

Arcady and Boris Strugatsky. Prisoners of Power

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[Origin: "Obitaemyj ostrov"](#)

OCR: Vladislav Zarya

INTRODUCTION

Early in these pages, when young Maxim dips his hand into a river on the alien planet on which he has just been marooned, and withdraws it hastily because the water is radioactive, the knowledgeable science fiction reader is likely to say, "Come on, now, fellows -- how could he know? Or, if it were so devastatingly, dangerously radioactive that he could determine it without instruments, how could he *notnot* know before he stuck iris silly hand in it?" But one forgives, proceeds in a smug and self-satisfied way, because Maxim's adventures are adventurous indeed, his encounters believable, suspenseful, unexpected, and quite beyond anticipation, the Strugatskys being the plot-masters that they are.

Then, some hundred-or-so pages in, the reader realizes that Maxim, being what he is, could most certainly perform that small feat at the river, and would; further, the reader realizes that this discovery was made some time back, indirectly, in the gradual unfolding of Maxim's character.

This knack -- the conscious commission of apparent illogic, quietly rectified in later narration -- is typical Strugatsky. It is the gleeful and deliberate provocation of criticism, in the sure knowledge that the criticism is made on the basis of insufficient data, and that the critic will be shown to be, in the true sense of the word, prejudiced -- pre-judging. After this has happened to the reader a number of times (and it

does) the reader has no recourse but to trust the authors -- and no author could ask for more than that. Few, however, can command your trust so deftly.

There is a great deal more in the Strugatsky bag of tricks. They will, for example, build up a vertiginous altitude of suspense (as in the scene where Maxim is sent to execute prisoners, one of them a woman) ending with a shocking twist -- and then proceed with something else, happening to someone else days later, joyfully refusing for the longest time to tell you just what has happened to Maxim. And when they do, what has happened to him is all over, part of his past, and we find him engaged in something quite new. Yet the tapestry is ultimately done and hung, the authors having completed certain panels while you weren't looking.

Then there's the matter of the shifting point-of-view. Any good creative writing professor (though there are those who maintain there is no such thing) will tell you that only one character permits the reader inside his head, so that you know what he is thinking and feeling. All the other characters act out what they are thinking and feeling. "Joe felt a surge of anger and thought what a great joy it would be to smash that smiling face," while "Sam turned white with rage and menacingly raised his embroidery-hoop." Well, apparently the Strugatskys don't give a damn what Teacher said. We repeatedly get inside the heads of many different people, not all of protagonist stature; but, as in the authors' use of their other tricks, we never enter through clumsiness, never by accident, never without a solid reason.

So much for technique; any Strugatsky opus (I think particularly of *Hard to Be a God* and *Roadside Picnic*) shows them to be potent and resourceful tellers of tales. But fiction is composed not only of manner, but of matter, and it is this that is most compelling, most provocative about their work.

First of all, there is the matter of character development. Here the Strugatskys obey one of the prime rules of lasting and important fiction: the central character is *changed* by the events of the narrative. There are no exceptions to this in great literature; your protagonist grows, gains, loses, perhaps dies, but he is not the same at the end as he was in the beginning, and never can be again. It is this which dooms series television to the minor niches of literature, no matter how beautifully written; the central character must be the same next week as he is tonight, no matter how drastic the action.) Maxim is without doubt a species of superman, and in lesser hands he would sweep aside all obstacles and emerge predictably triumphant. And Maxim, indeed, does perform many a superhuman feat. Along with these, however, he commits some horrible blunders, and more than a few laughable ones. His naivety is established early, as is his humanity. He loses the former the hard way, wherever his innocence is shown to be, in the matrix of action, just ignorance. The latter, his humanity, he never loses at all, whether it is shown as falling face-first into a mud puddle or grieving at the inexcusable death of a friend. His whole being, however, is work-hardened as the story progresses; placing himself so often

between the hammer and the anvil of events toughens and sharpens him, yet never even threatens that deep compassion which makes of him such an engaging person. There are many facets to his personality, but cynicism is not one of them. Not even when he confronts the bureaucrats.

