

THE CHASE

A Play in Three Acts

by

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Translated from the Russian

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MASTER (60)

APPRENTICE (20)

THE BLIND MAN (75)

MOTHER (80)

SERVANT

GIRL

BOY

MAESTRO

HER HIGHNESS

SOMEONE

OBSERVER

ACT I

Onstage: an imitation of a frosty, sunny morning in the city. The cobblestones are lightly dusted with snow; snow continues to fall, sparse and infrequent.

Center stage, two people stand talking. One is about sixty; the other is about a third of his age.

MASTER (*angrily*)

Who opens it like that? She's already been sold off cut by cut—what am I supposed to tell the customers now? Mark this: if we don't find her, I'll dock it all from your pay, down to the last crumb.

APPRENTICE (*confused*)

But, Uncle—how was I supposed to know she'd bolt?

MASTER

How was he supposed to... Wouldn't you have bolted, if you knew a blade was sliding along your neck right now?

APPRENTICE

I would've, Uncle. Then why didn't we slaughter her at the farm?

MASTER (*less angry, but hot and fierce*)

She got first prize at the show, you idiot—who would've let you butcher her on a farm? All right. She can't have got far.

Master and Apprentice pace, tracing intricate figures across the stage with their steps, peering into the patterns of someone's tracks pressed into the fresh snow.

APPRENTICE

Look, Uncle! Seems fresh, doesn't it? Or not?

MASTER (*crouching, peering intently at the spot*)

Not hers. That's canine feces. Pigs don't shit like that.

Suddenly, a man's swearing voice is heard. Then, from the left wing, its owner lurches in: a blind old man with a cane, wearing round black glasses, wrapped thickly in a scarf. On his head, an absurd woolen cap. He is about seventy-seven. Ahead of him, on a leash, an imaginary dog jerks him from side to side.

THE BLIND MAN (*out of breath*)

Stay! Stay! You'll rip my arm clean off! Sit! Stay! Who am I talking to! No—no! Down! Lie down! You pest! You'll kill me dead. Who's here?

Suddenly the imaginary dog sits on the cobblestones. The blind man freezes and, tapping the pavement in front of him with his cane, starts sniffing, nosing the air.

Where am I?

MASTER

By my shop, blind man. One day that mutt of yours will be the death of you.

THE BLIND MAN

Oh, you're right, she will. Just now someone ran past, and off she went after him. Then she slammed me into the lamppost by the house so hard I nearly died. Not a dog—disaster. No use at all...

The blind man jerks the leash; the dog, letting out a small yelp, comes to him and, rising onto her hind legs, licks his face. The blind man waves her off, but the dog is quite insistent.

Pah—back at it again. No—no! Sit! No! Sit! Stay! No! Down! There. Again—my whole face in dog slobber. A-a-ah, plague take it...

Satisfied, the imaginary dog lies down at the blind man's feet. He irritably wipes his face with the cuff of his overcoat sleeve.

MASTER

Look at that—affectionate. You're lucky, blind man.

THE BLIND MAN (*warmly, with sudden tenderness*)

She's a good girl, my girl. Good girl. Clever one.

Distractedly, the blind man pokes at the imaginary dog with his cane. The imaginary dog pays it no particular mind and continues to lie there at his feet.

MASTER

Listen, blind man—did your good girl bolt after a pig, by any chance?

THE BLIND MAN

After a pig? What pig?

MASTER

Our pig, you see, has run off.

THE BLIND MAN

A pig ran off? Why a pig?

APPRENTICE

I only opened it—she gave a yank, and around the corner.

MASTER

Because you've got to treat your work with attention. With attention, effort, and diligence—not like this, any old how, half-assed and slipshod.

THE BLIND MAN (*nodding gravely*)

That's for damn sure. Without attention to your work, it's never work that comes out—just some kind of nonsense. Take me, for example... Me, master—when I was young, I was very attentive and diligent at my office work. And then one day—bang—I went blind. Yeeeeeah... there was a time... Eh... We'd better be off, I suppose—things to do.

MASTER

Be so kind—don't tell anyone about the pig. Or you know—people will start talking...

THE BLIND MAN

How could I—I won't see anyone. (*jabs his index and middle finger at his eyes*) We'll drop by this evening. I'll take some bones for my good girl.

The blind man jerks the leash, lifts his cap above his head, and gives a slight bow in a direction opposite Master and Apprentice.

Come on, plague.

The imaginary dog tears off from a dead stop and, in sharp jerks, hauls the blind man by the leash into the right wing.

MASTER (*calling after him*)

Drop in, blind man—everything's fresh, I'll set you up proper, whatever your soul des—

MASTER (*turning to the Apprentice*)

That mutt will kill him—sure as hell she will. And what kind of life is it, without eyes? Look how the sun burns them, how the snow sparkles, the roof tiles red, the sky blue. And how can you not see it? And spring? The streams will start to run, the birds of heaven will flutter up, the lilac will bloom—you could cry with joy. And you—look at you—your dog: post, tree, post, tree. And in your eyes, eternal darkness. So it's darkness in his soul too, lad, most likely, if he never sees the light of day.

APPRENTICE (*reasonably*)

Well I don't know, Uncle. They say they sing well and spin verses. They say Fronk made up for their eyes with twice as much hearing and sense as a man with eyes. And by touch they can figure things out very neatly. My aunt was telling it: the brother-in-law of the matchmaker of her cousin's suitor once figured out by touch how old a tree was. Touched it, thought—and right on the mark: twenty-five years on the elm. He was one-eyed, true, but still. So in the soul it might be different with them—still not darkness.

MASTER (*irritated*)

What are you babbling? What one-eyed? Why "was"? Did he die, or what?

APPRENTICE (*importantly*)

In the sanatorium now, under treatment. It's been a full turn and more, Uncle.

MASTER (*waving it away*)

To Fronk with you altogether. Come on—follow the trail. We've got to catch that pig no matter what, or we're looking at a serious loss.

They start pacing the stage again, peering intently into the tangled paths of someone's tracks.

APPRENTICE (*on all fours, studying the tracks*)

Tell me, Uncle—why the medal pig? For what you paid for her at auction, we could've bought five carcasses—and no transport headaches, and the profit a lot bigger. Why all this, Uncle?

MASTER (*thoughtfully; rising from all fours to his feet, he looks into himself, toward the auditorium*)

The road to knowledge in your trade is long, and for now you're only at the very start. But never mind—listen to my teaching: you must do your work better than anyone, and in life you must get the very best there is to get. Otherwise there's no sense in life at all, and life itself is dull and burdensome.

APPRENTICE (*grinning with a wide, simple grin*)

And how's that? How's that tied to our pig, Uncle?

MASTER (*peevishly*)

How's it tied? I'll explain it to you now. You know what reputation is, lad?

APPRENTICE (*cheerfully, soldier-like*)

No, sir, Uncle.

MASTER (*calmly, patiently*)

Then you're a fool. Here it is: nobody else has a pig with a medal. Which means I have the best reputation.

APPRENTICE

I don't quite get it, Uncle.

MASTER

And you don't need to. Just do what I tell you, and in time you'll get it.

APPRENTICE

Yes, Uncle. But the pig's gone!

MASTER

That's your fault, that she's gone. If we don't find her, I'll send you begging—and I won't care who your father is.

APPRENTICE

Never mind Father... We'll find her, Uncle. Where's she going to go in winter?

MASTER

Anywhere she likes: she's got four legs, and you and I have only two apiece. Enough chatter—move. She ran to the park for sure. They feel nature keenly.

Master and Apprentice, collars turned up and shivering with cold, begin walking in place, facing the auditorium, carefully looking around and peering at the tracks. The sun has disappeared; the snow has stopped. The wind blows—its howling is clearly audible on the soundtrack.

APPRENTICE (*shivering, pulling his flat cap lower, wrapping himself into his overcoat collar*)

And how are we going to, Uncle? How are we going to catch her? She's got to be no less than four hundred measures, and she won't stand still.

MASTER (*gravely*)

Five hundred seventy-three measures, lad. Where we see her—there we put her down.

APPRENTICE

Where are we going to put her down, Uncle?

MASTER

We'll put one right in her head.

APPRENTICE

How's that, Uncle?

MASTER (*cheerfully, patting himself inside his shirt, over the heart*)

With my piece. I carry it, just in case. Times like these.

