

DMITRY GLUKHOVSKY

METRO

2035



THE FINAL INSTALLMENT
OF THE CULT TRILOGY

DMITRY GLUKHOVSKY

METRO 2035

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Brighter past. Darker future.



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Your guide to the world of Metro



fb 2023

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CHAPTER 1

— MOSCOW HERE —

“It’s not allowed, Artyom.

“Open it. Open up, I tell you.”

“The station master told us ... He said not to let anyone out.”

“Do you take me for some kind of idiot? Anyone—who’s that? Who is this anyone?”

“I have my orders! For the protection of the station ... Against the radiation. I have my orders. Got that?”

“Sukhoi gave you the order? My stepfather gave you the order? Come on, open up.”

“I’ll get it in the neck on account of you, Artyom ...”

“Then I’ll do it myself, if you can’t.”

“Hello ... Sanseich ... Yes to the sentry post ... Artyom’s here ... Your Artyom. But what am I supposed to do with him? All right. We’re waiting.”

“Snitched, have you? Good for you, Nikitska. You’ve snitched. Now push off! I’ll open up anyway. I’m going out anyway!”

But another two men darted out of the watch room, squeezed in between Artyom and the door, and started pityingly pushing him away gently. Artyom, tired in advance, with dark rings under his eyes—he still hadn’t recovered from his sortie to the surface the previous day—couldn’t resist the sentries, even though no one had any intention of fighting with him. Curious onlookers started sidling up: grimy little boys with hair as transparent as glass, pasty-faced women with hands blue and steely from constantly washing laundry in icy-cold water, weary farmers from the right-hand tunnel ready to gape mindlessly at anything. They whispered to each other. They were looking at Artyom, but somehow it seemed as if they weren’t; and just what kind of expression was that on their faces?

“He keeps going out there all the time. What’s the point of going?”

“Uh-huh. And every time the door gets flung wide open. And stuff gets siphoned in from up there, you know! Damned madman ...”

“Listen, you can’t ... You can’t talk like that about him. After all ... he saved us. All of us. Your children over there.”

“He saved people, uh-huh. And now what. Is this what he saved them for, then? If he picks up a massive dose of radiation, all of us here get one too ... The more the merrier.”

“What the fuck does he go for? That’s the question. It’s not as if there’s anything there. What for!”

Then a new face appeared among all the others: the most important face of all. A neglected mustache, hair already thinning and completely gray, stretched out like a bridge across a bald patch. But the face was drawn exclusively in straight lines, nothing rounded off. And everything else in it was tough and rubbery — too tough to chew on, as if the man had been taken and vulcanized alive. His voice had been vulcanized too.

“Everybody disperse. Did you hear me?”

“There’s Sukhoi. Sukhoi’s come. Let him collect his boy.”

“Uncle Sasha ...”

“You again, Artyom? We already talked about this ...”

“Open the door, Uncle Sasha.”

“Disperse! It’s you I’m talking to! There’s nothing to gawp at here. And you—come with me.”

Instead of that, Artyom sat down on the floor, on the cold polished granite, and leaned back against the wall.

“That’s enough,” SukhoI mimed soundlessly, speaking with just his lips.” People are whispering as it is.”

“I need to. I have to.”

“There’s nothing there! Nothing! Nothing there to look for!”

“But I told you, Uncle Sasha.”

“Nikita! Don’t stand there gaping. Get on with it. Escort the citizens away.”

“Right, Sanseich. All right, then, who needs a personal invitation? Move it, move it ...” Nikitska bantered, sweeping the crowd away.

“What you told me was nonsense. Listen ...” SukhoI released the air that was inflating him, went limp, crumpled up and sank down beside Artyom.” You’re butchering yourself. Do you think that suit protects you from the radiation? It’s like a sieve! A cotton frock would be more use!”

“So what?”

“The stalkers don’t go up there as much as you do ... Have you tried adding up your dose? Well, do you want to live or croak?”

“I’m certain I heard it.”

“And I’m certain it’s just a hallucination you had There’s no one there to send any signals. No one, Artyom! How often do I have to tell you? There’s no one left. Nothing apart from Moscow. Apart from us here.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Do you think I could care less what you believe and what you don’t? But I do care if your hair falls out! I do care if you start pissing blood! Do you want your dick to dry up and drop off?”

Artyom shrugged. He said nothing for a moment, weighing things up. SukhoI waited.

“I heard it. That time on the tower. On Ullmann’s radio set”

“But apart from you, no one else has ever heard it. In all this time, no matter how hard they listened. Empty airwaves. So what then?”

“So I’m going up there, that’s what. That’s all.” Artyom got to his feet and straightened up his back.

“I want grandchildren,” SukhoI said from the floor.

“So that they can live here? Down in the vaults?”

“In the Metro,” SukhoI corrected him.

“In the Metro,” Artyom agreed.

“And they’ll be just fine living here. At least they’ll get born. But this way ...”

“Tell them to open up, Uncle Sasha.”

SukhoI looked at the floor. At the black, gleaming granite. Apparently there was something there.

“Have you heard what people are saying? That you cracked up. Back there, on the tower.”

Artyom screwed his face into a smile.

He took a deep breath.

“If you want grandchildren, you know what you should have done, Uncle Sasha. You should have had children of your own. You could have ordered them around. And your grandchildren would have looked like you, not like fuck knows who.”

SukhoI squeezed his eyes shut. A second ticked by.

“Nikita, open the door for him. He can bugger off. Let him croak. Who gives a shit?”

Nikitska obeyed without speaking. Artyom nodded in satisfaction.

“I’ll be back soon,” he told SukhoI from inside the airlock.

SukhoI slid upright along the wall, turned his stooped back towards Artyom and shuffled away, polishing the granite.

The door of the airlock closed and locked with a crash. On the ceiling, a bright-white electric bulb, guaranteed for twenty-five years, lit up and was reflected like a weak winter sun in the dirty tiles that

covered everything in the airlock except one metal wall. There was a ragged plastic chair—for taking a breather or lacing up your boots, a chemical protection suit drooping from a hook, a drain set in the floor with a rubber hose sticking up out of it for decontamination. There was also an army knapsack standing in the corner. And a blue phone hanging on the wall, like one from an old telephone booth.

Artyom climbed into the suit—it was too roomy now, as if it wasn't his. He took a gas mask out of its bag. He stretched the rubber strap, forced it on over his head and blinked, getting used to looking through the hazy little round windows. He took hold of the telephone receiver.

“Ready.”

There was a harsh grating sound and the metal wall—not a wall, but a hermetic door—started creeping upwards. There was a breath of damp, chilly air from outside. Artyom shuddered. He heaved the knapsack on—it was as heavy as if he'd sat a man on his shoulders.

The battered and slippery steps of the endless escalator led upwards. The Exhibition Metro Station was sixty meters underground. Exactly deep enough not to be shaken by the detonations of aerial bombs. Of course, if a nuclear warhead had struck Moscow, there would have been a crater filled with glass here now. But the warheads had all been intercepted by missiles high above the city; only fragments of them had rained down onto the earth—still radioactive, but they couldn't explode. So Moscow was still standing almost intact. It even resembled its former self—in the way that a mummy resembles a living king. Arms in place, legs in place, smile ...

But the other cities didn't have interceptor rocket defenses.

Artyom grunted as he settled the knapsack more comfortably, stealthily crossed himself, stuck his thumbs under the loose straps to pull them taut, and started walking up.

* * *

The rain drummed hollowly on the metal of Artyom's helmet, as if hammering on his head. His waders sank into the mud; rust streamed down in torrents from somewhere above him to somewhere below him; the sky was heaped up with clouds, stifling his breath—and the buildings on all sides stood empty, gnawed down by time. There wasn't a single soul in this city. It had been like that for twenty years—not a single soul.

Looking along an alley formed by damp, naked tree trunks, he could see the immense arch of the entrance to the Exhibition of Economic Achievements. A fine cabinet of curiosities, that was—the embryos of hopes for future greatness transplanted into fake classical temples. Greatness had been due to arrive soon—tomorrow, in fact. Only that tomorrow had never arrived.

A godforsaken death trap, the Exhibition.

A couple of years ago all sorts of vile creatures had lived here, but now even they were gone. It had been promised that any time soon the background radiation level would drop and it would be possible to make a gradual return to the surface—look, there were mutants swarming all over the place up there, and they were alive too, even if they were mangled, mutilated brutes ...

The opposite had happened: Having shed its crust of ice, the Earth began breathing and steaming, and the background radiation level skyrocketed. The mutants clung on to life for a while with their massive claws, but those who didn't make a run for it died, while humans held on here underground, living in the Metro stations, without the slightest intention of dying. Humans didn't need that much. Humans could teach any rat a thing or two.

The Geiger counter clicked away, counting up Artyom's radiation dose. Maybe I shouldn't bring it any more, Artyom thought. It only pisses me off. What difference does it make how much it ticks up? Until I get the job done, it can crackle away as much as it likes.

“Let them talk, Zhen. Let them think I've flipped. They weren't there then ... on the tower. They never stick their noses out of that Metro of theirs. How do they know, eh? Flipped ... I'd blitz them all to ... I explained, didn't I? At the precise moment when Ullmann had just reeled out the antenna ... while he

was finding the wavelength ... There was something. I heard it! And I didn't imagine it. Fuck it. They don't believe me!"

An expressway junction reared up over his head; the ribbons of asphalt had buckled and frozen, shaking off the cars and trucks, which had landed randomly — some on all four feet, some on their backs, — and given up the ghost where they lay.

Artyom glanced around quickly and set off up the rough, protruding tongue of the ramp onto the elevated road. He didn't have far to go — a kilometer and a half, maybe. The "Tricolor" high-rise apartment buildings jutted up beside the next ramp. They used to be painted in festive white, blue, and red, but time had repainted everything gray, in its own style.

"But why don't they believe me? They just don't believe me, that's all. All right, so no one has heard any call signs. But where are they listening for those call signs? Under the ground. No one's going to go up on the surface just for that ... Isn't that right? But you just think about it—is it really possible that no one survived, apart from us? In the entire world—no one? Eh? That's plain bullshit! Well, isn't it?"

He didn't want to look at the Ostankino Tower, but there was no way he could avoid seeing it: even if he turned his face away from it, it still loomed up at the edge of his vision, like a scratch on the lens of his gas mask. Black and raw, snapped off at the knob of the observation platform, thrusting up from underground like an arm with a clenched fist, as if someone huge had been trying to clamber up onto the surface, but had gotten bogged down in the red Moscow clay, trapped in the vise-like grip of the earth, caught and crushed.

"When I was up on the tower that time"—Artyom jerked his head stiffly in that direction—"when they were listening, trying to pick up Miller's call sign ... Through all that crackling ... I'm prepared to swear on anything you like ... it was there! There was something there!"

Two colossal figures soared up over the naked forest—the Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman, grappling in their strange pose, either skating across ice or spinning around in a tango, but not looking at each other, like asexual beings. But then where are they looking? Can they see beyond the horizon from that height? Artyom wondered.

On his left the Big Wheel of the Exhibition of Economic Achievements was still standing, as huge as a cogwheel of the mechanism for turning the Earth. It was twenty years since the wheel, along with the entire mechanism, had stopped dead, and now it was quietly rusting away. The spring had run down.

The figure 850 was written on the wheel: That had been Moscow's age in years when the wheel was erected. It occurred vaguely to Artyom that correcting the figure was pointless: If there's no one to count time, then it stops.

The dour, ugly skyscrapers that had once looked white, blue, and red expanded to fill half the world. Very close. The tallest buildings in the area, if he discounted the broken tower. The very thing. Artyom threw his head back and fixed his gaze on the summit. His knees immediately started aching.

"Maybe today ..." Artyom asked without a question mark—not forgetting that the sky's ears were plugged with clouds of cotton wool.

No one up there heard him, of course.

An entrance hall.

Just an ordinary hallway.

The entry phone is an abandoned orphan; the metal door has no electric power; there's a dead dog in the doorkeeper's glass aquarium; the letter boxes clatter tinnily in the draught, with no letters or junk mail in them: Someone collected everything and burned it long ago, to warm their hands up a bit, at least.

At the bottom of the wall are three gleaming German lifts, standing wide open with their stainless steel innards glittering, as if he could just get into any one of them right now and ride straight up to the top of this tower block. Artyom hated them for that. And beside them—the door of the fire escape stairs. Artyom knew what was behind that. He had counted them already: forty-six floors on foot. Mount Calvary

was always climbed on foot.

“Always ... On foot ...”

The knapsack weighed an entire ton now, and that ton pressed Artyom down into the concrete, making it hard to walk, hindering his stride. But Artyom strode on anyway, like a clockwork toy; and he spoke like a clockwork toy too.

“So what if they didn’t ... have any intercept ... missiles ... All the same ... there must have been ... People must have ... Somewhere ... It’s not possible that only here ... only in Moscow ... in the Metro ... The Earth’s still there ... It hasn’t split apart ... The sky’s clearing ... It’s just not possible ... for the entire country ... and America ... and France ... and China ... and Thailand or some other place like that ... What did they ever do to anyone ... ? There was no reason to ...”

Of course, in all his twenty-six years of life, Artyom had never been in either France or Thailand. He had hardly seen anything of the old world at all; he was born too late. And the geography of the new world was scantier—the Exhibition Metro Station, the Lubyanka Metro Station, the Arbat Metro Station ... The Circle Line. But when he examined the mold-blighted photographs of Paris and New York in the rare tourist magazines, Artyom felt in his heart that these cities were still there, still standing somewhere, that they hadn’t disappeared. Maybe they were waiting for him?

“Why would ... Why would only Moscow be left? It’s not logical. Zhen! Do you understand? It’s not logical! And that means ... It means we simply can’t pick them up ... Their call signs ... We can’t ... Not yet. We just have to carry on. We can’t give up. We mustn’t ...”

The tower block was empty, but it still made sounds, it still had a life: The wind flew in through balconies, slammed doors, wheezed in the lift shafts, muttered something in other people’s kitchens and bedrooms, pretending to be the owners who had come back home. But Artyom didn’t believe it any longer; he didn’t even look round, and he didn’t pay any visits.

He knew what was behind those restlessly banging doors: plundered apartments. All that was left were snapshots scattered across the floor—the dead strangers had had themselves photographed as mementoes for no one—and incredibly cumbersome furniture that was impossible to take anywhere, not into the Metro or the next world. In other buildings the windows had been blown out by the shockwave, but here there were storm windows, and they had survived, though in twenty years they had all acquired a coating of dust, as if they had been blinded by cataracts.

Earlier on in some apartment or other he sometimes came across the former owner, nuzzling the trunk of his gas mask against some toy and weeping through it nasally, not able to hear anyone approaching from behind. But now it was a long time since he had come across anyone. One of them had been left lying here with a hole in his back beside that idiotic toy of his, and the others had glanced at him and realized that there wasn’t any home up here on the surface—that there wasn’t anything here at all. Concrete, bricks, slush, cracked asphalt, yellow bones, the decayed dust of everything, and the radiation too, of course. It was like that in Moscow, and in all the rest of the world. There was no life anywhere, except in the Metro. It was a fact. Everyone knew it.

Everyone except Artyom.

But what if somewhere in the boundless expanses of the Earth there was another place fit for human habitation? For Artyom and for Anya. For everyone from the station. A place where they wouldn’t have a cast-iron ceiling over their heads, and where they could grow right up to the sky? Build themselves houses of their own, a life of their own, and from that place go on gradually to resettle the whole of the scorched Earth?

“I could find places ... for all our people ... They could live ... in the open air ...”

Forty-six floors.

Artyom could have stopped on the fortieth, or even on the thirtieth; after all, no one had told him that he had to climb all the way to the very top. But somehow he had got it into his head that if he had any

chance of success at all, then it was only up there, on the roof.

“Of course ... it’s not ... not as high ... as on the tower ... that time ... But ... But ...”

The lenses of Artyom’s gas mask had misted over, his heart was trying to pound its way out of his chest, and someone seemed to be probing at Artyom’s rib, looking for a way to slip a crude metal shank in under it. The breath he drew in strenuously through the gas mask’s filters was too meager; there wasn’t enough life in it, and just like that time in the tower, when Artyom reached the forty-fifth floor, he gave in and tore off the tight-fitting rubber skin. He took a gulp of sweet and bitter air. Completely different from the air in the Metro. Fresh.

“The height ... Maybe ... up there ... About three hundred meters ... The height ... So maybe ... So probably ... From that height ... I can pick it up ...”

He shrugged the knapsack off his shoulders and lugged it the rest of the way. Leaning his stiff back against the hatch, he forced it out and clambered onto the open surface. And only then did he fall. He lay on his back, looking at the clouds, which were only an arm’s length away; he coaxed his heart and calmed his breathing. Then he got up.

The view from here was ...

It was as if Artyom had died and gone flying up to heaven, but suddenly run into a glass ceiling and got stuck there, dangling underneath it, no way back and no way forward. It was obvious from that height that it was no longer possible to go back: When you’ve seen how tiny everything on Earth really is, how can you take it all seriously again?

Towering up beside him were two identical skyscrapers, bright and colorful once upon a time, now gray. But Artyom had always climbed this one. It felt cozier that way.

For a brief second a gun-slit gap appeared in the clouds and the sun fired a shot through it; he thought he saw a sudden glint from the next building, either from the roof or from the dusty window of one of the upper apartments—as if someone had caught the ray of sunlight in a little mirror. But before he could glance round, the sun barricaded itself away again and the glint disappeared. There weren’t any more.

Hard as Artyom tried to turn his eyes away, his gaze kept slipping over toward the regenerated forest that flourished where the Botanical Gardens had been—and to the naked, black wasteland at the very heart of it. A spot as dead as if the Lord Himself had dumped his leftover boiling sulfur onto it. But no, not the Lord.

The Botanical Gardens.

Artyom remembered them looking different. They were all that he remembered from the prewar world that had disappeared.

A strange business: Look, your entire life consists of tiles, tunnel liners, dripping ceilings, and rivulets running along the floor beside the tracks, of granite and marble, of stale air and electric light.

Then suddenly there’s a tiny little piece of something else in it: a cool morning in May; innocent, delicate new greenery on elegant trees; park paths covered with drawings in colored chalk; a tantalizing queue for ice cream; and that ice cream itself, in a wafer cup, not simply sweet, but absolutely heavenly. And your mother’s voice—weak and distorted by time, as if it’s coming through a copper telephone cable. And the warmth of her hand, which you try not to let slip out of yours, so that you won’t get lost—and you cling on with all your might. Although, is it really possible to remember that kind of thing? Probably not.

And all of this something else is so incongruous and impossible that you don’t even understand any longer if it really did happen to you or you simply dreamed it. But how could you have dreamed it, if you’ve never seen or experienced anything like it?

Artyom could see it all in front of him—the chalk drawings on the paths, the sun shining through the lacy foliage in golden needles, the ice cream in his hand, the funny orange ducks scattered across the brown mirror of the shady pond and the rickety little bridges over it—he was so afraid of falling into that

water and even more afraid of dropping his little wafer cup into it!

But her face, his mother's face—Artyom couldn't remember that. He had tried to summon it. When he went to bed he had tried asking himself to see it at least in his dreams, even if he forgot it again by morning—but nothing worked. Had there really not been even a tiny little corner of his head where his mother could have hidden and waited out the death and darkness? Apparently not. But how can a person exist and then completely disappear?

And that day, and that world—where could they have vanished to? Look, they're here, right beside you; just close your eyes. Of course you can go back to them. They must have escaped and still be there, somewhere in the world, calling to everyone who has gotten lost: We're here, but where are you? You just have to hear them. You just have to know how to listen.

Artyom blinked and rubbed his eyelids, so that his eyes would see today again and not twenty years ago. He sat down and opened the knapsack.

It contained a radio transmitter-receiver—a cumbersome army model, green and badly scratched—and another monstrosity—a metal box with a handle that could be turned. A homemade generator. And right at the bottom—forty meters of fine cable, the antenna for the radio.

Artyom attached all the wires, walked round the roof reeling out the cable, wiped the water off his face, and reluctantly pulled on the gas mask again. Squeezed on the headphones. He caressed buttons with his fingers and twirled the handle of the generator: A diode blinked. He felt a buzzing and vibrating in his palm, like a living thing.

He flipped a switch.

He closed his eyes, because he was afraid they would prevent him from fishing out that bottle, the one with a message in it from a distant continent, where someone else had survived. He swayed to and fro on the waves. And he turned the generator handle as if he were rowing an inflatable raft along with his hand.

The headphones started hissing, whining through the crackling with a shrill “Eeeooo ...” They coughed consumptively and fell silent for a moment, then hissed again, as if Artyom were wandering through a tuberculosis isolation ward looking for someone to talk to, but not a single patient was conscious; there were only nurses putting their fingers to their lips and shushing strictly. No one here wanted to give Artyom an answer, no one intended to live.

No one from St. Petersburg. No one from Yekaterinburg.

London remained silent. Paris remained silent. Bangkok and New York remained silent.

It hadn't mattered for a long time now who started that war. It just didn't matter how it had started. Who could it matter to? History? History was written by the victors; there was no one here to write it, and soon there wouldn't be anyone to read it either.

Ssssssh ...

The airways were filled with emptiness. Boundless emptiness.

Eeeoooo ...

Communications satellites hovered restlessly in their orbits: No one called them. The loneliness was driving them insane, and they plunged back down to Earth; burning up in the air was better than this.

Not a word from Peking. And Tokyo was a silent grave.

But Artyom kept turning that cursed handle anyway, turning and rowing, rowing and turning.

How quiet it was! Impossibly quiet. Unbearably quiet.

“Moscow here! Moscow Here! Come in!”

That was his voice, Artyom's. As usual, he couldn't wait; he didn't have the patience.

“Moscow here! Over! Come in!”

Eeeoooo.

He mustn't stop. He mustn't give up.

“St. Petersburg! Come in! Vladivostok! Moscow here, come in! Rostov! Come in!”

What’s wrong with you, City of Peter? How could you have turned out to be so feeble? Feebler than Moscow? What’s taken your place up there? A lake of glass? Or has the mold eaten you up? Why don’t you answer? Eh?

Where have you got to, Vladivostok, proud city at the other end of the world? You used to stand so far away from us. Did they really spill their plague on you too? Did they really not have any pity, even on you? K-kuha, k-kuha, k-kuha.

“Come in, Vladivostok! Moscow here!”

The entire world is lying facedown in the mud; it doesn’t feel the drops of this interminable rain on its back; it doesn’t sense that its mouth and nose are full of rusty water.

But Moscow ... There it is. Standing there. Still on its feet. As if alive.

“What is all this? Have you all croaked then, all of you?”

Ssssssh ...

Maybe that was their souls who had slipped into the airwaves and were answering him like that? Or maybe that was the way the background radiation sounded? Death had to have a voice of its own. Probably just like that: a whisper. Ssssssh ... Come on now, no noise. Calm down. Calm down.

“Moscow here. Come in!”

Maybe they would hear him this time?

Right now someone would cough in the headphones, break excitedly through the hissing, and shout somewhere far, far away.

“We’re here! Moscow! I hear you! Come in! Moscow! Don’t go off air! I hear you! My God! Moscow! Moscow has made contact! How many of you have survived there? We have a colony here, twenty-five thousand people! The land’s clean! Zero radiation! The water’s unpolluted! Food? Of course! Medicines, yes, we have them! We’re sending a rescue mission for you! Just hold on! Do you hear, Moscow? That’s the most important thing—hold on!”

Eeeeeoo. Nothing.

This wasn’t an attempt at radio contact; it was a spiritualist séance. And Artyom simply couldn’t get the hang of that. The spirits he was summoning didn’t want to come to him. They felt just fine in the next world. They looked down through the sparse gaps between the clouds at Artyom’s little hunched-up figure and just chuckled: Down there? To you? Oh no, not on your life!

K-kuha, k-kuha.

He stopped turning that damned handle and tore off the headphones. He got up, coiled the antenna into a neat bundle, slowly, forcing himself to be neat, violating his own will, because he wanted to tear it into pieces and fling it into the abyss from forty-six floors up.

He packed everything into the knapsack and set the demon of temptation on his shoulders. He carried it down. Into the Metro. Until tomorrow.

* * *

“Have you carried out the decontamination routine?” the blue handset asked in a nasal voice.

“Yes.”

“Answer more clearly!”

“Yes I have!”

“He has, uh-huh ...” the handset hissed incredulously, and Artyom flung it against the wall in loathing.

The lock scraped inside the door, and the bolts withdrew. Then the door gave a long, drawn-out screech and opened, and the Metro breathed out its stale, heavy air on Artyom.

SukhoI met him on the threshold. Either he had sensed when Artyom would come back, or he hadn’t gone away at all. Probably he had sensed the moment.

“How are you?” he asked in a weary, good-natured voice.

Artyom shrugged. Sukhoi ran his glance over him. Gently, like a children's doctor.

"There was someone here looking for you. He came from another station."

Artyom drew himself up erect.

"Was he from Miller?"

His voice jangled, as if a shell case had been dropped on the floor. Hope? Or cowardice? Or what?

"No. Some old man."

"What old man?" The final drops of Artyom's strength, gathered together in case his stepfather answered "yes," instantly leaked away, and now all he wanted was to lie down.

"Homer. He called himself Homer. Do you know anyone called that?"

"No. I'm going to sleep, Uncle Sasha."

* * *

She didn't stir a muscle. Was she asleep or not? Artyom wondered. He simply wondered, automatically, because it was no longer any concern of his whether she was sleeping or pretending. He dumped his clothes in a bundle by the entrance, rubbed his shoulders to warm them up a bit, huddled up sideways against Anya, like an orphan, and pulled the blanket over himself. If there had been another blanket, he wouldn't have bothered to mess with her.

The station clock said seven in the evening, didn't it? But at ten Anya had to get up and go to work with the mushrooms. Artyom had been excused from mushroom duty, as a hero. Or as an invalid? He decided himself what his duties would be and when to perform them. He woke up when she came back from her shift—and went up onto the surface. He blanked out while she was still pretending to be asleep. That was how they lived, in antiphase. In a single bed, in different dimensions.

Carefully, so as not to wake her, Artyom started winding the quilted blanket round himself. Anya felt it, and without saying a word, furiously tugged the blanket in the opposite direction. After a minute of this idiotic struggle, Artyom gave in—and was left lying naked on the edge of the bed.

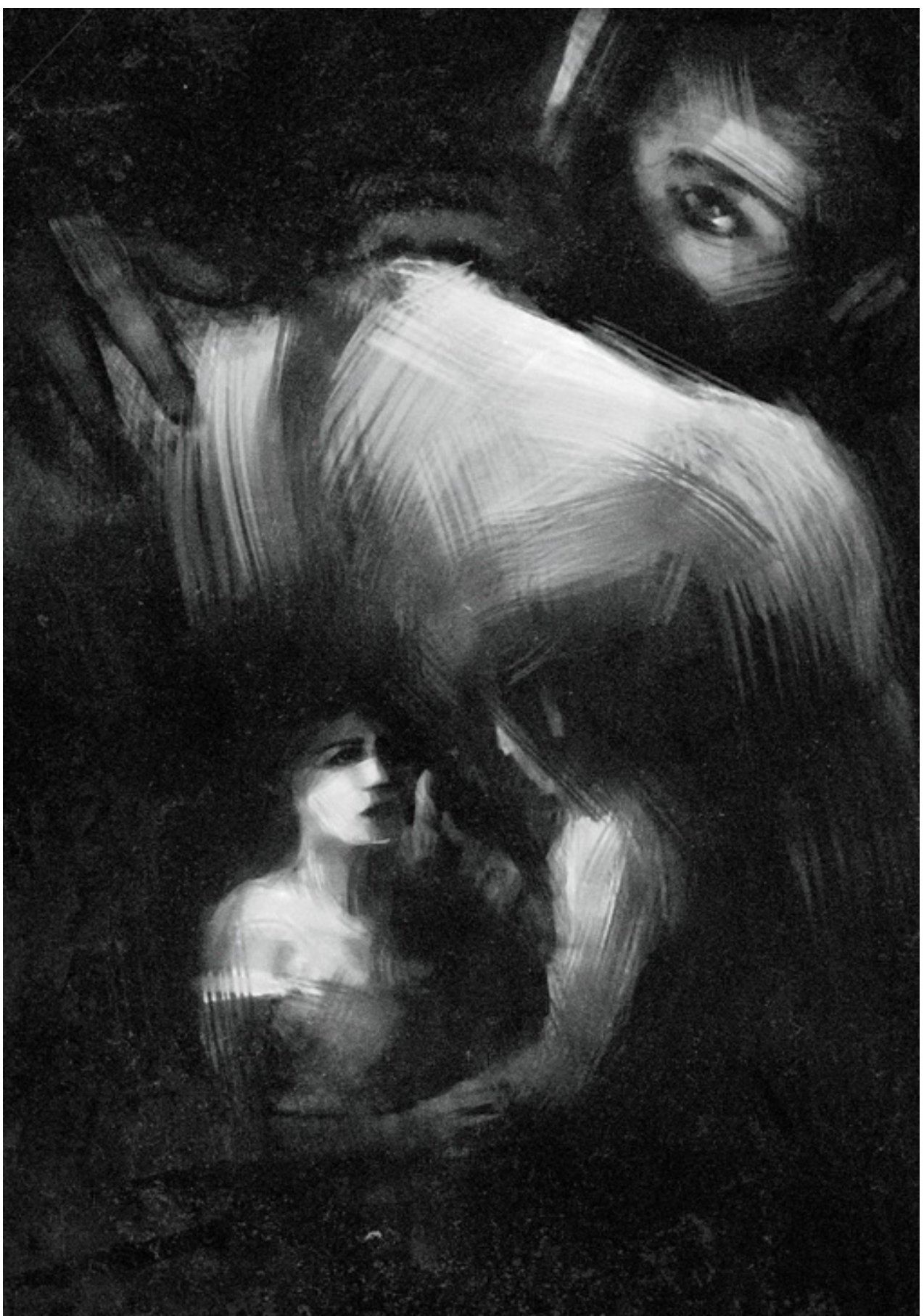
"Great," he said.

She didn't say anything.

Why is it that a lightbulb glows brightly at first, and then burns out?

Then he lay with his face buried in the pillow—there were two of those, thank God—warming it with his breath. And he fell asleep like that. And in a mean, sneaky dream he saw a different Anya—laughing, jaunty, cheerfully provoking him, so perfectly young. Although how much time had gone by? Two years? Two days? God only knew when things could have been like that. Back then it seemed like they had a whole eternity ahead of them. It had seemed that way to both of them. So everything must have been like that an eternity ago.

It was cold in his dream, but it was Anya who was making him feel the cold—he thought she was chasing him, naked, around the station, but out of mischief, not hate. And when Artyom woke up, in his sleepy inertia he carried on believing for a whole minute that eternity hadn't ended yet, that he and Anya were only halfway through it. He wanted to call her, forgive her, turn it all into a joke. Then he remembered.



CHAPTER 2

— THE METRO —

“Are you at least trying to listen to me?” he asked Anya.

But she was no longer in the tent.

His clothes were lying exactly where he had left them, by the entrance. Anya hadn't tidied them up or flung them about. She had just stepped over them, as if she was afraid of touching them. Of getting contaminated. Maybe she really was afraid.

She had probably always needed the blanket more. He'd get warm somehow.

It was a good thing she had gone. Thanks, Anya. Thanks for not bothering to talk to me. For not answering me.

“Thanks a whole bunch, fuck it,” he said out loud.

“May I come in?” someone replied through the tarpaulin right above his ear.” Artyom? Are you awake?”

Artyom crept over to his trousers.

Waiting outside, seated on a folding hiking stool, was an old man with a face that was too soft for his age. He was sitting comfortably, in an easy, well-balanced pose, and it was clear that he had settled in here a long time ago and had no intention at all of leaving. The old man was a stranger, not from this station: He puckered up his face and breathed in heedlessly through his nose. You could tell outsiders.

Artyom folded his fingers into a visor and used it to shield his eyes against the crimson light with which Exhibition Station was flooded while he peered at his visitor.

“What do you want, old man?”

“Are you Artyom?”

“I might be,” said Artyom, drawing air in through his nose.” That depends.”

“I'm Homer,” the old man announced, without getting up.” That's what they call me.”

“Is that so?”

“I write books. A book.”

“That's interesting,” Artyom said in the voice of a man who isn't interested.

“A historical book. Kind of. Only about our times.”

“Historical,” Artyom repeated cautiously, glancing round.” What's that for? They say history's finished. It's over.”

“What about us? Someone has to take everything that we ... Everything that's happening to us here, and tell the future generations about it.”

If he's not from Miller, Artyom thought, then who is he? Who from? What for?

“The future generations. A sacred duty.”

“On the one hand, we have to tell them about the most important thing ... What our life here is like. Record all the milestones and vicissitudes, so to speak. But then on the other hand—how do we do it? Dry facts get forgotten. For people to remember things, we need a living story. We need a hero. I've been searching for material like that. I tried all sorts of thing. I thought I'd found him. But when I got started ... it didn't work out. It didn't come together. And then I heard about Exhibition Station, and ...”

The old man obviously didn't find it easy to explain himself, but Artyom wasn't going to help him anyway: He still couldn't understand what was coming next. There was nothing malicious about the old man—he was simply incongruous—but something was accumulating in the air, taking shape between him and Artyom, something that was bound to explode at any moment, searing Artyom with heat and hacking at him with shrapnel.

“They told me about Exhibition ... About the Dark Ones and about you. And I realized you were the one I had to find, in order to ...

Artyom nodded: He’d finally understood.

“A good story.”

And without even saying goodbye, he strode off, thrusting his permanently freezing hands into his pockets. The little old man was left stuck on his comfortable little stool, still explaining something to Artyom’s back as it moved away. But Artyom had decided to go deaf.

He blinked, and his eyes adjusted; he didn’t need to squint any more.

It had taken them longer to adjust to the light up on the surface. A year. And that was fast! Most of the inhabitants of the Metro would have been blinded, probably forever, by sunlight, even the kind that was smothered by clouds. They had lived in the dark all their lives, after all. But Artyom had forced himself to see up there. To see the world in which he had been born. Because if you can’t tolerate the sun, then how can you go back up onto the surface when the time comes?

Everyone who was born in the Metro had grown without the sun, like mushrooms. It was okay. It turned out that people didn’t need the sun, just vitamin D. You could guzzle sunlight in the form of a pill. And you could live by touch.

There wasn’t any general system of lighting in the Metro. There wasn’t any common source of electricity. They didn’t possess anything in common: It was everyone for themselves. At some stations they had learned to generate enough electricity to light things up almost as bright as they used to be. At others they had only enough for a single lightbulb burning at the center of the platform. And some were crammed full of the same blackness as in the tunnels. If someone brought light there with them in their pocket, they could pick little bits out of the void—the floor, the ceiling, a marble column; and the inhabitants of the station would come creeping toward the beam of the torch to be able to see for at least a moment. But it was better not to show yourself to them: They had learned to live perfectly well without eyes, but their mouths hadn’t grown over.

At Exhibition, life was founded on a firm basis, and the people there were spoiled: Some individuals even had small light-emitting diodes, filched from up on the surface, glowing in their tents, and for public areas there was still the old emergency lighting—lamps with red glass shades. Lighting that would have been convenient for developing photographic negatives, for instance. In the way that the image of Artyom’s soul had been slowly developed in this red light, showing through the developing fluid, making it clear that the photograph had been taken back there, up on the surface, on a bright day in May.

And then exposed, fogging it, on a different day, an overcast one in October.

“A fine story, eh, Zhen? Remember the Dark Ones?” Artyom whispered; but it was always someone else who answered him. It was always the wrong people who answered him.

“HI there, Artyom!”

“Ho, Artyom!”

Everyone greeted him. Some smiled, some frowned, but they all greeted him. Because all of them, not just Zhenka and Artyom, remembered the Dark Ones. They all remembered that story, although no one knew it.

Exhibition Station. The end of the line. His native place. Two hundred meters long, with two hundred people in that space, which was just right. Any less and you wouldn’t be able to breathe freely; any more and you wouldn’t be able to get warm.

The station had been built a hundred years ago, in the times of the former empire, out of its usual imperial materials: marble and granite. It had been conceived as a triumphal structure, like a palace, but of course it was buried in the ground, so it had turned out like a cross between a museum and a sepulcher. The ancestral atmosphere here was absolutely ineradicable, as it was in all the other stations, even the newer ones. As if the inhabitants of the Metro were grown up, but they were still sitting on the bronze

knees of ancient old men and couldn't climb down—they were held tight.

The smoke-blackened columns spread wide at their tops, and in the archways between them, ancient, threadbare army tents had been pitched with a family, sometimes two, in each one. Those families could be simply shuffled about and probably no one would notice: When you live together at the same station for twenty years—when all there is between your secrets and your neighbors', between all the groans and all the screams, is a single layer of tarpaulin—that's the way things are.

In some places, maybe, people would already have eaten each other—out of envy, you know, and jealousy, because God loved someone else's children more than yours, and it was impossible to share your husband or wife with others, and space for accommodation was quite valuable enough to strangle someone for it; but not here, not at Exhibition. Here things had turned out simple and friendly somehow.

Like in a village or a commune. There weren't any children that weren't yours: if your neighbors had a healthy child, it was general celebration: If you had a sickly one, they would help you with the burden, each in whatever way they could. If you had nowhere to settle in, other people would move over. If you had a scrap with a friend, the cramped conditions would soon reconcile you. If your wife left you, you'd forgive her sooner or later. She hadn't really left at all; she was still here, in this marble hall with millions of tons of earth piled up on top of it. It was just that she was sleeping behind a different piece of tarpaulin. And you would meet her every day, and not just once, but a hundred times. You would have to come to an understanding; there was no way you could imagine that she had never existed. The important thing was that everyone was alive, and beyond that ... Like in a commune or in a cave.

There was a way out of here—the southern tunnel, which ran to Alekseevskaya and beyond, into the Greater Metro, but ... Maybe that was the point, that Exhibition was at the end of the line. And the people who lived here were those who couldn't go anywhere else any longer. Who needed a home.

Artyom stopped by one tent and froze. He stood there, shining his torch in through the threadbare tarpaulin, until a middle-aged woman with a puffy face came out.

“Hello, Artyom.”

“Hello, Yekaterina Sergeevna.”

“Zhenya's not here, Artyom.”

He nodded to her. He wanted to stroke her hair, take hold of her hand. As if to say, Yes, I know, I know. I know everything really, Yekaterina Sergeevna. Or are you saying that to yourself?

“Go on, Artyom. Go on. Don't stand here. Go over there and have some tea.”

“Right you are.”

Both ends of the station had been cut short at the escalators—they had walled themselves in and sealed up the exits, so that poisoned air wouldn't flow in from the surface ... And they could keep out visitors of various kinds. The end with the “new” exit was completely sealed off. At the other end, with the old exit, they had left an airlock for getting up into the city.

At the end with the blank wall there was a kitchen and a club. Stoves for cooking on, housewives in aprons fussing about, concocting lunch for their children and husbands; water flowed through the pipes of charcoal filters and gurgled as it ran out, almost transparent, into the tanks; every now and then a kettle would start whistling and a courier from the farms would run in to get some hot water, wiping his hands on his trousers and looking for his wife so he could grab her in someplace soft and remind her about love, and at the same time wolf down a piece of something still only half-cooked.

The stoves and the kettles, the dishes and the chairs and tables, weren't personal property. They were communal, but people still treated them with care and didn't damage them.

Everything, apart from the food, had been brought down from the surface: You couldn't cobble together anything decent in the Metro. It was good that when the dead still intended to live, they had laid in all sorts of goods and equipment for future use: lightbulbs, diesel generators, wire, guns, bullets, plates and dishes, furniture—and they had had masses of clothes made. Now these could be worn like hand-me-

downs from older brothers and sisters. There would be enough for a long time. In the entire Metro there were no more than fifty thousand people. And there used to be fifteen million in Moscow. That meant that everyone had three hundred relatives like that, crowding round silently, holding out their castoffs without saying a word: Take mine, take them, take them, they're almost new, I've grown out of them already.

You just had to check their things with a Geiger counter, to see if it clicked too loudly, and say thank you. Then you could wear them.

Artyom reached the queue for tea and tacked himself on at the end.

"Artyom, where are you going, like some kind of stranger? He wants to stand in the queue now! Sit down, take the load off your feet ... Shall I pour you a good hot one?"

The person in charge here was Fur-Coat Dashka, a woman who was clearly about fifty, but had absolutely no desire to think about the fact. She had come to Moscow from some dump near Yaroslavl three days before the big bang. To buy a fur coat. She had bought one, and since then she had never taken it off by day or by night, not even to go to the toilet. Artyom had never laughed at her. What if he still had a piece of his own former life like that? A piece of May, or ice cream, or the shade from the poplars, or his mother's smile?

"Yes, thanks, Aunt Dasha."

"Enough of that 'Aunty' business!" she reproached him flirtatiously. "Well, how are things up on top? What's the weather like?"

"It's raining a bit."

"Agh, are we going to get flooded again, then? Hear that, Aigul? Rain, he says."

"Allah is punishing us. For our sins. Look out, or that pork of yours is going to burn."

"Why go bringing your Allah into things like that! She always wants Allah involved straightaway! Ah, right, it is sticking a bit ... How's your Mehmet? Back from Hansa yet?"

"He's been gone three days. Three."

"Don't get so worried about it ..."

"I swear to you on my heart, Dasha, he's found himself someone there! One of your kind! In sin ..."

"Your kind, my kind ... What are you going on about? We're all here, Aigulushka ... All in the same boat together."

"He's found himself some easy lay, I swear by Allah ..."

"Agh ... You should give him it more often yourself ... Men are like kittens, aren't they? They keep on nuzzling until they find it ..."

"What's all this nonsense? He's away on commercial business!" put in a little man almost as small as a child, with a face that was childish, but ravaged by alcohol: something had stopped him from growing properly.

"All right, all right, Kolya. Don't you go covering up for your sidekicks! And you, Artyom, pay no attention to us women. There now. Blow on it; it's hot."

"Thanks."

A man walked up, covered with the lines of old white scars and completely bald, but not fearsome at all because of his bushy eyebrows and smooth speech.

"Greetings to all here present, and in particular the ladies. Who's here for tea? I'm after you then, Kolyun. Have you already heard about Hansa?"

"What about Hansa?"

"The border's shut. As the great classic put it, 'on came the red light, no crossing now, so sit tight.' Five of our people are stuck in there."

"There now, that's it, Aigulka. Stir your mushrooms there, your mushrooms."

"And my man's in there. What about me? By Allah ... What d'you mean, it's closed? Eh, Konstantin?"

"They just closed it and that's it. None of our lousy business. An order's an order."

“They’re fighting again, I suppose! Fighting with the Red Line again, probably, eh? I wish the whole lot of them would croak!”

“But who knows, eh, Konstantin? Who should I go to? My Mehmet ...”

“It’s a preventative measure. I’ve just come from there. Some kind of quarantine on trade. They’ll open it soon. Hello.”

“Oh, hello there, dear sir. Visiting here? Who are you, where from?”

“I’m from Sebastopol. May I take a seat here?”

Artyom stopped breathing the scalding steam and looked up from the chipped white mug with a narrow gold rim. The old man had staggered all the way here, looking for him, and was now studying him stealthily out of the corner of his eye. So all right. Artyom couldn’t run away from him.

“So how did you sneak through to us, Granddad? If they’ve closed everything?” asked Artyom, challenging the old man with a direct stare.

“I was the last to slip through,” the old man said without flinching or batting an eyelid. “They closed the border just behind me.”

“We could live our lives well enough without them, without that Hansa! But let them try living without our tea, without our mushrooms, the spongers! We’ll get by with the help of God.”

“They’ll open it, you say! But what if they don’t? What about my Mehmet!”

“You go and talk to Sukhoi, Aigulka. He’ll have your Mehmet out of there in no time. He’ll not abandon him. How about some tea? Have you tried ours before?”

“I won’t say no,” the self-styled Homer replied, wagging his beard.

He sat there facing Artyom, sipping their local mushroom infusion, which was proudly but groundlessly called tea—all the genuine tea had been drunk ten years ago, of course—and waiting. Artyom waited too.

“Who’s waiting for hot water?”

Artyom’s heart leapt into his throat. Anya had walked up. She stood there with her back to him, as if she hadn’t even noticed him.

“Working today, Anyut?” Fur-Coat asked, immediately trying to draw her into conversation and wiping her hands on her balding fur pockets. “The mushrooms?”

“Yes,” said Anya, still with her back to everyone, determined not to turn round. So she had noticed everything.

“Hard on the waist, eh? All that bending.”

“It’s killing me, Aunty Dasha.”

“Mushrooms aren’t pigs,” slant-eyed, thickset Aigul declared with a disapproving sniff. “Has to bend, does she? You try puddling about in shit!”

“You puddle about in it. Everyone chooses work to suit their own taste,” Anya retorted in an even voice.

Her voice was even, but Artyom knew it was precisely when she spoke in that calm way that she could lash out. She could do anything at all, she’d been well taught. With a father like that.

“Stop quarrelling, girls,” purred Konstantin with the slash scars. “All professions are necessary, all professions are important, as the great classic wrote. Without mushrooms, what would we feed the pigs?”

The champignon mushrooms grew in one of the two caved-in northern tunnels that used to lead to the Botanical Gardens Station. Three hundred meters of mushroom plantations, and then a pig farm after that. The pigs had been stuck as far away as possible, to keep the stink down. As if three hundred meters was enough to save anyone. What saved them was something different: the way human senses worked.

New arrivals smelled the vile odor of pigs for a day or two. And then they got used to it. Anya took a while to get used to it. The locals had stopped smelling anything a long time ago. They had nothing to compare it with. But Artyom did.

“It’s good if you happen to be fond of mushrooms,” he said in a clear, distinct voice, looking directly at

the back of Anya's head." It's easier to reach an understanding with mushrooms than with people."

"And some people shouldn't be so scornful of mushrooms," she said. "There are people you can't tell apart from mushrooms at first glance. They even have the same diseases." Anya finally swung round towards him. "Take today, for instance. Half of my mushrooms had some kind of mold on them. Rot has set in, do you understand that? Where did it come from?"

"What kind of mold's that?" Aigul asked in alarm. "Mold's all we need now, Allah preserve us!"

"Tea for anyone?" Fur-Coat intervened.

"I collected a crate that size of mold," Anya said, looking Artyom straight in the eye. "But they used to be perfectly normal mushrooms. Healthy."

"Well, what a disaster!" Artyom said with a shake of his head. "The mushrooms have gone off."

"Agh, what are we going to eat?" Fur-Coat asked reasonably.

"Of course, what kind of disaster is that?" Anya answered him in a quiet, steely voice. "Now, when no one takes the great hero and savior of the entire Metro seriously any longer—that's a real disaster!"

"Come on, Aigulka, let's take a breath of air," said Fur-Coat, jerking up one painted eyebrow. "It's getting a bit hot round here."

"Ahem ..." said Homer, getting to his feet after the others.

"No," said Artyom, gesturing to stop him. "Right. You wanted to hear about the hero? About Artyom, who saved the entire Metro? Then listen. Listen to the truth. You think people are interested in that?"

"Because people have their own business to deal with. Real business. Work. To feed their families. And raise their children. And when certain people mope about and can't find anything to occupy themselves and invent all sorts of bullshit for themselves, now that is a disaster." Anya had taken up position and opened fire on him in bursts: short, short, long.

"No, the disaster is when a human being doesn't want to live like a human being, but wants to live like a pig or like a mushroom," Artyom replied. "When he's only concerned about one thing ..."

"The disaster is when a mushroom thinks he's a human being," said Anya, no longer trying to conceal her hatred. "And no one tells him the truth, in order not to upset him."

"Is it true, there really is mold on the mushrooms?" asked Fur-Coat Dasha, who had almost decamped already.

"Yes, it's true."

"Oh hell!"

"Allah is punishing us!" Aigul proclaimed loudly from a distance. "For our sins! For eating pork, that's why!"

"Go on now ... Go ... The mushrooms are calling ..." said Artyom, shoving Anya, who had frozen on the spot. "Coughing and sneezing. 'Where are you, mummy?' they're saying."

"You useless bastard."

"Go!"

"Mushrooms would be more use in bed."

"Go on! Go!"

"You go. You go. Go on, clear off to where you belong, up there. Run that aerial right round the city. Tear your throat out with your wailing. There's no one there, got that? No one. They all croaked. You amateur radio enthusiast. You useless jerk."

"Afterwards you'll ..."

"There isn't going to be any afterwards, Artyom. It won't happen."

Her eyes were dry. Her father had taught her not to cry. She had a father. Her own, genuine father.

She swung round and walked away. Artyom was left with his mug of mushroom infusion: a white mug with a chipped gold rim. Homer sat beside him discreetly, without speaking. People started coming back to the kitchen. They talked about the mushrooms being infected with some kind of white rot and sighed,

hoping there wouldn't be another war, tattled about who someone's husband had grabbed by which part on the pig farm. A little pink piglet darted past with a pale, consumptive little girl chasing it. A cat walked round the table with its tail as erect as a chimney, rubbed up against Artyom's knee, and looked into his mouth. The steam above the mug had cooled, and the tea had grown a skin of scum. And everything inside Artyom started growing over with scum. He put the mug down and looked straight ahead. That old man was there.

"So that's the story, Granddad."

"I'm ... I ... I'm sorry."

"A waste of time coming, eh? That won't delight our descendants. Those of us who have any."

"It wasn't a waste."

Artyom drew in a sharp breath through his teeth. What a stubborn old fart.

He hoisted his ass up off the bench and dragged it out of the kitchen: Breakfast was over. Now he had to fulfill his work obligations. Homer tagged along behind.

"What was that you ... I'm sorry ... What was that girl talking about? An aerial ... Amateur radio enthusiast ... It's none of my business, of course, but ... you go up on the surface. Right? And listen on the radio?"

"I go up and I listen."

"Are you hoping to find other survivors?"

"I'm hoping to find other survivors."

"And how's it going?"

Artyom didn't hear any mockery in his voice. The man was simply curious, as if Artyom was doing something absolutely normal. Say, ferrying cured hams to Hansa.

"It isn't."

Homer nodded to him and frowned. He was about to say something, but he changed his mind. Would he commiserate with Artyom? Try to talk sense into him? Pretend to be interested? Artyom couldn't give a damn.

They reached the enclosure with the bicycles.

Artyom didn't like mushrooms because Anya liked them; he didn't like pigs because of the stink—he was the only one here who could smell it. And he had come to an arrangement; as a hero, he had been excused from those things. But they didn't feed spongers at Exhibition. Once you'd served your watch at the checkpoint in the tunnel, you had to do a shift in the station as well. And Artyom had chosen the bicycles.

There were fourteen of them in a row, handlebars pointing towards the wall, on which there were posters. The first poster showed the Kremlin and the Moscow River, the second showed someone's faded charms in a pink swimsuit, the third the skyscrapers of New York, and the fourth a snowbound monastery and the Orthodox Christian holy days in a calendar grid ... Choose your mood and spin the pedals. The bicycles stood on struts, and straps ran from their back wheels to electric generators. Attached to each bike was a little lamp that faintly illuminated your poster dream for the day. The rest of the electricity went into batteries to power the station.

The bicycles stood in a caved-in southern tunnel, and outsiders weren't allowed anywhere near them: a strategic facility. The old man apparently hadn't glanced in here yet.

"He's with me," Artyom said for some reason, waving to the sentry, and Homer was allowed through.

Artyom mounted a rusty frame and took hold of the rubber handles. Berlin, scrounged from some Hansa book dealers, loomed up indistinctly in front of him: the Brandenburg Gate, the TV tower, and a black sculpture of a woman with her hands raised to her head. Artyom realized that that gate was very similar to the entrance to the Exhibition of Economic Achievements; and the TV tower, although it had a spherical node halfway up, reminded him of the Ostankino Tower. And that statue of the woman, either

screaming or squeezing her ears shut ... He might as well never have gone anywhere.

“Fancy a spin, granddad?” Artyom asked, turning towards Homer.” It’s good for the heart. You’ll hold out longer. Here.”

But the old man didn’t answer—he was staring glassy-eyed at the flat tires spinning, trying to catch a breath of air. His face was skewed, as if he was paralyzed: one half was smiling and the other was lifeless, dead.

“Are you all right there, granddad?” Artyom asked.

“Yes. I just remembered something. Someone,” Homer wheezed. Then he cleared his throat and recovered.

“Ah.”

Everyone had someone to remember. Three hundred shadows each. Just waiting for you to think about them. They set out their snares, installed their trip wires, reeled out their long lines with hooks and suspended their webs—and waited. A bicycle with no front wheel will remind someone how he taught his children to ride a bike in the courtyard of their apartment block; a kettle will whistle exactly the way it used to do in the kitchen of someone else’s parents at the weekend, when guests came to have lunch and shared the news about their lives. Blink, and in that instant between now and now, your eyes suddenly see yesterday, your eyes see their faces. True, as the years go by, they see them less and less clearly. Well fine.

“How did you find out about me?”

“You’re famous,” Homer said with a smile.” Everyone knows about you.”

Artyom made a wry face.

“Famous ...” He spat the word back out.

“You saved the Metro. All the people. If you hadn’t hit those creatures with those missiles ... To be honest, I don’t understand ... Why don’t you want to talk about it?”

There in front of him were the gates to the Exhibition of Economic Achievements and a black woman with her arms raised. He ought to move to another bike, but all the others were already taken, and this was the one that had been left for Artyom. He felt like spinning the pedals backwards, away from that tower, but that way no electricity would be generated.

“I heard about you from Miller.”

“What?”

“Miller. Do you know him? The commander of the Order. You are aware of the existence of the Order, of course? The Spartans, they call them ... As I understand it, you were a member yourself ... before?”

“Did Miller send you to me?”

“No. Miller just told me about you. He said you were the one who informed them. About the Dark Ones. That you walked right through the Metro, all the way ... and then afterwards ... I started digging things up for myself. What I could. But even so, there’s a lot that remains unclear. I realized that I couldn’t make sense of it all without you, and I decided ...”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Ah? Who?”

“Did Miller say anything else about me?”

“Yes.”

Artyom stopped turning the pedals. He swung his leg over the bicycle frame and jumped down onto the floor. He crossed his arms.

“Well?”

“He said you’d gotten married. That you’d started living a normal human life.”

“That’s what he said?”

“Yes, it is.”

“A normal human life ...” Artyom smiled.

“Unless I’ve got something confused.”

“And did he tell you it was his daughter that I married?”

Homer shook his head.

“Is that all?”

The old man chewed on his lips. He sighed and confessed.

“He said that you’d gone crazy.”

“Well of course. I’ve gone crazy.”

“I’m only passing on what I heard ...”

“Nothing else?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“That he was going to kill me, for instance? Because of his daughter? ... Or ...”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Or that he’s expecting me back ... In the ranks?”

“I don’t recall that ...”

Artyom said nothing while he digested all of this. Then he remembered that Homer was still there, studying him.

“Crazy!” Artyom tried his best to laugh.

“I don’t think that,” Homer warned him. “No matter what anyone says, I’m absolutely certain that—”

“How would you know? You?”

“Just because you carry on searching for survivors? Just because you refuse to give in—they think you’re mad. Listen,” said the old man, looking at Artyom seriously. “You’re destroying yourself for people’s sake, and on my word of honor, I don’t understand why they treat you like this.”

“I go every single day.”

“Up there?”

“Every day—up the escalator onto the surface. Then up a high-rise. On foot—up the stairs onto the roof. With an army knapsack.”

People on the bikes nearby started listening more closely and racing more slowly.

“And no! Not once have I heard anyone reply! So what? What does that prove?” Artyom wasn’t just shouting at Homer now, but at all these fucking cyclists, hurtling straight into the wall, into the earth. “It doesn’t prove anything! Why can’t you feel it! There must be other people! There must be other cities! We can’t be the only ones, in this hole, in these caves.”

“You’re a fine one, Artyom! Now you’ve really fucked me off!” exclaimed a young guy with a long nose and little eyes. “The Yankees bombed everyone to hell! There’s nothing left. Why do you have to keep on suffering? They hit us; we hit them. Full stop!”

“But what if we aren’t the only ones?” Homer asked, almost as if he was asking himself. “What if I were to tell you that ...”

“He clambers up there like he’s going to work. He’s radioactive himself, and he contaminates other people! A walking corpse!” The young guy just couldn’t stop. “Do you have to poison all of us in here now?”

“If I were to tell you that there are ... survivors? That there have been signals from other cities? And they were picked up?”

“Say that again.”

“There have been signals from other cities,” Homer said firmly. “They were picked up. And there were conversations.”

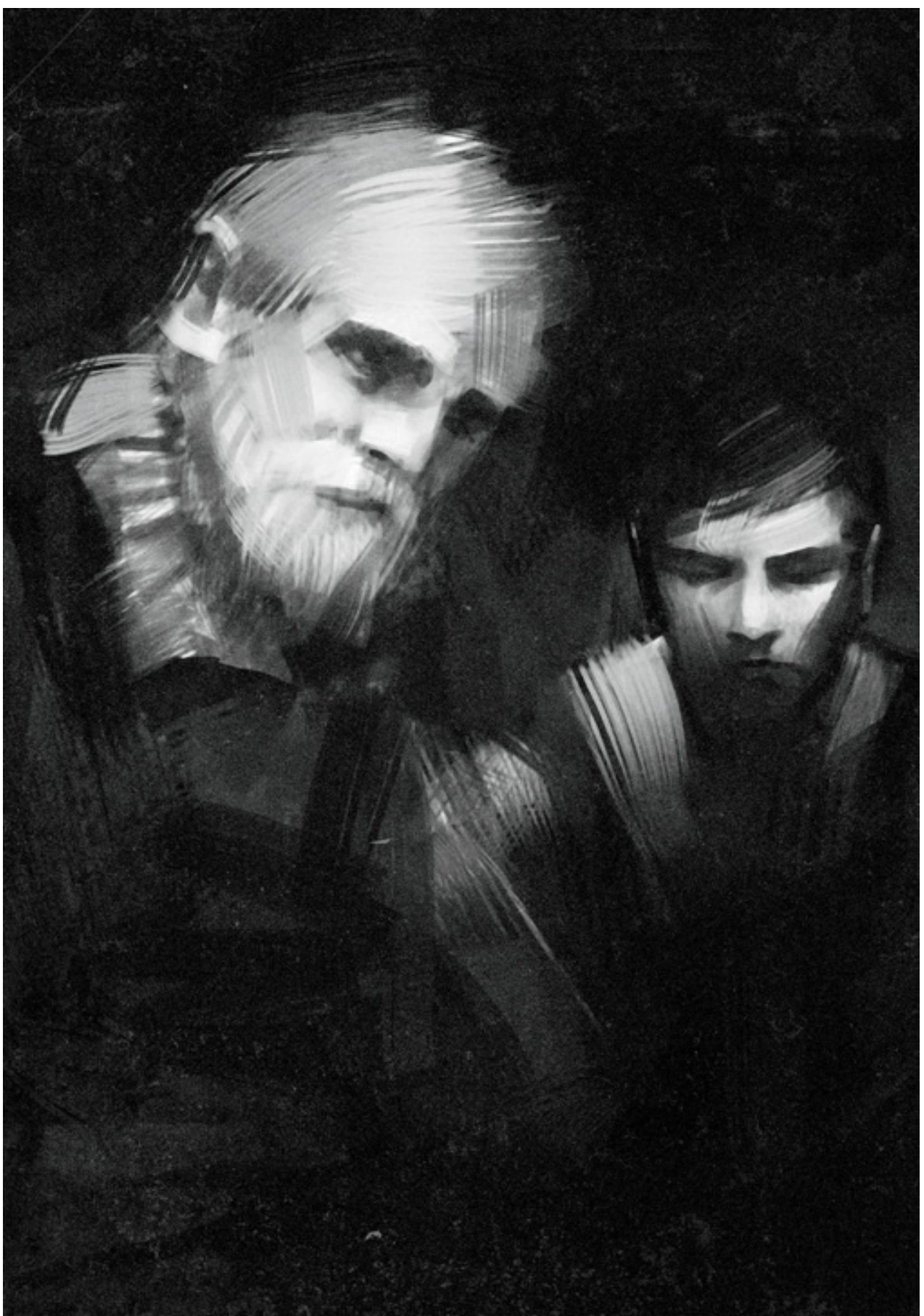
“You’re lying.”

“I myself know a man who handled the radio traffic.”

“You’re lying.”

“And what if I tell you he’s standing right here in front of you? What will you say to that?” Homer winked at Artyom.” Eh?”

“That you’ve flipped your lid, granddad. Or you’re deliberately lying. You are lying, aren’t you? You’re lying!”



CHAPTER 3

— THE PIPE —

The ceilings at the station were low, to suit people. But the tunnels had not been built for people: they measured five meters from wall to wall and the floor and ceiling were separated by the same distance.

Far away, at the other end of the Metro, there dwelt wild savages who believed that the tunnels were passages dug through the solid ground by the Great Worm, the god who created the Earth and gave birth to human beings from out of his belly; and it was only afterwards that people had repudiated their Creator and adapted these passages for their own needs. And instead of the Worm they had built trains of metal for themselves and started themselves the lie that they had existed in the beginning, and there had never been any Worm. Why not believe in a god like that? He was better adapted to a life underground.

The tunnels were dark and frightening; the ground water oozed into them in little rivulets and threatened to smash through the cast-iron tunnel linings at any moment and engulf entire lines. The rivulets gave off water vapor, and the cold mist prevented the light of torches from penetrating very far. The tunnels had not been created for man, no doubt about that, and man had not been created for the tunnels.

Even here, only three hundred meters away from the station, it felt creepy. And the men prattled to drown out the whispering dread.

The campfire of half-dried billets smoked slightly.

The tunnel, of course, was alive: it wheezed as it breathed, drawing in the hazy smoke from the campfire with its perforated lungs, savoring it, as if it was smoking a cigarette. The smoke whirled and eddied, then flew upwards, disappearing into the shaggy, overgrown bronchial tubes of the ventilation shafts.

A little distance away stood the hand-powered rail trolley on which the watch had arrived. It was three hundred meters to the station. If someone advanced towards Exhibition Station out of the northern darkness, the watch had to bear the brunt of the attack, sacrificing their lives if necessary, and send one “survivor” to the station. To warn people. So that the children would have time to hide and the women could take guns and join the men in blocking off the entrance with their own bodies.

It had always worked: That was why Exhibition Station was still here, still inhabited after two and a half decades. But for the last couple of years, if anyone had ever turned up here, it was only by mistake. The final terrible threat to both the station and the Metro as a whole, the Dark Ones, had disappeared, annihilated by a barrage of missiles about two years ago.

And everyone at the station remembered who had saved the station from those brutes: Artyom.

Now to the north of Exhibition there was only a chain of frozen, empty stations, of which the first was Botanical Gardens. That station lay very close to the surface, and the hermetic doors that were supposed to cut off the world on the surface from the world down below stood wide open and broken. It was impossible to live at Botanical Gardens, and people weren't interested in what came beyond it. So the limit to which the light of the camp extended marked the precise end of the world. Everything after that was outer space.

The watchmen sat there, walled off from the vacuum by sandbags heaped up into parapets. Their Kalashnikovs were arranged in a pyramid, leaning against each other. A battered, smoke-blackened kettle warmed its belly on the flames.

Artyom sat down with his face towards the campfire, setting the back of his head towards the emptiness of the tunnel. He sat Homer down right beside him—Artyom had deliberately brought his visitor into this quiet void, as he didn't want to listen to the old man's story back there, beside the bicycles, in front of everyone. He couldn't do it completely without witnesses, but at least let there be as few as possible.

“You shouldn’t sit with your back to the pipe!” Levashov hissed at him.

But Artyom trusted this pipe just at the moment. He had learned to feel it.

The others had sat down so as to keep their eyes trained on the open mouth of the tunnel. Homer had been warned to tell his tale quietly in order not to excite the others, but Homer didn’t know how to do things quietly.

“The town is called Polar Dawns. It’s up on the Kola Peninsula. There’s an atomic power station close by—and in working order too, note. The station has an operational life of over a hundred years in reserve! Because it’s only powering one town. And the town has been transformed into a fortress. They built a log stockade and other fortifications. Organized sound defenses. There were military units close by, guarding the power station, and the garrison of Polar Dawns was drawn from them. The area around it is deadly—the Far North. But they’re holding out. The station provides them with light and warmth—for farming. So ...”

“Stop making it all up, will you?” Levashov shouted from the other side of the campfire. He had red eyes, fleshy ears and a higgledy-piggledy mustache that pointed upwards.” What fucking dawns are you talking about? After Botanical there’s no one in the pipe at all, apart from the wandering dogs! As if one crackpot wasn’t enough, now another one’s shown up!”

“They’ll have their own club here now,” said Armenchik, winking and picking at his teeth with his fingernail to winkle out a fiber of pork that was stuck between them. The Crimson Sails’ Dreamers and Romantics club.”

“Who picked up the signal? Who talked to them?” asked Artyom, looking at the old man’s beard and his moving lips, trying to read them like a deaf man.

“I ...” Homer began.” I’m from that part of the world myself. From Arkhangelsk. So I kept hoping to find someone, thinking maybe some of my folks had survived. I kept listening and searching. And eventually I found something. There was nothing from my Arkhangelsk, that’s true. But Polar Dawns! An entire town, can you imagine it? up on the surface! Hot water, light ... But the most fascinating thing is that they have an electronic library, still intact. On magnetic media and CDs. The whole of world literature and cinema ... Do you understand? They have all the electricity they could need ...”

“What’s the wavelength? What’s the frequency?” Artyom asked abruptly, interrupting Homer’s cozy narrative.

“So it’s a kind of Noah’s Ark, which hasn’t saved all the animals two by two, but the entire culture of our civilization ...” the old man continued, as if he hadn’t heard.

“When was the contact? How frequent was it? Where was your radio set located? What kind of equipment was it? From what height did you pick up the signal? So why didn’t anything work for me?”

The old man had been expecting a conversation, not an interrogation: a cozy conversation beside the fire. But Artyom wanted this moment too much to waste it on rose-tinted schmaltz. The first thing he had to do was make sure this was true.

Artyom knew all about the vague mirages that loomed up in the desert on the surface. He didn’t want to admire them; he wanted to touch them, believe in them.

“Well?” He wouldn’t let it go, kept pushing: He couldn’t let the old man slip out of his grasp.” Remember exactly! Why doesn’t it work for me any longer?”

“I ...” Homer began, smacking his lips and pondering, turning his eyes away towards the darkness and eventually giving in.” I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? How’s that possible—for you not to know? If you picked up the signal yourself?”

The old man squirmed a bit in embarrassment and then confessed, the bastard.

“I wasn’t the one who picked it up. I just happened to meet this man. A radio operator. He told me.”

“Where? Where did you meet him? What station?”

The old man sighed a bit more.

“Teatralnaya Station, I think. Teatralnaya.”

“Smack in the hottest spot in the Metro that is? Do you think I’m scared of going and checking for myself?”

“I don’t think anything of the kind, young man,” Homer said in a dignified fashion.

“When?”

“A couple of years ago. I don’t remember.”

He doesn’t remember.

The only time that Artyom had heard someone’s distant, weak voice in the jagged gaps between the hissing and the howling of the airwaves had be imprinted on his mind forever, and even now he only had to start listening for that sound to ring in his ears like the dried-up voice of the sea in a seashell. How could anyone forget something like that?

How could anyone dream all his life about writing a book for his descendants, for the future generations, so that those generations would know where they came from, so that they wouldn’t lose the dream of one day returning to the surface—and not remember every little detail of something like that?

And at Teatralnaya too.

“You’re lying,” said Artyom, quite certain. “You just want me to like you.”

“You’re mistaken. I simply—”

“You want me to like you, so that I’ll spill all the beans for you. My entire sodding story. You decided to win me over, right? You probed for a soft spot and sank in the hook ... Right?”

“Certainly not! It’s an absolutely real event.”

“Agh, come off it!”

“Oh,” said hook-nosed Armenchik, sucking in his snot with relish. “The dreamers are arguing over whose dream is dreamier.”

Infuriated with himself and this stupid old liar, Artyom laid the back of his head against a bullet-riddled sandbag and squeezed his eyelids together. Fucking fantasist. As soon as your soul grows a scab over itself, someone comes along and picks it off.

The old man frowned and didn’t attempt to change Artyom’s mind.

Screw him anyway.

They didn’t say another word to each other until the end of the watch. As they emerged into the station, Artyom didn’t even exchange glances with the old man in farewell.

* * *

“There’s reliable information. A signal’s been picked up from the Kola Peninsula. There are survivors there,” said Artyom, glancing at Kirill significantly.

“Honestly?”

“Honestly!”

Kirill jumped up in the air, he was so delighted. He judged his breathing wrongly and started coughing violently. Knowing what would come next, Artyom gave him a handkerchief. When Kirill recovered, he tore the handkerchief away from his mouth and examined it with a frightened, guilty look that wrung Artyom’s heart.

“It will all pass. You’ll go chasing rats again! It’s no big deal, just a little bit of blood!”

“Mum scolds me. Don’t show her. You won’t show her, will you?”

“Oh, come on, will you! You and me, we’re like that! A team! You don’t squeal on me; I don’t squeal on you!”

“Swear on the Order.”

“I swear on the Order.”

“Swear solemnly.”

"I swear solemnly on the Order."

Kirill clambered up onto his knees.

"Come on. Tell me."

"Well," said Artyom." There's definite information. A signal was picked up from the north. From the Kola Peninsula. An atomic power station has survived there completely untouched. And there's a town beside it. It's called Polar Dawns. Beautiful, eh? So we're not here alone. Do you understand that, Kiriukh? We're not alone. There are other survivors too. And we've found them. How about that?"

"Wow, cool!" said Kirill, gazing at Artyom with his huge, pale eyes." But is it really true?"

"It is really true. And that power station makes enough electricity to keep the whole town warm all year round. And they've built a huge glass dome over the town. Can you imagine that?"

"Na-ah."

"Like a glass, only big."

"What for?"

"To keep the heat in. Outside there's a snowy blizzard, but inside the weather's fine and warm. Trees in blossom. Just like in that book of yours. And fruit orchards, with apples in them ... And tomatoes, by the way. People walking along the streets in their T-shirts. There's heaps and heaps of food. All sorts of sweet things. And the toys aren't like what you have, those used cartridge cases. All different sorts of toys."

Kiriukha squeezed his eyes shut, diligently trying to imagine all this. He coughed a couple of times with his mouth closed, quietly. Restraining himself. Breathed out long and slow. He probably couldn't imagine it. Artyom himself couldn't.

"And in summer this dome opens up—and they live in the open air. Not under the ground, but outside, in houses with windows. Through the windows they can see the other houses, or the forest, for instance. That's the way they live. Everything clean, dry, and fresh. Right out in the sun. And in air like that not a single microbe can survive; they all die. And people walk along the street without any gas masks."

"All the microbes? And tuber dies too?" asked Kirill, instantly wide awake.

"All of them. And tuber first of all."

"So I can just go there and breathe without a gas mask in order to be cured?"

"I think so," said Artyom." Yes. Here in the tunnels the damp, stuffy air makes things really easy for the tuber. But fresh air means instant death for it."

"Wow! I have to tell mum! She'll be so happy. And are you going to go there?"

"Well now, this place Polar Dawns is very far way. It's not that easy to get there. You have to build up your strength."

"I'll build mine up! How much do I need?" asked Kirill, bouncing on Artyom's knee.

"You need a lot. Do you know how long it takes to get there? On all-terrain troop transports probably ... six months! Across the surface. Through the forests and the swamps. Along the ruined roads."

"Well, so what? I'll get there!"

"Nah, I probably won't take you with me. I'll only go with other soldiers from the Order."

"Ah, why's that?"

"Your mother says you don't eat anything. We don't need a wimp like that with us in a troop transport team. Nothing but a burden. And it's a tough journey. Lots of obstacles to overcome. Monsters every step of the way. We'll have to survive lots of adventures. And how are you going to survive them, if you don't eat anything? You'll peg out in the very first adventure. No, our Order needs soldiers, not weaklings."

"I can't look at those mushrooms any longer. Ba-a-ah ..."

"What about the vegetables? Your mum got you some vegetables. Did you see the tomato? That tomato traveled all the way across the Metro from Sebastopol to get to you."

"Yuck."

“Exactly the same kind of tomato, by the way, as the tomatoes that grow in the streets and the gardens of that town Polar Dawns. Come on now, try it. It has a whole ton of vitamins in it.”

“Okay, I’ll eat the tomato, then. If it’s the same kind that grow there.”

“Get it down you right now. In front of me.”

“Then while I do it you tell me more about that town and the dome like a glass.”

Kiriukha’s mother, Natalya, was standing outside, listening to everything, every single word, through the tarpaulin. With shadows flickering across her face and her fingers twisting and twining together.

“I got him to eat the tomato,” Artyom told her with a smile.

“Why did you tell him that nonsense of yours? He’ll drive me crazy with it now,” said Natalya, not smiling back at him.

“Why be so quick to call it nonsense? Maybe the town of Polar Dawns does exist. Let him imagine it.”

“The doctor was here yesterday. He came from Hansa.”

Artyom forgot what word he was going to say next. He was afraid to guess what Natalya was going to tell him, so he simply didn’t think anything. He tried not to think, in order not to jinx things.

“He’s got three months left. That’s all. You and your Polar Dawns.”

Natalya’s mouth twisted out of shape, and Artyom realized what had been in her eyes all the time they were talking.

“You mean, there’s absolutely nothing?”

A film of dried-up tears.

“Mu-u-u-um. Artyom’s going to take me to the Far North with him in a troop transport! Will you let me go?”

* * *

He thought Anya would be asleep already; or pretending to be asleep—as usual, anything to avoid him. But she was sitting on the bed, with her bare legs crossed under her and clutching a half-liter bottle containing something cloudy with both hands, as if she was afraid someone might take it away from her. He caught a whiff of alcohol.

“Here,” she said, holding it out to him.” Have a swig.”

Artyom did as she said, scalding his throat with the homebrew, then held his breath and blinked. It made him a little dizzy and warmed him up a bit. Now what?

“Sit down,” said Anya, slapping the blanket beside her.” Sit down, please.”

He lowered himself onto the spot she had indicated, then half turned his head to glance at her.

A simple vest with shoulder straps.

The downy fluff on her hands was standing up on end—from the cold?

The same as she was two years ago. Black hair cut short in a boyish style. Thin, pale lips. Nose slightly too big for that delicate face, with a crook in it, but without it the face would be insipid and boring. Her arms were woven completely out of cables, like the arms of anatomical models, without a trace of girlish softness in them, and the muscles on her shoulders were like epaulettes. A long neck, with an artery pulsing rapidly, and that neck-bone of hers there ... Her collarbones stick out; those collarbones used to make him want to love her and pity her and torment her until he was all dried up. Sharp nipples showing through the white fabric. Why does a lightbulb shine brightly at first and then burn out?

“Put your arm around me.”

Artyom reached his arm out and arranged it awkwardly on Anya’s shoulder in a brotherly kind of way, or as if he was hugging a child. She leaned slightly towards him, as if she wanted to nestle against him, but all those cables in her remained taut and twisted. And Artyom couldn’t loosen up either: he took another swig, hoping.

He couldn’t do any of the right things either: he’d got out of the habit.

Anya touched him. Then she ran her lips across his cheek.

“Prickly.”

Artyom shook up the murky liquid in the plastic bottle and downed a really big gulp. His head was full of the Far North and an all-terrain vehicle.

“Let’s ... Let’s try, Artyom. Let’s try again. We have to. All over again. From the beginning.”

She lowered her fingers—cold and rough—onto his belt and deftly unhooked the buckle.

“Kiss me. Come on. Kiss me.”

“Yes. I ...”

“Come to me.”

“Wait ... Just a moment.”

“Well, what’s wrong? Take ... Take this off me ... It’s too tight. I want you to undress me. You.”

“Anya.”

“What is it? That’s right ... Ssssssh ... I’m cold.”

“Yes. I ...”

“Come here. That’s it ... And you too ... Come on ... Come on ... Take this nasty shirt off ...”

“Okay. Just a moment.”

“There. God. Let me have a swig.”

“Take it.”

“Ah. Agh. Come on. Here. Right here. Like you used to do. Do you remember? Do you still remember?”

“An ... Anechka ...”

“Well, what are you doing there? Well?”

“You ... You’re so ...”

“Well, what are you doing? Come on.”

“I’m not used to it any more ... I’m sorry.”

“Let me do it ... Why do you have to? Let me have it.”

“Anya ...”

“Well? Well! Come on ... Right in here ... Do you feel it?”

“Yes ... Yes.”

“It’s been so long for me. You’re completely ... Why are you like that? Don’t you understand? I need you. You. Well?”

“Okay. Just a moment. It’s just ... It’s just been a bad day ...”

“Shut up. Quiet. Let me try ... Just lie there.”

“Today I ...”

“Shut up. Close your eyes and shut up. That’s it. That’s it. Right ... And now ... Now just ... Well, what’s wrong with you? What?”

“I don’t know. It’s not working.”

“Well, what?”

“God only knows. No. My head’s just full of ...”

“What? What’s your head so full of?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Get off me. Go away.”

“Anya ...”

“Where’s my vest?”

“Wait.”

“Where’s my vest? I’m cold.”

“Oh come on ... Don’t act this way. You’re not the problem. It’s not because of you ...”

“No more, that’s it. And stop trying to fake your feelings.”

“That’s not true ...”

“Push off, do you hear? Push off!”

“All right. I ...”

“Where are those fucking panties! That’s it. If you don’t want to, you don’t want to. Or are you all withered up down here? From the radiation?”

“No, of course not, what do you ...”

“You just don’t want it with me ... To have children from me ...”

“I told you ... It’s been a bad day.”

“We don’t have any, because they know: You don’t want them, you’re not waiting for them!”

“That’s not true!”

“I ... Artyom! I left for you. Smashed everything with my father to hell. Because of you. After that war, after the battle ... With the Reds ... He’s in a wheelchair! Him! He can’t walk ... And they sliced his arm off ... Do you at least understand what that means to him? To be an invalid! And I left him, my own father—to be with you. I went against him! Against his will!”

“So what can I do about it? He doesn’t even think of me as a man ... I tried to tell him the whole truth ... But he ... He’s the one who doesn’t want us to be together. What’s that to do with me?”

“To have your children. Do you understand that? Yours ... I stopped going up on the surface, so all my female organs would be healthy ... They’re like a sponge ... The radiation ... You know that! Those damned mushrooms! To fit in here, in this station of yours! Do you think I see myself ... That I see my future like that? I abandoned my duty. To sing lullabies to pigs. And for what? But you just carry on! You haven’t stopped for a single day! You’ve completely burnt yourself out down there. Do you understand? Maybe that’s why it didn’t work for us? And it isn’t working now. And I’ve begged you so many times! Your father has begged you so many times!”

“SukhoI isn’t really ...”

“What are you doing it for? You just don’t want any children, is that it? You just don’t like children, is that it? You don’t want any from me! You don’t want any at all! You don’t give a shit for any of that. The only thing you’re fit for is saving the world. But what about me? Here I am! You’re letting me go! You’re losing me! And you want to lose me, is that it?”

“Anya, why are you ... ?”

“I can’t go on like this. I don’t want to go on. I don’t want to wait. I don’t want to beg for sex. I don’t want to dream about getting knocked up. And I don’t want to be afraid that if I do get knocked up by you, I’ll have a monster.”

“That’s enough! Shut up!”

“And you will have a monster, Artyom! You’re like a sponge too! You’ll pay for every one of your trips to the surface. Don’t you understand that?”

“Shut up, you bitch!”

“Go away. Go away, Artyom. Go away and don’t come back.”

“I’ll go.”

“Yes, go.”

All this is in a whisper. The shouts are in a whisper, the groans are in a whisper, the crying is in a whisper.

All soundless, the way it is with ants.

And all the neighbors pretend to be asleep.

And everyone knows everything.

The protective suit fitted into the bundle perfectly. He put his service Kalashnikov—which he was forbidden to take out of the station—on top of it, with six magazines of cartridges bound together

in pairs with blue insulating tape, and a plastic bag of dried mushrooms. The gas mask stared murkily at him until Artyom closed it in with the zip—yanking it violently like an annoying corpse in a sack. Then he heaved the knapsack onto his shoulders—his own curse, his rock of Sisyphus.

“Granddad! Get up! Collect your things! Just don’t make any noise.”

The old man seemed to have been sleeping with his eyes open—he woke up immediately.

“Where are we going?”

“Did you tell me the truth about Teatralnaya? About that radio operator of yours? About him being there?”

“Yes ... Yes.”

“Right then ... Will you show me the way there?”

“To Teatralnaya?” Homer asked hesitantly.

“You really did think I’d chicken out, eh? Screw that, granddad. Maybe it’s hell for some, but for us it’s the field of our military glory. Well? Or was it all just lies?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Come to Teatralnaya with me. I’ve got to see this man of yours for myself. And ask him about everything. Let him give me his radio ... So I’ll believe it.”

“It was two years ago, you know ...”

“Let’s make an arrangement, the two of us. You lead me to this radio operator, and I tell you everything you wanted to ask me about. Without hiding a thing. The Dark Ones, the Bright Ones, the Murky Ones. Whatever you fancy. The history of my heroic feat. I’ll tell you what I haven’t told anyone else. The whole fucking Greek tragedy from alpha to omega. A deal? Word of honor. Shake on it.”

Homer held out his hand—slowly and doubtfully, as if he thought Artyom might spit into it—but shook Artyom’s hand firmly.

While the old man was packing his bedding into his traveling bag, Artyom worked on his self-charging torch, squeezing and releasing the handle and listening to the buzzing of the mechanism as he filled up the battery. That was all he was interested in. Then he broke off.

“Explain this to me. That book of yours. What’s it for?”

“The book? Well, the way things are, we’re living here and time has stopped, you understand? There aren’t any historians. There’s no one to record that we also lived, and how, so it’s as if our lives are pointless. But that not true, is it?” Homer froze, holding a gray, crumpled pillowcase. “They’ll dig us up in ten thousand years, and we didn’t write a single line. They’ll try to read our bones and our soup bowls to tell who we believed in and what we dreamed about. And they’ll get everything wrong.”

“Who’ll dig us up, granddad?”

“Archaeologists, our descendants.”

Artyom shook his head hard. He licked his lips and tried to restrain the fury seething up in him, but it seared him, as if he had puked up bile.

“But maybe I don’t want them to dig you and me up here. I don’t want to be bones and bowls in a common grave. I’d rather do the digging myself, and not be dug up. There are enough people here who want to while away their lives in a burial mound as it is. I’d rather kick the bucket from an overdose up on the surface than be stuck here in the Metro until I’m old and gray. That’s no human destiny, granddad. That’s not for human beings. The Metro. Descendants, fuck it. Descendants! I don’t want my descendants to be stuck underground all their lives. I don’t want my descendants to be food for tuberculosis microbes! I don’t want that! Or to slit each other’s throats over the last tin of food? I don’t want that. Or grunt and sprawl around with the pigs? I don’t want that! You’re writing a book for them, granddad, but they won’t even be able to read. Their eyes will wither away because they’re not needed, do you understand? But their sense of smell will be as keen as a rat’s! They won’t be people!

“Should we breed creatures like that? If there’s even just one chance in a million that somewhere out

there, at least somewhere, it's possible to live on the surface, under a sky with stars, under the sun, if at least somewhere in this fucking world it's possible just to breathe through your mouth and not through a rubber trunk, then I'm going to find that place, got that? If there is a place like that, then yes! That's where we'll be able to build a new life! And have children! So that they won't grow up to be rats or Morlocks, but human beings! For that we have to fight! But we mustn't bury ourselves alive in the ground in advance, curl up in a tight little ball and meekly snuff it—we mustn't do that!"

Irradiated and stunned by Artyom's forcefulness, Homer didn't say anything. Artyom really wanted the old man to argue; he wanted to take at least one more hard swing. But instead of that the old man just smiled—honestly and warmly, with half his teeth missing.

"It wasn't a waste of time coming here. I sensed that it wasn't."

Artyom just spat. But it was the poison he spat out, the bile: For some reason the old man's gap-toothed smile made him feel better, it eased his tension. The old man was ludicrous and awkward, but Artyom suddenly had the feeling that they were on the same side. Homer felt something similar and waved to Artyom like a boisterous youngster.

"I'm ready."

They walked stealthily through the station. Hanging above the blank opening of the tunnel, the station clock, a local sacred relic, showed that it was night. So it was night for everyone. Artyom was the only one who could have disagreed with it, but Artyom was already leaving the station. The hall was almost deserted, except for someone having a late cup of tea in the kitchen. The crimson public lighting was dimmed; people had packed themselves away in their tents, lit up the weak little light diodes inside, and transformed their tarpaulin into a theater of shadows. Each stage offered its own performance. As they walked past Sukhoi's tent it was a figure leaning over a table; and then they walked past the one where Anya was sitting with her face buried in her hands.

The old man asked cautiously:

"Don't you want to say goodbye?"

"No one to say it to, granddad."

Homer didn't argue.

"To Alekseevskaya!" Artyom announced to the sentries at the entrance to the southern tunnel." Sukhoi knows about it."

The sentries saluted: If he knew, then he knew. Thanks for not going up on the surface again.

They climbed down the welded iron ladder onto the tracks.

"The pipe," Artyom said to himself as he stepped into the darkness, tenderly touching the rough, moldy cast iron of a tunnel liner, measuring with a glance the five-meters-high ceiling of the tunnel and its fathomless depth." The pipe is calling."



CHAPTER 4

— PAYMENT —

Alekseevskaya was like Exhibition, only a crummier version. They tried to cultivate mushrooms and made bungled efforts with pigs here too, but as luck would have it the mushrooms and the pigs always turned out half-dead. So there was hardly enough for the locals and nothing was left for trading. But the locals were a good match for their own pigs—sickly and resigned to the fact that in their fairytale the beginning and the end were both boring and everyone knew them in advance. The walls here used to be white and marble, but now it was impossible to say what they used to be like. Everything that could be pried off and sold had been. All that remained was a concrete shell and a few human lives. Scraping away concrete was difficult, and no one in the Metro needed goods of that sort; so most of the trading that took place concerned who the Alekseevans were going to die for in battle. If there was any choice, the price would have been higher. But apart from Exhibition there were no buyers to be found. So now the main purpose of Alekseevskaya Station's existence was to protect Exhibition Station.

And therefore at Exhibition the tunnel leading to Alekseevskaya was regarded as calm. It could take a week to make your way through some stretches of tunnel, but even with all the compulsory precautions it took them perhaps thirty minutes to get through this one. Although the minutes were left behind on the clock at Exhibition. It was ten years now since the clock at Alekseevskaya had been stolen, and since then everyone there lived according to his own intuition. If someone wanted night, then for him it was night. After all, in the Metro night never ended; it was the day that had to be imagined.

The guard detail glanced listlessly at the walkers, their pupils as tiny as the eyes of needles. There was a somber little white cloud hanging over the sentry post, and the air smelled of foot-wrappings: They had been smoking dope. The officer of the watch heaved a sigh and made an effort.

“Where to.”

“Peace Prospect. To the market,” said Artyom, with making any effort to slip in through eye of that needle.

“They won't let you through. There.”

Artyom gave him a warm smile.

“That's no concern of yours, uncle.”

“The tangent times the tangent gives the cotangent,” the old man replied, infected by Artyom's genial mood and wishing to something agreeable too.

And with that they parted.

“Which way shall we go?” Homer asked Artyom.

“From the Prospect? If they let us into Hansa, round the Circle. Anything's better than going straight down along our line. Unpleasant memories, you know. Hansa will be safer. I have a visa stamped in my passport. Miller fixed that up for me. Will they let you in?”

“There's a quarantine, isn't there?”

“They always have some kind of quarantine. We'll break through somehow. All the problems will start after that. Teatralnaya—no matter which side you come at it from ... You chose a fine place for your radio operator to live, granddad. In the middle of a minefield.”

“What do you—”

“I'm joking.”

The old man squinted in a special kind of way—looking in under his forehead, inside himself, where he evidently had a map of the Metro laid out. Artyom always had his own map in front of his eyes; he'd learned to look straight through it. He'd learned that in a year of serving with Miller.

“I’d say ... It’s best to go to Pavelets. It’s longer, but quicker. And from there up along the Green Line. If we’re lucky we can get there in a day.”

They moved on through the pipe.

Swishing quietly, the torch worked as hard as it could—but its spot of light only reached ten steps ahead, and after that it was eaten up by the darkness. Water dripped from the ceiling, the walls gleamed damply, something gurgled hollowly, and the drops falling on their heads irritated their skin, as if they weren’t water, but stomach acid.

Doors of some kind appeared in the walls, and sometimes the black openings of side tunnels—mostly boarded over or covered with welded gratings of steel reinforcement bars.

After all, everyone knew that the bright-colored passenger maps didn’t show even a third of the whole Metro, the real one. Why confuse people with all that? They just hurtled from one marble station to the next with their noses stuck in their mobile phones, leapt forward an hour, and that was it, they had arrived. They had no time to go thinking about what depths of the earth they had plumbed. And why wonder about what lay there, behind the walls of the stations and where the barred-off branches of the tunnels led to? It was just good that you got where you were going in good time. Gaze at your phone; think about something important to you; don’t stick your nose in where it doesn’t belong.

They walked with the special tunnel stride—docked to three-quarters size, to coincide neatly with the sleepers. It took a lot of walking to teach your legs to do that. Those who were stuck at the station all the time couldn’t do it; they lost the rhythm and stepped into the gaps.

“Well, what about you, granddad? Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

All the light went forward, and Artyom couldn’t make out the expression on the old man’s face. Probably there wasn’t one: just a beard and wrinkles.

They walked on for about another fifty strides. The knapsack with the radio set started getting heavy, really making its presence felt. Artyom’s temples were soaked, and sweat started running down his back.

“I had a wife. At Sebastopol.”

“Do you live way out at Sebastopol?”

“I used to, yes.”

“Did she leave you?” Somehow that seemed the most likely thing to Artyom. “Your wife?”

“I left. To write the book. I thought the book was more important. And my wife wasn’t going anywhere anyway. Do you understand?”

“You left your wife to write a book?” Artyom asked. “How’s that possible? And she ... She let you go?”

“I ran off. When I came back she wasn’t there.”

“She left?”

“She died.”

Artyom shifted the bundle with the protective suit from his right hand to his left.

“I don’t know.”

“Eh?”

“I don’t know if I understand or not.”

“You do, you understand,” the old man said wearily but confidently.

Artyom suddenly felt afraid. Afraid of doing something irrevocable.

After that they counted off the sleepers in silence. They listened to the rumbling echo and distant groaning: It was the Metro digesting someone.

They weren’t expecting any danger from behind: they stared hard straight ahead, trying to spot that faint ripple on the surface of the tunnel, following which something appalling and nameless would emerge,

splashing out of that well of black ink. But they didn't watch with the backs of their heads.

They should have.

Squea-eak-squeak. Squea-eak-squeak.

The sound stole into their ears like that, gradually.

And it only became noticeable when it was already too late to swing around and point their gun barrels.

“Ahoy!”

If whoever it was had wanted to nudge them in the back with lead and topple them over facedown onto the rotten sleepers, they could easily have had time to do it. A lesson: You should never think your own thoughts in the tube; it might start getting jealous. You're forgetting things, Artyom.

“Halt! Who are you?”

The knapsack and the bundle pulled his arms down, preventing him from taking aim.

A trolley trundled out of the darkness.

“Ahoy. Ahoy. Friends.”

It was that sentry, the cotangent. Alone on the trolley, a fearless man. He had abandoned his post and set off into nowhere. The dope had urged him on.

What the hell did he want?

“Lads. I just thought. Maybe I could give you a lift. To the next station.”

And he smiled his very best smile at them. Gap-toothed and craggy.

Of course Artyom's back was begging for a ride, instead of slogging on by foot.

He studied their benefactor: padded jacket, receding hair, puffy under the eyes, but there was light coming out through the pinpricks of his pupils, as if it was shining through a keyhole.

“How much?”

“Don't insult me. You're Sukhoi's son, right? The station master. I'm doing it for free. For peace throughout the world.”

Artyom shook himself; the knapsack skipped and sat on his shoulders more comfortably.

“Thanks,” he said, making up his mind.

“All right, then,” the watchman said delightedly, and waved his arms, as if he was dispersing all the fog he had smoked over the years.” You're a big boy; you've got to understand the subtle points! No way you can manage without a beam-compass in these matters!”

He didn't shut up all the way to Riga.

* * *

“Have you brought us a bit of shit?”

The first person to meet them—ahead of the sentries—was a young guy with short-cropped hair and folded-down ears. He had slightly slanting eyes, but they were concrete-colored, like the sky. His leather coat didn't close over his chest, and gazing out calmly and confidently at Artyom from among the curls and blue drawings behind the open shirt was a rather hefty Jesus.

The young guy had a tin bucket securely perched between his feet and a bag hanging over his shoulder, and he repeatedly slapped the bag to make it give out a tempting jingling sound.

“I'll give top price!”—and then a thin jingle.

In the old times the Riga market, famous throughout Moscow for its cheap roses, used to be above this station. When the sirens started howling, people had only seven minutes to grasp what was happening, believe it, fumble for their ID, and run to the nearest way down into the Metro. And the shrewd flower traders, who only had to go a few steps, crowded inside first, elbowing aside the other people about to be killed.

When the question arose of how to earn a living underground, they opened the hermetic doors, shoved aside the bodies heaped up outside and went back to the market for their roses and tulips: they were withered already, but perfectly good for a herbarium. And for a long time the inhabitants

of Riga Station traded in dried flowers. The flowers were damaged by mold and they were radioactive, but people took them anyway: There was nothing better to be found in the Metro. They had to carry on loving and grieving, didn't they? And how could they do that without flowers?

Those dried roses and the memory of a happiness that seemed to have been here only yesterday but had now vanished forever allowed Riga to spread its wings. But new flowers couldn't be grown underground: Flowers aren't mushrooms or people; they want sunlight. And although the market above the station had seemed inexhaustible, it dried up.

There was a crisis.

Everyone expected that the Rigans, accustomed to the good life, would have to switch to short rations and basically eat rats, like the other poor devils at ordinary stations without any special blessings. But their business acumen saved them.

They thought over the possibilities, took stock of the advantages of their location, and suggested a deal to their neighbors to the north; to buy the surplus pig dung and then sell it on as manure to all the stations who cultivated mushrooms. Exhibition accepted the offer. They had more than enough of that particular asset.

And Riga, already on the wane, already gray with imminent poverty, acquired a new lease of life. Of course, the new commodity didn't smell the same, but it was more reliable. And in this difficult new age they didn't really have much choice.

"Lads, aren't you carrying anything, then?" the young guy asked with a short, sharp sniff, disillusioned with his visitors. And at that moment other men with buckets, just like him, came flying up just a little bit too late—a whole throng of them, shouting across each other:

"Shit!"

"Got any shit? Good money!"

"I'll give a bullet for a kilo."

Like everywhere else in the Metro, they paid here in Kalashnikov cartridges, now the only hard currency. Roubles had become meaningless from the very beginning. What could they be backed with in a world where a word of honor was meaningless and there was no state? Cartridges were far better.

The banknotes had been rolled into cigarettes and smoked long ago: Large denominations were more highly prized than low ones—they were cleaner, they burned better, and they produced less tar. The poorer children, who hadn't gotten any empty cartridge cases, played with coins. But the real price of everything now was in "bullets," as cartridges were affectionately known.

A cartridge for a kilogram at Riga—and somewhere on the Sebastopol Line, a kilogram cost three. Of course, not everyone would want to take up this business. That was fine: There was less competition.

"Hey you, Lyokh, shove off! I'm first in line here," said a swarthy, fidgety man with a mustache, shoving the young tattooed guy on his Christ figure; the young guy snarled back, but retreated anyway.

"Where were you going, fuck it? D'you think if you meet 'em in the tunnel, all the shit's yours?" a gray-cheeked, bald man asked, darting up to the first two.

"Look what this pipsqueak's trying to pull!"

"Skip it, fellas, there's no point ... They're not carrying anyway!"

"Let me check that!"

The sharp sense of smell of short-cropped Lyokha with the cross hadn't deceived him. Cotangent wasn't carrying any cargo.

He spread his arms good-naturedly and let Artyom and Homer get down.

"This here is the boundary of my domain."

And he trundled off back into the darkness, whistling something excruciating.

The watch perfunctorily familiarized themselves with the new arrivals and let them through; the traders who had descended on them dispersed. Only the very first one, Lyokha, was left, he was clearly the

hungriest.

“How about a guided tour, lads? We have plenty of stuff here for tourists to look at. When was the last time you saw a train? Our hotel’s in one. The rooms are real swanky. With electricity. In the corridor. I’ll get you a discount.”

“I know everything here inside out,” Artyom explained amicably and strode on. Homer shuffled after him.

Riga consisted of two happy colors, red and yellow, but to discover that, you had to scrape the layer of grease off the tiles that covered the walls of the station. One of the tunnels was plugged with a dead Metro train, adapted as hotel accommodation. And all the life of this place was conducted via the other tunnel.

“Do you know our bar? It’s only just opened. The local brew’s first class. And they distill stuff too, of course, from—”

“No thanks.”

“But you’ll have to amuse yourselves here somehow, guys. The Prospect is closed. Quarantine. There’s a barrier right across the tracks, and machine-gunners with dogs. Didn’t you know about that, then?”

Artyom twitched his shoulder.

“So what, is there no way at all? It must be possible to arrange things somehow.”

Lyokha snickered.

“You go and try to arrange things. They’ve got a campaign on in Hansa right now. They’re fighting corruption. You’ll get there at just the wrong moment. Those on the take will get let off the hook later. Their own kind, aren’t they? But they have to put someone away.”

“But why did they close the border?”

“Some kind of mushroom disease. Like rot. It’s either carried on the air or people spread it. So they’ve put everything on pause for the time being.”

“They’re persecuting me,” Artyom muttered to himself. “They won’t let me go.”

“Eh?” asked Lyokha, wrinkling up his forehead.

“I loathe those damned mushrooms,” Artyom said clearly and distinctly.

“I understand,” Lyokha agreed. “A miserable kind of business.”

Several men rushed by with their tin buckets rattling. Lyokha twitched and almost set off after them, but stopped himself. He probably calculated it would be more interesting to stay with the stubborn tourists.

“Your business is more cheerful,” Homer remarked.

“Don’t be like that, granddad,” Lyokha said with a frown. “Not everyone can be a broker. It takes talent.”

“A broker?”

“Well, yeah. Like me. Like the lads over there. A broker. Why, what do you reckon it’s called?”

Homer couldn’t even make a guess. He was too busy trying not to smile. But the corners of his lips stretched upwards anyway, no matter how hard he tried to coerce them.

And then Artyom spotted a sudden change in his expression. His face turned cold and frightened, like a dead man’s. He was looking past the broker, off to one side.

“Don’t be like that,” Lyokha told the old man, who had suddenly turned deaf. “As it happens, shit is the lifeblood of the economy. What do mushrooms grow on? What do they fertilize the tomatoes with at Sebastopol? So don’t talk like that.”

But Homer nodded to Lyokha at some random word in the middle of a phrase and started sidling away from him and Artyom. Artyom traced out the line of his trajectory with a glance: he saw, but he didn’t understand.

A slim girl with white hair was a standing several steps away from them, kissing a very substantial, beefy broker: As he kissed her, the broker inconspicuously pushed his bucket away with his foot, so that it

wouldn't take the edge off the enchantment. This girl was the target of Homer's uncertain advance.

"And how much do you reckon we pull in on this lark?" Lyokha asked, switching to Artyom now that he'd lost the old man.

Homer stole up to the snogging couple and started tortuously trying to find an angle from which he could glance at their faces. Maybe he had recognized someone? But he didn't dare to interfere and drag them out of their kiss.

"What are you up to?" the beefy guy asked, sensing Homer with the folds on the nape of his neck." What d'you want, old man?"

The face of the girl, torn away from her kiss, was steamy and shriveled, like the sucker of a leech that has just been pulled off an arm. It was the wrong face, not the one Homer was seeking, Artyom realized.

"I'm sorry."

"Push off," said the leech.

And Homer, sullen now but still agitated, rejoined Artyom and Lyokha.

"I made a mistake," he explained. Artyom decided not to ask any questions, though: Open the tap of the old man's revelations and they could strip the thread.

"Of course, she couldn't have ... No way, not with someone like that ... Old fool ..." Homer said to himself.

"What, you mean you work at a loss?"

"You could call it a loss ... Hansa takes half of every delivery in customs duty. And now, anyway, with this quarantine..."

Hansa was what the Commonwealth of Circle Line Stations called itself. All kinds of goods from every end of the Metro had to pass through Hansa's markets and its custom posts. Many shuttle traders, rather than risk their necks traveling right across the Metro, preferred to take their goods as far as the nearest market at an intersection between the Circle Line and a radial line and pass them on to local merchants. And it was less bother to leave the profit here, in one of Hansa's banks, in order to avoid having your head chopped off in the dark tunnels by evil characters who had spotted a successful deal. The stubborn individuals who insisted on lugging their goods further themselves had to pay customs duty in any case. And no matter how well the other stations lived, Hansa grew richer. No one anywhere in the Metro could lay down the law to Hansa. That made its citizens proud and happy, and everyone else dreamed of obtaining Hansa citizenship.

From the center of the platform Artyom could see a line of goods trolleys that hadn't been allowed into Riga, running into the tunnel: That was what the brokers did—raced each other to buy their commodity in the northern tunnel and sell it in the southern one. After that other people made a living from it.

"Trading's come to complete standstill," Lyokha complained." They're strangling the entrepreneur, the fuckers. Fucking lousy monopolists. A man goes about his own honest business, but oh no! Who gave them the right to get rich off our backs? I have to slave away, and their bellies will just keep getting fatter? That's oppression, bugger it! If they let us trade freely, the entire Metro would thrive!"

Artyom felt a sudden liking for Lyokha, despite the smell. He wanted to continue this ludicrous conversation.

"There's no shortage of the stuff in Hansa," he said, remembering." One time I had to work at Pavelets. On the Circle Line. Raking out the crap house. They sentenced me to work for a year. I escaped after a week."

"Consider that your baptism," Lyokha said with a nod.

"They dumped all that stuff into cesspits and shafts. They didn't stoop to trading in it."

Lyokha chuckled darkly.

"They live in grand style."

He took out a cigarette case with ready-cut papers and a tobacco pouch and offered some to them. Homer declined, but Artyom took some. He positioned himself under a lightbulb dangling from the ceiling and glued his eyes to the words on the paper before rolling the homemade “tobacco” in them. A yellow page from a book with painstakingly printed letters, ripped out by hand and torn along just the right line for making a roll-up, but not so that he could make sense of the words. God only knew what they meant!

*And the newly born propensity of gravity—
Such were the origins of the rule of the few.
And so, prepare yourself to live in time’s
Hegemony; here, neither tapir nor wolf exist,
And the sky is pregnant with the future,
That satiating grain of the well-fed source.
For just today those that were victorious
Managed to avoid flight’s burial ground
By tearing the wings off the dragonfly*

And the wings had been torn off precisely. Artyom stuffed these useless letters with homemade baccy, rolled them up neatly, slavered them so that one edge stuck to the other and asked for a light. Lyokha clicked his alcohol-filled cigarette lighter, made from a machine-gun cartridge case. The paper burned with delicious sweetness. The baccy was lousy.

“So, you need to get into Prospect really badly, do you?” Lyokha whispered, squinting through the smoke.

“Into Hansa. Yes we do.”

“Got visas already?”

“Yes.”

They both took another drag. Homer started coughing. Artyom couldn’t care less.

“How much are you willing to pay?”

“Name the price.”

“It won’t be me naming the price, brother. Other people decide that there. I can only introduce you.”

“Introduce us.”

Lyokha suggested they should take one for the road in the uproariously merry local bar with the sign that said “The Last Time,” but Artyom remembered what they distilled the spirits from.

They agreed Lyokha would take them there and introduce them for ten cartridges. A fair agreement, made in a brotherly spirit.

The sanitary cordon cut across the tracks right just before they entered Peace Prospect. Formally speaking, only the Circle Line station belonged to Hansa, and the radial line station supposedly existed on its own terms; but that was only formally and supposedly. If they needed to cut off the other lines, then they did it like a shot.

The Hansa border guards in their gray camouflage gear stabbed the sharp beams of their torches into people’s faces and barked demands at them to turn round and go back to where they had come from. A placard perched on a pole like a scarecrow with the word QUARANTINE! And a picture of a mushroom pitted with ulcers. The sentries refused to talk to shuttle traders, and it was impossible even to make eye contact with them: They hid their eyes behind the forward-tilted visors of their camouflage-mottled caps. There was no way to take this bastion except by storm.

Lyokha the broker lingered, looking for acquaintances of his behind the visors. Eventually he dived down and whispered something under one of them, winked at Artyom with his face half turned towards him, and twitched his chin to beckon him over.

“They’re under arrest!” the snout under the cap explained to the smoldering crowd about why these three were suddenly being let through.” Come on, get ba-ack now! You’ll carry the plague in!”

They were led under armed guard through an oddly quiet Peace Prospect: Trading stalls closed off with screens, buyers besieging the cordon, disheveled saleswomen chilling their asses on the granite, chattering about life, death, and destiny—and it was almost dark: The market wasn't working; light had to be saved. At any other time this place would have been seething with life. Peace Prospect was a sort of center point, where people brought all sorts of stuff from all over the place. Clothes to suit any taste, stalls of books (which Artyom used to be unable to walk past), burnt-out smartphones in a heap—and what if you suddenly come across one that works, and it has photographs in it, in full color, jerked straight out of someone's memory ... Buy it? Only to remember someone else's children: but on a thing like that the only call you could make was into nowhere. And guns, of course. All kinds. Everything priced in cartridges. Sell what you don't need, buy what you do and clear off out of it.

The armed escort were strict: They watched carefully to make sure that Artyom and Homer didn't run off, prodding them in the back all the way from the radial line station to the Circle Line. Then they had them stand and wait by a little metal door in a white stone wall.

After about ten minutes they were called.

They had to duck down, then again and again: The service premises seemed to have been made for Morlocks. But then the entire generation that had been born already underground was stunted, and it would have fitted in here perfectly.

Two men were ensconced in the little room. The first one had an impressive round face and glasses, but not enough hair; the rest of his body was hidden away somewhere in the depths of a massive polished desk. It looked as if there was nothing there but the entirely autonomous head.

The second little man had nothing interesting about him at all.

"Deputy Station Master of Peace Prospect, Circle Line, Sergei Sergeevich Rozhin," said the inconspicuous man, respectfully indicating the fat-faced one.

"I'm listening" the fat face said in a staid, deep voice.

"It's like this, Sergei Sergeich. These guys need to get into Hansa. They've got visas," Lyokha told him.