And here we come to the most delightful, the most penetrating aspect of the Strugatsky corpus. The brothers have obviously declared war on the bureaucrats -- on their self-perpetuation, their greed, their pomposity, their prostration before the great god Protocol, their dedication to climbing the official ladder, and their willingness, in that climb, to forgo decency, honor, personal loyalty, honesty, even logic and consistency when expedient. Faced with a bureaucrat, civilian or military, the Strugatskys resist the temptation to explicate evil, to pile horror upon horror, vileness upon vileness, in an effort to turn our faces and our stomachs; for in that *Grand Guignol* Grand Guignol approach there is a quantum of awe. The brothers resort rather to ridicule. By deft touches of slight exaggeration, by swift indications of bad digestion, bad manners, and bad (or atrophied) consciences, they succeed in making the bureaucrats ridicule themselves.

But it doesn't stop there; for when the self-serving, self-seeking officials become responsible for the cruel enslavement of the entire populace, and instigate a war in which real people by the thousands die terrible and agonizing deaths, the clown has set fire to the circus tent, and nothing he and his kind are or do from then on can be the least bit funny. There is a battle scene in this book which brings this out unforgettably; I find myself enriched and grateful for it, and for another beautiful Strugatsky novel.

Theodore Sturgeon
San Diego, California, 1977

PART ONE: ROBINSON CRUSOE

1.

Maxim opened the hatch, leaned out, and cautiously scanned the sky. Low-lying and solid-looking, it lacked that airy transparency suggestive of infinite space and a multitude of inhabited worlds; it was a real biblical firmament, smooth and dense. Undoubtedly this firmament rested on the powerful shoulders of a local Atlas. It glowed with a steady phosphorescence. Maxim looked for the hole that his ship had pierced, but it

was gone; only two large dark blots floated at the zenith like dead bodies in water. Flinging the hatch wide open, he jumped into the tall dry grass.

The dense hot air smelled of dust, rusted iron, trampled vegetation, life. And of death, long past and incomprehensible. The grass was waist-high. Nearby, dense bushes loomed darkly, and dreary gnarled trees occasionally broke the landscape. It was almost as bright as a clear moonlit night on Earth, but without Earth's moon shadows and hazy nocturnal blueness. Everything was gray, dusty, and flat. The ship rested on the bottom of an enormous hollow with sloping sides. The surrounding terrain rose sharply toward a washed-out horizon; the landscape seemed strange because nearby a broad, serene river flowed westward and apparently upward along one slope.

Maxim walked in a circle around the ship, running his palm along its cold damp side. Traces of the impact were where he had expected to find them. There was a deep ugly dent under the sensory ring, sustained when the ship was jolted suddenly and pitched to one side; the cyberpilot had felt insulted and sulked, and Maxim had had to grab the controls quickly. The jagged hole next to the right porthole was made ten seconds later when the ship pitched forward. Maxim looked at the zenith again. The dark blots were scarcely visible now. A meteorite attack in the stratosphere? Probability -- zero point zero zero. But in space anything theoretically possible would happen sooner or later.

Maxim returned to the cabin and switched on the automatic repair controls and activated the field laboratory. Then he headed toward the river. An adventure of sorts, but still routine. Monotonously routine. The unexpected to be expected in the Independent Reconnaissance Unit. Landing accidents, meteorite and radiation attacks -- adventures of the body, merely physical stuff.

The tall brittle grass rustled and crackled beneath his feet and prickly seeds stuck to his shorts. A swarm of midges buzzed in front of his face, but then, as if on signal, retreated.

The IRU didn't attract solid establishment types. They were wrapped up in their own serious affairs and knew that the exploration of alien worlds was just a monotonous and exhausting game. Yes, monotonously exhausting and exhaustingly monotonous.