APPRENTICE

What times are those, Uncle?

MASTER (*didactically raising his index finger*)

Time is always the same.

APPRENTICE (*doubtfully*)

Ah-a.

From a nearby alleyway, apparently, comes loud grunting, the clatter of pig hooves, a woman's shrill scream, and a steady male voice.

MASTER (*delighted*)

Oh!

SERVANT (*offstage*)

All is well, Mother: the wild beast has passed us by and bolted off. Rise now—give me your hand. That's it, that's it—easy now, sit down. We'll get you back to the boarding house at once. And it's high time you had your lavender tea.

Master and Apprentice turn toward the voice. From the middle of the upstage backdrop and straight onto the stage, a pair slowly emerges: a man of indeterminate age, pushing a wheelchair with a tiny, decrepit old woman seated in it. She is in a heavy fur coat and, on top of that, wrapped in a wool blanket.

MOTHER (*grumbling*)

What is this coming to? In broad daylight some monster goes tearing down the cobblestones and knocks people flat. In my day that didn't happen—everything was in order. The Observers were always proper—and where is all that now? The salons are filthy, the girls are insolent... Bad. All bad. Lavender tea... Here I am trying not to die, and you're on about lavender tea. I'm sick of it.

She perks up and half-rises in the chair.

Look there—ain't that the Master? Who've you got with you, Master?

Servant and Mother draw closer to Master and Apprentice.

MASTER (*politely lifting his cap*)

Me, Mother—and this is my apprentice. What happened, Mother?

MOTHER

Who knows? It hit the chair from behind and went off at a gallop, and I went down on the stones.

SERVANT

It came on like a whirlwind from behind and threw Mother down, and me along with her. Only a swift shadow did I glimpse; I heard a dreadful snort and the pounding of hooves, but the beast itself I did not make out, for by a blow to the back I was cast down flat.

APPRENTICE

That's ours all right, Uncle. Sure as hell, ours. Who else would be tearing down the cobblestones since morning, headlong, knocking people to the ground?

MOTHER

What do you mean, yours? Your apprentice is awfully skinny. Don't you feed him, or what?

MASTER (*through his teeth*)

Come on, you... He lost the pig, Mother. I bought a pig at auction, Mother, and she up and ran! A winner, Mother—a medalist! So much money paid out! The skinny one let it slip when he opened it. And where—where did you say she ran?

MOTHER (*extremely irritated*)

Where she ran... You buy a pig and can't hold on to it? What kind of Master are you then? Blaming the skinny one... Taught him badly! You bought her—she's your pig, so you're the one at fault. Where she ran... How should I know where your pig ran, when because of her I near lost my breath? In my day that didn't happen—everything stayed in its place. Good Observers walked about and flower-girls stood everywhere. The salons were clean. Bad. All bad. I'll tell the girls at the boarding house what goes on in the street nowadays. Turn us toward the boarding house, Servant. Time for lavender tea.

SERVANT (*formally*)

This very second, Mother—we depart at once.

MASTER (*flustered, flattering, fawning*)

Hold on, brother—wait. Forgive us, Mother—be magnanimous: we are at fault before you. And therefore we humbly beg, by way of atonement, that you would kindly honor my modest dwelling at any time and choose whatever your soul desires from my blood sausages, offal sausages, or meat sausages for your table, entirely free of charge. Only—be so kind as not to speak ill of us to the girls at the boarding house. You understand: in that case they'll gab to the customers, the whole city will know, and my reputation will inevitably suffer. Yes—reputation. And what's more—once we put the pig down, I'll have my apprentice send you two measures of neck loin as a gift for the Day of Repose. No—even three measures of neck loin, and another five measures of two-turn ham. So how is it, Mother? Can you forgive us?

MOTHER (*shaking her trembling head, smiling reproachfully*)

And what do I need your ham for? Bad. All bad. All right—see it wasn't on purpose, and the skinny one too. I forgive you. But I remember—you had that little pat-tet of yours—goose fwa-gra with troofles. And the neck—fine, give me that; I'll treat my grandson to a roll. And after the Repose, drop by—and bring the skinny one with you; we'll pick him a thicker asymmetry, heh-heh. At the boarding house I'll tell the girls: a wild beast attacked.

MASTER (*obsequiously bowing, taking his cap off and putting it back on*)

Heh-heh—a thicker asymmetry, heh-heh-heh... You do make such a funny joke... Thank you, Mother, for your immeasurable kindness, for your sensitivity and magnanimity. I'll fetch you the very best pot of foie gras with truffles—only send your Servant for it. And I'll send you the neck—the very moment we put the pig down. For how guilty we are before you, but you—you, Mother, are rich in wisdom and universal forgiveness; and the most precious wealth of all possible wealths is held in your boundless soul in broad abundance. May Fronk grant you and all your girls good health, and may he grant your grandson every blessing as well!

MOTHER (*waving him off*)

Oh, enough—you've talked my head off. Turn to the boarding house, or we'll be late. And don't go losing pigs now, Master.

MASTER (*waving his hand*)

Perish the thought, Mother! How could I lose one now?!

SERVANT (*taking hold of the wheelchair from behind*)

This very second we depart, Mother, and we shall be at the boarding house in time without fail, so do not trouble yourself—only hold tight to the rails, for a considerable west wind is blowing straight into the face.

MOTHER (*peevishly, gripping the rails*)

You talk too much, clever-clogs. Now go on—move it, move it—quick!

MASTER (*waving his cap after the old woman*)

All the best, Mother! Don't catch a chill!

The old woman waves him off with her hand.

Turning around, Servant and Mother roll away into the hole in the upstage backdrop from which they first appeared.

APPRENTICE

She's nasty, that Mother—always grumbling and cursing. Why's that, Uncle?

MASTER

Because she's old, lad. Her whole life is behind her, and ahead there's only filthy girls, bastard customers, and lavender tea.

APPRENTICE (*thoughtfully*)

Filthy girls? Well I don't know, Uncle...

MASTER (*irritated*)

What's there to know? After Repose Day we'll go. Enough chatter—watch for the pig. Watch harder, or we won't find her by nightfall.

APPRENTICE

All right, Uncle.

Master and Apprentice start walking in place again at center stage, closer to the upstage wall, peering at the stage floor and turning their heads from side to side. The sun is shining; the wind's howling grows stronger; snow is falling.

Suddenly, from the left wing a Boy runs out straight at them, and from the right wing a Girl runs toward him. They are about ten to twelve. The Girl is about two heads taller than the Boy.

From here on, everything happens very fast.

The children almost collide, then stop short. The Boy tosses some object high into the air; it flies up and, naturally, falls back down, and the Boy and Girl jostle and shove as they try to catch it. They fail, and the object drops onto the stage. Then the Girl swings her arm down from above and slaps the Boy hard on the ear.

GIRL (*slapping the Boy on the ear*)

TICK!

BOY (*slapping the Girl on the ear*)

TOCK!

GIRL (*punching the Boy in the chest*)

TICK!

BOY (*striking the Girl on the forearm*)

TOCK!

GIRL (*kicking the Boy in the backside*)

TICK!

BOY (*trying to stomp on the Girl's foot, but missing as she pulls it away*)

TOCK!

The Girl trips the Boy, shoves him in the chest with her hand (a sweep), and he falls onto the cobblestones. The Girl triumphantly snatches up the fallen object: a big, torn brown leather ball, and cries out in victory.

GIRL (*holding the torn leather ball up high*)

BOLLUS!

BOY (*scowling; he gets up off the stones, digs in his pocket and pulls out a large sweet wrapped in gaudily colored paper*)

All right—you win. Here.

The Girl jerks the gaudy sweet from the Boy's hand, tears it open, and immediately eats it.

MASTER (*irritated*)

Where did you two come from? Why are you fighting on the cobblestones—why aren't you in gymnasium?

GIRL (*making a modest curtsy, politely, chewing*)

Hello. We're not fighting—we're playing bollus. Today is the sixth round. The whole gymnasium is playing.

MASTER (*skeptical*)

A game? I just saw you hitting each other in the face, and then the kid fell on the stones.

GIRL (*shrugging*)

Those are the rules in bollus. We didn't make them up.

BOY

We're doing it for pretend—

just so you barely touch. The main thing is it has to look real from the outside. Here, look. TICK!

