

TANITH LEE

ALL THE BIRDS OF HELL

Tanith Lee's most recent books include *Faces Under Water* and a young adult novel that's due out in England very shortly, *Law of the Wolf Tower*. Her last appearance in these pages was exactly two years ago, with her retake on the Cinderella fairy tale, *The Reason for Not Going to the Ball*." She returns now with a very different sort of story, a dark and dazzling vision of a world locked in winter for fifteen years...

ONCE THEY LEFT THE CITY, the driver started to talk. He went on talking during the two-hour journey, almost without pause. His name was Argenty, but the dialogue was all about his wife. She suffered from what had become known as Twilight Sickness. She spent all day in their flat staring at the electric bulbs. At night she walked out into the streets and he would have to go and fetch her. She had had frostbite several times. He said she had been lovely twenty years ago, though she had always hated the cold.

Henrique Tchaikov listened. He made a few sympathetic sounds. It was as hopeless to try to communicate with the driver, Argenty, as to shut him up. Normally Argenty drove important men from the Bureau, to whom he would not be allowed to speak a word, probably not even Goodday. But Tchaikov was a minor bureaucrat. If Argenty had had a better education and more luck, he might have been where Tchaikov was.

Argenty's voice became like the landscape beyond the cindery cement blocks of the city, monotonous, inevitably irritating, depressing, useless, sad.

It was the fifteenth year of winter.

Now almost forty, Tchaikov could remember the other seasons of his childhood, even one long hot summer full of liquid colors and now-forgotten smells. By the time he was twelve years old, things were changing forever. In his twenties he saw them go, the palaces of summer, as Eynin called them in his poetry. Tchaikov had been twenty-four when he watched the last natural flower, sprung pale green out of the public lawn, die before him -- as Argenty's wife was dying, in another way.

The Industrial Winter, so it was termed. The belching chimneys and the leaking stations with their cylinders of poison. The rotting hulks along the shore like deadly whales.

"The doctor says she'll ruin her eyes, staring at the lights all day," Argenty droned on.

"There's a new drug, isn't there --" Tchaikov tried.

But Argenty took no notice. Probably, when alone, he talked to himself.

Beyond the car, the snowscape spread like heaps of bedclothes, some soiled and some clean. The gray ceiling of the sky bulged low.

Argenty broke off. He said, "There's the wolf factory." Tchaikov turned his head.

Against the grayness-whiteness, the jagged black of the deserted factory which had been taken over by wolves, was the only landmark.

"They howl often, sound like the old machinery. You'll hear them from the Dacha."

Yes, they told me I would."

"Look, some of them running about there."

Tchaikov noted the black forms of the wolves, less black than the factory walls and gates, darting up and over the snow heaps, and away around the building. Although things did live out here, it was strange to see something alive.

Then they came down the slope, the chained snow tires grating and punching, and Tchaikov saw the mansion across the plain.

"The river came in here," said Argenty. "Under the ice now."

A plantation of pine trees remained about the house. Possibly they were dead, carved out only in frozen snow. The Dacha had two domed towers, a balustraded verandah above a flight of stairs that gleamed like white glass. When the car drove up, he could see two statues at the foot of the steps that had also been kept clear of snow. They were of a stained brownish marble, a god and goddess, both naked and smiling through the brown stains that spread from their mouths.

There were electric lights on in the Dacha, from top to bottom, three or four floors of them, in long, arched windows.

But as the car growled to a halt, Argenty gave a grunt. "Look," he said again, "look. Up there."

They got out and stood on the snow. The cold broke round them like sheer

disbelief, but they knew it by now. They stared up. As happened only very occasionally, a lacuna had opened in the low cloud. A dim pink island of sky appeared, and over it floated a dulled lemon slice, dissolving, half transparent, the sun.

Argenty and Tchaikov waited, transfixed, watching in silence. Presently the cloud folded together again and the sky, the sun, vanished.

"I can't tell her," said Argenty. "My wife. I can't tell her I saw the sun. Once it happened in the street. She began to scream. I had to take her to the hospital. She wasn't the only case."

"I'm sorry," said Tchaikov.

He had said this before, but now for the first time Argenty seemed to hear him. "Thank you."

Argenty insisted on carrying Tchaikov's bag to the top of the slippery, gleaming stair, then he pressed the buzzer. The door was of steel and wood, with a glass panel of octople glazing, almost opaque. Through it, in the bluish yellow light, a vast hall could just be made out, with a floor of black and white marble.

A voice spoke through the door apparatus.

"Give your name."

"Henrique Tchaikov. Number sixteen stroke Y."

"You're late."

Tchaikov stood on the top step, explaining to a door. He was enigmatic. There was always a great deal of this.

"The road from Kroy was blocked by an avalanche. It had to be cleared."

"All right. Come in. Mind the dog, she may be down there." "Dog," said Argenty. He put his hand into his coat for his gun.

"It's all right," said Tchaikov. "They always keep a dog here."

"Why.?" Said Argenty blankly.

Tchaikov said, "A guard dog. And for company, I suppose."

