

Arkadi and Boris Strugatski. Hard to be a god

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OCR: SCOUT

PROLOGUE

The stock of Anka's crossbow was made of black plastic. The string of chrome steel was operated by a noiselessly moving winch. Anton did not think much of such innovations. He owned a conventional arquebus in the style of Marshal Totz, King Pitz the first. It was overlaid with black copper and a rope of steer sinews ran along small wheels. Pashka, on the other hand, had an air rifle. Crossbows were childish weapons, he thought, for he was lazy by nature and lacked manual dexterity.

They landed on the north shore at a spot where the gnarled roots of mighty pine trees protruded from the yellow sandy slope. Anka let go of the rudder and looked around. The sun had risen above the forest. A blue fog hung over the lake. The pines glowed dark green and a yellow sandy beach stretched in the distance. A light blue sky arched over the whole landscape.

The children bent over the side of the boat and looked into the water.

"Can't see a thing," said Pashka.

"A huge pike," said Anton, a trifle too sure of himself.

"With fins like that?" asked Pashka.

Anton did not reply. Anka, too, looked into the water, but she saw only her own reflection in it.

"How about taking a swim?" said Pashka, and plunged his arm into the water up to the elbow. "Cold," he reported.

Anton climbed onto the bow and jumped ashore. The boat rocked to and fro. Anton took hold of the boat and glanced questioningly at Pashka. Now Pashka rose, placed the oar like a water carrier's beam across his neck, bent his knees a bit and sang at the top of his voice:

*Old salt, sea-dog, Witzliputzli!
Are you watching, on your guard?
Look! A school of hard-boiled sharkies
Are approaching, swimming hard!*

Anton rocked the boat.

"Hey, hey!" yelled Pashka, trying not to lose his balance.

"Why 'hard-boiled?'" Anka asked.

"I don't know," answered Pashka. They climbed out of the boat. "But

it's pretty good, isn't it? 'A school of hard-boiled sharkies!'"

They pulled the boat ashore. Their feet slipped on the wet sand, which was strewn with dried needles and pine cones. The boat was heavy and slippery but they dragged it all the way up onto the land. Then they stopped for a while to catch their breath.

"Almost squashed my foot," said Pashka, and straightened his red fez.

He made sure that the tassel hung directly above his right ear-- just like the broad-nosed Irukanian pirates were wont to do. "life isn't worth a

farthing, my dear!" he recited dramatically.

Anka was intently sucking her finger.

"A splinter?" asked Anton.

"No. Got a scratch. One of you two must have long nails."

"Let me see!"

She showed him her finger.

"Yes," said Anton. "A scratch.--Well, let's do something!"

"Pick up your arms and let's walk along the shore!" suggested Pashka.

"For that we didn't need to crawl ashore," Anton said.

"It's chicken to stay in the boat," stated Pashka. "But along the shore

there are all kinds of things. Reeds, canyons, whirlpools, eddies with

eels--and catfish, too."

"A school of hard-boiled catfish," said Anton.

"Hey, did you ever dive into a whirlpool?"

"Sure."

"Funny that I didn't see you do it."

"Lots of things you haven't seen yet"

Anka turned her back on them, raised her crossbow and aimed at a pine tree 20 feet away. The bark came off in splinters.

"Wow, did you see that!" exclaimed Pashka with admiration.

Then he

aimed his air rifle at the same spot. But he missed. "I didn't hold my

breath properly," he said.

"And even if you had held it properly, so what?" asked Anton. He looked

at Anka.

With a firm movement Anka retracted the steel bow with the winch. She

had splendid muscles, and Anton watched with pleasure the hard ball of her

biceps rolling beneath her tanned skin.

Anka took aim carefully, and shot again. The second arrow penetrated

the tree trunk, a bit lower than the first

"That doesn't make any sense," said Anka, and let the crossbow hang

down her side. "What?" asked Anton.

"We're only damaging the trees, that's all. Yesterday, a kid

shot an

arrow at a tree and I forced him to pull that arrow out with his own teeth."

"Pashka would have run away," said Anton. "You have good teeth."

"I can whistle through my teeth, too," said Pashka.

"Well," said Anka, "let's do something!"

"I don't feel like climbing up and down canyons," said Anton.

"Me neither. Let's walk straight ahead."

"Where to?" asked Pashka.

"Just follow your nose."

"Meaning what?" said Anton.

"Let's go into the forest!" said Pashka. "Toshka, do you remember the

'Forgotten Road'?"

"Sure!"

"You know, Anetchka--" said Pashka.

"Don't you call me Anetchka," Anka cut in abruptly. She could not stand

to be called by any other name than Anka.

Anton remembered very well that she did not like it, and said quickly:

"Sure--the Forgotten Road. Nobody has driven over it for ages. It isn't

even marked on the map, and where it leads to, nobody knows."

"Have you ever been there?"

"Yes. But we didn't explore it."

"A road coming from nowhere and leading nowhere," stated Pashka, who

had regained his former self-assurance.

"That's fine!" said Anka. Her eyes narrowed to black slits.

"Let's go!

Will we get there by tonight?"

"What are you talking about? Well be there by noon."

They clambered up the steep slope. Once they had arrived at the top,

Pashka tamed around. Down below was the blue lake with yellow speckled sand

bars, and the boat on the sandy beach. Close to the shore, where the water

was as smooth as oil, large concentric circles broke the surface-- that was

the pike, probably. And the boy felt, as always, that vague joy he

experienced whenever he and Toshka stole away from the boarding-school and a whole day of freedom lay before them. A day filled with unexplored places, strawberries, sun-scorched deserted meadows, lizards, and ice cold water from unexpected springs amidst the rocks. And as always he felt overcome by a desire to shout out loud and jump up into the air. Anton, laughing happily, watched him, and Pashka saw the understanding in his friend's eyes.

Anka placed two fingers in her mouth and gave forth with a piercing whistle.

And they entered the forest.

It was a pine wood, with sparse vegetation. Their feet skidded over the slippery, needle-covered soil. The slanting sun rays glittered between the straight tree trunks, and golden spots danced on the ground. The air smelled of resin, the nearby lake, and strawberries. Somewhere, far above them, an invisible lark was warbling.

Anka walked ahead. She carried her crossbow in one hand, and with the other reached now and then for the strawberries that occasionally peeked out, as red as blood, from among the foliage. Anton marched behind her with the solid battle gear of Marshal Totz slung over his shoulder. The quiver, filled with mighty battle arrows, rhythmically banged against the seat of his trousers with every step. He looked at Anka's neck: it was deeply tanned, and the vertebrae jutted out like little knobs. Once in a while he turned around and looked for Pashka, who had disappeared; only the red fez flashed from time to time in the bright sunlight. Anton imagined Pashka prowling silently among the pine trees, his air rifle held in

firing

position, his lean face with the hooked nose pointing forward like some predatory animal Pashka crawling through the underwood. But the forest knows no mercy. A challenge--and you must react at once, thought Anton. He was just about to duck--but Anka was walking right in front of him, and she might turn around any moment Wouldn't he look silly then!

Anka tamed around and asked:

"Did you sneak away real quietly?"

Anton shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody sneaks away noisily!"

"Well, I did. I guess I made some awful noise," said Anka with a worried expression. "I dropped a cup--and suddenly I heard steps in the corridor. Probably old maid Katja; she's on duty today. I had to jump out of the window into a flower bed. Guess what kind of flowers grow there, Toshka?"

Anton frowned.

"Under your window? I don't know, what kind?"

"Pretty tough flowers. No wind can rock them, no storm can break them.

You can jump around in them and trample on them and it won't harm them."

"That's interesting," said Anton in a serious voice. He remembered that he also had a flower bed under his window, with flowers that were neither rocked by wind nor broken by storm. But actually he had never paid any attention to it.

Anka stopped and waited until Anton had caught up with her. She held her hand out to him. It was full of strawberries. With the tip of his fingers, Anton seized exactly three berries.

"Go ahead. Take some more," said Anka.

"No, thanks," said Anton. "I like to pick them myself.-- But listen,

Anka, it must be easy to get along with old maid Katja, isn't it?"

"That all depends," said Anka. "Just imagine somebody telling you every night how dirty and dusty your feet are--"

She fell silent. It was good to walk with her through the woods, shoulder to shoulder, and their bare elbows touching now and then. And it felt good to look at her--how pretty she was, so nimble, so friendly--and how big and gray her eyes were, and what dark lashes she had.

"Sure," said Anton, and stretched out his hand to grasp a spider web that glistened in the sun. "Her feet wouldn't get dirty. If somebody carried you through every puddle, then you wouldn't get dirty either."

"Who carries her?"

"Henry from the weather station. A big, strong guy with blond hair, you know."

"Really?"

"Didn't you know it? It's old hat, everybody knows they're in love."

Both fell silent again. Anton looked at Anka. Her eyes were dark caves.

"And when did that happen?" she asked.

"Oh, on a moonlit night," replied Anton, not too eagerly.

"Just keep this all to yourself, will you?"

Anka laughed.

"It wasn't hard to drag it out of you, Toshka," She said. "Do you want some more strawberries?"

Quite mechanically, Anton now took some berries from her red-stained hand and put them in his mouth. I don't like gossip-mongers, he thought I can't stand people who tell tales about others. Suddenly he had a thought.

"Some day somebody will carry you, too. How would you like it if people talk about it then?"

"I'm certainly not going to tell anybody about it," said Anka.

"I don't
like gossip."

Then she continued in a more confidential tone: "You know, I'm
really
fed up with having to wash my feet two times every night."

Poor old maid Katja, thought Anton. What an uphill fight she has.

They reached a narrow lane. The path led up a steep slope and
the wood
became darker and darker. Ferns grew in profusion, and wood sorrel.
The pine
trunks were covered with moss and the whitish foam of lichen.

But the forest knows no mercy. Suddenly a hoarse, shrill
voice, quite
unhuman, roared out:

"Stop! Throw your arms to the ground! You, milord, noble don
and you,
too, Dona!"

If there is a challenge in the woods, you must react at
once, Anton
knew. With calculated precision, Anton pushed Anka down into the
ferns to
the left of the path, while he himself leapt into the ferns to the
right. He
slipped at first, and then hid behind the evil-smelling lichen
foam. The
echo of the hoarse voice still rang through the wood, but the
path was
empty. Suddenly everything was quiet.

Anton turned to one side to bend his bow, when an arrow hit
close by.

Dirt showered down on him. The hoarse, unhuman voice announced:

"Milord has been hit in the heel!"

Anton moaned and pulled up his left

"Not that one, it's the right heel!" corrected the voice.

He could hear Pashka giggle nearby. Cautiously, Anton peered
out from
the ferns, but he could not see him anywhere in the dusky, green
jungle.

At that moment, a penetrating, whistling sound came and a thud
as if a
tree were falling to the ground.

"Owoooooo!" howled Pashka in a tortured voice. "Have mercy!
Spare my

life! Don't kill me!"

Anton leapt to his feet. From the thicket of ferns he saw Pashka approach in an unsteady gait, both arms raised above his head. Anka's voice asked:

"Toshka, can you see him?"

"Yes, I can," called Anton cheerfully. "Don't move!" he yelled in

Pashka's direction. "Put your hands on top of your head!"

Pashka obediently clasped his hands above his head and declared:

"I won't tell a thing."

"What shall we do with him, Toshka?" asked Anka.

"You'll find out in just a minute," said Anton, settling comfortably on

the ground and placing his crossbow across his knees.

"Name!" he croaked, using the voice of the witch of Irukan.

Pashka simply arched his back and made a contemptuous gesture. He did

not want to submit to defeat. Anton fired. The heavy arrow noisily

penetrated the branches above Pashka's head.

"Wow!" exclaimed Anka.

"They call me Don Sarancha," grudgingly confessed Pashka. And then he

began to recite: "And here lies, as you all can see, one of his accomplices."

"An infamous thug and murderer," Anton clarified. "But he is known

never to do something for nothing. On whose behalf have you come here to snoop around?"

"Don Satarina the Pitiless has sent me," Pashka lied.

Anton spoke with contempt in his voice:

"This hand of mine cut the thread of Don Satarina's stinking life on

the Square of the Heavy Swords just two years ago."

"Shall I pierce him with an arrow?" suggested Anka.

"Oh, I completely forgot," said Pashka quickly. "Actually, I'm being

sent by Arata the Fair. He promised me one hundred gold pieces for your

heads."

Anton slapped his knees.

"What a liar!" he shouted. "Do you believe for an instant that Arata would have anything to do with a swindler like you?"

"Maybe I'd better pierce him with an arrow after all?" asked a bloodthirsty Anka.

Anton laughed demonically.

"By the way," said Pashka, "you were shot in your heel. You should have collapsed long since from losing so much blood."

"Nuts!" countered Anton. "First of all, I've had a piece from the bark of the White Tree in my mouth the whole time; and, second, two beautiful barbarian maidens bandaged my wound."

The ferns began to move and Anka stepped out onto the path. On her cheek was a long scratch and her knees were smeared with earth and lichen.

"It's about time we threw him into the swamp," she declared. "If the enemy won't surrender, he must be destroyed."

Pashka's arms dropped down and dangled at his sides.

"You don't stick to the rules of the game," he said to Anton.

"With you it always turns out that the witch is a good person."

"You don't know the first thing about it!" said Anton. He, too, stepped out onto the path. "The forest knows no mercy, you filthy mercenary."

Anka returned the air rifle to Pashka.

"You two are real sharpshooters," said Anka enviously. "Do you always aim so close?"

"What else did you expect from us?" Pashka asked. "We don't run around yelling 'Bang, bang--you're dead!' When we play, we always take risks."

Anton added with nonchalance:

"We play William Tell a lot."

"We take turns," volunteered Pashka. "One day I have to go stand there

with an apple on my head, and next time he's got to do it."

"You don't say." Her words came slowly. "I'd love to watch that some time."

"We'd show it to you right now--with pleasure," snapped Anton. 'Too bad we don't have an apple!"

Pashka grinned from ear to ear. But Anka quickly yanked the pirate's fez from his head and swiftly rolled it up into a cone.

"It doesn't have to be an apple!" she said. "This makes a marvelous target. Come on, let's play William Tell!"

Anton took the red cone and examined it carefully. He glanced at Anka; her eyes were like dark wells. Pashka was dancing about; he felt great Anton held the cone out to him.

"I can hit the bull's-eye at 30 paces," he said flatly. "Of course, only with a pistol I'm familiar with."

"Really?" said Anka, and she turned to Pashka. "And how about you? Can you score a direct hit from 30 feet away?"

"I'm known as the fastest gun this side of the lake!" he grinned broadly. "Let's try it out."

Anton made an about-face and walked down the path, counting out loud:

"... fifteen... sixteen... seventeen..."

Pashka said something that Anton couldn't hear, and Anka laughed, much too loud.

"Thirty," said Anton and turned around.

At a distance of thirty paces, Pashka looked pretty small. The red cone sat on his head like a dunce cap. Pashka grinned. He was still playing.

Anton leaned forward and leisurely drew his bow.

"Bless you. Father William!" Pashka called out to him. "And whatever happens, thanks for everything!"

Anton placed a bolt in the slot which would guide the

missile. He
straightened up. Pashka and Anka looked at him. They were standing
close to
each other. The lane stretched ahead like a dark soggy passage
between tall
green walls. Anton raised the crossbow. The battle gear of
Marshal Totz
suddenly felt very heavy. My hands are trembling, thought Anton.
That's bad.
What nonsense! He remembered how he and Pashka had amused
themselves last
winter for one full hour by aiming snowballs at an icicle on a
fence post
They were throwing from a distance of twenty feet, then
fifteen, then
ten--and they still could not hit it And finally, when they had
grown tired
of the game and were just about to leave, Pashka pitched the last
snowball,
without even taking aim, and made a direct hit.

Anton pressed the stock hard against his shoulder. Anka is
standing
much too close, he thought He was on the point of calling out to her
to move
over a bit, but then he remembered that this would seem silly.
Higher.
Higher still. . . Higher . . . Suddenly he was firmly convinced
that the
heavy bolt was going to strike Pashka right between the eyes, bore
deeply
between those merry, green eyes, even if he turned around now and
let the
arrow fly in the opposite direction.

He opened his eyes and looked at Pashka. Pashka's grin had
vanished.
Anka raised her hand very slowly, then ever so slowly spread her
fingers
apart. Her face looked very intense and grown-up. Now Anton
lifted his
crossbow higher still and pulled the trigger. He did not see where
the arrow
landed.

"Missed it!" he said very loud.

He walked along the path but his legs would not properly obey him. Pashka wiped the red cone across his face, shook himself like a wet dog, unrolled the cone and formed it into a fez again. Anka bent down and picked up her crossbow. If she hit me over the head with it, thought Anton, I'll even say thank you. But Anka did not even look at him.

She turned to Pashka and asked: "Are we leaving?"

"Right away," said Pashka.

He looked at Anton, tapping his finger against his forehead.

"But you were scared too." Anton said. Pashka did not reply.

Once more he tapped his finger against his forehead. Then he followed Anka. Anton ambled along in the rear, trying to cope with his doubts.

What did I do, he thought. His head felt very heavy all of a sudden.

Why are they so put out? Pashka--well, he was scared stiff. Who knows who

was more afraid: Father William or his son? But what's the matter with Anka?

Maybe she was worried about Pashka. But what should I have done?

Now they

make me trot behind like an outcast. I should take off on my own. I can take

that tarn over there on the left, there's an interesting looking little pool

Maybe I can catch an owl; wouldn't that be something!

But he did not even slow down. That's for good, he thought Somewhere he

had read that such things happened frequently.

They reached the Forgotten Road sooner than they had expected.

By now,

the sun was high up in the sky, and it was very hot. The pine needles

pricked their bare skin. The road was paved with concrete; it consisted of

two rows of cracked, reddish-gray blocks. Thick tufts of dried grass were

growing in the cracks. The soft shoulders on either side were full of dusty

thistles. Above the road flew fat blowflies, buzzing and droning, and a brazen one bumped right into Anton's forehead. The air was quiet and sultry.

"Look, you two!" said Pashka.

He pointed to a round metal sign hanging over the middle of the road on a rusty wire that had been strung across. The paint was peeling off the sign. They could barely make out a light-colored crossbar on a red background.

"What is that?" asked Anka. She did not seem too interested.

"A traffic sign," said Pashka. "Do Not Enter."

"A one-way street," explained Anton.

"What does that mean?" asked Anka.

"That means that you can't enter that road," said Pashka.

"But why do they have the road, then?"

Pashka shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a very old road," he said.

"An anisotropic road," Anton explained. Anka stood with her back to him. "Traffic can move only in one direction."

"The wisdom of our forefathers," said Pashka pensively.

"There they were, driving along for about 200 miles, and all of a sudden--smash, bang!--Do Not Enter! Wrong Way! And you can't drive on, and there isn't anybody you can ask."

"Just imagine all the things that might be there on the other side of that traffic sign!" said Anka. She looked all around. For many miles there was only the deserted forest and not a person to ask what might lie beyond that traffic sign. "Maybe it isn't an anisotropic traffic sign after all," said Anka. "The paint's almost all peeled off."

Now Anton lifted his crossbow, took careful aim and shot off an arrow. How nice if the bolt would snap the wire and let the traffic sign fall right

before Anka's feet. But the arrow hit the upper part of the sign, pierced the rusty metal and nothing fell down except some flakes of dried paint

"Silly ass!" said Anka without bothering to turn around.

That was the first remark she had addressed to him since they had played William Tell. Anton smiled wryly.

"*And enterprises of great pitch and moment,*" he recited, "*with this regard their current turn away and lose the name of action.*"

Faithful Pashka called out:

"Hey, kids, a car was here! After the thunderstorm! The grass is still flat where the tires drove over it! And here--"

That lucky Pashka, thought Anton. Carefully he examined the tire tracks in the road. He, too, saw the trampled grass and the black skid marks where the car must have suddenly braked before a pothole in the concrete pavement.

"I can see it now," called out Pashka. "The car must have come from the other side, from behind the traffic sign."

It seemed very obvious, but Anton said:

"Baloney! He's come from the other direction!"

Pashka regarded him with surprise:

"What's gotten into you? You're blind as a bat!"

"He's come from this way here," Anton argued stubbornly. "Let's follow his track."

"You idiot!" Pashka sounded angry. "Who in his right mind would drive into a one-way street the wrong way? And look here: here is the pothole and over there the skid mark --so where did the car come from?"

"I don't care what you say! I'm going along this one-way street, even if it's the wrong way."

Pashka turned pale with fury. "Go right ahead!"

He started to hiccup. "What idiocy! The sun must have cooked your brain!"

Anton turned around. He looked straight ahead, ducked under the traffic sign and passed through to the other side. He only wished he could come upon a collapsed bridge and have to work his way over to the other side. I have nothing more to do with them, he thought. Let them go wherever they please--with her darling Pashka. Then he remembered how Anka had cut off Pashka when he had called her Anetchka, and feeling a bit relieved, he turned and looked back.

His eye fell on Pashka. Like a dog sniffing a scent, Don Sarancha was following the track of the mysterious car. The rusty sign over the road was gently swaying in the wind, and the blue sky gleamed through the hole the arrow had made, Anka sat at the side of the road, her elbows resting on her knees and her chin supported by her small, clenched fists.

As they were returning home, dusk began to fall. The two boys rowed, while Anka sat at the rudder. A red moon stood above the dark forest and the frogs croaked untiringly.

"And we had planned everything so nicely," said Anka mournfully. "You two--!"

The boys remained silent. Then Pashka asked softly:

"Toshka, what did you find behind the one-way street sign?"

"A collapsed bridge," answered Anton. "And the skeleton of a German, chained to a machine gun." He thought a while, then he added: "the machine gun was halfway sunk into the ground already."

"Hmm, yes," said Pashka. "These things can happen. I helped somebody repair his car back there."

ONE

As Rumata passed by the tomb of the Holy Mickey--the seventh and the last on this stretch of the road--darkness had already fallen. The highly praised Chamalharian stallion which he had won from Don Tameo in a game of cards, was in fact a miserable nag. The animal was dripping with sweat; it kept stumbling over its own legs, and its irregular trot reminded one of the swaying motions of a tossing ship. Rumata pressed his knees hard into the animal's flanks and slapped his gloves between the horse's ears. The nag responded merely with a tired nod; its pace remained the same. Under the late evening dusk, the bushes that lined the road appeared like solidified smoke clouds. Swarms of flies buzzed annoyingly around the rider's head. Up in the darkened night sky a few yellowish stars dimly nickered. An alternately cold and warm wind came in gentle, irregular squalls, typical for this coastal strip during fall with its sultry, dust-filled days and cold, frosty nights.

Rumata drew his cloak closer around his shoulders and let go of the reins. There was no use trying to hurry. Midnight was still one hour away, and already he could recognize the black jagged outline of Hiccup Forest on the horizon. To the left and the right of the road carelessly ploughed fields stretched into the distance. Swamps stinking of rotten vegetation and decaying animals glimmered in the faint light of the stars: here and there silhouettes of hills and the half-rotted wooden palisades from the time of

the Great Invasion loomed up horribly. Far off in the distance the sullen, lambent flames of a fire flickered: most likely a village was burning somewhere over there--one of the innumerable wretched little look-alike places that until recently had been known by names such as "Death Hamlet," "Gallows Hill View," or "Robbers Nest"; imperial edicts had renamed them "Blossom Grove," "Peace Harbor View" and "Angel Rest."

This land stretched over hundreds of miles, from the shores of the Big Bay to the eerie Hiccup Forest. The terrain teemed with hosts of gnats, gouged by gorges, half smothered by swamps; its inhabitants were raked by fever and forever threatened by pestilence and vile colds.

Near a bend in the road, a dark figure stepped from the bushes. The stallion gave a sudden start and threw back its head. Rumata quickly seized the reins, then with a swift movement adjusted his right sleeve--an old habit of his--and reached for his sword. Then he had a closer look. The man at the side of the road took off his hat.

"Good evening, noble don," he said softly. "I beg your pardon."

"What's the matter?" inquired Rumata. He cocked an ear toward the bushes.

There is actually no such thing as a silent ambush. Robbers are betrayed by the singing of their bow strings; the men of the Gray Militia constantly belch up their sour beer; the hordes of the barons grunt with greed and rattle their sabers; and the monks who hunt for slaves scratch themselves noisily. No, it was all quiet in the thicket. This man was no bushwhacker, thought Rumata. He did not look at all like a sniper: he was a

short, stocky townsman wrapped in a rather inexpensive cloak.

"Will you permit me to run alongside your horse?" he asked the rider and bowed deeply to him.

"Come along," said Rumata, toying with the reins. "You can hold onto the stirrup."

The man walked alongside, holding his hat in his hand. His head was completely bald. A steward from some baronial estate, thought Rumata. Visits barons and cattle dealers, buys up hemp and flax. A stalwart man . . . Then again, maybe he's no steward after all. Maybe he's a "bookworm," or a fugitive. Maybe he's a ne'er-do-well--there are many of that kind roaming the roads at night--certainly more than there are baronial stewards. But he could be a spy as well...

"Who are you and where are you coming from?" asked Rumata.

"They call me Kiun," answered the man sorrowfully. "And I come from Arkanar."

"You mean you are *fleeing* from Arkanar," said Rumata and bent forward slightly toward him. "Yes." The man spoke with sadness. Some freak, an odd character, thought Rumata. Or is he a spy after all? I'll keep an eye on him . . . But why should I bother to keep an eye on him? Who will be helped by that? Who am I to scrutinize and test him? I don't even want to observe him! Why shouldn't I simply believe him? There is a man, quite obviously an intellectual, on the run, his life at stake ... He feels lonely, he's afraid and weak, just looking for a helping hand--and then he runs into an aristocrat The aristocrats are too stupid and arrogant to know much about politics. Instead, they have very long sabers, and they don't like

the Gray

Militia, Why shouldn't citizen Kiun simply seek protection from some stupid, arrogant aristocrat? That's it. Of course, I won't keep my eye on him especially. I have no special reason to. Let's rather chat for a while, kill some time, and then we will part friends...

"Kiun . . ." he said aloud. "I once knew a Kiun. A quack doctor and alchemist on Klempner Street. Are you related to him?"

"Oh dear, yes, I am," said Kiun. "I'm only a very distant relative of his, but *they* don't care. They exterminate our kind up to the twelfth generation."

"And where are you fleeing to, Kiun?"

"Any place. As far away from here as possible. Many have fled to Irukan. Ill try my luck with Irukan, too."

"Well, well," said Rumata. "And you think the noble don will lead you safely through the sentry posts?"

Kiun remained silent.

"Or, maybe you think the noble don doesn't know what kind of a man the alchemist on Klempner Street really is?"

Kiun still did not answer. I think I'm talking a lot of nonsense,

thought Rumata. But then he rose high up in his stirrups and, imitating the

town crier on the Royal Square, puffed up his throat and shouted:

"Accused and condemned of the most horrible and unforgivable crimes

against God, the Crown and the public safety!"

Kiun still remained silent.

"And what if the noble don adored and revered Don Reba, the father of

all abominations? What if he were devoted with all his heart to the cause of

the Gray Militia? Or do you think that is totally out of the question?"

Kiun kept silent. To the right of the road, the black

silhouette of a
gallows tree loomed in the dark. A ghostly white naked body,
strung up by
the feet, swung from a crossbeam. Oh well, thought Rumata, what's
the good
of it all? He pulled tight his reins, seized Kiun by the shoulder and
turned
the man's face around for him to see.

"And how would you like it if the noble don would hang you
now right
next to that gallows bird?" he said and stared into the white face
and dark
orbs of Kiun. "I'd do it myself. Swift and skillful. With a
strong
Arkanarian rope? For the sake of ideals? Why do you keep silent,
bookworm
Kiun?"

Kiun did not speak. His teeth were rattling with fright and he
twisted
weakly under Rumata's strong grip like a captured lizard. Suddenly, a
splash
could be heard as something fell into the canal alongside the road.
At the
same time, as if to drown out the splashing noise of the impact,
the man
shouted desperately:

"Go ahead and hang me! String me up, you traitor!"

Rumata caught his breath and let go of Kiun.

"I was only joking," he said. "Don't be afraid."

"Lies, lies," Kiun sobbed. "Nothing but lies everywhere!"

"All right, then," said Rumata. "Forgive me! You'd better fish
it out
of the water, whatever you just threw in there. It will get soaked
through
otherwise."

Kiun did not budge from the spot. His upper body swayed back
and forth
in indecision. He continued to sob softly, and beat his palms
senselessly
against his cloak. Then, slowly, he crawled into the canal.
Rumata was
waiting. He was very tired and he sank down into his saddle. That's
the way

it's got to be, he thought; it can't be done any other way.

Kiun came

staggering out of the canal, a bundle hidden under his cloak.

"Books, of course," said Rumata.

Kiun gently shook his head.

"No," he said hoarsely. "Only one book. My book."

"What do you write?"

"I'm afraid it wouldn't interest you, noble don."

Rumata wrinkled his brow and sighed.

"Hold onto the stirrup," he said, "and come on."

Neither spoke for a long time.

"Listen, Kiun," said Rumata. "I was only joking. Don't be afraid of me."

"What a world," grumbled Kiun. "What a funny world. Everybody is making

fun. And they all do it the same way. Even the noble Don Rumata.

Rumata was startled.

"You know my name?"

"Yes, I do," said Kiun. "I recognized you by the circlet on your forehead. And at first I was so happy to have met you of all people here on this road--"

Why, of course, Rumata thought. That's what was on his mind when he

called me a traitor. He said:

"You see, I thought you were a spy. And those I kill usually at once."

"A spy?" Kiun replied. "Yes, indeed. Nowadays it's so easy and profitable to be a spy. Our shining eagle, our most noble Don Reba, is very anxious to know what the king's subjects are saying and thinking. I wish I

were a spy. A proper scout in the Gray Joy Tavern. How fine and honorable!

At six o'clock, off I go to the inn. The innkeeper will rush to my usual

table to bring me my first tankard, and I can drink as much as I can hold.

Don Reba is paying for the beer-- or to be exact, nobody really pays for it.

I just sit there with my beer in front of me and my ears open. Sometimes I pretend to make some notes about the conversations, and you should see the poor frightened things crawl up to offer their friendship and their purses. In their eyes I can see what I always wanted to: the devotion of whipped dogs, awe and fear and impotent hatred. I can have any girl I want, any time I like; women melt in my arms right in front of their husbands' eyes--all healthy, strapping men, who stand there with obsequious giggles. Splendid prospects, noble don, don't you agree? I heard all this first-hand from a fifteen-year-old kid, a pupil of the Patriotic School--"

"And what did you tell him then?" Rumata's curiosity had been roused by the fugitive's tale.

"What should I have told him? He wouldn't have understood anyhow. So I told him about the men of Waga Koleso, the robber chief; whenever they catch a spy, they simply slit his belly open and stuff his guts with pepper. Then again, there are the drunken soldiers who jam a spy into a sack and drown him in the village pond. And, what's more, I was telling the truth, the pure truth--but he wouldn't believe me. He said, "That's not what they teach us at school." Then I took a piece of paper and started to write down our conversation. I needed it at the time for my book, but the poor boy thought it was a denunciation. He suddenly broke out in a sweat all over..."

They could see lights twinkle through the foliage of the trees lining the road. It was coming from the inn called Bako's Skeleton. Kiun's steps began to falter and he fell silent.

"What's the matter?" asked Rumata.

"A patrol of the Gray Militia. Over there," answered Kiun under his breath.

"Well, so what?" said Rumata. "Listen--we love and revere these simple rough men, our militant Gray boys. We need them. From now on the people will have to keep their tongues in check, if they don't want to dangle from the nearest branch of a tree!"

He laughed because he had expressed it so splendidly--exactly in the language of the Gray Barracks.

Kiun seemed to shrink; he pulled his head between his shoulders. "Simple folk have to know their place. God didn't give them a tongue for talking, but for licking the boots of their master, the noble lord, who has been placed above them from the very beginning of time..."

In the paddock, behind the inn, the saddled horses of the Gray Patrol pranced about. Through an open window came the raucous cursing of the players and the knock and rattle from their game of knucklebones. In the doorway stood "Skeleton Bako" in person, blocking the way with his tremendous belly. He wore an old leather jacket whose seams had burst in innumerable places. The edges of his sleeves dripped with moisture. His mossy paw gripped a club--evidently he had just slain a dog for his broth, had broken out in a heavy sweat with the effort, and had stepped outside to get his wind back. A Gray Sturmovik lolled on the stairs, his battle-ax held between his knees. The massive handle of his ax pushed his face to one side. It was plain to see that he was nursing a giant hangover. When he noticed the rider, he cleared his throat, spat between his feet, and called

hoarsely. "Sto-o-o-p! Who goes there? St-o-o-op! No-o-o-ble d-o-n-n-n!"

Rumata's chin barely jutted out as he rode past the man without so much as a glance.

". . . But if their tongue is licking the wrong boots," he said aloud, "then it must be yanked out, for it is written: Your tongue--my enemy..."

Hidden by the nag's croup, Kiun hopped alongside with long leaps. Out of the corner of his eye, Rumata noticed Kiun's bald head gleaming with perspiration.

"Stop, I said!" roared the Sturmovik.

One could hear his ax scraping against the steps as he dragged himself down the stairs, cursing God, the devil, and all people of high birth.

About five men, pondered Rumata, and tugged at his lace cuffs. Drunken butchers. So what!

They had passed the inn by now and kept moving toward the woods.

"I can walk faster, if you so desire," said Kiun with an exaggerated firm voice.

"Certainly not!" said Rumata and slowed his horse down.

"It would be boring to ride so many miles without a single brawl. Don't you ever want to get into a good fight, Kiun? Just talk, that's all you do, don't you?"

"No," said Kiun. "I have never any desire to get into a fight."

"That's exactly your trouble," Rumata grumbled, annoyed. He directed the stallion to the side of the road, and tugged impatiently at his gloves.

From a bend in the road, two riders came galloping at full speed. They halted as soon as they caught sight of him.

"Hey, there, noble don!" shouted the first one. "Show your pass!"

"You boor!" Rumata's voice was icy. "You can't even read, what good will a pass do you!"

He jerked his knees deeply into his horse's flanks, and the steed took off in a fast trot straight toward the two Gray Sturmoviks. Cowards, he thought. Let's just slap their faces a few times! No, what's the use. Here I am, burning to vent the rage that has been building up all day--but nothing will come of it anyhow. So let's stay calm and humane, let's forgive everyone, remain imperturbable like the gods. The gods are never in a hurry; after all, they have all eternity ahead of them...

He rode close to the Sturmoviks. The two men, no longer sure of themselves, seized their axes and fell back.

"W-e-e-ell?" Rumata asked slowly.

"Oh--what's the matter with me?" stammered the braver of the two Sturmoviks, quite perplexed. "I mean--it's you, the noble Don Rumata?"

His companion had already turned his horse around and made off in a fast gallop. The first Sturmovik kept falling back and lowered his raised ax.

"I beg your most humble pardon, noble don," he gushed. "We did not recognize you right away ... it was our fault. Official business, you know--so easy to make a mistake there. The fellows have been drinking a little, and they are burning with eagerness--" He maneuvered his horse around, ready to take off. "You will understand, noble don, such restless times . . . We're hunting down those fleeing bookworms ... I hope you won't make complaints about us, noble don--"

Rumata turned his back on him. "A pleasant journey, most noble don!" shouted the Sturmovik after him, much relieved.

As soon as the two riders were out of sight, Rumata called out softly:

"Kiun!"

There was no answer.

"Hey, Kiun!"

Still no answer. He listened more closely; now he could hear a distant rustling in the bushes that was set off distinctly against the background of the constantly singing gnats and mosquitoes. Kiun must be marching hastily across the land, toward the West, in the direction of the Irukanian border.

That's that, thought Rumata. What was the good of the whole conversation?

It's always the same thing, over and over again. Cautious exploring at

first, then guarded exchange of ambiguous remarks . . . Week after week you

waste your energy on stupid chatter with any number of morons; but if you

are lucky enough to meet some real person, there's no time for a

heart-to-heart talk. You'd like to provide some cover for him, to protect

him, to help him reach some refuge--and he walks away without ever knowing

whether he encountered a friend or a vain fop. And you don't find out

anything about him either--his desires, his abilities, his reason for

living, his goals...

His thoughts turned to Arkanar in the evening. Solid stone houses along

the main streets, friendly lanterns over the inn gates, kindhearted,

satisfied shopkeepers drinking their beer at clean tables, chatting about

the world, how it isn't such a bad place after all; discussing the falling

bread prices or the rising harness prices; here and there a conspiracy is

unveiled, warlocks and suspect bookworms are incarcerated, the king is as

magnificent and grand as ever; Don Reba, however, is infinitely

clever and
always on his guard. "You don't say!"---"That's the way it's
supposed to
be!"-- "The world is round!"--"For all I care it might be square,
only don't
you touch our learned men!"--"Believe me, brothers, all our
misfortunes come
from those know-it-alls!"-- "Happiness is not caused by money; the
peasant
is a human being, too, so they say, fine, but go on--and all the
time more
and more of this inciting poetry: and they begin to raise hell,
there are
riots and mutiny . . ." "Throw them all in jail, brothers!
Myself, for
example, what would I do? I would ask them directly: can you read and
write?
Lock him up! You write poems? Lock him up! You are an expert on
diagrams?
Lock him up! You know too much!--" "Bina, my angel, another three
tankards
of beer and a roast hare!"

And outside the window--stomp, stomp, stomp--come marching
along the
nailed boots of the sturdy, red-nosed fellows in their gray shirts.
And over
their right shoulder, the heavy hatchets. "Brothers! There they
are, our
protectors! They keep this learned rabble at a proper distance, yes,
indeed!
. . . And that one over there, that's my boy, my son--Over there
on the
right flank! It was only yesterday that I tanned his hide! Yes,
brothers,
we're living in a wonderful time! Our monarchy, so solidly
entrenched,
prosperity, unshakable law and order--and justice. Hooray for
our Gray
Troops! Hooray, Don Reba! Long live our King! That's the life,
brothers!"

Over the dark plains of the kingdom of Arkanar, however,
lit up by
raging fires and glowing woods, hundreds of miserable men are

fleeing,
skirting the sentry posts, running, stumbling, and running on.
Bitten by
gnats, with bleeding, sore feet, covered with dust and sweat,
tormented,
frightened and tortured by despair, but as hard as steel and firm
in their
convictions--they are unlawfully accused and persecuted. Why?
Because they
heal and teach their people, who are riddled by disease and
swamped by
ignorance; because, like gods, they create a second nature out of
clay and
stone, wishing to beautify our existence, for a people that does
not know
beauty; because they penetrate into the secrets of nature hoping
to place
these secrets at the service of and for the benefit of the dull,
apathetic
people, who have been kept in fear by ancient black arts. They are
helpless,
good and awkward, way ahead of their own times...

Rumata pulled off one glove and soundly slapped his stallion
between
the ears. "Let's go, you lame old mare!" He spoke Russian. It was
already
past midnight when he rode into the forest.

Nowadays nobody could tell exactly any more where that
strange name
came from--"Hiccup Forest." A rumor had been circulated via official
sources
that some 300 years earlier the Iron Squads of Imperial Marshal
Totz (who
later became the first king of Arkanar) had penetrated this forest
as they
were pursuing the retreating hordes of the copper-skinned
barbarians. There
the brave warriors had gathered the bark of the White Trees and
brewed a
kind of domestic beer which turned out so miserably that whoever
drank it
would suffer for hours from hiccups and belching. The following
morning, so

the legend goes, when said Marshal Totz came to inspect the camp, he tamed up his blue-blooded nose and spoke, the following words; "Indeed, this is unbearable! The whole forest has the hiccups and reeks of bad beer!" That is the origin, it is said, of this peculiar name.

One might quarrel about the veracity of this legend, but in any case this was no ordinary forest. Giant trees with firm white trunks were growing in it, of the kind that could no longer be found anywhere else in the country. Not even in the dukedom of Irukan, and definitely not in the Mercantile Republic of Sloan, where all the timber had long since been cut down for use in the construction of ships. There were rumors making the round that many such woods still existed beyond the Red Mountains, in the country of the barbarians--but there are all kinds of stories told about those barbarians, you know ...

A path had been cut through the forest some 200 years back. This road led to the silver mines and by virtue of feudal law the noble family of the Barons of Pampa, the descendants of a comrade-in-arms of Marshal Totz, had been invested with these holdings. According to this feudal law, the Barons of Pampa were supposed to pay the Arkanarian kings twelve poods of pure silver each year. Thus each new king would gather an army shortly after he ascended to the throne, and march toward Castle Bau, where the barons dwelt. The walls of the castle were solid, the barons were brave, and each year, as before, the kingdom of Arkanar had yet to collect the twelve poods of pure silver. After their defeated armies had returned home, the

Arkanarian kings

would once again confirm the barons' legal claims, in addition to other privileges, including the right to pick one's nose at the royal table, the right to go hunting in the western regions of Arkanar and, finally, the right to call the princes by their first names, without adding their rank and title.

Hiccup Forest was full of dark secrets. Throughout the day, heavy carloads of silver ore would roll toward the South. But at night, the road was deserted, for few men dared walk there under the lights of the stars. It was said that at night the *Siu* bird called from the High Tree. No one had ever beheld this bird, for it cannot be seen by human eyes, being no ordinary bird. It was said that great shaggy spiders would jump from the tree branches onto a horse's neck to suck his blood in almost no time. It was said that the monstrous primeval dragon Pech roamed this forest; the monster was said to be covered with giant scales; to bear a live young dragonlet once every twelve years; and to drag after it 12 tails pouring with sweat. And somebody is said to have seen with his own eyes, in broad daylight, how the naked wild sow Y, cursed by the Holy Mickey, was dragging itself along the highway, moaning and grunting--a rapacious beast of prey, invulnerable to iron but easily pierced by a bone.

Here in this mysterious forest, you might encounter the fugitive slave, the one with the black tattoos between his shoulder blades. He was stupid and pitiless, just like the shaggy, blood-sucking spiders. Or you might meet

the magician, the one who had been mangled by three deaths; he was always gathering mysterious mushrooms for his magic potions, which could make a man invisible, or change him into different animals, or even give him a second shadow.

Everyone knew, of course, that the robber captain Waga Koleso and his band roamed along the road all through the night, and fugitive forced laborers from the silver mines, with their black hands and whitish, transparent faces. The poisoners would gather here for their nocturnal meetings, and the brazen hunters of the Barons of Pampa camped out in the glades where they could roast their stolen buffaloes on a spit over an open fire.

In the midst of the thicket, where the underbrush was growing denser than anywhere, stood a giant tree, gouged with clefts and chinks by old age. Beneath it leaned a warped wooden hut, surrounded by a blackened, wooden palisade. The hut had been here since time immemorial. The door was always closed. Idols hewn of entire logs leaned against the moldering wooden steps. This hut was, as everyone could testify, the most, most dangerous spot in all Hiccup Forest. Every twelve years the old wild sow Pech comes here to bring forth its young. Then the sow crawls under this hut to die, poisoning the whole foundation of the hut with its black venom. If ever this poison seeps to the outside, the end of the world will be near. People also say that on unclean nights, the idols will dig themselves out from the soil, walk to the path, and make mysterious signs there. And they also say

that at times a demonic light will shine in the dead windows of the hut, while dull sounds can be heard from within, and smoke can be seen rising from the chimney up to the sky.

Not long ago, the village idiot Kukisch from the hamlet "Sweet Stench" (also popularly known as "Dung Heap") happened to chance upon this hut and, fool that he is, stared into a window. He came home completely mad, and after he had regained the pitiful traces of wit he had, he told of having seen a light inside the hut, a man sitting at a rough wooden table, his feet propped up on the rough bench, holding a little casket in his hand and drinking from it. His jowls drooped almost down to his belt and his skin was all pockmarked. And that, naturally, was the Holy Mickey in person, before he had seen the light, in fact: a moll hunter, drunkard, and blasphemer. To gaze upon him was only possible for those who were entirely without fear. A sweet, heavy odor had come through the window and shadows flitted through the trees. People came from all over to listen to the idiot's tale. The whole story finally ended when the Sturmoviks appeared, screwed his elbows up to his shoulders and sent him packing. Still, of course, the rumors about the old hut could not be quenched, and from then on it was generally known as the "Drunkard's Lair."

