have once achieved with tooth and nail. It's still the same way of ruling, the same privileged people who are unwilling to move while the world progresses unceasingly. The only way for them to achieve that goal with a modest number of casualties is to invent an imaginary siege and a strengthened defense, imaginary as well.

He became silent as though to gauge the effect of his words on Rrok's emotional state. He had said a lot, after many days of silence, except for the long monologues with his solitude and weariness. Rrok listened, not without a mystical thrill, the quasi-mythical fall of the raindrops on the few remaining

shingles on the roof. A stone flew through the air and crashed down with a muffled sound on the hallway, like a round pebble rolling inside a holed through drum.

- They're always throwing stones at me, - Kanad said, nearly drunk. - They terrorize me by paying thugs to sling stones at me. There isn't a single window glass left standing on the courtyard and they'll soon get started on this side, too.

His hand, as though seeking support, fell gently on Rrok Dalia's hand.

- It was very good of you to come. I need noble people.

Suddenly, they heard the roll of a large stone across the crumbling house.

- They must have paid him more since he's throwing larger rocks, - Kanad stated quietly. - Don't move! - he said to Rrok, when the latter almost got up to go to the ante-chamber, - it doesn't matter, by now I'm used to this long, psychological torture which will never cease because it's done by people who cast the stone and hide the hand.

He laughed perhaps mirthfully, while Rrok seethed inside with internal wrath. He wanted to leap like a madman in pursuit of those hooligans until he seized them with his powerful hands and slammed them on the cobblestoned street.

- This is happening because my theory has placed them in a difficult position, Rrok.

They use it from time to time only for their ill purposes, or when they find themselves in a bind, or close to death. Then, when they are assured that they will live another four or five years in peace, they rush to hide it in terror inside their safes and, as if I had been the cause of all the troubles they make up themselves, they begin torturing me again.

While chatting, they hadn't even noticed that it was almost evening. The door opened and his silent niece came inside. She left a white bundle with bread and cheese on the table and sat obediently, almost fearless, on the couch next to Kanad.

- She is my white angel, - Kanad said wearily, - as soon as she walks in, even the paid stones stop falling.

He took a white sheet of paper and with a pencil drew a closed circle in front of Rrok, who watched amazed that nearly strange display of life.

- My dream still remains for Nag to take advantage of its favorable position, no risk of any assault or danger, as Pigal's heralds like to foretell. Four highways wouldn't be a bad start for the exchanging of values that the world today reasonably creates, without excluding the airports and helicopter landing pads.

- Get up, Rrok, - Kanad said sleepily, after a moment. The Raki, like a drug taken in small but uninterrupted doses had a

powerful effect on his tired mind, - it's getting late. Nag is far away. There's nothing more you can do here.

Nonetheless, Rrok didn't go anywhere during that entire long night, cruelly interrupted only by the waking moments in his sleep, coming and going randomly. Occasionally he covered up the little girl, huddled poorly on the big couch, curled up like a white cat. Kanad went in and out of sleep, smiling childishly, rambling old stories, almost like fairy tales, like a traveler from a privileged land reserved only to those who know how to hope and dream. A few times he went into coughing fits as though he were in death's throes.

Rrok left him still asleep when he went out in the courtyard. He considered returning with Basri in a couple of days to bring him some food and a few necessary items. He descended the slopes of Bushtrima with a big void in his heart, as though he shared in an undeserved guilt.

XIX

The moment arrived when it dawned on Rrok that they were striking him too, in order to isolate him completely, like a ship whose sailors were drowning one after the other.

He was still under the grip of Kanad's drama and hadn't processed the suffering to the full, when they told him that Basri had been sent to the wastelands of Bug the previous night. He found the room in shambles, with the mattresses on the ground and the paintbrushes strewn everywhere, as though crazed children had been playing inside. One of the nightstands had been knocked down and its corner had leaked an azure trail of gouache on which somebody had stepped. The easel had been pushed aside to the end of the room, the canvas hanging over like a white sheet of paper upon which Basri hadn't been able to sketch anything more than the hasty outlines of Zibel's features. Across the canvas, someone had smeared haphazardly in black brushstrokes, as though placing the signature mark of death.

He sat down on his bed, all his strength sapped. His legs couldn't hold him up anymore.

"Oh God!" - he said in shock and heaved a heartfelt sigh. An ebbing hope reminded him that he still was a man of courage and intellect, and that everything that was happening shouldn't frighten him that much. He recalled how stoically Kanad Dika had endured the knocks. Perhaps he was a man that hadn't asked too much from life and that losing it wouldn't cost him as

dearly as it would to the others.

“Oh God!” - he sighed again and drew closer to the glass as though it could pacify the darkness in his soul. Through the glass, he saw someone talking to a woman on the sidewalk across from him. Perhaps he wanted to sleep with her. Maybe he kissed her raunchily, shamelessly, without noticing that two watchmen were glaring at them severely from the corner while the two of them held a small umbrella over this miserable winter weather which shook every time they violently clasped each other to exchange more kisses. Rrok laughed for the first time, the way one laughs at a joke in the middle of a funeral. Then, the watchmen blew their whistle. The couple split up but instead of leaving in the same heading they took off in different directions. The girl took the umbrella whereas the boy, undecided, turned at the next corner with her purse still in his hands. For a moment he thought that this whole welter of rains, arrests, crepuscules, and violently separated kisses would, in a sunny day, look like the vision of a magical hallucination. He finally got out of that room which enclosed the most contradictory things in life and headed straight for Basri's tavern. Even the waitress welcomed Rrok with a kind of visible hesitation on her face. When she brought him the double shot of cognac at the table, she gave him a nearly

baffled look. These days his face looked drawn and insomnia had framed his eyes with dark bluish circles.

- What's up? - she asked in half a voice.

- What do you think, everything is going great, - Rrok answered brusquely, - without Basri, the table feels completely empty, Rukije.

- Can't you see what's happening? He is gone suddenly and without notice.

- I have no inkling where they've taken him. But I have a feeling that soon I might be seeing him in Bug.

- You too, Rrok? - she asked naively. Rrok's cold statement and the indifference with which it was expressed made her shiver.

- Just like everyone else, Rukije. We want to live just as one ought to, we want everything and they give us nothing, except for what can get us into troubles.

He drank almost half the draft in one breath.

- Don't drink so hard, - she chided him gently and smiled sweetly, - Basri used to drink too, but not as much as you. You are fantastic.

- It's the only thing that mollifies me, Rukije, - with a new sense of shame in his voice, - otherwise I would go mad from sorrow.

- Be that as it may, you should never go to excess.

- Even if it were poison, I would still enjoy it, anyways. It's like a woman that never turns down my wishes, Rukije.

- Ah, - she laughed carefree.

Pardon me, - he said with his eyes that were firing up immediately, - I didn't mean to say something like that, it's just that it was the only comparison that came to my mind right at that moment.

- Don't worry, - she said, without taking insult from his words, - Basri was even worse when he drank. He liked to tease me. He wanted me to pose completely nude for him. Basri used to say I have very beautiful body, even though my husband never tells me such things despite the fact I undress in front of him every night. He truly was a hedonistic artist.

- To Basri! - Rrok said with a cheer, trying to imagine how far might have gone the relationship between Basri and Rukije.

She smiled, too, and went back at the counter. Two new customers walked in and loudly called for Fernet. She filled up two large glasses and turned her back away from the room. Her shoulders shook from her sobbing. He turned toward the window and started thinking of Zibel. Like Rukije, she used to break down into tears often, with good reason or without, over near trivialities and unimportant things. But the woman behind the counter must have lost more than

many others, who would have posed nude all too easily. Now she felt guilty toward a man that perhaps she might never meet again.

Rrok realized there was nothing more he could do there.

He went outside and called Zibel from the street corner. The phone rang for a while then he heard her deep voice as though from a distance.

- Hello?

Without taking too long or waiting for her answer, Rrok told her that he would be waiting for her in his room in half an hour.

XX

In silence, she began undressing herself slowly. He could hear the faint rippling, almost inaudible sound of her clothes as they fell slowly on the bed's metal frame, until she seemed surrounded by a white mist. She lay down uncertainly next to him and pressed her head, as though exhausted, on Rrok's wide chest. Her long hair seemed to envelop his chest in a soft caress of musk scent so that, inebriated by her ethereal presence, he closed his eyes. He placed a hand on top of her and felt her full breast sear his palm.

- Wait! - she said after a moment, when he moved as though to shake off the torpor

that was slowly lulling him into sleep, - let me get myself together for a moment, Rrok. I ran over here in one breath, just because I didn't want to let you down now that Basri is gone.

- Why?

Something bad is happening, Rrok. My father is in trouble, too. They have him almost under house arrest. It's a very subtly calculated move, perhaps to completely destroy him emotionally before they exile him or some other similar fate.

He sprang up to his feet in surprise. He would have never believed this. Zurba had seemed like one of Pigal's safe officials, but now, suddenly, everyone had written him off, perhaps because he had been more honest than Mek with his thoughts. He felt his heart pounding in his chest out of fear for Zibel. The knocks, apparently, came from all fronts.

- Things looked completely different on the surface, Zibel, - he said after collecting himself from the first shock of the troubling news, - Zurba has done nothing else except obeying Mek's orders and he didn't deserve this wicked backstabbing happen to him.

- Anyway, this happened two evenings ago. Father came home crushed and he was under surveillance by two of Pigal's watchmen. If you were to cut him, no blood would come out. Without a word of

explanation, he locked himself up in his study and hasn't come out of there except to go to the bathroom. My mother takes the food to him. A few times I've overheard him speaking indignantly with Mek or Pigal on the phone, asking them for explanations.

He was speechless and completely dumbfounded, unable to believe what she was saying with her mournful cries and uninterrupted sobs. He caressed her hair gently, like to a child that has been through torture. He lovingly held her beautiful head with both hands and pressed it tightly against his chest as though to give her some encouragement. But even he felt as dejected as her.

- Don't worry, - he said softly as he kissed her on the cheek, - this might just be one of their games merely to scare Zurba, if it's not altogether some kind of mistake, which Pigal will certainly straighten out.

- Oh, Rrok, if only that were true, how nice that would be, but things are getting increasingly worse. They are very vindictive and merciless with people who disobey them, even if only once. As long as you are their slave, they don't mind, actually, they've concocted their theories in order to subjugate everyone, until they've hatched a cadre of robots.