Argenty glanced up, toward the domed towers. The walls were reinforced by black cement. The domes were tiled black, mortared by snow. After the glimpse of sun,

there was again little color in their world.

"Are they -- is it up there?" "I don't know. Perhaps."

"Take care," said Argenty surprisingly as the door made its unlocking noise.

Argenty was not allowed to loiter. Tchaikov watched him get back into the car, undo the dash panel and take a swig of vodka. The car turned and drove slowly away, back across the plain.

The previous curator did not give Tchaikov his name. He was a tall thin man with slicked, black hair. Tchaikov knew he was known as Ouperin.

Ouperin showed Tchaikov the map of the mansion, and the pamphlet of house rules. He only mentioned one, that the solarium must not be used for more than one hour per day; it was expensive. He asked if Tchaikov had any questions, wanted to see anything. Tchaikov said it would be fine.

They met the dog in the corridor outside the ballroom, near where Ouperin located what he called his office.

She was a big dog, perhaps part Cuvahl and part Husky, muscular and well-covered, with a thick silken coat like the thick pile carpets, ebony and fawn, with white round her muzzle and on her belly and paws, and two gold eyes that merely slanted at them for a second as she galloped by.

"Dog! Here, dog!" Ouperin called, but she ignored him, prancing on, with balletic shakes of her fringed fur, into the ballroom, where the crystal chandeliers hung down twenty feet on ropes of bronze. "She only comes when she's hungry. There are plenty of steaks for her in the cold room. She goes out a lot," said Ouperin. "Her door's down in the kitchen. Electronic. Nothing else can get in."

They visited the cold room, which was very long, and massively shelved, behind a sort of airlock. The room was frigid, the natural weather was permitted to sustain it. The ice on high windows looked like armor.

Ouperin took two bottles of vodka, and a bunch of red grapes, frozen peerless in a wedge of ice.

They sat in his office, along from the ballroom. A fire blazed on the hearth.

"I won't say I've enjoyed it here," said Ouperin. "But there are advantages. There are some -- videos and magazines in the suite. You know what I mean. Apart from the library. If you get...hot."

Tchaikov nodded politely.

Ouperin said, "The first thing you'll do, when I go. You'll go up and look at them, won't you?"

"Probably," said Tchaikov.

"You know," said Ouperin, "you get bored with them. At first, they remind you of the fairy story, what is it? The princess who sleeps. Then you just get bored."

Tchaikov said nothing. They drank the vodka, and at seventeen hours, five o'clock, as the white world outside began to turn glowing blue.. a helicopter came and landed on the plain. Ouperin took his bags and went out to the front door of the Dacha, and the stair. "Have some fun," he said.

He ran sliding down the steps and up to the helicopter. He scrambled in like a boy on holiday. It rose as it had descended in a storm of displaced snow. When its noise finally faded through the sky, Tchaikov heard the wolves from the wolf factory howling over the slopes. The sky was dark blue now, navy, without a star. If ever the moon appeared, the moon was blue. The pines settled. A few black boughs showed where the helicopter's winds had scoured off the snow. They were alive. But soon the snow began to come down again, to cover them.

Tchaikov returned to the cold room. He selected a chicken and two steaks and vegetables, and took them to the old stone-floored kitchen down the narrow steps. The new kitchen was very small, a little bright cubicle inside the larger one. He put the food into the thawing cabinet, and then set the program on the cooker. The dog came in as he was doing this, and stood outside the lighted box. Once they had thawed, he put the bloody steaks down for her on a dish, and touched her ruffed head as she bent to eat. She was a beautiful dog, but wholly uninterested in him. She might be there in case of trouble, but there never would be trouble. No one stayed longer than six or eight months. The curatorship at the Dacha was a privilege, and an endurance test.

When his meal was ready, Tchaikov carried it to the card room or office, and ate, with the television showing him in color the black and white scenes of the snow and the cities. The card room fire burned on its synthetic logs, the gas cylinder faintly whistling. He drank vodka and red wine. Sometimes, in spaces of sound, he heard the wolves. And once, looking from the ballroom, he saw the dog, lit by all the windows, trotting along the ice below the pines.

AT MIDNIGHT, when the television stations were shut down to conserve power, and most of the lights in the cities, although not here, would be dimmed, Tchaikov got into the manually operated elevator, and went up into the second dome, to

the top floor.

He had put on again his greatcoat, his hat and gloves.

The elevator stopped at another little airlock. Beyond, only the cold-pressure lights could burn, glacial blue. Sometimes they blinked, flickered. An angled stair led to a corridor, which was wide, and shone as if highly polished. At the end of the corridor was an annex and the two broad high doors of glass. It was possible to look through the glass, and for a while he stood there, in the winter of the dome, staring in like a child.

It had been and still was a bedroom, about ten meters by eleven. His flat in the city would fit easily inside it.

The bedroom had always been white, the carpets and the silken drapes, even the tassels had been a mottled white, like milk, edged with gilt. And the bed was white. So that now, just as the snow-world outside resembled a white tumbled bed, the bed was like the tumbled snow.