Rumata made his way through the prolific growths of gigantic ferns until he came to the entrance of the Drunkard's Lair. He tied his horse to one of the idols. There was a light inside the hut and the door was open,

hanging by a single hinge. Father Kabani sat at the table, completely disheveled. A penetrating odor of *schnapps* filled the hut; on the table, amidst gnawed bones and boiled beets, sat a giant earthenware jug.

"Good evening, Father Kabani," said Rumata as he crossed the threshold.

"I bid you welcome," replied Father Kabani with a voice that sounded like a hunter's horn.

Rumata approached the table with clicking spurs, dropped his gloves on the table and looked again at Father Kabani, who sat motionless, his heavy drooping jowls supported in his palms. His shaggy, half-gray eyebrows hung down onto his cheeks like dried grass tufts over a ravine. From the nostrils of his porous large-pored nose the air came whistling whenever he breathed out. It stank of half-digested alcohol.

"I invented it myself!" he said suddenly, unexpectedly. With great effort he pulled up his right eyebrow and directed a somber glance at Rumata. "I myself! And what for?" He withdrew his right hand from under his jowl and his hairy finger gestured aimlessly in the air. "And despite all, I am good for nothing! I have invented it--and yet I'm no good, eh? That's right, that's right, a failure. None of us invents anything anyhow, nobody has any new ideas, but-- oh, the devil with it all...!"

Rumata unbuckled his belt, took off his fez and removed his swords.

"Come, come," he said gently.

"The box!" Father Kabani wheezed. Then he fell silent and moved his cheeks in a strange fashion.

Without taking his eyes off the old man, Rumata swung his feet, shod in dusty boots, over the bench and sat down. He placed both his swords

next to
each other on the table.

"The box . . ." repeated Father Kabani. "We always say we invented it. But in reality it was all thought up a long time before us. Some person invented it ages ago, put it in a box, made a hole in the box, and then made off--maybe went to sleep somewhere--And what comes next? Then Father Kabani arrives, closes his eyes and puts his hand into the hole." Father Kabani looked at his hand. "Ha! Invented! I, he said, have thought up this thing . . . ! And if you don't believe it, then you are an ass. And I stick my hand inside --One! What do I find? Barbed wire! What is that for? For the wolves, naturally. Splendid! And I stick my hand inside again--Two! What do I find? What a cleverly conceived thing, a so-called meat grinder. What is that for? For finely ground meat. Splendid! I stick my hand inside for the third time--Three! What is it? Firewater. What is that for? To make damp wood burn, eh?"

Father Kabani fell silent once, more and arched forward as if someone had grabbed him by the collar. Rumata took the jug, peered inside, then poured a few drops on the back of his hand. The liquid was violet and smelled strongly of cheap alcohol. Rumata carefully dried his hand with his lace handkerchief. Greasy spots remained on the cloth. Father Kabani's disheveled head touched the table. He suddenly straightened up again.

"Whoever put all this stuff into the box knew what it was good for. Barbed wire against the wolves? I made that up myself, fool that I am. They use the barbed wire for fencing the mines and the pits! So

that the
political prisoners don't run away from there. But I won't play
along with
them! I'm an enemy of the state, too. But did they ask me? Sure
they did!
Barbed wire, eh? Sure, barbed wire, what else. Against the
wolves, eh?
Against the wolves . . . Excellent . . . Splendid chap! Let's
fence the
mines and the pits with it! Don Reba in person, the first minister of
state,
helped to fence the mines. And he even requisitioned my meat
grinder. He's
got brains, all right! Splendid! And now he grinds the meat in the
Tower of
Joy--from human beings--And that works miracles during
interrogations,
people say..."

I know all that, thought Rumata. I know it all. I know how you
screamed
in your private audience with Don Reba, how you crawled at
his feet,
imploring and begging: Stop, please. I'll confess! But it was
too late
already. Your meat grinder had already started...

Father Kabani seized the jug and lifted it to his hairy mouth,
tippling
the poisonous swill as he roared like the wild sow Y. Then he set
the jug
back on the table with a bang and popped a boiled beet into his
mouth. Tears
flowed over his broad cheeks.

"Yes, firewater!" he said when he found his voice again. "To be
used as
tinder for the hearth and for a jolly game or two. But what
kind of
firewater is that, my dear, if you can drink it? Mix it with beer,
and how
the price of beer would soar! But no, I won't give it to you! I'll
drink it
all myself. And how I drink it! Night and day. I'm all bloated.
And it's
getting worse all the time. The other day I looked in a mirror

and--Don

Rumata, you won't believe it--I was scared of myself! I looked closer--may the Good Lord protect me! What was left of Father Kabani? A sea-monster, a polyp, dotted all over with colored spots. Some red, some blue . . . They say firewater was invented for merry games with fire--"

Father Kabani spat on the floor, scraping his shoe over the spot to rub

out his spittle. Suddenly he asked: "What day is it today?"

"The eve of Kata the Just," said Rumata.

"And why isn't the sun shining?"

"Because it's night."

"Night again," said Father Kabani painfully and fell forward, his face splashing into the beets.

Rumata regarded him for a while, whistling softly between his teeth.

Then he rose from the bench and walked over to the back porch.

Amid small

piles of beets and sawdust glittered the glass pipes of Father Kabani's

voluminous distillation equipment for home-brewed liquor. It was the amazing

creation of a born engineer and a masterful glass-blower. Twice, Rumata

walked around the devilish machine, then, in the dark, groped for a piece of

iron and began to hit about at random, without aiming at anything in

particular. There was the sound of breaking glass, rattling metal, and

gurgling liquids. The cheap smell of soured spirits pervaded the small room.

As he walked over to the other comer to switch on the electric light, the

broken glass crunched under his boots. In the comer stood a heavy strongbox,

containing a "Midas" field synthesizer. With his right hand Rumata swept

some rubble off the top of the safe, dialed a combination of various numbers

on the lock and opened it. Even in the bright electrical light, the synthesizer looked rather odd in the midst of all the rubbish and garbage.

Rumata grasped a handful of sawdust from a pile and threw it into the feeder

funnel. The synthesizer started humming at once, then automatically switched

on the indicator. With the tip of his boot, Rumata shoved a rusty pail under

the output slot. And in no time--clink, clink, clink--golden ducats, coins

with the aristocratic profile of Pitz the Sixth, King of Arkanar, fell into

the battered pail.

Rumata carried the old man over to an old creaking wooden cot, pulled

off his boots, tamed him over on his right side, and covered him with the

almost hairless fur of a long-dead animal. In the process, Father Kabani

woke up briefly. He could neither move nor think clearly. So he contented

himself with reciting a few verses of a forbidden romance: "I am like a

crimson flower in your dear little hand . . . ," whereupon he lapsed into a

hearty snore.

Rumata cleared the table, swept the floor, and cleaned the single

window, which was black with accumulated dirt and soot from the chemical

experiments that Father Kabani conducted at the window sill.

Behind the

dilapidated stove he found a bottle with alcohol which he poured into a

rathole. Then he watered his Chamalharian stallion, fed him oats from his

saddlebag, washed his face and hands, and sat down to wait. He stared into

the little smoking flame of the oil lamp.

He had been leading this strange dual existence for the past six years

and had apparently adjusted to it by now. Only from time to time--
like the
present, for instance--it suddenly seemed to him that there was no
reality
behind the organized bestiality, the depressing cult of the Grays.
He felt
as if a strange theater performance were unrolling in front of
his eyes,
with himself, Rumata, playing the principal part And any moment
now, after
some particularly successful rejoinder, the applause would begin to
thunder
and the connoisseurs and art lovers from the Institute of
Experimental
History would shout enthusiastically from their loges:

"Bravo, Anton, fantastic, great! Well done, Tony!"

He looked around but there was no crowded theater, only
damp, mossy
walls of rough-hewn logs, blackened by the smoking oil lamp.

Outside, the Chamalharian stallion neighed softly and pawed the
ground.
Gradually, a deep whistle came nearer. It sounded so familiar, so
well known
from days of old, that tears almost welled up in Rumata's eyes--
the sound
was so unexpected in this godforsaken place. Rumata listened
intently, his
mouth half open. Now the throbbing stopped suddenly; the tiny flame
in the
oil lamp began to sputter, then suddenly flared up again. Rumata
was about
to get up from the bench when Don Kondor emerged from the darkness
of the
night and came striding into the room. Don Kondor was the Supreme
Judge and
Keeper of the Great Seal of the Mercantile Republic of Soan, Vice-
President
of the Conference of the Twelve Negotiators, and Cavalier of the
Imperial
Order of Righteous Pity.

Rumata jumped up and knocked the bench over. He would have
loved to
embrace, his friend, kiss his cheeks, but his legs automatically bent

at the
knee (as prescribed by etiquette), his spurs clicked solemnly,
his right
hand swept in a semicircle from his heart over to his right side,
and his
head lowered itself so swiftly that his chin almost disappeared
in his
scarf. Don Kondor took off his velvet cap, adorned by a simple
feather, and
quickly waved it in the direction of Don Rumata, as if he were
shooing
flies. Then he threw the cap on the table and undid the clasp at the
collar
of his cloak. The cloak sank downwards along his back as he sat on
the bench
and stretched out his legs. His left hand was held akimbo, and
with his
outstretched right hand he held the hilt of his gilded sword,
whose tip
stuck in the moldy wood of the floor. He was rather small and lean,
and big,
somewhat protruding eyes marked his pale face. His black hair was
gathered,
like Rumata's, by a heavy golden circlet with a green stone on his
forehead.

"Are you alone, Don Rumata?" he asked hastily.

"Yes, noble don," Rumata answered, depressed.

Father Kabani's voice thundered suddenly: "Noble Don Reba!
You are a
hyena, that's what you are!"

Don Kondor did not pay any attention to him. He did not
even turn
around.

"I've come with the helicopter," he said.

"Let's hope nobody saw you."

One legend more or less. "What's the difference?" answered Don
Kondor
in a somewhat irritated voice. "I've simply not the time to ride
around on a
horse. What's happened with Budach? I'm worried about him. Do sit
down, Don

Rumata, will you please? I'm getting a crick in my neck this way."

Rumata obediently took a seat on the bench.

"Budach has disappeared," he said. "I waited for him at the Square of the Heavy Swords. The only person that came was a one-eyed vagabond, who gave the password and handed me a bag full of books. I waited for another two hours; then I got in touch with Don Hug, who told me he took Budach as far as the border. Budach was in the company of some noble don, a man who could be trusted since he had lost everything at a game of cards with Don Hug and therefore sold himself over, body and soul. Consequently, Budach must be somewhere here in Arkanar. That's all I know."

"Not much, I dare say," remarked Don Kondor.

"But the affair with Budach is not that important," replied Rumata. "If he is still alive, I'll find him and extricate him from any tight spot he might be in. That's no problem really. But this wasn't what I wanted to discuss with you. I must once more draw your attention to the fact that the situation in Arkanar is exceeding the bounds of the basis theory--"

Don Kondor made a sour face.

"No, no, hear me out," said Rumata firmly. "I have the feeling I can never make myself properly understood over the radio. And in Arkanar everything is helter-skelter! A new, systematically effective factor has made its appearance. It looks as if Don Reba is intentionally hurtling the whole depressing Grayness of the kingdom on the scientists. Anyone who rises even slightly above the average Gray level puts his life in jeopardy. Listen to me, Don Kondor! These are no vague, emotional impressions, these are real facts! It's enough to be intelligent and educated, to dare to have doubts, to say something out of the ordinary. Perhaps if some day you refuse

a glass
of wine, your life will be in danger. Any little grocery clerk can
beat you
to death. Hundreds, thousands of people are being denounced. They are
caught
by the Sturmoviks, strung up by their feet in the streets. Naked,
with their
head dangling down. Only yesterday they trampled an old man to
death in my
street with their boots: somebody told them he could read and
write. They
kept kicking him for two hours, these stupid pigs with their
beastly
drooling snouts--"

Rumata paused for a moment to collect himself and ended in
a calm
voice: "To sum it all up, it won't be long now until not a
single
intelligent person will remain alive in Arkanar. Just like in the
domain of
the Holy Order after the slaughter of Barkan."

Don Kondor fixed his dark eyes on Rumata and pressed his lips
together.

"I don't like what's happening with you, Anton," he said in
Russian.

"There are lots of things I don't like either, Alexander
Vassilevitch,"
said Rumata. "For instance, I don't like the fact that we have tied
our own
hands, the way we have set up our problem here. I don't like the
fact that
we call it the 'problem of bloodless procedure.' For as far
as I am
concerned, this is equivalent to scientific justification of
inactivity. I
know all your arguments! And I am well acquainted with our
theories. But
theories do not work in such a situation, where every minute human
beings
are attacked by wild beasts in a typical fascist manner! Everything
is going
to pieces, going to rack and rum. What good is our knowledge and
our gold?"

It always comes too late."

"Anton," said Don Kondor, "calm down. I believe you when you say that the situation in Arkanar has reached a critical point. But I am also convinced that you cannot propose a single constructive solution."

"That's true," agreed Rumata. "I have no concrete solutions to propose.

But it gets to be more and more difficult for me to control myself in view

of these increasing signs of physical and moral corruption."

"Anton," said Don Kondor. "There are 250 of us altogether on this

entire planet. All of us exercise effective self-control, and it is equally

difficult for all of us. The most experienced among us have lived here for

twenty-two years. They came only as observers, nothing else.

They are

forbidden to intervene here in any way. Just imagine: an out-and-out ban on

any intervention. We don't have the right to rescue Budach, even if they

trampled him to death in front of our eyes."

"You don't need to talk to me as if I were a child," said Rumata.

"But you are as impatient as a child," replied Don Kondor.

"And you

must display a lot of patience here."

Rumata laughed bitterly.

"And while we are practicing patience and waiting forever," he said,

"holding endless discussions about the proper ways to behave, these beasts

are attacking their fellow human beings every day, every single minute."

"Anton," said Don Kondor, "there are thousands of other planets in the

universe which we have not yet visited and where history runs its course."

"But we *did* come to this planet!"

"Yes. Not to vent our righteous anger, but rather to help these

creatures here. If you're too weak for the job, then get out! Go

back home!

After all, you're not a child. You knew what to expect here."

Rumata did not speak. Don Kondor's features relaxed; he seemed to have aged many years during his last words. Slowly he strode the length of the table, seized his sword and dragged it behind him like a stick. Then he lapsed into an almost imperceptible, sad shaking of his head; only his nose seemed to move.

"I can understand all that," he said. "I've gone through all of this myself. There were times when this sensation of personal impotence, my own wretchedness, appeared to me as the most horrible thing. Some weaker characters even went crazy over it and were sent back home for treatment. It took me fifteen years to understand what the most horrible thing is. It's become dehumanized, Anton; to harden your soul by dragging it through the dirt. We are the gods here, Anton, but we have to be wiser than the local gods that men here have created after their own image. Our path, however, leads us along the edge of an abyss. One wrong step and you are caught in a morass, and for the rest of your days you cannot free and cleanse yourself of it. In the *Story of the Descent*, Goran the Irukanian wrote: *After God had descended from Heaven and emerged from the Pitanian swamps in order to show himself to the people, lo and behold, his feet were covered with dirt.*"

"Goran was ultimately burned to death for that," added Rumata in a somber voice.

"True, they put him to death by burning him alive. But these things do not really concern us. I have been here now for fifteen years.

Even in my dreams I don't see Earth any longer. Some time ago while I was rummaging in some old papers, I found the photo of a woman, and for the longest time I could not remember who she was. Sometimes I am overcome by a sensation of horror because in reality I am no longer a staff member of the Institute but rather an exponent of that local institution, the highest judge of the Mercantile Republic. That, to my mind, is the most frightening thing: to become adjusted to your role. Inside each of us, the noble wild sow struggles with the communard. And while everyone around cheers for the sow, the communard is all alone.--Earth is a thousand years and a thousand parsecs away from here." Don Kondor fell silent; he patted his knees.

"That's the way it is, Anton," he said after a while, and his voice grew firmer. "So let's remain communards!"

He doesn't understand, thought Anton-Rumata. How should he after all? He's lucky; he does not know the Gray Terror or Don Reba. All that he has seen on this planet in the course of these past fifteen years fits somehow within the framework of the basis theory. And if I talk to him about fascism, the Gray Sturmoviks, the rising militancy of the petty bourgeoisie, he accuses me of emotional word games: "Don't fool around with terminology, Anton! Terminological confusion will bring about dangerous results!" He is absolutely incapable of comprehending that the average level of medieval bestiality corresponds to the happy day yesterday on Arkanar. In his eyes Don Reba is another Richelieu, a wise and farsighted politician,

who is
defending the absolute regime from feudalistic excesses. I am the
only one
on this planet to see the terrible shadow spreading over the whole
land. But
I just can't understand where this shadow is coming from, and why.
And how
can I convince him, when I can clearly see in his eyes that he
would like
best to send me back to Earth on the spot for a cure?

"How is the noble Synda?" asked Rumata.

Don Kondor stopped inspecting him with his eyes and
murmured: "Very
well, thank you." Then he added: "We must finally come to grips
with the
fact that neither you, nor I, nor anybody of our group here, will
ever see
the tangible results of our work. We are not physicists but
historians. Our
unit of time is not the second but the century. And what we are
doing here
is not meant to be the sowing of the seed but merely the preparation
of the
soil. And those emissaries from Earth, those--enthusiasts we get
from time
to time--I wish they'd go to hell, those eager beavers ..."

Rumata put on a forced smile and tugged needlessly at his riding
boots.

Eager beavers. Yes indeed.

Ten years ago, Stefan Orlovski, alias Don Kapada, commander
of the
crossbow troops of His Imperial Highness, had ordered his soldiers
to open
fire on the emperor's men as they were publicly torturing eighteen
Estorian
witches. With his own hand he had slain the imperial high judge and
two of
his assistants but in the end he had been pierced by the spears
of the
emperor's bodyguard. As he lay dying, he called out to the people
watching
the public spectacle:

"Remember, you are *human beings!* Defend yourselves, kill them,

don't be
afraid of them!" But his voice could scarcely be heard over the din
of the
roaring crowd as they were shouting, "Burn the witches! Burn them
alive!"

And it was at about the same time that Karl Rosenblum, one of
the most
highly regarded historical experts on the Peasants' War in
Germany and
France, alias Pani-Pas, the wool merchant, incited a riot amongst the
Murian
peasants, He took two cities by assault and was killed by an arrow
in his
back as he tried to put a stop to the looting. He was still alive
when he
was rescued by a helicopter but he could no longer speak. His big
blue eyes
expressed guilt and amazement as big tears trickled down his
bloodless
cheeks ...

And shortly before Rumata's arrival on this planet, the most
powerful
fellow conspirator, confidant of the Tyrant of Kaisan (alias
Jeremy
Toughnut, specialist in reforms on Terra), had staged a palace
revolution
out of a clear sky, had seized power and tried to introduce the
Golden Age
within two months; had stubbornly refused to reply to the strongest
protests
and interpellations of neighbors and the Earth had earned the
dubious
reputation of a crazy fool; had successfully evaded eight rescue
attempts;
and was finally captured by the Institute's special commando troop
who had
taken him by submarine to an island base near the South pole...

"Just think of that!" Rumata said under his breath. "And
people on
Earth still firmly believe to this very day that our physicists are
working
on the most complicated problems ..."

Don Kondor suddenly sat up and took notice.

"Ah, finally," he whispered.

From outside came the sound of angry or desperate neighing, hoofs pawing the ground, and energetic cursing in a voice with a strong Irukanian accent. A man entered the room, It was Don Hug, the first groom of the chamber of His Lordship the Duke of Irukan. He was stout, red-cheeked with a smartly upturned mustache, grinned from ear to ear, and from under the wavy curls of his auburn wig peered two merry little eyes. And once again Rumata wanted to obey the impulse to embrace the new arrival--it was his boyhood friend Pashka; but Don Hug suddenly assumed a formal posture, his fat face took on the sickeningly sweet smile demanded by etiquette; he bowed nimbly from the waist down, pressed his hat against his chest and pursed his lips.

Rumata stole a furtive glance over to Alexander Vassilevitch. Alexander Vassilevitch had vanished, and in his place was Don Kondor, the Supreme Judge and Keeper of the Seal; his legs stretched out, his left hand akimbo, while his right hand clasped the hilt of his gilded sword.

"You are very late, Don Hug," he said in an unpleasant tone of voice.

"I beg your most humble pardon!" called out Don Hug, swiftly approaching the table. "I swear by my Duke's rickets, nothing but totally unforeseen unfortunate circumstances! I was stopped four times by the patrol of His Highness, the King of Arkanar, and twice I had to fight off some rascals." He raised his left hand with an elegant movement to show off his blood-soaked, bandaged limb. "By the way, noble don, whose helicopter is that behind the hut?"

"It's mine," Don Kondor answered snippishly. "I have no time to waste on brawls along the way."

Don Hug gave him a friendly smile and sat down, straddling the bench.

"In other words, noble dons, we are forced to state that our most learned

Dr. Budach has mysteriously vanished somewhere between the Irukanian border

and the Square of the Heavy Swords--"

Father Kabani stirred on his cot. He turned over in his sleep and

without waking he mumbled: "Don Reba ..."

"Leave Budach to me," said Rumata, in a desperate tone, "and despite

everything, will you please try to understand me..."

TWO

Rumata woke up with a start. He opened his eyes. It was broad daylight.

Down in the street, just below his windows, was some commotion.

Somebody,

probably a soldier, yelled at the top of his voice: "You stinking bum! Look

at this filth! I'll make you lap it up with your tongue! (Good morning to

you, thought Rumata.) Shut up, you! I swear by the hunchback of Holy Mickey,

you make me lose my temper!"

Another voice, hoarse and coarse, growled: "You've got to watch your

step in this miserable street! It rained this morning, but who knows when

they last swept this place."

"You'll show me where I'm supposed to look, all right."

"You'd better let go of me, noble don, let go of my shirt, will you!"

"Oh, you'll show me, all right--"

Rumata heard a loud slapping sound. It was evidently the

second slap;

the first one had woken him up.

"You'd better stop hitting me, noble don." A familiar voice. Who could it be? Probably Don Tameo. I'll let him win back his decrepit Chamalharian nag today. I wonder if I'll ever learn to distinguish a good horse from a poor one. But after all, my family isn't known for their expertise with horses. Camels, yes; we are experts on fighter camels. A good thing there are hardly, any camels here in Arkanar. Rumata stretched his arms and legs, until his joints cracked. He groped for a silken rope attached to the headboard of his bed and tugged at it several times. Little bells could be heard ringing throughout the house. That fellow is probably hanging out of the window, watching the racket down below.

I could simply get up, of course, and get dressed by myself, but that would only start tongues wagging again.

He listened once more to the stream of abuse coming from below his windows. The inventiveness of the human tongue! What entropy, what measure of the uncertainty of human knowledge!

Lately, Rumata continued with his thoughts, some know-it-alls have emerged in the guard troops, declaring that only one sword alone can be used for noble warfare, while the second sword must be used exclusively for street fights--and Don Reba pays too much attention to their worries in beautiful Arkanar. By the way, Don Tameo is not one of them. Too much of a coward, our dear Don Tameo, and an incorrigible armchair politician.

How horrible when the day starts out with Don Tameo ... Rumata sat up in bed and clasped his hands around his knees underneath the

patched-up
elegant coverlet. He was seized by a feeling of leaden
hopelessness. You
could ponder forever, keep thinking about how powerless and small we
are in
the face of circumstances ... On Earth I wouldn't ever dream of doing
such a
thing. On Terra we are strong, self-assured men with
specialized,
psychological training, men who are ready for anything. And we
do have
strong nerves:

We manage, for instance, not to turn away our head when
some poor
person is beaten or executed. We are capable of tremendous self-
control: We
can stand to listen unperturbed to the endless babblings of the most
abject
cretins. We have also forgotten how to feel disgusted: We don't
mind when
someone puts a dish before us from which the dogs eat, or when they
wipe it
out afterwards with a duly rag. And aren't we marvelous actors? Not
even in
our dreams do we lapse into our mother tongue or any of the other
languages
of Earth. And after all, we are equipped with an invincible
weapon: The
basis theory of feudalism, worked out in the quiet offices of our
officials
and in our laboratories, based on studious research and
serious
discussions...

It's just too bad that Don Reba hasn't the slightest inkling
of the
theory. And too bad, also, that our special psychological training
peels off
like sunburnt skin, that we have to go to extremes, that we are
forced to
submit to a steady mental reconditioning: grit your teeth and
remember that
you are a god in disguise. Remember that they do not know what
they are

doing; and that they are almost all free of guilt. And that is why you must have the patience of Job, patience, patience--and meanwhile the fountains of humanism inside us, which on Earth seemed to be well-nigh inexhaustible, are drying up here with frightening speed. Holy Mickey! Weren't we real humanists back on Terra, lovers of mankind, humanism was the mainstay of our nature and in our respect for the human being, in our love for man, we even steered toward anthropocentrism--and now we discover with horror that we did not truly love mankind but only the communards, our compatriots who resembled us ... And more and more frequently we catch ourselves in the act of wondering: Are these human beings, after all? Are they even capable of becoming human beings in time? And then we remember men like Kyra, Budach, Arata, the hunchback, or the unsurpassable Baron Pampa, and we feel ashamed--but this is equally rare and unpleasant and, worse still, it does not help us in the least...

All right, thought Rumata, that's enough of that. At least not so early in the morning. And damn this Don Tameo! So much trouble, so much has accumulated inside me, in my soul, and there is no place to get rid of it in this isolated state. That's what gets me: the isolation, the solitude. What did they call us back home? "Strong and self-assured, strapping young men." When we were back home did we ever imagine in those days that we would ever have to put up with such loneliness? Nobody would believe it. Anton, my friend, what's happening to you? To the West from here, barely three hours

by plane, lives Alexander Vassilevitch, a good man with a set of brains. To the East is Pashka, a merry, faithful friend, who went to school with you for seven years. It's just a momentary depression, Anton. Too bad--we believed you had more endurance; but doesn't this happen to all of us? What a wretched grind. We understand. So why don't you go back home to Terra, recuperate from all this, occupy yourself with theoretical research, and the rest will follow...

Incidentally, Alexander Vassilevitch is a dogmatist par excellence. So if the basis theory doesn't take in the Gray Ones--"In fifteen years of working on this, my friend, I have never once come across an exception like this..." In other words, I am simply dreaming of the Gray hordes. And if I dream about them, it simply means that I am overworked, under too much tension, that they should send me home for a rest. "All right, Don Rumata, I promise to investigate this personally and advise you of my findings. But in the meantime, give me your word, no excesses, please . . ." And then there is Pavel, whom I used to call Pashka when we were kids together: now he's a scientist, an expert, a brain full of information. He became totally immersed in the history of two planets and proved with enthusiasm that the phenomenon of the Gray hordes represents merely the most common occurrence in the relationship of the bourgeoisie against the barons--" By the way, I'll pay you a brief visit in a few days. To be frank with you, I'm quite disturbed when I think about the incident with Budach . . ." Many thanks!

And that's the end of it! I'll take care of the Budach case myself, even if I'm no longer much good for anything else.

The most learned Doctor Budach. A great physician, a most devoted citizen of Irukan; the duke almost knighted him, but then he changed his mind and had him incarcerated. The most distinguished specialist for cures by drugs in the entire empire. Author of the widely known and famous treatise *Concerning Herbs and Other Plants, which Items in Mysterious Ways Cause and Occasion Sorrow, Joy or Tranquility; Concerning the Salivary and Body Fluids of Reptiles, Spiders and the Hairless Wild Sow Y, which Last Disposes over said Characteristics and Many Others Besides*. A remarkable person, undoubtedly, and a genuine mental giant, at the same time a devoted humanist and eccentric who never had any money. His entire fortune consisted of a sack full of books. Who needs you, Doctor Budach, in this country of darkest ignorance that wallows in a bloody morass of conspiracy and greed?

Let us assume you are alive and you are in Arkanar. Of course you may have fallen into the hands of the barbarians, who periodically raid the countryside from their mountain strongholds. If this should be the case, then Don Kondor will contact with our friend Schumtuletidovodus, a specialist in the history of antique cultures, who presently works as an epileptic shaman for the chieftain whose first name consists of forty-five syllables. But if you should be in Arkanar after all--first of all, you might have been captured by the nocturnal armies of the robber chieftain

Waga Koleso. No, not "captured, " - but simply taken along, for they would consider your companion the far more desirable booty, your friend, the noble don, who has gambled away his entire fortune. Either way, they will not kill you: Waga Koleso is far too avaricious.

There's an equal chance, though, that some idiot of a baron has you in his clutches. Without any malicious intentions, merely out of boredom and some warped idea of hospitality. He simply would like to drink together with a noble guest, so he sends out his hordes and has them drag you to the castle of your companion. And you will be sitting in the stinking chamber until the dons have drunk themselves into oblivion and finally part company. In that case no harm will befall you.

But it's quite another story with the remnants of the recently defeated peasant army of Don Ksi and of Pert Posvonotchnik, who have retreated to the hamlet "Rotten Nest" where they are secretly supported and fed by our bright eagle, Don Reba himself--just in case some complication should arise in his relationship with the barons. These peasant soldiers know no mercy; better not even imagine the eventuality. And then there is Don Satarina, a crabby imperial aristocrat, 102 years of age and, of course, totally senile. He carries on a family feud with the dukes of Irukan, and snatches--whenever he revives sufficiently--anything that crosses the Irukanian border. He is very dangerous; when he is under the influence of Cholezistit, he is quite capable of issuing commands with such catastrophic results that the churches cannot collect the corpses from his cellars fast enough.

And then there's the top possibility. Not the most dangerous one, but the one most likely to occur: the Gray Patrol of Don Reba. The Sturmoviks on the main roads. You might have fallen into their hands quite by accident, Budach, in which case your only hope would be the quick wit and cool head of your companion to get you out of this calamity. But what if Don Reba should be interested in you personally? For Don Reba will occasionally display an unexpected concern . . . His spies might report that you are traveling through Arkanar, then a detachment under the command of some very eager Gray officer will be sent out to meet you. And this Gray cretin of low rank will be responsible for your ending up in a bag of stones in the Tower of Joy...

Rumata pulled once more at the rope, very impatient now. The bedroom door opened with a repulsive creak and a thin, somber-looking boy entered the room. His name was Uno, and his fate might have served as the theme for a ballad. He bowed deeply as he stood on the threshold, scraping the floor with his torn shoes, and stepped up to the bed. On the small bedside table he put down a tray with letters, some coffee, and a stale bread crust to be chewed, which in turn was supposed to strengthen and cleanse the teeth. Rumata glanced at him, very annoyed.

"Tell me please, are you ever going to oil that creaky door?" The boy looked silently at the floor. Rumata threw the coverlet back, let his bare feet dangle down over the edge of the bed and reached for the tray. "Washed yourself this morning?" he asked. The boy shifted from one foot to the other; without answering he wandered through the room,

picking

up the scattered garments that lay on the floor.

"I believe I asked you whether you washed yourself today?" said Rumata

while he opened his first letter.

"Water won't wash away your sins," muttered the boy under his breath.

"So why, noble don, should I wash myself?"

"And what did I tell you about microbes?" said Rumata.

Carefully, the

boy placed his master's green trousers over the back of the armchair, then

passed his thumb in a circle above it to chase away the wicked ghosts.

"I prayed three times last night," he said. "What more could I do?"

"You numbskull," said Rumata and started to read his letter.

It was from Dona Okana, a lady-in-waiting, the latest favorite of Don

Reba. She invited him to come and visit her this very evening, and signed

the letter "amorously languishing for you." The P.S. stated in clear, simple

language what she really expected from this rendezvous.

Rumata felt

embarrassed; he blushed. Throwing a side glance at the boy, he murmured:

"That's really too much . . ." He ought to think it over. To go there was

disgusting; not to go there would be foolish. Dona Okana was a well-informed

person. He quickly drained his cup of coffee and put the chewing-crust into

his mouth.

The next envelope was made of heavy paper; the seal was damaged.

It was

obvious that the letter had been opened. The letter was from Don Ripat, an

unscrupulous careerist and lieutenant in the Gray Militia, who inquired

after his esteemed well-being, expressed his belief in the imminent victory

of the Gray Cause, and begged to postpone payment of his debt, by quoting

various unfavorable circumstances. "All right, all right," Rumata mumbled and put the letter aside, picked the envelope up once again and examined it with great interest. Oh yes, they were working much more carefully now; much more carefully.

The third letter contained an invitation to a duel because of a certain Dona Pifa, but the writer was willing to withdraw his challenge provided the noble Don Rumata would testify that he was making no claims upon the person of Dona Pifa and had never made any such claims. The letter was typical: the basic text had been written by a calligrapher and the blanks had been filled in with names and times-- in a clumsy hand and full of mistakes.

Rumata put the letter down and scratched the mosquito bites on his left hand.

"I want to wash up. Bring the things in!" he ordered.

The boy disappeared behind the door, to return soon with a wooden basin. He dragged the tub along the floor, his behind wagging with the exertion. Then he ran once more out of the room and dragged in an empty tub with a big dipper.

Rumata now jumped to his feet, pulled the elaborately embroidered nightshirt over his head, and noisily unsheathed the swords that had been hanging over the headboard of his bed. Cautiously, the boy ducked behind a chair. For ten minutes Rumata practiced attack and defense; then he leaned the swords against the wall, bent over the empty tub, and ordered: "The water!" It was rather miserable to wash without soap but Rumata had become used to it. The boy scooped up the water with the dipper and poured it over

Rumata's back, neck, and head. Dipper after dipper filled with water. All the while he kept grumbling: "Everywhere else people behave like human beings, only here in our house must we bother with such refined nonsense. Who has ever heard of such a thing? To wash yourself with two buckets of water? Every day a fresh towel . . . And His Lordship jumps around all naked with two swords every morning, without having said his prayers first.. ."

While Rumata toweled himself vigorously, he spoke with an authoritative tone: "I am a member of the court, not just some lousy baron. A courtier must always be clean and sweet-smelling."

"His Royal Highness will hardly sniff at you," replied the boy.

"Everyone knows that his Highness prays day and night for us sinners. And Don Reba--he *never* washes. I have it first-hand; his servant has told me so."

"All right, don't fret," said Rumata and put on his nylon undershirt. The boy regarded the undershirt with dismay. Rumors about it had been circulating for quite some time now amongst the servants in Arkanar. But there was nothing that Rumata could do about it, for very natural reasons growing out of his masculine mentality. As Rumata slipped on his shorts, the boy jerked his head to one side, moving his lips as if he wanted to shoo away the spirit of impurity.

Still, it wouldn't be a bad idea to introduce here the fashion of wearing undergarments, thought Rumata. But such innovations could naturally be carried out only with the help of the fairer sex. And in this area,

too--unfortunately for him--he distinguished himself by rather high requirements. Quite inconvenient for a spy. For a cavalier and man of the world, for a renowned connoisseur of court etiquette and for a person who was sent to the provinces, there to fight duels to settle love affairs, it was only fitting to have twenty mistresses. Rumata made heroic endeavors to keep up with his reputation. Half the members of his agency, rather than devote their time to more serious efforts, spread the most despicable rumors--rumors calculated to arouse the envy and delight of the young men of the Arkanarian Guard. Dozens of overjoyed and disappointed ladies whom Rumata visited until late in the night--reciting poems all the time (third night watch: fraternal kiss on the lady's cheek, a mighty leap over the balcony's balustrade and right into the arms of the commander of the night watch, whom he knew well)--dozens of ladies would outdo each other with tales of the marvelous style of the genuine cavalier from the big city. Rumata used the vanity of these women, depraved to the point of repulsiveness, for his own purposes. However, the question of underwear was never touched on.

How much simpler had been the business with the handkerchiefs! On the occasion of the very first ball he had pulled an elegant silk cloth from his waistcoat pocket, and with flourish had proceeded to dry his lips with it. And at the next ball, the manly youths were drying their sweaty faces with large or small pieces of cloth of various colors, gaily embroidered and with

monograms. And within one month, the ladies' men were outdoing each other by draping bedsheets over their hand, dragging the four comers elegantly along the floor behind them ...

Rumata put on his green trousers and a white batiste shirt with a freshly pressed, upturned collar.

"Any callers?" he inquired of the boy.

"The barber is waiting," said the boy. "And there are two dons sitting in the drawing room, Don Tameo and Don Sera. They had me bring them some wine and are quarreling violently. They are waiting to have breakfast with you."

"Go and get the barber. Tell the noble dons that I'll join them very soon. But don't be rude to them, do you hear me? You must always remain polite."

Breakfast was not very opulent and left room for an early lunch. A strongly spiced roast was served along with dogs' ears, marinated in vinegar. They drank Irukanian sparkling wine, the viscous, brown Estorian and the white Soanian. While he skillfully dissected a leg of lamb with the aid of two daggers, Don Tameo complained about the overbearing temerity of the lower classes. "I will lodge a complaint at the highest instance," he declared. "The nobility demands that the plebs, the peasants, and the artisans be forbidden to show their faces in public places and in the street. Let them use the courtyards and back entrances. In those instances where the appearance of a peasant cannot be avoided--for example, when they deliver bread, meat, or wine--they should obtain a special permit from the

Ministry for the Protection of the Crown.'" "

"What a clever brain!" Don Sera spoke with enthusiasm and sprayed the area before him liberally with saliva and juice from the meat. "But last night at the Court . . ." And he related the latest gossip. Don Reba's current flame. Lady in waiting Okana, had been careless enough to step on the king's sore foot. His Highness flew into a rage and turned to Don Reba, ordering him to mete out an exemplary punishment to the evildoer. Whereupon Don Reba, without even so much as batting an eyelid, replied; "It will be carried out, Your Highness. This very night!"

"I laughed so hard that two buttons popped off my waistcoat!" remarked Don Sera, cocking his head to one side.

Protoplasm, though Rumata. Nothing but ingesting and digesting and procreating protoplasm.

"Indeed, noble dons," he said. "Don Reba is truly a very, very clever man."

"Ho, Ho!" said Don Sera. "Much more--he is an intellectual luminary!"

"An outstanding statesman," said Don Tameo emphatically, with a knowing expression.

"Yes it's really very strange," Don Rumata continued with a friendly smile, "when you remember the kind of things people would tell about him hardly a year ago. Do you recall, Don Tameo, how wittily you expressed yourself on the subject of his bow legs?"

Don Tameo's drink almost went down the wrong way as he quickly swallowed a little glass of Irukanian wine.

"I can't remember a thing," he grumbled. "And besides I am not known as a wit--"

"Oh surely you must remember," said Don Sera and reproachfully wagged his head.

"Yes, indeed!" shouted Don Rumata. "You were present at the conversation, Don Sera! I remember so well how you laughed at Don Tameo's witty ideas. You laughed so hard that something popped off the clothes you were wearing."

Don Sera turned red and blue in the face and started to justify his remarks with long-winded and distorted explanations. He was lying in his teeth, of course. Don Tameo's face had grown somber. He made a long face. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to the strong Estorian wine, and since he had--according to his own words--"begun two mornings ago, and had not been able to desist till now," he had to be supported from either side when they finally departed.

It was a sunny, friendly day. The common people stood around in the streets and gaped as if there were something to look at; little boys whistled and screamed, throwing mud at each other; prettily bedecked housewives with bonnets on their heads leaned out of the windows; daring servant girls flashed their shy glances from moist eyes. Don Sera's mood began to improve. He tripped a peasant and almost split his sides to see how the man wallowed in the mud. Don Tameo suddenly noticed that he had put on his fez with the double sword ornament back to front. He yelled: "Stop! Stay put!" and raised his fez, held it up steady, while he tried to turn his body 180 degrees underneath the fez. Another item popped off Don Sera's

waistcoat. Rumata seized a pretty servant girl passing by the group, tugged at her pink ear and begged her to put Don Tameo's headgear in order. A crowd of onlookers quickly gathered around the three noble dons, all eagerly dispensing advice to the girl whose face was as red as a beet-- and Don's Sera's waistcoat kept losing a steady stream of buttons, buckles, and hooks. When finally they were on their way again, Don Tameo summoned up his courage and on the spot drew up an addenda to his complaint wherein he pointed out how necessary it was "To keep pretty persons of the female gender at a proper distance from peasants and the common people."

And then a cart loaded with earthenware pots blocked their path. Don Sera unsheathed both his swords and stated that it was not fit and proper for the noble dons to make a detour around pots of any kind and declared his determination to pave his way straight through the cart. But while he was still busy trying to aim properly and distinguish where the wall of the house ended and where the pots began, Rumata grasped the spokes of two wheels and turned the cart around, and thus cleared the road. The gaping crowd, who had followed the incident with delight, began to cheer: Hip, hip, hooray! The noble dons were about to continue on their way when from a second-storey window a fat merchant's gray-blue head popped out, loudly giving forth with a tirade concerning the rudeness of the courtiers against whom "Our Enlightened Eagle, Don Reba, would soon find some proper remedy." Of course they had to stop on the spot once more and transfer the entire

load of pots into the merchant's window. Rumata saved the last pot, threw two gold pieces with the profile of Pitz the Sixth inside into the vessel and presented it to the petrified owner of the wagon.

"How much did you give him?" asked Don Tameo as they started out again.

"Oh, it's not worth mentioning," answered Rumata, shrugging his shoulders. "Two pieces of gold."

"I swear by the humpback of our Holy Mickey!" broke from Don Tameo's lips. "You do have money! If you want, I'll sell you my Chamalharian stallion!"

"I'd rather win that stallion from you in a game of knucklebones," said Rumata.

"Splendid!" shouted Don Sera and stopped in his tracks. "Let's have a game of knucklebones!"

"Right here?" asked Rumata.

"Why not?" asked Don Sera. "I see no reason why three noble dons can't play a game of knucklebones wherever it pleases them!"

Suddenly Don Tameo stumbled and sprawled full length in the mud. Don Sera's legs, too, suddenly became entangled and he fell down.

"Oh, I completely forgot," he said. "We're supposed to be on guard duty now."

Rumata dragged the two to their feet and led each by the arm along the way. Before the giant dark house of Don Satarina he came to a halt

"We ought to pay a visit to the old don," he suggested.

"Sure, can't see any reason why three noble dons shouldn't call on Don Satarina," said Don Sera.

Don Tameo opened his eyes.

"In the king's Service," he managed the words painfully, "we must all look ahead to the future. D-d-d-on Satarina-- that's a piece of the past

already. Onward, noble dons! I must get to my guard post."

"Onward!" echoed Don Rumata.

Don Tameo's head dropped forward to rest on his chest; he did not wake up a second time. Don Sera cracked his knuckles and began to tell stories about his ever-successful amorous adventures. They arrived at the palace and went to the guardroom where Rumata, very relieved, laid Don Tameo on a bench. Don Sera, however, took a seat at the table, grandly swept aside a pile of orders signed by the king, and declared that the time had finally come to drink a glass of cold Irukanian wine. The landlord ought to roll out a little barrel, he stated, and these old women (he pointed to the officers of the guard on duty who were playing cards at another table) should join them for a drink. The commander of the guard, a lieutenant of the guard troop, came over. He eyed Don Tameo and Don Sera from top to toe. And after Don Sera had directed an inquiry to him--"Why are all the flowers fading away in the shelter of my solitude?"--he decided it would not make any sense to send them to their sentry post in the present condition; they'd be better off to lie there for a while.

Rumata won a gold piece from the lieutenant and talked with him about the new ribbons on their uniforms and the best method of polishing a sword. He mentioned a short time later that he hoped to visit Don Satarina, who was known to possess some fine grinding stones, and seemed visibly upset to learn that the honorable grandee apparently had now lost his mind for good. One month earlier he was said to have released all his prisoners, had

dissolved his bodyguard and handed over to the state his rich arsenal of instruments of torture. At the age of 102 years, the old man declared, it was his intention from now on to devote the rest of his life to good deeds.

He'd probably not be long for this world now.

Taking his leave of the lieutenant, Rumata left the palace and ambled over in the direction of the harbor. He had to walk around puddles and jump over deep wheel ruts filled with greenish-brown water. Without further ado, he pushed the loitering onlookers out of his path, winked at the girls (who seemed greatly impressed by his outfit), bowed deeply to the ladies who were being carried down the street in sedan chairs, waved friendly greetings to his acquaintances from the court and deliberately ignored the Gray Sturmoviks.

Next, Rumata made a little detour to look in at the School of Patriots. This school had been founded two years previously under the protection of Don Reba himself for the purpose of training the adolescent sons of merchants and the lower middle class for positions as low-ranking military and administrative officials. The building was constructed of stone, without any columns or ornaments; it had thick walls with narrow, embrasurelike windows; on either side of the main entrance were two semicircular towers. If necessary, one could defend oneself there for quite a while.