The head in glasses strained rustily to aim its puffy nose at him and sucked in air noisily. Catching a sniff, it contorted in a sudden spasm. Apparently brokers weren't often admitted to this office.

"Until further instructions entry to the territory of Hansa is whatchamacallit to be denied, full stop!" Rozhin proclaimed.

This was awkward.

"So are there no options?" Artyom asked morosely, but Lyokha hissed at him.

"What options bribing an official is the most immediately right now that's it and don't you ever dare again, is that clear or not!" Rozhin's head declared menacingly." At a time when people throughout the entire Metro, you simply have no right! That's what we have quarantine for; otherwise the situation could get out of hand. Do you understand that or not! And if we've been put here to keep order, then we're going to keep order and keep order right to the bitter end, because you know what's at stake! Phytosanitary control measures! Dry rot, incidentally! This conversation is over!"

He stopped talking, and silence established itself in the room as if the refusal had been recorded in advance on a cassette: It had played right to the end and clicked—and no music followed.

Rozhin seared Artyom and Lyokha with his gaze through the thick lenses of his glasses, and the silence carried on accumulating, as if something was expected of them.

A dung fly buzzed past, as heavy as a bomber plane. had Lyokha brought that in his pocket, then?

"Then I'll go over the surface," Artyom said with a shrug." You're a bungler, Lyokha."

"I'm still due my ten anyway."

"Why go over the surface?" the inconspicuous man finally spoke up." That's not safe."

Unlike Rozhin, he hadn't wrinkled up his face or snorted even once during the entire meeting. And in general it was clear that he didn't wrinkle up his face very often. His face was smooth; his features

were serene; his voice was lulling.

“SergeI Sergeevich has expressed the official position. He is on duty, after all. We can understand his position. And SergeI Sergeevich has correctly identified the problem: Our task is to prevent the spread of dry rot, a dangerous fungoidal infection that affects mushrooms. If some compromise has matured in your mind, discuss it with me. The situation is serious. A hundred cartridges for three.”

“I’m not with them,” said Lyokha.

“A hundred cartridges for two.”

Artyom glanced to see how Rozhin was doing: Such perfidy ought to have set him squirming. But no, the deputy station master hadn’t suffered at all, as if the inconspicuous man was producing ultrasound that was simply inaudible to his ears.

A hundred cartridges.

Three and a bit clips of the six that Artyom had brought with him, just for the opportunity to get into Hansa. And this was only the start of the journey, after all ... But even so, all the other routes, including the one across the surface, could cost him more—his head, for instance.

The map was there in front of his eyes: Down through Hansa; ride on its comfortable, rapid passenger trolleys all the way to Pavelets; and from there a quick leap, no difficulties or obstacles, straight to Teatralnaya. And no need to set foot across the border of the Red Line, and the Reich could be bypassed ...

“A deal,” said Artyom. Should I get them out right here?”

“Well naturally,” the inconspicuous man replied benignly.

Artyom took off his backpack, unfastened the bundle, felt to find the clips hidden in among the junk, and started clicking out the dull, sharp-nosed cartridges onto the desk.

“Ten,” he said, pushing the first batch towards SergeI Sergeevich.

“How very tactless!” The inconspicuous man was aggrieved. He got up off his seat and raked the cartridges towards himself.” The man is on duty, and what do you go and do? What do you think I’m here for?”

Fortunately SergeI Sergeevich hadn’t seen the cartridges.

Frowning formidably, he cleared his throat and started sorting out the documents dumped on the desk, shifting them from one heap to another. Now he seemed to have been left in the office alone: He was quite incapable of registering the presence of all the others with his sense organs.

“Eight, nine, ten: one hundred.”

“All correct,” the inconspicuous man concluded.” Thank you. You will be escorted.”

Lyokha patted his Christ approvingly.

“And let there be no more whatchamacallit!” Rozhin’s head piped up.” Because there have to be some kind of principles. And at a difficult moment like this, when solidarity is required! Dry rot! Urgent matter. Best regards!

Homer, who had remained dumb in amazement throughout this meeting, bowed to the talking head with genuine reverence.

“Beautiful,” he said.

“Best regards,” the head repeated strictly.

Artyom swung the satchel up onto his shoulders; he grabbed it too abruptly, and a green metal side projected from the upper corner.

SergeI Sergeevich came to life and started lifting up his short, plump trunk, which he did after all possess, from behind the desk.

“Isn’t that a whatchamacallit radio set you’ve got there? It looks very much in a certain sense like an army radio in terms of carrying it into Hansa territory!”

Artyom squinted at the inconspicuous man; but now that Rozhin had woken up, the inconspicuous man,

having barely managed to scrape his hundred cartridges away somewhere under the desk, had lost all interest in reality and was absentmindedly cleaning the dirt out from under his fingernails.

“Thank you!” Artyom retorted, picking up the bundle and pulling Homer towards the exit.

“There’s still my ten due to me,” the broker reminded them, scooting out behind.

Artyom heard muttering through the door that had slammed.

And on the platform they were already expected.

Not the sentries in camouflage gear who had led them here. Men in civilian clothes, holding their little security service ID books open. But it was impossible to read anything because it was so dark.

“Security Service,” one of them, a tall man, declared civilly.” Major Svinolup, Boris Ivanovich. Hand over your weapons, please, and the communications equipment. You are under arrest on suspicion of espionage for the Red Line.”



CHAPTER 5

— ENEMIES —

The major's office was perfectly cozy and actually looked more like a bachelor apartment. It was clear immediately that the occupant of the office also slept here: one corner closed off with a curtain, with the edge of a bed, carelessly covered with a synthetic rug, protruding from under the curtain in a rather homely fashion. A moth-eaten carpet with an intricate oriental design, the details of which had begun to disappear. Fitted into another corner was a sumptuous icon: two slim male figures in red, with sad faces and fragile swords in long, delicate fingers.

After unlocking the door, the major cast a critical glance round the room, groaned as he gathered up the touching plush house slippers abandoned at opposite ends of the floor, and shoved them under the desk with an embarrassed air.

"I beg your pardon for the shambles. I prepared in a hurry."

Meanwhile Artyom and the others were jostling in the hallway. When he had tidied up, Boris Ivanovich invited them in. But not everyone.

"A broker?" he asked Lyokha from arm's length away.

"That's right," Lyokha admitted.

"You wait outside, my friend. We'll talk separately. I eat in this office too, you know. I'm up to my neck in work. The enemy is ever vigilant."

And he cut off the stench with a door—padded and soft, but it gave a metallic clang when it closed.

"Please take a seat on the chairs there."

He swept the crumbs off the table, glanced into a hand-painted "Gzhel" mug, and clicked his tongue. Artyom was already wondering if he was actually going to offer them tea, but Boris Ivanovich didn't. He moved aside the brass lamp with the green glass shade so that it wouldn't glare in their eyes. And from out of the cozy twilight he asked, "Where have you come here from?"

"Exhibition"

"Oh."

Boris Ivanovich rolled "Exhibition" around on his tongue like a vitamin pill and rubbed his nose, trying to recall.

"What's that your boss is called? Kalyapin, I think, Alexander Nikolaevich? Is he managing all right?"

"Kalyapin retired six months ago. It's Sukhoi now."

"Sukhoi ... Sukhoi? The old security man, right? A colleague!" the major said delightedly. "I'm glad for him!"

"Affirmative."

"And you're from there yourself, as I understand it?" Svinolup leafed through Artyom's passport. "What work do you do?"

"Stalker," said Artyom.

"That's what I thought. Well, and you?" asked Boris Ivanovich, switching to Homer.

"From Sebastopol."

"Now that is interesting. Not the nearest of places. That's Denis ... Denis ... Lord, what is that patronymic of his?"

"Mikhailovich."

"That's right! Denis Mikhailich. How is he?"

"In good form."

"In good form! Hah!" Boris Ivanovich winked conspiratorially at Homer. "Couldn't have put it better."

We came across each other once. I have a genuine respect for him. A professional. Mm, yes.”

Svinolup glanced into his mug again, as if hoping that it would fill itself. Then he cautiously touched his own cheeks. There was something wrong with his cheeks, but in the semi-darkness Artyom simply couldn't make out exactly what. The major's face seemed to ... have something drawn on it. Was that it?

In every other way his appearance was rather pleasant: tall, with a broad forehead rendered higher by a receding hairline, athletic youthfulness stooped by office work. His eyes glinted warmly and probingly out of the half shadow. His surname, with the unlikely meaning of “swine-beater,” was incredibly unsuitable, too insulting for him. He was no common man of the people.

“By the way, you're not a Jew, are you?” Boris Ivanovich asked Homer.

“No. Why do you ask?”

““No. Why do you ask?”” the occupant of the office laughed. “I definitely like you. As it happens, I hold your kind in high esteem, unlike many of my colleagues ...”

“I'm not a Jew. You've seen my passport. Anyway, is it of any importance?”

“Your passport. People forge passports. But I'm not talking about the passport, I'm talking about the condition of your soul. To answer your question—none at all! This isn't the Reich, really and truly.”

A pendulum clock rustled its hands on the wall: a simple clock, a piece of glass set in blue plastic. Drawn on its face was what Artyom thought was a shield and a line of letters with dashes. In the green glow of the table lamp Artyom read to himself: “VChK-NKVD-MGB-KGB-FSK-FSB-SB CCL”. CCL is the Commonwealth of the Circle Line.” Artyom mechanically deciphered the correct title of Hansa.

“A rare item,” Boris Ivanovich explained to him.” There are only a couple like it in the entire Metro. A connoisseur would understand.”

“Do you have any more questions for us?” Artyom asked.

“Of course. Quite a lot, in fact. Can you hold your hands out here in the light, palms upward?” the major asked, without leaving the shadow.” Aha, thank you. The fingers. Will you allow me to touch them? Well, as if I'm shaking your hand. Whoops. Calluses. And this here is from gunpowder, right? Will you show me your shoulder? Come on, show it to me. The right one. No, no need to get undressed. There you are, a bruise. So clearly you sometimes use an assault rifle, then?”

And that was another strange thing: His fingers were damp and a little bit sticky. Only it wasn't sweat clinging to them, but ... Artyom barely overcame the desire to sniff at his own hands as soon as they were released from the major's clasp.

“A stalker. I explained.”

“Well yes, that's right. But stalkers are always in protective suits and gloves, right. You didn't fire all those shots of yours up on the surface. And you, NikolaI Ivanovich?” He said addressed Homer by his passport name, feeling neatly at his own temples.” Hands. If you please. Thank you. Right, here we see an intellectual.”

He pondered, kneading them, those fingers of his: thick and strong. As if he had been doing something with them that had made them numb and painful. Perhaps he had been charging a whirring pocket torch for a long time.

The museum-piece clock wound through a certain amount of time, ticking distinctly: tsik, tsik, tsik, tsik. No one spoke, allowing the clock to sound clearly. The metal door cut off voices on the outside. If it were not for the discrete and distinct ticks, it would have been as quiet in here as it is for men deafened by an explosion.

Then Boris Ivanovich recollected himself.

“May I inquire as to the purpose of your visit to Hansa?”

“Transit,” Artyom replied.

“Destination?”

“Teatralnaya.”

“Are you aware that the importation of uncertified communications equipment into Hansa territory is prohibited?”

“It never was before!”

“Oh come now, probably you have simply never tried before, Artyom Alexandrovich.”

The sound of his patronymic grated: Sukhoi had got Artyom his first passport, and Sukhoi couldn't have known the name of Artyom's real father. He hadn't even heard the name of Artyom's mother. And although Artyom could have heard it, he didn't remember it. So Uncle Sasha had written himself in, and back then Artyom didn't have the guts to argue with him. So it had stuck. But he had changed the surname afterwards anyway, when Miller got him new documents issued to replace the ones that were damaged.

“And here's another question: You live and work at Exhibition, as it says in the stamp, but the passport was issued in Polis. Do you do a lot of traveling? Are you there often?”

“I lived there for a year. Working on the side.”

“Not at Lenin Library Station, by any chance?”

“At Lenin Library.”

“Pretty close to the Red Line?”

“Closer to the actual Library.”

Svinolup became interested; he started smiling.

“And you're going to Teatralnaya because it's closer to the theatre, obviously? And not because both transfer stations are on the Red Line? Don't get me wrong; I'm only being curious. In the line of duty.”

“Almost. I have a trip to the surface planned at Teatralnaya.”

“Of course, to use a military-style radio unit? Who are you going to send coded messages to there? The corps de ballet? The corpse de ballet, ha.”

“Listen,” Artyom interrupted him. “We haven't got anything to do with the Reds. I explained: I'm a stalker. That's clear enough anyway, isn't it? From my face and my hair. I don't even have to turn the light on at night in the john; my bloody pee glows. Yes, right, I have a radio with me. What of it? What if I get stuck there, up on the surface? If something tries to eat me? Aren't I allowed to call anyone for help?”

“And is there anyone to call?” Boris Ivanovich asked.

He leaned forward, moved out of the shadow. And it became clear why he was touching his face. It was slashed all over with swollen scratches oozing bloody lymph. One of them ploughed obliquely through his eyebrow and, after a break, his cheekbone, as if someone had been trying to rip out the major's eye, but he had squeezed his eye shut and saved it.

That was what was sticking to his fingers: the juice that had oozed out of these scratches, which were quite fresh, not dried out yet; something had happened to the major only a few minutes before he arrested them.” I had to prepare in a hurry ...”

“Maybe there is,” Artyom replied slowly.

Should Artyom ask him What's wrong with your face, Boris Ivanovich? But what would he gain by that? Nothing, except maybe to distract the major for a moment.

“Then perhaps you should call them?” Boris Ivanovich smiled; with the scratches it didn't come out too well.” Because that could be handy for you right now. Registered at one station, documents issued at a different one. Carrying a firearm. With three magazines of ammunition. With your prohibited radio equipment. You understand what I'm talking about? This radio of yours ... We have good reason to detain you, Artyom Alexandrovich. Until things are clarified, so to speak.”

Offer reasons? Explain to this man about what he needed the radio for? Artyom himself could make this Svinolup's entire reply to him: In twenty years—no signals, no evidence that anyone else had survived anywhere at all. Who are you trying to fool, Artyom Alexandrovich?

The major moved out from behind his bulwark and walked to the center of the room—to trample with

his dirty boots the pattern that was turning blind and dark because of age.

“And you, NikolaI Ivanovich, for company’s sake ... Perhaps you at least have something to tell me? Not necessarily here, in front of the young man. Nothing has been found in your baggage, except for a diary. That is, your cute scribblings can be interpreted in various different ways. Maybe it’s a Chronicle of Bygone Years, or maybe you’re dashing off a report for the state security services of the Red Line. Eh?”

Homer pulled his head down into his shoulders and kept his mouth shut, but he didn’t forswear Artyom. Svinolup screwed the vise just a little bit tighter.

“Well, just as you like. These are difficult times. Anxious times. Difficult times require difficult decisions. You understand what I mean?”

Artyom searched for an answer down there on the bald carpet.

The melancholy plush slippers peeped out from under the desk. They somehow ... didn’t belong in this office.

Too small for Boris Ivanovich with his immense boots.

A woman’s?

“And it might be possible that you have some explanation for all of this. But I don’t know it yet, do I? Put yourself in my position: I have to invent my own hypotheses. And so far my hypothesis is shaping up this way ...

He had to prepare in a hurry. Didn’t have time to tidy away the slippers. His face is lacerated and bloody. Who did that to him, Artyom wondered, instead of thinking how to exculpate himself. A woman. With her nails. His entire face. She had tried to scratch his eyes out. It wasn’t a game. What had he done to her?

“You, comrades, attempted to gain entry to the territory of the hostile state of Hansa, bypassing border control by means of bribing a public official. For purposes, naturally, of espionage. Or, perhaps, to prepare a terrorist attack?”

What had he done to her?

The damned lamp was too sparing with its light, and in the gloom Artyom couldn’t tell if the pattern of the carpet was intertwined with crimson blotches. The little bachelor apartment looked tidy; no one had fought here, or rolled around on the floor, or knocked over furniture; but those slippers ... Those slippers had been lying here, scattered. So she had come here. They had brought her ... They slammed the door with that clang, turned the key. The same way they did behind them now.

“Hansa has quite a lot of enemies. Those who envy us. But that radio set, now ... A radio set, smuggled in undeclared and uncertified ... What does it mean? It means you’re not acting alone. Your intrusion is part of some kind of plan. Someone was intending to coordinate your actions. Infiltrate the territory of the Circle, establish arms caches here, possibly, find contacts, obtain false documents from them, lie low, wait for the order ... And emerge at the appointed time, together with the other sleeper agents.”

Homer probed Artyom helplessly with his transparent, honest eyes. But Artyom didn’t want to answer him; he kept turning blank eyes in his direction, slithering away.

Who is she? he wondered. What happened to her?

“And the fact that you say nothing means that you have no objections to raise. That is, I have guessed everything correctly, eh?”

There wasn’t any other way out of the office. One door—padded, muffling any sound. A desk. A clock. A phone. An icon. A bed curtained off in the corner. A bed. Covered with a synthetic rug. What if, on the bed ... The curtain is thick, you can’t see through it, but behind it ... On the bed ...

“Well?”

Artyom opened his mouth, preparing to make a confession. Svinolup gathered himself, lurked in waiting, stopped droning. The Chekist clock dragged out a bit more time. Tsik. Tsik. Tsik. Homer filled

his lungs up with air, didn't dare to breathe. And no one was breathing anymore.

The reason she had tried to blind the major with her final ounces of strength was because he was killing her. He threw himself on top of her, maybe ... and he was strangling her.

That curtain. Behind it. The covered bed. And right there on the bed. Where he sleeps.

Dead. But what if she's still alive?

Leap across? Tear back the curtain? Shout? Lunge in and fight?

No one's breathing. And what if there's nothing there?

"Who were you intending to signal? What about? Where from?" The major was losing patience.

Artyom started at him, transfixed. His head filled up with dirty ground water; it couldn't contain it and was threatening to burst. It hurt.

Who is she? Who is that woman? Why was it done to her?

He had to do something. He couldn't stay here. And the curtain—was that really any of Artyom's business?

"Are you really accusing me of spying, Major? For the Reds?" Artyom rose halfway out of his chair.

Svinolup pulled a matte little Makarov pistol out of the air and arranged it beside him on the desk, a broad, black pupil staring into Artyom's pupils. But it was too late to retreat. Artyom had to open the padded door; he absolutely had to get out of this cozy little apartment. Get out himself and take the old man out.

"So you found calluses on me, did you? Gunpowder? All right. Very well, let me tell you where the calluses are from. Do you remember the business with the bunker last year? You must remember. Do you remember Korbut from the Red Line? You must have known him! He was your colleague. When the Order lost half its soldiers, do you remember? Holding back the Reds. Fighting against your enemies, yours! Because if they had taken over that bunker ... And we asked for help from you, from your Hansa, remember? When we thought everything was over! But apparently you bastards had all your forces occupied on the invisible front! That's where I got my calluses! From the same place where Miller got his wheelchair!"

"Roll up your sleeve," the major told him in a changed voice.

Screwing up his face, Artyom rolled up his sleeve." If not we, then who?" The tattoo had already turned gray.

"Well, at least now the business with the passport has been cleared up." Boris Ivanovich cleared his throat.

"Any more questions for us?"

"You shouldn't act so jumpy with me. It so happens that I had good grounds to hold you here until things were clarified. Perhaps you don't know, but at this moment we're on the verge of declaring a state of emergency. Only last week fifteen agents of the Red Line were exposed and neutralized. Spies, saboteurs, and terrorists. The Order, of course, is busy with other things. I understand. But your Order, greatly as I respect it, doesn't have a clue about counterintelligence. Maybe it seems to you that the future of the entire planet lies in your hands alone. You probably think that the peace and stability of Hansa can be taken for granted, right? But what if I tell you that only yesterday we caught a little man who had obtained access to our water supply system? And they confiscated twenty kilos of rat poison from him? Do you know how agonizingly people die from rat poison? Or that a happy-go-lucky shit-shifter who looked just like your little friend carried an anti-tank mine into Belorussia in his barrel? Do you know that? If it was put in the right place, can you imagine what would happen? And that's just the saboteurs. We catch agents by the bunch. Propagandists. They start by whining that we don't have any justice here, that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, that Hansa, so they say, is stifling business, or that the working man's life is unendurable throughout the entire Metro, because Hansa's sucking the juice out of everyone, and then there are the leaflets—there now!"

He laid out in front of Artyom a piece of gray paper, on which the map of the Metro was shown as a cobweb; sitting in the center was a fat spider. Written on the spider was HANSA.

“And on the other side, turn it over—‘Pass it on to a comrade!’ or ‘Come to the meeting!’ So there now. They’re setting up cells. Now do we understand? They’re preparing a revolution right under our very noses, get it? Day and night. Have you ever been there, I’m afraid to ask? Do you realize what’s in store for us, if it comes to the worst? They won’t even bother to waste bullets on us. They’ll just beat us to death with metal rods. And the ones they coerce into happiness will end up eating each other—and then on ration cards. There! We’ll have Soviet power. And what can you do against a popular rebellion? How many men does the Order have left? Thirty! Forty! Oh, sure, you’re an elite force, sure, you’re heroes, sure, if not you, then who, who? But against a crowd that rabble-rousers have incited and wound up—what will you do then? Will you fire at the women? At the kids? Eh? No, my friend. Maybe you understand the tactics of close combat, or how to storm reinforced targets, but there’s more to life than just that. Do you know how many different situations there are in life?”

Tsik. Tsik. Tsik.

Boris Ivanovich clasped his hands together; that seemed to remind him of something, and he stared at his fingers—thick and strong—thoughtfully. Then he touched his cheek again.

“Why are you going to Teatrnaya?” he asked again, calmly. “And who’s this with you?” He nodded at Homer.

“I’m carrying out a mission for Miller,” Artyom replied. “If you want to, contact him and ask. I’m not authorized. The old man is my guide. We’re on our way to Pavelets.”

Homer started blinking. He heard Miller mentioned. He remembered where Miller had really sent Artyom. Crazy. But he didn’t know everything. The tattoo was still there, but if anyone told Miller that Artyom was still serving in the Order ... If anyone really did pick up that angular handset and ask to be connected with Miller ...” The old man’s guiding you,” the major drawled absentmindedly and laughed. “Good for granddad. And what about the broker?”

“The broker’s with us.”

“He was with you. Now he’ll be with us. He was the one who got you through the cordon and made the bargain, wasn’t he? In violation of the phytosanitary quarantine? After all, someone gave a bribe to an official of the Commonwealth of the Circle Line, didn’t they? To coin a phrase, if not you, then who?”

“No.” Artyom shook his head. “The broker’s with us.”

Svinolup didn’t hear anything.

“So the broker will have to ... spend a bit of time ... here with us. And I’ll send you to Novoslobodskaya by public transport. The shortest route. And that’ll be a weight off my mind.”

Homer gave Artyom a sideways squint. But Artyom couldn’t leave that fatuous young guy here. Not to Boris Ivanovich. Not in these worrying, difficult times.

“You let everyone go. Or let’s call Miller.”

Svinolup drummed his fingers on the desk, spun the heavy little Makarov like a top, clenched and unclenched his fist.

“Why are you trying to intimidate me with Miller?” he said eventually. “He’ll understand me. Miller’s an officer, and I’m an officer. It will just be stupid. We’ve got common enemies. We have to fight together, shoulder to shoulder. You in your way, me in my way. We defend the Metro against chaos. Preserve it from a bloodbath. Each as best as he can.”

It was hot. Suffocating. Murky water was pounding at Artyom’s ears. Suffocating—the thought span round in his head. The curtained-off bed in the corner. The slippers under the desk. Just grab hold of that cursed curtain ... Open it.

“You let everyone go,” Artyom repeated. “All three of us.”

“To Novoslobodskaya. My stretch. After that it’s someone else’s. And I don’t want to explain to all and

sundry about you and about the broker and about your Miller. Someone's bound to snitch on me to my bosses. They'll torture me to death with memorandums."

"Right now," Artyom pressed him.

"Right now for him ..."

Tsik. Tsik. Tsik. The saints in the corner whispered, conferring. Both their swords were naked and ready. Homer tried to wipe the sweat off his bald forehead with the back of his hand, but there was too much to wipe it all off.

Eventually Boris Ivanovich picked up the receiver of the flat keypad phone.

"Agapov! Get the broker to the door. Yes. That's all I have to say. What? What about Leonov? Well, give it to him. Work must be paid. Yes. Especially him! A God-given talent for fantasy! And especially good on the invisible observers ... Spellbinding!" he laughed." Yes. And let me have the broker."

Artyom nudged Homer on the shoulder: We're leaving. Homer started getting up, but slowly, as if he had gotten snagged on something.

"Give us back our things," said Artyom.

"At the border," Boris Ivanovich promised, turning serious." Or else you can still run for it and hide. We never did clarify the details of your mission. Don't worry. We'll give everything back at the border."

Before locking the office, he cast a proprietary glance around it. Everything there was in order. Boris Ivanovich shot a glance into the corner, shuffled his massive boots in front of the sword-bearers in haloes, parade-drill style, as if facing his commanding officer, and turned out the light. And Artyom looked back over his shoulder one last time—at the curtain. None of my business, he told himself.

"On the bo-o-order so-o-ombre clouds drift slo-o-owly ..." Svinolup started singing quietly under his breath.

* * *

The Peace Prospect Circle Line station had a face that was quite different from its Siamese twin's. The radial line station stared blindly into darkness. The Circle Line station had its eyes screwed up against the bright light. The radial line station was cluttered with stalls, kiosks, heaps of all sorts of junk and consumer crap, and basically it looked like a vagrant bum who had decked himself out in new threads at a garbage tip. The Circle Line station, despite being joined to its twin by the pedestrian passage, had managed to avoid being infected by its lice. The black-and-white checkered floor was scraped and licked spotless, the gilding on the ceiling had been touched up; and the ceiling itself—crisscrossed with an intricate, oblique patterning of lines, although rather soft-smoked—still hinted that it had once been snow white. Heavy bronze chandeliers with numerous lightbulbs hung suspended from it. On each chandelier only one lightbulb was lit, but even that was enough to leave not a single dark corner in the station.

Part of the platform was allocated to a goods terminal: Beside a crane leaning down to a trolley, loaders in blue overalls smoked something appetizing and rather pricy; crates of some kind had formed up in neat, disciplined ranks; a new goods wagon with bales of commodities was arriving out of the tunnel; profanities jangled vigorously. Work was going on, and life was moving with a swing.

The local inhabitants' houses were built in the archways that led onto the platforms, in order not to occupy the central hall and spoil its beauty: The gaps had been bricked off and even plastered in white, and the little entrance doors were on the hall side. Little windows had even been made beside them, facing the chandeliers. Looking though the curtains you could probably imagine that evening was simply falling outside. And if there was a knock at the door, you could pull back the curtain and look to see who it was before opening the lock. The people here were washed, even dressed up, and no matter how you searched, no way could you trace even a single weak and weedy person in the crowd. If heaven was still possible in this world, Peace Prospect would definitely be one of its stations.

Boris Ivanovich took his leave of them before emerging into the light: he apologized, saying he had to go across to the medical casualty center. A little man with a mustache, decent and ordinary looking,

came out of the office accommodation to replace him and led out the broker Lyokha. He had a split lip, but that didn't prevent him from smiling.

"You're going to Novoslobodskaya with us," Artyom told him." And then to Mendeleev."

"Anywhere you say!" said Lyokha.

The little man pulled down his washed-out sweater—not a uniform item, of course, but so congenial, with knitted snowflakes, and, after slapping Lyokha on the shoulder, beckoned for all three of them to follow him. From the outside they looked like four friends walking along the platform. Four friends, swapping jokes and smoking at the trolley stop.

The celebrated Hansa passenger trolley arrived right on time: a smoking motorized railcar with a passenger carriage attached. The passenger carriage, it's true, was open-topped, but it was conveniently equipped with soft seats ripped out of some Metro train. The conductor collected two cartridges from everyone. The sweater paid for the entire group. They sat down facing each other, swayed and trundled off.

There were almost no more free places. To their left sat a woman with bleached hair and a goiter. To their right was a big-nosed, sullen, male individual in a random assortment of clothes. Behind was a sleepy young father with bags under his eyes and a snuffling little bundle, then a man with a simply indecent paunch and a dark-haired girl of about sixteen in a dress right down to the ground—playing it safe. And then more people, and at the back, just like at the head of the trolley, machine gunners in Kevlar bullet-proof vests, with titanium helmets on their knees. But they weren't armed guards for Artyom: Even here, in Hansa, with its continuous traffic and never-extinguished lighting, tunnels were still tunnels, and all sorts of things could happen in them.

"And he had twenty kilos of rat poison with him!" the bleached woman continued her conversation from the previous stretch of track." They caught him at the last moment."

"They've gone berserk. Rat poison! They should kill that lousy snake with rat poison, make him guzzle it all himself," the gutbucket grouched." How many of them can we put up with! There's that one who came over from the Reds, you-know-where ... From Sokolniki. He says they're gobbling their own children there already! That there man is the Antichrist, that Moskvín of theirs. And he wants all of us too! Satan!"

"Come on, children ..." drawled the sleep-deprived father with bundle." No one would eat their own children."

"You don't know much about life!" the gutbucket grunted.

"Not their own children—no one," the other man said stubbornly.

"Well, when they get here, we'll see," the sweater joined in the conversation.

"It's getting worse and worse, isn't it! What about last year? With the bunker! The Order barely held out! What keeps driving them on?" the woman with the goiter panted.

"They're starving to death, that's what!" said gutbucket, rubbing his immense belly." It's so they can come swarming over us for you-know-what. To expropriate and share out."

"May the Lord forbid!" some old-womanish individual implored behind them.

"But I was on the Red Line once where the lines cross. And they don't have anything terrible like that there. Quite civilized. Everyone dressed the same way. They use them to frighten us!"

"And did you take even one step outside the buffer zone? Well I did! They grabbed me straight off, twisted my arms, almost put me up against the wall! The façade looks right enough, ah yeah."

"They don't want to work, the blackguards," said big-nose." We do everything here with our own labor. Twenty years in the galleys. But these ... They're like locusts. Of course, they're after new stations now; they've already cleaned out everything in their own. They'll gobble everything down in two sittings."

"But why should we? What for?"

“We’ve only just started living a decent life!”

“If the war hadn’t happened ... If only ...”

“If they want to—let them devour their own children and not come interfering with us! What do we care about them.”

“Oh, the Lord forbid! Let it not be!”

All this time the trolley was trundling along calmly and unhurriedly, puffing out a light, pleasant smoke—petrol-smelling, from Artyom’s childhood—along an exemplary stretch of line that was dry, soundless, and illuminated every hundred meters by an energy-saving light bulb.

And then suddenly—bang!—everything went dark.

Right along the tunnel the little bulbs went out, and it was as if God had fallen asleep.

“Brake! Brake!”

The brakes squealed, and the goitrous woman, the man with the nose, and all the others went tumbling head over heels across each other, inseparable in the darkness. The infant started mewling, working itself up louder and louder. The father didn’t know how to calm it down.

“Everyone stay in their places! Don’t get down off the trolley!”

One torch clicked, lighting up, then another. In the skipping beams they could see the Kevlar warriors bustling awkwardly to pull on their helmets, and saw them getting down reluctantly onto the tracks, cordoning off the passenger trolley, planting themselves between the people and the tunnel.

“What?”

“What happened?”

Something scrabbled in one Kevlar man’s walkie-talkie. He turned away from the civilians and mumbled something in reply. He waited for an order. None came, and without an order he didn’t know what to do and froze in bewilderment.

“What’s going on?” Artyom asked too.

“Aw, drop it, we’re fine here!” the sweater replied jauntily. “We’re in no hurry to get anywhere, are we?”

“Actually, I’d like ...” Lyokha hemmed and hawed, sucking on his lip.

Homer maintained a tense silence.

“I’m in a hurry to get somewhere!” said the father of the bundle, getting up. “I’ve got to get this child to its mother. I can’t give it the breast myself, can I?”

“Boys, what are they saying there, at least?” The peroxided woman swayed her goiter in the direction of the soldiers.

“Sit down, madam,” one Kevlar vest said firmly. “We’re waiting for clarifications.”

A minute stretched out like a string. And another.

The bundle, uncomforted by its inept father, worked itself up to squealing now. From the front of the trolley a million candles were shone into their eyes, seeking out the source of the crying.

“Shine that light up your ass!” the father shouted. “They can’t do a fucking thing. Let the Reds take everything here. Maybe they’ll introduce some order, at least! Every day they cut out the lights!”

“What are we waiting for?” someone supported him from the rear.

“Going far, are you?” There was a note of sympathy in the sweater’s voice.

“Culture Park! Half the Metro still to go! A-a-ah. Hush-a-bye.”

“Let’s move on at walking pace, at least!”

“We don’t run on electricity! Start it up! If we can least reach a station, then ...”

“What if it’s sabotage?”

“And what’s up with our security service? Where is it when it’s needed? The state they’ve let things get into!”

“Hasn’t started already, has it, oh Lord!”

“At a walking pace, I said, come on! Little by little ...”

“This is what we pay our taxes for!”

“We’re awaiting instructions,” a warrior muttered into his walkie-talkie, but it only coughed back at him.

“It’s definitely sabotage!”

“And what’s that there? Now then, shine the light ...” The sweater screwed up his eyes and jabbed his finger into the darkness.

One Kevlar soldier aimed his torch where he pointed: at a black hole. Running off from the tunnel into the thickness of the earth was a passage, a narrow little corridor.

“Wha-at is that, then?” the sweater asked in amazement.

A Kevlar man slashed a torch beam across his eyes.

“Don’t meddle with it, you,” he snapped. “You never know ...”

The sweater didn’t take offense. He formed his palms into a visor and became invulnerable to the light.

“Puts you straight in mind of Invisible Observers ... Have you heard that story?”

“Eh?”

“You know ... about Metro-2. That the government—the leaders of that Russia that used to exist before, the Great Russia—that they never went anywhere. They didn’t run off. They weren’t killed. They didn’t escape to the Urals or anywhere.”

“But I’ve heard about the Urals. Yamandau there, or whatever it’s called. The city under a mountain. And they all went straight off there, the moment the commotion started. We can all rot here, but all the top dignitaries ... That’s where they live.”

“Bullshit! They never went off and abandoned us. They wouldn’t have betrayed us, the people. They’re here. In bunkers that are beside us. Around us. We’re the ones who betrayed them. Forgot about them. And they ... turned away from us. But somewhere here ... They’re waiting. Keeping an eye on us all the same. Watching over us. Because for them we’re like children. Maybe these bunkers of theirs are behind the walls of our stations. And their tunnels, secret ones, are behind the walls of ours. They walk all around us. And watch over us. And if we deserve ... to be saved. Then—they’ll remember us. They’ll save us. They’ll come out of Metro-2 and save us.”

The people on the trolley went quiet, stared at the dark passage, into the pitch-black pit, and started whispering together.

“But the devil only knows ...”

“This is all fucking bullshit,” Artyom burst out angrily. “Gibberish! I’ve been in that Metro-2.”

“And?”

“And nothing. Empty tunnels. Empty tunnels and a heap of savages who feed on human flesh. That’s your observers for you. So sit here and wait. They’ll rescue us.”

“I don’t know,” the sweater chuckled good-naturedly. “I’m not much of a storyteller. You should listen to the guy who laid the whole thing out for me. I really got into it!”

“Are there really cannibals, then?” the father with the bundle asked Artyom.

But just then they turned the light on.

In the walkie-talkie someone mumbled a blessing to the guards. The trolley sneezed. The wheels creaked. They set off.

The people released their tight breath, and even the child quieted down

They started drifting past the dark passage and glanced in apprehensively.

The passage turned out to be a utility room. A little dead end.

* * *

Novoslobodskaya was a single endless construction site. Standing on the empty tracks was a caravan of trolleys loaded with sacks—probably sand or cement. Workers were lugging bricks, mixing concrete,

dripping stiffening mortar onto the floor, plastering over cracks, pumping water off the tracks. Heating units obtained from somewhere on the surface whirred, propelling hot air onto the damp plasterwork with their blades. A guard in gray had been assigned to each one.

“It’s leaking,” the sweater explained.

Novoslobodskaya had changed. Once there used to be panels of stained glass here, and the station was kept in slightly dim light, so that the glass paintings glowed more brightly. And a double line of upraised gold trim used to run above the stained-glass panels, tracing out rounded arches. And the floor had also been laid out in black and white granite squares, as if a passenger was stepping onto a precious chessboard, a gift to the tsar of Russia from the shah of Persia ... Now there was nothing but cement everywhere.

“Fragile stuff,” said Homer.

“Eh?” Artyom turned towards him: The old man had been silent for so long already, it was actually strange to hear him.

“There was someone I used to know. He told me once that the stained-glass panels at Novoslobodskaya had burst a long time ago, fragile stuff. But I’d forgotten. As we were traveling just now, I kept thinking about seeing them.”

“Never mind. We’ll cope,” the sweater said confidently. “We’ll save the station. Our fathers could, and so can we. As long as there’s no war, we’ll cope with it all.”

“Probably,” Homer agreed. “It’s simply a strange feeling. I never liked those stained-glass panels, and I didn’t like Novoslobodskaya because of those panels. I thought they were in bad taste. But just now, while we were traveling, all the same I was expecting them.”

“Maybe we’ll restore the stained glass too!”

“That’s not likely.” Artyom shook his head.

“Well if not, screw them!” Lyokha smiled a cracked smile. “Life goes on even without them. Where’s your way out here?”

“We’ll restore everything! Just as long as there isn’t a war!” the sweater repeated, slapping Lyokha on the shoulder.

He led them to a stairway over the tracks, across a narrow isthmus—to Mendeleev. They passed one cordon in camouflage gear, then another, and only then did the border loom into view, with the brown Hansa circle on standards and a machine-gun post.

Lyokha kept squirming and spinning about, turning to look back for some reason; his merriment was hysterical, Artyom knew that, not real. Homer glued his lips together and gazed in under his forehead at an invisible cinema screen. The sweater carried on spouting all sorts of optimistic prattle.

Languishing at the final checkpoint, in addition to the gray border guards, were another two men dressed as laborers—in stained and smeared overalls and with welding goggles on their foreheads. Artyom’s stuff was standing at their feet: the bundle with the protective suit and the knapsack with the radio set.

They greeted him, unfastened the zip, invited him to check that the automatic and the cartridges—there they were—were all in place, count them if you like. Artyom didn’t bother to count them. Right now he simply wanted to get out of here, get out alive, nothing else.

It’s impossible singlehandedly to fight their entire security service. All of Hansa. But there, in the room, behind the curtain ... There’s nothing there. Paranoia.

“Right!” The sweater shook Lyokha’s dirty shoulder blade vigorously and held his hand out to Artyom. “Godspeed!”

Looking from the outside they were four old friends saying goodbye, not knowing when they would see each other again.

It was only after they had already stepped into Mendeleev Station, when the men in civilian clothes definitely couldn't hear them anymore, that Homer took Artyom by the sleeve and whispered, "You spoke to them in exactly the right way there. We might never have got out of there, you know."

Artyom shrugged.

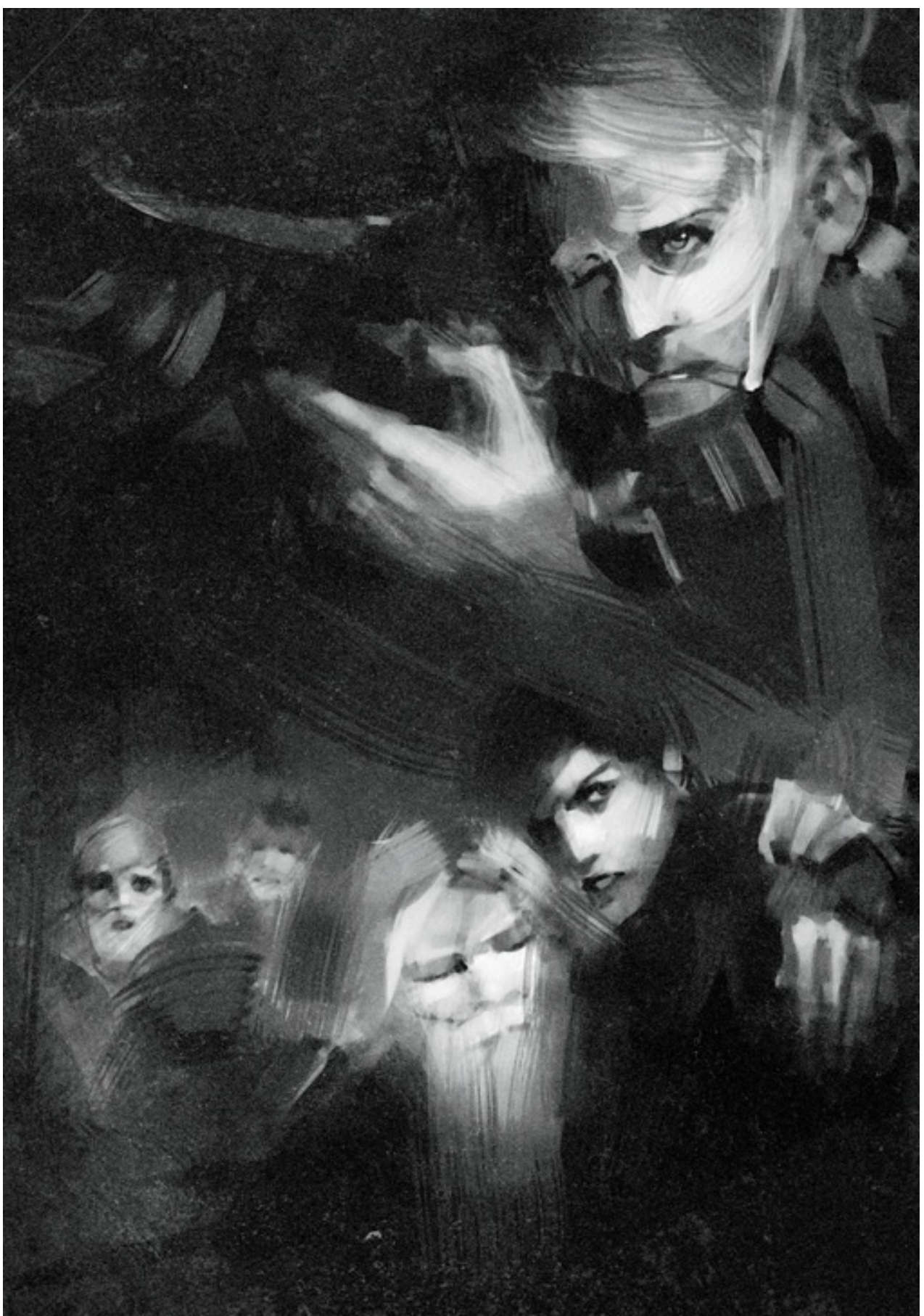
"I can't stop thinking about one thing," Homer went on. "When we walked into his office, he cleared away slippers that were scattered about, remember?"

"And?"

"Well, they weren't his slippers, were they? Did you notice. A woman's. Those slippers were a woman's. And the scratches ..."

"Nonsense!" Artyom barked at him. "A load of garbage!"

"A meal of something would be good," Lyokha declared. "Who knows when we'll get home now?"



CHAPTER 6

— EIGHT METERS —

“This is a one-way road here,” the commander of the border post told them in farewell, picking at a ripe, juicy pimple on his neck with his fingernail.

And then they started wondering where they’d ended up

Mendelev Station turned out to be dimly lit, misty with steam and sopping wet. The steps of the passage from next-door Novoslobodskaya ran down not onto granite flooring, but into a lake: people here lived up to their ankles in freezing-cold brown water. Artyom unbuttoned his bundle—his waders were in it. He hung the automatic on himself at the same time. Homer was clad in rubber too—easy to see he was an experienced traveler.

“I didn’t know it had sprung a leak,” Lyokha muttered.

Lying here and there in the water were frames cobbled together out of rotten wood, which lifted a person up a little bit above the bottom. They were scattered about haphazardly, and no one made any effort to knock them together into an island or a road.

“Pallets.” Homer recognized them as he dunked himself into the cold murk in order to reach a wooden platform.” They used to use them in trucks before. The whole area around Moscow was covered in advertising hoardings: Pallets bought! Pallets for sale! An entire black market in these pallets! Now just think about it: What damned good did those pallets do anyone? It turns out they were buying them up for the Flood.”

But even the pallets had long ago become soaked and sunk down a few centimeters. It was only possible to see them through the mud from very close up, and only looking straight down at your feet; from the side it really did look as if everything here was a single, uninterrupted, turbid Biblical sea.

“They walk miraculously here, straight across the water,” Homer chuckled, looking at the local people paddling along.

The broker appreciated the sight too:

“Like it’s flooded in shit!”

The pupils of their eyes soon forgot how brightly Hansa had shone, and the meager local light became more than enough for them. Oil burned in little bowls—scattered around with whoever happened to have it, sometimes behind screens of plastic bags from shops—with colors that were faded, but not completely.

“Kind of like Chinese paper lanterns,” Homer pointed out.” Beautiful, eh?”

It looked different to Artyom.

In the archways, which at first seemed solid black, they discovered the tracks. But not ordinary tracks, like at other stations. At Mendelev no border existed between the platform and the tracks. The murky water made everything look level. You had to guess where you could still stand and where you would lose your footing and swallow a bitter mouthful.

But the main question was: How to move on from here?

The exit to the surface was collapsed, sealed off. The pedestrian passage was cut off. The tunnel was flooded neck-high with cold and dirty water. And it was probably radioactive too; try bathing in that. Compulsive cramp, a shorted-out torch, and you’d just loiter there, facedown, like a float log until you filled up your lungs.

Locals sat along the invisible tracks, scratching themselves, trawling creatures better not thought about out of the depths with nets of some kind and immediately devouring them raw.

“You lured my worm away! Give back my worm, you bastard!” One fisherman grabbed another by his disheveled locks.

They didn't have any boats or any rafts. They couldn't get away from Mendeleev, and they weren't even planning to. But what could Artyom and Homer do?

"Why is everything flooded? Is it lower than Novoslobodskaya, then?" Artyom asked out loud.

"Eight meters deeper." Homer extracted the information from his memory. "So the water from there all flows here."

The moment they moved a little farther away from the steps of the passage, their legs were hung all over with skinny children. They didn't dare to meddle with the Hansa cordon; somehow they'd been scared off from there.

"Mister, a bullet. Mister, a bullet. Mister, a bullet."

Skinny, but wiry. Uh-oh! You catch someone's little hand in your pocket. Slippery, quick, agile. Seems like you've just caught it—and there's nothing. And which of the little imps it was, you can't tell.

Underground rivers flowed all around the Metro, scraped at the concrete, asking to be let into the deep stations. Those who could, bailed the water out: They reinforced the walls, pumped out the slurry, dried out the damp. Those who couldn't, drowned in silence.

At Mendeleev the people were too lazy either to scoop or to drown. They just carried on in temporary fashion, any old way they could: stole scaffolding pipes from somewhere, partitioned off the hall with them, screwed jungles together out of them, scrambled higher, up to the ceiling, and hung there on those metal lianas. The more bashful ones wound plastic bags around their nests so no one could gawk into their life from the outside. The simpler ones did their business loud and clear in front of everyone, straight from the upper tiers into the water—and that was fine.

Formerly the hall of Mendeleev Station—solemn and restrained, in white marble, with spacious rounded archways—was suitable, for instance, for a palace of weddings. But avalanches of mud had sluiced the marble slabs off the walls, short-circuited the electricity, extinguished the artfully twisted chandeliers, and transformed the people into amphibians. It was unlikely that anyone here still married—they simply clambered up a bit higher, in order not to get their backsides wet, and mated in casual haste.

Those who weren't trying to catch worms sat on their bunk tiers apathetically and dejectedly: They gaped into the darkness, babbled gibberish, and giggled brainlessly. Apparently there wasn't anything else to do here.

"So what's for chow, like?" Lyokha repeated in bewilderment, scrambling from wet to dry, brushing off the little scroungers and looking mournfully at his boots.

His persistence set Artyom's stomach rumbling too. They should have eaten at the Prospect: They had been roasting pork kebabs there, and they could have tipped a few braised mushrooms out into a bowl. But here ...

"A bullet, mister!"

Artyom wrapped his arms more tightly round his bundle and shooed the small fry away. Someone's little paw slithered craftily into his pocket again. It found something and twitched—but this time around Artyom was on the alert. The thief he caught was a little girl, about six years old. Hair tangled, every second tooth missing.

"That's it now, you little louse. Give it back. What have you got there?"

He unfolded one finger after another, trying to be angry. The girl seemed to have taken fright, but she tried to be cheeky. She offered to kiss Artyom if he let her go. The thing in her hand was a mushroom. How could a mushroom have got into Artyom's pocket? A raw mushroom, from a cultivation plot. What kind of nonsense was this?

"Ah, come on, give us the mushroom! Tight bastard, are yer?" the little girl squealed.

He guessed: Anya put it there.

She had slipped him the mushroom in farewell: This is you, Artyom. This is who you are and your essential nature, and remember about that in your heroic wanderings. Remember about yourself, and

remember about me.

“I won’t give you it,” Artyom said firmly, squeezing the childish hand harder than he had intended.

“That hurts! That hurts! You monster!” she screeched.

Artyom let go of the fingers and released the wolf cub.

“Stop. Wait.”

She was about to swing at him from a distance with some kind of iron bar, but she froze, agreed to hold on for a moment. She still trusted people a little bit, then.

“Here!” he held out two cartridges to her.

“Throw ’em,” the little girl ordered Artyom.” You monster. I won’t come near ya.”

Well, maybe only a tiny little bit.

“How can we get out of here? To TsvetnoI Boulevard?”

“No way!” She blew her nose in her hand.” If they want, they’ll come and get ya.”

“Who?”

“Them as wants to!”

Artyom tossed one cartridge into her palm, then the other. She caught the first, but the second plunged into the murk, and three little squirts immediately reached into the mire after it. The little girl smashed her heel into one’s nose and another’s ear: gerooff, gerooff, it’s mine! But someone else had already gotten lucky. She didn’t start crying in her frustration; she told the lucky devil cold-bloodedly, “Right, you son of a bitch, I’ll get ya anyway!”

“Listen, girly,” Lyokha called to her.” Has anyone here got any kind of chow? Something I won’t get poisoned on? Take me there, and I’ll toss you another bullet.”

She stared at him dubiously, then sniffed.

“Want an egg?”

“A chicken egg?”

“Nah, don’t be daft! Of course a chicken egg! At the other end of the village this guy’s got one.”

Lyokha was delighted, and Artyom also suddenly believed in this egg—boiled, with a white like a human eye and a yolk like the sun in children’s drawings, fresh and soft. And he was suddenly desperate for an egg like that, or better still, three fried eggs with round yolks, all at once, fried in greasy pork fat. They didn’t keep chickens at Exhibition, and the last time he had tried fried eggs was in Polis, more than a year ago, when the blaze between him and Anya was only just starting to kindle.

Artyom put the mushroom greeting away in his inside pocket.

“I’m in,” he told Lyokha.

“They’re going to eat the egg!” the little girl proclaimed.

This news drove the small fry into a fervor. Everyone who had been trying to cadge a cartridge from Artyom put his dreams on hold and stopped trying to extort a free handout; wide-eyed and mute, they clustered around the outsiders.

The entire delegation had to jump from pallet to pallet, like a brood of chicks, to the far end of the platform, to the chicken coop that was hidden there. The children clambered after them over the scaffolding and ran, overtaking them, along the upper tiers, sometimes falling into the swamp with a squeal.

The semi-slumbering figures on the bunks watched them go sluggishly and apathetically, feebly trying to untangle their muddled thoughts.

“What say we go down the Solyanka Club today? I read on a poster some shit-cool Swedish guy has come over. Electronic vibes.”

“It’s your soul he’s come for. They’re all faggots up there in Sweden. They said so yesterday on the telly.”

“They’re zonked on worms,” the girl explained as she walked along.

Left to its own devices a corpse lay, bloating, on one of the pallets.

Artyom glanced as a rat, holding its little face up high, swam towards it to feed, and he thought out loud, "The difference is only eight meters, and it's like we've descended into hell."

"Don't shit yourself!" Lyokha encouraged him." That means even in hell our lads are there! And they haven't forgotten Russian. Great stuff!"

They hopped and skipped all the way to the other end of this cursed little village. Right into the dead end.

"There!" said the girl, spitting." Here he is. Let's have my bullet."

"Hey, missus!" the broker shouted upwards." They say you deal in eggs?"

"That's right enough." A matted beard dangled down from above.

"Gimme the bullet! Gimme the bullet! Monster!" The little girl started getting worked up.

Lyokha sighed bitterly and grudgingly, but he settled up with their guide. From the bunks around them this was watched enviously.

"How much?"

"Two!" the beard demanded." Two bullets!"

"I could do with a couple and another ... Another three for my comrades here. You've got the deal of the century shaping up here, brother!"

Up above there was shuffling and grunting. A minute later a little man appeared in front of the visitors, wearing a jacket over his naked body. Private parts covered with a skirt made out of a broad plastic bag, slit from below, with the half-effaced inscription Aucha; a disheveled beard littered with garbage; eyes blazing like burning fat.

In one hand the little man confidently carried, like the tsar's orb, a symbol of power—a hen's egg smeared with manure. In the other he held gently but securely an emaciated chicken with an oppressed air.

"Oleg." The bearded man introduced himself with dignity.

"And is there any discount, Olezhek?" The broker jangled his bag.

"Everything has its price," Oleg said firmly." An egg costs two cartridges."

"All right ... Damn you anyway. Give it here. Is it boiled? And another four. Here you are ... One, two ... Five. Ten."

"Don't you do that!" Oleg shook his head.

"Don't do what?"

"There's only one egg. Give me two bullets. I don't want anything extra."

"What d'you mean, one?" Artyom was flummoxed.

"There's one for the whole station. Today. Take it, before the others buy it. And it's raw. There's nothing to boil it on here."

"And how do I eat it?" Lyokha scowled.

"Drink it, that's how. Tap it here and drink." Oleg showed him how." But money up front."

"All right, here's your cartridges. I'm afraid of raw eggs. I was flat on my back for a month once. Almost kicked the bucket. I'll boil it somewhere myself."

"Nah!" Oleg didn't let the egg out of his hands and didn't take the cartridges." Drink it here. In front of me. Or I won't sell it."

"And why's that then?" The broker was astonished.

"I'll tell you why. Ryaba needs calcium. What do you reckon she's supposed to produce a new shell out of?"

The little wolf-girl was standing there close by, observing, picking up crumbs of wisdom. Others clambered out of the semidarkness, preparing for something. Not just children—grown-ups who lived nearby moved closer too.

"You what?" Lyokha asked.

“The shell consists of calcium. Did you go to school? To lay a new egg, she needs calcium. Where am I going to get that here? So get it down you. And give me back the shell. She’ll peck it up, and tomorrow you can come back for the second one.”

“And two cartridges for that?”

“Everything has its price!” Oleg was adamant. “I’m not ripping people off! I’ll buy mushrooms for Ryaba with one cartridge and some for myself with the other. For a day. And tomorrow—a new egg. It’s all calculated. It all works. Like a Swiss watch. If you don’t want to, I’ll flog it to the Sonderkommando. They appreciate eggnog all right. Well? Will you take it?”

“Flog it to who?” asked Homer.

“Give that eggnog of yours here,” Lyokha muttered.

“Just you break the shell carefully, so it goes inside.”

“Don’t teach your grandmother!”

Tap.

“A brilliant break!” someone whispered respectfully in the crowd that had gathered around.

“Tastes good, eh?” a little boy with a swollen belly asked enviously.

“Now don’t you drink it so fast! Stretch it out, really feel it!” Lyokha was advised by a woman who was barely distinguishable from a man.

“The yolk, the yolk’s started coming already, who can see?”

“He does it like he guzzles eggs every day!”

Lyokha wasn’t bothered by his fans. He didn’t notice them.

“And you say boil it! An egg’s good raw. The white’s like liquid glass. The human soul probably looks the same as that,” said Oleg, scratching in his beard.

“Listen, pal,” Artyom said to him. “How do we get out of here?”

“Where to? What for?”

“What comes after this? In the TsvetnoI Boulevard direction.”

“What’s there to catch there? Nothing!” Olezhek declared categorically.

“Look here, let’s say, what if,” the broker started pondering loudly, relishing the taste of his smeared egg. “What say you go to collect worms, and every day you put aside one egg, and then you sell twenty all at once to Hansa, and on the earnings you buy yourself a second chicken. Then you’ll stop just covering your costs, won’t you? In a month you’ll be making profit, eh?”

“And feed her on worms? A chicken’s a delicate beast, she’ll kick the bucket from worms. Don’t you be the damned wise guy with me!”

“Well, what about waiting for chicks? What if I lent you bullets for a cock?” Lyokha toyed with his remaining cartridges, jingling them. “Or even put up that cock, for fifty percent in our future joint-stock company. Eh?”

At this point the little wolf girl, who had been watching all this without a break, couldn’t bear the tedium of the honest life any longer; she darted forward, ducked down, and struck the broker’s hand from below: the pointed brass cylinders shot up in the air and fell between the boards of the pallet, through the foul muck and onto the bottom. The egg-eating fans became flustered.

“Why you little shit!” the broker howled. “I’ll break your lousy fucking neck! Come on, back off, all of you!”

“There’s your loan for you!” Olezhek exclaimed in delight. “Sell myself into slavery. What for?”

“Ah, go to hell!” Lyokha went down on his knees and started raking through the murk in the cold water, trying to ferret out his sunken cartridges: he held the egg that he hadn’t finished drinking up high in his free hand.

The little girl clambered into some unassailable spot, hunkered down among the tattered plastic bags, and probably prayed there to her guttersnipe’s god not to let the broker retrieve all the bullets from the

bottom. The others, keeping Artyom's automatic in mind, were afraid to go asking for trouble.

"Money doesn't bring happiness," Oleg proclaimed. "A man doesn't need much. What's it to me, one egg or ten? One's exactly enough for me. And ten of them could give you a twisted bowel. I've always lived this way, and I'll carry on like this."

But at this point the dastardly god of the down-and-outs took note of the little girl's whisper, tore a hair out of his matted beard, uttered some mumbo-jumbo, and instead of a cartridge the broker Lyokha caught a shard of a bottle with his raking digits. He pulled it out—a cut like an infant's open mouth, puking up black blood.

"Bastards! Bastards the whole lot of you!" Lyokha actually shed tears in his fury, crumpled up the cursed egg, and flung it into the darkness.

The people were stunned into silence.

"You rat. You stinking reptile. What have you ... What have you done?" Olezhek was totally stupefied at how quickly and cruelly the shell crunched and how instantly it sank. "You rat! You rotten lousy snake! You swine!"

Together with Ryaba he stepped into the sharp water with his bare feet to look for where the shell had disappeared—there, he thought he saw it glowing white—but a hungry rat reached it first, grabbed it and then disappeared, trilling, as it dragging the shell off to somewhere in its own circle of hell.

Olezhek was desolated by that.

He sat the chicken on a pole and went for the broker, flailing his arms ludicrously. He had spent all these years in the Metro and hadn't learned to fight. The broker gave him a short jab to the chin with his left and immediately knocked him over. From the pallet, steeping his beard through the holes in the boards, Oleg mumbled in abject despair.

"My entire life ... You lousy swine ... My whole life ... Smashed to pieces ... Fucking money-grubber ... Great know-it-all ... What for? Why did you do that to me?"

People leaned forward in their agitation. Artyom clicked the safety catch on his automatic and took a firmer grip on it. But no one was in any hurry to intervene for the unfortunate wretch.

"There, now Olezhek's got his too," was the whisper on all sides.

"And serve him fucking right."

"That's the end of the high life."

"Let him be like everyone else now."

Olezhek burst into tears.

"Over in Hansa there's sand everywhere! They're repairing Novoslobodskaya. Let her peck at the sand ..." Homer tried to calm him down. "That way she might even produce another one, on her internal reserves ..."

"Clever dick! A fat lot you know about a chicken's reserves! And you go to Hansa yourself! They'll sprinkle some sand out for you!"

Confused, Lyokha squeezed his cut hand with his sound one, the terrifying little mouth in his palm didn't close, and it was clear to everyone that the broker needed urgently, right this very moment, to get it bathed with alcohol, because with the various sorts of garbage inhabiting this foul shallow water, Lyokha was certain to have gangrene in a day's time.

"Has anyone got any moonshine?" Artyom shouted to the ragged jungle. "To rinse a cut!"

They giggled derisively in reply, like monkeys. Moonshine, aha. Rinse a cut.

"Look what it's like in here! Half the station totally pissed! You must distill some out of something, don't you?"

"Even if only out of shit!" Lyokha implored.

"Ah, they suck the worms!" someone sympathetic explained. "The worms show them trippy movies. But there's no alcohol in them!"

“They can’t do a fucking thing!” The broker flew into a wild rage.” Totally useless.”

“You go and ask the soldier boys,” someone advised him.

“Yes, yes, the soldier boys,” someone else laughed.

“That’s right!” Artyom took Lyokha by the shoulder.” Let’s go to the border guards. You’ll go back to Hansa. We’ve still got visas. And that sweater’s gone away ages ago. They’ll seal you up, and we’ll part company.”

“Where?” Olezhek shrieked.” Where’s this you’re going off to? What about me? What am I going to do?”

“I’m not going back to them!” The broker dug in his heels.

“Where are you going?” Olezhek hadn’t heard.” You shattered all my calculations!”

“Right, pal ...” Artyom took hold of a clip to click out some consolation for Oleg, but Oleg misunderstood.

“Butcher! Executioner! Want to kill me? Well fire, then!” He got up off his knees, grabbed the gun barrel, and jabbed it onto his stomach.

There was a roar.

The chicken flew a little way off, fluttering its plucked wings, and started running half-wittedly around the pallet. The people were dumbfounded and deafened. An endless echo reverberated, drifting away along the underground river.

“What have you done?” Artyom asked Olezhek.

Olezhek sat down.

“So that’s it, then,” he replied.

The jacket on Olezhek’s stomach was turning sodden with something that flowed down onto the polythene skirt and became clearly visible as orange blood.

This was absurd.

“What have you done now, pal?” Artyom asked him.” Why did you do that?”

Oleg looked round to find his chicken.

“Who can I leave Ryaba to?” he said in a sad, weak voice.” Who can I leave her to? They’ll eat her.”

“Why did you do that, you idiot? Eh, you great, stupid idiot?” Artyom roared, infuriated by his own wretched uselessness, and Olezhek’s, and everyone else’s.

“Don’t shout like that,” Oleg told him.” It’s sickening to die. Come on, Ryabushka ... Come to me.”

“Why, you bastard! Why, you idiot! Grab hold of him. Grab hold of his legs quick. Let’s go to Hansa!” Artyom shouted to the broker, taking hold of Oleg under the arms.

But with his slashed-open hand Lyokha couldn’t hold anything. Then Artyom stuck his bundle in Homer’s hands, loaded the radio set onto the broker, picked up Oleg—light and limp—and carried him on his back toward the pedestrian passage.

“That’s Olezhek done for then,” someone said in the crowd.

“Now you see him, now you don’t.”

“And the egg didn’t save him.”

Homer strode after them; and Lyokha too, gazing foolishly at the palm of his hand. The chicken, having recovered from its shellshock, started clucking and dashed along, flying from pallet to pallet after its master. And all the fans set off after it in a procession, rubbing their hands and giggling.

Apart from one.

The moment they moved off, a vague shadow slid down and pressed its face against the wooden boards, stuck a little hand into the filth and the broken glass, fearing nothing—on the wild guttersnipes everything healed over of its own accord. Their wild blood would pulverize any gangrene, and death only took the pampered home-bred children; he didn’t want to grind down his bony teeth on the orphans.

By the time they got back to the center of the hall, to the steps that ascended from the underground

sea through those eight meters to the distant heavens, the scaffolding on all sides was hung all over with Mendeleevites. The hubbub fell silent; everybody was waiting for something.

Artyom clambered out onto the shore, set his waders on the granite, and stomped forward with them, leaving dirty puddles behind him.

“Hey, guys!” he shouted to the border guards, toiling upwards.” We’ve got an emergency here! Got to get someone to sick bay! Do you hear?”

The Mendeleevites, whispering among themselves, huddled up together and watched avidly.

From the other side there was no answer at all. Unbroken, deathly silence.

“Guys! Do you hear me?”

A rivulet babbled down the steps, transfusing bad blood from recuperating Novoslobodskaya to feverish Mendeleev: and that murmuring was quite clear and distinct. Artyom moved up one more step and hissed back over his shoulder, summoning the others, who had come to a standstill right at the very beginning of the stairway to paradise: Lyokha and Homer.

“I won’t go!” The broker shook his head stubbornly.

“Well, fuck you, then!”

Just how does this happen, thought Artyom, that it’s right there, Hansa—well fed, washed and clean, hair set in a neat parting—and beside it, at a depth of eight meters down, a cave with cave people? Communicating vessels, aren’t they? Why is it possible for ... ?”

They were all there. The commander had a perplexed air: He kept touching his neck, then looking at his hand. Another two were smoking; and somehow that reassured Artyom. They smoke—that means they’re human.

“Wounded man for sick bay ... Gunshot wound ... Happened by accident ...” he panted, lugging Olezhek up to the sandbag breastwork.

It’s true, just look how much sand there is, thought Artyom. What should Olezhek have to die for?

“Novoslobodskaya Station is closed, no access,” he was told.” Quarantine. You were warned.”

Artyom moved closer, as far as he could, but without releasing the roll-ups from their teeth, the soldiers jerked up their gun barrels.

“Ha-a-alt,” the commander said.

What is he so annoyed with? Artyom looked closer.

From here it was clear. The commander had managed to scratch off his pimple after all. Now the pimple was oozing blood one little drop at a time; as soon as the commander wiped it away, it gathered again and welled up. He had to milk it once more.

“We’ve got visas! Visas! We were just here with you!”

“Where’s my Ryaba?”

“Step back!”

He didn’t even look at either Artyom or Olezhek with his bullet wound, only at his fingers, at the little red drops. And he squinted sideways absurdly, as if he was hoping to see his own picked-raw neck.

“Maybe we can make a deal? Just as far as the sick bay. We’ll pay. I’ll pay.”

The soldiers couldn’t care less: their baccy was keeping them calm. They waited patiently for the commander’s word—to shoot or not. Olezhek didn’t move them.

“You dragging a savage in here, are you?” the commander asked his pimple irritably.

“Ryabushka.”

“Hey look, it’s that one with the egg! I recognized him from the kilt!” one of the sentries finally exclaimed in delight.

The chicken, caught by Homer, was fluttering its stupid, weak wings. Trying to follow its master—up to heaven.

“A savage? You mean a savage?”

“Step back!”

“But he’ll snuff it on the spot right now!”

“Has he got a visa?” The commander remembered something; he took a scrap of a paper napkin out of his pocket and plugged his wound with it.

“He hasn’t got a visa. I don’t know!”

“Step back. One. I’ll count to three.”

“Just temporarily at least! If only to sew up the hole!”

“Two.” The commander lifted off the napkin, looked to see if a lot of blood had flowed onto it, and was left unsatisfied.

“That’s annoying. About the egg. I resent it.”

“Let us in, you bastards!”

“Listen here, Don Quixote! They’re like flies in there,” one of the soldiers said to Artyom.

“You planning to rescue all of them? Your rescue tackle’s not up to it!” another one chuckled, spitting out the dead remnant of his roll-up.

“Please! Come on, will you? Please!”

“Three. Violation of the state frontier.” The commander frowned: The pimple refused to be plugged.

For the first time he looked at Olezhek, in order to take aim at him.

A scraping sound, like flint, a click—the automatics have silencers, in Hansa they take care of the soldiers’ ears!—and a bullet chipped the wall and pecked at the ceiling. Dust descended like a curtain.

Only his service with Miller saved him: the body’s learned ability to manage without the mind. To sense with its skin where the barrel of the automatic will sting, bringing death, and to fling itself down on the ground and dodge that death, still not understanding anything with its head.

He dropped, dumped the living bundle off his back, and started crawling, dragging Olezhek behind him. Another shot was fired at them, trying to hit the target, but the dust spoiled the aim.

“You bastards!”

Immediately, another whiplash—at his voice. A spray of concrete crumbs.

The monkeys behind him started whooping rapturously.

“There, try a dose of what we get.”

“Did they sprinkle any sand for you?”

“Thought you were a white man, eh?”

“Come on, give it another try!”

Artyom could only die uselessly here. Nothing else could be done.

He slid down one step lower, then another. He pulled Oleg after him. Oleg was breathing strenuously and trying not to bleed too much, but he was getting paler and paler.

“Listen here, pal, don’t you even think about it, right? How do we get out of this place of yours? There has to be something at TsvetnoI Boulevard ... There must be something there, eh, granddad?”

“There was a brothel there,” Homer recalled.

“Right. Where there’s a brothel there can be a doctor. Well, can’t there? We’ll sail that way. Come on. Don’t go to sleep here, you bastard! I’ll give you sleeping ... Stay awake!”

But they couldn’t sail to the brothel. Not Olezhek and not anyone. There was nothing to sail on. The banks of the canals running along the edges of the platform were empty.

“Pointless. He’s a goner.” The broker sentenced Olezhek lethargically.

“Wait a moment,” said Artyom. “Wait a moment.”

“I want to die,” Oleg confirmed. “And my egg’s broken. I’m sick and tired of living.”

“You shut your lousy trap! Just find a way to row out of here!” Artyom prodded the motionless broker with his gun barrel. “And you, show me your belly!”

Right then: dirty skin, a hole in the skin, thin fluid pumping out from inside, everything smeared with

filth. Homer took a look too and shrugged. Whether he would die or not, only the Almighty knew. He would die, probably.

Lyokha clutched the Christ hanging round his neck like a parachute release handle, roused himself, and set off, slipping and slithering, hunching over, to seek salvation. To look for a way out of this wolf pit.

Whose fault was it? Artyom tried to work it out. It was the fault of the man with the egg. I didn't shoot at him. When he dies, it will be his own fault.

"By the way, he promised me the chicken if he kicked the bucket," a stocky woman with sagging breasts and a swollen eye said right into Artyom's ear." We had a lot in common."

"Go away," Olezhek begged weakly." Witch."

"Don't take a sin on your soul. You won't need the chicken there. Tell them to give me it. While you still can."

"Go away. Let me think about God."

"Leave the chicken to me and then think. Or better, give me it straightaway ..."

The chicken closed its eyes under Homer's hand. It couldn't care less any longer.

"How can we get out of here, aunty?" Artyom asked the woman with the black eye.

"Why, where would you be going, sweetie? And what for? After all, people live here too. We can keep the chicken together. Olezhek here will kick the bucket ... And you and me will work something out!" She winked with the eye that could still wink.

It wasn't me who killed him, Artyom decided.

"Hey! Hey!"

Artyom heard some kind of singing. It came from a long way away.

A march.

"Hey! Over there!"

"What?"

"There's someone sailing along! Sailing out of the tunnel!"

Lyokha stood staring in amazement at the Jesus that had worked.

Artyom picked up Olezhek, who, as he dried out, was getting lighter and lighter, and they ran slowly to the canal tracks.

And something actually did appear there. A raft? A raft!

A headlight shone, oars plopped, a discordant choir clamored heartily. They were rowing from the direction of Savyolovo—and moving straight towards Tsvetnoi Boulevard.

Artyom hobbled out to meet them, almost tumbling into the canal, along with the wounded man, to drown idiotically at the last moment.

"Stop! Hey! Stop!"

The oars stopped stroking. But Artyom still couldn't make out what was there. Who was there.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot! Take us! To Tsvetnoi! We've got money!"

The raft crept a bit closer. Bristling with gun barrels. With about five men on it, armed. And—now he could see this—there was room for a few more.

They all gathered at the edge: Artyom with the dying man, Homer with the chicken, and Lyokha with his hand. They were inspected by turns with a broad beam of light.

"Don't look like freaks!"

"We'll take you for a clip! Climb on ..."

"Glory be ..." Artyom didn't even finish saying it; he felt like singing.

With his heart feeling as if his own brother had been pardoned, he put Olezhek on the raft—unsinkable, lashed together out of thousands of plastic bottles full of emptiness. And flopped down beside him.

"Watch it now. Don't you even try to snuff it before Tsvetnoi!" he impressed on Olezhek.

"I won't go anywhere," Oleg protested." Why bother going somewhere. No point."

“Don’t take him away! Don’t shatter a woman’s heart!” the woman with the black eye wailed.

“You’ll never get him anywhere,” a voice supported her from out of the jungle.” Don’t torment the man.

Leave him here. He lived here. He’ll give up the ghost here.”

“Why, you’ll chew him up before he croaks.”

“That’s insulting!”

There wasn’t any time for haggling: it was time to get under way.

“The chicken! Leave the chicken! May you go blind in both eyes!”

* * *

Mendeleev Station sailed away into the past. Ahead lay a voyage along a drainpipe to the far end of the world, from where the beacon of life was twinkling to them.

“And where are you going yourselves, guys?” the broker asked the bottle-raft oarsmen.

“We’re sailing to the Fourth Reich,” they answered him.” As volunteers.”



CHAPTER 7

— TSVETNOI BOULEVARD —

The side of the raft jostled against a drowned man. He was dangling with his hunched back upwards, feeling at the bottom with his hands. He'd lost something there, probably. Artyom felt sorry for him—he'd very nearly managed to swim all the way to Tsvetnoi. Or was it that he hadn't gotten very far when he bolted from it?

"How are things with the freaks at your place?"

Artyom pretended it wasn't him they were picking at with the questions. He kept quiet. But they didn't give up.

"Hey, friend! It's you I'm talking to! I said, how are things with freaks at Alekseevskaya."

"Okay."

"Okay—does that mean there are some or you've killed all yours?"

"We haven't got any freaks."

"Yes you do. They're everywhere, my friend. They're like rats. You've got to have some. They lurk, the bastards."

"I'll bear it in mind."

"But they won't be able to hide forever. We'll figure out who they are. Every last one of them, the animals, we'll work it out. Use the ruler and the compasses on all of them. Right, Belyash?"

"Spot on. There's no place for freaks in the Metro. We've got no air to breathe ourselves.

"They don't just eat mushrooms, they eat our mushrooms. Ours, get it? Mine and yours! There won't be any room in the Metro for our children, because theirs will take it all up! It's got to be us or them ..."

"Us normal people have got to hold the line, because those animals stick together ..."

A hand was placed on Artyom's shoulder. In comradely fashion.

The first one: puffy, bags under his eyes, a little wedge beard, hands swollen up with excess water. The second one: covered in finely worked gunpowder tattoos, pockmarked face, forehead two finger-breadths high. The third one: a shaven-headed goon with a single fused black eyebrow; he definitely wasn't an Aryan. The other two melted into the darkness.

"People are like pigs, get it? They've got their snouts stuck in the trough, grunting away. As long as someone pours swill in for them, everyone's happy. No one wants to think. Know what the Führer hooked me with? He says 'Think with your own head.' If there are ready answers for everything, that means someone got them ready for you! You've got to ask questions, get it?"

"And have you already been in the Reich before?" asked Artyom.

"I have," said the pockmarked one." Passing through. It really got to me. Because everything's right. It all falls right into place. You think, 'Fuck it, where have I been until now'?"

"Spot on," the shaven-headed one confirmed.

"Everyone has to start with himself. With his own station. With some little thing; start with some little thing. Like just running through his neighbors, at least. Heroes aren't born."

"And they're there. They're everywhere. They have this kind of mafia of their own. They help each other along. Don't let normal people in."

"And at Riga you wouldn't believe it. No matter how hard you struggle, it's like banging your head against a wall!" Lyokha remarked." Is that because of them, then? What do they look like, at least?"

"Sometimes, get it, they conceal themselves so well, you can't tell them from a human being. You have to scratch a bit."

"It's a shame not everyone catches on!" the puffy-faced, shaven-headed one supported him." I've

started figuring out who the freaks are at our station ... Basically, not all the people are ready yet.” He rubbed his jaw.” Some even interbreed with them. How’s that for filth?”

“The main thing is to remember them all. All of them who have raised their hand against our folk. Who have strangled our kind. The time will come.”

“I say, Come along with us!” The pock-marked one just wouldn’t take his hand off Artyom’s shoulder.” As a volunteer! Join the Iron Legion! You’re one of us! You are one of us, aren’t you?”

“No, guys. We’re dummies when it comes to politics. We’re going to the whorehouse.”

Artyom really felt like he was choking. And that hand was burning through his turtleneck sweater; any moment now there’d be a whiff of scorched wool. He wanted to wriggle out from under that hand like an adder. But where to?

“Now isn’t that a shame? He’s invited to save the Metro, and he sticks his snout back in his trough. Have you even thought about the reason why we’ve ended up in this situation? Have you thought at all about how we human beings are going to survive at all? With your own head? Of course you fucking haven’t. Just want to visit the whores. You’re interested in harlots, but the future of the nation doesn’t bother you.”

“Get that, Armor-Plate, to hell with it! Maybe he’ll shaft a freak there? Yu-u-uck. Eh?”

“Hey granddad, maybe you at least? In your old age it’s time to think about your soul. You should be normal! Or have you got a little spot of cancer? They say the Führer equated—”

“No bother. They’ll get the Iron Legion together, and then ... For now we’ll do a bit of training ... And then we’ll come back and remind all these ... animals. We’ll take a trek through the Metro again. On the march.”

“What’s this Iron Legion, then?” Lyokha couldn’t resist asking.

“A volunteer force. For our own kind. Them as are trodden down by the freaks.”

“That’s me.”

“Oh! There it is ... Quiet ... We’ve arrived, look at that.”

At TsvetnoI Boulevard they were greeted by a searchlight, so they had to approach the station with their eyes screwed up, almost moving blind. Instead of sentries there were hefty bruisers. They weren’t interested in visas or passports, only cartridges: Have you come here to spend money or just drool?

“We need a doctor! Is there a doctor?” They had barely put in to the platform before Artyom scrambled out and jerked the broker up by the scruff of the neck.

Olezhek had already given in and wasn’t raving any longer. There were red bubbles coming out of his mouth. The faithful chicken had dozed off on his punctured stomach, so that Olezhek’s soul couldn’t evaporate through the hole.

“A doctor or a nurse?” cackled a mangled guard: a flattened nose and two cauliflower ears.

“Come on, a man’s dying.”

“We can even find you angels here too.”

But he showed Artyom the way, after all: Okay, down that way to the doctor.

“Of course, she deals with social diseases here. So no promises about the bullet, but she’ll diagnose clap as quick as a shot.”

“Grab hold,” Artyom ordered the broker.

“The last time,” Lyokha warned him.” It wasn’t me that shot him, after all.”

“Nobody needs you,” Homer told the unconscious Olezhek, taking a grip on one leg.” Only the chicken.”

“Yes, by the way! The chicken!” said Lyokha.

They set off through the station. According to Homer’s calculations, it ought to lie even deeper than Mendeleev; however, there was exactly enough water here to turn the tracks into canals, and the platform itself remained dry. In response to Homer’s amazement at why this was, Lyokha explained, “Well, shit

doesn't sink, does it?"

What TsvetnoI Boulevard had been like before, there was no way of telling anymore. One single great den of vice had been set up here now. Broken up into little cubicles, rooms, and halls separated off by plywood, chipboard, sheets of cardboard, folding screens, blinds, curtains—TsvetnoI Boulevard had been transformed into an impassable labyrinth, in which all the dimensions were violated. At this station there was no floor and no ceiling. In some places they had managed to squeeze in two stories under the roof and in other places three. Odd little doors led from narrow, winding corridors into rooms the size of a bed, and other doors exactly like them led into spaces under the platform that were as big as a whole station; and where some of the others led to was anybody's guess.

The din here was ferocious: Every room made its own kind of sound, and there were a thousand rooms. In some they wept, in some they laughed, in some they tried to drown out the screams with lively music, in some they bellowed drunken songs, and in some they howled in terror. That was how TsvetnoI Boulevard's collective voice sounded: like a devils' choir.

Well, and the women too, of course.

Whorish angels, and stern ones in epaulettes, and femmes fatales in stockings full of holes, and nurses with naked asses; and simply vulgar sluts without any make-believe—an entire division. As many as could be fitted in—that was exactly how many had been fitted in. All shouting, calling out, exaggerating their charms, trying to lasso your glance; every one of them short of time: just enough for one snake strike while someone walks past her, just this short half-meter. If she hasn't broken the skin, hasn't squirted the love poison into the scratch—that's it, he's gone.

He who does not work shall not eat.

Lyokha's pain was relieved instantly, as if his wound had actually started healing up. But Homer felt ill at ease here; only right at the very beginning, when they dived into a twisting and endless corridor, he suddenly jerked his bony neck round farther back than it could possibly be wrenched—and after that kept looking round, looking back over his shoulder.

"What is it, granddad?" Artyom asked him.

"I keep thinking ... All the time I keep thinking ... Everywhere ... All the time ..." Homer replied. "This girl ... One I ... Who ..."

Olezhek's naked leg started slipping away from Homer.

"Good for granddad, eh?" Lyokha panted.

"Get a better grip. There. That door there!"

They carried the dying man inside. There was a queue of violated souls and itching bodies. All women. The doctor came out—a woman in thick glasses, with a roll-up cigarette, hoarse-voiced and mannish.

"He's a goner!" the broker informed her just to be on the safe side.

So that Olezhek wouldn't stain the reception area with his final trickle of blood, they agreed to take him in hand immediately. They laid him out on a splayed gynecological chair, took a clip of cartridges in advance, in case he croaked anyway, and told the others not to wait.

They gave Lyokha alcohol to feed to the mouth in his hand, but he was still left in the queue anyway.

"Here they sit like people, not like professionals," he explained to Artyom, nodding at the sad ladies. "Maybe I'll meet the right one for me?"

"Maybe. Well, let's say goodbye."

Whatever I could do, I did do, Artyom explained to himself. This time I did everything I could.

Job done: footloose and fancy-free.

"Right then: either this way or that way."

They were sitting in a little cubbyhole of a room. Close beside them a plain and underfed girl about fourteen years old was bending and twisting on a pole: she had no breasts at all, and her ribs protruded pitifully, stretching her washed-out body-stocking. She kept thrusting her bones into Artyom's bowl

of soup, and he felt afraid of offending her by driving her away completely, because she didn't have any other clients, and he simply pretended that the pole wasn't there, or the young girl either. Or was that even more offensive to her? Where was a prostitute's pride, in what part of her? He didn't know. The soup was cheap, though, and he needed to watch his money at this stage. The cartridges had disappeared rapidly—and on nothing.

Hanging on the wall was a map of the Metro. That was what they were talking about.

From TsvetnoI Boulevard there were two routes leading onward. One—the line straight on to Chekhov. The other—through a connecting passage to Trubnaya Square Station and from there to Sretensky Boulevard. If the map could be believed, you could get to Teatralnaya by the first way or by the second way. But Artyom couldn't get there either way. The map had been drawn a long time ago.

The transfer hub consisting of three stations—Chekhov-Pushkin-Tver—was now known by a different name: the Fourth Reich, which was supposedly heir to the Third. Perhaps the will had been forged, or perhaps the Reich really had been reincarnated.

A regime can be killed, empires become decrepit and die, but ideas are like plague bacilli. They'll dry up and lie dormant in the corpses that they have killed and wait there for as long as five centuries. If you dig a tunnel and run into a plague cemetery ... Touch the old bones ... And it doesn't matter what language you used to speak, what you used to believe in. It's all good grist for the plague bacillus mill.

And the former Sokolniki Line, slicing the Metro in half, had long ago become the Red Line. It wasn't called that for its color, but for its creed. A unique experiment: building communism on one Metro line. The formula was the same—Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire line. Plus, of course, the other variables of this equation, which are not actually variables at all, no matter how much time may have passed.

Some kinds of corpses can be sprightlier than the living.

"I can't go to the Reich." Artyom shook his head. "No way. Cross out Chekhov."

Homer gave him a quizzical look.

"It's the shortest route, after all. From Chekhov to Tver, and then the next station's Teatralnaya."

"Cross it out! I've got problems there."

"You're Russian, right? White."

"That's not it. When I was there ..." Artyom beckoned the girl, who was prancing in desperation. "Go and have some soup. On me. Don't hang around here."

Somehow he just couldn't speak openly after the conversations in Hansa. He kept imagining he saw sweaters everywhere.

"It's not important what it is. I won't go through the Reich. You know, those stinking rats, I'd ... On the raft, on the way here ... I could hardly stay on my seat. If there hadn't been five of them ... Five makes things ... A bit tricky. And that hopeless case of ours too ... With the egg ..."

"An idiotic situation." Homer stroked the chicken dozing on his knees. "I feel sorry for the guy."

"Today's been a long old day." Artyom wiped his mouth. "Hey! Hey! Waiter!"

"Eh?" The waiter was elderly, grubby and indifferent.

"What have you got? Got any moonshine?"

"Mushroom. Forty-eight percent."

"Yes. Have some, granddad?"

"Only fifty grams no more than that. And some sausage. Or I'll get squiffy."

"And a hundred grams for me."

The moonshine arrived.

"An endless kind of day. How about we drink to that idiot? To Olezhek. May he live. May he not haunt my dreams with his egg."

"Okay. An absolutely idiotic business. Grotesque."

“And I came close to getting clipped, didn’t I. You know, you don’t feel anything. Zi-ip. But now I’m thinking: it could all have been over already. And there are worse ways to go. It would have suited you, for your book? Bang! And what a neat little ending, eh? A stray bullet.”

“Do you really think you could have been killed back there?”

“Maybe it would have been for the best, eh?”

“Three stations from Teatralnaya?”

“Three stations ...” Artyom swigged again; he looked round at the dancer, immersed in her soup, at the sour waiter.” Is he really there, this radio operator, eh, granddad? Where am I going, anyway? What for?”

“He’s there. Pyotr. Umbach, I think his name was. Pyotr Sergeevich. We got to know each other. My age.”

“Umbach? Is that an alias? Sounds like he fled from the Reich. From those stinking rats.”

“Would you like another?”

“No. No-no. Well, okay then. Thanks. I don’t think he’s from the Reich. It’s just ...”

“They almost strung me up there once, granddad.”

“Eh? But you’re not ... Or are you?”

“I shot one of their officers. It just happened. And then after that ... To keep it short. I was snatched down off the gallows.”

“Could I? Only this much. Enough, enough! And so they snatched you down, eh? You know, I’ve been thinking ... About the way people die. Who gets where in life. I mean, of course, I’m a romantic old fool, but ... After all, you didn’t die today, or then. Maybe it wasn’t your destiny? Your time hadn’t come yet?”

“What about it? What about those guys, the lads that we ... The ones I held the bunker against the Reds with ... The guys from the Order. Out of my unit Letyaga was the only one left. And he just barely made it. But how many of them lost their lives? Ullman, Shlyapa, Number Ten ... What about them, for instance? Why were they told to die then? had they been misbehaving?”

“Oh, Good Lord, no!”

“Right. Right, granddad. Hey, pal! Bring us some more of your rotgut! Come on, work, work!”

“Is this ... is this the business you mentioned in Svinolup’s office?” Homer asked cautiously, after waiting for their drinks to be poured and the waiter to move away.” It’s about Korbut, right? The Reds’ head of counterintelligence? He threw all his fighting men against Miller ... Right. Without any authorization from the Party leadership?”

Someone was knocking regularly against the other side of the plywood wall—with the headboard of the bed or their own head—growing more and more ardent, moaning louder and louder.

They said nothing for a while, listened, goggled and winked at each other. Leaning down across the dwarf table, Artyom gasped out, “Counterintelligence ... He was chairman of the KGB. Of the Red Line. And with approval or without it ... Just think about it: the chairman. Anyway, I was in that bunker together with the guys. The entire Order. How many of us were there? Fifty? Against a battalion. And no ordinary battalion. And if the Reds had got their hands on the bunker ... There was a depot in there.”

“I heard something. Either tinned food or medicines.”

“Tins, uh-huh. But the kind that if you open them up ... Do you think the Reds want chow? They’d always lived without it and they would have carried on that way. Chemical weapons. Tinned food! We fought them off. Took your tinned food up out onto the surface. Buried half of our men. That’s the whole story. Once again, without clinking glasses.”

“Without clinking.”

“And Miller ... You’ve already seen him in a wheelchair. But did you ever meet him before that?”

“Yes. But even in a wheelchair ... He’s so pugnacious ...”

“He’s the man who put the Order together—on his own! Collected the men one at a time. The best. Twenty years. And then, in one day ... I only served a year with him ... And it was like my family. But for

him? And he's an invalid. One arm—his right arm!—missing. Can't move his legs. Imagine it. He's in a wheelchair!"

"And as I understand it, you served in the Order from the time when the Dark Ones were hit by the missiles ... You and Miller found those missiles, isn't that right? And if you hadn't found them, the Dark Ones would have devoured the entire Metro. And after that he took you into the Order. As a hero. Right?"

"Let's have another right now, granddad."

On the other side of the wall someone cried out so loudly that even the chicken woke up. The drowsy film slid off the little berries of Ryaba's eyes, and she tried to take wing.

"Your sou-oul flew up to heaven," said Artyom, grabbing at the chicken with a drunken hand." And here's the interesting thing. The route's the same. Look. Where can we go now from here? Only to Trubnaya. And from there to Sretensky Boulevard. Sorry, but I really don't want to go to the Red Line either. That's the kind of traveling companion you've got. So then it turns out there's only one way. To Turgenev. And then along our branch—to Kitai-Gorod. There used to be a deadly tunnel there ... Evil. And to Tretyakov. Two years ago I walked along the same route ... Dammit. So much crammed into just two years. And from Tretyakov—to Teatralnaya. That time, of course, I was on my way to Polis ..."

"Is that the quest I heard about? That time with the Dark Ones?"

"That time with the Dark Ones. Listen, playmate, why don't you go and have some more soup. Really. I'm married. I think."

"No-no ... I don't need anything, either, thank you ... But what ... Why? Miller's daughter ... She's your wife, isn't she?"

"She is. My wife used to be a sniper. Her daddy trained her. But now these here mushrooms ... Where did I put it now ... The mushroom ..."

"And Miller? Why did he take a dislike to you?"

"Because she took a liking to me ... Granddad, why don't you tell me something instead ... What's this business all about? With you and the blondes?"

"I ... Don't understand."

"You talked about some girl or other. You had something going on. You keep asking me questions, grilling me. Let me ask one."

"There wasn't anything going on. Nothing ... She's ... Like a daughter to me. Last year. I don't have any children of my own. And ... this young girl. I got attached to her. Like her father or her grandfather, really ... Not as ... And she was killed."

"What was her name?"

"Sasha. Her name was Sasha. Alexandra. The station ... was flooded. And everyone. Okay. Why don't we ... Without clinking again."

"Pal! Hey! Another one and some sausage!"

"The sausage is finished. We've got marinated worms. But they give you ... You have to know what you're doing with them."

"And can we stay here? For the night?"

"The room's only rented out with the woman."

"With the woman ... With that one, is it? I'll take her. Hey. Take the day off. Go on. Go away."

"And well ... I tell myself she was killed. That she's gone. But I still see her everywhere anyway. I meet her. I confused her with that appalling hussy ... How could I? She ... Sasha ... Was so gentle ... Such a radiant girl. And she'd only just got out of her station ... Her entire life, can you imagine? At the same station. Sitting there on that same kind of bicycle with no wheels ... For the electricity. Imagining something to herself. And she had this little packet that used to have tea in it. With a picture. Some mountains or other ... Green. China, I suppose. Like a crude old woodcut. And that was her whole world, imagine it, that little packet was the whole world for her. But tell me ... Tell me, who's this Zhenya?"

“Who’s Zhenya?”

“Yes, who is he? This Zhenka, when you wander off, you start talking to him.”

“A friend of mine. A childhood friend.”

“And what about him? Where is he? Is he always with you? Does he hear you?”

“Where? The same place as that Sasha of yours. There’s no other way to talk to him.”

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“I’m the one who didn’t mean to. Letting anyone and everyone hear. I won’t say anymore. I understand everything: Zh-zhenya’s gone, Artyom. Full stop.”

“Will you forgive me?”

“No more, fuck Zhenya. We’re finished with him. Wai-aiter! You’ve persuaded me. Let us have this worm of yours. Only slice it ... As fine as you can. So I can’t tell. I’m sorry about your Sashka.”

“Sashenka.”

“Maybe she ought to have stayed at her station? Maybe all of us ought to have just stayed at our stations, eh? Ever thought that? I sometimes think that ... Stay at home and don’t go anywhere. Grow mushrooms. Although ... Zhenka stayed, and what came of that?”

“I. What I say is this ... I used to be an engine driver. In the Metro. A genuine Metro engine driver, yes, yes. And ... I have this theory ... A kind of simile, if you like. That life is like a branch ... Like the tracks. There are points on them that switch those tracks. And an end of the line—not just one, but a number of them. Some people simply go from here to there, and that’s it. Some go to the depot to their final rest. Some go through a secret connecting tunnel and skip across to another branch. That is ... There can be lots of ends of the line. But! Each of us has only one destination! And it’s his own! And you have to set all the points on the tracks correctly to end up at precisely your destination. To do what you were actually born into this world to do. Am I expressing myself clearly? And so, as I started saying, maybe I’m an old fool, and this is all stupid romantic nonsense ... But to die from a stray bullet ... Or not to get anywhere at all ... All that’s not for you, Artyom. That’s what I think. That’s not your point of destination. You’ve got a different one. Somewhere.”

“That sounds good, all right.” Artyom let out his breath.” And which line did you work on? Where was your point?”

“Me?” Homer downed another shot.” I was on the Circle Line.”

Artyom pulled a wry face. He winked at the old man.

“That’s funny. But the worm’s not too bad. If you don’t know what it’s called ... Eh?”

“I won’t have any.”

“But I will. I’ll tell you what, granddad: I’ve met people before who spoke to me about life and fate ... About destiny. Bullshit. Garbage. Got that? There isn’t anything. Just empty tunnels. And the wind blowing through them. That’s all!”

He scooped the remains of the worm into his stomach and got up on airy-light, unsteady legs.

“I’ll g-go and take a pi-iss.”

He fell out of one little box of a room into another—behind the plywood—and everything changed. Before there was a bar with a pole and a poor wretch in a body stocking, a ceiling two meters high, and now there was a walk-through space, a corridor, with mattresses scattered about in it, and naked people fumbling about on the mattresses, some taking their time, some frenziedly, bumping against each other, trying to find a foothold, thrusting out their bare heels, groping for firm ground with them; walls papered with pages out of porn magazines, faded and stale. A ceiling too low to straighten up. He staggered on ...

A huge belly covered in curly hairs, but no hair at all left on the head, striped suspenders, sitting on a sagging sofa, with a nymph on each knee, and walls covered in this snug, cozy wallpaper, like there is up on the surface in the abandoned apartments ... He’s stroking the girls’ bare backs; they arch them

like cats ... One of them kisses the other. The fat shudders and shakes ... He grabs one of them by the back of the neck, in a different way, crudely. The light goes out ... Grope on.

“Where’s the john here?”

“Farther along!”

A grand piano tinkling, a genuine grand! And right there on the lid they’ve laid out a corpulent lady, one hindquarter to the right, the other to the left. The lady is squealing shrilly, a man in a denim jacket is beavering away diligently; a lean backside with dimples, submerged in the meaty opulence ... The ceiling’s swaying ... What’s that drawn on the ceiling? No ... Got to move on.

Three men in black uniforms that they say were made for railway workers in the old world, but which have found owners in the new world too; three-legged spiders on the sleeves, black in a white circle: the triumvirate of Chekhov, Tver and ... Pushkin. Precisely. This place is only one stretch of track away from them. They come here every day, probably ... Every night. Right there, standing, he’s hiked up her skirt, dropped his trousers ... She’s biting her lip, enduring it ... Another two in the queue, getting ready. Discipline. The piano can still be heard here, and this man in black seems to be following the rhythm ... Two ways out at once: to the right and to the left.

“Where ...”

And then back to basics without any frills again: zero décor, bodies lined up side by side, like a ditch full of people who’ve been shot, and stirring as feebly as the ones who weren’t finished off. Dope fumes eddying in the air, creeping through the cracks from a room to tickle people’s nostrils next door. The fumes get into his eyes, his lungs, his head, his heart. On farther and farther ... Where has he come from, this Artyom? How is he going to get back there?

Straight ahead or left?

There’s a devil with his backside flogged raw, and look at that broad-shouldered wench working him over. Where do they get that underwear from, my God? Take it off the corpses up on the surface, do they? Really good-quality underwear, imported ...

A boy dressed as a girl moving towards Artyom, wiping his lips with the hem of his dress, but he’s got a mustache, like in a circus freak show—the bearded woman. There used to be a circus here, didn’t there, directly above this station? The famous old circus on TsvetnoI Boulevard ...

And yet another door. Maybe it’s here. They must have one somewhere here, after all.

Some kind of feast. In carnival masks. That is, they wanted them to be carnival masks ... Did they draw them themselves, then? Could it be the place that girl-boy escaped from?

A girl gets up to meet him, frail and elegant and completely ... Only hiding something with her hand ... Something in her hand ... Reaching for her throat ... Feeling at something there ...

“Sit down. Sit down. Don’t go away. Stay a while.”

“I’ve got ... A mushroom. Anya ...” He fumbled for the mushroom in his pocket and clutched it like an amulet.

“You’re funny.”

“Where’s your ... ? I’ve got to go ... Got to!”

“Over there. That way. And then come back to me. Please.”

But no, he didn’t go back there: He got lost.

And then he feels tired, and there’s some kind of table, and men round the table, and girls under the table. And he feels sick, and doesn’t have the strength to walk any farther. He sits down. The ceiling’s spinning, spinning, a proof that the entire universe spins around the Earth. They bring one out. She’s naked, and they lash her across her bound arms. The others exchange glances and clap.

“Don’t you! Dare!” Artyom got halfway up, as far as he could.

“Who are you? Eh?”

“Don’t dare! Humiliate her!” He dashed to beat his way past, but they caught him and held him.

“She wants to! Who’s forcing her? We feed her!”

“Dimwit!”—that’s the girl shouting.” Get lost! I’m working.”

“Give it to her hard!”

“Come on, no pity!” she begs: that’s her, begging them.

“And you ... Don’t you dare! You! Don’t!”

“You don’t want to! She doesn’t want to! She just hasn’t got any choice! Where else can she go?”

“Smartass! And all of us—where can we go? Lash away, lash away! And now across the tits!”

“Aaaagh!”

“Give! Me! It! I’ve got a better aim.”

“Sit down! Sit down, have a drink! Have a drink with us? A stalker? You a stalker?”

“I won’t ... Not with you! I won’t! Don’t touch her! Worse than animals! All of you! Where can you go?

I know where!”

“And where’s that? Eh?”

“To search! Search for where other people have survived! Search! Leave this cursed place. Here we ... Who are we turning into? Why you make me ...”

“A stalker! A dreamer! Did you hear that? Go up on top! Have you seen the back of your head? You’re going bald, brother! And you want us to follow you! Uh-huh!”

“Aaaagh!”

“Oh, that’s good! Oh that’s sweet! Eh, you little bitch?”

“What can we do here, in the Metro? We’ll degenerate. People with two heads will be born! People with no fingers! Hunchbacks! People with no eyes will be born! Slime instead of eyes! One out of three with cancer! Goiter! Just go and count up how many have goiter! While you still know how to count! Your children won’t know how to do anything! You whip girls to amuse yourselves! But at the next ... At Mendel ... Mendeleev ... It’s all over! Finished! They’re cavemen! In twenty years! Cave! Men!”

“Hang on ... Hang on there, stalker! You’re talking good sense there. He’s talking sense. Eh? He’s our man!”

“And Mendeleev’s a grand old station! Compared to it, this brothel—phooey ...”

“But what he says is right! We’re degenerating! Our genes ... Our genes are polluted. Let’s have a drink, stalker. What’s your name? Isn’t that right, guys?”

“Our genes are polluted! There’s no purity. Pour him a drink ... We’ve got something here with a little secret to it, stalker. Here’s to you. To the purity of our genes.”

“Eh? What?”

“There’s no other way we can save ourselves. It’s hard work. Dirty work. But someone’s got to do it. Here’s to us!”

“To us!

“To the Reich!”

“To the Reich!”

“Ah, go to hell. Me, drink to fascists ... They fought ... Our grandfathers ...”

“Just look at this stalker, eh? Getting his dander up! Fascists! You haven’t been following the Führer’s speeches! There haven’t been any fascists around for ages. A change in the general line! Even the nigg—Right! All men are brothers—are you taking this in? If their genes aren’t broken! People have to stick together. Against the freaks! Because to survive the Metro, there’s only one way to go ... A-a-a-and ...”

“Purity! Of genes! Salvation! Of the people!” they yelled in chorus.

“Darwin was a fine boyo for sure.”

He wasn’t going anywhere on these legs.

“And it has to be done! We have to purge, stalker! You climb up there. Keep climbing up. Look for a place where we can live. Go right ahead. Hahaha! And in the meantime we’ll be ... purging. Everyone.

Has his own. Job to do! You're okay! Okay! Don't distress yourself! Lay into her."

He gathered up enough strength to slip down and collapse under the table. And there were naked girls down there, stuck between the legs of the orators. He puked.

He crept out of there on all fours. Followed by applause.

"Vile brutes ... You've degenerated into brutes ... And me along with you ... I'm a vile brute ..."

And then the rooms and tiny little rooms and cubbyholes started swirling about strangely. Were they real or not? Colored, made of cardboard glued together with naked, naked, naked ... And naked people climb into his face, and someone naked tries to ride along on him, and all the time, all the time someone's following him, prowling after him, catching up with him. Is it a devil or someone else, or have those merry-makers sent a killer? I wouldn't want to find myself floundering in their noose. Are the ones who condemned me to death two years ago with them? Maybe they are and those steps are still there behind me and I have to move faster. But I'm on all fours, and what if it isn't a killer after all but a devil—Satan come to take me. He wants to drag me back down eight meters into the next circle, and what's there? Go away go away. I don't want you. Where's my mushroom—the mushroom she put in my pocket? Where's my talisman against these evil spirits? Lord save and protect me.

"Over here. This way. That's it. We've got a comfortable little sofa in here too."

A strange hall, what a strange hall, and that chandelier and the ceiling here so high. Four meters. How can that really be possible, and where's all this light from? What are they offering me? What kind of man is this? No strength left, no strength. Why the guards in the doorway, who are they? I beg your pardon, I couldn't help overhearing. I got interested. A stalker, right? You dream of still finding other survivors. Don't believe we've been left here all alone. It's sickening, I understand. Sickening even to imagine that apart from our Metro no one was saved at all, absolutely nowhere.

"Who? Who are you?"

But what do you think, if it suddenly turned out that the world hadn't really been destroyed at all? What, do you think people would leave the Metro? Abandon everything here. Start making a new life for themselves somewhere else instead? Don't talk nonsense.

"In an instant! Our disaster ... Tragedy ... We've got nowhere to go ... All of us ... We're stuck slaving away down here ... down in the vaults ..."

Come on now, what do you mean, nowhere to go? Look what a choice there is. There you have the fascists; there you have the communists; there you have any religious sect you like, just choose a god, or invent yourself one to suit your own taste. If you like you can even dig a stairway down into hell and basically you can settle wherever you like. There are lots of stations, rescue books if you want to, develop a taste for human flesh if you like, fight a war—by all means! What else do you need? Do you think people here are lacking something? And what would that be, I wonder? Take you, for instance? Yes, and you can do whatever you like with the women, they're not going to go anywhere. Right, by the way, we've got something set up for today. Sasha, Sashenka, come on in. We've got a visitor. Yes, he's unwashed and wild, but you know, don't you, you know that's precisely the kind I like to make happy. Come on, little one, be gentle with him, look what a crust he's grown, this man, he's got a splinter of ice in his heart, like little Kai, you have to breathe on his heart, hold him in your hands, or else it won't thaw out. Yes, I want to watch how you caress him and he caresses you, but you don't have to hurry, we've got time. Kiss him. That's it. And don't forget about me, my little one.

No, stop, don't. I've got a mushroom here, and it will protect me. Of course you're the devil, the devil, but you must be afraid of mushrooms. All holiness is in them. You're Sasha. Where have I heard that name? Your name's Sasha Sasha Sasha Sasha Sasha.

* * *

"Hey! Do you hear me? Hey-ey! Is he even breathing at all?"

"Seemed like he was breathing. Try blocking his nose. If he's alive, he'll open his mouth.

“Hey! Brother! How are you? Is it definitely him?”

Something white. White and cracked. A black crack. Like the river Moscow exposed between banks still covered in snow. And it hurts; it hurts the river so badly when the ice breaks. Meltwater. Spring, probably.

“Turn him over. Why has he got his face stuck in the tiles?”

The picture changed: No more snow or river to be seen, but the pain is still flowing along it, strange. His cheek’s scorched. His arm’s smarting. Someone’s eye has manifested itself in the empty void. It looks inside Artyom, creeping in where it hasn’t been invited.

“It’s him! Get up, Artyom! What did you do to him?”

“It’s nothing to do with us. He was like that already!”

“And where are his clothes? Where’s his jacket? And his vest? And what’s this here, on his arm? Bloody hell ...”

“I definitely didn’t do that. I swear on my own mother.”

“Your mother ... Okay, get him up. Get him up, I say! That’s it. Sit him with his back against the wall. And bring some water.”

The distance opened up. A corridor, doors, doors and light at the end. Maybe that was where he ought to go? Could that be where his mother was waiting for him?

“Mama ...” Artyom called.

“He can hear everything. Right as rain. Coming back from outer space. Mixed worms and moonshine, did you? You mixed them, you suicidal freak. And something on top of them as well. How long is it since you lost him?”

“We parted the day before yesterday.”

“A good job you copped on. A corner like this ... He could have been lying here for a week. Even six months.”

“We don’t abandon our friends in trouble. Here’s your three cartridges. Hey, Artyomich! That’s it. No more of that. Reveille. The bugle’s calling.”

Something clicked and the pain eased off a bit. They changed the lenses. First they focused one on the world, and then the other, selecting the right one. Eventually it all matched up and outlines became distinct. They adjusted the focus.

“Who are you?”

“A shit shifter in a leather coat! Lyokha, that’s who!”

“Why? Why you?”

It’s strange. Strange, Artyom thought excruciatingly. And there was something even stranger: This wasn’t their Lyokha. Something was missing. Missing.

The stink.

* * *

Because when Artyom disappeared in TsvetnoI Boulevard, Homer wasn’t able to find him. Then he ran into Lyokha in the labyrinth, and Lyokha recognized him and helped, thanks for that. They found him on the third day in a toilet that didn’t work, smeared with filth, with no clothes left except his trousers.

“What happened?”

He didn’t know.

Grope around in your memory with your hands, and they don’t catch anything. Blackness, just like in the tunnel. Is there anything there or isn’t there—you can’t tell. Maybe it’s empty. Or maybe there’s someone standing right behind your back, breathing on the back of your head and smiling. Or maybe that isn’t a smile, but gaping jaws. You can see damn all.