- I know, - he replied, slightly relieved now that she was no longer crying, - but this

happens with everyone, Zibel, not just with you. Maybe it's harder on you because you stand to lose a great deal, but the others, even though they have less to lose, they understand that this whole thing is a rather badly rigged game, from which there is no escape unless you run away. Now everything here is getting swept away. Even that slither of coerced freedom which they only need to approve, they exchanged it with a new round of torture by mutes.

- God, oh God! - whispered Zibel and spun eagerly toward him. - What will happen to us, Rrok?

- Nothing, Zibel, nothing, just try to relax and get some sleep. Maybe this whole thing is a momentary giddiness, an anxiety game, placed before us by an unwitting fate.

He did not believe his own words but it was the only way to calm her down.

They suddenly heard two loud shots from across the square. As though it were thumped with a baton, the night momentarily rumbled everywhere with the sound of barking dogs and the sirens of the watchmen's vehicles, which seemed to magically emerge out of every dark corner of the streets. They heard the muffled sounds of dozens of running feet, voices, shouts on the loudspeaker, which echoed grotesquely in that mishmash of clashes and getaways.

Zibel curled up like a fist over his cold,

yet calm body.

- What is it? - she asked almost unconsciously and threw her arms around his neck.

- They are in hunt of the ones escaping through the borders, - he replied in a strangled voice. - Nag is becoming empty, Zibel. Every night, dozens if not hundreds of people are fleeing.

- Even Berti wants to leave. Or maybe he has already left, Rrok.

- There's nothing you can do, Zibel.

- Why don't the two of us leave together, Rrok? - she asked meekly.

- We can leave any time you like, - he said after kissing her lightly on the corner of her lips, - there's nothing that ties me to Nag. We can come back later, when the rains have stopped and Pigal is dead.

- Is he going to die someday?

- Certainly.

- Oh, no, no, - she then cried out in a doleful voice, which nearly caused Rrok to break down into tears, - I can't come with you, Rrok, I have my mother and father. I can't abandon them now; they already have a noose around their necks.

- Then, let's stay here together, - he laughed.

- Oh, you are so good and noble, Rrok.

She pulled herself tighter to his chest. Her hands invaded him gently, but thirstily,

as if finding protection from an assault coming from outside, which threatened at every moment to knock her on the head. In "Pigal" square, they had turned on the big loudspeaker. It played the melody of a new song about Dok Zojzi. Then, like the cracking of a door thrown opened violently, the unbearable voice of Mek Doda swept over them, delivering the words of one of his speeches given at an important meeting of the community council. He spoke in a heavy tone. His voice now dominated the entire frozen silence of the city.

- He is on the attack, - she uttered amidst her incessant sobbing. - They're starting on the same old story again, Rrok. Why do these people never change!

- Otherwise they couldn't govern, - Rrok replied, attentive to what was being said through the loudspeaker.

- What is he saying? - she followed up immediately.

- He harshly condemns the culture of the people beyond Lake Cud while, at the same time, he elevates Dok Zojzi to the level of a saint that should have greater power over everyone. He says they will erect a huge memorial at the center of "Pigal" square; one of the biggest ones mankind has ever built.

- How long shall we go on like this?

- It will keep going up to a point. Then, like everything that endures under a period

of compulsory existence, the entire system is going to unravel, having been propped up by force. It's going to be a real pandemonium, Zibel.

- "Oh God!" - Zibel exclaimed, shaken, and leaned enticingly on his shoulder.

- What a mess it'll be, Zibel!

She was silent for a minute, her gaze dissolved in nothingness. Then, as though she'd been jolted by an electric current, she leapt up to her feet and asked Rrok, who had been startled by this sudden change that came upon her.

- Oh, no-no-no, what time is it?

- Five minutes to seven, - he replied, peering through the dim room light at the clock's thin luminous hands, the scent of a woman and cognac wafting in the air.

- I have to go, Rrok, - she said, getting up.

It was evident she felt badly about something. She turned to face him and bent over to kiss him but without the earlier passion.

- Don't you feel bad that I'm going? - she asked him and drew her willing lips closer.

He tried to grab her haunches but she was almost insensible to his dubious nibbles. However, she did not object when he drew her almost violently under him and pulled up her shirt, all the way up to her breasts.

Then he remembered the turmoil raging inside her, how much she was suffering and enduring, and that she was granting him this concession out of her benevolent soul. For a moment, he stood over her body feeling crushed. He sensed that she was trying with all her might to make him believe that she was in the mood, but it was obvious that this time was different from those days when she was gripped by a frenzied passion.

- Get up, Zibel! - he sat on the side of the bed and anxiously looked for the glass of cognac. He found it on the chair and drank it in one gulp.

- What are you drinking? - she asked him while she looked for her clothes in the dark, relieved that she wasn't obligated to do what she didn't want to.

- It's Basri's cognac.

- Pour me a glass, too, Rrok.

- Oh, since when? - he asked her in a subdued voice.

- Since tonight. Give me a cigarette, too. Now I'm coming to understand those women who drink cognac and smoke in front of the men.

- Bravo! That's miraculous!

She drank some of the cognac almost without wanting to.

- Drink a little more, Zibel, - he insisted, - drink up, for it's the only means we have left to restore the morality that has stooped

so low.

- Cheers, Rrok! – she called out, kissing him a moment later in the lips lacking their earlier warmth, - perhaps this might be the last toast to our love.

- Cheers, Zibel! Don't give up the fight so easily. I will hurtle behind you like a shadow, wherever you may be. Even if my strength were to slacken, even if I were to die, I would turn into Constantine¹; I will fly through the winds and rains, through hail and snow, until I find you. It is the greatest feature that I have learned from all these hollow things that grimly surround us.

She leaned her whole body against him, soothed, absorbed by that voice that never let her get lost in boundless thoughts. She enclosed his hands and pulled him next to her, as though she were afraid he might disappear like a mirage. The firm tips of her breasts gently squeezed against Rrok's jacket and their shivers penetrated her body, like a life-giving bloom. They went down the stairs enthralled, without a care that they might be seen together. But nothing stirred in the hallway. They went outside in a hurry and immediately were confronted with the

1 Translator's note: Constantine is the main character in the Albanian legend "Constantine and Doruntine" that pertains to the Albanian epics. His figure represents moral aspects of the Albanian identity such as the promise kept. The legend speaks about Constantine who got resurrected to keep the promise he had given to his sister Doruntine.

rain and wind. Zibel took out the umbrella from her bag and opened it. She curled up close to him.

They took every shortcut but still arrived at Zurba's villa entirely drenched.

- See you tomorrow, - she said plaintively, as she reluctantly had to split up, - even though I don't want to go, Rrok.

- Don't go, - he said, - let's stay like this, or better yet, let's return to the room.

Zibel laughed softly and kissed him again on the lips. Then, before she could prevent the avalanche of kisses, she leapt back and went through the open door of the villa. The villa wasn't guarded the way it had been before, as a separate extremity of the power; now it lacked the aura of invulnerability.

XXI

Zurba could feel the rain slowly add to the worries that brewed inside him. He was leaning in vain against the blue sofa. He had turned off nearly all the lights, except the big, honey-colored lampshade on top of his desk. He felt the suffocating anxiety of what they were going to do with him. Zurba couldn't imagine how far they could go in their vindictiveness, but he knew it was not a negligible affair and it could extend beyond

the family and clan, maybe to include even those that had never laid eyes on him.

In this delirium of shocks and broken dreams, he heard, as though through sleep, the opening of the door across and the low voice of the two women. Certainly it must be Zibel. She had come home late again. She slept or went out with that guy they had told him about in the community, a very ordinary man, perhaps without a trade and without a future, a sort of frequent patron of taverns and alcoholic drinks. But now this did not trouble him greatly. Witness reports always emphasized the seediest details, so maybe he shouldn't lend them too much credence. In the troubles that had swallowed him, it would be premature to call Zibel to account, and her affairs didn't aggravate his situation.

He needed to take a quick decision, perhaps even to call Pigal and demand better explanations. He was aware that people were recalcitrant to directly confirm or admit these things, because that was done through the whispers of the guards, through secret conversations, which pretended to attempt thwarting something dangerous for the city, all the while they did the accounts to settle the scores with those that caused them the most trouble. "Oh God, - he said frightfully, - what is going to happen? How long will this emotional torture go on while awaiting something which, for better or

worse, can drive a man mad and encourage in people the crazy ideas of sincere suicide?" Perhaps this was something borrowed out of the practices of the Asiatic states, which gave the officials caught in wrongdoings the chance to confront the tentacles of their own troubled conscience. Many of them had preferred not to endure all those tortures of solitude and fear, after going from a life of luxury and full of privilege to the other extremely bleak corner of life, like a man crossing in a flash from a sunlit planet to a cave pierced only by death's rattle. Some drank the poison with their coffee, some took their lives with daggers, scimitars, revolvers, others wouldn't last that long and accepted a swift decapitation or being interned.

He had read somewhere that a man, in order to drown his sorrows, had gotten drunk on wine. Thus Zurba stretched his tired, short arm toward the bottle of the black "Kagor". He turned in his hand the bottle with its luxurious label, meant just for him and it occurred to him that this might be among the last bottles of "Kagor" he would enjoy, because afterwards they would be reduced to drinking third rate wine, or maybe nothing at all, like the overwhelming majority of Nag's families. He poured out of the bottle into his glass and drank it heartily. He felt that the drink had no effect as his nerves were too taut, so he downed another

glass filled to the brim, until he realized that a small flame was fluttering in his stomach. "Oh God, - he moaned plaintively, like those who don't know what they will be punished for and aren't particularly distinguished for their courage. He placed the bottle on the table and leaned back wearily against the sofa. Everything today was getting prolonged into torture. Three days and three nights under this cold shower of fear and ice. He hadn't deserved such a blow at all, but alas, that's how things went in Nag, depending on the whims of a man like Pigal. He thought of Basri Mema and his nudes, not without surprise.

Something in the Raphael style, he had told him cheerfully; indeed, it was a style that even Zurba enjoyed, something completely different in Nag, where the majority of the paintings were filled with swords and guns, and only rarely did one see a bit of revealing cleavage or part of a sun-kissed thigh. "It's something quite paradoxical," - he mused darkly. He himself had been coerced to sentence Basri Mema, precisely for the reasons he had previously enjoyed his artwork, and he hadn't had the courage to oppose them, while two days later Mek had sentenced Zurba himself. It was just like in the fairytale where the big fish eat the little fish.