Rumata climbed up a narrow circular staircase leading to the second floor, his spurs clanking on the stone floor. On his way to the office of the school's procurator he passed by the classrooms. A monotonous, uniform

hum of voices came from the rooms; answers were given in unison. "What is our king?"--"A sublime person." "What are our ministers?"--"Faithful and without the spirit of contradiction." "And God, the Creator, spoke: 'I pronounce a curse.' And He pronounced a curse . . ." ". . . and at the sound of the horn blowing twice, run two by two and form a chain, holding your spears ready to thrust . . ." ". . . in case the tortured should lose consciousness, the torturing must be interrupted immediately..."

The school, thought Rumata. The breeding ground of wisdom. The mainstay of culture ...

Without knocking, he pushed open the low entrance door and entered the office; it was dark and icy as a crypt. Behind an immensely massive writing desk, heaped with papers and thrashing canes, a tall, angular man jumped to his feet. A pair of deep-seated eyes peered from his bald head, and on his tightly braided gray uniform could be seen the epaulets of the Ministry of Security. He was the procurator of the School of Patriots, the most learned Father Kin, a sadist, a murderer, and a monk at the same time, author of the Treatise Dealing with Denunciations, which had aroused Don Reba's interest

"Well, how are you faring here?" asked Don Rumata with a benevolent smile. 'The literate folk . . . Some we slaughter and others we teach, eh?"

Father Kin smiled wryly.

"Not every literate man is an enemy of the crown," he said. "The king's enemies are the literate dreamers, skeptics, and disloyal dissidents! Whereas our task here--"

"All right, all right," said Rumata. "I believe you. Are you

writing

anything new? I have read your treatise--a very useful work, but stupid. How

can you harbor such thoughts? How do you get such ideas? That isn't very

good, my dear ... procurator, is it... ?"

"I make no boastful claims of special intelligence or wisdom," answered

Father Kin with dignity. "My only goal is the good of the state. We need no

clever people. We need loyalty. And we--"

"That will do, that will do," said Rumata. "All right then. But are you

writing anything new or not?"

"In the near future I will hand the minister an outline of the New

State for his perusal. I have used the Realm of the Holy Order as a model

for it"

"The very ideal" Rumata was filled with wonder. "Do you intend to make

monks of all of us?"

Father Kin pressed his palms together and leaned forward.

"Permit me, noble don, to make myself clear," he said excitedly,

licking his lips. "The crux of the matter lies somewhere else. The crux of

the matter lies in the basic pillars of the New State. And the basic pillars

are rather simple; there are but three: blind belief in the infallibility of

the law; total submission to the law; and finally, the unrelenting

observation of everyone by all."

"Hum," said Rumata. "And what for?"

"What do you mean, what for?"

"You are stupid after all," said Rumata. "All right, I believe you. I

wanted something else. What was it now? . . . Oh, yes. Tomorrow you'll get

two new teachers to add to your staff. Father Tarra, a venerable old man, is

dabbling in --cosmography; and Brother Nanin, also a most

worthy man,
specialist in history. They are my people, and you are to treat them
right!

Here is my pledge." He threw a money pouch of leather on the table.
"That's

for you, five gold pieces. All clear?"

"Yes, noble don," said Father Kin humbly.

Rumata yawned and looked around.

"Just as long as we understand each other," he said. "For some
reason

my father used to love these people very dearly, and charged me
with the

task of making their lives as pleasant as possible. Would you do me
a favor

and explain, you learned man, why such a most noble don would be so
inclined

toward the sciences?"

"Some special merits perhaps?" guessed Father Kin.

"What are you babbling about?" asked Rumata angrily. "But then
again,

why not? Indeed, why not? There might be a beautiful daughter, or a
sister .

. . Don't you have any wine here? Of course not--"

Father Kin shrugged his shoulders guiltily. Rumata took one
of the

papers that cluttered the writing desk and held it against the
light for a

while.

"Defensive belt breakthrough," he read out loud. "Oh, you
crafty
fellows!"

He dropped the paper on the floor and rose to his feet "Just
make sure

that your educated brood doesn't bother these two. Ill come to
visit them

some time soon, and if I hear that--" He pushed his fist under
Father Kin's

nose.

"All right, all right, don't worry." Father Kin snickered
obsequiously.

Rumata nodded curtly and walked out the door, scraping his
spurs along

the floor.

On the Boulevard of Overwhelming Gratitude, he went into an armorer's workshop and bought new rings for his sword sheath. He tried out a few daggers, hurled them against the wall, weighed them in his hand, but could not decide on any of them. Then he sat down on a table and chatted with the owner of the place, a certain Father Hauk. Father Hauk had kind, sad eyes, and small pale hands, stained with inkspots. Rumata discussed with him for a while the merits of Zuren's poetry, listened to an interesting commentary on the poem. "It weighs upon my soul like fallen leaves," and asked for something new to read. Before leaving, he sighed with the author over the inexpressibly sad verses and recited "To be or not to be" in an Irukanian translation.

"Holy Mickey!" Father Hauk cried out exuberantly. "Who writes such verses?"

"I do," said Rumata and left the store.

He made his way to the Gray Joy Inn, drank there a glass of Irukanian white wine, patted the innkeeper's wife on the cheek, skillfully overthrew with one thrust of his sword a table where a government spy sat staring at him with empty eyes. Then he walked to a far comer of the inn and found there a ragged, bearded man, who had an inkwell suspended around his neck.

"Good day, Brother Nanin," he greeted the man. "How many petitions have you written today?"

Brother Nanin's embarrassed smile displayed his small decayed teeth.

"Nowadays people want to write very few petitions, noble don," he answered. "Some believe that it is useless to beg for favors. And

others

count on the likelihood that they will get what they want soon anyhow, without having to ask for it."

Rumata bent over and whispered in his ear that he had arranged the matter with the School of Patriots.

"Here are two pieces of gold for you," he said finally. "Clean up and put on some decent clothes. And weigh your words. At least for the first few days. Father Kin, the procurator, is a dangerous man." .

"I'll read him my treatise about rumors," said Brother Nanin merrily.

"I thank you, noble don."

"The things one does in memory of a dear departed father," said Rumata.

"But, tell me, where can I find Father Tarra?"

Brother Nanin's smile vanished suddenly and a nervous tick played around his mouth.

"There was a brawl here yesterday," he said. "And Father Tarra had a bit too much to drink and got somewhat out of hand. And, then, you know, he has red hair . . . They broke his ribs."

"What a mess!" Rumata said. "Why do you all drink so much?"

"Sometimes it's hard to control oneself," said Brother Nanin sadly.

"That's very true," said Rumata. "Well, here's a few more gold pieces, and try to take care of him, will you?"

Brother Nanin bowed low and wanted to kiss Rumata's hand but Rumata stepped back quickly.

"Now, now," he said. "I have seen you make better jokes in your time, Brother Nanin. Farewell!"

The harbor smelled like no other spot in Arkanar. It smelled of seawater and foul algae, of spices, tar, smoke, and rotten corned beef, and from the taverns came a nauseating odor of boiled fish and home

brewed beer
turned sour. The sultry air was filled with a jumble of curses
in many
tongues. On the piers, in the narrow lanes between the warehouses and
around
the taverns, thousands of people shoved and pushed. They caught
the eye.
Down-and-out seamen, bloated merchants, fishermen with somber
faces, slave
traders, pimps, heavily made-up whores, drunken soldiers, men
impossible to
classify, hung with arms from head to toe, and fantastic vagabonds
in torn
clothes with golden bracelets around their dirty wrists. And
all were
excited and ill-tempered. Don Reba had issued an edict three days
before,
forbidding any ship or boat to leave the harbor.

The Gray Sturmoviks lounged on the quays, playing with
their rusty
butcher cleavers. They spat into the water and bestowed
impertinent and
malicious glances on the crowd. On some of the ships that were
moored near
the quays, groups of five or six men huddled, brawny, copper-
skinned men
clad in heavy furs turned inside out. These were the barbarian
mercenaries.
They were no good in a fight at close range, but when they
were at a
distance (as they were now) they were very dangerous with their
blowpipes
and poisoned arrows. In the distance loomed the black masts of
the war
galleys of the royal fleet, like threatening fingers pointing
skywards. From
time to time, streams of fire issued from them and landed on the
surface of
the water toward the quays: the oil slicks were ignited in this way
in order
to intimidate the waiting crowd.

Rumata passed the customs shed where the ship captains were
waiting in

front of closed doors in vain, trying to obtain their permit to depart. He thrust through the noisy crowd that was busy at bartering and trading with anything at hand: from slave girls and black pearls to narcotics and trained spiders. He continued on to the quays, threw a swift glance over to the side where corpses in sailors' uniforms were publicly displayed. The dead bodies had already swelled up under the hot sun. He described a wide circle around a square which was littered with all kinds of junk and garbage, and finally entered an evil-smelling little side street. It was much quieter here. Half-naked prostitutes were sprawled in the doorways of cheap waterfront dives; at a street crossing a soldier lay, dead drunk, his nose bashed in and his pockets tamed inside out: suspicious figures with pale nocturnal faces crept along the walls of the houses.

This was the first time that Rumata had come here during the day. At first he was surprised at the lack of reaction to his presence. The people he encountered either looked past him with their watery eyes or saw straight through him. Still, they stepped aside to let him pass. Once when he tamed around a corner and then swiftly looked back, he saw some twenty various heads--male and female, bushy-haired and bald--disappear instantly behind doorways, windows, and fences. Suddenly he felt the strange atmosphere of this nauseating neighborhood, an atmosphere filled not so much with hostility or danger as with an evil, avaricious interest.

He pushed a door open with his shoulder and entered one of the taverns. Inside the darkened room a man dozed behind the bar. He was very old,

with a face like a mummy and an extraordinarily long nose. There were no patrons in the room. Rumata approached the bar and was just about to flip his fingers against the enormous nose of the old man when all of a sudden he became aware that the old man was not really asleep, but was watching him carefully from behind his almost closed eyelids. Rumata threw a silver coin on the table and the old man's eyes jerked open as if pushed by a button.

"What would you like, noble don?" he inquired officiously. "Something to eat? To sniff? Or maybe a girl?"

"Don't ask such stupid questions," said Rumata. "You know quite well what I'm here for."

"Well! Now isn't that the noble Don Rumata!" shouted the old man as if completely taken by surprise. "There I am, just sitting there--and suddenly I see a familiar face--"

After this long speech, the old man closed his eyes again. Rumata got the message: the coast was clear. He walked around the bar and crawled through a tiny door into the adjoining room. It was very crowded and dark inside and the room was filled with a penetrating odor of sour beer. In the middle of the room, standing behind a high desk, was an elderly man. His deeply wrinkled face was bent over a pile of papers. His head was covered by a flat black cap. A weak oil lamp flickered on the high desk and its pale light barely illuminated the faces of the men sitting motionless along the wall. Rumata used his two swords like canes and groped for a low chair near the wall. He sat down. Special laws and a special etiquette ruled here. None

of those present paid the slightest bit of attention to the newcomer. If somebody entered, then that was the way it was supposed to be; but in case it was not the way it was supposed to be, then you blinked just once and that person disappeared. You could search the wide world over and never find a trace of him . . . The pucker-faced old man busily scratched his pen over the paper; the people along the wall did not budge. From time to time one of them would sigh deeply. Up and down the walls scurried invisible salamanders, hunting for flies.

The motionless men along the wall were the leaders of robber bands. Rumata had known some of them by sight for quite a while now. These dull brutes were not worth anything, actually. Their psyches were no more complicated than that of the average shopkeeper. They were stupid, brutal, and very handy with knives and cudgels. But then there was the man at the high desk.

He was called Waga Koleso, and he was all-powerful; there was no competitor who would have contested his position as chief of all the criminal forces in the land, from the Pitanean swamps in the Western regions of Irukan to the maritime borders of the mercantile republic of Soan. He had been cursed and expelled from all three official churches of the empire because of his excessive haughtiness, for he claimed to be the younger brother of the ruling prince. He had at his disposal a standing nocturnal army, some ten thousand men strong; had a few hundred thousand gold pieces in his treasure chests; and his agents penetrated as far as the

very heart
of the government machine. He had been officially executed at
least four
times during the past twenty years, each time in the presence of
a large
populace. According to an official version he was currently
languishing
simultaneously in three of the darkest jails of the realm.
Don Reba,
however, had repeatedly issued commands "regarding the rebellious
spreading
of rumors and legends by enemies of the State and other malevolent
persons
regarding a certain so-called Waga Koleso, who in actuality does
not exist
and thus belongs to the realm of legends."

According to certain rumors, the same Don Reba summoned several
barons,
who disposed of strong troops of warriors, and promised the
following
reward: five hundred gold pieces for Waga's body and seven thousand
for Waga
alive. In his time, Rumata himself had had to spend a great deal of
effort
and money in order to establish contact with Koleso. He felt
violently
repelled by the old man but Koleso was occasionally very
useful, even
literally indispensable. Besides, Waga was of scientific interest
to him,
namely as a most intriguing specimen in Rumata's collection of
medieval
monsters, and as a person who apparently lacked any trace of a past.

Finally, Waga put his quill aside, straightened up his back
and said
with a croaking voice:

"Well, then, my dear children. Two and a half thousand pieces
of gold
within three days. And expenses run only 1996. Five hundred and four
little
round pieces of gold in three days. Not bad, my dear children, not
bad at
all..."

Nobody moved. Waga .left his place behind the high desk, took a seat in a comer and forcefully rubbed his dry palms together.

"Isn't that something to make you jump for joy, my dear children?" he said. "These are good times for us, these fruitful years . . . But we must work hard for our daily bread. Indeed, how hard! My older brother, the king of Arkanar, has set his mind on annihilating all learned men in his own kingdom as well as in mine. Well, he in his wisdom ought to know what should be done. After all, who are we to doubt the wisdom of his judgment? It does not behoove us to criticize his most exalted decisions. On the other hand, we may--nay, we must--extract some profit from these decisions. And since we are his loyal subjects, we must serve him. As we are but his nocturnal subjects we will not deliver into his hands our modest part of these profits without further ado. He, of course, won't notice it, and therefore he will not be annoyed at us. What is the matter?"

Nobody moved.

"I had the impression that Piga was sighing over there. Am I right, Piga, my son?"

There was a slight commotion, somebody fidgeting in his seat, apparently, as nothing could be seen in the darkened room. A slight cough came from a comer.

"I didn't sigh, Waga," said a coarse voice. "I wouldn't.. ."

"That's it, Piga, just keep quiet! Excellent! Now hold your breath and listen to me carefully! Look sharp and set to work and nobody will bother you at your difficult task. My older brother, His Royal Highness, has let it be known through his mouthpiece, the noble Don Reba, that he

has set a rather considerable sum of money on the heads of several learned men who are in hiding or who wish to flee from here. We must deliver these heads into his royal hands, just to humor the old man. On the other hand, though, some of these scientists want to hide from my older brother's wrath, and are willing to remunerate whoever will assist them in it. Out of compassion, in the name of pity, and also to guard my brother's soul from the burden of excessive misdeeds, we will help these people. And if later on His Royal Highness should still be in need of these heads, he can still get them from us. At a good price. Very cheap ..."

Waga fell silent and lowered his head. Tears were trickling down his cheeks all of a sudden--the slow tears of an old man.

"I am getting old," he sighed, trying vainly to stifle a sob. "My hands are trembling with age, my legs fail me and my memory begins to fade. Indeed, I forgot completely that inside this tiny, stifling cage a noble don is languishing in our midst--surely he does not care to hear about our petty money deals. I am leaving you, I will rest. But meanwhile, my children, let us ask the noble don to be gracious enough to forgive our oversight . . ."

Moaning and groaning he rose to his feet, arched over to make a bow. The rest of the men also got to their feet and bowed before Rumata, but indecision and fear showed plainly in their faces. Rumata could literally hear their dull, primitive brains crackling with the strain of trying to interpret the old man's words and gestures.

Things were perfectly clear, however. The clever old man

would seize the opportunity at the right moment to inform Don Reba of his intention that he and his nocturnal army would join the Gray hordes in the pogrom they had just started. Now, however, the time for concrete orders had come, when lists of names were to be handed out and the exact date and hour were to be determined when the plans would be carried out. At this point Don Rumata's presence was, to put it mildly, considered undesirable. This way it was suggested to the noble don to state quickly the purpose of his visit and then to take his leave as fast as possible. What a morose old man! A nasty person! What was he doing here in town? Waga couldn't stand city life.

"You are right, my dear Waga," said Rumata. "My time is limited. But it is I who must beg your pardon because I will bother you with some inconsequential little business." Rumata remained seated while all the others listened to him standing up.

"It has come about that I am in need of your advice . . . You may sit down."

Waga bowed once more and sat down.

"This is what I came to tell you," continued Rumata. "Three days ago I was supposed to meet my friend, a noble don from Irukan, at the Square of the Heavy Swords. We failed to meet. He has vanished. But I knew for certain that he has crossed safely the Irukanian border. Perhaps you might know something further about his fate?"

Waga did not reply for a long time. The bandits kept clearing their throats and sighed deeply. Then Waga, too, cleared his throat.

"No, noble don," he said. "Nothing is known to us in this matter."

Rumata instantly stood up.

"Thank you, my friend," he said. Then he walked over to the high desk in the middle of the room and set down a leather pouch with ten gold pieces.

"I'm leaving this here with you with the following request: Should you hear of any further news, let me know about it, please." He touched his cap.

"Farewell!"

He stopped once more, just before he reached the door, turned around and remarked casually:

"You mentioned something about learned men. A thought just occurred to me. I have the feeling that the King of Arkanar won't succeed in capturing any proper bookworms even if he should try for a whole month. And I must found a university in the capital city. I once made such a vow when I was cured there from the plague. So if you should seize any bookworms, will you let me know before you inform Don Reba. Maybe I might use one or the other for my university."

"That will cost you dearly," warned Waga with a mawkish voice. "The merchandise is hard to come by."

"But my honor is dearer still," bragged Rumata as he turned to go.

THREE

It would be most interesting, thought Rumata, to capture this Waga and bring him to Terra. Technically not difficult at all. Easy to arrange. But what would he do on Earth? Rumata tried to imagine what Waga

would do on Earth. Throw a giant shaggy spider into a bright room with shining walls and air conditioning pervaded with pine scent or ocean breezes - and the spider flattens itself against the shiny floor, jerks its wicked, feverishly contorted eyes to and fro and--what else can he do?--crawls sideways, always sideways into the farthest little comer, doubles up into a ball and threateningly bares its poisonous mandibles. First and foremost, Waga would seek out the company of the dissatisfied and the social outcasts. And just as certain would it turn out, that even the most stupid grumbler of Earth would still be too pure and unsuitable for Waga's purposes. The old man would simply deteriorate. Maybe even expire. But who really knew what he was like? That is the whole difficulty in such an affair. The psyche of these monsters resembles a dark forest. Holy Mickey! To find your way through it is far more complicated than in nonhumanoid civilizations. It's possible to explain all their actions but hellishly difficult to prognosticate them. Yes, there was definitely a possibility that Waga might die of grief. Perhaps, though, he might look around, get adjusted somehow, quickly understand what belongs where, and then sojourn in some wildlife reserve as a sylvan spirit. It's most unlikely that he wouldn't have some small, insignificant passion, some interest which is only in his way here, but that on Earth might become the center of his existence. I believe he is fond of cats. They say he has a whole barrage of them somewhere in Hiccup Forest,

and a servant who does nothing but take care of them. And Waga even pays that man, despite his reputation of being an old miser, and despite the fact that he could simply string along the caretaker with promises and threats. But I can't imagine what he would do on Earth with his tremendous lust for power!

Rumata stopped before a tavern. He was about to enter when he noticed that one of his money pouches was missing. He stood at the entrance door, totally perplexed--he could not get used to such things for the life of him, although this was not the first time that it happened. He searched and rummaged through his pockets for the longest time. All told he had brought along three pouches with ten gold coins in each. One he had given Father Kin, the procurator, the second to Waga. The third pouch had disappeared. His pockets were empty. From his left trouser leg all gold clasps had been carefully cut away and his dagger had been removed from his belt.

Suddenly he saw two Sturmoviki a little way off who were staring at him, grinning and sneering. As far as the collaborator and member of the Institute of Experimental History was concerned, they could simply go to Hell--but the noble don flew into a rage. For a moment he lost control. He walked over to the two Gray Soldiers and raised his hand, which somehow clenched into a fist of its own accord. Evidently some terrible change had also come over his face, for the sneering soldiers were gripped by sheer terror, their mocking faces suddenly frozen, and they fled inside the tavern. Rumata was frightened. Only once before had he ever

felt so horrible: the time when (as a standby cosmonaut) he had been seized by the first symptoms of malaria. Nobody could understand how the malady had appeared so suddenly, and two hours later he had been cured, and sent off with some good words and a few jokes. But he had never been able to forget the shock, the shock that he --who had never been sick before in his life--had felt at the notion that something was disintegrating inside his body, the realization that he was gradually diminishing and was somehow threatened with loss of control over his body.

I didn't want to do it, he thought now. It would never have crossed my mind. They didn't even do anything in particular, after all ... They were just standing there, grinning, baring their teeth ... It was a stupid grin, I admit, but I must have looked quite idiotic myself, rummaging through my pockets like that. And I almost tore them to pieces, he suddenly realized. If they hadn't run inside I would have killed them! He remembered the bet he had recently made, how he had taken a dummy clad in a double Soanian suit of armor and split it from head to toe with his sword--cold shivers ran down his back at the thought. They might now be lying here in a pool of their own blood, like stuck pigs, and he would be standing here, sword in hand, not knowing what to do ... A fine god you are! You've become a beast ... Suddenly all his muscles ached as if he had been doing heavy physical labor. Come on, come on, he told himself. It wasn't so horrible after all. It's all over now. Just an instant flash. Like a bolt of lightning and it's

all gone.

I am a human being, in spite of everything, so there must be animal in me as well. It's only nerves. Nerves and the tension of the past few days. The worst thing, though, is the sensation of an approaching shadow. You can't tell whose shadow it is or where it comes from but it keeps creeping closer and closer and can't be stopped . . .

This feeling of inevitability pervaded everything. It could be felt in the fact that the Sturmoviks, who until recently had huddled like cowards inside their barracks, now paraded brazenly in the middle of the roads, where hitherto only the noble dons had been permitted. And in the fact that the streetsingers had vanished from the city, the storytellers, the dancers, the acrobats. And in the fact that the citizens no longer sang songs with political themes, had become very serious, and could suddenly predict with utter certainty what would benefit the state. And in the fact that the harbor had suddenly been closed without any explanation. And in the fact that "indignant crowds" had been seen destroying all the old curiosity shops, the only places in the kingdom where it was still possible to buy or borrow books and manuscripts in all the languages of the country, even in the now dead languages of the natives beyond the bay. And in the fact that the landmark of the city, the shining tower of the observatory, loomed against the sky like a blackened, decayed tooth: it had been burned down by a "careless conflagration." And in the fact that the consumption of alcohol had increased fourfold during the past two years--in Arkanar of all

places,
that had been notorious for its heavy drinkers from days of old. And
in the
fact that the flogged and frightened peasants buried themselves
in the
cellars of their filthy little nests and could not bring
themselves to
emerge even to deal with the most urgent field chores. And finally
in the
fact that the old buzzard Waga Koleso had transferred his
headquarters to
the city (evidently he must have gotten wind of some worthwhile
spoils).

Somewhere in the interior of the palace, in the luxurious
apartments,
where the gout-ridden king resided, the king who had not seen the
light of
the sun for the past twenty years for fear of anything that moved
outside in
the world; the son of his own grandfather; the imbecile king who
would sign
one terrible edict after the other, sending the most honorable and
selfless
people to a cruel death--somewhere inside there ripened a tremendous
abscess
that threatened to burst any moment now...

Rumata stumbled over the remains of a squashed melon and
raised his
head. He was on the Boulevard of Overwhelming Gratitude, the
neighborhood
where the better merchants had their stores, the moneylenders
and the
jewelers. The street was lined with solid old houses, the
sidewalks were
wide and the road was paved with granite. Usually one would find
here the
noble dons and the moneyed aristocracy of the town but now a dense
crowd of
simple folk poured toward him. They made a wide and cautious detour
around
Rumata. Some gaped at him with curiosity; many, though, bowed deeply
before
him, just to make sure. Fat shiny faces glowed from the upper-storey

windows

like little light towers, excited and paralyzed with curiosity.

Somewhere,

farther on ahead, imperious voices could be heard: "Hey, there, move on!

Disperse! Hurry up, will you? Move it on!" Comments came from the crowd:

"They've got the devil on their backs, got to watch out for those, those, they're the worst kind. Look like ordinary, quiet, moral people. Like honest folk. Just like any other merchant. But just look a bit closer--there's poison inside them, .. bitter poison..."

"He had it coming, the devil ... I'm used to quite a lot, but my eyes are still smarting from that..."

"Put a fire under them! Yes, that does my heart good. We can count on our boys."

"Wasn't that a little too cruel? After all, he is a human being, a creature of flesh and blood . . . When someone sins, well, you should punish him, set his mind right, but why--"

"Cut out that nonsense! And please keep your voice down, my friend. You aren't alone here, remember that, will you? People are listening ..."

"My dear sir! It's marvelous material, a good piece of cloth. Take advantage of it now, before the price goes up again . . . Take advantage of it, before Pakin's agents snatch up everything again ..."

"Above all, my son, don't doubt! Simply believe, that's the most important thing. Once the authorities step in, you can be sure that they know what they are doing..."

They've done it again. Cruelly beaten some poor soul. Rumata wished he could turn around, make a wide detour around this spot, from the oncoming crowd and the shouts of "Get a move on! Disperse!" But he did not

turn back.

Instead, he smoothed back his hair to uncover the stone in the golden circlet around his forehead. In fact, it was not a stone, but the lens of a television camera, and the circlet was not an ornament but a transmitter.

The historians back on Earth could see and hear everything that the two hundred fifty scouting emissaries saw and heard on the nine continents of this planet. And the emissaries were obligated to look and to listen.

He made his chin jut out, spread the two swords apart on each side of

his body, in order to push as many people out of his way as he could, and

marched directly toward the middle of the road. The idle onlookers quickly

jumped aside to let him pass. Four thick-lipped porters, their mouths

heavily painted, were carrying past a silvery sedan chair. From behind the

curtains peered a beautiful, cold face with half-closed eyes.

Rumata took

off his hat with a flourish and made a bow. It was Dona Okana, the current

favorite of the Enlightened Eagle, Don Reba. Upon catching sight of the most

noble cavalier, she smiled at him, yearning and promise in her eyes. One

could have ticked off the names of at least two dozen noble dons who would

have given a great deal for that smile. Such a smile was a rare thing these

days and could not be bought with gold. Rumata paused for a moment and let

his glance follow the sedan chair. I must come to a decision, he thought. I

must finally make up my mind . . . He shuddered at the thought of what this

would involve. But it had to be! I must . . . My mind is made up now,

besides I have no choice, there is no other way. Tonight. He passed

by the
armorer's workshop where he had tried out the daggers and listened to
poetry
earlier in the day. He stopped. So that's what it was. It was your
turn this
time, my dear Father Hauk ...

The crowd had already begun to thin out. The door of the shop
had been
torn off its hinges, the windows smashed. A bully of a Gray Sturmovik
leaned
in the entrance, his, feet crossed. Another Sturmovik squatted
near the
wall. The wind blew some torn papers with writing across the
street. The
Sturmovik bully stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked at it for a
while,
pulled it out again and examined it carefully. The finger was
bleeding. The
Sturmovik caught Rumata's glance and said in a complacent, raucous
voice:

'That beast bit like a polecat.'

The second Sturmovik chuckled, full of zeal. What a thin, pale
youth,
still insecure, with pimples around his mouth. He was
obviously: a
greenhorn, a beginner, a young monster, a wolf cub.

"What's going on here?" asked Rumata.

"They went after a secret bookworm," the wolf cub said nervously.
The bully stuck his finger back in his mouth, without
changing his
posture.

"At-ten-tion!" commanded Rumata.

The young wolf cub jumped to his feet and took his ax, holding
it the
proper way. The bully thought a while, but then he straightened out
his feet
and stood more or less at attention.

"A bookworm? What kind? Who?" inquired Rumata.

"Who knows?" said the young one. "On orders of Father Zupik..."

"Well--did they catch him?"

"Sure. They got him all right."

"Splendid," said Rumata.

It wasn't too bad, after all. There was still time left.

Nothing is
more important than time, he thought. One hour may cost a life, one
day is
invaluable.

"And where did you take him to? To the Tower?"

"Huh?" asked the wolf cub in a totally absentminded voice.

"I'm asking you, is he in the Tower now?"

An uncertain smile spread over the pimply face. The bully
laughed deep
in his belly. Rumata turned around quickly. Over there, on the other
side of
the street, the body of Father Hauk swung from a crossbeam of a
house door.
He hung limply like a bag filled with rags. A few neglected children
stared
at him, their mouths wide open.

"Not everyone gets to go to the Tower nowadays," came the
raucous voice
of the bully from behind his back. "We do quick work these days. Rope
around
the neck--and fare-thee-well..."

The wolf cub started giggling again. Rumata glared at him
with blind
eyes and then walked slowly across the street. The face of the sad
poet was
black and unrecognizable. Rumata lowered his eyes. Only the
poet's hands
looked familiar now, long, weak fingers, all covered with ink ...

No one walks out on life these days.

You're led out by the neck.

Did anyone ask for

Another choice?

Limp and awkward

his feeble hands will fall.

Who knows where the heart of the polyp is located

Or whether the polyp has a heart at all...

Rumata turned away and left. Good weak Father Hauk ... The
polyp *does*
have a heart. And we know where it is. And that is the most horrible
thing,
my silent, forsaken friend. We know its location, but we cannot
destroy it
without shedding the blood of thousands of frightened, corrupt,

uncritical,
blind people. And there are so many of them, so hopelessly many
dismal,
desperate people, grown hard by constant work without proper
recompense.

Debased human beings who are not yet capable of rising above the
ideal of a
few copper pennies. And they cannot yet be taught, united, guided,
and saved
from themselves. Too early, far too early, one century too early
did the
Gray vermin rise in Arkanar; there is no resistance to meet it. So
only one
thing remains to be done: save the few that can still be saved.
Budach,
Tarra, Nanin, and another dozen or two at most. . .

But merely the thought that thousands of others, perhaps less
gifted
but still honest and truly noble human beings, were condemned to
perish,
evoked in Rumata a sensation of chill horror and a feeling of
his own
baseness. Occasionally this feeling would overwhelm him to the
point where
his conscious awareness grew dim; and then Rumata could visualize in
bright
daylight rows upon rows of Gray soldiers, their backs turned
to him,
illuminated by flashes of gunfire; and Don Reba's insignificant
face being
eaten up alive by stinking flies; and the Tower of Joy slowly
collapsing in
a rubble heap . . . Wouldn't that be a splendid, a
marvelous feat.

Intervention in great style. But then later ... They were right back
home in
the Institute. Then the inevitable will follow. Bloody chaos
throughout the
country. Koleso's nocturnal troops will rise to the forefront, ten
thousand
foul assassins, the rejects of society, the excommunicated,
the child
molesters, the rapists, the dregs of the human race;

hordes of
copper-skinned barbarians pour down from their mountain
strongholds and
slaughter everyone, babes-in-arms and the old alike; immense
crowds of
peasants, artisans and burghers, blinded with fear, take to the
woods, flee
to the mountains, the desert; and your comrades-in-arms--those
wonderful,
brave men!--will slit each other's bellies in a cruel struggle for
power and
your machine gun, of course, after you have come to an inevitable,
violent
end, your death . . . And this stupid, ugly death will rise to find
you from
a goblet of wine some friend will offer you, or in an arrow shot from
behind
a curtain. And then the stony face of your successor, who will be
sent from
Earth as your replacement and who will find the land drenched with
blood and
ravaged by fire--a land where everything, yes, everything must be
started
all over again from the very beginning...

Rumata pushed open his house door, and entered the magnificent
entrance
hall, which already had fallen in a state of disrepair. His face was
as dark
as an approaching thunderstorm. Muga, the hunchback, his gray-haired
servant
who had worked as a lackey for the past forty years, was frightened
at this
sight He hunched his torso a bit more forward and drew his head still
deeper
between his shoulders, as the furious young master tore off his
hat, cape,
and gloves, hurled his swords on a bench, and quickly ascended to
his room.
The boy Uno awaited him in the drawing room.

"Give orders to have my lunch served!" yelled Rumata. "In my
study!"

The boy did not move from the spot.

"Somebody's waiting for you in there," he announced in a sulking

voice.

"Who?"

"Some young woman. Perhaps a dona. Very charming, dressed like a noble lady; she is beautiful."

Kyra, thought Rumata, relieved. His tension began to fade away. How wonderful, how good of her to come right at this moment, sweet child . . . He stood there, his eyes closed in order to regain his composure completely.

"Want me to chase her away?" asked the boy solicitously.

"Idiot," said Rumata. "I'll chase you away! Where is she?"

"In the study," answered the boy and smiled sheepishly.

"Lunch for two, Uno," Rumata said as he turned to go to the study. "And no visitors! Not even the king--or the devil --or Don Reba himself! I won't let anybody in."

He saw her as he entered the study. She was sitting in a big armchair, her legs tucked under sideways, her head cupped in her little left hand, while she absentmindedly leafed through the *Treatise Concerning Rumors*.

She saw Rumata come into the room and wanted to stand up. But he did not give her enough time to do so, rushed over to her, embraced her, buried his nose in her thick, fragrant hair and said softly: "You've come at the right time, Kyra! How wonderful!"

There was really nothing very special about Kyra. A girl like many others, eighteen years old, upturned nose. Her father an assistant clerk at the courthouse, her brother a sergeant in the Gray Militia. She had few admirers, since she had reddish-blond hair, and redheads were not much in demand in Arkanar. This was probably the reason she was so surprisingly quiet and shy: she had nothing in common with those loud,

voluptuous women who were the idols of rich and poor alike. Neither did she share any of the characteristics of those languid ladies of the court, who were forced to learn--far too soon, and for the rest of their lives--what a woman's role was. Kyra was capable of true love, the way women on Earth would love--quiet and without any reservations.

"Why have you been crying?"

"What has upset you so much?"

"No, tell me, why have you been crying?"

"I'll tell you in a moment. Your eyes look so tired.

What has happened?"

"Later. Who insulted you?"

"Nobody insulted me. Just take me away from here! Please!"

"I promise I will."

"When will we leave?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. But we will go away, most assuredly."

"Far away?"

"Very far."

"To the capital?"

"Yes... To the capital. To my home."

"Is it beautiful there?"

"Very beautiful. Nobody ever has to cry there."

"And what are the people like there?"

"Like me."

"All?"

"Not all. There are many far better than myself."

"That's impossible!"

"You'll see!"

"Why is it so easy to believe you? My father won't believe in anybody.

My brother says all men are pigs, filthy animals. But I don't believe them,

I have no confidence in what they are saying, but I always believe you."

"I love you..."

"Wait. . . Rumata . . . Take off your circlet--you said it was sinful--"

A happy smile came over Rumata's face. He removed the circlet

from his
head, placed it on the table and covered it with a book.

"That is the eye of the God," he said. "Let it rest for a while."
He took her in his arms.

"It's really very sinful. But when I am with you, I don't need
any god,
do I?"

"Yes, you are right," she said softly.

When they finally sat down at the table, the roast was cold
and the
wine from the cool cellar had become warm. Uno came into the room and
walked
noiselessly along the wall--the way he had been trained by old
Muga--and
began to light the candles in the candlesticks, although it was still
day.

"Is that your slave?" asked Kyra.

"No, he is free. A splendid boy, only very stingy."

"Gold should stay in its place," said Uno without turning around.

"You probably still haven't bought any new sheets, have
you?" asked
Rumata.

"Why should I?" said the boy. "The old ones are still good
enough.
They'll do for quite a while."

"But I can't sleep on the same sheets for a whole month, Uno,"
remarked
Rumata.

"Eh!" said the boy. "His Royal Highness sleeps on the same
sheets for
half a year, and he doesn't complain."

"And the candles?" said Rumata and winked at Kyra. "The candles
in the
candlesticks? Did you get those for free?"

Uno paused for a moment.

"But you have a visitor," he said finally with emphasis.

"You see what he is like!" said Rumata.

"He is a good person!" Kyra was serious. "He's fond of you.
Let's take
him along with us."

"We'll see about that," said Rumata.

The boy frowned with suspicion and said:

"Where are we supposed to go? I won't leave."

"We'll go to a place where all men are like Rumata."

The boy pondered for a while, then said, full of contempt:

"To paradise, eh, like nobility?"

Then he snorted like a horse and shuffled out of the study.

Kyra followed him with her eyes.

"A fine boy," she said. "Grouchy as a bear cub. But you have a real friend in him."

"All my friends are good people."

"Baron Pampa, too?"

"Where do you know him from?" wondered Rumata.

"You talk about no one else. All I hear from you is Baron Pampa this, Baron Pampa that."

"Baron Pampa is a valuable comrade."

"What do you mean: the Baron--a *comrade*?"

"I meant to say, he is a good fellow. Very kind and cheerful. And he dearly loves his wife, more than anything."

"I'd like to meet him ... or do you have second thoughts about me?"

"N-n-n-o. But even if he is a good fellow, he's still a baron."

"But--"she said.

Rumata pushed back his plate.

"Now, tell me, why you were crying. And why you came running to my house unaccompanied. You know it's not advisable these days to be out in the streets all alone."

"I couldn't stand it any longer at home. I won't go back there. I'll work for you as a servant. For free."

Rumata smiled but he felt a lump in his throat at the same time.

"Every day Father copies written confessions," she continued, with quiet desperation in her voice, "and the papers he copies from are stained with blood. He gets them in the Tower of Joy. Oh, why did you ever teach me to read? Every evening, every night, he copies these reports from the hearings--and he drinks. It's so horrible, so horrible! 'Look,

Kyra,' he says. 'Our neighbor, the calligrapher, he used to teach people how to read and write. Can you imagine what he is in reality? He confessed it in the torture chamber: A magician and an Irukanian spy.--'And who,' he says, 'who should one believe now? I myself,' he says, 'learned to read and write from him.' And my brother comes home from patrol service reeking of beer, dried blood on his hands . . . 'We are exterminating all of them,' he says, 'down to the twelfth generation.' He won't leave Father alone, he keeps asking him why he can read and write . . . Today, he says he and his friends dragged a man into our house . . . They beat him until they were splashed all over with blood. Then he finally stopped screaming.--I can't go on like this, I won't go back any more, I'd rather die..."

Rumata stood beside her, his hand softly caressing her hair. Her dry, shining eyes were fixed on a far-away point. What could he say to her? He swooped her up in his arms, carried her to the divan, sat down next to her and began to speak. He told her of crystal temples, of gay gardens stretching for many miles--without filth, or swarms of flies and gnats, or garbage. He spoke of the table that serves dinner all by itself, of the flying carpet, of the charming city of Leningrad, of his friends--proud, happy, good people, and of a wonderful country beyond the oceans, beyond the seven mountains, the so-called "Earth" . . . She listened quietly and attentively, and pressed closer to him as they heard now down below in the street--grrrrrum, grrrrum, grrrrum--rang out the metallic sound of

boots on
pavement.

Kyra possessed a marvelous trait. She believed unconditionally in what was good. If he were to tell the same story to some peasant serf, the man would only make an unbelieving, stupid grimace, wipe the snot off his nose on his sleeve and wordlessly gape at him as if he were a legendary creature, all the while thinking: What a pity, such a good, clever, noble don! Too bad he lost his marbles telling such tales! Or even worse, let him tell such stories to Don Tameo or Don Sera--they wouldn't bother hearing him out. One would unfailingly fall asleep and the other just belch and remark: "Very creditable, very creditable indeed . . . and how about the women over there, any good?" Whereas Don Reba would listen attentively to the end, then give a sign to his bloodhounds, the Sturmoviki, to screw the noble don's elbows up to his shoulder blades and find out for sure where the noble don had learned such fairy tales and who else had heard them...

After Kyra had calmed down and fallen asleep, he kissed her gently on her peacefully slumbering face, covered her with his fur coat, and left the room on tiptoe, closing the squeaking door behind him softly. He descended through the darkened house, down the servants' quarters, looked over the heads bowed down in salute to him, and said:

"I have taken on a housekeeper. Her name is Kyra. She will live upstairs, share my quarters. The room next to the study is to be thoroughly cleaned tomorrow. You will obey the housekeeper's orders as if they were my own!" He threw a quick glance at his servants to see whether

anyone was grinning. No one as much as batted an eyelid; they listened to his instructions with the respect due him. "And if anybody here dares whisper behind my back, I'll pluck out his tongue!"

After he had finished, he lingered a while to let his words take full effect on them, then he turned and walked back to his apartments. The walls of his parlor were draped all over with rusty old weapons, and the room was filled with strange-looking furniture, stained from the dead remains of innumerable insects. He went to the window, pressed his forehead against the dark, cold glass, and looked down into the street. The bells were just chiming for the first night watch. In the windows across the street the lights were lit and the shutters closed, to avoid attracting wicked men and ghosts. All was quiet for a little while. The silence was broken only once, when a drunk roared out horribly; either he was being robbed or else he had stumbled against a strange house door.

These evenings were the most terrible thing here: miserable, lonely, and hopeless. We believed it would be a long drawn-out battle, wild but victorious, reflected Rumata. We believed we would never deviate from our firm notions of good and bad, of friend and foe. And in general our ideas proved to be correct; but we did not foresee everything. Evenings like these, for instance--although we knew well enough that they were bound to come.

Downstairs he heard the sound of metal striking upon metal: they were bolting the doors to prepare for the night. The cook prayed to Holy

Mickey

to send her a man, any man, just as long as he had some pride in himself and understanding for her. Old Muga yawned and made little circles with his thumb in the air. The servants in the kitchen drank their evening beer and gossiped for all they were worth, while the boy Uno flashed angry glances at them and scolded them like an adult: "He'll wash your mouths out with soap, you fools."

Rumata stepped back from the window and began to pace the room. It's hopeless, he thought. No power in this world is strong enough to jerk them out of their habits, their worries, their ingrained traditions. You could give them everything. You could move them to the most modern spectro-acoustic housing, teach them the ionization--they'd still gather in their kitchens at night, play cards till all hours, and let loose on the neighbor who beats his wife. And there will be no better pastime for them. Don Kondor is right there: Reba is a louse, a nothing compared to the overwhelming weight of traditions, strict rules sanctified through the centuries, time-honored, irrefutable, and familiar for even the most stupid. They relieve you of the necessity to think and to be interested in something. And Don Reba will probably hardly be mentioned in high school textbooks: "A minor adventurer during the epoch of consolidation of absolutism."

Don Reba, Don Reba! Neither tall nor short, neither fat nor lean; his hair is not exactly full, but he's far from being bald. When he moves, it's

neither energetic nor lethargic.

You'd forget his face in a minute; there are thousands who resemble him closely. He is polite and gallant toward the ladies; an attentive conversationalist, if he so chooses, but not a brilliant one...

Three years ago he emerged from some musty basement room in the chancellery, a small, inconspicuous official . . . At that time he was still servile, and his complexion was rather pale (sometimes even a little grayish-blue). Shortly afterwards, the prime minister was suddenly arrested and executed. In the torture chambers many high officials lost their lives; they went mad with fright and never even knew what had happened. And over their corpses grew a giant, colorless mushroom, this bull-headed, merciless genius of mediocrity.

He is a nobody. He comes from nowhere. He is not some brilliant mind in the regime of a weak ruler, the kind of man we know from history; nor is he the great man who strikes fear in many hearts as he devotes his entire life to uniting the country in the name of autocracy. He isn't even the greedy parasite with nothing on his mind except women and gold, who, drunk with power, will blindly lash out left and right, and who rules in order to kill. Some people even whisper that he isn't Don Reba at all, that Don Reba is actually quite a different person; while the other one. God knows, may be a werewolf, a Doppelganger, a changeling...