Of course, if you are twenty years old, can't do anything well, haven't the vaguest notion of what you really want to do, haven't yet learned the value of time, that most precious of all things, haven't any special talents and don't foresee acquiring any -- if at age twenty you still haven't outgrown the lad stage where your hands and feet are more important than your head; if you are still naive enough to imagine yourself making fabulous discoveries in unexplored space... if, if, if... You pick up the catalog, open it to any page, take a random stab to choose your unexplored world, and take off into the wild blue yonder. Discover a planet, name it after yourself, determine its physical characteristics, do battle with any monsters you might encounter, and establish contact with intelligent beings, if there are any. If not, become a Robinson Crusoe.

What for? Well, you'd be thanked and told you've made an enormous contribution, and some prominent expert would summon you for lengthy discussions. The school kids, especially the little ones, would gaze at you in awe. But your old teacher would ask only: "Are you still with the IRU?" Then he'd change the subject and look distressed and guilty because he felt responsible for your inability to outgrow the IRU. And your father would say: "H'mm" and hesitatingly offer you a position as a lab assistant. And your mother would say: "Maxie, when you were little you drew rather well." And Pete would say: "How long can this go on? Haven't you disgraced yourself long enough?" And everybody would be right except you. So what do you do? You return to IRU headquarters, pick up the catalog, open it at random and stab blindly.

Before descending the high, steep bank to the river, Maxim looked around. Gnarled trees were silhouetted against the sky, and a small circle of light came from the open hatch. Everything appeared normal. "Well, OK," he mumbled to himself. "Take it as it comes. It would be great if I could find a civilization's powerful, ancient, wise culture. And human." He went down to the river.

The river was very broad and sluggish; it appeared to flow downhill from the east and uphill to the west. The refraction here was incredible. The opposite bank was sloped and choked with bulrushes; a half-mile upstream some sort of columns and twisted beams -- buckled trusswork overgrown with vines -- protruded from the water. "Civilization," thought Maxim, not particularly enthusiastic. He sensed the presence of a great deal of iron. And something else, too, something unpleasant and stifling. Scooping up a handful of water, he realized quickly that it was dangerously radioactive. The river was carrying radioactive substances from the east. This certainly wasn't the kind of civilization he had in mind. Rather than establishing contact, it would be wiser to take samples and perform the usual analyses, orbit the planet's equator several times, and head for home. Once on Earth he would turn the material over to the experts on the Galactic Security Council and quickly put the entire episode out of his mind.

He shook his fingers squeamishly, dried them in the sand, and squatted on his haunches. He tried to picture the inhabitants of this planet, hardly a happy place. Somewhere beyond the forest lay a city of dirty factories; decrepit reactors emptying radioactive wastes into the river; ugly houses beneath metal roofs, with endless walls and few windows; and buildings separated by litter-strewn alleys. And the people? Probably dressed heavily, encased in thick, coarse material, with high white uncomfortable collars cutting into their necks.

Suddenly he noticed footprints in the sand. They had been made by bare feet. Someone had scrambled down the bank to the river, someone, he imagined, with large feet, heavy, pigeon-toed, and clumsy. Undoubtedly humanoid, but with six toes on each foot. He had scrambled down the bank, hobbled along the sand, plunged into the radioactive waters, and swum to the opposite shore, into the bulrushes.

Like a bolt of lightning, a brilliant blue flash lit up everything around him. Above the riverbank there was a thunderous crash followed by sizzling and crackling. Maxim jumped up. Dry earth rained down and something sped through the sky with a menacing whine and dropped into the river, raising a spray mixed with white steam. He realized what had happened, but not why, and he was not surprised to see a swirling column of scorching smoke rising like a giant corkscrew into the phosphorescent firmament from the spot where his ship had been standing. The ship had exploded: its ceramic shell glowed violet, flames danced through the grass around it, bushes flared up, and the gnarled trees were enveloped in smoky fire. Intense heat struck him, and Maxim shielded his face with his palm as he backed away.