The Boy goes up to the Girl, winds up, and strikes her with an open palm on the ear. The Girl takes the fake slap, doesn't even sway, not upset in the least, and smiles happily. Having taken the fake slap, she winds up and strikes the Boy on the ear in return; he, in turn, reacts extremely positively.

GIRL (*striking the Boy on the ear*)

TOCK! See? It's not for real.

MASTER (*bewildered*)

Well I'll be... lad... What kind of games are they playing in gymnasiums these days? All right... Tell me—have you seen a pig? A big pink pig with a white bow on her back.

BOY

A pig like that was eating bread by the park entrance. Some guy was sitting there on a bench, crumbled bread down by his feet, and she came up and ate. We even thought she'd run off from a nomad camp. She had a bow, only it was under her belly.

MASTER

How long ago?

GIRL

Just now. Only she's not eating anymore.

MASTER (*a little bewildered*)

Not eating anymore?

BOY

Well, she was eating at first, and then a tram went by and she bolted into the bushes. Must've got scared.

MASTER (*irritated*)

Pah... Why are you messing with my head? Couldn't you say right away she bolted into the bushes?

GIRL

I did say it right away.

MASTER

You didn't say a thing. He said it. All right, lad—let's go. Kids—be careful, you'll tear each other's heads off.

BOY

We're careful—we're on the sixth round.

GIRL

True!

She turns to the Boy and gives him a sharp cuff on the back of the head.

TICK!

The Girl takes off running and exits right. The Boy runs after her and shoves her in the back.

BOY (*shoving the Girl in the back*)

TOCK!

With a crash, both disappear behind the right wing.

MASTER

Disgusting kids. Bollus? What the hell is bollus? All right—move.

Master and Apprentice resume their walking-in-place. The sun is shining, the wind blows, big sparse flakes of snow fall. Over the heroes' heads, with loud cawing, a flock of crows flies past. Master looks up, shading his eyes with his hand.

APPRENTICE

When we were kids, Uncle, we played stick all the time, but this “bollus”—never even heard of it.

MASTER

Ha! Stick... Stick, lad—that's classic. Well, now it's a different time, of course.

APPRENTICE

But you said time is always the same, Uncle.

MASTER

For bullets time is always the same; for games it's different. That's why games are all different, but bullets are the same.

APPRENTICE

That's a bit complicated—you talk, I don't get it, Uncle.

MASTER

No matter, lad. You just watch for the pig, and little by little the mind will come.

APPRENTICE

I won't let her slip now, Uncle, that's for sure. She'll get tired, sit down to rest—then we'll put one in her, right, Uncle?

MASTER (*thoughtfully*)

A pig is an unpredictable beast.

APPRENTICE

What do you mean by that, Uncle?

MASTER (*irritated*)

How should I know what I mean by it? We might not catch her, that's what I mean.

APPRENTICE

We will catch her for sure, Uncle.

At the left corner of the upstage backdrop, caught in a sudden spotlight, a strange citizen of great height strides toward the heroes—walking in place, lifting his legs high above the snow. The snow squeaks under his tread. His hair is not very clean, cut into a very long gray bob. He is dressed all in black and wears no hat. He stops walking in place and approaches the heroes, still lifting his legs high as he steps.

MASTER (*under his breath*)

Here come the angels with another one. Good day, **MAESTRO**. Where are you off to this early?

MAESTRO (*speaking fast*)

Ah—it's as if I'm in a magic dream and cannot wake... And of all things?! A rehearsal of the vocaloria! My poor, poor little boys! My respects, Master. And to you as well, young man. My poor little... What is happening in the city now!

MASTER

What "little" are you talking about? You're not yourself at all, Maestro. Hey—you're shaking! What happened?

MAESTRO (*rambling, heated*)

The choir—my tender choir! The little boys of my cathedral choir of little boys! We were just singing number seven hundred and seventy-seven, and suddenly into the Cathedral House bursts—who would you think? A pig!

APPRENTICE (*delighted*)

Uncle!

MASTER (*hastily giving the Apprentice a light cuff on the back of the head; then, with marked astonishment*)

Silence! A pig, Maestro—truly? And how did that happen? Curious—how could a pig turn up in the Cathedral House?

MAESTRO

I've no idea. A pig as enormous as can be, and with a bow tied on it! I think it ran in from the nomads.

MASTER

Well, likely! They had a monkey run off not long ago. There's no controlling them—filthy nomad riffraff.

APPRENTICE (*bewildered*)

But Uncle—

MASTER (*giving the Apprentice another cuff on the back of the head*)

Go on—go on, Maestro—tell us what happened!

MAESTRO (*fast, rambling, extremely expressive*)

You see, since early morning we have been rehearsing numbers from the vocaloria—Repose Day is almost upon us, so we are, you see, preparing for it. Today my boys sang especially splendidly—truly, they sang as if Fronk Himself had descended upon their little ears and little throats. In short, they sing, my little suns, like angels from the Universal Administration, and I accompany them on the harmonium. And so we go through the choral passages with them: we sang number two hundred and seventy and thirty-one, then one hundred and eighteen, we remembered number twenty-one. I do not recall the rehearsal order, only that after number twenty-one we began rehearsing number seven hundred and seventy-seven. Yes, yes—exactly so it was. And so, no sooner had we finished number twenty-one and set ourselves to number seven hundred and seventy-seven than the doors fly open—and in a snowy whirlwind a monster bursts into the house. A pig! From sheer surprise I even fell off the bench, and in fright I clonked the harmonium with my hands. And the beast—at those sounds—leaps up and charges between the rows! And there it darts in all directions, grunting and squealing at full force. It ran, like that, all the way to the altar, then turned—and back it came. From its rear end—pray forgive me—down it comes, down it comes, and the bow under its belly drags along the floor. And the whole floor in the house is now covered in swine—

APPRENTICE

In shit?

MASTER (*giving the Apprentice a cuff on the back of the head*)

Forgive him, Maestro. But what happened next?

MAESTRO

My boys were frightened at first, and some of the first sopranos even cried. But the moment they saw a pig running through the house—they cheered up at once and began to misbehave. But what can you expect of them, Master—little boys? The pig thrashed about for several minutes, and then ran back out through the door into the street. As for me, I bruised my back when I fell off the bench. The rehearsal, of course, we ended there; I sent my little boys out... We never got through number seven hundred and seventy-seven with them—but how can one rehearse the vocaloria in swine feces? And now I am going to the Observers to report the sacrilege, then back to the house—to set things in order. As if in a magic oblivion...

MASTER (*sympathetically*)

You, Maestro, are a man of higher matters and a delicate inner constitution. You need to calm down—that's what. But tell me: no one was harmed? Only your back?

MAESTRO

Oh, my back... Everyone—everyone is healthy. A pig in the Cathedral House! Like a magic glamour... Surely it is the nomads.

MASTER

Report those damned nomads to the Observers, Maestro—otherwise they've let their camp run wild; next thing you know they'll bring the plague into the city again, or something worse. They should be driven out of here by the neck—and far away.

MAESTRO

Yes—you're right, you're right—far away... I'll be off, Master... My back, yes... Everything is like a magic vision... My little boys... All the very best to you, Master. And to you as well, young man.

The Apprentice bows uncertainly. Master, with a half-sincere smile, fawningly shakes Maestro's hand with both hands.

Maestro slowly exits into the right wing, lifting his legs high as he goes.

MASTER (*brightly, calling after him*)

I'm sure, Maestro, you'll go on delighting us townsfolk with your talent and your high arts! And do drop in before Repose Day—I'll have very decent discounts for you!

MAESTRO (*confused, already from offstage*)

Yes, yes, I will... My little ones... As if in a magic...

MASTER (*to the Apprentice; angrily*)

Are you an idiot?

APPRENTICE (*confused*)

What did I do, Uncle?

MASTER

You want me not to be here?

APPRENTICE (*confused, startled*)

WHAT?

MASTER (*angrily; rapping the Apprentice on the forehead with his knuckles*)

THAT. You blabbed about the pig to the old bitch? You did. And just now you almost blabbed to that mistake whose pig it is.

APPRENTICE

I, Uncle—

MASTER

I'm the Uncle. You're nobody at all. The medal pig, lad, has shit up the Cathedral House on the eve of Repose Day! Scared the boys, injured the Maestro... What boys are those—singing there?