Whatever plan Don Reba hatched out, it was bound to fail. He incited two princely houses of the kingdom to battle and intrigue against each other, in order to weaken them, and tried to profit from this

enmity by waging a frontal attack against the barons. But the two princely houses became reconciled, swore eternal blood-brotherhood over the clinking of champagne glasses, and robbed the king of a fine piece of land that since time immemorial had belonged to the royal family Tutz of Arkanar. He declared war on Irukan, personally led the army to the border, let them drown in the swamps or lost them in the woods, left them to their fate, and fled back to Arkanar. Due to Don Hug's endeavors--of which he was totally ignorant, of course--he succeeded in wresting a peace treaty from the Duke of Irukan, albeit at the cost of two fortified border towns. Furthermore, the King was forced to scrape the bottom of the barrel of his depleted treasury in order to cope with the peasant rebellions that had seized the entire country. Anyone else committing such foolish blunders would have been strung up by his feet in the Tower of Joy. Don Reba, however, somehow managed again and again to remain in power. He issued a decree to dissolve the ministries of culture and morals, founded the Ministry of Internal Security for the Protection of the Crown, removed the local aristocracy and a few scholars from key positions, totally upset the entire economy of the state, wrote a treatise *Concerning the Foolishness of Cattle Breeders and Agriculture*, and just one year ago, organized his special troops, the Gray hordes. Hitler was backed by the capitalists, thought Rumata, but nobody stands behind Don Reba; it is as inevitable as night follows day that his

Sturmoviki will kill him like a fly sooner or later.--But he kept on hedging and shuffling, committed one foolish act after the other, extricated himself again and again from the net that threatened to strangle him, cheated and deceived himself day after day, and was in the grip of one ardent, insane desire: to destroy all culture. Like Waga Koleso, he had no past. Barely two years ago, every aristocratic parasite of the court had still talked of him scornfully as a "contemptible swindler who cheats the King." At present, however, you could ask any number of noblemen, and each would firmly declare himself to be a relative of the minister of internal security, at least on his mother's side.

Right now he seems to need Budach for one of his plans. It's bound to turn into another of his many calamities. Another blunder. Budach is a bookworm. Into the hole with him! Make a lot of fuss and noise about it, so that all will know. But there is no fuss and outcry. Should that mean that he needs Budach alive? What for? Reba can't be naive enough to hope to be able to force Budach to work for him? But maybe he is that stupid after all. Could it be that Don Reba is merely a dumb (but successful) spinner of intrigues, who doesn't know what he wants himself, who acts the fool with a sly face in front of everyone's eyes? It's ridiculous; I've been watching him now for the past three years, and I still can't figure him out. And if he should watch me in turn, he would not fare any better. But anything is possible, that's the amusing part about it all. The basis theory may put

forth a list of fundamental aspects of the psychological goals to be attained; but in reality there are as many of these objectives as there are human beings on Earth, and any one--it doesn't matter who--can ascend to power, even one who has devoted his life to playing pranks on his fellow human beings, sabotaging and ruining them. Eventually he is swept off the throne, of course, but in the meantime he's had sufficient time to show his contempt for all mankind, to cause harm wherever there, is a chance, and, worst of all, to enjoy his evil deeds. And he is not in the least concerned that history won't even wonder who he was, and just as little affected by the thought that his descendants will rack their brains many years from now to categorize his behavior to fit the advanced theory of the laws of history. Suddenly Rumata remembered Dona Okana. Come on, make up your mind, he thought. Start at once. Once a god decides to make a clean sweep of things, he needn't bother to make sure he has unsullied hands . . . He felt nauseated as he thought of what lay ahead of him. But this was preferable to killing. Better filth than blood.

He walked on tiptoe, careful not to awaken Kyra, to his E study and changed his clothes. Undecided, he kept toying with his transmitter circlet, but then put it resolutely in a drawer of his desk. Then he stuck a white feather behind his right ear as a symbol of passion, buckled on his two swords and threw his best cloak over his shoulders. As he was unlocking the gate downstairs, he thought: If Don Reba gets wind of this, that will be the

end of Dona Okana. But it was already too late to turn back.

FOUR

The guests were assembled, but Dona Okana had not yet arrived. Gathered around a small golden snack table, as if on a wall gobelin, were the chiefs of the royal guard, who were famous for their duels and amorous adventures. They leaned forward gracefully as they drank, while their fat behinds stuck out in the rear. Beside the fireplace giggled thin-blooded ladies who were distinguished in nothing whatsoever, and who for this reason had been assigned to Dona Okana as her confidantes and companions. They sat in a simple row on small, low divans, and before them three elderly gentlemen danced around constantly on their thin legs: famed lounge lizards from the era of the previous king, the last connoisseurs of long forgotten anecdotes of the royal court. Every one knew that a salon was no proper salon without these old gentlemen. In the middle of the hall, legs spread wide apart, stood Don Ripat, lieutenant of the Gray Court Guard--a clever and dependable agent for Rumata. He had a splendid mustache and was completely amoral. He had hooked the thumbs of his big red hands into his leather belt and listened to Don Tameo who, totally disorganized and with great rushes of detail, tried to present a project to revitalize business at the expense of the peasants; at the same time, Don Ripat pointed his mustache in the

direction of Don Sera, who groped his way along the walls, obviously searching for some hidden door. Two famous portrait painters sat in a corner, scanning the room with alert eyes as they devoured a roast the size of a half-grown crocodile, and nearby in a bay window sat an elderly lad clad in black -- the chaperone assigned to Dona Okana by Don Reba. She stared straight ahead with a rigid face, looking very severe; only once in a while would she suddenly jerk her whole body forward. Off to one side, a personage of royal blood and the secretary of the Soanian embassy passed the time with a game of cards. The royal personage was cheating and the secretary smiled indulgently. He was the only person in the entire salon who was occupied with something serious: he was gathering material for the diplomatic spy forces.

The guard officers at the little golden tables greeted Rumata with friendly shouts. Rumata gave them a comradely nod and went from one guest to the other. He exchanged bows with the old lounge lizards, paid a few compliments to the confidantes of Dona Okana, who immediately eyed the white feather behind his ear; gave a friendly slap to the blubbery back of the personage of royal blood; and then turned his attention to Don Ripat and Don Tameo. As he passed the bay window, the chaperone's upper torso happened to fall forward once again; a strong odor of brew emanated from her.

Upon seeing Rumata, Don Ripat pulled his thumbs from his belt and clicked his heels. Don Tameo, however, called out loudly: "It's you, my friend? Wonderful that you have come, I had already given up all

hope of
seeing you. *Like a swan with a broken wing, sighing and staring up to
a star*

. . . I was filled with such a longing--And if it had not been for
the most
charming Don Ripat, I would have long since perished from grief!"

It was obvious that Don Tameo had had the best intentions to
remain
sober until lunch, but unfortunately had not quite made it.

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Rumata. "Since when do we quote the
words of
the rebel Zuren?"

Don Ripat straightened up and flashed his catlike eyes at Don
Tameo.

"Eh, eh--" stammered Don Tameo in confusion. "Zuren? Yes,
indeed, and
why am I quoting him? Yes, yes, if I may say so ... with sarcastic
intent--I
assure you, noble dons! Yes, for who is this Zuren? Nothing but a
common,
ungrateful demagogue. I wanted simply to emphasize--"

"That Dona Okana hasn't arrived yet," interrupted Rumata. "And
you were
forced to drink without her company."

"That's exactly what I wanted to emphasize."

"By the way, where is she?"

"We expect her any moment now," answered Don Ripat, who then
bowed and
walked away.

The confidantes of the lady of the house, however, sat there
with their
mouths wide open, still staring at the white feather. The old lounge
lizards
snickered archly. Don Tameo finally noticed the feather, too, and
began to
tremble.

"My friend!" he whispered. "What is that supposed to mean? If
Don Reba
should see that . . . Even if we don't expect him tonight, but you
can never
know for sure . . ."

"Oh, cut it out," said Rumata, letting his eyes sweep
impatiently

across the room. He wanted to get it all over with as quickly as possible.

The officers of the guard approached, wine cups in their hands.

"How pale you are!" whispered Don Tameo. "I understand, passion is like that . . . But, Holy Mickey! The state should come first. And after all, it's so dangerous, so very dangerous... An insult to Don Reba's emotions ..."

Something in his face changed and he began to mince his steps restlessly; he stepped back a bit and then walked backwards out of the room, bowing and scraping all the while. The officers of the guard gathered around Rumata. Somebody handed him a full wine goblet

"Let's drink to honor and to our Majesty, the King!" shouted one of the officers.

"And to love!" added another officer.

"Just show her what the guard is capable of, noble don," said a third officer.

Rumata took the goblet; then suddenly he saw Dona Okana. She stood in the doorway, fanning herself with her elegant fan and swaying her shoulders, a languid expression animating her features. She was very pretty. From this distance she could even be called beautiful. Unfortunately she was not at all Rumata's type, but she was undoubtedly pretty, this stupid, sensuous cow. Big, blue eyes without a glimmer of intellect or warmth, a soft, knowing mouth, a voluptuous body whose contours were revealed intentionally with skill and with great care ... A guard officer behind Rumata apparently could not control himself any longer and he noisily smacked his lips. Without turning around, Rumata handed him his goblet and with long

strides

walked over to Dona Okana. All those present in the salon turned their eyes aside and began to talk busily about inconsequential things.

"Your beauty is blinding my eyes," murmured Rumata as he bowed deeply and rattled his swords. "Permit me to lie at your feet--like a whippet at the feet of an indifferent and beautiful woman."

Dona Okana hid her face behind her fan and peeked out coquettishly.

"You are very daring, noble don," she said. "Poor ladies from the provinces that we are, we are simply unable to withstand such storms . . ."

She had a deep, rasping voice, that occasionally failed. "Alas, there is nothing left for me to do but to open the gates of my fortress and admit the victor..."

Gritting his teeth with shame and anger, Don Rumata bowed deeper still.

Dona Okana lowered her fan and called out loudly:

"My noble dons! Go on and amuse yourselves! I'll be right back with Don

Rumata! I have promised to show him my new Irukanian carpets ... I"

"Don't rob us too long of your presence, you bewitching beauty!"

bleated one of the old gentlemen.

"What a magnificent woman!" called out another old man. And he added in

a sickeningly sweet tone of voice: "A fairy princess!"

The officers of the guard rattled their sabers. "You must admit, he has

pretty good taste," said the personage of royal blood. Dona Okana held

Rumata by his sleeve and dragged him along behind her. Out in the corridor,

Rumata could hear Don Sera declare in an offended tone of voice:

"I can't

see why a noble don shouldn't have a look at some Irukanian carpets..."

At the end of the corridor. Dona Okana suddenly came to a halt,

clasped
her arms around his neck and with a deep moan to indicate a sudden
outburst
of wild passion, she kissed him hard on his mouth, clinging and
sucking on
to his lips as tightly as a leech. Rumata held his breath. The
woman's body
radiated a sharp odor of strong Irukanian perfume mingled with the
smell of
unwashed limbs. Her lips felt fiery hot, moist and sticky from
sweetmeats.
He tried valiantly to fight off nausea and to return the kiss,
and was
apparently successful, for Dona Okana moaned again loudly and with
tightly
shut eyes surrendered herself to his embrace. That seemed to
last an
eternity. Well, you're going to get it now, you beast, thought
Rumata and
pressed his arms tightly around her torso. Something began to
crack, the
corset--or perhaps her ribs--; the beauty whined pitifully,
opened her
startled eyes and wiggled weakly trying to free herself from his firm
clasp.
Rumata quickly let go of her.

"You daredevil, you, what a lover!" she said breathing hard
and rapt
with desire. "You almost squashed me!"

"I'm burning with desire," he murmured guiltily.

"So am I. Oh, how I have been waiting for you! Let's go! Let's
hurry!"

She led him by the hand through some icy cold rooms. Rumata
took his
handkerchief and furtively wiped his Ups. The whole affair
seemed so
senseless now. But it's got to be, he thought The things we have
to bear
here! Can't be all done with words alone. Holy Mickey, why don't
they ever
wash here at court? And on top of that stench this peculiar
passionate
temperament ... if only Don Reba would surprise them now . . . She

dragged
him behind her, without a word, with purposeful strength, the way
an ant
drags along dead larvae. Rumata felt like an idiot and kept
murmuring
nonsense about "swift little feet" and "rosy pink lips." Dona
Okana kept
giggling the whole way. She whisked him into an overheated
boudoir, whose
walls actually were decorated by huge rugs; threw herself on her
enormous
bed, gaped at him with her moist, glittering eyes. Rumata's body
stiffened.

There was an unmistakable odor of bedbugs in this boudoir. "You
are so
beautiful!" she whispered loudly. "Do come closer, come to me. I
have been
waiting for you such a long time!"

Rumata turned away his eyes; he felt nauseated. Perspiration
beaded on
his forehead. I can't do it, flashed through his mind. To hell with
all the
information I can drag out of her . . . what a beast she is,
what a
caricature . . . It's unnatural, it goes against my grain, it's
dirty. Dirt
is preferable to blood, of course, but this here is far worse than
dirt.

"What are you waiting for, noble don?" panted Dona Okana.
"Oh, my
sweet, do come to me, I'm waiting!"

"Oh, go to hell!" Don Rumata hissed between his teeth
impulsively.

She jumped off the bed and hurried toward him.

"What is the matter with you? Are you drunk?"

"I don't know." He forced the words over his lips. "It's so hot
here."

"I'll have a cup brought for you."

"What cup?"

"Oh, forget it ... it'll pass . . .," Her fingers were
trembling with
impatience as she started to unbutton his vest. "How gorgeous you
are . . ."

she whispered breathlessly. "But you are so shy, like a virgin. I'd never have suspected that from you, . . . But it's so exciting, I swear by the Holy Bara!-"

Whether he wanted to or not, he could no longer delay it; he had to take her by the hands now. He looked down on her and saw her lacquered, untidy hair, her round, bare shoulders, dotted with tiny clumps of powder, and her tiny rose pink ears. Disgusting, he thought. Nothing doing here. . . Too bad, though, she is bound to know a few things . . . Don Reba talks in his sleep . . . He takes her along to the hearings, and she loves cross-examinations . . . No, I can't do it...

"Well?" she asked, irritated.

"Your carpets are beautiful indeed, Dona," he said. "Thanks for showing them to me but I have to go now."

At first she failed to understand; but then her features were grotesquely contorted with fury.

"How dare you!" she demanded, but he had already groped for the door knob, slipped out into the corridor and taken to his heels. From now on I won't wash myself any longer, he thought. One has to be a filthy swine here, not a god!

"You old nag!" she yelled. "You miserable old woman! You should be thrown into the dungeon!"

Rumata yanked a window open and jumped down into the yard. For a while he stood underneath a tree, greedily breathing in big gulps of fresh, cold air.

Then he remembered the stupid white feather. Furiously he pulled it from behind his ear and stomped on it with his boots. My friend

Pashka

wouldn't have made it either, he thought. None of our crowd. (Are you so sure?--Yes!-- Then none of you are any good.--But it makes me

nauseated!--The experiment doesn't care what your feelings are. If you can't

do it, then keep out of it!--But I'm no animal!

--If it's required by the experiment, then you must turn into an

animal, if need be.--The experiment can't make such demands.--It can very

well, as you see!--But then ... !

--What, then?--He did not know what would follow after that-- Then . . .

Then . . . Well, then, *well* say that I am a bad historian.--He shrugged his

shoulders--so let's try to improve. Let's learn how to turn into a pig ...)

It was midnight when he arrived home. He undid the clasps of his fez

and, without getting undressed, threw himself down on a couch in the salon,

where he fell into a deep sleep.

He was awakened by the exasperated shouting of Uno and a good-natured

deep bass voice yelling:

"Get away, you little beast. I'll skin you alive!"

"My master is asleep, I'm telling you!"

"Beat it! Don't crawl around my legs!"

"You can't go in, I'm telling you!"

The door flew open with a loud bang and into the room came storming Don

Bau, Baron Pampa, gigantic like the wild monster Pech, red-cheeked, with

white teeth, drooping mustache, a jaunty red velvet beret on his head and an

expensive raspberry-colored cape slung around his broad shoulders, and a

copper mail shirt clearly visible underneath. He dragged Uno after him. Uno

frantically clung to the baron's right trouser leg.

"Baron!" called out Rumata and let his legs slide off the

couch. "How

do you happen to be in town, my friend? Uno, let go of the baron!"

"What a devoted boy, he really sticks by you," said the baron and

walked toward Rumata with open arms. "He seems all right, I must say. How

much will you take for him? But let's discuss this later . . . Now let me

embrace you!"

They embraced. The baron exuded a pleasant smell of dusty country

roads, horses, and a mixed bouquet of various wines.

"I see you are totally sober," he said, sorrow in his voice.

"But then,

you are always sober, you fortunate man!"

"Please sit down, my friend!" said Rumata. "Uno! Bring some Estorian

wine, and plenty of it!"

"Not a drop!"

"What? Not a drop of Estorian wine? Uno, forget the Estorian and bring

us some Irukanian instead!"

"No wine at all!" said the baron miserably. "I'm not drinking."

Rumata sat down again.

"What has happened?" he asked, worried. "Are you sick?"

"I am as healthy as a horse. But these damned family quarrels ... To

make a long story short; I have had a terrible fight with the baroness. And

now I am here."

"A fight with the baroness? You? Now please stop it, baron; what kind

of joke is that supposed to be?"

"I can't understand it myself, I'm like in a fog. Yes, I came here on

horseback, riding 120 miles, my brain all in a fog!"

"My friend," said Rumata, "let's start right away and ride back to

castle Bau."

"But my horse is still winded and sweaty," replied the baron. "And

what's more: I want to *punish* her!" "Who?"

'The baroness, damn it! Am I a man or a mouse? You see,

she is
dissatisfied with Pampa, the--drunk; let her find out for herself
how sober
he can be! I'd rather rot away here with plain water than return
to the
castle!" Uno pouted:

"Tell him to stop wiggling his ears."

"Now be off, you little rascal!" grumbled the good-humored
deep voice
of the baron. "And bring me some beer! I've sweated it all out; now
I must
fill up again."

Baron Pampa spent the next half hour filling up again and
chattering
away merrily all the while. In between big gulps from a tankard of
beer he
reported his troubles. He repeatedly cursed "those drunkards, my
neighbors,
who come and invade my castle. They pretend they want to go hunting
with me,
arrive early in the morning--and before you know it, they are all
dead drunk
and smash up the furniture. They come charging over the entire
castle,
befoul everything, annoy the servants, spoil the dogs and set a
terrible
example for the young baron. Then they all depart, ride home again
and leave
me behind, drunk as a pig, and I have to stay there with the
baroness, all
alone, have to face her, eye to eye..."

Toward the end of his story, the baron lost control over
himself and
was just about to ask for some Estorian wine, when he pulled
himself
together again and said:

"Rumata, my friend. Let's leave here. Your wines are
much too
expensive! Let's go!" "But where to?"

'That doesn't matter, where to! How about the Gray Joy?"

"Hmm," said Rumata. "And what are we going to do there at
the Gray
Joy?"

The baron remained silent for a few moments and tugged mischievously at his beard.

"Come, come, now!" he said finally. "You ask the strangest questions.

What are we going to do there? We'll just sit and talk a bit."

"At the Gray Joy?" asked Rumata doubtfully.

"Yes," said the baron. "I understand what you mean . . . That's awful .

. . . but still, let's go. Here I'm constantly tempted to ask for Estorian wine!"

"My horse!" said Rumata and went into his study in order to pick up his sender.

A few minutes later the two were riding side by side down a narrow lane, enveloped by impenetrable darkness. The baron had regained his good humor and told with a loud voice about the huge boar they had killed the previous day, then about the remarkable talents of the young baron, and about the miracle at the monastery of the Holy Tukky, where the abbot had given birth from his hip to a six-fingered boy. In between stories he did not forget his own kind of pranks. From time to time he would howl like a wolf, sing lullabies, and knock with the heavy handle of his riding whip against the shuttered windows.

They arrived at the Gray Joy and the baron stopped his horse and fell into deep thoughts. Rumata waited. The dirty windows of the inn shone gaudily, the horses were pawing the ground, the heavily made-up girls who were sitting on a bench underneath the window were quarreling noisily, and two servants were straining to roll a giant barrel through the entrance door.

The baron said sorrowfully:

"Alone! How horrible to think that I have the whole night before me, and all alone! And she, too, is all alone!"

"Don't be so sad, my friend," said Rumata. "The young baron is there with her, and I am here with you."

"That is not the same thing," said the baron. "You haven't the faintest idea, my friend. You are young and light-hearted. I believe you even enjoy looking at these sluts here."

"And why not?" replied Rumata and regarded the baron with interest.

"These girls are quite acceptable, I think."

The baron shook his head and laughed sarcastically.

"Just look at that one over there," he shouted, "her behind is practically flopping to the ground. And the one over there, the one scratching herself, she hasn't any behind at all. They are cows, my friend, cows at best. Just think of the baroness! What hands, what grace! What a body, my friend!"

"Yes," agreed Rumata. "The baroness is beautiful. Let's get out of here."

"Where to?" asked the baron depressed. "And why?" An expression of resoluteness came suddenly over his face. "No, my friend. I won't leave here. I won't go anywhere but you can do what pleases you." He got off his horse. "Although I would feel insulted if you would leave me here alone."

"I'll stay with you here, of course," said Rumata. "But--"

"No buts," said the baron.

They threw the reins to one of the servants who rushed up, and strutted haughtily past the girls into the inn. The air was oppressively heavy. The weak light of the tiny oil lamps hardly penetrated through the dense

haze of fumes and exhalations; the place resembled a big and very filthy sauna bath back on Earth. Soldiers with unbuttoned tunics, dripping with sweat, sailors with colorful kaftans over their naked bodies, women with barely covered breasts. Gray Sturmoviks holding their battle axes between their knees, and some down-at-the-heel workers were all sitting at some long tables, eating and drinking, cursing, laughing, crying, and singing filthy songs with roaring voices. To the left, one could vaguely see a bar, where the innkeeper sat on a platform surrounded by huge barrels and directed a swarm of skilled and fraudulent servants. On the right, a large bright rectangle shone through the mist, the entrance to the "private room," the room for noble dons, reputable merchants, and Gray officers.

"Why shouldn't we wet our whistle, come to think of it?" asked the baron in a tone of irritation. He seized Rumata by the sleeve and made his way toward the bar, passing through a narrow aisle between the tables, scratching the backs of guests who were seated at the tables with his slightly protruding belt-armor. At the counter he picked up a large jug, had the innkeeper fill it up to the rim and without a word drained the jug in one large draught to the last drop;

then he stated that all was lost anyhow and only one thing remained--to have a good time. Then he turned to the innkeeper and inquired loudly if this establishment had some accommodation where noblemen could pass the time in a befitting manner without having to be bothered by all kinds of rabble,

riff-raff and vermin. The innkeeper reassured him that there was indeed such a suitable place on the premises.

"Excellent!" said the baron with a grand flourish as he threw a few gold coins to the innkeeper. "Will you bring us the best you have in your house? But don't have the food served by some dolled-up little whore--we want to be waited on by some respectable older woman!"

The innkeeper himself accompanied the noble dons to the "private room."

It was occupied by just a few guests. In one corner sat a group of Gray officers, two lieutenants in tight uniforms and two captains in short soldiers' coats with the epaulets of the Ministry of Internal Security. Two aristocrats were dozing near the window over a slender jug of wine: their faces looked pinched and sour, exuding an air of general depression. At the nearby table sat a little band of impoverished dons in rumpled jackets and mended cloaks. They sipped their beer and let their greedy eyes sweep around the room ever so often.

The baron lumbered over to a free table, cast a mean glance in the direction of the Gray officers and grumbled:

"You just can't get away from that rabble. Not even here." But now a fat old auntie waddled into the room bearing the first course. The baron croaked greedily, pulled his dagger from his belt, and fell over the feast. Silently he devoured big chunks of roast venison, mountains of marinated mollusks, huge piles of crabs, enormous quantities of salads and mayonnaise dressings, washed everything down with cascades of wine, beer and home brew, and finally wine mixed with beer and home brew. The

impoverished dons attempted repeatedly to join Baron Pampa at his table, but the baron sent them packing with a majestic sweep of his hand and a nasty growl.

Suddenly he stopped eating, stared at Rumata with protruding eyes, and roared like a beast of prey: "It's quite a while since I've been last in Arkanar, my noble friend. And I swear upon my honor there is something I don't like about this place!"

"And what would that be?" inquired Rumata, interested, while he gnawed at a chicken wing.

Awe and attention marked the faces of the impoverished dons.

"Tell me, my dear friend," thundered the baron and wiped his greasy hands at his cloak, "since when has it become the custom in our beautiful capital city, the seat of our Highness the King, that the descendants of the oldest families of the realm can't take a step without running into these miserable shopkeepers and butchers?!"

The noble dons exchanged quick glances and withdrew into their comer.

Rumata blinked over to the other corner where the Gray officers were sitting. They put down their glasses and looked over to the baron's table.

"I'll tell you, noble dons, where the fly in the ointment is," continued Baron Pampa. "The whole trouble is that you are a bunch of damped cowards. You tolerate them because you are afraid OF them. You over there, you are scared stiff!" He yelled at the top of his voice and locked eyes with the impoverished don nearest to him. But the poor nobleman, smiling weakly, left his table like a dog with his tail between his legs. "Cowards!" trumpeted the baron. He was so excited that his mustache reared up

skywards.

But there wasn't much one could expect from the impoverished dons. They were obviously disinclined to get into a brawl; they only wanted to eat and drink.

Now the baron hurled one foot over the bench, twirled the right half of his mustache around his fist, riveted his eyes on the corner where the Gray officers were sitting and declared:

"But I, gentlemen, I am not afraid, not even of the devil! I squash the Gray pests under my foot wherever I encounter them!"

"What's that beer barrel whining over there?" loudly inquired a Gray captain with a horse's face.

A satisfied smile played around the baron's lips. He rose boisterously from the table and jumped onto the bench. Rumata raised his eyebrows and started to gnaw at his second chicken wing.

"Hey, there, you Gray bastards from hell!" yelled the baron as loud as if the officers were miles away. "Let it be known that I, Baron Pampa Don Bau, gave a fine object lesson to the likes of you just three days ago. You know, my friend," Baron Pampa turned and spoke from the ceiling down to Don Rumata, sitting at the table, "I had a few drinks the other night with Father Kabani at my castle. Suddenly my horse groom came running up to announce that a Horde of Gray Sturmoviks is just about to tear down the Golden Horseshoe Inn. *My inn!* On my own grounds! I issued the command; Let's ride! And we were there in no time. I swear to you by my spurs, we found there a whole horde, some twenty men altogether! They'd caught three of my men, got as drunk as pigs--these bastards can't drink, of course--

and they were just beginning to smash everything to smithereens. I grabbed one by the legs, and that started the merry chase. I chased them as far as the Heavy Swords. Blood was flowing--you won't believe it, my friend--we were wading in it up to our knees, and I don't know how many battle axes were left behind!"

Here the baron's account was interrupted. The captain with the horse's face swung his hand and hurled his heavy dagger against the baron's chain mail.

"Finally!" said the baron and drew his giant two-fisted sword. He jumped off the bench with unexpected agility; his sword arched expertly through the air and cut through a crossbeam supporting the low ceiling. The baron cursed. The ceiling sagged a little and plaster and dust fell from above on the men's heads.

Everyone in the room had risen. The impoverished dons kept close to the walls. The young aristocrats climbed onto the tables to have a better view. The Gray officers formed a half-circle and drew their swords while slowly advancing toward the baron. Only Rumata remained seated, trying to figure out on which side it would be safer to stand up without coming to grief. For now the baron's broad sword was hissing ominously through the air, describing flashing circles above the baron's head. It was an awe-inspiring sight. The baron reminded Rumata of a freight helicopter with idly spinning rotary blades.

Now the baron was hemmed in on three sides by the Gray officers, who were forced to a halt as soon as they came within range of the

whirling
sword. One of the officers was unfortunate enough to have his
back to
Rumata, who leaned across the table, seized the hapless man by the
collar,
yanked him down so that his back slammed into the dirty dishes on the
table,
and gave him a sharp chop behind his ear. The Gray officer shut his
eyes and
his body stiffened. The baron yelled:

"Cut his throat, noble Rumata, I'll finish off the others!"

He'll massacre the whole lot, thought Rumata uneasily.

"Attention!" he said to the Gray officers. "Why should we
ruin each
other's evening? You don't have a ghost of a chance against us.
Throw down
your arms and beat it!"

"Certainly not! That would be the limit!" put in the baron,
visibly
upset. "I want to fight! I want them to fight! Stand up and
fight, you
wretches!"

With these words he advanced towards the Gray officers, all
the while
whirling his sword faster and faster above his head. The Gray
officers fell
back, all pale in the face. Evidently this was the first time they
had ever
seen a freight helicopter. Rumata jumped over the table. "Stop, my
friend!"

he called out. "There is really no reason for us to quarrel
with these
people. You don't care for their presence here? Fine, tell them to
leave!"

"We won't leave without our weapons," grumbled one of the
lieutenants.

"We'd be punished. We are on patrol duty now."

"Go to hell and take your weapons with you!" decided Rumata.
"Sheath
your swords, hands on top of your head; leave one at a time! And no
tricks!

Or I'll beat you to a pulp!"

"How can we get out of the room?" inquired the captain with

the horse
face. His long upper lip twitched with irritation. "This don blocks
our way
as you can see!"

"And will continue to do so!" insisted the stubborn baron.

The young dons snickered.

"All right then," said Rumata. "I'll hold him down and you
file out,
one after the other, but hurry up. I won't be able to control
him much
longer! Hey, there, clear the doorway! Baron," he said and
grasped Pampa
around his broad waist, "it seems to me you have forgotten an
important
fact. This famous sword was used by your ancestors only to do battle,
for it
is written: *Do not draw your sword in taverns!*"

The shadow of a doubt darkened the baron's features while he
continued
to swing his sword.

"But I don't have another sword here with me," he said puzzled.

"All the more relevant . . . ," answered Rumata emphatically.

"Do you think that?" The baron was still hesitating.

"You know the rules better than I do!"

"That's true," said the baron. "You are right." He looked up
to his
whirling hands. "You wouldn't believe it, Don Rumata, I could go
on like
this easily for another three or four hours without stopping. And I
wouldn't
even feel tired. Too bad that *she* can't see me like this now!"

"I'll tell her all about it, rest assured," promised Rumata.

The baron sighed and lowered his sword. The Gray officers crept
out of
the room, cowering in fear. The baron followed them with his eyes.

"I don't know, I don't know," he said undecided. "Do you really
think I
made the right decision, not smashing them to a pulp?"

"You acted correctly, absolutely correctly," Rumata reassured
him.

"Well then," said the baron as he sheathed his sword. "If we
were not
fortunate enough to have a good fight, let's have something decent

to eat
and lots to drink."

He grabbed the still unconscious Gray lieutenant by his legs and pulled him off the table, while he croaked out loudly: "Hey, there, innkeeper!

Bring us some wine and a bite to eat!"

The young aristocrats came to their table to congratulate them most humbly on their victory.

"That's nothing, it was easy!" said the baron complacently. "Six skinny milksops--and big cowards, like all shopkeepers are. I've finished off two dozen like that, at the Golden Horseshoe--chased them out . . . How fortunate," and he turned to Rumata, "that I did not have my battle sword with me at the time! I might have drawn it, absentminded as I am. Although the Golden Horseshoe is actually not a tavern, it's just a little comer bistro ..."

"Some also say," remarked Rumata, "that it is written: *Do not draw your sword in the corner bistro!*"

The innkeeper's wife brought new dishes with meat and some more wine.

The baron rolled up his sleeves and set to work.

"By the way," said Rumata, "who were the three prisoners you set free that time at the Golden Horseshoe?"

The baron stopped chewing and stared at Rumata. "But my dear friend, maybe I didn't make myself clear. I did not set anybody free. True, they were all prisoners, had been arrested, but these are affairs of the government. Why should I have liberated them? It was just some old don, a big coward, an old bookworm and his servant . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, of course," said Rumata.

Suddenly the baron turned purple in the face; he rolled his eyes in a most frightening manner.

"What?! Again?!" he roared.

Rumata turned around. Don Ripat stood in the doorway. The baron jumped up from his seat, overturning benches and dishes. Don Ripat threw a significant glance at Rumata and left the room again.

"I beg your pardon, baron," said Rumata, rising to his feet. "The King's service is calling."

"Oh, dear," mumbled the baron in a disappointed voice. "I feel sorry for you. I wouldn't serve for anything in this world!"

Don Ripat was waiting for him outside the door.

"What's new?" asked Rumata.

"Two hours ago," reported Don Ripat officiously, "I placed Dona Okana under arrest under the orders of our Minister of Internal Security. I had her taken to the Tower of Joy."

"Hmm," was all that Rumata said.

"Dona Okana died one hour ago. She did not survive the tortures."

"Hmm."

"Officially she was accused of being a spy. But--" Don Ripat seemed embarrassed and gazed down at the floor. "I think--I believe--"

"I understand what you mean," said Rumata.

Don Ripat looked at him with a guilt-ridden face.

"I was powerless--" he started to say.

"That's none of your concern," said Rumata hoarsely.

Don Ripat's eyes became leaden. Rumata slightly nodded his head to him and went back to his table. The baron was just finishing off a platter with fried clams.

"Estorian wine! Let's have a lot of it!" Rumata could hardly choke out the words. He tried to swallow a big lump in his throat. "Let's enjoy ourselves now! To hell with everything, let's have a good time!"

When Rumata came to again, he found himself lying in the middle of a big empty lot. A gray day was dawning, in the distance roosters crowed a raucous reveille. Dense flocks of blackbirds were crowing overhead, circling above something unpleasant nearby. It smelled of rot and decay. The fog in Rumata's head lifted quickly, the usual penetrating lucidity and reliability of all his senses returned. A pleasant taste of mint seemed to linger on his tongue. The fingers of his right hand hurt badly. Rumata lifted his right fist, all cramped up, to his eyes. The skin around his wrist was chafed. He opened his fist and found that he had still been grasping an empty vial of Casparamid, the potent medication against alcohol poisoning that was standard equipment --just as a precautionary measure--for all Terranian emissaries sent by the various institutes to extraterrestrial planets. Apparently he had followed some blind instinct and poured the whole contents of the vial into his mouth before he had sunk completely into brute unconsciousness here on this large empty lot.

The neighborhood seemed familiar. The charred skeleton of the observatory tower jutted skywards and to the left of the burnt-out ruin, the watchtowers of the royal palace, thin as minarets, pierced the pale light of the dawn. Rumata breathed in deeply the cold, humid air, then set out for home.

Baron Pampa had had a wonderful night, exactly the kind he liked. Accompanied by a little band of moneyless dons who were easily inclined to lose their dignity, he set out on a gigantic roving expedition

through the cheap saloons of Arkanar, where he downed unbelievable quantities of alcohol, accomplished amazing feats of gluttony, and became involved in no less than eight brawls. At least this was the number of times that Rumata could clearly recall having intervened to separate the belligerents in order to prevent the worst from happening. The rest had vanished in a haze. Only occasionally the fog would lift and animallike, grimacing faces, knives held in their teeth, would emerge, then again the bewildered, bitter face of the last of the moneyless dons, whom Don Pampa tried to sell as a slave down in the harbor area, then again an Irukanian with a bulbous nose and mean eyes, who, boiling with rage, demanded from the noble dons the return of his horse.

In the beginning Don Rumata still remained a spy. He did not drink any less than the baron: Irukanian, Estorian, Soanian, and Arkanarian wine; but every time he changed the brand of wine he secretly popped a vial of Casparamid into his mouth. He retained his discerning power of judgment and noticed that the Gray Patrols were stationing themselves in far larger numbers than usual at intersections and bridges; then there was a sentry post of barbarians on horseback somewhere on the Soanian cross-country road, who would probably have shot the baron if Don Rumata had not understood and mastered their dialect. He remembered clearly the thought that flashed through his mind at the motionless rows of strange soldiers in long, black cloaks with hoods, who had taken up position in front of the

Patriotic

School:

But isn't that the guard of the monks? What business does the church have in this place? he had wondered. *Since when does the church mix in secular affairs here in Arkanar?* Only very gradually did he get inebriated, but then, all at once, he was overcome by deep intoxication. In a fleeting moment of lucidity he noticed a totally wrecked table in some unfamiliar room, saw his own hand brandishing a sword and the pitiful, imploring figures of the impoverished dons around him. He almost thought it was time to go home; but by then it was already too late. He was seized by a wave of mad rage and by a disgusting, irresistible joy to be able for once to throw off all traces of humaneness. Nevertheless, he had still remained a Terranian and an emissary of the institute back on Earth, a descendant of man, the masters over fire and iron, who will neither spare themselves nor stop before anything if it is in the cause of a great goal to be achieved. He could not remain Rumata of Estoria, flesh from the flesh of twenty generations of his warrior ancestors, who were famed for their robbing and drunkenness. But neither was he a commuuard, a comrade any longer. He no longer felt any obligation to the great Experiment. He was only concerned now with obligations toward his own person. And he was no more beset by doubts. Everything seemed clear now, absolutely clear. He now knew exactly who was to blame for everything and he knew exactly what he wanted to do: to lash out blindly, to hurl down into the fire, down from the steps

of the
palace, down onto the spears and pitchforks of the raging mob . . .

Rumata gave a sudden start; he unsheathed his swords. There were nicks on the blades that were otherwise blank. He remembered vaguely having fought

with someone. But with whom? And how had it ended?

They had boozed away their horses. The impoverished dons had vanished

somehow. Rumata had dragged the baron home--this he could recall, too. Pampa

Don Bau was enterprising, apparently completely sober and good and ready to

continue with this most entertaining evening--only he could not stand on his

legs any longer. Besides, he believed for some obscure reason that he had

just taken leave of his beloved baroness and that he was now on a campaign

against his arch enemy, Baron Kaska, who had already had the audacity to

commit the most outrageous feats ("Will you judge for yourself, my dear

friend, this scoundrel brought forth from his hip a six-fingered boy and

named him Pampa...").

"The sun is about to set," he declared as he regarded a gobelin

representing a sunrise. "We could drink all night through, noble dons, but

we need some sleep before the battle. And not a drop of wine during the

battle! Besides, the baroness would not care for it."

"What? A bed? Beds on a battlefield? Our bed is our saddled steed."

With these words he tore the gobelin off the wall, wrapped it around his

entire body and stumbled noisily over to the comer under the big chandelier.

Rumata ordered the boy Uno to place a tub with pickled cucumbers and a tub

with sauerkraut beside the baron. The boy's face was sleepy and very angry.

"There, look! He has wrapped himself in our good gobelin," he muttered.

"Eyes that look in different directions . . ." "Shut up, you fool," said

Rumata in answer, and--then something happened. Something very vulgar, that

had chased him halfway across town to this empty lot. Something very, very

vile, wretched, mean, unforgivable, embarrassing...

The memory of this distressing action reawakened as he approached his

house. He stopped in his tracks.

. . . He had pushed Uno aside, climbed up the stairs, pushed the door

open and stormed over to her. He was her master. And by the light of the

street lantern he saw her white face and huge eyes filled with fear and

disgust--and in these eyes he could see himself as he was: staggering, with

a drooping, drooling lower lip, with fists whose skin hung down in shreds,

in soiled clothes. He saw a beastly, vile, blue-blooded skunk. And her

glance hurled him backwards, down the stairs, into the entry hall, out of

the door and out into the street, the dark nocturnal street and on and on,

farther and farther, as far away as possible ...

He gnashed his teeth, felt his insides contort and turn to ice, then he

gently opened the house door and entered the hall. Over in a comer, snoring

peacefully like a walrus, was the sleeping baron. "Who is that?" called Uno,

who had been slumbering on a bench, a spread lying across his knees.

"Quiet!" commanded Rumata in a whisper. "Go to the kitchen, bring a bucket

of water, vinegar and new clothes. Hurry up!"

Leisurely he poured water over his body for quite a while, and with

great gusto scrubbed himself with vinegar, thus cleansing himself

from the
filth of his nightly pleasures and fights. Contrary to his usual
self, Uno
remained silent throughout while he assisted his master. Not until he
helped
him button up the ridiculous lilac-colored trousers with the pretty
buckles
did he report sullenly:

"During the night, after you ran out, Kyra came downstairs and
asked if
the master had come home or not, but then said that she must
have been
dreaming. I told her that you had not yet returned from your guard
duty at
the palace, where you went last night..."

Rumata sighed deeply and turned away. But this did not help
in the
least. It made things even worse.

"And I've been sitting here the whole night through near the
baron with
my spear all ready across my knees. I was afraid he might crawl
upstairs
while he was so drunk."

"Thanks, my little one, thanks," Rumata uttered painfully. He
put on
his shoes, went into the dressing room and stood in front of his
dark metal
mirror. The Casparamid was doing its work. Very effectively. The
mirror
reflected an image of an elegant, noble don with a slightly
fatigued face
after the long, strenuous night guard duty. But definitely very
decent
looking. His moist hair, framed by the golden circlet, fell
softly and
neatly down on either side of his face. With an automatic gesture,
Rumata
adjusted the lens on his forehead. Lovely scenes they're watching
today on
Earth, he thought somberly.

Meanwhile, the day broke. The sun began to peer into dusty
windows. The
shutters rattled. Sleepy voices could be heard in the street. "Did

you sleep
well, brother Kiris?"-- "Very well, brother Tika, praise the Lord.
The night
is over, thank God."--"Somebody was beating against the windows
of our
house. They say Don Rumata went out during the night"--"He is said to
have a
house guest."--"So, and he went out? I think he went to the young
prince,
and did not even notice how they burnt down half the town."--
"What can I
tell you, brother Tika? Thank God that we have such a noble don
in our
neighborhood. Once a year he does guard duty, and that's a lot
already."

Rumata walked up the stairs, knocked and entered the study.
Kyra was
sitting in the armchair as the day before. She raised her eyes and
looked,
restless and fearful, into his face.

"Good morning, my darling," he said, walked over to her,
kissed her
hands and sat down in an armchair across from her.

She looked at him a while with questioning eyes and asked
finally:

"Are you tired?"

"Yes, a bit. And I must go away once more today."

"Would you like me to prepare something for you?"

"No, thanks. Uno will take care of it. Well. . . you might
iron my
collar..."

Rumata could feel a wall of lies rise between them. Very thin at
first,
then thicker and thicker and more and more solid. For the rest of our
lives!

Rumata thought bitterly. He sat in his seat, covered his eyes
with his
hands, while she was rubbing carefully various lotions and perfumes
onto his

strong neck, his cheeks, his forehead and his hair. Then she said:

"You don't even ask how I slept."

"How did you sleep, my darling?"

"I dreamt. A terrible, horrible dream. Do you know what I mean?"

The wall grew as thick as a rampart.

"It's usually that way in a new place," said Rumata hypocritically.

"The baron must have caused quite a commotion."

"Shall I order breakfast for you?" she asked.

"Go ahead!"

"What kind of wine do you like in the morning?"

Rumata opened his eyes.

"I'd like some water," he said. "I don't drink in the morning."

She went out and he heard how she spoke to Uno. Her voice sounded clear and full. Then she returned, sat on the arm of his chair and began to tell him her dream. Rumata listened, nervously plucking at his eyebrows, and felt the wall grow thicker and more unassailable by the minute, separating him forever from the only human being whom he loved and cherished here on this horrible world. And, all of a sudden, he threw himself forcefully against this wall.

Kyra, he said. It was no dream!" And nothing extraordinary happened.

"My poor darling," said Kyra. "Wait, I'll bring you some pickles..."

FIVE

Once, not too long ago the court of the Irukanian kings had been one that especially concerned itself with refinement and culture. A number of scholars were retained at court-- mostly charlatans, of course, but also men like Bagir Kissenski, the discoverer of the curvature of the planet, or the king's personal physician Tata, who made the brilliant assertion that epidemics were caused by tiny worms, invisible to the naked eye and spread by water and wind, or Synda the alchemist, who--true to his kind--was searching for a way of making gold from dirt, and who quite incidentally

discovered the law of the preservation of energy. There were also poets to be found at the Arkanarian court. Though the majority consisted mainly of sycophants and parasites, there was also Pepin, the Great, the author of the historical tragedy *The Northern Campaign*; then there was also Zuren, the Just, who wrote over five hundred ballads and sonnets that became folksongs; and finally the poet Gur, who wrote the first secular novel in the history of the realm, a sad romance about a prince who fell in love with a beautiful barbarian maiden. There were also splendid artists, dancers and singers at the court. Remarkable painters covered the walls with immortal frescoes, famous sculptors adorned the parks of the royal abode with their creations. Nevertheless it cannot be said that the Arkanarian kings were true patrons of the arts and sciences or genuine connoisseurs. All that served merely as decoration, the same as the ceremony accompanying the awakening and rising of the king or the spectacular officers of the guard at the castle entrance.