"Oh, God, no! No! Why?" He tried to reconstruct what had happened. "Some big ape came along, got inside, lifted up the deck, found the batteries, picked up one of the strange-looking boulders, and *bambam!* What a boulder -- three tons! And with one swing. A powerful animal, all right. It wounded my ship with its pebbles twice in the stratosphere and finished it off down here. Incredible! Bet it never happened before. Now what? I'll be missed soon, of course, but nobody will think that the ship could vanish and its pilot survive. Damn it!"

He turned from the fire and walked away rapidly along the river. The entire area glowed red. His shadow on the grass, shortening and lengthening, rushed ahead of him. Sparse and musty woods began on his right, and the grass became soft and moist. It occurred to him that the fire could overtake him and he would be forced to make his escape by swimming -- a most unpleasant prospect. But as the red glow grew dim and died out, he realized that the ship's fire-fighting system, unlike himself, had understood the problem and done its job well. He vividly pictured its sooty tanks protruding absurdly from the hot fragments, emitting dense pyrophage clouds. They must be very pleased with their performance.

"Easy now," he thought. "Don't panic. Take your time. You've plenty of it. They can look for me forever. There's no ship, and it will be impossible to find me. Until they are absolutely convinced of my death, mother won't be told anything. And I'll figure something out."

He passed a small cool bog, forced his way through some bushes, and emerged on a cracked concrete road leading into the woods. Stepping along the concrete slabs, he walked to the edge of the river. There he saw rusty girders overgrown with vegetation, the remains of some huge latticed construction lying half-submerged in the water. On the other side the road continued, barely visible beneath the luminous sky. Apparently, long ago a bridge had spanned the river, but it probably had interfered with someone's plans and had been knocked over into the water, creating an ugly mess. Maxim sat down and contemplated his predicament.

"OK, you have a road. That's the main thing. It's a lousy road, very old, but it's still a road. And, on all inhabited planets, roads lead to their builders. What do I need now? Not food. I wouldn't mind a snack, but I

had better keep my appetite in check. I can manage without water for another day. There's enough air, although I'd be happier with a little less carbon dioxide and radioactivity. So far. I'm in fair shape. What I do need is a small primitive coil transmitter with a spiral pitch." In his mind's eye he saw clearly the circuit for a positron sender. If only he had the parts, he could put one together at once, blindfolded. He assembled it mentally several times.

"Robinson Crusoe. That's me, all right." He was somewhat taken by the idea. "Maxim Crusoe. I don't have a damned thing except a pair of shorts without pockets and my sneakers. On the other hand, my island is inhabited. And if it's inhabited, there's always hope of locating a primitive coil transmitter." He tried hard to visualize a coil transmitter but had no luck this time. Instead he kept seeing his mother and the expression on her face when she was told her son had disappeared without a trace. His father would nib his cheeks and look around absentmindedly. "Cut it out," he said to himself. "Stop thinking about them. Anything, but not about them. Otherwise you're sunk. Cut it out and get hold of yourself." He rose and started along the road.

The forest, timid and sparse at first, gradually became bolder and edged up closer to the road. Several impudent young trees had burst through the concrete and were growing right through the highway. Obviously the road was at least twenty or thirty years old. Along its sides the woods were taller, denser, and wilder; here and there branches interlaced overhead. It grew dark and loud guttural cries came from the depths of the forest.

Something moved, rustled, thudded. Then, about twenty paces in front of him, a dark squat shape darted across the road. Mosquitoes whined. It suddenly dawned on Maxim that this region was too desolate and wild for human habitation and that it would take several days to reach an inhabited area. Again his hunger surfaced, but Maxim sensed that flesh on the hoof was plentiful here. He wouldn't starve to death. Although the meat wouldn't be particularly appetizing, the hunt itself would be interesting. Deer? Maybe, maybe not. But the local game was undoubtedly edible. Stop moving, and the midges would begin to feed on you savagely. And as everyone knows, what's edible on an alien planet doesn't die of hunger. It wouldn't be so awful to get lost here and spend a year or so roaming the forest. He would find himself a buddy -- some kind of wolf or bear. They'd go hunting together. He supposed he'd eventually tire of it. Besides, the prospect of tramping through this forest wasn't particularly appealing, with all that iron junk around and the polluted air. Anyway, the main thing was to put together a coil transmitter.