The biblical outpour of rain still

continued outside, without ever stopping, as though to bury everything beneath a watery coffin. Through the window glass covered with water streaks, he noticed footsteps in the darkened garden and was stunned. His eyes peered through a gap in the window blinds and, not far from the faint illumination coming from one of the garden lights, he spotted the shadow of a man. "Surveillance," – he hissed with a shudder and a tangle of rage and hate welled up inside his chest. Now they are all over the garden, like those gray and black wasps swarming up and are watching over the demise of an official, of one that until yesterday they were kissing his shoe-tips.

As though in a dream, he heard the creaking of the door. With the fur coat thrown over her shoulders, the flannelette nightdress showing underneath, the bottom of which widened like a bell, there stood Artemis facing him, wearing a look on her face which Zurba found displeasing, as though it spelled his doom.

- Zurba! – she said.

He opened his eyes and she was looming very close even though a moment ago she had seemed to be very far. For a second, he looked at her with the hate of a man who has lost everything in gambling. Then, his eyes stopped irritably over her eyes, which were full of sincere sorrow.

- I made you coffee!

- Thank you!

He drank the coffee without any kind of enjoyment, with the absent-minded look of a man that doesn't know what he's doing.

- Did they call? - she asked him, as though to bring him back to his senses.

- No, - he said curtly, - give me more wine, - he added a moment later.

Artemis left running and he sighed with relief. This time, however, she was gone for too long and his eyes remained fixed on the door. He had this notion that he should absolutely be having some wine, as though he hadn't drunk wine before. She hated alcohol and had always given him grief about his vice, but tonight she was quicker to obey than on the other occasions.

She came back not carrying just one bottle, but two. She placed them on the small luxurious table and filled up two glasses. Then, she gave him a cigarette. She lit one up for herself and brought it up to her fleshy lips, which were blanched and blemished by her unrelenting use of lipstick.

- They are scoundrels, - she added after a while, when she could no longer endure his silence, like that of a stale grave.

- Yes, - said Zurba and smoked the cigarette with pleasure, - you did well with these cigarettes, Artemis.

- How terrible, after twenty years of

exemplary service! You have served them like no other, Zurba. And yet, they show no gratitude or mercy, since they seek to quickly push you deeper into the mud.

- Don't even think of such a thing. They won't go that far with the vengeance because what goes around comes around, Zurba objected.

- And what have you done to them, anyway?

- Absolutely nothing, except only that I have given them too much. But for Pigal that is not a virtue. Even the slightest doubt is enough to stoke up in him the fear of losing his grip on power.

- Oh God!

Artemis finished smoking the entire cigarette and pressed the butt on the ashtray with her manicured fingers. She saw how her husband was tormented by incessant doubts, like an animal that is being stalked by merciless hunters. During these three days of tortures he seemed to have declined physically as though three years had passed.

- If it were up to me, Artemis, - he said, while he swirled in his mouth the last of his precious wine, - I would make Nag into something completely different, not the way it is now, drown towards the end, even though they try to dress it up in brand new clothes.

- Why didn't you do that sooner? - she

asked without meaning to, impelled by a torturous tick, - you had the time but you didn't have the courage.

- And I'm never going to do it, - he admitted woefully, acknowledging that she was right, - they have always threatened us with the fear of losing our heads, after they've turned us into robots with all kinds of pointless tasks. Kanad Dika was right to insist, but would Pigal listen? He considered himself to be the navel of the world and he would never accept for someone to proffer him advice, let alone someone like Kanad whom they regarded as a psychopath. Like the silkworm, Pigal weaved his cocoon around us, because it was the only thing he knew how to do really well. Anyway, Artemis, who knows what they'll do with me. Take care of Zibel and Berti, take care of yourself. I have left you the valuables inside the safe here. Take them before Mek's watchmen arrive, do you hear me?

Through her tears, she nodded she understood. Zurba shuddered when he saw her in that state: miserable and alone in the face of dangers that could not be foreseen. He extended his hand and gently placed it on her lap. She gently held his hand as well, as though they were repeating something that for many years had been covered by the ashes of indifference.

- There's nothing to be afraid of, - he

said to encourage her, - maybe this whole thing is a false alarm, and instead, the total opposite is going to happen. Go get some sleep now, hopefully I'll call Pigal again in the morning and explain everything in detail. One shouldn't look at everything through dark-colored glasses. Come now, my dear, go check on Zibel! She's getting old enough to get married, we really need to find her a husband, otherwise who knows what kind of blunders she'll make.

Through her tears, she looked at him with a lightning flash of hope.

- Ah, - she sighed almost exhausted, - if only it were just a dream!

- It is a dream, Artemis!

His eyes followed her for a while as she walked away on the carpet, hunched over. He wanted to ask her to turn back and continue chatting for a bit, but he was drained and tired of everyone. He wished to stay inside his own world.

Half an hour later, he put his ear next to the blinds to hear what was going on outside. It was still raining. In the ceaseless din of the rainfall he could make out the footsteps of those who had him under surveillance. Everything seemed so rotten, so futile and inconsequential, like a game that he was tired of playing with all its dangers and hidden pains. A wild, internal revolt fired up his eyes and made him leap up like a

madman; he wanted to scream with all his might, to instill a great fear into them, so that they would fly off like bugs on the wall, but he immediately sensed someone gripping his chest with a powerful hand, clawing at his flesh so that, in surprise, he slowly fell on the couch, his mouth gaping painfully as though getting ready to ask what was that nightmarish thing he saw a moment ago, in a foul spiritual sob. He died at once from a myocardial infarction.

XXII

The news of Zurba Sina's death found Rrok while he was shaving on the bent mirror over the sink.

After the radio finished reporting this news, without making any detailed commentary as it was customarily done the occasion of the death of a statesman, he stopped the slow movement of his electric shaver in shock. He felt that all that hurry and haste to communicate the news as a perfectly ordinary occurrence disguised in itself the always-present suspicion that someone had deliberately murdered Zurba. As to what that reason might be, he had a hard time guessing, yet, since that day when Zurba publicly opposed Mek and Pignal on the issue of the freedom of the arts, the doubt

existed. This was only the tip of the iceberg because, behind it, there certainly hid a score of misunderstandings and old hatreds.

- "It's over," - he said as he chillingly wiped the shaving foam from his cheek. He realized that along with Zurba's death, a part of the love between him and Zibel would also die. Now, Zibel would certainly have to follow new directions in her life, if she wasn't to be interned to Bushtrima.

He paced back and forth, like a man who doesn't know where to unload his sorrow and anger, until he stopped in front of the window. He didn't have anyone with whom he could talk things over.

He got dressed in a hurry and went down the stairs immediately to call Zibel on the phone. She answered in tears; sometimes there was silence and other times there were long sobs on the phone's speaker. Rrok tried to console her but the right words wouldn't come to mind. He settled on talking about completely trivial subjects, but his words came out as though he was speaking with a mouthful of soft plaster. "I'm such an idiot, - he cursed himself, she is in grief whereas I'm prattling about nonsense. But alas, sometimes a man doesn't know how to express what he feels. He promised that he would call her the next day but she objected gently and feebly. She told him they could not meet because tomorrow she would be

receiving the visitors who would come to their house to express their condolences; she had to take Berti's place since he had fled through the border beyond Lake Cud the previous night. "Now, please go, there's a lot of people around me, some are honest, some are not. See you tomorrow! It's better if you call me because it'll be more difficult for me. I have the impression that they have me under surveillance. So, tomorrow then, don't forget, got it?" Her voice suddenly vanished in the depths of the black apparatus.

- I am alone again, - he said in a daze, as he hung up the receiver. - You are the only one that I wish will not abandon me, because only then I will truly believe that my darkest moment has arrived."

He felt like an empty husk devoid of everything that had interested him. His eyes gazed absent mindedly on the evening's uniform landscape, with only a few people and a few streetlights lit, which heightened his sense of a great abandonment, that, like tattered clothes about to be torn, he couldn't get a handle on. Like a lost soul, he walked the rest of the way down to Sanije's bar, the only person to whom he could open up a little, otherwise he would blow up or start screaming at his impotence in changing anything in that jumble of unfortunate events which seemed to keep on coming all at once and one after the other. Zibel was the

only link that for now connected him to Nag, the only being that bestowed something to his heart tired from twenty years of futile waiting, otherwise he would have escaped like the others, somewhere in the lands beyond Lake Cud, never to cast eyes again on this twilight guarded by watchmen and covered with hollowness and abandonment.

- Still alive? - Sanija asked him as soon as she saw him, with that dour look and sullen humor since the day Basri had gone.

He sat in the most distant corner of the bar, where he was the least visible to all. He sank on the chair as though cut down by a sword, rested his elbows on the table, and as soon as he got comfortable he remembered that he used to come here often with Basri Mema to drink cognac and coffee. He shivered inside from a sense of loneliness which seemed to come from every quiet corner of the nearly empty tavern, with that dim light over Sanije's uncombed hair who now, after Basri's disappearance, appeared not to pay any particular attention to her eyeliner, makeup or hairdo. On the contrary, she appeared pale, her skin somewhat unnourished from the internal heaving and gaudiness of a wanted woman.

After a moment, without saying anything, she sat down facing Rrok, who meanwhile was drinking his second glass of cognac. She also had a glass of cognac in

front of her, somewhat less than her usual amount, and in her fever-like cracked lips she held a lit cigarette.

- Cheers, Rrok, - she said almost crying, - here's to Basri!

- To Basri Mema! - he laughed, trying to bring up her spirits, and his own.

- He was different from everybody else, - Sanija continued, - he never sought and never took anything that was not given to him, not like some others that annoy you to death and ask you for it immediately...

Rrok laughed without taking her last words in the wrong way. He regarded her with a kind of pity mixed with chagrin.

- Have you heard anything?

- No, - answered Rrok with the third glass in his hand, - I don't have any recent news. But I know he is somewhere in Bug, that terracotta wasteland.

- What a devilish business, - she said plaintively, - we're scared of shadows, Rrok. We're afraid to say anything because it can be taken to mean something else. What's going to happen now, eh?

- I have no idea what is going to happen now.

- Oh God, - she sighed, - the bar sales have sank to the bottom, and I don't have any cognac or coffee left; people have turned into misers in their souls, they claw at each other tooth and nail even for one cent.

They quarrel for a lost coin, assaulting and battering each other.

- Cheers, Sanije, and don't think too much about it.

- Cheers, Rrok, drink up because Basri is paying tonight.

- Very good then, - he said cheerfully and tossed back his glass, - those are wise words indeed.

The bar was nearly completely empty. The wind swirled in the dark corners, streaming in through the broken glass on the windows.

Rrok shuddered a little, after he had finished drinking the cognac.