The indulgence of the monarchs would sometimes go as far as to permit some scientists and poets to become note-worthy little cogs in the machinery of the state. Thus, for instance, barely fifty years had passed since the highly learned alchemist Botsa had held the post of Minister of the Department of Mining--a position that had since been eliminated because it was no longer needed. In this capacity he opened up several new mines and made Arkanar famous for its high-grade, alloys; unfortunately, Botsa's secret formulas had been lost after his death. Pepin, the poet,

presided
until recently over the state's educational program, but then his
Ministry
for History and Language Sciences was declared to be detrimental to
mental
health, as it was known to have caused the disintegration of human
minds.

Although it had occasionally happened that the king's
favorite
mistress, a dull, mawkish person, did not care for a particular
scientist or
artist, who then might be either sold abroad or poisoned by arsenic,
it was
Don Reba who finally espoused the cause thoroughly and with gusto.
During
his reign as omnipotent Minister of Security for the Protection
of the
Crown, he would organize such violent pogroms amongst the members
of the
intelligentsia that he would even manage to evoke the
dissatisfaction of
certain noble grandees, who pronounced that court life was
becoming
increasingly more boring and who complained that they heard
nothing but
silly gossip at the court balls.

Bagir Kissenski was accused of insanity present to a degree
bordering
on treason, and was then imprisoned in a dungeon. It was only
through the
efforts of Rumata that he was released and returned to the capital.
Bagir's
observatory was burned to the ground and those of his students
who had
remained unmolested fled as far away as possible. Tata, the king's
personal
physician, together with five other quacks, suddenly turned out
to be a
common poisoner who was inciting the Irukanian Duke against the
person of
the King. He confessed everything in the torture chamber and was
hanged in
public on the Royal Square. While attempting to rescue Tata,

Rumata spent thirty poods of gold, lost four of his agents (noble dons who did not realize what they were doing) and came himself within an ace of being killed when he was attacked during an attempt to abduct the condemned physician.

That had been his first big defeat. And that was when he finally understood that Don Reba was no mere accident. One week later he learned that Synda the alchemist was to be brought to trial for allegedly concealing the philosopher's stone from the state treasury. Rumata was still boiling mad over his latest defeat and therefore decided to take matters into his own hands. He laid an ambush around the house of the alchemist, disguised himself with a black mask, and personally disarmed the Sturmoviks who were about to march the alchemist off to prison; locked the Sturmoviks in the cellar of Synda's house and that very night led Synda, who had not the vaguest notion what was happening to him, across the border to Soan. There, after an initial shrug of his shoulders, the alchemist continued his search for the philosopher's stone under Don Kondor's supervision. Pepin, the poet, suddenly donned a monk's garb and retired to some distant monastery. Zuren, the Just, had been unmasked only recently. He was found guilty of making criminally ambiguous utterances, and was further convicted of playing up to the taste of the lower classes. He was declared to have forfeited his honor and fortune, tried to fight for his rights, recited quite openly subversive ballads in disreputable inns and was twice almost beaten to death by some

patriotically minded persons. Not until then did he permit his friend and patron Don Rumata to persuade him to flee to the capital of the realm. Rumata would never be able to forget the sight of the departing poet: pale and blue at the same time, totally drunk, his thin arms clung to the planks of the ship as it left the dock, while he roared out his farewell sonnet in a resonant, surprisingly youthful voice: "*It weighs upon my soul like fallen leaves . . .*"

As far as the poet Gur was concerned, he was informed by Don Reba on the occasion of a private audience that the Prince of Arkanar could not befriend his ilk, in view of the hostility expressed in his poems. Whereupon Gur personally threw his own works into a bonfire on the Royal Square. Ever since that time, whenever the king was graciously pleased to go for a ride, Gur would stand in the crowd of courtiers, his head bowed, his face blank; upon an imperceptible sign from Don Reba, he would step forward from the courtiers' ranks and recite ultrapatriotic poems-- which, however, were greeted with nothing but secretly stifled yawns.

And on the stage the same play was presented over and over again: *The Downfall of the Barbarians; or Marshal Tutz, King Pits of Arkanar*. Musical performances were generally limited now to concerts with songs accompanied by orchestra. Those artists who had survived painted signboards. Two or three of the cleverest ones even managed to remain at court, where they painted portrait after portrait of the king and Don Reba (who was always solicitously and respectfully supporting the king). This

characterization

was none too encouraging: the king was always represented as a radiant twenty year old clad in a suit of armor, while Don Reba was pictured as a mature man with a very meaningful expression.

It became very boring indeed at the Arkanarian court. Nevertheless, the grandees, the noble dons without occupation, the officers of the guard, and the noble dons' frivolous beauties would fill the antechambers and salons of the palace as of yore--some out of vanity, others out of fear. To be truthful, many were quite unaware of any changes. They were those who, in the olden days, when they had had to attend concerts and poetry readings, had been most appreciative of the intermission. In fact, they could hardly wait for the pause so that they could discuss the merits of various breeds of hunting dogs or tell each other jokes. They were still capable of participating in a short dispute about the characteristics of souls in life after death, but problems such as the form of planets or the cause of epidemics were already considered indecent. A certain nostalgia was felt by the officers of the guard when the painters vanished; their representations of nature in the raw had been so masterful...

Rumata appeared at the palace, a little too late. The ceremony of the king's toilette had already begun. The rooms were packed, and the king's irritated voice could be heard over the melodious commands of the master of ceremony, who oversaw the formal dressing of His Majesty. The courtiers were discussing the events of the previous night. A criminal with Irukanian

features had stolen into the palace during the night, slain the guard, and crept into the king's sleeping chamber. There, it was said, he had been disarmed and captured by Don Reba in person; on the way to the Tower of Joy he had been torn to pieces by a pack of patriots whose servility and loyalty to the king had driven them wild with rage. This was the sixth attempt on the king's life in one month, and this latest incident hardly roused any particular interest. It was only the special details that were being discussed. Rumata learned that His Majesty had set up in bed at the sight of the murderer and had covered the most beautiful Dona Midara with his own body, while uttering the historic words: "Get away with you, scoundrel!" Most courtiers willingly believed that these historic words had been spoken but assumed that the king had uttered them mistaking the murderer for a servant. And all agreed to a man that as usual Don Reba had been on his guard and was invincible in a fight at close quarters. Rumata expressed his agreement with this opinion with some flowery expressions, and in reply told a story he thought up on the spur of the moment how Don Reba had been attacked by twelve bandits: he finished off three of them right then and there, and routed the rest. The story was received with keen interest and lively approval, whereupon Rumata made the incidental remark that he had heard this story from Don Sera. All interest rapidly faded from the faces of the listeners, for it was common knowledge what a notorious liar and cheat Don Sera was. Not a word was said about Dona Okana. Either they had

not yet

heard about it or they pretended not to know anything.

With pleasant remarks, gallantly kissing the ladies' hands, Rumata pushed his way step by step through the crowd of bedizened, perfumed and profusely sweating people until he reached the front rows. The nobles of the land spoke in soft voices: "Yes indeed, what a filly. She tried to barricade herself but, confound it! if he didn't gamble her away that same night and lost her to Don Ke . . ."--"And her hips, my noble don, were of the most exquisite shape. How did Zuren phrase it so beautifully . . . hm, hm, hm . . . *mountains of cool foam* . . . hm, hm, hm . . . no, *hills of cool foam* be it as it may, they were fine hips."--"So I open the window very softly, take my dagger between my teeth, and just imagine, my dear friend, I feel how the window grating above me is giving way . . ."--"I raked the hilt of my sword across his teeth so that the old gray dog spun twice around his axis. By the way, you can admire him right over there; there he stands looking like he owned the world . . ." --" . . . and Don Tameo was spitting on the floor, slipped and fell head forward into the fireplace . . ."--" . . . then the monk says to her: 'Do tell me your dream.' Ha ha ha!"

Nauseating, thought Rumata. If somebody should chance to do away with me at this moment, this group of morons would be the last thing I had seen in my life. Only ready wit, that's the only thing that will save me. Me and Budach. Seize the right moment and then suddenly let him have it. Take him by surprise so he won't even have a chance to open his mouth! But don't give

them a chance to finish me off; there-is no reason for me to die here!

At a measured pace he advanced toward the door of the king's bedchamber, touched his swords with both hands, bent his legs slightly at the knees according to the court's etiquette and approached the royal bed. They were just about to put on the king's stockings. The master of ceremonies followed with bated breath each movement of the skillful hands of the two royal grooms. To the right of an open alcove stood Don Reba, talking in a hardly audible voice with a tall, rawboned man in a gray velvet uniform. It was Father Zupik, one of the leaders of the Sturmoviki, a colonel in the king's bodyguard. Don Reba was a well-experienced courtier. To judge by the expression on his face, his only concern here was the nose of a certain filly, or the virtuous behavior of the royal niece. Father Zupik, however, a warrior and an ex-grocer, did not know how to control himself. His face grew dark, he bit his lips, and his fingers gripped his sword hilt, then released it suddenly. Finally, with a violent twitching of his cheeks, he turned around abruptly and--violating all rules of proper etiquette -- walked straight out of the king's bedchamber toward the crowd of assembled courtiers, who stood there petrified by such rudeness. Don Reba looked after him with an innocent smile, while Rumata followed the awkward gray figure with his eyes and thought: *another dead man. Here we go again!* He knew of the friction between Don Reba and the leadership of the Gray hordes. History was about to repeat itself; another one to share the fate of

Captain Ernst Rohm of Nazi fame!

Now the stockings had been properly pulled up on the king's legs.

O obeying the melodious orders of the master of ceremony, the royal grooms

elegantly reached for the royal shoes with their fingertips, when suddenly,

out of the clear blue sky, the king kicked at them and turned so violently

in the direction of Don Reba, that his belly flopped on his knees like a

fully packed sack.

"I am sick and tired of your attempts on my life!" he howled

hysterically. "Assassins, assassins, assassins! I want to sleep at night,

and not to have to battle with assassins! Why can't it be arranged that they

attack me sometime during the day? You're a lousy minister, Reba. Another

night like this and I will have you executed." Dona Reba bowed and put his

hand on his heart. "I always get a headache after these attempts on my

life!"

All of a sudden he fell silent and quietly regarded his belly. The

moment seemed favorable. The royal grooms were hesitating. Above all, he had

to draw the king's attention to himself. Rumata yanked the right shoe out of

the royal groom's hand, knelt down before the king and reverently pulled the

shoe onto the heavy, silk-clad foot. For this was the age-old privilege of

the house of the Rumatas: to shoe with their own hand the right foot of the

crowned heads of the kingdom. The king bestowed a dull glance upon Don

Rumata; then suddenly, a glimmer of interest came into his eyes.

"Ah, Rumata!" he said. "You are still alive? But Reba promised me to do

away with you!"

He started to chuckle. "What a miserable minister he is, that Reba. He's always making promises but he only pretends. He promised to put an end to all these conspiracies but the conspiracies grow more and more frequent. And these Gray monsters he's shipped into my palace . . . I'm a sick man, and he hangs all my personal physicians."

Rumata had now completely slipped the shoe on, bowed and stepped back two paces. He intercepted an attentive glance from Don Reba and tried to give his face a snooty, dull expression.

"I'm a very sick man," the king continued. "Everything hurts me. I'd like to pass on to my eternal rest. I would have long since done so, but you'll all go to rot and ruin without me, you pigs..."

Now they put on his other shoe. He rose to his feet but soon began to moan, doubled over with pain, and clasped his knees.

"Where are my physicians, my quacksalvers?" he roared with pain. "Where is my good Tata? You hanged him, you imbecile! And I would feel better at the mere sound of his voice! Be silent! I know myself that he was a poisoner! But I could not have cared less? So what if he concocted poisons? He was a physician, he was a good medical doctor! Do you understand that, you murderer? He may have poisoned some people, but he cured others. But you strangle everybody you can lay your hands on. How I wish you'd hanged yourself instead of him!" Don Reba bowed, placed a hand over his heart and remained in this position. "You had all of them hanged! Nobody stayed alive except for the charlatans! And the priests who administer holy water to me instead of medicine . . . Who will prepare some medicine for me

now that

Tata is gone? Who will rub healing ointment on my foot?"

"My King!" Rumata spoke up loud and clear, and it seemed to him that the whole palace froze in horror. "You have but to give the command and the best doctor in your entire kingdom will be here within one hour!"

The king stared at him perplexed. The risk was tremendous. Don Reba needed merely to blink an eyelid . . . Rumata could sense with all his body how numerous eyes stared at him intensely, ready to attack at any moment-- he also knew the purpose of the rows of round, black openings which were visible just below the ceiling of the bed chamber. Don Reba regarded him with an expression of both politeness and benevolent curiosity.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked the king in a sulking voice.

"Well, then, I am giving you an order: where is your quacksalver?"

Rumata's entire body began to tense up. He could almost feel the arrow tips in his back already.

"Your Majesty," he said quickly. "Please, order Don Reba to produce the famous doctor Budach before your presence!"

How amazing! He had said the most important thing and he was still alive. Should Don Reba harbor any doubts about his position in this case?

The king directed his weary glance toward his Minister of Internal Security.

"Your Majesty," continued Rumata, now without haste and with a deliberate and restrained tone. "Inasmuch as I have known of your truly unbearable suffering, and heedful of my family's duty toward the royal house, I arranged for the famous, most learned physician Budach to come here from Irukan. Most regrettably I must report that the doctor's journey to you

was cut short. The soldiers of our honorable Don Reba seized him one week ago and his fate from that day on is known to Don Reba alone. I presume that the physician is currently somewhere in this vicinity, probably in the Tower of Joy. I can only hope that Don Reba's peculiar dislike of physicians has not yet had a fateful effect on Doctor Budach's well-being."

Rumata fell silent and held his breath. Apparently everything was going smoothly. Hold your horses, Don Reba! He glanced swiftly in the direction of the minister--and froze. The Minister of Internal Security had firm control over himself. He nodded briefly toward Rumata--a tender, fatherly reproach. This was the last thing Rumata expected from him. He seems triumphant, thought Rumata nonplussed. But the king, on the other hand, behaved true to form.

"You scoundre!" he shouted. "I'll wring your neck! Where is the doctor?"

Where is the doctor, I am asking you!"

Reba advanced a step, smiling pleasantly.

"Your Majesty," he said, "you are truly a fortunate ruler, for you have so many devoted subjects that they sometimes interfere with each other in their desire to serve you." The king stared at him with dull, uncomprehending eyes. "I do not wish to conceal that our zealous Don Rumata's noble intentions were well known to me, like everything else in your realm. I do not wish to conceal that I sent out our Gray soldiers to meet Doctor Budach halfway for the sole purpose of protecting the honorable old man from the discomforts of his long journey. Furthermore, I do not wish to conceal that I was in no particular hurry to present the Irukanian

Budach

to Your Majesty"

"How dare you do that!" the king reproached him.

"Your Majesty, Don Rumata is young and as inexperienced in politics as he is experienced in the noble art of dueling. Thus he was, of course, totally unaware of the dastardly feats the Duke of Irukan is capable of in his raging wickedness against the person of Your Majesty. But you and I, we two are naturally aware of that, aren't we, Your Majesty?" The king nodded assent. "And that is why I deemed it advisable to conduct some kind of an investigation, merely as a precautionary measure. I would not have rushed matters, but if you, my King (a deep bow toward the king), and you, Don Rumata (a slight nod toward Rumata), so urgently insist on it, I'll bring Doctor Budach into your presence this very day, after your midday meal, so that he can begin your treatment."

"You are not so stupid after all, Don Reba," said the king, after pondering a little while over his minister's words. "An investigation . . . that's fine . . . can never do any harm."

The cursed Irukanian . . ." He howled suddenly with pain and touched his knee again. "Oh, damn that leg! Good, right after the midday meal then? I'll have to wait till then . . . have to wait."

And leaning on the shoulder of the master of ceremony, the king slowly walked into the presence chamber, past Rumata, who was completely dumbfounded. And just as Don Reba was about to make his way through the crowd of the courtiers, who politely stepped aside to let him pass through, he bestowed a friendly smile on Don Rumata and asked:

"Is it correct, Don Rumata, that it is you who will do guard duty tonight in the Prince's bedroom? I have been properly informed, haven't I?"

Rumata bowed in silence.

Rumata ambled aimlessly through the endless corridors and cross passages of the palace. It was dark and humid there, and smelled of ammonia and putrefaction. He passed by magnificent rooms, decorated with rich carpets and wall hangings, and also by storage closets filled with junk and old furniture with peeling gilding. One rarely encountered anybody there. Occasionally some courtier would lose his way and wander around in this labyrinth, located in the back wings of the palace where the royal apartments gradually merged into the offices of the Ministry of Internal Security. It was easy to get lost here. Everyone remembered the time when a patrol of the guard, doing their rounds, were frightened by the howling of some man, who stretched his scratched hands out to them through the barred window of an embrasure. "Save me!" yelled the man. "I am a gentleman of the bedchamber! I don't know how to get out of here! I haven't eaten in two days! Will you get me out of here!" (There was an animated correspondence for ten days between the Treasurer of the Household and the Lord Stewart, which finally resulted in a decision to yank out the window bars. During these ten days they fed the poor gentleman of the bedchamber with bread and meat that was passed to him speared upon the tip of a lance.) Besides, there lurked various other dangers in these passages. Drunken soldiers of the

Household troops, who were supposed to guard the person of the king, and drunken Sturmoviks, in charge of watching over the ministry, would clash in these narrow corridors and fight bitter battles. But after they had done with beating each other up, they would separate and carry off their wounded. And finally, this was where the ghosts of the slain would wander about--a quite considerable crowd of poor murdered souls had accumulated here in the palace during the course of the last two centuries.

From a deep nook in the wall he saw a Sturmovik emerging who was on guard duty. The Gray soldier raised his ax and said somberly:

"No admittance."

"A fat lot you know, stupid!" said Rumata and shoved him aside.

As he was walking on, he could hear the Sturmovik scrape the floor with his boots and stomp his feet, unable to decide how he should react to Don Rumata's insult. Don Rumata caught himself thinking that this offensive manner of speaking and these indolent gestures had almost become second nature to him: no longer did he merely pretend to act like a lout of noble birth, but he had assumed such behavior as sort of an automatic reflex. He visualized the effect of such behavior back on Earth and was overcome at once by a feeling of shame and nausea.--Why should I behave that way? What change has come over me? Whatever became of the respect and the confidence in my peers that constituted an ingrained pattern of conduct ever since I was a child? What kind of relationship have I developed to other human beings, to the wonderful creature called "man"? But I must be beyond all help anyhow by now . . . The horrifying thought raced through his

mind: I
actually hate and despise them. I feel no pity for them--no, I
truly hate
and despise them. Even if I consider the dullness and bestiality
of that
lump of flesh, the social circumstances and his horrible
education ... I can
try as hard as I might, but I now see quite clearly that this is my
enemy,
hostile to everything I hold dear, the enemy of my friends, the enemy
of all
I personally hold sacred. And I do not hate him in an abstract
manner, nor
as a "typical representative," but as an individual. I hate his
disgusting
mouth, all smeared with saliva, the stench of his unwashed body,
his blind
faith, his antipathy toward anything beyond sexual needs and
guzzling beer.
There he stands, shuffling his feet, this adolescent whose potbellied
father
used to thrash his hide not more than half a year ago in order to
train him
with such methods to become a merchant in maggoty flour and
mouldy jam:
there he stands, moaning and groaning, this addlebrain, torturing
himself as
he tries in vain to remember the pertinent paragraphs of the rules
that were
crammed into his stupid head--and he cannot make up his mind whether
to use
his hatchet on the noble don, to shout for help, or to simply wave
him on
his way. Whichever way he decides, no one will ever find out about
it. He
shrugs off everything in the world that bothers him, returns to his
niche in
the wall, puts a piece of chewing rind into his fat mouth, smacks
his lips,
chews the cud like a contented cow, and drips saliva like a
teething babe.
And nothing in the world will interest him. He will not exercise
his brain

for anything. God forbid! But how much better than he is our Enlightened Eagle, Don Reba? True, his psyche is more complicated, and his reflexes are more intricate, but his thoughts definitely resemble those of this fellow, who is reeking of ammonia and these labyrinthine corridors, studded with crimes. And he is indescribably vile, a horrid criminal, an unscrupulous spider. I have come to this planet to love these people, to assist them in their task of self-development, to enable them to see the light. No, I am a poor emissary, he thought sadly. I am a failure as a historian. And when did it happen that I fell into this abyss of which Don Kondor was speaking? Is a god entitled to any other feelings besides pity?

From behind his back came a hurried clomping of boots down the corridor. Rumata spun around and seized both swords with his hands placed crosswise at the hilt. Don Ripat rushed toward him, brandishing his unsheathed sword.

"Don Rumata, Don Rumata!" he called out in a loud whisper while still far away.

Rumata released his grip on his swords. Now Don Ripat had come quite close; he looked carefully in all directions, then whispered, almost inaudibly, into Rumata's ear:

"I've been looking for you for nearly an hour. Waga Koleso is here in the palace! He is talking with Don Reba in the lilac room."

Rumata narrowed his eyes momentarily. Then he cautiously stepped to one side and said with polite surprise:

"You wouldn't be talking about the famous robber chief? I believe he has been executed a long time ago, or probably exists only as a

figment of
popular imagination."

The lieutenant licked his chapped lips.

"He does exist . . . He is in the palace ... I thought
this would
interest you."

"My dear Don Ripat," said Rumata with emphasis. "I am always
interested
in all kinds of rumors. Gossip. Anecdotes. Life is so dull... You
must have
misunderstood me."

The lieutenant regarded him with perplexed eyes. Rumata
continued:

"Just use your own judgment, will you? Why should I be involved
in Don
Reba's underhand dealings and fishy relationships? But don't forget
how much
I do appreciate Don Reba as a person; I would be unable to
condemn and
criticize his actions.--Please, will you forgive me, I am in a hurry.
A lady
is expecting me."

Don Ripat licked his lips again, bowed awkwardly and walked off
to one
side. Suddenly, Don Rumata had an inspiration.

"By the way, my friend," he called after Don Ripat with kindness
in his
voice, "how did you like the little trick we played on Don
Reba this
forenoon?"

Don Ripat willingly came to a halt.

"We are most satisfied," he said.

"Wasn't it charming?"

"It was marvelous! The leadership of the Gray soldiers is very
pleased
that you finally have openly taken our side. Such a clever man like
you, Don
Rumata, wasting your time with barons, these titled monsters ..."

"My dear Ripat!" said Rumata condescendingly, while turning to
leave.

"You seem to forget that seen from the pinnacle of my lineage
hardly any
difference can be noticed between the king and your ilk. Goodbye!"

He strode off confidently through the corridors, turned into side passages without a trace of indecision and pushed the guards aside without as much as a word being said. He had only some dim notion how to proceed now but he was sure that this was an amazing and very rare coincidence. He must hear the conversation between the two spiders. It was not for nothing that Don Reba had promised fourteen times the reward for Waga brought in alive rather than dead.

From behind the heavy lilac-colored curtains stepped two Gray lieutenants, their swords unsheathed.

"Greetings to you, my friends," said Don Rumata and stopped right between the two men. "Is the minister in his apartment?"

"The minister is busy, Don Rumata," said one of the two lieutenants.

"I'll wait for him, then," said Rumata and passed between the drapes.

It was pitch dark here, impossible to see anything at all. He cautiously groped his way through chairs, tables, and heavy cast iron lantern stands.

Then he perceived a thin ray of light, heard the familiar tenor voice of Waga Koleso, and came to a halt. Several times he distinctly heard someone breathe just behind his head and he was enveloped in a cloud of garlic and beer odors. Then he felt a spear point pressed cautiously but unmistakably between his shoulder blades. "Keep calm, you moron!" he said irritably but softly. "It's me, Don Rumata!"

The spear was withdrawn. Rumata pushed a chair toward the chink of light, sat down, crossed one leg over the other, and yawned so loud that anyone could hear it. Then he started to observe.

The spiders had met. Don Reba sat there, very tense, elbows on the table and fingers interlaced. At his right was a stack of papers with a heavy wooden-handled dagger placed on top.

The minister's face displayed a pleasant if somewhat rigid smile. The honorable Waga was sitting on a divan, his back turned to Rumata. He resembled a quaint old magnate who had been spending the last thirty years of his life on his country place in total seclusion.

"The murgles are crockled," he said, "and the crack-stampers have been stubbing around our warrels with their greems quappered up. And there are twenty long zackerlings by now. Crupply and cressly, I would shrab them right on the snoller, crump over crass. But the zackerlings have a zunker way of sharmauning things. That's why we've been brimsing our trunks. That's our expomple ..."

Don Reba cupped his well-shaven chin in his hand.

"Murbelously brickered out," he said pensively.

Waga shrugged his shoulders.

"That is krapul our expomple. I wouldn't flarry that you'd cruckle with us. Well, groosby then?"

"Groosby," said the Minister of Internal Security firmly.

"And smucks off," said Waga and got to his feet.

Rumata, who had listened totally perplexed to this nonsense, discovered a bushy mustache in Waga's face and a little, gray pointed beard. A genuine courtier from the reign of the former king.

"This was a very pleasant chat, Don Reba," said Waga.

Don Reba rose, too.

"I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation, a great pleasure indeed," he said. "I have never met such a courageous man as you, my dear Koleso..."

"The same here," replied Waga with a slightly bored

expression. "I am as amazed as I am proud of the boldness of the First Minister of our kingdom."

Then he turned on his heels and walked toward the exit, leaning heavily on his cane. Don Reba did not take his eyes off the old man. He seemed lost in thought and absentmindedly placed his hand on the handle of his dagger. Immediately afterwards somebody standing behind Rumata puffed with all his might and the long blue tube of a blow-gun pushed past his ear to the chink in the drapes. For a moment, Don Reba remained motionless, intent on listening, then he sat down again, pulled out a drawer, took out a bundle of papers and began to study them. Somebody spat out in back of Rumata and the blowpipe disappeared. It was all very clear. The spiders had found their solution. Rumata stood up, stepped on someone's feet and finally left the horrid room with the lilac-colored drapes.

The king was dining in a gigantic hall whose ceiling took up two storeys. The ninety-foot table had been set for 100 persons. The king was joined at table by Don Reba, personages of royal blood (two dozen blue bloods, gluttons, and experienced drunkards), various masters of ceremony, several members of the local aristocracy who traditionally were the king's dinner guests and among whom Rumata was counted, a few transient barons with their wooden-headed spouses, and at the farthest end of the table, the landed gentry, the lesser nobility that had been invited with or even without any special privileges. The last group of guests received, together

with their dinner invitations, a seating number for the table, and a list of instructions: "Sit quietly; the King does not like people to wiggle in their seats. Keep your hands on top of the table; the King does not like people to hide their hands underneath it. Do not turn around; the King does not like people to turn their backs on him." At every meal they would devour enormous quantities of the choicest foods, guzzle down rivers of old wines, and veritable mountains of the famous Estorian porcelain dishes were broken. In one of his reports to the king, the Treasurer once boasted that one such dinner at the royal table cost as much as was spent for the upkeep of the Soanian Academy of Sciences during six months.

While Rumata was waiting for the master of ceremonies to call three times, "Come to table!" and the accompanying sound of fanfares, he joined a group of courtiers and listened for the tenth time to Don Tameo's famous story about how he had had the honor to partake of another royal meal some six months ago. "... So I arrive at my designated seat, we're all standing, the King enters, sits down, so we, too, sit down, and the meal takes its normal course. But suddenly, just imagine, my noble dons, all of a sudden I feel all wet on my seat. Wet! I don't dare to budge from the spot, neither turn around, nor put my hand down there. But, then, I wait for some propitious moment and cautiously feel down there with the fingers of my left hand. And would you believe it, my dear gentlemen, would you believe it! It's wet down there! I quickly sniff at my fingers--no, they don't stink.

What the devil is going on? Meanwhile the dinner is over, everyone rises from their chairs, but--as you can fully imagine, my dear dons-- I don't quite feel like getting up from my seat . . . Then, lo and behold, the King comes toward me, His Majesty! But I remain seated like some yokel baron from the hinterland who knows nothing about court etiquette. His Majesty comes quite close, smiles graciously and puts his hand on my shoulder. 'My dear Don Tameo,' he says. 'We have all gotten up from table and are going to watch the ballet but you are still sitting on your chair. What is the matter? Have you not had enough to eat, perhaps?'--'Your Majesty,' I say, 'have my head cut off, but my seat is wet.'" His Majesty was graciously pleased to break out in laughter, and ordered me to stand up. I rise from my chair--and guess what? Loud laughter all around us. Noble dons, all throughout dinner I had been sitting on a rum torte! His Majesty was graciously roaring with laughter. Finally he said: 'Reba, Reba! Is that one of your pranks again? Just wipe the noble don's behind, he has his pants full!' Don Reba doubles over with laughter, pulls out his dagger and scrapes the torte off the seat of my pants. Can you picture what I felt like, noble dons? I won't hide it from you, I was trembling and shaking all over, frightened to death at the thought of having humiliated Don Reba in front of everyone, afraid that he now would revenge himself. Fortunately, however, all turned out all right at the end. I assure you, my noble dons, this was the happiest event in my life! I made the King enjoy himself. Oh,

how he
laughed! How he had fun!"

The fanfares sounded, the master of ceremonies called in his melodious voice for all to come to the table. The king entered the hall, slightly dragging one leg behind. All took their seats at the royal table. The guards on duty were stationed in all four corners of the hall, immobile, leaning on their double-fisted swords. Rumata's table companions on either side were silent. To his right, the chair was filled with the quaking, immense belly of the somber glutton Don Pifa, married to a fabled beauty. On his left sat the poet Our, staring into his empty plate with a blank expression. The guests were all intently watching the king. The king fastened a napkin, more gray than white, around his neck, quickly glanced at the round of dishes in front of him, and reached for a chicken leg. Hardly had he fastened his teeth on the meat than one hundred knives swept with a noisy clatter down on the plates and one hundred hands greedily dug into the dishes. The dining hall was filled with slurping and smacking of lips, the wine flowed like a torrent. The mustaches of the guardsmen, who were leaning unmoving on their swords, began to twitch in a dance of greed. Once Rumata had been nauseated by these affairs, but now he had gotten used to them.

While he was carving the thigh of a ram with his dagger, he slyly glanced to his right, but quickly looked away again:

Don Pifa's torso was bent over an entire roast boar and working its way into it like a bulldozer. Not even the bones remained behind his steadily advancing body. Rumata held his breath and emptied a full glass of

Irukanian

wine. Then he turned slightly to his left. The poet Gur was poking his spoon joylessly in a bowl of meat salad.

"Writing something?" inquired Rumata in a subdued voice. Gur gave a sudden start.

"Writing something? I? I don't know ... sure, sure, lots of things.."

"Poems?"

"Yes, yes ... poems ..."

"They're terrible poems, Father Gur." Gur looked at him with a strange expression "You're no poet!"

"No poet. . . Sometimes I reflect on what I really am, and what I am afraid of. I don't know..."

"Look into your plate and continue eating. I'll tell you what you are.

A creative genius, the discoverer of new ways in literature, and one of the most productive writers to boot." Gur's cheeks became flushed with red. "In a hundred years, and maybe sooner, dozens of poets will follow in your tracks."

"God forbid!" The words escaped from the poet's lips. "Now I shall tell you what you're *really* afraid of." "I am afraid of the dark." The evening darkness?"

"This too. For dusk offers us up to the power of the ghosts. But most of all I fear the darkness at night, for everything turns gray in the same manner at night."

"Well said. Father Gur. But now, something else: is your work still obtainable?"

"I don't know--and I do not want to know." "Let me assure you, one copy is in the capital, in the emperor's library. Another copy is preserved in

the Museum of Rarities in Scan. And a third copy is in my possession." Gur took a spoonful of jelly, his hand trembling heavily. "I... I do not know..."

His large, deep-set eyes were depressed as he looked at Rumata. "I would like to read it... read it once more . . ." "I shall send it to you with pleasure." "And then?" "And then you'll return it to me." "Oh, yes, give it back again!" said Gur sharply. "Don Reba has intimidated you very much Father Gur." "Intimidated , . . Have you ever had to burn your own children? What do you know of terror, of fear, noble don?"

"I bow my head respectfully before all you have had to go through, Father Gur. But I condemn you with all my soul for giving up!"

Suddenly Gur, the poet, began to whisper so softly that Rumata could hardly hear him over the general babble of voices and noisy eaters at the table.

"And what is that all supposed to mean? What is the truth? Prince Chaar really did love that beautiful copper-skinned woman. They had children together. I know their grandchildren. They poisoned them, they really did. But they told me this was all a lie. They told me truth is whatever is beneficial for the King. All else is nothing but lies and crimes. Only now am I finally writing the truth . . ." He suddenly rose from his seat and

recited in a lofty, declamatory singsong:

Great and glorious, like eternity,
Rules the King named Noblemind.
Plotting princes grope uncertainly
When their visions he strikes blind.

The king interrupted his chewing for a moment, parted his lips to show

a mouth full of food. He regarded Gur out of dull eyes. The guests pulled their heads back between their shoulders. Only Don Reba smiled and clapped his hands a few times, almost inaudibly. The king spat out several bones onto the carpet and said:

"Glorious? Right. Eternity? Good! You can go on eating."

The lip smacking and babbling started anew. Gur sat down.

"How sweet and pleasant to tell the King the truth right to his face," he said raucously.

Rumata was silent. Then he said:

"I'll have a copy of the book sent over, Father Gur. One condition though. You will immediately begin a new work."

"No," said Gur. "Too late. Let Kiun write. I'm already poisoned. And anyway, I'm no longer interested in these things. The only thing I'd like to do now--I want to learn to drink. Only I can't... My stomach hurts ..."

One more defeat to chalk up, thought Rumata. Too late.

"Listen, Reba," said the king suddenly. "Where is the quack? You promised to bring me a physician after dinner!"

"He is here, Your Highness," said Don Reba. "Are you ordering me to call him?"

"Am I ordering you? That's more than flesh and blood can bear! If you had pains in your knee like mine, you'd be squealing like a stuck pig! Have him come in at once!"

Rumata leaned back in his chair in order to see better. Don Reba raised his hand above his head and snapped his fingers. The door opened and in walked an old, bent man, constantly bowing, clad in a floor-length mantilla embroidered with silvery spiders, golden stars and glittering snakes. He was carrying a long, flat satchel under his arm. Rumata was

worried and
disappointed at the same time. He had imagined Budach to
look quite
different. Could such a wise man and humanist, author of the
encyclopedic
Treatise Concerning Poisons, have such restlessly wandering,
inflamed eyes,
lips aquiver with fear, and such a pitiful, subservient smile?
But then
Rumata remembered the poet Gur. Wouldn't the persecution of an
Irukanian spy
be a worthwhile literary discussion in Don Reba's cabinet?
Wouldn't it be
fun to tweak Don Reba's ear, he thought, and mentally smacked his
lips. He
should be dragged off to the dungeon. And the torturers
should be
instructed: There he is, that Irukanian spy who pretends to
be our
Arkanarian Minister of Internal Security. The king demands that you
drag out
of him where the real minister is being kept. Go to work! And woe
betide
you, if he dies before the week is over . . . Rumata had to hide his
face in
his hand. A wave of hatred swept over him. What a terrible
thing, this
hatred...

"There you are. Come over here, you quack," said the king.
"Come here,
my dear man, you mental giant. Well, sit down over here--sit
down, I
said!--and begin!"

The unfortunate Budach set to work, his face contorted with
fright.

"Go on, go on!" winced the king. "Keep on going, I tell you!
Get down
on your knees, your knees can't possibly hurt you. Cured
himself, that
devil! Now, let me see your teeth! That's the way. I'll say a fine
set of
teeth you have here. If I only had teeth like that! And your hands
are in

fine shape, too, good and strong. What a healthy chap he is ... and a mental giant in spite of it ... Well, then . . . Come on, my dove, go on, heal me, what are you waiting for?"

"If You-you-r Ma-majesty . . . would graciously show me the sick leg ... the leg . . .," stuttered the physician. Rumata looked up.

The physician knelt before the king and cautiously examined his leg.

"Eh!" snorted the king. "What's that supposed to be? Don't you touch me! Now that you have started, cure me!"

"I ... I ... have seen everything I need, Your Majesty," mumbled the physician nervously and started to rummage hurriedly in his satchel

The guests stopped chewing. The aristocrats of lower rank, who were sitting at the farthest end of the table, even stood up and, burning with curiosity, stretched their necks so as to be able to see better.

Budach took a few small stone bottles from his satchel, uncorked them, sniffed at each, one after the other, then placed them in one row on the table before him. Then he took the king's goblet and filled it half with wine. While he was executing mysterious hand motions above the goblet, he whispered magic formulas then swiftly emptied all the little bottles into the cup. A distinct smell of ammonia spread throughout the hall. The king's lips became pencil-thin. He peered into the cup, puckered, up his mouth, and glanced over in Don Reba's direction. The minister smiled sympathetically.

The courtiers held their breath.

What on earth is he doing? wondered Rumata. The old king has gout! What concoction has he been brewing together in that cup? Yet he stated quite clearly in his treatise:

"Rub the swollen limbs with the three-days-old poison of the *Qu* snake."

Perhaps he is going to use it to rub the potion into his skin?

"What is this?" asked the king, full of distrust, pointing with his right forefinger to the goblet. "It's a liniment, is it, to rub into my aching knee?"

"Not at all, Your Majesty," said Budach. He seemed to have regained his composure somewhat by now. "This is to be taken by mouth."

"B-y-y mou-outh?" The king puffed out his cheeks and leaned back in his armchair. "I don't want to take anything by mouth! Rub it in!"

"Your wish is my command," said Budach obediently. "But I take the liberty of warning Your Majesty that an external application will not help you, not at all."

"And why did all the others used to rub my knee with ointments?" inquired the king in a surly tone. "And you insist on making me drink this abomination."

"Your Majesty," said Budach and straightened up proudly. "This medicine is known only to me. I have cured the uncle of the Duke of Irukan with it. And what concerns those who advocate rubbing your knee with salves . . . permit me to say . . . these quacksalvers have not cured Your Majesty . . ."

The king glanced once more over to Don Reba. Don Reba smiled with compassion, it seemed.

"You swindler!" said the king to the physician in a nasty tone of voice. "You yokel! You flea-bitten know-it-all!" He seized the cup. "Here, that's what I'll do with this brew! I'll throw it in your teeth!" He peered into the goblet. "What if it makes me throw up?"

"Then the procedure will have to be repeated. Your Majesty,"

answered

Budach with a sad face.

"Well, I'll do it then," said the king and was just about to raise the cup to his lips when he suddenly pushed it back again, so violently that some of the liquid spilled on the rug. "Ha, dear man, you drink some of it first! I know your ilk, you tricky Irukanians have even sold our Holy Mickey to the barbarians. Drink, I order you!"

Budach accepted the cup, looking rather offended, and sipped a few drops from it.

"Well, what does it taste like?"

"Bitter, Your Majesty," said Budach subdued. "But you, Your Majesty, must drink this medicine now!"

"Must, must!" wailed the king. "I know all by myself what I must do. Give it to me! Half has been spilt already anyhow. Well then, hand it to me!"

He drained the cup at one draught. Compassionate sighs could be heard here and there coming from the dinner guests. And suddenly all was quiet.

The king grew rigid, his mouth wide open. Tears welled up in his eyes, then ran down his cheeks, one by one. His face became flushed, little by little, then it turned blue. He stretched one hand out over the table, spasmodically snapping his fingers. Don Reba quickly handed him a sour pickle. The king hurled the pickle at Don Reba and then stretched his hand out again.

"Wine!" he croaked hoarsely.

Somebody bent down and handed him a clay jug. The long drank hastily with huge gulps, madly rolling his eyes all the while. Red stripes were flowing down on his white vest. After he had drained the jug, he threw it at

Budach, but he missed.

"You dog's son!" he said with an unexpected deep basso. "Why do you want to kill me off? Haven't they hanged enough of your kind? Go to the devil!"

He fell silent and touched his knee.

"It hurts!" he said in the same whining tone as before.

"It's still hurting!"

"Your Majesty!" said Budach. "To obtain a complete cure your Majesty ought to drink this mixture daily, for at least one week."

Something seemed to burst in the king's throat.

"Get away!" howled the king. "Go and be hanged! All of you!" The courders jumped up, rushed en masse to the doors, overturning some chairs.

"Out of my sight! Ou-ou-ou-t!" screamed the king, beside himself with fury, and swept the dishes from the table.

After Rumata had quickly fled the scene along with the rest of the diners, he dived behind the nearest curtain at hand and started to laugh. Behind the curtain next to him, he heard the others laughing too--fitfully, gasping for breath and howling with delight.

SIX

Rumata's tour of night duty in the prince's bedchambers did not begin until midnight. Rumata decided, therefore, to go home in the meantime in order to check if everything was in order and to change clothes. He was puzzled by the way the town looked in the evening light. The streets were enveloped in deep silence, the inns and taverns had shut their doors.

At the street crossings groups of the Gray Sturmoviks rattled metallically, their torches in their hands. They, too, did not utter a sound, and seemed to be waiting for something definite. On several occasions one of them would come quite close to Rumata, stare at his face, but as soon as he had recognized him, would always silently permit him to proceed on his way. When Rumata was within fifty feet of his own house, a group of suspicious-looking characters followed hard behind him, yet keeping at a steady distance. Rumata came to a brief halt and rattled his swords. The figures fell back a bit, but soon afterwards he heard behind him the click of a loaded crossbow. Rumata hurried on his way, all the time pressing close to the walls of the houses. He groped for his house door, turned the key in the lock and was all the time painfully aware of his unprotected back. He leapt inside the entrance hall with a sigh of relief.

All his servants had already assembled in the entrance hall, armed with all kinds of weapons. They had checked the gate already repeatedly to make certain it was well secured. Rumata liked none of this. Perhaps I shouldn't leave the house after all, he thought. To hell with the young prince.

"Where is Baron Pampa?" he asked.

Agitated greatly, his crossbow slung over his shoulder, Uno answered that the baron had not awakened until noon, had then drunk all the available water from the sour pickle *jugs* and had then departed again to have some more fun. Then Uno reported in a serious voice that Kyra had inquired several times after the master--she was most worried about him.

"All right," said Rumata and ordered his servants to take up their posts.

All in all, not counting the female cooks, he had six servants, dependable people generally, used to street brawls. Of course, they won't start up anything with the Gray Ones, thought Rumata, for they fear the wrath of the omnipotent Minister of the Security Forces; but they can make a stand against the wretched characters of the nocturnal army, all the more, since the robbers were expecting to find easy prey without any resistance.

The servants were equipped with two crossbows, four battle-axes, several big butcher knives, iron helmets; the gate was secured, studded with nails and bound with iron in keeping with the good old local traditions. Or would it perhaps be best not to leave the house tonight?

Rumata walked upstairs and tiptoed into Kyra's room. Kyra was sleeping in her clothes, curled up on top of the bedspread. Rumata leaned over her, a candlestick held in his hand. Shall I go or not? I would dearly like for once not to have to leave.

He put a light blanket over her, kissed her on the cheek and returned to his room. I must go. Whatever happens, a scout must always be right in the thick of all that is going on. For the benefit of the historians back on Terra. A bitter smile flitted across his features, he took the circlet off his forehead, carefully cleaned the lens with a soft rag and then put the circlet back on again. Then he called Uno and ordered him to bring his suit of armor and the freshly polished copper helmet Shivering with cold, he

pulled his metalloplast shirt over his undershirt, right underneath his vest. The metalloplast garment was fashioned like chain mail (the local chain mail provided good protection against injuries inflicted by daggers or swords, but an arrow from a crossbow could easily pierce it). While he girded himself with his uniform belt, fastening the metal clasps, he said to Uno:

"Listen, my boy. I trust you more than anyone else.

Whatever might happen here, Kyra must remain alive and well.

I don't care if the whole house burns down, or if they steal all the money I have, but do protect Kyra for me. Lead her, if necessary, over roofs or through basements, whichever way is best, but look out for her, guard her. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Uno. "You shouldn't go out tonight"

"Listen to me. If I'm not back in three days, take Kyra and lead her to the clearing in Hiccup Forest. Do you know where that is? Well, there you will find the Drunkard's Lair, a peculiar-looking hut not far off the road. You need only ask, people will show you where it is. But be careful who you ask. A man by the name of Father Kabani lives there. Tell him everything. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. But it would be much better if you wouldn't leave tonight."