APPRENTICE

Little ones, Uncle?

MASTER

Little ones... The burgomaster's son sings there. How do you think the burgomaster will thank me for a frightened little son and a Cathedral House covered in shit? The burgomaster's cook is expecting a ham leg from the medal pig tomorrow—already paid for. Do you grasp the seriousness of the situation, lad? You let her go, and who's to blame? The Master is to blame, not you—no one even knows you exist! Hear the old hag? The rotten bitch is right: my pig—so I'm at fault. For this kind of "mastery" they'll run me out of town—twenty years of professional cutting and spotless trade—into the trash! And you'll go back to your father a parasite, eating horse shit. Good thing there are nomads—may Fronk grant them long years of sorrow and suffering. Now, if we meet anyone, you do not open your mouth at all until I give the command. Only "hello" and "goodbye." Understood?

APPRENTICE (*crushed*)

Understood—every bit of it, Uncle. Forgive me, Uncle.

MASTER (*angrily*)

Last time. Come on.

Master points toward the upstage backdrop, and they walk in place into a narrowing city perspective built by scenery, a lighting installation, and video projections. As they "move" upstage, the light goes out.

ACT II

In darkness, J.S. Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B minor, BWV 1067: 8. Badinerie begins to sound softly. Against the music, for about a minute, there is the touching, defenseless grunting of a pig.

The flute and orchestra, fading into diminuendo, continue. In complete darkness, over the music, an unhurried, calm dialogue is heard: a woman's voice and a man's. The music gradually dies away; the dialogue continues for a while in the dark. Then the stage lights return, and the audience sees a set dressed as a round central city square. In the middle rises a round city fountain—winter, of course: snow-covered and not running. Only the center of the stage is lit, the fountain zone, where a man of indeterminate age and a beautiful young woman stand talking. The buildings around the square are darkened; only their overhanging outlines are barely visible. Yet the stage sun is shining.

So: music, grunting, darkness.

HER HIGHNESS

Poor thing! Come to me, sweetheart. Or could it be... he?

Music, grunting, darkness.

SOMEONE

It is clearly she, Your Highness. You know, if it were he, the primary sexual characteristics would leave no doubt whatsoever. And besides—you can see these rows of teats. But be careful, Your Highness: the pig is of quite considerable size and may do harm, willingly or unwillingly.

Music, grunting, darkness.

HER HIGHNESS

What nonsense! Look—why, she’s affectionate, like a dog. Come on, darling, I’ll scratch you behind the ear.

Music, grunting, darkness.

You see—she’s completely tame. Poor thing, she must be hungry, and she must be cold. Quickly—give me an éclair.

SOMEONE

Here, Your Highness.

HER HIGHNESS (*tenderly*)

Thank you. Take it—quickly. Good girl, clever one. Eat, eat, my girl. Where did you come from on this snowy, frosty morning, little pig? And this bow...

After this line, the grunting and the music die away completely. Darkness.

SOMEONE

The appearance of this pig here can be explained by several versions, Your Highness, and the first of them is the nomads, wintering outside the city on the bank of the local river since time immemorial. From this camp, as you know, animals run off now and then; they make their way into the city, disturbing the peace and order of the townsfolk. Some time ago a monkey ran off from them, causing no small number of various incidents, until at last it was caught by the Observers. However, do not take it as importunity, Your Highness, but in your place I would be wary of touching with your hand an unclean creature of unknown origin. It is entirely possible—and even probable—that this pig is a carrier of an ailment which could have the most grievous consequences for you citizens, up to and including fatal ones; therefore we cannot lightly risk your precious health, Your Highness.

Grunting, darkness. Suddenly, the ring of a tram bell and the clatter of rails. The grunting intensifies and vanishes from the mix together with the sounds of the departing tram and the patter of little pig hooves.

Fairly quickly, but not abruptly—rather smoothly—the stage lighting returns, as if someone carefully, though not slowly, is turning the dimmer. Center stage: a round city square with a snow-covered fountain in the middle. The square is ringed by the indistinct outlines of buildings. A conditional sun shines, but it lights only the fountain zone. By the fountain’s rim stand and talk a man of indeterminate age and a beautiful young woman. Both are dressed modestly for winter.

HER HIGHNESS

The girl ran off—got scared. Well then. Shall we go on?

SOMEONE

Of course, Your Highness. So: would you care to clarify what interests you first of all?

HER HIGHNESS

Tell me about the appearance of Fronk.

SOMEONE

With pleasure, Your Highness, I will share with you all I can say on that score; however, I must warn you that history is exceedingly sparse in documentary facts concerning Fronk's early turns. For the most part these are oral or written testimonies of the descendants of Fronk's contemporaries, bearing numerous signs of fantasies and artistic invention introduced into the witness text.

HER HIGHNESS

Yes, yes, I know. There was a fire...

SOMEONE

Hm. The fire—yes. The thing is that one hundred and twenty-five turns ago, during the Great Fire, the memorial city archive burned to the ground, and with it all official documentary and legal records of Fronk's childhood turns. And therefore everything known of Fronk's childhood is known to us only from personal testimonies of his contemporaries, passed down by ancestors to descendants, orally and in writing, from generation to generation. No one, however, can know with juridical—or even merely reliable—precision the authenticity of these testimonies, since their basis is human speech, spoken and inherited by oral transmission, or else fixed on parchment or paper, and not confirmed by any proofs whatsoever.

HER HIGHNESS

And yet I would like to know...

SOMEONE

Of course, Your Highness. So: the first oral testimonies state that Fronk was born not here, and came to the locality in which he later created the city only upon reaching thirteen turns, having been brought here by his mother, Princess Fronk—she purchased several income-bearing buildings in a riverside wasteland. His exact birthplace remains a mystery to this day. By the way, the locality then was built up with brushwood constructions and had not a single fundamental building, and likewise had no title of "city," and therefore fires, taking numerous lives and the property of the aborigines, were, alas, a regular phenomenon. The exact time of Fronk's life, as you doubtless know, is likewise not reliably determined, and it is considered that Fronk lived and created approximately from seven hundred and fifty to four hundred and twenty turns ago by the city's scale of time.

HER HIGHNESS

You know, everything connected with Fronk fascinates me greatly. But tell me: how did an ordinary boy become the greatest creator who made the city?

SOMEONE

The rare and doubtful testimonies state the following: Fronk, a strange and sickly child in his youth, was extraordinarily talented in all that concerned external forms of self-expression and the adjacent domains of human existence at that time. There exists a strange and unreliable oral legend, kept by the family of distant descendants of Princess Fronk's servants, telling that in the second turn of his life here the boy Fronk astonished the aborigines to the utmost by constructing a great number of strange forms of unheard-of variety, whose building material in summer was flour sand—still in abundance covering the beaches of the local river—and in winter, snow, of which there has likewise never been any shortage here in winter seasons.

HER HIGHNESS

And what did he build?

SOMEONE

It is considered that little Fronk, left by Princess Fronk to himself, spent all his time on these beaches, raising from sand, branches, water, and the droppings of river birds certain constructions which could have been either early model prototypes of future segments of the city, or a sporadic expression of the chaotic creative origin of the young Fronk.

HER HIGHNESS

How I would like to see the works of little Fronk!

SOMEONE

Legend has it that the fountain by which we are now standing was created by Fronk precisely on the basis of one of his childhood ideas, Your Highness; however, these are only unreliable rumors carried by human gossip through hundreds of turns of the city's existence. To my great regret, Your Highness, visual images capable of confirming these, hm, testimonies in any way, and of explaining what forms the creative fantasies of young Fronk took, have never existed; and therefore I would venture to recommend that you treat them as a work of artistic invention—pretending to documentary chronicle—filled with a strange poetics and possessing for your bright mind an exclusively artistic value, though not of unconditional magnitude.

HER HIGHNESS (*thoughtfully*)

I think I'm beginning to understand...

SOMEONE

I am sure the bottomless depth of your imagination, as well as the boundless power of your creative fantasy, will without particular effort help you picture forms which could have been made by little Fronk, relying on what you have seen built by Fronk mature, and also on my modest testimonies.