He stopped and listened carefully. From somewhere in the depths of the forest came a monotonous, muffled rumbling. Maxim realized that he had been hearing it for some time before it broke through to his consciousness. It was not an animal or waterfall, but a mechanical device, some sort of barbarous machine. It wheezed, made grinding noises, and gave off a rusty odor. And it was drawing closer.

Hunching over and edging closer to the shoulder, Maxim ran noiselessly toward the machine and then stopped just before reaching an intersection. The road here was muddy, with deep ugly ruts and slabs of concrete jutting up. It smelled foul and was very radioactive. Maxim squatted and looked to his left, toward the approaching rumbling and grinding.

A minute later it appeared. A hot stinking mammoth of riveted metal, rumbling along the road with enormous mud-clogged caterpillar treads. It plodded along, humpbacked and shabby, clanging through the iron litter in the forest. It was stuffed with a mixture of raw plutonium and lanthanides. Driverless and helpless, yet menacing, it swung over the intersection and plodded on, dangling a tail of scorching heat. It disappeared into the forest, growling, tossing and turning, roaring, its fury gradually subsiding.

Maxim caught his breath and brushed away the midges. He was stunned: in his whole life he had never seen anything so absurd and pitiful. "Well," he thought, "I won't find any positron senders around here." He watched the monster until it disappeared and he suddenly noticed that the crossroad was just a narrow corridor through the forest. Maybe he ought to overtake it. Stop it and turn off its reactor. He listened carefully. Crackling and crashing filled the forest. The monster was moving deeper into the forest like a hippo into a bog. Then the rumble of the engine drew closer again. Clanging and roaring, it plodded once more over the intersection and returned to the area it had just left. "Boy, oh boy," thought Maxim. "I'd better keep clear. Vicious beasts and uncivilized robots are not for me." He paused, broke from the bushes, and, with one bound, leaped over the polluted intersection.

After walking very rapidly for some time, inhaling deeply to clear his lungs of the iron mammoth's exhaust fumes, he slowed down. He thought about what he had encountered in his first two hours on his inhabited island and tried to construct a logical picture from his bizarre experiences. It was too difficult; the pieces were incredible, unreal. The forest itself was straight out of a fairy tale: almost human voices of fantastic creatures echoed through it. As in a fairy tale, an old deserted road led to an enchanted castle, and invisible, evil sorcerers placed obstacles in the way of those who chanced to pass by. From afar, they had showered his ship with meteorites and, failing to turn him back, had then burned his ship, caught him in a trap, and dispatched an iron dragon after him. The dragon was old and stupid, but they had surely realized their mistake and were preparing something more up-to-date.

"Listen here," said Maxim to them, "I've no intention of breaking the spell over your castles and waking your sleeping beauties. All I want is to meet one of you, one of your more intelligent people, who can help me with a positron sender."

But the wicked sorcerers persisted. First they dropped a gigantic rotted tree across the road, destroyed its concrete surface, dug a large hole in the ground, and filled it with putrid radioactive liquid. When that failed to stop him, when the midges tired of biting and retreated in

disappointment, toward morning they released a cold, malevolent fog. Maxim jogged to warm himself. The fog was sticky and oily, and smelted of decay. Soon the smell of smoke was added, and Maxim tried to locate the fire.