"I would prefer to stay. But it's impossible. Duty calls. Well then, be careful!"

He gently patted the boy's cheek and returned his awkward smile with a friendly glance. Downstairs, he said a few encouraging words to his servants, left the house, and disappeared once more into the

darkness.

Behind him, he heard the clanking of the heavy doors as they were barred against intruders. Traditionally, the prince's apartments had never been guarded very closely. Quite likely this was the reason no one had ever made an attack against the life of the Arkanarian princes. And in particular, nobody seemed to be interested in the present prince. There was no one who liked this sickly blue-eyed boy, who resembled everyone except his own father. Rumata was fond of the boy, though. His education had been grossly neglected and therefore his imagination had remained unspoiled; he was not cruel like the others, could not stand Don Reba--instinctively, it would seem--loved to sing songs to the verses of Zuren and to play with little boats. Rumata had ordered some illustrated books to be sent for him from the capital, told him about the starry sky and completely won the boy's sympathy by regaling him with fairy tales about flying ships. To Rumata, who rarely had any dealings with young children, the ten-year-old prince seemed to be quite different from the other inhabitants of this wild country. And yet these innocent, blue-eyed children, whichever strata of the population they came from, were the ones who would later develop bestiality, ignorance, and blind submission to the authorities.

Still, these children showed absolutely no traces of meanness. It wouldn't be a bad idea, he thought sometimes, if there were no adults on this planet.

The prince was already asleep. Rumata began his guard duty. Together

with the officer he had come to relieve, he approached the bed where the prince was sleeping, and they executed complicated figures with their naked swords as prescribed by court etiquette. Then Rumata made the traditional rounds to check if all windows were closed and bolted, if the nursery-maids were stationed at their assigned places and if candlesticks were burning in all the rooms. Then he returned to the antechamber, played a game of knuckles with the officer of the guard, who was now off duty, and who inquired of the noble don what he thought of the recent events in town. The noble don, a man of tremendous intellectual prowess, became lost in deep thoughts, then announced that in his opinion the common folk were preparing for Holy Mickey Day.

After the officer had left, Rumata pushed a chair to the window, sat down at ease and looked out over the city. The house of the prince stood atop a hill and during the day one had a splendid view all over the city and as far as the ocean. Now, however, all was enveloped in darkness. Only occasional clusters of lights were visible where people gathered at the crossroads, waiting for the torch signals of the Sturmoviks. The city was asleep, or at least pretended to be. How interesting it would be to know whether the inhabitants could sense that something horrendous was about to happen. Or did they assume, like the noble don with the tremendous intellectual prowess, that these were just preparations for Holy Mickey Day? Twenty thousand men and women. Twenty thousand locksmiths, armorers,

butchers, cloth merchants, jewelers, housewives, prostitutes, monks, money-changers, soldiers, vagabonds, and bookworms who had still been spared were tossing in their sticky beds that reeked of bedbugs. They were sleeping, making love, going over in their minds the profits of the day, crying, gritting their teeth with wickedness or depression...

Twenty thousand human beings! In the eyes of a terrestrial observer, they all had something in common. Probably it was the fact that all of them, with almost no exceptions, were not yet human beings in the current sense of the word, but rather preliminary stages, blocks of raw iron ore out of which the bloody centuries of history would eventually forge proud and free men. They were passive, greedy, and incredibly egoistic. Seen from a psychological point of view, almost all of them were slaves--slaves of faith, slaves of their own persons, slaves of their powerful passions and slaves of their avarice. And if by chance one of them was born a nobleman, or worked his way up through diligence over the years, he did not even know what to do with his freedom. He rushed to become a slave once more--enslaved by wealth, enslaved by unnatural luxury, enslaved by debauched companions and enslaved by his own slaves. The majority could not really be blamed for this at all. Their enslavement was rooted in passivity and ignorance. Passivity and ignorance, however, would lead in turn again and again to their enslavement. If indeed they all came from the same mold, all would merely twiddle their thumbs and not a glimmer of hope would exist for them.

But they were nevertheless human beings and bore the spark of intelligence. And thus constantly, sometimes here, sometimes there, the fire of a very, very distant but inevitable future would flare up. It would begin to bum, despite everything. Despite their apparent incompetence. Despite the unending suppression and persecution. Although they were kicked and beaten. Although nobody in this world needed them, and all men were against them. Although at the very best they could count on uncomprehending, condescending pity ...

They did not realize that the future was ahead of them, that the future was impossible without them. They did not recognize themselves as the only real hope for the future in a world caught in the grip of horrible ghosts of the past, that they are a ferment, the vitamin in the organism of their society. Once you destroy these ferments, society will start to rot, social decay will result, the muscles grow limp, the eyesight fade and the teeth fall out. No state can develop without the help of the sciences.--It will be wiped out by its neighbors. Without art and culture a state will lose its capacity for self-evaluation, will give impetus to the wrong drifts, will constantly bring forth hypocrites and scoundrels, encourage the development of overconsumption of goods by its citizens, engender arrogance and eventually fall victim in turn to some bolder neighbor. Let the authorities persecute the bookworms as much as it pleases, hinder and stop the activities of the scientists, destroy the arts: sooner or later the

government leaders will stumble, and as they gnash their teeth they will be forced to reopen all those avenues to mankind that are so hated by the power-hungry dunderheads and ignoramuses. And as thoroughly as these Gray men in power might despise culture and knowledge, in the long run they are nevertheless impotent in the face of objective historical necessity--they can only delay the course of progress, but they can not bring it to a complete standstill. And even if they fear and scorn educated minds, they are inescapably forced to further them eventually, simply in order to survive. Sooner or later they must stand by as universities are founded, scientific societies are organized, scientific research centers are set up, observatories and laboratories are built, to train cadres of experts who are already beyond the rulers' control--to educate men with a totally different psyche, with completely different demands.

These people, however, cannot exist--nor can they function properly--in an atmosphere of common greed, plebeian interests, dull self-sufficiency, and exclusively sensual desires. They need a new type of atmosphere--an atmosphere of general and all-encompassing cognition, imbued with artistic tension; they need writers, poets, painters, composers --and the mighty Gray Ones will see themselves forced to make concessions here, too. Those who resist will be swept away by cleverer rivals in the battle for power; those, on the other hand, who agree to make such concessions, will be digging their own graves against their own will--inescapably and paradoxically. For

ignorant egoists and fanaticists are doomed, once the people's culture awakens in all areas, from scientific research to the ability to enjoy good music. This is followed by an epoch of vast social upheavals, accompanied by an upswing of the sciences such as has never been seen before. And in conjunction with the intellectualization of society through all strata will follow an era when the powers of Gray will gather their final effort in a battle whose cruelty will throw mankind back to the inhumanity of the Middle Ages. This life-and-death struggle will see the downfall of the powers of Gray, and they will ultimately go under in a society freed of all class distinctions and the oppression of man . . .

Rumata was still looking out over the city, a petrified globe veiled in gloom. Somewhere in its midst, in some stifling little room, was Father Tarra, twisting and squirming on a wretched cot, racked by fever, but Brother Nain was sitting next to him at a lopsided little table--drunk, happy, and mean--finishing his *Treatise about Rumors*, the book wherein he ridiculed with obvious relish, and with artfully chosen words, the life of Graydom. Somewhere else, down there, Gur, the poet, was pacing the floor of his empty, elegant rooms, blind with despair and terrified at the realization that in spite of everything new worlds were trying to surface from the depths of his ravaged soul. These new, bright worlds seemed to be buoyed up by an unknown force, seemed to be filled with wonderful human beings and staggering emotions. And somewhere down there Doctor Budach was

spending the night, who knew how? Humbled, forced to his knees, and beaten, but still alive . . . My brothers all, thought Rumata. I am one of you. After all, we are of the same flesh! Suddenly he was overwhelmed by the insight that he was no god protecting the luminaries of the mind between the palms of his hands, but rather a brother helping another brother, or a son hurrying to his father's rescue. "I'll kill Don Reba."--'What for?'--"He has destroyed my brothers."--"He does not know what he is doing."--"But he is murdering the future."--"He is innocent; a child of his time."--"You mean he does not realize his guilt? But what does it matter whether or not he is aware of his guilt?"--"And what about Father Zupik? What wouldn't he give if someone were to slay Don Reba? Now you're silent. You'll have to do a lot of killing, won't you?" --"I don't know. Perhaps. One after the other. All those who try to prevent the future from happening."--"The same old story. Poison, homemade bombs--they never changed anything."--"Oh yes, they did. The strategy of the revolution was born."--"What do you care about the strategy of the revolution? All you want is to kill."--"Yes, I want to kill."--"Can you really go through with it?"--"Yesterday I caused the death of Dona Okana. I knew she would be killed the moment I went to her house with a feather stuck behind my ear. I only regret having killed her senselessly. They've almost managed to teach me such things here."-- "But this is bad. It's a serious matter, and a dangerous one. Do you remember Sergei Koschin, George Lenni or Sabine Krueger?"--Rumata ran his

hand over
his sweat-covered forehead. Here you are, pondering,
contemplating and
worrying--and all you have to show for it is a load of garbage.
He leapt to his feet and tore the window open. The widely
dispersed
concentrations of lights throughout the dark city were set in
motion,
broken, scattered, drifted apart, moved along in chains, vanished
behind
invisible houses and appeared again. An indefinable roar surged up
over the
city, a distant, many-voiced din. Two conflagrations flared up,
illuminating
the neighboring rooftops. Something exploded in the harbor area.
It had
begun. In a few hours it would be known what the significance was
of the
union between the Gray hordes and the nocturnal army, this
unnatural
alliance of little shopkeepers and robbers. And it would also be
known then
what Don Reba had accomplished with that and what new provocation
he had
managed to finagle, or--to put it in a plain language--who was
to be
slaughtered tonight. Most likely this was the beginning of a night
of the
long knives, a blood-letting among the leadership of the Gray hordes
and at
the same time the annihilation of those unfortunate barons who just
happened
to be in town, as well as of those aristocrats who represented the
greatest
nuisance. I wonder what Pampa is doing, he thought. If only he isn't
asleep.
Hell make out all right then.

There was no more time now to give free rein to his thoughts.
The door
began to shake from a violent hammering with fists; somebody was
yelling in
a hoarse voice: "Open up! Open up!" Rumata pushed back the bolt. A
man, half

undressed, blue with fright, rushed into the room, seized Rumata by his vest and shouted with a trembling voice:

"Where is the prince? Budach has poisoned the king! Irukanian spies have started a riot in the city! Save the prince!"

It was the marshal of the prince's household, a stupid man, an obsequious servant of his master. He pushed Rumata aside and ran into the prince's bedchambers. The women began to scream. Meanwhile, however, brandishing their notched battle-axes, the Sturmoviks in gray shirts rushed through the open doors, their distorted faces drenched in perspiration.

"Get back," he said as cool as a cucumber.

From behind his back, from the bedchamber, came a brief, muffled outcry. We are in trouble, thought Rumata. He dashed into a corner and barricaded himself behind a table. Panting Sturmoviks began to fill the room. Fifteen men in all, it seemed. A lieutenant in a gray uniform, in the front row, raised his dagger.

"Don Rumata?" he asked, gasping for air. "You are under arrest. Surrender your swords."

"Why don't you come and get them!" said Rumata and threw a quick glance toward the window.

"Seize him!" the lieutenant wheezed.

Fifteen men, drunk and equipped with mere axes are no match for one who is an expert in defensive techniques that will become known here only three hundred years hence. The crowd surged forward and then fell back again. On the floor remained several axes, two Sturmoviks writhing in pain, their smashed hands gingerly pressed against their stomachs as they stumbled off

to the back rows of their comrades. Rumata was a master of the defensive fan technique. The attackers were greeted by a dense, glittering curtain created by his whirling swords, and it seemed impossible to penetrate this barrier of steel. The Sturmoviks withdrew and looked at each other with baffled faces. A sharp odor of beer and onions emanated from them.

Rumata moved the table, cautiously walked along the wall toward the window, all the while keeping an eye on the Gray soldiers. A knife was thrown at him from the back rows but it missed. Rumata laughed, set one foot on the window ledge and said; "You try once more and this time I'll cut off your hands. You know me."

They knew him. They knew him very well, and not one of the men budged from his spot despite the commands and curses from their officers who were careful not to risk anything themselves. Constantly threatening them with both swords, Rumata pulled himself all the way up onto the window ledge. At that moment a lance, coming from the street down below, hit him in the back. The impact was terrific. Though the weapon did not pierce his metalloplast shirt, it still swept him off the ledge and threw him back into the room, down to the floor. Rumata held onto his two swords but they were of no help in this situation. The whole mob pounced at once. All of them together must have weighed well over a ton but they were in each other's way and thus he succeeded in getting back to his feet again.

His fist smashed between somebody's wet lips, another fellow was wiggled under his shoulder like a wounded rabbit, and Rumata kept hitting

out in all directions with his fists, elbows, shoulders (he had not felt that free in a long time) but he could not shake them off. Dragging a throng of bodies behind him, he managed to get as far as the door, where he finally freed himself from the men who had dug their fingers into his legs. Then he felt a painful, mighty blow on his shoulder and he fell on his back. Several Sturmoviks were struggling to get out from under him. Once again he managed to get back on his feet, dealing short blows that hurled the desperately hitting and kicking Gray soldiers against the walls. For a moment he saw the pockmarked face of the lieutenant loom up before him as he ducked behind his discharged crossbow, when suddenly the door gave way and a new flood of sweating, grimacing faces poured into the room. They threw a large net over him, drew it together around his feet, and flung him to the ground. He stopped resisting at once in order to preserve his strength. For a while they kicked him with their boots-- silently, straining hard and panting with delight. Then they grabbed him by his feet and dragged him away. As they passed the open door of the bedchamber, he could see the master of the prince's household nailed to the wall by a spear, and a bundle of bloody sheets on the bed. "It's a revolution!" thought Rumata. 'That's what it is all about. Poor boy. ..' They pulled him down the stairs, and then he lost consciousness.

SEVEN

He was lying on a grassy hill looking up into the clouds that sailed along the deep, blue sky. He felt quiet and at peace but on the grassy hill next to him sat the embodiment of shooting pain. The pain was externalized, and yet he could also feel it inside himself, especially on his right side and on the back of his neck. "Kicked the bucket, has he? I'll cut off your heads!" And then a flood of icy cold water poured down on him from out of the sky. True, he was lying on his back and looking up into the sky, but it was not a grassy hill, but a puddle of water; and the sky was not blue either, it was leaden black with red stripes. "Not a bit," said another voice. 'That's alive. Twitching with the eyes.' I am the one who is alive, he thought. They are talking about me. I am the one whose eyes are twitching. What's all this drivel? Don't they know how to speak properly?

Someone moved nearby and hit the water with some heavy object. The black silhouette of a head with a flat cap appeared on the sky.

"How about it, noble don, will you walk under your own power or shall I have them carry you?"

"Untie my legs!" snapped Rumata, and felt at once a sharp, burning pain in his bruised lips. Gingerly he passed his tongue over them. Some lips, he thought. More like flabby pancakes.

Someone busied himself about his feet, pushing and pulling them unceremoniously. People were conversing nearby in subdued voices.

"You certainly made a mess of him."

"Had to, he almost got away . . . He's bewitched--arrows bounce off his body . . ."

"I knew a fellow once, you could work him over with an ax and he wouldn't bat an eyelash."

"Probably a peasant."

"Of course he was."

"So? But this one is a blue blood."

"To hell with it. Look how they tied these knots! Even our Holy Mickey couldn't untie those. Pass me a torch!"

"Better take, a knife!"

"Hey, fellows, leave his legs tied up. Hell start thrashing at us again. He almost knocked my head off."

"No, no, he won't do anything."

"Whatever anyone says, comrades, I sure let him have it with my spear.

It went right through his armor."

Some voice called out peremptorily from the darkness.

"Finish up, will you!"

Rumata felt now that his legs were free; he stretched them, tried to stand up, but fell down immediately. Several Sturmoviks who were crouching on the ground watched in silence as he wallowed in the muddy puddle. Rumata

gnashed his teeth in fury and humiliation. He jerked his shoulder blades:

his hands were bound and turned up on his back, but so tightly that he could

not tell where his palms and where his elbows were. He gathered up all his

strength and violently jerked them upwards, but at once doubled over in

pain. The Sturmoviks broke out in laughter.

"Can't escape that way," said one of them.

"I think he's a little tired. Hey, you, drop dead."

"Hey, don, not too pleasant, is it?"

"Shut up! Stop that silly babbling!" said the imperative voice from the

dark. "Come over here, Don Rumata!"

Rumata struggled to his feet and walked toward the voice; he felt

himself staggering uncertainly from side to side. A man

appeared from somewhere, holding a torch, and led the way for him. Rumata recognized the locality. It was one of the innumerable interior courts of the Ministry of Security, near the royal stables.

He thought quickly. If they lead me to the right, that would mean the Tower, the dungeon. To the left: The offices of Don Reba's Ministry. He shook his head. So what, he thought. I am still alive, I'll make out all right.--They turned to the left. These new, bright worlds seemed to be buoyed up by an unknown force, seemed to be filled with wonderful human beings and staggering emotions. And somewhere down there Doctor Budach was spending the night, who knew how? Humbled, forced to his knees, and beaten, but still alive ... My brothers all, thought Rumata. I am one of you; after all, we are of the same flesh! All of a sudden he was overwhelmed by an insight that he was actually no god protecting the luminaries of the mind between the palms of his hands, but rather a brother helping another brother or a son hurrying to come to his father's rescue. "I'll kill Don Reba."--"What for?"--"He has destroyed my brothers."--"He does not know what he is doing."--"But he is murdering the future!"--"He is not guilty; he is a child of his time."--"You mean he does not realize his guilt? But what does it matter whether or not he is aware of his guilt?"--"And what about Father Zupik? What wouldn't he give if somebody were to slay Don Reba. Now you're silent. You'll have to do a lot of killing, won't you?" --"I don't know. Perhaps. One after the other. All those that try to prevent the

future from
happening!"--"That's an old story. Poison, homemade bombs--And
nothing ever
changed."--"Oh yes, something did change. The strategy of the
revolution was
born."--"What do you care about the strategy of the revolution? All
you want
is to kill!"-- "Yes, I want to kill."--"Can you really go
through with
that?"--"Yesterday I caused the death of Dona Okana. I knew she
would be
killed the moment I went to her house with a feather stuck behind my
ear. I
only regret having killed her senselessly. They've almost managed
to teach
me such things here."--At least not right away, thought Rumata.
First an
interrogation, a cross-examination. Awful. In that case, what
can they
accuse me of? That's obvious enough. Inducing the poisoner Budach to
poison
the king, conspiracy, plotting against the crown. Maybe also
murdering the
prince. And, of course, spying for Irukan, Soan, the barbarians, the
barons,
the Holy Order, and so on and so on. Surprising enough that I
am still
alive. That means he has been thinking of something else
still, the
toadstool.

"This way," said the man with the imperious voice. A low
door flew
open. Rumata ducked his head and entered a large room, lit up by
a dozen
chandeliers. The men who sat or lay on the worn rug in the center
of the
room were tied up and covered with blood. Some were already dead
or had
fainted. Almost all were barefoot and wore only worn and
ripped night
shirts. Along the walls, the red-nosed Sturmoviks were leaning
negligently
on their hatchets and battle axes. They looked about with wild eyes

and were satisfied. They had been victorious. The officer on guard was striding up and down before them, his hands clasped on his back. He wore a gray uniform with a very greasy collar. Rumata's companion, a tall man in a black cloak, approached the officer and whispered something in his ear. The officer nodded his head, regarded Rumata for a moment with great interest and disappeared behind the heavy, colorful drapes at the other end of the room.

The Sturmoviaks examined Rumata in turn, also very interestedly. One of them, with a dim eye, said:

"Say, that's some precious stone there on his forehead!"

"Not bad, that stone," agreed another soldier. "Some booty for the king. And the circlet is made of pure gold."

"We are the kings now."

"Down with it then, eh, what do you think?"

"Get away from there," growled the man in the black cloak.

The Sturmoviaks stared at him in surprise.

"Another one to patronize us?" asked the Sturmovik with the blind eye.

The man with the black cloak did not answer, but turned his back on him and stepped close to Rumata. The Sturmoviaks looked him up and down, their eyes filled with mistrust.

"Perhaps a blackbird, a priest?" said the Sturmovik with the blind eye.

"Hey, blackie, want a smackie?"

The Sturmoviaks cackled and crowed in amusement. The dim-eyed man spat on his palms, tossed his hatchet from hand to hand and moved toward Rumata. He's going to get it now, thought Rumata, and slowly pulled back his right foot.

"The people I have always beaten up," said the Sturmovik as he came to

a halt before the man in black, and staring at him insolently, "were the

priests, any learned trash and our so-called masters. Once I--"

The man with the black cloak raised his outstretched hand. A buzzing click could be heard all of a sudden, just below the ceiling. Sh-sh-sh-! The Sturmovik with the blind eye dropped his hatchet and fell over backwards. A thick, feathered arrow protruded from the middle of his forehead. All at once there was absolute silence. The Sturmoviks shifted nervously from one foot to the other, their eyes flitted anxiously along the openings below the ceiling.

"Get rid of that body, quick!"

Several Sturmoviks bent down, grabbed their comrade by his arms and legs and dragged him outside. A Gray officer came out from behind the curtains and beckoned to Rumata and the man in black.

"Let's go, Don Rumata," said the man in black.

Rumata passed the bodies of the prisoners and walked over to the curtains. I don't understand anything any more, he thought. Once behind the drapes, he was seized by invisible hands that expertly frisked his body in the darkness, tore the empty scabbards from his belt, then pushed him into the light.

Rumata knew at once where he was.

This was the infamous cabinet of Don Reba in the lilac-colored apartments. Don Reba sat at the same spot, striking the identical pose as once before; his back straight, elbows resting on the tabletop and fingers clasped. I bet the old man is suffering from hemorrhoids, the thought abruptly flashed through Rumata's mind. He felt sorry for him. To the right of Don Reba was enthroned Father Zupik, concentrating hard and

pompously
biting his lips. To Don Reba's left sat a kindly smiling potbellied man, the epaulettes on his shoulders marking him as a captain of the Gray Army.

Nobody else was in the room besides these three- As Don Rumata entered, Don

Reba said benevolently in a low voice:

"Well, my friends, here we have finally the noble Don Rumata."

Father Zupik smiled condescendingly and the fat man started to nod his head kindly.

"Our old and very consistent enemy," said Don Reba.

"An enemy? Hang him!" remarked Father Zupik hoarsely.

"And what is your opinion, Brother Aba?" asked Don Reba, throwing a warning glance at the potbellied man.

"You know . . . somehow I have . . ." Brother Aba smiled rather childishly and lost, fidgeting with his short arms in the air.

"Somehow, you know, I actually do not care. But maybe we ought to hang him anyhow? Or perhaps burn him, what do you say, Don Reba?"

"Why not," said a pensive Don Reba.

"You see," continued Brother Aba desperately, and directed a strangely friendly smile toward Rumata, "in general we hang the riff-raff, the little fish. But we must maintain a respectful relationship toward the aristocracy.

For the sake of the people. After all, he is a descendant from old nobility,

an important Irukanian spy. Irukanian, isn't that right?" He took a piece of paper from the table and stared at it with nearsighted eyes.

"Ah, and besides that, also a Seaman spy. Even worse!"

"Burn him then," concurred Father Zupik.

"Fine," said Don Reba. "Then we are all agreed. Burn him!"

"By the way, I believe Don Rumata might ease his lot!" said Brother Aba. "You know what I mean, Don Reba?"

"To be quite frank with you, not quite."

"His fortune! My noble don, his fortune! The Rumatas are a fabulously wealthy family... !"

"You're right, as always," said Don Reba.

Father Zupik yawned, covered his mouth with his hand, and kept stealing glances toward the heavy lilac-colored drapes to the right side of the table.

"All right then, let's start according to the rules," said Don Reba with a sigh.

Father Zupik still cast furtive glances at the drapes. Evidently he was waiting for something definite and was not at all interested in this cross-examination. What kind of a farce is that? thought Rumata. What is the meaning of all this?

"Well, then, my noble don," said Don Reba and turned to Rumata, "it would be most pleasant to hear your answers to some questions we are interested in."

"Remove these bonds from my hands," said Rumata.

Father Zupik flinched, while making desperate chewing motions with his lips. Brother Aba moved his head from side to side excitedly.

"Well?" said Don Reba and looked first at Brother Aba, then at Father Zupik. "I do understand you, my friends. However, considering the circumstances and the fact that they will also be clear to Don Rumata . . ."

With a meaningful glance he let his eyes sweep along the rows of openings in the walls underneath the ceiling. "Untie him," he said in the same quiet, even voice.

Without making a sound, somebody stepped up to Rumata from behind. He felt the oddly soft, skillful fingers touching his hands, and then

heard the ropes being cut with a knife. With amazing speed-- considering his bulk--Brother Aba pulled a huge crossbow from underneath the table and placed it directly in front of him on top of a pile of papers. Rumata's arms fell to his sides like two braids. He had almost no feeling in them.

"Well, then, let's begin," said Don Reba cheerfully. "Name, family, and rank?"

"Rumata, descended from the race of the Estorian Rumatas. Noble courtiers for the past twenty-two generations."

Rumata looked around, saw a sofa, sat down and started to massage his wrists. Brother Aba gasped for air and aimed the crossbow at him.

"Your father?"

"My noble father--imperial councilor, loyal servant and personal friend of the emperor."

"Is he alive?"

"He's dead."

"When?"

"Eleven years ago."

"How old are you?"

Rumata found no time to reply. From behind the lilac-colored curtains came suddenly some noises, and Brother Aba turned around suspiciously.

Father Zupik rose slowly from his seat and laughed maliciously.

"Well, there you are, gentlemen ..." That was all he managed to say.

For three men jumped out from behind the heavy drapes, to Rumata's greatest surprise--they were the last people he would have expected in this place.

Apparently his feelings were shared by Father Zupik. The three men were powerfully built, clad in black monk's garb, their hoods pulled down over their eyes. Swiftly and noiselessly, they leapt over to Father Zupik and

seized him by the elbows.

"Devil take it!" he uttered somehow. A deathly pallor fell over his face. Undoubtedly he had expected something quite different.

"What do you think, Brother Aba?" inquired Don Reba calmly and leaned slightly toward the fat man.

"Yes, of course!" Father Aba answered resolutely. "Of course!"

Don Reba motioned with his hand. The monks lifted Father Zupik off his feet and carried him, still treading noiselessly, behind the curtain. Rumata

frowned in disgust, Brother Aba rubbed his soft palms together and said boldly;

"That went off splendidly. What did you think, Don Reba?"

"Yes, not bad," nodded Don Reba in consent. "But let's go on. So. How old are you, Don Rumata?"

"Thirty-five years."

"How long have you been in Arkanar?"

"It has been five years."

"Where did you come from?"

"Till then I had been living in Estoria on my family's ancestral seat."

"Why this change of residence?"

"I was forced by circumstances to leave Estoria. I was in search of a city that could challenge the splendor of our capital." Finally he began to feel a fiery tingling in his arms. Patiently and untiringly, Rumata continued to massage his swollen joints.

"What kind of circumstances?" asked Don Reba.

"I killed a member of the imperial household in a duel."

"Oh? Who?"

"The young Duke Ekin."

"And what was the reason for this duel?"

"A woman," answered Rumata briefly.

He became gradually suspicious that all these questions were actually meaningless. That they were just as much part of the game as the

consultation regarding the manner of his execution.

The three of us are waiting for something. I am waiting until I have regained full use of my hands. Brother Aba, the dunderhead, is waiting for me to drop all the gold of the family treasure of the Rumatas in his lap. Don Reba, too, is waiting for something. But the monks, the monks! How did the monks come to be here at court? And especially such skillful and nimble fellows--?

'The name of that woman?'

Oh, these questions, thought Rumata. One would be hard put to think up a more witless batch. I'll try to throw him out of gear a bit.

"Dona Rita," he replied.

"I did not expect that you would answer me. Thank you."

"Always at your service."

Don Reba slightly bowed his head. "Have you ever been in Irukan?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Are you?"

"We want to speak the truth!" said Don Reba in a didactic tone of voice. Brother Aba produced a quivering nod of his head. "Nothing but the truth."

"Aha!" said Rumata. "And I was under the impression . . ." He fell silent.

"Under what impression?"

". . . that you were mainly interested in laying your hands on my fortune. But for the life of me I can't imagine, Don Reba, how you will finagle that?"

"How about donating it? Yes, donate it!" shouted Brother Aba.

Rumata laughed impudently.

"You are an ass, Brother Aba, or whatever your name might be. One can see with half an eye that you're nothing but a miserable little shopkeeper."

You probably are not aware that the right of primogeniture is not subject to transfer into other hands?"

It was plain to be seen that the fat man was ready to explode with rage. But he managed to keep himself under control.

"You are not entitled to speak in such a manner," said Don Reba in a gentle voice.

"You want the truth?" countered Rumata. "Here it is, the truth, nothing but the truth--the absolute truth: Brother Aba is an ass and a petty shopkeeper."

Meanwhile, Brother Aba had completely regained his composure.

"It seems to me that we are not sticking to the point," he said with a smile. "What do you think, Don Reba?"

"You're right, as always," said Don Reba. "My noble don, did you ever go to Soan?"

"I was in Soan."

"For what purpose?"

"To attend the Academy of Sciences."

"What a peculiar occupation for a young man of your circumstances."

"That's what I fancied."

"And are you acquainted with the chief judge of Soan, Don Kondor?"

Rumata became suspicious; he smelled a rat

"He is an old friend of my family."

"A most worthy man, isn't he?"

"A most honorable person."

"Are you familiar with the fact that Don Kondor is a member of the conspiracy against His Majesty the King?"

Rumata's chin began to jut out imperceptibly.

"Put your own house in order first, Don Reba," said Rumata haughtily.

"As far as we, the old nobility of the capital, are concerned, all these Soanians and Irukanians, as well as the Arkanarians, are and will always be

nothing but vassals of the imperial crown!" He crossed his legs and turned away.

Don Reba studied him pensively.

"Are you rich?"

"I could buy up all of Arkanar if I had a mind to. But I am not interested in trash."

Don Reba took a deep breath.

"My heart bleeds," he said, "when I consider how I am forced to chop off the famous branch of such a famous and noble lineage! It would almost be a crime if I were not driven to do it in the higher interests of State."

"Don't worry so much about the interests of the state," said Rumata.

"Better worry about how to save your own skin."

"You are quite right," said Don Reba and snapped his fingers.

Rumata alternately tensed and relaxed his muscles. His body was apparently functioning normally again. From behind the curtains, once more three monks jumped out, with the same incredible agility and precision which bespoke a great deal of experience. They surrounded the still smiling Brother Aba and grasped his arms, twisting them up behind his back.

"Ou-ou-ou-ouch!" he screamed in pain, his fat face distorted in agony.

"Hurry up, get it over with quickly!" commanded Don Reba.

As they were dragging him behind the drapes, the fat man resisted furiously. He could still be heard, crying and whining; then suddenly he roared briefly in a weird, hardly recognizable voice, and finally all became quiet again.

Don Reba stood up and cautiously unloaded the crossbow. Rumata, quite perplexed, followed his motions with his eyes.

Slowly, Don Reba began to pace the floor, apparently lost in deep

thought, while scratching his back with the arrow. "Good, good," he murmured, almost tenderly. "How perfect . . ." He seemed to have completely forgotten Rumata's presence. He kept pacing faster and faster, twirling the arrow in the air like a baton. Then, abruptly, he stopped in his tracks by the table, threw the arrow away, sat down gingerly, his face suddenly lit up by a smile, and said:

"Well, what do you say to that? Neither of them even put up a good fight. I don't think we'd get away as easily as that with you."

"Ye-e-es . . .," said Rumata slowly, thoughtfully.

"All right then. Now let's have a talk, Don Rumata. Or is it maybe not even Rumata? And perhaps not even a don? How about it?"

Rumata remained silent and examined him interestedly. Don Reba was pale, and little red veins showed on his nose. He was nearly shaking with excitement, as if he were about to clap his hands in glee and scream out: "I knew it! I knew it!"--You know nothing at all, you dog, he thought. And even if you should find out, you would not believe it anyhow. Go ahead, speak, I'm listening.

"I'm listening," said Rumata.

"You are not Don Rumata," explained Don Reba. "You are an usurper." He looked seriously into Rumata's eyes. "Rumata of Estoria died five years ago and is entombed in the family crypt of his ancestors. And the saints have long since quieted his rebellious and--excuse me--none too pure soul. So? Do you confess or do you need some prompting?"

"I confess," said Rumata. "I am called Rumata of Estoria, and I am not accustomed to people doubting my words."

Let me annoy you a bit, thought Rumata. Look out, here we go.

"I can see well have to continue this talk somewhere else," said Don Reba in an ominous tone.

Remarkable changes came over Don Reba's face. The pleasant smile disappeared, his lips narrowed to a thin line. It was odd, almost to the point of eeriness: even the skin on his forehead started to twitch. Yes, thought Rumata, a man like that can be frightened. "You do have hemorrhoids, don't you?" he asked solicitously.

Something flashed in the comers of Don Reba's eyes but he did not bat an eyelid. He acted as if he had not heard.

"You treated Budach very badly," said Rumata. "He is an excellent physician. That is to say, he was . . . ," he added significantly.

For another moment, Don Reba's eyes flashed again. Aha, thought Rumata.

Budach is presumably still alive ... He settled more comfortably in his chair, clasped his hands around his knees.

"You refuse to confess," said Don Reba.

"What?"

"That you are an usurper!"

"My most honorable Don Reba," said Rumata with the intonation of a schoolmaster. "Such accusations usually ought to be solidly backed by concrete proof. You insult me!"

Don Reba's face assumed an expression of utter sweetness.

"My dear Don Rumata," he said. "Forgive me if I continue to use that name for the time being. I am not usually in the habit of proving anything. The proof comes over there, in the Tower of Joy. For this purpose I have at my service experienced, well-paid specialists who work with the meat grinder of our Holy Mickey, with the weapons of the sole divine force, the gloves of the holy martyr Tata, or, for instance, with the seating

accommodation--oh,
pardon me, with the iron chair of Tetz, the fighter. They can prove anything they please with these implements. That God exists or that He does not exist. That human beings walk on their hands or even on their sides. Do you understand me? You are perhaps unaware of it but we have an entire science devoted to obtaining confessions. Just think for a moment:

Why should I try to prove what I already know? And what's more, no harm will befall you after you have confessed . . ."

"I am not threatened by any harm, but you are," interrupted Rumata.

Don Reba pondered for a while.

"All right," he said finally. "Apparently I will have to make a beginning. Let's examine in what way Rumata of Estoria has distinguished himself during the five years of his stay in the kingdom of Arkanar. And then you will explain the meaning of it all. Agreed?"

"I won't make any rash promises," said Rumata. "But I am interested in listening to what you have to say."

Don Reba started to rummage in his writing desk, took out a thick pile of square papers and skimmed them with raised eyebrows.

"You are probably aware of the fact," he started with a pleasant smile, "that in my capacity as Minister of Internal Security I have undertaken some steps--for the protection of the Crown--against the so-called bookworms, scholars and other elements that are useless and harmful for the State. These actions encountered strange resistance. At the same time as the entire population helped me in a unanimous wave of patriotism and loyalty--denouncing hidden criminals, organizing trials on the spot, giving

useful hints as to who the suspicious characters were that had escaped my attention--just at that time some unknown but extremely energetic person snatched away from right under my nose all the most important, incorrigible and detestable criminals and abducted them across the border. This way many have gotten away, as for instance the godless astrologer Bagir Kissenski; the criminal alchemist Synda, who, it has been definitely proven, was in alliance with the devil's brood as well as with the Irukanian potentates; the vile pamphleteer and disturber of the peace, Zuren; and several others of low rank. And the mad magician and mechanic Kabani has slunk away and is hiding in some hole somewhere. Some unknown person has distributed enormous sums of gold in order to prevent the people from venting their righteous anger on those blasphemous spies and poisoners, the former personal physicians of His Majesty. Someone liberated Arata, the hunchback, under the most fantastic circumstances which once more lead us to suspect the unknown to be in league with ungodly forces--Arata, a regular demon of depravity, who seditiously poisons the nation's soul, the instigator and leader of peasants' revolts ..."

Don Reba stopped, wrinkled his forehead and regarded Rumata with a meaningful glance. Rumata turned his eyes up to the ceiling and smiled dreamily. True, he had kidnapped Arata, the hunchback, yes, indeed--with a helicopter at that. It had made a tremendous impression on Arata's guards. On Arata, too, by the way. I'm quite a guy, I must admit, he thought. That

was a good piece of work.

"You are probably also aware that the aforementioned Arata is currently in the eastern sectors of the capital, leading a mutineering army of slaves, shedding considerable quantities of noble blood--and he still disposes over sufficient money and arms."

"I can easily believe that," said Rumata. "He impressed me right away as a very determined man."

"You confess then?" quickly asked Don Reba.

"To what?" asked Rumata surprised.

They remained silent for a while, just staring at each other.

"I'll continue," said Don Reba. "In order to rescue all these spoilers of souls, you, Don Rumata, have poured out at least over one hundred pounds of gold, according to my moderate and incomplete calculations. I will not make mention here of the fact that contact with these forces of evil has sullied your soul for all eternity. Neither will I discuss here the fact that you did not receive a single copper penny from your Estorian estates as long as you have been staying within the borders of the Arkanarian realm; surely, after all, why should you have gotten any money? Why provide a dead man with money even if he's a relative? But your gold, your gold!"

He opened a strong-box that had been buried under a pile of papers on the table and took out a handful of gold coins showing the profile of Pitz the Sixth.

"This gold alone would suffice to have you burnt at the stake!" he cried. "This gold is the devil's work! Human hands are not capable of producing gold of such purity!"

He literally pierced Rumata with his glance. I must admit in all

honesty, Rumata thought, he's got me there. Touche. We didn't think of that one. Must give him credit for that; he's the first to have noticed it . . .

But Don Reba grew suddenly very mild again. Paternal, solicitous tones came into his voice:

"And in general you are behaving in a most imprudent manner, Don Rumata. I kept worrying about you the whole time. What a duelist, what a mischief-maker! One hundred and twenty-six duels within five years! And not a single person killed . . . After all, in the final analysis, one might arrive at some conclusions. I, for instance, have done so. And I am not the only one. Just take Brother Aba, for example--well, we shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but he was a very cruel man, and I never could really stand him . . . Well, then. Brother Aba selected not the most skillful, but the biggest and strongest men to have you put under arrest. And he was right in the end. A few dislocated shoulders, wrenched necks, not to mention some bashed-in teeth . . . And here you are standing in front of me! But how could you know you were fighting for your life? You are a master! You are undoubtedly the best sword fighter in the whole country. And there can be no doubt that you have sold your soul to the devil, for only in hell is it possible to learn such fantastically masterful swordsmanship. I am even inclined to admit that you were given this fabulous skill only under condition never to kill anyone. Although I am hard put to imagine why the devil of all creatures should insist on such a stipulation. But that's

something for our scholars to figure out..."

A thin, high scream, a sound like a squealing pig, interrupted Don Reba's deliberations. Annoyed, he looked at the lilac-colored, heavy drapes. Sounds of people scuffling came from behind them. There were thuds, blows, and someone shouting, "Let go! Let go!" and then hoarse voices, cursing and shouting in an incomprehensible dialect. Suddenly the curtain tore with a crack like a whip and fell to the ground. Into the cabinet staggered a bald-headed man on all fours, his chin bleeding and his eyes open wide. Huge human paws pushed through a chink of the other curtains that were still in place, seized the man by his-feet and pulled him back again. Rumata recognized the man--it was Budach.

He screamed like a wild animal:

"Betrayed! I have been betrayed! It was poison! Why?"

They dragged him back into the darkness. A man, clad in black, swiftly picked up the fallen curtain and arranged it again. The sudden silence was interrupted by sickening noises coming from behind the curtain--somebody was vomiting. Rumata understood.

"Where is Budach?" he asked harshly.

"As you can see, he's had a little accident," answered Don Reba, but he was clearly no longer as self-assured as he had been.

"Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes," said Rumata.

"Where is Budach?"

"My dear Don Rumata," said Don Reba, wagging his head. He had collected himself again. "What do you want with Budach? Is he a relative of yours, perhaps? You've never even set eyes on him in your life until now."

"Listen to me, Reba," Rumata was enraged. "I'm not joking. If anything

happens to Budach, you'll die like a dog. I'll strangle you with my own two hands!"

"Hardly," Don Reba said quickly. He was very pale.

"You're a fool, Reba. You're a master at intrigue, but you actually don't know your way around. You've never let yourself in for a game as dangerous as this one. And you don't even know it."

Don Reba bent over the table, his eyes like glowing coals. Rumata knew that he himself had never been in a situation as precarious as the present one. It was time to put the cards on the table; they would soon know who had the upper hand in the game. Rumata tensed his muscles, ready to spring. There was no weapon, be it spear or arrow, that could kill you instantly: the thought was written on Don Reba's face. And the old man with the hemorrhoids wanted to live. "What is it that you want?" he said in a whining voice. "We've had a nice little chat here . . . your Budach is alive. Alive and healthy. He'll even live to treat me one of these days. Just don't get excited."

"Where is Budach?"

"In the Tower of Joy."

"I need him!"

"So do I, Don Rumata."

"Listen to me, Reba," said Rumata, "don't provoke me. And stop pretending. You are afraid of me. And well you might be. Budach belongs to me, do you understand? To me!"

Now both were standing, facing each other. Don Reba's face was an alarming sight: He turned blue, his lips began to twitch feverishly and he mumbled to himself with little spurts of saliva coming from his mouth.

"You whippersnapper!" he hissed. "I'm not afraid of anybody!"

I can
squash you like a leech!"

He wheeled around abruptly and pulled down a gobelin that had been hanging behind his back. A wide window appeared.

"There, have a look!"

Rumata went to the window. It opened onto the square in front of the palace. Dawn was approaching by now. The smoke of many fires rose into the sky. The square was dotted with corpses. In the center of the square was a black, unmoving rectangular mass. Rumata examined it more closely. It was a group of riders, lined up with amazing exactitude. They wore long black cloaks, black hoods that were pulled down over their eyes, black, triangular shields in their left hand--and long halberds in their right.

"If you please," said Don Reba with a rattling voice. He was trembling all over. "The valiant, martial children of the Lord our God--the cavalry of the Holy Order. They landed in the port of Arkanar during the night in order to crush the barbarian revolt of the nocturnal scoundrel Waga Koleso, who allied himself with the snooty merchants and storekeepers. The rebellion has been quelled. The Holy Order now rules over the city and the entire country whose name henceforth is the Arkanarian Province of the Holy Order..."

Instinctively, Rumata scratched the back of his neck. So, that's what it is! These are the people for whom the unfortunate shopkeepers have paved the way. What a coup! Don Reba was grinning triumphantly.

"We haven't properly met yet," he continued with the same rattling voice. "Allow me to introduce myself: Don Reba, representative of the Holy Order in the Arkanarian Province. Bishop and Councilor of War, servant of

Our Lord!"

It isn't so surprising after all, thought Rumata. Wherever Graydom triumphs, the blackbirds will always seize power. Oh, you historians, to hell with you ... But he regained his composure, gripped his hands behind his back and began to rock back and forth on his heels.

"I am tired now," he said in an affected manner. "I want to sleep. I want to wash myself with warm water, to rinse off the blood and spit of your cut-throats. Tomorrow . . . that is to say, today . . . let's say, one hour after sunrise ... I'll come to your offices. The writ for Budach's release must be ready by then."

"Look, down there! Twenty thousand men!" shouted Don Reba pointing to the square below the windows. Rumata frowned.

"Not quite so loud, please," he said. "And just remember, Don Reba: I am absolutely certain that you are not a bishop. I know you through and through. You are nothing but a filthy traitor and a clumsy, cheap schemer . . ." Don Reba licked his lips; his eyes assumed a glassy stare. "I know no pardon. For any foul play, involving myself or any of my friends, you'll have to pay with your own life! I hate you, just remember that! I'll have to tolerate you, but you must learn in time to get out of my way. You understand?"