“My arm. What’s wrong with my arm?” Artyom touched it and winced.

“Don’t you remember that either?” Homer was alarmed.

“Not a thing.”

“Your tattoo.”

“What about it?”

On his forearm it used to say: “If not we, then who?” But not a single letter was left. They were all covered in something charred and swollen, with something red and white oozing out from under it. Over every letter there was a little round brand.

“They burned it out with a cigarette,” Lyokha announced.” What was it, then? ‘Lusya, I’m yours forever’? Did you run into a jealous one?”

The Spartan tattoo. Everyone in the Order had one like it. When you were accepted, they marked you with it. A reminder: This is forever; there aren’t any ex-members of the Order. And Artyom, it was a year since he’d been discharged, but he’d have choked before he would have erased those words.

“Who could have done this?” Homer asked.

Artyom touched the cauterized bumps without speaking. It stung, but not as badly as he would have liked. More than one day had gone by. A crust had already started growing. A crust?

A table floating in the moonshine like a little rescue raft, and behind the table, faces of some kind, and he himself, Artyom, clinging to this raft for a while, but they didn’t torture him there, they didn’t burn him, they applauded him for something ... And after that it was all some kind of nonsense or other. Or was it maybe a delirious dream? There was no way he could tear his dreams apart from the reality.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

“Take a hair of the dog,” Lyokha suggested.” That’ll revive you. And here’s a little jacket I got for you, to replace yours.”

Artyom wrapped himself in the jacket. It was two sizes too big for him.

He couldn’t make out if it was night or day at TsvetnoI Boulevard. There was the same soup in the bowl, the irrepressible neighbors were still moaning and shaking the ramshackle walls in the same way, the glutinous music was stewing in the murky air, a different girl was swinging round the pole in exactly the same way. Artyom took a sip of his hot soup—exactly the same as at Exhibition, exactly the same as everywhere in the Metro, and thought slowly: Why this brand? Who could have done it? Who had dared?

The Order had never interfered in the squabbles between the lines. It had always stood above the fighting. Miller despised politics. He wouldn’t tolerate any command structure above him, he didn’t obey anybody’s commands, and he wasn’t on anybody’s payroll. Twenty years ago he had been the first to swear an oath not to take sides. To defend, without making any exceptions, all the people in the Metro. Against the kind of threats that no one else could stand up to, or the kind that no one understood yet. The oath of the Order was only administered to a few, and only after long trials and tests—Miller didn’t want an army. Former special services soldiers, stalkers, and agents of the Order wandered through the Metro, invisible, reconnoitering, remembering, reporting. Miller listened to them. And if a threat arose—a genuine, unavoidable threat against the entire Metro—then the Order struck a calculated, deadly blow. Because of its small numbers it couldn’t wage open wars; and so Miller tried to destroy the enemy secretly, suddenly, in the embryo, in the cradle. And so it turned out that not many knew about the Order, and everyone who knew was afraid of it.

Only now someone hadn’t been afraid.

But why hadn’t they finished off the job?

“While I was looking for you, I walked into a dead end. I saw stained glass pictures there. At Novoslobodskaya they broke, but here they’ve survived!” Homer paused and added.” Filthy, rotten station.”

“We have to get going.” Artyom put down his empty bowl.

“I’m leaving in an hour!” Lyokha announced.

“Going back? You think they’ll let you into Hansa?”

“Nah. I thought about it and I realized. I’ve outgrown shit. I’m going to join the Iron Legion.”

“Eh?” Artyom turned his eyes towards the broker: red, strained eyes.

That was what Lyokha had washed himself off for.

“I listened to the lads: It’s good sense. Until we normal people fling the freaks out onto the surface, life here won’t be worth living. Anyway, I’m setting off to the Reich with a platoon of volunteers. Remember me kindly.”

Homer merely blinked moistly: Apparently he was already in the know

“What are you, a cretin?” Artyom asked Lyokha.” A cretin, is that it?”

“You go to hell! What do you know about the freaks? Do you at least understand what a savage mafia they have right through all the Metro? And all those bastards at Riga ... For dead sure! I’m going back to them in metal-tipped boots. They issue these brilliant boots there.”

“I know a thing or two about freaks,” Artyom replied.

“Well that’s it!” Lyokha said, as if that was the end of the conversation.

“Well now,” said Artyom.” We’ll meet up again sometime, then!”

“Definitely,” Lyokha responded merrily “We’ll definitely meet up.”

He got up and crunched his finger joints happily: It was time to take his life into his own hands. At that point his glance fell on the chicken pecking at the floor.

“Maybe we should divide it up then?” he suggested.

“What about Olezhek, by the way?” asked Artyom, suddenly remembering.

“Snuffed it!” the broker declared cheerfully.” Just as I thought he would.”

* * *

He was still unsteady on his feet. But he didn’t want to stay at TsvetnoI a single second longer than necessary. But forcing his way through Gomorrah with a knapsack and a big bag was even harder than doing it naked.

The labyrinth came to life; the kaleidoscope of crummy dives shook itself, settled into a new pattern, and the right way out of there didn’t work anymore.

And so, instead of the pedestrian passage to Trubnaya Station, they were jostled out to the canal tracks.

“Oh! Look here now. It’s our brother in arms! The stalker!”

It was spoken to his back.

Artyom didn’t even think it was meant for him. But a slap on the shoulder made him turn round.

Four man in black uniforms, with three-legged spiders on the sleeves, were standing there: Artyom didn’t recognize them at first. And then it was as if he glanced into that three-liter jar of salted mushrooms, and there in the murky brine their faces turned towards him. From out of the day before yesterday. This one ... This one, hadn’t he been sitting at the table? He welcomed Artyom and poured him the poison. A mole on the bridge of his nose. Artyom had peered hard at that mole of his, while the others ... But what had they talked about? And after that conversation, why were they glad to see him? They ought to bite his throat out.

“Remember, comrades? That stalker, right? The one who’s one of us! And he crawled away from us like a moon rover.”

“Ho-ho! Well fancy seeing you again!” Artyom hadn’t seen such sincere smiles for a long time.

“Why not come along with us? We need men of principle!” the man with the mole suggested.

Their collars had Unteroffizier tabs, and behind them a column of riff-raff was lined up in threes. Somewhere at the end of it Artyom glimpsed the former broker as well. He guessed: the volunteers. The Iron Legion. For the purity of our genes. But then, hadn’t he drunk to that? He ought to have puked then instead.

“Go get fucked.”

And he stomped away from them, well out of harm's way.

But what he fancied now was that all the inhabitants of the glorious city of Gomorrah were watching him through narrowed eyes, recognizing him and winking at him: What's all this then, we met you just recently down on all fours without any trousers, why don't you say hello?

He remembered: He puked.

And he remembered something else too: Someone following him, pursuing him, keeping up with him—sober, contemptuous, adult—while Artyom fled from his disgrace on sprawling hands and knees like a one-year-old child. And that man wanted something from Artyom.

As clammy as a nightmare, but was it a nightmare?

And then, it occurred to him: There weren't many locals in Gomorrah, were there? All visitors. The fascists were visible—they were in uniform, the fools. But who else was here, in civilian clothes? From Trubnaya you could get to Hansa too, and to the Red Line, and to the outlaw settlements at Kitai-Gorod, and from there to anywhere at all. And anyone at all could sail here: any ravenous vermin.

Maybe he had gotten off lightly. If only he knew how he'd done it.

By hit and miss they extricated themselves from the tangle and arrived at the passage to Trubnaya Station. Artyom with his bundles, Homer with the chicken: The old man had turned stubborn and refused to kill it and hand it over to the broker volunteer. As Olezhek had prophesied, the chicken wasn't laying anymore.

Here there was a surprise: passport control. How Trubnaya made its living, Artyom couldn't recall, but obviously not the same way as Tsvetnoi Boulevard did, if it was so choosy. Visas weren't required, but no one was let in without documents. Homer took out a green booklet with an eagle and a crown: NikolaI Ivanovich Nikolaev, born 1973, Arkhangelsk Region, Sebastopol Station, married (struck out). In the laminated photo he has no beard, he isn't gray and he's not forty yet. But recognizable, recognizable. Artyom put down his load and started rifling through his pockets.

It wasn't in his trousers. He turned cold.

Not in the jacket was it, eh? Not in the jacket that had disappeared, along with the mushroom that was supposed to keep Artyom safe and keep his feet planted on the ground. He opened his bundle, suddenly covered in sticky gunk—his fear set the poison he had drunk yesterday flowing out of his pores—and rummaged and rummaged, thrusting his hand in here and then there. Then he freaked out, tugged out the suit, flattened out his second skin on the floor in front of everyone, rifled through the pockets of the bundle, stuck the automatic under himself, tipped out everything at last and glanced into all the corners. Not there! It's not there!

“Didn't leave it behind, did I?” he asked Homer in a numb voice.” Did it fall behind the table?”

Homer shrugged.

No passport.

He couldn't live in the Metro without a passport. He couldn't get into Hansa, or Polis, or the Red Line. Not into Alekseevskaya and not into any other station where people at least tried to think about tomorrow. What he could do was starve to death at some barbaric way station or be devoured in a tunnel.

People gathered. They gaped with an equal mixture of suspicion and sympathy. Damn the gawkers. There was no time to hide; he had to know the truth. He reached into the knapsack in front of everyone. Exposed the green side of the radio set. The border guards noticed it and frowned. He pulled it out—the radio and the dynamo. People started cackling.

Not there. It's not there, fuck it!

Homer was farther off already: He gave a wave of his hand, sidled up to the border guards and started trying to tempt them. But what was there to tempt them with? There were only one and a half magazines of cartridges left at the most. God forbid that they should have to shoot.

“Refused!” growled the lard-bucket border-post commander.” We let you through and then the Reds

will skin us alive. You won't get any farther than Sretensky Boulevard anyway."

"How come?"

"The Red Line cut us off yesterday. They entered Sretensky and they're checking everyone's documents. There's no way into the Red Line and no way out either. They've had some kind of a dustup over there, but nobody knows what. So ... They've entered Sretensky. And from Sretensky to us here ... Better not to provoke them."

"They say the Reds are going to take Teatralnaya."

"Who says?"

"People say. So it doesn't go to the Reich. They're afraid the fascists will grab it first. They're getting ready. They'll cut off all the stations bordering on the Reich."

"And when?" Artyom froze motionless over his savaged rucksack.

"Whenever. Go and ask them. They can do it any moment, if the story's already leaked out."

"We've got to ..." Artyom started angrily and nervously stuffing back the dynamo, the radio set, and all his damned junk." We've got to ... Come here, granddad. You go on alone through Sretensky. You've got a passport; you've got kind eyes and a beard like Father Christmas; you've got an idiotic chicken; they won't touch you. I'll go over the top ... Across the surface. We'll meet there. At Teatralnaya. If the Reds don't take it first. But if they do ..."

Homer watched, perplexed, as Artyom spoke. He nodded—what else was there left to do?

"But if only ... If only I hadn't decided back then ... For Olezhek ... For the good of his health ..." Artyom muttered, glancing in loathing at the chicken as he packed the final things into the bundle." And it was all a fucking waste of time anyway! A goner, fuck it!"

He mounted his rider on his shoulders and went back to the border guards—red-faced and heated, his condition actually seeming improved by his anger.

"Where's their way up here? Where can I get up on top? What is there? A stairway, an escalator?"

The border-post commander shook his head almost regretfully.

"A stalker, right? There isn't any way up here. It was demolished ages ago. Who needs to go wandering up there? Those floozies of theirs."

"What about you? On Trubnaya. Is there a way?"

"It's sealed off."

"Just what kind of people are you!" Artyom bellowed in fury." Haven't you got any use for the surface at all?"

The border-post commander didn't even bother to reply. He turned his well-fed backside towards Artyom; his trousers were splitting: To hell with you, don't you come the wise guy with me.

Artyom inflated his chest, tried to calm down.

He ran and ran through the labyrinth, and the way out seemed to be just up ahead already, but suddenly—all the corridors ended in dead-ends. And behind him the little bridges he had bounded across had all gone crashing down into the abyss: Where could he go now? They'd cornered him.

"Artyom." The old man touched him. "What if we go through the Reich after all? Eh? To Chekhov ... Then we only have to get to Tverskaya ... And there it is already, Teatralnaya. We can even reach it today, if everything goes smoothly ... There's nowhere else you can go."

Artyom didn't say anything; he clammed up like an oyster. And just kept on and on rubbing his neck: His throat felt rough and scratchy.

* * *

"Not too late, are we?"

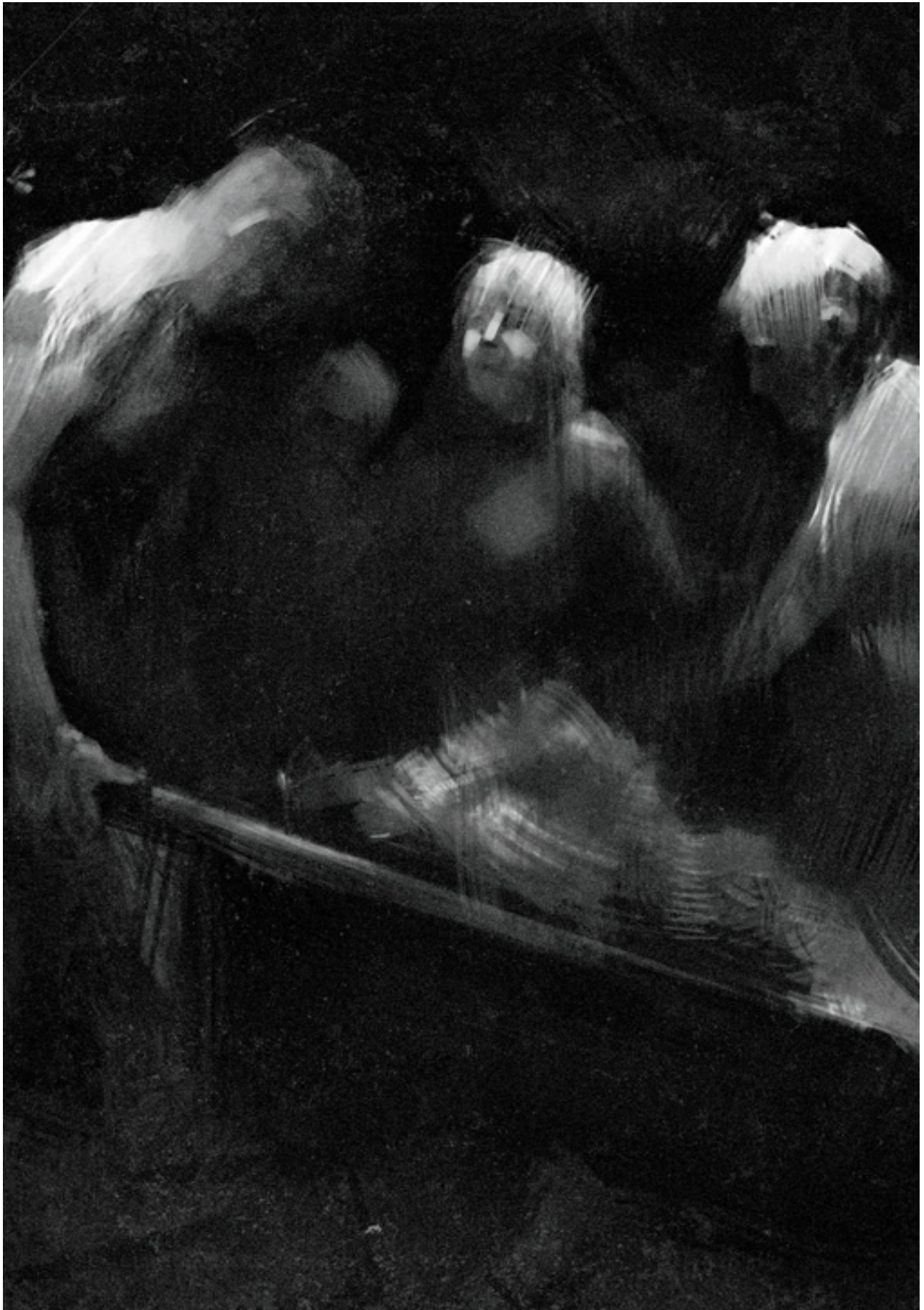
The Unteroffizier with the mole—he smiled genially.

"We were expecting you!"

Artyom hesitated, looking over the column: Should he tack himself onto the tail end of it now?

“I, er ...” He lowered his voice.” Don’t have any documents. Do you take people into this legion of yours without documents? And I’ll tell you right away—this is a stalker’s gear. Plus a radio. So there won’t be any questions afterwards.”

“We accept men without documents just fine,” the Unter assured him.” You get to rewrite your biography from scratch anyway. Who’s bothered about who the heroes of the Reich were before?”



CHAPTER 8

— HEIL —

They left TsvetnoI Boulevard on the last bottle raft: Homer and Artyom; Lyokha, who was delighted that they'd met up again so soon; and the Unteroffizier with the mole, who told Artyom he was called Dietmar. Two other nameless men in black uniforms laid into the oars, and soon all that was left of TsvetnoI Boulevard was a copper coin at the end of the tunnel. And then the coin drowned.

There was a smell of mold. The oars splashed in the water, dispersing the rainbow-colored film of petrol, scattering the floating garbage. Down below, under the scum and the rainbow film, vague, sinuous shadows moved about, and Artyom fancied he saw vile, restless creatures stirring, as thick as a man's arm. There hadn't been anything like them here before; there couldn't have been. The radiation had rolled and warped together some creatures of its own, grotesque and hideous.

"Do you know who the Reds have in their advance guard?" the Unter said." They take freaks into the advance guard. They put freaks into breakthrough units. They arm them. Train them. Freaks with three arms. With two heads. With cancer, who have nothing to lose. And move them towards our borders. Closer ... And closer. They know how those animals hate us. They recruit them throughout the whole Metro. Our reconnaissance says they've set up a checkpoint at Sretenka and cut the line off from Trubnaya. And the commander of the checkpoint is completely covered in scales. You can't even tell anymore if the Reds are in command of the freaks, or the freaks are in command of the Reds. I think it's the second. That's why they want to finish us off. There's something in the works ... In the works ..."

Artyom listened without hearing. He was thinking about something else. The most important thing was that no one there in the Reich must recognize him. No one must recognize the young boy who they had promised the ecstatic crowd at Pushkin would be hanged from the scaffold. The jailers from the cells at Tverskaya mustn't recognize him. A prisoner escaping from the gallows was a rare event. Would they forget something like that?

"Eh, stalker?" Dietmar touched him on the arm and caught him through the sleeve directly on the burn.

"What?"

"What districts do you cover, I said. Where do you work? On the surface?"

"Me ... The Library. Arbat. I used to bring books down for the Brahmins."

Homer looked past them, absentmindedly scratching the chicken's shoulder: They didn't have time to give it to anyone in the den of vice and they didn't have time to eat it, so the chicken was still alive.

"A good district." The Unter looked at Artyom: Fractured glimmers of light from torches clung to his face." Do you know everything round there? Okhotny Ryad and farther up towards the BolshoI Theater?"

"I've been there," Artyom said cautiously.

"And why did you work for the Brahmins?"

"I like to read."

"Good for you!" Dietmar exclaimed approvingly." Good for you. The Reich needs men like you."

"And men like me?" Lyokha asked.

"The Reich needs all sorts of men." The Unter winked at him." Especially now."

They arrived.

The underground river ran up against a dam. The banks were heaped up with sacks of what was probably soil, and the bottle raft nudged against them. Behind the sacks was a genuine wall, halfway up the tunnel. An electric pump was humming, bailing out the puddle that collected on the other side of the dam. Standards were hung around: red field, white circle, three-legged swastika. The

triumvirate of Chekhov, Tver, and Pushkin. Of course, they had all been renamed a long time ago. Chekhov was Wagner; Pushkin was Schiller; Tver was something else as well. The Reich had its own idols.

They jumped out onto the bank, and the Unter exchanged “Sieg Heil” with the watch. They were all spruce, spick-and-span. They had discovered the central railroad office up on the surface; they didn’t say so, but their uniforms were the same, black and silver.

They examined the luggage and, of course, they found everything: There was the radio set, there was the automatic rifle. The Unter saved the situation: He whispered something, smiled to Artyom from behind a black shoulder, and the border guards relaxed.

But they weren’t allowed into the station itself.

They found a side passage in the tunnel, blocked off with a grating and with guards on duty.

“First the medical inspection,” Dietmar announced cheerfully. “They don’t take weaklings into the Iron Legion. You’ll have to hand in your equipment, and the chicken, temporarily.”

They left everything with the guards.

A room. White tiles all around. A smell of carbolic. A couch, a doctor standing there in an antimicrobial mask, in a cap, just his eyebrows drooping down. Some kind of doors farther on. The Unter went in with them, sat down on a stool in the corner. The doctor smiled with his salt-and-pepper eyebrows and gave them an oily glance from his olive eyes. He spoke in a singsong voice, with an undefeated accent.

“Right, who’s first?”

“Well, why not me then!” The broker squirmed.

“Undress to your underpants. Have you been through an army medical board?”

The doctor looked, tapped, felt with rubber gloves, glanced into this throat, asked him to bare his teeth. Put on a stethoscope and asked him to breathe.

“And now we lower the underpants. Lower them, lower them. Right. If you don’t mind. Aha. And what’s this you have here?”

“What?” Lyokha tensed up.

“Why here, the left testicle, I think ... Don’t you feel it?”

“Like that ... Like that, of course ... I feel it.”

“Rather advanced already. Ne-glec-ted.”

“Well, but ... Doctor ... I’m a good dancer!” The broker grinned. “So I’m okay. It doesn’t bother me.”

“If it doesn’t bother you, that’s just fine. Get dressed, dear fellow. You’re free to go. There, the door on the right.”

Lyokha pulled on his clothes and buttoned them, and meanwhile the doctor wrote something on a piece of paper. The Unter read it and nodded.

“Welcome.”

The broker winked at Homer and Artyom—good health to you too—and ducked through the prescribed door. Some kind of steps ran downwards there.

“Well then, now you, dear fellow.”

That was to Homer.

The old man stepped forward. He glanced back round at Artyom: Who knew what their medical boards were like here? Artyom didn’t take his eyes off him, didn’t abandon the old man. Suddenly he was overwhelmed by déjà vu and bewildered, as if he’d just woken up. He coughed from a sudden tickle in his throat. The doctor looked at him intently.

Homer folded his greasy dressing gown into four and put it on the couch, on the edge, at his feet. He pulled his sweater over his head—there was a dirty vest under it, with stains under the arms. He stood up, naked, sunken-chested, pale-bellied, sparse clumps of curly hair on his shoulders.

“Right ... ? Let’s take a look at the neck ... The thyroid gland ... And under the chin ...” The doctor lowered his hands into Homer’s sour silver.” Well now ... No goiter. Now we’ll feel out all the rest ...”

He kneaded tense, sullen Homer’s belly, made the old man drop his underpants too, and checked him there as well.

“I don’t see any tumors at all. You take care of yourself, right? You don’t go up on the surface, buy filtered water, yes?” the doctor said with respect, even surprise.” Congratulations. I myself wouldn’t mind being in that kind of shape at your age ... Get dressed.”

He scribbled something on a piece of paper and stuck it in the old man’s hand.

“The left door.”

Homer suddenly felt doubtful. He didn’t hurry putting on his light coat, drew it out. Looked round searchingly at the Unter, the man in authority.

“But why the left door for the old man?” Artyom asked for him.

“Because, my dear fellow, your old man is perfectly all right,” the doctor replied.” Take a look at the note.”

“Normal. Fit for service and immigration,” Homer read, gingerly holding the note farther off.

“Fit for immigration. They’re looking for tumors. And what if they find them?”

“And where does the door on the right lead to?”

Dietmar, the one who had been asked, only smiled.

“Ah! The young man has been sent for further examination. Things aren’t completely clear there. The specialists have to take a look. Go on through, old man; don’t loiter. It’s time for me to get on with your grandson,” the doctor explained rather impatiently, but not rudely.

Homer reached out his hand timidly, still not detaching himself from Artyom. And Artyom cringed, thinking, What now? Will I be able to do it now? Can I stand up for the old man, the way I did back then?

He could hear some kind of buzzing through the widening crack.

Beyond the door on the left there was a stone passage, painted green; the passage was crammed with volunteers, naked to the waist. A man in a uniform, with a mustache, was running a stuttering device over each of them one by one, removing their hair.

“No cause for alarm!” the Unter declared.

Homer breathed out his agitation. He walked in there, to the normal men. Shut himself in. And Artyom’s tension eased a little.

“Well, and now we’ll deal with you, young man. A stalker, I see?”

“Yes.” Artyom ran his hand over the back of his head, balding prematurely: traitor.

“You’re taking a risk, taking a risk, my dear fellow! Right. The cough is worrisome; I heard it. Let me see your back. You don’t feel cold? Do you not have tuberculosis? Breathe. Deeper.”

“Do you think I’ll get enough air?” Artyom twisted his mouth into a smile.

“Now, now. There’s nothing so terrible. A bit of wheezing. Now let’s take a look for neoplasms.” He stuck his head out into the corridor.

“Will you join us?”

Both of the bruisers squeezed inside.

“What’s this for?”

“Well ... A stalker. The background radiation isn’t falling; you know that. Quite often your colleagues, even before they reach forty ... Now don’t you worry; don’t be so anxious. Boys, hold him. That’s fine. Lie back like that. A stalker. The neck. Right. The throat. A-a-a-ah ...”

The neck: Some get cancer of the thyroid, the most common from radiation; sometimes first they grow a goiter on the neck. But sometimes a man burns out in a month even without a goiter, and others potter on to old age with a goiter somehow.

And what if he feels something now? If he says: six months left. The doctor’s right. That sort of thing

happens only too often with stalkers.

“What kind of further examination is it in there? X-ray?”

“Now that’s pushing things a bit too far, an X-ray! Right ... Hang on ... No, I imagined it. Over on your side. Aha. So far everything’s okay with you. Let me have your stomach ... Don’t tense it up, no need.”

The rubber fingers—soft and cold—somehow suddenly reached past the skin and the muscles to touch the liver itself and tickle the frightened intestines.

“Well, I don’t feel anything directly. Let’s inspect the sexual organs. How are you? Still using them?”

“More often than you use yours.”

“Well, you’re a stalker, that’s why I ask. You chose a fine trade, of course. All right. I don’t see any particular abnormalities here. Get up. You should stay in the Metro, dear fellow, like all the other people. But you just have to go and do it. And next time maybe we’ll have to send you for further examination too.”

“And how long ... Will they take to examine ... Him ... That man?”

Artyom couldn’t help listening: What was going on there behind that door on the right? Not a sound.

And what was going on inside him, Artyom? Did it matter to him now if the broker was being X-rayed or not being X-rayed? Not a sound there either.

The important thing now was to grab Homer by the scruff of the neck and drag him out of this place alive. And get to Teatralnaya, before the Reds arrived there. Only one stretch of line. One step to the goal. And Lyokha. He wanted to fight the freaks. First let him prove all about himself. Idiot.

“How long, how long ... As long as it requires, that’s how long they’ll take,” the doctor said pensively, writing out an authorization for Artyom.” In this matter, dear fellow, nothing is ever known in advance.”

* * *

Dietmar gazed around proudly.

“Well now, welcome! Darwin Station. The former Tver. Were you ever here before?”

“No, never.”

Artyom had a scratchy tickle in his throat again.

“That’s a pity. The station’s changed beyond recognition.”

And it was true—Artyom couldn’t recognize Tver Station.

Two years ago the low archways were completely covered off with metal grilles, converted into cells. Squatting in those cells in their own shit were non-Russians who had been caught in neighboring stations. Two years ago Artyom had spent the night in one of those cells, counting the minutes until his execution in the morning, trying to breathe and think his fill for the final time.

“There’s been a complete reconstruction!”

The cells had disappeared. No soot on the ceiling from smoking torches, no rusty stains from human fluids that had leaked out onto the floor. Everything scoured off, washed away, disinfected, and forgotten.

And standing there instead of the dungeons were trading kiosks, neat and freshly painted, with numbers. A holiday bazaar. A crowd splashing around in it: happy, peaceful, indolent. Strolling around in families. Little kids sitting on their fathers’ shoulders, dangling their legs. Choosing something from the counters. Music playing.

He felt an urge to rub his eyes.

He looked for the spot where they had tried to hang him ... He couldn’t find it.

“You won’t recognize the entire Reich!” said the Unter.” After the general line of the Party was changed ... The reforms began. We’re becoming a modern state. Without any excesses.”

Black uniforms were only a drop in the crowd; they didn’t offend the eye. The hand-daubed posters about the superiority of the white race had vanished, the long banners: THE METRO FOR RUSSIANS! had disappeared. And of all the old slogans only one remained: A HEALTHY MIND In A HEALTHY BODY! And so it was: there were all sorts of different faces on all sides, not just with

snub-noses, milky-white skin, and freckles. And most importantly of all—the people were all trim and erect, neat and tidy; like at Chekhov-Wagner, where they had been to first. He couldn't hear the wrenching cough that was a permanent fixture at Exhibition; there was no one with goiter from radiation exposure, and all the kids looked handpicked: two arms, two legs, cheeks like tomatoes from Sebastopol.

“Just like your Polar Dawns,” said Artyom, turning to Homer.

The old man was shuffling his feet behind Artyom, twisting his beard and soaking it all in: for that book of his, what else. The chicken was dangling under his arm; the notepad, screwed up, was jutting out of his back pocket. The Unter had refused to give back anything else yet, including Artyom's equipment.

“Over there, round the corner in the old offices we have a hospital. Free, of course. And the entire population is given a medical examination twice a year. The children every three months! Will you go and take a look?”

“No, thank you,” said Artyom. “I've just come from the doctor.”

“I understand! All right, then let's ... You know what ... This over here!”

Loading cranes jutted up along the edge of the tracks; trolleys had accumulated there. They went over to admire them.

“Darwin is our main trading gateway now!” Dietmar declared proudly. “The volume of trade with Hansa is especially large, and it's growing all the time. I think that in these difficult, turbulent times all the civilized forces should close ranks!”

Artyom nodded.

What did Dietmar want from him? Why had he spared him the shaving of his head and formation training that the other volunteers had been herded off to? Why had he given way, when Artyom demanded to keep Homer with him? Why would a common volunteer be honored by being led on an excursion round the stations: first round Chekhov, and now here too?

In these difficult. Turbulent.

“Over there is the tunnel to Teatralnaya.”

Drop everything and make a dash for it.

“The most unsettled section of the border. We're reinforcing our defenses. Preparing, so that not even a mouse can creep through. So I'm sorry, but we won't go that way now.”

So now what? How could they get to Teatralnaya? Ryaba clucked and started flapping her wings: Homer had obviously squeezed her too tight, almost smothered her. But she didn't go anywhere. The old man was holding her tight. Artyom felt like a chicken himself. What could he do now?

“And over at that end, take a look: a tallow candle workshop, one of only a few in the Metro, strangely enough, and sitting over there is our team of weavers, a genuine shock brigade! Absolutely magical socks; anyone with rheumatism pays any price at all for them! Right ... What else? Let's go down into the passage! That's where our accommodation sector is.”

Leading down to the passage to Pushkin-Schiller were two escalators that dived straight into the marble floor of the hall. The group scampered down the ribbed, black steps and emerged into a genuine avenue: The passage had been lined on both sides with little cabin-houses, bronze torch-lamps burning between them, caressing the marble. In one of the gingerbread houses there was even a school; and at the break, with the jangling bell, well-washed, sound, and healthy children came spilling out from inside towards Artyom, running straight into his chest.

“Shall we go in?”

They roused the teacher Ilya Stepanovich from the journal that he was pondering over, and he showed them the classroom: a pencil portrait of the Führer—a severe-looking man with a youthful air and stubbly cheeks, a map of the Reich, caricatures of the Reds, appeals to do morning exercises.

“Artyom is a fellow thinker, joining the Iron Legion as a volunteer!” Dietmar presented him. “And this is ...”

“Homer.”

“What a curious name!” Scrawny Ilya Stepanovich removed his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose.” Are you Russian?”

“Il-ya Ste-panovich!” Dietmar drawled reproachfully.” Is that really important now?”

“It’s a pseudonym,” said Homer.” Dietmar is probably Dmitry too, isn’t he?”

“I used to be,” the Unter chuckled.” So how did you become Homer?”

“It’s just people’s mockery. I was trying to write books. A history of our time.”

“You don’t say!” Ilya Stepanovich tugged on his beard.” Would you do me the favor of coming to visit for tea? That would be really interesting. And my wife can give you some dinner, if you’re feeling hungry.”

“We’ll come! We’ll come!” Dietmar was delighted.” And how strong will the tea be?”

“As strong as our love for the Motherland!” Ilya Stepanovich smiled with his yellow horse’s teeth.” We’re right at the end of the passage, opposite the gypsy family.”

“Social housing!” Dietmar raised his finger towards the molded ceiling.” Thanks to the Führer’s concern.”

* * *

The accommodation sector really was like something through the looking glass: The floor was covered with cozy little rugs stretching the entire, infinite length of the corridor; the walls were hung with reproductions of all sorts of solemn old works and calendars with cats and flowers. Along the way they came across women in aprons and men in braces on their bare bodies; a draft wafted out wisps of mushroom-stew steam from someone’s kitchen; and suddenly, screwing up his eyes and laughing, a little toddler on a tricycle trundled out from behind some bend and went hurtling along the avenue.

“It turns out that there is life on Mars,” Artyom remarked.

“You see? And they demonize us.” The Unter smiled at Artyom over his shoulder.

The passage to Schiller ran into a brick dead-end; Dietmar explained that the station was under reconstruction, so there was no way they could visit it today. They wandered around a bit more where possible, counting off every lingering second as they wandered. And the Unter didn’t drop back for a single one of those seconds; he never left them alone together. They had to guess in silence.

And at the arranged time they knocked at their hosts’ door.

On the doorstep they were met by a dark-haired, brown-eyed young woman with a huge round stomach.

“Narine,” she introduced herself.

Dietmar pulled out of his sleeve a champagne bottle, refilled with some kind of enigma, which he had bought at some moment unknown, and gallantly presented it to their hostess.

“A pity you won’t be able to try it!” He winked at her.” I’m willing to bet that it’s a boy in there! My mother had a way of telling: If the stomach is round, it will be a boy. But if it’s a girl, it’s pear-shaped.”

“It would be good if it’s a boy.” She gave a pale smile.” A provider.”

“A defender.” Dietmar laughed.

“Come on in. Ilya will be here in a moment. There, if you want to wash your hands ... The toilet.”

And they really did have their own tiny little toilet. Separate, like in the abandoned buildings on the surface. A human toilet bowl instead of a hole in the floor, and a china washbasin on a leg, and a bolt on the wooden door; on one wall there was even a thick rug.

“Splendid!” said Dietmar.

“There’s a very cold draft from there ...” their hostess explained in a quiet voice as she handed him a waffle towel.” We insulate ourselves as well as we can.”

It was decided to lock Homer’s chicken in the toilet: They even sprinkled some crumbs for her.

Their host came back from work, darting avid and curious looks at Homer. He invited them

into a charming little room, sat them on a folding sofa, rubbing his hands, and poured them all clean little spirit glasses of his special tea with a secret.

“Well, how do you like it here? In the Reich.”

“It’s remarkable,” Homer admitted.

“And people in the greater Metro still frighten their children with us, eh?” Ilya Stepanovich wrinkled up his face funnily and tossed back a little glass.” We’ve seen such great changes here! After the Führer’s New Year speech in particular!” He turned towards a pencil portrait—exactly the same as the one in the school classroom.” It’s all right. Let them come and take a look for themselves. Not even Hansa has a system of social security for its citizens like the Reich’s! And by the way, the program for accepting immigrants is being expanded here! They’re reconstructing Schiller now.”

“Is that for the Iron Legion?”

“And for that too. By the way, you can’t even imagine how many volunteers are arriving from all over the Metro! Many with families. We have two new children in the class just this month alone. I have to admit: The rejection of nationalism was an idea of absolute genius. And such boldness! Can you imagine what boldness is required to admit—in public, at the Party congress, that the political course of all the preceding years, not just years, but an entire century—was mistaken! What courage! To declare something like that to the faces of all the delegates. Do you think the Party consists of spineless puppets? No! Allow me to assure you that it has an opposition, and quite a serious one! Some have been in the Party for even longer than the Führer himself! And then to throw out a challenge like that to those authority figures. I don’t know about you, but I’d like to drink to him.”

“To the Führer!” Dietmar rose smartly to his feet.

Even Narine touched a glass to her lips.

It was awkward not to drink. And Artyom and Homer drank.

“Why pretend about it? Narine and I ... It was the Führer who gave us a chance.” Ilya Stepanovich touched his wife’s hand tenderly.” By permitting mixed marriages. And not just a chance. This apartment ... Narine used to live at the Pavelets radial-line station. It’s a different world! A completely different world!”

“I’ve been there,” Artyom muttered, replying awkwardly to his ardent gaze.” The hermetic doors are broken there, right? All sorts of garbage used to creep in from the surface, I remember. And ... there were a lot of sick people ... Because of the radiation ...”

“We. Never. had. Any. Sick. People,” little Narine said harshly, with surprising malice.” You’re talking nonsense.”

Artyom was taken aback. He shut up.

“And so history is changing before our very eyes!” Ilya Stepanovich exclaimed in a voice resounding with joy, stroking his wife’s hand soothingly.” And you’re damned right to decide to write precisely now! You know, I myself ... Well, after all, I teach my pupils the story of the Reich. From Hitler’s Germany down to our days. And the idea keeps niggling at me that I should start writing a textbook. Why not write about all of our Metro? And now here’s the competition.” He laughed.” Shall we drink, colleague? To all those fools who ask why do we need to write a history textbook! For all those fools who mock us! And whose children will find out how everything was from our books!”

Homer blinked, but he agreed to drink.

But Artyom kept glancing surreptitiously at Narine. She wasn’t eating; she wasn’t listening to the conversation. Her arms were embracing and protecting the large, round stomach in which a little boy compounded of two bloods was sitting.

“Really, why shouldn’t you write it, Ilya Stepanovich?” Dietmar exclaimed, infected by the teacher’s enthusiasm.” Would you like me to have a word with my superiors? After all, we have a printing press, don’t we? We publish the army’s Iron Fist, so why not a book?”

“Are you serious?” The teacher blushed bright red.

“Of course! Educating the children is a supremely important task!”

“Supremely important!”

“And it’s very important what is presented to them and how, right?”

“Fundamentally so. Fundamentally important!”

“For instance, take our confrontation with the Reds. You know, their propaganda accuses us of all the deadly sins ... You’ve had a chance to see for yourself now.” Dietmar turned towards Homer.” But you know, there are quite a lot of people who believe it! They believe it and they’re afraid even to stick their noses in here.”

“But just imagine!” Ilya Stepanovich continued.” Just imagine setting out to write about the Reich, without ever having been here! What could you have told posterity about us? Some terrible poppycock! Nothing but stupid nonsense.”

“And what will you tell them?” Homer couldn’t resist asking.

“The truth! The truth, naturally!”

“But surely everyone has their own truth, don’t they?” the old man enquired.” Even the Reds, probably. If so many people believe it ...”

“For the Reds truth is advantageously displaced by propaganda!” Dietmar intervened.” This egalitarian leveling-down ... I tell you, the freaks have secretly seized power there, and they’re brainwashing the normal people! They incite them and stir them up against us. They’re preparing for war! Where’s the truth in that?”

“Hungry, poor people! Just how hard do you think it is to make them believe anything at all? Do you think they’ll even try to distinguish the truth from the lies, to separate the wheat from the chaff?” Ilya Stepanovich put in.” They can’t admit that here, in the Reich, a social model has been created that has no equal in the entire Metro, can they? No! They’ll try to scare you with concentration camps and ovens and such rubbish!”

Narine put her hand over her mouth, as if afraid that some forbidden word or other would slip out, then stood up and walked out hastily. Ilya Stepanovich didn’t even notice, but Artyom did.

“And what will you write about the freaks in your textbook?” Homer asked.

“What is there to write about them?”

“Well ... if I understand correctly, aren’t they now ... ? They’re the ones the Reich is fighting against now, isn’t that so? Instead of ...”

“Yes, they’re the ones,” Ilya Stepanovich confirmed.

“But how? How is it fighting?”

“Remorselessly!” Dietmar prompted.

“But what do you do with them? The ones that you find?”

“What difference does that make? Well, they’re sent off to perform corrective labor.” The teacher frowned.

“You mean that deformities can be corrected by this labor? What about cancer?”

“What?”

“Cancer. From what I’ve heard, the Führer has equated cancer to genetic deformity. I wonder what sort of work that is?”

“Well, if you’re so interested.” Dietmar smiled.” Then we can show you. But what if your hands should get used to the pick? Then your fingers wouldn’t be able to hold a pen.”

“Then you’ll produce a really fine little textbook!”

“Did I just imagine it, or do you sympathize with the freaks?” Ilya Stepanovich asked.” Are you going to present them as little blond-haired angels in your book, then? The Führer has explained everything quite explicitly as far as they’re concerned: If we let those animals multiply, the next generation of human

beings will be unfit for life. Do you really want them to dilute our blood with theirs? Do you want your children to be born with two heads? Is that what you want?"

"Children with two heads can be born to anyone in this cursed Metro of ours. Anyone!" Homer cried, jumping to his feet. "Poor, sick children. And your two-headed children here—what do you do with them?"

Ilya Stepanovich didn't answer.

Homer didn't say anything more either; he just breathed heavily. Artyom, who hadn't gotten involved in the conversation, suddenly realized that the old man had turned out to be braver than him. And he suddenly wanted to kill someone for this old man, in order to be as brave as he was.

"Well now, why don't we take a look at what our honorable historian writes in his book?" Dietmar leaned across the table, dipping his uniform jacket in the salad, and deftly grabbed the notebook out of Homer's hands.

Artyom jumped to his feet, but Dietmar lowered his hand onto his holster.

"Sit down!"

"Stop this!" said the old man.

Narine came running in. Her face was wrinkled up, and her eyes were gleaming. It was too frightening to fight Dietmar in this little room: A stray bullet could hit anyone.

Narine huddled against her husband in fright.

"Everything's all right, my dear."

"Ilya Stepanovich, give me your opinion!" Keeping one hand on his holster, Dietmar handed the notebook to the teacher.

"Gladly," the teacher said with a grin. "Right. Let's say, the beginning then. Aha. They didn't come back on Tuesday, or on Wednesday, or on Thursday, which had been agreed as the final deadline ... Ummm. The handwriting, of course ... The first guard post was standing duty. What's this? Ah, round the clock. Listen, don't you ever put any commas in anywhere? All right, so far it's some kind of literary essay. Let's try the middle ... Boring ... Boring ... Oh! Homer—the mythmaker and painter of life—was only just being born into the world, like a bright-colored butterfly! And can you believe it, mythmaker is written with a hyphen! Myth-hyphen-maker. And that punctuation again. Agh, it's giving me cramp in my temples. So is that how you write about yourself, colleague? Or this here ... Alone against a legion of killers ... She said stubbornly: I want a miracle. Oho-ho. Now that's real pathos. But what of it? Streams started rustling ... Aha, rustling. The wall's breached, someone howled. It's rain, she shouted. Ah! So she confuses a breach in the wall with rain. Romantic."

Homer seemed to have lost his tongue. Artyom kept his eyes fixed on the holster.

"Well then, let's try the end, although I think everything about your story is already clear. Softly, like a lullaby ... What a hell of a mess ... Aha ... Homer didn't find Sasha's body ... at Tula. And what else? The end. And about yourself in the third person again. Delightful, delightful! Here, take it!" The teacher slapped the notebook down on the wet oilcloth. "There's nothing seditious here. Nothing but pretentious nonsense."

"Go fuck yourself," said Homer, wiping the notebook on his trousers and stuffing it into his inside pocket.

"Ah, save it! Learn to write without mistakes first! And then you can sculpt your Iliad. You probably called yourself Homer; nobody else would have done it."

"Fuck off," Homer repeated stubbornly, with a sullen scowl.

"Why, half of the book is about you! What kind of damned history is that? There's no room left for history!"

"It's an old one. The new one will be different."

"Well, may the new one turn out better!" Dietmar suddenly let go of his holster and picked up a shot

glass.” We’ve had a row and quarreled a bit, and now that’s enough. Here’s to your new book. Eh, Ilya Stepanovich? We’ve been a bit rude with our guests ... Please do forgive us. Your beautiful wife here is getting upset. As it happens, I rather like the passages that Ilya Stepanovich read out—those little passages. I’m no specialist on commas myself, but apart from that it’s all smooth enough. Forgive us, Homer Ivanovich. We got so heated because it’s a very sensitive subject. For everyone.”

“For everyone,” the teacher confirmed, placing his hand on his wife’s stomach.” What you said about children with two heads ... That was simply tactless!”

“I think you understand that yourself, Homer Ivanovich? You do understand, don’t you?” Dietmar asked in a stern tone of voice.” We were tactless ourselves, but so were you. Let’s consider this incident closed, shall we?”

“Yes. All right.”

Homer raked a shot glass off the table and drained it in one.

Artyom followed his example.

“Got any tobacco?” he asked across Dietmar.

“Let’s make it my treat.”

“Smoke in the toilet, please,” said Narine.

Artyom offloaded the chicken, locked himself in the toilet, sat down on the genuine human toilet, rolled himself a cigarette with the enemy’s tobacco, struck a match, set the glowworm against the roll-up, and took a drag, quietly releasing the vicious demons from inside him. He wanted to cool off.

He remembered about the wall that was warmed by the beauty of the carpet.

He felt the nap with his hand: Was it even cool? Then what was it for? He slipped his fingers under it. There was just an ordinary wall, not cold at all. So why lie about the carpet?

Artyom finished off his roll-up in a hurry, drowned the butt in the water, and listened to see if anyone was getting killed in the room. Not so far. Dietmar was laughing, the merry fellow.

He clambered up onto the toilet bowl, felt to find out how the carpet was held up on the wall, lifted it up with an effort, and took it down.

What did he think he would find there?

A little door with a little lock that a little golden key would fit into? For the local Pinocchios the country of magic began on this side of the carpet, but what was on the other side?

There wasn’t anything. It was a bare wall. Bricks smeared with plaster. The carpet simply cheered things up a bit.

Now he had to hang the incredibly heavy carpet back up, get the little loops onto the nails. He desperately didn’t want to.

Artyom pressed his forehead and his cheek against that rough wall anyway. It didn’t help him to cool down. The roll-up had done more good.

But ...

Something there ... He was imagining things, wasn’t he?

He turned his head and pressed his ear against the abrasive plaster.

Behind the wall, on the other side, someone was howling quietly.

They were howling and yelling so quietly that he could hardly hear them, because it was a thick wall, but the yelling was still bestial and spine-chilling. They shut up for a second to draw air into their lungs, then started howling again. They wept, implored unintelligibly, and beseeched again. They broke off, choking, then screamed again. As if someone was being boiled in oil there: It was that kind of howling.

Artyom tore himself away from the wall.

What was behind it?

Schiller Station. That was the passage to Schiller Station, wasn’t it? And it was a dead end, because Schiller was being reconstructed. They’d taken the dungeons out of Tver Station and transferred them

to Pushkin. So much for all the reforms.

“Hey, stalker?” Dietmar’s voice asked outside the door.

“I really had to go! I’m on my way.”

Artyom strained and lifted the incredibly heavy carpet off the floor, just hoping that the toilet bowl wouldn’t come unstuck. He just barely managed to guess where to hang it before the strength in his arms ran out.

He climbed down carefully and quietly.

The toilet was filled with impervious silence once more.

Now it was possible to shit in peace again.

* * *

“Well, how do you like the apartment?” Dietmar was loitering right outside; he must be desperate to go too.

“It’s really fantastic.”

“I can tell you in secret that there’s another one the same beside it. And it’s still free.”

Artyom stared at him.

“Social housing. They’re finishing the renovations. They give us a quota for the soldiers. Would you like to live in one? Eh?”

“It’s my dream.”

“Well now, we could reward a hero of the Legion. As an example to the others. For a feat of valor.”

“What feat of valor?”

Dietmar blew out smoke and grinned.

“Still angry because we tweaked your old man’s nose for him? Don’t be. That was a little check. For adequacy of response. You handled it pretty well.”

“What feat of valor?”

“A little apartment with a separate toilet. Eh? Sounds good. And a military pension. You could quit all your excursions. The doctor told you, but you ...”

“What do I have to do?”

The Unteroffizier shook his ash onto the floor. He ran his glance over Artyom again. Coldly. His smile had passed off, and the black mole looked like a bullet hole in his dispassionate face.

“The Reds are going to try to take Teatralnaya Station. It’s a neutral station, always has been. And that’s a sore point with them. They have Okhotny Ryad and Revolution Square, but no direct passage between them. They can only go back and forth via Teatralnaya. Our intelligence service says they’ve decided to connect them together. We can’t allow that. Teatralnaya Station is only one stretch of line away from here. The next blow will be struck at the Reich. Are you listening?”

“Yes, I am.”

“We have an operation all prepared to save Teatralnaya from them. We have to cut off the passages from Teatralnaya to Okhotny Ryad, to the Red Line. So they won’t be able to move their forces through them. There are three connecting passages. You’ll get the upper one, via the vestibule. You’ll go over the surface, along Tverskaya Street. You’ll go into the vestibule and lay a mine there. You’ll set up your radio and report. And wait for our signal.”

Artyom breathed in a chestful of the other man’s smoke.

“But why don’t you send your own men? Don’t you have any stalkers?”

“We’ve run out. Two days ago a group of four soldiers went up there on the same mission and disappeared. There’s no time to train any more. We must take urgent action. The others might be spotted at Teatralnaya. The Reds could attack at any second.”

“And the vestibule at Teatralnaya ... Is it open? Not caved in?”

“You don’t know? It’s your district, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Will you do it?”

“If the old man goes with me. I need him.”

“Oh no!” The Unteroffizier smiled, and the bullet hole became a mole again.” I need him more. I need him because if you don’t get in contact in time, or you don’t blow up that fucking passage in time, or if you don’t get back here in time, then for that I’ll have to ... finalize someone’s examination.”

Artyom took a step towards him.

Dietmar whistled, and the door immediately swung open with a crash. Suddenly there were three men in black uniforms in the room, automatic rifles at the ready. And they already knew where the holes would be in Artyom.

“Agree,” said the Unteroffizier.” You’ll do something great. Something truly good and necessary.”



CHAPTER 9

— THEATER —

He spat in the lenses of the gas mask and rubbed them with his finger, so that they wouldn't steam up. Then he clicked the switch on the radio and turned it to the right frequency.

“Come in.”

“Contact in one hour. Everything must be installed already.”

“This is the surface. I can't promise in one hour.”

“If you don't get in touch in an hour's time, you've either run out on us or croaked. Either way the old man's dead meat.”

“You haven't been able to contact your own men in three days. But you give me—”

“Good luck.”

Blank noise again.

He sat there for another minute, listening to it, and turned the handle. In order not to hear what? Then he closed his knapsack, pulled on the straps cautiously, got to his feet, and carried it away delicately, like an injured child. Ten kilos of explosive inside it.

He pushed open the badly scratched transparent door and clambered out into a pedestrian passage. A row of trading kiosks with no end to it in sight, all the display windows smashed, filth everywhere, everything covered in graffiti. He didn't switch on his torch: A torch could be seen from a long way away. He wondered where the four stalkers had been taken out. Four of them. All armed. With a radio. And not one of them had managed to say a damn word on that radio.

He walked forward along the wall—past the kiosks. Who knew what they used to trade in here. Books. And smartphones, probably. There were so many of those smartphones in the Metro ... All the flea markets were choked with them. They sold them by the kilogram, and they were almost all dead. People had bought them somewhere. They bought them to call their nearest and dearest. Put that tiny, flat box to your ear ... and out comes your mother's voice. Artyom had once made SukhoI buy him one like that at Peace Prospect, when he was still little. He played with it for six months, calling his mother at night from under the blanket, until the batteries acidified.

And then he made calls on the broken phone for another three years.

But now if you wanted to talk, then lug this box of tricks around with you. If only you could get through to the next world ... If it could just call the next world, eh?

He walked up the steps, squinting. Twilight.

Hello, Moscow.

The world unfolded in a cross. A huge square, with ten-story buildings like the walls of a canyon, burnt and charred, Tverskaya Street crammed with rusty cars that had crashed into each other, with their doors splayed out, as if they were trying to flutter those four doors like a dragonfly's wings, break free from the traffic jam and make their escape. Everything was gutted: seats torn out, trunks broken open. And the boulevard ring ran across Tverskaya Street: a black thicket. Naked, knotted roots reaching out along the ground towards each other from both sides, trying to close the circle, impatiently pushing aside the skeletons of the cars.

Huge advertising hoardings on the buildings. Without old people's help there was no way to tell what they were trying to sell. Watches? Soft drinks? Clothes? Those crooked Latin letters, each the height of a man, didn't mean anything; Artyom wouldn't even have realized that they were advertisements if his seniors hadn't explained that to him. Gibberish. The memories of the demented. Now the exposed roots and black branches, the wandering dogs, the tumbleweed and bones laid bare by looters could buy this

gibberish.

He took a closer look at the thickets: Was there anyone there? Better not go close. The city seemed dead, but someone here had gobbled up four fully equipped soldiers. It wasn't far to Teatralnaya Station: only a fifteen-minute walk. That's what they'd thought too. If it hadn't happened to them here, by the boulevards, then it must have happened somewhere up ahead.

Should he walk along the buildings or down the middle? Moving straight along the road, between the cars, he'd be too obvious. Walking along the pavement, he'd have to listen and watch all the time: The buildings might only look empty. Maybe everyone at Exhibition knew Artyom, but here ...

He adjusted the hang of his automatic, took a grip on the stock, and stepped out along the pavement, past the huge, two-story-high shop windows. Everything out as far as the roadway was littered with fine debris, sprays of smashed glass, and various dummies lying there, killed—some looking like human beings and some looking like Dark Ones made of shiny black plastic, but faceless, with no noses or mouths. All lying there together. No one got away.

A ransacked jewelry shop, a ransacked clothes shop, a ransacked and burnt-out God-knows-what shop. And the same thing on the other side of the road. A fine street, Tverskaya. Good pickings. The people living in the local stations were lucky. But unfortunately there weren't any food shops.

The buildings stood close-packed in a solid wall; and the evening sky was settling down, laying the quilted jacket of its paunch straight onto them, making Tverskaya look like an immense tunnel, and the frozen metal torrent of the roadway looked like railway tracks to Artyom.

In the jaws at the far end of this tunnel the Museum of the Revolution flourished its towers like fangs, with the Kremlin's fangs at one side. The stars on them were extinguished; all their bewitching power had fizzled out, leaving only their vague, black-paper silhouettes against the dirty clouds. They made a dismal sight: After all, a walking corpse is more cheerful than the ordinary kind.

And another thing: It was quiet.

Absolutely quiet, the way it never was in the Metro.

“What do you think, Zhen? The city probably used to be noisy; it must have been noisy. All these cars growling away and sounding their horns at each other! And all those people clamoring away together, because every one of them needed to say what he wanted to say more than all the others did; and the echoes from these buildings as well, like from cliffs ... But they've all shut up now. It turned out that none of it mattered. It's just a shame that not everyone got a chance to say goodbye. And they needn't have bothered to say all the rest of it at all.”

And then Artyom saw something ahead.

On the pavement.

Not a shop dummy. Dummies can't lie like that. They're always contorted by convulsions, like tetanus: Their arms don't bend; their legs jut out; their backs are like rigid sticks. But this one had huddled up tight like a little child. And died.

Artyom looked round quickly. No one there.

A black uniform protective suit. Clutching an automatic rifle. His helmet knocked off, lying beside him. Staring into the asphalt, into the dried-up blood. A hole in the back of his head. On a closer look, his stomach had leaked a lot too—a ribbon of blood ran across the ground. So they wounded him, then walked up and finished him as he crawled. And he was obviously in a really bad way, too busy trying not to die in order to crawl anymore, totally focused on it. He didn't even glance back to look into the faces of the men who had shot him. And they weren't interested either.

That was the first.

So no one had eaten them.

And they hadn't taken his automatic; they'd spurned it. That was strange.

Artyom squatted down and tried to take it. But the dead man's hands had turned stiff; he'd have to break

the fingers. Okay, so keep your rod.

He just unclipped the magazine and found the spare. That even gave him a kind of lift. As if Dietmar had paid him an advance for the operation. Stalkers don't believe in pillage. What stalkers believe is this: Taking a dead man's gear is like remembering him in your prayers. Lying there with his gear is depressing and pointless for him anyway. He feels better knowing it will serve a good man.

Artyom felt like moving on quickly.

Where did this martyr get shot from? Why hadn't his three comrades stopped, picked the wounded man up, and carried him into cover?

They couldn't have finished him off themselves, could they? Then why had they abandoned the service automatic? Were they in a hurry? He'd have to ask them that.

But he didn't get a chance.

The second was lying about three hundred meters farther on. On his back, like a star. He had wanted to take one last look at the sky, only he probably didn't see anything: One lens of his gas mask was shot through, and the other was flooded with something brownish on the inside. And there was a puddle under his back. The same thing, then: First they brought him down, then walked up for the coup de grace.

His friends hadn't loitered here either.

Artyom fancied he heard something in the distance.

A gust of wind brought a droning sound. Like a motor. He couldn't really tell: The air hummed too loudly in the filters; the gas-mask rubber blocked his ears.

Artyom quickly took the dead man's magazine, huddled close to the wall after all, and hurried on, gazing round. It was only half a kilometer now to Okhotny Ryad. Now he just had to avoid croaking anywhere himself.

He didn't spot the third one immediately; and only with his peripheral vision. This one was cunning; he'd turned off the street and tried to hide in a restaurant. But how could he hide when all the walls were glass? They'd found him and riddled him with bullets. Turned a man into a shapeless sack. They probably dragged him out from under a table and finished him.

Now that was a sound. Definitely.

A roaring motor.

Artyom held his breath. No, it didn't help. Then he pulled off his gas mask: Who cared what might happen in a year's time? He turned one ear toward the wind, so it wouldn't prevent him from hearing. There it was again: a hoarse roaring. Someone stepping on the gas somewhere far away, behind the buildings.

A vehicle. Operational. Who?

Artyom took off like a bat out of hell.

So that was how.

That was why they ran, and why they couldn't get away.

They were overtaken and finished off one by one, which gave the others a lead of two or three hundred meters, but then they got the next one. But why hadn't they fired back? Why hadn't they taken up position in a shop window and tried to fight them off?

Were they still hoping to reach Teatralnaya?

He didn't want to jolt the knapsack at first, but the roaring suddenly sounded quite distinctly behind his back, from straight along the tunnel of the street. And Artyom started bounding along, not looking round or stopping ... Move it, move it! If the jolting set off the blast, that wasn't as terrifying as if they winged him first and then came to finish him off. So let it go boom.

And then the sound split in two: There were two motors, not one. One straight behind and the other apparently to one side. Apparently. One on one side of street and one on the other. Were they corralling along?

Who could it be? Who?

Should he hide? Dodge into a building? Run and take cover in an apartment? No ... On this side of the street there weren't any residential entrances. Nothing but shopfront fish tanks, burnt-out and empty, with no exits.

Just a bit farther to the turn.

Then there's Okhotny Ryad ... Then skirt round the Duma ... And he'd be there.

The fourth stalker wasn't anywhere on Tverskaya Street, so he must have made it to the turn; that meant Artyom could make it too; he had to make it.

He saw his own shadow in front of him—long and pale. And a strip of light.

They'd switched their headlights on behind him. Or was it a searchlight?

Someone pulled a length of barbed wire down through his throat into his lungs. Pulled it down and jerked it backwards and forwards, using it like a bottle brush to clean out Artyom's bronchial tubes.

He couldn't control the urge and looked back as he ran.

It was an off-roader. A wide brute of an off-roader. Tearing along the pavement. The road was choked with rusty metal; there was no way through. Then there was a squeal of brakes and it stopped: Something was blocking its way.

Artyom took a gulp of cold air and turned the corner.

And immediately he heard the other engine off to one side: a hoarse, mosquito buzzing.

A motorcycle.

Ponderous and substantial, the State Duma was like an immense headstone, with its ground floor of gloomy granite and its stony-gray upper sections. Who was buried under it?

The motorcycle shot forward and hurtled along beside him. Without taking his eyes off the road, the rider flung out his left hand and fired a random, glittering burst that chattered along the gravestone walls, ricocheting. Artyom was spared.

And then, without stopping or reducing speed, he also held out his bouncing automatic and blasted a burst somewhere in the general direction of the motorcyclist. A complete miss. But the rider stepped on the gas to avoid putting himself in the path of the blind bullets and shot off in order to swing round somewhere far away.

The roaring started up again behind him. The off-roader had found a way through.

But now Artyom only had a short distance left to cover to Teatralnaya Station and the entrance. Only a hundred meters. Is the entrance open, Lord? Lord Jesus, is the entrance open?

If you exist, it must be open! Do you exist?

The final, fourth soldier was lying right in front of the doors; not even lying, but sitting, with his back slumped against the locked panels of wood. Sitting there dejectedly, looking at his bullet-riddled stomach, at his hands, at the life that had flowed out through his fingers.

Artyom darted up to the doors and tugged on one, then another, and another.

The hysterical motorcycle came back from its banking turn, getting louder and louder. Then the square off-roader drifted wide round the corner; armor-plated, was it? Artyom had never seen any like that. No one in the Metro could have any like that. None of the ragged-trousered subterranean empires had anything like it.

He pressed his back against the doors and raised his automatic, trying to catch the narrow windscreen in the dancing sight. No point in even firing at something like that. A tiny figure appeared on the roof of the off-roader, like a target in a shooting gallery or a jack-in-a-box. A sniper. A bullet zipped by, making a neat hole in the glass. That was it, the end, he was done for. He fired a wild burst.

An entire bracket of floodlights lit up on the roof of the off-roader, lashing at his eyes and blinding him. Now he couldn't even take aim. Unless he fired up into the air.

This was the end. It would all be over in a moment.

Just as soon as the sniper caught Artyom in his little circle. Artyom screwed up his eyes.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

The motorcycle shot out to a convenient distance and spluttered into silence. Artyom tried to get a peep, shading his eyes with his hand. No, both vehicles were undamaged, just standing motionless, and Artyom was standing in their crossed beams of light.

“Hey! Don’t fire!” he called out to them in a squeaky voice.

He put his hands up. Take me prisoner, please.

They couldn’t give a damn what he was croaking about. They consulted soundlessly among themselves. And refused to take him prisoner.

“Who? Who are you?”

Sixty-seven. Sixty-eight. Sixty-nine.

Suddenly the motorcycle darted away with a puff of blue petrol fumes and zoomed off out of sight. Then the armored car did the same: Doused its searchlights, reversed, swung round, and disappeared into the twilight.

So you exist after all, eh? Don’t you? Or else what the fuck was that?

In his joy and disbelief he prodded the last poor bastard, the fourth one, with his boot: You didn’t get lucky like that, eh? The man slumped and slid down the door. He had a bag with wires sticking out of it on his side. A mine. I could have punished you for that right now, he told Artyom. Don’t rile me.

Artyom apologized, but he didn’t repent.

He remembered something and frisked the dead man.

Then he ran round the vestibule; come on, come on, before the guys in the armored car change their minds. He tugged on all the doors again: At least one of them had to be open! And he found it, on the other side. He clambered inside and ran straight down the slippery steps before he squatted down to catch his breath. Only there did he start believing he wasn’t about to die. That he wasn’t going to die right now.

The steps had led him to a chamber with turnstiles and a ticket office.

There were two ways out. Down the empty, sagging escalator to Okhotny Ryad Station and along a gallery to somewhere: to Teatralnaya Station. Artyom’s worst fear was that the Reds could have set up a patrol here and it would finish off what the guys in the off-roader had started. But the connecting passage wasn’t guarded: apparently they just locked the hermetic gates down below, at the station, and didn’t even come up to the surface, to avoid getting poisoned: just like back home at Exhibition.

Artyom took out the mine and looked at it. How could it be activated?

The mine was as stupid and ugly as power. It was power, granted to Artyom over a still-uncounted number of people.

What should he do with it?

* * *

A jog along the corridor to the entrance of Teatralnaya Station. Everything there was closed, blocked off and walled up too. But a door had been left so that stalkers could go up on top. Artyom squeezed into his gas mask and hammered on that door with all his manic strength. Someone took five minutes climbing up from below. Then they didn’t want to open up and interrogated Artyom from behind the shutter; they didn’t believe he was alone. Eventually they opened up a little crack—for his ID—and Artyom thrust the passport he had confiscated from the dead man into it.

“Open up and quick! Open up, or I’ll complain to the ambassador. Open up, I say, do you hear? I almost got bumped off out here. An active service officer of the Reich. It’ll be on your head! Open up, you bastard!”

They opened up, and they didn't even make him take off his gas mask to check his face against the passport. It's good to have an entire ogres' state behind you! It's good when you stride along and an Iron Legion marches in step with you! You can live with confidence!

Artyom didn't let the sentries gather their wits, didn't let them inspect the knapsack; he grabbed the passport back and tumbled down the stairs. He just shouted to them over his shoulder that he had an important mission and lackeys like them didn't need to know any more about it.

As soon as he reached the bottom, he turned a corner and hid in order to shed his skin like a snake, changing the green protective one for his own usual one. He tucked the rubber away somewhere temporarily, but didn't abandon the radio set.

In forty minutes he had to contact Dietmar. That meant he had forty minutes here to find Pyotr Sergeevich Umbach, the man who had heard on the airwaves that people had survived somewhere else too. And yank that man out of this station before the Reds—or the Browns—came bursting in.

Artyom peeped out to see if they were chasing him. No, they weren't. They'd already forgotten about Artyom and gone back to their own business. They probably had more important business than arresting saboteurs. What could that be?

And that was when he remembered what Teatralnaya Station was all about.

The small, cozy, low central hall of the station, with its ceiling quilted in rhomboids like a bedspread, was the auditorium of a theater, almost completely filled with seats and also with tables—at the front, closer to the stage hidden by the closed velvet curtains. The arches were also curtained off, only not with velvet, but with whatever could be found. The rectangles of the route indicators hanging from the ceiling glowed with dull, ineffectual light, but the list of stations had been replaced by a flamboyant inscription: WELCOME TO THE BOLSHOI THEATER!

The people here lived in Metro trains standing on both tracks; one had actually been standing at the station when all the electricity in the world was cut off, and another had just stuck its nose into the tunnel on its way to Novokuznetsk. It had all worked out pretty snugly. Better than scaffolding above water. And better than social housing with hell on the other side of the wall.

Although these trains didn't go anywhere and the view from their windows was always the same—either gray stone or straight into the ground—the locals led a lighthearted life: They laughed, joked, and pinched each other on the backside without taking offense. As if they were simply waiting in their carriages for the driver to apologize at any moment over the loudspeakers for the twenty-year delay, and then the train would set off and, without getting lost anywhere, arrive at the next station and also, of course, at the very day from which they had set out: the last day before the end of the world. And in the meantime they'd gotten the hang of living here.

Grubby children were running around, all bright and quick-witted: They fought, using plastic insulation piping as swords, flung convoluted phrases torn out of some half-decayed plays at each other, battled to the death, giggling and squealing, over a stolen cardboard stage prop painted with gouache.

The people here, however many there were, all lived off the theater. Some acted, some painted scenery, some fed the customers, some ushered out the drunks. Bespectacled women wandered the platforms, fanning themselves with swatches of tickets, touting them in cracked, trembling voices: "Today's performance! Today's performance! The final seats!" They walked over to the edge of the platform and glanced into the tunnel to Novokuznetsk: How many more fools would it bring them?

But Artyom felt an urge to go to the other end and look in the opposite direction.

At the other end both tunnels led to Tver Station. To the Reich. Somewhere there in the darkness, the columns in black uniforms had already been drawn up, ready to march, and were waiting. It would take them fifteen minutes at a goose step. And if they flew in on a petrol-powered trolley, only two. After Artyom told Dietmar over the radio that everything was ready, two minutes would go by and the avant-garde assault units would be here.

At the center of the hall two stairways ran off in opposite directions, above the tracks. Both led to passages to Red Line stations. One to Okhotny Ryad, to which the communists had given back its old name of Marx Prospect. The other to Revolution Square, which used to be part of the Arbat-Pokrovsk line, but after the first war with Hansa the Reds had traded Lenin Library for it.

Both passages were fenced off with moveable metal barriers. Standing behind each barrier were several Red Army men in washed-out green uniforms and an officer wearing a peaked cap; their cap badges were enamel stars that age had turned raspberry-red. They stood facing each other, ten paces apart, swapping jokes, but those ten paces were the territory of a neutral station, over which they had no authority. And in addition, even up in the gallery, they were part of the audience of the Bolshoi Theater.

That was how Teatralnaya lived: squeezed between the Red Line's two neighboring outposts and the Reich. Between the hammer and the anvil. But somehow it had always managed to rebound from the blows of fate, spinning round and deceiving the cold iron, avoiding war and preserving its neutrality. It had managed to do that for a long time: until this very day.

And seemingly only Artyom could sense the stormy electrical charge in the air today: The others didn't understand; they couldn't see the imminent and inexorable bloodbath. Strolling along beside the stranded trains with their young ladies, railway officers on leave with swastikas on their sleeves managed to pass quite amicably by faded-green officers with raspberry-red stars, who had just been toasting the health of Comrade Moskvin, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Lenin Metropolitan, in the theater buffet, only one step away. They all had tickets jutting out of their breast pockets in the same way. All of them were getting ready to go to the show.

Ah no, not all of them. Some of them were getting ready to do something else: When the signal came, cut off the passages to Okhotny Ryad and slit people's throats. In addition to the central passage, there were two others: one at the rear of the station, at the very end of the platform, and another up above, via the vestibule. It was difficult to block off all three instantaneously. Dietmar's idea was audacious.

But Artyom's own goal was twice as difficult to achieve.

Since that conversation beside the toilet Dietmar hadn't left Artyom alone with Homer for a single second. The old man hadn't been able to tell him what the radio operator looked like or what kind of work he did or where he lived. So now find him, Artyom: whoever he is, wherever he is. And in half an hour.

"Excuse me." He stuck his head into a compartment belonging to strangers." Does Pyotr Sergeevich live her? Umbach?"

"Who? I've never heard of—"

"My mistake."

He butted into the next compartment.

"Pyotr Sergeevich? Umbach? I'm his nephew ..."

"I'll call the guards. Barging into people's homes! Tanya, are the spoons locked away?"

"You know where you can stick those spoons, you stupid fool."

He walked past another two doors, looking back just in case.

"Pyotr Sergeevich, do you know where I can find him?"

"Ah, umm ... What?"

"Umbach, Pyotr Sergeevich. The technician. My uncle."

"Technician? Uncle? Eh?"

"A radio operator, I think. Does he live here?"

"I don't know any radio operator. Ah, umm! There's Pyotr Sergeich who works as an engineer in the theater. With the stage, he, er ... Well? You know what I mean."

"Can you tell me where to find him?"

"Look for him there. That's the place to ask. Well? The director's place, God Almighty. Why are you so

thickheaded?”

“Good luck to you.”

“Bugger off! Can’t do anything for themselves. Fuck it, these young people.”

In the hall the musicians started tweedling away, warming up. Artyom darted towards the entrance, and the usherette almost bit him on the hand.

“I can’t go letting everyone in for free! Nothing’s sacred any longer! You lout! This is the Bolshoi Theater!”

He had to run back and buy a ticket, paying with the cartridges that the dead men had lent him. As he bought it, he kept looking round: Somewhere here, somewhere among the promenading public, among the people who had come to the show from Novokuznetsk or wherever else, from all over the Metro, there were two scattered groups of saboteurs. Somewhere there were bombers pretending to be theater lovers. Perhaps somewhere there were even suicide bombers, playing at being fathers of families, for instance, but already wearing explosive belts. When they got the signal that it was time to die for the Reich they’d walk up, sweating, to the Red Line’s border posts and dash into the passages like bats out of hell. And fifteen minutes later the assault teams of the Iron Legion would come bursting in from the two tunnels.

He looked at his watch.

And he realized that if he did everything on time, it would be right in the middle of the play. That wasn’t Artyom’s calculation; it was Dietmar’s. So after Artyom had managed not to die up on the surface, everything was going precisely according to Dietmar’s plan.

But if Artyom didn’t do anything, Homer would hang. And instead of the fascists, the Reds would enter Teatralnaya Station, only tomorrow instead of today. It seemed like one man could change the world, but only just a little bit; the world was as heavy as a Metro train; you couldn’t really shift it too far.

He dashed back to the female Cerberus at the gate and stuck the ticket in her teeth; and he tipped cartridges into her pocket too. The cartridges made her glasses mist over, and through the mist she didn’t see him sneak into the auditorium first, ahead of the rest of the audience. He walked briskly past the two Red Army posts without looking the soldiers in the eye, so that they wouldn’t remember him. Then he went up onto the stage and stuck his face in through the velvet.

It was dark behind the curtain: In the shallow space of the stage he could just make out the form of some kind of gazebo, or perhaps a rather vaguely painted ancient temple. Artyom touched it—plywood. He heard voices from behind the plywood, as if it was possible to enter it and live there.

“Well, believe me, I’d like to put on something different! You don’t think I’m happy with our present repertoire, do you! But you have to understand that in our situation—”

“I don’t want to understand anything, Arkady. I’m tired of all this balderdash. If there was another theater anywhere in the Metro, in the world, I’d leave here without a second thought! And God knows, I’m absolutely not in the mood to go on today.”

“Don’t say that! What can I do? I wanted to stage Ionesco’s Rhinoceros. A fine play in every way. And also—an important point—there are no costumes, apart from a rhinoceros’s head, and that can be made out of paper. And then I realized we couldn’t do it! What’s the play about, after all? It’s about normal people turning into animals under the influence of ideology. How can we put on something like that? The Reich will think it’s about them, and so will the Reds. And that will be it. A boycott at the very least. Or something even worse ... And then, these people with rhinoceros’s heads ... In the Reich they’d be sure to see a parallel with the freaks. They’d think we were mocking their fear of mutations.”

“Good God, Arkady. That’s paranoia.”

Artyom took a cautious step forward. Several small rooms appeared: a dressing room, a cubbyhole with stage props, and another one that was locked.

“Do you think I’m not searching for material? I search constantly! All the time! But take the classics, Hamlet for instance: Open it and what do you see there?”

“Me? The question is, what do you see?”

“The question is what do our spectators from the Red Line see there! A neat little plot: Hamlet learns that his father was killed by his own brother! By Hamlet’s uncle, that is. Doesn’t that remind you of anything?”

They were arguing in the closed room: But in the cubbyhole beside it an old man with gray hair and a droopy mustache was sitting hunched over a table and soldering something with his eyes watering from the smoke. This was more or less how Artyom had pictured the man called Umbach.

“I haven’t got a clue.”

“How about the death of the previous general secretary of the Line? In the prime of life! And how was he related to Moskvín? He was his first cousin! Only a blind idiot could fail to spot the hint! Is that what we want? Listen, Olga, we simply don’t have any right to provoke them! That’s all they’re waiting for. Them and the others!”

Artyom stood in the opening of the cubbyhole where the man with the droopy mustache was sitting. The man sensed his presence and gave him an inquiring look.

“Pyotr Sergeevich?”

Suddenly he heard footsteps drumming fiercely and screeching as the steel tips of the boots scraped the floor—somewhere in the hall. Several men. Not saying anything. Artyom hunkered down and turned one ear so that it could hear through the velvet.

“You’re simply a coward, Arkasha.”

“A coward?”

“Any play is too risky for you, whoever we take on! Remind me, will you, why we can’t even put on the pitiful Seagull. The pitiful, absolutely innocent Seagull. A least a decent role could be found for me in that!”

“Because it was written by Chekhov! Chekhov! Just like The Cherry Orchard!”

“So what?”

“So it’s Chekhov! Chekhov and not Wagner! I’m absolutely certain that our neighbors from Wagner Station would think it was a swipe at them! That we had deliberately chosen Chekhov in order to spite them!”

The footsteps scattered rapidly round the hall.

“Two of you watch the hall and four get up on the stage!” someone whispered in Artyom’s ear.” The radio operator must be here!”

Artyom pressed one finger to his lips imploringly, dropped to the floor, and half crept, half rolled away at random; and by a lucky chance he found a gap under the stage.

They were looking for the radio operator. And for him. The sentries hadn’t tried to catch him immediately; they’d reported to someone. The security police. If only the old man with the mustache didn’t give him away!

The two people arguing behind the closed door didn’t hear the footsteps.

“And A Streetcar Named Desire? I could have played Stella!”

“The whole storyline in that is based on Blanche feeling ashamed of her appearance and hiding away in a dark room!”

“I don’t understand.”

“Haven’t you heard about the Führer’s wife?”

“Idle gossip.”

“My dear Olenka. Now listen to me. People will come to see you, won’t they? They have come. The tickets are sold out ... Can I give you a hug?”

“You coward. You lout.”

“We put on a neutral show. Do you understand that? Neutral. A show that can’t hurt anyone’s feelings!

Art shouldn't offend anyone! It's meant to console them! It's supposed to arouse the very best in them!"

Artyom's arms had turned numb; his back was starting to hurt. Slowly and cautiously he moved the wrist with his watch on it towards a slanting beam of light. He looked at the dial: In ten minutes he had to go on air, tell Dietmar the mine had been installed and carry out his next order.

The woman's voice jangled.

"And what do you think I arouse in them? Eh?"

"I understand what you mean, but after all, in Swan Lake the ballerinas used to go on stage with their legs naked! Ah, if only we could put on Swan Lake ... But we've been told quite clearly that the people regard Swan Lake as a hint at putsches and coups d'état. The situation is strained enough as it is, we mustn't irritate either side! And then, your pretty legs ... Those pretty legs of yours ..."

"You animal. You rhinoceros."

"Just tell me that you'll go on today. Tell me you will perform. The girls from the corps de ballet will be here any moment."

"Are you screwing one of them? Have you been screwing Zinka?"

"My God, what stupid nonsense! I talk to her about art, and she ... Why fritter away my time on petty little whores when I'm in love with the prima?"

"And why are you jabbering to me about art, eh, you lousy rhinoceros? Tell me the truth!"

"You know how sick and tired I am of this, of this neutrality, of the fact that art ... Blah-blah-blah ... At this stage I'd like the boss to get shafted by ... Do you understand me? One or the other of them."

"Don't start that now. There's not enough time left."

"It could be the Reds, or it could be the Browns, but at least let it be one of them."

"I understand you. There's no need for that."

"Yes there is."

"There's not enough time."

There was a hiss right above Artyom's ear, and someone clumsy shuffled his feet and grunted. Whoever it might be and whoever he might have come for, he was standing right outside the closed door and eavesdropping intently. There were six minutes left to radio contact.

"Yes there is ... Let it be one or the other of them. My God, whose idea was it that art should be independent?"

"You're tickling my ear, Arkasha."

"Whose idea was it that an artist should go hungry? Some idiot or other."

"I agree. And you know, I'd like more clarity too. No ambiguity. A firm basis. That's what I'd like."

"You understand me, then? Let them support us, but let them give us a firm set of rules. Let them appoint a censor, but let it be just one of them. Then, for instance, we could put on Streetcar and Seagull ... Or, on the contrary, Hamlet and—"

"Oh yes! Yes ..."

"A consolation, you understand? Art for us ... You and me ..."

"Hush ... Like that ..."

A knock at the door.

"Good evening! Arkady Pavlovich!" The voice was hoarse and low—and strangely familiar to Artyom.

"Who is it? Who's there?"

"My God ..."

"Oh, and Olga Konstantinovna is there too. Will you open up?"

"Ah ... Oh! Comrade Major! Gleb Ivanich! What brings you here? One moment ... One moment. To what do we owe the honor? We were just making up Olga Konstantinovna here. Before the performance. I'm opening the door now."

Artyom could see through a crack: four pairs of steel-tipped high boots and a pair of low boots with

laces. The door opened.

“Oh ... What’s going on? Surely you don’t have the right to be here with armed men ... Gleb Ivanich! This is a neutral station. Naturally, we’re always glad to see you as a guest ... But what’s going on?”

“In exceptional cases. And this is definitely an exceptional case. We received a warning message. There’s a spy in hiding at this station. Here’s the document. It’s all official, from the Committee of State Security. We know that he’s in illegal radio contact with the enemy and planning an act of sabotage.”

Artyom completely stopped breathing. For some reason it occurred to him that none of the stalkers who’d been shot on the surface had a radio with him. He had found a mine, but the radio set had disappeared.

“Do you have anyone here who owns radio equipment?”

“Where are you going? Halt! Your documents!” a voice rumbled in the next room. “Hold him!”

“Who’s that in there?”

“One of our colleagues. A technician. Pyotr Sergeevich.”

“Where are you going, Pyotr Sergeevich?”

There was a crash and a groan. The crack showed Umbach, flung down on his knees: One outstretched wing of his drooping mustache was pinned down by a lace-up boot. Artyom prayed that Umbach wouldn’t look down into the darkness under the stage. That in his fear Umbach would forget to sell Artyom to the boots and buy his own life with the proceeds.

“Right then, lads, take a look at what kind of junk he has heaped up in there.”

“That ... That’s professional equipment. I’m an engineer.”

“We know who you are. We got a tip-off about you. Been planning terrorist attacks?”

“God forbid! I’m an engineer! A technician! In the theater!”

“Take this mumbling idiot along. He’ll go in the Lubyanka.”

“I protest.” Arkady’s determination gave his voice a squeaky note.

“Take him, take him. Come here, Arkady Pavlovich. Just for a second.” The voices moved farther away across the stage, but the quietly hissed words were very clear. “Listen, you piece of scum. Who’s this you’ve been sheltering here? Do you think it would be any bother for us to grab you at the same time? You could take a ride to the far end of the Red Line, and no one here would ever miss you. And Olenka ... Your Olenka ... Touch her again and I’ll cut your dick off. And your balls. Myself. I know how. You fucking juvenile lead. Go screw your corps de ballet, and don’t even dare look at Olga. Have you got that? Do you understand me, you shit?”

“I’ve g-g—”

“Say ‘Yes sir, Comrade Major!’ ”

“Yes sir. G-gleb Ivanich.”

“All right. Go. Take a walk.”

“Where to?”

“Anywhere you like. Move it!”

The stage creaked above Artyom’s head: forlorn, lost footsteps. Arkady Pavlovich didn’t know where to go. Then he jumped down onto the ground, swore, and shuffled away miserably. It turned quiet: They had already got Umbach to his feet and led him away, and the steel-tipped boots had all galloped out of Artyom’s field of view.

And what was more, he had missed the time to contact Dietmar.

Another knock at the door. A different knock this time: crude and masterful, without any pretense.

“Olga.”

“Ah ... Gleb. Gleb, I’m so glad ...”

“I was standing outside the door. And she’s glad, the bitch.”

“Oh, Gleb. He blackmails me. Doesn’t give me any decent parts. First one thing, then another ... He

keeps me on a short leash and fobs me off with promises!”

“Shut up. Come here.”

They slurped loudly and lusciously, then pulled themselves apart with an audible effort.

“Right then. I’ll come tonight. I’ve got executions this evening. We’re going to top a few traitors. And after that business ... I always fancy something sweet. So badly, it sets my teeth on edge. Make sure you’re here waiting for me. All right? And wearing a tutu.”

“I understand. I’ll be here.”

“And make sure no one else is here. Not that Arkasha of yours or—”

“Of course, Gleb, of course ... But what ... What kind of traitors are they?”

“We caught a priest. He was preaching. And the others are defectors. The mushrooms on the Line are all ruined. Some kind of plague. So the wimps have started running. They remember being bloated with hunger last year. Never mind. They won’t run far. We’ll top a few of them as an example, and the rest will soon settle down. All right, as a woman, that’s none of your concern. You just give yourself a good douching and don’t ask any questions. And don’t forget the tutu.”

“Yes, sir.”

The major gave her a fruity slap on the backside, thundered across the stage with his heels, jumped down heavily onto the granite, and disappeared into nowhere: into the same abyss that had belched him out.

Artyom went on lying there, waiting. Would she cry? Would she have hysterics or a fit of convulsions? Would she call her Arkady back?

She started singing.

“To-re-a-dor ... en garde ... allons, allons ...”

* * *

“Ladies and gentlemen! And now! Permit me! To present to you! The superstar! Of the Bolshoi Theeee-aaaatre ... Olga Aizenberg!”

Some kind of wind instrument struck a sad, beautiful note, and Olga Aizenberg, with her long legs that were absolutely unsuited to life in the catacombs walked out onto the stage and across to a pole. He couldn’t see her face from backstage, only a shadowy outline in China ink, but even the shadow was incredible.

She made her entry in a long dress, and the first thing she did, before throwing her glorious legs round the pole, was to take the dress off.

Artyom laid out the segments of his aerial on the floor and arranged it to point towards where he imagined Tver Station ought to be. He pulled on the headphones and clicked the switch. He didn’t have the time or the courage to go pushing his way through the jam-packed hall with the radio set on his shoulders, arguing with the sentries and crawling up the escalator. He just hoped the signal would reach Tver-Darwin Station along the tunnel. Let it get there.

“Come in ... Come in ...”

There was a rustling, choking sound in his head, and then mercy was granted.

“Oh! Stalker? And here we are already measuring up your old man for a necktie. You’re late.”

“Cancel the operation! Come in! They’re not planning to take Teatralnaya! Come in! They’ve got famine ... On their line. They’re putting up ... those checkpoints ... to catch defectors ...”

Dietmar made an indistinct sort of sound: Either hawking something up or grunting.

“Do you think you’ve just made me any wiser?”

“What?”

“Where’s the mine, you cretin? Have you installed the mine?”

“Didn’t you hear me? There isn’t going to be any invasion of Teatralnaya!”

“What do you mean?” Now it became clear that Dietmar was laughing.” Of course there is. Most

certainly there is.”



CHAPTER 10

— RED —

“Hey, pal! What d’you want here?”

Artyom looked at the man who had asked: a raspberry-red star drifting in a blurred haze. He shrugged.

Weary flagstaves with faded red banners stood, slanting crookedly, beside the archways. The curves of the arches were cut off slightly above the height of a man by suspended signs: RED LINE. STATE BORDER.

“Come on, move. That’s enough staring.”

The officer kept his eyes fixed on Artyom’s hands. The Red Army men behind him waited for an order.

“What do I want?” Artyom asked himself.

No matter what, he mustn’t do that: put his hands up and take a step forward. He mustn’t follow the unfortunate Umbach to that place where Pyotr Sergeevich was about to have his guts wound onto a stick. He mustn’t confess that he, and not Umbach, was the subversive radio operator they were searching for. Because they wouldn’t let him see Umbach in any case, and Artyom’s guts would be next for the stick.

Then what?

Then forget Umbach and what he’d heard on the tubercular Moscow airwaves, forget Homer, who was waiting for Artyom somewhere at Pushkin Station with a noose around his neck, forget Dietmar and his little assignment, forget the people who were sitting behind him right now and lapping up this garbage, who would soon be slaughtered with bayonets, say goodbye to the little raspberry-red star and stroll on to Novokuznetsk Station. And just let whatever happened behind him, happen. He didn’t have any eyes in his back.

And what was there at Novokuznetsk?

Nothing.

The same thing as at Exhibition.

A void filled with stuffy air. Mushrooms. The miserable life that Artyom was supposed to drag out uncomplainingly, until he croaked. Circle round, go back to Anya. Some time, whenever, using someone else’s dead documents.

Someone else’s documents, but the life would be his, Artyom’s, the same old life—as black, twisted, and dry as a burnt-out match. Did he want that life? Could he hack it?

Olga Aizenberg took off her bra. Without Pyotr Sergeevich’s hands to guide them the orphaned spotlights picked her out ineptly, in blindingly harsh light, casting Olga’s intense, black silhouette onto the walls.

The trumpet played too fast and with nauseating insinuation, churning Artyom’s guts, and the silhouetted woman on the pole flailed to its rhythm, swirling furiously, as if she were impaled on a stake.

“Are you deaf? Go on, push off!”

And while Artyom was searching for Umbach, while he was on his way here with Homer, for a while he had forgotten, hadn’t he, what it was like when you had nowhere to go to. The old man had given him something. A direction at least. Forgive me, granddad.

How can I save you? Follow that fiend’s orders? Help him set up a bloody massacre? And then what? Will they really let you go then? They won’t, granddad.

So that’s the choice, then: Whatever I choose, it’s hopeless.

“Right, search him!”

Artyom’s feet took a step back. His feet hadn’t decided yet.

The audience started turning round and shushing him.

Someone relaxing in a railway man's uniform grabbed hold of Artyom. Was it Artyom he had really been waiting for while he watched with a bored air as the actress writhed on the stake?

If they moved the other way, forward, there was no way back; his feet knew that. It was too soon for his body to die. But his soul simply couldn't stomach the idea of going back to the old life.

No, I don't want her children, Artyom realized. He realized it quite simply and for good.

What was there at Exhibition Station? There was nothing. Or everything that Artyom had failed to become. And everything he would rather croak than become.

Using his mind, he forced himself to raise his hands: One crept up a bit faster than the other. Sweat ran down his temples into his eyes in a caustic trickle, with a raspberry-red star swimming in it.

Perhaps they haven't killed you yet, Pyotr Sergeevich? Eh? I traveled halfway across the Metro to find you, didn't I? And I got here. Now there's nowhere for me to go on to. Come on, now, they haven't killed you, have they?

"I have some information."

"What are you mumbling about?"

Artyom sensed a spider's gaze from the audience, making his skin creep. So he said it again in the same quiet voice.

"I have important information. About a planned armed coup. By the Reich. I want to talk. With an officer. Of the state security services."

"I can't hear you!"

Artyom wiped away the sweat and took a step forward.

* * *

The pedestrian passage to Okhotny Ryad was long, interminably long, as if it been built especially for Artyom, to give him time to change his mind.

From the outside the border of the Red Line looked flimsy: a movable barrier and a couple of sleepy soldiers. But on the inside, where outsiders couldn't see, there were three layers of fortifications, with sandbags, barbed wire and machine guns. The gun barrels were staring at the walls, not inwards or outwards: They didn't know yet which direction the enemy would advance from.

There were twin profiles stenciled in paint on the walls: two awfully similar bald, scowling men with fat cheeks, like a blurred image embossed on a medal, one of them either protecting or eclipsing the other. The Moskvins cousins, Artyom knew that. The one in the foreground was Maxim. The present general secretary. The one Maxim had been stamped over was the previous general secretary, who had died.

With every step away from Teatralnaya Station he heard the Bolshoi Theater's perverse trumpet less and less clearly, because tearing along the passage from the opposite direction, from Marx Prospect Station straight into his forehead, getting louder and louder, was the bracing polyphony of a bravura march generated by an entire military band. At the point where the second third of the passage began, the orchestral march collided with the languorous trumpet and drove it back out into the theater.

The place was lit miserably; there was only a moat of light along the barbed wire, and beyond that the gloom was as thick as jelly until the next strip of barbed wire. They didn't meet any live people along the way, only sullen soldiers. Artyom was straining at the leash, eager to resolve his fate, but his armed escorts had no intention of hurrying—their own fates were too indefinite

He barely managed to hold out until Marx Prospect-Okhotny Ryad. Until the very last border post, which looked just like the first one: so flimsy that a good, hard puff would demolish it. Nothing else could be seen beyond it. The steps hid everything, and that made it seem as if no one here on the Red Line could give a damn for Teatralnaya.

But the band was absolutely genuine, and it was standing right at the entrance, beside the border, tootling and jangling and drumming. It made Artyom want to straighten up and square his shoulders, despite himself; and of course, no trumpet or any other theatrical sounds could force their way through

that.

The station—as cozy, homey, and small as all of the earliest stations in the Metro—was full of people who were all the same color. It wasn't dirty here, and there wasn't any water running from the ceiling, and the lamps were lit: everything decent and decorous, in short.

But when the orchestra fell silent for a second to swap one march for another, the station's other voice could be heard. An unusual voice: instead of the hubbub people are supposed to make, Okhotny Ryad was filled with a constant rustling. People rustled as they glanced round in the winding queues, where each of them had a number written on his hand; in the entrances of the archways, people rustled papers at tables, performing some kind of bureaucratic function that Artyom didn't understand; the women rustled and children rustled. And suddenly, while the drums and timpani were catching their breath, the station was no longer bright or clean enough. But then the orchestral conveyor belt started up again, and the merriment that it delivered changed the station back. The little lamps burned more brightly, the lips of people walking by stopped drooping, and the marble started gleaming.

There were slogans to buoy up the mood too, also stenciled in block letters: With The Red Line We Will Wipe Out Poverty, Illiteracy, And Capitalism!—No To The Plundering Of The Poor! Yes To Universal Equality!—Their Oligarchs Eat Our Children's Mushrooms!—A Full Ration For Everyone! And Lenin, Stalin, Moskvina, Moskvina. A bald Lenin and mustached Stalin hung in gold frames on the end wall of the station. Standing beside them was a guard detail of pale little boys with little red rags round their necks, and there were flowers lying there: plastic ones.

The locals didn't seem to notice that Artyom was under armed guard: All the people he strode past somehow found more interesting business to distract them; he wasn't able to meet anyone's eyes at all. But the moment he was past someone the nape of his neck started burning as those scattered glances were immediately focused into intense beams by the lenses of their curiosity.

He walked along, trying to reach an agreement with Pyotr Sergeevich that he wouldn't die for a little while longer or go away anywhere, that he would wait until Artyom got there. No more than an hour had gone by, so there was still a chance.

The Committee of State Security was located on the underside of the station: Below the floor that the monochrome citizens tramped across, there was another level with low ceilings that no one knew about, and the entrance to it was made to look like a cupboard, a place for sticking mops and buckets.

Inside, however, everything was familiar, the same as everywhere else in the world: a corridor painted with linseed oil paint, green up to waist-high and white above that, plasterwork turning brown from the damp, the eternal dangling lightbulbs, and a line of rooms.

An escort unlocked one and shoved Artyom into it.

"I've got urgent business! Something urgent to report!"

"They report things in the army," he was told with a wink. "In this place you report people."

The iron bolt on the outside of the door clattered in his ears, scraping across his naked nerves.

He looked at his cellmates: a woman with mascara eyes and a chemical-yellow fringe of hair, with all the rest gathered into a little clump at the back of her head, and a morose, undersized man with white eyebrows and eyelashes and a hit-and-miss haircut. He had tough, tanned-leather skin like an alcoholic's.

Umbach wasn't in the cell.

"Sit down," said the woman. "No point in standing."

The man blew his nose.

Artyom eyed the bench and remained standing, as if that meant he wouldn't have to wait so long for them to see him, listen to his story, and agree to let the radio operator go as free as a bird.

"You think they're going to sort everything out straightaway, right now, too, do you?" the woman sighed. "We've been stuck in here like this for more than two days now. And maybe that's good. The way they sort things out here ... it would be better if they didn't bother."

“Shut up,” the man groaned.” At least now keep your mouth shut will you?”

“Did they bring an old guy in here before me?” Artyom asked her.” With a mustache like this?” He demonstrated with his hands the feeble way that Umbach’s mustache dangled.

“No, they didn’t. And there wasn’t anyone without a mustache either. We’re stuck in here on own. Snapping at each other like that.”

The man turned away to face the wall and picked at it with his fingernail with an air of loathing.

“And what have you done?”

“I haven’t done anything. I’ve got to get the old guy out.”

“And what’s the old guy done?”

Artyom looked at her flesh-colored tights, scarred all over with darns, and her hands—blue blood flowing just under the surface of the skin, bursting it open. At first the black borders made her eyes seem large and passionate, as if she was giving herself for the last time, but in fact they were just ordinary. A wrinkly smile. With tired wrinkles.

“The old guy hasn’t done anything either. We’re from Teatralnaya actually. We were just getting on with our lives.”

“And what’s life like there, at Teatralnaya? Lousy, I suppose?” she asked sympathetically.

“It’s fine.”

“But they tell us here that you’ve almost eaten each other up already. Are they lying, then?”

“Yulka! Are you stupid or what?” the man appealed to her.

“We have a good life here,” Yulka said, remembering.” Basically we couldn’t give a shit how things are at your place.” She paused and asked doubtfully.” Do you have to queue long for mushrooms?”

“What do you mean, queue?”

“Well, say you join the back of the line. What number would you be?”

“What line? If you’ve got money, you just buy them.”

“Money, you say? You mean coupons?”

“We don’t need any money here,” the man put in.” If someone works, then he eats. Not like at that Teatralnaya of yours. Our working man has protection.”

“All right,” said Artyom.

“You go eat your money,” the man added.

“Come on, Andriusha, why attack him like that?” Yulka interceded.

“They stick some fat-faced git in here and you want to show him your titties!” Andriusha hawked up and spat by his feet, but as if he was spitting at Artyom.

“As if you suddenly needed my titties.” She smiled at the man.

“I’m not a stooge,” said Artyom, telling himself.

“I don’t want to know anything,” said Andriusha.” It’s none of my business.”

They said nothing for a while.

Artyom pressed his ear against the door. It was quiet.

He looked at his watch. What was Dietmar up to? Did he still trust Artyom? And how much longer would he agree to trust him?

“You mean there aren’t any queues at all for mushrooms?” Yulka asked.” So how many do they give each person?

“As many as he has the money for. The cartridges,” Artyom explained, just to be sure.

“Well, would you ever!” Yulka exclaimed in delight.” And what if two of you come together?”

“What?”

“Do you both get as many as you have money for?”

“Well, yes.”

“Greedy bastards,” said Andriusha.” Whose mushrooms do you think they’re guzzling? Yours and mine!

Our kids are bloated from hunger, and they're pigging themselves."

"They're not bloated!" Yulka exclaimed in fright." And we haven't got any children."

"I was being imagistic. Figural, that is, I was."

He stared at Artyom with an air of anguish and a feeling of just having made an irreparable mistake. Blushing bright crimson.

"He didn't say that," Yulka implored Artyom." All right?"

Artyom shrugged and nodded.

"You watch your own tongue," Andriusha barked at his wife." You cunt! If you hadn't blabbed, we'd be at home. As if you didn't learn anything from the Yefimovs."

"The Yefimovs didn't say anything, did they, Andriusha?" she whispered." They took them anyway. They never said a single word against ... Against."

"Then it must have been for something else! There must have been something!" he shouted in a whisper. How could they just take them like that, without any rhyme or reason and ..." He hawked and spat." And the whole family too."

"How's that, the whole family?" Artyom asked.

"It's nothing. None of your business!"

"What was it I said, anyway? That there wouldn't be enough mushrooms this year. That the crop had failed in the state farm, because of the plague. Because of the white rot. We'll go hungry. And that was all. I didn't get it all out of my own head. But they said it was slander ... Propaganda ..."

"Who did you say it to? You stupid blabbermouth! Svetka Dementieva, that's who! Are you telling me you don't know about the Dementievs?"

"The Dementievs' Dasha works in the canning shop, and it's like she doesn't understand anything."

"She stands there and keeps her mouth shut, then! People get taken for less than that! What about Vasilieva? The one who said 'Lord, have mercy' and crossed herself! And what did they take Igor from section 105 for? During a break he prattled about people from the outside showing up at Cherkizovo Station."

"From where outside? And what happened?"

"From outside Moscow. From somewhere up on top. Another city, like. And supposedly they came without protective suits. So what's wrong with that? What about it? It's obviously a load of bullshit. Like, they picked up all those outsiders in a single sweep, and the same day ..." He ran his finger across his throat.

"Don't show that on yourself!" Yulka exclaimed in fright.

"Bullshit, right? Garbage, isn't it? The bastard Yanks flattened everything for us. Even a little child knows there's only Moscow still standing. What other city! And the next day they snatched Igor Zuev. Yudin was listening, and Yudin's another ... You have to be a real wanker to talk in front of Yudin ..."

"What city?" Artyom asked, tensing up." What city did they come from? Those outsiders at Cherkizovo?"

"Uh-huh," Andriusha said to him." Like I'll just tell you."

Artyom pulled away from the door, took a step towards the man, and leaned down towards him.

"But he said it, didn't he? He said it? This Igor?"

"And look where it got him."

"Tell me! Tell me, it's important."

"You haven't given them the dirt on the old guy yet! You can't rake everything in!" Andriusha chuckled balefully.

"You witless idiot! Just tell me! Where from?" Artyom grabbed the man by the collar, wound the material onto his fists and pressed him against the wall.

"Get off him! Get off!" Yulka squealed." He doesn't know anything, not a thing! Guards! Help!"

“It’s all garbage.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“So what? So what if it isn’t?”

“Then that’s it! Then we can sling our hook, get out! Out of this Metro!”

Half hoisted up off the floor, Andriusha shook his head and pulled an ugly face.

“If they’re so well off up there, why would they come barging in on us?”

Artyom filled his lungs to answer, but he couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Put me down. Put me down where I was standing, you louse,” said Andriusha.

Artyom put him down. Then he turned away and went back to the door.

He was about to press his forehead against it when it opened.

“The one from Teatralnaya. Out you come!”

“That was a mistake. You should have told me,” Artyom told Andriusha.

“Now you can ask them yourself.” Andriusha hawked up.

* * *

“Here you are, Comrade Major. This is the subversive.”

“Where are his bracelets? Let’s have him in bracelets.”

The handcuffs clicked on.

“That’s just, when they confess themselves ... They always have to wear bracelets,” the comrade major explained to Artyom, meeting him in the doorway. “Call me Gleb Ivanich. And who are you?”

But Artyom already knew that this was Gleb Ivanich. He knew his hoarse, low voice. And his lace-up low boots.

“Fyodor Kolesnikov.”

The name in the dead man’s passport.

“Well, Fyodor, let’s hear it.”

Gleb Ivanich was stocky and hardy: a beef breed. His head was balding above its large forehead, his thick lips looked rouged. He was the same height as Artyom, so he wasn’t very tall, but he was twice as broad and four times as powerful. His tunic wouldn’t close on him, the collar was too tight for his bull neck, and his trousers were hummocky.

Gleb Ivanich sat down at the desk and left Artyom standing there.

“You picked up the wrong man.”

“What wrong man?” the major asked cautiously.

“Umbach. At Teatralnaya. He’s not guilty of anything. You confused him with someone else.”

“And who should we have picked up?”

“Someone else.”

“Ah. Aha. And have you come to get him out?” The major was bored immediately.

“He’s no saboteur. He’s a technician in the theater,” Artyom told him.

“Well, he confessed to being a saboteur.”

“Well then ... That isn’t true. He slandered himself.”

“That’s his problem. We’ve got everything signed off.”

So now what?

The room was spacious, but simple to the point of severity. The linoleum on the floor was curling up; the safe in the corner was a gray cube; only the desk was luxurious, a trophy item; and there was a double profile on the wall. That was everything.

Ah, but no. Not everything.

There was something ticking too. Artyom looked round: Behind him there was a clock hanging above the door. One that he’d seen, not long ago, in a completely different place. A simple clock, a piece of glass set in blue plastic. The dial had an image of a shield with a sword thrust into it, and some letters

in a line—all capital letters, with hyphens. VChK-NKVD-MGB-KGB. It was ten minutes to ten.

“In a hurry to get somewhere, Fyodor?” the major asked him and smiled. “Are you late?”

“That’s an interesting clock.”

“A first-rate clock. And from this clock I gather that I have business waiting for me. Is that all you have to say, Fyodor? I’d like to carry on with you later.”

“I need to talk to him.”

“Ah, well, there’s no way that can be arranged. Who is he to you? A relative? Or a colleague?”

“What has he confessed to? He isn’t a saboteur. He’s never been in the Reich. It wasn’t him you were looking for. It was someone else.”

“No, Fyodor. We were looking for him. Pyotr Sergeich. And the Reich hasn’t got anything to do with it. Look.” The major waved a thick piece of paper. “The briefing material. From Central Office. Central Office can’t be wrong.”

So it wasn’t Artyom that they’d come for? So Umbach himself was to blame?

“Is that all?” Gleb Ivanich got up. “I’ve an appointment at ten.”

He leaned down to the safe, fiddled with something, and the door creaked. He took out a dull, scratched, greyish black revolver.

And then Artyom remembered exactly what kind of appointment Gleb Ivanich had.

“And what ... what will happen to him now, to Pyotr Sergeevich?” Artyom asked with a dry throat.

“It’s the supreme penalty for him,” the major pronounced. “All right, Fyodor. Wait until tomorrow. We’ll talk tomorrow. I have a feeling it will be quite a long talk. You want to tell me something, but you’re hemming and hawing. I’ve got to speed you up somehow, but as luck would have it, time’s too short today. Business to deal with.”

He rummaged in the safe, took out a handful of little brass plugs, and tipped them onto the desk. He swung open the cylinder of the revolver and started stuffing it with blunt-nosed death. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. And there were more left on the desk.

“You mustn’t shoot him!” Artyom shouted. “Umbach!”

“Why?”

“He has information ... He’s a radio operator. And he knows something ...”

“Everything he knows, we know too,” the major reassured him. “He can’t have any secrets from us. That’s it. Go and get some sleep. There are ... people waiting for me.”

Gleb Ivanich scratched and stroked himself on his taut fly and stretched sweetly.

“But you have no idea! He has information! Valuable information ... He ...” Artyom bit his lip and weighed things up one last time. “He found survivors! He contacted them! Other people! Do you understand? Other survivors! Not in Moscow!” He glanced into the major’s broad, flat face.

Nothing changed in it and nothing moved.

“That’s bullshit.”

Then the shadow of a smile flitted across his lips. Gleb Ivanich straightened his hair with his hand, with a dreamy air. He was waiting, waiting for the evening, waiting for ten o’clock, and waiting for what would come afterwards—the date he had made with his little bitch in a tutu. That was what he wanted to think about.

Artyom flung up his shackled hands.

“But what if there are places where it’s possible to live? If we don’t have to, we’re not forced to stay here in the Metro ... Until the end ... Eh? And he ... He might know about it!”

The major weighed the revolver in his hand, squeezed one eye shut and peered at the table through the sight.

“That’s quality for you,” he said pensively. “They were executing people with this gun a hundred years ago. But even so ... There’s no machine more reliable than a Nagant. Especially for this business. It won’t

jam or get overheated.”

“Aren’t you listening to me then?” Artyom flew into a fury.” Or do you know something?”

“Okay, that’s enough. Escort!”

“No, it isn’t enough. If you shoot him now we’ll never know anything ... Never!”

“Escort, fuck it!” the major barked.

“Never! He’s the only one, do you understand that? No one else has managed to do it! To find them and contact them ... You mustn’t kill him!”

“So I mustn’t?

“No!”

“Valuable information?”

“Yes!”

“Survivors?”

“Yes, survivors!”

“All right, let’s go.”