He greeted Sanija and went outside, hobbling. One of those two he left behind laughed, but he didn't have the strength to turn back around and show him his place. Now everything was over for good. It no longer mattered how the world turned.

He woke up at a certain time at night, from the effect of some powerful knocks on the door. Startled, he raised his head from the pillow and with a faltering voice he wanted to ask who was standing at the door. The door was shaking lightly in the frame, bits and pieces of plaster fell on the ground, a hail of fine dust spread across the room, giving him the impression that the house was shaking violently by a whimsical earthquake. He got up in a hurry, still in his

underwear and shirt, and ran toward the door; he barely had enough time to open it before rough hands were already pushing him. Inside the room, four watchmen were standing at inopportune positions, along with clerk Betin. His thin face, elongated toward the chin and with somewhat finicky lips, expressed the expectant tension of an inquisitor. His small, attentive eyes surveyed Rrok at first with fright, but also with timidity, then with a feral and openly mocking look. A derisive smile was lightly outlined at the corners of his thin, sensual mouth.

- An unpleasant meeting, is it not, Mr. Rrok? - he said finally, breaking that tormenting disquiet that momentarily had come over the room invaded by him and his four watchmen. - Anyway, we've met other times before as well, but under circumstances that were more favorable to you.

Without paying great attention, but also tense, expecting a physical assault from the watchmen, Rrok started getting dressed hastily, as though in a delirium, without realizing he was putting his pants on backwards; then, realizing the mistake, he turned them the right side with hands that hardly obeyed him. He sensed their intense scrutiny and cold taunting gaze, perhaps deeply satisfied with the terrible power they lorded over everyone without exceptions.

He felt his heart beating furiously.

- What do you want? - he finally asked, as he glanced at the frightened head of a neighbor peeking through in a lightning flash, the glimpse of which gave him enough courage to ask the question he had wanted to ask since the beginning.

- We've come to settle the score for good, - replied clerk Betin hastily and irate.

- How wonderful, - Rrok sneered, his shoelaces in hand, - it's the only thing you know how to do perfectly, without any mistakes. The day will come when even you will do down this road.

Clerk Betin laughed softly.

- Indeed, I will, but who knows when. Come now, quickly, gather your stuff and run along to the car, enough of your incoherent ramblings! Move it!

Rrok began to move about hastily around the room, while the watchmen started to throw down and violently smash the shelves, books, Basri Mema's unfinished paintings, the mattresses and whatever else they could get their hands on.

Rrok Dalia began to slowly recollect himself from that first jolt of fear and shock which had oppressed him earlier. Little by little, he started to relax and his heart was returning to normal. He had expected this to happen to him someday, just like it had happened to Kanad and Basri.

- Why am I being accused? - he asked, as though he sought to learn about the least important aspect of what was happening.

- Why? - clerk Betin seemed relieved out of that destructive silence into which Rrok had led him with ill intent. - That's obvious, political agitation and propaganda against Nag and Pignal. What more do you want? You're going to go to Bug, in a picnic that, at the moment, should last about five years. Maybe later we can add another five years, just enough time for a man's hair to turn gray down to the roots.

- An ideal picnic, Mr. Betin, - said Rrok, gathering up his clothes in a sharp sweep of the hand and throwing them over his arm. - At the rate you are going, there isn't going to be a single soul left in Nag.

- That's even better for us, - replied Betin and his face glared from a wicked surge of feelings. His hands were itching to strike Rrok right on the face but he was unable to do anything except shove him violently down the stairs.

XXIII

It was cold inside the dark coach even though Rrok had hastily put on Basri Mema's thick coat with beaver fur lining the neck. The wind drafts that swept by when

they rounded a corner whistled around his feet and gave him the shivers. He felt cold even though he was pressed in by the nearly immobile elbows of the two deaf-and-mute watchmen. The truck rocked back and forth slowly, apparently going up a steep slope, as everything started to shift back toward the rear fender. Without meaning to, Rrok leaned on the metallic elbows of the watchmen on the left, so that he felt the sudden, light trembling of a human body that, just like him, was inclined to eschew the unpleasant aspects of the weather. Both of them, as though in an agreement that for a moment stripped them of their obligatory roles of the victim and executioner, leaned against each other for a sliver of warmth and, somehow, to escape from that expanse which bore no signs of life and which seemed to attack the big truck as though it wanted to grind it into dust, the way it grounded into dust the trees, the mountains, the earth, like the jaws of death eternally chomping at life, trying to force its surrender.

- What time is it? - he asked instinctively, completely forgetting where he was and who was accompanying him.

The watchman on the left, the one that had earlier revealed the natural human weakness, looked in the dark at his wristwatch with luminous hands.

- Half past two, - he said in a stifled

voice.

- Shut up! – the watchman on the right barked the order with immediate ferocity.

- My nose is itching for a cigarette, - the left side watchman said unruffled with a trace of indifference in his voice.

- Shut up, I'm telling you! – his companion chewed somberly. – Do you understand me, or not?

- Alright, Freckles!

Again, it's night, rain, and suicidal silence. "Where is Bushtrima now? Have we gone past it already, or maybe we are crossing further down, at the place where we met Kanad Dika for the first time. What was Kanad doing now" – Rrok thought to himself.

While rounding another turn, the watchman on the left leaned against Rrok Dalia again, as though to find the warmth he was looking for a few hours earlier. He had started to talk in a muzzled voice.

- What a flooding! – the watchman on the left sighed coldly, the silence gnawing at him. He was afraid of the rains.

- What a flooding, indeed! – said Rrok just to give him a reply, since Freckles remained doggedly silent.

- If it keeps up like this for a few more days, who knows what will happen. A cataclysm!

- Will you shut your beak, you idiot?

- the watchmen on the right snarled ferociously, - are you trying to end up in Bug with this wretch? There's plenty of room, all it would take is for Mek and Pigal to catch wind of some the things you are saying. We need a high moral standard, not the rubbish this pumpkin and his ilk are peddling, - his head pointing toward Rrok.

- Have you ever seen it? - Rrok asked him sarcastically.

- It doesn't matter, it's good enough that the leaders have seen it before me.

Rrok and the other watchman started laughing at once.

- Anyway, it's not as bad as people say, - Rrok went on, as though to add some unimportant detail to the previous conversation, - it's place of abundance and a man, when he has money, knows how to maneuver better than he who has nothing. Isn't that right?

- Freedom and pride, that's what is missing there, you numbskull, - the watchmen, who wanted by any means to avoid this conversation that made him uneasy, shouted terrified.

- I've never heard anyone complain about a lack of freedom there, - Rrok retorted.

- Shut up!

The other watchman wanted to add something but he changed his mind when he saw the sallow, angry face of his colleague

and moved on to another kind of complaint:

- Oh God, it's so cold!

Rrok noticed that in the place they were traveling through at present was indeed colder than in the valley. A luminous band became outlined in the horizon ripped by aggressive rain clouds. The road twisted around the hills and fields planted with spinach and leeks. A few ruined houses loomed darkly in the dryer sections of the field. Hungry sparrows hopped behind the big truck.

XXIV

They had been traveling for about seven hours without stopping.

At last, the truck stopped in front a long barracks built out of wood and bricks.

- Get down! - the watchman on the right ordered him.

Rrok could sense that all this was the beginning of something terrible which was to follow.

- Get moving! - the watchmen shouted again, his face like a red pepper.

Rrok felt the watchman on his left give him a gentle prodding, as though to remind him that now it was all over. The other watchman started throwing his belongings right on the mud. The driver, smoking a

cigarette with an indifferent air, looked upon this scene with an almost bitter sneer.

- This is where you'll croak! - the watchmen prophesied without even getting out of the vehicle, - it's just the right place to send people like you to rot.

Without a stir in his demeanor, since it didn't matter at all what happened any longer, Rrok mechanically inserted his hand in his coat pocket and brought out a recently opened bottle of cognac. It had belonged to Basri, as well. He chuckled coldly and gave it a pull with a sharp snap of his head. Then he extended it to the other watchman, the one that had shown more humanity during the trip. The driver came next to them and drank from the bottle only once.

- This place is appalling! - he said, casting his handsome blue eyes pitifully around the barren landscape.

- I think your time is coming! - Freckles threatened his colleague from the top of the truck, then, as though he had remembered something, he turned his devious face toward Rrok and said in a sinister tone: You will never leave this place, do you understand? You can buy your food at the village store, if you have any money, if not, you can rot away in this birdcage. Don't even think about coming down to the city; only after five years, if you're still alive. You need to discuss everything else with the watchmen

standing guard over there, do you see it? Now, get lost! You'd better learn not to spit where you shouldn't.

The truck started going back the same blind road from which it had come. Rrok was left standing alone, in that daze and frost that he could not control, without knowing what he was going to do next. He turned toward the barracks, as though after a great physical exertion, and opened the first door within reach. He went inside and recoiled. On the filthy floor he saw garbage strewn about, like dirty dinner scraps, shreds of paper, cow dung and corn cobs, with which someone had even made a fire. The walls were crudely plastered with mud and were dotted with holes through which the wind from the plateau whistled like flutes that seemed to conjure only ill fortune. He went back out and checked the other rooms to see if they were more acceptable, but they were even worse than the first one. He returned to his room, sat down on the bed and lit up a cigarette. He had found it in Basri's pocket, as well. "Basri again," - he thought with relief, as it was the only name that followed him closely even on this living hell on earth, with the persistence of an inseparable shadow. It was the only allowance he could concede to the bitter past.

He looked in every crevice of the barracks and, at last, he found a shovel with a

shortened handle. Then he began cleaning out the chamber vigorously, which previously must have served as a butcher's shop or a cow barn because the metallic fittings to which the ropes were tied were still visible on the walls. In one breath, he took the stuff outside then filled a metallic pot with water and started splashing the cement floor. He repeated the process several times in a row until his nostrils could no longer smell the heavy stench of animal urine. He opened the small window and the door in order to increase the wind draft. And indeed, shortly the small room was filled by the whistling wind, which blew in freely and abundantly. As soon as he brought in the last of his belongings that he had managed to bring with him in that nightmare of questions and blows, it began to rain again. Rrok sat down on the bed and lit up the second cigarette from Basri Mema's pack. He took out the bottle from the coat pocket and chugged it heartily. Nonetheless, the cognac seemed to land on a deeply frozen stomach.

He wrapped himself tighter with the blanket since the incessant torrent of rain kept blowing hard through the open window. A strong, biting wind pierced through the barn openings. The world outside seemed to have gone entirely mad. A heavy darkness started to dominate the room, that darkness which now governed all reason and logic.