Don Reba smiled pleadingly and said quickly: "I have only one wish. I want you to be near me, Don Rumata. I cannot loll you. I do not know why, but I cannot do it!"

"You are afraid," said Rumata.

"All right, then, so I am afraid," said Don Reba. "Maybe you are the

devil, maybe the Son of God. Who can tell? Maybe, on the other hand, you come from some faraway, powerful domain: People say they do actually exist.

I won't even try peering down into the abyss that has swallowed you. My head

begins to swim and I feel close to heresy. Yet, I can have you killed any

time I want to. Now. Tomorrow. Yesterday... Do you understand that?"

"I am not interested in any of that," said Rumata.

"So? What does interest you?"

"Nothing at all," answered Rumata. "I simply want to have a good time.

I am neither a devil nor a god, I am Chevalier Rumata of Estoria, a gay

nobleman, a courtier, burdened with personal whims and prejudices,

accustomed to be free in every respect. Bear that in mind, will you!"

Don Reba had himself well under control again. He dabbed his swollen

face with a handkerchief and smiled pleasantly.

"I appreciate your stubbornness. After all, even you are striving

toward some goal. And I respect these ideals, even if I fail to comprehend

them. I am very happy that we had a heart-to-heart talk. Quite possibly

sometime you will present your views to me more fully and, who knows, you

might convince me that way to revise my own. All men are liable to make

mistakes; that's a human failing. It may well be that I am the one who is

making a mistake, that I am not striving toward those goals that would make

it worthwhile to work as arduously and strenuously as I do now. I am a man

of broad views, and I can well imagine that some day we will work together,

standing shoulder to shoulder..."

"That remains to be seen," said Rumata and left the room. What a

bootlicker!" he thought. Some collaborator he would make!

Shoulder to
shoulder... "

The city was shaken to the core by the unbearable terror. The blood-red morning sun illuminated a somber scene of empty streets, smoking ruins, shattered window shutters and doors. Bloody glass splinters glittered in the dust of the roads. Innumerable swarms of crows descended on the city as if it were a churchyard. Patrols of two to three riders, clad in black, trotted their horses across open places and at crossroads. They slowly tossed from side to side in the saddles. Everywhere could be seen wooden stakes, hastily rammed into the ground, with scarred bodies drooping over the embers of the pyre. The whole city gave the appearance that nothing alive had remained--except for the disgusting, screeching crows and the busy slaughterers in black.

Rumata was making his way through the city. Most of the time he kept his eyes closed. He was gasping for air, his bruised body hurting furiously.--Can these still be called human beings? Some are slaughtered openly in the streets while the others sit inside their houses, waiting obediently for their turn. And each one thinking: Who cares what happens, as long as it is not me--I'll escape. Cold-blooded bestiality of the slaughterers and cold-blooded obedience of the slaughtered. Stupid cold-blooded attitudes, that is the worst. Ten people will stand there paralyzed with fear and wait obediently until someone comes by and chooses a victim and cuts his throat in cold blood. The souls of these people are

littered with filth, and each hour of obedient waiting will sully them further and further. Quite unintentionally, these homes, cringing with fear, will give birth to the vilest villains, informers, and murderers. Thousands of people who throughout all their lives will be wracked by fear and fright, will teach fear and fright to their own children, and these children in turn will teach their children.--I can't go on, Rumata kept repeating to himself. I am close to losing my mind and then I'll become like these people; it won't take much more before I finally stop understanding the reason for my being in this place ... I must gain perspective again, turn my back on all of this for a while, get some peace and quiet...

". . . At the end of the year of the Great Water--in the year X of the new era--the centrifugal processes rapidly gained ground in the old empire. By taking advantage of this future, the Holy Order which represented the interests of the most reactionary groups of the feudal society who tried with every means to bring to a halt the general decay . . ." But are you familiar with the stench of smoldering corpses at the stake? Do you know what it is like? Have you ever seen a naked woman, her belly slit open, wallow in the dusty road? Have you ever seen cities where human beings are silent and only crows can be heard? Yet, the still unborn boys and girls, who will be sitting before the dictascopes of the schools in the Communist Republic of Arkanar?

His chest bumped into something pointed and hard. He looked up and saw a black rider before him. A long spear with a broad, precisely

toothed
blade, pressed against his chest. The rider regarded him silently through
the slits of his black hood. All the hood revealed were a thin-lipped mouth
and a small chin. I must do something, thought Rumata. But what? Dismount
him? No. The rider slowly drew back his right arm, readying his spear. This
gesture reminded Rumata of what he had to do. Casually, he raised his left
hand and pulled back his sleeve. An iron bracelet came to light; it had been
handed to him before he had left the palace. The rider inspected the
bracelet, lowered his weapon, moved aside to let Rumata pass. "In the name
of the Lord," he said with a strange accent. "Blessed be His name," murmured
Rumata. A short stretch farther on he passed another rider who was busily
knocking down with his spear some elaborately carved figurines representing
little devils from a roof ridge. On the second floor a fat face, distorted
with fright, peeked out from behind half-lowered shutters--probably one of
those shopkeepers who barely three days ago had enthusiastically hollered,
"Hooray for Don Reba!" while waving his beer stein and listening with gusto
and relish to the crunch, crunch, crunch of the Gray horde's hobnailed boots
marching on the pavement. Oh, Graydom, Graydom... Rumata turned away.
But what is happening at home? he suddenly remembered, and he began to
quicken his steps, almost running during the last stretch of the way. The
house was unharmed. Two monks were sitting on the small stoop. They had
pulled back their hoods, exposing their badly shaved heads to the sunlight.
The moment they saw him, they stood up. "In the name of the Lord,"

both said
in unison. "Blessed be His name," replied Rumata and demanded:
"What business have you to be here?" Both monks bowed and
folded their
arms over their stomachs. "Now that you have come we can leave,"
answered
one of the monks. They descended the few steps and walked
leisurely off,
their crossed arms halfway hidden in their long sleeves. Rumata
followed
them with his eyes, remembering how many thousands of times he
had seen
these humble figures in then-long black habits, walking down the
street. But
then they did not use to drag the scabbards of long swords behind
them in
the dust. We goofed on this one. Oh, and now we goofed here, he
thought.
What a delightful pastime it had been for the noble dons to
attach
themselves to some lone monk, ambling down the road, and to tell
each other
naughty stories close to the monk's ears. And fool that I am, I
pretended to
be drunk, and would walk behind them, laughing out loud for joy
because the
country, at least, was not ravaged by religious fanaticism. But
what else
could we have done? *Indeed, what else could we have done?* "Who is
it?" rang
out a voice. "Open up, Mugu, it's me," said Rumata softly. The bolts
clicked
as they were pushed back; the door was opened slightly, and Rumata
squeezed
himself through the narrow chink. Here in the entrance hall, all
was as
usual, and Rumata breathed a sigh of relief. Old Mugu with the
silvery hair
and perpetually wagging head relieved his master of his helmet and
swords.
"How is Kyra?"
"Kyra is upstairs," said Mugu. "She is fine." "Splendid," said
Rumata

while he unbuckled his belt. "And where is Uno? Why is he not here to welcome me?" Mugu took the belt.

"Uno is dead," he said in a calm, firm tone. "He is lying in the servants' room." Rumata closed his eyes. "Uno dead..." he repeated. "Who killed him?" Without waiting for an answer, he went into the servants' room.

Uno's body lay on the table. He was covered with a sheet up to his waist.

His hands were folded over his chest, his eyes wide open and his mouth distorted in a grimace. The servants surrounded the table, their heads bowed, listening to the murmurings of the monk who prayed in a corner. The cook was sobbing. Without taking his eyes off the boy, Rumata unbuttoned his collar.

"The dirty dogs," he said. "Oh, those filthy beasts!" He stumbled over something, went very close to the table, looked into the dead eyes, raised the sheet slightly, but dropped it again at once.

"Yes, too late," he said. "Too late. Hopeless. Oh, you bastards! Who killed him? The monks?"

He turned to the monk, seized him by the scruff of his neck, pressed him down to the ground and bent over his face.

"Who killed him?" he said. "Was it one of you? Speak up!"

"No, not the monks," spoke a calm voice behind his back. "The Gray soldiers did it."

For a while Rumata stared into the emaciated face of the monk, whose pupils slowly began to dilate. "In the name of the Lord," croaked the monk painfully. Rumata let him go, sat down on a bench at the boy's feet, and began to cry. He covered his face with his hands, cried, and listened to the

quietly droning voice of Mugu. The old servant told that shortly after the second watch, there was knocking at the house door: "Open up, in the name of the King!" Uno called out not to open the gate, but then they were forced to open it after all when the Gray soldiers threatened to set the house on fire. They forced their way into the entrance hall, beat and bound the servants, then crept upstairs. Uno had been standing guard at the doors of the upstairs apartments; he started shooting with his crossbow. He had two bolts, and shot off both. The second arrow missed. The Gray soldiers threw their knives, and Uno fell. They dragged him down the stairs and were just about to kick him and hack him with their cleavers, when suddenly the black monks entered the house. They killed two Gray soldiers, disarmed the rest, tied ropes around their necks and dragged them out into the street.

Mugu fell silent But Rumata remained seated at the end of the table, his elbows resting on the table top at the feet of the dead boy. Slowly he rose to his feet, wiped his eyes dry with his sleeve, kissed the boy on his cold forehead. Then he walked upstairs, placing one foot in front of the other with great effort.

He was half dead with fatigue and exhaustion. Only with great effort did he reach the landing, and walk through the guest room to his bed; there, moaning, he fell face down on a pillow. Kyra hurried over to him. He was so exhausted that he could not even help her as she removed his soiled clothing. She pulled off his boots, cried over his swollen face, took off his uniform and the metalloplast shirt, and continued to weep

quietly over his bruised body. Now, suddenly, he felt his bones aching, aching as if he had been bound on the torture rack. While Kyra washed his body with a sponge dipped in vinegar water, he panted and hissed through his teeth, without opening his eyes: "I could have killed him . . . He was standing right next to me . . . Wrung his neck with my bare hands . . . Is that a life, Kyra? Let's leave this place . . . After all, this is an experiment with me, and not with them." He did not even notice that he was speaking Russian. Kyra looked anxiously at his eyes, glassy with tears, and showered gentle kisses on his cheeks. Covering him with the mended sheets (Uno had not bought any new ones despite his master's urging) she ran downstairs to prepare some mulled wine for him. Moaning in physical and mental pain, Rumata crawled from his bed and staggered barefoot into the study. There he opened a secret drawer in his desk, rummaged in his medicine chest, and took several Sporamin tablets. When Kyra returned, bearing a steaming kettle on a silver tray, he was already back in bed. He felt the pain leave him, the din in his head quieten down and his body fill with new strength and energy. He drained the kettle and soon felt quite well again. Then he called Mugu and asked that his clothes be made ready.

"Don't go, Rumata," said Kyra. "Don't go! Stay here at home!"

"I must go, my darling!"

"I am afraid. Stay here... They'll kill you!"

"You don't say. Why should they kill me? They're all afraid of me, aren't they?"

She started to weep again, but quietly, as if she was

afraid of
annoying him. Rumata pulled her down on his lap and gently stroked
her hair.

"The worst is over," he said. "And remember, we're going to
leave this
place..."

She calmed down and pressed her body against his. Mugu stood
quietly
next to them, patiently holding Rumata's trousers with the little
golden
bells.

"But before we leave, I have a lot to do here," continued
Rumata.

"Countless numbers of people have been killed this night. I must
find out
who is still alive and who has been slain. And I must help those
who are
still in danger."

"And who is going to help you?"

"Fortunate the man who thinks only of others . . . And
besides, there
are powerful people who will come to our assistance if necessary."

"I cannot think of others," she said. "You came home more
dead than
alive. I can see with my own eyes how they have beaten you. And
Uno was
beaten to death. Where were your powerful people when you needed
them? Why
did they not prevent all this slaughter? I do not believe you ... I
do not
believe..."

She tried to wrest herself free from his arms but he held her
tight.

"It was unfortunate," he said. "This time they came a bit too
late. But
now they are watching us again and will protect us. Why don't you
believe me
today? You have always believed me. And didn't you see for yourself:
I came
home half dead, and now, just look at me!"

"I don't want to look at you," she said hiding her face. "I
don't want
to cry again."

"Oh, come, come! These scratches here? Nothing! The worst is over now

... at least for the two of us. But there are fine, upstanding people for

whom the horror has not yet ended. And I must help them."

She sighed deeply, kissed his neck and freed herself gently from his

embrace. "Come tonight," she begged. "Will you come?"

"You can count on it," he said firmly and smiled. "I'll be home even earlier than nightfall, and most likely not alone. I'll be back at dinner time."

She walked over to an armchair, sat down, clasped her hands around her

knee, and watched Rumata getting dressed. As he put on his trousers with the

bells he mumbled to himself in Russian; Mugu sat cross-legged on the floor

before him and began to fasten the innumerable buckles and buttons. Rumata

put a clean undershirt over his metalloplast shirt. Finally he said in a

desperate tone: "Darling, please do understand me, I must go!

What can I

do?! It's simply out of the question for me to remain here!"

Suddenly she said pensively: "Sometimes I wonder why you don't beat me."

Rumata was just buttoning his shirt with the lacy frills; he froze with horror.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked perplexed. "How could anyone possibly want to beat you?"

"You are not only a good, a very good man," she continued without

listening to him, "but you are also a strange man, almost like an archangel.

When you are with me I feel very strong. Now, for example, I am strong.

Sometime soon I shall ask you for something. Won't you tell me about

yourself some day? Not now, only when all this is over-- will you do that for me?"

Rumata did not reply for a long time. Mugu handed him the orange-colored vest with the red ribbons. Rumata put it on with intense dislike and buckled up his belt.

"Yes," he said finally. "Someday I shall tell you everything, my darling."

"I'll wait till then," she said seriously. "But now you must leave.

Don't let me detain you here any longer."

Rumata walked over to her and pressed his bruised lips tenderly on her soft mouth. Then he pulled the iron circlet from his wrist and held it out to her.

"Put this on your left arm," he said. "I doubt that they'll pay us another visit today . . . but in case they should turn up here just show them this iron bracelet."

She followed him with her eyes and he felt that she was mutely calling out after him.--I know, she is thinking: I do not know who you are, perhaps the devil or the Son of God, or maybe a man from legendary worlds across the seas, but one thing is certain. If you do not return I will die.

He was most grateful for her silence, for having to leave her now was somehow quite unusually hard for him. Like diving head first from a sunny, emerald-blue shore into an evil-smelling puddle.

EIGHT

Rumata decided not to take the direct route to the offices

of the
bishop of Arkanar. He crept stealthily through rows of backyards, hid
behind
rags hung on washlines, crawled through holes in fences--catching
his rich,
colorful ribbons and strips of the finest Soanian lace on rusty
nails--and
wriggled on all fours between mounds of potatoes. But for all his
efforts he
failed to evade the watchful eye of the black soldiery. As he
turned into
the narrow, winding lane which led to the big dump heap, he
encountered two
somber, drunken monks.

Rumata wanted to get out of their way but the monks drew their
swords
and blocked his path. As Rumata, too, grasped both his swords,
the monks
whistled for reinforcements. Rumata was just about to withdraw to
the hole
in the fence through which he had emerged a moment ago when an agile
little
man with a nondescript face ran toward him. He brushed against
Rumata's
shoulder, hurried over to the monks, and whispered something
to them,
whereupon the monks pulled up their long habits, baring their legs
wrapped
around with lilac-colored ribbons and made off in a trot, soon to
disappear
behind some houses. The little man scurried after them without
looking back
once.

So that's the story, thought Rumata. A spy, a bodyguard. And he
doesn't
even bother to do his job in an inconspicuous manner; our new
bishop of
Arkanar really thinks of everything. It would be interesting to know
whether
he's frightened *for* me or *of* me. Following the spy with his eyes,
Rumata
walked toward the dump heap. The dump heap led to the rear buildings
of the

former Ministry of Internal Security. He hoped that no guards had been posted there.

The lane was empty; not a living thing could be seen. But soon he could hear the soft creaking of shutters, doors being opened and shut, a baby crying, and above all that hung anxious whispering. From behind a half-rotten fence cautiously peered out an emaciated face all blackened by deeply imbedded layers of soot. Two frightened, hollow eyes stared at Rumata.

"I beg your pardon, noble don; please forgive me. Could the noble don perhaps tell me what is going on in the city? I am Kickus, the smith, also called the lame one; I want to go to my forge, but I am afraid ..."

"Don't go there," advised Rumata. "One can't fool around with these monks. The King is dead. Don Reba has seized power. He is now the bishop of the Holy Order. Just stay home, will you."

The smith accompanied each of Rumata's words with an eager nod of his head, his eyes filling with melancholy and despair.

"The Holy Order, you don't say," he mumbled heavily. "I'll be damned ... I beg your pardon, noble don. So, the Order, well then . . . They are the Gray Ones, aren't they?"

"No, no," said Rumata and regarded him with a certain curiosity. "The Gray Ones have been beaten, you see. These are the monks."

"Oh, dear me!" said the smith. "So the Gray Ones are ... well, and the Holy Order! The Gray Ones are defeated? Not bad, I say. But what is going to happen with us now, noble don, what do you think? We'll have to conform, eh? Conform to the Holy Order, yes?"

"Why not," said Rumata. "The Order will have to eat and

drink, too.

Adjust to them, I say!"

All of a sudden the smith became quite animated.

"That's what I think, noble don. We must adjust and conform. I believe

the main thing is not to bother others and you will be left in peace. Is

that the idea?"

Rumata shook his head.

"Oh, no," he said. "Those who remain quiet and peaceful will be the

first ones to be slaughtered."

"That sounds right to me, after all," moaned the smith. "But what are

we supposed to do? One man alone is as weak as a little finger, and all the

snot-nosed blackbirds are on his back. Oh, Glorious Mother, if only they

would cut my master's throat! He was an officer with the Gray Ones. What do

you think, noble don, it's possible that they did him in, isn't it? You

know, I owe him five golden guilders."

"I wouldn't know," said Rumata. "They might have finished him off,

quite possible. But I'd like you to think about something: It's true that

you alone are as weak as a little finger, but fingers like that exist by the

tens of thousands in this city."

"So?" said the smith.

"Just think about it, what that means!" said Rumata annoyed, and walked

on.

A fat lot of good that advice will do him, thought Rumata.

It's still

too early for him to try and think. And how simple things could be here

really; Ten thousand such hammerlike fists--if properly infuriated--would

make mincemeat out of any foe. But they have not yet reached that point.

They have not yet experienced the right kind of fury. Only fear.

Every man
for himself, and one god for the lot of them.

The elderberry bushes lining the road suddenly began to move and sway and out jumped--Don Tameo. The moment he saw Rumata walking in the harrow lane, Don Tameo roared with joy, and despite his enormous bulk he leapt nimbly to his feet, then staggered toward Rumata, stretching his dirt-encrusted hands out to him.

"My noble friend!" he roared. "What joy! I see you too are on your way to the chancellery offices?"

"Yes, indeed, my noble don," answered Rumata and quickly twisted his body to free himself from Don Tameo's embrace.

"Will you permit me to join you, noble don?"

"It will be an honor for me, noble don."

They bowed to each other. Apparently Don Tameo had not yet quenched his thirst from earlier in the day. He extracted a little bottle of the finest quality from the folds of his wide yellow trousers.

. "Would you care to join me in a drink?" came his offer, accompanied by an elegant flourish of the bottle.

"No, thank you," said Rumata.

"Rum!" explained Don Tameo. "Genuine rum from the capital! I've paid its weight in gold!"

They descended to the dump heap. They held their noses as they made their way through the garbage piles, past dead dogs, through stinking puddles swarming with white worms. The morning air was filled with the constant hum of millions of emerald green flies.

"Most peculiar," said Don Tameo, and stoppered up the bottle. "I've never been in this place before."

Rumata was silent.

"I've always been delighted by Don Reba," said Don Tameo. "I

knew all
along that he would sweep this good-for-nothing monarch from the
throne and
pave new ways for us and open up new vistas for the country."
With these
words he slid with one leg into a yellow-green puddle, splashing
mud over
himself from head to toe, but managed to grasp Rumata's arm to avoid
falling
flat on his face. "Oh, yes," he resumed his remarks after they had
regained
firm ground once again, "we, the young aristocracy, will always stand
by Don
Reba's side! Now they'll finally show the proper respect due to
us. Judge
for yourself, my noble friend, I've been walking now for one hour
through
streets and gardens and I have not met a single Gray bastard. We
have wiped
the Gray scum off the face of the earth. Ah, how wonderful and how
sweet it
is now to be able to breathe freely in our newborn Arkanar! In place
of the
boorish shopkeepers, in place of the impertinent swindlers, and
peasant
louts, the streets have now been taken over by the Servants of the
Lord. I
have seen it with my own eyes: noblemen are parading quite openly
in front
of their houses. No longer must they fear that some fool in a
coachman's
apron will splash mud all over them with his dirty cart. And you no
longer
have to elbow your way through the throng of butchers and
shopkeepers.
Inspired by the blessing of the great Holy Order, for which--I must
admit--I
have always felt great admiration and great sympathy, we are now
striving
forward to an era of unheard-of glory. No peasant will dare any
longer to
raise his eyes up to a nobleman without procuring first a special
permit

which will have to be signed by the district inspector of the Holy Order. I

am just on my way to hand in a written petition for this purpose."

"A nauseating stench," said Rumata with feeling.

"Yes, disgusting," agreed Don Tameo and replaced the cork on his bottle. "On the other hand, though--how freely we can breathe in our newborn Arkanar I And the price of wine has gone down to half what it was just yesterday..."

By the time they reached the end of the lane Don Tameo had emptied the contents of his bottle, which he flung to the side of the street. He became unduly agitated, fell twice flat on his face, refusing both times to brush the dirt off his soiled clothes, declaring that it was his natural state to be defiled and that he wished to come into the presence of his new master in this condition. He began again and again to recite his petition at the top of his lungs. "How marvelously said!" he shouted. "Just take this passage, for instance, noble dons: 'In order that the stinking peasants . . .' Eh? Isn't that a splendid thought?"

As they entered the courtyard behind the chancellery, Don Tameo collided with a monk, burst into tears and begged for forgiveness of his sins. The almost choking monk tried to ward off his iron clasp and whistle for help but Don Tameo clung to the monk's habit and thus both fell into a garbage heap. Rumata left them lying there and walked on. From quite a distance he could still hear the fitful, pitiful whistling and the shouts of "In order that the stinking peasants! . . . your blessi-i-ing! . . . with all my heart! ... I felt sympathy, sympathy, understand, you peasant

lout?"

On the square in front of the entrance to the chancellery stood a detachment of infantry monks, armed with blunt cudgels. They had removed the dead from the street. The morning wind drove yellow columns of dust across the square. The rectangular shadow of the Tower of Joy fell across the monk soldiers. Below the broad, conical roof of the tower the crows were cawing and quarreling as usual. A rafter jutted out above; this was where they would hang the men head downwards. The tower had been built two hundred years before by the king's ancestors for the exclusive purpose of warding off the enemies in case of war. It had been erected on a firm foundation, a three-storey structure, which served as storage rooms for victuals in case of a protracted siege. Later on the tower was used as a prison. As a result of an earthquake, all the floors and ceilings inside the tower collapsed and the prison had to be moved to the basement. Some time previously, an Arkanarian queen complained that the cries of the tortured prisoners disturbed her, whereupon her royal consort decreed that a military band was to play in the tower from early in the morning until late at night. It was from this time that it received its present name. It was no longer anything more than an empty stone shell; the torture chambers had long been shifted to the newly opened, deeper cellar holes; and the orchestra had long since stopped playing its daily concerts; but the citizens still called it by its old name, the Tower of Joy.

Usually the area around the Tower of Joy. was deserted. But

today there was a great commotion. The soldier monks led, pushed, dragged along the ground hordes of Sturmoviks in torn gray uniforms, miserable vagabonds clad in rags, half-undressed citizens, frozen with fear, and hysterically screaming young girls. The down-at-the-heel soldiers of the nocturnal army, casting sullen looks about them, were driven there like whole herds of cattle. And from secret exits they pulled out the corpses with barbed hooks, threw them on carts, and transported them out of the city. In the long queue of waiting courtiers and privileged citizens that still stood outside the doors of the chancellery, the last in line observed this dreadful traffic with fear and horror.

All were admitted to the chancellery; some, however, were guided inside in a convoy. Rumata elbowed his way inside, where he found the air as sticky and close as in the dump heap. Behind an enormous table, piled high with papers, sat an official with a yellow-gray complexion. A giant goose quill was stuck behind his right ear. The petitioner, whose turn it was now, the noble Don Keu, haughtily twitched his mustache as he announced his name.

"Take off your hat," said the official in a monotonous voice, without raising his eyes from his papers.

"The clan of the Keus has the privilege to keep on their hats, even in the presence of the King," stated Don Keu proudly.

"Nobody has any privileges before the Holy Order," said the official in the same monotonous tone of voice. Don Keu began to hiss and tamed beet red, but removed his hat nevertheless. The official moved his long yellow

finger
across the paper.

"Don Keu . . . Don Keu," he murmured. "Don Keu . . . King Street, number twelve?"

"Yes," said Don Keu in his fat, irritated voice.

"Number 485, brother Tibak."

Brother Tibak, his face purple from obesity and shortness of breath, sat at the next table. He rummaged in some documents, wiped the sweat from his brow, got to his feet and read out in a toneless voice:

"Number 485, Don Keu, King Street, number twelve, guilty of blasphemy against the name of His Magnificence, the bishop of Arkanar, Don Reba, two years ago at a royal dance, is ordered to receive three dozen lashes on his bare buttocks, as well as to kiss the shoe of His Magnificence."

Brother Tibak resumed his place again. "Go to the corridor here," said the official with the colorless voice. "The lashings to the right, the shoe to the left. Next, please."

To Rumata's great surprise, Don Keu did not even attempt to protest. Evidently he must have seen a great deal while he was waiting in line. He croaked once briefly, stroked his mustache with great dignity and walked out into the corridor.

The next in line was the gigantic Don Pifa, who wobbled with fat. He had already taken off his hat as he stepped up to the table. "Don Pifa . . . Don Pifa," cackled the official and moved his finger along the paper before him. "Milkjug Street, number two?" Don Pifa emitted a gurgling sound.

"Number 504, brother Tibak." Brother Tibak stroked his bald head and stood up. "Number 504, Don Pifa, Milkjug Street, number two, remained unnoticed

for any offenses by His Magnificence and consequently pure!"

"Don Pifa," said the official, "receive the sign of blameless conduct."

He bent down over a box next to his chair and took out an iron bracelet

which he handed to Don Pifa. 'To be worn on the left wrist, to be presented

immediately when requested by the warriors of the Holy Order.

Next one,

please."

Once more Don Pifa emitted a gurgling sound; his eyes were riveted to

his bracelet as he left the room. The official with the colorless voice was

already calling out the next name. Rumata viewed the people who had lined up

to wait. There were many familiar faces among the crowd. Some were dressed

in fine clothes as usual, others were obviously impoverished, but whether

they were rich or poor, they were all thoroughly splashed with mud.

Somewhere in the middle of the line, Don Sera said in a loud voice and for

the third time in five minutes, "I fail to see why a noble don shouldn't get

a few sound whacks, too, in the name of His Magnificence!"

Rumata waited until they sent the next man into the corridor (he was a

well-known fishmonger, sentenced to five strokes with a cane--without having

to kiss the shoe-- because of illicit trains of thought). Then Rumata

jostled his way to the table and without much ado placed his hand on the

official's stack of papers.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I need an official order for Doctor Budach's release. I am Don Rumata."

The official did not look up.

"Don Rumata . . . Don Rumata," he mumbled, pushed Rumata's hand aside

and ran a finger down a list of names.

"What are you doing, you old inkpot?" said Rumata. "I need an order of release!"

"Don Rumata . . . Don Rumata . . ." It was impossible to stop this ossified automaton of a bureaucrat, "Spengler Street, number eight. Number sixteen. Brother Tibak." Rumata sensed how all behind him were holding their breath. But to be quite frank, he, too, felt somewhat ill at ease. The scarlet-faced, heavily perspiring Brother Tibak stood up!

"Number sixteen, Spengler Street, number eight, for special services in the cause of the Holy Order to receive an expression of special recognition by His Magnificence. His Magnificence will therefore graciously issue for him an edict for Doctor Budach's release, over whose person he will be permitted to dispose at his own discretion, see form 6/17/11."

The official proceeded to pull this form immediately from the pile of documents to his right and handed it to Don Rumata.

"Through the yellow door, to the second floor, room six, straight through the corridor, make a right turn at first, then one to the left," he said without moving a muscle. "Next, please."

Rumata quickly skimmed the contents of the document. It was not an order for Doctor Budach's release. It was merely a document to obtain an entry permit to the fifth special department of the chancellery, where he was supposed to pick up a recommendation for the secretary of the secret police. "What did you give me here, you nitwit?" asked Rumata. "Where is the official release order?!"

"Through the yellow door, to the second floor, room six, straight through the corridor, make a right turn first, then one to the

left,"
repeated the official.

"I am asking you, where is the release order!" yelled Rumata.

"Haven't the faintest idea ... no idea . . . Next one, please!"

A softly rattling breath sounded above Rumata's ears and something warm and soft leaned against his back. He shook it off with a brief resolute movement. It was Don Pifa, who had pushed his way back once more to the front.

"It doesn't fit," he complained in a whining voice.

The official looked up and regarded him with his tired, dull eyes.

"Name? Rank?" he inquired.

"It doesn't fit," repeated Don Pifa, and pulled and pushed the bracelet that would hardly fit over three of his fat fingers.

"It doesn't fit ... it doesn't fit . . ." murmured one of the two officials and suddenly seized a fat book that had been lying on the table over in a corner. The book looked ominous in its greasy, black cover. For a few seconds Don Pifa stared in confusion at the book, then swiftly recoiled one step and without another word quickly stomped toward the exit. Voices from the queue began to complain: "Don't keep us waiting!... hurry up, will you!"

Rumata, too, left the table. You filthy beast. I'll show you a thing or two! thought Rumata. The official started loudly to read from the greasy black book in a droning voice: "In case said bracelet should not fit the left wrist, or if the purified person should not have a left hand . . ."
Rumata walked around to the other side of the table, stuck both hands into the box with the bracelets, took out as many as he could hold in his hands

and went his way.

"Hey, hey," shouted the official in the same monotonous tone, "the motivation ..."

"In the name of the Lord," said Rumata over his shoulder with significant emphasis. The official and Brother Tibak rose swiftly from their seats and answered confused: "In His name!" The people waiting in line stared after Rumata with envy and admiration.

Rumata left the chancellery and made his way toward the Tower of Joy, merrily jingling the iron rings on his left hand. It turned out that he had snatched nine iron rings but he could find enough place for only five on his left arm. So he slipped the other four over his right wrist. That's the way the bishop of Arkanar intended to get rid of me, he thought. Well, he's barking up the wrong tree! His metal bracelets were clanking with every step he made and in his hand he held an important-looking piece of paper--form 6/17/11-- decorated with many colorful stamps. The monks in the street, walking or riding toward him, quickly gave him a wide berth. Occasionally he caught a glimpse in the crowd of his faithful spy and bodyguard, who always kept at a respectful distance. Rumata arrived at the gate of the Tower of Joy. He rattled his swords in a menacing manner at the guard who stuck out his head in curiosity, but who just as quickly withdrew it when he heard Rumata's growl. Rumata passed through the courtyard and descended the slippery, worn-out state down into the semidarkness, only relieved by some primitive, sputtering oil lamps. Here was the entrance to the Holy of Holies

of the former Ministry of Internal Security, the royal prison, and the torture chambers.

Every ten paces along the vaulted corridor he could see a stinking torch fastened in a rusty holder on the wall. Below each torch was a cavelike recess that ended in a small black door with a tiny window provided with iron bars. This was the entrance to the prison cells; heavy bolts on the outside secured the doors. The corridors were teeming with people. They bumped into each other, ran back and forth, shouted and screamed, trying to give orders to each other. Bolts rattled and clanked, doors were opened and slammed, somebody was being beaten and cried out in pain, another tried desperately to hold onto the railing as he was dragged away, another was shoved into a cell that was already overflowing with too many prisoners, and another prisoner, whom some men were unsuccessfully trying to drag out of a crowded cell, clutched his neighbor with an iron grip, screaming all the while: "Not me, not me!" The faces of the passing monks were eager and puckered up. Everyone was in a hurry, everyone performed duties of great importance to the State. Rumata intended first of all to find out what was going on in this place. He wandered leisurely through a number of passages and corridors, gradually venturing farther down the stairs. The lower floors were somewhat quieter. Judging by the conversations he overheard, this was the place where the graduates of the School for Patriots were examined. Clad only in leather breechcloths, the adolescents stood at the doors of the

torture chambers, leafed through old greasy manuals, and occasionally walked over to a big wooden tub to drink water from a tin cup that was fastened by a chain to the wall above. Horrible cries came from the chambers, the sound of thrashings, and it smelled unmistakably of burnt flesh. And their talk! Oh, that talk!

"You know, the rack has a screw on top, and it got worn out and went right through. Is that my fault, I ask you? He had them whip me for that.

'You rotten, stupid pig,' he said. 'You ape, go get five on your naked butt.

Then let me see you again.'"

"If we only could find out who does the whipping. Maybe it's one of us, a student. We could grease his palm--a few copper pennies would do the trick ..."

"If you get a fat man, the spikes won't leave a mark in his flesh. The best thing to do is take a couple of red-hot needles and push the lard aside a bit..."

"Yes, but the Lord's bonds are intended for torturing only the legs, and the martyr's gloves, those with the screws, are specially for the hands, remember?"

"I almost exploded, brothers, I laughed so hard! I go inside to have me a look--and who's lying there, all chained up? Fika with the red hair, the butcher from down our street, he always used to box my ears, when he was drunk. Now it's my turn, I said to myself, just wait..."

"And Pekor with the thick lips was dragged away this morning by the monks. He hasn't come back yet. Didn't show up even for the exam."

"I was supposed to work the meat grinder but I accidentally placed the

man sideways. Well, he broke a few ribs, so what? But you should have seen

Father Kin! He grabs me by the hair and kicks me in my behind with his heavy

boots. Boy, can he aim well! I saw stars! 'What's the idea,' he screamed at

me; 'you're damaging the goods!'

Just look here, friends. Come take a good look, thought Rumata while he

slowly turned his head from side to side to get a sweeping view of the

scene. We're not dealing with mere theory here. No one on Earth has ever

seen anything like it before. Just watch, listen, and film it all!

And learn

to appreciate and love our own era on Earth--oh, damn it-- and bow to honor

the memory of those who have lived through times like these! Just take a

long, close look at these disgusting faces--young, dull, indifferent, inured

to the worst kinds of bestialities; but don't turn up your noses. Our own

ancestors weren't any better in their time.

By now the young students had noticed him. A dozen pairs of eyes of all

shades stared at him.

"Hey, look, the noble don deigns to visit us down here. A bit pale around the gills, eh, milord?"

"I say! I thought we were all done with noblemen?" "They say in such

cases they put water in front of them, but make the chain too short for them

to reach it..." "What's he nosing around down here for?" "I'd love to lay my

hands on that character. He'd answer every question, confess anything I'd

ask him to, I bet,..."

"Keep it quiet! Not so loud, friends! He's quite capable of drawing his

sword all of a sudden, just watch out . . . Look at all the iron bracelets

he is wearing--and that slip of paper!"

"I don't like it the way he is looking at us. Let's beat it, boys; we don't want to mix with such unsavory characters!"

Finally they withdrew and left the scene, hiding in some dark comers where occasional flashes from suspicious spider eyes revealed their presence. Good riddance, thought Rumata, they won't bother me any more. He was just about to tug at the cloak of one of the monks who hurried by down the corridor, when he noticed three other monks in a comer who were less in a hurry and quietly concentrated on their business at hand. They were systematically beating a henchman--probably guilty of some insubordination--with their heavy sticks. Rumata approached them.

"In the name of the Lord," he said and clanked his iron bracelets.

The monks lowered their cudgels and examined Rumata. "In His name," said the tallest of the three. "Take me to the section supervisor!" said Rumata. The monks quickly exchanged some glances. Meanwhile, the henchman crawled behind a water tub to hide. "What do you need him for?" asked the tall monk. Without a word, Rumata shoved the paper under the monk's nose.

"Aha," said the monk. "Well, for the time being I am the supervisor for this section."

"Splendid," said Rumata and rolled up the piece of paper.

"I am Don Rumata. His Magnificence has made a present to me of Doctor Budach. Have him brought here!"

"Budach?" he said frowning. "Who is that supposed to be?" The monk put his hand under his hood and noisily scratched his head. "Budach, the troublemaker?"

"No, no," said another monk. "The troublemaker is called Rudach. He was released last night already. Father Kin in person removed his chains and led him out of the building. But I--"

"Nonsense, nonsense!" said Rumata impatiently and slapped the rolled-up paper against his thigh. "Budach is the one who poisoned the King!"

"Ah-aah," said the supervisor. "Now I know who you mean. He's probably already in the dungeon. Brother Pacca, go and have a look in number twelve." Then he turned again to Rumata. "So, and you want to take him out of here?"

"Of course," said Rumata. "He belongs to me now."

"All right. Your Honor. May I have that paper? I must record everything properly." Rumata handed him the form. The supervisor examined both sides of the paper, devoting special attention to the seal, and then remarked delightedly:

"That's what I call a fine document! Pardon me, don, will you just step aside for a moment and wait until we have finished this little business here

. . . Now where did that henchman get to?"

The monks searched for the hangman, who had apparently treated the tortured prisoners too tenderly for the new master's taste. Rumata walked away. The monks found the hangman, pulled him from behind the water tub expertly, laid him out flat on the floor and then started to work him over again with their sticks without displaying any particular passion or cruelty. Five minutes later, the first monk, who had been sent off to fetch Doctor Budach, reappeared. The monk came around a bend in the corridor pulling behind him a rope that had been fastened around the neck of an

emaciated gray-haired old man in dark clothes.

'There you have your man! You old Budach!" shouted the monk joyfully while still at a distance. "He hadn't been thrown into the dungeon yet; he's alive and well! Just a bit weak, probably hasn't eaten in quite a while."

Rumata walked toward them, yanked the rope out of [:] the monk's hand, and removed the noose from the old man's neck.

"Are you Budach from Irukan?" asked Rumata.

"Yes," said the old man.

"I am Rumata. Follow me and try to keep up with me!" Rumata turned to the monks. "In the name of the Lord," he said.

The supervisor straightened up, let his stick sink to his side and answered, breathing heavily: "In His name!"

Rumata turned his attention back to Doctor Budach. He saw that the old

man was leaning against the wall, hardly able to keep on his feet

"I am nauseated and very weak," he said, and a sickly smile came over his face. "Please forgive me, noble don!"

Rumata took him by the arm and led him along the corridor. As soon as the monks no longer could see them, he stopped and took from a small vial a Sporamin pill. He handed it to Budach who questioned him with his eyes.

"Just swallow it," said Rumata, "you'll feel better directly."

Budach was still leaning against the wall. He took the tablet from Rumata's hand, examined it carefully, sniffed at it, raised his shaggy eyebrows, then cautiously placed the pill on his tongue and tasted it.

"Swallow it, just swallow it," said Rumata with a friendly smile.

Budach swallowed the pill.

"Mmm," he said. "And I thought I knew everything there was to know about medicines." He fell silent again and observed the changes that soon came over his body. "Mmm," he said again. "Interesting! Dried spleen of the

wild sow Y? Np, can't be, I can't taste any putrefaction."

"Let's go," said Rumata.

They walked along the corridors, then up some stairs, turned into another passage, a few more steps again. Suddenly Rumata stopped in his tracks as if struck by lightning. A wild and familiar roar filled the prison vaults. From somewhere inside one of the cells curses boomed out damning God and the world; it was the thundering voice of his dear friend the baron Pampa, Don Bau de Suruga de Gatta de Arkanar. With his stentorian voice he cursed God and all the saints he could think of, Don Reba, the Holy Order, and many more. So the baron fell into their clutches after all, thought Rumata very contritely. I had completely forgotten about him. He wouldn't have forgotten me ... Rumata quickly slipped two bracelets off his own wrist, placed them on Doctor Budach's thin arms and said:

"Walk upstairs now, but stay inside the building. Wait for me somewhere in some hidden comer. If anybody should bother you, just show him these iron circlets and you'll be left alone."

Baron Pampa roared and howled like an atomic icebreaker plowing through the Polar fog. A thundering echo reverberated in the vaulted building. *The* people in the corridors stiffened and listened attentively, their mouths wide open. Many quickly passed (heir thumbs across their faces in order to chase away the evil spirits. Rumata raced down two stairs and hurled aside the monks that tried to block his way. With his two swords he forced his way through the throng of the graduating students of the School for Patriots, and kicked in the door of the cell. The whole room shook with Baron

Pampa's
bellowing voice. The flickering light of the torches revealed a
strange
sight: His friend Baron Pampa, this mountain of a man, had been
strung up by
the legs and was hanging face down and stark naked. His face had
turned a
bluish-black color from the congestion of blood in his head. At
a small
table with crooked legs sat a hunchbacked official holding his
hands over
his ears; a perspiring torturer --who somehow resembled a dentist--
busied
himself with his clinking instruments in an iron vat.

Rumata dosed the door, stepped up to the torturer from
behind and
struck him on the head with the hilt of his sword. The torturer
wheeled
around, his hands flew up to his head, he lost his balance
and fell
backwards into the tub. Rumata drew his other sword from its
sheath and
hacked the table in two where the official had been silting
shuffling his
papers. The torturer sat in the tub hiccupping violently, while the
official
swiftly crawled on all fours into a corner of the cell. Rumata
stepped over
to the baron and tried to loosen the chains by which his feet
had been
fastened to the wall. At the second try he succeeded in yanking the
chains
down. Carefully, he helped the baron to get back on his feet.
The baron
abruptly ceased to roar, stiffened in a peculiar pose, then hastily
pulled
and tugged at his bonds and freed his hands.

"I can't believe my eyes," he bellowed, rolling his blood
shot eyes
from side to side. "It's you, my noble friend! I've found you at
last!"

"Yes, my friend, here I am," said Rumata. "But let's get out
of here.

This is no place for you!"

"Beer!" said the baron. "I've seen beer somewhere in this place." He walked around the cell, dragging the rest of his chains behind him on the floor and did not stop roaring and bustling about. "Half the night I was chasing through town! And damn it, they told me you had been arrested, so I beat up a number of people, one after the other. And I was convinced I would find you here in this prison! Well, and here you are indeed, as it turns out."

He went over to the torturer and with one move of his mighty arm swept him and the tub aside as if he were busy dusting off something. Beyond the space where the tub had stood appeared now a small barrel. With his bare fist the baron smashed in its bottom, threw back his head, opened his mouth wide and let the contents pour down his throat. A torrent of beer ran gurgling into his gullet. What a guy, thought Rumata as he watched the baron with great pleasure. Looks like an ox, like some brainless bull, but still, he went looking for me, wanted to rescue me, and most likely landed here in this prison because of me . . . and he did all this out of his own accord. Thank God there are some human beings on this world after all, as rotten as it is. How lucky it's turned out all right in the end!

The baron had drained the barrel dry and hurled it into the comer where the official's teeth could be heard loudly chattering. Now a squeal came from that comer.

"That's better," said the baron and wiped his beard with the back of his hand. "Now I'm ready to follow you. Does it matter that I have

nothing
on?"

Rumata looked around the room, walked over to the torturer and shook him out of his leather breechcloth.

"Take that for the time being," he said.

"You are right," said the baron and tied the breechcloth around his loins. "It would be most improper to appear naked before the baroness."

They left the torture chamber. Nobody had the courage to block their way and the corridor was suddenly quite deserted for twenty paces.

"I'll kill all of them!" shouted the baron. "They're occupying my castle--they've ordered somebody by the name of Father Arima to take up residence there. I don't know whose father he is, but I swear to you that his children will soon be orphans! Devil take it, dear friend, don't you agree that these ceilings here are mighty low? I've already skinned the top of my skull to the bone..."

Finally they got out of the tower. For a moment the spy and bodyguard became visible but he disappeared directly again in the crowd. Rumata gave a sign to Budach to follow him. The crowd in front of the gate parted before them as if they had tried to scatter them with a sword. They could hear shrieks that an important state criminal had fled, fingers pointed to them, and voices growled: "Just look at that naked devil, the famous Estorian hangman!"