The major grabbed Artyom’s shoulder in the hydraulic press of his massive hand, kicked the door open and led him out into the corridor. A guard came running up, guilty and frightened, taking a last drag on a roll-up, but the major just shoved the burnished gun barrel in his face and pushed him away.

He pulled a bundle of keys out of his pocket and jangled them at a door. Then he scraped it open and pushed Artyom into the cell.

“Umbach!”

“Here.”

Pyotr Sergeevich with the droopy mustache got up with an anxious, searching look in his eyes. He was smeared all over with something reddish-brown that was drying out: the bridge of his nose was split open and his mouth was gap-toothed. He was holding his head thrown back a little so that his nose wouldn’t run.

Patches of shadow and light flickered across his face by turns: What should he expect?

The major raised the revolver to his forehead, and the crash immediately smashed into Artyom’s ears, slamming into them like a sledgehammer, and a fine red mist spattered in all directions, settling on the major’s hand and face and uniform tunic. Umbach went limp and sat down on the floor, turning into a sack of sand. Pale-faced, the other prisoners covered their ears, and a woman started squealing. The wall was covered in scraps of something wet and gleaming. A jailer stuck his head into the cell and swore inaudibly and then asked something, still speaking inaudibly. Artyom’s ears were ringing painfully.

The major grabbed Artyom by the shoulder, dragged him out into the corridor, and slammed the door. He growled through the ringing.

“Who mustn’t? I mustn’t? Me? You little son of a bitch! I mustn’t?”

A sick, dizzy feeling.

Artyom swallowed it down, held it inside. If he puked it would be a sign of weakness.

“Lead out the condemned prisoners! As many as possible!” the major shouted to the jailers, his voice barely audible through that ringing.” How many are there?

“There were seven including Umbach.”

“Just right, then. One cylinder will do it. And wash down the cell!”

The major took a step forward and stood right in front of Artyom’s eyes.” Bring him with me,” he told the men who came running up from the guardroom.

They went back into the office.

“You say I shouldn’t. But I should! I should shoot you. And in public. An execution is a useful thing. Every damn bastard thinks he’s playing the lead and this is a movie shot about him. But there, just look at the way people turn into sacks of shit. Click! All done and dusted. Now you won’t go getting above

yourself like that!

He picked a cartridge not yet allocated to anyone up off the table and stuck it under Artyom's nose.

"Look. That's for you. I wanted to take care of you tomorrow without hurrying things. You and your raving nonsense. But you just go looking for trouble."

He jerked out the cylinder and rammed Artyom's own personal cartridge into it.

"Put him with the rest!"

"No!" Artyom shook his buzzing head. "No!"

"Get out there!"

"Today ... Right now ... The Reich ... Is going to ... Teatralnaya ..."

"Get out there, you bastard!"

"Umbach ... He's their agent. He was. I had to ... Get him out of here. I'm ... I'm a spy too."

"You're a blabbermouth ..."

"Wait. Wait. Everything I said about the radio operator was a lie ... Don't kill me ... Really, I swear ... There are two ... groups there now. Mining the passages."

Gleb Ivanich finally turned towards him.

"What for?"

"They're going to take Teatralnaya."

"Are they now?"

"They've got assault brigades standing in the tunnels. At the ready. And two sabotage groups at Teatralnaya ... In five minutes ... They'll be there."

"What did Umbach do? Why him?"

"He's a radio operator. He was supposed to receive the signal to start."

"And you?"

"I'm attached to him. His liaison."

"Who set the assignment? Who briefed you?"

"Dietmar."

"We're acquainted."

The major was transfixed. The clock above Artyom's head kept counting: ts-ik, ts-ik, ts-ik. Exactly the same kind of clock as the Hansa major had. Only the ending of the abbreviated history of the Cheka was different, premature.

"But you're here, aren't you? We have you. And we have Umbach. So they're still waiting. How long will they wait?"

"They were supposed to strike before the end of the performance. If we drag it out, they'll send someone to check. And they'll blow the place up anyway."

Ts-ik. Ts-ik. The major's eyebrows knitted together.

"Do you know what the others look like? In the two groups?"

"I know the leaders."

"Will you help?"

Artyom nodded once with a stiff, rusty movement.

"We won't be able to get the men together that fast," the major said out loud. "We have to drag things out. We have to drag things out."

Artyom wanted to suggest something, but he was afraid: The major would do the opposite, wouldn't he? He had to think of it himself. Think, Major, think. Well?

"How about disinformation? Tell them the groups have already been neutralized?"

"How? There's no time."

Artyom wanted to squeeze his eyes shut, hide, screen off his insides so the major wouldn't guess at his suggestion, his prayer, but he made himself keep his eyes wide open, as if he was inviting Gleb Ivanich

into himself. And the major clambered inside Artyom through his pupils, scraping through the corneas, smearing everything in there with fine spatters of Pyotr Sergeevich.

“Have you got a password or a response for radio communication?” he eventually decided to ask.

Artyom tilted his head forward without saying anything. Then he cautiously raised it again. He was afraid of frightening off the major’s decision—the only one that would save Artyom.

“Let’s go.”

They walked along the corridor, past the cell that was already unlocked, with the condemned prisoners standing there, staring at the floor and the walls, as if they were hastily trying to save their souls by hiding them in the joints of the tiles, under the turned-up edges of the linoleum, and went into a different room with the word COMMUNICATIONS on the door.

An exhausted communications officer with a harelip stood to attention. A desk with a phone, green boxes with switches and dials, headphones.

The escort stopped in the doorway, and Artyom was prodded to invite him to go over to the equipment. But before that Gleb Ivanovich picked up the telephone receiver and jingled the buttons.

“Hello. This is Svinolup. Yes, Svinolup. Get me Antsiferov.”

Artyom did a double take. Now the identical clocks were linked by that idiotic and unusual name. A coincidence like that was impossible. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

The other one was Boris Ivanovich. This one was Gleb. With the same patronymic. They didn’t look much like each other. But even so he believed it straightaway, fantastic as it was.

“Yes, Comrade Colonel. I have an operative here who has confessed. He says the Reich is going to take Teatralnaya. Right now.”

The voice. Lying there under the stage, Artyom had recognized the voice, because the brothers had one voice between them. They spoke different words with this voice, and put together different sentences; and they had different uniforms, and their clocks had stopped at different times. But even so it was the same voice.

Gleb was probably older. He looked older. So that meant Boris had risen faster through the ranks. How did he manage that? Artyom wondered for some reason, instead of wondering if the fine thread that he was planning to walk along over the abyss would snap. How did it happen that the two brothers ended up with the same rank on different sides of the front? Did they know about each other? They must. It was impossible for them not to. Were they at war? Did they hate each other? Try to kill each other? Were they playing games? What?

“Do you give the go-ahead? Yes sir. And then you’ll just have time to send us reinforcements ... Yes. I agree. We didn’t start it. And I also can’t see any other ... Yes sir. Accepted.”

Artyom waited quietly, not even thinking any more about the noise of his thoughts scaring off the magical firebird of luck that had landed on his shoulder. It was one chance in a thousand.

“What’s the frequency?”

The communications officer with the twisted face sat down at the radio set; Artyom told him the frequency. They started combing the airwaves. They set the headphones crookedly on Artyom’s head: covering one ear and leaving the other open on the side towards the other men.

“Did you run the aerials out onto the surface?” he asked. “How do you pick anything up here?”

“You think about your own job,” Svinolup advised him. “Our job.”

“But have ... Haven’t you ever ... Heard any other cities?”

As if he was being asked, the radio officer shook his head.

“There aren’t any other cities, kid,” said the major. “Forget it.”

“But people came ... People have come from other cities, haven’t they? Come to the Metro?”

“Hogwash.”

“And they were eliminated. By your people.”

“More hogwash.”

“And anyone who blabbed about it ...”

Gleb Ivanovich narrowed his eyes. He banged his gun against a metal box.

“No fucking point passing on a pack of lies! We’re stuck here and that’s it! Why get people all worked up? Let them dream about what they’re told to dream about. About us defeating Hansa and putting all the bourgeois up against the wall, and then there’ll be communism in the Metro. And a full ration of mushrooms for everyone. Things will be good here. Here. Where we are. You have to love your homeland, got that? After all, there’s no place like home.”

“I was born up on the surface.”

“But you’ll die down here!”

Svinolup slapped him on the shoulder and chortled. It was his first joke.

A voice emerged from the mush of the airwaves. The major nodded to Artyom and set the gun barrel to his head, encouraging him, admonishing him.

“Dietmar.”

“This is your stalker.”

“Oh! Stalker. Well?”

“The lilies-of-the-valley have flowered.”

“Then it must be spring.”

The gun barrel poked into Artyom’s free ear, cold and metallic. Straight into the canal. It was anxious, trying to tell if it was being deceived.

“But I liked winter better.”

“Well go and hide, then.”

Artyom tried to squint at Svinolup, but the revolver wouldn’t let him. He ought to have been counting, but he couldn’t. The barrel scratched him as it squeezed into the little hole; it plugged his ear.

“What’s this crap?” the major rasped through the barrel into his brain.

“We’re cancelling the operation,” said Artyom.” Dietmar, we’re canceling ...”

And then, an instant later:

Ka-boom!

Everything jumped; the ceiling fell apart; masses of dust tumbled in and hung in the air; the light blinked and disappeared; everyone was blinded and deafened.

Artyom was the only one expecting it. And it was just what he was expecting.

He dived to one side, jerked on the gun barrel with his shackled hands, tugged it out of the weakened grasp of those fat fingers and sprang sideways.

There was a blink of light.

The escort was lying on the floor, pinned down by concrete. Svinolup, cut by flying stone chippings, was bleeding and fumbling around him. The radio operator was still sitting over his apparatus, totally dazed.

Shouts forced their way through the cotton wool ... Tramping feet.

Svinolup finally saw Artyom.

“Hands! Hands!”

The major raised them lazily. His eyes roamed about, already looking for the smartest way to come at Artyom.

“Get up! Over to the door! Move it! Come on!”

The Nagant sat in his hand awkwardly, badly, like someone else’s gun.

“What the hell was that?” Svinolup asked him, barely even moving.

He was doing it all deliberately, the bastard.

Artyom squeezed the trigger: it moved stiffly. The hammer shifted back threateningly.

“Get up! Walk!”

“Where was that blast?”

He squeezed it home: another thunderclap, but not as painful as in the cell when Umbach was killed. Artyom’s ears were already blocked. Svinolup grabbed at a blotch on his right shoulder with his left hand. He finally obeyed and got up. He stepped over the escort and glanced out into the corridor.

Another jailer was dithering about out there, shell-shocked. He tried to jerk up his automatic, but Artyom shot him at hazard somewhere in the stomach and kicked the automatic aside.

“Who has the keys? Who has the keys of the cells?”

“I have.”

“Open them! Open all of them! Where’s that guy who lied about the survivors? Zuev! Where is he?”

“He’s not here. We sent him to the Lubyanka. We got a request for him. He’s not here!”

“Come this way. This way. Where’s my cell? Is this it? Open it!”

The major fiddled with the soundless keys and unlocked the door. Heavily made-up Yulka and the morose hawker were alive and well.

“Come out! We’re getting out of here!”

Svinolup pulled a sour face.

“And where to?” Andriusha asked.

“Where to? Out of here. To freedom!”

“They won’t run off anywhere with you,” said Svinolup.

“Off the Line! I’ll get you out of here!”

Yulka didn’t say anything. The man batted his dust-covered eyelids, figuring something out and sucking air into his lungs. And then he didn’t just shout, he bawled.

“Push off, you ugly fucking mug! You lousy stooge! Push off! We’re not going anywhere! We live here! Here!”

“Get the picture?” Svinolup asked with a grin. “That’s love of the Homeland for you.”

“They’ll put you up against the wall here! He’ll do it himself! Svinolup!”

“Fuck off! Sit down, Yulka. Why’d you jump up like a stupid fool?”

“That’s right,” said Svinolup. “That’s exactly right. And you, you greenhorn ...”

Artyom went wild.

“Get in the cell! Get in! They’re afraid of you! Give me those keys! Throw them! He’s not getting out of here, have you got that? That’s it, there he is! Now let’s go! What’s your name? Andrei. I’ll get you out of here! I’ll get you out, okay? Move it! There’s no time to waste!”

“We’re not going,” said Yulka, backing up her husband.

“You’re a fool, Fyodor, a perfect naive idiot ... They’re rabbits! Docile rabbits! They not going to run anywhere!”

“What do you mean, rabbits?”

“They’re docile! Here, look!”

Svinolup hiked up Yulka’s dress and tugged down her darned tights and panties, exposing her ginger curls. She just put her hands over her mouth.

“Well?” Svinolup shouted at Andriusha. “Are you just going to stand there?”

He squeezed Yulka’s flabby backside in his massive hand. Then stuck his fingers into her crotch and worked them about there.

“Well? Still standing there?”

Andriusha stared down at the floor.

“You shit!” Svinolup slapped him with his left hand—and knocked him to the floor with that single slap. “Go on, you shit, run! Grab your fingered wife and run! Eh?”

Andriusha crawled over to the bench, sat on it, and started feeling at his cheek.

Yulka howled quietly. Her mascara was running.

“Nobody will follow you!”

“You’re lying, you bastard! You’re lying!”

Someone was running along the corridor with his boots thudding. Surely reinforcements couldn’t have arrived already? Artyom fired in that direction, into the dust. Someone in there ducked down and hid, or else died a random death.

Where was it the condemned prisoners had been?

He bounded along the corridor and found the cell. The door was wide open. There was no armed guard. They were all standing inside. Six of them. Two women and four men.

“Run! Come on! Follow me! I’ll get you out!”

No one believed him. No one moved.

“They’ll shoot all of you ... Put all of you up against the wall! Well? Well? What are you afraid of? What have you got to lose?”

They didn’t even answer him.

Svinolup was coming towards him along the corridor, swaying. Sniffing at his hand. Smiling.

“Rabbits. Rab-bits. These have already tried it once. They know how it will end.”

“You foul bastard.”

“You go ahead, open all the cells. Go on, kid. Set them free. You’ve got the keys over there, and a gun. You’re in charge. Eh?”

“Shut up.”

Svinolup moved right up close—filthy, gruesome, squat—and Artyom took a step away from him, and then another.

“Nobody will follow you. Freedom, fuck it. A hero, fuck it, a liberator.”

“He was taking you all to be shot!” Artyom shouted to the condemned prisoners.” Now! Right now!”

“But now maybe they’ll pardon us?” someone mumbled.” We’re here, aren’t we, not going anywhere.”

“Maybe!” Svinolup agreed.” Anything’s possible! Now do you understand, you shit? Do you? Do you understand everything?”

Artyom shot him in the chest, fired into the center of this man, and the little bullet got stuck in him, and he staggered and laughed again. Then Artyom squeezed out another bullet for him from the unfamiliar, untrustworthy revolver—into his stomach. He couldn’t shoot him in the face; he couldn’t look into Svinolup’s eyes. Into his confident, insolent, domineering eyes.

Even so, Svinolup only fell reluctantly.

“Well?” Artyom asked the condemned prisoners again.” That’s it! He’s finished! Let’s go!”

“This one’s finished. There are others,” someone mumbled.” Where will we run to? There’s nowhere to go.”

Above them there was shouting, and commands were barked. They’d start coming down in a moment.

“Well stay here, then! All of you!” Artyom yelled at them.” And croak here! If you want to croak, then croak! Like shit!”

He stuck the barrel of the Nagant into his trousers, picked up the shot guard’s automatic and found the keys for the handcuffs, but he didn’t have time to take them off—guards were already running towards him. He sprayed bullets from the automatic, made it through the corridor unharmed, scrambled up the steps and darted out into the station hall.

Smoke, grime, and turmoil.

The band was still thundering away cheerily, like on the Titanic.

The mine had detonated where Artyom installed it—at the lower end of the escalator, behind the screen, directly above the cells. But it hadn’t brought everything down—instead it had blown out the gates, just as he’d hoped it would.

It was a good thing the station wasn't too deep underground and the signal had got through. It was a good thing Dietmar didn't trust his hireling and gave him a radio-controlled mine, not one with a timer.

He reached the break, pushed aside the bustling rescuers covered in white dust—and shot up the steps. That idea didn't occur to anyone else there apart from him.



CHAPTER 11

— DEBRIS —

They shouted something to him as he ran up the escalator, but Artyom didn't look back even once. What if they were afraid to shoot him in the back, but they would shoot him in the face?

Now he was up by the turnstiles and the ticket offices, at the spot where he had chosen his route to the theater.

There was a dull rumbling down below. As if somewhere deeper down than the Metro the earth in which men had pierced their holes was coming to the boil, as if lava was eating through its thin crust in order to take over the stations and the tunnels. As if. But in fact it was a war being fought at Teatralnaya. A war that Artyom had given the order to start. Maybe now that idiotic director and his star whore had been killed down there: Maybe they were dying at that very second. But Artyom had come out alive again.

He sat down and stayed there, perched on the cold steps, although he had to go, get out of there before the war rose up, before it came splashing out of the craters of the escalators and scalded him.

He simply couldn't go on just yet. He needed ... He had to wait just a little bit. After Umbach. After those horrors in the basement. After Svinolup. After the condemned prisoners in the cells. After Umbach again. He just needed stay here for a little while, sitting on the cold surface. And listen to the echo of what was happening down there without him.

He remembered about the handcuffs, stuck the little key into them, and tore them off.

He was shaking. And then it passed.

He walked up from the turnstiles to the exit. Pushed the door.

And it was only when his chest, legs and cheeks were caressed by the wind that he realized he had come out without the protective suit. On the surface without a suit!

He mustn't. He mustn't. He had already breathed too much of the vile muck as it was.

He walked round the building, expecting to come across the real Fyodor Kolesnikov. The last time Fyodor had still had lots of useful things: a suit, for instance.

But now there was nothing left where Fyodor had been. Something had made off with Fyodor and all his bits and pieces. And Artyom was standing on the surface of the earth in just his trousers and jacket: without any armor, naked.

And he set out naked.

It was a strange feeling.

When was the last time he had been on the surface without a protective suit? When he was just four years old. When his mother was fighting her way into the Metro, holding him in her arms. But he didn't remember that day. He remembered a different one: with ice cream, with ducks on a pond, with asphalt covered in colored chalk. The May breeze blew playfully into his face and tickled him behind his little knees in exactly the same way then—or was it different?

And now that wind grew stronger, swooping down to Artyom from the sky and ran, singing, along the side streets hidden behind the smart facades, flying towards him, washing over his face. What was it carrying?

Something heavy slid down inside his trousers, scratching his leg and catching on the material, clinging to Artyom the way a parasite clings to its host: Finally it fell out and jangled on the surface of the road.

A black revolver.

Artyom leaned down and picked it up. He scrutinized it and fingered it. A strange weapon. It seemed to be made out of lodestone. It was hard to let go of. But painful to hold.

He swung his arm and tossed it in the direction of the Kremlin. And then he felt a bit easier. Or started feeling easier.

Shivers began running up and down his spine.

He ought to run as fast as he could, sticking close to the buildings. To the restaurant where one of the four stalkers had cowered under a table, the one who realized he had to turn off the street and hide from his pursuers. He ought to undress the swollen man quickly, try on his stretched gear, breathe the air that he hadn't finished breathing and gaze out at Tverskaya Street through the lenses of his gas mask. He had to, to survive again, to live.

But Artyom just couldn't. He didn't have the right to look at the city through that spittle-smearred glass. Or breathe dust through those tinned filters.

For a little while now—not for long, perhaps only half an hour or ten short minutes—“living” meant walking along the midnight street like this, in ordinary clothes, without any tight-fitting rubber, the way he used to walk holding his mother's hand twenty years ago: the way all people used to walk twenty years ago.

Or the way, twenty-seven years ago, his mother had walked, perhaps on a night just like this, perhaps even along this very street, a young and quite definitely beautiful woman, arm in arm with the still nonexistent Artyom's nameless father. Who was he? What did he say to her? What would Artyom have grown up to be if his father had stayed?

Artyom had gotten used to hating him, because he adored his mother unquestioningly. But Sukhoi hadn't managed to graft himself onto the spot where Artyom's father had snapped off. And there hadn't been anyone else even to try.

But right now ...

Right now Artyom could imagine that man walking beside his mother in habitual style: taking her warm, living arm and setting off, chatting about this and that. And he breathed the way that Artyom was breathing now: not through a pleated trunk, not even with his nose, but with his entire body, with every pore. And he listened to her, this young woman, with his entire body all at once, the way people listen right at the very beginning, when they are only just cautiously groping their way towards each other.

His father was a live human being, and his mother was a live human being. Artyom realized that now. The same kind of live human beings as he was.

And at this moment he was very much alive.

Only a moment ago he ought to have died. He had even seen the bullet that was destined to break off his life, and been spattered with someone else's life in proof of the fact that people really can die, and die instantly, stupidly, pointlessly.

But now he was living. And he had never been more alive and more real before this moment. Something was unfolding inside Artyom, as if his heart had been clenched tight, like a fist, before this. But now it was unclenching slightly.

He was gradually being released.

He could imagine his father walking beside his mother after all; and he didn't feel an urge to interfere, to squeeze in between them and push him away from her.

Let them walk along together twenty-seven years ago; let them breathe the way he was breathing now. Let them take as much joy in each other as they could. And let Artyom appear in the world after all. up here, on the surface.

It was as if everything down there under the ground had all been delirious raving—a long typhoid delirium, viscous and clammy—and real, genuine life was only just beginning now.

He believed what the wind told him—that there was something amazing up ahead. Everything that was most breathtaking was yet to come.

Artyom reached the end of Tverskaya Street and carried on.

Straight down the middle of the street, between the Scyllas and Charybdises of various Kremalins, palaces, and State Dumas. Rollicking along, he couldn't give a damn that something might stick its head out of anywhere, lean down to him and just gobble him up—he was out strolling, simply strolling.

And he also dismissed from his thoughts the men who had pursued him along Tverskaya Street: the first time a miracle had happened and they spared him, and it would happen again now.

Artyom's end of the line probably wasn't here, or at Teatralnaya; this wasn't his point of destination.

The government buildings, so bombastic, built for the centuries, no longer seemed like granite headstones; the wind scattered the odor of the grave. They didn't fill him with horror, but pity. There they stood in the night, empty, probably regretting that they had lived longer than all the people they were built for. Like old men suffering the pain and horror of outliving their own children.

Something licked his hand.

Then again. And now it licked his nose.

Rain.

It was starting to rain.

It was as insidious and poisonous as the air up here on the surface: It tasted like water, but the air tasted like life, and look how many it had snuffed out. Of course Artyom mustn't walk along naked in this rain. But he strolled on and for some reason even felt glad. He even slowed his stride: He wanted to get soaked.

Rain ...

Artyom stopped, threw his head back, and offered his face to it.

And suddenly he had a vision.

Streets with incredible giants strolling along them in brightly colored clothes. White, pot-bellied airplanes, flying low, just above the rooftops—not real-life airplanes, but airplanes imagined by someone: Instead of the flat aluminum struts that genuine planes used to cling to the sky, these had transparent, fluttering wings—like dragonflies, maybe? And they didn't hurtle along; they floated. Cars: not these rusty tin cans stuffed with dead bodies crammed into them like sardines, and not what they used to be like before, but funny, tiny little carriages, exactly like the carriages in the Metro, but with places only for four.

And there too, in that strange world, there was rain. Warm and caressing.

Where had this vision appeared to him from? Was it memory? No, this world had never existed. What then? Artyom felt a pang of anguish in his chest he wiped the raindrops off his face.

It was as if he had dreamed it. As if a fragment of a dream had surfaced into the open, inflaming his tissues at the point where it emerged. Who was it? Whose was it? Artyom froze, afraid of frightening it off.

These weren't his dreams. What would he want with dreams like this? And who could possibly dream of something like that? His mother? No. No. This was something else.

He slung his automatic behind his shoulder and held his palms out like a little dipper, and the clouds wept a little water for him. He washed his eyes with the poison—to go blind on the outside and acquire sight on the inside.

No. The memory wouldn't come. Strange.

Artyom walked on—past the Hotel National; past the dumb, silent university faculties; past the monuments that would scarcely be remembered for even half a generation longer; past senseless towers that no longer had any meaning; past walls that no one would ever storm again—forward, that way, towards the Great Library. To what lay under it.

To Polis.

That word could have brought his past flooding back. But he still saw that impossible nonsense before his eyes, that beautiful absurdity—dragonfly airplanes and giants in funny little railway carriages.

He simply couldn't escape from this vision that wasn't his, get rid of it.

But what was it?

* * *

Artyom used a special, secret signal to ring at the gates. It was the way stalkers who were hired to plunder the Great Library rang when they came back from their forays. Sometimes they stood at these gates and rang with their left hand because their right hand was holding up the intestines tumbling out of them. Sometimes only one out of a group could ring, after dragging the others here—the wounded and the ones who had already died along the way. Sometimes there was only enough strength and blood left in the viscera for a single tricky ring. So the men at Borovitskaya Station whose who knew that ring opened up immediately.

And they opened up for Artyom too.

Even the men who moved aside the sliding door in the hermetic gate, intending to expose themselves in the vestibule of Borovitskaya for no more than a minute, were swaddled in tarpaulin and rubber. They knew the risk they were taking.

And through their gas mask portholes they looked at Artyom—soaking wet from the rain, in nothing but dark-soaked trousers and a jacket that clung to his body—as if he were a prodigy, a savage, a suicide. They pointed their guns at him and frisked him. They took his automatic. They brought over a radiation monitor and let it take a sniff at Artyom. The monitor flew into hysterics.

Artyom stood there with his hands up, smiling.

“Can you talk?” they asked him

He caught in shot the one who had asked: a little green elephant with its round lenses steamed up in amazement.

“Can. You. Talk?” the little elephant repeated slowly.

“Call Miller. At Arbat. Tell him it's Artyom.”

“Have you got any documents?”

“Tell Miller. Say it's Artyom. He knows.”

And they knew Miller—like everybody here.

They led Artyom inside, keeping well away from him, as if he was a plague carrier. They zapped him with the jet from a fire-hose nozzle and washed off all the garbage. They took off their own suits, then led him to the guardroom naked and gave him someone else's uniform. They started calling Arbat Station, keeping their eyes fixed on Artyom.

“A fine old whiff you have in here,” he told them.

“You go to hell,” muttered one of the men who had met him.” It smells fine. No smell.”

“You can say that again.” Artyom smiled at him.

“Are you drunk or what?”

The one who was waiting with the phone to his ear glanced round dubiously at Artyom: Was it worth trusting him, should they disturb Miller, wouldn't it be best to stick this suspicious character in the slammer for the time being? But someone had already answered the call at the end of the line.

“Yes, Colonel Miller. The Borovitskaya-surface frontier post. I know it's late. No, this is urgent.”

Like that other time, thought Artyom. When he came to Polis to warn them about the Dark Ones. About the appalling threat to Exhibition Station, the whole Metro and the entire human race. Fool. That was Miller and Borovitskaya too. It seemed like only yesterday and like a century ago. In less than three years since then he had gone through more than in the previous twenty-four.

“Miller,” a voice snapped in the speaker.

Artyom's frivolous mood instantly evaporated. The tension swamped him, and his guts cramped up again. What if Miller didn't acknowledge him?

“We've got a weirdo here. Came down from surface with nothing on. No suit, that is. Yes! Says he's

Artyom. Just Artyom. Yes, your Artyom, Comrade Colonel. That's what he said."

The voice stopped grating in the receiver, and there was a pause.

What if Miller really did reject Artyom? After all, he hadn't asked him to come. He hadn't sent for him even once in the last two years, he hadn't even inquired how Anya was getting on. Just cut off contact. Artyom had just wasted his time waiting.

"I'm busy," a spiky gearwheel rasped at the other end of the line.

"Can I have the phone?" Artyom asked in desperation.

The sentry reluctantly let him approach.

"Svyatoslav Konstantinovich. This is Artyom. Anya's husband."

"Artyom," the rusty, cracked voice repeated after him. "What have you come here for?"

"Tell them to let me in, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich. I haven't got any rubber or any documents."

"I've got an emergency here. I can't talk. I have to go."

"Do I go back up to the surface, then?"

Suddenly the receiver was empty. The sentries and Artyom listened together to the hissing of silence. The same silence as for the last two years. Miller didn't want to answer him. The commander of the border post squeezed and released the handles of an invisible little spring-driven torch, demanding that Artyom give him back the phone. The guardroom went a little bit darker.

"The emergency's at Teatralnaya, right?" Artyom asked.

The voice in the phone reluctantly reawoke.

"What's Teatralnaya go to do with anything? It's an explosion at Okhotny Ryad. Only one stop from Polis. I have to work out—"

"Okhotny Ryad is chicken feed. I've just come from there."

"What the hell ... ?"

"Don't you ... Don't you know anything about Teatralnaya yet? About the invasion? Haven't they told you?"

"What invasion? What are you babbling about?"

"Tell them to let me in. I won't talk on the phone. But I'll tell you."

There was a thud. Miller had put the phone on the desk. Artyom caught what he said to someone else: "Anzor! What's happening at Smolensk? Have they moved out? Yes, we're going! Take Letyaga! Follow me in one minute."

Artyom clutched the heated plastic tight in his hand.

"Svyato ..."

"Okay. Give the phone to the watch officer. At the Library in ten minutes."

* * *

Polis.

There were stations in the Moscow Metro that were well fed, even prosperous. Not many, but there were some. Compared with the destitute, wild, or abandoned stations, they seemed like heaven, but compared with Polis they were pigsties, even though they were well fed.

If the Metro had a heart, that heart was here, in these four stations—Borovitskaya, the Alexander Gardens, the Lenin Library, and Arbat—linked together by the blood vessels of their pedestrian passages.

This was the only place where people didn't want to give up on who they used to be. Pompous university professors, scholars of wild and woolly sciences, stupid bookish people and performers of all kinds, apart from street artists—at the other stations the same fate lay in store for all of them: to eat shit. Nobody needed these pampered drones. In the new world their sciences didn't explain anything, and nobody had any patience for their art. Go and clean mushrooms or guard the tunnels. Or you can turn pedals, because in the Metro, light is simply light, and everybody here has enough knowledge already without you. And don't talk too fancy; don't put on airs if you don't want to catch it hot.

That was how it was everywhere, except Polis.

But at Polis they were actually welcomed. And fed. They were allowed to feel like human beings: to take a wash and get their bumps and bruises treated. In the Metro many old words had lost their meanings and become mere shells holding decomposed nuts: “culture,” for instance. The word existed, but bite it open and there was nothing but putrid, bitter mold left on your tongue. It was like that at Exhibition, and on the Red Line, and in Hansa.

But not in Polis. Here that word still had a sweet aroma to it. Here they sucked on it and gnawed on it and laid it in store by the barnful. Verily, not by mushrooms alone ...

The Lenin Library Metro Station had upper exits leading directly into the actual building of the Great Library that was once the Russian State Library, and so that no one could break through from there into the Metro; these exits had been securely sealed off long ago. The only way to get in here now was through the vestibule of Borovitskaya. That was only a stone’s throw, so Artyom and his escorts arrived at Lenin Library before Miller’s ten minutes were up.

The station was really old, as if the Metro builders hadn’t built it themselves, but chanced upon someone’s ancient sepulcher as they drove their tunnels through the clay of Moscow and then excavated it, adapting it to their own Metro-building needs. The hall here was unsuitable for the Metro, with immensely high ceilings and wide archways; there was too much air for Metro passengers. When it was built, no one worried about the thick strata of clay crushing these vaults and tearing them down. Almost all the new stations were hidden in low, narrow tunnels, inside a shell of tunnel liners, so that when the ground settled onto them, it wouldn’t break their backs. So that bombs couldn’t reach them from the surface. But when they built here they had also thought about beauty; as if it could save the world.

The lighting here was glaring; every last one of the lamps, those white spheres hanging from the ceiling two stories high, was ablaze. It was a waste, a feast in time of plague: People had no need for so much light. But here they let it blaze unsparingly—the magic of Polis was simply its ability to give outsiders the feeling, if only for one brief hour, that they were in the old world that had disappeared.

And like everyone else, Artyom squeezed his eyes shut for a second, and for that brief second he bought the illusion.

And then that picture from someone else’s dream flashed before his eyes—the city that never was, up on the surface. Something somehow reminded him of it. He brushed it aside and swatted away the planes with dragonfly wings. Enough of that.

The station was in turmoil.

Unkempt little old men and old women with spectacles as thick as magnifying glasses, forty-year-old students of long-perished educational institutions, effeminate performing artists of all stripes, Brahmins in robes with books under their arms, the entire endearing mass of moribund, recondite sophistry—they were all swarming in alarm along the edge of the tracks, craning their necks to get a better look at the black square of the tunnel that led to Okhotny Ryad. But they should have been sleeping, shouldn’t they? The clock showed midnight.

The black square was smoking.

Standing there on the border were Red Line sentries: All the tunnels leading up to the Library and immediately beyond it were Red Line territory. After the war with Hansa, the Reds had exchanged Lenin Library for Revolution Square.

“What is all this? What’s happened down there?” The gawpers pestered the sentries.” Has something been blown up, then? A terrorist attack?”

“Nothing’s been blown up. The situation’s routine. You’re imagining things,” the sentries lied, although the smoke from the black square was irritating their lungs so badly they had to lie through their coughing.

“So it’s started, then. At last their people will be free,” one bespectacled individual confidently

assured another, leaving the Red Army tin soldiers in peace.

“We have to support them. It’s our duty!” exclaimed an agitated lady with a gypsy skirt draped casually over her broad backside.” I’ll go and paint a poster for solidarity. Would you like to join me, Zakhar?”

“I knew it; I knew it would happen. But so soon! The Russian man’s patience is exhausted!” said an old-timer with a long beard, wagging his index finger.

“There’s equality for you. There’s brotherhood.”

“You see! And it’s no accident that Okhotny Ryad is the first place it happens! It’s all because we’re next along the line. Polis! Soft power in action, so to speak. It’s simply our presence here, our cultural influence! Our concrete example! You can’t hoist democratic values up on a bayonet. And our ... spirit of freedom, pardon my grandiloquence ...”

“I think we have to reach out to them. Open the border to refugees. Organize the distribution of food!” proclaimed a woman with a bouffant hairstyle and a dramatic neckline. “They’re being starved to death there, so I’ve heard. How appalling! I’ll bring some biscuits from home just in case. I just seemed to feel something when I was baking them yesterday.”

“There won’t be any refugees here,” Artyom told them all. “And there won’t be any uprising. Nothing’s going to happen. It’ll smoke for a while and then stop.”

“How can you be so sure?” they asked him resentfully.

Artyom shrugged. How could he explain?

But they had already forgotten about him; they all turned away from the smoking square towards a little bridge that rose almost right up to the ceiling as it crossed one of the tracks.

Men clad in black were pouring off that bridge in a silent avalanche. Masks on their faces, Kevlar on their chests, and burnished helmets with raised visors on their heads. And in their hands—AK-74s with silencers.

“The Order!” The words buzzed in the air above the people’s heads. And inside their heads.

“The Order,” Artyom repeated in a whisper.

His heart started pounding. And the cigarette burns that had taken the place of every letter of “If not us, then who?” started itching.

As always, there was no one else.

The column of men flowed over to the tunnel entrance and formed up. Artyom pushed his way closer to them, drawing his escorts along with him. He counted: fifty men. That was a lot. So Miller had managed to make up for what had been lost.

Artyom peered into the slits of the masks, into the eyes and tops of noses framed in black. Were any of his comrades here? He had heard Letyaga’s name. What about Sam? Styopa? Timur? Prince? But no one noticed him; they were all staring fixedly, motionless, at a point in the tunnel.

Miller couldn’t have replaced all of them! There was no one who could take the place of men like that.

Miller himself wasn’t with them. This was probably the brigade from Smolensk, the Order’s base, that had just arrived. Now they were waiting for their commander. He was based separately, at Arbat.

The ten minutes that Miller himself had set ran out. Then it was fifteen minutes. And then twenty. A slow wave crept along the column: Men shifted from one foot to the other and straightened their backs. They were men after all, not stone idols.

He finally appeared.

One man carried the wheelchair down the steps. Another two brawny characters brought down Miller himself. They sat him in the chair, adjusted his balance, and started trundling him along.

He had a dappled pea jacket thrown over his shoulders—almost naturally, almost as if he was simply feeling cold. But there was only one hand, the left one, lying on his bony knees. His right arm was missing from the shoulder down; that was what the pea jacket was for. Two years had gone by, but he still covered up the stump. He hid it. He didn’t want to get used to it. As if his arm could grow back again, if

only he was patient for a while.

The entire formation turned on its heels in unison to face its commander. A universal spasm drew them all up to attention. Artyom realized that he was straining too, but he only realized it when the unaccustomed effort made the muscles cramp in his back.

“At ease,” Miller croaked to them.

He had become withered and yellow. The ruddy, glowing flesh had dwindled away. The color had washed out of the hair that used to be black, streaked with white, and now it was completely gray. But when he was moved closer, it was clear that he hadn't lost any of his toughness as a result; the wrinkles and folds only delineated his features even more starkly; and his eyes hadn't faded. On the contrary, they blazed brighter than ever.

Artyom moved through the crowd towards him.

“Let me through! I must see the colonel!”

They immediately cut him off, blocking his way with their black arms. One of the hulks in his path exclaimed in surprise, “Artyom? You?”

“Letyaga!”

They were too embarrassed to embrace, but they winked slyly at each other. Artyom tapped his finger on a badge on his shoulder: “A Rh-” —blood group A, rhesus negative. The same as Artyom.

Miller half turned to look over his shoulder and recognized Artyom too.

“Bring him here.”

“Comrade Colonel.” Artyom addressed his father-in-law formally in public. His hand flew up to his temple of its own accord.

“Don't salute with no hat,” Miller told him.

“Yes, sir.” Artyom smiled at him, but Miller didn't smile back.

“Report. What's happening down there? A terrorist attack? Sabotage?”

“That's not the most important thing. It's at Teatralnaya.”

“I'm asking you about Okhotny Ryad.”

“At Teatralnaya, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich. The fascists have attacked. They're taking over Teatralnaya. And the explosion ... There isn't just one. There are three. They're cutting off the Red Line, to keep out any reinforcements.”

“Where did you get all this? All this about the fascists?”

“I was at ... Teatralnaya. I got away.”

“Anzor!” Miller waved to his adjutant; the pea jacket slipped to one side and fell on the granite floor. People in the crowd gasped and started pointing at the stump and discussing it with relish.

“Move them away ... ” Miller nodded angrily at the crowd.

The formation instantly disintegrated, turning into a chain, and the chain formed into a circle, forcing the disgruntled gawkers farther away from Miller and the tunnel.

“Damned military!” the crowd muttered resentfully.

“Are you sure that they want to take over the station?” Miller asked mistrustfully. “That's in contravention of the treaty.”

“They say that if they don't take it, it will go to the Reds.”

“What were you doing there?” Miller looked up at Artyom, but it felt like he was looking down.

“I ... can I tell you in person? Tell you in private?”

“In private ... ” Miller touched his sharp knee; his legs were spindly, nerveless, useless. “Tell me in private, right? Anzor!” he said in a low, ominous voice. “We could have guessed about it for ourselves, couldn't we, eh? About the fascists. Couldn't we?”

Several more men in the cordon finally recognized Artyom and turned towards him. That gave Artyom a warmer feeling. Maybe they were smiling under their masks. After all, he hadn't shown up for two

years. But it could have been a hundred and two: If you've fought alongside a man, you never forget him. He needn't have doubted.

"We could have, Comrade Colonel."

"Wait. If they cut off Okhotny Ryad ... Revolution Square will be left without any support too. And the only crossing between Teatralnaya and the Red Line is there, right?"

"Yes, sir," red-haired Anzor confirmed.

"If all this is true ..." Miller spun his left wheel and turned a half-circle, pondering. "If I were them, I'd snatch the Square as well. This way they're one station better off, but that way it's two."

That's right, Artyom realized. It would be stupid not to. Blood will be spilled anyway. Of course Dietmar will try it.

"The question is, are they biting off too much? Did they manage to cut off the passages?"

"There's one they certainly didn't," Artyom replied, suddenly realizing.

"Well that means the Reds will throw their forces in and try to take it back. And what's that? A large war just one step away from us. From Polis. And on three sides at once." He raised his left hand and started bending down the fingers one by one. "Revolution Square is next down the line from our Arbat. Okhotny Ryad is just one stretch of line from here, the Library. And Borovitskaya is one stretch away from the Reich at Chekhov. It'll get to us. The only question is when. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, or in a week."

Miller surveyed his soldiers; there were exactly enough of them to clear half of the platform.

"Leave half of them here," he ordered Anzor. "Take half to Revolution Square."

And he trundled off lopsidedly towards the steps.

"Svyatoslav Konstantinovich ... I need to talk to you ..."

"Come." Miller rolled on without stopping.

They took him to Arbat, where the colonel had his own quarters. Along the way they didn't talk. Artyom didn't want to talk in front of witnesses, and Miller simply didn't want to. He left Artyom in the lobby with Letyaga and locked himself away in his own office. Anzor, a stranger to both of them, ran off on some errand, and it was only then that fair-haired Letyaga gave Artyom a hug that almost crushed his bones, and winked at him with a squinting eye.

"How are you?" he whispered.

"I'm missing it all," Artyom confessed.

"Won't he take you back?" Letyaga nodded at the door. "What's he being so bloody about?"

"It's about Anya."

"Well, after all ... you did snatch away his little darling!" Letyaga chuckled soundlessly and prodded Artyom in the chest, making him sway. "Do you think he raised her for varmints like you?"

"And how are you getting on?"

"They recruited a lot of new guys. After the bunker ..."

Their eyes met for a moment and they paused.

"Yes. He doesn't answer. He's cut himself off. Withdrawn. Won't talk to anyone. We'll find him, Alexei Felixovich. And deliver him. Understood. Yes sir!" The words barely crept through under the door of Miller's office.

A brief flash of thought: Who was Miller reporting to? Some Felixovich or other? Miller! To cover his own awkwardness and avoid giving the impression of eavesdropping, Artyom asked, nodding at the closed door, "How is he?"

"Well now ..." Letyaga hesitated and switched to a really soft whisper. "Before he went to the Library, he decided to go for a pee ... And in the john he fell off that damned wheelchair onto the floor. Of course, we were standing right there ... Outside. We tried to go in and help him up ... His legs are no use to him, and he's only got one arm. He yelled like fury—get out! The stubborn mule spent ten minutes on the floor

before he could climb back up himself ... And fuck knows how he did climb back with one arm. And all so we wouldn't see him on the floor without his trousers. That's how he is."

"Ah ..."

"Right ... Ah. Okay. But you—what brings you here?"

"Me? I ..."

Artyom looked Letyaga up and down, evaluating him; in the bunker Letyaga had taken bullets for Artyom when he was sitting on the floor with a jammed breechblock—he'd darted out from under cover and drew the fire. And Artyom had carried him on his back to the paramedic, like a carcass riddled with lead. The paramedic had prescribed death from loss of blood for Letyaga, but Artyom was his blood-group twin, and he'd funneled off a liter and a half of his own blood for Letyaga, and that was enough for him. They took the lead out of him in crumpled little lumps: All the bullets had flattened themselves against Letyaga's tough flesh. So since then he had literally been carrying inside himself a liter and a half of blood that Artyom had lent him. He kept meaning to pay it back.

"I was looking for a radio operator. At Teatralnaya."

"What radio operator?" Letyaga asked cautiously.

"There was this guy there ... He said he'd found survivors. People apart from us. Somewhere up in the north. It's a strange story. Do you how many times I tried to do that? Pick up a signal? Nothing ... A waste of time. But this guy ... So, well I ..."

Letyaga nodded to him. Compassionately, sort of.

"Oh go to hell!" Artyom laughed and jabbed Letyaga in his rock-hard belly.

"Artyom!" a voice shouted from behind the door.

"Act like you're sane," said Letyaga." Maybe he'll take you back. We miss you here too."

* * *

It was a large room; a perfect match for its occupant. Miller had driven in behind a wide oak desk cluttered with papers. After driving in, he adjusted the pea jacket—and the wheelchair was invisible. As if there was just a man who was feeling chilly, sitting on a chair. The office wasn't heated, that was all.

"Letyaga!" Miller barked thorough the doorway." I need three men, volunteers. To take a little envelope to the Führer. One of them is you. Go find the others!"

All the walls were covered in maps, with little flags and arrows. Lists of names with marks after each one: duty rosters.

And on one wall—a different list, a special one. Long. With a little shelf under it, and a little faceted shot glass on the shelf, half filled with a something murky white. As if someone had already taken a gulp of moonshine out of it with a brief grunt. Someone from that special list.

But no. It was Miller, commemorating them. In the beginning he used to commemorate them every day, the old crank. But the sleeve of the pea jacket was still empty anyway.

Artyom felt a lump rise in his throat.

"Thank you for seeing me, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich."

Was Hunter in that list? he wondered. After all, he wasn't killed in the bunker ...

"Close the door. Why have you come here, Artyom?" Now, face to face, he became harsh and impatient." What are you doing here, and what were you doing there, at Teatralnaya?"

"I came here to see you. There's probably no one else to take this kind of thing to. And there I ..."

Miller didn't look at him. He was clumsily rolling himself a cigarette with one hand. Artyom was afraid to offer to help.

"This ... It's makes a strange kind of story. Basically, I'm almost certain that ..." Artyom filled his lungs right up to the top with air." I'm almost certain that we're not the only survivors."

"Meaning?"

“At Teatralnaya I found a man who managed to pick up a radio signal from another city. Apparently Polar Dawns. That’s somewhere near Murmansk, I think. He talked to them. up there ... It’s possible to live ... And there are reports that people have come to Moscow ... from outside. Probably from there. From Polar Dawns. They showed up at Cherkizovo, on the Red Line. They told people there where they were from ... But then, the interesting thing is they were all picked up immediately. According to reports, that is,” he clarified.

“Who picked them up?”

“The KGB. And then they started arresting people who’d seen them. And even people who only told others about the story. And apparently they sent them to the Lubyanka. In other words, it’s all really serious. Do you understand?”

“No.”

Artyom smoothed down the brush of bristles on his head.

“No!” Miller repeated.

“But haven’t ... Haven’t you had any reports? About people from Polar Dawns? From your own network? Maybe the group that reached Cherkizovo wasn’t the only one?”

“Where’s this radio operator of yours? Where is he now?” Miller interrupted.

“He’s ... dead. He was shot. By the Reds. They showed up at Teatralnaya and took him away. The KGB. And ...” Artyom paused, piecing everything together. “But it was him they came for ... Him and not me. He said there was briefing material from Central Office ... About him. So they didn’t have the faintest idea about me just then.”

“Who? What?”

Miller lit up and puffed; the smoke went into his eyes, but his eyes didn’t water. The smoke was too heavy to rise up to the ceiling, and it hung in a cloud above the colonel’s head.

“What if they know about Polar Dawns? What if the Red Line already knows? And they’re trying to keep it all secret? They’re ... They’re taking out everyone who finds out about it ... Who talked to them ... To those others ... Finding them and ...”

“Right then.” Miller wafted away the smoke and immediately started producing more of it. “Right. I’m very interested in the Red Line right now. Because at any moment they’ll be at war, or maybe they already are at war, with the Reich. Can you even imagine what that will mean? Teatralnaya is about to turn into a meat-grinder, and the entire Metro will get sucked into it. And that, Artyom ... that requires serious thought. From me. As the commander of the Order, I have to think about how to stop these lousy bastards from ripping each other’s throats out. How to protect Polis from them. Our entire intelligentsia with their eyeglasses and fancy bathrobes. And at the same time”—he jerked his chin upwards towards the spot where the white monolith of General HQ towered above Arbat Station. “And at the same time protect all those pensioners who are convinced that they won the Final War and are the only defenders of our Homeland. Our entire magical game reserve. Our entire Metro. I’m against the Reich, and I’m against the Red Line. Do you know how many men there are in the Iron Legion? And in the Red Army? And you know how many I have? A hundred and eight soldiers. Including the orderlies.”

“I’m willing ... Permit me to rejoin the ranks.”

“Ah, but I’m not willing, Artyom. Why would I want a man here who wanders around in the rain in just his shirt? Why would I want a man here who sees incredible conspiracies everywhere? Has anyone contacted the Martians?”

“Svyatoslav Konstantinovich ...”

“Or those Dark Ones of yours, maybe? Eh?”

“Don’t you really give a damn?” Artyom exploded. “All this underground hustle and bustle. Let them do it! It’ll just be one bunch of scumbags devouring another. There isn’t enough space for them here! Or water! Or Air! Or mushrooms! You won’t stop them. And you’ll lose half of our boys again. You’ll lose

them all. What will that achieve? What will it decide?” Artyom waved his hand towards the glass of vodka that the dead men hadn’t finished drinking.

“But the boys swore an oath. And so did I. And so did you, Artyom. If we have to lay down our lives to save this lousy fucking place, then we lay down our lives. And don’t you go flinging them in my face, you young punk. I came out of that bunker a worm with one arm. You came out all in one piece, and for what? So now you can destroy yourself with these expeditions of yours? Have you thought about your children? About what kind of child you’ll have after this little shower of rain? About what kind of child my daughter will have?”

“I’ve thought about it.”

“In a pig’s fucking eye you have!”

“And you, have you thought? About whether it’s possible to leave and go somewhere else? Go back to the surface? Take all of these ... outside. If there’s even just one suitable place up there! A place for us, up there, on the surface! Walking in that rain today ... I felt like a human being. up there! I don’t care if I do croak after that. Then I came down ... into this stench of ours. I want to go back. It’s not only the Reds and the fascists who have turned into animals! We all have! These are caves for cavemen. We’re turning into cavemen! You left your arms and legs in the bunker. In the next war, maybe it will be your head! And who’ll take your place? Who is there to do it? There isn’t anyone. If there’s somewhere to go, anywhere at all, we have to leave here! And now, I’m telling you, it seems like there is! And maybe the Reds know about it.”

“You know what, Artyom.” Miller’s voice gave out and he started croaking.” I’ve listened to you. Now you listen to me. Don’t disgrace yourself. And don’t disgrace me. The men know whose daughter you married. And all this raving drivel comes right back to me, do you understand that? Don’t even think of telling—”

“Drivel? Then why bother to waste everyone who saw and spoke to those people ... Those others ...”

“Artyom, Artyom! My God, fuck it! What the hell did she see in you? Can she really not see it?”

“Not see what?” Artyom asked quietly, because there wasn’t enough air to ask loudly.

“That you’re schizoid! It started with the Dark Ones, and now it’s carrying on with this conspiracy. Those Dark Ones of yours have eaten your brains out. I suppose you’ve made your confession to her, all about the Dark Ones? About how we shouldn’t have hit them with those missiles. How they were really goody-goodies. Angels here on earth. The ambassadors of God. Mankind’s last chance of survival. And we should have just talked to them. Let those brutes get inside our heads. Relaxed and enjoyed it. Like you. Like you!”

“I ...” said Artyom.” Let me tell you this. Yes, I told you all that, and I’ll tell you it again. When we wiped out the Dark Ones, we made the most terrible mistake we could possibly have made. I made it. I don’t know about angels, but they definitely weren’t demons. No matter what they looked like. And yes, they were trying to make contact with us. And yes, they did choose me ... Because I was the one who found them. When I was a kid. I was the first. I told you that already ... And yes, they ... sort of adopted me, I suppose. But I resisted it. I was afraid they’d slip their hand inside me like some kind of fairground booth puppet and turn me into something—a thing of their own. Because I was a cretin and a coward. And I was such a great coward that just to make sure I wiped them out, every last one of them, with those missiles of yours ... Anything to avoid checking what would happen when they started talking to me. And I was such a coward, I realized I’d just exterminated a new species of rational life ... and our last chance! To survive! But everyone was applauding me, applauding me for doing that—the women, the children, the men. They thought I’d saved them from ghouls, from monsters! The poor idiots! But I ... I! I condemned them! I condemned them to stay stuck under the ground forever! Until they all croak! The women! And their little kids! And the kids they’ll have—if they have any at all!”

Miller watched him coolly and dispassionately. Artyom couldn’t touch his feelings with anything:

neither guilt, nor despair, nor hope.

“We shouldn’t have done that! Here under the ground we’ve simply turned into such vicious brutes that we attack everyone, we grab anyone who comes too close by the throat ... The Dark Ones ... They were searching for contact with us. For symbiosis with us. We could have gone back up onto the surface, if we had joined together. They were made ... to be our salvation. Sent to test us. To see if we deserved forgiveness ... For what we did ... To the Earth. To ourselves.”

“You’ve already preached that sermon to me.”

“Yes, and to your Anya. I’ve only told you two. No one else. All the others ... Even now I’m ashamed to admit it. I was a coward and I’m still a coward.”

“And that’s a good thing! That you’re a coward! At least you’re still walking around free, and not in a straitjacket in some madhouse, banging your head against the wall. I warned her. The fool. I said you were a raving lunatic! Just take a look at yourself in the mirror. If it was up to me ...”

Artyom shook his head.

“They’re gone. That’s all over. But ... But if ... If there’s another place where we can live ... Where people do live ... then ... not everything’s lost.”

“And then somehow what you did to these rational friends of yours isn’t so very terrible, right? Is that why you go wandering about on the surface? Is that why you have your head stuck in the empty airwaves all the time? For absolution?”

Clutching his cigarette in his teeth, he spun the wheel of his chair with his working left hand, trundled out deftly from behind the desk and moved up close to Artyom.

“Permission to smoke?” Artyom requested.

“You flipped out, Artyom! Do you understand that? Back there on the tower! And what you’re doing now ... It’s all just your imagination. It’s schizo stuff. No, you may not smoke. That’s all, Artyom. I’ve got a war starting at two stations and you ... Go, Artyom. Get out. Did you leave my daughter alone there?”

“I ... Yes.”

“How is she?”

“Okay. Fine. Everything’s fine with her.”

“Artyom, I really hope she leaves you. And finds herself someone who’s normal. She deserves better than an obsessive psychopath who wanders about undressed on the surface. So what’s the point of it all? Leave her, Artyom. Let her go. I’ll forgive her. Tell her that and let her come back.”

“I’ll tell her. On one condition.”

Miller blew out smoke and heat through his roll-up.

“What condition? What will you swap your wife for?”

“The three men who are going to the Reich with the envelope. I want to be the fourth.”



CHAPTER 12

— THE ORDER —

They left from Borovitskaya.

A cozy, red-brick space, looking like the reading room of a medieval university. Crammed with shelves of books stolen from the surface, from the Great Library, and wooden-plank desks at which these books were studied and discussed: populated with the book-loving cranks who called themselves Brahmins and keepers of knowledge.

Lamps with cloth shades hung down low over the desks, giving a kind, gentle light—and the Middle Ages, as Artyom had seen them in children’s history books with pictures, were infiltrated by the spirit of Moscow apartments, as he recalled them from pictures ripped out of his own four short years of childhood.

The archways were blocked off to form rooms. As Artyom walked by one, a memory of the past swept over him, from his first visit to Polis: a night spent in a good man’s home, conversation deep into the night, a strange book that claimed there were fiends imprisoned in the ruby-red stars of the Kremlin and there was a little demon in the little star of every Child of October ... An absurd book. The truth was always simpler and more appalling than people could imagine.

That good man no longer existed and, and the Kremlin stars had been extinguished.

And the Miller who had met Artyom here, with a “Pecheneg” machine gun slung over his shoulder and his body crisscrossed with ammunition belts, the commander who was always at the front of his troops, who was first into the thick of every battle—he no longer existed either.

And that Artyom didn’t exist. They had both been reduced to charcoal.

But Letyaga was the same as ever: a squinting eye, a back broad enough to block a tunnel, and a smile as if he had just tied your bootlaces together and was waiting for you to stumble; he was twenty-seven, but his smile belonged to a ten-year-old. Letyaga was fireproof.

“Hey!” He unsheathed that smile of his.” So congratulations are in order, then? The old man’s taken you back?”

Artyom shook his head.

“What, then? A test assignment?”

“A swan song. I’m just going to the Reich with you.”

Letyaga stopped smiling.

“What do you want with that place?”

“I have to get someone out of there. There’s a good person I really need to get out. If I don’t go back, there’ll be a hanging.”

“You’re a reckless bastard. Is it a woman at least?” Letyaga winked at him.

“An old man. With a beard.”

“Ah ...” Letyaga croaked.” That’s your business, but ... aaaaa ...”

“You great oaf. Shut up,” said Artyom, restraining his smile; he felt embarrassed by the thought of Homer.

But he ended up laughing anyway. The laughter rose up out of him: chewed up, glutinous, and acrid. The laughter convulsed him, exhausted him, devastated him—and Artyom sank down onto a bench to avoid going down on all fours. Everything that the Metro had forced him to swallow in the last few days came bursting back out of his mouth, undigested, as laughter. He laughed until his eyes watered, until he started hiccupping. He pumped air into his lungs and started again. Letyaga laughed together with him—maybe about something of his own. Or maybe about nothing at all.

And then it passed off.

“A secret mission, definitely!” Letyaga summed up confidently and entirely seriously.” They don’t write off guys like you, brother.”

They didn’t.

“I’ve been wanting to ask you for a long time,” Artyom told him.” Just how do you take aim?” He turned his eyes in towards his nose, in imitation of Letyaga.” You ought to see everything double.”

“I do see everything double,” Letyaga admitted.” That’s why I use up so much ammunition. Every normal guy’s got one target, but I’ve got two. And I shoot at both of them. It’s no accident the old man’s sending me to the Reich. The cheapskate wants to get rid of me.”

“Do you think it’s a one-way ticket?” Artyom chuckled.

“I travel on tokens.” Letyaga winked at him, raising his finger to jingle the dog tags of the medals hanging round his neck instead of a cross so that he could be identified.

“What do you need them for? There’s no way you could be confused with anyone else anyway.”

“Ah, you’ll never see that day,” Letyaga chuckled.” This is for something else. You know how it is, when you wake up sometimes and wonder, Who am I? And what did I drink? And then, okay, well at least who am I?”

“I know,” Artyom sighed.

The other two men walked over. One had high cheekbones, a prickly crew cut, and narrow eyes; the other had a bulbous boxer’s nose and was agile and loose-limbed.

“Well, you take your time getting ready! Like bimbos going on a date! But I can see you were hurrying after all—you didn’t get time to put your lipstick on,” Letyaga told them.” We’ll do that on the way then, all right?”

“Who’s this?” The loose-limbed one prodded Artyom offhandedly.

“That’s no way to say hello.” Letyaga shook his head.” It’s not ‘who’s this’, but ‘who are you,’ Yurets. Artyom was with us in the bunker. This is a living legend, that’s who. You were still chasing rats around Hansa with a rattle when Artyom and the colonel flattened the Dark Ones with missiles.”

“Then where did he disappear to?” the other man asked.

“He’s been building up his strength, Nigmatullin, for new feats of heroism. Right Artyom?”

“He hasn’t built up much,” Nigmatullin remarked, looking Artyom up and down skeptically.

“Every day’s a major feat for me,” Artyom responded.” I don’t have anything left over for myself.”

“Battle yet again, boys, and the girls are just a dream,” Letyaga cited, backing him up.” Okay, guys, let’s go. The Führer’s waiting. And the Führer doesn’t wait!”

He saluted the weedy Borovitskaya border guards smartly, and all four of them went down the ladder onto the tracks. The tunnel enveloped them, at first illuminated, then gloomy, then pitch dark. The other two hung back a bit, letting Artyom and Letyaga go ahead.

“That guy’s from Hansa, right?” Artyom asked.

“They’re both from Hansa. Nigmatullin’s from Komsomol and Yurets is from Culture Park, I think. Normal guys, by the way, both of them. Reliable.” Letyaga thought for a moment.” They’re almost all from Hansa.”

“All of who?”

“All our reinforcements.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, where else can you get guys with training? No point in scouring the dark stations. Or collecting them like the fascists do, with that legion of theirs, all sorts of rabble. That’s not for us. Miller pulled off some kind of deal with Hansa. And they agreed to ... Bring us back up to strength.”

Artyom gave him a quizzical look. “And he agreed to that? He cursed them. Remember? Back there when we ... In the bunker. They promised to help us. And they shafted us. If they’d shown up then—if

they'd given us men—maybe we wouldn't have had to be brought back up to strength ... All those boys of ours ... To be blunt.”

“To be blunt,” said Letyaga.” They didn't give us any men then. But they did afterwards. They gave them when they could. And they threw in all sorts of equipment and ammunition too. You know yourself how much money Hansa has. They made the offer themselves. Well and ... the old man was in deep mourning, drinking to the list of our men ... But there was nothing he could do. There was nowhere he could get another fifty men. Then he consulted the guys. They all understood. So they started recruiting on the quiet. With tests—that only stands to reason—and interviews. They sifted the riffraff out straightaway. And in the end it turned out okay. Hansa Special Forces, mostly. So everything's peaceful and quiet with them. It's not like we're on our own and they're on their own. We're all together.”

“Uh-huh,” said Artyom, clearing his throat and nodding at the two men hanging back.

“All in the same boat,” Letyaga insisted.

“I don't believe it,” Artyom said after a pause.

“What?”

“I don't believe that simply to exonerate itself, Hansa would allocate us fifty fighting men and throw in equipment on top of that. They don't do anything for nothing.”

“But it isn't for nothing. The old man signed on to train their special forces. Because ...” Letyaga clicked his tongue.” They're not really all that special. Especially when it come to the surface. They're as helpless as kittens up on top. Children of the catacombs, fuck it.”

The last lightbulb was left dangling somewhere far behind, and Letyaga took a torch that looked like a club out of his knapsack. The two men behind moved up closer and clattered their automatics: It was a short tunnel, well known to everyone, but still not much fun to walk. Better to stick close together.

The torch immediately lanced into the darkness in the tunnel, filling it with milk and then stirring it up.

“The catacombs ... But you're the same age as me,” Artyom recalled.” So you were four too, right? When the Final War ...”

“Oh no, kid,” said Letyaga.” I'm a year older than you. We already figured that out. So I was five.”

Artyom tried to picture his own Moscow, but those potbellied dragonfly planes soared into his head again, and the little carriage cars drove in trembling, and a fine, warm rain started falling. He shook his head to fling out this tenacious nonsense, this fantastical vision.

“And what do you remember? Your parents? Your flat?”

“I remember the television. I remember them showing the president on the television—we had a great big one. And the president said, ‘We have no other choice. They've forced us into it. They've driven us into a corner. They shouldn't have driven us into a corner. So I have decided ... ’ And then my mother came in from the kitchen, carrying a bowl of chicken soup for me. Noodle soup it was. She said to me, ‘Why are you watching all this terrible stuff? Come on, I'll put the cartoons on for you.’ And I told her, ‘I don't want any noodles.’ I remember that very moment. The very beginning. Or the end. After, there weren't any more cartoons, or more noodles.”

“And do you remember your parents?”

“I do. But it would be better if I didn't.”

“Listen, Letyaga,” loose-limbed Yurets interrupted.” It was them who hit us first. We didn't hit them; they hit us. Without warning. And we intercepted the first salvo before we fired. I'm telling you. I was seven.”

“And I'm telling you. Noodles! Noodles, stood in the corner, and forced to eat it. I thought at the time: There's the president, and he gets put in the corner too.”

“What difference does it make now?” Artyom asked.” Whether it was us or them?”

“There is a difference,” Nigmatullin objected.” We wouldn't have started it. Our people are sane and responsible. We were always for peace. Those bastards blocked us in; they dragged us into the nuclear

arms race so they could run us into the ground. They wanted to break up the country. Carve it into pieces. For the oil and the gas. Because our state was like a thorn in their side. They didn't want any independent countries at all. Everyone just lay down and spread their legs for them. We were the only ones who snarled back at them. And those lousy bastards, those assholes pushed us ... They just didn't expect us to go all the way. They thought we'd piss ourselves. But we ... They wanted to break us up, that was it. No surrendering to the enemy! Fuck them and their oil-grabbing. They wanted to colonize us. But they ended up shitting themselves, the dickheads, when their TV showed them what was flying their way. That's what you get for playing the tough guy with us. And we're still not croaking even underground."

"How old were you then?" Artyom asked.

"What business is that of yours? I was one. The old guys told me. So what?"

"So nothing," Artyom replied. "So nothing on that side of the ocean, so nothing on this side either."

Letyaga cleared his throat to smooth things over. They didn't talk any more after that.

* * *

"Halt! Extinguish the torch!"

Nigmatullin and Yurets parted and pressed up against the walls, with their automatics half raised; Artyom stayed in the center of the tunnel with Letyaga. A button clicked obediently, and the light fizzled out. Night fell.

"The border's closed! Turn round and go back!"

"We're from the Order!" Letyaga shouted into the echoing well. "With a message for your leadership."

"Turn round. And go back!" a voice repeated out of the well.

"I told you, we have a letter for the Führer! In person! From Colonel Miller!"

The red spots of laser sights leapt out of the darkness, darted about, and then jumped onto Letyaga's forehead and Artyom's chest.

"Get back! We have orders to shoot to kill!"

"So that's all their fucking diplomacy for you," Letyaga summed up.

"They won't let us in," Yurets whispered.

"There was no order to obtain entry by force," Nigmatullin responded.

"But we were told to deliver the envelope," Letyaga objected. "Otherwise the old man will rip my head off. I don't know what's in there, but he said if it's not delivered, everything's down the tubes."

There was a sweet, putrid smell of musty urine: Apparently no conveniences were provided at the guard post, and when the sentries had to pee, they simply walked down the dark tunnel into no-man's land.

Artyom looked at the ruby-red spot marking the position of his heart. He thought about Miller, and about his own final mission that was still uncompleted: to go home to Anya and tell her that he was leaving her. Tell her to her face and not go running off secretly, with his tail between his legs, for the sake of great causes.

He had already stirred up more than enough trouble for the sake of great causes. He had left Olezhek to that doctor after doing everything that he could. Just dumped the body with its leaky holes, dusted off his hands and gone off to drink vodka. He had let Lyokha walk down the steps into nowhere, whistling, and decided not to interfere or try to bring him back. Some went left, some right, to each his own. He hadn't driven the condemned prisoners out into freedom with Svinolup's Nagant pistol. He hadn't asked about the woman's slippers in the major's office. And he hadn't jerked the curtain aside. He hadn't done anything; he hadn't tried to see if there was anyone there or not. And since he hadn't seen, that meant there wasn't anybody. That was what he could tell himself, and he could live very calmly with that. And he'd be able to make up some explanation about Homer too, about that worthless old man and illiterate scribbler. Everyone just lied about the pangs of conscience: A man was strong and he could cope with anything. And great affairs excused everything.

He tried to cover the trembling spot of light with his palm, and it jumped up onto his hand.

“Final warning!” a voice shouted out of the well of darkness.

“Do we pull back, then?” Letyaga asked himself.

Leave the old man. Leave all your corpses, clear off into this dark well and put the lid on it. You have a more important mission, Artyom. To save the world. You mustn't waste your time on mushrooms.

“Find Dietmar!” Artyom shouted into those dark depths, and his voice turned squeaky.

“Who?”

“Dietmar! Tell him the stalker's come back!”

“What's all this about?” Letyaga turned towards Artyom.” What kind of story's this?”

“It's all the same story. About the old man with a beard.” Artyom tried to smile.” And about a certain idiot. My secret assignment.”

And at that moment in their little flea pit of a universe a supernova lit up.

* * *

Dietmar came out to the first machine gun nest of the first checkpoint. He probably looked at the bold, decorated warriors hiding behind their hands and laughed to himself. But he didn't turn off the searchlight.

“Who called me?”

“I did. Artyom.”

“Artyom?” Dietmar seemed to have forgotten him.” What Artyom?”

“I knew it!” Nigmatullin huffed.

“The stalker. With a dispatch for the Führer. Personal delivery. From Miller! From the head of the Order! Concerning the situation!”

“Concerning what situation?” Dietmar didn't want to understand him.

“At Teatralnaya! Concerning your invasion!”

“Our invasion? From Miller?” Dietmar sounded surprised.” There isn't any invasion. There is unrest at Teatralnaya. We have refugees flooding in. The Führer has ordered the establishment of a peace-keeping mission at the station in order to prevent casualties. But it's after three in the morning now. He's sleeping. And he's not expecting any letters from Mr. Miller. But if you wish you can let me have the dispatch. In the morning I'll hand it on to him at his secretariat.”

“Out of the question,” Letyaga prompted in a whisper.” Instructions are to hand the document to him in person or destroy it.”

“Out of the question!” Artyom repeated in a shout.” To be handed only to the Führer in person!”

“A great pity,” Dietmar sighed.” The Führer is not receiving anyone. Especially professional cutthroats. Before being handed to him the envelope will in any case be opened and examined to avoid any attempt at poisoning.”

“I am in possession of information,” Artyom said, bracing himself, “that the events at Teatralnaya are not public unrest, but deliberately planned subversion. Designed to take over the station.”

“But we are in possession of different information concerning Teatralnaya,” Dietmar responded indifferently.” And not everyone likes it, Mr. Stalker. Including your comrades, for example. Goodbye.”

He saluted them, swung round, and started striding towards the station.

“Wait,” Letyaga shouted.” Stop! This envelope isn't from Miller!”

Dietmar couldn't care less. The machine gunner stirred the long sting of his barrel, pointing out the pathway for the lead bullets. The snipers released their spots free, and these spots even pierced through the floodlight's white light, that was as bright as the first second of death.

“Do you hear me?” Letyaga roared.” The envelope isn't from Miller! It's from Bessolov!”

The black figure that had almost dissolved into the whiteness froze.

“Repeat that.”

“From Bessolov! To the Führer! In person! Urgent!”

Artyom turned towards Letyaga. There was something going on here that he couldn't understand.

Nigmatullin and Yurets were anxiously mulling over the unfamiliar name. Dietmar didn't say anything, but he was glued to the spot.

"Very well. One man will be allowed into the station. The others can wait."

Letyaga jerked his massively broad shoulders, accepting the condition. He stepped forward.

"Not you!" Dietmar stopped him. "Give the dispatch to that boy, Artyom."

"I have my orders."

"And I have my orders. He's the only one I'll let through. And only after he has been searched."

"Why him? Artyom, what the hell ..."

"Give me the envelope," Artyom told him. "Come on, Letyaga, you saw through me. A secret mission.

This is what Miller sent me for. In case they wouldn't let you ... I have my own story mixed up in this. You're not allowed to know. How do you think I found out about Teatralnaya?"

"Everyone here has his own story, fuck it," Letyaga growled. "They all hide them from each other. The old paranoiac ..."

"Don't give it to him. Are you crazy?" Nigmatullin hissed. "Who is he, anyway? The colonel said you should do it ... Or we—"

"Shut your gob, Ruslanchik," Letyaga told him. "This is Artyom, all right? He's one of us. Our man! Got that?"

"As you wish!" said Dietmar, turning cool. "I don't have any more time for this. I ought to be at Teatralnaya already, handing out humanitarian aid to the population."

Letyaga cursed him, spat in annoyance, and pulled a small, brown, thick, opaque envelope out of the pocket over his heart. He handed it to Artyom.

"This is our man, is that clear?" he yelled to the machine gun, the snipers' rifles, the spot of laser light, the black stencils, the piss-soaked universe, and the blinding star. "We'll be waiting here for him!"

"By all means," Dietmar responded. "But the Führer can sleep until midday. Wait."

"We'll be waiting, we'll be here, Artyom," Letyaga whispered passionately. "You'll come back. If they harm even a hair on your head ... The old man growls at you, of course, but he'll move mountains for his own men ... We be one blood, thou and I?"

"Right," said Artyom. He wasn't hearing much at this stage. "Right, Letyaga. Thanks. I don't know."

And he glued that damned envelope to his skin, went stumbling over the sleepers, and flew towards the supernova, straight into it. Into a billion degrees Celsius.

* * *

"Enemies Of The Reich! Enemies Of Mankind! A Horde Of Freaks! Stands At The Gates!"

There was only one speaker, but he was broadcasting from a dozen loudspeakers lagging slightly behind each other, and so he repeated his words as his own echo; and this chorus of one man's voice sounded like the voice of a hydra, eerie and mesmerizing. That voice was oozing with venom.

"If We Do Not Fight To The Last! We Are Threatened With Total Annihilation!"

The voice reached Artyom before the light of Chekhov-Wagner Station; the light couldn't bounce off the curved, twisting walls of the tunnel, but the voice could.

"Having Learned Of The Treacherous Plans Of The Red Line To Violate The Peace Accord! To Seize Teatralnya Station! I! Have Decided To Strike A Preemptive Blow!"

"The Führer? But you said he was sleeping ..." Artyom said to Dietmar.

"Right now no one in the Reich is sleeping," Dietmar replied.

At Chekhov-Wagner Station Artyom was greeted by a long banner: Welcome, Dear Guests From Polis! A file of men of various ages, dressed any old way, was lining up at the center of the hall, gawking with red, sleepless eyes and whispering uncertainly to each other. Junior officers looking like Alsatian dogs scurried along the ranks, shouting, clapping men on the shoulders, and slapping their faces.

Tables with placards on them were being set up, and heaps of camouflage gear were being tipped

onto them. Trolleys of guns were being trundled up, rumbling and clattering. At the far end of the platform a tent with a red cross on it was being set up, and glances from the ranks were repeatedly drawn to it as if to a magnet.

“But The Red Line Will Stop At Nothing! To Deprive The Citizens Of Teatralnaya Station Of Their Legal Right! To Live A Peaceful And Happy Life!”

It was a strange station—round-vaulted like a tunnel and with archways like gun slots that had been sawn in the walls. Its white armor glittered brightly, and the lamps—old, genuine ones—had been polished too. They seemed odd not separate from each other, like at the other stations, not simply double or welded together in clusters, but with twenty of them at a time sitting on bronze gondolas in two rows; as if they too had been woken up in the middle of the night and forced to fall into line. And they also looked like the souls of slaves, rowing their fleet galleys through an incredible white tunnel to their honestly earned heaven.

“Where did you plant the mine?”

Dietmar was walking fast, and Artyom could barely keep up with him: The faces in the ranks flashed by, and not one of them had time to take on any shape. Behind him, steel heels clattered on the granite as the guards strode along.

“Down below, I went down the escalator,” Artyom reported. “By the hermetic doors.”

“Did it bring everything down?”

“Very thoroughly.”

“Look here. At present everything at Teatralnaya is under our control, so I want to believe you. But I’ll check, of course. If you did everything correctly, a decoration ... An order!” Dietmar chuckled. “You deserve an order for work like that.”

Suddenly someone rushed out of the line across their path: The guards darted forwards and raised their Kalashnikovs. But it was some small, silly person, harmless: a little beard, steamed-up glasses ...

“Excuse me! Excuse me! Mr. Officer! Mr. Dietmar ... In the name of all that’s holy! This is a mistake. I’ve been mobilized by mistake. I have a wife ... Narine ... You were just at our home ... You’ve come from there.”

Dietmar remembered, halted, and waved the guards away.

“Ilya Stepanovich. I’m here with an acquaintance of yours. What’s the mistake?”

“To Flood The Station With Freaks! That Is What They Want! They Are Enraged! By Our Resistance! And This Horde! Is Already! At Our Gates!

“My Narine ... Her contractions have started. After those explosions at Teatralnaya. They took her into the maternity home. They said the waters could break at any moment ... But her time still isn’t ... due yet, do you understand? Perhaps with proper bed rest she could ... We have such a wonderful maternity home! But if they draft me into the army ... Or something happens there ... What will she do? Now? Who’ll be with her? And if she gives birth? I have to be there ... I must know ... What the child is ... A boy or ...”

“And For This Reason! I Am Declaring General Mobilization!”

The Unteroffizier smiled at the teacher and put his hand on his shoulder.

“As they say, the tsaritsa was delivered of a fright, neither son—right, Ilya Stepanovich?—nor daughter.”

“Why are you ... Why are you saying that?”

“Good Lord, it’s a joke. I remember our conversation. Of course I do. Let’s take a walk.”

He made a sign to the junior Alsations and led Ilya Stepanovich away with his arm round his shoulders. Artyom walked alongside, crumpling the envelope in his pocket. What was in it? The envelope was hard; it had something inside it ... What did it remind him of? Not a letter, not paper ... His head was splitting with the effort. The spring was running down.

“You were planning to write a history textbook for us, right?” Dietmar asked the teacher.

“Mr. Officer ... But if ... If something happens during the birth ...”

“Then sit down and write it! Start now, right away. History is being made before your very eyes!” He stopped, removed Ilya Stepanovich’s glasses, breathed on them, wiped them, and set them back in place.” I’ll set aside a corner for you in my headquarters. Or else you could get killed, that’s true ...”

“To Defend A Neutral Station Against The Red Hordes! That Is Our Duty! They Have Begged Us For Help! And We Are Coming!”

“Thank you. I’m very grateful, Mr. Dietmar ... But ... Allow me to see my wife ... Now ... To support her ... She looked terrible ... I want her to know that everything is all right ... That you intervened ... And if the birth ...”

“But what for?” Dietmar asked him.” There’s nothing that either you or I can change about that. If a healthy child is born, then good. There are people at the maternity home to congratulate the mother in the name of the Party.”

“But ... But what if ... Oh damn it ... What if, God forbid ...”

“And if it’s a freak ... Quiet, now, quiet ... Then we have a wonderful maternity home, as you said yourself. General anesthetic. And when she wakes up, it will all have been done. And the little child won’t even feel a thing, believe me. They’re all professionals there. The same anesthetic, only a different dose. Everything humane. One snip and it’s done.

“Of course ... Yes, I understand ...” Ilya Stepanovich was ashen-faced.” It’s just that it happened so soon. Her contractions. She was so anxious, my Narine. I thought there would still be time.”

“And there still will be time, Ilya Stepanovich!” The Unter tightened his grip on the teacher.” What a good time there will be! So there’s absolutely nothing for you to do in the maternity home. That’s all. They’ll give you paper and a pencil. And I’ll be keeping my fingers crossed for you!” He shoved the dumbstruck teacher towards one of the guards.” Allocate this gentleman space in my office.”

“No One Will Stop Us! When We Carry Out! Our Sacred Duty!”

“Where are we going?” Artyom asked in alarm after they had walked almost all the way through the station; it ended at the steps of a pedestrian passage with sentries on guard.

“Well, you need to deliver this dispatch of yours, don’t you?” Dietmar looked round at him.” What’s in it, by the way? An ultimatum? A plea? A proposal to divide Teatralnaya among the interested parties?”

“I don’t know,” said Artyom.

“The Order, eh? Fool that I am, I ought to have guessed exactly what you were doing at Polis, Stalker.”

“We Shall Always Stand Up For The Rights Of Noncombatant Civilians! We Shall Take Teatralnaya Under Our Protection! We Shall Protect It Against The Hordes Of The Freaks!”

“Who is Bessolov?”

“You mean you really don’t have a clue what it is that you want to deliver to the Führer?”

“That’s none of my business. I’m simply carrying out an order.”

“I like you more and more. I’d even say that you’re my ideal,” Dietmar laughed.” Tell a man to blow up a passage—and he blows up a passage. Tell him to deliver an envelope containing God only knows what from God only knows whom—and he does it. Tell him to stick his balls in a press and he can’t refuse to do that either! I wish I had more like you!”

“And We Are Prepared To Pay Any Price For The Right To Be Called Human!”

“Is Homer alive?” Artyom asked Dietmar.” What’s happened to my old man? Where is he?”

“He’s alive. And waiting for you,” Dietmar reassured him.

“I want to collect him first.”

“Predictable. That’s why we’re going to him now. Another good thing about you, Stalker, is your predictability. It’s a real pleasure working with such people.”

The sentries ground their heels together, and the commander of the watch threw out his arm, afraid even

to look Dietmar in the eye. They started walking up the beveled steps.

“You ... Why do you wear those shoulder straps? You’re no Unteroffizier are you? Who are you?”

“Me? An engineer of human souls!” Dietmar winked at him.” And a bit of a magician.”

The passage was used as a barracks. The last time Artyom and Homer had not been allowed in here. There were rows of bunks. Orderlies saluted. The Führer glowered down from posters. The standards of the Iron Legion hung down from the ceiling: a gray fist and a black, three-fingered swastika. Loudspeakers grew out of the walls like mushrooms, trying to outshout each other:

“There Is No Way Back! And We Shall Not Retreat! For The Sake Of Your Future, For The Sake Of Our Future! For The Sake Of Our Children’s Future! For The Sake Of The Future Of Mankind!”

“What are you counting on with this little envelope?” Dietmar chuckled.” The train has already set off. You can’t stop it, even if you throw yourself on the tracks. Teatralnaya is going to be ours. And Revolution Square will be too. The Reds won’t be able to do a thing. They have their own hunger revolts to suppress as it is. Half the mushrooms rotted because of that dry mold. It’s spreading like wildfire.”

“Who is Bessolov?” Artyom repeated, wondering who Miller would accept orders from.

“I have no idea.”

“Then why is a letter from some Bessolov more important than a letter from Miller?”

“It’s not a letter from some Bessolov that’s more important to me, Stalker. You’re more important.”

The barracks came to an end, and there were heaps of fortifications: hedgehogs, barbed wire, black machine guns with their barrels pointing forward in the direction in which Dietmar was leading Artyom. Guard dogs started barking, mimicking the Führer, and then, mingling with their ragged verse, there came a man’s groan—a groan with which the life was probably departing from someone’s body. Pushkin Station, Artyom realized: Dietmar was taking him to Pushkin Station.

“Is he there? At Pushkin? You promised not to touch him!”

They stopped at a brick wall that ran up to the ceiling, with an iron door in it. Dietmar dismissed the guard with his index finger. He took out a tobacco pouch; extracted some cut newspaper out of one pocket; sprinkled dried stuff onto the whimsical, black letters; licked the paper and rolled it up.

“Here, you have a smoke too.”

Artyom didn’t disdain the offer. His soul had begged for poison back in Miller’s office, but Miller had begrudged Artyom one final cigarette before discarding him forever, and now Dietmar had made the offer himself.

The Unter leaned against the wall, propped his head back, and looked at the ceiling.

“If our teacher’s Armenian woman has a freak, what do you think, will he write our book for us?”

“If you kill it? The child?”

“If we put it to sleep. Do you think he won’t praise us in his little book?”

“No, he won’t,” Artyom replied.” He couldn’t be such a bastard.”

“Well now ...” Dietmar screwed up his eyes and blew out smoke.” But I think he will. I think the Armenian girl will feel bad about it and she’ll rail at our Ilya Stepanovich, but then he’ll convince her that it’s all right and good. That they just have to try again. And he’ll sit down to write his book about the Reich, and then we’ll publish it in an edition of ten thousand, so that everyone in the Metro who can read will read it. And the others will learn to read from it. And everyone will know Ilya Stepanovich’s name. And for that Ilya Stepanovich will forgive us for putting his little baby to sleep.”

“For ten thousand books? He’ll surprise you yet.” Artyom smiled crookedly at Dietmar.” He’ll flee from the station, maybe even make an assassination attempt. That kind of thing can’t be forgiven.”

“It can’t be forgiven, but it can be forgotten. Everyone comes to terms with himself. People rarely surprise me, stalker. A man is arranged fairly simply. Everyone has the same gear-wheels in their head. Here’s the desire to live a bit better, here’s the fear, and here’s the sense of guilt. And those are all the gear-wheels a human being has. Tempt the greedy, wear down the fearless with guilt, intimidate the ones

with no conscience. Take you. Why the hell did you show up here again? You knew you were risking your neck. Ah, but you've got a conscience. You're anxious about your old man. You blew up the passage because you've got a conscience! And now there's the hook. I can see it sticking out!" Dietmar touched Artyom's cheek with a finger smelling of cigarette smoke, and Artyom jerked it away." You swallowed it. And now you're stuck with me, aren't you? After all, you betrayed your Order. You cozied up to the enemy. Your friends are there outside, waiting for you. They think you're their man. But you're not. You're mine.

Artyom even forgot to smoke. The roll-up went out.

"Your tobacco's shit," he told Dietmar.

"Ah, but when the Reich is victorious throughout the Metro, everyone will have excellent tobacco!"

Dietmar promised him." All right. Let's go to see Homer Ivanich."

He winked at the sentry. A bolt one meter long with a massively heavy lock on it moved aside, and they were let into Schiller Station.

* * *

Artyom remembered the station as Pushkin: as white and marble-faced as Chekhov next door, even though it was besmirched with hatred for non-Russians. At Pushkin they had showed him to the crowd and explained why he had been condemned to the scaffold: for killing a fascist officer. Artyom had killed the officer quite simply—pointed his automatic at him and squeezed the trigger; it was a spasm of his finger. The spasm cramped his finger when the officer put a bullet through the head of a young boy with Down syndrome. Forgivable. Artyom was young and impressionable. Now he would probably put up with it and turn away. Turn away? He would try to turn away. That tickling in his throat from the noose was far too strong.

But now they weren't at Pushkin; this was Schiller.

They were nowhere.

The entire station had been taken apart and stripped. Not a single slab of marble was left; it had all been torn off and carried away. There was naked, scraped concrete; there were mounds of earth and rivers of mud, antiquated wooden props; instead of air, there was a fine spray of mist mixed with cement dust—and that made the air concrete too. Searchlights lashed through the vapors, and their beams were visible from beginning to end, like immense clubs.

These clubs drubbed at the backs and faces of hideous, naked people—some concealed their privates with a piece of rag, others didn't bother; they were all stamped with black, all dripping blood. The ones who were men were overgrown with stubble right up to their eyes. The ones who were women seemed to have no eyes behind their tangled hair. But they were all normal, with two arms and two legs. And only the youngsters were warped and distorted. Twisted spines, fingers fused together, flattened heads; some one-eyed cyclopes, and some with two heads, and some thick-furred like animals. Freaks.

No one was wearing any clothes. There were the naked, and the ones in uniforms.

The automatic riflemen wore respirators: This was bad for the health otherwise. The respirators looked like muzzles, as if without them the guards might fling themselves on the naked prisoners and gnaw on them with their teeth. But the muzzles meant they had to deal with them differently: with chains and whips of barbed wire. And they filled the air with the roaring that Artyom had heard from behind the wall, from the teacher's toilet.

But the most terrifying thing about the station was that there was no end to it. In all directions, these naked beast-humans were scrabbling dirt out of it—with pickaxes, spades, hammers, and fingernails—desperately scrabbling at the earth and the stone, gnawing out emptiness to the left and the right, upwards and downwards. Schiller Station was already the most cavernous station that Artyom had ever been in; and it was expanding with every minute.

"You use them as slaves?" Artyom asked.

“Why not? More humane than simply liquidating them, isn’t it? Let them do something useful! We’re expanding our living space. Such a huge flood of volunteers from all over the Metro, and nowhere to accommodate them,” Dietmar explained to him, straining to shout over the roaring of the freaks. When the reconstruction work is finished, there’ll be a garden city here! The largest station in the entire Metro! The capital of the Reich! A cinema, a sports hall, a library, and a hospital!”

“So is this where your Führer got his idea about the freaks? So he could have slavery? Not even a quarter of these are freaks!”

“But it’s not up to you, stalker, to decide who’s a freak and who isn’t! The Führer is a genius. It’s stupid to persecute people because they’re Armenians! Or Jews! That has zero effect. If a man was born a Jew, there’s nothing that can be done about it. With some, it’s even written on their faces. Jew. Chechen. Kazakh. And that’s it! He’s your target, he’s your enemy, and he’ll never be loyal to you. But if someone is Russian, does he have immunity now? Is he a chosen one, simply by the fact of birth? Is he free to do whatever he likes? Maybe he has nothing at all to be afraid of now? That doesn’t make sense. But genetic deformity, now? Now that’s a horse of an entirely different color. And mutations! Deformity’s a tricky business. You’re born healthy, and then a tumor starts developing! Or goiter! Or other abnormalities! And perhaps they can’t be seen with the naked eye at all. Only a doctor can say for certain! And so every bastard has to tremble in fear and shit himself when he goes to the doctor for a checkup. And the doctor has to tremble in fear too. And decide in consultation with us, the concilium, who is a freak and who isn’t. And no one can be certain of anything. Ever. And right through his entire life—you understand that?—he has to justify his existence. And vindicate ours. That’s really beautiful! Eh? Incredibly beautiful!”

He set his hand on Artyom’s shoulder. The mole on the bridge of his nose became a third eye, granted to him, as a demon, to allow him to see more clearly into the rotten, soft innards of human beings.

“Where is he? Where’s Homer?” Artyom shouted at him.

“Give me the envelope!”

“We had an agreement!”

A sudden shower of sparks—Artyom’s teeth crunched, and the cave heeled over to one side: Dietmar had swung and smashed the butt of his pistol into Artyom’s face, right against the cheekbone. Then he adjusted his grip on the gun and pressed the barrel against Artyom’s forehead: a lethal pistol, a Stechkin.

“Do you want me to take it off your body?”

Artyom took a step back, wondering how he could manage to destroy the dispatch, but there were guards waiting behind him. They twisted his arms and threw him down, bending him over with his face to the dirt, and tore the envelope out of his hands. They handed it carefully to Dietmar, who twisted it in his fingers, tried to fold it, and looked at it against the powerful beam of a searchlight.

“Photographs, I think,” he said, squatting down beside Artyom.” That’s curious. Photographs that stopped a war. That’s beautiful, eh?”

He put it in his inside pocket.

“They must be damned good photographs. And the Führer must really like them, if no one else is supposed to see them. Right? Who could resist the temptation to take just a little peep at something like that? You, for instance—aren’t you interested?”

“Where’s Homer?”

“He’s here somewhere. Look for him. I don’t have any time for that. I have to get to Teatralnaya. Humanitarian aid, identifying agents ... You stay here for a while. Get used to the place ... Do a bit of work.”

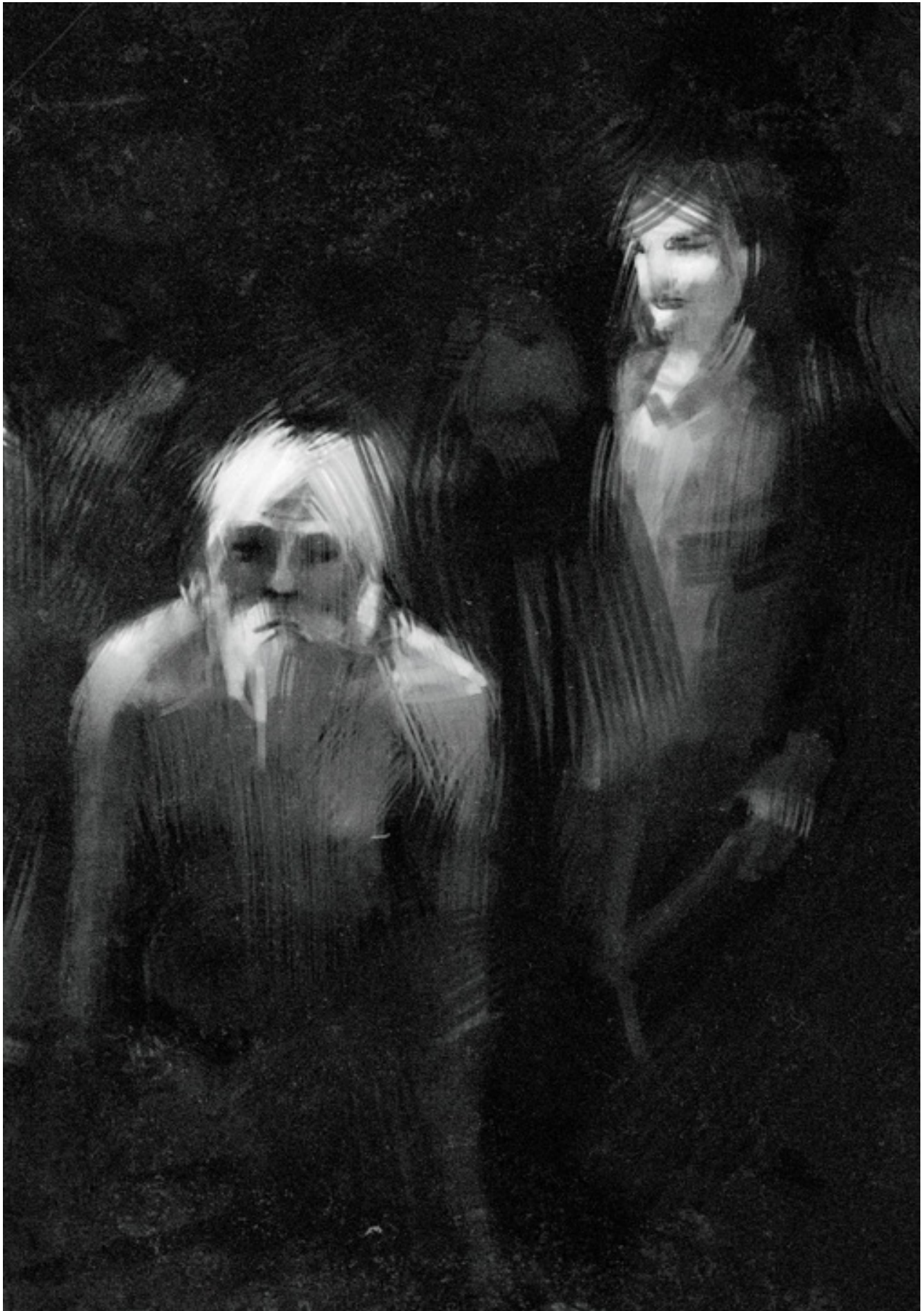
“They won’t abandon me! Letyaga! And the Order! They’re waiting for me. You’re all done for here! Do you hear me, you scumbag? You lousy bastard? Do you hear me, you dirtbag?”

Artyom tried to jump up, but the guards were well-fed and experienced, and they were holding him tight, so he stayed down on all fours with his face in the dirt.

Before he got up from his squatting position, Dietmar stroked Artyom on the head.

“They’re waiting. Yes, they’re definitely waiting, aren’t they? And now I’ll go and tell them whose little man you are.”

And he gave Artyom an affectionate slap on the backside.



CHAPTER 13

— LIVING SPACE —

He thought the day would come after he had worked through the night; but here there was neither night nor day, and there was only one shift: from the beginning to the end. They gave them water from a hose, counting the swallows; saving water wasn't allowed. There weren't any privies. All the tunnels apart from one were completely blocked off with barbed wire, intertwined like cobwebs. It was impossible to run; there was nowhere even to crawl. The beast-people crapped where they stood, without interrupting their work: men in front of women and women in front of men; new arrivals learned to do this during their first day. They were taught with barbed wire whips. They were killed without compassion, as a matter of course: the ones who didn't want to work, the ones who were dying anyway and couldn't work, and the ones who tried to be cunning and pretended to be dead already. Workers weren't spared—new ones were brought twice a day, they had to eat too, and the amount of food wasn't increased.

Every time the iron door opened and the dumbfounded new arrivals were dragged and shoved into the boundless cave of Schiller Station, Artyom's guts twisted: Now Dietmar would come in. Artyom's deception would be discovered at any moment: The Reds would send soldiers to Teatralnaya from Okhotny Ryad through the demolished hermetic gates and the upper vestibule. The blitzkrieg would turn into a war of position, and Dietmar would come back to hang Artyom for treachery.

When would he come? Soon?

They felt Artyom's body, determined that he still had a lot of strength in him, and gave him a barrow to push. He had to collect from the bearded scrabblers everything that they had scraped and broken off, fling it into the barrow, and transport it into an open tunnel, which led to Kuznetsky Most. A flooring of planks had been laid over the sleepers. He could run something like three hundred meters along it and then dump the earth and stone on a heap that already rose right up to the ceiling.

Artyom had a good job—he realized that immediately. They didn't hobble his feet, and he wasn't made to stand till in one spot, he had to walk round the others, looking to see who had accumulated the most soil and rock. Unfortunately, there was nowhere to run. But on the other hand, he did manage to find Homer.

The old man had only spent half a day here, and he was still clothed; but he had already understood what he was allowed to do and what he wasn't. He couldn't slack off or shirk. He couldn't look into anyone's eyes, no matter who he was talking to. But if you spoke to someone without looking at them, that was forgiven: In this factory of bodies and earth it was impossible to hear anything more than one step away in any case.

Homer might be old, but he was bearing up. He wasn't groaning and he wasn't weeping. He struck intently at the ground, not quickly and not slowly, but in no hurry to exhaust his strength. He was soaking wet and smeared with earth, his shoulders were ripped open and stained reddish-brown, and his lips were bitten.

"I came to get you, NikolaI Ivanovich," Artyom said, looking past Homer." And now we'll probably both end up staying here."

"Thanks. You shouldn't. Have bothered," Homer gasped back in time with his blows." That. Two-faced. Bastard. Scumbag. Won't let. Anyone. Out."

"We'll get out of here somehow," Artyom promised him.

Their conversation proceeded scrappily: Artyom couldn't keep going back to the same corner too often; the overseers spotted that sort of thing and lashed people with their whips for it. The whips were springy steel wire, with barbs protruding from them in all directions. Some bit into the flesh when they struck, others when they were tugged away.

“How. About you. Were you. At Teatralnaya.”

“I was.”

“Did you. See Umbach.”

“The Reds arrested him. Someone ratted. Because he. Listened to the radio. They took him and shot him. In front of me. I didn’t. Get a chance. To talk.”

“A pity. Really. A good. Man.”

He collected Homer’s lumps of stone. Then he took a mound of earth from a hunchback at the other end of the station. Then he helped a woman with flabby breasts get up before the overseer could spot her through the stone mist. Then he went back to Homer.

“Umbach wasn’t alone. Others had been in touch. People came to Moscow from a different city, from Polar Dawns, probably.”

“People. Right. People. You say. Where are they? I didn’t meet any.”

“The Reds find everyone and waste them. Shoot them, send them to the Lubyanka, to the KGB. The ones who come, the ones who see them and the ones who hear about them.”

“Maybe. They’re afraid. They’ll help Hansa. Against. Them.”

Artyom took a new load of stones from Homer. Then he ran over to a young guy who was slow, lopsided, and short of fingers, to collect up his scrapings. And then to a skinny Caucasian type, who had flung together an entire mountain in his vicious determination not to croak. Through the haze Artyom thought he saw something familiar, but he didn’t have any reason to go closer.

“So do you believe me? I told Miller, Miller doesn’t believe it. He says it’s crazy nonsense.”

“I heard. Umbach myself. I believe him. I don’t understand it. But I believe him.”

“Thanks, granddad, Thank you.”

“Or. It’s spies. Someone’s. Agents. Eh.”

“I don’t know.”

He cleaned everything up and ran on. Someone waved to him: Come and take my load. An unexpected joy: It was Lyokha the broker. Exhausted and flogged, but smiling.

“So you’ve joined us too!”

“You, alive?” And Artyom smiled at him sincerely, feeling a little better.

“I’m too valuable an employee to be made redundant,” the broker croaked

“So it didn’t work out with the Legion?”

“No, it didn’t!” Glancing round stealthily, Lyokha helped Artyom tip earth into the trolley.” Probably just not my thing. No getting away from your true calling.” He nodded at the dried-up heaps.

An overseer darted over and lashed Artyom and Lyokha for talking.

Artyom pulled his head down into his shoulders to protect it. He ran into the tunnel, tipped out the barrow, came back and looked round: A guard called him over to the woman that Artyom had lifted up of the floor so that she would live a little bit longer. But she had only held up for a little while and then fallen again. They shone a torch in her eyes, but she still saw nothing but darkness. One guard moved Artyom aside with his automatic rifle; another took a firm grip on a steel reinforcement bar, took aim, and split the woman’s head open, smashing it like an egg. Artyom forgot about the automatic and darted forward, taking the reinforcing bar across his shoulder, the gun butt to his chin, and the kicks from boots when he fell. A damp, iron gun barrel was stuck in his mouth, and its foresight scraped his palate.

“Want to try that again, bastard? Do you? Get up!”

They stood him on his feet and dumped that woman in his barrow.” Take her.”

“Where to?”

They smacked him round the back of his head and sent her off on her final journey. The dead went to the same place as the rocks and soil. The woman was uncomfortable in the barrow: Her legs dangled out, and her broken head lolled to one side. Just hang on for a moment.

The first time round they had showed him what to do with cases like this. The dead had to be taken along the planking floor to the mountain of earth blocking off the tunnel to Kuznetsky Most. And then dumped on a mound there, along with the rocks and stones. The mound sometimes slipped down, clothing the naked bodies, filling their mouths and ears with clay and sand. This was their funeral.

After that Artyom didn't try to approach Homer or Lyokha: The overseers had spotted him. Instead of Homer there were various others who were still strong and some who were already exhausted: Kirgizes and Russians, Russians and Azerbaijanis, Azerbaijanis and Tajiks. They all gave Artyom their stones, and they all took his strength. Soon the minute that he took to load the barrow was no longer enough for his legs to rest, and the minute when he ran with the barrow was no longer enough for his arms to recover. He kept looking round when the door creaked: Was it Dietmar? had he come for Artyom?

He stuck it out until he started to fall. Then he went back to his old man. Homer was waiting for him, completely exhausted too.

"Why. The Reds. Why doesn't. Anyone know. But them."

"Maybe they don't let anyone find out? Do you think they're in contact with Dawns? And they're keeping it secret?"

"They're lying. To Dawns. Holding. Talks. Eh?"

"Talks about what?"

"God only. Knows what. The Reds. Want."

"They've got famine ... The mushrooms are rotting. Maybe they want food supplies. Eh? If so, the earth there ... is fertile!"

"Sure. Pull the other one."

An overseer walked past and whistled: You and you and you and you, eat quickly, it's your turn. They brought a trough of swill and told them to scoop it up with their hands. Artyom couldn't even bear the smell of it, although the others champed and slurped for as long as they could.

But at least Homer was fed on this shift, so they had ten minutes without a pick and a barrow.

"I've been up on top. So far I've walked along Tverskaya Street to Teatralnaya. And up there ... someone's hunting everyone who walks along Tverskaya Street. With a genuine armored car and a motorbike. They killed four of their stalkers. And they were going to finish me ... For some reason they didn't touch me. But they found me quickly."

Homer shrugged. Then he folded his fingers into a cup, scooped up some gruel, sniffed it, and thought.

"And then I walked back ... And there was no one there. I got to Polis. Without a suit, not dressed. And you know what? I got caught in the rain."

"In the rain?" the old man asked, looking up.

"In the rain," Artyom chuckled.

On all sides people jostled and pushed their way through to the trough like swine. Artyom didn't see it. Instead he saw tall, slim people in wide-brimmed hats; he saw rain falling from a cloudless sky and those slow flying machines again.

"What an idiot," he said to himself. "Just imagine it! Walking along in the rain and imagining something like that ... Like an airship, or something. Only with transparent wings. Like flies have, only big ones. Like dragonflies. And all in such bright ... Festive colors. And the rain as well. I dreamed it." He lowered his voice in embarrassment: the beast-people were eating; he mustn't distract them with nonsense like this.

But the beast-people couldn't give a shit for Artyom's dreams; their trough was getting shallower, and they still had to live here for some time yet, and without the slops, there was absolutely no way they could possibly do that.

But Homer was listening. Listening and not eating.

"But those carriages ... the little ones ..." He coughed to clear his throat. "Instead of cars. On the

roads ...”

“Yes,” Artyom confirmed, perplexed. “With four places.”

“Did you see them? Did you see that? up there? On the surface?”

“I saw it. As if I was remembering a dream, you know? But you ... How do you know?”

“That’s out of my book. Out of the notebook. It’s written in the notebook!” Homer screwed his eyes up, examining Artyom and blinking, trying to understand if this was some kind of mockery.

“Did you take it? My notebook? And read it? When?”

“I didn’t take it. And where is it anyway?”

“They confiscated it. Immediately. That Dietmar. My documents, the notebook. Everything. But what do you mean, you didn’t read it? How else could you know?”

“I told you, it was a dream!”

“It’s not your dream, Artyom. It isn’t even a dream.”

“What?”

“I told you about that girl. About Sasha. The one from Tula ... She was drowned. At a flooded station.”

“Something ... Yes, I remember something. When we got addled at TsvetnoI Boulevard.”

“Yes ... That Sasha ... It’s hers. That’s the way she pictured the world up on the surface. She was born in the Metro; she’d never been up on top. So that was her stupid ... Her own naïve way.”

“Sasha? With white hair, you said?” Artyom’s head started spinning, and the world swayed as if it was caught in a wave of hot air. He rubbed his temples. His head was splitting.

“Eat. Why aren’t you eating?” a man with a swollen belly told him wearily as he dropped back from the trough: His beard was matted, and there was dark water streaming down it.” Enough of that idle chatter. They only feed us once a day!”

He strained and gave a long, drawn-out fart. Then he lay down on his back and started staring up at the ceiling. He’d done what he could to save Artyom. But Artyom couldn’t even glance into that trough today—he felt sick immediately.

“With white hair. She’s about eighteen ... How do you know? How do you know?” Homer stood up too, with his hands on his waist.

“I don’t understand. I don’t remember how, where from. But I saw all of it myself. I can picture it to myself ... With my own eyes.” Artyom raised his hand as if he wanted to catch a toy plane flying past him.

“You took it. My notebook. You took it!” the old man said angrily, absolutely convinced. “It couldn’t be anything else. Why are you lying to me now?”

“I didn’t take your fucking notebook!” Artyom yelled furiously. “What the hell would I want with you and your damn chronicles?”

“You’re making fun of me, right? You asshole!”

Artyom grabbed hold of his barrow without even waiting for the whistle. Afterwards he regretted it. While there was still time to regret it.

But then routine took over, things grew together: load, run, unload. Stone, earth, a dead body. One thing on top of another, one thing underneath another. His arms and legs first caught fire, and then fell silent, then turned weak and came to a halt. Then more life appeared in them from somewhere deep down on the bottom, and now through the dull aching pain, they jerked, lifted, lowered, walked and dragged the time along.

He started falling asleep as he moved—he hadn’t slept for twenty-four hours—and they roused him with steel thorns. He tried to help those who fell, and they drove him away with chains. He stopped turning round and reacting when the door rumbled—he had already forgotten about Dietmar. He didn’t want to know about him; he didn’t want to hear the whining, miserable beast-people, to hear their stories about how they had ended up in here, who was punished for what kind of deformity. Some of them only

mumbled anyway—not to Artyom, but to everybody there, so that everybody there would know a little bit about them and remember them when they died here and were covered over by the advancing bank of earth. And he had no more wits left to construct lines and chains from the shot radio operator to the KGB man Svinolup, from the loose-mouthed Zuev to the Lubyanka, from Miller to some Bessolov or other, from Bessolov to the Führer, from the Führer to Dietmar. None of this came together; none of it made any kind of meaning.

Instead of connections drawn in by an invisible pencil, instead of a dusty slaughterhouse, instead of troughs filled with slops, Artyom summoned the slow-moving planes into the concrete air and built houses reaching up to the sky in the cave. Those planes allowed him to wait for the “lights out” signal; they evacuated him into the world that the drowned girl had imagined for herself. But no, he had seen it all for himself, definitely. With his own eyes. But when? How?