The long windows were black with night, but a black silvered by ice. Ice had formed too, in the room, in long spears that hung from the ceiling, where once a sky had been painted, a sky-blue sky with rosy clouds, but they had darkened and died, so now the sky was like old gray paint with flecks of rimy plaster showing through.

The mirrors in the room had cracked from the cold and formed strange abstract patterns that seemed to mean something. Even the glass doors had cracked, and were reinforced.

From here you could not properly see the little details of the room, the meal held perfect under ice, the ruined ornaments and paintings. Nor, properly, the couple on the bed.

Tchaikoff drew the electronic key from his pocket and placed it in the mechanism of the doors. It took a long time to work, the cold-current not entirely reliable. The lighting blinked again, a whole second of black. Then the doors opened and the lights steadied, and Tchaikoff went through.

The carpet, full of ice crystals, crunched under his feet, which left faint marks that would dissipate. His breath was smoke.

On a chest with painted panels, where the paint had scattered out, stood a white statue, about a meter high, that had broken from the cold, and an apple of rouged glass that had also broken, and somehow bled.

The pictures on the walls were done for. Here and there, a half of a face peeped out from the mossy corrosion, like the sun he had seen earlier in the cloud. Hothouse roses in a vase had turned to black coals, petrified, petals not fallen.

Their meal stood on the little mosaic table. It had been a beautiful meal, and neatly served. An amber fish, set with dark jade fruits, a salad that had blackened like the roses but kept its shape of dainty leaves and fronds. A flawless cream round, with two slivers cut from it, reminding him of the quartering of an elegant clock. The champagne was all gone, but for the beads of palest gold left at the bottom of the two goblets rimmed with silver. The bottle of tablets was mostly full. They had taken enough only to sleep, then turned off the heating, leaving the cold to do the rest.

The Last Supper of Love, Eynin had called it, in his poem, "This Place."

Tchaikov went over to the bed and looked down at them.

The man, Xander, wore evening dress, a tuxedo, a silk shirt with a tunic collar. On the jacket were pinned two military ribbons and a Knight's Cross. His tawny hair was sleeked back. His face was grave and very strong, a very masculine face, a very clean, calm face. His eyes, apparently, were green, but invisible behind the marble lids.

She, the woman, Tamura, was exquisite, not beautiful but immaculate, and so delicate and slender. She could have danced on air, just as Eynin said, in her sequined pumps. Her long white dress clung to a slight and nearly adolescent body, with the firm full breasts of a young woman. Her brunette hair spread on the pillows with the long stream of pearls from her neck. On the middle finger of her left hand, she wore a burnished ruby the color and size of a cherry.

Like Xander, Tamura was calm, quite serene.

It seemed they had had no second thoughts, eating their last meal, drinking their wine, perhaps making love. Then swallowing the pills and lying back for the sleep of winter, the long cold that encased and preserved them like perfect candy in a globe of ice.

They had been here nine years. It was not so very long.

Tchaikov looked at them. After a few minutes he turned and went back across the room, and again his footmarks temporarily disturbed the carpet. He locked the doors behind him.

In the curator's suite below, he put on the ordinary dimmed yellow lamp, and

read Eynin's poem again, sipping black tea, while the synthetic fire crackled at the foot of his hard bed.

We watched the summer palaces
Sail from this place,
Like liners to
the sea Of yesterday.

Tchaikov put the book aside and switched off the light and fire. The fire died quite slowly, as if real.

Outside he heard the wolves howling like the old factory machinery.

Behind his closed eyelids, he saw Tamura's ruby, red as the cherries and roses in the elite florist's shops of the city. Her eyes, apparently, were dark.

Above him, as he lay on his back, the lovers slept on in their bubble of loving snow.

The first month was not eventful. Each day, Henrique Tchaikov made a tour of the Dacha, noting any discrepancies, a fissure in the plaster, a chipped tile, noises in the pipes of the heating system--conscious, rather, of the fissured plaster and tiles, the thumps of the radiators, in his own apartment building. He replaced fuses and valves. In the library he noted the books which would need renovation. And took a general inventory of the stores the house had accumulated. Every curator did this. Evidently, some items were overlooked. The books, for example, the cornice in the ballroom, while lavatory tissue and oil for the generator were regularly renewed.

He used the hot tub, but only every three or four days. In the city, bathing was rationed. For the same reason he did not go into the solarium, except once a week to check the thermostat and to water the extraordinary black-green plants which rose in storeys of foliage to the roof.

Most of the afternoon he sat reading in the library, or listening to the music machine. He heard, for the first time, recordings of Prokofiev and Rachmaninov playing inside their own piano concertos, and Shostakovich conducting his own symphony, and Lirabez singing, in a slightly flat but swarthy baritone, a cycle of his own songs.

For those who liked these things, the Dacha provided wonderful experiences.

Tchaikov also watched films, and the recordings of historical events

Sometimes in the mornings he slept an hour late, letting the coffee plate prepare a sticky brew, with thick cream from the cold room.