Dawn was breaking when Maxim spotted it at the side of the road, near a low moss-covered stone structure with a caved-in roof and dark empty windows. Although there was no one in sight, he sensed that people had been there recently and might return soon. He turned off the road, leaped over a drainage ditch, and sinking ankle-deep in rotting leaves, approached the fire. The fire welcomed him with its primitive warmth. Everything was very simple here. Without the formality of greetings, one could squat, warm one's hands by the fire, and wait in silence until the host, just as silently, served hot food and drink. True, the host wasn't around, but a blackened kettle with a strong-smelling broth hung above the fire.

Maxim sat down by the fire and warmed himself, then rose reluctantly and entered the house. House? Only a stone shell remained of the original structure. The morning sky shone through the broken beams overhead, the rotten floorboards were treacherous, and clusters of crimson mushrooms grew in the corners -- poisonous when raw, but edible if roasted sufficiently.

But Maxim suddenly lost his appetite. In the semidarkness by the wall, mingled with faded rags, there was a skeleton! Revolted, he turned, descended the broken steps, and cupping his palms around his mouth, shouted at the top of his lungs: "Hey, six-toes!"

His shout was smothered almost instantly by the fog-bound trees. There was no answer except for the angry chattering of birds overhead.

Maxim returned to the fire, tossed on some branches, and peered into the kettle. The broth was boiling. He found a spoon of sorts, sniffed it, dried it with grass and sniffed it again. Then he carefully skimmed off a grayish scum and flicked it over the rim. He stirred the broth, scooped some from the edge, blew on it, and pursing his lips, tasted it. Not bad. Something like broth made from a takhorg liver. Only stronger. Setting the spoon aside, he took down the kettle carefully with both hands and placed it on the grass. Then he looked around again and called out: "Breakfast! Come and get it!"

He still sensed that the owner of the dwelling was somewhere nearby, but all he saw were motionless bushes, wet from the fog, and dark gnarled tree trunks. There were no sounds except the crackling of the fire and the restless cross-chatter of the birds.

"Well, OK," he said aloud. "Do as you please, but I'm breaking the ice!"

He developed a taste for the broth very quickly. Before he knew it, a third of the soup had vanished from the kettle. Regretfully, he moved away, rested for a while, and dried the spoon. But he couldn't control himself: he scooped up from the very bottom more of those delicious brown chunks of meat that melted in his mouth. Then he moved away, dried the spoon again, and placed it across the top of the kettle. Now the time had come to express his appreciation to his invisible host.

He jumped up, selected several thin branches, and entered the house. Treading cautiously on the rotten floorboards and trying to avoid looking at the remains in the shadows, he picked some mushrooms, selecting the firmest, and threaded their crimson caps onto a branch. "You could use some salt and a little pepper, but never mind. You'll do for an introduction. We'll hang you over the fire, steam out every bit of your poison, and you'll be delicious. You'll be my first contribution to the culture of this inhabited island."

The house darkened almost imperceptibly and he felt someone's eyes on him. Suppressing the desire to turn sharply, he counted to ten, rose slowly, and with an anticipatory smile turned his head.

A long dark face with large doleful eyes and lips drooping at the corners looked at him blankly through the window. They stared at each other for several seconds, and it seemed to Maxim that the gloom emanating from the face was flooding the house, sweeping over the forest, and engulfing the entire world. Everything around him turned gray, gloomy, and mournful. Then the house became still darker. Maxim turned toward the door.

A stocky man, topped by a shaggy mop of red hair and wearing an ugly jump suit, straddled the threshold with his short sturdy legs and blocked the entrance with his broad shoulders. Maxim was pierced by a pair of blue eyes, very steady and hostile, yet almost cheerful -- perhaps in contrast to the all-pervasive gloom spreading from the window. Obviously this was not the first time this rough-looking native had encountered a visitor from another world. But it was also obvious that he was used to dealing with annoying visitors promptly and harshly, dispensing with such amenities as communication and other unnecessary complications. An ominous-looking thick metal pipe suspended from a leather belt around his neck was aimed directly at Maxim's abdomen. It was clear that he hadn't the slightest notion of the value of human life, of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, of humanism's lofty ideals, even of humanism itself.