HER HIGHNESS (*eagerly*)

You know, upon my return to court I intend to take up that practice of which you have now kindly informed me. More than that: today I will attempt to sketch what I have imagined in watercolors in my court workshop. But tell me of Fronk's most significant work—I absolutely wish to see it today.

SOMEONE

Your plans are worthy of admiration, Your Highness; and undoubtedly, after their realization, you will have the deserved success with spectators who will have the pleasure of beholding the fruits of your labors. As for what you were pleased to call Fronk's "most significant" work—here I must clarify something. The matter is as follows, Your Highness: the creative legacy left by Fronk is such that it is impossible to break it apart into separate objects—what you were pleased to call "more significant" or less significant. Fronk's merit consists in this: having received from the Universal Administration time, space, means, and authority, he created the city exactly as Your Highness may observe it right now—this concerns both the buildings and the layout of the streets, as well as all other attributes of the city's existence, including questions of the sex of its townsfolk, the townsfolk themselves, the administrative order, cultural and religious life, the **Observers'** University, the system of punishments and rewards, and the food-and-market political economy.

In a word: exactly such as in two months you will receive it into your subordination, Your Highness—with all households, with all subjects, with all virtues and shortcomings. I would put it thus: the city is the single, but exhaustive, work of Fronk—the absolute canvas of his creative will, embodied by means of an instrumentarium invented by him as well. It was Fronk who devised the attributes of city being; it was Fronk who formulated the principles of action, counteraction, and interaction; he devised the names, introduced the terminology, and made function what was conceived and created as the only possible working mechanism. Or, if you prefer: as an organism born in torment, which exists in the form in which you feel yourself, since you are its inalienable part, Your Highness. Fronk created all city existence—and first of all, you, Your Highness. And who knows, Your Highness: perhaps at any moment of past or future Fronk thought, thinks, or only yet intends to think of what he might create a little farther and a little higher, using, for instance, your beautiful eyes, Your Highness, as one of the quarter-tones in his boundless palette of creative possibilities. So if you, Your Highness, wish to see, as you said, his most significant work—look into yourself: there you will find the most "significant," as you were pleased to express it, of his works. At least, anything more significant personally for you Fronk most certainly did not create—and, of course, will never create.

HER HIGHNESS (*with a smirk, stunned*)

You mean to say I, too, was created by Fronk? Nonsense—how could that be? It is completely, absolutely impossible. I remember perfectly well that I simply appeared here all by myself four turns ago, in exactly the form in which I am speaking with you now—and you, of all people, must know this, because the first person I saw, waking for the first time, was you. No: Fronk is, of course, a great creator—my court tutors told me so from the first day, and, as far as I know, teachers tell this to every single pupil in every gymnasium in the city, regardless of the tuition in each of them. But that he should be my creator? And did he not publicly repose in sleep after the Cathedral House was finished and commissioned?

SOMEONE

As you rightly noted, I was present at your awakening, Your Highness; however, the four turns of which you speak are merely a personal sensation of the flow of time assigned to you by Fronk—a kind of dimensional scale bestowed by the creator for your better orientation in the city's living space. As for the day of Fronk's Repose—everything happened not quite as the chronicles state, Your Highness; more accurately—it happened not at all as they state. What took place on the dark that followed the bright, in which the Cathedral House was finally completed, and Fronk, exhausted by his great labors, was preparing to depart into final sleep, was so unusual and so unfit for historical legacy that the witnesses to what occurred made the decision to keep the events of that

dark secret. Instead, it was decided to put forward a version according to which Fronk's final sleep, as he had planned, continued with the burial of the great creator in the bed of the old channel of the city river, in a case made by his own hand from willow wands, birds' feathers, and balsamed meadow flowers.

HER HIGHNESS

But how can you know this?

SOMEONE

That, Your Highness, to my great regret, I cannot reveal to you. I can only say that you are free to take my words with whatever degree of trust your reason and your soul deem possible.

HER HIGHNESS (*with force*)

You know perfectly well that I believe you with all my heart, for I have known you from the moment I first remember myself.

SOMEONE

I thank you, Your Highness. I am deeply moved.

HER HIGHNESS

But what happened on that dark? Tell me—tell me quickly! I'm dying of curiosity.

SOMEONE

So then: on a late May dark, after the solemn opening of the Cathedral House, Fronk—ceremonially arrayed—was conducted with honors and chants befitting an event of such magnitude into a case of his own making, in which he was to be consigned to burial the next day. After that, a procession consisting of six processors slowly carried the case through all the streets of the city and, in the end, arrived at the grand staircase of his mansion.

HER HIGHNESS

I have gooseflesh down my spine, and I can see what happened then as if with my waking eyes: the May dark, the thick, all-pervading smell of lilac blossom. From an alley come scraps of voices, and I see six silhouettes, burdened with a great load, moving toward eternity. They step in step; their boots, shod with gold, click brightly on the cobblestones—and there they are, at the grand staircase of the great creator's mansion.

SOMEONE

It is remarkable how precisely Your Highness feels the atmosphere that reigned here on that dark. Now, with your leave, I shall continue.

HER HIGHNESS

Yes, yes—forgive me, I interrupted you.

SOMEONE

It is nothing, nothing. So then: the procession arrived at Fronk's mansion, and the processors, according to the protocol of the Repose ceremony, lowered the case onto the cobblestones with the utmost care, so that Fronk could leave it on his own, ascend the grand staircase one last time, pass through the enfilade of rooms, bid farewell to the servants and the most beloved of his mistresses, then return to the case, where, according to his will, Fronk was to sink into final sleep before the burial in the bed of the old channel of the city river.

HER HIGHNESS

And what was this case itself like?

SOMEONE

Fronk's case was woven from young willow, gathered by his own hand in winter seasons in the willow thickets of the riverside wastelands. In form it resembled an ordinary coffin; however, it was several times taller, many times wider, and had nine hundred hexagonal facets symmetrically arranged across the entire outer surface of the object—like a cut precious stone. It was a structure of very considerable size, Your Highness; and if not for the lightness of the material of which it was made, the six processors could never have lifted it in their arms. The case stood two human heights tall; it had little gates for entry, placed at the back and at the front; and it also had viewing slits the full length of the right and left walls, which were closed with outer shutters. Handrails for the bearers ran around it horizontally like the rings of the planet Saturnus, which is located not far from here. The willow had been soaked beforehand in a varnish of Fronk's own invention and had a strange dark-silver, slightly bluish tint, phosphorescing in moonlight. And besides: the acoustic method of weaving devised by Fronk—letting the headwind pass through cunningly arranged air tunnels in the wall-cloth of the case—made the walls resonate and produce quiet, whisper-performed multidimensional segments of half-melodies, the sound of which resembled nothing of anything I had heard before or since.

HER HIGHNESS

What you describe is completely astonishing—but tell me: how is all this known to you?

SOMEONE

I think I can reveal something to you without harm to equilibrium. The matter is that I was in the city during the period of Fronk's *Repose*, and I was in the very thick of events. You must know that you are not my only protégée; at that time I had quite a different kind of business here. But I beg you once again: do not ask me "how," "from where," and "why," Your Highness—for I am not free to reveal the unrevealable. Be satisfied, I ask you, with what I am able to tell you.

HER HIGHNESS

Yes, yes—please forgive me. But go on!

SOMEONE

So then: the inner space of the case, unlike its faceted surface, had the shape of a regular oval cone—yet it had neither walls nor floor nor ceiling, whose functions were assigned to three dimensions well known to Your Highness. The inner finish of the case was a fantastically made mosaic bas-relief depicting scenes of Fronk's creation of city being. The bas-relief was made by Fronk simultaneously with the stages of the city's construction over several centuries and was something like his creative autobiography—or, to be more precise, a chronological work of art: a sculptural model of the creator's activity, produced by him post factum of that very activity. The bas-relief was executed from flowers and grasses gathered by Fronk in the riverside wasteland and preserved by him in a special manner. By injections of an elixir of meat whey mixed with sand powder, eggs, and quicklime, he managed to give the plucked plants the strength and plasticity of a finishing material, preserving—and in places even improving—their original outward appearance. The strange bas-relief covered the entire inner surface of the case from the conditional floor and walls up to the conditional ceiling; and the lower portion of the relief was made by Fronk with inlays of river gull feathers and city crow feathers of various sizes, likewise collected by Fronk throughout his entire activity. Fixed in the lower, conditionally floor-like part of the relief in countless positions and

combinations, the feathers gave peculiar volume to the depicted scenes; and their quantity increased proportionally from the conditional edges of the inner space toward its center, where the creator's throne stood—made entirely of black and white bird feathers, reinforced with wrought gold wire.