The signal for “lights out” came after all.

They were prodded into the corner and heaped up onto each other. Artyom fell asleep, expecting to see that city. Sasha’s city. But he saw cells, Svinolup arisen from his ashes, and himself fleeing. Only in the dream he didn’t run along a straight corridor to freedom, but through an enchanted maze that had no exit.

And after that the dream ended and the whistle of the new shift sounded.

It was still day, or was it night—twenty-four hours during which Artyom had learned to slurp the swill together with everyone without getting sick; during which he hadn’t gone over first to the old man when he was hurt; during which he had stopped counting the barrows of earth and the barrows with dead bodies.

His clothes were all ripped and tattered by barbed wire; the scratches from the thorns constantly oozed a red liquid, and the liquid kept getting more and more transparent, more and more futile and useless. The group A, rhesus negative, flowed out like diluted compote. There was no one to compensate for it, to fill Artyom up with fluid of his own. Letyaga had obviously gone on standing there, catching those spots of light on his hands, until he turned away and went tramping back. He couldn’t do anything without orders. And there could only be one order about Artyom from Miller: Scratch him off the list. And Dietmar hadn’t come for him. hadn’t taken him off to be hanged. He was busy at the front.

Artyom had neither rescue nor execution coming to him.

Then he ran through another day and night.

He took away Homer’s stones without speaking, and Homer let him have them without speaking. NikolaI Ivanovich looked bad: He had turned yellow and was swaying on his feet. Artyom would have felt sorry for him, but the old man wouldn’t allow it. He was offended about the chronicle, and because Artyom had given him hope.

He forced himself to talk with the exhausted Lyokha: How were they building this vast hall, who was directing the workers, who told them to take the tunnel liners apart? Lyokha pointed to a slant-eyed individual: That’s Farukh. He built Moscow City. He has his own people, Abdurahim and Ali, and they’ve been trusted with the job. They couldn’t find any other specialists. Farukh strode around everywhere with his assistants, and with no shackles, full of himself. But he too scooped the swill out of the common trough with his own hands. He guided the construction work confidently, deciding who should dig, who should mix cement, who should put up props.

“We’ve got to escape,” Artyom told the broker.” Otherwise we’ll croak.”

“Croaking is the surest way to escape from here,” the broker said with a feeble smile.

“Well, you go first then.” Artyom laughed with half his face.” To scout out the way.”

On the fourth day Dietmar still didn’t come; and Letyaga didn’t come either. And Artyom had no strength left even to think about escaping. But he definitely wanted to keep on living for a while, and the desire became more desperate with every hour. Not in order to get his business done, take revenge, find out the truth and see his nearest and dearest, but simply to live for a little while.

For this Artyom learned not to acquire fresh wounds from the barbed wire. The repulsive taste of the

swill made him feel sick to the stomach, but he forced himself to keep going back to the trough, in order to draw at least a little bit of strength from it. He learned how to work so that he didn't see anything around him apart from the dragonfly airplanes.

But his blindness came at a price. When people lying beside you have their heads broken open and you say nothing, then what is left unsaid accumulates, turns sour and rots. When they lashed him with the metal thorns, the purulence in his soul flowed out together with the pain and the blood. But when his wounds began drying up and growing over with scabs, Artyom started fermenting on the inside.

"Lights out" sounded, but he couldn't get to sleep: He tossed and turned, scratching at his scabs, opening them up.

Scabs.

And the sleeplessness, and the sweltering heat, and the excessive corporeal closeness with other people, like being in a ditch with dead bodies, set him drifting. Who was it that had spoken to him about scabs? Who had wanted to wash those scabs off him? Eh?

His head was lying on some woman's knees. See how this person is overgrown with some kind of scabs, isn't he? Better be gentle with him, baby ... Everything was blurred, as if he was looking through dirty polythene. But no—it wasn't a dream. It was true. His head really was lying on her knees ... The girl's knees. He looked up into her eyes and she looked down at him, leaning over. From below her breasts looked like white little half-moons. She was naked. And Artyom was naked. He turned his head and kissed her on her soft, hollow stomach. There were crimson marks there. Like dots. Cigarette burns. Old ones. The traces of lazy torture. He kissed her on that burn. That spot was more tender, more vulnerable. Thank you, Sasha. She touched his hair with her fingers and moved her hand, stroking, and the hair was soft, but as soon as her fingers moved on, it straightened up stubbornly. Her smile was abstracted. Everything was drifting. Close your eyes. Do you know how I used to imagine the world up on the surface?

On the next shift Artyom kept looking round to see when Homer would finally accumulate enough stone: He couldn't wait to tell him, to share this with him, bring him this joy—and to justify himself.

But the old man worked very slowly, as if he was in no hurry at all. He had become scraggy, and his skin hung loose on him; the gaze of his eyes wandered. Homer struck at the wall sparingly. The pieces that broke off it were small, and mostly he just left scratches on it.

And then, before he'd gathered enough stone, he suddenly sat down on the ground.

He leaned back against the wall, stretched out his legs, and closed his eyes.

Artyom noticed first, before the overseers, and he tossed a stone at Lyokha: Distract them. He loaded the dried-out old man in his barrow and trundled him off towards the tunnel, as if to bury him, but dumped him with the sleepers. Then he took a dose of the whip for walking along with an empty barrow, but not for the old man.

Artyom asked God not to write the old man off yet. He had asked for a lot this last week—how could he pay everything back? But this time he was allowed to extend his credit. Homer didn't die: He woke up at the whistle along with the other shift.

Artyom managed to meet him at the trough. He was impatient to talk to him.

"Listen, granddad! I've remembered. I've remembered where those planes got into my head."

"Eh?" The old man was still stunned.

"That time on Tsvetnoi Boulevard. When you got me drunk. I think I saw her. Right there in front of my eyes, you know. It's kind of vague. Only ... You won't be angry with me, will you?"

"You saw her?"

"I saw her. There, at Tsvetnoi. It was her who told me everything. Your notebook had nothing to do with it. Honestly."

"She was at Tsvetnoi? How ... ? What was she ... ?"

“A girl. With white hair. Frail. Sasha. Sashenka.”

“You’re not lying now, are you?” The old man’s voice had turned weak. He wanted to believe Artyom; he was trying.

“I’m not lying. I’m not mocking you,” Artyom replied firmly.

“Alive? But you ... You ate that garbage there ... It gives you all sorts of ...”

“I saw her. I talked to her. I remember it. I’ve just remembered.”

“Wait. Sasha? My Sasha. In that hellhole? In a whorehouse? What was ... What was she doing? Did you see how ... What she was doing?”

“Nothing, granddad. She was ... She was just fine. A week ago she was alive.”

“But how could she ... How did she get out? How is she?”

“I got them from her. Those pictures. The planes and the rain. She said, ‘Close your eyes and imagine ... ’”

“But in a whorehouse. Why was she in a whorehouse?”

“Calm down ... Calm down, granddad. You mustn’t get so ... upset. She’s in a whorehouse, but just look where the two of us are ... See. Perhaps a whorehouse isn’t the worst place to be.”

“We have to get her out. We’ve got to get here out of that place.”

“We’ll do that, Granddad. We’ll definitely get her out. If only someone gets us out. Sit down, sit down. What have you jumped up for?”

Sasha had given Homer strength, and hope had deceived his body. But the deception didn’t last for long. The old man waved his pick feebly, and he wasn’t the one controlling his tool now; it was controlling Homer, setting him swaying. He and Artyom never had anywhere to escape to from the station anyway—but now it was just impossible.

Asking the guards to spare Homer would have been to condemn him to immediate death. There was only one thing delaying the execution: The arrival of new workers had been disrupted, and the overseers had become more condescending to the old ones. And so Homer held out for another day.

Then they came for him.

* * *

“Nikolaev!” someone shouted through a megaphone from the door. “NikolaI Nikolaev!”

Homer pulled his head down into his shoulders and started striking more rapidly with the pick in order to grind out his norm before he was shot.

Artyom crept towards the door with his barrow to scout things out; standing there in the doorway, backed up by men with automatic rifles and gazing round with an air of fright and revulsion was the teacher Ilya Stepanovich, looking a bit puffy-faced, but unhurt, and in uniform. He raised the megaphone to his beard and called again:

“Nikolaev! Homer!”

Then the guard remembered, took a closer look, and dragged the old man over to Ilya Stepanovich. The teacher walked down one step, and then a second. He mumbled something into the old man’s dirty ear, wincing at the stink. Homer didn’t look at him, but down at the floor. Artyom received a lash of the whip for his pensive pause and curiosity and had to move on. Ilya Stepanovich stood there for a while, then gestured despairingly at NikolaI Nikolaev with his clean hand and left.

“What did he want?” Artyom asked the old man, seizing his moment at the trough.

“He wanted to take me out. He sat down to write his book, but it won’t come. They gave him everything he needs ... A separate study. Special rations. But no. He says he’s read my notebook. And he wants me to help him. Give him pointers. He’ll get me out of here for good.”

“Go on! Agree!”

“Agree to what? To write his book?”

“What difference does that make to you? You’ll croak in here!”

“Write him a book about the glory of the Reich in my own words?”

“This way there won’t be any kind of book! You’ll be gone and there’ll be nothing left after you!”

Homer sucked in his gruel and swallowed; the taste was all right, more or less like life.

“I told him I won’t go without you.”

“Yes you will, granddad! Go!”

“He can’t do that. He only got permission for one man to help; he says they won’t let him have two.”

“But what ... What about Dietmar?”

“Dietmar’s been killed. At Teatralnaya. The Reds broke through somehow and killed him. And lots of others too. That very day. Now the teacher works directly for the Führer. He liked the little idea of a book.”

Dietmar’s been killed.

Artyom was suddenly suspended in the void of a tunnel.

Now there was no one here who knew him or remembered him: He wasn’t a hostage, a prisoner or a double agent any longer—he was a nameless freak, a disposable slave. There was no point in waiting for anything any longer, nothing left to be afraid of, no straws to clutch at. He was lost here, in this boundless living space, and there was no one to look for him. He’d taken all the strength out of himself and put it into the tunnel: The tunnel was stuffed full of Artyom’s strength, like a length of gut, but Artyom’s energy was dwindling; he was getting weak. He couldn’t eat a thing; he had a rusty taste in his mouth and a ringing sound in his ears. A man, damn the bastard, was an exhaustible resource. And now it looked like the end of Artyom’s tunnel was looming into view.

“Go on, granddad. Go anyway.”

“How can I leave you? You came here to get me.”

“This way at least there’s some hope. They don’t need me anymore. But now they do need at least one of us. If you die, then I’ll die too, that’s for sure. Ask them to bring the teacher back. And go with him.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then how are you going to get that girl of yours out, if you kick the bucket? I’m sorry, but you don’t have much time left. You can barely stay on your feet! Well?”

“I can’t.”

But that night, before “lights out,” after they had trundled away the man with the swollen goiter who worked next to Homer in order to pile up stones over him, the old man finally scraped together enough fragments for Artyom to go over to him.

“If I agreed, then ... I could get fixed up there somehow and then try to rescue you too, couldn’t I?”

“Of course!” said Artyom. “That’s what I’ve been talking about!”

“You think I should ask ...”

“Ask!”

“But will you hold out? How long can you hold out?”

“As long as I have to, granddad!” Artyom promised as convincingly as he could. “You wait here. I’ll go and get the guard.”

After that, while they were waiting for the teacher—the overseers were wary of crippling Homer now, and a little of his immunity had rubbed off on Artyom—they had time to say a few more things to each other.

“It’s good you’re getting out, granddad. It’s good that you’re going to write. You probably won’t just write his book, you’ll carry on with your own too, right?”

“I don’t know.”

“You will. For sure. It’s right that people should leave something behind them in this world. That was a good idea of yours.”

“Drop that.”

“No, listen ... I can’t tell you everything here now ... I just wanted to tell you about the Dark Ones, the most important things. You were going to write about them in your book, weren’t you?”

“What about them?”

“The Dark Ones, granddad ... They weren’t what we thought ... They weren’t demons, they weren’t a threat to everything. They were our only salvation. And another thing ... I was the one who opened the gates into the Metro for them. I was still little then. There was this one day from my childhood that I just couldn’t forget ... And so ...”

And so, when he goaded Vitalik and Zhenka, two other kids just like him, into playing at stalkers and going to visit the abandoned Botanical Gardens, even though children were strictly forbidden even to set foot in the tunnels, and when he turned the handle of the locking screw on the hermetic door, opening the way up to the surface, and when he went first, dashing up the collapsed steps of the escalator—how could he explain it?—it was because he wanted to see his mother, the mother from that day with the ducks and the ice cream; he was on his way to meet her, because he had missed her so badly. The others had trudged up, following Artyom’s lead, simply because it was frightening to be alone.

And the Dark Ones ... The Dark Ones didn’t see him from the outside; they saw him immediately from the inside: a solitary orphan who had gotten lost in their world. They saw him and ... made him their pet? No, they didn’t tame him: They adopted him. But he thought they had tamed him: He was afraid that they would put him on a chain, that they would teach him to obey commands, and they would use him against people. He was afraid they wanted to be his masters. But they didn’t want that. They simply felt sorry for him, and in their pity, they took care of him. And with the same compassion, they were willing to save all the people under the ground, but the people had become too brutalized already. The Dark Ones needed an intermediary, an interpreter. And Artyom had been picked up and adopted by them. He could sense their language— could have learned to translate it into Russian. That was his mission in life: to be a bridge between the new man and the old man.

But Artyom took fright. He was afraid to trust; he was afraid of the voice in his head, the dreams, the images. He didn’t trust them, he didn’t trust himself, and he turned to a different mission—to find a way of wiping out the Dark Ones—only because he was afraid of letting them inside himself, of listening to them and doing what they said. It was easier to find some missiles that hadn’t been used in the war and exterminate every last one of the Dark Ones. To cauterize the spot where a new, rational human being had appeared with a bright orange flame. The Botanical Gardens. The very place where Artyom had walked hand in hand with his mother as a four-year-old.

Before Artyom allowed the missiles to be launched, before he gave Miller the coordinates, he still had one second. And for that second he let the Dark Ones inside himself after all: And then—not in order to save themselves, but out of pity for him, knowing that Artyom wouldn’t cancel their execution in any case—the last thing they showed him was his mother. Her smiling face. They told him, in her voice, that they loved him and forgave him.

He could still have put everything right then. Stopped Miller. Cut off the radio set ... But he felt afraid again.

And when the missiles started falling ... There was no one to love Artyom anymore. And there was no one he could ask for forgiveness. And his mother’s face disappeared forever. And the Botanical Gardens became molten asphalt and black charcoal: square kilometers of black charcoal and soot. There was nowhere for Artyom to go back to.

He walked down the Ostankino Tower and went home, to Exhibition Station—he was greeted as a hero, as a savior. As a saint who had conquered a monstrous dragon. But he carried on being afraid: if not of going insane, then of becoming known as a madman. And he didn’t tell anyone, apart from his Anya and Miller, what had really happened up there. He didn’t tell anyone else that he might have destroyed mankind’s last chance of reclaiming the Earth. He confessed to two people, and neither of them

believed him.

And it was only afterwards, a year later, that he started remembering: While he and Ullman were uncoiling the aerial on the Ostankino Tower, something else seemed to flicker in the radio set before Miller came on. There was some kind of call sign ... But Artyom didn't have the headphones: He could have imagined it.

But if he just imagined it, then ...

Then there was no hope. It was all irreparable. Irrecoverable. With those clumsy fingers of his, slimy from mushrooms, he had strangled the only hope left for himself and everyone else. He did it. Artyom had condemned the people at the station and throughout the Metro to life in prison. Them, and their children, and their children's children.

But if there was at least just one place in the world where people had survived ...

Just one ...

"Just one."

"Nikolaev. NikolaI Nikolaev."

"Go! Come on. I'll see you to the door. Maybe they won't send me packing."

"Is it all true?" Homer held on to Artyom's arm, as if Artyom was helping the old man along; but in fact it was the old man who was helping Artyom.

"Yes. I told you as quickly ... as I could. To get it all said in time."

"When I get you out of here, you'll tell me the whole story, right? With all the details?" Homer glanced into his eyes. "So that it's all there in the book, so that nothing gets confused ..."

"Of course. When you get me out. But that's the most important part. I just ... wanted to tell you. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"And you'll write it all down like that?"

"Yes, I'll write it like that."

"Good," said Artyom. "That's right."

Ilya Stepanovich was standing there impatiently, examining the beast-people; maybe he was wondering what was the best way keep them out of his textbook. He was glad to see Homer and smiled as he laid a padded jacket across his shoulders. The old man held out his hand to Artyom in farewell.

"Till the next time, then?"

The teacher's face twitched: He knew there wouldn't be any next time, but he didn't want to argue with Homer.

Artyom knew too, and he didn't want to argue either.

"Ilya Stepanich!" he called to the teacher as he led the old man away to live.

The teacher looked back over his shoulder reluctantly. The guards came to life and raised their barbed-wire whips above Artyom.

"How's your wife? Did she have the baby?" Artyom asked, speaking clearly. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Ilya Stepanovich's face turned gray, and he aged instantly.

"A stillborn girl," he said soundlessly, but Artyom understood anyway, from his lips.

The door slammed shut, and a whip stung Artyom sweetly across the shoulders. The blood started. Good. Let it flow. Let everything inside come out.

When they served the slops, Artyom didn't simply eat.

He ate in memory of Dietmar.

* * *

It was good that he had seen the old man out.

It was good that he had convinced the old man that he could get Artyom out of here.

It was good that he hadn't allowed himself to be convinced. At least he didn't twitch anymore when the

door clanged. He didn't hope for anything; he didn't count the days. It was easier that way, outside of time.

And it was good, too, that he'd been able to tell Homer the most important thing, about himself and the Dark Ones. That he'd had enough minutes and enough breath to do it. Now it wasn't so terrifying to be left here, forgotten.

Something was happening out there, at the other stations: maybe war. But it didn't affect Schiller Station at all. Everything here carried on as usual: Living space ate away at the ground, the tunnel to Kuznetsky Most was fed earth and human beings and kept creeping closer and closer to the station. Artyom was getting weaker, but he was still trying to live. Lyokha the broker was like a walking skeleton now, but was still stubbornly trying to outlast Artyom.

They didn't talk to each other any longer. There was nothing left to talk about. There were some men who tried to escape, who attacked the barbed wire and the guards with their picks—they were all shot, together with a few randomly chosen others, to put a fright into everyone. After that they were all afraid of trying to escape; they were afraid to talk about it, they were even afraid to think about it.

Artyom kept himself to himself: After "lights out," as he arranged himself on someone else's body in the sleeping trench, he locked his eyes shut and imagined that his head was lying on the knees of that lovely, naked girl Sasha; and he stroked his own hair, not feeling the weight of his own hand. He imagined her showing him the city up on the surface. Without Sasha he'd have had no choice but to croak.

After sleeping the regulation four hours, he got up and ran and lifted and tossed and trundled and dumped. And walked and crawled and fell. And got up again. How many days? How many nights? He didn't know. The barrow was only half-full now. He couldn't cart away more than that. It was a good thing the freaks had been cut down to half their weight by the atrocious food, or he couldn't have lifted them and buried them.

In the afternoons he also had a secret amusement: Artyom knew that no one had battered that wall over there, because the passage with the social housing lay just on the other side of it. He had calculated where Ilya Stepanovich and Narine's cozy little apartment was located. Once a day Artyom glanced round furtively and ran over to that wall and knocked on it: rat-a-tat-tat. The guards didn't hear it. Ilya Stepanovich didn't hear it. Artyom himself didn't hear the knocking; but even so, every time he split his sides in paroxysms of wild, soundless laughter.

But then, in the middle of eternity, when they had already stopped waiting for it, deliverance arrived. A terrible deliverance.

The war butted its way through into their little world.

The door slammed rapidly again and again, and Schiller Station was filled with well-fed men in the uniform of the Iron Legion. The freaks and beast-people stopped pottering about and froze, gaping obtusely at their visitors. With their numbed brains working reluctantly, they began assembling the words dropped by the new arrivals into a mosaic.

"The Reds have taken Kuznetsky Most!"

"They've deployed troops from the Lubyanka! They'll break through this way!"

"Any moment now! Orders are to block off the tunnel."

"Where are the demolition men? What's holding up the demolition men?"

"The tunnel to Kuznetsky Most has to be mined! As far as possible from the station!"

"Where are the explosives? Where are the demolition men?"

"They're coming! Almost here already! The vanguard, their machine-gunners. Come on! Move it!"

"Cut it! Cut the cable! Lay the mines as far as possible from the station."

"Farther on! Now!"

Sweaty demolition men came running in, dragging heavy crates of explosives; the beast-people still didn't understand anything. Artyom watched the fuss through his usual scraped, perspiring polythene.

None of this seemed to concern him.

“We don’t have enough time! Too close! We have to gain more time somehow! Time!”

“What can we do? How? They’ll be here soon! Superior forces! We’ll lose the station! It mustn’t happen!”

Then someone was inspired.

“Drive the freaks out into the tunnel!”

“What?”

“The freaks. Put them in the tunnel! They’ll take the brunt of it! With their picks! And their spades! They’ll delay the Reds. And while they’re being hacked down, we’ll have time to lay the mines!”

“They won’t fight! Look at them ...”

“A blocking detachment, then! We’ll drive them in ... Solovyov! Bormann! Fang! Drive them in! Come on! Every second counts, you shit-eaters! Move it!”

The guards started whistling their whips and chains through the air, tearing away the diggers clinging to the walls who had turned to stone, herding them together and channeling them into the mouth of the tunnel. Only a moment ago there was an insuperable barrier here—three layers of barbed wire. But now the cobweb was dangling down in untidy clumps and there turned out to be a tunnel behind it. With another set of tracks to Kuznetsky Most. And somewhere deep in that tunnel something bad was brewing.

The stupefied beast-people trudged into the tunnel, gazing round in helpless confusion at the overseers: What did they want from them? Each of them was holding the tool that he always worked with: The pick workers had picks; the hammer workers had hammers. Artyom would have gone in with his barrow, but it got in other people’s way, jabbing at them below the knees, and it didn’t know how to move over the sleepers, so Artyom was ordered to abandon it. He left it behind and walked on empty-handed. His hands felt awkward; they wanted a tool to hold. His fingers were stiff, curved, and callused now, so that the handles of a barrow or the haft of a spade fitted into them neatly.

The ones shambling at the back were lashed and squeezed in by men with automatics. The men with automatics were followed by sappers dragging crates and unreeling cables.

“Where are we going? What for?” the naked prisoners bleated, staring into the darkness or looking round at the torches and gun barrels of their escorts.

But as all of them were about to be dragged into that black, gaping hole straight ahead, the echoes of a distant “hooraaaah” came seeping out of it, together with the fine trickles of water alongside the rails.

“What? What’s that in there?”

“Where are we going? Are they setting us free?”

“They say they’re setting us free! Someone in there said something!”

“Shut up! Shut up, all of you! Move! Move, you dumb brutes!”

“... oooaaaah ...”

“Did you hear it? Did you hear that? We won’t even get a hundred meters with these creeping lice ... They’re barely even hobbling along! This is sabotage!”

“Here! Here! Start laying the mines here!”

“Drive the freaks farther in! Drive them into a bayonet charge!”

“... hoorraaaaaaaaaah ...”

“We don’t have time. Here! In front of these ones!”

The sappers halted and busied themselves with their equipment. They opened up their crates and started taking out briquettes, attaching them to the walls of the tunnel and setting them in indentations in the tunnel liners.

Someone nudged Artyom in the back with a gun barrel. He started moving his feet faster, and the anxious demolition men were left behind. Whips whistled through the air, and million-watt torches shone between the figures shambling into darkness—tracing out far-reaching, hunchbacked shadows on the

sleepers—and a bullhorn barked, spurring them on.

“Hey you! All of you! A great deed lies ahead of you! You are destined to save the Reich! A horde of freaks is advancing against us! Red cannibals, who will stop at nothing! Today, at this very moment, you can earn forgiveness! You can pay with blood for the right to call yourselves human beings! They will destroy the Reich, and then the entire Metro. There is no one else to stop them now, except you! They wanted to stab us in the back, but they didn’t know that you were covering our back! They are better armed, but you also have weapons! You have nothing to lose and therefore nothing to be afraid of!

“Me ... Where? I won’t go! I won’t! I won’t! I don’t know how to fight!”

There was a loud crash. The echo of the shot swallowed the echo of the scream. And immediately, without even waiting for everyone in the herd to understand what had happened, the automatics started slamming into the backs of the dawdlers’ heads. Someone let out his last breath and expired. Someone whom the blow had failed to kill howled. A woman started squealing. The man next to Artyom looked round, a bullet whistled, and he tumbled to the ground with a gurgle in his throat.

“Forward, you scumba-aggs! Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare try to stop!”

“They’re killing us! Don’t stop! They’re shooting! Run!”

Artyom shoved against someone’s crooked back, pushed forward through the jam, reached down, pulled a young boy out from under all the feet, immediately forgot about him, and then, constantly glancing round at his pursuers, started squeezing through towards the center—to safety.

“Forward! Forward!”

People fell facedown on the rails, their deaths pushing the ones ahead of them in the back like dominoes—some stumbled and others surged forward, towards the vague and terrible “HOORRRRAAAAAH” that seethed and eddied towards them along the tunnel, like groundwater that has broken through into a working mine.

“We’re not sheep!” someone at the front roared out suddenly; one of the freaks. “We won’t just give up like this!”

“Come on! We won’t surrender!”

“Death to them!”

“Kill them!” someone else in the crowd howled. “Forward! Forward!”

And slowly, like the flywheel of a locomotive or a sick man recovering consciousness, the entire long, naked crowd—the shaggy, battered beast-people with their picks and hammers—began picking up speed, searching inside themselves for the strength to raise their tools above their heads so that they could kill someone before they were killed themselves.

“Death to them! We won’t surrender! Forward!”

“FOR-WARD!”

A minute later everyone was running forward, roaring, shrieking, or weeping. And the shepherds with the automatics should have run too, to keep up with their excited flock, but they were too lazy and too squeamish. The torchlight from behind paled slightly: The cattle-drivers fell back, reluctant to mingle with the cannon fodder. The gloom ahead was dank and murky where the shadows of the running people merged into the darkness that was flooding towards them.

Artyom still didn’t have anything in his hands, but he couldn’t stop any longer: Anyone who even thought he could stop in the middle of this avalanche would immediately be swept away and trampled down. Artyom drew level with Lyokha: The broker gave Artyom a wild, insane look; he didn’t recognize him. Then Artyom overtook him.

“HOORRAAAAHH!”

The Reds burst upon them suddenly.

They broke through the pall of haze and suddenly there they were, face to face, eye to eye with the beast-people. They emerged straight out of the tunnel into hand-to-hand, forehead-to-forehead combat.

“AAAAAH!”

Like the herd from Schiller, they didn't have any torches: They were dashing through the darkness in a frenzy, at random. The beast-people at the front of the herd just had time to swing back their picks ...

And from behind them came a massive roar ... BOO-OOM!

The whole earth seemed to shake!

The heavy breath of the blast swept the back rows of the running herd off their feet, and the tunnel resounded with it, like the sound of a trumpet at Jericho; all the torches were extinguished in a single instant, all the automatics fell silent, and suddenly there was nothing—nothing but blackness upon blackness, impenetrable blackness on all sides, as if the world had disappeared completely: Darkness total, absolute and hopeless had exploded and drowned everything.

Artyom went blind and deaf, and the people running behind him went deaf, and the people running in front of him too. Some fell, tossed and tumbled and concussed, but immediately started getting to their feet, fumbling in the darkness for their picks or hammers.

Because although they didn't hear it with their ears, they could feel it with their skin and the down on their skin, the way that blind death was working at the front of the herd, feeling its way along, swinging its sickle, mowing people down. And they had to get up; they had to fend it off with their picks or, better still, take a swing and shatter its empty skull, jab the sharp point into its dry eye sockets, wrench them out, swing again from the shoulder and strike again.

No one was driving them forward any longer, but everyone strained in that direction themselves, because death was calling, because it was more terrifying to hide and wait until death found you, because they wanted to strike the first blow, before they were struck.

Not a single shot was fired: The Reds didn't have rifles or automatics either; they all charged into hand-to-hand combat with whatever they had managed to find, and in the pitch darkness it was impossible to tell what that was.

Artyom flung his arms out wide, grabbed hold of a handle, took someone else's pick, and waded in too, drunk on the fear and the passion, straight ahead through the naked bodies, to stick his own head into the maelstrom, to make sure that in this battle he wouldn't be a blind beast, but at least a blind butcher, since there were no other choices.

It was close now, the spot where they were slashing, hacking, and chopping brutally, inhumanly, not knowing who they were killing and for what, no longer crying out either “Death!” or “Hoorah!” because they had forgotten Russian and any other language but whooping and cackling and simply growling or howling something incoherent and meaningless.

The air whistled and hummed, sliced through and through.

Picks jangled when they shot past the target of flesh and struck concrete. Or champed when they guessed right and sank home.

A breath of rusty air wafted into Artyom's face as sharp-pointed iron hurtled past only a hand's width away. He recoiled and struck back—but at his own side or the others? And were there any of his own side here anyway? Blood smelled of rust; and the people smelled of shit.

The beast-people and people-beasts from both sides charged towards each other, hurrying to use every last ounce of their strength to kill each other and at least put an end to everything that way, to stop being afraid.

Artyom swung once, twice, again and again—and several times he found someone. A squelching sound and a spurt of something hot; the pick got stuck and pulled him downwards, saving him: Something instantly whizzed past above him—something heavy enough to split his head open—but it missed.

Then something exploded in his knee, and he was flung down onto the rails; he couldn't stand any longer, and he crawled and tried to hide in something soft, but the softness lashed out and shoved him away for as long as it could, snarling unintelligibly, polluting him with something sticky and hot.

An infinity of time passed, but it didn't get any lighter; and the people were still hammering at each other—wherever they heard crying or groaning, they lashed out wildly, sounding the alarm on the rails when they missed. Artyom listened to the chiming, crossed himself quietly, and didn't let a single sound out of his throat. He lay down with the back of his head on someone dead, pretending that Sasha had put his head on her knees. He pulled another body over himself and hid in it.

A lot more time passed before everything went quiet.

They only stopped killing when no one could stand any longer.

And then the ones who weren't dead yet started moving and learning to speak again. Clutching his mutilated knee, Artyom lifted his head off Sasha's knees and sat up. He whispered.

"No more ... No more. No more. I don't want any more. I'm not going to kill anybody else. Who are you?" He reached out around himself with his fingers. "Who's here? Are you from Schiller?"

"I'm from Schiller," someone said somewhere.

"We're from the Lubyanka," someone close by answered.

"The Lubyanka?"

"Are you fascists? The Iron Legion? Cannibals?"

"We're from Schiller Station," said Artyom. "We're freaks, prisoners. They drove us on ahead of them. With a blocking detachment."

"We're from the Lubyanka," the voice repeated. "We're prisoners. Political. They moved us to the front. At Pushkin. Like cannon fodder ... Ahead of the real units ... Against the gun emplacements ... So we could ..."

"They threw us forward as cannon fodder ... so we could ..." Artyom echoed. "We're freaks ..."

"Everyone here's from the Lubyanka, from the cells, all prisoners," someone told him. "The blocking detachment fired at our backs ... The Chekists fired at our backs ... To make us ..."

"Us too ... They fired at us ... The guards."

"They didn't come after us ... The blocking detachment stayed behind ..."

"They blew up the tunnel behind us. There's no way back there ... We've got nowhere to go ... They didn't come after us. They abandoned us ..."

"Why did you do it? Why did you do this to us?"

"Why did you do this to us? What for? Eh?"

Someone struggled painfully towards Artyom's voice, crawling like a worm on their broken legs. He heard it, but he couldn't strike another blow. It was difficult for the man to move towards Artyom, and Artyom moved towards him too. He reached out his hand, entwined his fingers with the other man's, and dragged the man towards himself.

"Oh God, why did you do this to us?"

"Forgive us ... Forgive us ... Oh God, forgive us."

And they huddled up against each other. Artyom hugged him—he thought it was a grown man—and their foreheads touched; the man sobbed and shuddered, and Artyom was convulsed by a sudden spasm too—when it shook him, the tears started flowing. When the man had cried his heart out, he heaved a sigh and died. And then Artyom released him too.

He lay there for a while.

A spring in his mind clicked, and he remembered something.

"From the Lubyanka ... Who else is from the Lubyanka?"

Here and there bodies came to life, trying to move their broken arms and think with their dented foreheads, grunting and raving.

"Natashenka ... Put the kettle on, my love ... I've brought a cake."

"When I get back from Turkey, I'll call you straightaway!"

"I built the Moscow City! I built it!"

“Why is it so dark? I’m afraid of the dark! Turn the light on! Seryozhka!”

“Good grief, granny, what are you doing here? What have you come for?”

“We’re going to expand the living space! So there’ll be enough room for everyone!”

“Give me some water ... Give me some water ...”

“Alyonka, Alyonka, you naughty girl!”

“I’m from the Lubyanka. I am.”

Artyom crawled on one knee and two elbows towards the spot where the confession had come from.

“Who? Who? Tell me, don’t be afraid! You! Where are you?”

“Who are you?” It was a woman.

“Zuev. Was Zuev there with you?”

“What Zuev? There wasn’t any ...”

“Zuev!” Artyom roared. “Igor Zuev! Zuev, are you alive? Zuev!”

He stood up on one leg, leaned against the wall, and started skipping along blindly, holding on to the tunnel linings.

“Zuev! Igor Zuev! Which person here is Igor Zuev from Okhotny Ryad? From Marx Prospect? Who?”

“Stop that! Stop shouting! Or they’ll come! They’ll come!”

“Why don’t we go to the cinema this evening? Eh? Such lovely weather, it’s a shame to stay in.”

Igor didn’t reply.

Maybe that was him, lying right here, but with half his head missing it was hard for him to talk. Or maybe the cunning devil was just keeping his head down and not saying anything, didn’t want to be found.

“Igor! Zuev! Who was in a cell with Zuev? The one who knows about the survivors in other cities ... in Polar Dawns ... The ones who came to Moscow ... Who was with him? Zuev!”

“What?”

“He told tall stories! About people who had survived in some other city! He said they came to Moscow!”

“You’ve no idea how much shit just goes to waste at Schiller, guys, if only you knew!”

“He’s not here. Aaaagh-agh. Zuev’s not here.”

“What? Where are you? Who said that?”

“Zuev’s not here. They handed him over to Hansa.”

“Wait. Stop. Say that again. Where are you? Where are you, fuck it? Come on, tell me; don’t hide!”

“Why are you looking for him? A friend of yours, is he?”

“I have to know. I have to know what he said! Who were these men? Where did they show up? Where from? Why Hansa?”

“Those men, aaaagh. They’re not from Polar Dawns. Polar Dawns, fuck that. It’s the stooges who spread lies about Polar Dawns. Stooges ... Spreading rumors ... They’re our men ... Come back from Rokossovsky. Aaagh. Our shock workers ... Aaagh-agh. Who were sent to the construction project of the century ... To Balashikha ... That’s where they’ve come back from. From Balashikha.”

“Wait. Come on, where are you?”

He skipped forward, and his hand disappeared into the wall—was this a doorway? He fell, got up, and started moving toward the voice and the straining cough.

“Kazan is a beautiful city. They’ve got a remarkable mosque there.”

“I could get rich on that shit, if I could get the contract.”

“I’m from Kazan. And my granny’s from the country. My grandad’s name is Khairullin. My granny can’t even speak Russian!”

“Where are you? You, the one who was talking about the outsiders, you? Did Balashikha survive? And what about Polar Dawns? Were they all killed? I don’t understand!”

“How about some milk in your tea?”

“Who knows what survived out there? It’s the stooges that talk about Polar Dawns. Agh-aaagh. A beautiful story, that. The idiots go for it. Aaagh-agh. At Balashikha ... There’s an outpost. On the surface. With a radio ... Radio center ... They can contact other cities ... In case ... Zuev said ...”

“What? What did Zuev say?”

“Who’s collecting Tanyusha from the kindergarten today, me or you?”

“Get away from me, Satan; don’t touch me. Go away, please go away. I’m not yours. They’re waiting for me up in heaven.”

“An outpost? On the surface? Who’s building it, I don’t understand! What radio?”

“Agh-aaagh.”

“Where are you? Tell me. Why a radio center?”

“They’re real bastards altogether, those fascists. Torturing people for nothing. And they don’t even take the shit into account.”

“The Reds ... The Red Line’s building ... Aagh-agh-agh ... up on the surface ... In Balashikha ... A secret base ... A station ... And an outpost ... So that ... Instead of the Metro ... Radio ... A station ... They herded men out there ...”

“There’s a station at Balashikha? What sort of station?”

“They sent men ... from Rokossovsky Station ... And they ... came back ... themselves. Aaaagh-agh. Aaaagh-agh.”

“Do they pick up signals? They can pick up signals from there, right?”

“Aaagh-agh ... agh-aaaagh.”

And the man disappeared, as if he’d never even existed. He came out of the darkness and went back into it. Artyom went round, shaking the men who were alive, and tried to persuade the dead to talk, but it was all pointless.

“In Balashikha!” he kept repeating to himself, so that he wouldn’t forget and wouldn’t decide that he had imagined the entire conversation. “In Balashikha. In Balashikha. In Balashikha. In Balashikha!”

Now there was absolutely no way that Artyom could die. Now he had to crawl out from under these people, find the way out of this concrete womb and be reborn, patch up all the holes in himself and walk or crawl to this fucking promised land of Balashikha, no matter who or what be there.

He got up again and grabbed hold of a tunnel liner as if it was his mother’s hand. Schiller Station had been cut off. The Reds were at Kuznetsky Most. They probably weren’t on their way here yet, because they’d heard the tunnel get blown up, but he couldn’t go to them.

He remembered that opening in the wall. Maybe it was some kind of foot passage between the lines. He hopped along, feeling his way ... Skipped inside ... Rats scattered, squealing ... If only he was a rat. A rat wouldn’t get lost, even with its eyes put out.

A breath of air. His shaggy hair stirred on his head.

As if Sasha’s fingers had combed it.

He looked up with his sightless wall eyes.

Another breath of air—gentle and playful, like a mother blowing into a baby’s face.

He grabbed at the darkness with his fingers, broke his nails on concrete ... and felt metal.

A rung. And another rung. A ladder in a shaft. A ventilation shaft running upwards. The draught came from up there. From the surface.

“He-ey!” he shouted. “He-e-e-ey! Hey! You over there! All of you! This way! There’s a way out here! A way up to the surface! A ventilation shaft! We can climb out! Do you hear me, you freaks? We can get to the surface here!”

“The surface! Are you out of your fucking mind?” the invisible beast-people groaned.

“Up!” Artyom shouted to them. “Follow me! Follow me, you freaks!”

They were afraid; they didn’t believe him. They didn’t know that there was wind and rain up there, and

you wouldn't die the first time you went up. He had to set them an example.

He grasped a rusty metal rung with his curved fingers: The rung fitted into his fingers perfectly. He hopped and pulled up his shattered leg. Shifted his grip and pulled himself up. Again. Again. Again.

His head was spinning.

He kept slipping, losing his grip, but he immediately grabbed the rung again. He didn't feel his shattered leg, his lashed and shredded back, his skinned hands. He scrabbled. Hopped. Climbed.

He glanced down—there was someone following him.

So he hadn't wasted his time.

Occasionally he stopped for a second—and then went on. If he didn't get out now, he'd never get out.

How long it had taken didn't matter when he tumbled into a tiny little room, a booth covered with a grating. A door bolted on the inside. A rusty bolt. He finally skinned his hands completely, turned them into a bloody mush, rust mingled with rust; but he defeated it. He opened the door, crawled out on all fours, and turned over onto his back. It was early morning in the world; a copper-red sun was rising.

He simply lay on the ground. On the ground, not under the ground. And it wasn't his head that was spinning—it was the whole fucking globe of the Earth: Artyom had set it spinning like a top.

Someone fell beside him and lay there. Just one person; no one else had climbed up.

“Who are you?” Artyom asked him without turning his head, even for his only follower, but smiling blissfully at the pink morning sky through his lowered eyelids. “Who the fuck are you, you monster of a man?”

“Lyokha, that's who,” was the answer. “The broker. What other ... stupid fucking prick would it be?”

“You used to be a broker,” said Artyom, happy to have lived as far as this. “But now you'll be the first apostle.”

And then he switched off.



CHAPTER 14

— STRANGERS —

“I thought it was Polar Dawns; I thought it was a thousand kilometers away, but it’s right here beside us, in Balashikha! Can you imagine that, Zhen? Here in Balashikha, right beside us. As good as in Moscow. They’re building it here! An outpost! That means there is clean land ... If they’re building. Real bastards, aren’t they, eh? The Reds? Without telling anyone! No one knows. They’re building a base on the surface. We can stay down in the Metro, right, Zhen, but they’ll breathe fresh air!”

“Bastards, Tyomich, bastards. Sit quiet there now.”

“And did you hear the most important thing? The radio! That guy says they’re building it round a radio center. But what for? That’s obvious. Because they—they!—have managed to establish contact somehow after all. With someone. Maybe the Urals? Eh? Maybe the bases in the Urals! Eh, Zhen? If it’s not Polar Dawns.”

“You’re a heavy lump, damn you.”

“Or maybe it is Polar Dawns? How does he know? Eh?”

“Just don’t jerk your legs about! Or I’ll dump you right now and you can crawl on your own!”

“And I’ll go there, Zhen. I’ll go. After all, no one ... None of the creeps is going to admit anything. I have to go to this Balashikha myself. To look for the outpost. Otherwise there’s no way of knowing what’s really going on. Will you go with me, Zhen?”

“You know what? You want the truth? Now you’re really pushing it. First it’s carry you to Tsvetnoi Boulevard, to this Sashenka of yours. And now we’ve barely even reached Trubnaya Station, and you want to go to Balashikha! That’s a bit over the top, don’t you reckon? You’re not some bucket of shit I can carry round and round in circles. You weigh sixty kilograms! And by the way, I served my time in that hellhole, just like you! And I swung a pick while you waltzed around with that little barrow of yours! Have you no shame? That’s it, get down.”

“Hang on, Zhen ... Where have you brought me?”

“Where? To your Sashenka, that’s where. Lie here. I’ll go and knock. If they don’t open up ... Then we wasted our time climbing out.”

“Zhen. Do you think I don’t understand anything? You’re dead. I know that. How did you carry me here?”

“Me? You’re the dead one.”

“Right, I warn you straight off. You bundled that goner of ours off to the next world, but you just make good and certain that Tyomich here gets back up on his feet.”

“What’s wrong with his shoulders? And his leg?”

“An injury. Occupational, to keep it short. So rub something on it.”

“Such as what? Take a look around.”

“At my station they rub shit on everything, but I hope you’ve got something with a bit more kick to it. Or did I waste my time dragging him down here from on top?”

“Don’t you get pushy now. Or you’ll be plodding back up there.”

“I’m a patient too, by the way! Take a look at my back, lady! I wasn’t scratched by a woman either.”

“It would be better if you had been. And this one looks like he was run over by a train. Give me some light ... Not really my area. I’m a venereologist, you know. I’ve got a queue waiting.”

“Lady, I know who you are. Just patch him up the way he was before. And after that you can feel my balls. I’m a bit worried. Someone told me something very disturbing!”

“Why’s he unconscious? That’s not because of the knee! And this flush he has. Maybe he’s been sunbathing too, eh?”

“I’ve been sunbathing. And I’m conscious. I need to get some sleep. Where’s Sasha?”

“Who’s Sasha? Oh, and look here ...”

* * *

“Hey! This the one?”

“Eh?”

“Is this the chick?”

“Wait. Stop blurring like that ... Stay still.”

“This one? Is she your Sasha?”

“How did you find me?”

“She found you? Ha! I turned this entire damned brothel upside down! I did! You’re some ungrateful brute, aren’t you now?”

“I remember him. I remember. You ... What are you doing here?”

“And I remember ... Since I remembered you ... I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind.”

“You’re Artyom, right? The stalker from Economic Achievements. Am I right? What’s wrong with him?”

“What’s wrong with him? You can see the state he’s in.”

“He can’t stay here.”

“Why can’t I stay here? I don’t want to go anywhere else. I walked to get here.”

“Uh-huh, you walked. He walked, uh-huh.”

“He can’t, because ... Because I’m working. This is my working room.”

“Well, work with him now. Or did I bugger up my back for nothing, then?”

“What do you ... What do you remember, Artyom? From that night?”

“You. I remember I was lying on your knees. And I felt ... I felt so ... Can I rest my head on you again? I really need to.”

“He can’t stay here. You have to take him away.”

“Please. Otherwise, where will I get the strength to leave? Just for five minutes.”

“Five minutes. All right.”

“And stroke my hair, please. Like that. Yes. Again. God, that’s so good.”

“Let me pay for an hour for him! I’m up to my ears in debt anyway ... It was hardly worth the trudge for just five minutes!”

“What? Artyom ... Do you see? Look ...”

“Well yes, that’s basically what I’m talking about.”

“Eh? What? Don’t stop, oh please.”

“Your hair’s coming out, Artyom. It’s falling out.”

“My hair? Really? That’s funny ... Really funny ...”

* * *

“You said only five minutes ...”

“Be quiet. Here, swallow this. Take a drink of water. Swallow. Swallow it, come on, you need it. It’s iodine.”

“I don’t care what it is. It’s good the five minutes aren’t up yet. It’s too late to take iodine. Thanks.”

“You were talking ... In your sleep. About Homer. I couldn’t make it out. Do you know Homer?”

“Yes. Yes. Homer. A fine old man. He’s looking for you. He thinks you drowned. It was you who drowned, right? At Tula?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t drown after all? I really, really don’t want you to have drowned!”

“Of course she didn’t drown! She’s sitting there, look: not as red-faced as you are, of course ...”

“You know what I did? I remembered what you told me. About the city on the surface. That stupid story. I used to go up there every day. And then ... All that about airplanes with dragonfly wings. And the railway carriage cars. And the rain. I got caught in the rain up there. Without a rubber suit.”

“That’s probably when you picked this up! And you dragged me up there without a suit too! Let’s go, let’s go, you said. Ha, me—a stalker! I should have stayed in the tunnel with that crowd of jokers ... I had already problems anyway ...”

“Could you go out? What’s your name?”

“Uh-huh, pay for an hour, that’s just fine, but the slightest thing, and it’s go take a walk, right?”

“Lyokha ... Go take a walk, eh?”

“Why you creeps! Although you look pretty good. All right, you do your billing and cooing. If your plug isn’t burnt out, that is.”

“What do you remember, Artyom? What else?”

“I don’t know. I remember that some man picked me up in the corridor. He took me ... Was it here?”

“No, not here.”

“And he called you. And after that ... I don’t know. I remember I was lying on your knees. Like right now. And ... Could you just pull your top up a bit here? Yes, there, that’s it. Your stomach. This here ... Wait. Where’s that from? It was cigarettes, right?”

“That’s not important.”

“I’ve got some exactly the same. Look, here on my arm ... They just appeared. What is that?”

“I don’t know, Artyom. Can I pull it down? I’m cold. And where is he now? Homer?”

“He’s in the Reich. Writing a book. A history textbook. He’s got another book too. About you.”

“About me? Did he finish writing it?”

“Yes. I think it finished like this: ‘Homer never did find Sasha’s body at Tula.’”

“I got out through a ventilation shaft.”

“Me too. The same. Funny, eh?”

“And what does it say there about Hunter?”

“About who? Wait ... About who?”

“Lie down ... Lie down ... You’re sick! You mustn’t get up!”

“Hey! Come out of there! Where are you? I’m from Catfish!”

“That’s it, my customer’s arrived. Stay here. Later.”

* * *

“Come on, what’s up? Don’t shrink away like that. Come over here. On my knees.”

“Money first.”

“Money she wants! And maybe I want to try a little sample first! To make sure. See what the quality’s like. Come on!”

“Ow!”

“Wider! Open up wider! Right. That’s it. Tha-a-at’s it ...”

“Just a moment. A second. It’s uncomfortable like that.”

“It doesn’t have to be comfortable for you, little bunny. Not for you, you little bitch. Not for you, not for you.”

* * *

“Why are you staring at me?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Well, all right then. You knew what I do, didn’t you? What sort of place you’d come to? And anyway, you hour’s over already.”

“I ... It’s nothing to do with you. I’m sorry. Should I leave?”

“Where will you go to ... In that state. Just lie down. Aren’t you going to say anything, then?”

“About Hunter. What Homer says about Hunter in that book of his?”

“I thought you were going to tell me. Do you know him?”

“Hunter? Do I know him? Is he ... Is he alive, then? Have you seen him?”

“I saw him. The book was supposed to be about him, not about me. Homer was traveling with him. They were together. And then we were all together.”

“When? What year was it?”

“Last year. That whole story of his, the one he was writing—I just happened to turn up. He was looking for a hero all the time. Out of the myths. He’s so funny, Homer. I looked over his shoulder when he was writing in his notebook. He described Hunter as so ... Mysterious ... As if he had a monster inside him. And as if that monster was trying to break out. Homer ... He wants to be poet.”

“He wants to be Homer. But you know, I ...”

“What?”

“I’m from Exhibition, you know, Economic Achievements ... I already told you all that, didn’t I? And I lived there almost all my life. My stepfather didn’t let me go anywhere. And then Hunter showed up. In armor. With a machine gun. And this black leather coat. With his head shaved. And he argued with Sukhoi ... With my stepfather. Hunter said there was no threat that we humans couldn’t handle. That we had to keep on fighting to the end. Like the frog that fell into a jar of milk and worked away with its legs until it churned the milk into butter, and then climbed out. I can see him saying it right now. But my stepfather ... His brains had gone soft. He was ready to surrender.”

“Who to?”

“The Dark Ones. It doesn’t matter. Anybody at all. The important thing is that I saw Hunter, and that was it. I realized that was the way I had to be. He wasn’t Homer’s hero ... Ha! He was my hero. And it was him that sent me ... He gave this assignment. He went up onto the surface to destroy the Dark Ones. ‘If I don’t come back,’ he told me, ‘you’ve got to get to Polis. Take this cartridge ... And find Miller.’ Do you understand? It’s all because of him. I became who I am because of him. Thanks to him.”

“I fell in love with him too. And now look, the two of us have met up. Two fools.”

“Sashulka! Where are you, you pest?”

“I’m sorry. Maybe you can sleep for a while?”

* * *

“You haven’t been here in a long time.”

“And would you believe, I haven’t been with anyone apart from you! I’ve been waiting to see you!”

“Are you tired? Lie down; I’ll do everything myself.”

“What about you? That doesn’t seem decent somehow. I want you to, you know, as well.”

“Don’t worry. I enjoy it anyway. Really. It’s always good with you. You’re careful and you’re gentle.”

“And you ... Do you know what it’s like for me with you? Not like with my wife.”

“No more idle chatter. Stop it. I don’t need any extra money. Here. Take this off.”

“Ooh. Ooh you ... What ... Ooh. I love you ... You’re my ...”

* * *

“Are you sleeping?”

“In this place?”

“Wait, I’ll just rinse myself off. I’m all smelly ... I smell of him. Will you wait?”

“Yes.”

* * *

“Anyway, I thought he’d been killed. I thought that all this time. But you tell me he’s alive.”

“He was. I don’t know about now. I didn’t try to look for him. After I clambered out of Tula ... I’d go anywhere, but not back there. Not to a place where I could meet him.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t Homer write about what happened at Tula? Why it got flooded? Didn’t he?”

“I didn’t read it. He just said it was flooded.”

“Oh, right. Homer was always trying to justify him. The monster woke up ... And in the notebook I was trying to tame the monster. Who’d believe something like that?”

“But what really happened?”

“He took to drink. Hunter. And he drank really hard. He was totally plastered every day. He staggered about, couldn’t even walk straight. It was frightening to be near him. Terrifying. He’s a killer. He has that pistol with him all the time. With the silencer. He grabs for it at the slightest little thing. A pistol in his right hand and a flask in his left. He never stopped. Always swigging. He could hardly string two words together. I asked him to stop. He couldn’t. That’s how it was. Greetings to Homer.”

“He ... Did he touch you?”

“No. Not once. He shunned me like fire. Maybe he didn’t want to spoil a young girl. Or maybe he just didn’t need any of that, women. But me, when our eyes met ... I went weak at the knees. Imagining that someday ... he would ... well, hug me and so on. What could I imagine then?”

“And what happened to Tula?”

“He flooded it. Mined it close as he could to the groundwaters and flooded it. With all the people who were sick and the ones who were healthy. To prevent an epidemic in the Metro. And to make sure they didn’t escape from there, he set up flamethrowers. I was at Tula. And I shouted to him, told him there was a cure. He heard me. He saw me there. But he blew everything up anyway. Three of us got out of the station. All the others drowned.”

“What for? What did he do it for?”

“He said he had to save the Metro. Save it like that. But I think he just got this itch. You know? The booze wasn’t enough for him.”

“That’s not what’s in Homer’s book.”

“What is in it?”

“In the book you ask for a miracle, I think. And afterwards, when the water breaks through ... You think it’s started raining. Something like that.”

“I ask for a miracle!”

* * *

“I ... I feel bad. Sick. Help me ... Get to the toilet.”

“You can do it here. Nothing bothers me. Shall I give you a basin?”

“I don’t want to do it here. Not in front of you.”

* * *

“Come on! Come on! More! More! Please, more! Well? Well?”

“You’re sweet. Such a sweet girl. God, how sweet you are.”

“Don’t stop. More. I want more.”

“I can’t ... I can’t ... I ...”

“No. No, no.”

“I’m finished. Finished. My God. My God. I love you.”

“Don’t talk nonsense.”

“No, honestly. I’ll take you out of here. I’ll save up a bit and take you out. I don’t want you to be in here. This isn’t the right place for you. I’ll take you out.”

“Okay, you persuaded me.”

“Ah, my sweet girl! How much do I owe you?”

“The same as last time.”

“How about giving me a little discount? Give me something off! As a regular customer!”

* * *

“What do you do it for?”

“What?”

“Why do you work like this? I’m not lecturing you about morals, it’s just ...”

“Now it’s starting, right?”

“No, really. Homer said that ... that you weren’t like that.”

“Like what? You don’t understand, do you? What difference does it make what Homer said? He lives in his own magical world. And I live in my real one. And in my real world, it’s better to do this than shoot people in the head. And what else could I do? Dream about how someday we’ll all go back to the surface and how wonderful and amazing it will be? But that’s later, and I need money now.”

“Only for the money? But what if you had money?”

“Well, have you got any?”

“No.”

“Then what are we talking about?”

“How did you end up in here?”

“A kind man brought me here. He picked me up and gave me the job. I don’t have anyone else. And nowhere to live. Have you got a home?”

“Yes.”

“And a wife?”

“Yes. I did have. I do.”

“Well, that’s good. What are you doing here?”

“I don’t want to go there. I feel calmer here.”

“You’ll have to leave soon. You can lie here a little bit longer, and then on your way. You can come back later sometime.”

“Why?”

“My master will come. He mustn’t see you.”

“What master? Your pimp?”

“Lie down. And calm down. Have some broth, drink it. Drink.”

“I won’t drink that garbage ... I feel sick. What master?”

“It’s not important.”

“What are you, a slave? What master?”

“You fool!”

“Do you get pleasure out of this? From all these dirty men?”

“Pleasure ... By the way, it would be a good idea for you to get a wash too. Get up. I’ll show you where.”

* * *

“Can you find Lyokha? The broker? The one who brought me here? Tell him to collect me. I have to spend the night somewhere.”

“You can ... You can stay today. My master probably won’t come. Because of this war ... He doesn’t come every day now. Do you want to?”

“Where? Right here? Or on that bed where you ...”

“Here. Will you eat with me? Mushrooms.”

“Thanks. I don’t know how ... I’ll pay you afterwards.”

“Let me take a look at your knee. Someone gave me some ointment. Lie still.”

“It’s cold. And it stings. Ow.”

“And when they tore your back open like that, didn’t that sting?”

“There ... There was no one to complain to there. But here there’s you.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“You were just asking. Why am I like this? A whore. How did I become one?”

“I’m not asking.”

“Well ask. I’m not ashamed. Do you think you’re the only one like that? Do you know how many there are? Men running wild. Lonely men. Who have no one to complain to. They all feel drawn to me. I draw them like a magnet. Do you understand? Into me. And if I don’t accept them, don’t let them ... splash out all that filth and horror of theirs ... The rage. And the tenderness. Then they’ll turn into absolute animals. That’s how you men are made. They come to me like that—life has them all jittery. And I calm them down. I give them peace. Do you understand? Peace. I console them. They poke away and poke away ... And shout a bit ... Get angry ... Cry a bit ... And quieten down. They zip up their flies. And they can go and live for a little bit longer without a war.”

“You say that ... A young girl can’t say that. You’re a young girl. Frail. And elegant. These hands of yours. These little hands ...”

“One year counts for ten in a brothel.”

“So we’re the same age, then?”

“Oh, stop that!”

“I need a drink. It helps against the radiation. Have you got anything?”

“I need a drink too.”

* * *

“Move over.”

“Weren’t you going to lie down over there? Not in your own bed?”

“Come on, move over.”

“I can’t just lie here with you, remember. Have you seen yourself in the mirror? You’re very beautiful.”

“Shut up.”

“I can’t shut up.”

“What can you do, old soldier? You should see yourself in the mirror. You shouldn’t be up for anything right now. You’ll have no hair left soon. You’ll look like that Hunter of yours, the way you dreamed.”

“Will you fall in love with me then? I want you to fall in love with me.”

“What for?”

“Well, it would make it easier for me to live and die.”

“Shut up. Turn over. Turn towards me.”

“You ... No, wait. I don’t want to do it like that.”

“What?”

“I don’t want you to do it with me out of pity. Out of compassion. Like with all the others. Don’t sleep with me because my hair’s falling out. All right?”

“All right, I won’t. You don’t look that great, to be honest. We’ll give you a shave tomorrow. Good night.”

“Wait. Maybe there could be other reasons?”

“Such as?”

“Well ... Because the first time, back then, it was good for you. Because I’m handsome and what else ... I don’t know ... And brave.”

“I don’t remember too well how it was the first time.”

“Give me another swig. And yes, because there’s no one else like me. I’d like to think I’m the only one like me. Can I think that? At least for an hour?”

“Drink.”

* * *

“That’s it ... That’s it ... I’m done ...”

“You’re just crazy ... Again ... Can I go again?”

“You’ve got radiation sickness ... What more can you do? Eh?”

“I don’t know ... I still need you. Maybe my body thinks it’s the last time ... Eh?”

“You fool. You’re heavy.”

“It can’t be explained from the medical viewpoint. It’s a miracle. But I can go again ...”

“All right. If it’s a miracle.”

* * *

“You’re very beautiful, by the way. Did I tell you that?”

“You did.”

“Especially your eyebrows. And eyelashes. And eyes. And your lips—the little corners there. And here, the kink. And your neck. Your little neck. And those legs ... Like matchsticks.”

“A fine compliment.”

“And the hairstyle ... Well ... The hair.”

“I cropped it myself in front of the mirror.”

“You know, while I was waiting for you here, this afternoon ... While you were in there ... While they were ...”

“That’s enough.”

“I heard so much, all sorts of things.”

“You’d better get up and get out.”

“No, wait. And I want to say so much to you now ... That you’re incredible, and it was so good for me with you, and it hasn’t been like that with my wife for a long time, and that I want to take you out of here, and I will, when I can ... But someone else has already said all that to you today.”

“And yesterday too.”

“And yesterday as well.”

“So what? Aren’t you going to say any of that to me now?”

“Shall I?”

“Better give me some water. It’s over there.”

* * *

“A cross ... Are you a believer?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“I didn’t used to believe. I ended up with the Jehovah’s Witnesses once. It was all so stupid and funny. For a long time after that ... When I thought about it ... Yes. And now ... Yes, probably. I pray sometimes. Quite often. Well, I don’t exactly pray, as such ... I ask for something. Let’s do it this way, Lord; you give me this, and I’ll give you that.”

“You mean you want to strike a deal with God. Like all men.”

“Again?”

“Ow!”

“And women don’t do that?”

“Not the same way.”

“How then?”

“Like this: If there’s no God, then there’s nothing at all to hold on to here in this Metro. Then everything’s screwed. And He ... forgives. He says, Hang on. You have to be patient here, but it’s for a good cause. Yes, people suffer and people die. But it’s not all for nothing. It’s a test. You have to pass it. You’re not getting dirty; you’re being cleansed. Just remember about me—you can always pour your soul out to me. I can’t talk, but I can hear just fine. If you want to apologize—apologize to me. You can get angry at me too. Come on. Hit me. Don’t hold it in. If you want to love someone, love me. I’m your father, and I’m your bridegroom. Come into my arms. I can endure anything. I’ve endured worse than this. Do you

understand? A world without God isn't round, it's like gravel. Nothing but corners and sharp edges. It's God that makes it round and smooth."

"Yes. Without Him there simply isn't anything to hold on to. That's it."

"You just have to forgive Him for what he's done to people, for the war, for the ruined planet, for everyone who was killed."

"That wasn't Him. That was us. He held His hand out to us again afterwards, to pull us out of the pit. But we bit that hand. He's the one who has to forgive us. I don't know if He will. I wouldn't forgive if I was Him. God the Father doesn't forgive anyone; the entire Old Testament is nothing but wars and covert operations. But Jesus, on the contrary, forgave everyone."

"I haven't read it. The Bible is for people who don't believe. In order to convince them. But if you simply believe, and that's it, then all those stories aren't for you. All right. It's late."

"And what if it isn't all ruined? The planet?"

"Good night."

* * *

"Are you asleep?"

"Not much chance with neighbors like you."

"What if I tell that not all the planet was ruined after all? If not everything's polluted?"

"Did you dream that or something?"

"Really. I know. I heard it from someone. And it's not far away; it's right here, near Moscow. They're reclaiming the surface. Without telling anyone about it. In Balashikha. That's less than an hour away from here on the map. They're building something. An outpost on the surface. That means the land there allows them—"

"How long did you spend on the surface without a suit? And what happened to you? Think."

"And the most important thing is that they're building this outpost next to a radio station. What does that tell us? That they're in contact with someone. Maybe they're getting ready to evacuate? Imagine it: the return to the surface! I just have to get to Balashikha."

"Who told you all that?"

"A man. What difference does it make?"

"There are lots of men here who tell stories about all sorts of things. Ordinary men and not so ordinary. You can't believe everything. You can't believe anything."

"Come with me, eh? To Balashikha?"

"No."

"Do you think there's nothing there? Do you think we're the only ones too? That I'm wrong to go trudging off up there? That I'm a useless idiot? That I'll have freaks for children? And it will all be for nothing?"

"I just don't want you to die. For some reason, just at this moment, I really don't want that."

"And I'm not planning to. But I'll go there anyway. I'll just get my strength back, and be on my way."

"Hug me."

* * *

"Deeper! Deeper! Stop acting like you'd never had your cherry popped!"

"Ow ... That hurts!"

"Shut your gob, you slut. Want me to tie you up?"

"No, don't. Please don't."

"You all act hard-to-get. All you bitches. Think I'm going to believe you're some pure little girl? You're a filthy, filthy bitch. And you like it, don't you, when someone does this to you ... When they do this to you ... When they shaft you good and hard?"

"That hurts!"

“How about that? Does that hurt too? Take that! And that!”

“You bastard ... If you—”

“Who are you? Who the hell are you? Eh? What the fuck are you?”

“You scumbag! Scumbag! Filthy bastard. I’ll slaughter you.”

“Help! Murder! Guards! Help! Mu-urde-e-e-e-er ...”

* * *

“You can’t stay tonight. He’ll come this evening.”

“Who’s ‘he’? This master?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“That scar there, on your stomach. The cigarette burn. Did he do that?”

“No, not him.”

“You’re lying, right? Look, I’ve got burns too, here. They’re from that night. That night when the two of us ... When we were introduced. That man who found me in the corridor. I was crawling along, drunk. He picked me up and brought me to you. He was the one who gave you to me. Is he your master?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Did he burn you with a cigarette? Why do you put up with things like that? And what did he burn me for? There on my arm, that’s my Order tattoo. It was.”

“I know what was there, Artyom. I read it. I remember that night.”

“Why did he burn it out, your master? Why did he torture you?”

“It wasn’t him Artyom. He didn’t burn me. He had nothing to do with it.”

“Who then?”

“I did it. I burned myself.”

“You did? What for? That’s insane. And who burned me? Who burned out my tattoo? You?”

“You did it, Artyom.”

“What? Why? What the hell for?”

“You really do need to get ready and go. If you don’t remember anything, that’s the best way. Honestly.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re protecting him. What kind of man is he?”

“You can sleep at my friend Kristina’s place today. I’ve arranged it. And don’t come here. I don’t want you to come here. Or tomorrow either.”

“Why?”

“You only make me feel worse. I want to burn myself again.”

* * *

“How are you? How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know. Alive.”

“I thought ... What you told me about Balashikha. I have a ... an admirer. He’s a stalker too. Freelance.”

“Has he been there?”

“No. He has a car. Hidden on the surface somewhere. I can ask him to ... to take you. To go there with you. He’s making a trip today.”

“Is he one of your clients?”

“Yes, he’s one of my clients.”

“I don’t want to. I’d rather walk there.”

“Artyom. You won’t get anywhere on foot. Look at your leg. And ... I asked the doctor about it. If the radiation sickness isn’t treated ... You might have only three weeks left. But how can you get it treated here? Where?”

“You just want to get me out, right? So this master of yours and I don’t lock horns?”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“You just don’t know what to do with me. Any place will do, just as long as I’m not here this evening when your master comes.”

“The trip’s today, Artyom. Will you go?”

“Yes, I’ll go.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Right then ... bend down.”

“What for?”

“You can wear it for the time being. So you’ll have something to hold on to. When you come back, I’ll take it back.”

* * *

“Hi. Sashun, I’m a bit tired today, so can we just have some tea and get some sleep, eh? Let’s go into my office.”

“All right.”

“Those cretins, would you believe it, they blew up the passage to Kuznetsky Most, and all Pushkin collapsed. They’ve got nowhere left to go now, and the Reds don’t want to listen to any talk. A total damn mess. I’m exhausted. They foul everything up, and I have to sort it out.”

“I understand.”

“What are you doing here? Eh? Eavesdropping, are you? Who are you?”

“I—”

“He’s with me. He came for a consultation. So to speak. He’s got the consulting hours confused. I’ll take him away ... I’ll take him away!”

“I got confused. Sorry. Wrong time, wrong place.”

“Is he tanked up, or what?”

“Of course he is. Totally shit-wasted, can’t you see? Come on, let’s go, you great hero.”

“Who’s there? What is it?”

“It’s nothing, Alexei Felixovich. A false alarm.”

“Falshsh. Alaaaarm.”



CHAPTER 15

— ENTHUSIASTS' HIGHWAY —

They went up from Trubnaya Station. There turned out to be an exit there, as well as an entrance. And you could get in there without any ID documents: You just had to know who to talk to, who to talk in front of, and what words to use.

“You don’t know how to deal with people, you fool,” Lyokha told Artyom.

But Lyokha knew how. And he was an impeccable first apostle.

“I’ll go with you,” he said rather indefinitely. “Firstly, I didn’t see anything so almighty scary up on that surface of yours. Secondly, a stalker’s earnings are as good as anyone’s, and it might even pay better. And thirdly, my balls are swelling up anyway. One roentgen more or less isn’t going to make much difference. Let’s go. Whatever we find, a third of it’s mine.”

“You’re a greenhorn,” objected the stalker who had agreed to take Artyom to Balashikha. “You owe me for the lesson and for the suit. So whatever you find, half of it will be mine, and you get damn all out of what I find. All right?”

Lyokha thought for a moment.

“Well, that’s something at least,” he sighed. “Just make the lesson a good one!”

The stalker was called Savelii. Savelii’s wrinkles didn’t run like normal people’s did, but any which way: vertically across his forehead and down from his mouth, and crisscross around his eyes, and where his eyebrows should be. The folds from Savelii’s nose to the corners of his mouth had been carved with a penknife, and just below his forehead a deep notch had been carved in with a fretsaw, so that his nose seemed to hang there all on its own. His hair all seemed to be in the right place, but it was sparse; and his cranium, which was also wrinkly, could be seen through it quite clearly. And Savelii’s fangs were forged out of steel: Not all of them, though—some were simply missing. He was getting on for fifty years old, so he must be a good stalker.

It was painful for Artyom to walk with the acute, shooting pain from his knee. And at every step his lacerated back felt agonizing, as if the skin was about to burst and roll up into a tight tube, leaving the brown, baked flesh exposed.

They crossed the boulevards, steering clear of the creeping roots, and walked past the ruined shopping center beside the circus. The circus was closed. The shopping center had been devoured by some kind of malevolent mold. They walked round it and went down into the car park. Savelii’s car was standing there.

“As if I’d just driven in to take a stroll round the shops,” the stalker confided to them in a nasal voice. “A good feeling.”

Artyom didn’t like this. He didn’t like the random wrinkles either, or the steel teeth, or the squinty eyes. Or the fact that this man came to see Sasha whenever he wanted and used those eyes and teeth on her. He didn’t want to picture that to himself, but he couldn’t help it.

And the worst thing was that Savelii only came up to Artyom’s shoulder. How could she possibly do it with someone like that?

“Are you shagging Sasha too?” Savelii asked him straight out. “Glad to meet you. A fine girl. Although she could be my daughter. But I don’t have a daughter, so my conscience isn’t bothered by that.”

“You go to hell,” Artyom told him for saying that; he’d been going to do it anyway.

“I get it,” the stalker said with a wink and didn’t take offense. “I’d fall for her too, if I was a bit younger. But when I was a bit younger, I had different Sashkas.”

And Artyom didn’t like that at all.

Savelii's car was a station wagon. Under its cover it was silvery, pampered and well-oiled; its windows gleamed like mirrors, and the whisker of the radio aerial was about one and a half meters long. And, in particular, the driving wheel was on the right. Artyom took a look at himself in the black glass: The helmet on his head, the one Savelii had given him, was idiotic, but the gun was good, with a silencer. The gun was more important.

Everything else in the underground car park had rotted away or been ransacked. Can't be much fun for this car of his here, thought Artyom, the only one still alive. Like going to a graveyard to visit your relatives.

The car started immediately.

"My little Japanese girl," the stalker explained with a hint of pride. "I visit her every time I come up on top. Of course, there aren't many weirdos wandering about now, but I still worry anyway."

They crept up out of that crypt and drove out onto the Garden Ring Road.

"To Balashikha, you say?"

"Yes, Balashikha."

"Where exactly? It's quite a big place, Balashikha. Pretty much a town."

"We'll find it when we get there."

"You're a funny guy," said Savelii.

They went to the right along the Garden Ring. They couldn't hurry; the corridor through the rusty junk wasn't very wide and it was twisty. Sometimes they stuck their nose into a track, but it was a dead end. They had to reverse out. The pavements were all cluttered with crashed cars too. When people had tried to escape from Moscow, they'd raced along the pavements as well. And straight over other people. But was there even anywhere to run to anyway?

"And what's there?"

They'd set off early in the morning, so they would have the dim light of the day for the expedition. The sky was completely smeared over with clouds that didn't let the ten-rouble sun Artyom had seen the last time shine through. The night had been black; the dawn was gray and the morning was completely colorless.

He drank all evening, just to avoid thinking about the fact that someone else was Sasha's master; there were only two hours of night left, and he didn't even wake up with a hangover but still drank. He felt sick—maybe that was the home brew, but obviously it was really the sickness.

There weren't any crows in the city, or dogs, or rats. The buildings stood there, parched and withered. Only the wind moved; everything else had stiffened and frozen ages ago. The radiation meter ticked away as if it was counting down especially for Artyom. Lyokha was as quiet as if he'd swallowed his tongue. Deadness surrounded them.

"There's an outpost there. The Red Line is building a colony on the surface."

"The Red Line? A colony? What for?"

"They're going to settle the surface," Artyom said in desperation

"In Balashikha? Balashikha isn't exactly very far away. Just outside the Orbital Ring Road. Take a look at the meter. Who can live there?"

"People."

"Just where did you get this from, kid?"

"Someone told me ... Someone reliable. He said men had been sent there from Rokossovsky Boulevard Station to build an outpost. Convicts. They've got a prison camp at Rokossovsky. And the boulevard is right beside Balashikha, within walking distance. It all fits, if you think about it."

"But why in Balashikha? What's that place got?" Savelii persisted. "Some kind of bunkers? A military base?"

"A radio communications center. Maybe. Apparently. So, thinking logically ... They must communicate

with someone, if it's a radio center." Artyom turned his head and looked at Savelii: How would he react? "So I think there are survivors somewhere else."

An outpost.

While he was lying there recuperating on the sofa bed in Sasha's little room, he'd had time for imagining. So it was probably a fortress with walls a few meters high and machine gun towers to keep enemies away; but inside it was like one of those little glass globes with toy snow—a cozy little paradise. But what exactly was there? People, of course, without gas masks, breathing the air. Children playing ... All well-fed. Some kind of domesticated animals. Ducks, maybe? Orange ones. And mushrooms, obviously, great huge ones. And the whole inner courtyard was covered in luscious greenery: rustling in the wind and shimmering. Basically, they had a life, not just an existence.

Savelii's face was covered with pale-green rubber instead of skin: The rubber didn't wrinkle up or stretch at what Artyom said. Savelii had round glass lenses instead of eyes, and the lenses could only bulge; they couldn't narrow. Did he think this was funny? Or was he angry that he'd signed on for this imbecilic tomfoolery? Was he wondering why he was taking the risk? If he only knew who told Artyom about Balashikha and what the other people there at the time had said.

Savelii waited for a moment, then reached out his hand, found a button, and switched on the radio. He ran through the FM wavelengths and switched to AM. And then to ultra-short waves. Everywhere the abandoned airwaves howled faintly, like the wind in naked branches. The sterile Earth spun in its dusting of insect powder, completely empty, in airless space, with man only perched on it at one spot, like a solitary louse that hadn't been killed yet. Squatting there, motionless and sleepy, under the bell jar of the heavens: with nowhere to go and death won't come.

"It would be good if there were survivors somewhere," Savelii answered, and looked back at Artyom. "Maybe there really are?"

Artyom couldn't believe he was being honest when he said that.

"I'm not from Moscow," the stalker continued. "I come from near Ekaterinburg. I came here to study after the army. To be a cameraman. I wanted to shoot a film about the war, what a cretin. I thought I could come up with a film about tanks and my time in the army. And conquer the capital. I left everyone behind there. My mother and father. My younger sister. And my grandad and granny were still alive. My mother hinted that I could get settled in in Moscow and then Varka could come up here too. And maybe, she said, in our old age we'll move to somewhere outside Moscow, closer to you. Or you can come back to us, leave the grandchildren with us for the summer, to go mushrooming and berry-picking. I finished my studies. But the work went nowhere. And every year I told them, Yes, yes, right away, any moment now. I couldn't sink any roots into this Moscow, and that was it. I lived in rented apartments all the time. Just one room, always in the outskirts. I was ashamed to bring women to photoshoots, let alone put up my own sister. And then, if my little sister was there, what could I do about women? I reckoned I'd fallen in love, but I didn't have the money to get married. To get to work, I always took the minibuses and the Metro and the taxis—never had enough money for a car. I saved up and saved up, and then the rouble went down the drain. Life was lousy. That's what I thought then. But now I think different."

"Have you ever tried listening for radio signals?" Artyom asked.

"I've tried, all right," Savelii responded. "Nothing there. But basically, I couldn't give a shit for the radio. I have the car all fitted out and fueled up because the way I think is this: Why not just abandon the whole fucking shooting match? Why not just walk out of the Metro one morning and get into the car, put on a Prodigy disk, and zoom off out of this fucking Moscow of yours and go east, for as far as I can keep going? Eh? I've already swapped some stuff for oil from the chemists and pickled plenty of mushrooms. They're in the boot, by the way. And I packed them in rubber, so the jars wouldn't smash against the machine gun. Everything's ready. It's been that way for more than two years."

"Why don't you go?"

“Because. Because I’m a human being, craven and cowardly. It’s easy to decide; going through with it is harder.”

“I can see that.”

“But every couple of nights I see our dacha: the vegetable patch, the well, the raspberries on the bushes, my father scattering manure on the dug-over soil and shouting ‘come and help me,’ and I keep dodging him. And my mother calling me to drink goat’s milk. Can you see that too?”

“I can see it,” sleepy Lyokha piped up from the backseat. “Not all of it, but some of it.”

“Well then,” said Savelii, “I wouldn’t mind if they were all alive. Or someone, at least. At least the old man who lived opposite us and used to pull my ears for firing my catapult at his chickens.”

They drove past the Leningrad Railway Station, and the Kazan Railway Station, and the Kursk Railway Station. From all of them the rusty tracks ran off into bleak desolation. Artyom had been here, when he was serving under Miller: He’d walked out onto the tracks and watched the two rails come together at a single point and wondered what was out there, at the other side of the world. A strange thing, a railway: like the Metro, but with no walls.

“But I’ve heard,” he said, “that there’s a tunnel somewhere from Metro Two that goes to the Urals. To the government bunkers. And that’s where all the government leaders are. Guzzling tinned stuff and waiting for the radiation level to drop.”

“They’re guzzling each other,” Savelii retorted. “You don’t know those people; you never watched the television.”

Artyom didn’t know those people, but he knew others. He remembered the unopened envelope that must be lying somewhere in Dietmar’s breast pocket, riddled with bullet holes. Miller and that Felixovich in his phone had failed to stop the war.

“Felixovich,” said Artyom, sobering up. “Alexei Felixovich. Bessolov?”

“Sleep it off,” Savelii advised him. “Your friend back there has switched off. Why don’t you do the same? It’ll take us a while to get to Balashikha at this rate.”

But Artyom couldn’t. The tension was making him feel dizzy.

“Stop,” he told Savelii. “I feel sick.”

Savelii stopped, and Artyom got out to spill his guts. It felt better without the gas mask, but the radiation tasted bitter on his tongue; that was bad. And the desolation all around was so bad that Artyom couldn’t think any more about who was Sasha’s master, and who was Miller’s.

A different thought started buzzing in his head instead: What a stupid idiot you are, how could you let yourself be deceived by that half-alive corpse in the tunnel, how could you have believed his dying ravings? There isn’t anything there. Not in Balashikha, or in Mytishchi, or in Korolyov, or in Odintsovo, nowhere, there never had been.

“Copped a dose, did you?” Savelii droned. “Or is it the hangover?”

“Let’s get going.” Artyom slammed the door.

From the Garden Ring they trundled down to the embankment of a swampy little river with heavy yellow vapor slowly rising from it. Then through a thousand empty buildings again, past a strange, tiny little red church with dull little crosses, crushed in between two squat little houses. His hand rose up to his neck of its own accord, felt for the talisman through the rubber suit and stroked it: without any help from his head or his conscious mind.

They came out onto a straight, wide road, very wide and straight, like the Red Line itself: no bends and no sharp corners—three lanes in one direction, three lanes in the other, and tramlines as well. And it was packed solid, but only in one direction—to the east, out of the poisonous city. Packed solid with cars that had stalled or collided.

The veins of Moscow had choked up.

“Enthusiasts’ Highway,” Artyom read on a blue sign.

The cars had turned into metal containers, into tins. The petrol had been drained out of all of them a long time ago, but nobody had taken the people out of their tins: Where could you put them, anyway? The cars had stopped so tightly packed together that the doors couldn't be opened. So their owners were still there inside them, still traveling east to this very day. Black and withered, long ago gnawed right down to the bones. Some had nestled their faces into the driving wheels; some had lain down on the backseat; some were lulling a child to sleep. It was good that they hadn't died of hunger but from the radiation, or perhaps from the poisonous gases: They hadn't had to wait long and hadn't really understood anything.

Where there could have been eight rows, twelve had squeezed in. One car every four meters. On average, let's say, three people in a car, although many of them were packed. How many did that make? How long, Artyom wondered, was the highway? Where did it go to? Where did it end?

The meter started crackling loudly. SaveliI squirmed anxiously in his chair, which had some kind of white pelt thrown over it to make it cozier. They had to scramble along the margin of the road, and there was barely enough space.

"Right then, enthusiasts?" he asked Artyom. "Balashikha, is it?"

"Craven and cowardly," Artyom replied. He stopped looking at the passengers hurrying along in their frozen jeeps and sedans. He was bored with them. He closed his eyes. A rusty taste lingered miserably in his mouth. SaveliI and he were going nowhere. Everyone was right; Artyom was wrong. He'd gone out of his mind.

How long had Sasha said he had left? Three weeks?

And the doctor said the same. She'd stamped the sentence with her medical seal. And that seal was all the doctor had; she didn't have any medicine.

And what could he do in those three weeks? What else should he do during that time?

Go back to everyone and ask them all for forgiveness?

Anya—because Artyom hadn't wanted to live a coherent human life with her and he hadn't been able to give her children. Miller—because Artyom had turned his only daughter's head. Sukhoi—because Artyom had never been able to call him father, not when he was six and not when he was twenty-six, and instead of "good bye" he would say to him, "Dad, give me some money."

If his legs would carry him a little bit farther, he could go and find Hunter too. Have a final drink with him. Tell him, "It didn't work out for you, and it didn't work out for me. My hair's fallen out, but apart from that I'm nothing like you. So after I'm gone people will still be stuck in the Metro forever eating worms, stumbling around in the darkness, telling tall stories, trading in pig shit, and fighting to the last breath. I won't open their cell door for them; I won't set them free; I won't teach them not to go blind in the sun."

Then take the cartridges that Sukhoi had tipped into his pocket, go to TsvetnoI Boulevard, give them all to Sasha and embrace her gently, snuggle up against her, with their foreheads and noses touching, for this money, and do nothing—just simply lie there and look into her eyes from close up. Oh, and ask Homer to take her out of that dive when Artyom kicked the bucket.

Well, it was a plan.

Didn't it seem like the Japanese girl had started moving a bit faster?

"Look."

Artyom opened his narrowed eyes.

A path had opened up. The cars had been pushed off it, crumpled up and squeezed into other rows. As if an immense bulldozer had moved along, clearing them off to the side with its metal blade. An asphalt channel had been cleared through the solid surface of rust, all the way to the horizon.

"There," said Artyom. "There! Who do you think did that?"

His heart started trembling and swaying on thin rubber straps in his hollow chest. His body broke

into a sweat under the impermeable protective suit. The excitement brought that sour spittle back into his mouth, but Artyom checked it and held it back. He didn't want to stop and lose even a single second.

So they had found some kind of equipment, brought it here, and worked in secret on the surface, raking aside the endless traffic jam and clearing a road for traffic going east, to Balashikha. Probably no one but the Reds could have pulled off something like that in total secrecy. So that man in the tunnel hadn't deceived him. Artyom simply had to rush to the horizon, burst through it like the ribbon on a finishing line, and there it would be: the outpost. The place where in some miraculous way people lived on the surface.

No, it wasn't all in vain.

Not a madman, not an idiot, not a pitiful dreamer.

"Step on it," Artyom told Savelii.

Lyokha was dozing. The radio was hissing. The wind was flattening itself against the windshield. Savelii went up to a hundred kilometers an hour, and the channel narrowed from the speed, but he didn't even think about slowing down; Artyom got the feeling that under the clinging rubber the stalker was also smiling with his steel-lined mouth.

The buildings came to an end, and strange forest thickets began: Tree trunks rose up on both sides of the confined road, leaned in towards each other, stretched out their branches and wove them into a canopy, trying either to embrace or to strangle each other. But there were no leaves on them—as if they were fighting for sunlight and water, but had expended their final reserves of life on this. And whoever had carved the road through the cars had moved through this thicket too, without hesitating.

Then the thickets receded, and a wide space opened up, dotted haphazardly with multistory boxes; Enthusiasts' Highway expanded by another two lanes at each side, and all of them, apart from the channel, were packed solid with corpses; eventually an immense flyover curled round into a concrete loop up ahead.

"We're crossing the Orbital Ring Road," Savelii announced. "Balashikha comes after that."

Artyom rose halfway out of his seat.

Where are you, miracle? Straight after the Ring Road? Could it really be that they only had to cross the orbital highway and the radiation level would drop immediately? No, the meter only started clicking away even faster; the channel narrowed—the carrion had been cleared off it less carefully here—and it became harder to hurtle along it so fast.

The Orbital Ring Road was immensely wide, like a highway in the kingdom of the dead, and just as endless. Standing together on it in the queue for final judgment were sedans and heavy trucks, plain little Russian boxes and stately foreign limousines. Some of the trailer-trucks had their cabins tipped forward, as if their heads had been half-severed in an execution; all of their bellies had been gutted. The metal herd stretched from horizon to horizon; the circle of the Orbital Ring Road closed in some place unknown, like the circle of the Earth itself.

But the Earth didn't end here. It carried on; it was still the same Earth.

They passed a sign that said "Balashikha."

There was nothing outside the Orbital Ring Road that was different from what was inside.

The buildings stood more sparsely; instead of five-story Khrushchev blocks, factory ruins crept up to the road. What else was there here? Shattered kiosks at overturned bus stop shelters; buses like gas chambers with a panoramic view; the wind: blowing roentgens in your face, flying from east to west. The day was beginning, and there was no one to see it. Artyom could have completely lost his faith and renounced the church, only one thing stopped him: The channel carried on farther. Where to?

"Well? Where is it?" Savelii asked. "Which way, Susanin?"

"Which way?" Artyom asked the man who was coughing in the tunnel.

Why had he believed him? Sasha had told him: Don't believe anyone.

But how could I not believe? What would I hold on to then, Sash?

“There! What’s that over there?” Lyokha started squirming about behind him.

“Where?”

“Over there! What’s that there, on the left? It’s moving. And there’s more than one!”

They were moving.

Turning.

It was standing by the road, in an open spot: a tower that wasn’t a tower, a windmill that wasn’t a windmill ... Made of metal rails, probably, a cross-welded structure about four stories high, broader at the bottom, narrower at the top, with a huge three-bladed propeller grafted onto its head. In its rush the east wind lost its way and fell into the trap, and it spun the blades to free itself.

“And over there! Look! And there too!”

The wind towers were strung out, one after another, along the side of the road. The others were hidden behind the first—one, two, three, four, lots of them. The blades were each three meters long, irregular and sheathed in tin plate that was gray from the gray sky; a single glance was enough to realize that this was a handmade thing, not delivered from a factory but assembled sometime after the end, after the war, maybe not long ago. These were what they had been building recently.

Recently, right now!

Someone had built these wind towers recently!—on the surface!—for some purpose!

The propellers spun without any coordination: It looked like an entire squadron of planes moving across an airfield to take off—maybe a squadron of those pot-bellied slow-flyers with transparent wings. Or as if these propellers wanted to shift the entire planet, move it to somewhere else—maybe to some inhabited planet that people could jump across on to and escape that way?

“What are they for?” Lyokha asked through his nose from the backseat.

Artyom knew.

“They’re like the bicycles at our station,” he answered after a pause, in a dull, spellbound voice.

“They’re generators. They produce electricity. From the wind.”

“And what’s that for?”

“Are you plain stupid, or what? It means that people live here! Here! What else would they need such a humongous amount of electricity for? How many of them are there? Just look! Count them: six, seven, eight, nine! Ten-eleven-twelve-thirteen! And over there as well! They could supply an entire high-rise building! Or two! Or three! Fourteen! Fifteen! Sixteen! Can you imagine it? And someone built all of this! On the surface! What’s the radiation level like?

“The same,” said Saveli.

“Well, screw it then. It means they’ve managed to get round it somehow. Or they’ve built themselves something to keep it out. But at least they’re on the surface! Why would the Reds need to be on the surface? They know something that we don’t! They’ve got power here! We don’t have as much power in the entire Metro as these wind turbines produce! A whole city district can live round the clock with this power! Stop the car, pal!” Artyom shouted to Saveli. “Stop. I want to take a closer look!”

Saveli killed the engine at the side of the road.

Artyom jumped out, hobbled over to a wind tower, narrowed his eyes, and threw his head back to look up at the sky, at the slow, creaking blades. Everything was working properly: From the wind and the creaking, these contraptions made electric current. Not one of them was standing idle.

Saveli walked over with his cunning 9-millimeter special-forces sniper rifle at the ready and studied the windmill. He looked round and listened.

“But where are your people, then?” he asked Artyom. “Where’s your city district of live people who use this electricity to make porridge and light up the lavatory? Eh?”

“I don’t know, pal. They’re hiding. This is a high road. Why would they stick their noses out here?” Artyom explained.

“You mean they’re watching us right now?”

“They could be.”

Savelii raised his sniper rifle, put his eye to the sight, and swept it round in a circle.

“Doesn’t look like it. It’s the same as in Moscow, Artyom. Empty.”

“There’s a road, and they built wind generators. Someone built all this. Workers, engineers, electricians!”

“There’s no one here. You’re not blind, are you? They built this and went back into the Metro. The meter reading’s off the scale! The experiment didn’t work!”

They drove on: at walking speed, with the windows lowered so they wouldn’t miss a single person, not even the very smallest. But there wasn’t a single one. Naked trees reached their gnarled fingers up to the sky, asking for something. Behind the trees the pylons of a power transmission line jutted up, with their wires broken; they were invisible from a distance, concealed behind the buildings. The wind got tangled in the propellers. The cumbersome rotors creaked in raucous disunity, and this collective creaking never stopped for a second. And then they could see that the wind towers came to an end up ahead. But the outpost still hadn’t appeared.

“Take us back. We’ve probably driven past it!”

Savelii did that. While they were turning round, Artyom started feeling impatient and got out of the car again. He set off on foot, listening and looking.

Where are you, people?

You do exist! You are here! Come out! Don’t be afraid! I’m friendly!

Even if you’re Reds, it’s okay. Anyone. Do those underground colors exist up on the surface anyway? Surely they’ll fade out in the sunlight?

A dog appeared at the edge of the road.

It sniffed at the air and yapped lazily.

Artyom hobbled towards it. It wasn’t a guard dog: It had no collar, no pedigree, nothing. A whitish coat with darker patches, dirty.

“What?” asked Savelii, overtaking him.

“Do you see?”

“A dog.”

“It’s not afraid of us. It’s not afraid of people. And look how fat it is! It’s so glossy! Domesticated, get it? Eh? There’s a settlement here. Somewhere behind the trees. It’s tame and it lives in the settlement, like the mongrels we have at our station. Look how they’ve fattened it up!”

A few more wandered out slowly to join the whitish creature. If Artyom came across dogs in Moscow, he’d pick out the leader and shoot it, or he’d never get away. But they were different here: They didn’t growl; they didn’t spread out in a semicircle to corner you; they narrowed their eyes peaceably and just yapped gently. The radiation had taken its toll on them—one had five legs and another one with a big head had a little, blind head beside it. The radiation had taken a toll, but not turned them vicious. They were well-fed, that was it.

“Where did they come from? Look, over there! There’s a path behind the trees! That’s where the people are!” Artyom droned to Savelii.

Savelii parked the car and took out the keys. Lyokha slammed his door as he got out. He had dark glasses with pink, heart-shaped frames over his gas mask to protect him from the sun. Savelii had lent them to him.

The dogs sniffed at the people; Savelii shooed them off with his gun, and they ran away a few steps, lazily, not believing. Their paunches prevented them from running any faster. Fattened up.

Artyom raised his empty hands and set off along the path ahead of the others.

“Is anybody there? Hey! Don’t shoot! We were just driving by!”

Could they hear him here? Artyom couldn't tell; the wind towers were creaking so desperately, and his voice could easily have gotten stuck in the creaking.

"Is anybody there? Hey, hey! Don't be afraid. We're not going to ..."

It was hard to breathe. The filters didn't let through as much air as Artyom needed right now. And his little windows had steamed up, turned misty. But he didn't want to pick up another dose: Doses added up, and now every breath took time off his life, and he still had to figure everything out; he still had to find comfort and hope for himself and the whole Metro.

SaveliI and Lyokha walked after him.

The dogs trudged after them without hurrying, then went ahead, showing the way. Through the bare trees they couldn't see a building or a shed, or a fence, but there was something reddish towering up about fifty steps from the road.

They came out into a grassy clearing.

Wagging their tails guiltily, the dogs glanced into their visitors' eyes and ran to the center. When they got there, they disappeared. Artyom walked closer. Maybe there were dugouts there?

It was a hole.

An immense hole, dug out by an excavator. Not just a hole, but a foundation pit. The brownish color through the trees was the clay and sand taken out of it, a mountain, and there was no dugout.

The pit was full of people, dumped there.

All dressed any old way at all.

All men. Artyom couldn't make out any more than that. The dogs had gnawed away at them.

How many were there? A lot. Maybe twenty, just on the top. But there was obviously another layer under those, and then another and another, going deeper and deeper.

And there were a lot of dogs—but there was more than enough for all of them; that was why they were so gentle and good-natured. They jumped down and carried on quietly gnawing on someone. This was the activity that Artyom had distracted them from with his own howling.

"There they are, your builders," SaveliI said to his back. "The builders and the engineers and the electricians. All lying here. Work hard, play hard."

Artyom looked round at him.

"Why this?" he asked. "What's this for?"

"What do you mean, what for?" Lyokha droned in his pink-heart spectacles. "What's it for at the Reich? As if you never saw it. Did you think it'd be different here?"

Artyom grabbed hold of his rubber trunk and tore off the mask. He needed air, so that he wouldn't lose his mind; he'd forgotten that corpses smell. Sweet and repulsive, it slammed into his brain, and he gasped and puked up bile.

He ran, dragging himself away, away from the disturbed grave; and the creaking blades of the wind towers lashed and lashed at his ears. He ran out to them, standing in their neat single column; bad work, difficult—building them here. But they were built. It must have taken a long time to get them up. Men died off one by one, and others came instead. No they didn't come—they were brought here, political prisoners, or any kind, to build the outpost, and almost no one ever went back. Probably Zuev's people were the only ones who escaped, but they were caught in the Metro and liquidated rapidly, so they wouldn't talk. That was how it was.

The tin-plated wings of the wind towers swirled inexorably, glinting dully in the dull sunlight, but it wasn't a squadron of visionary airplanes; these were the blades of a meat grinder to which men had been brought from the Metro to be turned into dog food and have electricity pumped out of their lives.

"What for?" Artyom asked. "What do you need so much power for?"

He spat out the sour, bitter saliva and pulled on his gas mask.

And then there was a roar from behind the trees. An engine!

Artyom dropped to the ground and waved to the others, who were walking back. They lay flat too, so they couldn't be seen through the bare trees.

A truck drove out—six immense wheels, barred windows, a toothed battering ram instead of a bumper, a riveted iron box with narrow loopholes and a little door instead of a back section, and everything painted gray. It drove out from a side road onto the endless Enthusiasts' Highway and into the clear channel—at a point they had shot past in their Japanese car. It stopped and stayed there. What was it waiting for?

Artyom didn't breathe. Had they heard? Were they searching? Could they see the Japanese car parked behind them?

No. There was another roar, and another truck, exactly the same, trundled out onto the road. Freshly painted. They lined up, belched out black smoke, hooted, and set off towards Moscow. Hurling along the open channel, fitting neatly and precisely between the heaped-up tinned goods—and soon they could no longer be seen at all on the gray asphalt.

"From over there," said Artyom. "Round the corner. What's round there?"

That was where the power line pylons jutted up above the trees.

He set off along the edge of the road, his fingers spontaneously grasping the handle of his automatic. It didn't matter if SaveliI and Lyokha were following him or they were thinking it over. He had to find that place. He had to know what was there. What all those men had been spent on.

He turned off Enthusiasts' Highway onto a road attached to it; the sign called it Bypass Highway.

And began to understand, even before he got there. They weren't power line pylons. They were radio masts. One two, three, ten ... How many were there? This was the radio center!

He hobbled and skipped towards them, and the pylons also crept towards him from where they had been hiding behind the trees, moving out onto the sky, towering lacework forms woven out of metal. Never mind the silly wire that Artyom used to unwind on the roof of a skyscraper! These radio aerials must be able to reach all the way to the end of the world! If they couldn't pick up a signal from Polar Dawns, then what could?

"Wait!" SaveliI grabbed hold of his arm. "Where are you dashing off to? In the front entrance? Through the checkpoint?"

"Ah, fuck that," said Artyom. "The front entrance will do. These are radio masts, get it? These are aerials! A radio station. All those turbines—this is what they're for. They were built beside this! Not a settlement! They're here to power the radio! Now do you see? And what does that mean? It means they're in contact with someone! Maybe those Urals of yours! The bunker at Mount Yamantau! The red-bellies are talking to someone! Get it? Otherwise, why guard this? You do what you like, friend. I've only got three weeks left anyway. I've got to know."

He tore his arm free and walked on.

"Wait, you blockhead!" SaveliI whispered furiously. "We can't just charge in! What can three of us do against them? At least let's sit down for a while and figure this out."

"You sit; I'll reconnoiter."

He limped off under the trees—he could already see the concrete wall that the pylons stood behind. If he could just get past the wall somehow ... The gates maybe? No, better not go near the gates.

At one spot the trees parted, close to the barrier. Artyom scrambled through the brushwood: There was barbed wire stretched out along the concrete top of the wall. Never mind. He wasn't afraid of that any longer. He jabbed his automatic at it. Would it short out and spark? No. He grabbed hold, tore his mittens, ripped his trousers, and bloodied his leg again, but didn't even notice immediately. He scrambled over to the other side and dropped down with his good leg first. Slapdash.

If they saw him, they'd drop him on the spot.

He'd jumped at a good place. They hadn't seen him immediately: The grounds were covered in bushes

and cluttered with brick buildings and junk; there was even an excavator curled up in the corner, sleeping—probably the one they'd used to make the dugout for the builders.

A surprised Alsatian started barking and dashed out at Artyom from behind a corner, but Artyom put a quiet bullet into its face. The dog gurgled and tumbled head over heels.

He crept along a building—the guardhouse at the gates. He glanced in through the window at the back. Men. Dressed in rubber. Under the suits he couldn't tell if they were Reds or some other color.

He walked round and knocked at the door. They opened it, and he gave them a dose of lead. As you do unto us, so we do unto you. We can figure out later if I should have done that or not; we'll work that out in three weeks' time.

There was a little television on a desk, showing the gates and the wall. Winding the image back: They'd missed his jump, turned their backs, decided to rewind or just been too slow ... So God had protected him, then ... The one who was the Father. He appreciated this kind of thing ... The entire Old Testament was nothing but wars and covert operations.

He found the button marked GATES. Then hit it and went outside.

And that was when he got the bullet he'd been asking for from the very beginning. In the shoulder. He managed to run to a wall—at least it was the right wall, facing away from the shooter—and pressed up against it. He lifted the heavy automatic with his good arm and fired at random. The wrong wall, the wrong one! Another bullet zipped off it right beside his head, and a chip of brick flew into one of his glass lenses and the glass cracked. He ran towards the opposite wall—the shooting pain from his knee cut him down and he fell. A burst of fire started moving over the ground towards him in little fountains of dust; it had just crept up to his belly when someone started shooting from the gates. He looked with one eye: Lyokha! You've drawn their fire. Thanks.

Artyom got up, slipping in the dust—and another three of them came running out of the building, all in protective suits; they must have been delayed putting them on. Lyokha hid behind the corner. Someone was blasting entire belts of bullets at the corner from the roof, so he couldn't come out, and those three had spotted Artyom, who was down on all fours again, who just needed two steps to get away. But he didn't have those steps, and they would have dropped him, staining the dust red, if the Japanese car hadn't come flying in through the gates and squealed as it swung round, straight through the dumbfounded men, hurling them across its hood. They started peppering it from the roof. Lyokha peeped out and distracted the rooftop machine gunner again. Artyom managed to get away and reach the door. SaveliI jumped out of his car and took shelter behind it. The stalker found the man on the roof in the sight of his sniper's rifle, the silencer smacked its lips twice, and the machine gun choked. One of the men who had been knocked down got up and struck Lyokha a stupid blow on the chin with the butt of his gun. Then he started fiddling with his gun like a drunk, so he could finish the stunned broker off, but Artyom came up, shot him in the face, and rescued his rescuer. He pushed the door and started running along a corridor. Someone came at him with a pistol, and he didn't have time to think about anything—just pulled the trigger; the man staggered back. And that was all; that was it.

After that it was empty and quiet. There was no more firing outside either. Through the window he could see SaveliI kicking the other men he had knocked down to make sure they'd died for real.

The building turned out to be small.

A corridor and some rooms. All the doors wide open. There was the stairway to the upper floor, and it was the same picture up there. There was a control room, but Artyom had killed the man who understood something about it matter-of-factly as he passed by him.

There was a whole host of buttons and a bristling stubble of switches, and although the letters beside them were Russian, everything was labeled in some kind of gibberish—nothing but abbreviations—and there was no one to make long words out of them.

Artyom sat down on a chair with wheels.

He took off his one-eyed gas mask.

He touched the buttons. Well? Which one of you will connect me with Polar Dawns?

He thought he'd found how to change the frequency. There were the headphones. In the headphones the sea was murmuring: fshshshshsh ... fshshshshsh ...

Next.

Aaagh-agh ... Aaagh-agh ...

A TB ward. A black tunnel, filled with naked beast-people. Coughing. Breathing through holes punched in them with picks. They didn't want to go anywhere. Didn't want to follow him up. There's nowhere to go up there, they said. Everything's bombed; everything's poisoned; everything's polluted. Go up there on your own, you crazy fucking man.

Aaagh-agh.

Sma-ack! He swung his fist down into the control panel.

"Work!"

Sma-ack!

"Work, you bastard! Work, you heap of shit! What is it? What were you listening to here? Who were you talking to? All those men in that pit! What are they for? All the men outside! What are they for? Work! Work!"

Sma-ack!

Aaagh-agh ...

Fshshshshsh ... Fshshshshsh ...

Such huge aerials. Real towers! Ten of them! They can broadcast and receive on all wavelengths. Why are you so huge and so deaf you fucking fuckers?

How do you broadcast here? How can I tell the dead world everything? How do I tell it to fuck off, along with all the seven billion dead people in it?

SaveliI came in.

"Well, how are my mum and dad getting on?"

"They're not! They're not!"

"Well, does someone answer, at least? Or has all this been a waste of time?"

"Were they wasting their time? What did they do it for?"

SaveliI didn't answer. He stirred the dead radio operator hopefully with the toe of his boot. But he'd been killed once and for all.

"All right. Then we need to pull out. He could have warned his friends in the trucks. Dead easy. If they come back now, it's curtains for us. Alexei's out of it, for instance."

"Is he alive?"

"Knocked out. They hit him good and hard. I put him in the car. So. Come on. Collect up these guys' guns and let's go home. At least we'll get something out of this little trip."

Artyom nodded.

There was nothing left to do here. There was nothing left to do anywhere at all, for him.

He got up off the chair with wheels. His legs wouldn't bend. His eyes were dry. The fingers that were curved at Pushkin Station, shaped to the handle of the barrow, were senselessly set together, as if they were clutching the stock of an automatic rifle: The index finger was extended slightly.

He went over to the radio operator and took his pistol. The radio operator didn't mind; he let Artyom have it immediately. His uniform was featureless, badgeless. Who are you? Why are you?

He shuffled outside. Took one man's automatic, then another's. There's a machine gun on the roof, he remembered. He didn't want to go back in there, into this radio center.

The doors of the car were open. Lyokha was groaning as he came round. The airwaves were murmuring tediously in the car's music system, loud and clear. Just like in the control room. He needn't have

bothered to go in there. He needn't have killed men he didn't know. Or taken that sin on his soul when he'd have to account for it in three weeks.

Artyom sat own on the ground and looked round obtusely.

The door of the guardhouse was open. A human arm jutted out from behind it, with the fingers clutching at the asphalt. Next door was the transformer building—a yellow sign on the door, with a lightning bolt. A two-story radio center with a reticent radio operator. What was there to guard here? Why were the two big trucks here? Why build the wind towers? Why dig the pit with the excavator? And drive men out here from the Metro? To feed the dogs? To search for fugitives?

The windmill turbines creaked, produced electricity, poured it into a switchgear room, and charged those damn pylons.

They ground souls into flour, lives into dust.

They creaked so laboriously, winding Artyom's guts onto their blades: eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee.

And the deaf, useless pylons jutted up over his head.

Eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee, eeee!

He jumped up and limped fast to the transformer building, with the speed of the hate that had erupted inside him. He broke off the lock with his gun butt, kicked the door—it jangled like a cracked bell—and burst in. There was the distribution board: little lamps and switches.

He smashed the barrel of his gun into the board stupidly and clumsily. Little lamps crunched.

“Why, you bastards? Why do you need so much power?”

He grabbed his automatic, holding it like a stick, like a club, and swung the stock hard into the board. Splintered plastic and glass sprayed out; dislodged fuses dropped on the floor and the light went out.

He grabbed a bundle of bright-colored, toylike wires and jerked them towards him.

Inside Artyom, everything was burning; everything was twisted and compacted, and he couldn't get any relief. He wanted to destroy every last thing in here, tear everything down to the foundations, rip this pointless fucking station to pieces, send the current from the meat grinders into the ground, into the sun, out into space.

Tears would have helped. But something had died in his eyes, and the tears couldn't get started.

“Hey! Come here! Artyom!”

He walked out of the dark transformer building—tense and dissatisfied, still not free from that loathsome, stupid blackness. His ears were ringing. He had the rusty taste of blood in his mouth again.

He saw SaveliI waving his arms to him from the wide-open Japanese auto.

For some reason SaveliI didn't have his gas mask on.

“What?” Artyom shouted, trying to shout over the ringing.

The stalker answered him in an inaudible whisper and beckoned.

“Eh?”

“Come here, you blockhead!”

The wrinkles on SaveliI's face had arranged themselves in a strange pattern. As if he was smiling. Or maybe as if he was terrified out of his wits. His smile was insane, with a metal glint to it.

“What?”

“Can't you hear it?”

Artyom finally hobbled as far as the car. He frowned. Now what?

Something coming out of the car, from inside it ... Something ...

He gave the stalker a wild, crazy glance, jumped into the front seat, and started fumbling with trembling hands, missing the buttons: How could he turn it up?

“Is this your disk? Are you taking the piss, you bastard?”

“Cretin!” SaveliI laughed, looking in through the open window. “Can't you tell the Prodigy from Lady

Gaga?"

The music flowed out of the speakers.

Soft and fuzzy, tangled up with hissing—and absolutely nothing like any music that Artyom had heard in the Metro. Not a guitar, not a broken-down piano, not mournful hymns in deep voices about the Day of Victory: It was some kind of humorous antics, buffoonery, not music—but it was jaunty and sprightly, lively. He felt like dancing to this song. And it was overlaid with the familiar fshshshshsh ... fshshshshsh. It was the radio, not a disk. Definitely the radio. Music! Not call signs, but music! Somewhere people were listening to music! And playing it! They didn't say, We've more or less managed to survive over here, but have you survived over there? They put on music for other people to dance to.