He woke up shuddering as though someone was suddenly shaking him.

His swollen, reddened eyes glanced around the room. Rrok felt he was still alive. He threw his light jacket over his shoulders. Then his hand fumbled for the bag underneath the bed but he couldn't find it. He jumped to his feet but relaxed when he saw it resting on the floor painted with a thin layer of yellow sludge. The bag was right next to the door, carried away by the stream coming from the field, along with all his other belongings except for the boots that he was still wearing. He cast a glance toward the murky expanse of the dark plateau, where water and solitude still reigned, with that gray sky shabbily painted over it and no sign of a living bird anywhere. Only the watchtower blackened in the distance like the end point of a forgotten world. Behind the watchtower, a part of the abandoned village was visible, stretching on the slope of a miserable bank, beyond which there loomed a small, dark forest.

Suddenly, he remembered that he hadn't had anything to eat since yesterday. He wrapped himself tighter with Basri's jacket. He tried to find a way out. He had heard talk of people dying under long sieges, prisons, and torture, while now he was experiencing dying from loss of hope, for he was now a captive inside the largest prison

ever created by man's hand: on a plateau, probably abandoned even by birds, insects, and wild animals.

He pressed hard against the cold wall. He felt the mud splash behind him in woven patterns. He laughed to himself because until yesterday he could have never imagined himself in such a critical situation.

To some extent, now he was outside of the game. And it was better that things went this way. Otherwise he would have gone insane, even without being sent to Bug. Down there, they had taken away from him everything that he had need of. First Basri and then Zibel. Ah, yes, Zibel. In all that tangle of arrests and suffering, everyone's interest on her had waned. Suddenly, as though faded in a half-memory and shaken to the core, she surged again on the surface of the old dreams. "Where would she be, now? Maybe surrounded by a wall of indifference. Excluded from all the codes of life, along with her mother, deserted by everyone."

He dozed off for a few hours. He must have really slumbered because in a dream he saw a black field full of mud. He walked through in disgust, feeling the incessant slithering of the snakes around his feet, writhing, slipping up to his calves, biting him with bloodsucking mouths like corks. He began walking hurriedly, nearing a boundless insanity, which compelled him

to walk even faster, until finally he started soaring higher and higher. He thought he would leave the field behind for good but then he began falling and falling. He plunged again in the mud, among the serpents, which bit the soles of his feet, beneath that viscous sucking mud, where every attempt to escape was nearly equal to nothing.

He opened his eyes in that delirium between awakenings and momentary snoozing. The day was dawning. "At last!" – he exclaimed again, as though liberated by something that bothered him to death. It had already stopped raining. The small window framed a square of faint sky, colored majestically by the gloomy gray of the foul weather. The watchmen's tower loomed darkly at the desolate corner of the expansive plateau. It must have not been raining for a while since the water had retreated from the room. For a moment, he remained as if he'd been nailed in that inopportune position, until, as though in a dream, he heard human voices, which he could scarcely believe. He stood there without moving, afraid that the whole thing might be a hallucination from his physical exhaustion, like a mirage appearing in the desert to a man without water. But the people's voices were now clearly audible; there were two or three of them, which, at any rate, opened up in that wasteland two or three windows of illusions and momentary

insanity. He leaped to the door, as though he were afraid that the unseen apparition was indeed a devilish trick by the watchmen. In that faint mist of water, mud splashes, and sleepy clouds to the point of idiocy, he saw three people in long boots forging through the water straight toward the far hills. They were already moving away and Rrok, as though he had been given the last chance to put life to the test, yelled out something, with what little spiritual strength he had left which hadn't been consumed by solitude. Maybe it had been more of a jump than a shout because the three people turned their heads back in surprise. Suddenly, one of them, the one not wearing a hat, whispered something to his companion and from that nearly involuntary movement of a familiar gesture he realized who it was.

- Basri!

XXV

Indeed, that altered man, with the black beard and tired, deeply sunk eyes, as though under strenuous exertion, was Basri Mema.

He looked so surprised he could scarcely believe his eyes. He was standing still in ankle deep mud and gazed, as through the delirium of a dream, at Rrok's nearly childish and uncertain gait. "Oh God!" - he

called out. That was all he was able to utter since he felt that that nearly frozen stance, as though emerging from a violent fear, was something that shouldn't last long, as he would consider that something abnormal. Then, he moved as well, after dropping in the mud a sack of bread he was carrying in his back, without a care that it might get dirty. They embraced under the bewildered stare of the other two men, who were also growing beards like Basri. Rrok hugged his friend longingly, as though grasping, at last, that sliver of hope that had been missing between him and life. He felt Basri's eyes shoot a nearly lightning quick glance over his ghastly and altered appearance, as though hiding behind a shoddy mask covering the real complexion. Basri was aware that Rrok was kissing him eagerly with his cracked lips, which were nearly sticky like adhesive bandages. He was withered and his gaze had the fearful, nearly abnormal look of a man who has just fought an imaginary beast. Then, he saw Rrok's eyes, meek and empty, cast a fleeting glance toward a loaf of bread which showed through the open sack. It was a look that Basri knew in great detail.

- Do you want some?

Rrok nodded his yes. Basri tore off a piece with his hands and placed it in Rrok's open palms. Rrok pondered for a moment, then, with quasi automatic movements he

broke off the bread in smaller pieces and started chewing it, while the other two men waited with Spartan patience, apparently accustomed to these difficult scenes of human nature.

- When did this happen? - Basri asked, after the other ate a piece of bread.

- Almost three days ago. I'm relying on intuition, since I've completely lost my sense of time.

- You haven't had any food since then?

- Nothing, - confirmed Rrok, with a wry smile at last, swallowing up that morsel of bread the way scorched earth swallows up the first rains after a prolonged drought. - They came to arrest me at midnight and I had no time to take anything with me. It was an arrest that found me completely unprepared.

- All of these things always come at an inopportune time, - said one of the other men, as he looked with some curiosity at the hungry man.

- That's enough, - said the other man compassionately, - you shouldn't eat too much right now or you'll suffer for it later.

- I am hungry, - Rrok uttered almost plaintively, - I'm damned hungry.

He couldn't prevail by any means over the instinct that urged him toward the bread he had begun eating.

- This happens to everyone that hasn't

had any food for some time, - Basri explained, taking Rrok in his embrace, - Hold on for a few more hours, then you can have the second portion, larger than the first.

- Oh God! - Rrok cried out with impatience, but he did not dare to defy, - I'm very hungry. I am ready to throw myself on the bread loaves you've dropped in the mud.

- You must endure a little longer!

The other men grinned in a self-contained laughter. Basri, too, smiled with an air of uncertainty, but careful not to offend Rrok.

- Listen now, - he went on after throwing the sack of bread over his shoulder, - wait for me till I deliver these breads to the watchtower. You hear me? I'll bring you back something to drink too, one of those drinks you like.

- These things still exist upon this world? - Rrok Dalia asked in a half-hearted humor.

- The world is still the same, my friend, - laughed Basri, - only the people change.

Suddenly, Rrok felt like laughing as he looked at Basri with the sack of bread loaves on his back. He still stood distractedly next to him.

- Go ahead and I'll wait for you, Basri, - he said with a more open look, - just let me have a little bread before you go.

Basri gave him another piece of bread.

While Rrok chewed on hastily, Basri hurried along to reach his two friends, who were waiting for him on a parcel of dry ground. He walked strenuously under the weight of the sack. Behind him there trailed an open furrow on the soggy ground. Rrok, as though he sensed he had done something that wasn't normal, called out from behind, but Basri didn't hear him. "He's gone, - he mused, - I didn't tell him any of the things I had thought about. It was as if my lips were sealed. I must be taking on the features of a mummy because I sense that my heart does not obey me." As though he had taken a shot of Luminal, he started to feel like someone was lowering his eyelids with a magical wand. It felt good to shut down like that, like two falling curtains, which perforce had to hide a crippled world.

It was almost noon when he woke up. It had not been raining for a good while. An irksome silence hovered all around him. Feeling somewhat better after that deep, but necessary sleep, he felt he was hungry again. Before getting up, he gave a few vigorous twists to his neck, which had been cramped during the night's sleep. He felt cold. Shuddering, he wrapped himself tighter with his thin, trusty blanket and slammed his feet on the floor to loosen up his muscles. His legs were cold like two iron rods. He got up and walked to the door, still limping,

with the realization that Basri must be on his way back. Indeed, Basri noted him from afar. His pace quickened because he knew Rrok had been expecting him from some time. He raised his hand when he saw Rrok in that unmoving position.

- Am I late? - he asked as soon as he was near, with a package wrapped in paper in his right hand.

- Not too late, - Rrok replied, without wanting to admit that he had been exasperated by the long wait.

- Anyway, I purloined something from the guys at the watchtower, - said Basri in a very lively tone, - after I gave them a pack of cigarettes first. Do you want one?

- Wouldn't be a bad idea if we had a smoke, - replied Rrok, his eyes on the package Basri held. - What do you have in there Basri, the magical apple?

- Can you guess? A little bread and meat, and in my pocket, - he continued, tapping cheerfully his coat pocket, - I have some of that Robert Lohkamp's juice.

- Oh God, how were you able to find it in this dessert ...!

- By sniffing Rrok, you think I've lived through hard times without learning a thing or two?

He took out two glasses from the other pocket and went down on his knees next to Rrok, just a little further away from a water

pond that reflected the noon clouds. He laid down on the ground the piece of paper that held the bread and meat.

- I think we should set up here, - he said while looking at Rrok with an irksome care, - it smells like cow urine inside there. I wonder how you could even sleep there, Rrok?

- It's not like I got any sleep, - Rrok replied, who could hardly wait to eat and didn't see a point to this long conversation, - but your jacket saved my life, Basri.

- After everything bad that happens there's something good that follows it, - retorted Basri and continued: - The night that took me in for questioning the jacket was the only thing I didn't manage to take with me. I was freezing the first few days and if some poor soul hadn't given me this cotton jacket I would have kicked the bucket. But fortunately it came to your rescue.

He poured a little of the cognac bottle into the two glasses. Basri drank his glass at once. Rrok hurried to follow his example. He recalled that he hadn't had any cognac for a few days. He drank it with a certain impatience.

- Have another shot. You've earned a reputation as a Robert Lohkamp in here.

- Is that so? - he asked with interest, then brought up the question that really bothered him. - What is going to happen

with us, Basri?

- Something is going to happen, - said Basri, - in a few days I am going to propose something amazing. I'm talking about getting out of here.

- Really? You surprise me.