HER HIGHNESS

Your description bewilders me. But I beg you—what happened next?

SOMEONE

Having lowered the case, the six processors lined up on the staircase in two rows, waiting with the tact and patience proper to the ritual for Fronk to appear; yet the case remained motionless and gave no sign whatsoever of containing anything. On the second interval of waiting, the processors began exchanging bewildered looks; and after one more interval the chief processor spoke up and suggested that Fronk might have reposed earlier than the time planned according to the protocol of the Repose ceremony. After a brief conference, the processors decided to open the shutters of the case's viewing slits, to understand what exactly had happened inside and, on the basis of what was understood, to take a correct decision most fully corresponding to the situation—considering the scale of the creator's person and the significance of the events for the city's history.

HER HIGHNESS

And what did they see there?

SOMEONE

I will begin with this, Your Highness: the processors had to labor before they were able to look inside and before what was happening within the case became possible to comprehend. The shutters, also woven, but from grapevine, were fastened to the outer surface of the case by a complex system of clasps and hooks, ending along the edge of the shutters in decorative lacing made of thin hazel twigs, drawn tight in several places by trick knots; and in order to open the viewing slit without damaging the woven cloth of the finest workmanship, the processors had to rack their brains. When a small part of the shutters was, with difficulty, untied from its fastenings and the viewing slit became partially accessible, it became clear that, despite an attempt to light the slit with a torch, it was impossible to make out absolutely anything of what was happening inside the case: beyond the slit there was absolute darkness; only an unpleasant sharp smell was present, and a strange hissing sound—as if air locked in some kind of prison, after long searching, had finally found a random route and, in its whole volume, hurried to rush along it to some unknown exit—or entrance. Then the processors decided to untie all the shutters and, having bared the viewing slit along its full length, lit it with two gas torches from both sides—this allowed one of them to see what was happening inside the case.

HER HIGHNESS

Tell me quickly—what was there?

SOMEONE

In the half-dark disturbed by the flicker of flame, squinting, the processor made out the throne standing at the center of the case and a figure of Fronk seated upon it. The figure was not static: it performed barely perceptible oscillations in space, slightly increasing and slightly decreasing in size. As I said earlier, a sharp unpleasant smell, unlike anything, hung in the air; and there was also distinctly audible, from no one knows where, a quiet yet all-pervading constricted whistle. When the processor attempted to call Fronk by name and regalia, the silhouette did not respond; however, it immediately—as it seemed to the processor—greatly increased in size and, continuing to make

strange barely visible sways in the air, appeared to lift above the throne. The processor informed the others that something strange was occurring in the case and demanded that four more torches be lit at once, so that what was happening could be examined attentively and in full detail. The processors hurriedly lit the gas lanterns and illuminated the viewing slit from both sides with six sources of fire. The following picture appeared to their eyes: Fronk seated on the throne seemed to be filling unevenly from within with some substance; parts of his body changed shape chaotically, increasing and decreasing their volumes and dimensions. His skin, covered with large drops of liquid, had a strange violet tint, shifting in intensity from pale amethyst to almost ebony, bluish-black. The body was in a dynamic of alternate swelling and shrinking of its parts; this dynamic had an astonishing amplitude to the eye: for instance, at the moment when, say, the right hand of Fronk increased, his head diminished; his legs became, one after the other, shorter than the other; Fronk's left ear grew to a size comparable to his entire face, then at once shrank to the size of a pinky fingernail—and all this occurred in the same instant. The process flowed smoothly; yet all visible parts of the creator's body were involved, and each acted, it seemed, according to its own individual program, obeying only the general tempo of transformation. Are you listening, Your Highness?

HER HIGHNESS

Yes, yes! I have never heard anything like it! Go on—quickly!

SOMEONE

The processors, not expecting to see anything of the kind inside the case, were completely stunned and watched what was happening without moving, mouths agape. Meanwhile Fronk's body began to increase in size with substantial speed. Now it pressed its swollen head into the upper part of the case; Fronk's eyes spun madly in their sockets; and the tongue hanging from his mouth seemed to take on a separate life: continuing to grow rapidly like a deranged plant shoot, it moved chaotically over Fronk's body, feeling the dynamic protrusions and depressions it encountered on its path, and twining the body in multiple directions. Fronk, grown severalfold, was already hovering in the air—or, more precisely, was braced against the ceiling and, more than half entangled in his own tongue, occupied about two-thirds of the case's inner space. Then events developed swiftly: Fronk's tongue, greatly accelerating its journey over its owner's body, covered him almost completely in a few instants, and now Fronk was a gigantic cocoon of oval shape. Across the surface of this cocoon, differently sized tongue-blisters swelled and sank; it was in constant motion, increasing at the same time in all directions at once. The hissing whistle intensified and became unbearable to such a degree that some of the processors had to step away from the viewing slit and observe from several meters back. Meanwhile Fronk swelled so much that through the slit one could see only the dark-pink, porous surface of tongue, wrapped in several layers around its owner's body. For a time the cocoon continued to grow, beginning to push outward, and now the woven walls of the case began to crackle—when suddenly there came a loud pop, and from the viewing slit in all directions, including onto the processors, there splashed thickly a stinking black oily liquid. The whistle stopped at once, and absolute silence reigned.

The processors, wiping their faces of the unknown-origin slime with the sleeves of their cassocks, held a brief processorial conference: the situation demanded immediate clarification and a decision, for the city was awaiting the burial ceremony on the next bright. As a result of the conference, it was decided to force open the little gates leading into the case's interior, which was done at once with the handle of a gas torch. Having entered and lit the case from within, the processors found that the entire inner space was coated in a black greasy film—including the mosaic bas-relief, as well as the bird-feather throne, which now stood at the center of a sizable

puddle of oily liquid that reached the throne halfway up its legs; and Fronk himself was visible nowhere at all.

With difficulty making their way to the throne, one of the processors noticed a movement in a recess of the seat; coming closer, he saw a small goldfish writhing in the black slime, frequently opening its mouth as if trying to tell him something. Scooping up the fish in his palm together with the slime, the processor brought it to his ear, listened closely, and distinctly heard a constricted fish-whisper repeating without pause: “fronkfronkfronkfronkfronkfronk...” He showed the find to the others, and the fish was at once placed into a travel cask of drinking water carried by one of the processors. But the moment the fish was inside, the cask, set on the cobblestones, began to rock violently from side to side; a moment later the iron hoops binding it began to burst; and finally, from the wooden staves that flew apart, together with the water, there splashed onto the cobblestones a scrawny black kitten with blue eyes, an arched back, and matted wet fur. Wavering on flimsy legs, the kitten gave a nasty squeak and, twitching its mangy tail several times in convulsions, swiftly vanished into a basement window of Fronk’s mansion—this time disappearing entirely and for good.

After the conference that followed Fronk’s metamorphoses, it was decided not to cancel the procedure of Fronk’s burial appointed for the next bright, and to place into the alcove prepared in the bed of the old river channel a hermetically sealed empty case, announcing to the city that Fronk, sunk into eternal sleep, was inside—just as had been planned according to the Repose ceremony’s design. Such is the story of Fronk’s last bright in brief, Your Highness.

HER HIGHNESS

Could it really be that everything you have just told me happened in reality?

SOMEONE

Without a doubt, Your Highness. The matter is that I was one of those very processors. I heard the fish and saw the kitten.

HER HIGHNESS (*thoughtfully*)

All this is very unfamiliar to my young, unsteadied mind.

Suddenly, in the man’s overcoat pocket, an iPhone rings with a traditional ringtone. Someone takes the iPhone from his pocket and looks at it.

SOMEONE

Excuse me, Your Highness: I’m being disturbed from the Universal Administration, and I must answer.

Her Highness raises her left hand in assent, and Someone begins speaking into the handset.

SOMEONE (*into the phone*)

Yes, Alex. You have my full attention.

Someone listens to the caller for about ten to twenty seconds, then replies.