"What is it?" Artyom asked.

"The radio, fuck it," SaveliI explained to him.

"But what city?"

"Fuck knows which one."

Artyom pressed a button to change the wavelength. What if there was something else somewhere?

It tuned in immediately. Immediately. In a single second.

"Come in, come in! This is St. Petersburg. This is St. Petersburg ..."

Artyom couldn't reply right now, so he rushed on. He heard jarring speech in a strange language, as if someone had stuffed his mouth with mushrooms and was trying to talk.

"English!" SaveliI nudged him in the shoulder where he'd been shot. "English? Savvy? Even those bastards have survived!"

Aaaagh-agh ...

"Berlin ... Berlin ..."

"Kazan ... Can you hear me? Hearing you loud and clear! This is Ufa ..."

"Vladivostok to Mirny Island."

Fshshshshsh ... fshshshshsh ...

"Greeting to the citizens of Sverdlovsk and the district ... Who can hear ..."

Surfeited on the sounds of the airwaves, Artyom fell back, drunk, from the radio. He goggled at the stalker, and his tongue could barely even mumble.

"What is this? How did this happen? What is this?"

"What did you do?"

"I smashed ... The distribution board. Disconnected it, I suppose. I tried to disconnect it."

"Well look, you must have done it."

"I don't ... I don't understand."

"Well, what else could it be?"

"Eh, what?"

"What do you think those pylons are?"

Artyom tumbled out of the car, threw back his head, and gazed at the masts propping up the sky. They looked exactly the same as half an hour ago, only now they were dead.

"So what?"

"You switched them off, blockhead, and the radio came on! The whole earth just opened up! And what does that mean?"

"I don't know. I don't know!"

"They're jammers!"

"What?"

"Jammers! They create interference! They're putting out interference at full power on all frequencies!"

"But how come?"

"And jamming all the airwaves! Everything! The whole world! Like in Soviet times!"

“The whole world?”

“Shtop being sho dumb ...” Lyokha pleaded feebly from the backseat with a mouth that wouldn’t close.

“The whole world, brother! All of it! Have you realized at least that the whole world is alive? We just think it’s not there! And this is why we think that! But it is there! Have—you—got—that?”



CHAPTER 16

— THE FINAL BROADCAST —

“Wotto I do wif vis?” Lyokha asked, struggling to get his bitten tongue round the words.

“What sort of question is that?”

Artyom looked round at him as if he was seeing him for the first time. Lyokha was lounging back with his gas mask pulled up onto his forehead. Liquid was flowing out of his mouth, and he was holding an open bottle of home brew. SaveliI had given it to him to disinfect his wound.

“Give me some too.”

Artyom swigged, but it didn't help. Lyokha's crushed teeth grated in Artyom's mouth. He looked at the neck of the bottle: It was completely red. He took another swig.

“Let's go!” SaveliI plonked down onto his animal pelt.

“Where to?” Artyom turned his head towards the stalker.

“Hello! Where to? What do you mean, where to?”

“Back? To Moscow?”

“Back, back? Are you crazy? Forward! To Ekaterinburg! Home!”

“Right now?”

“Right now, friend! Right now! Before those fiends come back.”

Artyom thought for a moment. He stuck his head out of the car and spat in the dust.

“What about the people?”

“What people?”

“Well, in the Metro. The people in the Metro. What will they do? What's going to happen to them?”

“What's supposed to happen to them?”

“Well, they have ... They have to be told. They have to find out. That we're not alone. That there are jammers. That they can go wherever they like!”

“That's what I'm talking about, ‘wherever you like.’ Don't you get it? We have a chance right now. All the roads are open. A full tank of diesel and the canisters back there. We've got a head start. We picked up plenty of guns and cartridges! It's a now-or-never situation.”

“But those big trucks really will come back. And they'll fix everything. And the jammers will start working again. And everything will be the same way it was. Then what? Won't anyone find out that there's a whole world out there? That they can up come out of the Metro?”

“Those who heard it, heard it, okay? They'll figure things out for themselves. Well? Are you coming?”

“But who did hear it? No one's even bothering to listen ...”

“Well, fuck them, then.”

“You can't say that!”

“Oh, yes I can. This is the Sverdlovsk Region speaking! How long have I been waiting for that? What Metro? What's the Metro got to do with anything? This is it, my day. I've got to get moving. This is what I was waiting for—exactly what I was waiting for and preparing for!”

Artyom pushed the door with his foot and got out of the car. He threw his head back and looked up at the pylons that were silent now. Lyokha slurped down booze without saying anything.

SaveliI spun a knob on his radio. A jabbering voice with burred Rs spoke out of it.

“Paris, damn it,” said the stalker. “Eh? How do you fancy shooting off to Paris?”

“I fancy it,” said Artyom.

“To join the faggots.” SaveliI roared with laughter at duping Artyom like that. “What's stopping you?”

“My stepfather's in the Metro. My wife's in the Metro. And as well as that ... Everything I have is

in the Metro. I can't just not tell them anything, can I? Just go away and leave them there?"

The stalker turned the key; the motor started chugging.

"Well, it's up to you. I don't have a stepfather in the Metro, or a stepmother. Apart from whores, I don't have anyone in the Metro. And whores aren't likely to just jump up and go dashing off anywhere. The darkness is handier for them."

"How do you know that? Whores or not whores ..." Artyom's blood was beginning to boil. "No one will stay stuck in the Metro of their own free will! People think there's nowhere for them to go to! Those Red bastards have locked people in the Metro, and they're keeping them there. They've hidden the whole planet from them! How do you feel about that?"

"I don't give a shit."

"You don't give a shit?"

"To hell with the whole damn place. I really don't give a shit, believe it! I don't give a shit for the Metro. For the people. For whoever is keeping someone else somewhere for some reason. That's no business of mine any longer! I know something else too. If we hang about here for another ten minutes, we'll all be dog food. I say stop playing the God-almighty hero. Fasten your seatbelt and let's go."

"I can't," Artyom answered in a low voice after a moment's thought. "I can't go to damn-blasted Paris when everyone I have is in there ... And I have to get them out. To tell them ... Everyone. They're being tricked! Everything they do, it's all a waste of time! The tunnels ... The fighting ... The worms ... The whole thing, don't you see? It's all for nothing. The 'living space' ... The war ... The mushroom plague ... The famine. Forty thousand people! Live people, all of them! Not just my stepfather, not just ... All the others. All the people! I have to let them out."

"You do as you choose," SaveliI replied.

Artyom paused for a moment. He reached his hand out to Lyokha and took another swig of crushed teeth.

"And you do as you choose," he said.

"So what are you going to do?"

Artyom's head was splitting. He shrugged.

"I'll stay here. I'll try to break them. The pylons."

"How can you?"

"I don't know. Maybe they have grenades or something here."

"Uh-huh. Now he wants a grenade. Served up on a plate. Okay, there's no point. It you want to croak, I'm not your comrade."

Artyom nodded.

"Hello, up there in the gallery!" SaveliI turned to Lyokha. "Who are you with?"

"I'll stay here for now," the first apostle said with his red lips. "I'm not so fast."

"Well, then, fuck you both," SaveliI said conclusively. "At least let me take a look at your shoulder."

"You're supposed to be eager to leave."

"I've got bandages and neat alcohol, and you've got nothing but your bare ass." SaveliI sighed. "I wouldn't get high-and-mighty if I was you. And get a couple of these painkillers down you. Past the sell-by date, but the doctors say the important thing is to believe. A goodbye present."

The bullet had passed right through. They splashed alcohol on the wound and bandaged it up. That would do it. Lyokha let them rinse out his mouth too. And he put his faith in the painkillers.

"That's what you get for interfering," the stalker told Artyom. No one's going to let you save everybody. The Lone Ranger, fuck it."

Artyom didn't want to talk about it.

SaveliI slammed the doors, took hold of the driving wheel, and swung round. When he was already halfway through the gates, he braked for one last time. He stuck his head out of the window.

“They’ll kill you, you cretins!”

“What the fuck can I do about that?” Artyom replied to the clouds of bluish smoke blowing into his face.

* * *

They closed the gates by hand. How long would they hold out when the assault started? Three minutes? Five?

“What did you stay for?”

“Oh, sure,” said Lyokha. “Just go driving off somewhere or other. Let’s get this fucking shit cleared up quick and then go home. Maybe we can still slip through.”

“I’ll go and look for something we can use ...”

“Listen, Artyom. I’ve been beating my brains out: What do they want these jammers for anyway?”

“Ask the Reds that one. Maybe so they can tell everyone on the outside that they are the Metro? That they’re the ones in charge here? Maybe they’re preparing to attack Hansa ... And getting help from someone on the outside. You saw the equipment they have, right? How could there be anything like that left in the Metro?”

And that four-by-four at Teatralnaya Station, he told himself. They were picking off the fascists. In their uniform protective suits. War, wasn’t it?

Right, then: He’d explained it to Lyokha, but not understood it himself. Why would anyone do that? Why would they keep forty thousand people—or however many it was—under the ground? What goal would justify doing that? he wondered.

“Go up on the roof. The machine gun’s still up there. Keep an eye on the road.”

He hobbled past the radio operator again.

“Where do you keep your grenades here?”

The weapons locker was standing there empty. They’d grabbed everything during the alarm. The little rooms: One had bunks in it; the other was the mess—you couldn’t hide anything there. Walking back past the control room, he glanced in. All the lights had gone out. Silence and dust hanging in the air.

It was a pity about one thing.

Svyatoslav Konstantinovich, you legless old fogey, you’ll listen to the airwaves when they all thaw out, but there won’t be anyone left for you to apologize to. If I could just get back to Moscow alive and sit down to listen to the radio with you. There you go, dad. In connection with our conversation. I’m totally schizo, of course, and I’m definitely an obsessive psychopath, and no way am I worthy of that little daughter of yours. But here you go, Svyatoslav Konstantinich, listen to this. Listen, listen. Don’t frown like that. Yes, that’s St. Petersburg. And this here is Paris. Uh-huh, that’s English. Right, then that’s Vladivostok. Impossible, eh? No it isn’t, because God knows when, but the Red Line set up jammers. Jammers, Svyatoslav Konstantinich. Oh yes! You probably know all about those, don’t you, unlike me? Eh? You know, but you missed this. We thought they’d broken all their teeth on the Order; we thought they were desperate to get that bunker. We got half our boys killed, just so they wouldn’t get their hands on that bunker. But maybe they weren’t interested in that old bunker of ours? Maybe they had bigger things in mind? Isn’t it just possible, Svyatoslav Konstantinich, that they were simply using it as a cover, distracting us, grinding us down in that siege, so we wouldn’t notice what was really important? Eh?”

He took the radio operator’s mask too, to replace his own one-eyed version, and went back outside. He walked round the building and came out facing the pylons. Firmly planted, with their roots in concrete, and held down on the ground by steel cables on all sides. No way to cut them down. No way to rock them and push them over. On the closest one he saw a ladder made of reinforcing bars, and he climbed up to see how much time was left.

You missed them, Svyatoslav Konstantinich. You missed the jammers; you missed the big trucks; you botched things with the war. You’re getting old, dad. You might not believe me, of course, because I’m

obsessed, but you listen, listen to the radio. Listen and tell me this. What's our Order's mission now? To carry on peddling pig shit? Or to get people out onto the surface? To get our boys killed so the people here can all stay Morlocks? Or to help them get to a place where the radiation will be bearable? Where they can live! What good is all this to me? No good at all! I'm not going to be Moses after all, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich, and I really couldn't give a damn. I was just trying to look good for this little whore. I won't have time to be Moses for a while. I get demobilized in three weeks. Three weeks and I'll be off—back to May, with the little orange ducks, to lick my ice cream. But you could have been Moses. And you still can be. It doesn't say anywhere that no one with physical disabilities gets taken on for the Moses job.

Eh?

Right, then. Go to hell.

His shattered knee wouldn't bend or straighten out. He had to scramble up to the sky the same way he scrambled out of that pitch-black hell: skipping lamely, hauling himself up.

He climbed until the grounds inside the concrete wall were the size of a pack of cigarettes. The wind up there was angry; it tried to blow Artyom off and carry him away. The pylons swayed, despite the steel hawsers. He saw a little doll-size Lyokha; he saw a little toy excavator; through a bald patch in the woods he saw the sandpit with the dead men and the little toy windmills.

To the west, in the direction of the city, his view of the highway was blocked by blank-eyed high-rise buildings. But to the east he had a clear view all the way to the horizon. There was no trace of Savelii already: He was in a big hurry to get home. But Artyom did spot something else. Something like little beetles scrambling feebly along the road in the far distance. A pity the stalker had taken his sniper's rifle with him. Could those be people?

As he was climbing down, he thought, But where were you before, people?

Why didn't you ever reach us?

With the radio, it was probably like this: The Reds set up these pylons, well, so that no one in the Metro could contact any other cities. So okay, the radio's dead. But if there were other places that were alive, inhabited, surely someone must have tried to get to Moscow? There weren't any people from those other places in the Metro; Artyom hadn't seen them, and neither had anyone else that he knew. So how come?

We didn't know anything about you. They stopped our ears and blindfolded us and drove us underground. They told us that the place where you were born is the place where you belong. But didn't you really give a blind damn about us?

He jumped down onto the dusty ground, leading with his sound leg, and shuffled off rapidly towards the guardhouse by the gates. Maybe he could find some grenades?

"Well, what?" Lyokha shouted to him.

"There's someone on the road. Walking in from out of town! Keep your eyes peeled!

People from some other town out there, interesting ... Or maybe a reconnaissance party, returning to the outpost. He'd find out soon. Very soon now.

He'd almost skipped and hopped all the way to the guardhouse when it suddenly struck him.

The excavator!

A huge brute like that must be able to topple the pylons. With its bucket ... Or by towing. If only it was in working order ...

He turned away from the guardhouse towards the corner. He hopped over to the monster across the wild grass and weeds crushed down by the caterpillar tracks—the orange paint was peeling off, the glass cabin was cracked, the arrow head of the bucket was resting on the earth wearily and dejectedly, like a drunk lying with his face in the mattress.

Was it working?

He scrambled up onto a caterpillar track and into the cabin. What did it look like?

Not like anything. There wasn't any steering wheel. There were levers instead; one had a fancy knob on it—a fly in glass—and another had a metal skull. Ah no, there were pedals sticking out of the floor too, with buttons beside them. The ignition lock was taped over with something, but the wires were sticking out of it. Disconnected ends. Should he give it a try? Red to red, blue to blue.

Do you use this heap of junk or don't you? Well?

He joined the bare ends together: Something awoke inside the brute; metal jerked convulsively and started trembling. There was a puff of black, sooty smoke. Artyom set his foot on a pedal uncertainly. He tried to move off, but the convulsion that had almost brought the machine to life passed off—and the machine faded out. Went quiet. Died.

Had Artyom done something wrong? He felt hot under the gas mask. It wasn't me who broke it!

He looked at the cracked and split instrument gauges: The fuel gauge needle was licking at the zero in its thirst.

The end.

He could hear the wind towers again. Hammering at his ears—at his ears and his nerves.

The little windows in his gas mask misted over: Time was running out. He had no solution; he shouldn't have stayed and he shouldn't have allowed his apostle to stay. He walked round the excavator and found where to pour in the diesel. He shouted into it: Wooh!

Motherfucker.

Dragging his leg, he hopped over to the guardhouse: Maybe there was something in there. A grenade launcher?

No, of course not. No grenade launchers. There were two dead men. One in the doorway, crawling outside, another in a room, staring up at the ceiling. Neither of them happened to be carrying any explosive: no reason to. SaveliI was right.

There wasn't a thing that Artyom could do to those pylons.

They had stood there before, they were still standing there, and they would carry on standing there. The trucks would come back; men without any insignia would shoot the two lost idiots and fling them to the dogs, who would blunt their teeth on lead; they'd replace the fuses, splice the torn wires together, and the aerials that could reach right to the other side of the world would start whispering again in chorus, that quiet whisper smothering any screams.

And everyone who was already used to life underground, to an empty globe, wouldn't have to change their ways. They wouldn't even have time to hear anything. Before they could even blink, the radio would be transmitting their favorite tuberculosis ward program. The world just flashed once and then went out again. They would be the sane ones again, and Artyom would be a psycho.

“Well, what?” Lyokha shouted from the roof.

“Nothing. Nothing so far,” Artyom answered.

So far.

It still wasn't too late to leave, was it? Abandon this damned place, hide, and let the big trucks go hurtling past? Pretend to be a dried-out passenger in a rusty car, crawl along the long, long shoulder of the road to Moscow, and then somehow ... Something. Another three weeks. Or two.

Back into the radio center, past the control room again, through the rooms again, banging the doors, kicking the cupboards and chairs. Where? Where was there anything anywhere in this place? How do I destroy you, you brutes? How do I annihilate you? The mute radio operator got under Artyom's feet. He dragged him aside in a fury, and to spite him the man left a dirty track.

Back outside. Where hadn't he looked? He ran round behind the building, raked through the bushes and combed through the grass. Then back into the blacked-out guardhouse. HI there, HI there. Since the television had fainted, it was showing a gray mirror-world, and everything in the mirror-world was the

same, only even more crooked and more stupid. If there was any electricity, at least he could have observed the perimeter. If there was any electricity, he could ...

He hobbled to the transformer building.

He swung the door wide open and propped it like that, so the creaking wind couldn't slam it. I was in too much of a hurry, sorry. Maybe I can fix that here, eh? If there was electricity, I could ... So clearly the only thing that can be done ...

On all wavelengths ...

You whisper on all wavelengths, right? Is that how you work, you bastards?

On all the wavelengths—on shortwave, and medium wave, and probably even on long wave—instead of music and call signs, you hiss, you blind. But if I can't knock you down, maybe I can teach you to talk?

His fingers were clumsy in the thick rubber; the shadow didn't belong to him—it wouldn't let any light through; it stopped him from seeing. His lenses had steamed up, and now they were running with water. What had he broken here? He started tying together broken wires, clicking fuses back into place, trying to persuade them.

Nothing. There wasn't any light. The wind towers were groaning, but there wasn't any light.

“Lyokh! Lyokha!” He skipped outside. “Do you have any kind of clue about electricity?”

“Why?”

“Come down for a sec and take a look!”

It was two long minutes before he came in.

“Did you do that? You vandaw,” he mumbled through his crushed teeth.

“Do you have any idea?”

“Wew, some. I wanted to be an ewectwician. A wew-paid job. Only no one will fucking wet you work. They've got their own mafia.”

Artyom looked out and stuck his face in between the bars of the gates. There wasn't anyone on the road: So those beetles hadn't managed to crawl all the way here yet? had they missed the turning?

The first apostle was still fiddling with the distributor board. Shifting fuses about, mumbling something to himself under his breath. The little electric bulb under the ceiling dangled there, lifeless, its flask empty.

“Okay, d'you hear? Drop it. Forget it. It's not your thing. Let's go home.”

And Artyom looked bleakly at the dreary, gray wall assembled out of big concrete squares and realized there was no way home from here. Because the wall was so easy to climb over that it was a trap. It was easy to get inside, but you couldn't get back out. He'd just keep on scurrying round the bait, spellbound, until the spring lashed out and broke his back.

“And what is my thing?” Lyokha asked. “Trading in shit at ten buwwets a bucket for the west of my life? Shove over, you're bwocking my wight.”

“You're a bastard,” Artyom told him. “I appointed you my apostle, and you abuse me.”

“Well, aren't you funny! Come on, why don't I take you on as my apostuw? You know, my mother pwophesied a gwreat futuw for me,”

Lyokha snagged something with his fingernail and clicked it.

And there was light.

Artyom's heart leapt. He grabbed hold of Lyokha and squeezed him as hard as he could.

“That's it! You're the savior here, not me. Go watch the road!”

He limped past the creaking into the radio center: A lightbulb was working in the buffer zone! He burst into the control room and straddled the chair on wheels. Teach me to understand gobbledygook! What was this here on the switches? He forced himself to breathe out, blinked his eyes clear, and went through the inscriptions systematically, from top to bottom and right to left. He found a switch: INT.GEN.USW, deciphered it as “interference generator” and moved it down. The others were SW, LW, and various

different frequencies, scattered haphazardly across the makeshift console. He stuck the headphones on and clicked his way through the frequencies: Were they clear of hissing now?

He'd driven the snakes out of all the wavelengths, hadn't he? It seemed like he had.

Now what?

The pylons were a metal forest growing outside the window, every one of them draped in wire lianas and tangling its own frequency up in them, sucking the living juice out of it. That was why there were so many of them here: To silence all the distant voices at once.

So can I replace them with my voice?

His fingers fumbled across the switches again like fingers. Engage broadcasting on USW-SW-MW ...

Artyom touched the microphone on the headphones. He bent it towards his mouth: Listen to me. He traced where the wire dived down to with his fingers and found a switch with a little lamp on the console. He pressed it in and coughed into his own ears.

He coughed into the ears of the entire planet.

Artyom froze. He pulled off his gas mask: They had to hear him clearly—all of them. Every word he said. He licked his cracked lips.

“This is Moscow. Do you hear me? St. Petersburg? Vladivostok? Voronezh? Novosibirsk? Do you hear me? This is Moscow! We're alive! I don't know if you heard us before ... We couldn't hear you. We thought we were the only ones left. We thought ... There wasn't anyone else. Nobody and nothing, do you understand? How could you understand? You've been chatting to each other all this time ... While we ... Oh Lord, thank God that you're alive! That you're there. Out there ... Singing songs. How are you out there? We've been here all these years. Underground. We were afraid even to stick our heads out. We thought there was nowhere to go, can you believe that? We had no radio. There were no signals. Some bastards here set up jammers ... In Moscow. In Balashikha. And they hid you from us. It was as if we were deaf. And blind. We sat here for twenty years ... I've been here for twenty years, and I'm only twenty-six ... Sitting here, down under the ground. My name's Artyom. Down in the basement. In the Metro. Did you at least try to find us? I tried to find you ... We tried. We thought the whole world had been burnt up, the whole planet ... That there was nowhere to go, to crawl out to ... But we still searched, we hoped. How are you? You have dances there ... I want to come and see you so much. Can you breathe out there without a gas mask? What's your air like? We don't know anything about you. We've spent twenty years here alone. I don't even know why. What for. Why did we sit here in the darkness? Surrounded by concrete? We'll find out who did this to us. We'll smash their fucking jammers. We'll be together again. This is Moscow. We'll be with you, with the whole world. We're alive, do you understand? Everyone's alive, and so are we! Maybe you have relatives here. Forty thousand people survived here. How many of you are there? We'll be a country. We'll live on the surface, like before. Like human beings. I ... There was so much I wanted to say to you. I rehearsed what I was going to say a hundred times in my mind. And now I've forgotten it all. I hope you can hear me, at least. I'll speak here for as long as I can. Then they'll probably switch me off. The people who put up the jammers. Who cut us off from you. They'll come back. We'll try to hold out here for a while. But there are only two of us, and lots of them ... The Reds. Just don't think that you're imagining this. Or that this is all a joke. I'm real. My name is Artyom. If they kill me, others in Moscow will hear and they'll lead the rest of them out. Are you there, Moscow? Hansa? Polis? Everyone who hasn't forgotten yet ... Who else is listening? I'm not the only one. We've been tricked. We've all been tricked. We could have left our shelter a long time ago. And gone wherever we wanted. Driving or walking. Anywhere at all. Even as far as Paris. Or Ekaterinburg. The Reds hid everything from us. What for? So there wouldn't be any hope? I don't know what for. I can't understand it. We can just ... We can just live now. All go up on the surface—and live. Like before. Like human beings. The way people are supposed to live. Live! Do you hear me? There: I haven't gone insane. They are there; they exist—all of Russia, and Europe, and America ... They're all

real! Listen for yourselves! And now we exist too!”

He switched off broadcast mode to let the cities babble instead of him and took off the silenced headphones. Had he been broadcasting to no one or whispering at least to someone? He couldn't tell.

Enough bleating.

Let them listen to the others for themselves. Let them listen to the Earth.

* * *

“Artyom! Some people have arrived! Artyom!”

Artyom grabbed his automatic. Pulled on his mask. Hobbled out of the buffer zone and jabbed his gun barrel at the dust swirling in the creaking wind.

There were three of them standing behind the bars.

All three were holding their hands up, showing that they didn't want to fight. Their gas masks—they looked like they were homemade—were lowered onto their chests, hanging on their straps. The protective suits, also homemade-looking, didn't hang loose and baggy, like the crude, standard army ones, but were cut to fit the figure precisely. Two of them were young guys who looked like each other, like brothers. The third was a powerful man with a gray beard and long, gray hair gathered into a bun at the back of his head.

The young guys exchanged glances and smiled.

“They are here after all! They're here, dad! People. I told you I heard it,” one of them said, glancing round proudly at the older man.

“Hello,” the older man said calmly and confidently.

Artyom didn't lower his gun.

He looked at these men. The young guys were rosy-cheeked and close-cropped, they'd put their homemade sawn-offs down on the asphalt, and their hands were empty. Artyom could have cut them all down with a single burst through the bars of the gates.

But the outsiders didn't seem to expect him to do that at all.

The young men smiled. At each other, at Artyom. Like cretins. Not like people from these parts. Their father looked at Artyom calmly, not afraid of anything. His eyes were blue; they hadn't even faded with age. There was a silver ring dangling from his left ear.

“Who are you?” Artyom droned through his trunk.

“Is this Moscow already? We're on our way to Moscow.”

“This is Balashikha. What do you want from us?”

“Nothing,” the man answered staidly. “My lads got it into their heads that someone was still alive in Moscow. And they were calling for help. So we got out stuff together and came.”

“Where from? Where are you from?”

“From Murom.”

“Murom?”

“It's a town. Between Vladimir and Nizhny. Nizhny Novgorod.”

“How many kilometers? From here?”

“Three hundred. Approximately.”

“You walked three hundred kilometers to get here? On foot? Who are you anyway?”

“I'm Arseny,” the gray-bearded man said. “This is Igor and this is Mikhail. My sons. Igor—this one—tells me that he picked up a radio signal from Moscow. Where we're from they think Moscow was completely burnt out. He convinced his brother. And then the two of them convinced me.”

“What for?”

“Well, it's like this ... As I said, on the radio they were calling for help. Trying to find out where people had survived. And abandoning people in trouble ... It's not Christian. But I can see you're managing just fine here without us. Maybe we could have some tea? It's been a long journey.”

“Stay where you are!”

“Sorry,” Arseny laughed. “Is this a high-security facility you have here?”

“What we have here ...” Artyom looked round at Lyokha: Lyokha raised his hand—everything’s under control. “... is a facility. Did you see any cars on the road?”

“A pickup drove past, going the other way. We thumbed him, but he shot past like a bat out of hell.”

“Thumbed him?”

“Held our hands out. You know, so he would stop. We wanted to check the way.”

“So he would stop?” Artyom snickered.

“Don’t they do that round here? Give people lifts?”

Artyom didn’t answer. He listened through the wind towers: Was this an ambush?”

“You walked three hundred kilometers to save people you don’t know? Do you expect me to believe that?”

“Okay. We can do without the tea. Let’s move on,” Arseny declared.

“No, Dad, no! What are you saying? Where to?”

“Igor,” Arseny snapped to his son. “Don’t argue.”

“Well at least ask what it’s like in Moscow. Is there really anyone still alive there? Or ... You know, mister, I play around with the radio ... And I picked something up a few times. Things like: This is Moscow here. Come in, St. Petersburg, or maybe Rostov. What was that?”

“What was that?” Artyom repeated.

He ran his glance over them. Over their strange clothing; their raised, empty hands; their dangling gas masks: single pieces of glass instead of separate eye lenses. And he saw his own reflection. Behind the bars. With a rubber face and round, misted-up eyes. Drunk, wounded, full of painkillers, he gazed into his own suspicious gun barrel.

For some reason he remembered the Dark Ones. That day on the observation platform of the Ostankino Tower. Why did he remember that?

Should he believe or not?

“Wait.”

He went into the guardhouse and slowly and deliberately pressed the button that opened the gates. He heard a creaking sound outside.

There were three of them.

Still standing in the same place, and they hadn’t lowered their hands. Their guns were lying on the ground.

“Come in.”

They exchanged glances again.

“Let’s go inside. You can bring your guns. I’ll ... tell you about Moscow. And ... there are bodies in there. Don’t be afraid.”

* * *

“I don’t expect you to believe me. I wouldn’t believe it. I’m speaking out loud right now, and I don’t believe it. I can’t understand it. I know it with my mind, but I can’t understand it.”

“Cool.” Igor or Mikhail even clapped his hands. “Now this is life! Things are really moving. And will you show us the Metro? Murom’s such a rotten hole. Nothing ever happens there!”

Artyom didn’t answer.

“Well then ...” Arseny tugged on his earring. “Are you going to stay here until they kill you?”

“I have to. I’ll try to hold out for as long as I possibly can. Basically ... That’s the story with Moscow. Maybe they didn’t have time to send a signal when we stormed them. But they’ve heard everything now for sure. They’ll be here soon. Go home. It’s not your concern. Afterwards ... You can come back sometime. If you want to. When it’s all over here. And you’d better not go along the road.”

Arseny didn’t move. Igor and his brother squirmed restlessly on their hard stools. Their father

was smoking with Artyom, and the sons looked at him enviously but didn't dare to ask for a cigarette.

"I don't want to go home, Dad!" Mikhail or Igor protested in a light bass voice. "Let's stay. I'd like to help."

"There's no point," said Artyom. "How many men do they have? Maybe twenty. Maybe more. And they'll be prepared. Even five of us won't be able to hold out. And then ... It's the Red Line. Thousands of people live on it. It has an army. A genuine army."

"Let's stay, Dad."

"Go. Don't stay. Go and tell the people there ... in that Murom of yours. Can you really breathe outside without a filter?"

"Yes."

"And vegetables ... Do they grow? Normally?"

"We cover them to protect them against the rain. The rain's dangerous. We purify our water, but otherwise, yes. Tomatoes. Cucumbers."

"Tomatoes, that's fantastic."

"It's weird to hear about communists. And about fascists. Like something out of the last century."

Artyom shrugged. Now he wondered how he hadn't guessed right from the start that these three men couldn't be scouts from the outpost. They looked nothing like people from the Metro. Nothing at all. As if they they'd just flown in from Mars.

"Back there, what ... do you believe in?"

"We live in the monastery there, not in the actual town. We have an old, beautiful monastery, on the riverbank. The Holy Trinity monastery. A genuine fortress. You know, a white fortress with sky-blue domes. An incredible place. It's impossible not to believe in God there."

"And in yourself, basically," Igor or Mikhail barked fervently.

"You're lucky." Artyom smiled at them raggedly. "We don't have a monastery. We don't even have ourselves. There's fuck all left."

Arseny screwed his cigarette butt into a crumpled tin that had contained some kind of prehistoric fish and got up.

"You have to tell people this. You have to tell them about everything, and you're wasting time on us. Go."

"I'll see you off."

"No need. You ... tell people. And we'll do our best to let you talk for as long as possible."

"They're coming. I can see them from the pylon! They're coming! Is that them?"

The wind grew tired and the creaking died away. Suddenly it was quiet outside—cotton-wool-muffled quiet, like on the Garden Ring Road. And the only sound in this silence came from motors that didn't seem menacing, still far away, droning in high voices.

"How many of them are there?" And without waiting for an answer, Artyom set off up into the sky again himself.

He glimpsed them in a gap between the high-rises—one, two, three—and then they disappeared. Three trucks for certain, maybe more. Yes, there were more! Another two! Five identical trucks, coming this way from Moscow. The bedraggled prefabricated buildings hid them and cut off the sound. They probably had about ten minutes left to travel.

How many people were in those trucks? Fifty men could get in. They had machine guns on their roofs. And there were probably snipers too. They'd fire simultaneously, if they stormed the place ... None of Artyom's troops would even have time to blink. They'd all be mown down. And fed to the dogs.

Ten minutes. He had to get down then. And start his final broadcast.

So he'd have time to say everything. Arseny and his sons and Lyokha would buy him a little bit of time,

those good people. And now—no more irrelevant chatter.

Could anyone pick him up or not? Moscow hadn't replied even once. But they didn't need a two-way radio to listen, did they? A receiver was enough. Let them say nothing, just as long as they were listening.

Artyom thought he heard another whoosh of sound in the distance.

He turned his ear towards it. Screwed up his eyes ...

From the east, out of nowhere, out of Russia, a little dot was hurtling towards the outpost: a column of dust. It was farther from the turn to the radio center than the trucks, but it was rushing along faster. Who?

Never mind crawling down; it was time for him to jump! But Artyom couldn't let the dot go until it grew a little bit. Something ... Gray? Silvery! Not a dot, more like an automatic rifle bullet—a long shape: a station wagon!

Savelii?

In his hurry, his feet slipped on the thin reinforcement bars. The alcohol and painkillers were fizzling out already, and it wasn't too easy to move now. He lost a few seconds. He wanted to explain everything to Igor-Mikhail, but he realized it would be quicker if he did everything himself. They were both waiting down in the yard—jumpy, frightened, and joyful.

“Get up to the second floor! You can fire from the windows!” he ordered the brothers. “Lyokha! Watch the road!”

He opened the gates, and instead of making his radio broadcast, ran out onto the highway. Right now there were only five of them, and Artyom was going to broadcast, but if Savelii got here in time, he would count as two. But was he coming back to them? What had he left behind?

There was a ringing sound in both his ears.

The trucks folded together into one, like a deck of cards. Rushing along with their lights on, not trying to hide.

From the opposite direction the low-slung station wagon was flying straight towards the trucks, as if it was going to shatter itself against them.

The meat-grinding blades had halted, waiting for a delivery of men.

Artyom waved to Savelii: Come on, we're waiting! And he ran back into cover.

The roaring of the large trucks was already quite distinct when Artyom heard a squeal of brakes on the highway: the station wagon bullet got there first, twisted itself into the turn at full speed, and squeezed in through the gates as they were closing.

It was Savelii after all.

“Savelii!”

“I er ... decided to postpone my vacation ...” he explained with his head in the car trunk as he pulled out the large bag with the machine gun. “We'll finish off this job first, and then I'll go.”

Artyom wanted to hug Savelii and kiss his wrinkled skin.

“Lousy damn heroics,” he said to him instead.

“We'll pump the diesel out of their KamAZ trucks!” the stalker said with a wink.

“Diesel,” Artyom echoed. “Are you driving on diesel?”

“That's right.”

“Give me the canister.”

“Wotchawant?”

“Give me the canister! Come on! Diesel! Give me some diesel!”

He tore the large plastic flask of murky liquid out of Savelii's hands and galloped off with it to the comatose excavator, glancing round all the time at the wall—where would they come over it? At the same place Artyom had?

“Get that down you!” Artyom poured a gulp of liquid rainbow from the canister into the excavator's dry

throat. “Gulp it down! You wanted some too, right? Even with the ground teeth and the blood mixed in. Let’s all get wasted here, before it’s all over. The soldier’s shot of vodka before the action.” He climbed up onto a caterpillar track.

“What are you doing?” SaveliI was loitering nearby, down below.

“I’m going to uproot those fucking pylons!” Artyom tied the wires together—cautiously, soundlessly and prayerfully, as if he was talking to a mine.

The trucks were already roaring right there, at the turn. Then they cut out. Were they offloading the assault force?

He pressed a pedal.

Come on! Co-ome o-on!

The excavator jerked spasmodically.

It snorted. Roused itself. Roared. Woke up. Came alive. Alive!

There were the levers. Two in front and two more, one each side of the seat. Artyom touched one and the boom moved upwards. He touched another and it swung round, slamming its teeth into the wall—smack!

“Those two levers!” SaveliI yelled to him. “At the front! Like in a tank! Get out! Get out, you bonehead! Let me do it!”

He scrambled up onto a track at the second try and shoved Artyom to make him clear out of the cabin. He grabbed hold of the levers.

“Move aside! Or I’ll splat you!”

He moved his hands apart and the excavator—all fifty tonnes or however many it was—started turning round, as if was whirling into a dance, and started spinning round on the spot.

“Beau-eautiful! I missed my caterpillars!” SaveliI laughed. “Where do we start?”

“From the ones farthest away! Start with the farthest ones! Get it away from here!”

Outside the concrete wall, the men without any insignia had probably already scattered; maybe they were already uncoiling grappling hooks; and the snipers were weaving nests in the branches of trees. One second too long now, and he’d be too late forever.

He ran to the radio center, forgetting about his knee. That’s it! That’s it!

He thought he glimpsed men’s shadows through the trees. Someone darted past the gates.

“There’s a radio in there! And there’s a voice! They’re trying to call you!” Mikhail-Igor shouted from upstairs.

“They’re surrounding us! Spreading out all around! Shall I fire?” Lyokha called from the roof.

The resurrected excavator crawled slowly past the control room, enveloped in sooty smoke, with its only arm, covered in cadaverous spots, already raised to strike.

“Come in! This is urgent!” the headphones squealed in a mosquito-voice.

So who’d got the urge to call right now?

Why didn’t you say anything sooner, instead of keeping mum?

Artyom couldn’t breathe. He threw his hand out, flung open the window, and started breathing sweet smoke: And then he heard a nasal voice from a megaphone.

“We order you! To leave! The building! Immediately! And! Lay down! Your weapons! We promise! To spare! Your lives! Otherwise!”

“That one! The farthest!” Artyom gestured through the window.

The excavator clattered its rusty bones and trudged off where it had been told to go. Would it be strong enough? Would it have enough rainbow?

“Artyom!” the headphones on the table chirped, gathering all their strength. “Can you hear me, Artyom?”

He picked them up too slowly—he didn’t want to put them on his head and block his ears with them.

The machine gun on the roof stuttered ... To frighten them off? Or had they launched the assault?

“Who is this?”

“Artyom! It’s me! It’s Letyaga! Letyaga, Artyom!”

“What?”

“Letyaga, Artyom! It’s me! Group A minus! Come on now! It’s me!”

“What are you ... ? Did you hear me? You heard me? The Reds were jamming all frequencies! I wasn’t out of my mind! The whole world! We’re the only idiots under the ground! I’m just going to demolish those fucking jammers right now! Tell Miller ... Tell him ... That I ...”

“Wait! Do you hear me? Stop, Artyom, don’t ... Wait!”

“I can’t! I can’t wait! The Reds are here! Reds all around us. They’ll storm us in a moment. They’ll grind us to pulp. But we’ll have time to smash those fucking ...”

“No, they won’t grind you to pulp! We can ... We’ll make a deal with them! Don’t touch anything!”

The machine gun exploded in another paroxysm, and thunder pealed inside the building: They were blazing away from the upper floor too.

“Who with? The Reds? Make a deal?”

“It’s not the Reds! Not the Reds, Artyom!”

There was an abrupt, mighty crash outside the window. And another. Artyom heard a long, infernal grating sound, like an iron curtain being raised from horizon to horizon. Weary steel groaned like an immense horn. And a toppled pylon tumbled over unhurriedly and majestically to lie alongside the building, almost right across the enclosed grounds; the earth shook.

“Too late! It’s all over here! We’re smashing the fucking lot!”

“No! You mustn’t smash them! I know! We know about the jammers! It’s not ... It’s not what you think! I can stop those men! I will stop them! There won’t be any assault! Just wait for me, Artyom! Wait! I’ll explain everything!”

There was another clang and another groan.

“Who is it? Tell me! What’s it all for?” Artyom tore off the headphones and stuck his head out of the window.

A gray man was dangling on the wall, crucified on the barbed wire; he tried to free himself, but the strength had deserted his arms. The excavator screeched and raised its arm again.

“Cease fire! Stop. The assault! The Order! Miller!” Letyaga the mosquito squeaked somewhere off to one side. “Artyom! Artyom! They’ll wait! You wait too! I’m already on my way! Do you hear me? Artyom?”

The machine gun quieted down. had the gray men pulled back, or had a sniper found Lyokha?

Boom! And another baobab tree released the grip of its cement roots on the dry earth and its crown’s grip on the clouds, and started heeling over painfully and reluctantly.

We are one blood, thou and I, right Letyaga? One blood. If I’m not with you, who am I with?

“Stop! Sto-o-o-op!” Artyom leaned out as far as his waist, so that Saveli could spot him.

The excavator started pondering. But the pylon was already felled anyway, and it started sinking down heavily past the window onto the ground. Artyom breathed out black smoke and believed what the headphones said. He couldn’t have done anything else.

“I’m waiting! I’m waiting, Letyaga!”

“How old are you?” Mikhail asked Artyom.

Igor was the one who was slightly shorter and a bit more delicate. Mikhail was more coarsely molded, with less care; and he was a bit slower because of his extra body weight. Artyom had finally begun to tell them apart.

“Twenty-six,” said Artyom. “In March, that was.”

“Your sign’s Aries, then?” Igor inquired.

“I wouldn’t have a clue. The thirty-first. One more day and I’d have been born on the first of April. April Fool’s day. I should have hung on for a bit, probably.”

“Aries. A ram. Stubborn.”

“Twenty-si-i-ix?” Mikhail raised his black eyebrows. “Oh, man! I’d never have said that.”

“How old would you have said?”

“I don’t know. Forty?”

“Thanks a fucking bunch.”

“Don’t listen to the little fools.” Arseny pulled a hair out of his beard. “For them, anything over twenty is forty already.”

“And how old are you two?”

“I’m seventeen.”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Strange,” Artyom remarked after thinking for a moment. “Neither of you is twenty yet, but you were both born on the surface.”

* * *

Was Artyom surprised when he stopped at the gates?

He certainly was.

The same armored off-roader that had blasted lead at him and chased him along Tverskaya Street. The very same one. The heavy door was moved aside, and Letyaga jumped down into the dust: without a mask.

“I’m alone! Let me in!”

The off-roader slammed itself shut, reversed, and set off back to where it had come from, towards Enthusiasts’ Highway.

Artyom took a look at the cameras, and only then opened up for Letyaga. Letyaga shook his head, puffed out his cheeks, and squinted at Artyom. Then he hugged him.

“You look lousy, brother.”

“That’s working in the open air.”

“Right. Fine work. You’ve stirred up trouble big-time.”

“Me?”

“The old man will give you a roasting. Let’s go to the radio.”

Artyom led his visitor inside. They were waiting there—Arseny and his sons. Lyokha was looking into the trees from the roof. Savelii had curled into a tight ball in the excavator, so that the snipers couldn’t get a bead on him. The gray men had promised a truce, but they hadn’t named the terms. He felt uneasy.

“Who’s this?” Letyaga nodded suspiciously at the outsiders.

“People. They’re people, brother. Live people from another town. From Murom. They came to save you and me.”

“From Murom?” Letyaga asked Arseny. “Is that somewhere north of here?”

“It’s to the east of Moscow,” Arseny replied.

“And who are you going to save us from, granddad?” Letyaga asked. “From the horned Devil?”

“Someone like you—maybe only from himself.” Arseny smiled at him.

“And where’s your Miller?” Artyom walked past the radio operator into the control room. “I’m itching to talk to him myself ...”

He only turned his back on Letyaga for a second.

A flurry of hasty popping sounds.

Artyom swung round at the popping, at the sudden hoarfrost along his spine, at the gurgling—and there

were the travelers, stretched out across the floor, all three of them. And Letyaga was strutting between them like a stork, finishing each one off with a shot in the head from above.

When he saw Artyom, he dropped his Stechkin pistol on the floor. Then he raised his hands.

Only half a minute—and he had killed three people forever.

“You ... What have you ... ? What for?”

The sight of Artyom’s automatic snagged on his protective suit, his hands were shaking, but Letyaga was a patient man—he waited for Artyom to take proper aim at him.

“People ... from Murom. They came to us! You bastard!”

“Easy. Easy, Artyom. Don’t.”

“You scum! You traitor! You’ve turned traitor!”

“Listen. Calm down. It’s over. It’s over.”

“What’s over? What? What did you kill them for?”

The smiles were still on Arseny’s and Igor’s faces. Holes in their foreheads and smiles on their lips. Mikhail looked serious. The floor was completely flooded with sticky gunk now: impossible not to step in it.

“They’re spies. We have orders, Artyom.”

“What orders? Who has? Who from?”

“Concerning exposure. Countermeasures to exposure, that is. Miller ... Let him explain it.”

“Down on your knees! Hands behind your head! Let me see them! Walk on your knees! Into the control room! This way! Come on! Where’s your Miller? Where is he?”

“Let me ... There, see. I’m not doing anything. Nothing. Just a moment. I’ll tune in. It’s all over. Don’t get upset. I understand you. Comrade Colonel?”

“Put the headphones on the desk. And move away. Away into the corner.”

“Artyom?” a voice hissed in the speaker. “Artyom, are you there?”

“What is this? All of this, what is it? Tell me what it is! I’ll count to three, have you got that? You old ... What’s going on here? Why is there this lid on Moscow? Why hide the world from us? Why did you lie to me? What for? You lousy rat ... You old ... Legless ... Why did you lie to me all this time?”

“It’s not a lid, Artyom.” Miller had swallowed everything without choking. “It’s not a lid, it’s a shield.”

“A shield?”

“It’s a shield, Artyom. Those jammers don’t hide the world from Moscow, they hide Moscow from the world.”

“What for? What the hell is ...”

“The war isn’t over, Artyom. We’re not the only ones who survived. Our enemies did too. America. Europe. The West. They still have their weapons. And the only reason they don’t finish us off—the only reason!—is because they’re sure that we all croaked and there’s nothing left here! That everything was destroyed. If we allow ourselves to be exposed ... No matter how it happens ... Radio, or infiltration ... If they just find out some way—and they’re trying to—then they’ll pulverize us immediately. All of us. Do you hear? The jammers mustn’t be damaged! Don’t you dare touch them!”

“The war was over ages ago!”

“It was never over, Artyom. Never.”



CHAPTER 17

— ALL CORRECT —

They were still there in the rearview mirror: the radio center that they had left, the ten surviving pylons, the excavator with its arm raised for a blow that was never struck, the fateful turning off the Enthusiasts' Highway onto the Bypass Highway and not three or four, but six armored trucks with overriders on their bumpers and machine guns on their roofs, a line of men without insignia and a line of propellers that had started working again in the fresh wind. A lot of things were behind him now, and somehow they had all fitted into that dusty little rectangle. It had all seemed huge, but it had turned out to be small. Arseny and his two sons were all that hadn't fitted in.

"But what about them?" Artyom asked. "They could at least bury them."

"They'll tidy up without you," said Letyaga. "After you and after me. Let it go. Relax."

The dogs' pit hadn't fitted into the mirror either.

Savelii and Lyokha were sitting together on the spacious backseat. When Artyom was buying his own immunity, he'd bought theirs into the bargain. Savelii's little Japanese girl was raising dust behind them, tied to the off-roader, taken prisoner. Savelii had refused to abandon her.

"Suspicious characters," Savelii put in. "That's the first thing I thought when I saw them on the highway."

"They walked here from Murom," said Artyom. "They have a monastery there, beautiful, so they said. White and sky-blue."

"They said they were from Murom and they said they walked," Letyaga corrected him. "Maybe a helicopter dropped them off ten kilometers from here. They gave them a cover story to elaborate on and let them get on with it. Someone's always trying to get through. The bastards just keep on coming."

"But it was them who called me to the radio ..." Artyom thought out loud. "When you called me. What would they do that for?"

"I don't know," Letyaga confessed. "But my orders are clear."

"The alarm bells went off in my head immediately, you know." Savelii shifted closer to the conversation. "The moment I heard English on the radio, they started up! The Yanks haven't pegged it! Here we are thinking we pounded them until the last dog died, and they're having a little singsong together. I think like you: What comes next? They'll never let us breathe easy, will they? All they ever dreamed about was toppling us! Colonizing us! Those Rothschilds and the entire global shit-ass international. And honest to God, that's what I thought: Maybe they're the ones dragging us facedown through shit in the Metro?"

Lyokha smacked the lips of his toothless mouth. What did he mean? Was he missing home?

"Uh-huh," Nigmatullin snarled from the driving seat. "If only. They wouldn't dirty their hands with that. They'll blast us with missiles the moment they sniff us out. And what can we intercept them with? There's damn all left."

"Yeah, it's all clear now. As soon as you explained, everything fell into place!" Savelii hissed through his teeth. "It all fitted together. These jammers. There I am driving along, dammit, and I think: What is this? What's it all for? That yarn Artyom spun me—the Red Line, the people have been tricked and locked away underground—that's just plain crazy, right? I'm sorry, brother, of course. But where's the sense in it? I was driving along and I realized: You're a good guy, but you're talking nonsense. I just felt in my heart that it was bullshit. It just couldn't be true. Our own people treating us that way for no good reason. But when you explained it, I just knew in my heart: That's it. Bullseye. I just felt that it was too

damn smooth altogether. Them leaving us alone for all these years. And us somehow surviving so cheerfully. Now it's clear what's what. Eh, Artyom?"

"Yes."

They passed the Orbital Highway: Some vehicles going right, into the dead traffic jam, some going left, but all going to the same place, and they were going back to Moscow, to live out as many days as they each had left.

It was a good off-roader: leather seats, armor plate as thick as a finger, and some kind of special instrumentation. The motor purred cozily, Nigmatullin drove determinedly, and the mummies flashed by as fast as frames in a movie, like a single person.

"A good car," said Artyom. "I didn't know we had any like this."

"We do now."

Artyom chewed on his cheek—instead of asking Letyaga about everything else. He didn't want to do it in front of the others. And then he gave in after all.

"I've already seen this car, you know. On Okhotny Ryad Street."

"I know about that."

"I thought I'd be left lying there."

"But you weren't."

"Why?"

"You were recognized. One of us. How could we zap one of our own?"

"But if I hadn't been recognized? If I'd been wearing a gas mask?"

"Then ... You shouldn't fucking wander around with a radio. Even the jammers can't cut out the signal completely. They stifle everything coming in, but not always everything going out. So we have to work hands-on."

"How do you search for people?"

"With this." Letyaga slapped the instrument panel. "There's a position finder in here. A good car."

SaveliI squirmed. There was something on his mind that hadn't been resolved yet.

"Why not tell people? So there wouldn't be any hitches ... The way we messed things up."

"We have to avoid any panic," Letyaga said. "And then ... People have relatives, some in this place, some in that place ... This is Moscow, after all. They'd start creeping off. Then we'd be exposed for sure. Not even everyone in the Order knows."

"Not everyone." Artyom nodded.

"Well, maybe I have relatives too," SaveliI responded. "But in a case like this! We can't plaster on the lube so those bastards can shaft us."

Nigmatullin mumbled something unintelligible in his support from the driving seat.

"Don't be angry with the old man." Letyaga turned towards Artyom from the front seat. "So he didn't tell you. I only found out myself a year ago. He was probably going to."

"Probably."

"You did everything right, brother," said Letyaga. "You came away with us. So definitely. Everything will be fine."

"And you keep tabs on all of Moscow?" Artyom asked. "You track everyone's location?"

"Yes, we do. Not you, Artyom. We do it, the Order. We keep tabs on them. We track their locations."

"But I went up on the surface every day ... up to the forty-sixth floor ... I broadcast every day. What about that?"

"What about it?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

"We heard you, and we saw you."

"But I was blowing your cover! Our cover! Everyone's!"

Letyaga looked at Nigmatullin. Then he turned towards Artyom with his eyes squinting.

“Miller said not to touch you.”

“Why?”

“Well, you’re sort of ... family. That’s awkward.”

“Pull up,” Artyom replied. “I’m feeling sick.”

Nigmatullin did as he’d asked. He let Artyom spill his insides out. It was all left at the roadside: the home-brew vodka with crushed teeth, an entire living, talkative world, and somewhere on it the dot of a snow-white fortress with sky-blue domes. Clearly there was no way he could have carried all that back home into the Metro with him.

Now he could get some sleep.

“Have you picked up a dose?” Letyaga asked sleepy Artyom suspiciously.

“It’s car sickness,” said Artyom.

* * *

When he opened his eyes, it was Moscow already. They were driving along the embankment. Night was falling.

Artyom didn’t recognize the city in the window. Moscow was the same as it had been in the morning. But someone had put new eyes in his head.

It was a strange feeling. Strange and stupid.

Everything around him had turned fake now: The abandoned buildings were stage scenery; the empty palaces were decoys; the dead bodies in the cars were mannequins. Once he used to look into the magical tube of a kaleidoscope and see a heart-wrenchingly beautiful mirage; and then something possessed him to take it to pieces, and the painted cardboard and multicolored crumbs of glass had fallen out into his hand. And how can you dream about cardboard?

He tried to love Moscow again and miss it again, but he couldn’t. It was a hoax. It was nothing but an empty cardboard cutout after all, and the dead people in it were only cardboard cutout people, and their grief was molded out of papier-mâché. Everything was arranged like this for an audience: Supposedly for the one underground, but really for the one across the ocean.

What a discovery he’d made. A truly great one. After all, he had discovered the entire world, all the continents at once. And a useless one—he couldn’t do anything with this knowledge in three weeks. And did he have three weeks anyway? The doses added up, and how much more radiation had he breathed in? Maybe it was two, not three.

They drove along the river, past the Kremlin.

The Kremlin was undamaged, but it was pretending to be dead too.

He remembered how the overseers at Schiller Station smashed dead people’s heads with metal reinforcing rods, just to make sure, so they wouldn’t bury anyone alive. Don’t take anything on trust.

So was Miller right? So was all this worth it?

Yes, they lied to people, but in order to save them. Right?

Was there a way to live with this? For two weeks at least?

He’d ask Miller about that.

* * *

At Borovitskaya Station they all went through decontamination. Lyokha and SaveliI were taken off somewhere, with promises to treat them nicely. Letyaga led Artyom through the dark connecting passages towards Arbat, to Miller. Artyom didn’t talk: as if his teeth had been glued together with tar. Letyaga whistled excruciatingly.

“What happened back there in the Reich? How did you get out?” he asked after all, when the start of the tune came round for the third time.

“It was bad” said Artyom. “I thought I was going to croak. The letter was taken off me. By Dietmar.”

“We know.”

“See,” Artyom joked, without looking at Letyaga. “You all know everything. It seems like I’m the only one who knows fuck all.”

“I’m sorry, little brother,” said Letyaga. “I really wanted to get you out of there. But this real achtung situation blew up. With the Reds and the Reich.”

“That’s what I thought.” Artyom nodded.

“I reported to the old man. He said we’d deal with it. Don’t be angry with him.”

“I’m not angry.”

“Everything’s being sorted out right now. There aren’t enough men. I’ll just park you here, and then I’m off on different business. The Reds have been hit by famine. All the mushrooms have rotted. And now this war is the last way they have to placate the hungry people. It could spread to Hansa. And everywhere else as well. They have to be restrained. And yet again there isn’t anyone but us to do it. The final, decisive battle is brewing.”

“See, the mushrooms ... They’ve turned out to be really important,” said Artyom.

“They have,” Letyaga agreed; he whistled a bit more.

“What does Miller say?”

“I was told to deliver you safe and sound and indulge your every whim,” Letyaga replied.

“I see.”

“I’m a little man, brother. I don’t even want to peep anywhere I haven’t been told to look. Everyone should get on with his own job, I reckon. And not interfere with anyone else’s. Who am I to decide anything? Do you understand me?”

Artyom finally looked at him. Carefully—in order to really understand.

“You’re not really all that little,” he told him.

* * *

“Artyom!” The colonel drove out from behind his desk to greet him.

Artyom stood there mutely: All his prepared speeches had soured in his mouth, like pig’s milk, curdled; he’d spat them out before he walked into the office, but the taste of bitter whey was still there on his tongue.

“Listen,” Miller told him.

Artyom listened. And rolled his eyes round the office. A desk swamped with papers. Maps on the walls. Were the jammers on them? And Moscow’s lines of defense? The wall-mounted list of the boys who were killed when the Reds stormed the bunker. Where had their souls gone to—Number Ten’s, Ullman’s, the whole crew’s? Maybe they were sitting in that sheet of paper, breathing alcohol fumes from the half-drunk shot glass? Totally plastered, probably, on half a shot, both platoons: A soul doesn’t need that much.

“We’ll keep this business quiet,” said Miller. “I’ll arrange things. It’s my fault. I didn’t warn you.”

“So it really isn’t the Reds?” Artyom asked. “In the trucks? At the radio center?”

“No.”

“But they’re not our men, are they? I didn’t kill our men?”

“No, Artyom.”

“Who are they? Whose men were they?”

Miller hesitated for a moment, as if asking whether the boy needed the truth: What could he do with it?

“Have you got a radiation overdose?” He rolled a bit closer to Artyom and stopped so that he wouldn’t be in his own light.

“Whose soldiers were they?”

“Hansa’s. They were Hansa’s men.”

“Hansa? But the wind towers ... Who built the wind towers? I heard something about political

prisoners that the Red Line sent ... Banished ... From Rokossovsky Boulevard ... From the Lubyanka ... For construction work.”

“Artyom ...” The colonel clicked a lighter and lit up with one hand. “Would you like one?”

“Yes.”

Artyom helped himself. And lit up. He started breathing full and deep. It sharpened up the contrast a bit. He didn't interrupt his superior or try to help him.

“Artyom, I understand that it will be hard for you to accept everything on trust. Now. But think about it—would the Red Line ever build anything for Hansa? For its own sworn enemy?”

“No.”

“Correct. It wouldn't. They did everything themselves. They have enough ... workers and equipment.”

“And the bodies in the pit ... There's a huge pit dug out there. Crammed right up to the top. Then who are they?”

Miller nodded. He knew about the pit. And did he know about the dogs?

“Spies. Saboteurs. Potential spies and potential saboteurs.”

“Hansa's been doing this without us knowing ... Without anyone knowing ... All these years? Hiding everything from us? Blotting it out, deleting it? The whole planet?”

“In order to save Moscow.”

“But why don't they ... The West, the Americans ... Why don't they bomb the other cities? Look, I heard them myself! Petersburg! Vladivostok! Ekaterinburg! They're all out there ... Babbling away ... On peaceful subjects. In Russian! They're all there! The country's out there! Are we the only ones who aren't? What about the war out there? Is it still going on?”

“Out there ... What do you know about 'out there'? You listened to the broadcasts for half an hour. It's all a radio game, Artyom. How can you tell which are our side and which are paid mercenaries? Where their saboteurs are? What's really ours now, apart from the Metro? Nothing. The Metro is all we have left! Where is there any real, live life out there? They've planted provocateurs everywhere, like spiders sitting in their webs. 'This is Vladivostok, come and join us. This is Petersburg, come to us!' And everyone drawn in to them from the villages is finished off on the spot. A bullet in the forehead. There isn't any Russia! Everything happened just as we feared it would. They blitzed us, crushed us, and occupied us. If we don't hold out here—if we let them know that we've survived—then we'll be next. We have only one way to save ourselves, Artyom. Pretend to be dead men. And build up our strength. So that we can go back.”

“But what if people simply come to us? Our people? Like that, from the villages? Not saboteurs, but our people? Russians? The genuine article?”

“There's a war on, Artyom. It's not possible to check everyone out. They're enemies, full stop.”

“What if they don't come from the east, but the west?”

“All the main directions are covered.”

“And the jammers?”

“That's not the only station.”

“So I wouldn't have ... I wouldn't have achieved anything anyway?”

“You wouldn't have had time, Artyom. It's a good thing Letyaga got you out of there. If you'd wrecked just one more pylon, I wouldn't have been able to strike a deal with them. Their orders were to take no prisoners.”

Artyom drew in smoke, caught the unraveling words and lined them up.

“Were you watching me? When I climbed up to the top of the Tricolor building? The high-rise?”

The colonel's mouth twitched: Letyaga had blabbed.

“We knew.”

“Why didn't you shut me up?”

“Because you’re one of us. Even though ... I said those things to you.”

“But you, yourself—when did you find out? How?”

“I was put in the picture. Some time ago.”

Artyom took a drag. He sat down on the floor with his back to the wall: There wasn’t any chair. Now Miller in his wheelchair was actually taller than him. He ought to be taller than Artyom in any case. He used to be taller, when he had legs instead of wheels.

“You know, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich ... In our last conversation, you demonstrated conclusively that I was schizo.”

“I did that to protect you. So you wouldn’t do ... Everything that you have done.”

“But why couldn’t you simply explain? Or am I schizo after all? Eh?”

“Artyom.”

“You tell me. Am I schizo or not? Just tell me.”

“Listen. Your story about the Dark Ones. This certainty of yours that you could have saved the world. That you were chosen by them. That mankind will perish because of you. How can I tell you ... How can I say something like that simply?”

All that story of his about the Dark Ones. All that story of his. All of it.

“None of it was important, right? The way we hit them with missiles ... It didn’t change anything, right? We never were the last people on Earth, here in Moscow. And the Dark Ones were never our only hope. I didn’t save them, because ... just because—but nothing terrible happened. The world’s still living the way it was before. But if I had saved them—well, there would have been someone to show in the zoo. Whether they were angels or not would be totally fucking irrelevant. Not a miracle, just a curiosity. Even I think it’s funny. Funny what a stupid wanker I am, right, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich?”

“No.”

“It’s fun-ny,” Artyom protested.

It was hard to sing, hard to pronounce the vowels: as if a goiter was getting in the way.

“I did try to explain to you. I told you that you were too hung up on them. But in view of your condition, I didn’t have any right to break secrecy about the shield.”

“My condition,” Artyom echoed. “Yes. Definitely schizo. First I thought I was saving the world, then I thought I’d doomed it. Delusions of grandeur.”

“You simply weren’t sufficiently informed. You had to invent all the rest. But talking to you now, I’m convinced that you’re reasoning perfectly soundly. It’s not your fault.”

But whose was it? Artyom looked into the glowing ash on his cigarette as if it was gun barrel. It looked like a pocket-sized roll-up hell. Always there with him.

“I had to invent a lot of things for myself,” he agreed.

“If you think it was all easy for me ...”

“I don’t think that. I was simply an idiot. What did I do it all for anyway? I thought I could take you ... Anya, before ... And you ... The boys ... My stepfather ... up onto the surface. So we could live ... in a city. Together. In houses. I thought. I pictured it. Even in that monastery ... All together. Or set out ... on the railway. To take a look at the country and the earth. It was a dream. If only the world was still there; that’s what I thought. Then I’d ... But everybody knew. Do you think you need to lie to people? Why not tell them? Let them choose for themselves ... If they want to go, let them go!”

“You’re starting to talk like a fool again.” Miller frowned. “They’ll leave Moscow. And then what? They’ll be picked off out there, one by one! All of them! We’re still together here. The Metro is our fortress. A fortress besieged by the enemy. We’re all part of the garrison, not just the Order, but everybody. And we’re not here forever. We’re building up our strength to strike. For a counterattack. Is that clear? We’ll leave this place. But not to surrender! Not with a white flag! We won’t run for it. We’ll leave this place to take back what’s ours! We have to win back our land! Is that clear or not? But right

now there isn't anyone waiting for you out there!"

"There isn't anyone waiting for me here."

"That's not true. I didn't summon you here to snivel. And that's not what I got you out of there for either."

"What for, then?"

Miller trundled back to his bunker-desk, pulled out a drawer, rummaged in it for a while with a frown, and took something out.

"There."

He rolled over to Artyom himself and held out his fist. He opened it slowly. Not theatrically, but as if he was struggling with himself. There was a name tag lying on his palm. Engraved on one side was: "If not we, then who?" Artyom took it. He licked his dry lips and turned it over. "Artyom Dark": the first name his mother gave him and the surname he invented himself. His name tag. The same one that Miller had confiscated from him a year ago.

"Take it."

"What ... is this?"

"I want you to come back, Artyom. I've thought everything over, and I want you to come back into the Order."

Artyom examined his surname obtusely: It was meaningless; it didn't signify anything anymore. It used to be his penitence; it was a burning cross, a reminder to him about himself. But now what was it? He wasn't to blame. That was over and done with. He ran his finger over the black niello inlay of the letters. Something was hammering in his ears.

"What for? Because I exposed Moscow's cover?"

"I won't let them have you," Miller replied. "You're one of us. Let them choke on that."

Artyom finished his cigarette: He stopped at the point there the tobacco singed his fingers. Then.

"What do you need me for?"

"Right now every man counts. We have to stop the Reds. At any price. And sort out the fascists. It's the last chance to stop the war, Artyom. Otherwise there won't be any more radio signals here, and not because of the jammers ... But because of us. We're doing the West's work for them. They won't even get a chance to be surprised. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Well? Are you with us or not? I'd just like to patch you up a bit and you can join the ranks!"

"And what about my men? SaveliI and Lyokha? What will you do with them?"

"We'll take them on for training. Since you've already cleared them for access to a state secret."

"Into the Order?"

"Into the Order. As far as I understand it, the three of you took the radio center. That's a good recommendation."

Was that all? Artyom ran his hand over his scalp. Sashenka had shaved it.

"You got too much radiation," Miller said definitively. "Let's put you in hospital. Stay there for a while, and we'll see what's what. And then ..."

"Svyatoslav Konstantinovich. Permission to ask a question? What was in the envelope?"

"In the envelope?"

"In the envelope we were supposed to deliver to the Reich."

"Ah." Miller frowned, trying to recall. "An ultimatum. An ultimatum from the Order. A demand to halt the operation immediately and withdraw all forces."

"And that's all?"

The colonel spun round on the spot. The fuming roll-up in his teeth described a circle, deploying a smokescreen. He squeezed the words out.

“An ultimatum from the Order and Hansa. From both of us. Jointly. Full stop. They’re waiting for you, Artyom.”

Artyom straightened out the cord, stuck his head in the noose, lowered the name tag, and hid it under his shirt.

“Thanks for having confidence in me.”

And to himself he wondered why he hadn’t been killed in the bunker. Was Letyaga to blame? If they’d stitched a red line in Artyom then, would he have been better off or worse off? Did he feel good now that he knew? What would he die of radiation sickness for now? He could have been here in Miller’s office with the boys. He could have been letters on that sheet of paper, always drunk and always jolly.

“Our fighting days aren’t over yet!” the colonel promised. “Only we have to get you ...”

“No need to put me anywhere. I know all about myself already. Do the boys have something on today?”

“Something on?”

“Letyaga told me. An operation. Against the Reds. Not enough men, he said.”

Miller shook his head.

“You can’t even stay on your feet, Artyom! What can you do? Go with that man there, take a rest ... There’s someone out there ... To socialize with.”

“I’ll go with them. When is it?”

“Why the hell?” Miller tossed his butt on the floor. “Why can’t you just sit still on your backside?”

“I really want to do something,” Artyom said, although it should have been “one last thing.” “Not just lie there, but finally do something meaningful.”

* * *

“It looks like a room for conjugal prison visits.”

“Would you like to go for a walk?”

“Yes.”

She pushed the door and walked out first; Artyom followed.

Arbat Station was like the chambers of a royal palace, like the Russia of a dream: grandiose, white and gold and endless. There was somewhere to go here—follow the perspective all the way to its vanishing point.

“What happened to you?”

“Nothing. I picked up a dose of radiation. If you mean the hairstyle.”

“I mean in general.”

“In general? In general ... Did you know? About the radio?”

“No.”

“Didn’t he ever tell you before?”

“No, Artyom. Never. He didn’t tell me anything about it until now.”

“I see. Well then, that’s it. There’s nothing to add.”

“You’ve got nothing to add?”

“What else is there to say about it? I found what I was looking for. That’s all.”

People looked round at them. At her. All those General HQ fossils and desk warriors at Arbat cracked their calcified joints, twisting their entire torsos if their crimson, creased necks couldn’t turn. After all, she was beautiful, Anya. Tall, light, haughty. With a boyish hairstyle. Dashing penciled-in eyebrows. Angled upwards and outwards. And all of a sudden, here she was wearing a dress too.

“So are you going to come back now?”

She said it in a flat voice, as if she was the same on the inside as on the outside. As if her face was made of china and she had a wind-up key in her back.

Artyom’s own back was suddenly running with sweat.

There are some things you learn not to be afraid of. But he had never developed immunity

to conversations like this. He strode along, counting off his silent steps to himself; and they simultaneously became the ticking meter of his awkwardness, cowardice, and misery.

“That’s what your father assumes. He gave me my name tag back.”

“I meant us.”

“Well ... If I accept his offer ... And I have accepted it. Then I won’t have ... Anywhere to go ... I can’t live at Exhibition, can I? I’ll be here. The barracks. There’s some kind of operation today. They’re sending me on it. And ...”

“What’s that got to do with anything? Stop it.”

“Listen. I can’t ... I can’t see. How. How we can start over again.”

“I want you to come back.”

She spoke in the same way—calmly, firmly, quietly. With an impassive face. There was nowhere at Arbat Station for two people to talk. Better among strangers than with your own folks on the other side of the wall. The crowd jammed the signal; in a crowd you could talk heart-to-heart.

“It didn’t work out for us, Anya. Everything went wrong for you and me.”

“It wasn’t going right. So what?”

“That’s all.”

“That’s all? Have you given up?”

“No. It’s not that.”

“So you didn’t want it anyway? And you just cut and run? You used some idiotic excuse to cut and run.”

“I ...”

“I’m telling you that I need you. I need you, Artyom. Do you realize what saying that costs me? Me? What it costs me to say that?”

“We can’t glue it all back together.”

“Glue what back together?”

“The story of you and me. Everything in it happened wrong. This thing, and that thing ... Everything. Too many mistakes.”

“So you just scuttle off. Too many mistakes, I think I’ll be off now. Was that it?”

“No.”

“Yes it was! And I was probably supposed to think: If he leaves, then okeydokey. It looks like there’s nothing to glue back together anyway. Was that it?”

“No. What are you ... ? I’m not going to talk about this in public.”

“No? But you’re the one who brought me out for a walk. A real strategist.”

“Stop it.”

“Or was it like this? I’m a proud woman, I told you that myself. And you probably decided: Well then, she won’t grovel if I just run away from her without saying goodbye, will she? She’ll hang herself before she comes crawling to find out why I dumped her.”

“I didn’t dump you.”

“You ran away.”

“Anya. Come on, why are you doing this? Like some stupid woman? You’re not a woman, Anya. You’re a real man! You’re my brother-in-arms! You’re Letyaga with boobs!”

“Oh, please. Tell me ‘It’s all over for us, Anya.’ Tell me to my face, no more whining. And explain why.”

“Because it won’t work out for us anyway. Because everything was wrong.”

“But you really are like some stupid woman. Can you be a bit more specific? What’s wrong? The fact that my father was your commander? That he was against our marriage? That you had hangups? That you were more in love with him than with me? That he thought you were insane? That you were always comparing yourself with him? That he was a genuine hero and the savior of his homeland? That you

wanted to be him first? That you couldn't simply be with me?"

"Shut up."

"Why? You can't say all this out loud. Let me say it for you. Someone has to."

"Because I don't love you. Because I fell out of love with you. Because—yes, I don't know how to tell you that."

"Because you're afraid of me."

"No!"

"Because you're afraid of my father."

"Oh, go to hell. Just fuck off, will you? That's all!"

"People are turning to look at you. It's embarrassing."

"I have someone else."

"Ah, so that's what you found. You looked for it and found it. You should have told me. You should have said, 'Anya, I was simply looking in the wrong place. There wasn't anyone up on the surface, but underground someone turned up in a week.'"

"Go ahead. Pile it on. You spent the whole year training those skills of yours on me. You never believed me. You didn't believe me and you didn't believe in me. Like your daddy. He called me schizo too. He still does, to this very day. You take after him!"

"I'm like my mother."

"You're like your daddy."

Anya stopped walking. People stumbled into them, swore, gaped at Anya's pedigree points, forgot their annoyance, and went frothing on with the current. They were very preoccupied with their underground business, as if there was nothing in the world but the Metro.

"Let's have a drink."

"I'd ... I'd like to get some sleep. Before the operation."

"You owe me. So shut up and let's go."

He'd already realized that he had to do it. And do it before this operation. Before finally doing something meaningful. He owed her more than he did anyone else.

They found themselves an intellectual dive in a pedestrian passage, sank down onto the stuffed sacks, and drew the curtains. Now it was as if they'd been left alone together.

"How come you're here?"

"He sent his men for me. Told them to tell me that you'd given me my freedom. A fine way to separate. Sending the message via my father and two armed cretins."

"I didn't want it to be like that ..."

"You're a brave man, Artyom. I respect you."

"I'm a shit, okay, accepted. But what now? You've come back to your ideal daddy now, haven't you? Eh? That's it! Hoorah! Why eat my brains out?"

"You're a real cretin after all."

"Accepted: a shit and a cretin."

"Have you never wondered why I went away to Exhibition Station with you? Never wondered what I saw in you? Back here the entire Order, the whole herd of studs, trailed after me, one hero after another, all drooling and trying to get a sniff under my tail. Including that Hunter of yours, by the way! So why you?"

"Yes, I wondered."

"Well maybe I didn't want a hero! I don't want a psychopath, I don't want a husband who saws a man's head off with a knife and doesn't even blink when the blood spurts out! I don't want that! I don't want a husband like my father! Is that clear? I wanted a good, decent, normal human being! Someone like you. Like you used to be. Who does everything he possibly can to avoid killing people. And I wanted him

to have children like that. Kind.”

“People like that die underground.”

“People of all kinds die underground. So do we stop having children?”

“That’s right, we stop.”

“When were you planning to live? With me—have a life?”

They drank without clinking glasses. Artyom took a long swallow. His empty stomach soaked it up immediately. His blood warmed up and set the globe spinning.

“I can’t live, Anya. I don’t know how to anymore.”

“Who then?”

“Your father will pick someone for you. Someone worthy. Not a schizo.”

“Are you a cretin? Are you listening to me at all? Or just yourself? Who will my father pick for me? He washed me in the shower himself until I was thirteen! Thirteen! Do you understand that? I ran away from him—from him! To you! To have a normal life! To live! And you want to be him! Him or Hunter, I don’t know which!”

“I don’t ... Dammit ... Do I have to hear this?”

“Why not? Are you afraid of getting all emotional? Are you afraid you’ll have to take me away?”

“No. But ...”

“Then wait till you hear what happened to my mother!”

“She died. She was ill. You were still little.”

“She poisoned herself with bad vodka. She drank, because he beat her every other day. How do you like that? Eh? How’s that for a hero-daddy?”

“Anya.”

“Go and join his army. Has my daddy forgiven you?”

“But he adores you ... Could he ever ... ?”

“No. Beating the heart out of my mother was enough for him. Daddy takes good care of me. Yes, he adores me. Whatever I say, that’s the way things will be. Just as long as I sit on his knees.”

“Wait. He ... Why did he ... ? When I was in the radio center ... When I was just about to ... When they were about to storm the place ... You ... Where were you? Then?”

Anya finished off her drink in one; her eyes were red, quite unable to cry, just like Artyom’s. She’d made up her eyelashes with mascara, he realized suddenly. Anya. Eyelashes.

“I told him straight: if anything happens to my man ... He has to be reminded about that from time to time.”

Artyom grinned—he tried to do it contemptuously, but his face didn’t have the strength.

“Hey! Another one!”

“And for me.”

“That’s what it’s for. That’s why.”

“To my mother!” Anya raised her glass tumbler. “To my mother, who drank because she married a hero. So you got it all wrong. I’m like her, not like him, Artyom.”

He reached out his own glass in his numb hand and struck glass against glass feebly and listlessly.

“She was from Vladivostok. When she put me to bed, she used to tell me about the beaches. About the ocean. Once she’d put me down, she reached for her hip flask. You see, I knew how to close my eyes as if I was asleep and peep through my eyelashes. How’s Vladivostok getting on? Does it answer?”

“Yes.”

“How are you doing, brother, okay? No temperature? Your cheeks are burning up.”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure you want to drag yourself back up on top again?”

“I’m sure.”

“Did you go to the infirmary?”

“Yes. They painted my back with green antiseptic.”

“Okay. When we get back from the assignment, I’ll carry you there.”

The same off-roader was waiting in front of the Library with its engine running; and behind it was a large gray truck with toothy overriders on its bumpers. Savelii and Lyokha, wearing black uniforms under their protective suits, exchanged glances.”

“This ...” said Artyom.

“Our men are inside there. Don’t worry. Hansa just lent us the truck. Where would we get anything like that?”

“True enough.”

They started with a squeal and set off in convoy towards New Arbat Street. Letyaga took Artyom with him in the off-roader. He kept looking round at him with some unspoken thought from the front seat.

“What’s this assignment?” Artyom asked.

“It’s at Komsomol Station,” Letyaga explained. “You’ll see.”

They hurtled along empty New Arbat Street. Artyom didn’t have time to remember anything. Where had all the living beasts of Moscow disappeared to? Why had they fled? Moscow, a city of stone, stood as empty as if it was Babylon, smothered by the sands three thousand years ago.

They raced as far as the Garden Ring; turned where they needed to go, straight across the funny lines of prohibition on the asphalt; and drove past the massive hulks of hotels without any guests and office centers without any clerks, and then past the pointed building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a Bald Mountain for sorcerers.

“I wonder how foreign affairs are going now.”

“I don’t poke my nose in,” said Letyaga, looking straight ahead. “Everyone has his own job.”

“But someone listens to the radio, don’t they? To find out how people are doing in general ... How the enemy’s getting on. What he’s getting up to. What cunning tricks.”

“How?” Letyaga objected. “With the jammers working away.”

“That’s true.” Artyom kneaded the rubber of his face.

After the Ministry of Foreign Affairs they dived into the narrow side streets and stopped at an abandoned mansion behind a tall fence. Some embassy or other. A ragged scrap of the unknown country’s flag was dangling there, washed white by the vicious rain.

They sounded the agreed signal on the horn. The silent gates opened to let the convoy into the courtyard. Inside, figures with the badges of the Order swarmed over the vehicles, making sure their visitors hadn’t picked anyone up along the way. Artyom clambered out and thought he saw a familiar pair of eyes behind glass saucers.

“What’s this?”

No one explained. Doors opened, and the figures dragged green zinc boxes with stenciled inscriptions out of the mansion and into the truck—two at a time, three at a time, then more, and more ...

Boxes of cartridges.

They worked deftly and got the job done in a minute. They saluted, signed some kind of document for irrelevant bookkeeping, saw the vehicles out through the gates, and the mansion became uninhabited again.

“Why so many?” Artyom asked Letyaga.

“For Komsomol Station,” Letyaga repeated.

“What’s there? The Red Line intersects with Hansa ...” said Artyom, suddenly realizing. “Is that where the front line is now? Has Hansa already joined in the war?”

“Yes, it has.”

“What are we doing? Are our men there already? We’re pitching in for Hansa, right? I mean us, the Order?”

“That’s right.”

Letyaga had obviously been forbidden to talk openly with Artyom: He spat the words out through his teeth, but since Artyom was guessing everything for himself, he couldn’t refuse to confirm things.

“Our boys are there already? Are the cartridges for them? Are they holding the Reds?”

“Yes.”

“This ... This is the bunker all over again, eh? Right, brother? It’s us again, with the Reds again ... And the same thing: If we don’t hold them, no one will hold them?”

“It could all happen again,” Letyaga admitted reluctantly.

“I’m glad we’re going there,” Artyom declared out loud. “That’s the right kind of assignment.”

* * *

And it happened again at night. The Garden Ring Road, the rusty lumps of cars in the headlights, the chasm between the buildings, plastic bags flying through the air, the oxidized moon outlining the clouds faintly; the engines growled and Artyom felt drowsy. Past TsvetnoI Boulevard, along the ramps of the flyover, through tricky side streets and along secret trails that the dead didn’t know, along jolting tramlines to the station square, to Komsomol Station.

Three stations: trains to the east from one, all the way as far as Anya’s Vladivostok; trains to the north, to St. Petersburg, from the second; and trains to Kazan and onward, into the underbelly of Russia, from the third. Wherever you wanted to go, there were the tracks; they started right behind the buildings. Put a trolley on them, lay into the levers, and roll on and on for as long as your strength holds out. All the wonders of the world are waiting for you. But no—you can’t go anywhere, right? What do you mean, there isn’t any lid, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich? There it is; there’s the lid.

They drove up onto the pavement and set their vehicles right up against the doors of the Metro pavilions.

“Now move it,” Letyaga ordered. “This isn’t our ground.”

They opened the doors instantly, dispersed to form a circle round the vehicles, and lowered their night-vision goggles onto their foreheads: At night on enemy ground anything could happen. They unloaded the zinc boxes, passing them along a line of men. Artyom was the last, standing by the cracked wooden doors. He took the boxes and stacked them in a pyramid. He had a strange feeling: calm. He saw himself behind the breastwork of a trench, clutching the stock of an automatic rifle in his finger and catching bullets with his forehead. It had been good in the bunker: everything clear, everything comprehensible. He really wanted to go into the bunker again. He wanted to use up these cartridges, every single one of them. Or as many as he had time for.

Now he didn’t need to say goodbye to Sasha, to make up with SukhoI or see Hunter. He had nothing to say to all of them. He didn’t have any full stops for them, let everything break off at a comma.

“Now follow me!”

They each took two zinc boxes and stepped into the half-ruined pavilion with them in the dark, as if they were carrying children in their arms. Letyaga had forbidden them to switch on their torches. They started moving down the chipped escalator, groping at the cold contours with their night vision. The only thermal glimmers blazing red on their screens came from below: the heat of human bodies trying to warm the earth from the inside.

And from down there, below, they heard an indistinct buzzing, like the moaning of a beehive. It seemed to come from below, but also from everywhere at the same time.

They couldn’t look round—they were running down the slippery steps in a line, and it would be a bad idea to stumble. But from out of some ventilation openings or other, or perhaps through the thin walls, they heard hoarse howling and muffled roaring, like the wind in pipes, but in pipes welded shut; with no hope;

and with every step down it got louder, and it got hotter and hotter.

“What is that?” Lyokha panted as he ran.

“The Red Line’s down there. There’s something going on there. But that’s not where we’re going.”

They stopped somewhere.

“Now to the left.”

They set off without any shadows, moving along the walls: flashes of red in the blackness. The warmth flowing out through cracks in the wall meant that somewhere here there was something alive, warming itself, breathing out steam. But there wasn’t anyone coming towards them. Maybe it was some kind of secret passage? Were they coming at the enemy from the rear? Was there an ambush here? Why couldn’t they hear the battle? hadn’t it begun yet? had they gotten there just ahead of the beginning? All those cartridges. With that many you could hold the line for a month. But where were the other men from the Order waiting? Was that why they couldn’t turn on their torches—so they wouldn’t give them away?

“Now march.”

Someone inserted red markers into the darkness up ahead: little human figures. They heard voices superimposed on the racket made by the ventilation. Warmth lived and flowed along in the pipes on the ceiling—the extraction system?—and in the drainage gratings under their feet. Apparently there were large rooms nearby—where stoves were lit, light shone, and people whispered to each other about something—but Artyom and the other members of the Order were being kept in the dark.

“Halt.”

They stopped under the grating of a brazier in the wall. Several crimson figures loomed up ahead. One, more like a bull than a man, was blazing furiously, consumed in flames, and two were blurred and indistinct, as if their blood was cold.

A conversation trickled out through the brazier. The words stuck together and fused, nibbled round the edges, and the pipe echo reduced the tone of all the voices to one—tinny—so it was impossible to understand who was talking to whom, as if someone with a metal funnel in his larynx was reciting a monologue.

“Are they all here? Yes, they’re all here. How many? Exactly as agreed. Twenty thousand. Twenty thousand, four hundred units to be precise. I hope this will solve our problem. Our joint problem. It should solve it. It always has solved it. So, shall we shake on it? Thank you for your flexibility. Oh, no. And of course we would like to avoid similar excesses in the future. You know perfectly well that the situation simply got out of control. It’s not our fault. An initiative from below. A matter of control. Our agreements always remain in force. Will you do something to restore the balance? We have already. Well, and I’d like to talk separately about these rumors. You know, brother against brother. Malicious tongues are wagging; there could have been a leak. No, I assure you. That’s not in our interest. We’re sticking with our relationship. All right, then. May I take this? Yes, we’ll issue instructions. Thank you, Maxim Petrovich. Thank you, Alexei Felixovich.”

“This way!”

“Forward march!” Letyaga commanded. “Towards those three.”

Alexei Felixovich, Felixovich, Felixovich. Thank you, Alexei Felixovich. Yes sir, Alexei Felixovich. Accepted. Artyom’s forearm started itching. There were already scabs there instead of tattoos.

“Right you monster moles, over here quick,” someone growled out of the darkness. “Hand over that scrap metal!”

A hoarse voice. Low and chesty.

A small torch lit up. The beam started skipping about close to the ground, over the green boxes and the stenciled inscriptions, counting the zinc containers.

“One. Two. Dismissed, what are you standing there for? Circulate. Three. Four. That’s it. You’ve delivered. Take a stroll. Five six.”

Artyom's turn was coming soon. His heart was pounding now, after he'd recognized the other man; his head was blazing hot already, but he kept waiting for his turn, to see from close up, to know for certain ...

"Seven, eight. Put them over here, over here. Next. Nine, ten. That's it, now you're free."

They were handing over these cartridges to someone. All twenty zinc boxes—they hadn't brought them here so that the members of the Order could hold the line. All that was required of them was to deliver twenty thousand cartridges and hand them over to someone. That was the entire assignment.

"Eleven, twelve."

Artyom heard that. His turn was approaching. They're rabbits! Docile rabbits! They not going to run anywhere! Twelve. But down below here you'll croak. Thirteen, docile rabbits, fourteen.

He put his two boxes down on the floor. He groped with an uncertain hand at the pockets of his tactical assault vest. He pulled it out and missed the button.

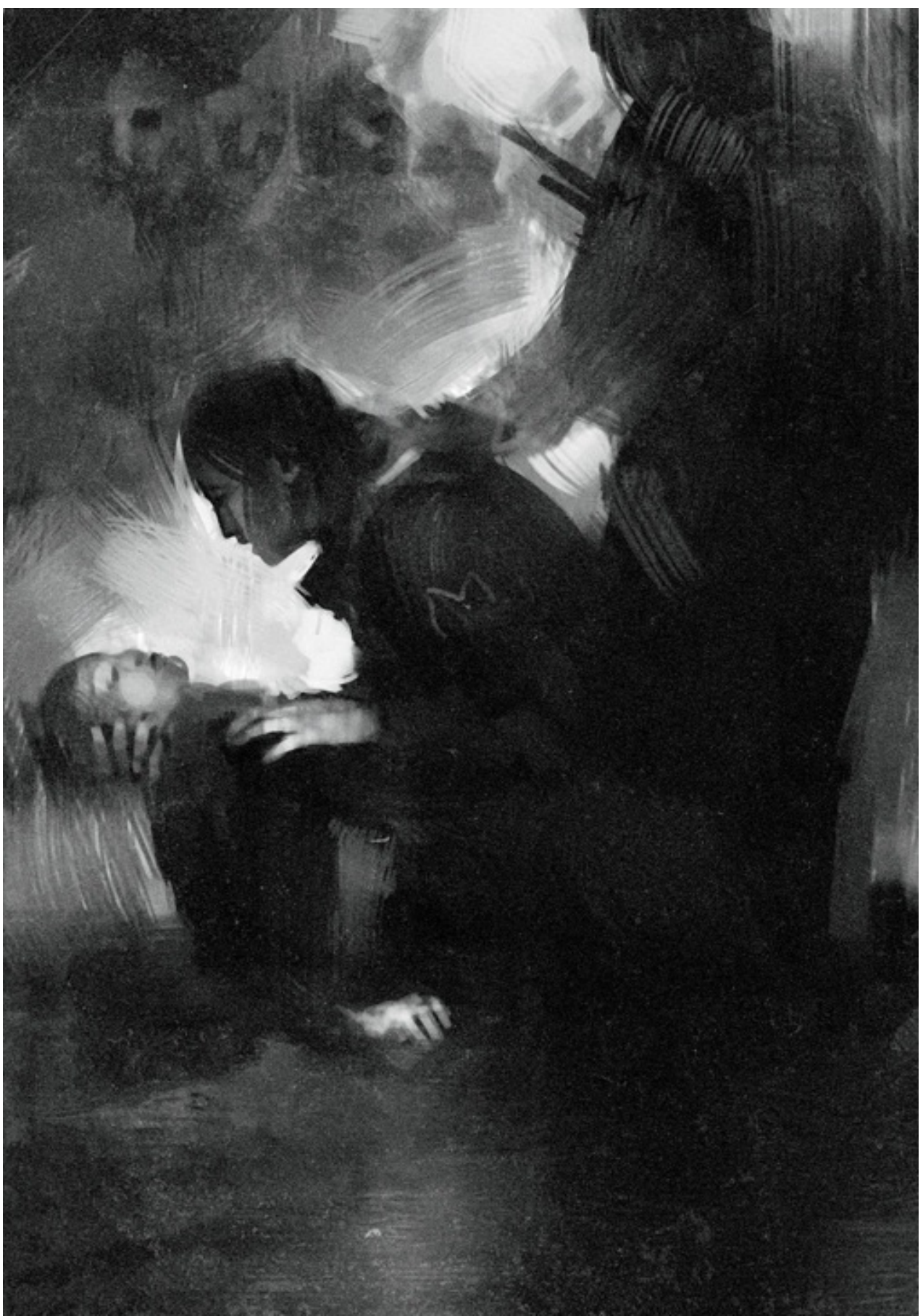
"Next! What are you doing stuck here?"

The little torch's beam jabbed into Artyom's eyes, leaving the stenciled letters—the same way as the barrel of the revolver had jabbed into his ear.

Then Artyom raised his own torch against it—long and weighty, a million candle power. And he clicked the button.

In the harsh million-candle beam he could see the man had shriveled a bit and turned pale and wrinkled while he was on his way back from the next world—but here he was, standing confidently, with his fat legs straddled wide, clutching the green zinc boxes presented to him with one possessive hand and protecting himself against the light with other. Shot recklessly by Artyom, and not killed at all by his snot-nose little bullets. In a new Red Army uniform, sewn to order to fit his bullish torso.

Gleb Ivanovich Svinolup.



CHAPTER 18

— ACTIVE SERVICE —

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Letyaga smacked the torch hard, and the thick beam somersaulted, lashing across other, superfluous faces, revealing the walls, the floor, the ceiling—so they were all there after all. A corridor, a door, men. The men screwing up their eyes and swearing. Two images emerged side by side, looking familiar to Artyom. One fat-lipped and balding, his silvery temples sheared with electric clippers, wearing an officer’s pea jacket. The other one sharp-nosed, with bags under his eyes and neatly trimmed hair; where could Artyom know him from? It was as if they’d met in a dream ...

While the torch was tumbling into the corner, Artyom had time to grab hold of his automatic, but not to aim it at Svinolup—they grabbed hold of his arms and the gun and tore them apart; the light went out; in the pitch-black darkness various strangers threw themselves on the two familiar-looking red silhouettes, shielding them against bullets.

“They’re Reds!” Artyom wheezed. “Let go of me! We brought the cartridges for the Reds! They’re Reds!”

“Easy now. Easy, easy ...”

“Now what kind of shit have you got shouting his head off here? Eh?”

A hand in a fingerless leather glove—Letyaga’s—shut Artyom’s mouth—the taste was like gun oil, diesel, gunpowder, and old blood. Artyom sank his teeth into it, tugged, and shouted God only knew what with his mouth full. Chewing on it didn’t help—Letyaga had no nerves. The device was torn off his forehead, and his night vision went blind.

“Don’t touch him!” Lyokha’s voice, and the clatter of Lyokha’s automatic rifle. “Sava, they’re battering our man!”

“Let go! Let him go!” That was Savelii. “Or I’ll drop everyone right now!”

“Damir ... Omega ...”

There was a grunt in the blackness, the gurgle of a strangled throat, the flash of a burst of fire—into the ceiling—and someone wheezed, tried to break free, and howled frenziedly.

“Do we finish them?” someone asked in the darkness, breathing fitfully.

“So you specials have a few problems of your own,” the invisible Svinolup chuckled. “Right, guys?”

“No. Not now. Bring them this way, follow me.” Letyaga’s deep bass.

“The colonel said if they pulled anything flaky ...”

“I know what the colonel said. Bring them and follow me!”

“What happened?” A familiar voice, not Svinolup’s, but different—weary and lordly; at the sound of it a vision of a brothel rose up in front of Artyom’s unseeing eyes, with curtains lit from the inside ...

“That’s it. Sorry about the little hitch. Let’s take them and leave!” Letyaga.

Hands of steel dragged Artyom along the floor, behind him his comrades started jerking their legs about—but the soldiers of the Order were well-trained; you couldn’t break their grip.

“Bring them over here. Put them there. Right, that’s all; I’ll sort this out myself. You go up. And you keep your ugly mugs to the floor!”

“The colonel said to waste them all if anything started up.”

“Waste us! Are you totally berserk?” Savelii shouted, coming round.

“Damirchik, I remember. I’ll handle this. Have you searched them? Are they clean?”

“They’re clean.”

“Right then. Move on. I’ll be quick.”

“Okay, guys ...” They drawled their agreement dubiously. “Let Letyaga do it. It’s his sidekick.”

Heels clattered, seemingly moving away—but also dubiously, dissembling. Apparently going up, but as if they were just moving aside. The oil-soaked leather released Artyom’s mouth.

“That’s Svinolup! The Reds’ KGB! We gave the Reds cartridges! The Reds—we gave them—cartridges! Have you got any clue you’re doing?”

“I have my orders, brother,” Letyaga replied gently. “Deliver. What I deliver to who is none of my business.”

“The Reds! The Reds! Cartridges! The two of us! Fought them! In the bunker! Our boys died there! Number Ten! Ullman! Shlyapa! The Reds killed them! Do you remember that? They almost killed you! And me! How could we? How could you all help them?”

“We were told to collect the stuff from the depot and bring it here. And hand it over.”

“You’re lying!” Artyom yelled, blowing his top. “You’re fucking lying, you bastard! You scumbag! You’re a traitor! To them! And me! All of them who were killed! Our boys! Both of you! You and that old rat! You’ve betrayed everybody! What was it for? What did they croak for? So we! Could give? The Reds! Weapons? Cartridges?”

“Easy now, easy. It’s aid! It’s not cartridges. They’ve got a famine. They’re going to buy mushrooms with those cartridges. From Hansa. From Hansa. All of their own harvest has rotted.”

“I don’t believe you! Any of you!”

“What a load of crap,” Lyokha said into the stone floor.

“What about you? Do you believe it? You?”

“My job ...”

“What is that—your job? Do you think I didn’t hear? You were told to waste me. If I didn’t swallow this, right? What does flaky mean? Was I supposed to swallow this! You and me—the two of us!—giving the Reds cartridges?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’ll never forgive you. Not you! One blood, you bastard. Uh-huh! You! How do you feel right now? How can you believe now, Letyaga? What in? Now? What’s it all for? For the rations?”

“You ... Don’t you ...”

“Come on! You know, right? I couldn’t give a shit about anything. I’m going to croak anyway. Shoot, you shit. Carry out your orders. Group A fucking minus. Only let my guys go. These two. What do you want with them? The old man doesn’t owe them anything. There’s nothing to get even for!”

Letyaga said nothing, breathing loudly through his nose. Something metallic hovered tensely close beside Artyom, but he didn’t feel the death that was all ready and waiting to happen.

“Well?”

The stinking leather shoved all the sounds back into Artyom again.

“Get up, you two,” Letyaga ordered in a whisper. “I’m sorry, Artyom.”

A pistol cracked into his ear.

Once. Twice. Three times.

Nothing changed.

In pitch darkness, how can you distinguish life from death?

That was how—from the taste of blood and diesel, gunpowder and oil in his mouth. He was alive.

“Hold hands!” Letyaga whispered. “If anyone comes adrift, I’ll waste him on the spot.”

They didn’t try to run from him blindly; they put their trust in Letyaga one last time. Letyaga’s palm led Artyom, silenced now, hurrying along, and the others followed him in a chain.

“Hey, how are you doing down there? All done?” someone called to them from the escalator.

“Now at a run,” said Letyaga. “If they catch us, they’ll snuff me with you.”

They ran, not looking and not seeing. Holding each other’s cold fingers, slippery with the sweat

of imminent death.

“Where are you going?” someone roared from above them. “Halt!”

Letyaga didn't seem to know where—he was simply running, anywhere. After thirty seconds something started whistling around them and boots started clattering behind. They turned off somewhere, stumbling and crashing into each other, getting in each other's way.

“Who is he, this Felixovich?” Artyom demanded from Letyaga as he ran. “Bessolov! Who is this Bessolov? Who has our old man sold us to? Eh?”

A pillar of light shot down from the sky. The four of them shied away from it like cockroaches.

They poked their noses into a dead end and turned back. The running feet moved away, then started moving closer again. And again that indistinct, chesty droning oozed out of the cracks in the blackness. Like at the very beginning, when they were just coming down into Komsomol Station.

And again mute bullets zipped past close by, bounced against the walls and flew off at random, sparing them reluctantly.

“Bessolov, who is he?” Artyom persisted. “Who is he? You know, Letyaga! You know! Tell me!”

Letyaga stopped, confused: Maybe because everywhere here was equally black, everywhere was equally far from warm, red life, and there was no way to find any direction?

Letyaga switched on his torch.

“There they are! That way! Over there!”

They were standing by a welded grille. Letyaga took aim and shot off the padlock, three of them jerked the bars outwards, and they squeezed in and crawled, crawled away from death on all fours. Maybe the others wouldn't bother to chase after them?

“Oooooooooo ...”

The groaning was growing louder as the choir warmed up; it blew into their faces like a wind from the pipe they were crawling along. Artyom's eardrums, heart, and spleen were already vibrating in tune with it. And the men behind were keeping up, trying to carry out their orders, tickling the back of his head with their torch beams, trying to choose a target.

Letyaga came across something: some kind of iron cover. The droning on the other side of it was as loud as if the cover was screwed onto a pressure cooker on the stove and about to be blown off by an explosion of steam at any moment.

He pressed down hard on the cover—no use. The rust had already put down roots; the salt had grafted the bolt to the frame. A bullet zipped through the air and bit the last one in line—Savelii.

“Get against the wall!”

Letyaga stretched out his hand and turned his torch on their pursuers, dazzling them; zap, zap, zap, he replied in lead and Artyom thought he wounded someone. In the sealed-off pipe it was hard to miss.

And from behind they replied generously in kind.

“Give me some fucking help, with you?”

Two of them stamped hard, then three, the iron in their path hesitated and then slumped down. Savelii caught another bullet and squealed, and they dragged his limp body after them through the hole that had burst open. They tumbled straight out of the ceiling of the tunnel, into a thousand screaming people. They fell on their heads and didn't get hurt.

Now it was clear what the groaning was.

“FOOOOOOD!”

* * *

Artyom had never seen so many people at once anywhere. It was an unusual tunnel, immensely wide, to take two sets of tracks at once, with right-angle vaults; and it was completely flooded with people for as far as the eye could see.

There was a whole sea of people here. And the sea was raging.

The four of them had fallen out about fifty meters from the station, and they started sculling through the living bodies in that direction, towards the light. They pulled SaveliI behind them, not looking to see where the bullets had hit him. SaveliI caught hold of Artyom's collar, pulled himself up from his low tank-driver's height, and shouted into Artyom's ear in a whisper. Artyom shrugged it off: Come on, what is all this? You've still got years and years of life ahead of you! They couldn't just stop and stand still—the huge crowd was swaying, and it could crush them against the wall or trample them underfoot. And they had to keep going to get lost in the crush: Their pursuers could follow them out any second now.

The bodies here were gaunt and exhausted, with the skin hanging loose on them. Forcing a way through them they felt it: The fleshless bones snagged on them as they moved past, like the ribs of a kitchen grater, seeming to plane a little bit of something off each one of them—for themselves. It was the famine that had gathered them together and herded them here from all over the Red Line, Artyom realized. But why here?

“MUSHROOOOOOMS!”

It was strange that the people could even stay on their feet. There couldn't be any strength in those emaciated stick-legs. But not all of them could stay up—every now and then Artyom stumbled over something that had given in, his boots trod in something soft—stomachs, maybe?—and slithered off something hard and round. But the living could no longer weep for anything except mushrooms.

It was easy to guess the right direction: All the heads in the tunnel were turned the same way. And in between their roaring the people quietly hummed the word “Komsomol”.

They moved along with all the others and through them—towards Komsomol Station, with just the backs of people's heads turned towards them. Short-cropped or with hair hanging loose, shaved, gray or white. As if people here got by without faces.

Artyom looked back—and saw one black figure in an Order balaclava dive out of the ceiling like a little toy soldier, followed by another one. Letyaga hadn't carried out his orders, but the others couldn't disobey. The heaving surf swallowed up the divers; now they would start swimming to find Artyom and drown him.

He redoubled his efforts and walked on with his knees bent, so that his black uniform would be hidden behind other people's brownish shoulders, and he tugged the others down too.

They couldn't talk to each other: The weeping and roaring of the human sea drowned everything out, so all they were doing was opening and closing their mouths without making a sound. Everything they tried to say something about turned into mushrooms.

They got through to Komsomol Station. The radial line station, the Red one.

They looked up at it from the tracks—it was immense, solemn and terrifying.

The station was a bit like Lenin Library Station in some ways: It was also high enough for two stories and looked absolutely unearthly—right-angle vaults, with nothing rounded off, immensely tall columns, classical ones, with frizzy ears of wheat thrusting up against the ceiling.

It was all about bread at this station, all about the most important thing of all: an atheists' temple of the harvest. With columns faced in blackish-brown marble with sprays of red; the walls by the tracks faced in tiles, like torture chambers; and the ears of wheat just below the ceiling cast in bronze, like swords.

The crowd was standing on the platform and on the tracks; the people on the tracks were trying to clamber up onto the platform, and the people clinging onto the platform were trying not to fall onto the tracks. And as they sang their hymn of hunger with a heavy groan from the chest, they all shoved forward, towards somewhere farther ahead. The station was in semi-darkness; torch beams falling from above roamed over white and naked craniums like over the crests of waves, as if they were searching for survivors of a shipwreck in stormy water.

Artyom threw his head back and looked up.

Komsomol Station had a second level—balconies running round the whole station about four meters above the platform. And those balconies hadn't been flooded yet. There were only Red Army men with

automatic rifles standing there, with the barrels propped on the handrail for convenience. But who were they supposed to aim at? It couldn't be everyone at once!

There were officers standing spaced out between the soldiers; they were trying to shout something through the loudspeakers, but the roar of the crowd blotted out their hoarse electrical straining.

Artyom and the others clambered up onto the platform over shoulders, over heads, over each other. He looked back again—and spotted black-wool faces in the crowd. And they spotted his black figure too.

He squatted down, sweating. All his wounds started talking to him at once: the shoulder with a hole in it, the shattered knee, the lacerated back. They said, “No more, that’s enough. Stop, stay here.”

Up ahead he caught sight of where everyone wanted to go so desperately.

At the center of the hall a broad marble stairway descended from the balconies into the people like an emergency escape chute. There used to be another two, one at each end of the hall, but they had been demolished and walled off. So the central one was the only way up—and into the connecting passage to the Circle Line. To Hansa. That was what the crowd was pushing towards.

Three lines of border guards were standing on the steps; barbed wired had been wound onto the portable barriers, and on the intermediate landing machine guns snarled in both directions from a thoughtfully installed nest. Absolutely no way up had been left here.

“MUSHROOOOOMS!” the station roared; it seemed like the whole line was roaring.

Mothers with bundles in their arms—some had silent ones, some had ones that were still squealing. Fathers with goggle-eyed children on their shoulders—hold them up higher, higher, so the dead can't trip them up and drag them onto the floor, down to the bottom. They all wanted to get to the stairway, to the steps. They all knew that no one here would give them any mushrooms. They all needed to get to the Circle Line; there was no other road to life left.

Why had the crowd held back from rushing the thin fences—basically no more than air framed by pipes and wire? People were already pressing towards them, getting close to those barbs, eyeing them and the Red Army men hungrily. The Red Army men brandished their rifle butts at the hungry people, but the red line hadn't been crossed yet from either side.

How had such a huge horde of people gathered at Komsomol Station? had anyone tried to stop them leaving their own stations farther along the line, and what had happened to whoever had tried? Artyom didn't know, but they kept on arriving out of the tunnel, clambering onto the platform over other people's shoulders, packing themselves in tighter and tighter—three people, or five, or seven to a square meter.

It had to burst any moment now; that soap-bubble membrane between the soldiers and the people. The final sand-grain-seconds before the atomic explosion were running out.

It was appallingly stuffy in here, and it was as hot as in a foundry—there was nowhere at Komsomol Station for those who had come here to get any oxygen. The people breathed rapidly and shallowly—and the station was shrouded in haze from the water they breathed out of themselves.

Artyom looked back again: Where were the black faces in the crowd? And he glimpsed them, closer now. As if they could sense where to look for him and nothing could put them off the trail.

But something was happening up under the ceiling.

All those people—thousands of them!—took each other's example and started turning their faces upwards.

A resolute convoy was striding rapidly along the balcony, led by a surging, tank-like figure: Svinolup.

It was eerily reminiscent of the service that a priest and his assistants, who were invited in from somewhere, had once held at Exhibition during the Dark Ones' time. The armed escorts were carrying something; stopping beside each of the snipers at the balustrade, Svinolup conferred some of it on them.

Artyom's faltering heart sank like a stone as he realized what they were being blessed with up there: the very cartridges that he and Letyaga had brought an hour earlier. So there it was, the cure for famine.

“There's your aid!” Artyom grabbed Letyaga by the shoulder and jabbed his finger upwards. “Up there!”

That's yours!"

When he'd gone round all the marksmen, peppering up each one, Svinolup walked down to the sandbag nest on the landing between the stories: His retinue started feeding the machine gun crews with cartridges. The major whispered something in the ears of the crews' commanding officers and slapped them on the shoulder.

The people down below were in turbulent mood, but sensing what was going on up above, they started falling dumb: The choir turned ragged and lost its nerve.

Svinolup addressed the people in a booming voice.

"Comrades!" he trumpeted. "In the name of the leadership of the Red Line I request you to respect the laws of our state, including the law on the freedom of assembly. Please disperse."

"Mushrooms!" someone shouted.

"Mushrooooooms!" the crowd yelled in support.

"Let us gooooo!" a woman's voice squealed above the roar of the crowd. "Let us go, you monster! Let us out!"

Svinolup nodded. As if in agreement.

"We have no right! To allow you! Into the territory! Of another! State! I! Demand! That you! Disperse!"

"We're starving! My little daughter died! Save us! Let us out! I can barely stand! My belly hurts! But you're so fat, you guzzler. Let us go! Let us out!" the crowd said in a babble of voices.

"To Hansa! And food!"

They won't let these people into Hansa, Artyom thought dully and slowly in the sultry heat. They'll never let these people into Hansa. Hansa knows everything: About the jammers. About the cartridges. About the Reich. About living space. About the Reds. About the famine. They won't let these people in.