- Don't even doubt it for a moment.

Otherwise, we'll die in this pit.

Rrok could feel his spirits lift from Basri's words. It hadn't even crossed his mind that there might be such an anchor of hope. He had heard the idea of crossing over to the countries beyond Lake Cud mentioned by a few others and a couple of times from Zibel herself. Whereas now, the notion was being proposed for him to enter into precisely such a breakneck adventure. Despite everything, he started to feel in better shape.

- Something always happens that completely overturns the dark times, - said Rrok while he finished the third glass of cognac. His empty stomach, which contained only the few pieces of bread he'd had in the morning, thirstily absorbed the burning cognac. His head started spinning. To avoid getting drunk, he started to chew on pieces of bread and nearly uncooked meat. They seemed very tasty. Basri, observing him the excessive care, filled up his fourth glass and then spoke in a startling tone:

- Someone else is here too, Rrok.

- Zibel?

He almost jumped to his feet and his impetuous movement flipped the paper with all the food into the mud.

- Careful, - Basri said with a cheerful face, - how fortunate you didn't spill our cognac.

- Is she alive, Basri?

- Yes, she was exiled along with her mother and aunt. Her brother, I think, had left before Zurba died, isn't that right?

- It was just around that time, I don't recall precisely.

Rrok could hardly stand in one place. The sudden mention of Zibel's name seemed to have awakened a lost world.

- What a surprise! It never crossed my mind that they would have brought her all the way out here. How is she, Basri?

- Very beautiful as always! A sexy girl.

- Are you starting that again?

- I was just joking, but she's very well.

She works as a cleaning maid at a bakery. But she's made of sterner stuff, Rrok.

Happy and worried at the same time, Rrok wanted to find out more about Zibel but he refrained himself. The important thing is that she is here.

XXVI

Zibel came running the next morning, before Rrok went to see her.

He was washing his face when Zibel entered as lightning flash in the tired circle of his pupils. She almost ran through the mud which was sticky like resin, her boots rolled up to her beautiful calves, looking fresh and rejuvenated by the news Basri had given her the other day.

- Zibel! - Rrok called out.

- Rrok!

Their names, spoken at nearly the same time, resounded incredibly in that plateau of exile and suffering. She threw herself in his arms, her whole body heaving with heavy breathing, singed from the treacherous winds and rain, where she had preserved something from that transparent fragility, which Rrok remembered with longing. He placed his fiery lips against hers as though touching on a hot trivet. She leaned her tired body against his, with almost nothing separating them, as though she were attempting to unite the organs with him in one single binding element of the world. Rrok could feel his blood flowing again, even if before he had thought it had frozen or dried up. He breathed in the heady scent of her cheeks like a peach, where shock, death, and pain had started drawing the first tattoo

lines of misery.

In that unbelievable rapture of gazes, bodies, and kisses, he took notice of her pretty eyes, which he had never before seen in such clarity; she had transparent irises like water, framed by black eyelashes which contrasted with her blazing blond hair. He grabbed her goldilocks with his hand, as though to comprehend their solar secret. On his palm he felt their light, caressing crackle, sliding like gelatin on his rough skin, something akin to golden crystal. She was the most enchanting crystal with which man had ever adorned nature. Engulfed by lust, he tried to pull her toward the bed.

-Tomorrow! - she told him pertinacious, but in a hurry.

- Alright! - Rrok was persuaded to admit. He knew that when she said "No", it was impossible to change her mind.

They sat on an old crate that Rrok dragged from a corner of the barn. Stirred by a series of shivers, she leaned against him again. She had a sense of dread that even Rrok might abandon her, as she had been abandoned by everyone else. Obviously, she still suffered from her father's mysterious death, the tragic circumstances of which still constituted the core of the interminable conversations between Artemis and her aunt. She kissed him again fiercely. Rrok embraced her slowly, aching with desire.

- Oh how I suffered the night we came here, Rrok; it was a rainy night and completely devoid of the friends that used to almost suffocate us every evening with their attentions.

- The friends of rank would be more fitting, - Rrok replied. - I hope I never see the likes of such friends again!

- Anyway, we have been through a lot, - she went on, her head thrown aside with exhaustion on his shoulder, - Pigal and Mek took their vengeance to the full.

- It's the only thing they know how to execute flawlessly, - Rrok said again in a sarcastic tone.

- As if everything that we went through after my father's death wasn't enough, they sent us to the worst part of this plateau.

- It's a good thing they didn't stuff us into prison, like the others, - Rrok said, as though to encourage her and drew her closer. - Besides, - he added, to get her mind away from the disagreeable subject, - this won't go on for all of your life. They are nearing the end of their power. And usually, the end is bitterer than the beginning. Nag is gradually crumbling under the unending rain. The night that I left, the first facades started to collapse in Pigal square.

For now, Zibel, he is chewing through the last ounce of fat, if he even has any remaining in store.

- Oh God, - she sighed, - and what's going to happen with us?

- The same as with everybody that comes here and lives through this experience against their will, we will adjust to the circumstances.

- How, Rrok?

- Quite easily. By abandoning the sinking ship.

She stood there in shock. She hadn't given any thought to that simple course, which her own brother, Berti, had taken while Zurba was still alive. But she had never wanted that kind of abandonment herself.

- But, that's a sign of weakness, - she said.

- Perhaps, - Rrok admitted, - but it's not at all like you think, Zibel. We are compelled by deadly circumstances to do this, violence compels us. A man is not guilty before the law when he commits an act in order to avoid impending tragic events which threaten him or doom others. All the heads that have rolled should suffice for us not to be sentimental, Zibel.

For a moment she seemed to hover in doubt. She realized that, in essence, he was right. Maybe everything Rrok was telling her this morning was the same as what Basri had told her previously but she'd had a sliver of reservation about his words.

- Something is going to happen, Zibel, -

he said tenderly, - as long as the world keeps on turning. That is the thread of hope that guides everything in the world.

He raised his head and saw that the sky was again covered with rain clouds. They came from the hinterland of the plateau like a black herd of celestial cows whose feet never touched the ground. The first rain drops started falling on the tepid ponds, heralding the torrential rains to come.

- But how could I leave my mother behind? And my aunt?

- Even if they wanted to, they could never go through a getaway like this. Better for them to stay where they are.

- Oh God, - she said, upset, - I could never do such a thing, Rrok. It would be murder for those two poor souls.

He drew her close slowly and gently and caressed her hair which shone with a cold light.

- Hold me tight! - she called out to the point of madness and began to listen with angst to the shudders of his body.

They rolled blindly on the narrow bad, without looking each other in the eyes.

- You are so beautiful, Zibel!

She laughed nonchalantly. It had finally happened, as before, that she had given herself without any reservations. He could sense that she now thought a great deal about him.

- You are even more beautiful uncovered, Zibel!

- Really? Well, I can't spend all my life uncovered, like a statue - she smiled, showing a row of beautiful and healthy teeth.

- Stay a little longer, Zibel! - he said fervently, - I need you tonight.

- I can't, Rrok. My mother is waiting for me.

- I completely forgot.

The last part of her tight chest disappeared, engulfed by her thick woolen dress that fell freely over her full thighs.

- You turned invisible, - he said with a smile on his lips but also with a hint of sadness.

- Goodbye! - he said and escorted her to the door, then accompanied her part of the way, unable to shake off the idea that she reached a perfection in something that couldn't be easily attained.

XXVII

The languishing of Kanad Dika resembled an endless welter of pains, delirious spells, and long silences. He had approached death's door several times but hadn't crossed that threshold, even though he wished for such a thing. His niece, even though she was exhausted from the long

waiting, felt sorry for him and tried to relieve his pain. The last doctor had visited that wrecked tower three weeks earlier, before than the watchmen received the firm order to isolate Kanad from every living contact with the world around him.

To extract their revenge, they no longer paid thugs to smash the damaged roof, the broken windows, and the cracked floors, for that wasn't worth it to them anymore, but they started hitting him with their stones, by way of a revenge that soothed their spirits somewhat. They threw the first stones on a dark midnight while in the days that followed they hurled stones in broad daylight, without a care that everyone in Bushtrima might take notice. Faced with this new scourge, everyone was silent, having lost their former courage. Indeed, those days the ancient courage sung with such zeal by the bards in their ballads during holidays was replaced by the emphatic waiting of the subjugated. The moral gap between Kanad's mutilated tower and Bushtrima, deafened by the rains and Pigal's enthusiastic speeches, grew wider every day.

He heard the soft, slight footsteps of his niece, which like a saving angel broke the uninterrupted and pitiless chain of the watchmen.

- I brought you some bread and cheese, uncle, - she told him in her caring voice.

He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

- I'm feeling better today, Ketrin, - he said. - Help me walk to the bathroom.

When he returned, he tried to do what he could to make up the smelly bed. The little girl was now used to his immobility and was no longer bothered by the grime on his hard pillow, or by the bugs roving on the bed frames, that disappeared as soon as she hit them with the foot towel.

He began eating a little bread, as much as a man can eat who has lost interest in what other people are doing at the dinner table.

- Can you bring me the bottle, Ketrin? - he asked, after he left the plate with a piece of unfinished cheese next to the bed.

The girl hesitated for a moment when she looked at the plate.

- You can't finish eating that, either? You are killing yourself with your own hands, uncle, - she said plaintively, almost in tears. She was the only being in Bushtrima that openly dared to express that he was indeed someone for whom one should feel sorry.

- Pigal killed me a long time ago, Ketrin! - he replied.

Then, Kanad searched under the pillow and took out a folder tied across with a string and held it in his hands.

- Keep these notes in the house, Ketrin.

When Pigal has fallen and we are again connected to the world beyond Lake Cud, publish them in print. With the honoraries you'll receive, I want you to buy a wedding gown for yourself. I want you to become the prettiest bride in Bushtrima, or better yet, the first Miss Beauty of this country.

- Her black eyes, slanted, like oriental eyes, looked intensely at his eyes sunken deep in their sockets. Unable to resist her sobbing, she threw herself to embrace him with all the verve of her thin arms. Through her old jacket, she felt how Kanad's bony body shuddered. Finally, even Kanad began to sob. It was more of a sobbing that belonged to joy than to the approaching loss.

- I'll come back in the evening, uncle, - she told him as she was leaving around noon, - I'll bring doctor Pandalemon along. He has begged me to so many times.

Do not trouble yourself, Ketrin, - he replied, lying down again on the hard mattress, - they won't allow any doctor to come near me. It's useless to even try.

- I'll bring him anyway, - she persisted.

He remained alone again in his foundering ship.