Right now? Right now I’m at point thirty-one forty-eight five hundred twenty-nine zero five. We were recalling the bright of Fronk’s Repose with Her Highness. Fronk—that creator of the city, remember? Yes, yes, that one—he’s the one. But if so, then of course. In principle, we’re already finishing. Yes, of course. Consider me already flown in.

Someone, having finished speaking, puts the iPhone back into his overcoat pocket.

Your Highness, with great regret I must inform you that I must take my leave at once and urgently depart for an extraordinary General Assembly of the Universal Administration, convened on a matter of extreme importance directly concerning the preservation of universal equilibrium. All of us are being recalled there in full force, Your Highness, regardless of how significant a person each of us is patroning at this moment in time and space.

HER HIGHNESS (*emotionally*)

Tell me—might I go with you today? I would very much like that.

SOMEONE

Unfortunately, Your Highness, this is absolutely out of the question, since, for certain fundamental reasons, you will be unable not only to make such a journey, but even to imagine it. But I will certainly visit you before Repose Day with new patronage—if you wish it, Your Highness.

Beginning from [a piano rendering of the main theme, W. A. Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 5 in D major, K.175: 2. Andante ma un poco adagio](#), starts to sound. The light begins to fade smoothly.

HER HIGHNESS (*sighing in disappointment, spreading her hands*)

In that case I will wait with great impatience. You know, I must tell you: our meetings are the most interesting thing of all that happens in my career.

SOMEONE

I thank you, Your Highness. It pleases me greatly to hear this. However, I must depart immediately, and I wish you to spend this day and all your other days exactly as you yourself desire.

HER HIGHNESS (*with bright sadness in her voice*)

Thank you. In turn, I wish you a pleasant journey and await you again with impatience.

The light goes out completely. The music continues to sound.

ACT III

W. A. Mozart continues: Piano Concerto No. 5 in D major, K.175: 2. Andante ma un poco adagio. *In complete darkness the music plays for about 30–40 seconds, then the stage light returns slowly.*

Onstage: the entrance to a park. Downstage there is a large snow-covered flowerbed with a marble sculpture—armless and headless—of a nude woman. In place of her head sits a crooked cap made of fallen snow.

To left and right, widening diagonally toward the audience from the park gates, park alleys run off—dark silhouettes of trees should be suggested rather than seen. Along the alleys stand benches; the ones nearest the flowerbed must be real, i.e., functional, not painted.

Center stage, closer to upstage, there is a fence and massive wrought-iron park gates. The gates are open toward upstage, i.e., toward the city.

By the flowerbed with the female statue stand Master and Apprentice. They peer into the tangled chains of tracks that densely cover the snowed stage.

The music stops.

MASTER (*worried*)

And what kind of track does she have? A hoof and two toes. Here there's no hoof at all, and the toes—six. Who's got six toes, lad?

APPRENTICE (*puzzled*)

I don't know, Uncle, who's got six, but seems like on one hand we've got five and on the other five too. And on the feet—five each.

MASTER

To Fronk with you. (*suddenly jabs a finger at the floor*) Ah! There it is! That's her—no doubt. Come on. After me!

APPRENTICE

Well there, Uncle—I told you! Now we'll—

MASTER

Stay out of the way.

APPRENTICE

Yes, sir, Uncle.

Master drops into a crouch and begins, huffing loudly like a cockroach—or perhaps a monkey—scuttling very nimbly across the stage on all fours, following the tangled pig-route, tracing intricate figures and leaving behind him, on the white snowed stage, a broad dark streak. Apprentice scurries alongside, bending down and straightening up again, since the two of them have neither the space nor the knack to crawl together in a crouch along the tangled pig-track.

Master crawls quickly first toward the right wing, then back to the flowerbed, then—crawling around it in a circle—toward the park gates, then back to the flowerbed, then to the left wing, then returns again to the flowerbed, following the pig tracks, climbs directly onto the flowerbed and crawls up to the very pedestal of the marble female figure without arms or head. Apprentice follows awkwardly at his side, bending and straightening.

At this moment a heavy snowfall begins, almost instantly covering the pattern of tracks with a white snowy carpet. Master rises to his feet beside the statue.

MASTER (*breathing hard, out of breath, brushing snow from his knees and sleeves*)

And couldn't it pick a worse time! That's it—no tracks. All right. Now we'll comb the alleys—just catch our breath a bit, then we start. Come on—let's sit for a second. Oof...

Master and Apprentice go to the first bench on the left alley. Master, having brushed the snow off it, drops onto it broadly, one arm thrown over the backrest; Apprentice stays standing beside him. They talk.

APPRENTICE

Uncle, don't take it so hard. We'll find her for sure. Father's here today doing inspections—maybe he saw her. If we go down the alleys, we'll run into him there.

MASTER

An OBSERVER in the park? Why didn't you say so sooner?

APPRENTICE

You didn't ask sooner, Uncle. And besides—he does inspections here every Friday, like you didn't know.

MASTER (*irritated*)

How would I know? But good—if he's here, he might help. It's easier to chase a pig on horseback. Or is he doing inspections on foot today?

APPRENTICE (*tenderly, dreamily*)

On foot? No, Uncle. He's got a bay mare—Service Eastern breed. They issued her new two months ago. They call her **Stella**. Oh, she's a beauty, Uncle. All sleek—like carved from ebony—croup gleaming, mane like silk. And affectionate, Uncle—like a cat. In a word: the beauty of the whole world, not a mare.

MASTER (*roughly*)

Then ask your father to let you marry her, if she's such a great love of yours.

APPRENTICE (*hurt*)

That's unfair, Uncle... I've tended Father's horses since I was a child—and they're so good, so kind and gentle. No worse than people, Uncle.

MASTER (*peevishly*)

There's nothing worse than people. And why are you sulking like some little girl? If you want to get ahead, unlearn taking offense. If you're going to act like a young lady—go wherever you please, just not with me.

APPRENTICE (*indignant*)

I'm not offended at all. I'm the opposite.

MASTER (*highly surprised*)

How are you offended the opposite?

APPRENTICE (*confused*)

I don't know, Uncle. Like... I respect you to the point of utter impossibility.

MASTER (*wisely*)

I think you may turn out useful after all.

APPRENTICE (*gratefully*)

Thank you, Uncle.

An intense, hoarse cough is heard. From the right alley—or rather, from the downstage right wing—there comes a tall older man, limping badly and leaning on a crooked, knotty stick. He has lush gray sideburns, a khaki tunic, and a peaked cap with a cockade; he is about sixty turns. At his belt

hangs a wooden holster with a Mauser. His khaki trousers are smeared with blood; his face is badly scratched. The OBSERVER sees Master and Apprentice and, limping hard, comes up to them.

OBSERVER (*coughing, angrily*)

And what are you two doing here? Move. What are you staring at? Move, I said.

Master obediently takes his arm off the backrest of the bench and shifts aside, making room. The Observer, swaying, sits down in the freed spot, tossing his stick onto the snow in front of the bench.

APPRENTICE (*confused*)

That's blood... Father! Father, what happened to your face? And where's Stella, Father? What happened, Father?

OBSERVER (*dully*)

There's no more Stella.

APPRENTICE

No more—how, Father? Where is she?

OBSERVER

Killed her.

APPRENTICE (*gasps*)

Killed her? How—how could you... Why did you, Father?

Apprentice drops into a crouch in front of the bench and hides his face in his palms.

MASTER

Why'd you kill the mare?

OBSERVER (*head down, coughing, angrily*)

She punched clean through her belly in two places—guts out, front legs snapped so the bones were sticking out. No horse-doctors fix that. Or should I have left her to die in agony? Mare was brand-new, too—now I'll have to wait and see what they issue me instead... And don't double over, pup. I'm sick enough without you—

The Observer gives his son a light shove in the shoulder with his good leg; the son falls onto his back in the snow.

MASTER

Easy with your son.

Apprentice immediately gets up and brushes himself off.

APPRENTICE

I'm fine, Uncle. What happened, Father?

OBSERVER

What happened... I was riding not far from here—suddenly a huge pig runs out into the alley, some bow flapping. Ducked right between Stella's legs—and straight into the bushes, the filthy thing. Stella spooked and bolted out of the alley across the clearing—straight into a pit full of deadfall,

some forester bastard dumped it any old way. Down we went, both of us, right into that pit—onto the trunks and branches: Stella drove her belly clean through, and I just clawed up my mug and she pinned my leg—barely got out. She’s ruined: two holes in her belly the size of my head, guts showing, legs like broken branches. Lying on her side, looking at me with that big black eye—whinnies soft, tail swishing back and forth, back and forth. So I finished her.