Usually he kept in mind these treats were his only for eight months at the most, less than a year. Then he would have to go back.

The dog became more sociable, though not exactly friendly. He stroked her fur, even brushed her twice a week. He called her Bella, because she was beautiful. Probably this was not the right thing, as again, when he left, some other person would be the curator, who might not even like dogs.

Bella, the dog, each evening lay before the fire in the card room, sometimes even in the suite. But normally she would only stay an hour or two. Then she wanted to go down through the house and out by the electronic dog-door.

He began to realize that the wolf howling was often very close to the mansion. At last he saw the indigo form of a wolf on the night snow. The wolf howled on and on, until the dog went out. Then the wolf and the dog played together in the snow.

The first time he saw this, Tchaikov was assailed by a heart wringing pang of hope.

The house manual told him that the wolves had invaded the factory, and remained there, because they lived off the rats which still infested it. The rats in turn lived off the dung of the wolves. It was a disgusting but divinely inspired cycle. Bella and the wolf must have met out upon the frozen ice of the ancient river buried below the Dacha and the pines. Although there would be females of the wolf kind for the wolf to choose from, instead he took to Bella. An individualist. Tchaikov did not see them join in the sexual act, but he accepted that they too were lovers. This seemed to symbolize the vigor still clinging in the threatened world, its basic tenacity, its magic. But he put such thoughts aside. Magic was illusion. Sex was only that, just like the "hot" magazines Ouperin, or someone, had secreted in the suite, and which Tchaikov did not bother with. For him, sensuality was connected to personality. He preferred memory to invention.

Of course, occasionally he pondered Tamura and Xander, their intrinsic meaning. But never for long. And he did not go up again to look at them.

IN THE FIRST DAY of the second month, a fax came through from the city computer, informing him a party would be arriving at midday. He shut the dog Bella in the kitchen, and put on his suit and tie. At sixteen hours, or four o'clock w they were late, another avalanche -- the party drew up in two big buses with leviathan snow tires.

Tchaikov understood he was unreasonably resentful at the stupid intrusion, for

which the place was intended. He wanted the Dacha to himself. But he courteously welcomed the party, twenty-three people, who stared about the hall with wide, red-rimmed eyes, their noses running, because the heating in the buses was not very good.

They had their own guide, who led them, following Tchaikov, up the stairs to the manually operated lift. Tchaikov and the guide took them in two groups of eleven and twelve up into the dome.

They seemed frightened on the narrow stair, and in the corridor, as though extreme cold still unsettled -- startled -- them. They peered through the glass doors, exactly as Tchaikov had. When he and the bossy guide ushered them through, they wandered about the bedroom. Told not to touch anything, they made tactile motions in the air over ornaments and furnishings, with their gloved hands.

One woman, seeing the lovers, Tamura, Xander, on the bed, began to cry. No one took any notice. She pulled quantities of paper handkerchiefs from her pocket; possibly she had come prepared for emotion.

Downstairs in the ballroom, the guide lectured everybody on the Dacha. They stood glassy-eyed and blank. The significance of Tamura and Xander was elusive but overpowering. Tchaikov too did not listen. Instead he organized the coffee-plate in the card room, and brought the party coffee in relays, laced with vodka, before its return to the city in the two drafty buses.

When they had gone, about six, Bella was whining from the kitchen. He fed her quickly, knowing she wanted to be off to her lover. He gave her that night two extra steaks, in case she should want to take them out as a gift, but she left them on the plate. Oddly, from this, he deduced she would eventually desert the Dacha for her wolf panner. Instinctively she knew not to accustom him to extra food, and to prepare herself for future hardship. But doubtless this was fanciful. Besides, she might by now be pregnant with the wolf's children.

Bella lay before the synthetic log fire, her gold eyes burning golden-red. Her belly looked more full than it had. It was about twenty-two hours, ten o'clock.

Tchaikov read aloud to her from the poem "This Place."

I dreamed
once, of this place.
When I was young.
But then I woke
When I was young.

It was five nights since the bus party had visited. Once the dog had got up, shaken herself, and padded from the room, Tchaikov went upstairs and stepped into the elevator.

The night was extra cold, minus several more degrees on the gauge, and the great bedroom had a silvery fog in it.

He could look at the couple now quite passively, as if they were only waxworks. A man and a woman who had not wanted to remain inside the sinking winter world. But was it merely that? Was their mystical suicide cowardice -- or bravura? Did they think, in dying, that they had somewhere warm to go?

The Bureau had not advanced any records on them, and probably their names were not even those they had gone by in life:

Again, he asked himself what they meant. But it did not really matter. They were. that was all.

In the night, about four A.M., an unearthly noise woke him from a deep sleep, where he had been dreaming of swimming in a warm sea jeweled by fish.

The sound had occurred outside, he thought, outside both the dream and the room. He got up and went to the window, and looked out through the triple glazing which was all the suite provided.

The snowscape spread from the pines, along the plain, and in the distance billowed up to the higher land, and the black sky massed with the broken edges of stars. Far away to the right, where the plain was its most level and long, a black mark had appeared in the snow. It must stretch for nearly twenty meters, he thought, a jagged, ink-black crack in the terrain.