"This is an act of provocation! And those who call for it are provocateurs!" Svinolup rapped out after running a slow, meticulous gaze over the crowd; everyone there seemed to be remembering his face, so they could get even afterwards. "And we won't! Waste words! On provocateurs!"

"We're dying! All of us! We're exhausted! Have pity! Lord, deliver us! Rescue us! Don't let it happen! Don't let us perish. Just a crumb! Some broth! Not for me, for the child! You scum! Let us go!" The crowd stopped talking normally and started groaning again with its chest made of clay. "MUSHROOOOOMS!"

The people at the back moved closer to the footbridge, the stairway, and Svinolup—and they squeezed the people at the front. The people at the front breathed out together to make space for themselves, and that exhalation set the station, this shrine of the harvest, trembling. The people wanted to go up the steps, to the inner sanctum, as if bread or wine had been made ready for them there. But there was nothing in there. Only a sacrificial altar—and a knife.

Now it would all happen. Now everything would be hot and slippery.

Svinolup couldn't talk them out of this. And he wasn't even trying.

They had to be saved. Stopped from ... Gotten out of here.

Why did they all have to die here? They could carry on living.

He had to do it.

Artyom was being swayed together with the others—towards the barbed wire and back again. The swaying made him feel sick. He only had a little drop of the beggarly air left. And he used that drop to say it: first in a whisper, then in a loud voice.

"There's nothing for you there ... Don't go to Hansa! Nobody there wants you! Do you hear me? All you people! Don't go! Please! Don't!"

Not many people heard Artyom, but Svinolup heard—he was standing quite near.

"You see! There's no one waiting for you there!" he said languidly, supporting Artyom for form's sake. "Your place is here!"

"But where, then? Where to? Where can we go?" The people close by became agitated, and the

agitation started rippling out in circles from Artyom.

They don't know anything, do they? Artyom remembered.

They believe there isn't anything apart from the Metro, apart from Moscow. They're all lied to, told that the world was burnt out, that they're alone, they're being held in these tunnels, under the ground. Nobody even explains anything to them about our enemies; they've just been locked up here underground, in the darkness ...

“Go up on the surface! You should go up! The world is still intact up there! We're not the only ones who survived! Do you hear me? We're not alone! Moscow isn't alone! There are other cities! I've heard them myself! On the radio! You can leave this place and go anywhere! Wherever you want! Live wherever you want! Everything's wide open! The whole Earth is wide open!”

People started looking round, trying to find him. And Artyom realized that this was the moment, right now, when he had to tell them. Tell them so that they would know and could decide for themselves. Someone lent their arms to support him; someone lent him their back; and he started climbing up them—to stand on other people's shoulders, so that he could be heard.

“You've been deceived! They're all still up there! Petersburg! Ekaterinburg! Vladivostok! It's still there, all of it. We're the only ones down here! In the pig shit! We slurp it down, we breathe it! The sun's up there! But we guzzle pills instead! They keep us here ... In the darkness! In this stifling air. They keep us here! They shoot us! They hang us! And we ... strangle and butcher each other! But what for? For someone else's ideas? For these stations? For these tunnels? For mushrooms?”

“MUSHROOOOOOMS!” the crowd echoed.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Letyaga wheezed up at him. “You've blowing our cover! Now they'll all start creeping out of here!”

Artyom embraced the people with his inflamed eyes—so dry and hot. How could he explain to them? How could he get through to all of them?

The black balaclavas surfaced like little buoys. Miller's errand boys. Now they'd drag him down—off the other people's shoulders. But he mustn't hide now. Now he absolutely had to say everything that he hadn't told them before, through the jammers.

Svinolup stood there without saying anything, waiting to see if this half-dead specimen could persuade the others to move away from the stairway. The marksmen waited for his command.

“We're dying here! We grow tumors! Goiters! Everything we have is stolen! Food ... We steal it from our children ... Clothes ... We steal them from the dead ... We beat each other to pulp ... In the tunnels! The Reds ... The Browns ... It's all pointless! All of it! Brothers! Pointless! We eat our own kind! In the darkness! We don't know anything! Everyone lies to us! Everyone! What for? To achieve what?”

“But where can we go?” they shouted to him.

“Up to the surface! You can leave! You can escape! There's a way out! Behind you! In the tunnel! A hatch! Go back! Freedom is there! There! Climb up and out! And go wherever you like! Yourselves! Live for yourselves!”

“He wants to turn us away from Hansa!” someone yelled in spite.

He saw the black pupils of gun barrels. One, two. Staring at him. But he hadn't told the people everything yet. He started hurrying.

“You'll be killed for nothing here! You'll be killed, and no one will even know! There's a whole world out there! And we're here ... Shut in under a lid. We'll all croak, every last one of us, and no one will ever know! It's all pointless! Leave! Don't do this! Go back!”

“Where will we get mushrooms from?”

“Stooge!” they shouted. “He's a stooge! Don't listen to him, people!”

“Wait!” Artyom waved his hand, and just at that moment someone spat lead at him out of the crowd.

The movement of his wave diverted the bullet from his heart. It hit him in the shoulder—the left one

again. It jolted Artyom, put him off track, toppled him backwards into the crowd. And the moment he stopped speaking, the crowd immediately forgot everything.

“Mushrooooooms!” someone howled in a shrill voice.

“MUSHROOOOOMS!” the people groaned.

Letyaga managed to drag Artyom out, steady him on his feet, and shield him with his own body—just a second before the crowd moved.

“The last time!” Svinolup barked, but the back rows couldn’t hear him and couldn’t see him.

Out of the corner of his eyes, through the polythene sheet, Artyom saw Svinolup slap a machine gunner on the shoulder and then run up the steps, to the balcony and away, out of the station. He had to get back to work, deal with important business; it wasn’t permissible for him to be killed. He left, and it all started without him.

“Let us gooooo!” the crowd told the machine gunners.

Letyaga dragged Artyom against the people’s movement—farther away from the barriers, farther away from the gun barrels, pulling away with all his bearish strength, but the current dragged them back, to impale them on the barbed wire and the bullets that were almost ripe.

“Fi-ire!”

A machine gun thundered, fanning the humming bursts out, and mowed down the first row. Mowed it down with Artyom’s bullets.

“Have mercy!” someone squealed. “Lord, have mercy!”

“Have mercy on us, Lord!” groaned someone else, a woman.

“We’ll die here! Have mercy!”

“Up there! Go! up! Onto the surface! You don’t have to die! Go up to freedom!” Artyom shouted to them, but he was drowned in the call that had spread instantly, like electricity—“Have mercy!”

And with that lamentation all the thousands upon thousands advanced against the barriers, against the machine gun.

“Have mercy, Looooord!”

They hadn’t been taught how, so each of them spoke those three words to their own music. The sinister chorus was weird and unearthly. They tried to tug their trapped arms up to cross themselves, but they couldn’t get them out from down there. And they moved forward with no arms, stepping on those who had been mown down, not learning anything from them.

“Have meeericy!” Lyokha howled, clutching at his own Christ.

Those at the front fell, and the second row became soft shields for the third. Artyom, Letyaga, Lyokha, and SaveliI wanted to go back, away from the machine guns, but the crowd wanted to go forward anyway, because it couldn’t see anything for itself there behind.

Artyom was armless himself, and there was absolutely no way he could stop the crowd now.

The automatic rifles up above began howling down onto the heads and people started going limp here and there, but in the crush they couldn’t fall anymore and remained standing on their feet, even after they had died. No one here was afraid of death. Maybe they even wanted to be slaughtered, in order to do something at last with lives that they were sick and tired of, and be at peace. They simply chanted “Have Mercy!” and carried on walking towards the stairway that led upwards—as they understood “up”—and towards the bullets.

While the magazine of the machine gun was being changed—mere seconds—a hundred hands grabbed the barrier and dismembered it. A moment later they had gouged out the machine gunner’s eyes, torn the commanding officer of the detail to pieces and strangled all the others, and then they started creeping upwards, the living and the dead together, like lava out of a volcano. They didn’t even take the drowned men’s weapons; they had no time for that.

The gunmen flew down from the stairway and the balustrade, in silent consent. Artyom was walking

back, towards the tunnel, towards the hatchway, but even so he went up the stairs to the balconies with everyone else: He was carried towards the connecting passage to Hansa.

The Red Army men over whom the people hadn't flooded yet started retreating, already begging the crowd for forgiveness, but they shouted too quietly, so they were killed anyway. SaveliI slipped away and sank, and he never surfaced again. And hundreds out of those thousands, or perhaps even thousands of those thousands, also disappeared.

Someone tugged on Artyom's sleeve.

He looked back and saw a woman. Gaunt, with bluish-gray skin.

"Young man! Young man! I can't do it! They'll crush my son!" she shouted to him. "They'll crush him! Hold him! Lift him up! They'll crush him! I can't do it!"

He looked down and saw a boy about six years old, with light blond hair and a smear of bloody snot under his nose. And he managed to jerk the boy up to himself just in time.

"Okay! Where do I take him? Who are you? What's your name?"

"Kolya."

"And mine's Artyom."

At first Kolya put his arms round Artyom's neck, so that he wouldn't slip off, but he was being crushed—he managed to change his grip and scramble up onto Artyom's neck. Kolya's mother took hold of his hand. She held it for a while—then let go. Artyom twitched fretfully: Where was she? She was standing there, caught in the vise-grip of the crowd. She couldn't fall, but her head was dangling down, shot through.

"That way! That way!" little Kolya shouted from Artyom's shoulders; he hadn't noticed yet that his mother had been killed.

Letyaga walked at the front, massive and indomitable. Artyom and Kolya followed him. Lyokha had latched on to his crucifix and was clinging to it like the broken mast of a ship, praying with the only three words he knew as he sculled along. Somehow they managed to stick together, and they were swept along like that as far as the Hansa border.

"Mama! Ma-ma! Where are you?" the little boy called, remembering about her. But there wasn't anyone now where he had left her.

All the Reds had been swept aside and trampled to death. Flags appeared out of the darkness of the passages—a brown circle on a white ground.

"Up," Artyom pleaded with the people. "Not this way. Go up."

"Mama! Maaaaaaaaa!"

The boy tried to climb down and jump into the grindstones, to drag his mama out himself. But Artyom caught him: He would have been trampled down in a second.

The thought came to Artyom that he couldn't abandon this boy now. He had to take him as his own. Take him and keep him for as long as his own life lasted. But how could he raise him? Suddenly he pictured himself back with Anya and they had this kid he was clutching by the ankle. And they all lived together ... In Polis? At Exhibition? He suddenly wanted to go there, into that life—to take a look, just for a minute.

The searchlights above the fortifications lit up and tried to blind the people. But even blinded, the people knew which way to go.

"MUSHROOOOMS!"

"This is a state border," someone shouted to them. "The Federation of Stations! Of the Circle Line! We'll open fire! And shoot to kill!"

"Have meeerccyyyyy!"

And that was all: They had all survived in vain back there on the steps.

Artyom took the boy down off his shoulders and into his arms—so that the bullets wouldn't pick him

off above all the heads. The boy tried to break free. And Artyom thought, Damn, what a responsibility—now I have to drag him around with me everywhere.

But Sukhoi ... How had Sukhoi taken Artyom—just taken him and dragged him around all his life, exactly like that, someone he had picked up by chance. He was able to do it. But what about Artyom—could he do it?

Rat-Tat-Tat-Tat-Tat-Tat-Tat-Tat! The guns chattered.

The ones at the front, the bravest, came crashing down; the ones behind them, desperate people, fell, but others kept jostling from behind: the third row, the fourth row, the hundredth, the two hundredth. Artyom turned his back to the front to shield Kolya.

“Mama,” said Kolya.

“Hush,” Artyom told him.

They walked past a dead man in a black balaclava who had lost his way.

It was frightening to take responsibility for someone else, especially a six-year-old. To bind yourself to him for the rest of your life ... How did you do that?

Kolya relaxed and stopped struggling.

Artyom looked down—and the boy was dead. With his arms hanging loose and his legs dangling, with his light-blond head thrown back and little holes in his chest. He'd been caught by falling bullets at the end of their flight. And he had shielded Artyom.

“You cowardly bastard,” Artyom told himself. “You stinking coward. You shit.”

He wiped away the snot and looked for a place to put the boy down, but there wasn't anywhere. And then the three of them were tossed towards the reinforcements and the Hansa machine guns. They were exactly the same kind of machine guns, no different at all from the Reds'. And the bullets were probably the same. And they killed in exactly the same way.

The muzzle was turning towards them, spitting death, but Letyaga remembered about his sniper's rifle and stopped the machine gunner halfway, and a second later the emplacement was swept away by the wave, and the body was dragged across the stone slabs.

Artyom held Kolya in his arms for as long as he could, but he lost him anyway.

Absolutely everything was smothered in people.

The dead stared indifferently and kept silent. The others couldn't do that. Those who went on roared. Those the bullets were flying towards mumbled about mercy. The dying finished up their conversations with God. No one was listening to anyone else.

But suddenly they started taking hold of each other's hands, to walk in a chain and not get split up. Artyom's hand was taken on one side, then on the other—people he didn't know. Warm, ardent hands. They didn't hold on for long. When they'd taken a few steps, the little man on the left let go, then the man on the right.

They were already walking over the crumpling faces of Hansa border guards, and the vanguard of the starving was already bowling through the barbed wire; they had already reached the Circle Line Komsomol Station when the flamethrowers jumped out behind them, like fiends from hell.

Artyom and Letyaga and other people were swept out into a huge, stately hall: a ceiling covered with happy mosaics, chandeliers giving undeserved light, caressing and divine, well-washed little people screeching and recoiling from the invasion, and the defectors, the intruders—like rats, like cockroaches, hurrying and scurrying to get out of this palace and out of sight, into the tunnels, into the burrows, to scatter before they were all caught.

Behind them in the passages the flamethrowers started roaring; the first people who were burned howled, and a smell of roasted flesh and burnt hair spread through the air, but Artyom and Letyaga and Lyokha ran, with their arms round each other, into the blackness of a tunnel, without looking back to see what they had left behind them.

Someone shouted in the tunnel behind them, ordering them to stop. Hansa security guards who had rushed to the scene were already arresting people and dragging them back home, to the Red Line. These fugitives weren't wanted here.

The three of them didn't talk to each other.

There wasn't enough air for talking.

* * *

Before the exit to Kursk Station, there happened to be a connecting passage between tunnels, and after wounding the guards, they managed to get out through it onto another line, the Arbat-Pokrovsk blue line. Letyaga remembered about a ventilation shaft there. They scrambled out among the courtyards of dilapidated detached brick houses, between the flaking gold of church domes and the flaking gold above smashed shop windows.

They sat down to take a breather, deafened by all the shouting and screaming.

Letyaga didn't say anything; Lyokha batted his eyelids in confusion; Artyom puked. They had a smoke.

"How do you feel about it now?" Artyom asked Letyaga. "Got the idea?"

Letyaga shrugged his bearish shoulders.

"They killed the kid. I was holding him."

"I saw."

"He killed them with our cartridges," Artyom told him. "Svinolup. That scumbag. The major. With your cartridges. He must have run out of his own. They were waiting for us. And he just left. Alive. All those corpses were left back there. But he's alive. And he'll go on living."

"I was following orders."

"He was following orders too. It's pretty certain he didn't think it all up himself. All of them there were following orders."

"Why the hell are you comparing me with him?"

"It would be gweat if we could kill someone too," said Lyokha. "The one who did think all this up. That fucking twat. So there'd be no more orders like this."

"I was sure he'd croaked. I put two bullets into him. I should have shot him in the forehead."

Artyom's left arm had gone numb and his shoulder was soaking wet, but he wasn't allowed to think about his shoulder right now.

"What's the point of taking out a major?" Lyokha objected. "Theware shitwoads of majors. Take out a major and you onwy make a captain happy. You have to take out the field marshals stwaight off."

"What if I had finished him back there? What would have changed? They would have charged the machine guns anyway. I told them. They don't understand anything. I told them they could leave that place. Go up on top. They don't hear anything! None of them! Even the ones who are going to croak any moment. It's easier for them to storm a machine gun than go up there! What can you do?"

Letyaga snorted bloody snot into his hand and started absentmindedly wiping it on his trousers. He rubbed his forehead.

"Fuck them. You can't change their direction. They're like a herd of animals. Where can I go?" he asked. "This is desertion. There isn't anywhere to go."

Artyom looked at him for a moment. The fireproof man. He didn't burn, because there was nothing there to burn. If only Artyom could be like that.

His ears were gradually uncorking themselves.

His stretched eardrums were shrinking back.

And then, from down below, out of the crevices, sewer manholes, and drainage gratings, through the ventilation system, from all sides, sounds started welling up from under the ground. Weeping and howling. Weak, muffled by the heavy Moscow clay, reflected off numerous bends in fractured pipes. An echo. The people couldn't escape. Only their voices could.

It was like a birth. Moscow was like a woman who had already died, but the children in her petrifying womb were still alive. And they wanted to be born, and they were crying there inside. But Moscow didn't let anyone else out. She pressed her concrete cunt shut and squeezed all her children to death, and after their torment they fell silent, and were never born.

And their smokes ran out.

It was night.

Moscow had been dunked into this night as if it was a bucket of dirty water, to wash all the blood off it. When the murky night ended, there would be a murky day, and on that day no one would find out what had happened on the day before. Everything would be washed out in the night. Who would find out about the black tunnel where some people had flailed at others with pickaxes? No one. Who would find out about the jammers? No one. Who would find out about the atheists crossing themselves as they charged the machine guns? And what they all died for? What the reason was?

"Letyaga. Letyaga. Do these enemies exist? The West? America? Are they real? Do they exist at all? Tell me honestly."

Letyaga squinted at him, but in the darkness it seemed as if his eyes had evened out and were looking straight and true.

"They must."

"What the fuck do we need enemies for?" Lyokha asked. "We get awong just fine without them!"

"If they wanted to, they'd zap us anyway, just to make sure. The coup de grâce. If they were seriously afraid of us. Have you ever thought about that?"

"No."

"And all the other cities—Petersburg, Vladivostok and all the small fry—why don't they bomb them? Have you thought about that? Or have they taken them all, and we're the last ones left unconquered?"

"No! What's it to you if I've thought about it or not?"

"The point is that there aren't any enemies. They couldn't give a shit about us, Letyaga. The enemies. Nobody needs us. You bought that story, and so did I. We're always thinking that someone needs us real bad. That we're the center of the universe. That we're the last ones, or the only ones, or the most important ones. That the fate of the world is being decided right here. Like fuck. Nothing's being decided here. We build empires here, and storm machine guns, croak on construction sites, feed ourselves to the dogs, save the human race, and it's all under a lid. Our entire struggle, the sacrifices and the heroism. It's nothing but the heroism of ants in an anthill. No one can hear them. We croak for nothing. Take away that lid ..."

"Shield! It's a shield, not a lid!"

"Take away that shield and nothing will change. I'm certain of it. Our enemies don't need us, Letyaga; we need our enemies."

"I'm certain," Letyaga said painfully and fiercely. "I'm certain the old man is telling the truth."

"Then he's a stupid fuck," Artyom replied just as fiercely. "He's a stupid fuck, and you've been head-fucked. And I'm a stupid fuck too. For swallowing that story back at Balashikha. And now it's too late. There's nothing else I can do. That was the moment. We should have smashed all those jammers to hell. Flattened them all. And then seen what happened. Right, Savelii?"

"Wight," Lyokha replied for the trampled Savelii.

"It wouldn't have achieved anything," Letyaga spat out. "There are lots of those jammers planted all around Moscow. And people wouldn't have believed you anyway."

"Because you've all been head-fucking them for twenty years! How can they believe it? It's not their fault, is it?"

"I never head-fucked anyone."

"Uh-huh. You cull everyone who doesn't fit into your story."

“That’s with enemies. I’m defending the homeland—against enemies! And if I hadn’t yanked you out of Balashikha, you bullshit, the Hansa troops would have put you in the ground right there! Before you even knew what hit you!”

“It wasn’t you who yanked me out! It was the old man! And not because he felt sorry for me! But in order to save his shitty equipment! That’s all! He told you to whack me! Me! Think about it! Who am I to him? His son-in-law! His daughter’s husband! But he still sentenced me to death!”

“But I didn’t whack you.”

“Well, thanks a fucking bunch!”

“You’re welcome!”

“And what reason is there to kill me? Because I know about the jammers? Because I know how they mess with people’s heads? Or what? If I happen to object when he gives the Reds cartridges? Twenty thousand cartridges! Twenty thousand! You were treated to a good helping yourself today. It’s time to stop being such a dumb fuck!”

“So at least the war will stop! That was Moskvin’s condition!”

“So that’s what the old man meant when he said at any price! He said it would have to be paid! Just twenty, right?”

“So were we supposed to get more of our boys pulverized? Arrange another bunker?”

Artyom turned away.

“Was that Moskvin there? I recognized him. Moskvin, and the other one was Bessolov. Who is Bessolov in Hansa?”

“Some kind of bigshot. I can’t fucking tell them apart.”

“You’re lying,” said Artyom, sure of himself. “You know. Who is he?”

“Bugger off.”

“He passed on the envelope for the Führer through our old man. And the cartridges for the General Secretary. He did it. And the old man reports to him, doesn’t he? Eh? To Alexei Felixovich! How come? How did he get such a grip on him? With those shitty jeeps?”

“So? Hansa picked us up off our knees! When was it you cleared off? After the bunker. You took your Anechka and ran out on us, like liquid shit. And what could we do? How many of us were left after the bunker? Maybe half? And all full of holes. If not for Hansa, we’d have fallen to pieces, and that would have been the end of it. The old man did what he could. No one else was willing to help. But what could he do, with no legs and one arm? Hang himself? And were we supposed to turn into mercenaries?”

“Being a mercenary’s more honest than being in your Order now!”

“You fuck off! All right?”

“Do you at least understand what he paid for those off-roaders, and the sniper rifles, and the little caps? Our boys! It was Hansa who set us up, Letyaga! We asked them to come! When we were in the bunker! We called them! But did they come? Some great help, landing us with their wankers instead of our boys! Who were killed because of them! He sold them! And he sold them to Hansa!”

“That’s not. Possible. There must be a reason.”

“And what was the reason for bumping me off?”

“What if you were a spy? Or a saboteur? You tried to break the shield! What if you were playing against us? And you wormed your way back in? He said, if you tried to disrupt the peace agreement ... Or put the delivery in danger ... Then ...”

“Whose spy? Whose saboteur?”

“America’s. You got in touch with them from your high-rise and ...”

“And what? I help them target missiles again? At my own people? At my wife and my father-in-law? At you, you jerk? You were sold, I was sold, all our boys were sold, and their souls too, as a job lot! That’s what happened! Got that?”

“They sacrificed themselves, that’s all. And the Reds ... It has to be done. It’s hard, but it’s necessary. Now’s the time to join forces, Artyom. If only with the Reds. There’s a different enemy. A genuine enemy. It’s hard to forget the boys. I know. The old man can’t forget them himself. You saw. You saw how he drinks with them every day.”

“He doesn’t drink with them. He just boozes! He boozes, because he used to be a hero and he turned into a roly-poly toy. No fucking arms and no legs! And if he really thinks the war with the West isn’t over ...”

“It isn’t over!” Letyaga roared. “How come you can’t see that?”

“Does he have any proof? This Bessolov? How did he prove to you that the war’s still going on? You’ve been brainwashed. How did he get such a tight grip on your balls?”

“You’re the one who’s been brainwashed! They’re always there! Creeping out of every crack! They want to wipe us off the face of the earth!”

“Bastard!” Artyom skipped up onto his sound leg. “You can’t prove a thing! You can’t prove a thing to anyone!”

“And what have you proved to me? If there aren’t any enemies—then what’s the point?”

“What’s the point?”

“Yes!”

“I don’t know!”

“Then get off my back!”

Artyom thought for a moment. He nodded. And started hobbling away.

“Where are you going?” Letyaga shouted after him.

“You’re right,” Artyom replied to himself, without looking back. “You’re right. There has to be a point. It’s just that we don’t understand it yet. And your old man doesn’t understand it. And Svinolup pretty certainly doesn’t understand it. A good job there’s someone to ask.”

“Wait! Artyom! Artyom!”

Letyaga caught up with Artyom at Lubyanka Square. And handed him his own gas mask.

“Take it. I don’t need it to get there.”

Artyom didn’t argue. He spat in the mask’s eyes and put it on. He droned to Letyaga, “Thanks. There’s no way can I croak ahead of time now.”

He dragged himself lamely downhill from Lubyanka. Past the Bolshoi Theater, with its coach-and-four that had plunged over the cliff, past the tearless fountains, past the hotels for guests from the next world, past the dogs’ streets, the mute parliament and the Kremlin pretending to be dead, with its extinguished stars and walls to keep out no one; somewhere here.

He stopped. It was dark.

How had he done it? Where had he been standing?

Blood was oozing out of Artyom’s twice-shot shoulder as if he had no end of it inside him, and he was beginning to feel bad without it. Weak. But he kept on searching. And trying to remember. He shuffled in one direction for a while, then in the other.

The feeble moon wasn’t much use. It couldn’t see black on black, and it didn’t give Artyom any help. He went down on all fours and crawled, fumbling at the rough asphalt with his hands. He fished out a shoe once, and another time a door handle that had been dropped in the middle of the roadway.

Lyokha and Letyaga walked up.

“What are you looking for?”

“The answer,” Artyom joked, and laughed hoarsely into his own rubber ears.

And then it turned up.

It winked to Artyom in the moonlight from a slight parting in the curtains of cloud.

Lying there on the grayish black asphalt was a grayish black revolver. Svinolup’s execution Nagant.

Artyom picked it up. A heavy, blunt, baleful weapon. Exactly what Artyom needed right now. What he had come here for. It turned out that nothing in this business could be understood without it.

This blued-finished gun was the very one he needed to stick down Bessolov's throat. He could breathe through it for a while—and explain to Artyom why people had to stay in the Metro.

“Is that all?” Lyokha asked him.

“No, there's more!” Artyom looked at him. “Now we go to the brothel!”



CHAPTER 19

— WHAT TO WRITE —

He was carried to Trubnaya Station.

Letyaga carried him piggyback-style. He carried him over the surface, since he was afraid to go down into the Metro.

Artyom was already coughing up rust-brown phlegm. While he was swinging his legs on Letyaga's back, he kept trying to persuade them to let him walk on his own. But as soon as he stood on his feet, he fell to his knees. The mechanism was running down. The key in his back had almost stopped turning.

But when they arrived at TsvetnoI Boulevard, some spring in his chest clicked and decided to carry on whirring for a while. Artyom waved away the red fog in front of his eyes and straightened up. He sensed that he wouldn't have time to do much. He had to do just one thing, but an important one. He fumbled for the handle of the Nagant. Like that? The Nagant agreed.

"Take me to Sasha. Do you hear, Lyokha? Remember where?"

"Aha. You want a beautiful death! Want to snuff it on a chick? Nah, first wet's go patch up the howes."

"Oh, sure. If it was just the holes."

Something strange was going on at TsvetnoI Station.

It was jam-packed with fascist fugitives. Lost, pitiful, battered. The fascists' railway uniforms had gotten soaked, and now they were drying out, shrinking and getting too small for them, as if they had been made for children's games or theatricals, but grownups had pulled them on and started doing everything in earnest. Their faces were scratched and smeared with mud; their steel-tipped low boots had dried out and cracked.

"What's this? What happened?" Lyokha asked some whores he knew.

"The Reich got flooded out. Pushkin collapsed. The Tajiks made the extension crooked. It collapsed, and then the stations next door. It all flooded."

"The Tajiks' crooked work ..." Artyom said with a crooked smile. "It's all the Tajiks' fault. What bad bastards."

"Everybody scattered. From Tver they went to Mayakovsky, and the people from Chekhov came here."

"And what about the war?"

"We don't know. Nobody knows anything."

You had it coming, thought Artyom. Maybe the Lord really does listen and takes complaints. Someone, maybe that woman in the barrow, managed to snitch to God before her head was smashed in with a reinforcement bar. The Lord counted up the sinners and the righteous in the Reich on his abacus of bone, and decreed that the Reich should be closed and sealed. But why did he ever open those premises?

And what about Homer?

"Do you know if an old man escaped? From Chekhov Station?" Artyom asked, pestering the railway workers. "Homer?"

They shrank away from him.

They took him to the woman doctor: Among the bites from the barbed wire she found a bleeding sore that the radiation had made in his skin, like an awl. Not long left, she said. An urgent transfusion was needed, but the doctor for social diseases didn't have anything to transfuse or anything to do it with. She winkled out the bullet, cursing Artyom; poured fermented garbage into the holes; covered his back with a crumpled rag so that his flogged skin could ooze into that. And she gave him some painkillers long past their sell-by date. That improved things a bit. So that was where Savelii had gotten them from.

“Now what do we do?” asked Letyaga. “We have to find you a decent doctor. Not this Cunt Ivanovna here. I’ll squirt some red stuff back into you. With interest.”

“Nah. I’m going to the whores,” Artyom said the moment his wounds felt the soothing breath of the painkillers. “We’ll settle up later.”

“And me.” Lyokha winked. “I need a transfusion too.”

“If I was you, Tyomich, I think I’d pray instead.” Letyaga shook his head.

“Let’s do this without the sappy stuff,” Artyom replied.

“Here, take some bullets.”

Artyom took them.

“Will you go and hand yourself in?” He glanced into Letyaga’s crooked eyes.

“Nah. The old man doesn’t forgive deserters.”

“What if you hand me in?”

“Then your Anka will scorn me to death,” Letyaga told him. “I’m not sure which is worse. Okay. I’ve got a little darling of my own here. Down that way. If you get knackered, come over.”

“Shall I show you the way?” Lyokha asked.

“No need. I’ve remembered.”

He really had remembered.

They parted.

As Artyom hobbled away, hiding in the crowd, he looked round again: had they really parted? He didn’t want to ask anyone for help with this important job. Tsvetnoi Station was swarming with riffraff. Which of them here was an agent for the Reds, for the Order, or for Hansa? They were listening, searching for him. They had to be searching.

His right hand was in his pocket. He didn’t loosen his grip on the revolver.

But Sasha’s place was empty.

There was no one inside, and the little door was locked.

He suddenly felt worried: What if Bessolov had taken her away? Or what if something even worse had happened to her?

Diagonally opposite there was a dismal little tavern with a few seats squeezed into it. Partitioned off with straw rain from ceiling to floor. Artyom could position himself here so that he could see Sasha’s establishment through the jets of straw, but no one walking by could recognize him immediately.

Artyom looked at the closed door. He wanted to think about Sasha, but he kept thinking about Anya. Well, well, Vladivostok. Why hadn’t she mentioned Vladivostok before? It might have been easier for him to live with her if he’d known about Vladivostok.

Beside him two wet fascists were huddled together, muttering. They kept glancing round at Artyom suspiciously. He strained hard, trying to feel hate for them, but just couldn’t: He was completely burnt out after Komsomol Station. To reassure them he ordered some vodka to go with the painkillers. He couldn’t even look at food; the very thought of it set his head spinning.

“Dietmar ...” He caught the rustle of that name through the deliberately mangled words.

He hesitated, then made up his mind.

“Do you know Dietmar?” he asked the pair.

“Who are you?”

“There was a man working for him. Ilya Stepanovich. He was supposed to write a book. And he had another man with him. Called himself Homer. A comrade of mine.”

“Who are you, I asked.”

“I carried out an assignment for Dietmar,” Artyom confessed in a whisper. “At Teatralnaya.”

“An agent?” The fascist moved and sat right up close.

“Saboteur.”

“Dietmar died heroically ...”

“I’m aware of that.”

“All his network has moved over to me,” the man declared. “You’ll be working for me now. I’m Dietrich.”

That made Artyom want to laugh. He used to observe Dietrich from somewhere above the clouds. From up there a lot of things could seem funny. But not everything.

“Listen, man.” Artyom wiped his lips with the back of his hand and showed Dietrich the watery blood. “Let me die in peace.”

“Radiation sickness?” Dietrich got the picture and moved away. “You’re that stalker, are you? The one he recruited?”

Under the table Artyom cautiously pulled the revolver closer, so that the firing hammer wouldn’t snag on his pocket.

“Did you know Homer?”

“Weren’t you killed back there at Teatralnaya?”

“As you can see.”

Apparently Dietmar had allocated him to the living space without any superfluous consultation.

“All right. If you’re one of our veterans ...”

“Don’t yell. There are ears all around here.”

“They’re here. They got out. They’re drinking nearby. Both of them. They’re in my charge too. Shall I show you the way?”

“Please do.”

Homer was alive. Glory be. He had to find him. Can you wait a little bit, Sasha?

Artyom had a week or thereabouts left. And Homer wasn’t going anywhere. He needed to make his confession to Homer at least, for his notebook. He could write it all down for himself. About the pylons, about the pits, about the mushrooms and about the cartridges. Let him write down everything about the goddamned whorish Order. And the most important thing, the most sacred thing—that the world was still there.

He wanted a story, and here was a real story.

The old man turned out to be sitting only twenty meters away. He and Ilya Stepanovich were drinking morosely, without clinking glasses.

But when he saw Artyom, he lit up.

Homer was disheveled—the fine gray hairs round his bald patch were sticking out, and in the lamplight they looked like a golden halo. He’d recovered. He was holding a chicken—the same one, Olezhka’s. No one had wrung its neck; no one had stuck it in the soup; it had even fattened up well on fascist feed and it was sleek and glossy, the little pest.

Artyom walked up the steps to the old man and embraced him. How long was it since they’d seen each other? A year?

“You’re alive.”

“And you’re alive.”

“How are you, granddad?”

“How am I? Well now. Ilya and I started ... working.” Homer looked at Artyom’s guide. “Hello.”

“And how’s it going?” Artyom asked Ilya Stepanovich.

“Good,” Ilya Stepanovich replied to Dietrich. “We’re writing. It’s going well.”

“That’s great,” said Artyom. “Come on, granddad, why don’t we take a stroll? Thank you, Genosse.” He nodded to Dietrich. “I won’t forget it.”

Dietrich ought to have followed Artyom, of course, to eavesdrop. But behind the straw rain the mushrooms were getting cold and the rotgut was getting warm. And there didn’t seem to be any Reich any

more.

“Don’t set foot outside the station!” Dietrich commanded strictly. “Until further instructions.”

They shuffled through the little rooms: Women like beads threaded on the corridor. How could they find a more secluded corner here?

“The writing’s going okay?” Artyom asked Homer in the meantime.

“Not so great.”

“What’s up?”

“Ilya’s wife hanged herself. Narine. He’s drinking.”

“When? When did it happen?”

“Well, we worked for a couple of days, and ... But the Führer insisted. He came himself every day, read it and asked questions. I had to work for both of us, basically. But then, Ilya has promised to make me a coauthor. My name on the cover and all the rest of it. Flattering, eh?”

“Oho. “ Artyom looked at Homer. “And what’s he like, the Führer?”

“Well ... Just himself ... In everyday life ... ordinary.”

“Ordinary,” said Artyom. “Well, well. A most ordinary man. And no doubt he’s some kind of VasiliI Petrovich too.”

“Yevgeny Petrovich,” Homer corrected him.

“Almost right,” Artyom chuckled. “Have you got to the freaks yet? In the textbook?”

“We didn’t have time,” Homer answered, looking past him. “And now who knows if we ever will. Everyone’s scattered. The Reich’s finished. The Führer’s disappeared.”

The chicken spread its wings, as if for flight. But Homer, already familiar with chicken habits, held it away from him at arm’s length. It huddled up and crapped on the floor.

“Is she laying at least?” Artyom enquired.

“No. She’s on strike.” The old man smiled mirthlessly. “Although I stuffed her full of eggshells. Damned if I know what’s wrong.”

They walked on, talking, past battered fascists and inspired whores, through other people’s oohs and aahs, under the whistling of the horsewhip, conforming to the rhythm of other people’s depraved love.

“Well then. You won’t have to stifle your conscience,” Artyom said, feeling the urge rising through his weariness: Tell the whole story. “Now you can write your own book. Like you wanted to do.”

“My own book that no one will print.”

“That depends on what you write in it.”

“And what will I write?”

Artyom got the feeling that someone was tailing them. He looked back once, then again. The man seemed to have dissolved in the haze. Maybe he wasn’t following Artyom, but just going about his own jolly business. Or maybe he’d dropped back to avoid catching anyone’s eye.

One hand on the Nagant.

“Did you find your Sasha?” Artyom asked Homer.

“My Sasha? No. You ...”

“She’s here, granddad, She was here yesterday. I talked to her. About you.”

“Do you know? Do you know where she is?”

“Yes.”

“Is she all right? Where are we going? Shall we go to her, rather than... And what ... Does she do ... here?”

“What do women do here, granddad? She works.”

“Nah, come on! Sasha? I don’t believe it.”

“Well, now.”

“It’s not true!”

“And tell me ... About Hunter—is that true? That he became a hopeless drunk? I wasn’t aware that you knew each other.”

“Hunter? You know him too? Where from?”

“He was the one who sent me on my crusade. Back then. Against the Dark Ones. To get the missiles. Didn’t I tell you about it? And didn’t he tell you? Was that the reason he drank? Because of the Dark Ones? Or what was it?”

“Hunter? I don’t know, he ... We didn’t talk much. Not enough.”

“You were writing that book about him, weren’t you? Your own story in the notebook. So how come?”

“I don’t know. You know, he ... He’s not a genuine hero. I wanted to make him into a hero. So that people would read it and be inspired.”

“So that’s why you made him a teetotaler?”

“How do you ... ?”

“I told you: Sasha told me all this. Don’t you believe me, then?”

“I have to see her. To take a look. I want to make certain.”

“A bit later. Be patient. It’s important. Ah, seems like there’s no one here ... Come in. Wait, I’ll just check everything ...”

“And that about Hunter ... Yes! Well, who would want to read about an alcoholic? To follow him? Do you understand? It has to be a myth. Beautiful. People are sitting in the dark, in doom and gloom. They need light. Without light they’ll degenerate completely.”

“I understand. And now you listen.”

Artyom leaned down to the old man and whispered feverishly into his hairy ear.

“People are sitting in the dark because the light is being hidden from them. The West wasn’t annihilated, granddad. And not all of Russia was. There are other survivors. Almost the whole world survived. I don’t know what kind of life they have out there, but ... Vladivostok, your Polar Dawns, Paris, America.”

“What?”

“They’re hiding them all from us. Using jammers. They’re spaced out around Moscow. Radio stations that suppress the signals from other cities.”

“What?”

“It’s Hansa. And my Order knows about it. It serves Hansa. And it bumps off everyone who reaches here from the outside. Finds them and terminates them. And everyone who tries to contact the outside world from here too. That’s why no one even knows. And I think the Red Line built wind towers for Hansa. There are wind generators standing out there, in Balashikha, to supply the jammers with power. And a ditch dug with an excavator—a huge, great pit, crammed with corpses, and dogs eat them, dogs with five legs. The builders and the outsiders all together. And Hansa gives the Reds cartridges for that. Or maybe not for that, maybe just to support them. Twenty thousand cartridges, can you imagine that? And Reds are firing those cartridges at the mushroom riots. Firing into the crowd. People even walk straight at the machine guns, asking for mushrooms, and they mow them down, just mow them down ... The people don’t want to know anything. You tell them, ‘You can get away from here, out of the Metro! There’s life out there, up on the surface! Leave this place!’ And they still keep plodding on towards Hansa, walking into the bullets ... That’s why it’s important for you to write all this down. In the notebook. Yes, and another thing. They lie to everyone and claim that we have to be hidden in here because there are enemies all around us; they say the war’s still going on, but that’s all lies. I’m certain it’s all lies. But what it’s all for—I’ll find that out, if I get out of here. But meanwhile, you write it. All right? Write, so the people will know. It’s important.”

Homer took his ear away and looked at Artyom intently, as if he had to demine a tripwire. And compassionately too, but he tried to hide the compassion, because he realized the fishing line

was invisible and his compassion could snag it.

“How are you?” he asked. “You look terrible, to tell the truth.”

“It’s all up with me,” said Artyom. “There’s maybe a week left. So you write, granddad. Write it down.”

“Write what down?”

“Everything. Everything I just told you.”

Homer nodded.

“All right.”

“It is all clear? Shall I tell you again?” Artyom half rose on his good leg and glanced out into the passage.

“Not everything’s clear.”

“What isn’t?”

Homer hesitated.

“Well ... It all ... sounds a bit strange. To tell the truth.”

Artyom drew back and looked the old man over from a distance

“Do you think ... ? Don’t you believe me? Do you think I’ve flipped out too?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Listen. I realize it all sounds crazy. But it’s true, do you understand? And vice-versa, everything you know about the Metro—that there isn’t any life on the surface, that we have nowhere to go, that the Reds are against Hansa, that Hansa are the good guys and all the rest of it ... Absolutely all of it—that’s all lies! We’ve just been living with them for so long ...”

“One city could still ... Maybe two ...” Homer frowned and made an effort to force himself to believe Artyom. “But the whole world? And jammers. And Hansa.”

“Never mind that. You just remember it for the time being. You can write it down later. You will write it down for yourself, won’t you? I’ll be gone soon, granddad. I don’t want all this to just disappear. This is a mission for you, understand? I found out really crazy stuff. And if you—you!—don’t put all this in your notebook ... No one will ever even find out. Today I’m going to ... Never mind. I might not pull it off. But you—you, do you understand?—can make a difference. Will you do it? Write it down?”

The old man chewed on it. He stroked the chicken. It sat there drowsily.

“Even if all this is true ... Who’ll publish something like that?”

“What difference does it make, who?”

“Well how ... People, how will they find out?”

“Granddad! What do you mean? Why does it have to be printed? Homer—the other Homer, the real one—he didn’t write anything at all, did he? He was blind. He just spoke. Maybe he sang ... And people listened to him.”

“The other Homer—yes,” the old man agreed. “The real one,” he repeated with a bleak smile. “All right. I’ll write it down, of course. But you need to see a doctor. What kind of way is that to talk—only a week left! And let’s go ... Will you take me to her?”

“Thanks, granddad. I’ll tell you more later ... In more detail. When I find out. I’ll dictate it. If things work out.”

Homer didn’t talk as they walked. Something was ripening on his tongue, and he kept sucking at it, gritting his teeth in order not to let it go. Then he muttered something.

“And you know what else? I had to publish a couple of short articles in their newspaper. They forced me. You know the kind of stuff. About the breakthrough at Schiller ...”

“But they forced you,” Artyom said to him.

“Yes, they forced me.”

They got back.

And everything there had changed. Dietrich and his comrade had finished eating and disappeared. And there was groaning coming from Sasha's little cubicle. She was quite all right.

"This is it," said Artyom.

They exchanged glances.

And they sat down to wait behind the curtain, each staring into his own glass. Homer squirmed and coughed. Artyom listened intently to himself: What was happening in there? The wind was howling inside him. Turning the metal blades, creaking and transforming itself into power, so that Artyom could spend a little more time on the Earth. Where are you, white-bellied ships of the heavens? Where are you flying to on this wind? He gulped at his vodka: When he put the glass to his lips, a pink cloud spread out from the spot, and a cloud as murky as the hooch spread inside Artyom. Sleep weighed heavily on him. How long had he gone without sleep? Twenty-four hours?

The groaning came to an end. Some goon came out, buttoning himself up. He smiled like a conqueror. What could be done about this?

Homer darted off, shuffling in that direction. He dropped the chicken.

"Sasha!"

"Homer ... You?"

Artyom didn't move. It wasn't his conversation. But he couldn't help hearing it.

"My God ... You, here ... Why are you? Sashenka ..."

"I'm all right ..."

"I ... I thought you were dead ... I looked for you there, at Tula ..."

"I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you tell me? Find me?"

"But how did you find me?"

"I ... Artyom. Do you know him? He showed me."

"Is he here?"

"You ... Why are you doing this? Sasha? Why are you doing these foul things?"

"Why are they foul?"

"You shouldn't. You mustn't do this. Come on ... You collect your things. And we'll go."

Artyom stroked the barrel of the Nagant. Not right now. Tomorrow, or the next day—when Bessolov came to see her. Let him answer. After that—by all means. All right? The chicken looked at him with its head on one side.

"Where to? I'm not going anywhere."

"What are you saying? When they hold you here like this? In slavery? We can ... I'll ask ..."

"No."

"I don't understand! You can make a living from something else ... If you have to be bought out ... Do you have to be bought out?"

"I'm not enslaved."

"Then what is it? I don't understand ..."

"I'm in the right place for me. Why don't you tell me about yourself, how you are. How's ... Hunter?"

"I don't know. Good God. What does that mean—in the right place?"

"I'm where people need me."

"That's raving nonsense! You're not even eighteen yet! What are you talking about? This is a brothel! A den of vice! All these filthy men ... This can't go on! We're leaving!"

"No."

"Come on!"

"Let go!"

The chicken was listening. Worrying about Homer. But Artyom didn't interfere. He didn't have any right to. And whose side should he take?

"You mustn't do this! You have no right! You're not a prostitute!"

"As if that's the worst thing that can happen to a human being."

"You're ... a poor little girl. I lost you ... It's my fault ..."

"It's not your fault. And you're not my father."

"I'm not even ... Why do you have to be here? It's not what you want!"

"Is that all? You thought I was dead. Here I am, alive—what's the difference if I'm a prostitute or not?"

"You're! Not! A prostitute!"

"Then who am I?"

A man stopped at the open door. With the shaved back of his head gathered into folds. And a leather jacket puckered across his shoulders. A security guard? Checking if the master could come in? Artyom rubbed his eyes, leaned forward, and looked right and left. Dark hair with a parting, bags under the eyes—was there a man like that in the crowd?

"You're not the kind of girl who lets herself ... For cartridges ... Who allows things to be done to her ... That's not the way I remember you!"

"I see. And what if that's the way I am now?"

"No! This is disgusting?"

"Well, make me different in that book of yours. Make me the way you'd like me to be. What difference does it make what I do in real life? What difference does it make what happened to Hunter?"

"What has that got to do with this?"

"You finished your book. How? What happened at Tula?"

"I don't understand! A flood! The water broke in."

"A miracle. Do you have a miracle in there?"

"That's not the final version."

"Well, you corrected a slaughter to a miracle. So you can correct me. Make me a fairy. I'm sorry. It's time for my next visitor. I see them by appointment. Like a doctor. Make me a doctor."

"I won't leave!"

The man with the folds on the back of his head listened to all this, spat, and went away. Artyom went limp. He stroked Ryaba with his fingers. The chicken was dozing. The Nagant was wide awake.

* * *

The painkillers and vodka spun the den of vice round; they spun the world round; they spun Artyom's insecurely attached head round.

Homer eventually came out—looking lost, as if he'd been doused with icy water and zapped with electric current.

"Why is she acting that way?"

"You go. Go on, granddad. Let me have a talk with her. Later ... I'll see you later. Let's say, in the same eating joint. Where you and Ilya were. Give him my condolences."

"Are you ... One of her ..."

"Take a look at me. What could I do? I need to talk to her."

"Take her away from here, Artyom. You're a good boy. Sincere. Take her away."

"Sincere. All right."

He knocked. She'd already heard his voice and wasn't surprised to see him. He swayed inside.

"Hi."

"You're back! Did you get to your Balashikha?"

"Yes."

"You look terrible. Sit down. Would you like anything? Water? Over here. This way."

She was amazingly clean, Sasha. Fresh. No dirt stuck to her. After she'd been mauled and torn to pieces, she just tidied her hair and bounced right back. How did she do that? How did women do that? Maybe they drank men?

"There ... There are jammers. In Balashikha."

"What jammers?"

"Sashenka. That man who you call your master ... Bessolov ..."

"Wait. What's this you've got here? God, what terrible sores. And this ... You're hot. You've got a fever."

"Wait. Do you hear me? This Bessolov. Who is he?"

"You've got a pistol."

"When will he come?"

"Poor thing. You've got worse, right?"

"Is he the pervert who used you that night? Who used me? Who watched us?"

"Who introduced us?"

"Listen! When will he come? I want to talk to him. I need to."

"What for?"

"For a good reason. He's at the top of this pyramid. He calls all the shots here. He's got the Reds on a string, and the fascists ... Miller. I want to understand. What's the point of it all? All of us being stuck in the Metro? What's the plan? I want him to tell me."

"Look. Your scabs have dried up. From the burn. Can I?"

"That ... You said I burned myself?"

"Yes."

"Why did I do that? What for?"

"You talked to him and burned yourself. To Alexei."

"I did? I mean ... Because of the Order? It was ... It was the Order's motto that I burned off ... Did he tell me something about the Order? What it does nowadays?"

"Have you remembered?"

"So you knew everything too?"

"Artyom. Do you want to lie down? You can hardly stay on your feet."

He squatted down by the wall.

"Why didn't you explain to me? What did you send me off to Balashikha for?"

"There's nothing you can do about it, Artyom. Sometimes all you can do is just burn yourself with a cigarette. That's all."

"And about the jammers? And about the world?"

"Yes."

"When will he come? When?"

"I don't know."

"You do! You told me you can sense him! Tell me!"

"What do you want from him?"

"Hide me. Hide me. Please. Hide me here."

"I'll hide you." She squatted down beside him, stroked his bare temples tenderly, and the top of his head. "Sit here behind the curtain."

She closed the curtain.

"I can still do it. Everything can still be done."

He carried on looking at the fabric with its design of little flowers, and in the heart of every little flower he saw the eyeless back of someone's head, an entire meadow, flowering with the backs of heads. All the people from the Red Line were represented here, without faces, living only so that one day they

would be shot in the back of the head: That was the pattern.

“Why?” Artyom whispered stubbornly to himself, in order not to fall asleep. “Even if you are the master, even if you’re the devil himself. You’re going to tell me everything. Why you treat us like this. Why you treat people like this. Why we have to stay here. And if you don’t tell me—I’ll blow your brains out. With this Nagant here. Right between the eyes. You shit.”

He carried on lulling himself like that—and fell asleep.



CHAPTER 20

— MIRACLES —

And he died.

He had always wondered if there was anything there or if they simply turned out the lights. And if it was possible to make a deal with someone to go back to his childhood. To the time before the war, to his mother who was still alive and an Earth that was still alive. That would be a magnificent heaven.

But the world after death hadn't turned out like that. The afterlife was the same way life had been: battened down tight. Except maybe a bit cleaner, with freshly painted walls. If life was painted with linseed-oil paint everywhere, then heaven and hell had to be exactly the same as that.

Apart from the walls, there was a bed. With more beds standing beside it, made up and empty. Strange, he couldn't be the only one who had died and come here.

There was a metal rod too, with a transparent bag full of some kind of liquid hanging on it. A rubber tube ran from the bag to Artyom's arm, replacing his blood with some kind of junk.

Aha. He was alive, therefore.

He raised his arm and clenched and unclenched his fingers. The arm wasn't tied. He moved his legs—they were free. He threw back the sheet and looked at himself: stark naked. Bullet holes covered with plasters, white. Why had they done this to him? Who?

He moved his back—and didn't feel anything. The bite marks from the whip had healed up a bit. He looked at the cigarette burns: The scabs had come off, leaving pink blotches.

What happened?

He started remembering: There were flowers with the backs of heads. There was a conversation with Sasha. There was a revolver in his hand. How had they foisted a bed on him instead of all that and dripped a substitute into him to replace his blood?

He lowered his feet onto the floor. Then took hold of the rod as if it was a staff. Standing on his feet felt strange. His head was swimming, sounds twisted and bent.

A square room, one door.

Taking the staff with the false blood along, he hobbled on his stilts towards that door. He tugged on it. It was locked. He knocked. No answer.

But out there, on the other side of the door, life was going on. He heard the sound of voices, filtered through plywood: music, laughter. Laughter. Maybe it was heaven out there after all? And he was in the antechamber? And he just had to get rid of all his corrupt blood, replace it with this colorless, angelic fluid, and they'd let him in?

An iron maggot appeared in the keyhole and started turning. He had been heard.

Artyom wondered what he could use to strike a blow. But he thought too long. Missed his chance.

A woman was standing in the doorway. In a white coat: a neatly washed and ironed white coat. Smiling at him.

"Well there you are. And we were beginning to get worried."

"Worried?" Artyom asked cautiously. "You?"

"Of course. You were unconscious for so long."

"How long?"

"Oh, a week already. You're into the second week."

"At least I caught up on my sleep," said Artyom, trying to look over her shoulder and spot what was being prepared for him in the corridor. "I don't even know any longer what I'm going to do in the afterlife."

“Are you really in such a hurry?” The woman shook her head.

She was lovely. Pale freckles, copper eyes, hair gathered back. A smile—and he could see that she smiled often: such a neatly delineated face.

“The doctor said a week or two, and I’d be moving on.”

“Well, I’m a doctor too. And I wouldn’t have been so categorical.”

“How would you have been?”

Another maggot stirred in Artyom’s chest—hope.

“Well ... You received, in my view, a dose of five or six grays. When? About two weeks before you were hospitalized? Judging from your blood.”

“Before I was hospitalized?”

“If everything had been done more promptly—if we’d started the treatment immediately—I would have said that your chances were fifty-fifty. And now—I wouldn’t like to mislead you ... The results of therapy are quite good. Transfusions. We managed to select the right antibiotics.”

“Antibiotics? Therapy?” Artyom narrowed his eyes.

“Well, and some other things ... I think you can feel it for yourself. The sores are healing up. Anyway, it’s nothing like a week. There’s a good chance—a quite solid one—that you’ll start to recover. Your body is responding well.”

“Where are the antibiotics from?”

“I beg your pardon? If you’re concerned about the expiration date, I assure you ...”

“Where am I? What is this? Is this Hansa?”

“Hansa? The Hansa outside here? The Circle Line, you mean?”

“Outside? Outside what?”

“Where are you going? Stop! You have no trousers, by the way!”

He jostled her aside and squirmed his way out of the room.

The corridor ran off, immensely long and strange-looking—as if it had been built inside a tunnel. One wall was rounded, covered in tunnel liners. But not tunnel liners like the ones in the Metro, eaten away by rust—these were clean and covered in heavenly linseed-oil paint. Everything clean and dry. Long-life lightbulbs dangling down. What sort of place was this? Not a station. There weren’t any stations like this.

A little orchestra started playing somewhere, merrily and drunkenly.

“Where are we?”

“It will seem rather strange if you set out to explore everything here with a bare backside, Artyom. I suggest you go back to the ward ...”

“How do you know my name?”

“It’s written on your card.”

“On my card.”

And then he remembered. He remembered how two years ago he sat in one of the fascists’ cages, waiting to be hanged early in the morning. He simply couldn’t get to sleep. And when he did fall asleep for a few minutes, his sneaky, pitiful brain fed him a dream of escape. Hunter appeared, exterminated all Artyom’s enemies, and freed him. It was a pretty good dream; the lousy part was having to wake up.

Artyom raised his hands and looked at them again.

He wanted like hell to believe in this: the odds and the chance and the recovery. He thought he had already come to terms with death, but no. The moment he was promised another little bit of life, enticed—he fell for it.

But if it was a dream, then he didn’t need any pants.

He started walking forward, towards the voices.

At one spot the wall suddenly disappeared, to reveal a large space with a distant ceiling; here he could see how everything was built—like a tunnel, but a gigantic tunnel, so high that it could be divided

into three human-size levels. And running up from the first of these levels was a broad formal stairway covered with red carpet runners. Hanging above the stairway was a globe—an incredible globe. With little square mirrors glued all over it. Some kind of lighting device shone its beam onto the globe, and the reflected glimmers scattered around, like the bright spots of laser sights. The globe rotated with staid dignity, as if it was a planet, and the flecks of light drifted across the walls.

The dashing, do-or-die music was coming from upstairs, and that was where people were laughing. The entire wall above the stairway was covered by a huge banner—vibrant red, embroidered in gold. At the center of it was a crest: The globe of the Earth in an interlaced frame, with a hammer and a sickle crossed above it. A familiar symbol to anyone who had been on the Red Line. And the jolly glimmers from the mirror globe crept across that too.

Was he with the Reds?

Why would the Reds nurse him back to health?

A dream.

“I shall be obliged to call the guards,” the lady doctor warned from somewhere behind him.

Artyom set his staff on the first step and moved up a bit closer the music. His legs were rather weak, not fully pumped up. He waited, and then conquered the next step.

What was this place?

Slowly, narrowing his eyes, he plodded upwards. An archway started moving into view; he could see a white ceiling in it, and light as bright as day.

And then it surfaced from behind the steps—a hall.

An immense hall. A round, bluish white dome, with a chandelier dangling from the ceiling like an explosion of glass. The floor was soft, covered by a single continuous carpet with incredibly bright patterns; just looking at them made him feel dizzy and sick. And there were tables and more tables, tables everywhere. Round tables, laid for a meal—the tablecloths were blotchy, but they had once been white too. Plates with leftover scraps. Carafes half-full of something ruby-red. Forks lying on the floor.

And people: scattered about.

They had clustered round some tables, abandoning others that they had eaten empty. In some places they were embracing, with their foreheads set together, like Artyom and the dying political prisoner in the tunnel, only not moved by grief, but by vodka. In other places they were conducting solemn conversations. Strangely dressed: not with bare torsos under their jackets, but shirts, even though they were crumpled. And even ties, like in photos from before the war.

As if he was invisible, Artyom set out towards them across the soft carpet, bathing his bare feet in the woolen grass. Someone looked up at him from a table with bleary surprise in his eyes, but he couldn't look for long and slumped back into the complicated salads and half-drunk shot glasses.

A ragged orchestra was blaring away on a little stage at the far end of the hall, and a potbellied, bandy-legged character was cavorting impetuously between the musicians to cack-handed applause from the nearest table.

“Artyom?”

He stopped, spotted.

“Sit down. Don't be shy. Well, you're not shy anyway; I can see that.”

A man was looking at him and smiling. Dark hair in damp streaks across his forehead, swollen bags under his eyes with a tipsy glint in them, an unbuttoned shirt. With a balding hog, bright red in the face and hiccupping, sitting beside him.

“Alexei ... Felixovich?”

“Oh! You remember me too?”

“I was looking for you.”

“Well here you are: You've found me! Artyom—this is Gennady Nikitich, Gennady Nikitich—Artyom.”

“Plistomityou!” the hog snorted.

At this point it occurred to Artyom that he should cover his private parts. He suddenly started suspecting that this might not be a dream after all. The raving lunacy on all sides was beyond endurance, but in a dream it wasn't possible to think about the fact that you were asleep and you had to wake up soon—that would wake you up immediately, wouldn't it?

Artyom sat down with his bare backside on a velvet chair and covered himself with a napkin. How could he interrogate Bessolov in this situation? Where was his Nagant? What could he threaten Bessolov with to make him tell the truth? A table knife?

“How did I end up here?”

He asked in order to avoid confessing about the dream.

“Your friend persuaded me. Our mutual friend.”

“What? Sasha?”

“Sasha. She implored me exceedingly tearfully. And, you know, I'm soft-hearted by nature. Then I remembered you and how funny you are. We had quite a ball that time ... My foster brother, you might say. So my heart faltered. I did pick you up off your knees, after all. Do you remember anything? I think you'd overdone it with the worms. You were a bit woozy. But you coped well with all the assignments.”

“Howtitlating!”

Artyom crept a bit farther under the tablecloth. He suddenly felt very naked—shamefully, idiotically naked. Sasha had asked this ghoul to save him? They were nursing Artyom because Sasha had persuaded him?

“I don't want this. I don't need your charity handouts!”

“Ah, there you go again! You fought stoutly that time too! Under the influence of the worm. You were going to introduce global justice. Especially when we chatted about Miller. You used up two of my cigarettes getting rid of that tattoo. Don't you remember anything at all?”

“Where are we? Where am I? Right now?”

“We ... We're in a bunker. No, not your heroic bunker, don't make those eyes at me. You know, there are lots of these bunkers under Moscow ... We picked one that's fairly decent, refurbished to Euro-standard. The others are not so great. Some are flooded, and some you can't get into at all, the doors are so rusty.”

“Zactklyso!”

The lady doctor walked up, and she had the guards with her; smartly dressed, in tunics, as if they'd come straight from a parade. They prepared to impose order on Artyom.

“Oh come on, are you going to take him away from me immediately?” Bessolov was upset. “Let me talk to the man for a while. He probably has loads of questions.”

The lady doctor agreed and went away.

“Sasha got me in here?”

Naked and helpless. Had she saved him?

“Why, yes. The boy got a bad dose of radiation, she said. And he got it because all on his own, alone, he guessed all of your terrible secrets. He wanted very badly to go back up on the surface, and this is where it got him. He even captured the radio station in Balashikha. Cut out the jammers! Appealed to the people! A hero! An admirable young man!”

“She told you? You?”

Had she betrayed him? Given him away?

“It wasn't only her. My own sources too. I must confess, I underestimated you that first time. You were pretty far gone, of course. That's what I like: a little chat with one of the common people. Tell him just a little bit about how things really are and get a sniff at the smoke that starts rising from his brains. Many people here haven't been in the Metro for years, but I'm curious. And then, my job means I have

to associate with people.”

“Remarkblman!” the boar exclaimed.

“Are we in Moscow?”

“Of course we are.”

“A bunker? Why ... Does it look so strange? Why are the banners Soviet? It ... I don’t understand. Is the Red Line really controlled by Hansa? Or is it really Hansa that’s controlled by the Red Line?”

“What difference does it make?”

“What?” Artyom frowned: The white hall was slipping away sideways and upwards.

“Well, is there any difference between the Red Line and Hansa?” Bessolov smiled like quicksand.

“And just you try finding ten differences between the Reds and the fascists.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s all right. And I’m willing to explain. Why don’t we take a little stroll here? Without trousers, of course, it will be rather ... Hey! Waiter!”

A fidgety waiter with a bow tie, gray hair, and a mustache came scurrying over. Bessolov ordered him to take off his trousers and shirt to dress his guest. Artyom demanded his own clothes, but he was told everything had been burned. Then he agreed to take the black-and-white outfit, except for the bow tie. The waiter stood to attention, with his little gray-haired stomach trembling. The lady doctor disconnected the angels’ blood and sealed off the puncture hole in his arm with a plaster.

Alexei Felixovich got up and wiped his lips with a napkin; he cast off from the table.

“Mosimpressd,” the boar told Artyom in farewell.

They set off, exchanging greetings, through the well-liquored, drowsy guests at the feast: Kondrat Vladimirich, Ivan Ivanich, Andrei Oganosovich, and all the rest of them.

“Who are they? Who are these people?”

“Splendid people!” Bessolov assured him. “The very best!”

They reached the stairway.

“So.” Alexei Felixovich gestured round the space. “There was a question. Why the Soviet symbolism? We reply. Previously, before everything happened, this was the premises of the Moscow Cold War Museum. A private museum. But! It was located in a genuine government bunker from the time of that same cold war. A former so-called SF! That is—a State Facility. Somehow it was privatized, God knows how, during the turbulent nineties, it doesn’t matter. Flooded, filthy, and abandoned. Because at that time it seemed to us that these bunkers would never be needed by anyone again. And then the new owners decorated it according to their own nostalgic taste: all these banners, red stars, hammers and sickles and so on and so forth. Basically hinting at the USSR, but Nepman-style. They refurbished the place superbly, for which we are very grateful. They took it with a wooden plough and left it with an atom bomb, so to speak. They collected a curious exhibition of historical artifacts and started showing foreign tourists round. But when World War Three happened, they were quickly reminded what SF stood for, and who was the real owner here, and who was just a temporary placeholder. Because anyone who has been here, naturally, doesn’t want to go to the genuine SFs. It’s all rather dingy there, without any of this pizzazz. Private hands are private hands, after all. And the style is majestic; it’s breathtaking. You look at that banner—and you remember how our great power used to threaten the whole world. So we didn’t change anything here. It’s stylish, and patriotic and snug.”

The glimmers from the mirror globe tickled the red banner and gamboled on the crest.

“But the Red Line ... They drive people against machine guns! ... Under these flags ... Right now, at Komsomol Station! Yesterday! A week ago! A child was shot ... In my arms ... Not mine ... But ...”

“Well, what of it, pray tell? That’s nothing to do with us.”

“It was you who forced Miller to give them the cartridges, wasn’t it? Hansa! There, at Komsomol, to Moskvin!” Artyom had finally woken up.

“In the first place, we are not Hansa. In the second place, we didn’t force anyone. The cartridges are ours. And the Order is merely an armored delivery service. Moskvín was entitled to compensation for the actions of the Reich. And what they do with the cartridges is a matter of their ethics. But on the other hand, we stopped the war. Which, moreover, began not because of the way the system is set up in general, but as a result of cretinous initiatives at the middle-management level. The same, as it happens, as that time with your heroic bunker. Do you really want a civil war?”

“At Komsomol Station they used those cartridges to make mincemeat of all those people! Live people! Why are you trying to frighten me with war? People there are starving; they’re ready to storm machine guns. Can you imagine that? What that’s like?”

Bessolov stopped talking and remained silent until they got down the steps.

“But what can be done? We’re trying to find a cure for the mushroom rot. We’re trying pesticides. But there are certain natural processes. The ecology of the Metro, so to speak. I suggest we should consider it the self-regulation of the population.”

“But you stuff your belly here!”

“You could get that impression,” Bessolov agreed.” But it’s stupid to think that the bigwigs at Polis, or Moskvín or Miller, don’t stuff their bellies. This is a matter of rendering to Caesar. There aren’t enough tinned goods in the state reserves for everyone. That’s the way the world’s made. If I go out of here and feed an unfortunate, hungry little girl with scraps from my plate, that won’t change anything. My scraps aren’t Jesus’s fishes. But even so, I do go out and I feed a hungry little girl. And nothing changes.”

“Because your Hansa is no better than the Reich!”

“And I tell you that, in essence, Hansa is the Reich.”

“What?”

“Catch up with me.”

Artyom hobbled after him.

From the staircase with the banner they turned to the right. A bright red star shone above their heads. A sign glowed crimson: BUNKER 42. There was enough electricity for all this. All this was important. They walked along the corridor and came to an empty bar. The counter was illuminated by a Kalashnikov rifle woven out of neon tubes; there was no barman, and the opened bottles proffered themselves. Bessolov pulled over something with a label that wasn’t Russian, tugged out the spongy cork with his teeth, and put his lips to the bottle. He offered Artyom some, but Artyom declined fastidiously.

“And so, the Cold War Museum!” said Bessolov, turning into a narrow passage: sheets of steel attached with square rivets.

They walked into the museum space: an old map on the wall, lit up from below; an immense crimson shadow across half the world signed USSR; gray little European states huddled up against each other; and everything dotted with the stamped silhouettes of missiles and wide-winged planes. A pale mannequin standing in the corner, dressed in an old uniform; a stupid, summer uniform. Guarding a huge, fat bomb painted in gray linseed-oil paint.

“Here we have an amusing little exhibit. A model of the first atomic bomb, developed and produced in the Soviet Union ...”

The bomb had a glass cap set in its nose, as if to allow people to glance into hell. But of course there was nothing in there: just some kind of device with indicators.

But Artyom wasn’t looking at it. He was looking at the huge map of Europe.

“It’s all you, isn’t it? The jammers are yours. I was looking for you, just for that reason. What’s it all needed for? What are we all doing stuck here? In the Metro? If the whole world survived ...”

“Did it really survive?” Bessolov raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Well, all right, all right. It survived. I got you there!”

“All those missiles and planes on the map. That’s all old stuff, right? It even still says the USSR, not

Russia! How old is this map, a hundred years? There aren't any enemies after all, right? Those enemies that Miller is afraid of. The ones these jammers are there for. The war ended! Back then! Right?"

"It's all very subjective, Artyom. Perhaps for some it's still going on."

"They're not planning—the West—to do anything to us! Right? Go and pull the wool over Miller's eyes with that one!"

"Everyone believes what's most convenient for him."

"Then what's it for? The jammers—what did you put them up for? Why kill people coming from other cities? To make it look like the whole world was bombed to pieces! What for? To make it look like we're alone! Then why are we stuck here in the Metro?"

"Because," said Alexei Felixovich, shedding all his playfulness like a viper shedding its skin, "outside the Metro we will no longer be a people. We will stop being a great nation."

"What?"

"I'll try to explain that too. And you stop yelling and try to listen. And by the way, we didn't put up the jammers. They're old, from Soviet times. What quality! In the nineties they were simply rented out to businessmen, to broadcast music. Temporarily."

The old waiter's outfit hung loose and baggy on Artyom. Somewhere behind him a security guard harrumphed to indicate his presence. Alexei Felixovich took a handkerchief with initials in the corner out of his breast pocket and ran it over the bomb, wiping off the dust.

"But I think we'll start with this beauty here."

"Why do you want this thing here?" Artyom felt disgusted: It was as if Bessolov was kissing a dead person on the lips.

"Oh, come now. One needs to know one's roots." Bessolov turned towards him and smiled. "And so we don't touch anything at all here. This bomb is the primogenitor of our sovereignty!" Alexei Felixovich stroked the bomb's immense paunch. "Essentially, it's only thanks to this that we were able to defend ourselves against encroachments from the West. To defend our unique social order. Our civilization. If our scientists had not created it, the country would have been brought to its knees after the Second World War. Well, and after that ..."

"So that in World War Three we could get hit with it and ..."

"World War Three?" Alexei Felixovich interrupted. "In number three we got a bit carried away. Too caught up, so to speak, in our own television truth. Man is good at that sort of thing in general: at substituting illusion for reality. And living in a world of complete make-believe. A useful quality, in principle. The entire Metro, for instance, manages quite splendidly in this system of imaginary coordinates."

"The entire Metro manages quite splendidly?" Artyom asked, moving closer to him.

"What I mean is that everything works. Everyone is drawn in, involved. On the Red Line they believe that they're fighting Hansa and the fascists. The people in the Reich believe that they're battling against the Reds and the freaks. The people in Hansa frighten their children with Moskvín and inform on their neighbors as Red spies. As if it all really existed!"

"As if? It was there." Artyom suddenly felt he couldn't breathe in this museum. "I was in the tunnel. Between Pushkin and Kuznetsky Most. That bloody slaughter between the Reds and the fascists. Baited dozens of people. Into fighting. Real, live people. They hacked each other to death there. With pickaxes. And knives. Metal bars. That really happened. Got that, you scum? It! Really! Happened!"

"I sympathize. But what does that prove? Who was killed there? Reds? Fascists? No. A certain number of genetically damaged individuals on one side, and a certain number of saboteurs and blabbermouths on the other. A controlled conflict. And a highly original mode of autopurification, if you take a detached view of it. As if our system was a living organism ... Cells that hinder survival die off and peel away. But let me repeat: We did not start that war. The midlevel command of the Reich's intelligence service

attacked the Red Line in order to curry favor with their leadership. Without having even the slightest idea that neither the Red Line nor the Reich actually exist.”

“What do you mean—they don’t exist?”

“Well, that is—of course they exist! The names exist. It’s very important for people to call themselves something. To believe that they are someone. It’s very important to them to fight against someone. And we accommodate them. We don’t have a totalitarian state here! And we offer them the widest possible product range: If you want to massacre freaks, the Iron Legion is recruiting. If you’re dreaming of free rations and a common cause—run to the Red Line. If you don’t believe in anything and just want to do business—emigrate to Hansa. Are you an intellectual?—fantasize about the Emerald City and wear a hole in the seat of your pants in Polis. A convenient system, you see. I already tried to din that into your head back at TsvetnoI Boulevard. Why do you want to go up on top? We can provide you with freedom here. What do you want with the surface?”

Alexei Felixovich stopped at the way out, ran his glance round the bomb’s shrine, and turned out the light. Artyom was still thinking about how to answer.

“So you’re not from Hansa? All this isn’t Hansa?”

“From what Hansa?” Bessolov shook his head. “I told you: There isn’t any Hansa. All right? There is the Circle Line, and there are people who think that they live in Hansa.”

“Where are you from, then?”

“Why, from here.” Alexei Felixovich raised his eyes to the vaulted ceiling, assembled out of tunnel liners. “From this very place. To be even more precise, from that room over there. Catch up with me.”

They came out into a little room with a parquet floor and a desk with a green lamp burning on it: a security post. The sentry on duty, wearing an officer’s uniform, got up and saluted. Someone’s reception area? Escalator steps leading up to the next intermediate level: a replica. It was like a room from a different time: not from the pretentious 2000s, but from times that seemed to be ancient but had never actually ticked by in reality.

They walked up the steps and there was a door.

An office. Bookshelves with glass doors, crammed with weighty volumes; a dais or podium in the middle of the room. And a nomenklatura desk in the corner of it, like Svinolup’s or Miller’s. A man sitting at the desk.

Motionless.

Lounging back and looking up at the ceiling. Eyes with a plastic glitter.

In a tunic with gold stars on the shoulder straps. A bushy black mustache. Hair combed across the head.

“That’s ...”

“Joseph Vissarionovich. Delightful, isn’t he?”

“Stalin?”

“A life-size dummy of Stalin. Wax. You can take a look.”

Tangled up in this dream, Artyom obediently stepped up onto the podium.

Stalin had put his boneless hands on the desk: A pen protruded out of one waxy fist, as if the dummy leader was about to sign some decree. The other hand was spread out on its flat palm, with the fingers extended forward. Below the mustache was a smile—carved out with a knife, unwavering. Beside his hand lay unfading rag roses.

Unable to resist, Artyom touched Stalin on the nose. Stalin couldn’t care less. He couldn’t care less that he had died and been resurrected; couldn’t care less that now he was a dummy, that he had escaped at such a price, when the world had been reduced to dust; couldn’t care less if they laid flowers at his feet or tweaked his nose. Stalin was in an excellent mood. Everything was fine as far as Stalin was concerned.

“As large as life, eh?” said Bessolov.

“Is he ... from the museum too? An exhibit?”

Artyom walked over to a bookcase, raked the dust off the glass with his finger, and looked at the shelves. They were crammed with one and the same book, repeated a nonsensical number of times. Printed on the spine of every one was: J. V. Stalin. Collected Works. Volume 1.

“What’s it for?” Artyom looked round at Bessolov.

“Stalin’s office was here when it was a genuine bunker. Although the guides say that Stalin never did spend any time sitting in here: He passed away before the facility was commissioned. But they made an effigy for the Western tourists and licked the office into shape. Stalin was already here when we moved into the bunker. And we preserved everything. One must respect the history of one’s people!”

Alexei Felixovich clambered up onto the dais, moved over to Stalin, sat down on Stalin’s desk, and dangled his legs.

“Continuity! There he is and here we are. It turns out, as it were, that he built this bunker for us. He was thinking of our future. A great leader.”

Apart from the mustached portraits on the Red Line, Artyom hadn’t encountered Stalin before; what did he feel when he touched the great leader on the nose? Wax.

“Why continuity? The continuity’s on the Red Line.”

“Artyom. Come on, Artyom!” Bessolov tut-tutted. “Let me spoon-feed you, then. The Red Line, Hansa, the Reich—they’re dummies too. Of course, they simulate independence, competition, and struggle. They even actually fight, when they get carried away.”

“So who are you, then?”

Alexei Felixovich chuckled.

“It’s an elegant sort of thing—a multiparty system. Like a hydra. Choose a head that suits you and fight the other heads. Believe that an enemy head is a dragon. Conquer it. But what about the heart?” Bessolov stroked the desk and gestured round the office with his chin. “This is the heart. You can’t see it, and you don’t know a thing about it. And if I hadn’t shown it to you, you would have carried on fighting against a head. If not the Red Line, then Hansa.”

Artyom moved away from the bookcase and walked up close to Bessolov.

“Won’t you regret that you ever showed me?”

Bessolov didn’t back away or move aside. He wasn’t afraid of Artyom, as if he wasn’t in Artyom’s dream, but Artyom was in his.

“Go and tell someone that you were here. Even that Miller of yours. What will he say to you? He’ll say it’s sheer lunacy.”

Artyom gulped. had he really confessed that too in his drunken state?

“Why, hasn’t he been here?”

“Of course not. Why let everyone in here? This is a temple. A sanctuary.”

“What about me?”

“What about you? You’re a holy fool, Artyom. God’s fools can enter the temple. They are even shown miracles.”

Suddenly it clicked.

“The Invisible Observers.”

“Louder!”

“The Invisible Observers.”

“There now. Look at that, you’re not so hopeless after all!”

“But that’s just a tall story. A myth. Like the Emerald City.”

“Precisely,” Bessolov agreed. “A tall story. A fairytale.”

“Everything collapsed ages and ages ago. It didn’t even hold up for a month. The state. And then there was chaos. And since then ... Everybody knows that. The children know it. No one governs us. We’re here all on our own. Alone. The Invisible Observers are a myth!”

“But how do you know that they’re a myth? We were the ones who told you that. Do you understand? We immediately gave you a ready-made image that you could fit us into. You’re a simple soul, after all; you think with your heart, not your head. In images. Well, all right, I’ll spoon out the clichés for you. Help yourself! The Invisible Observers! Oop-la! On the one hand, you definitely don’t believe in me, but on the other, it’s as if you already know everything about me. Rumors! Better than television.”

“But you ... The previous leaders, that is ... The government, the president ... You were evacuated beyond the Urals, weren’t you? The system of government fell apart ... The state ...”

“Just think about it: Why would we move beyond the Urals? Why would we move to some separate bunker at the far end of the world? Out in the cold, all on our own? What would we do there—eat each other? Our place is with the people!” He stretched, looking like a well-fed cat.

“And where were you all the time? When we were eating shit? When we were throttling each other? When we were dying up there on top because of you, where were you?”

“Right beside you. We were always beside you. Just on the other side of the wall.”

“That! Can’t be! Possible!”

“I told you—it works. You can’t booze away real skill.”

Bessolov got down off the desk and took a pull at his amber-colored bottle.

“What are we doing stuck in here? Come on, I’ll show you how we live. Rather ascetically, by the way. So you won’t go getting any ideas.”

He carefully hoisted up the slumping Stalin and stepped down off the podium. Artyom lingered, glugged with all this knowledge.

“You’re bastards.”

“But what did we do?” Alexei Felixovich asked. “On the contrary—minimal intervention! We are merely observers! And invisible ones, at that. Only if the system starts keeling over, then we have to straighten it up.”

“The system? People are so hungry they eat their own children!”

“So what?” Bessolov shot a hostile glance at Artyom. “We’re not the ones who like to eat your children. You’re the ones who like doing that. And we don’t like the fact that you eat your own children. We just like governing you. But if we want to govern you, we are obliged to allow you to eat your own children!”

“Lies! You stuck us in here and you keep us here! You treat people like pigs! Stoolpigeons everywhere ... Some have a Security Service; some have the KGB; some have ... There are Svinolups everywhere ... It’s true, there is no difference between the Reich and all the rest ...”

“And that’s because our Russian man can’t be managed any other way,” Bessolov replied sternly. “That’s the way nature made him. Loosen the screws a bit and you get rebellion! He needs constant watching. What was all that business of yours at Komsomol Station? Look at them, they demanded their rights. They rebelled. How did it all end? In a bloodbath! And has that undermined the Red Line? No in the least! Why, the security services are a God-given gift to our Russian man! He’s riotous by nature! Those machine guns of yours ... Why, they pressed up as close as they could to the machine guns, jostling into the front row. But the patient ones survived. At least that’s some kind of selection process. And how else can our man be governed? He has to be distracted all the time. Restrained. Channelled, so to speak. He needs to have some kind of idea foisted on him. Religion or ideology. He needs to have enemies invented for him all the time! He can’t live without enemies! He’s completely at a loss without them! He can’t define himself. He knows nothing about himself. We had really excellent enemies in reserve two years ago. The Dark Ones. You couldn’t possibly invent a better external threat than them. They scabbled about on the surface. They were coal-black, without even any whites in their eyes, like devils. And they filled our Russian man with horror and loathing. Wonderful enemies. Everything’s clear immediately: If they’re black, then we’re white. We were saving them for a rainy day. The ‘threat to mankind’ scenario.

But no, some imbecile appeared and wound up that old fool from the Order, and they went and bombarded our pet devils with missiles in their own safari park. Can you imagine that?"

"Yes."

"We tried to intervene via the Council of Polis; we hinted that there wasn't any danger from the Dark Ones as yet. Basically, the scenario just got bogged down. We had to domesticate that Miller of yours too. I'd chop hands off for initiatives at the local level. If we had a dictatorship. Are you coming?"

Shell-shocked and crushed, Artyom plodded after Bessolov. They walked past the sentry, who jumped up again and saluted again. Then they found themselves in a narrow passage, with their steps echoing hollowly on an iron floor. They passed the turnoff where the restaurant was located. A bright glimmer from the mirror-globe darted straight out into Artyom's eye. The globe was spinning like Artyom's head—once there was broad sheet of mirror, and the reflection of the whole world fitted into it. But the mirror had been smashed to smithereens and glued onto hell knows what, and now they were lashing at it with a searchlight for the amusement and beauty of it.

They passed the turn and carried on.

"How did you get a grip on him? How did you get a grip on all of them?" Artyom asked obtusely. "Did you buy them? Moskvina? The Führer?"

"Well now. I can't generalize about that. There's a right approach to every man. Moskvina values money, and he poisoned his cousin. And Yevgeny Petrovich, for instance, has a little daughter growing up with no fingers. She was born like that. A sentimental man. He passed all those laws about the fight against deformity and he can't observe them himself. And we send him some photos. Here you are, Yevgeny Petrovich, and here is your little daughter in your arms, and your wife beside you, so there can't be any doubt. So play by the rules, Yevgeny Petrovich, and play with gusto, because your citizens have to believe you. Not even a single one of your very lousiest citizens must doubt that your Reich is absolutely the most authentic of Reichs. He must be prepared to give his life for the Reich."

"There isn't any Reich any longer. It gobbled itself up, digested itself, and shat itself out. And your Führer bolted."

"And we'll bring him back and plant him there again. And we'll arrange a new Reich for him, better than the previous one. We've already picked up his wife and daughter, and the Führer will be reeled in."

"Why do that? He's an absolute monster!"

"Because, you droll little man, we are accustomed to working with Yevgeny Petrovich. And we know how to do it. The incriminating evidence hasn't been disclosed yet. Why should we look for a new man, find out about his weaknesses, lure him with the bait and sink in the hook, when there's such a wonderful, ready-made option? He messed things up, it's true—well, we'll penalize him for that. Where would we be without the Reich?"

"They're all scumbags there! Animals! Some are animals, and some are cowards!"

"The animals aren't only there, but right throughout the Metro. And look what a wonderful, beautiful enclosure has been built for them. And the animals crawl into it themselves from all over. The Iron Legion and so on and so forth. To fight the freaks. To let off steam. If there's no Reich, where will they go to? Think about the people. No, let them go and fight for the Reich. Or for the Red Line. Or for the Order. Choose what suits your taste. Freedom! There it is, that's freedom!"

"That's not what people need!"

"Yes it is. Precisely that. So they won't be bored. So they'll have something to keep themselves busy. So they'll have a choice. We have a genuine, self-sufficient world here under the ground! And we don't need any other world up on the surface."

"I need it!"

"Well, so you need it, but no one else does."

"Maybe they have family up there! If only for that, at least!"

“Their families are all here now. And really and truly, I can’t understand you. All you did was damage your health. They barely managed to revive you, you little fool. What is it that you’re looking for up there?”

“We were born on the surface. Our place is up there. In the open air. You breathe differently up there! And think differently. There aren’t enough directions here for me! Here there’s only forwards and backwards. I feel cramped here—can you grasp that? Don’t you feel that yourself?”

“No. You know, it’s the quite the opposite for me: I feel dizzy outside. I immediately want to come back down into the bunker. Into the coziness. Right. This is our accommodation block. Little apartments.”

They turned a corner.

Into an immense, blind tunnel ten meters across that ran from one point in the middle of the ground to another point somewhere in the middle of the ground. How many more of them were there here? The passageway ran on farther.

It was obviously late. The inhabitants of the bunker were straggling away, blowsy and fuzzy, from the snow-white drinking joint and creeping off home. Artyom glanced through the doorjamb into one of the apartments lined up along the tunnel. Then into another one. Yes, really quite cozy.

Good enough for a human being.

“Why are showing all this to me? Saying all this?”

“Well, you know, I enjoy it. A bit of an argument. You’re a revolutionary, aren’t you? What were you doing, sitting there, at Sashka’s place? Waiting for me. A romantic. Did you want to shoot me with your revolver? What, did you think that if you killed me, that would straighten out people’s lives? What do I do? I’m only in charge of domestic policy. Waste me—and a new head will grow. I tried to talk some sense into you back there at Tsvetnoi Boulevard. But, you see, your memory has failed you.”

“At Tsvetnoi?”

“As I said, loss of memory. But that’s not surprising. It’s essentially symbolic. This amnesia of yours is a blessing to us, of course. No one remembers anything. A people of ephemeral mayflies. It’s as if yesterday never happened. And no one wants to think about tomorrow. A single continuous present moment.”

“What tomorrow? How can you plan tomorrow, when there’s barely enough chow for today? And that’s if you’re one of the lucky ones!”

“Now that’s where our skill comes in. There should always only be enough chow for today, and always just barely enough. An empty stomach brings dream about comprehensible things. One has to be able to keep a balance. Let people stuff themselves, and they get indigestion and their self-importance escalates. Underdo the chow—and they smash the structures of power. Well, or what they understand by power. Will you drink to our skill with me?”

“No!”

“That’s wrong. You should drink more. The salvation of the people lies in vodka. And it helps with the radiation, by the way.”

Thanks for the reminder.

The pure, alien blood crept through Artyom’s veins as viscously as gel, stinging and confusing him. Artyom would have preferred to have his own thin, dirty, poisoned blood back. Anything not to be indebted to these scumbags. Even if he only had one more week to live, at least he could burn out his own life and not parade about with a borrowed one.

“You talk like that about the people ... But you, yourself ... Where are you from?”

“Yes ... It might have sounded as if I don’t like the people. Or I despise them. But quite the contrary, my heart lies completely with them. I love them, do you believe me? Look, I go out into the people like that, get to know people and mingle with them. The way I got to know you. Simply, loving the people, one has to understand everything about them. And one has to be honest. One mustn’t delude oneself. Yes, that’s

what our people are like. One has to feel the kind of people one is governing. One has to love one's own people. One has to edify them. Catch the demons."

"You govern? Who governs? EloI governing Morlocks, is it? Are you some kind of aristocrat, then?"

"Me?" Bessolov smiled. "What sort of damned aristocrat am I? The aristocracy were all shot way back when! I'm not even from Moscow. I started out as a TV journalist. The food wasn't so good, so I became a political technologist. And things spiraled on up from there. So I'm bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh through and through."

Artyom had a sudden realization: Let their gel flow through his veins. This was the very respite that would give him the time to do something.

He looked around. There weren't so very many guards here. He had to walk through the entire bunker, of course. What if there was a military base in one of the tunnels? Who provided the force to back their power?"

"What's over that way?"

"Let's go take a look, if you like. In the third tunnel we have a storage depot, and the fourth is just standing bare and empty. The businessmen didn't get it refurbished before the war, and we haven't had time to do it. What, are you wondering what's the smartest way you could grab all this from us?" Bessolov winked at him. "I could take you on as an apprentice if you like; you only have to ask."

"I don't think you've explained to me yet why I should hang around here. Don't you understand? It may be better or worse, but it's all under the ground, in the Metro. What's the fucking point of that? When there are entire cities up on the surface? Forests! Fields! The ocean, fuck it!"

They reached the end: an immense, empty tunnel flooded with rusty water. Nowhere further to go. A pump droned, siphoning the phlegm out of this throat.

"But how do you know what's up there? Eh? Maybe it's all exactly the same as here, only without a ceiling? Well, so there's something on the radio. Does that give them paradise? Freedom? Fraternal love? Don't make me laugh. They wander across the face of the Earth, turning wild one by one without any authorities, without any state, forgetting how to read and how to write. I was talking to you about exceptionality. It's this Metro makes us exceptional! Fifty thousand people in one place. Only with a concentration like that is it possible to preserve civilization and culture. Only in that way. Yes, in the Metro. So what? up there in the fresh air they'll become brutalized more rapidly; they'll forget more rapidly what it means to be human. up there! On the surface there'll be Neanderthals, polygamists, zooerasts! But the people—the spiritual, rational people—will be here!"

"Spiritual? And who eats their own children?"

"Well, Robinson Crusoe didn't wean Friday off human flesh instantaneously. We simply don't try to rush things. But sooner or later ..."

"But why don't you let us choose for ourselves? Whether we live on the surface or under it? Why didn't you ask us?"

"We have asked." Bessolov smiled. "And we're still asking."

"You've got nothing to feed them with! There's the mushroom disease. Let them go! Then at least they won't all starve to death here!"

"Our great people has survived worse trials than this. They'll get by somehow. Do you know how hardy they are? It's fucking crazy."

"Let them go up there! At least give them a chance!"

"Up there? Do you think there's a land flowing with milk and honey up there? You've been there! In Balashikha, for instance. What is there for them to eat?"

"They'll find a way to feed themselves."

"You bloody romantic. Why the hell am I wasting my time on a fool like you?"

"Well, let me go, then! I didn't ask to be saved! For people like you to—"

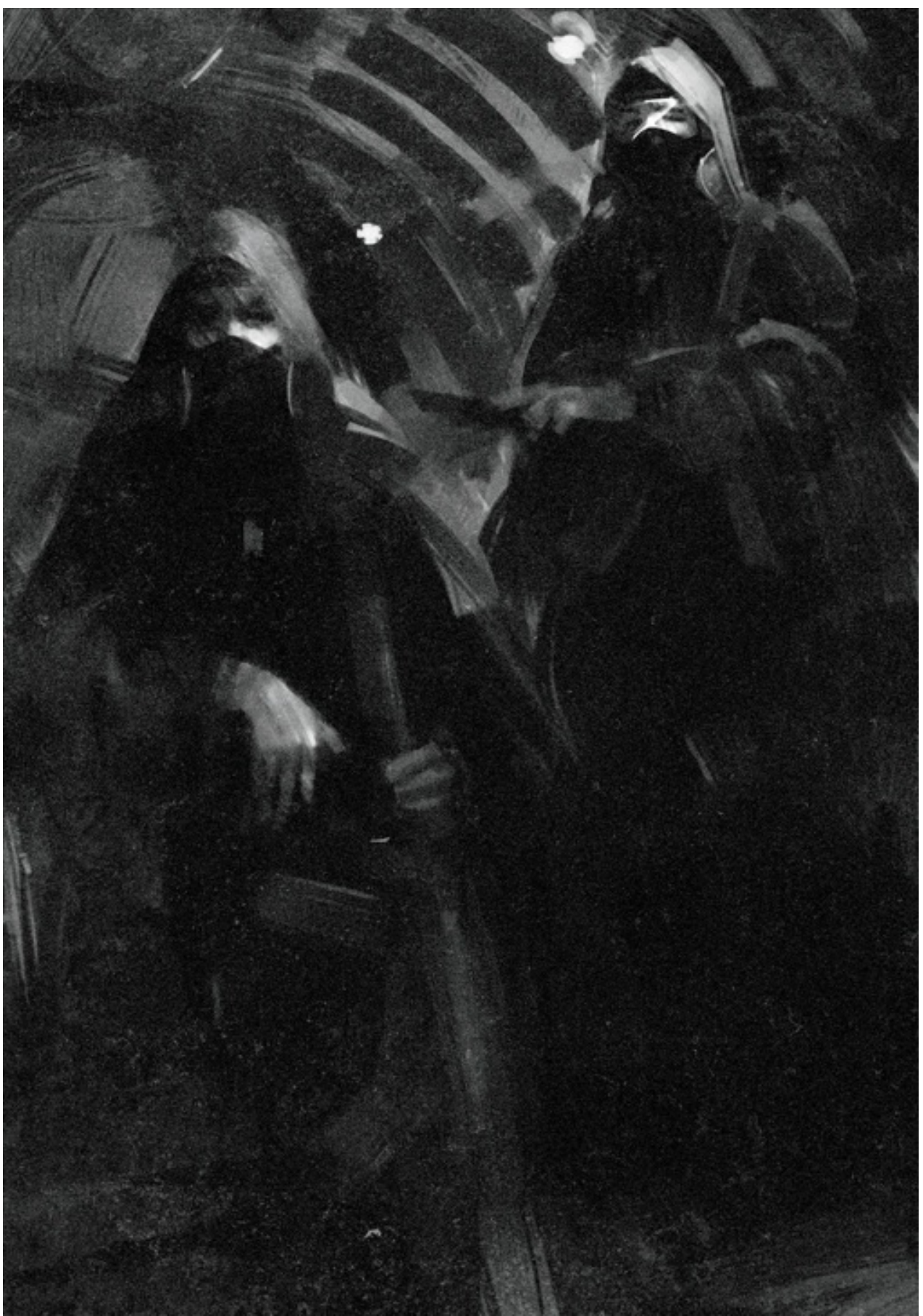
“And what then? Do you think that if I let you out, the entire Metro will immediately rise up to support you? That you’ll cast us off, tell people the truth, and lead them off, up to the surface? And everything there will be different from here?”

“It will!”

“Off you go then,” Alexei Felixovich said indifferently. “Go ahead. I’ll even give you back your revolutionary Nagant! No one there will believe you, just as you didn’t believe me. Do you realize at least that you’ll simply be telling everyone the tall tale about the Invisible Observers? Get real, Artyom!”

Artyom nodded. He smiled.

“We’ll see about that.”



CHAPTER 21

— COMRADES —

They took the bag off his head.

And he looked.

But even without looking, he'd already guessed from the voices where they'd brought him: to Tsvetnoi Boulevard Station. To the same place they'd taken him from. They'd dragged him all the way from the bunker with a sack over his head, so that he couldn't find the way back.

They unfastened the handcuffs, tugged the shapeless robe up over his head, and gave him a kick up the backside; then the blue-finished revolver fell beside him with a clang.

The first thing Artyom did was grab it. Empty. He turned round—but his escorts had already vanished into the crowd. He caught a brief glimpse of two gray human grains before they were buried under the rest of the gray sand.

They'd flung him out of the bunker immediately, without wasting any time. Just as he was, still dressed in the waiter's outfit. The lady doctor only had time to stuff some kind of tablets or other into the pocket of his trousers with the razor-sharp creases. A kind soul. Then the sack went over his head.

He sat down and thought for a while. People were copulating all around, giving it everything they'd got, because they had to live somehow. And now Artyom had to live somehow with all the things he had learned inside his frail, plywood brainpan. The new knowledge pressed against the inside of the millimeter-thick walls. Artyom couldn't accept it; there couldn't be any reconciliation.

It was impossible to believe that everything that was happening in the Metro—the living hell, the dark hopelessness and senselessness—had really been arranged that way by someone and that it all suited someone perfectly well. The appalling thing wasn't that people were mixed together with earth to fill in tunnels, but that without all this the world couldn't carry on; it would collapse and crumble into the ground. It was impossible to understand a world arranged like that.

And it was impossible to forgive it.

He sat there, looking at somebody's bare, white backside pumping away and arguing with it, as if it was Bessolov's face. He told it everything that he hadn't been quick-witted enough to tell Bessolov.

“Of course, if you lie to people for so many years ... How can they tell the truth from ... If you make them bend them down over a trough of swill all the time ... But that doesn't mean they can't straighten up ... And look upwards, or at least forwards ... Of course, that's the way you've arranged things. But that doesn't mean they can't do it themselves. Or they don't want to ... You say you ask them? And you stick the right answers down their throats ... They ask ...”

Arguing with the backside was easy. The backside didn't offer any objections.

“But what do people understand ... You're the ones who should be obliterated ... That bunker of yours ... Scattered ... If the abscess isn't lanced ... Then nothing ... You fat rats should be taken ... By the scruff of the neck ... And shown to the people ... You try talking like that in front of people ... About them ... As if they were dumb cattle ... And then ... Then we'll see. All of them in the bunker ... They're stinking bastards ... I'll scatter the lot of them ... If they don't believe me, they'll believe you ... I'll make you tell them everything ... And if you don't ... I'll blast you with this here gun ... We're not the only ones who have backs to our heads ... Bastards ...”

He squeezed the handle of the empty Nagant in his hand.

He couldn't do something like this alone. Nothing could be done alone.

He only had a small team—but he did have one. Letyaga, Homer, Lyokha. He could get them together. They already knew half the truth, and he could tell them the other half. Ask them. Together they could

come up with a way to find that rats' nest and rip it open.

How much time had gone by—a week? Or more? Everyone had probably wandered off throughout the Metro. Hunkered down in the cracks and crannies. One—so that Miller wouldn't find him, another so that Hansa wouldn't find him. But as for Homer—there wasn't any more Reich. Maybe Homer knew where to look for the others? And he knew where to look for Homer.

He got up.

He strode off, elbowing aside the men lined up for some lovey-doving with numbers on their hands, past the dried-off fascists, past the sluts of every possible caliber, past the frightened adolescents who had come to discover love, past the scorched stalkers who wanted at least to take a look, past the villains who had been raped by life and now needed to rape life through women. Past all of them who were just beginning or already finishing their life of manhood in the underground world.

Where was Sasha's cubbyhole here?

He found it.

He walked in without knocking, jumping the queue, smashed some trouserless fighting cock over the head with the butt of his Nagant, dragged him off Sashenka, and dumped him in the corner; and after that he said hello, turning away so that she could wrap herself up.

"Where's Homer?"

"You can't stay here, Artyom." She looked up at him. "Why have you come back?"

"Where's the old man? He hasn't stopped pestering you, has he? Or has he? Where has he gone?"

"They took him away. Please, go."

"They took him? Who took him?"

"You ... Did he help you? Alexei—did he help? You look different. Better."

"He helped me. You helped me. Thanks a fucking heap. To everyone. All my benefactors."

"You wanted to find out. Now you have. Right? Or what did you want? Just to die?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I ... I don't want anything from him ... from them. It's a charity handout. I don't want it. I didn't. But now ... Now thanks anyway."

"Why did you leave them? It's ... It's a completely different life there, isn't it?"

"You mean you've never been there? He hasn't taken you there?"

"He promised. He's going to. But I asked him to take you instead of me. For the time being."

"You haven't missed anything. Life's exactly the same down there. Only with better chow. Well ... and the medical treatment too. You mean you could have gone there? With them?"

"What did he tell you about?"

"He told me about everything. Everything. The Invisible Observers, the powers that be, the Reds, the fascists, everything."

"And he let you go?"

"Yes."

"You have to go away. They picked up all your friends. That broker of yours. Everybody. The same day that you ... Maybe they're not alive any longer. I don't know."

"Who? The Observers?"

"No, not his people. Your Order."

"The Order ... Listen. You ... I'm trying to understand. He explained everything to you, right? You knew everything. About the surface. About the world. But! That was your dream, wasn't it? To go back up there. Just like it was mine. So that we could all ... up there. Again. up there! You told me about it. Yourself! What are you doing here? Why are you hanging about in this cesspit? Why haven't you made your getaway? Why are you here?"

Sasha stood there in front of him, as delicate as a pencil sketch, hugging herself. She gave him a sullen look.

“Go away. Really.”

He grabbed hold of her twig-thin wrists.

“Tell me. I want to get the people to rise up. You ask me why I didn’t stay there. Because everyone else ... Us. All of us here. They have to know. All of them. They must know. You won’t betray me again? To him? You won’t give me away?”

“I won’t betray you.”

Her lips seemed seal themselves after that. Artyom waited.

“But I won’t go with you.”

“Why?”

“Artyom. I love him.”

“Who?”

“Alexei.”

“Him? That ... old fart? That pervert? But he ... He ... He’s got no soul ... You should hear what he says ... about people! You love him?”

“Yes.”

Artyom released her arms from his scorched fingers and recoiled.

“You can’t!”

“I love him.” She shrugged her muffled shoulders. “He’s like a magnet for me. He’s a magnet, and I’m an iron filing. That’s all. He’s my master. And he has always been kind to me. From the very beginning.”

“He loans you out to be used! You! He likes to watch when you and all kinds of ... Filthy ... All kinds!”

“Yes.” Sasha nodded. “He enjoys that. And I like it too.”

“You like it?”

“So what? Doesn’t that suit you either? Like Homer? Then I’m sorry.”

“And you’re waiting ... Waiting for him to take you there? To join him?”

“One place became free there. He got permission. But I ...”

“Okay. I get it. Instead of yourself—you sent me ... I understand. Okay.”

“You have to go.”

“Do you really want to go there? To him? To that twenty-four-hour drinking den? To the bunker? Instead of going up—going even deeper?”

“I don’t care where I go. I want to be with him. I’m his. And that’s all.”

“Okay. I understand.”

He stood there for a little longer. Then he took the cross off his neck. And threw it to her.

“See you. Thanks.”

“See you.”

* * *

He walked out: a topsy-turvy, tumbling world.

He plodded through the lewd, ephemeral, drunken crowd. He’d told Sasha that he understood, but he hadn’t understood a thing. How could she—with Bessolov? How could she possibly love someone like that? How could she swap her airships, even for the dream of the bunker? Or for the brothel, for the sake of brief, condescending bawdy-house assignments? Bessolov brought her his leftover scraps of food from the bunker—and his leftover scraps of love too. But she didn’t mind that. Both kinds of scraps were enough for her. She wasn’t spoiled.

What didn’t Artyom really understand about Sasha?

And could he even hate her?

“Hey, waiter!” Someone reached out towards his lackey’s outfit. “A liter of hooch!”

“Go fuck yourself!”

He came out at the quayside. The water was high, right up to the brim.

He had to smash it. Smash everything. Smash it all to fuck.

So Miller had taken all his comrades from him. Homer, Lyokha, Letyaga. Artyom had to free them, if they were alive. He couldn't do anything alone.

Miller.

If he could just win the Order over onto his side ... With a force like that, he could even go up against the Observers. The Order had defended a bunker; it could storm one.

But how could he stir them up? Tell them about the way their comrades had been sold? But it was Miller who sold them—and who to? He'd been bought and sold himself, the old idiot; and the boys had all simply been killed senselessly. Because of an initiative at the middle-management level. Did the old man himself realize what he had given his legs for?

What if Artyom told him, explained?

What did he know about the Metro, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich? What Bessolov had ladled out for him. He'd probably had half the truth stuffed down his throat too. There was no way a hero could feel happy about changing into a roly-poly toy in a wheelchair—and not even in order to save the Metro, but because he hadn't been trusted with the second half of the truth!

A plastic-bottle raft was bobbing about at the far end of the platform, with a drunken railway man sound asleep beside it. Artyom looked round and gathered his thoughts. Sail through the flooded Reich—it couldn't be flooded right up to the ceiling, could it?—and he'd be at Polis. Demand to talk to Miller. Tell Miller everything that he didn't know, give him the rest of the truth. If Miller didn't come over to Artyom's side, at least he could let Artyom's people go.

As he walked towards the raft, he picked up a pig-fat lamp in some whorehouse. Not a torch, but at least it would provide some sort of glimmer in the tunnel. He sneaked up to the raft and prodded the sleeping man with the toe of his lackey's shoe—like a log.

He untied the flimsy vessel, jumped onto it, and set off into the pipe on the murky water. Instead of an oar—a ladle on a stick; row with it on one side, then on the other. The raft was swung round on the water. It was reluctant to go back, but it crept into the blackness anyway. The lamp only lit up one step ahead—even the ladle reached further than that. The tunnel ran downwards and the water rose upwards; the ceiling sank lower, getting close to the top of Artyom's head. Would there be enough air?

He couldn't row standing up any longer—the ceiling wouldn't let him—so he had to sit down.

A rat swam towards him, delighted to see dry land.

It clambered onto Artyom's raft and sat on the edge modestly. He didn't drive it away. He used to be afraid of rats, but he had gotten used to them a long time ago. Rats were just rats. Shit was just shit. Darkness was just darkness. A life like everyone else's. And he wouldn't even have noticed, just as no one else noticed, if he didn't know there could be a different kind of life.

The lamp was the hanging kind; it tried to look not only forwards, but down, under the transparent hull. Something splashed down there.

He thought about Sasha. Saying goodbye to her. Why didn't Sasha want to tell people that they didn't have to stay stuck under the ground? Why was she here herself? What made her prefer Bessolov?

There was a stink of pig fat. The rat breathed with relish.

A drowned man turned over under the raft and goggled at the lamp through the wall of bottles with his open eyes clogged with sand. He hadn't seen light for a long time and was trying to remember what it was. He clutched at the raft from below with his fat fingers, hindering its passage, then let it go.

The ceiling moved even lower. Squatting down on his haunches, Artyom could reach the ribs of the ceiling with his hand now.

The rat thought for a moment or two—and leapt into the water. It swam towards TsvetnoI Boulevard after all, to its own kind.

Artyom stopped. He looked back: everything was just as dark there. Even darker in fact. He fumbled at his chest with one hand, but he had given the little cross back. Okay, he'd manage somehow. He asked without it.

And rowed on.

And then the water started receding.

Maybe he'd gotten past a hollow, a deep spot. The ceiling stopped pressing down on him and moved upwards, letting him breathe. Light glimmered up ahead. The lightbulbs that had climbed right up under the ceiling were trying to blink on. Apparently the generators had been protected against the flood somehow.

When he reached the station, the water turned really shallow. On the platform it was only knee-deep. But the owners were in no hurry to come back home just yet. Those who hadn't escaped were bloating dejectedly, at a loose end. There was an intense stench that Artyom could feel all over his face.

The ground waters had washed out Darwin Station, and it had become Chekhov again. All of its cannibalistic trappings—the banners, the murals, the portraits—were floating belly-up in the liquid mud.

Never mind. They'd summon up their courage and put their house in order. They'd rebuild the menagerie. Dietrich would be there instead of Dietmar, but that was all; Yevgeny Petrovich would come back, one of the family, part of the system, even if he was a monster. Because everything had already been set up so gloriously and conveniently: This is where the little people climb in, and this is where the minced meat comes out. Like out at Balashikha. Like everywhere in the Metro.

And of course, someone would have to finish writing the history textbook for Yevgeny Petrovich. Ilya Stepanovich, probably. The teacher would have to carry the can alone, since Miller had gobbled up Homer. Never mind. Ilya Stepanovich would spell out everything the way it had to be: At Schiller he'd have a heroic defense of the station against the Reds, and the freaks at the station wouldn't be defending, but attacking. Yes, and then some kind of soulful, uplifting finale. About the Reich being flooded due to the nefarious scheming of enemies, but not broken, and a phoenix would rise from the ashes, better than the one before.

How could Sasha sleep with this going on?

He scattered a skin of sodden paper with his ladle. Looking closer, he saw it was blurred newspapers. On some he could still read the word "Iron," on others "Fist." The fragments of someone's days. They had a print shop somewhere here as well, didn't they? Dietmar hadn't been lying; he seriously intended to print ten thousand bricks of correct history.

The station came to an end, and the tunnel started again.

* * *

He'd thought through various ways of getting past the guard post and what lies to tell there. But he didn't get a chance for any lies: The men on watch weren't the scatterbrained Polis guards, but the taciturn graven images of the Order.