The baron walked to the center of the square, stopped and halfway had to close his eyes because of the bright sunlight. Speed was of the essence now. Rumata quickly sized up the situation. "My horse was somewhere around

here," said the baron. "Hey you there! My horse!"

Over in the paddock where the horses of the cavalry of the order were prancing, a wild commotion arose.

"Not that one!" crowed the Baron. "That one over there, the gray piebald stallion."

"In the name of the Lord!" yelled Rumata belatedly and pulled his circlet down over his forehead.

A frightened little monk in a dirty cloak brought the Baron his horse.

"Give him something, Don Rumata," said the baron and raised himself with difficulty up onto his saddle.

"Stop, stop!" came loud shouts from the tower.

Several monks came running across the square, brandishing their cudgels. Rumata gave the baron one of his swords.

"Hurry up, baron. Quick!" he said.

"Yes," said Baron Pampa. "I must speed on. That Arima is probably cleaning out my whole wine cellar in the meantime. Ill expect you at my castle, tomorrow or the day after, my friend. Any messages for the baroness?"

"Kiss her hand for me," said Rumata. The monks were almost upon them by now. "Faster, faster, baron!"

"Are you out of danger yourself, my friend?" the baron pressed. His voice betrayed that he was still concerned about Rumata's safety.

"Yes, damn it, yes! Move on!"

The baron dashed off and rode at full speed directly into the crowd of monks. One of them fell to the ground, another one tumbled, there was a loud whine, a great cloud of dust arose, the horses' hooves rapped sharply on the cobblestones -- and the baron was out of sight. Rumata was just looking down a lane which led off the square and where those who had been knocked

over in
the tumult had taken refuge. Suddenly an insistent and
stealthy voice
sounded in his ear:

"But, my noble don, don't you think you are taking
unwarranted
liberties here?"

Rumata spun around and found himself peering into the
affectedly
smiling face of Don Reba.

"Unwarranted?" said Rumata. "That word doesn't exist for me."

Suddenly he remembered Don Sera. "And anyway, I can't see
why noble
dons should not help each other in case of distress."

A group of heavily breathing monks rode quickly past
them, their
halberds held ready for action, in hot pursuit of Baron Pampa. A
change came
over Don Reba's face.

"All right then," he said. "Forget it. Oh, isn't this the most
learned
Doctor Budach here? You look splendid, Doctor. I think I ought to
inspect my
prison. Criminals of State, including released prisoners, must
never go on
foot when they leave. They should be carried out."

Doctor Budach stormed toward Don Reba with the movements of
a blind
man. Rumata quickly stepped between the two men.

"By the way, Don Reba," he said, "what do you think of Father
Arima?"

"Father Arima?" Don Reba raised his eyebrows. "An outstanding
warrior.
Occupies a high position in my episcopate. What is that question
supposed to
mean?"

"As a faithful servant of Your Magnificence," said Rumata with
obvious
malicious relish of the situation, "I hasten to inform you that
you may
consider this high position as vacant."

"How come?"

Rumata glanced down the lane where the yellow dust had not yet

settled.

Don Reba, too, looked that way. A worried expression came over his face.

It was already late in the afternoon when Kyra asked her noble Lord and his most learned guest to come to the table.

Now that Doctor Budach had bathed, carefully shaved, and changed into fresh clothes, he made a pleasant and imposing impression. His movements were deliberate and dignified, his intelligent gray eyes peered out from under his shaggy eyebrows in a benevolent and somewhat condescending manner.

First of all he apologized to Rumata for his impetuous behavior toward Don Reba during their encounter on the square.

"Please understand me," he said. "He's a hideous person, a monster who came into this world only because of some divine oversight. I am a physician, but I'm not ashamed to admit that I would kill him if I only had an opportunity to do so. It has come to my ears that the King has been poisoned. And now I do understand how he perished." Rumata sat up and took notice. "That Reba came into my cell and demanded I should mix a poison for him which would become effective a few hours later. Of course, I refused to do so. He threatened to have me tortured -- I laughed in his face. In reply, he summoned his torturers and ordered them to bring a dozen boys and girls, not more than ten years old. He lined them up in front of me, opened my medicine bag and declared he would try out all my medications one after the other on these pitiful human guinea pigs until he found the right one. And this is the way the King was poisoned, Don Rumata."

Budach's lips began to tremble, but he soon regained his

composure.

Rumata nodded knowingly and turned aside, so as not to embarrass his scholarly guest. Now I finally understand, he thought. I understand it all now. The king would never have accepted anything from the hands of his ministers, not even a dill pickle. So the wicked rogue foisted some fifth-rate charlatan off on the king by promising that no-good nobody to make him the king's personal physician as a reward for curing his ailing legs. And now it's clear why Don Reba felt so triumphant when I compromised him in the royal bedchamber: one would have been hard-put to imagine a better way to slip the king a false Budach. The entire responsibility now fell on the shoulders of Rumata from Estoria, the Irukanian conspirator and spy. We are real greenhorns, he thought. Just like silly little innocent puppies. They ought to teach a special course for feudal intrigues back home at the Institute. And they should introduce another course on how to acquire the right qualifications for properly sizing up the Rebas of the universe, large and small. Doctor Budach was quite obviously starving. Nevertheless, he politely yet very definitely refused all meat dishes and devoted his attention exclusively to the salads, pastas and desserts. He also drank a glass of fine Estorian wine and his eyes began to sparkle again; a healthy blush spread over his cheeks. Rumata could not swallow even a bite. He could still see in his mind's eyes the crackling, smoking, scarlet torches; he could still smell the odor of burnt flesh. He felt a big lump in his throat.

And thus he waited, until Doctor Budach had eaten his fill, while he, Rumata, leaned against the window sill, conversing politely, slowly and calmly, to avoid disturbing the guest who was enjoying his meal.

Slowly, life returned to the city. People appeared in the streets again, voices could be heard, growing louder and louder, accompanied by the pounding of hammers and the cracking of wood: they were knocking down the wooden idols from the walls and the gabled roofs. A bald, fat shopkeeper pushed a cart laden with a barrel of beer in front of him so he could sell it later on the square for two pennies a jug. People walked arm in arm, slapping each other on the back in a friendly fashion. Under the arched gate across the street he could see his spy and bodyguard talking with a thin woman. Carts passed under his window piled high with something. At first Rumata failed to understand what kind of carts these were but then he noticed blue-black hands and feet sticking out from under the hemp matting. He quickly walked away from the window.

"Man's nature," said Budach while chewing leisurely, "is characterized by his ability to adjust to everything. There is nothing in this world that man cannot adjust to. Neither horses nor dogs possess this ability. Presumably when God created man he considered the tortures to which he would subject man on this earth, and therefore equipped him with a tremendous capacity for endurance. Of course, it's difficult to say whether this is good or bad. If man had not been endowed with such potential for patience and suffering, then all good people would have perished long ago

and only
the wicked and soulless would remain. On the other hand,
tolerance and
adaptability make men dumb beasts, distinguishable from animals
only on
corporal structure, even surpassing the lowly beasts in their
lack of
ability to defend themselves. And each new day brings forth new
horrors of
wickedness and brutality ..."

Rumata glanced over in Kyra's direction. She sat opposite
Budach and
attentively listened to his words, one cheek resting on her hand.
Her eyes

were filled with grief: it was obvious how sorry she felt for mankind.

"You are probably right, dear Doctor Budach," said Rumata.
"But take
me, for instance. I am nothing but a simple don of high birth."
Budach's
high forehead became wrinkled like a washboard and his eyes grew
wide with
amazement and amusement. "I love learned people more than anything; I
admire
their nobility of spirit. But on the other hand I completely
fail to
understand why you, who are men of science and the sole
representatives of
intellectual life and wisdom, remain so hopelessly passive? Why
do you
surrender without any resistance to contempt, why do you permit
yourselves
to be thrown into prisons, why do you accept your fate and let
yourselves be
burnt at the stake? Why do you separate your *raison d'etre* -- the
search for
new knowledge -- from the practical demands of life, the fight
against all
evil?"

Budach pushed back his empty dish.

"You ask strange questions, Don Rumata," he said. "Oddly
enough, I was
confronted with these self-same questions by the honorable Don
Hug, the

duke's chamberlain. Are you acquainted with him by any chance? Yes, I thought so . . . Indeed, the fight against evil! But what actually do we understand by 'evil'? After all, everyone is at liberty to interpret this concept of evil in his own way. For us, the scholars, evil lies in ignorance; the Church, however, teaches ignorance to be bliss and that all evil comes from knowledge. For the peasant, evil consists of high taxes and drought; for the grain merchant, however, drought is very propitious. Slaves see the evil embodied in the person of a drunken, hardhearted master, while the artisans regard an avaricious moneylender as evil personified. Tell me, then, what is the evil we are supposed to fight, Don Rumata?" He cast a saddened glance at his interlocutor. "Evil cannot be eradicated. No man is capable of curtailing its growth in this world. The individual might improve his own lot, perhaps, but always only at the expense of sealing the fate of others. And there will always be kings, who can be distinguished from one another by the *degree* of their cruelty, and there will always be, too, crude and debauched barons, the same as there will always be stupid folk, the ignorant masses, who show delight toward their oppressors and who, paradoxically, meet their liberators with hatred. This can all be explained by the strange phenomenon that servants and slaves understand their masters (even the most cruel) so much better than their liberators; for each subjugated slave can easily picture himself in the place of his master, but it's a rare one who can visualize himself in the role of his

liberator. This is the way of human beings, Don Rumata; this is what our world is like."

"The world undergoes constant changes. Doctor Budach," said Rumata. "We know of a time when there were no kings at all..."

"The world cannot keep on changing forever," countered Budach, "for nothing is forever, not even change itself . . . We do not know the laws of completed perfection but completion will be reached some day, sooner or later. Examine, for example, the structure of our society. How pleasant for the eye of the beholder to regard this geometrically perfect system! Down at the very bottom come the peasants and the artisans, above them the noblemen, then the clergy, and finally the king. How meticulously everything has been calculated! What steadfastness, what constancy, what harmonic order! What change could ever occur in this cut crystal from the hand of our divine jeweler? There is no structure in this world that is superior to a pyramid--as any well-trained architect will confirm." He raised a finger, punctuating each remark with a slight stab in the air. "When grain pours from a sack, it does not spread out flat in a plane area, but will form a so-called conical pyramid. Each little grain adheres to the next, trying to avoid the fall to the ground. And this is the way it goes with mankind. In their attempt to form some kind of an entity, men must cling together, and inevitably they form a pyramid."

"Do you seriously consider this world the best of all possible worlds?" asked Rumata astonished. "After your encounter with Don Reba, your

experiences in jail?"

"Of course not, my young friend! There are many things I do not like in this world, I'd like to see many things changed. But what should we do? In the eyes of the Supreme Power, perfection presents quite a different picture than in mine. What sense would it make for a tree to complain that it is rooted to the spot, although it would be most happy to be able to move away in order to escape from the woodcutter's ax?"

"But if it were possible to change the decisions of the Supreme Power?"

"Only the Supreme Power itself is capable of doing so,"

"But just imagine you had divine authority to act . . ."

Budach laughed.

"If I could imagine being God, I would become God!"

"All right, suppose you had the opportunity to give God some advice?"

"You have a fertile imagination," said Budach amused. "That would be splendid. You know the Holy Scriptures? Wonderful! I'd be happy, to carry on a conversation with you."

"You flatter me. But still, what advice would you give the Almighty? What, in your opinion, would the Almighty have to do so that you'd be able to say: the world is now truly good and beautiful?"

Budach smiled approvingly, leaned comfortably back in his armchair and folded his hands across his stomach. Full of interest and anticipation, Kyra peered into the physician's face.

"All right then," he said, "if you so desire. I would tell the Almighty: 'Great Creator, I do not know your plan; maybe it's simply not your intention to make mankind good and happy. Nevertheless, I beg you: let it happen--it would be so easy for you to accomplish--that all men have

sufficient bread, meat, and wine! Provide them with shelter and clothing, let hunger and want disappear from the face of the earth, and all that separates men from each other."

'That would be all?" asked Rumata.

"Does it seem too little to you?"

Rumata shook his head slowly from side to side.

"God would answer you: This would be no blessing for mankind.

For the strong of your world take away from the weak whatever I gave them and the weak would be as poor as before."

"I would beg God to protect the poor. "Enlighten the cruel rulers,' I would say."

"Cruelty is a mighty force. Once the rulers rid themselves of their cruel ways they would lose their power. And other cruel men would take their place."

Budach's friendly face grew suddenly somber.

"Then punish the cruel men," he said with determination, "and lead them away from the path of evil, so that the strong may not be cruel to their weaker brothers."

"It is man's nature to be weak from the moment he is born. He will only grow strong when there is no one stronger than he is. And if the cruel ones among the strong are punished and removed from their ranks, they will simply be replaced by the relatively stronger ones from among the throng of the weak. And the newly strong ones will become cruel in their turn. That would mean that eventually all men would have to be punished, and this I do not want to do."

"You have greater insight, Almighty Lord. Therefore arrange that mankind will obtain all they need and thus avoid that they will

rob each
other of whatever you gave them."

"This solution wouldn't be a blessing for mankind either,"
sighed
Rumata. "They would not reap profit from this. For if they obtain
everything
from my hand without any effort on their part, they will forget
what it is
to work and labor; they will lose their taste for living. As time
goes on
they'll become domestic animals whom I will have to feed and
clothe--and
that for all eternity."

"Don't give them everything at once!" said Budach excitedly.
"Give it
to them slowly, gradually!"

"Gradually mankind will take everything they need anyhow."
Budach's smile became embarrassed.

"Now I can see that things are not quite so simple," he
said. "I've
never really thought about the problems ... I believe we have
discussed all
possibilities now. However," he leaned forward, "there exists still
another
possibility: Ordain that mankind will love work and knowledge
above all,
that work and wisdom will be regarded by them as their sole
reason for
being!"

Yes, thought Rumata, we've already considered such
experiments. Mass
hypno-induction, positive remoralization, exposure to hypnotic
radiation
from three equatorial satellites ...

This is an alternative I might choose perhaps," he said. "But
could it
be justified if I were to rob mankind of its history? Does it make
sense to
replace one type of man with another? Would this not mean in the
end that
one would wipe this mankind off the face of the earth and create
another in
its place?"

Budach frowned and remained silent, busy with his own thoughts. From below the windows came again the melancholy groaning of heavily laden carts.

Suddenly Budach spoke softly:

"Then, oh, Lord, remove us from the face of the earth and create us anew, make us better men this time, more perfect beings. Or, better still--leave us the way we are, but ordain that we can follow our own path!"

"My heart is heavy with sorrow," Rumata said slowly, "but this is not within my power."

And he suddenly became aware of Kyra's eyes which she had fastened on him with great intensity. There was fear and hope in her glance now.

NINE

Rumata led Doctor Budach to a bedroom to rest for the long journey ahead, and then went to his study. The Sporamin had worn off, and he felt exhausted; his wounds began to hurt again, and his wrists--they still smarted from the rope burns--started to swell. I should lie down and sleep now for a while, he thought, I simply must get some sleep; then I ought to get in touch with Don Kondor. I should also communicate with Controls and have them report everything to headquarters. We need to decide what to do now -- if there is anything we can do at all. And how we should behave in case there's nothing we can do.

As Rumata entered his study, he saw a black monk sitting at the table, his hood pulled down over his eyes. He was all bent over and had

his arms
hidden in his wide sleeves.

"What are you doing here?" asked Rumata, very tired. "Who let you in here?"

"Greetings, noble Don Rumata," said the monk and pulled back his hood.

Rumata shook his head gently.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said. "Greetings to you, my good Arata. What brings you here? What has happened?"

"The usual," said Arata. "The army has broken up, the men are dividing up the land among themselves and nobody wants to go south. The duke is gathering those of his warriors who have escaped unscathed, and it won't be long now before he starts stringing up my peasants by their feet along the Estorian tract. Everything as usual," he repeated.

"I understand," said Rumata.

He threw himself down on the divan, leaned his head back on his crossed arms and regarded Arata. Twenty years earlier, when Anton had built models with his erector set and played William Tell back on Earth, the man had been known as Arata the Fair, and he was quite a different person at that time.

At that time Arata the Fair had not yet acquired the horrible purple scar on his high forehead. He bore the scar ever since the mutiny of the Soanian sailors--three thousand naked, enslaved workers who had been driven from all corners of the realm to the wharves of Soan and who had already become so brutalized that they had almost lost their drive for survival. One dark night they swarmed out of the harbor area and attacked Soan, leaving nothing but bodies and raging fires behind. Finally they were received near

the edge of the town by the imperial infantry, well equipped with steel armor...

And at that time, of course, Arata still had two healthy eyes. He lost his right eye through the vigorous blow of a cudgel, struck by a baron, when a peasants' army, twenty-thousand men strong, planned to invade the capital in order to ferret out the baronial gangs, and when instead they encountered the imperial guard, five thousand men strong, on the open field. They were split up into small groups, surrounded, and finally trampled to death under the pointed iron shoes of the fighting camels ...

In those days, Arata the Fair was still as straight as a poplar tree. He acquired his hunchback (and with it his new nickname) after the battle in the dukedom of Uban, two oceans removed from here, when after seven years of pest and drought, four-hundred-thousand living skeletons seized their hay forks and threshing flails, chased away the noblemen and besieged the Duke of Uban in his residence. However, the duke, whose weak mind suddenly became strong in the face of this unbearable strain and fright, declared himself willing to forgive his subjects, lowered the price of intoxicating beverages and promised his serfs freedom. Arata, seeing that all was lost, ordered and implored them in a desperate roar, not to swallow this treacherous bait; he was then seized by the Atamans, who believed that nothing good should be expected from a good man; they beat him with iron rods and threw him into a pit, leaving him to die a miserable death ...

But the heavy iron ring on his right wrist probably went back to the

time when he was still called the Fair One. The ring had been forged at the end of a chain to the rudder of a pirate's galley, and Arata had ripped the chain apart, struck a blow against the temple of Captain Ega the Gracious, captured first the ship and then the entire pirate's fleet, and then had tried to found a free republic on the ocean. And the whole enterprise ended in a blood fight, for at that time Arata was still a young man who had not learned how to hate and who believed that the gift of freedom was sufficient in itself to render a slave into a godlike creature...

He was a professional rebel, an avenger by the grace of God, a figure that is not often encountered during the Middle Ages. Historical evolution gives birth to such pikes only from time to time, releases them into the deep gulfs of society to stir up the fat carps who sit and dream in the mud at the bottom of the abyss . . . Arata was the only person here whom Rumata neither hated nor pitied. And in the heated dreams of this citizen of Earth, who had spent almost five years in blood and stench, he frequently saw himself as a figure resembling Arata. He had gone through all the infernal torments of this universe and was rewarded for it with the privileged right to slay the murderers, to torture the torturers, and to betray the traitors.

"Sometimes it seems," said Arata, "that we are all powerless. I remain forever the leader of mutineers and I realize that my strength is based on my extraordinary vitality. But this strength does not help me in my powerless state. As if by magic, my victories change into defeat. My allies

in battle become my enemies, the most courageous desert me, the most faithful betray me or perish. And nothing remains to me but my own bare hands. But one cannot reach the golden idols behind the fortress walls with bare hands ..."

"How did you get to Arkanar?" asked Rumata.

"With the monks."

"You're crazy! You're so easy to recognize."

"But not among monks. Among the crowds of officers of the Holy Order nearly half are made up of divine fools and cripples like myself. The maimed and the deformed are a pleasing sight in God's eyes." He stared straight at Rumata and laughed.

"What do you intend to do now?" asked Rumata and lowered his eyes.

"The same as always. I know the Holy Order. Before the year is out, the people of Arkanar will arm themselves and crawl out of their holes-- they'll chop each other to bits with their axes. I'll lead them so that they slaughter not each other, but rather those who deserve it." "Do you need some money?" asked Rumata.

"Yes, as usual. And weapons . . ." He fell silent. Then he narrowed his eyes and said; "Don Rumata, do you remember how disappointed I was when I found out who you really are? I hate the shavelings, and it hurts me that their tissue, of lies proved to be the truth. But unfortunately, a poor rebel is forced to profit from circumstances of all kinds. The priests are saying that the gods have thunderbolts at their disposal . . . Don Rumata, I urgently need such thunderbolts, to be able to smash the walls of these fortresses."

Rumata sighed deeply. Following his miraculous rescue, Arata had ceaselessly demanded explanations. Rumata had once even attempted to tell about himself, he even once showed him Sol, the sun of his planet, in the nocturnal sky --a tiny, hardly recognizable star. But the rebel understood only one thing: The cursed priests were right, gods were indeed living behind the walls of the firmament, omniscient and almighty gods. And from that moment on, every conversation he had with Rumata would always lead to the same point: God, since you do exist, lend me your strength, for this is the best that you can do for me. And each time Rumata made no reply or would steer the conversation on to a different topic.

"Don Rumata," said the rebel, "why don't you want to help us?"

"Just a minute," said Rumata. "I beg your pardon, but first tell me how you got into my house?"

"That isn't so important. No one besides me knows the way. But don't try to sidetrack me, Don Rumata. Why don't you want to confer your powers on us?"

"We won't go into that."

"Oh yes, we will. I did not call you. I have never asked a favor of anybody. You came to me of your own accord. Or did you just want to have a little fun?"

It's hard to be a god, thought Rumata.

Patiently, he answered: "You don't understand. I have tried at least twenty times to explain that I am not a god-- and you wouldn't believe me. And neither will you comprehend why I cannot help you with my weapons."

"Do you have thunderbolts?"

"I cannot lend you the thunderbolt."

"I've heard that story twenty times," said Arata. "Now I want to know: why not?"

"I'll tell you once more: you won't understand."

"So try once more to explain it to me."

"What do you plan to do with the thunderbolt?"

"I will burn the golden brood like bedbugs, to the last man, their cursed kith and kin down to the twelfth descendant I'll wipe their fortresses off the face of the earth. I'll burn their armies and all those whom they defend and support. You can rest assured that your lightning will serve a just cause, and once only the freed slaves remain on earth and peace reigns everywhere, I shall return your thunderbolts to you and never again ask you for them."

Arata fell silent He was breathing heavily. His face had turned almost purple from the blood that had congested his brain. Apparently he could already see duchies and kingdoms going up in flames, the seared bodies lying at the scene of conflagration and among the burnt-out ruins, and the gigantic armies of the victors roaring triumphantly: "Liberty! Liberty!"

"No," said Rumata. "I will not give the thunderbolt to you. It would be a mistake. Try to believe me, I can see further than you can."

Arata lowered his chin onto his chest. Rumata began to crack his finger joints. "I'll tell you just one of the reasons. Though it is insignificant compared with the main reason, you will understand this one. You are brimming over with vitality, dear Arata, but even you are mortal. And if you should perish and the thunderbolt should happen to fall into the wrong hands, those that are not quite as pure as yours, the mere thought

of what
this might lead to is unbearable ..."

Neither spoke for some time. Then Rumata took out a bottle of Estorian wine and something to eat, and placed it before his guest Without raising his head, Arata started silently to bite off chunks of bread and sip at the wine. Rumata was overcome by a strange and morbid schism within himself. He knew he was right and yet this awareness humbled him before Arata. Somehow, Arata surpassed him; but not him alone--Arata surpassed all the others that came unbidden to this planet and observed with full impotent pity its teeming life from the lofty peak of passionless hypotheses and alien moral standards. And for the first time Rumata thought: Nothing can be acquired without loss. We are infinitely stronger than Arata within our realm of goodness but infinitely weaker than he is within his realm of evil.

"You should not have descended from heaven," Arata remarked suddenly.

"Go back. You are doing us here only harm!"

"No, no," said Rumata. "We don't harm anybody here."

"Oh, yes, you are harming us. You instill unfounded hopes in us."

"Who, for instance?"

"Me. You have weakened my will power, Don Rumata. It used to be that I relied only on myself, but now you have caused me to be always aware of your strength standing behind me. Formerly, I fought every battle as if it were my last one. But now I have noticed that I preserve my strength for the other battles, for the decisive ones, because you will participate in them. Leave this planet, Don Rumata, return to your heavens, and never come back here. Or else, give us your thunderbolts, or at least your iron bird. If

nothing else, draw your sword and be our leader."

Arata fell silent again and reached for another piece of bread. Rumata observed Arata's hands, especially his fingers. Two years ago, Don Reba in person had torn out the nails of both hands with some special device. You know only half the story, thought Rumata . . . You feel pacified by the thought that you are the only one to be condemned to failure. You don't know yet how hopeless your entire cause really is. You don't know that your enemy is not to be found beyond the ranks of your own soldiers, but rather within themselves. Perhaps you will succeed in annihilating the Holy Order of the Black monks and the wave of the peasant rebellion will carry you onto the throne of Arkanar. You will raze to the ground the castles of the feudal lords and drown the barons in the bay. The rebellious masses will shower you, their liberator, with all honors, and you will be a good and wise ruler--the only good and wise man in your entire kingdom; in your goodness you will distribute all the land among your comrades-in-arms, *but what good will this land do your co-fighters without serfs?* And the wheel will turn in another direction again. And you'll be getting off easy if you die a normal death and do not have to watch the new barons and counts emerge from among the ranks of your faithful collaborators of yesterday. All this has happened time and again, my good Arata, back on Earth as well as on your planet.

"You are silent?" asked Arata. He pushed back his plate and swept the bread crumbs off the table with the sleeve of his cloak. "Once upon a time I

had a friend," he said. "You have probably heard of him--Waga Koleso. We started out together. Then he turned into a bandit, a dark prince of the night. I have never forgiven him for this betrayal, and he knows it. Later, he would help me a great deal--out of fear or vanity--but whichever way, he did not wish to repent his ways: He had goals of his own. Two years ago his men delivered me into the hands of Don Reba . . ." He looked down at his maimed fingers and clenched his fist. "And this morning I caught him in the harbor of Arkanar. Half-hearted friendships are impossible in our cause, for half a friend--is always half an enemy."

He rose and pulled the hood down over his eyes. "Will I find the gold in the usual place, Don Rumata?" "Yes," said Rumata slowly. "In the usual place." "I am leaving now. Thank you, Don Rumata." Almost inaudibly, he crossed the study and disappeared behind the door. Downstairs, in the entrance hall, the door bolts clicked softly.

TEN

"The Drunkard's Lair" was comparatively clean today; the floor had been carefully swept and the table vigorously scrubbed. Bunches of sweet-smelling herbs and lavender lay in the comers. Father Kabani sat respectably on a bench in the comer. He was completely sober and calm and his clean hands rested in his lap.

While they waited for Budach to fall asleep, they discussed everything

imaginable. Budach, who sat next to Rumata at the table, followed the lighthearted chatter of the noble dons with a kind, indulgent smile. From time to time he would give a sudden start, when he was just about to nod off. His hollow cheeks burned from the double dose of Tetraluminal they had slipped unnoticed into his food. The old man was highly excited and had great difficulty falling asleep. Don Hug, filled with impatience, fingered a camel's horseshoe underneath the table; his face, however, kept its appearance of unaffected ease. Rumata crumbled his bread into balls and followed with tired interest Don Kondor's efforts to swallow his anger. The Keeper of the Seal of State was excessively nervous since he had arrived late at the extraordinary nocturnal conference of the twenty terrestrial agents. The conference was to deal with the overthrow of the government in Arkanar, and he was supposed to be the chairman.

"My dear friends!" Doctor Budach said at last with a sonorous voice. He stood up and immediately fell onto Rumata's shoulder.

Rumata carefully put an arm around him.

"Ready?" asked Don Kondor.

"He won't wake up till tomorrow morning," said Rumata, and he took Budach into his arms and carried him over onto Father Kabani's cot.

Father Kabani said with jealousy:

"You certainly take good care of the doctor, but you forget about old Kabani. Well, then, gentlemen!"

"I have fifteen minutes," Don Kondor said in Russian.

"I need only five minutes," answered Rumata. He could hardly hide his irritation. "And I've told you earlier so much about it that even one minute will do now. In complete accordance with the basis theory of

feudalism," his
furious glance was directed straight at Don Kondor's eyes, "this is
merely a
normal confrontation between the burghers and the barons"--he looked
over at
Don Hug--"which developed, however, into a provoking intrigue of
the Holy
Order and eventually made Arkanar a stronghold of feudal-fascist
aggression.
We are sitting here, racking our brains in an attempt to
align the
complicated, contradictory, and enigmatic figure of our Enlightened
Eagle,
Don Reba, with historical personalities of similar stature,
such as
Richelieu, Oliver Necker, Tokugawa Iyemasa, and Monk--and our
eagle turns
out to be merely a little insignificant hoodlum and dolt. He
betrayed and
sold out anything he could lay his hands on; got caught in the web
of his
own intrigues, was overcome by mortal terror, then tried to save his
skin by
throwing himself into the hands of the Holy Order. Wait another six
months:
they'll cut his throat, but the Order will remain. The
consequences
resulting from this for the coastal regions and eventually for the
entire
kingdom I simply dare not envision. One fact, though, is certain: our
entire
work of twenty years within the borders of the kingdom has gone
down the
drain. There is no way back under the regime of the Holy Order.
In all
probability, Budach is the last person I'll be able to rescue. We
won't save
anyone else; it's too late. That is all I have to say."

Don Hug finally broke the horseshoe in two and hurled the
fragments
into a corner.

"That's quite a setback, to be sure," he said. "But maybe
it isn't

quite as bad as you think, Anton."

Rumata glanced briefly at him.

"You should have removed Don Reba," said Don Kondor suddenly.

"What do you mean by 'removed'?"

Red splotches spread over Don Kondor's face.

"In a physical sense!" he said sharply.

Rumata sat down.

"Kill him?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Kidnap! Destroy! Squash! Kill him! You should have acted and not conferred with two idiots about the matter, men who had not the vaguest notion what was really going on."

"Neither did I!"

"You sensed it, at least."

There was an uneasy silence.

Then Don Kondor started up again. He spoke softly and looked to one side. "Something like the carnage at Barkan?"

"Yes, something like it. Only better organized."

Don Kondor bit his lips.

"Would it be too late now to remove him from the scene?"

"Completely senseless," said Rumata. "First of all, they'll finish him off anyhow, with or without our assistance; and secondly, it won't even be necessary to kill him. He's eating out of my hand."

"What do you mean?"

"He's afraid of me. He senses that some mysterious power is standing behind me. He even suggested that we collaborate."

"Really?" growled Don Kondor. "Then there's no point in doing it."

Don Hug swallowed hard.

"What is the matter with you, comrades, are you serious about all this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, all this . . . everything . . . to remove him, to kill him off . . .

What has gotten into you, are you out of your mind?"

"The noble don is cut to the quick," Rumata remarked softly. Don Kondor

chose his words deliberately and cautiously:

"In case of extraordinary circumstances only extraordinary means are effective!"

Don Hug let his eyes wander from one to the other, his lips trembling.

"Do you ... do you . . . really know what you are getting into?" He could hardly bring the words to his lips. "Do you realize what this might lead to?"

"Calm down, please," said Don Kondor. "Nothing will happen. And now, enough of that. What shall we do about the Holy Order? I suggest a blockade of the area around Arkanar. What's your opinion, comrades? Make it quick, will you, I'm in a hurry."

"I have no opinion, not yet," replied Rumata. "And neither has Pashka. Well have to confer with Controls. Let's wait a bit. We'll meet again in one week and then come to a decision."

"Agreed," said Don Kondor and stood up. "Let's go!"

Rumata loaded Budach onto his shoulders and left the hut. Don Kondor lit the way with a lantern. They walked to the helicopter and Rumata laid Budach down on the back seat. Don Kondor's foot got caught in his long cloak and he fell into the driver's seat with rattling swords.

"Couldn't you take me home quickly?" asked Rumata. "I have to get some sleep."

"Yes, yes," rumbled Don Kondor. "Make it quick, will you!"

"I'll be right back," said Rumata and hurriedly returned to the hut.

Don Hug was still sitting at the table, staring vacantly ahead of him and rubbing his chin. Father Kabani, who stood beside him, said:

"This is the way it always ends, my friend. You strive tooth and nail, try to do your best, and still it doesn't turn out right in the

end ..."

Rumata swiftly picked up his swords and his fez.

"Cheer up, Pashka," he said to Don Hug. "Don't lose heart, we're all overtired and irritable."

Don Hug shook his head vigorously.

"Look here, Anton," he said. "Will you please look! I won't say anything about Uncle Sasha. He's been here a long time, and we can't change him any more. But you . . ."

"I want to sleep, that's all I want now. Father Kabani, do me the favor and take my horses and bring them to Baron Pampa. I'll come to see him in a few days."

Outside, the propeller started up a gentle roar. Rumata waved to his friends and ran out of the hut. The bright light streaming from the helicopter's headlights made the gigantic tangled growths of the high fern look ghostly against the background of the brilliant white trunks of the birch trees. Rumata climbed into the cabin and slammed the little door.

Inside the cabin it smelled of oxygen, synthetic wall-boards, and cologne. Don Kondor let the machine climb and guided it with nonchalant assuredness along the country road. I wouldn't be up to that now, thought Rumata, a bit jealous. From the back seat came the peaceful snore of old Doctor Budach.

"Anton," said Don Kondor, "I'd like to ... that is, I don't ... I don't want to be tactless, and please believe me, I don't want to ... uh ... interfere with your personal affairs..."

"I'm listening," said Rumata. He knew at once what Don Kondor had in mind.

"We are scouts on a mission here," said Don Kondor. "And all we cherish must either remain back on Earth or locked up inside ourselves. This way it can never be taken away from us or used for blackmail or as hostages against us."

"Are you referring to Kyra?" asked Rumata.

"Yes, my friend. If all I have heard about Don Reba is true, then it will be neither easy nor safe to hold him back. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I understand," said Rumata. "I'll try to think of something."

They lay next to each other holding hands in the darkness. It was very quiet now in the city. From the distance came only an occasional neighing and stomping of horses. From time to time Rumata would drop off into a light sleep, but he woke up quickly again. Then Kyra would hold her breath; in his sleep he clung tightly to her hand.

"You are very, very tired," said Kyra softly. "Go to sleep, my darling."

"No, no, tell me all, I am listening."

"You keep falling asleep, my darling."

"I'm nevertheless listening to you. You are right, I am extremely tired, but I am longing even more to be near you and to listen to your words. I won't sleep. Just go on telling me, I'll pay attention, go ahead."

Gratefully she rubbed her nose against his shoulder, kissed him on the cheek and picked up her story again, how recently the son of her father's neighbor had come to her one evening at her father's bidding. "Your father is confined to his bed. They chased him from the office and beat him up with

sticks as a farewell present. He hardly eats anymore, he just drinks. His face looks bluish-gray, and he's got the shakes." The boy also told her that her brother had appeared again, wounded, but happy and drunk, in a new uniform. He gave some money to the father, had a few drinks with him, then threatened that he was going to slaughter all of them. He is now a lieutenant--goodness knows where--in some special detachment, has sworn loyalty to the Holy Order, and will soon be knighted. Her father implored her not to come home, at least for the time being. Her brother was constantly threatening to disavow her since she, the red witch, had taken up with some nobleman...

Sure enough, he thought, she can't go home anymore. And under no circumstances can she stay here either. If anything should happen to her ... He had vivid visions that some evil would befall her. Chills ran down his back at the mere thought.

"Are you asleep?" asked Kyra.

He gave a sudden start and relaxed the hand that had been squeezing her little finger spasmodically.

"No," he said, only half awake. "What else did you do?"

"I tidied up your rooms; everything was in a terrible disorder. I found a book, a work by Father Our. It tells about a noble prince who loves a beautiful but primitive young girl from the mountain regions. She is really a savage and thinks he is a god, but she still loves him with all her heart.

Then they become separated and she dies of grief."

"It's a good book," said Rumata.

"I even cried. I kept thinking it was about us, about you and me."

"Yes, it concerns people like the two of us. And, in general, all human beings who are in love with each other. Except that nobody will ever separate us."

The safest place for her would be on Earth, he thought. But how will she get along there without me? And how will I fare here, all alone? I could ask Anka to become your friend. But how will I be able to remain here without you? No, we'll fly to Earth, but together! I myself will steer the spaceship and you will sit beside me and I'll explain everything to you. So that you won't be afraid. So that you'll love Earth immediately. So that you will never be homesick. This planet isn't your home at all. Your home has rejected you. And you were born a thousand years before your time. My darling, you good, you dear, you selfless girl, willing to sacrifice yourself . . . people like you have been born in every epoch of the bloody history of our planets. Pure, unsullied souls who do not understand cruelty and who know no hatred. Victims. Unnecessary victims. Far more senseless still than the poet Our or Galileo. For people like you are no fighters. In order to be a fighter one has to be able to hate and this is exactly what you cannot do...

Rumata dropped off to sleep again. In his dreams he saw Kyra standing at the edge of a flat rooftop in Soviet Russia with a degravitator fastened to her belt. And Anka, in gay and mocking mood, urging Kyra impatiently toward the edge of a mile-deep abyss ...

"Rumata," said Kyra, "I'm afraid!"

"Of what, my darling?" .

"You are always silent, forever silent I get an uncanny feeling..."

Rumata pulled her closer to him.

"All right, my darling," he said, "then I'll talk and you pay close attention to me: Far, far away from here, beyond the great forest, is a sinister-looking, inaccessible castle. There lives Baron Pampa, a merry, happy and good man the very best baron of all of Arkanar. He has a wife, a beautiful, kind woman, who loves Pampa when he is sober but who cannot stand him when he is drunk..."

He fell silent and listened attentively. He heard the stomping of many hooves in the street and the loud snorting of many men and horses. "Looks like it's here, eh?" asked a coarse voice under their windows. "Looks like it, yes." "Ha-a-alt!" The heels of many boots were clicked outside on the steps of the terraced staircase, and shortly afterwards several fists hammered on the gate. Kyra was frightened and clung closely to Rumata.

"Wait, my darling," he said and threw back the blankets.

"They've come for me," she whispered, "I knew they would!"

Rumata freed himself with difficulty from her arms and rushed to the window. "In the name of the Lord!" they shouted down below. "Open up, it'll go bad with you if we have to beat down the front door!" Rumata pushed the curtain aside a bit and the dancing light of torches flitted into the room. A fairly large crowd of riders were trampling the ground in front of the house, somber people, dressed in black with pointed hoods on their heads. Rumata cast a swift glance down below, then looked and examined the window frame. The frame was solidly anchored in the masonry. Downstairs they were

trying to ram the front door. Rumata groped for his sword in the dark and smashed the window pane with the hilt. A tinkling shower of splinters rained down to the street.

"Hey, you there!" he shouted down to them. "What's the matter with you?"

You must be tired of living!"

The pounding and ramming stopped.

"They always mess things up," came the low voices from below. "The master is home..."

"And what should that matter to us?"

"Don't you know? He's unbeatable with his swords in his hands..."

"And they said he was away for the night and wouldn't be back before daybreak."

"Scared?"

"N-n-o, we aren't scared. It's just that we have no orders to do anything with him. No orders to kill him . . ."

"Well tie him up, beat him over the head, and then chain his legs and hands! Hey, who's fidgeting with their spears back there?"

"If only he won't bash in our skulls ..."

"No, don't be afraid. They all say he has the strange habit of never killing anybody."

"I'll slit your throats like puppies," said Rumata with a frightening voice.

Kyra pressed herself against his back. Her heart was beating wildly; he could hear it. Downstairs the screaming commands were flying: "Knock the gate down, brothers! In the name of the Lord!"

Rumata turned around and looked into Kyra's eyes. She stared at him as she had done a little while ago, with fear and hope in her glance. The reflection of the torches shone in her dry eyes.

"Come, come, my little one," he said tenderly. "You aren't afraid of

that mob? Go and get dressed. There's no sense in staying here any longer."

Hastily he put on his metaloplast shirt. "I'll chase them away and then we'll leave. We'll go to Baron Pampa's castle."

She stood at the window and was looking down into the street. Red dots of light ran across her face. Sounds of smashing, splintering wood, clanking metal came from downstairs. Rumata's heart seemed to burst, it was so full of pity and tender love for her.--I'll chase them away like mangy dogs, he thought. He bent down to pick up his other sword but when he straightened up again, Kyra was no longer standing at the window. Her fingers clutched the drapes as she slowly sank to the ground.

"Kyra!" he cried.

A bolt from a crossbow had pierced her throat, another stuck in her chest. He seized her in his arms and carried her to the bed, gently placing her down on the covers. "Kyra . . . ," he called out softly. She moaned briefly and her limbs went limp. "Kyra," he said. She did not answer. For a moment he stood over her, then he took his swords, slowly walked down the stairs to the entrance hall and waited for the gate to give way under their blows...

EPILOGUE

"And then?" asked Anka.

Pashka lowered his eyes, slapped his knee several times with the flat of his palm, bent down and picked a wild strawberry growing on the

ground

near his feet. Anka waited.

"Then . . .," he murmured. "Actually, nobody knows for sure what happened then, Anka. He had left his transmitter at home, and after the house had burnt to the ground, they understood at Controls that things were not going well, and they immediately sent a special emergency squad to Arkanar. They released a considerable amount of sleeping gas over the city, to cover all eventualities. At first they looked at the house. But since it was totally burnt to the ground, they were confused, not knowing where to look for him. But then they saw--"

He became embarrassed and hesitated for a moment

"Well, they saw the traces he had left behind."

Pashka fell silent again and started popping one strawberry after the other into his mouth.

"And?" said Anka softly.

"They came to the palace . . . That's where they found him."

"How?"

"Well . . . he was sleeping. And all the others . . . around him . . . were also lying on the ground. Some were asleep and others . . . well . . . They also found Don Reba . . ." Pashka quickly glanced at Anka, then swiftly lowered his eyes again. "They took him, that is, they took Anton and brought him back to the station at the base . . . You see, Anka, he doesn't tell us about anything. And in general he talks very little now."

Anka sat bolt upright, very pale, and looked over Pashka's head toward the little meadow in front of the cabin in the woods. The fir trees rustled their needles as they swayed in the breeze; a pair of fat white clouds slowly drifted through the blue sky.

"And what was the matter with the girl?" she asked.

"I don't know," Pashka said firmly.

"Listen, Pashka," said Anka, "maybe I shouldn't have come here at all."

"Will you stop that nonsense! Of course he will be happy to see you..."

"And I have the feeling he is hiding somewhere here in the bushes, watching us, and waiting for me to leave."

Pashka laughed.

"No, no," he said. "Anton's not hiding in the bushes, you can believe me. He hasn't got the faintest idea that you're here. He's gone off fishing somewhere, as usual."

"And how does he behave toward you?"

"So-so. We get along all right. But didn't you want something else?..."

They were both silent for a while.

"Anka," said Pashka. "Do you remember the anisotropic road?"

Anka frowned.

"What kind of a road?"

"The anisotropic road. With the one-way street sign. Don't you remember? We were there, the three of us ..."

"Oh, yes. Now I remember. Anton used that word."

"Yes, and then he entered the one-way road the wrong way and walked its whole length; and when he returned he said he'd found a collapsed bridge and the skeleton of a German chained to a machine gun."

"I don't remember that part," said Anka. "What about it?"

"Nowadays I often think back to that road," said Pashka. "Maybe there's some connection somewhere ... the road was anisotropic--just as history is. *There is no way back.* And he went right ahead anyway. And met up with a chained skeleton."

"I don't follow you. What do you mean by the chained skeleton?"

"I don't know," admitted Pashka. "It's just an impression I have."

Anka said:

"See to it that he doesn't brood too much! Try to keep him involved in discussions about anything at all. Make small talk with him. Try to take his mind off his worries."

Pashka sighed deeply.

"Oh, I know ... I've tried all of that. But what good does all my small talk do him? He listens for a little while, smiles and says:

'Pashka, why don't you sit here? I'm going for a walk.' And then he goes off. And there I sit ... In the beginning I used to follow him secretly; but now I only sit here waiting for him to come back. Maybe you could--"

All of a sudden Anka got to her feet. Pashka stood up too and looked around. Anka followed with bated breath as Anton emerged from a clearing in the woods and came walking toward them--very tall, broad-shouldered, his face pale. He seemed completely unchanged; he had always had a serious expression on his face.

She walked to meet him.

"Anka," he said tenderly. "Anka, my little friend ..."

He held his long arms out to her. Timidly she leaned forward, then quickly jumped back a step. On his fingers . . .

But it was not blood, only the stain of strawberries.