Slowly, another night was descending. Its approach was foreshadowed by a temporary darkening of the horizon, stricken woefully by the ceaseless rain. He stretched out his hand, dried out like a parchment,

toward the gap of the open window panes. His upturned palm became moist with something cold and soggy. "Snow" - he whispered, - thankfully, because we were drowning in rain! It was snowing indeed. The gentle rustling of snowflakes filled the great void that had sprung between the end of the rain and the sudden start of the icy strands of snowflakes. He wrapped himself tighter with the old quilt. The change in the atmosphere seemed to have brought him an immediate peace, which he had expected with longing. He closed his eyelids but, as he was about to fall asleep, he heard another stone, heavier, rolling down the ruined hallway. Its tumble down the stairs reverberated in a shocking manner throughout the whole battered down house.

"It's the heaviest stone they've thrown", - he sighed bitterly. Nothing else remained of the house now except its frame and the walls. Then, something else cracked downstairs. He listened in anxiously. He realized that they had broken the stairway that connected the first floor with the second. "Ah, - he laughed, - I stand alone in a tower with no floors and no stairs, which is like a body between heaven and earth, that no longer belongs to anything living or dead." He was "the nobody" of the fairytale, who would fly away from Bushtrima toward the distant planets, swallowed up by celestial

winds and cosmic magma.

His quasi child-like eyes attempted to make out how far the white winter had encroached on Bushtrima. It loomed in the distance, spread out in equal measures over the cliffs and rocky peaks, worn down by the wind and never-ending erosion, like a city that had always lacked topsoil and grass, until the edges had softened into finesse and indolence. His tower was right at the peak and from that vantage point he could more easily master the space stretching before him, where the unbroken rustling of the snowflakes lent everything a universal sleep. He was being overcome with sleep, for he, too, was also a particle of this universe that was destroyed by volcanoes, damnation, the winds, rain, and people. He suffered internally the sins of those that had come before him and of those that would perforce come after, on those very same rocky paths that were hardened by the lack of politesse. In front of his tired eyes, from which the last embers of an ancient fire were going out, there danced the endless whirlwind of snowflakes, no longer answering the call of the clouds but that of Mars, Saturn, and Pluto. He saw that beyond the paths that crisscrossed the world there walked a man, who became proportionally smaller, like a figure that desired to reach the threshold from whence he had started. "Ah, - he said, sleepily, - I know you, you are

the young Kanad". "Yes, - replied the man walking backwards, in the direction he had once emerged through the pain of another, - I am Kanad the man, boy, child, and now nobody. I am snow, wind, the stones that eternally guard the power to renew even that which seems invincible: death."

And he walked in her lap. It was soft and, in his contentment, he turned his head to find out who she was. "It's me, - spoke an unknown voice. - This road will take you toward the other Bushtrimas." He laughed to himself, then felt that something prevented him from asking who she was, for he was being engulfed by a white sleep, that sleep for which had no need of a heart or the blood of the living.

XXVIII

The noise came unexpectedly and just at the moment when he would never have expected it to come.

He had just leaned back, thinking that the escape would take place in the late hours of the night. After he ate a little bread and cheese, he laid down to get some sleep. He woke up precisely when someone was kicking the door. He woke up and through his anger, which made him waver between getting dressed or not, he heard Basri Mema's

worried voice calling him from behind the wall.

- Rrok!

He dressed up quickly, worried that they might leave without him. He grabbed what he could in that darkness black like coal, soaked from rain that had just replaced the melted snow. They were waiting for him a little further away, in single file, gripped by thirst and anxiety.

He hastily threw his hood over his head and started to examine, carefully and nervously, the line of people that began to move. He was waiting for something. He recognized her as she was standing somewhat apart from the rest.

- Zibel!

She stood in front of him, wearing that outfit like an astronaut. Slowly, she leaned on his chest.

- Will we be able to break through, Rrok? - Zibel asked.

Her scent caught him right in the nostrils. He rocked back and forth almost like being drunk and, without waiting for her reaction, gave her a quick, gentle kiss on her cold and tense lips.

- I don't know why I'm so scared, - she added later.

- Don't worry, darling, - he reassured her, following close behind with a steady footing and pulling her lightly by the jacket, -

this escape happens every night. The guides know the easiest places for us to cross.

- We'll be soaked to the bone.

- Is this jacket water-proof?

- Yes, - she replied, - but nothing is safe from this rain.

- We don't have a very long way to go,

- Rrok said, - maybe as much as three hours.

- A century you might as well say.

The caravan of escapees, linked to each other in an unbroken chain, descended almost in a straight line toward the water filled valley. They were walking toward the west, to where Rrok had always looked on the rounded peaks mountains with hope.

Among the twisting passes deformed by the rain, armed watchmen stood guard and, behind their backs, there loomed the border fence, comprised of barbed wire and alarm bells, like a new castle wall. Nonetheless, frequent crossings by escapees had opened up wide paths where large guard dogs were tied at night. Yet, dozens of escapees made it through every night, even if some of them were caught or shot dead without warning.

They were crossing a sloping ridge surrounded by spiking crags which stood ominously with their quasi metallic peaks. They walked side by side and Zibel whimpered gently with every step, afraid they might slip and fall the bottom of that crypt filled with mystery. Rrok, walking behind

her, never took his eyes off her, obsessed with the thought of how far they would rush through that inferno of darkness and fear where every phantasmagorical figure, eerily drawn against a blue background, stirred up a deep anxiety in him. Suddenly, Zibel leaned over and gave a muffled scream. Her footing had slipped and now she was holding on to Rrok's jacket with one hand only. A strange thunder resounded across that bewildered darkness. Pulling gently, he lifted her up by her arms, as she limply tried to grip the slippery crevices with her frozen fingertips.

- Oh God, - she cried out mournfully, - I can't walk any further, Rrok!

- Just a little longer, Zibel, - Basri answered, pulling her carefully to avoid another dangerous turn, - a question of minutes.

- I am down to the end of strength, - she said, swallowing her tears.

- It's the last thing we cross with our necks on the noose, - Rrok whispered, worried by her fatigue and desperation, which were rising with every passing moment

- I know, - she said calmly, - but there's nothing I can do, Rrok. Hold me for a bit.

He slipped under her and raised her in his shoulders.

- Faster! - someone called out in an angry voice in front of them.

Rrok raised his head and estimated the two steep slopes that surrounded the tired and soggy escapees. He was tired to death also; he had to do the work of two people. He felt steamy underneath his clothes. Along with the water, now rushing toward the least protected areas of his body, he felt the sweat dripping indifferently behind his ears. He could hardly wait for all this breakout run toward a dark point of the night to come to an end; with every passing instant, nature was gaining a nearly absolute power over all of those people walking with their head bent to the ground in search of they knew not what. Rrok's feet, necessarily tangled with Zibel's legs, like two bodies with a single soul, continued to carefully search for the slippery footsteps.

- Oh God, - whispered Zibel, nearly vanquished by fatigue, - I am utterly exhausted!

- Hold on a little longer, Zibel! - he told her encouragingly, without forgetting to encourage himself, too.

He noticed that Basri stood for a moment and waited for them. He was panting tiredly, as well.

- It feels like we are climbing to purgatory, - he whispered while crawling on his hands and feet. Rrok and Zibel were doing the same.

- Even better yet, to paradise, - Zibel said as she wiped her muddy hands. - We

came from hell and must certainly go to paradise.

- Burdened by rain and suffering like this, we are in just the right state for that destination, - Rrok laughed softly for the first time that night and added: - Saint Peter won't have any objections against taking us to the best quarters. We deserve it.

- Don't forget that we need to cross purgatory first, - Basri retorted, - for we have committed many sins. Particularly you, Adam, and you too, Eve.

Zibel leaned her back against Rrok's body. She had started feeling afraid from all that traveling.

- I think we lost our path, - she said, as though to answer the doubts that hounded her since they slipped into that abyss.

- I don't think so, - Rrok replied as he pushed her gently, helping her climb up a slippery slope. They walked without being detected through a terrain that was frequently crossed by the watchmen patrols. The lack of their presence filled him with ominous forebodings, as he feared a hidden trap. Suddenly, several shots rang through a distant portal in the night that seemed to devastate that entire phantasmagoric, frozen and wet décor of stone, water, and darkness. Zibel leapt to his chest, nearly breathless, overcome by an emotional alarm. Someone in front of them fell and plunged down the

mountainside, as though his hands and feet were suddenly cut off. The body disappeared in the thundering abyss.

- What is it? - she asked, terrified.

- Nothing, he slipped and fell, - Rrok said in order to calm her down, - and the shots are coming from the other side of the border.

- From the other side of the border? - she inquired, as she realized that Rrok gave her a false explanation just to reassure her.

- Yes, - said Basri, who could no longer hide his distress, - you should walk faster.

They were going down a gentler slope. When they descended to the bottom, they heard more shots ring out. Two more bodies glinted a few yards further away. They perilously started on a tumbling descent down an empty riverbed full of black stones. They plunged one after the other, bouncing like people that were asleep, until they disappeared in the deep, torn pit of the suspicious night. Shortly after, there came the muffled sound of their premature fall on the sharp edges of the black stones.

- They are shooting at us, - Zibel cried out and anxiously grabbed Rrok's hands.

- Faster! - someone behind them yelled, in a tone of callous sorrow.

They started moving faster as more shots followed behind from their left and the right sides. This time, the bullets flew almost

over their heads, causing Zibel to scream in the voice of a woman that has lost her last shred of patience. But the bullets now fell behind them. Three or four people stormed away from the suddenly unraveling column.

They started running almost without paying any heed to the calls of the guides. Basri emerged in front of them, running easier at the bottom of a valley dotted with ponds, the water splashing around their eyes and ears, unaware of what the others around them were doing.

Rrok realized that they had been sold out from the outset. The traitor might still be hiding among their ranks, or perhaps they might have killed him in order to conceal any evidence of their guilt. There were multiple ambushes but Basri didn't take the route everyone else was following as that would have cost all three of them their lives, instead he snaked around the cliffs of a mountain full of large boulders.

- This way! - Basri yelled and jumped over a stone parapet that separated the two banks of a stream foaming at the end. Rrok lifted Zibel bodily and jumped with her to the other side.

- Are you hurt? - he managed to ask in the anxiety and uncertainty of a man who is lost.

- Just a little! - she replied and seized his hand like a child.