So they wouldn't shoot him. He shouted to tell them that he was Artyom, on his way to see Miller. They approached him distrustfully, slapped the pockets of his jester's outfit, and seemed to recognize him, but didn't take off their own masks. They took the Nagant, then led him through the service corridors, in order not to disconcert the air-headed local citizens.

But they didn't take him to Miller.

A door into some little box of a room. Bars. Guards.

They led him in and shoved him viciously in the back, like strangers.

But inside there was joy!

All alive: Lyokha, Letyaga, Homer. And even, for some reason, Ilya Stepanovich.

They complimented Artyom on not having died, on looking much fresher and on being dolled up so smartly. They laughed. And hugged each other.

He discovered that they had all been raked in back there at Tsvetnoi Boulevard. After all, it was only two stations from Polis, and one of the Order's soldiers had gone to shag the girls and recognized both Letyaga and Lyokha. They'd taken Homer and the worthless Ilya Stepanovich for good measure: They were having supper together and hadn't split in time.

"And you—where were you?"

Artyom paused. Gathered his thoughts. He looked dubiously at Ilya Stepanovich, the Führer's darling. And then he realized that this shouldn't be kept secret from anyone. Secrets were their weapon, but Artyom's was telling it like it is.

He dumped it all on them. Everything.

The bunker, the tavern, the salads, the shots of vodka, the fat drunks in suits, the antibiotics, the wax Stalin, the inexhaustible electricity, the foreign bottles—and what lay behind them: the puppets on strings, the wars of fools, the slimy affection of the security services, the necessary famine, the necessary cannibalism, the necessary skirmishes in blind tunnels. The necessary and ever-present Invisible Observers.

He told all of it to them—and himself. And he himself was surprised by the neat way everything lined up, how well it all seemed to knit together. There was nothing useless in this building of Bessolov's, nothing inexplicable. All questions received an answer. Apart from one: What for?

"In other words ... while we chew on shit here ... Down there ... They ... Eat sawads?" Lyokha wheezed in a sudden fit of hatred. "Dwink foweign vodka? And the meat's pwobabwy a bit fwesher than ours ... Eh?"

"And they don't finish up their food. There are plates full of leftovers standing there. And down there ... They were probably guzzling then too. Guzzling, at the precise time when we were with all the others ... At Komsomol Station... . Facing the bullets."

"Bastards," said Lyokha. "What bastards. And medical care, you say?"

"Can't you see for yourself? Look, they ... put me back on my feet. I don't know for how long. But! See what I mean?"

"I see. But we have a diffewent kind of medical care here, wight? The kind where they grab a man by the balls and tell him: cwawl to the graveyard yourself, man. We can't do anything to help you with your cancer anyway. That's the way we get tweeked. Of all the wotten bastards."

Homer stood there without saying anything. He couldn't believe something like this with the same eager speed as Lyokha.

"But why do they tweek us wike shit, then?" the apostle asked. "If we're in the shit, ewewyone should be in the shit! There shouldn't be some in it up their necks, while others carve up their sawads with table knives. And where is this bunker? Maybe we should flood it, eh?"

"They put a bag over my head when we left ... And I was unconscious on the way there ... I don't know where it is."

"But I've been there. In that museum," said Homer. "I was there before the war. On a guided tour. Its full name was the Tagansky PCC. Protected command center. Tagansky because it was right there on Taganskaya Square. There was one entrance from the street. The old Moscow side streets, beside the Moscow River. Old mansion houses. And one mansion, with two stories, that's really a dummy. They explained to us at the time that behind the wall there was a concrete cap, to protect the lift shaft against bombs. Twenty stories down, and there was the bunker. And yes, it was all just as you describe it. The neon light, the restaurant, the refurbishment."

"But how do they get into the Metro?"

"There was an exit. Not just one. To a station—Taganskaya, in fact—and into a tunnel, to the Circle Line."

"Taganskaya Station ... But that's only two stations away from Komsomol ..." said Artyom. "Only two.

Surely they must have heard the shouting and screaming? If we heard it even up on the surface?"

"The Invisible Observers ..." Homer shook his head. "It would be better if the Emerald City had turned out to be real."

"We can shake them out of there!" Artyom said ardently. "Force them out, drive them into the Metro. Show these creeps to the people. Let them confess for themselves. Let Bessolov confess that they've been lying for all these years. Let them say that there is a world on the surface and we're just dying down here for nothing. Let them order their men to turn off the jammers. We really can pull the whole thing off! There aren't many guards there. We just have to work out how to get inside ..."

"But where did they get so much gwub fwom?" Lyokha asked.

"Depots. State storage facilities. But I think they take some from the Metro too. From Hansa ... They've got Hansa in their pocket. They've got everyone in their pocket. The Reds drive their prisoners out to their construction sites, Hansa feeds them and the Order ... It cleans up after them. Did you know about that? Eh, Letyaga?"

"No." He was looking past Artyom, at the wall.

"And Miller?"

"I don't think so."

"We have to tell him!"

"You can tell him. You'll get your chance."

"Has he spoken to you? Have you seen him at all?"

"Yes. There's going to be a court-martial. In other words, he'll decide for himself. And Anzor will sign on the dotted line. Desertion. Basically, for that I should get ... And Lyokha too. He was sort of taken on as one of us. So he has to answer for it. And now you as well. You know what the penalty is. The max."

"Well, as for me, that wasn't what my mama had me for. Actuawy, she pwophesied a great future ..."
Lyokha informed them.

"But what about you?" Artyom asked Homer. "Why did they pick you up?"

"I'm classified as a witness." Homer shrugged. "What did I do? Miller doesn't even remember me. Maybe they'll let me go."

"A witness," Artyom repeated. "Do you think he needs witnesses? I'm not exactly a deserter either. If we don't convince him ... If he turns pigheaded ... We're all done for."

"What about Ilya?"

Artyom turned round and looked at Ilya Stepanovich. He was sitting on the cold floor, with his eyes fixed on Artyom. Their glances met and he came to his senses.

"Is it all true? About the Reich? About Yevgeny Petrovich? About his daughter?"

"There was an envelope with photographs. I held it in my own hands. And that's what Bessolov said. I think it's true."

"He ran away. The Führer. Ran away."

"I know. Now they're searching for him, want to bring him back. They say they'll build a new Reich there, all of them together."

"I had ... a daughter ... too," said Ilya Stepanovich, gulping with a dry throat. "And they took her away. And ... And you say he ... He kept his daughter. For himself."

Artyom nodded. Ilya Stepanovich hid behind his knees, in a shell.

"Can they really still be there?" said Homer. "Right until now? The state authorities? And they run the whole Metro?"

"Yes, they do. But that's what makes them vulnerable. If we can smoke them out of there ... Arrest them ... We can let everyone out at last! Onto the surface! We can all go out. Eh?"

"Well, yes."

“We just have to convince Miller. Explain to him how they pulled the wool over his eyes too.”

They pondered for a while. Each focused on his own thoughts, probably.

Feet scraped in the corridor. A tiny window at face height grated open. A figure appeared behind the wire grille. It wasn't tall enough.

“Artyom!”

He shuddered. Walked over to the door. Whispered.

“Anya?”

“Why did you come here? What have you come back for? He'll get rid of you.”

“I have to get my guys out. And I want to see your father ... One more time. The last time. Talk to him. He doesn't know everything. He won't ... He'll change his mind. I just need to talk to him. Can you ask?”

“I can't do anything. He doesn't listen to me anymore.”

“I need to explain to him! You tell him that. About the Invisible Observers!”

“Listen. He's arranged a trial. Today. There'll be a comrades' court instead of a court-martial.”

“A comrades' court?” Letyaga asked with a start. “What does he want that circus for?”

“Yes, what for?” Artyom asked.

“I don't know ...” Anya said in a broken voice. “Because of me. He wants everyone to condemn you. All of you. So it's not just his personal decision.”

“Anechka ... Let him do it. A comrades' court is good ... It's good everyone will be there. Let them listen. I'll tell all of them. Then we'll see who comes out on top. Don't worry. Thanks for telling me.”

“It won't do any good. More than half of them are from Hansa. They'll vote the way they're supposed to. Even if all of ours ... They won't have enough votes.”

“But we'll give it a try. Give it a try. Thank you for coming. I was wondering how I could get to talk to the boys. And now here he himself ... He's giving me a chance.”

“Hey, Anya!” someone hissed in the corridor. “Cut it out.”

“Artyom ...” The little shutter slid shut. Anya disappeared. “I ...”

They took her away.

“Listen. We can do this. Letyaga? Do you hear me? If you back me up—it will all work out.”

“How?”

“Bessolov has to come for Sasha soon. To TsvetnoI Boulevard. If we just have even a few fighting men ... He always has only a couple of bodyguards with him. We'll take him. Deliver him to the bunker. To Taganskaya Station, via KitaI Gorod. And the bunker itself has almost no defenses. If they open it ... For Bessolov ... From the inside ...”

“You can't decide anything with just a couple of men.”

“I thought about that. I sailed here through the Reich. The water level has already gone down. Chekhov is almost dry. And there are newspapers floating everywhere. Homer? Don't they have a print shop there? At Chekhov Station?”

“Yes, at Chekhov,” said Homer. “In the service premises.”

“And there's electricity there in some places. I saw it, maybe the printing press didn't get flooded either. What if we print a leaflet instead of their little rag? Tell the people how they're being fooled. Tell them about the Observers. About the jammers. What do you think, can the two of us handle that? Eh?”

“When I was there I ... They showed it to us. To me.”

“If we can get in there ... We can use their whole system ... We'll print a couple of thousand leaflets at least! And hand them out to people at Taganskaya Station. And along the way too ... Read this and pass it on to someone else. At KitaI Gorod ... And right there in the leaflet we'll tell them about the bunker! Take a crowd of people to the entrance. Bessolov will open up for us, the bastard. He won't have any choice ... And that's all! Let them tell the people the truth to their faces! Then we won't be alone, Letyaga. And even storming the place doesn't work immediately ... The leaflets will spread round the

Metro anyway!”

“Do we have to wet the people from Taganskaya Station into the bunker?” Lyokha asked. “Aw of them, weawy?”

“The more, the better. Let them take a look for themselves at the cushy life these greasy bastards have and always have had. When they see that, maybe they’ll believe all the rest. Eh? Right, Lyokha! Can we do it, granddad?”

“Theoretically ...” said Homer. “If the paper survived. They stored it in plastic, actually ... So it wouldn’t get damp. It could have survived.”

“Okay, Letyaga? What are our boys saying? Have they already forgotten everyone the Reds trampled in the dirt?”

“What do you ... ?” Letyaga sighed. “How could they forget?”

“So we have a plan. I realize it’s risky. But it could work. Eh?”

“It could,” Lyokha admitted.

“Do you think they’ll just allow us to hand out those leaflets?” Homer asked doubtfully. “If things here are as you say ... If the state hasn’t disappeared ... Do you even have any idea what our state is like?”

“No, and bollocks to it anyway, granddad! We have to try. We just have to try! We have to tell people everything! We have to let them out!”

Homer nodded.

“And you ... What are you going to do up on the surface? When we go out?” he asked Artyom. “Where at least? Have you decided?”

“Live! Like before all this! We’ll figure that out up there! Like people! Isn’t that clear?”

“Not very,” Homer sighed. “Take me now. I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“What difference does it make? Plant mushrooms if you like, even grain. I’m willing. If it’s up there. But first of all ... There’s a huge world up there. You can walk right round it. Find yourself a place ... One after your own heart. A city ... Or the shore of an ocean. Why, aren’t you offended by the fact that a bunch of ghouls has decided for us that we’ll never see all of this?”

“And they sit there guzzwing sawads wound the cwock!” Lyokha added.

“There has to be a reason,” Letyaga reeled out again.

“There is a reason! Open spaces make them feel sick and dizzy. And they keep you with them like a domesticated animal.”

“We’ll knock them to hell out of that fucking bunker,” the apostle decided. “You’re pwan’s okay. Just as wong as they don’t stwing us up.”

“Do you understand, brother?” Artyom took hold of Letyaga’s massive shoulder. “Up there you’ll do more for people! What was that oath you swore about? Helping some red-bellied rats shoot at their own people? You swore to protect people! All of them! The Metro! If we lead them out onto the surface—then that’s the place where they’ll really need us! The people! Because we, the Order, have experience. We know how to do things. up there. We understand the risks. We know the wild animals ... All about the radiation level. Our place is up there! Not here! Not slitting peoples’ throats if they come here from somewhere else. But helping our people reach land that’s alive! Well! Agreed?”

“Sure, okay. Agreed,” Letyaga mumbled.

“Granddad?”

“I don’t know.”

“I realize it’s frightening for you to go up on the surface. After being stuck underground all these years. You understand everything down here. It’s kind of dark and cramped, but it’s your own place already, right? And going up on top is somehow ... And you’re not the only one. At Komsomol I called for people to follow me ... Not a single soul believed; no one went. You’re not to blame. And they’re not to blame either. Those bastards in the bunker are to blame, that’s who. They lied to you; they lied to all of us. They

taught us to be moles. They persuaded us that we're worms. But it's all lies, and it's built on lies. If we don't tell them the truth, if you—you've got the skill! Right, Ilya Stepanich? He's got real talent? If you don't tell the truth about the dead bodies in the barrows, about the metal bars, about my tunnel, about the dogs' feeding pits, about the machine guns at Komsomol Station—who's going to tell them? No one! I know they won't believe it. Not immediately they won't. No one believed me! You still don't completely believe me! It's hard to believe something like that ... But it has to be done. Let them point their fingers at us. Let them say we're fucking psychos. Let them think we're the enemy. Someone must tell them. Let them have their doubts ... But what if someone does believe it? And someone follows us? Eh? We have to do it for the people. Even if they'll be against it right now. They'll understand later. Or what will you do? Publish another fascist pamphlet?"

Ilya Stepanovich didn't even show his face from behind the shell of his knees, as if he had died. When the world shattered, a piece of shrapnel had hit him in the heart.

"Oh, no. "Homer shook his head. "That's all over with."

"That's all, then? If we get a chance—we'll do it? Are you all with me?"

"Yes!" Lyokha responded. "We'll fuck the bourgeoisie!"

* * *

The time until the trial started coiling up into a spiral spring—the tighter it got, the slower it contracted. Artyom spoke to the jailers, demanding to see Miller—but they had black knitted-wool faces; they didn't recognize Artyom, and Miller didn't want to remember Artyom either.

Why was Svyatoslav Konstantinovich dragging his feet, what was he doing? Was he erecting the gallows in advance, because he already knew how the Order would vote, because he had already discussed and pondered every soldier's vote with him?

But Artyom prepared anyway.

He strode round the cell, stepping on the others' feet, repeating to himself everything that he had to say. He would only have one chance. To save himself, to rescue Letyaga and Lyokha. To burn out the rats' nest and liberate the people from the rats.

It's good that it's a comrades' court, he kept telling himself. That's the right thing. They're not stone idols. They're not made of clay or granite. Artyom might only have served one year with them, but that year was worth seven others. They were all sewn tight to each other with a single red thread. Timur, Prince, Sam. Let Miller put up his gallows. It wasn't that easy to condemn your own brother to death.

They arrived suddenly.

And called the prisoners out one by one.

"Letyaga!"

The big man hunched his bearish shoulders: He let them put the handcuffs on.

How was he?

While Artyom was talking to him, Letyaga seemed to be picking up his furious infection and started nodding along in time. But once Artyom fell silent, Letyaga's fever subsided and passed off, unable to maintain itself. Letyaga was one of those who decide once and for all, for the rest of their lives, what they'll think in this life and the view they'll take of every single subject in it. And he had decided firmly a long time ago. To his thick skin the new truth wasn't even like shotgun pellets; it was like salt.

"Zvonarev!"

That turned out to be Lyokha. There you go: Miller had managed to find out more about him than Artyom had. He wondered if the others had been questioned. They cuffed Lyokha's hands too. As they led him away, he looked back at Artyom.

"Tyomich! You mustn't fow things up."

A sacred precept.

"Dark!"

Artyom's heart started racing. He'd thought he could breeze through it, but his heart was flustered and agitated anyway. That was plain stupid. A week ago you weren't counting on lasting any longer than this week, were you? So now the time's up. Right?

No. Wrong. That wasn't going to happen.

He couldn't croak now. Now was too soon.

"What was that you told me, granddad? Everyone has his own end of the line?"

Homer raised his head. He gave a faint smile, weary and surprised.

"You remembered?"

"I couldn't forget it."

"Let's have your hands!" they barked.

He held out his wrists: They ringed them.

"There can be lots of ends of the line," Homer corrected him. "But each person has only one final destination. That's what you have to find. The destination."

"You don't think this is it?" Artyom asked him, examining the handcuffs again.

"I don't think it's the end of the line yet," said Homer.

Steely fingers squeezed Artyom's neck and bent him down closer to the floor. And they jerked his hands behind his back to make him peck better.

"Be seeing you," Artyom said to the old man.

He ran through the corridors with his armed escorts, his eyes thrust down into the worn granite, with the escorts doing Artyom's looking and Artyom doing their thinking. There's never a bad moment for a sermon.

"Guys ... I don't know if you're ours or from Hansa ... You're being tricked. All of you. All of us. Do you know about the jammers? They're only there to keep us stuck in the Metro ..."

They stopped.

A solid bone slid across his temple, and sticky tape cracked as it unrolled. They sealed off his mouth with a wide, black strip. Then stuck another one over it, crisscross style.

And they dragged him on.

Just like that.

Now he broke into a sweat. What if they didn't take it off? If they didn't let him say anything?

They carried him out into a hall. Into Arbat Station.

The station was completely full of no one but men in black. Outsiders had been asked to disperse while the Order lynched its own. The men who had gathered here weren't wearing masks. Voting by roll-call, Artyom guessed. Afterwards every man would have to answer for his vote; they'd have to remember about it, if it was suddenly decided to pardon him.

They pushed him into an empty circle of space. Lyokha and Letyaga were already there. Both restrained; hands behind their backs and faces redecorated at the front. They must have wandered off course on the way here and been given directions.

Letyaga saw the black cross where Artyom's mouth should be and started blinking his crossed eyes. Artyom jerked too: Take it off! He started looking round for Miller, to demand justice from him.

And Miller was soon rolled out by Anzor.

But Miller didn't even see Artyom; for some reason he kept looking in different directions. Artyom wriggled and squirmed like a tapeworm on a hot skillet with his glued-up mouth, biting at his rusty-tasting lips, so that maybe he could at least say everything through a little hole in them. But the tape was wide, and the glue had a grip of iron.

They hadn't started yet.

Finally Homer and Ilya Stepanovich were pushed through the crowd. They weren't restrained: witnesses. What testimony would they give? Artyom fixed his gaze on the burnt-out teacher. He had heard

everything, back there in the cell. What would he decide to tell? had he been bought? Artyom recalled Dietmar, with his simple and precise formula for winding people round his little finger. He recalled how he had slurped down swill to the repose of Dietmar's soul, remembering his premonition about Ilya Stepanovich.

Again and again he tried to tear his lips apart, but everything was firmly stuck. His mouth had grown shut.

"We're ready," said Anzor.

"This is a hearing of a case of desertion and treason by three of our former comrades," Svyatoslav Konstantinovich hissed from his throne. "Letyaga, Artyom, and a newly accepted member. Zvonarev. Acting by previous collusion. They sabotaged two highly important assignments. The goal of which was to halt a war between the Reds and the Reich. In our interest. And the interest of the entire Metro. They obstructed the delivery of a dispatch with an ultimatum for the Führer. And then the operation to coerce Moskvín into peace. At the center of the collusion stands Artyom Dark. In our opinion, Letyaga simply fell under his influence. Regardless of circumstances, we demand the death penalty for Artyom. We are prepared to discuss Letyaga's case. The third accused is Artyom's hanger-on. A spy, basically. He should be liquidated too."

"Are you totawy off your wocker? What have I done? Or Artyom!"

"Right. Is this one mentally incompetent? Restrain him."

Someone kicked Lyokha from behind and shut his chipped teeth.

"But what's that on Artyom's mouth?" someone muttered in the crowd. "How's he going to speak for himself?"

"There are grounds for believing that he has lost his mind," Miller replied reluctantly. "Don't worry; his turn will come; we'll hear him out. You'll be convinced for yourselves. Everything is clear to me as it is. But we decide fair and square. With open and general voting. We'll start with Letyaga. Then we have the witnesses. We'll vote on Letyaga. Then on the subnormal one, then Artyom. I wish to say specifically that this is not some kind of slapstick show. You must give me your answer with all due severity. A former relative, that's not important. The man betrayed us. The law applies to everyone. I especially brought him before a comrades' court so that afterwards there wouldn't be any doubts. Is that clear?"

The crowd started buzzing, but it only managed to buzz in chorus, only as a team, drawn up in ranks.

"Right, Letyaga. Tell us the facts. When Artyom Dark made his first attempt to recruit you and what he said. How he made you hand over the secret dispatch. And the details of how he disrupted the negotiations with Moskvín. The men can know. We have no secrets here. And in whose interest Dark was acting."

Miller's face was as calm as a paralytic's. But with his one live arm he had clutched the rim of his chair's wheel so hard that the fingers were white. He looked at Letyaga with eyes of bronze, and his pupils were holes hollowed out in the bronze.

Letyaga stepped forward like a bear on a chain. He moved his head about and squinted guiltily at Artyom. He breathed out noisily, expelling surplus air. Looked down at the granite. The crowd was silent. Artyom couldn't part his lips; Lyokha was chewing on bloody jelly.

"We watched Artyom for a long time," Letyaga began. "All last year. We knew that he went up onto the surface several times a week. He walked out of the Exhibition of Economic Achievements Station and went to the Tricolor high-rises out along the Yaroslavl Highway. We had a position fitted out opposite them. We watched. Several times a week he tried to make contact by radio."

Letyaga was selling him out. As Artyom listened, he jabbed his tongue against the bitter glue and bleated through his nostrils. The helplessness pressed down on him heavily—like cold, sharp-edged crushed stone, like damp, freshly chopped soil—weighing down on his legs, on his arms, on his chest.

Artyom's comrades were here: Sam, Styopa, Timur, Prince. He thought he glimpsed Anya, squeezed

in behind the men's shoulders. He looked closer—was it really her? He lost her.

“You know ...” Letyaga said. “That the war with the West isn't over. That they're just waiting for us to give ourselves away. Of course, we immediately suspected that Artyom was trying to get in contact with someone there. To unmask us. Perhaps even to direct attacks against us ... He was a new man. And the colonel said: watch him. Regardless of ... Well, in a nutshell. And this other business ... With the radio center. You've already heard about it, probably.”

The men started rustling.

Anya!

Anya appeared. She tore herself out of someone's clawed hand and squeezed through into the front row. She fixed her eyes on Artyom and held him in their grip.

“You're wandering,” Miller said severely. “First tell about the dispatch.”

“Yes. Well. It's like this. Basically, everything was more or less clear about Artyom. That he was probably working for the enemy. With the goal of destabilizing the situation. Exposing Moscow. Directing their fire. And with the dispatch ...”

Artyom jerked and squirmed, but he was held firmly. And there wasn't even a tiny little hole in his mouth for him to say something to Letyaga about A minus—and anyway, Letyaga had already repaid that debt, And Artyom had borrowed a load of blood from Bessolov. But what for? So he could hobble to the noose on his own?

Letyaga didn't want to see him anymore.

He was already speaking clearly and concisely, as if he was playing on a disk.

In the crowd occasional men whom Artyom knew were already squinting at him as if he was a stranger, some kind of poisonous creature that should be crushed.

“And what happened with Moskvin?” Miller asked.

“With Moskvin,” Letyaga repeated after him. “The story with Moskvin was this: Artyom dragged me out of the bunker when we were stuck in there, fighting Korbut and his specials. When we buried Number Ten, Android, Ullman, Red, Antonchik ...”

“I remember all of them,” Miller interrupted. “Don't go on.”

“Yes, you remember all of them. You've got that list. We've all seen it. And I almost croaked there. And Artyom said to me: Do you realize that we just brought cartridges, twenty thousand cartridges—to the Reds? To Moskvin. That we brought them to the bastards who killed our boys? On Miller's orders. I realized. That we'd sold their memory. I realized what they died for. For nothing. That it was politics.”

“Letyaga!”

“That politics is more important. That's it's war yesterday, peace today. It's too bad the boys all croaked for nothing yesterday, when there was war, because today there's peace. Today we'll load those scumbags' guns with twenty thousand cartridges so tomorrow they can mow down the rest of our boys with them when there's a war again.”

“That's enough!”

“And then Artyom said there aren't any Reds or fascists at all. And there isn't any Order. There's only this sort of structure. The Invisible Observers. Or fuck knows who; it makes no difference. And we're one section of this structure, and the Reds are another. And it wasn't a genuine war, and the defense of the bunker was a load of crap. It's all a show. And what I wonder is—maybe drinking vodka with our dead boys is all a show too?”

“Letyaga!”

“Let him speak!” someone shouted from the crowd. “Let him have the floor! Letyaga's our man! One of us! Don't shut his mouth!”

“Let him go! What's the problem?”

“Right, Letyaga has finished ... And by the way, both my legs ...”

“And Artyom said—so where was Hansa in the bunker, then? Why did they only help us out with men afterwards, and not when we asked them? And is that what he traded his legs for?”

“Letyaga for commander!” someone roared.

And then there was a raid click from somewhere and Letyaga sprayed a red stain onto the beautiful white wall behind him. He sputtered red, went limp, sat down, and stretched out facedown on the floor. The back of his head had disappeared, and a crater of flesh had opened up in its place.

And one exactly like it immediately opened up somewhere in Artyom’s soul.

“Letyaga!”

“Letyaaaaga! This is Hansa!”

“Smash Hansa!”

Someone flying by swept Miller out of his armchair. He fell on the granite not far from the thick puddle and started twitching his arm like a cockroach turned over on its back, trying to get up; the wheels spun and the spokes flashed, but men were already clashing above him, indistinguishable from each other, but everyone knowing for certain who was against him and who was with him.

They grabbed Artyom, dragged him away, tore off the tape, and let him speak, shielding him with their chests. They dragged out Lyokha, and Artyom dragged out Homer; now they were in a circle of friends; the men were fighting brutally, with bare hands—no one was allowed to bring weapons into the court, apart from the escorts and executioners.

“A chance! A chance!” Artyom yelled into Lyokha’s ear as they were unlocking Lyokha’s bracelets with the keys grabbed from the escorts. “We take the men! To Tsvetnoi! And Homer! To the Reich! To the print shop! We’ll do everything! According to plan!”

“Yes, sir! Yes sir!” Lyokha yelled.

The two waves that had clashed started separating, moving apart from the line of schism: One took dead Letyaga with it; the other took Miller, twisting his arm about, and the invalid chair with the bent wheels.

But Artyom couldn’t run off with all the others yet. He darted out of the crowd and started looking round. Where was she?

“Hey! Heeey!” someone bawled to him from that direction.

They showed her to him, grabbed by the hair, with her shirt torn: Anya.

“Where’s the ringleader? Give us Dark! We’ve got his wife!”

“Anya!”

“Come over here, creep! Or we’ll rip her foul mouth ... We’ll let everyone here shag the bitch ... Got that? Crawl over here to us, you shit!”

“Don’t you dare!”

Anya was jerking about and cursing them; one bruised eye was already turning black. The brown nipple of one breast protruded in pitiful defiance.

Artyom caught hold of Homer’s hand.

“Leaflets! About the jammers, about the survivors, about the Observers! About how we’re all being duped! The truth! The truth, granddad!”

Homer nodded.

“Lyokha! You know him! You know his face! Bessolov! Sasha’s fancy man. There’s no one but you! Take some men from here. To Tsvetnoi. Get that rat to ...”

“That’s enough, Dark!”

“Either he lets you in, or you waste him there and then! Don’t touch her, you motherfuckers.”

Lyokha blinked.

“That’s it!” Artyom shouted to the men. “That’s it! I’m coming! I’m coming to you! Let her go! Well?”

He and Anya met for half a second—between two opposed poles of black. Met and parted.



CHAPTER 22

— THE TRUTH —

Arbat's absent population came seething out of the passages on its way back to the station: The cordon that was keeping it well away from the rigged trial had gotten involved in the general affray. The Order's dissenters withdrew from the station in various directions; Artyom, squeezed in between strangers, couldn't see this any longer, but he shouted to everyone from behind the blank, black backs.

"The world is still there! We're not alone! They're deceiving you. You can leave the Metro! They're lying to you! Don't believe them!"

Then they fastened his mouth shut again.

The men in the Order who had remained loyal to Miller withdrew to his embassy at Arbat Station. They seated the crumpled colonel on his bent wheelchair and set him in his legitimate place—that office with the shot glass and the lists.

Artyom and Ilya Stepanovich, who had also been noted down as a mutineer, were held in a cubbyhole beside Miller's reception area. They were guarded by unfamiliar soldiers. Men walked into the colonel's office and inquired behind the loosely closed door whether it was time to do away with the prisoners, but Svyatoslav Konstantinovich postponed his decision.

A cold draft wandered along the corridor, carrying tatters of conversations in through cracks under the doors: Some from the station, others from the colonel's office. They could hear an agitated crowd accumulating at Arbat. People were telling each other what had happened to the Order and repeating Artyom's bellowing in a cracked echo.

It was a good thing that he'd handed himself over in exchange for Anya, Artyom thought.

If only she had escaped!

Ilya Stepanovich goggled at the men in black; he was shuddering violently. There was a smell of urine. Maybe he was imagining to himself for the time being the way a bullet would drill its way into his forehead. But he wasn't whining at all. Just muttering almost inaudibly.

"Of course, he can do anything he likes. His daughter has no fingers. Did he hand her over? No, he kept her. He probably sees her. Watches her growing up. Plays with her. And his wife is alive. She didn't hang herself. With her tights. She's not dangling from the ceiling. With her tongue sticking out. Her black tongue."

One of the men guarding them had a watch on his right wrist. On its topsy-turvy hands Artyom noted infinity. He calculated how much time Homer would need to reach the Reich. Working remotely, Artyom figured out the workings of the printing press with him, looked for dry paper and dictated the text to the old man. They didn't even have to carry the leaflets throughout the whole Metro. If they could deliver them to Polis and Tsvetnoi, at least, everything would creep farther on from there of its own accord.

Apart from Lyokha and Homer, no one knew about the plan. All the Hansans in the Order were here: with Miller. Holding back the swarm that was pressing forward.

A voice barked in the office.

"Call Bessolov's number! Again! I need to talk to him! In person!"

Lost, knocked out of his chariot and off his stride, he kept trying to call his master. He couldn't get through. So Lyokha still had a chance to find Bessolov before Miller located him

And then, after dropping Homer off at Chekhov Station in his own mind, Artyom rowed on remotely with Lyokha to the brothel. Operating remotely he stole through the hubbub and the whoring under cover of the Order's veterans, invisibly cordoned off Sasha's little shanty and finished off his former unsuccessful attempt on Bessolov's life for Lyokha and himself. No, he took him hostage and led a combat

team to the bunker.

“Dial him again! Again!”

The inverted minute hand moved backwards. It measured off half an hour, three quarters, an hour. The droning in the station was growing louder. The local administrators, who had been sent by the managers of Polis, shouted at people uncertainly. But the gawkers didn't want to disperse. They asked the cordon what had happened, and who the madman was who had howled about survivors in other cities on the earth.

“And what did mine have? A little tail. The tail could have been removed. Right there. Such a sweet little mite. Narine said, Let's call her after your mother if it's a girl. Marina, that is. Marina Ilinichna. Marina Ilinichna Shkurkina.”

Artyom suddenly realized that Ilya Stepanovich wasn't talking to himself; he was telling Artyom about it, even though he wasn't looking him in the eyes. Artyom shook his head in agreement, but he was thinking his own thoughts.

“Shut your gob!” a guard wheezed to Ilya. “My head's splitting from all your muttering! Shut it, I said, or I'll whack you right here. We've got to waste both of you anyway!”

“Marina Ilinichna!” Ilya whispered then, too quietly for the guard to hear, but clearly enough for Artyom. “Little Marina Ilinichna. Her grandmother would have been delighted.”

But would Lyokha be able to grab Bessolov?

And take him though half the Metro as a prisoner? After all, he hadn't been specially trained for that. He was a broker, not a soldier or a killer. Back at the radio center he had managed somehow, but there they had been shooting at him and he didn't have to plan anything, only survive and get out of a tight corner.

Never mind; he could do it.

The veterans would help. He'd be able to explain everything to them, wouldn't he?

He would. That was what an apostle was for. He had been through everything together with Artyom. He didn't have to be convinced; nothing had to be proved to him. He remembered everything; he felt everything himself.

“I don't give a rat's ass if he doesn't answer! Keep calling!”

What if Bessolov had already been taken? What if they were already dragging that louse with a bag over his head towards the secret entrance of their rusty bunker from down-and-out Taganskaya Station? If only Homer was in time with the leaflets. But even without the leaflets ... He knew everything as well, didn't he? If the print shop couldn't be brought back to life, he could do it himself and tell everyone about everything. Like that other Homer, the real one ...

Someone scrabbled at the outside of the door.

They walked in, preoccupied and sullen, three of them: one Brahmin in a robe, one military officer in a tall peaked cap with a double-headed eagle, and some kind of civilian. They knocked at Miller's office and mumbled outside the door in collective anxiety. They were also looking for an answer to certain questions.

Something was maturing out there in the station. Fermenting, taking shape, rising up. And the three who had been sent to Miller wanted to halt this fermentation and keep a lid on it.

Miller barked back raggedly and angrily.

The office door opened slightly.

“We'll call a session of the Council of Polis. We have no right to remain silent! Let everyone speak there. And then we'll inform the population. In accordance with the outcome. And this schism of yours ... Deal with it yourself somehow!”

“And what if the Reich really is a fake,” Ilya interrupted. “If Yevgeny Petrovich himself is a fake and a traitor, if everything they have there is fake, then what about me, what do I do, what did they do that

to Marina with her little tail for, and what did Narine hang herself with her tights for, and why did it happen to me, and what for? They tell me write, but write what? How can you write that down? what words can you use?"

But Artyom's mouth was stuffed with rotten rags; he couldn't answer and he couldn't even ask Ilya Stepanovich to be quiet.

The unshorn Brahmin rustled towards the way out, sweeping the dust with his robe; the officer strode after him, smelling of stale sweat and unwashed underwear, and the unidentified civilian trotted by last. The end of the audience.

"Get through to him!"

The trinity wafted away, fitted through a doorway compressed to the size of a matchbox at the end of the corridor, and emerged to the people.

"The truth!" blazed in from outside through the open door.

Ilya Stepanovich got up along the wall and reached out in the direction of the shouting, leaning himself bodily towards it, but a wool-faced man stopped him short and planted a fist in his solar plexus.

And everything slammed shut again.

There, look: The people finally wanted to know, and Artyom had a stinking rag in his mouth again. That was okay; now others could speak for him. Both speak and act. He had sent out messengers in all directions; now it wasn't so terrible to croak.

He could hear those three taking turns to purr something soothing to the awakened crowd. It shouted questions; it didn't want lullabies.

Thanks, Letyaga, Artyom thought.

A pity you died.

Strange that you died.

How come you'll never squint at me again with that eye of yours? You won't be able to crack jokes. Who can I borrow blood from now? Forgive me for doubting you at the very last moment, Letyaga. But then you doubted me at the very last moment, didn't you?

You doubted, but you said everything right; so they would take the noose off my neck.

A pity you can't hear the people out there in the station, asking for the truth.

The two of us will open the hermetic doors for them now: you and me. Together we'll let them up and out.

And somewhere the others, our conspirators, are doing their own bit. Homer's printing leaflets; the apostle's leading Bessolov along with a gun barrel pressed against his pale temple—to unseal the bunker. Let Miller thrash about frantically here—a dog without a master.

What are they going to talk about at the Council of Polis? About how to press the lid down tighter and screw it on? About how to crush all the rebels quickly, one by one, so the rumors of the resurrected world won't spread through the Metro?

"Call! Call anywhere you like! Call Tsvetnoi!"

They won't crush all of them.

"Tell us!" voices bellowed outside.

"Are you telling the truth?" Ilya Stepanovich asked Artyom. "Everything that you told Homer? Is it true?"

Artyom nodded to him. What was being smelted inside the little teacher's head? What was it being cast into?

The owner of the watch—two shifty eyes in holes—kept raising the hands to his face more and more often. A presentiment of the solidifying irreversibility of everything that was happening in the Metro leaked out through the cracks from the colonel's office into this lobby of the reception area.

He thought about Anya again.

About how stubborn her love had proved to be.

Artyom was arranged differently on the inside: He'd felt the first coolness from Anya—and started cooling in response. As if he couldn't radiate love himself, but only reflected Anna's love with his own concave soul. He sensed the diffuse light of attention on him—gathered it into a beam and directed it back. He inflamed her with it—and gathered more warmth in reply. But the moment Anya started to fade, he had nothing to repay her with. And her light had grown feebler and feebler like that until it went out completely and he stopped believing, until their future dried out and crumbled away in his mind.

But Anya's heart seemed to work the other way round, back to front. It seemed like she didn't need him any longer—because of his mean-spirited deafness, his malign obstinacy, his unwillingness to compromise on his own idiotic dreams and his disdain for hers. Maybe she really had been thinking of dropping Artyom first. The wick only had enough oil left on it to smoke. But as soon as he left, she had flared up again—with obdurate desperation. So intensely that the heat had started grilling his eyes and he wanted to cover them with his hand. He had covered them—and the heat still reached him anyway. Anya was reflected in it—crookedly and comically—but the image was growing clearer and brighter.

Love—what a strange fuel!

“No answer?”

Maybe there's nowhere for you to call now, dad. Enough time has gone by. If the apostle got lucky, if he's done everything just right, maybe the bunker has already been taken and gutted. The fat rats have already been lined up in ranks at Taganskaya Station, in their stupid outfits, and they're reciting their latest geography lesson for the teacher, like schoolkids.

“Anzor!”

Anzor walked in and looked Artyom and Ilya up and down with a hostile glare. He listened to Svyatoslav Konstantinovich's barking and rolled him out, skipping along on the wobbly wheelchair, into the corridor.

“What do we do with these?” asked the one with the watch.

“I haven't decided yet. After the Council,” Miller hissed without turning round.

He hadn't gotten through on the phone.

“Do we keep them here?”

“Yes. No, wait. Let me take them with me. They might come in useful. Only make sure they keep their mouths shut.”

They took them under the arms and lifted them off the floor—Artyom with his taped-up mouth and Ilya with his pissed pants. And led them out into gleaming Arbat Station. They formed up in a wedge and forced their way through the crowd. They marched through the whole station, defiantly. They turned deaf and didn't hear the people shouting to them.

The Council of Polis convened right here: That was why Miller required an office at Arbat Station.

The entire formation remained outside—Artyom and Ilya weren't summoned into the Council either. The Order formed up like a hedgehog, with its bristles raised to close off the entrance to rubberneckers. Miller and Anzor went in; then a few late Brahmins walked through and the doors closed.

“They say they picked up some signals or other ...” voices rustled on all sides.

“It seems like we're not the only ones who survived ...”

“But where else? Who? Who said so?”

“That will all be clear when they come out. They're conferring.”

“But how could something like that happen? They haven't said anything all these years ... And then—take that—”

“The Order found out. There was a skirmish over whether to tell or not.

“But who are they? On the bench? Who's the one tied up?”

“They caught some terrorists. They'll tell us soon.”

Artyom couldn't see the people whispering. Instead of them he saw identical black backs, the shoulder straps of bulletproof vests, the woolly backs of heads and wide-straddled boots. But he could sense them: Their curiosity set the air ringing; the oxygen was burning up; the walls were closing in. There were hundreds of them here. Just let Miller try to make them wait for his answers.

Suddenly there was a commotion.

Someone was forcing his way through the crush—skillfully and determinedly.

“To the Council! Make way!”

The men in the cordon were confused too. At first they grabbed hold of each other tighter than ever. Then they swayed doubtfully.

Was that Timur's voice? A comrade of Letyaga and Artyom. Another schismatic, Timur ... He had left together with Lyokha and Homer, with rescued Anya! Why was he here? Why had he come back? He was storming the bunker right now. Or had he already taken it? had he brought Bessolov's severed head to the Council session?

“Make way! By invitation of the Council!”

The cordon tore open—they let Timur through into the circle, and together with him Prince and Luka; both from the old team. Timur noticed Artyom on the bench and nodded to him, but didn't intervene for him. He walked inside. Luka and Prince stayed on guard.

What were they talking about? What were they haggling over? Stalling for time? Setting ultimatums? Begging for forgiveness? Studying the head on a dish?

Inside there was silence.

Had all of them in there been poisoned?

“Make way! Make way! To the Council!”

Who was it this time?

The crowd parted less willingly now, without the same respect, grumbling: Why the hell should we? Artyom craned his neck. The black circle didn't part immediately for these people either.

He didn't see him immediately.

The first one to step through the cordon was Bessolov.

Alive, pale, intense, and silent. Lyokha the apostle appeared behind him. Alexei Felixovich cast a gloomy glance over Artyom, but didn't greet him. Lyokha, on the contrary, nodded. They both walked inside. had the apostle brought a hostage? There were another two members of the Order with him, they stayed outside.

Artyom leapt up off the bench and started shouting his questions into the rag. They struck him behind the knees to make him fall back again, and he fell. Luka and Prince hissed at the man who chopped him down, and they all grabbed their holsters.

They waited for a moment and then eased back.

Everything was being decided behind the doors now, and not here.

It was getting really stuffy—like at Komsomol Station, like right in front of the machine guns. People pressed forward and the cordon shrank slowly, although it had no right to yield its positions. The bronze chandeliers, hoops two meters wide that weighed half a tonne, seemed to sway on their chains as if in a wind—so many people here were breathing in and out in unison.

Suddenly.

A different sound flew across the station. A cough.

The soldiers in the cordon roused themselves; the crowd fell silent and started gazing round. Staccato coughing, from numerous speakers at the same time. It turned out that this place also had its own public address system.

“Testing. Testing. One, two. One, two.”

Right across the station—in a deep, pleasant voice.

“Dear citizens. Your attention, please. An important announcement will be made shortly. Do not disperse.”

“Give us the truth! Tell us the truth!” They shouted back to the invisible announcer.

But he merely cleared his throat and fell silent.

“Something important ...”

“Could it really be ...”

“Mind-blowing ...”

It was only when time came to a complete stop that the door opened. A fat man wearing a brown suit walked out into the black circle with a businesslike air; his eyes were glassed in, and his broad forehead swept back and up in a humped bridge to the back of his head. His assistant gave the fat man a hoist up, and he scrambled onto the marble bench beside Artyom; that way the crowd could see him.

“The Chairman of the Council ... Himself ...”

Then Miller and Anzor appeared in the doorway, with Timur following. They separated, moving away from the bench in opposite directions.

The fat man blew his nose. He wiped his sweaty forehead with the snotty handkerchief, then used it to clean his lenses and set his glasses back on the bridge of his nose.

“Citizens. We have gathered here today. The reason was a rather unpleasant event. Within the highly respected Order, which is called upon to safeguard all of us ... There has been a disagreement, so to speak. We’ll come back to that in a while.”

“Stop pussyfooting about! Give it to us straight!”

“Yes. Of course. Straight to the essence. The point is that we have established. It is absolutely incredible, of course. But we have incontrovertible proof. Which we will present in due course, have no doubt about that. Well then. We have established quite certainly that. That Moscow is not the only city to have survived in the Last War. We have intercepted a radio broadcast.”

The crowd was struck dumb. The sounds died—all the other sounds, apart from the tedious, musty voice of the man in brown.

Mute Artyom looked up at him as if he was an oracle. The way he had looked at Letyaga before the shot. As if he was a saint.

“We are prepared to allow you to listen to it. But first a few words. For me personally, as for all of you, this is a genuine shock. The point is that the broadcast comes from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Dear citizens, comrades, brothers. You understand what that means. It means that the enemy who annihilated our country, who sent a hundred and forty million of our compatriots to their graves—Parents, children, wives, husbands—that enemy is still alive. He wasn’t finished off. The war is not yet over. None of us can feel safe anymore. A new, final blow could be struck at us at any moment if we betray our presence in any way at all.”

Artyom bellowed and roared, slipped off the bench, and fell on the cold floor.

“For all these years only one thing has saved us. The fact that we lived in the Metro. The fact that we were certain the surface was not fit for us to live there. Thanks to that we have survived. And now it is our only chance to continue to survive. I know. It is frightening. It is hard to believe. But I am asking you to believe it. The Council of Polis is asking you. Listen for yourselves. This is the recording that we made today. It is New York broadcasting.”

The speakers came back to life. They sneezed.

“Khkhkhkh ... Eeeeeoooo ... Shshshsh ...”

And a song thundered out. A strange, alien kind of song: in a foreign language, with drums and whooping, with trumpet fanfares and bugles; in a broken rhythm a man’s voice started half wailing, half reciting something between a hymn and a march. He was supported by a female choir. The song reverberated with an irrepressible strength. There was a defiant challenge in it. And a malign joy. And

a savage, vital energy.

It was music to which you could, you had to, move and dance to—dissolutely, licentiously.

But no one under the half-tonne chandeliers in the immense hall of white stone could stir a muscle.

The chandeliers swayed as if in an earthquake. The people breathed in the thunder of drums and breathed out horror.

“As you can see ... Hear ... for yourselves ... There it is, the bestial music of cavemen ... In other words, while we suffer our privation, they continue with their debauchery. And in addition we have information that they have preserved their nuclear potential. This is an enemy who is a hundred times more dangerous. This is something we still have to grasp. Now our life can hardly remain as it was. This is the beginning of a new era. And in this connection ... Here is a declaration. Gather round.”

Timur—black hair with gray streaks, slim and sinewy, came over to the brown chairman. He leaned down to Artyom and helped him sit up. Then he climbed up on the bench.

“The veterans of the Order are outraged by the arbitrary actions of our former commander, Colonel Miller. Our comrade was killed by his henchmen instead of being given a fair trial. We apologize to the citizens of Polis for the disturbances. We announce our withdrawal from the command structure. We refuse to obey the orders of Colonel Miller.”

Timur was speaking jerkily, in a husky smoker’s voice. The best intelligence officer in the Order. Letyaga’s senior colleague and teacher. What was he planning?

“The base of the Order at Smolensk Station remains ours. We will hold an honest election for new commanders. However, we consider that in the new circumstances a continuation of conflict is impermissible. Therefore, as a new command, we swear an oath of allegiance directly to the Council of Polis. We swear to be loyal and undertake to defend Polis. Against all enemies. Both overt and covert.”

He swung round towards the man in brown and saluted him.

First a single clap rang out, then another; and then, like a scattering downpour, there came a rustling, a pattering, a drumming.

“Bravo! Hoorah! Glory!”

“Idiot!” Artyom roared at Timur with his stuffed mouth. “You great idiot! There isn’t any Polis! There isn’t any Council! You’re just swearing loyalty to a different head! Don’t believe them!”

Timur looked at him and nodded.

“We’ll get you away from them too, Tyoma. We’ll fight side by side against the Yanks yet.”

“I disagree with the way the question has been posed,” Miller said gravely from his bent wheelchair. “But I’m willing to close my eyes to that. I will not consider this a mutiny. Temporary disagreements, let us say. When the Homeland is in danger, we have no right to petty squabbles. We’ll resolve things by negotiation. Our Order has already paid too high a price. I also swear loyalty in the name of the Order to the Council of Polis. I believe that the time for internal strife is over. We no longer have any right to slaughter each other. Reds, fascists, Hansa ... First and foremost we are Russian people. We have to remember that. We are under threat from our archenemy. He doesn’t care what we believe in. As soon as he finds out that we are still alive, he will annihilate us all without any distinction!”

People listened and took it all in: No one argued or even dared to whisper. Artyom leaned his weight forward and got up onto his knees. He swayed and managed to stand up. And before the guards, spellbound by Miller, realized what was happening, he took a short run-up and butted Miller in the temple, tumbling him over onto the ground, together with his wheelchair.

“Hold him! Hold him!”

They started beating Artyom, and he tried to catch hold of the old idiot’s neck with his legs, to squeeze, crush him, and strangle him. They broke out one of his teeth, and the gag fell out.

“Lies! You’re lying! You bastards!”

There was no way to squeeze through the tightly packed crowd, and the men in black started dragging Artyom inside, through the doors. They picked Miller up and dusted him off.

“You little shit. You scum! I’ll grind you to dust. You trash. You and that ungrateful bitch. You’ll both hang. You mildew. It’s lies. All lies.”

Timur explained for him.

“This is an arrested saboteur. We have grounds for believing that he was spying. Trying to expose us. We’re checking.”

Eventually they loaded the colonel into his wheelchair and dragged Artyom inside. On that side of the doors a long corridor with numerous exits began. They dumped Artyom immediately.

And from there, in a seizure, he listened.

“Yes, Svyatoslav Konstantinovich.” The brown chairman swayed his heavy head with its receding hair. “You have spoken the golden words of a man who knows the value of human life. In this and all other matters I am in complete solidarity with you. I suggest that we dispatch our diplomats to the Red Line, Hansa, and the representatives of the Reich today, without delay. And get everyone sitting round the negotiating table. To put an end to the disagreements that have plagued us for all these years. When all’s said and done, we’re not so very different. We have to stick together now. Combine our forces. And together, collectively—we, you—must defend the Metro. Our only home, our common home. Our only home for the decades to come, if we wish to survive. Our sacred home forever!”

“Not so very different,” Ilya Stepanovich repeated after him in horror. “We’re not so very different. Us and them. First and foremost Russian people. Stick together. For what? What for. To the representatives of the Reich. Narineshka.”

But the crowd chewed up his mumbling. Battered and bruised at first by this revelation, now it was beginning to straighten up, understanding and mulling over what had been pumped into it.

“The Yanks ... All this time ... Music ... Stuffing themselves ... Dancing about ... Like animals ... But I always had the feeling ... Them and their darky hip-hop ... Here we are eating shit ... And they want to take our shit away from us ... The last thing we have left ... I knew it, I knew it ... They won’t give us any peace ... Never mind, we’ll wait it out ... We’ll hold out ... We’ve seen worse ... Maybe nothing will change ...”

“As you know, times are difficult even without this,” the man in brown continued, speaking over them all. “The mushroom disease has exhausted our reserves. We’ll have to tighten our belts even further. But if we join together, we can ... Our great power! Our people have time and again!”

He had to shout above a rising hubbub. People had finally managed to chew up and swallow the truth that they had wanted to hear.

Artyom, pulverized, sat against the wall, intently swallowing unappetizing, warm blood. He felt with his tongue at the hollows from his lost teeth.

Bessolov suddenly appeared somewhere in the corridor. Had he come out of a meeting room? Lyokha the apostle was striding behind him.

“Kill him!” Artyom hissed to Lyokha. “That’s him! He incited them!”

“Who’s this?” Alexei Felixovich didn’t recognize Artyom. “Is there another way out here? I don’t fancy going through the crowd again.”

“You forgot your waincoat,” Lyokha said to him. “Thew, wet me help you.”

“Lyokha! Lyokha! You ... What ... But you’ve ... Got to ...”

“Catch up with me!” Alexei Felixovich strode off rapidly in the opposite direction.

“Wisten ... You know, I decided ... We won’t achieve anything that way ... If we just kiw him. The system has to be changed fwom the inside! Gwaduawy. Wevowution isn’t our method. Do you understand?” Lyokha explained in a spuriously apologetic tone of voice over his shoulder to Artyom. “He’s taken me on as a consultant. An assistant. I’m going to gwaduawy ... Fwom the inside ... Fwom the

bunker ...”

“You shiteater!” Artyom wheezed, straining his voice. “You sold out for the bunker? For the grub? You sold me out for the grub? Us? Everyone?”

“What do you mean—us?” asked Lyokha, getting furious. “Who’s that—us? There isn’t any us! Nobody needs all this except you! You’ll cwoak now, but I’ll still be there, managing things.”

“Alexei!” Bessolov called to him. “Do I have to wait much longer? Is this the way you start a new job?”

Lyokha didn’t spit at Artyom in farewell; he didn’t kick him. He spun round and ran to catch up with Bessolov.

The door scraped, and Timur stuck his head in.

“Can you walk?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Get up! While they’re still speechifying. Come on!”

He jerked Artyom up by the scruff of his white waiter’s shirt, and the collar split. He set Artyom on his feet and let him lean against his shoulder.

“I’m with you!” Ilya Stepanovich whispered prayerfully. “Take me! I don’t want to be with them! Don’t leave me.”

“There’s another exit here. Let’s go that way for a start. Once the old man gathers his wits, you’re for the high jump. We’ll never get you out.”

“Where to?”

“Borovitskaya. Anka’s waiting there. And from there to Polyanka. And onwards from there. Do you have a place to hide?”

“At home. Anya ... Is she all right?”

“She’s waiting! Where should we take you?”

“To Exhibition. No need to go to Polyanka. I have to go to Chekhov, to the Reich.”

“What for? What the hell do you want at Chekhov?”

“Homer’s there. I have to see Homer.”

“Hey!” A long-haired Brahmin glanced out of a conference hall. “Where are you going?”

“Timurchik. Do you understand? The Invisible Observers. They’re keeping us here. They’re lying to all of you. They trick all of us!”

“Listen, Tyoma ... Don’t feed me all that. I don’t want to poke my nose into politics. I’m a soldier. Full stop. An officer. I can’t abandon you here. But don’t try to brainwash me with that shit of yours. Let’s just stay friends.”

What could he do with him? What could he do with all of them?

There was still a chance to prove it all to people. While they were lying about their bastard radio. He had to get there, to Chekhov. Help with the printing. Help with the distribution.

The three of them walked through corridors and passages. Painted doors banged; people walked towards them and were surprised by Artyom’s outfit and battered face. Ilya Stepanovich strode along stubbornly behind. The light blinked; the rats scattered from under their feet. Finally, a breath of creosote blew in their faces. A snug, cozy smell. This was it, Borovitskaya.

“Just a moment, I’ll find your ever-loving ... And then it’s Polyanka.”

“Not Polyanka. Chekhov. To the Reich.”

“You can discuss that with her. Stay here. Sit quiet. Just don’t let any of our guys see you, okay?”

“I will. Sit quiet. Thanks, Timurchik.”

He sat down at a long table of wooden planks. Folded his lacerated hands in front of him.

He looked round: This was his favorite station in the entire Metro.

Dark-red brick, creosote in the air, like pine resin—sweet and smoky—little monk-cell homes, cloth

lampshades, gentle music playing somewhere, string instruments, people in amusing robes, leafing through decrepit books. Holding whispered conversations about what they've read, and living in what they've read, with no need at all of the upper world or the lower one.

Where was the cell in which Artyom spent the night with Danila, his friend for one day and for the rest of his life? It was occupied by someone else.

"Homer?"

He got up.

It was a familiar silhouette.

"Homer!"

Where had he come from? How? Why? Surely he should be at the Reich?

Artyom got up and started hobbling ... He rubbed his eyes. The old man was absorbed: He was examining the empty cell. A young Brahmin with a stupid little mustache that had never been shaved was showing him the small room, giving him instructions, handing him the keys.

Was Artyom mistaken?

"Of course, there isn't anywhere to put a table here, but you can work with everyone else ... The bookshelves are over there, though ... The only thing is—you can't keep animals here. You'll have to part company with the chicken."

"Is that compulsory?"

"It is."

"Well, then ..."

"Homer!"

The old man looked round.

"Granddad ... What are you doing here? How did you get here? Did our boys hide you? Did you manage everything ... with the print shop? Did it go okay? Do the presses work? Was the paper still dry?"

Homer looked at Artyom as if he was a dead man—with sadness and detachment.

"Why don't you say anything? Did it work? Show me!"

"Artyom."

"What do you want?" the boy with the mustache asked irascibly.

"Where are the leaflets, granddad? Did you go to Chekhov?"

"Shall I call the guards?"

"No, don't." Homer shook his head.

"Wait. Why didn't you go there? They had a meeting here at Arbat, started pulling the wool ... Their usual lies. And everyone believes them."

"It's not for me, Artyom."

"What?"

"I can't do that sort of thing."

"What? What sort of thing?"

"Propaganda. Printing leaflets. All this revolutionary activity ... I'm too old for all that stuff."

"You didn't even go there? To Chekhov?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't believe in it, Artyom."

"In what? The jammers? The Invisible Observers? In what? The world on the surface? That everything down here is pointless?"

"I don't believe that people need that. That people want to know that."

"That is the truth! The truth! People need the truth!"

"Don't shout. What truth am I supposed to tell them?"

“The whole truth! Everything that you’ve seen! About the woman whose head was smashed in with a reinforcing rod. About his privy!” Artyom jerked his head, which was almost falling off by now, at half-dead Ilya Stepanovich, who had dragged along here after him too. “About how they shoot their own people in the back! How they put babies down for a little tail! How they blow people’s brains out for gossiping! How they drive men out to build wind generators without any protection! So there’ll be enough electricity for the jammers! About the jammers! About the dogs eating them—the dead men!”

“Is that really the truth?” Homer asked.

“What is it, then?”

“It’s gory trash, Artyom. Do you think they don’t know all that anyway? They live in it. They don’t want to remember about it, and the last thing they want to do is read about it. Perhaps I should write about the life of the cannibals? Or about how the Party high-ups debauch young orphans? Hansa or the Red Line, it’s all the same.”

“What has this got to do with anything?”

“It’s the truth too. Do people want to read that kind of thing? Is that what they need? We shouldn’t stuff them with that shit. They need heroes. They need a myth. They need beauty in other people, so that they can remain human themselves. What can I tell them about here? That some bunch of bureaucrats has been governing them since the beginning of time? That there’s no point in them hanging about in the Metro? That there’s nothing that can be done here? That has a whiff of paranoia about it. It’s darkness. But they need light! They search for it. If only from a candle stub. At least little gleam. What do you want to tell them? That they’re all slaves? Nonentities? Sheep? Nobody will listen to you! They’ll string you up! Crucify you!”

“And you—what will you give them? Instead of the truth?”

“What will I give them? This ... I’ll give them a legend. About Artyom. Who was the same kind of simple young guy as all of them. Who lived at an outlying station by the name of the Exhibition of Economic Achievements. And whose home, along with all the rest of the Metro, was threatened by an appalling danger. From nightmarish monsters who lived on the surface and were trying to deprive the besieged human race of its final refuge. About how this young guy walks all the way through the Metro, how he is hardened in battles and changes from being a plain lummoX to a hero. How he saves the human race. That’s a story that people will like. Because it’s about them, about every one of them. Because it’s beautiful and simple.”

“You’re going to write that? That? What about everything that just happened?”

“That’s politics, Artyom. It’s propaganda. It’s the struggle for power. It will pass away too soon. Everything will change. I don’t want to write leaflets. They turn stale as soon as they’re written.”

“And what do you want? The eternal?”

“Well ... The eternal—that’s too high-flown ...”

“I forbid you to write about me. I forbid it. All right?”

“How? It doesn’t belong to you any longer, but to humankind.”

“I don’t want to be a sugar lollipop in your cock-sucking little book!”

“People will read it. They’ll learn about you.”

“But I couldn’t give a shit if people learn about me or not! What’s that got to do with anything?”

“You’re young, Artyom.”

“What has—that—got to do—with anything?”

“Don’t talk like that ... to me. You’re a hero. People will find out about you. Word of you will remain. Perhaps you’ll have children as well. But what about me? What am I supposed to do? What will remain of me? An anonymous leaflet? A scrap of paper?”

“Wait ... They’re giving you ... They’re giving you a room here ... Are they giving you a room?”

“They’re providing me with the conditions for work.”

“The conditions for work. Are you going to write this for them? For Bessolov? About me? Is this how they bribed you?”

“Did they bribe me or I bribe them? There’ll be a book. About you. A genuine book, and a decent print run. What doesn’t suit you about that? I don’t understand it.”

“Artyom!” Anya calling him.

“Ask Ilyusha. He’ll tell you. Who would turn down something like that? A genuine book, signed with my name! Not a textbook for cannibals. A myth. A legend. For the ages.”

“They drown us in shit. They treat us like cattle. Like building material. Don’t even regard us as human ... And you ... You help them ...” And then Artyom was hit by a blast wave; he realized—and the understanding concussed him; his voice disappeared completely, and he was left sculpting air soundlessly, with his throat only whistling slightly on the outbreath. “Fuck it. He’s right. He’s right about everything, that lousy scumbag. There isn’t any ‘us’ and there isn’t any ‘them.’ That’s the hydra. We ourselves are the hydra. They consist of us. All the aristocracy was shot a hundred years ago. Who can we blame? There isn’t anyone. We did this to ourselves. All of them down in the bunker—who were they recruited from? From us. And now ... You, Lyokha ... How can the hydra be defeated? No one even thinks seriously about fighting it. The only thing everyone dreams of is offering it their own head, of becoming one of its heads; they say—here, bite, take me, I want to be inside you, to be with you. There’s isn’t a single Hercules out there, but there’s an entire line of heads queuing up ... What has power got to do with it? My God, what an idiot I am ... You know what? Write it, granddad. Get it into print. And a long life to you. My God, fuck it ...”

He laughed himself into stitches.

He’d been afraid of bursting into tears, but laughter poured out of his mouth like foam out of a rabid dog’s.

“Artyom!”

He saw Anya. And went down on his knees in front of her.

“Forgive me.”

“Artyom, what’s wrong with you?”

“Well, are we really off to Chekhov, then?” Timur asked. “The fascists will get back there any moment now. Maybe Polyanka after all?”

“No. Open the hermetic door. up. I’m going up on top.”

“What?”

“Artyom!”

“Open the door! Open it up!”

“Artyom, what’s wrong with you?”

“Let’s go up, Anechka! up! up.”



CHAPTER 23

— HIS OWN PEOPLE —

“There they are! Over that way!”

Down below, through the bars of the banisters, he fancied he saw, no, he did see them—black boots.

“Run!”

“Open the doors! Open them, I tell you!”

“Have you totally flipped? You haven’t got a suit ...”

“I’m just fine! Do it! We’ll croak here because of you, you cretin! Come on!”

“Where is he? Where are they?”

“Give me your hand! Don’t let go!”

“I’m with you. I’m with you. I don’t want to stay here.”

“Screw you ... Where could you go up there? What is there for you on the surface?”

Overturning tables, jumping over benches, knocking down cackling Brahmins, they dashed to the far end of the station. Soldiers of the Order came pouring out of the passage and scattered across the platform like lead shot.

They reached the hermetic doors at top speed, stuck a gun barrel in the sentry’s face, spun the locking screws, and dragged the tonne of steel along the rails; it started shifting reluctantly; they squeezed through a crack and flew up the steps.

How could Artyom still have any strength left? Or any life?

The pursuers came after them. Clattering over the granite. Hot on their heels. Firing as they ran, but missing because they were running. The clamor of a shattered chicken coop. One door froze. Only a narrow crack was left through to backstage. The soldiers in black squeezed through it, but the Brahmins cowered back, keeping well away, to avoid picking up someone else’s dose of radiation.

They darted out into the vestibule: Artyom, Anya, Timur, and Ilya. In the second they had gained they managed to break open the outer door and tumble out, naked, into the freezing Moscow night.

“So what’s here?”

“Here ... They left it here ... Wait ... There it is! Your hand. That way!”

Hunched over, at a run, along the silent library, where Artyom once left behind his fear; under its blind windows, under the elephantine pedestals of its columns, over marble slabs that had come away from the walls. Behind them black figures shot out in pursuit from the Borovitskaya Station vestibule that looked like the entrance to a mausoleum. They hesitated, wondering about running down the street with no protection.

“We’ll get hammered here! Do you know what the background level is like here ...”

“There it is. Here. Is that it! Yes!”

Savelii’s towed Japanese auto. Abandoned after Letyaga had brought them away from the jammers. When? It was ages ago. Savelii was gone—the people had swept him away and trampled him at Komsomol Station: On the very first day of his service in the Order he had been killed, gone missing in action. But his car was right here. Standing and waiting for its owner.

Artyom swung the handle and climbed in through the car’s forgotten hatch. Under the little mat on the passenger side there was a spare key. Savelii had told him about it at Komsomolskaya. As if it was a bequest. Artyom put in the key and turned it. The car came alive.

The black figures broke away from Borovitskaya after all and took the plunge.

“Get inside!”

“Where are you going?”

“To Exhibition! To my people. Home. To tell them!”

“Not me. I’ll stay here. What would I do there? I’ll come to terms with them.”

“Get into the car, you idiot!”

“They’re our guys! I’ll come to terms. Wait ... I forgot. There. Is this yours? They gave it to me.”

He took it out—grayish black, dull; the Nagant.

“It’s mine.”

Timur stuck it in through Artyom’s open window.

“Thanks a fucking heap.”

“That’s it! Go!”

Timur raised his hands, swung round, and set off towards the black devils running in his direction.

In his mind, Artyom made the sign of the cross over him. And stepped on the gas.

From Okhotny Ryad, from Tverskaya Street, the wind brought a brief spurt of sound: the growl of a motor.

They shot off. Swung round with a squeal of smoking rubber. Anya on his left, on the front passenger seat; Ilya Stepanovich, their redundant tail, dangling free behind them. They battened the windows tight.

In the rearview mirror Timurchik tumbled mutely to the ground, like a rag doll, falling forward with his arms raised. And then, a second later, the armored off-roader darted into the same black frame.

It braked by the body. Doused its lights. Dwindled. And dissolved.

They hurtled along Vozdvizhenka Street, through all the places where Artyom had strolled a hundred times: But now—this was the last time. Someone’s pecked-out skulls, gnawed-out buildings, and dried-out trees gazed emptily after the speeding Japanese car from the side of the road.

And the empty sky was highlighted slightly by a gnawed-away moon. There were lots and lots of stars pinned to the sky, like on that night when Artyom went out on the surface with Zhenya, after tricking him and Vitalik into opening the hermetic door to the Botanical Gardens.

“Remember, Zhen?”

“Stop it, Artyom. Please.”

“Sorry. I won’t do it again. Honestly.”

The bone-white limestone of the Ministry of Defense blinked and disappeared; the little crypt of Arbat Station whisked by. On the right, tall buildings with twenty-something stories stood straight and narrow, looking like soldiers forgotten at a victorious parade. The fatuous and bombastic buildings of Kalininsky Avenue passed by on the left, with the very biggest advertising screens in somewhere called Europe, now burnt-out and black. The sentries saluted Artyom. The screens showed him his past and his future.

“How does the air feel?”

“Different.”

He remembered the first time he had been here—two years ago. How different everything here was then. There was life here then—a twisted, weird, alien life, but it was teeming. And now ...

Artyom looked in the mirror. He thought he saw a little patch of darkness pursuing them somewhere in the distance; did he only think it?

He turned sharply, with a squeal, onto the Garden Ring Road and set off along it in a gnawed-out rut, past the Embassy of the United States, burnt on a pyre, past the high-rise on the Krasnopresnenskaya Embankment, built for the living dead, with a pointed stake on its roof, past the huge, substantial, granite buildings that were called “stalinkas” in honor of the dummy, past the bomb-crater squares, past the trenches of the side streets.

He looked and thought: The dead for the dead.

“Home?” Anya asked.

“Home,” Artyom replied.

The right-handed Japanese bullet darted out onto Peace Prospect, violating the road markings, and

hurtled off to the east. They slid by under a flyover—the intersection with the Third Ring Road—which brought them out onto a bridge over a railway laid somewhere right on the very bottom of the darkness. A bit farther on—and a rocket rose up above the trees, frozen in the sky, the museum of stupid space exploration, a signal that the Exhibition of Economic Achievements was close.

Again Artyom fancied there was some movement behind them. He even looked back for a second; and almost crashed into a crooked, battered truck, only just swerving away in time. He darted between the rusty tins, picking his way along a familiar track to the entrance pavilion—to his home station; he drove the car in behind a currency exchange kiosk—a metal cube. And hid it.

“We got here quickly. Maybe the dose won’t be too big,” Artyom told Anya.

“Okay,” she replied.

They climbed out and listened. There was a roaring somewhere in the distance.

“Run.”

They made their way into the vestibule—Artyom cast a final glance through the dust on the plexiglass—were they following? had they caught up?

He didn’t think so. If they were still chasing, they’d fallen behind.

The upper hermetic door was open; they had to go down the escalator, fifty meters down into the depths. Down below it was pitch dark, but in a year Artyom had learned these steps off by heart. Ilya stumbled and would have gone flying nose-first onto the steps and farther on—to break his back; they barely caught him in time.

Eventually the steps ended. At the other side of a short platform there was a steel wall—the hermetic door. Artyom stepped with blind precision to the left, feeling as he moved for a telephone receiver on a flexible metal tube on the wall, the first out of two.

“Open up! It’s me, Artyom!”

The receiver was as deaf as if the wire had been snapped. As if he was calling into one of those buildings on the outside, not into his own, living station.

“Do you hear me? This is Artyom! Dark!”

The echo of his voice jangled in the coal dust, in the fine metal plates. There wasn’t any other sound in the receiver.

Artyom felt for Anya’s fingers. He squeezed them.

“Everything’s fine. He’s just sleeping.”

“Yes.”

“When you left, was everything ...”

“Everything was fine, Artyom.”

Ilya Stepanovich was breathing laboriously and loudly.

“Don’t breathe so deeply,” Artyom advised him. “The background radiation, you know.”

He hung up the phone. Picked it up again. And pressed his mouth to the cold, plastic circle.

“Hello! This is Artyom! Open up!”

No one had any intention of opening up for them. As if there was no one to do it.

He walked up to the wall and hammered on the metal with his fist. That wasn’t any good. Inaudible. Then he remembered about the revolver. He grabbed hold of the barrel in order to slam the handle against the steel. Then thought better of it. What if it was loaded? He pulled out the cylinder. For some reason there were two cartridges inserted in it. He squeezed them out and put them in his pocket.

Then he started beating that Nagant against the iron curtain, as if it was a bell. Boom! Boom! Boom!

Get up, people! Wake up! Come alive! Well?

He pressed one ear against the wall. Was anyone there?

Again: Boom! Boom! Boom!

“Artyom ...”

“There must be people there!”

He grabbed the phone again, hung it on the cradle, and took it off again.

“Hello! Hello! This is Artyom! Sukhoi! Open up!”

Something began stirring unwillingly inside there.

“Do you hear me?”

They coughed.

“Open the doors!”

Finally they spoke.

“What the fuck is all this? It’s night.”

“Nikitska? Open up, Nikitska! It’s Artyom! Open up!”

“Open up, Nikitska, and guzzle the rads. Right? What the fuck did you want out there again?”

“Open up! We haven’t got any protection out here.”

“That’ll teach you a fucking lesson, then!”

“Right then, I’ll tell my stepfather ... You shit ...”

Someone blew his nose inside.

“All right ...”

The metal wall crept upwards lazily and indifferently. Light appeared. They walked into the buffer section. A tap in the wall, a hose pipe lying there. Another phone.

“Open the buffer!”

“Rinse yourself off first! Dragging all sorts of crap in here ...”

“How? We’re not dressed out here!”

“Get washed, I tell you!

He had to lash himself and Ilya Stepanovich and Anya with cold, chlorinated water. They walked into the station soaking wet and frozen. Instantly they caught a smell of manure and pigs.

“Everyone’s asleep. Sukhoi’s asleep. That’s some outfit you’ve got.”

“But where can we go?”

“Your tent’s free.” Nikitska looked at these shivering little puppy dogs and relented. “We were expecting you. Wait, I’ll get you some cloths to wipe yourselves off. And go and lie down. You can sort things out tomorrow morning.”

Artyom wanted to argue, but Anya took him by the hand and pulled him away.

That’s right, he thought. I came barging in from the street in the middle of the night, without a suit. I don’t want to wake up the whole station as well. They’ll definitely think I’m a half-wit. Never mind; there’s no great hurry. Before the buzz creeps here from Polis ...

“Just tell the sentries not to let any strangers into the station. And from up on top ...”—he remembered about the patch of darkness. “Don’t let anyone else in from up on top. All right?”

“Trust me,” Nikitska grinned. “I won’t go waking up again for that sort of thing!”

“That’s all, then. Oh yeah, and this comrade here has to be given a place somewhere,” said Artyom, remembering Ilya Stepanovich. “I’ll explain everything to my stepfather in the morning.”

Ilya Stepanovich stayed with Nikitska, looking like an abandoned dog. But that wasn’t Artyom’s misfortune; he hadn’t taken this man as a hanger-on, and he hadn’t abandoned him.

Their tent really was free. hadn’t anyone dared to hanker after it? No doubt people had attempted to take it, but Sukhoi had held them off. Being even the boss’s stepson was pretty useful.

They switched on the torch and stood it so that it shone into the floor, in order not to wake the neighbors. They got changed into the dry clothes that were there. Without looking at each other naked. It felt shameful and awkward. They sat down cross-legged on the mattress.

“Is there anything left to drink?” Artyom asked in a whisper. “You had some.”

“Yes. I bought some,” Anya whispered back.

“Will you give me a swig?”

They drank by turns, gulping from the chipped neck of the bottle. The hooch was lousy, with a vile odor and dregs on the bottom, but it did the trick. It unscrewed the head that had been twisted into his shoulders and relaxed the cramp that had already become habitual in his back, his arms and his soul.

“I realized that I can’t live without you.”

“Come here.”

“Really. I tried.”

Artyom took a big swallow—it wouldn’t go down, it scorched his larynx and he started coughing.

“After we talked ... at Polis. Your daddy sent me to Komsomol Station. To give the Reds a present of cartridges. So that the rebellion ... The starving people there ... They rebelled. And ... I ended up there by chance. With the Reds. All of us. I don’t know how many thousands of people. And they fired at them with machine guns. A woman there ... Gave me ... She asked me to hold her son. About five or six years old. I held him in my arms. She was killed. And I thought then that you and I would have to adopt that boy. And a minute later he was killed as well.”

Anya took the bottle from him. Her eyes were glittering.

“You’ve got cold hands.”

“You’ve got cold lips.”

They drank in silence, by turns.

“Are we going to live here now?”

“I have to tell all of them. Sukhoi. Everyone. Our people. Tomorrow. Calmly. First, before other people tell them everything their own way.”

“Do you think they’ll believe you? They won’t go anywhere, Artyom.”

“We’ll see.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. No need to be. It’s me ... I.”

“You even have a cold tongue.”

“My heart’s hot, though. And you’re covered in goosebumps.”

“Let me have your heart over here. I want to get warm.”

* * *

They woke late—and at the same time.

At last he got dressed in his normal clothes: a sweater and threadbare jeans—instead of that repulsive waiter’s outfit. He stuck his feet in a pair of galoshes. Waited for Anya to get dressed.

They crawled out of the tent—smiling. Their female neighbors looked at them in envious condemnation. The men offered Artyom a smoke. He thanked them and took one.

“But where’s Sukhoi?” he asked Fur-Coat Dashka, who happened to be close by.

“He’s preparing a surprise for you. You’ve gone bald, have you? What did we tell you?”

“Where?”

“In the piggery.”

They went to his stepfather together.

The enclosure was in a dead-end tunnel. They walked to the end of the station, greeting everyone. They all looked at him as if he was a ghost. And at Anya as if she was a hero.

“He’s over there, your man! Sticking a pig!” Aigul gestured towards the far end of the enclosure.

He couldn’t catch his breath.

They walked past wet, pink snouts poking out through the wattle fence. Youngsters jostling at the troughs. Boars roaring. Immense sows with colorless eyelashes, each with a row of about ten tiny, squealing piglets.

Sukhoi, in rubber wading boots, was walking among the yearling boars. The piggery foreman, Pyotr

Ilich, was standing beside him, explaining.

“Don’t take this one, Alexanlexeich. That one was ill; he’ll be bitter. That one over there, the frisky one, that’s what I advise, Proshka. Come here, Proshka. You should have told me sooner, Alexander Alexeich. It’s best not to feed them for a day in advance.”

“Well ... It came as a surprise to me too ...” said Sukhoi, not seeing Artyom. “My son came back. I was afraid it was all over. There hadn’t been a single word. But he’s alive. And with his wife. It seems like they’ve made up. Such a joy. All right, let me have your Proshka.”

“Prosha ... Proshenka. Come here. Now how am I going to lure him out of there, the pest? He needed to be left hungry for a while; then he’d come out himself for feed. But now ... Nah, don’t drag him. A pig doesn’t like to be forced. Let me; there is a way.”

Artyom stopped short before he reached them. He looked at Sukhoi. His eyes were stinging. From the stink?

Sukhoi stepped back and made way for the specialist. The foreman took an empty bucket off a hook and put it over Proshka’s head. The pig froze, rooted to the ground at first, grunted inquiringly, and then started backing away. Then Pyotr Ilich took hold of his tail and started guiding him backwards towards the exit from the pen.

“Hold the others; that’s the important thing.”

“But none of them are butting in.”

Looking into the bucket, Proshka became obedient. Guiding him with his tail, they led him out of the pen in a jiffy. Then they took the bucket off. Pyotr Ilich scratched the pig behind the ears and then deftly thrust a loop of rope into the mouth that was half open in pleasure, shoving it as far past the fangs as possible and drawing it tight above the long snout. He tied the rope to a little column supporting the wall of the enclosure. Artyom didn’t watch this: He had seen it a hundred times and done it himself. He looked at Sukhoi.

Eventually Sukhoi looked round.

“Oh! You’ve woken up!”

He walked over and they embraced.

“Anechka. Welcome back.”

“How are you, Uncle Sasha?”

“We’re getting by, taking it easy.” Sukhoi smiled. “I missed you.”

“Howdy, traveler!” Pyotr Ilich held out his left hand: in the right hand he already had the long knife for the slaughter, looking more like a honed spike. “Right, Alexanlexeich. Hold him for a minute.”

“I wanted to astonish you with fresh meat,” Sukhoi said with a smile. “You spoiled my surprise.”

Proshka stretched out the rope as far as he could, but the rope was short. His hind legs shifted as far away from the column as they could manage; but his snout, captured by the rope, couldn’t move even slightly away from it. But Proshka didn’t screech; he wasn’t anticipating death. And then Sukhoi stroked him too, and the young boar became calm and thoughtful.

Pyotr Ilich squatted down beside Proshka and scratched him on the side, feeling for the pulse with his fingers. Through the skin and the ribs he found the heart. With his left hand he set the knife at the required spot, without even scratching the skin yet. The other pigs gathered round, curiously thrusting their snouts closer in order to figure out what was going on.

“Okay, bye now.”

He swung his right hand hard onto the handle. Knocked it in like a nail. The knife slipped in immediately right up to the handle. Proshka jerked, but remained standing. He still hadn’t had any time to understand anything at all. Pyotr Ilich pulled the blade out of the wound and plugged the little hole neatly with a little rag.

“That’s it. Move back.”

Proshka carried on standing there, and then he staggered. His hind legs buckled, and he sat on his backside, but immediately got up again. And fell again. He started squealing, realizing he had been betrayed. He tried to get up, but couldn't manage it any longer.

Some of the pigs looked at him indifferently with their little buttons; some carried on guzzling from the trough. Somehow Proshka's alarm wasn't transmitted to any of them. He tumbled over onto his side and started jerking his legs about. He squealed for a while. Passed blackish brown, round balls of dung. And went quiet. All this didn't concern the others. They didn't even seem to have noticed the death that had occurred so close.

"All done!" said Pyotr Ilich. "I'll butcher him and deliver him to the kitchen. What do you say? Roast him? Braise a hock?"

"Roast him or braise him, Tyoma?" SukhoI asked. "Since the surprise didn't work out anyway."

"Better roast him."

SukhoI nodded.

"How are you?"

"How am I? I don't even know where to begin."

"Let's go. No point standing here. Where did you get to?"

"Where?" Artyom looked round at Anya. "I was in Polis. Did anyone come here from Polis? From Miller? Or any strangers in general? Did anyone ask for me?"

"No. It was all quiet. Why, should they have?"

"Did our people come back at night from the center? From Hansa? Didn't they bring any rumors?"

SukhoI gave him an intent look.

"What happened? Something's happened, right?"

They walked out of the piggery into the station. The red emergency lighting made it look as if Alexander Alexeevich had slit the pig's throat. Or Artyom had.

"Let's go and have a smoke."

Artyom's stepfather didn't approve of smoking. But this time he didn't grumble. He took a handmade roll-up out of a cigarette case and held it out. Anya helped herself too. They walked well away from the living area. And lit up sweetly.

"I found survivors," Artyom said simply. "Other survivors."

"You? Where?" SukhoI squinted at Anya.

Artyom parted his lips to carry on, and suddenly started thinking. An independent station—the Exhibition. And SukhoI was its boss. But were there any independent stations here?

"He's telling the truth," Anya confirmed.

"Didn't you know?"

"Me? I didn't." SukhoI answered carefully, in order not to offend Artyom, who had become even thinner and had a shaved head now.

"Middle-level," Artyom stated to himself. "All right."

"What?"

"Uncle Sash. The whole thing's a long story. Let me just give you the essence. We're not the only ones who survived. The whole world did. Various cities in Russia. The West."

"And that's true too," said Anya.

"The West? And what about the war?" SukhoI frowned. "Is it still going on, then? And why are the airwaves empty? Why hasn't any one here seen these survivors?"

"They jam the radio. Like in Soviet times," Artyom tried to explain. "Because the war is allegedly still going on."

SukhoI understood that.

"That's familiar."

Artyom narrowed his eyes dubiously.

“Familiar?”

“We’ve been through that before. Who is it? The Reds?”

“Do you know Bessolov?” Artyom asked.

“Bessolov?” SukhoI echoed. “The one from Hansa?”

“There isn’t any Hansa, Uncle Sash. And there isn’t any Red Line. And soon they won’t exist at all. Soon they’ll combine everything together to stand against the common enemy. So they never climb up out of the Metro. That’s the new scenario now.”

SukhoI seemed to believe it, but he checked with Anya just to make sure.

“Does anyone else know this? That people survived in other cities?”

“They made a public announcement about it yesterday at Polis,” she replied. “It’s true, Alexander Alexeevich.”

“The whole world survived? And how do they live? Better than us?”

“I don’t know. They don’t say,” Artyom explained. “But if it was worse, they’d be sure to say so.”

SukhoI lit a second roll-up straight from the first one that had burnt through too fast.

“Bastard—fucking—hell.”

He looked at the red lamp for a while.

“Do you owe this Bessolov anything?” Artyom asked.

“No. What could I? I’ve only ever seen him once, in Hansa.”

“That’s good. Uncle Sash ... You have to close off the station. Close it, so that no one from there gets through to us. And get the people ready. You have to tell them everything. They’ll believe you.”

“Get them ready for what?”

“They have to be led out of here. Led out of the Metro. While it’s still possible. At least our people.”

“Led out to where?”

“Up on top.”

“Where to exactly? There are two hundred people in the station. There are women and children. Where do you want to lead them to?”

“We’ll send out scouts. Find a place where the background radiation is low. Some people came from Murom. They just live up on the surface there.”

SukhoI started his third roll-up in a row.

“What for?”

“How do you mean, what for?”

“What would we go to Murom for? Why would all these people leave the Metro and go off somewhere else? They live here, Artyom. This is their home, here. They won’t follow you.”

“Because they were born up on the surface! In the fresh air! Under the open sky! In freedom!”

Alexander Alexeevich nodded to Artyom: not mockingly, but sympathetically, precisely like a children’s doctor.

“They don’t remember that any longer, Tyomochka. They’ve got used to being here.”

“They’re like Morlocks here. Like moles!”

“Ah, but at least life follows a well-worn path. Everything’s clear. They won’t want to change anything.”

“But the moment they sit down by a campfire, all they ever do is remember—who had what, the way each of them used to live!”

“You can’t take them back to the things they miss. And they don’t want to go back, just to remember. You’re still young; someday you’ll understand.”

“I don’t understand!”

“Well ...”

“I’m simply asking you to close off the station. If you don’t want to tell them—let me do it. Otherwise that plague will ooze its way in here ... They’ll fill people’s head full of shit, like everywhere else ... I’ve already seen it happen ...”

“I can’t close off the station, Artyom. We trade with Hansa. We get the all-mash—you know, the combo-fodder—for our pigs from them. And we have to sell off the manure to Riga Station.”

“What all-mash? There are mushrooms!”

“The mushrooms are screwed. Almost the entire harvest died off.”

“You see?” Artyom gave Anya a crooked smile. “And you were concerned about the mushrooms. It turns out we can get by without them. But we can’t manage without their shitty all-mash!”

“Don’t judge me. I’m the station master, Artyom.” SukhoI shook his head. “I’ve got two hundred souls looking to me for everything. I have to feed them.”

“Well at least let me tell them! They’ll find out anyway!”

“Do you think it’s worth it?” SukhoI sighed. “Coming from you?”

“Yes, it is!”

* * *

They agreed: The people would be gathered together after supper, when the shifts on the farms ended. Until then—Artyom had to keep quiet. And he did keep quiet, trying on for size his old life at Exhibition. The bicycles. Watch duty in the tunnel. The tent. This life had shrunk, and he couldn’t fit into it any more.

Disoriented Ilya Stepanovich trailed around after him. Artyom had agreed with SukhoI for Ilya Stepanovich to be allowed to stay at the station. So Artyom was showing him what was what and how things were arranged here.

Although the teacher was shabby and wretched, Fur-Coat Dashka took an instant liking to him. They filled him up with weak tea—the mushrooms were running out. People asked about his life. He replied evasively, and Artyom didn’t give him away.

But Ilya Stepanovich was a good listener. As Artyom told him about the station, he put in bits about himself now and then. It just came out that way. As they wandered between the tents, things came to him. This is where Zhenka used to live. My childhood friend. We opened the doors at the Botanical Gardens together. He died later: Someone in the watch cracked up when the Dark Ones were advancing on Exhibition and killed him. And this was the spot where I saw Hunter for the first time and was totally bowled over by him. Look, we walked round the empty hall at night, and he took my fate in his massive great hands and tied it in a knot in a moment, like a metal bar. Well, and so on. About the Dark Ones. It was ridiculous to keep quiet about them at this stage. The tragedy of his entire life, and it had turned out to be a damp squib. Ilya Stepanovich nodded rapidly, as if all this concerned him. But who could tell what he was thinking about?

Artyom held out like that until the evening.

Of course, a royal supper like that wasn’t restricted just to close friends. All-comers were invited. The tables were laid in the dead end—“in the club,” on a dais—where the truncated corridor began, leading over the rails to the new exit.

The hooters sounded to end the day shifts; people came from the shower rooms clean and dressed as festively as they could manage.

The starters were a bit sparse, but Proshka atoned for everything. They had cooked him superbly. He was served roasted, with the head separate. The head squinted through narrowed eyes, the ears were oily, transparent parchment. The meat was tender, just lightly veined with fat: He had been slaughtered at just the right time. The meat melted in their mouths. They poured mushroom moonshine, from the old reserves. The toasts proposed became more and more heartfelt.

“Welcome back!”

“Good health to you, Artyom!”

“Anechka! And here’s to you!”

“And little kiddies to you at last!”

“And, don’t take this for bootlicking, now—to the parents. To you, that is, Alexanlexeich!”

Pyotr Ilich got worked up and really stood out at this Great Supper, with his red hair standing up like a crown round his crimson bald spot.

“And then, let’s drink straightaway to our Exhibition Station, an island of peace and stability in the raging ocean of the Metro! Thanks to the efforts of a certain person, and you know who!”

Artyom had thought he wouldn’t be able to get a single morsel down, but he’d gotten so hungry that he wolfed down two portions. It was a fine young boar. Really. Although it was best not to remember that he’d been grunting just this morning. But then they all grunted some time; were we just supposed to stop eating them?

Artyom just couldn’t drink. But SukhoI didn’t miss a round. They were each preparing in their own way for the talk with the people.

“I wanted to talk things over with you; I was waiting for you to show up. Of course, you’re free to talk to people. I don’t take back my word. But I just want you to understand that you don’t have to, you know—the mushrooms and the pigs ... You can do something else. Reconnaissance, for instance ...”

“Thanks, Uncle Sash.”

Little Kirill sneaked over, the couger. “Boo!” He tried to frighten Artyom, then climbed up on his knees. He’d run away from his mother: It was past his bedtime already, and he ought to be sleeping. Then she came herself, Natalya. She scolded her son, but agreed to stay for a while—there was still some of the young boar left.

“A-any! Give me a piece!”

“Come over to us. I’ll put a bit more on your plate; you need it to grow.”

Kiriukha was given his own plate, and he sat down between Artyom and Anya and started chewing on his meat for dear life.

Before the third serving Artyom’s stepfather was approached by a watchman, the Georgian Ubilava, who whispered something to him. SukhoI wiped his greasy lips and, without looking at Artyom, got up from the table. Artyom watched over his shoulder: SukhoI had been called to the southern tunnel. The one leading to Alekseevskaya Station and on into the Metro. What was going on there? Artyom couldn’t see. SukhoI walked behind the columns, onto the tracks.

He didn’t come back for ten minutes.

“And did you find Polar Dawns?” Kiriukha bleated.

“What?” Artyom asked absentmindedly.

“Polar Dawns! You said you’d picked it up! Did you find it? That’s what you went for, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was. I found it.”

“Ma, do you hear? Artyom found Polar Dawns!”

Natalya pursed her lips.

“That’s not true, Kiriushenka.”

“Artyom! It is true, isn’t it?”

“Stop it,” Natalya told Artyom.

“What’s it like there, Tyom? What’s there, in Polar Dawns? How are things with the microbes there?”

“Just a moment,” said Artyom. “Wait a bit, kiddo.”

SukhoI was standing with some men at the south end of the platform, looking round at the feast: signaling in semaphore with his crimson face in the crimson light. Artyom wanted to go over to him. He started getting out and moved Kiriukha over, but his stepfather noticed and waved to him: Stay there; I’m coming.

“What’s happening?” Anya asked.

“Well, tell her that it’s true!”

“Right! Now you’re going off to bed!”

Sukhoi came back to the feast. He sat beside Artyom and smiled as if his lips were cracked and it was painful to stretch them out.

In his annoyance with his mother, Kiriukha picked at Proshka’s screwed-up eye with his fork. Dashka served Ilya Stepanovich a good portion of fatty top leg. Artyom took hold of Sukhoi’s elbow.

“What’s happening, Uncle Sash?”

“They came to get you. We gave them their marching orders, of course.”

“The Order’s men? From Miller?”

Anya held her knife in her hand as if she was about to strike out with it. Artyom laid his fingers on his pocket. The Nagant was still there, in its place.

“No. From Hansa.”

“Are there many of them? Did they spend special forces?”

“Two men. Civilians.”

“Only two? And what? What do they say?”

“They say they’ll give us time to think until the morning. They understand that you’re my son and all the rest of it.” Sukhoi looked down into his plate. “They say they don’t want to take things to the extreme.”

Artyom didn’t argue about the word “son.”

“And what happens in the morning?”

“They’ll start a total blockade of the station. They won’t buy anything from us anymore, and they won’t sell anything to us either. All-mash for the pigs and so forth. Plus a ban on all travel. They say they’ve already settled that with Alekseevskaya.”

Andrei, the senior scout, stood up. He raised his glass.

“A toast! Your father and I have already discussed this, Artyom. Comrades, I am a victim of force majeure. I’ve fallen in love. And my love lives at Krasnopresnenskaya Station. I realized it was time. I’m thirty-eight. So I’m leaving my beloved home station, Exhibition, and moving to join my bride in Hansa. So what do I want to drink to, basically? I want to drink, Artyom, to every one of us finding his own place. And now my place is free—for you!”

Artyom nodded, stood up, clinked glasses, and sat down again. He whispered to Sukhoi.

“How long can we hold out?”

“I don’t know. The mushrooms, well, you can see ... For a while on the pork. Only there won’t be anything to feed them with. All the feed comes from Hansa ...”

“Since when does Hansa deal in animal feed? Where do they get it from? Didn’t the plague affect them, then?”

“It’s combined fodder, I told you. Not made from mushrooms—a mixture of something or other. But the pigs eat it. They don’t turn up their snouts and they put on weight well.”

“But haven’t the pig farmers asked what it is they’re feeding them? Where they get it from? Maybe we could do something like it ourselves ...”

“I don’t know. We don’t ask. Supposedly Hansa gets it from the Reds. According to the rumors. We tried it—the pigs eat it, so why quibble. We—”

“Where would the Reds get it from? The Reds have—”

“Pyotr Ilich! Where do they bring the all-mash from, do you remember?”

“Why, from Komsomolskaya, I reckon. I recall them saying it’s close by. Fresh. Although not so very fresh these last few times.”

“From Komsomolskaya?”

Salty, bitter spittle flowed into Artyom’s mouth. His throat cramped up, and he couldn’t swallow or get any air down.

“From Komsomolskaya? From the Reds?”

“From Hansa ...”

“What’s the difference.”

“But what’s wrong with it?”

“You don’t ask any unnecessary questions, right? A blockade, shit?”

“I have to feed people, Artyom. Two hundred souls. If we have it, that’s good. One day when you’re a station master, you’ll understand ...”

Artyom stood up.

“Can I?”

“Oh, the star of the occasion! Let’s have a toast from you, Artyom!”

And he pulled himself up to attention, as if he really was going to propose a toast to them. Only his fingers clutched air instead of a glass.

“Some men just came to get me. Supposedly from Hansa. They want to catch me and take me away, so that I won’t have time to tell you all of this. If you don’t hand me over, they say they’ll set up a blockade.”

People at the table started shushing each other; the song that was just starting up about evenings near Moscow faltered and stopped. Some carried on chewing, but without making any noise.

“Moscow isn’t the only city where people survived. Yesterday at Polis they announced to everyone that there are others. Soon they’ll tell you here about that too. So think of me as the first. The whole world is still alive! Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Vladivostok. America. But we didn’t hear about it because they were suppressing radio contact with jammers.”

The silence was deathly. People listened, transfixed.

“We don’t have to live here any longer. We can pack up and leave. At any moment. Right now. Go anywhere we like. At Murom, only three hundred kilometers from Moscow, the radiation level is already normal. People live on the surface. It’s Moscow that is dead and poisoned, because the warheads were intercepted above it. We shouldn’t stay here. We mustn’t stay here. What I’m suggesting, what I’m asking you is: Let’s leave.”

“What for?” someone asked him.

“Trudge three hundred kilometers, and then what’s there?”

“What are you listening to him for? He’s nuts on this subject.”

“What for? Because man’s place isn’t under the ground. Because you live in tunnels—they keep you in tunnels. Like worms. Do you at least remember about it? These idiotic wars we fight against each other ... We have no tomorrow here. This is a graveyard, the Metro. We’ll never be anyone here. We won’t be human here. We won’t do anything new. We won’t grow. We get sick here. We’re degenerating. There’s no air. There’s no room here. It’s cramped in here.”

“There’s just enough for us,” someone told him.

“Did Dushanbe survive?” someone enquired timidly.

“I don’t know.”

“So you compare us with worms, then?”

“But what if America’s still all there, is the war still going on?” someone at the table asked, thinking out loud.

“In the city of Murom there’s a monastery. Painted all white. And the domes above it are bright blue. The color of the sky. It stands on the bank of a river. Surrounded by forest. Why don’t we go there? First scouts, and then everyone would go. We’d find some kind of transport and fix it up. Women and children in the cars and trucks.”

“And what is there to eat up there?”

“Well what do you eat here? Here you ... Damn you. And there’s obviously no other way here! That’s the whole problem. With this place! It isn’t a refuge! It’s a crypt! We have to clear out of here!”

“So you bloody clear out, then,” someone told him in a low, sullen voice. “Why can’t you clear out on your own? Why drag other folks with you? Like some bloody Moses.”

“And what if Hansa wants us to hand him over for something he’s done? Has he killed someone?” a woman asked inquisitively.

Artyom looked round at Sukhoi. He was running his eyes round the table, as if searching for support for Artyom. But he didn’t interfere.

Artyom wiped his forehead.

“All right. Okay. I’m getting together an expedition. Purely exploratory—for now. We’ll go to the east and explore. We’ll try to find a place there fit for habitation. And when we find it, we’ll come back for the others. Who’s with me?”

No one answered. They chewed, gaped, and drank. No one answered.

Anya moved her knife aside. She got up.

“Me. I’m with you.”

The two of them stood there for a moment. Then everything started buzzing.

Consumptive Kiriukha clambered up on the bench so he could be seen. He squeaked determinedly.

“Me too! I’ll go with you! Out of the Metro! To Polar Dawns!”

He stood up exactly where he had been sitting—between Anya and Artyom. They glanced at each other.

Natalya, his mother, recoiled from the table. Glasses went flying and smashed on the floor.

“Come here right now! That’s it, we’re going to bed!”

“Aw, ma! Let’s go to Polar Dawns!”

“We’re not going anywhere! This is our home!”

“Aw, just let me go and see ...”

“No!”

“It’s the surface, Natal ...” said Artyom. “There’s air up there. Different. Fresh. And the tuber ...”

“If there’s no tuber, there’s something else. Some kind of plague! People say there are Americans out there! Do you want to hand us over to the Americans?”

“If you don’t want to—let him go. Here he ... You told me yourself. How long has he got?”

“You want to take him from me!” She started choking. “You want to take my son! Agh, you filthy rat ... I won’t let you have him! I won’t allow it! My little Kiriushka! Did you hear that? He wants to take my son from me! Give him to the Americans! Like a toy! And go himself ... And hand us over to them!”

“You fool,” Artyom told her. “You bitch.”

“You push off up onto your surface! Comparing us with worms! I won’t let him go! Don’t you dare! Don’t let them take him!”

“Don’t give him the child! He’s fucked in the head; everybody knows that! Where would he drag the kid off to?”

“We won’t give him to you. This is way over the top!”

“I want to go with you!” Kiriukha started crying. “I want to take a look at the surface!”

“Ah, just hand him over to Hansa, and that’s that,” someone said. “Let them sort it all out.”

“So you push off! If you’re so miserable here with us! Push off, you traitor!”

They started moving back from the table, jumping to their feet.

“Well stay here, then! Eat! Carry on devouring each other! Let them herd you around! Like sheep! If you want to croak, then croak. If you want to shuffle through shit, then shuffle. If you want to dig over your lousy fucking past—go on! But what are the children guilty of? Why do you want to bury the children alive?”

“You’re the sheep! You’ve sold out! No one will go anywhere with you! Where do you want to lead us, into a trap? How much did they pay you? Just hand him over! Are we supposed to break off relations with Hansa because of this shit?”

“Right, that’s enough!” SukhoI shouted, getting up.

“And you ought to keep an eye on that kid of yours! Now he’s gone and sold out to someone or other! Poisoning us all that time wasn’t enough for him! Maybe we wouldn’t be sick if that bastard hadn’t kept opening the seals! You keep your nose out; don’t meddle in our business! We’ll manage, all right! This—is—our—home!”

“Tyo-om, I’m with you, I want to go, plea-ease!”

“Push off! Get lost! Before we hand you over! Why should we suffer for him?”

Kiriukha’s hand found Artyom’s index finger and clutched in a tight hug, but Natalya jerked him—and dragged him away.

Artyom’s eyes started running with tears.

“Dad ...” He looked round at Sukhoi. “Dad. And you—will you?”

“I can’t, Artyom,” SukhoI murmured in a dead voice. “I can’t go with you. How can I abandon the people?”

Artyom blinked.

His head was spinning. What he had guzzled was stuck like a cobblestone in his throat.

“Ah, fuck everything in this damned Metro with a barge pole! I was ready to croak for all of you, but there’s nobody here worth croaking for!”

He swept the plates of human pork off the table with a crash and a clatter and kicked over the bench.

Striding behind him came Anya; and plodding after them for some reason was Ilya Stepanovich.

“Have you decided to go up on top, then?” Artyom asked him.

“No. Not me. I’ll stay here. I’ll write about you ... Artyom ... About all this ... Give me your permission, eh? Will you let me write a book? I’ll put everything in it, just like it is ... Word of honor!”

“Write the damn shit. You won’t get a fucking thing written anyway. And nobody will read it. Homer’s right, the old bastard. Everyone wants fairytales!”

* * *

In the west the sunset sky was scarlet, but in the east it rang as crystal clear as a freshly washed bottle. All the clouds had been swept off it, and now, one by one, little silver nails were being hammered into the cerulean vault.

They tossed food, cartridges, guns, and filters into the back of the station wagon. There were still three full canisters of diesel oil in there. Enough to drive halfway round the earth.

The Yaroslavl Highway, massively wide, ran straight from the Exhibition of Economic Achievements to the far edge of the continent. It was crammed with cars and trucks that never reached their destinations, but visible between the vehicles that had got stuck in the past was a narrow furrow, through which it was possible to drive in that direction—to somewhere. The dead buildings glowed gold around their edges, and in this moment of farewell Moscow seemed warm and real to Artyom.

He was sick of the rubber on his skin and sick of the preparations for the journey. He wanted to ditch the rubber already. He wanted to race along as soon as possible with the windows down, catching the oncoming stream of air with his open hand and breathing it, warm and fresh. But never mind: In about three, maybe four, hours they’d take these gas masks off once and for all and fling them out of the window, as far away as possible.

They embraced anyway.

“Where are you going to go?” asked Sukhoi.

“Anywhere at all. Where are we going, An?”

“To Vladivostok. I want to go to the ocean.”

“Vladivostok it is, then.”

Artyom moved Savelii’s white animal skin to Anya’s seat: They needed to be careful; she still had to have children. He put the Nagant in the glove compartment. Started the engine. They slammed the

doors.

SukhoI leaned down to him. And asked him to lower the window. He droned through his trunk.

“Artyom, don’t judge the people. It’s not the people’s fault.”

Artyom blew him a kiss.

“See you, Uncle Sash. Ciao for now.”

SukhoI nodded and moved back. Ilya Stepanovich, huddling up, waved his hand. There wasn’t anyone else seeing them off.

Artyom put his hand on Anya’s knee. She covered his glove with both of hers.

The Japanese car sneezed blue fumes, struck up a marching song, and shot off immediately that way—to the magical, fabulous city of Vladivostok, standing on a warm, gamboling ocean—across an immense and beautiful, unknown country, inhabited by real, live people.

And a luminous, sunlit fair wind saw them on their way.

— THE END —

AFTERWORD

They were good binoculars—German, really high quality. Easily good enough to see for a kilometer or even farther. The off-roader trailed the Japanese car at a cautious distance as far as the Moscow Orbital Ring Road and halted there.

“He’s scrambled, Alexei Felixovich,” Lyokha said to the walkie-talkie. “Shall we stay on his tail?”

“What’s he going to do out there? Let him bugger off. Good riddance,” said the walkie-talkie. “That’s it; come on back.”

Recorded by I. Shkurkin

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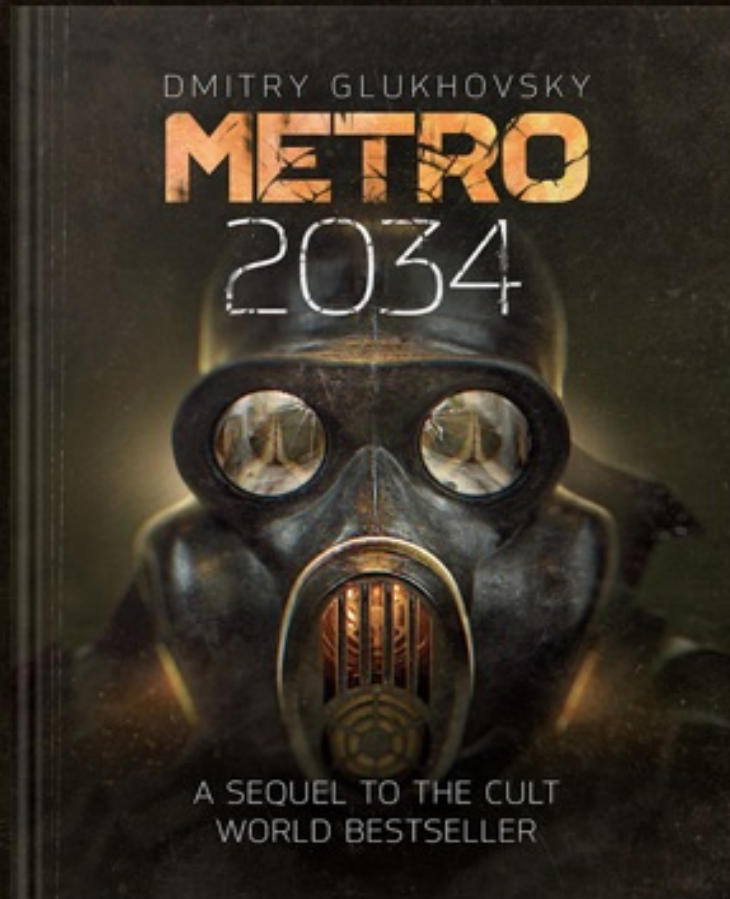
...Twenty years after a nuclear war has destroyed the entire civilization, the few survivors have found their last refuge in the tunnels and stations of the Moscow subway – the Metro. Its stations became city-states that trade and war with each other. The surface of Earth is contaminated with radiation and plagued by mutant monsters. Humans have long renounced their hope to return to the surface as masters of the planet. Everyone has given up hope... Everyone but one unlikely hero.

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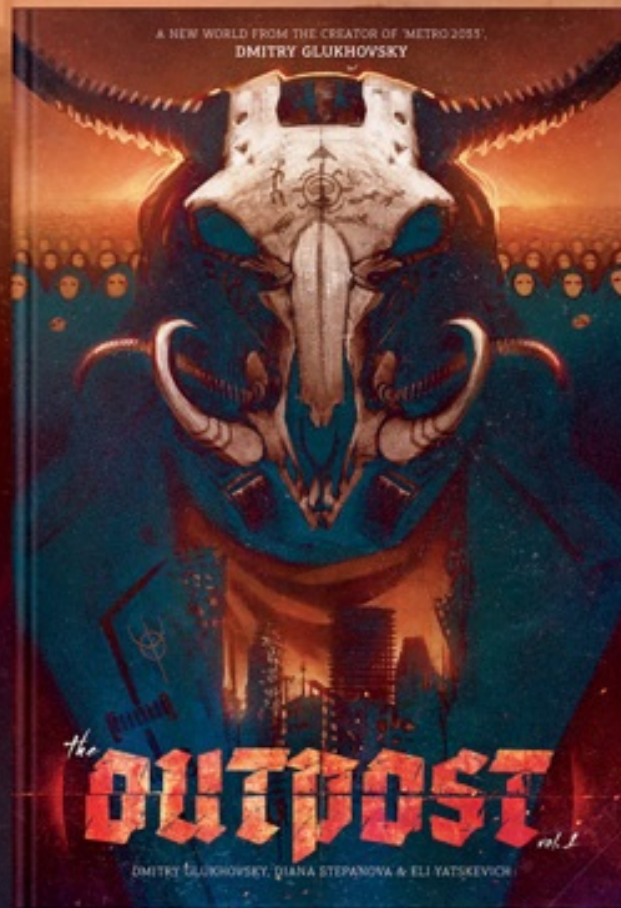
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