Tchaikov stared, and saw a vapor rising out of the crack, caused by the disparity between the bitter set of the air and some different temperature below.

The sound had been a crack. Like a gigantic piece of wood snapped suddenly in half- a bark of breakage.

But new snow was already drifting faintly down from the stars, smoothing and obscuring the black tear in the whiteness. As Tchaikov watched, it began to vanish.

Probably it was nothing. In the city apertures sometimes appeared in the top-snow of streets, where thermolated pipes still ran beneath. Somebody had told Tchaikov there had been a river here, passing below the house. The driver

had mentioned it too. Perhaps the disturbance had to do with that.

Tchaikov went back to bed, and lay for a while listening, expectant and tensed. Then he recalled that once, in his early childhood, he had heard such a crack roar out across a frozen lake in the country. Instinctively, hearing it now, he had unconsciously remembered the springs of long-ago, the waxing of the sun, the rains, the melting of the ice. But spring was forever over.

He drifted back down into sleep, numb and calm.

The next morning, as he was coming from the solarium, having switched off the sprinklers, he heard the sound of a vehicle on the plain. He went into the ballroom and looked down at the snow, half noticing as he did so that the curious mark of the previous night had completely disappeared. A large black car was now parked by the Dacha's steps, near the statues. After a moment, Tchaikov recognized the car which had brought him here. Puzzled, he waited, and saw the driver, Argenty, get out, and then a smaller figure in a long coat of gray synthetic fur.

They came up the steps, Argenty pausing for the smaller figure, which was that of a woman.

After a minute the house door made a noise.

There had been no communication from the city computer, but sometimes messages were delayed. In any case, you could not leave them standing in the cold.

Tchaikov opened the door without interrogation. Argenty shot him a quick look under his hat.

"It's all right, isn't it?"

"I expect so," said Tchaikov.

He let them come in, and the door shut.

Argenty took off his hat, and stood almost to attention. He said, "There aren't visitors due, are there?"

"Not that I know of."

"I thought not. There's been another power failure. I shouldn't think anyone would be going anywhere today."

"Apart from you."

"Yes," said Argenty. He turned, and looked at the woman.

She too had taken off her hat, a fake fur shako to match the coat. She had a small pale slender face, without, he thought, any makeup beyond a dusting of powder. Her eyes were dark and smoky, with long lashes of a lighter darkness. Her dark hair seemed recently washed and brushed and fell in soft waves to her shoulders. Just under her right cheekbone had been applied a little diamante flower. She met his eyes and touched the flower with a gloved fingertip. She said quietly, "A frostbite scar."

"This is my wife," said Argenty. "Tanya."

Then she smiled at Tchaikov, a placating smile, like a child's when it wants to show it is undeserving of punishment. She was like a child, a girl, despite the two thin lines cut under her large eyes and at either side of her soft mouth.

He remembered how Argenty had talked on and on about her, her light-deprived Twilight Sickness, her wanderings in the night and cries. She had been lovely, he said, twenty years ago. In a way she still was.

Unauthorized, they should not be here. It could cost Argenty a serious demotion. What had happened? The power failure? The electricity off in their flat, gloom, and the refrigerator failing, and Argenty saying, Leave all that, I'll take you somewhere nice. As you might, to stop a miserable and frightened child crying.

Tchaikov said, "Come into the card room. There's a fire."

They went through with him, Argenty still stiff and formal, absolutely knowing what he had risked, but she was all smiles now, reassured

In the warm room, Argenty removed his greatcoat, and helped her off with her fur. Tchaikov looked at them, slightly surprised. Argenty wore the uniform of his city service, with an honor ribbon pinned by the collar. While she -- she wore a long, old evening gown of faded pastel crimson, which left her shoulders and arms and some of her white back and breast bare. On her left hand, under the woolen glove, was another little glove of lace. She indicated it again at once, laughed and said, "Frostbite. I've been careless, you see."

Tchaikov switched on the coffee-plate. He said, "I usually have lunch in about an hour. I hope you'll join me."

Argenty nodded politely. She began to walk about the room, inspecting the antique oil paintings and the restored damask wall covering. Argenty took out a brand of expensive cigarettes and came to Tchaikov, offering them.

Argenty murmured, very low, "Thank you, for being so good. I can't tell you what it means to her."

"That's all right. You may even get away with it, if the computer's out."

Argenty shrugged. "Perhaps. What does it matter anyway?"

After the coffee, Tchaikov showed them the ballroom, then went to organize a lunch. He selected caviar and pork, the type of vegetables and little side dishes he did not, himself, bother with, fruit and biscuits, and a chocolate dessert he thought she would like. He took vodka and two bottles of champagne from the liquor compartment. For God's sake, they might as well enjoy the visit.

He opened up the parlor off the ballroom. It too had a chandelier dripping prisms. He turned on the fire and lit the tall white candles in the priceless candelabra. He was not supposed to do this. But against Argenty's tremendous gamble it was a small gesture.