APPRENTICE (*dropping back into a crouch, covering his face again*)

Oh, Father... Uncle...

MASTER (*shaking his head*)

Hell of a thing... How do I... In short—it’s my pig.

Apprentice stays crouched, face covered, rocking.

OBSERVER

Your pig? And stop rocking like a bitch.

He shoves his crouching son in the shoulder again with his good leg. The son topples onto his side, then comes up onto his knees and again covers his face with his palms.

APPRENTICE

It’s all me, Father. I only opened it, and she yanked... We’ve been chasing her all morning, Father. We thought you’d help us, Father...

MASTER

Right. Your son let her out.

OBSERVER (*grimacing, coughing; he gets up from the bench and picks up the knotty stick*)

So it’s because of you, you little son of a bitch? Now... Now... Wait... Stand right where you are, you vermin.

The Observer swings and kicks his son full in the face—into the hands covering it—then starts laying into him with the stick at full force, helping himself now and then with his boots.

After the kick, Apprentice drops into the snow, shielding his head with his arms.

APPRENTICE

Father, don’t! Father, I didn’t mean it! I only opened it, and she yanked!

OBSERVER (*kicking and striking with the stick*)

Didn’t raise you enough, you piece of filth—should’ve done more, should’ve done it harder... T-t-take it, bitch, t-t-take it—

The stick snaps in two. The Observer flings the broken pieces aside and keeps kicking his son.

APPRENTICE (*on his side, arms over his head*)

Father, don’t! It hurts, Father! I’ll work it off, I’ll pay you back—just don’t hit me!

OBSERVER (*spitting down on him*)

Tch. With what, you suckling. T-t-t-take it.

MASTER (*rising from the bench; coming up to the Observer*)

Hey, Observer. That's your son. Enough. Stop.

The Observer stops beating him and, panting hard, bends and braces his hands on his knees.

Apprentice, arms over his head, whines on the snow in a fetal curl.

OBSERVER

And stay out of my way—unless you want some yourself. My spawn—I'll teach it how I please.

MASTER

And you brought him to me yourself—have you forgotten? And you remember how you begged me to take him on as an apprentice, and I didn't want to? Now he owes me a full turn of work for free over that pig, and you want to cripple him. How's he going to work it off if he's a cripple?

Apprentice keeps lying there, sobbing in a fetal curl, arms over his head.

Master and Observer stand over the prone Apprentice and talk.

OBSERVER (*breathing hard; straightening up*)

Why does he suddenly owe you a turn of free work? A whole turn for free... What is your pig—gold-plated or what?

MASTER

Because she cost what five ordinary ones cost. She's a medal pig—a show winner. I bought her at auction and sold her ahead of time—with a public announcement—at the top price for Repose. Today was the day we were supposed to butcher and break her down, and tomorrow your boy would've delivered her out by addresses. The top figures of the city are waiting.

OBSERVER (*irritated*)

What are you feeding me? Medal pig, top figures, auctions... Save that nonsense for your customers. Ride out on a dark to the nomad camp, take any pig you like, stick it, chop it up—and haul it to whoever you please, top or bottom. How would they know whether it's a medal pig or not?

MASTER (*scratching his head, puzzled*)

The nomad camp, you say? Worth thinking on.

OBSERVER (*limping; sitting down on the bench; slapping the bench with his palm, inviting Master to sit*)

Think, think. And besides—why should Stella rot for nothing? Young mare, good meat. Saw her up and flog her to that same camp—I've got contacts there, they'll snatch fresh horsemeat out of your hands. Half to you, half to me.

MASTER (*sitting beside the Observer*)

That could work... Only how do we chop her up here? Right in the pit, or what?

OBSERVER

You'll figure it out. And what about the boy—can he do it, or is he good for nothing at all?

MASTER

He probably can...

OBSERVER

Then let him cut, and you and I go to the tavern and talk it over. Hundred years since we sat. (*to his son*) Hey, parasite—get up. Enough play-acting. I hardly touched you.

Apprentice slowly gets up on all fours, wincing with pain.

APPRENTICE

I'm fine, Father—just please don't hit me anymore. I'm fine.

MASTER (*thoughtfully*)

He knows the theory, and we've broken down plenty together. Never a horse, though—always pig, cow, and bird. But I'll say this: your son's turning into a capable butcher. Talent, as they say, right there in plain sight. Only you near beat the soul out of him. Lad—how are you, alive?

APPRENTICE (*swaying as he gets to his feet*)

Seems I'm alive, Uncle. So I'm to cut up Stella? How can I, Father? I tended her...

OBSERVER

Tended her... You let the pig out, and because of it Stella is dead—so you'll be the one to break down the horse. Consider it an aptitude exam that's fallen into your lap. Now you go and fetch what you need, and we go to the tavern—business to talk.

APPRENTICE (*downcast*)

All right, Father. Where's Stella? Where am I supposed to cut her?

OBSERVER (*pointing toward the alley he came from*)

Close by. Down that alley—two hundred steps—you'll see a big clearing on the left. Cross it, follow my tracks straight to the pit with the deadfall—it's all drenched in her blood. You won't miss it. And move it—have it done by evening, or you know what, pup. (*gives his son a cuff on the back of the head*)

APPRENTICE (*obediently*)

Yes, Father.

MASTER (*rummaging in his inner pocket; handing the Apprentice keys*)

All right then, lad. Here are the keys. Take the sledge, the axe, the boning knife, and six sacks or so. Sacks are in the cellar; the rest you know: legs first, then work the body. Head off right away—don't need it. In short: same as always, only she'll be stiff by now, most likely. Never mind—you've worked frozen meat.

APPRENTICE (*dully*)

All right, Uncle.

OBSERVER

Leave the head, the bones, the hide, and the guts in the pit.

APPRENTICE

Yes, Father.

OBSERVER

Just cover it with snow on top so it can't be seen. And the blood on the clearing—cover that too. Clean up, in short.

APPRENTICE (*dully*)

All right, Father.

MASTER

When you're done—meat into the sacks and to the shop, into the icehouse.

APPRENTICE (*dully*)

Yes, Uncle.

OBSERVER

All right—come on. My soul's on fire. (*to his son*) When you've handled it—come find us and report.

APPRENTICE (*dully*)

Yes, sir, Father.

The light goes out.

EPILOGUE

The light comes up smoothly. Same location. From the left wing, slowly and dejectedly, Apprentice enters. He drags a large sledge piled high with canvas sacks. Having come out of the left wing, Apprentice walks along the alley, goes around the flowerbed with the statue, and exits through the park gates.

Snow is falling; the sun is shining; [Musikalisches Opfer, BWV 1079: Fuga \(Ricercata\) a 6 voci \(Orch. Webern\).](#)

THE END

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AUTHOR'S NOTE ON THE PLAY "THE CHASE"

The video projection is conceived by the author as a parallel, clip-like edited layer. The projection accompanies the text through fragmentary visual forms (loops, hard cuts, rhythmic repetitions, overlays). The video functions as an autonomous space of commentary and pressure: it amplifies tempo, nervousness, logic, mythological overheating, and the ideological charge of the world. The projection may use elements of Fronk's cosmogony, text fragments, signs, symbols, diagrams, visual quotations, or typographic impulses—however, always as a visual montage that does not relieve the spoken text, but condenses perception. The relationship is clearly defined: language carries meaning; video carries rhythm, atmosphere, and semantic friction.

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON THE DIPTYCHON ON CONTINUITY ("THE CHASE" / "THE POST")

The video projection is a continuous element of the diptych and ensures continuity between both plays. In "The Chase" it appears as an overflowing, mythological, overheated text layer—as cosmogony, ideological noise, unformed doctrine. In "The Post" the same textual material transforms into a purified residue: code, formula, regulation, instruction. The projection fixes the evolution of one and the same language of power—from chaotic myth to institutionalized norm. Within the diptych it is understood as an autonomous bearer of meaning that is not subordinated to the dialogue and does not duplicate it, but makes the system as a whole visible.