They heard loud rifle shots again, the bullets tracing a magical light show over their heads, like the vigil of a macabre party. Now they walked more slowly through a field of hard, jagged stones. Rrok, who hoped to finally step on neutral ground, became suspicious that they might have doubled back by mistake into Nag's territory. His eyes, now accustomed to the dark hues and tones, finally managed to discern in the distance the tall border fence, in the mountain pass above them.

- It's above, Basri! - he said and grabbed Zibel by the shoulders.

They ran into a few other escapees, also distraught and at their wits' ends just like them. Shots came from a vantage point straight ahead of them. Two people fell on the ground in front of Basri, writhing in blood. Another rolled down the pit below with a petrifying scream. As if spurred on by this trenchant agony, the bullets began to ricochet across the wounded body of the darkness.

- To the border fence! - Basri called out.

The three of them leapt in a single stride through the open gap between the wires that had been torn wide previously by other escapees.

The moment that they almost passed into neutral territory, they were fired upon again from the fortress. The bullets flew over their heads; only one seemed to fly

dangerously low and hit something in front of Rrok's feet. He grabbed Zibel by her shoulders, as she seemed to struggle with something that he had no idea what it might be, and lacking the time to find out. They rolled right across the ground of Lake Cud, finally free from that nightmare.

- Finally, we are saved! - Basri exclaimed.

- We are the only ones to have escaped, - Rrok said, with an insane look, his eyes veiled with something unknown. He lay next to Zibel, with his legs sprawled, and stared thirstily at the blue expanse below, where the shores of Lake Cud were drawn in soft outlines.

- It was at least a hundred of us, - Basri answered jokingly, his eyes bolted to the prone body and Zibel's unusual position, - now we are down to three, ninety seven others are lost, captured, or dead.

- Get up, Zibel! - Rrok cried out suddenly and forcefully, as though he was reminded of the most important reason that he had temporarily forgotten, - we managed to get by one more time.

- She must be tired to death, - Basri said, but without truly believing his own words, unable to understand why Zibel was acting so indifferently.

Rrok caught a glimpse of the flashing worry that slipped across Basri's bewildered

eyes. He turned his head toward her, and like a man that begins to realize what terrible truth was hiding behind that unusual pose, as though she were under anesthesia, he screamed out again in a howl.

- Zibel!

- Perhaps she sleeps, - Basri said uncertainly, approaching near her head full of worry and spoke to her:

- Zibel!

He immediately turned her over with her face toward them. But her still warm body hardly obeyed his strength and a part of her remained in the previous position. She did not give a single reaction to his superhuman outcry. Small, sparse rain drops fell on her face.

- Oh God, - he blurted out nearly bent over her body, - what is wrong with her, Basri? She was fine just moments ago.

Basri examined her face and turned his eyes away in horror. Rrok's gaze was almost devoid of everything human. It was filled at the moment with the heavy, foreign, and aggressive matter of an unearthly body.

He caressed her sunken temples, her cheeks, nose, and the hair ruffled by the heavy hood. He still couldn't convince himself that such an irrevocable event had happened. He tried with all his might to take back from death that which it had so casually stolen from him, like the ninety seven others

before her. But now he was merely holding a husk. Zibel wasn't there anymore. Like a pearl removed from its shell.

- Aaaaah! - he screamed and got up to his feet like a madman. Basri had turned to ice inside and was unable to say or do anything, except to feel that inside he was ready to scream, too.

- Oh God, - Rrok said near the end of his outcry, - is she dead, Basri?

- Yes, - Basri confirmed as though he were not himself.

- Oh God, - Rrok repeated again, droningly.

He bent over her as though in front of a brittle crystal and kissed her often and gently on her lips, now already dry even from the smallest raindrops and the vital fluid that life grants to its warm bodied creatures.

- Yes, - Basri said mournfully, - they killed her.

XXIX

Rrok carefully placed Zibel on an almost flat area on the ground. Her head hung limply and underneath it he inserted the rolled up jacket, still wet, but with the soft lining on the outside. He was more dead than alive.

It's going to start raining again, - Basri said in a kind of strangled nonchalance.

Rrok looked at the sky that had received the first knocks of the night's dissolution.

- Shall we bury her? - Rrok said in a thin voice. He had finally conceded the most important point, something that a little earlier he didn't dare to admit even to himself.

- Yes, - Basri replied. His features had dried up as though from a sudden evaporation of the blood.

- Where? - Rrok asked again.

Basri shivered lightly under that stare almost like that of a beast. He curled up on his knees on top of the stone, as though he were being whipped in the face. He felt guilty about her death, because he was the cause behind that night filled with rifle shots. The sense of guilt burned all over his body like stinging nettles.

- Up there, - Basri said curtly.

- Where? - Rrok asked again, not quite himself.

- In the cave. It rains a lot here but the cave is a safer place. It's up there, on that peak above us.

Rrok sat down slowly in front of her curled up body. It was all over now; she couldn't be Zibel any longer. Nature was rapidly taking away from her that which it had once generously given her. Drowning in infinite pain, he recalled one night, drowsy with the languor of love making sealed

with kisses, he had told her the fairytale of a princess who was cut down to pieces with a sword by her stepmother and whose lover, sacrificing his strength and youth, brought back magical water from the dreadful ends of the world, with which he pieced her together and revived everything that she had enjoyed at the peak of her beauty. He was ready to believe that miracle; he would sacrifice everything a man could give to secure that water. "A horse and a sword, Zibel", - he whispered. - The road to the dragon is long and difficult; it runs through deserts and harsh mountains, but I arrive at its lair in the end, Zibel. Step outside, - I tell the dragon, I am putting my life to the test for a vial of magical water."

As though remembering that the whole thing could only be a hallucination, he felt that the blood in her limbs and exposed areas was cooling down, growing mournfully damp by the rain. Cold and lost in the deepest recesses of his consciousness, he turned his head toward Basri.

- Let's go! - said Basri. - We are still on the neutral zone, Rrok!

- Yes, - he admitted.

Pigal square, which from that height looked like a poorly unfurled napkin was drowning in an annihilating wasteland. It looked completely grey from the all the mold sprouting on top of the roofs, the stools, the

collapsed walls, the numerous ruins, and the soggy plazas.

- It's horrifying! - Rrok admitted with a heavy sigh.

- Yes, - Basri managed to get out, - it has been raining nonstop for forty days and today is the first day that the weather cleared up somewhat. This has favored the overgrowth of the spores, the mold, and the mushrooms. Apparently, now the city belongs to them for good.

- Anyway, in order to renew it, you must rebuild it from scratch, - Rrok said and turned his gaze diagonally over Zibel's body, carefully arranged over the fur jacket. She seemed to be sleeping and it gave him the idea that the game of death that they were playing earlier was just an act incited by a completely casual premonition.

- It was something to be expected, - Basri replied, - they deliberately caused this to happen.

- More precisely, it was an egotistical game with the world.

- Now there are very few people still left there, - continued Basri, - maybe the majority have already left, like us, or they'll be leaving in the days ahead.

Basri looked at his watch.

- Do you see? There's no movement yet even though it's almost seven o'clock.

- For now, the city is occupied by

mushrooms and mold. Maybe the sunrise will destroy even this kingdom of saprophytes.

- Or the absolute curfew has begun. I've heard that Pigal, under extraordinary circumstances, is going to impose the regimen of a Mongol camp.

- There isn't anything left there to impose such a curfew upon, - Rrok said in a livelier tone than before. - The isolation has wiped away everything that needed to be wiped out. The curfew can save only death alone, because there's nothing else it can accomplish in an utterly ruined country.

- Who knows, the world has now grown wiser and is going to understand what pain and toil we have been through, - Basri said. - It would be sufficient to implement the ideas that Kanad Dika proposed.

- That would be difficult, - Rrok repeated and bent over, then with a powerful sweep he took Zibel in his arms. - Now let us go to the cave, Basri, to Zibel's cave.

At the top of the hill, Basri took a slight right turn and entered the interior of the cave. It began to cool off at once. Rrok could no longer stand on his legs that felt like lead. His sluggish hands felt even worse from the static weight of Zibel's body. He sighed softly when Basri stood at the edge of a large pond with clear water. Above, over their heads, a ray of light entered through a long, vertical stone chimney, while more

light came through the cave entrance that was only a dozen yards away.

- Here, - Basri said, pointing at a more elevated position, encircled by stalactites and thin stalagmites on the cave roof.

He carefully laid Zibel down over the jacket he had placed on the ground earlier. He gave a quick glance over the place where they were standing. He liked it because it was very quiet and very remote, like a place that didn't belong to people but rather it belonged to Nag's ancient fairytales.

- I've been here twice before, - spoke Basri from beyond a bend that wasn't visible from where Rrok stood, - it's a known cave among speleologists. I've hidden a shovel somewhere around here.

Rrok suddenly shuddered. The shovel and the pickaxe were natural tools of a burial. He sobbed softly, as though to punish himself for the last time.

- It's the ideal place, - Basri said, returning with a shovel and pickaxe and dropping them on the ground, - the cave doesn't have a name, but from now on we'll call it Zibel's Cave.

Rrok stood up and fiercely picked up the pickaxe. He started to dig through the gasps that cruelly shook his soul. Basri, sifting through the dirt, followed him with a tender gaze. They kept digging for a long while, through wind drafts that mercilessly

drank up their sweat. Then, Basri wrapped her frozen body with the large jacket. He buttoned it up all the way up to her face, so she wouldn't come into contact with the dirt.

- Wait, - Rrok screamed.

He leaned over and kissed her with all his heart and soul on her frozen lips.

They stood for a long while without speaking over the carefully arranged grave. Basri slowly took out of his pocket the same flask they were drinking from the previous night.

- Have a drink, - he told him, - she also drank.

- Cheers, Zibel! - Rrok said and drank from the flask like a lunatic, - we will come back again, my dear. Wait for us.

- Cheers, Zibel! - Basri toasted.

When they went outside, it had started raining again. From the hilltop, Rrok momentarily caught a glint of the city of Nag for the last time. Zibel had begun dying since there.

Lake Cud flashed with emerald colors in front of his eyes.

- Let's take the shortcut on this side, - Rrok said and took off through the narrow pass between two mountains, as though escaping through the grasp of Scylla and Charybdis, at whose fangs he had just left behind more than half of himself.

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CIP Katalogimi në botim BK Tiranë

Karadaku, Shefki

The frozen kiss : novel / Shefki Karadaku ; transl.
Herion Gjomema, Klarita Xhafo ; ed. Petraq Risto.

– Tiranë : Streha, 2021

208 f. ; 12 x20.5 cm.

ISBN 978-9928-367-01-3

1.Letërsia shqipe 2.Romane

821.18 -31