Everything sparkled in the room. It was now only like an overcast snowy winter day in the country. Perhaps before some festival. And the lunch was like a celebration.

Argenty ate doggedly, drank quite sparingly. She ate only a little, but with interest, excitement. She sparkled up like the room, her personal lights switched on.

In the middle of the meal, the dog, Bella, came padding in, her coat thick with rime and water drops. Tchaikov got up, thinking Tanya would be afraid of the dog. But Tanya only laughed with delight, and went straight to Bella, ruffling her fur, and drying her inadequately with linen napkins from the table.

As Bella stood before the fire, and the slight woman made a fuss of her, Tchaikov could see the swelling shape of the dog's belly, her extended nipples. She was definitely pregnant from the wolf. And the girl-woman bent shining over her, caressing and stroking- kissing the big animal on the savage velvet of her brow.

Argenty said, "Tanya used to live on a farm. They had dogs, cats, horses, everything."

Tanya said, lightly, "I came to the city to sell stockings. Isn't that ridiculous."

When the meal was finished, they drew the large chairs to the fireside. They sat

drinking coffee and brandy, and the dog lay between them, glistening gold along her back from the fire.

Outside, the dusk of the afternoon seemed only seasonal through the openings of the heavy drapes.

They were sleepy, muttering little anecdotes of their pasts, quite divorced from their present. In the end, Tanya fell asleep, her head gracefully drooping, a lock of her hair like dark tinsel on her cheek.

"When she wakes up," said Argenty, "we'll be going."

"Why don't you stay tonight?" said Tchaikov. "Leave early in the morning. There's another bedroom in the suite. Quite a good one-- I think it's for visiting VIPS. By tomorrow the power failure will be over, probably."

"That's kind...you've been kind...but we'd better get back."

They looked at the sleeping woman, at the sleeping dog, and the fire.

"Why did this happen?" asked Argenty. His voice was gentle and unemphatic. "Couldn't they have seen-- why did they give up all the best things, let them go -- they could have -- something -- surely"

Tchaikov said nothing, and Argenty fell silent.

And in the silence there came a dense low rumble.

For a moment Tchaikov took it for some fluctuation of the gas jet in the fire, and then, as it grew louder, for the noise of snow dislodged and tumbling from a roof of the mansion.

But then the rumbling became very loud, running in toward them over the plain.

"What is it?" said Argenty. He had gone pale.

"I don't know. An earth tremor, perhaps."

The rumbling was now so vehement he had to raise his voice. On the table the silver and the glasses tinkled and rattled, something fell and broke, and on the walls the pictures trembled and swayed. The floor beneath their chairs was chuming.

The dog had woken, sat up, her coat bristling and ears laid flat, a white ring showing round each eye.

Argenty and Tchaikov rose, and in her sleep the woman stretched out one hand, in its lace glove, as if to snatch hold of something.

Then came a thunderclap, a sort of ejection of sound that ripped splintering from earth and sky, hit the barrier of the house, exploded, dropped back in enormous echoing shards.

The windows grated and shook. No doubt some of the external glass had ruptured.

"Is it a bomb?" cried Argenty.

Tanya had started from sleep and the chair, and he caught her in his arms. She was speechless with shock and terror. The dog was growling.

"I don't know. It's stopped now. Not a bomb, I think. There was no light flash." Tchaikov moved to the door. "Stay here."

Outside, he ran across the ballroom, and to the nearer window which looked out to the plain.

What he saw made him hesitate mentally, stumble in his mind, at a loss. He could not decipher what he was looking at. It was a sight theoretically familiar enough. Yet knowing what it was, he stood immobile for several minutes, staring without comprehension at the enormous coal-black dragon which had crashed upward through the dead ice of the frozen river, showering off panes of the marble land, like the black and white concrete blocks of a collapsed building. In the puddle of bubbling iron water, the submarine settled now, tall, motionless, less than thirty-five meters beyond the Dacha, while clouds of stony steam rose in a tumult on the steel sky.

THEY MARCHED STEADILY to the mansion, over the snow. Henrique Tchaikov watched them come, black shapes on the whiteness.

Reaching the steps, they climbed them, and arrived at the door. He could see their uniforms by then, the decorations of rank and authority. They did not seem to feel the cold. They did not bother with the buzzer.

He spoke through the door apparatus.

"You must identify yourselves."

"You'll let us in." The one who spoke then gave a key word and number. And Tchaikov opened the door.

The cold gushed in with them, in a special way.

"You're the current Bureau man," said the commander to Tchaikov. He was about thirty-six, athletic, tanned by a solarium, his hair cut too short, not a pore in his face. His teeth were winter white. "We won't give you much trouble. We've come for the couple."

Tchaikov did not answer. His heart kicked, but it was a reflex. He stood very still. He had taken Tanya and Argenty down to the kitchen, with the dog, and shut them all in.

The commander vocalized again. "We don't need any red tape, do we? My men will go straight up. It'll only take the briefest while. The dome, right?"

Tchaikov said slowly, "You mean Tamura and Xander."

"Are those the names? Yes. The pair in the state bedroom. Here's the confirmation disc."

Tchaikov accepted the disc and put it in the analyzer by the door. After ten seconds an affirmative lit up, the key number, and the little message: Comply with all conditions. The commander took back his disc. "Where would we be," he said, "without our machines." Then he gave an order, and the four other men ran off and up the stair, like hounds let from a leash, toward the upper floors and the elevator. Obviously they had been primed with the layout of the mansion. Tchaikov saw that two of them carried each a rolled rain-colored thermolated bag. They would have some means of opening the upper doors.

He said, "Why are you taking them away? Where are they going?"

The commander showed all his pristine, repulsive teeth. "Quite a comfortable stint here, I'd say, yes? Don't worry, they won't recall you until your time's up. Messes up the files. Seven months to go. You can just relax."

Tchaikov grasped it would be useless to question the commander further. He had had his orders, which were to remove the frozen lovers in cold-bags, take them into the submarine, go away with them, somewhere.

Tchaikov said, "It was impressive, the way you surfaced."

"That river," said the commander, "it runs deep. So far down, you know, the water still moves. We came in from the sea, thirteen kilometers. Must have given you a surprise."

"Yes."

"There's nothing like her," said the commander, as though he boasted about a selected woman, or his mother. "The X 2 M's. Ice-breakers, powerhives. Worlds in themselves. You'd be amazed. We could stay under for a hundred years. We have everything. Clean reusable air, foolproof heating, cuisine prepared by master chefs, games rooms, weaponry. See how brown I am," he added, dancing his narrow eyes, flirting now. "Have you ever tasted eggs?"

"No."

"I have one every day. And fresh meat. Salads. My little boat has everything I'll ever need."

There was a wooden, flat sound, repeated on and on.

The commander frowned.

"It's only the dog" Tchaikov said. "I shut her in, below. In case she annoyed you."

"Dog? Oh, yes. Animals don't interest me, except of course to eat."

Tchaikov thought he heard the lift cranking up the tower, going to the dome.

The commander looked about now, and laughed at the old regal house, the old country Dacha with its sleeping white-candy dead.

Then stood in silence in the hall, until the other four men ran down again, carrying, not particularly cautiously, the two thermolated bags, upright and unpliant. Filled and out of the dome, the material had misted over. Tchaikov could not see Tamura or Xander in these cocoons, although he found himself staring, thinking for a second he caught the scorch of her ruby ring.

"Well done," the commander said to him. "All over." It was like the dentists in childhood. "You can go back to all those cozy duties." He grinned at Tchaikov. But his use of jargon was somehow unwieldy and out of date. Did they speak another tongue on the submarine? "A nice number. Happy days."

The dog had suddenly stopped barking.

The door let the men out. Tchaikov watched them returning over the snow, toward their black dragon-whale. Already the ice was forming round the submarine's casing, but that would not be much of an inconvenience. He wondered where they had been, how far out in jet black seas, where maybe fish still swam. When the vessel was gone, the ice would swiftly close, and tonight's fresh snowfall heal the wound it had made as snow had healed the preface to the wound, last night.

Tamura and Xander, preserved from the submarine's warmth in some refrigerated cubicle. He did not know, could not imagine for what purpose. Although the nagging line from some book -- was it a Bible? --began to twitter in his head...And He said: Make thee an ark

Above, the dome was void. The great polar room with its stalactites of ice, the footsteps already smoothing from the carpet.

He descended quickly to the kitchen. He had told Argenty where the medicine cabinet was, and suggested that he dial some sedative tablets for his wife. Tchaikov was unsure what he would find.

Yet when he reached the lower floor, there was only quietness. Opening the kitchen door, he found the two of them seated urbanely at the long table.

The dog Bella had gone. But Tanya sat in her red dress, and looking up, she met Tchaikov only with her lambent eyes.

She said to him, reciting from memory from Eynin's poem that he too knew so well:

In Hell the birds are made of fire;
If all the birds of Hell flew to this place,
And settled on the
snow,
Still darkness would prevail,
And utter cold.

"She knows it by heart," said Argenty.

"So do I, most of it," Tchaikov answered.

"The dog went out," said Argenty. "We thought we heard a wolf."

"Yes. They've mated."

The kitchen was bathed in vague ochre heat, only the light of the new cooking area was raw and too bright.

Tanya's eyes shone.

"You were very good, to hide us away."

"It's all right," he said. "The military are shortsighted. They came for something else."

In a while they heard the strange, sluggish hollow suction of the submarine, its motors, diving down again below the ice. The house gave now only a little shudder, and on its shelf one ancient plate turned askew.

Tanya laughed. She lifted her dark springy hair in her hands.

Tchaikov saw that Argenty's hair, under the polishing light, was a rich dull gold.

He slept a deep leaden sleep, and dreamed of the submarine. It was taller than the tallest architecture of the city, the Bureau building. It clove forward, black, ice and steam and boiling water spraying away from it, rending the land with a vicious hull like the blade of some enormous ice-skate. In the dark sky above, red and yellow burning birds wheeled to and fro, cawing and calling, striking sparks from the clouds. The birds of Hell.

When the submarine reached the Dacha, it stopped just outside the wall of the suite, which in the dream was made of glass. The wall shattered and fell down, and looking up the mile of iron, steel and night that was the tower of the submarine, Tchaikov noticed a tiny bluish porthole set abnormally in the side, and there they sat, the lovers, gazing down with cold, closed eyes.

Waking, he got up and made black tea on the plate. From the other bedroom of the suite, across the inner room, came no sound. When he looked out, there was no longer a light beneath their door. If they had switched off the optional lamp, perhaps they slept.

When the afternoon darkened, they had sat on with him in the kitchen, drinking a little, talking idly. There was the subtle ease of remaining; he realized before Argenty asked, that they did after all mean to stay a night at the house.

Later the dog came in again. Tchaikov fed her. She lay by the hot pipes for half an hour before going out once more.

During the interval, Tanya suddenly sang a strange old song in her light girl's voice, "Oh my dog is such a clever dog --"

Bella listened. Her tail wagged slowly. She came to Tanya to be caressed before padding off into the star-spiked night.

They ate cold pork and bread for supper and finished the champagne. Argenty thanked Tchaikov, shaking his hand, throwing his arm around him. The girl-woman did not kiss Tchaikov as he had half expected -hoped? --she would. She only said shyly, "It's been a wonderful day. Better than a birthday."

By the time he concluded his nocturnal check of the Dacha, they had gone up, and just the lamp showed softly under the door.

But they were in full darkness now, so Tchaikov walked almost on tiptoe from the suite. He did not want to wake them if they slept. He wished her not to dream as he had, of the triumphant submarine.

Outside, the ice had superficially closed over again. Snow fell in gentle pitiless flakes.

The elevator seemed particularly sluggish. He had to work at the lever with great firmness.

Above, in the icy corridor, Tchaikov shivered, only his trousers and greatcoat on over his nightshirt. As he walked toward the glass doors, he had a sense of imminence. What was it? Was it loss?

As formerly, he hesitated, and stood at the doors, staring in through the glacial light, the glacial glass, the cracks, the fog of ice.

He experienced a moment of dislocation, pure bewilderment, just as he had with the submarine. He had previously seen the bed clothed by two forms. Now they were removed and the bed was vacant. But there were two forms on the bed.

The bed was clothed.

Tchaikov opened the doors with the electronic key they had so noiselessly replaced on the chest in his room, before going up again. Of course, the key, lying there, had been obvious for what it was. Like the house map in the card room. There would have been no difficulty in deciding.

The bedroom, when he entered it now, did not strike him as so frozen. The breath of the living seemed finally to have stirred it, like the fluid of the deepest coldest pool, stirred by a golden wand.

Tchaikov went across to the bed. Two bottles had fallen on the thick carpet. He looked down, at the couple.

They lay hand in hand, side by side. Their faces were peaceful, almost smiling, the eyes fast shut. Like the faces, the eyes, of Xander and Tamura. Yet these two lovers had needed to be brave. Despite the vodka they had swallowed and the tablets from the medicine cabinet, they had had to face the cold, had had to lie down in the cold. He in his well-brushed uniform with its single honor, and she in her pale red sleeveless gown.

But there had been no struggle. They seemed to have found it very simple, very consoling, if not easy. Perhaps it had been easy, too.

Her somber hair, his gilded hair, both smoked now by the rime. And on the diamante flower that gemmed her cheek, a single mote of crystal like a tear.

Tchaikov backed slowly and carefully away. It was possible they were not quite dead yet, still in the process of dying. He tiptoed out, not to disturb their death.

By the end of the ninth month, when the Bureau at last recalled him, the dog was long gone. He had seen her at first sometimes, out on the snow, playing with the wolf and their three pups. But the wolf was a king wolf, made her queen over the wolf pack, and in the end, she went away to the factory with them.

When he heard the howling in the still night, he thought of her. Once, the moon appeared incredibly for a quarter of an hour, sapphire blue, and the wolves' chanting rose to a crescendo. Her children would be very strong, cross-bred from an alpha male and such a well-nourished mother.

His faxed report had been acknowledged, but that was all. Tchaikov never commented upon or thought about the aspects of what had occurred, he detailed and visualized the events only in memorized images.

The night of the blue moon, which was two nights before his return to the city, and to his cramped flat with its thudding radiators, the tepid bath once a week, the rationing, the dark, he wrote in the back of the book of Eynin's poetry, on the blank page which followed the poem called "The Place."

Here too he set out the facts sparsely, as he had done for the Bureau. Under the facts he wrote a few further lines.

"I have puzzled all this time over what is their meaning, the lovers in the ice, whoever they are, whether right or wrong in their action, and even if they change, their bodies constantly taken and replaced by others. And I think their meaning is this: Love, courage, defiance-- the mystery of the human spirit, still blooming, always blooming, like the last flower in the winter world."