Having no choice in the matter, Maxim extended the branch of skewered mushrooms, smiled more broadly, and spoke in carefully articulated words. "Peace! Everything is OK. Everything is fine!" The gloomy face behind the window responded to this greeting with a lengthy but unintelligible sentence that succeeded in clearing the air. Judging from the sounds outside, dry twigs were being tossed into the fire. Behind the unkempt red beard, the blue-eyed figure produced clanging sounds that reminded Maxim of the iron dragon at the crossing.

"Yes!" Maxim nodded vigorously. "Earth! Space!" He pointed the branch toward the zenith and Redbeard obediently looked up at the broken ceiling. "Maxim!" continued Maxim, poking himself in the chest. "Maxim! My name is Maxim! Maxim!" "Mac Sim!" bellowed Redbeard. He had a strange intonation. His eyes glued on Maxim, he shot a series of rumbling sounds over his shoulder. "Mac Sim" was repeated several times. The doleful character replied with some eerie, melancholy syllables. Redbeard's blue eyes and yellow-toothed jaws opened wide and he began to guffaw. Evidently there was

something funny here that Maxim failed to grasp. Finished with his fun, Redbeard dried his eyes with his free hand, lowered his death-dealing weapon, and signaled Maxim to come out.

Maxim was delighted to obey. On the porch, he again held out skewered mushrooms to Redbeard. Redbeard seized the branch, inspected it carefully, sniffed it, and tossed it aside. "No!" Maxim protested. "This stuff is good." Maxim bent down and retrieved the branch. Redbeard did not object but slapped Maxim on the back several times and shoved him toward the fire, forcing him to sit down. He attempted to communicate something, but Maxim was busy studying the gloomy one sitting on the other side of the fire and drying out a dirty rag. One foot was bare, and he kept wiggling his toes. Five, not six.

2.

Guy sat on the edge of the bench by the window and polished the insignia on his beret with his cuff while Corporal Varibobu prepared his travel orders. The corporal's head was tilted to one side, eyes opened wide. With his left hand he held a red-bordered form while he slowly traced out a fine calligraphic script. "What handwriting," thought Guy somewhat enviously. "Ink-stained old fogey: twenty years in the Legion and still a measly clerk. Just look at those eyes goggle -- the pride of the brigade. Watch that tongue come out. Yup, there it is. Full of ink, too. So long, Varibobu, you old paper pusher. I won't be seeing you again. I feel sorry to leave -- good men they've got here, and the officers, too. And the job we do is useful and important." Guy sniffed and looked out the window.

Outside the wind was blowing white dust along the broad sidewalkless street paved with hexagonal slabs. The long walls of identical buildings housing administrative and engineering personnel gleamed white. Mrs. Idoya, a stout imposing woman, walked past the window, shielding herself from the dust and holding down her skirt. She was a courageous woman, not afraid to gather up her brood and follow her brigadier husband to these dangerous parts. The sentry in front of the CO's headquarters, a recent recruit wearing an unwrinkled trench coat and a beret pulled down over his ears, presented arms. Then two truckloads of trainees passed -- probably going for their shots. "That's right, sergeant, give it to 'em. Don't stick your head out. There's nothing to see here," Guy thought. "Where do you think you are -- on some main drag?"

"How do you spell it?" asked Varibobu. "G-a-I?"

"No. My last name is Gaal -- G-a-a-I."

"Too bad," said Varibobu, sucking his pen. "Gal would fit on one line."

"Come on, write," thought Guy. "It won't do you any good to save lines. This jerk is a corporal? Can't even polish his buttons. Some corporal. Two stripes, but you can't shoot worth a damn, and everybody knows it."

The door flew open and Captain Tolot, wearing the gold arm-band of duty officer, strode into the room. Guy jumped to his feet and clicked his heels. The corporal rose slightly but continued writing.

"Aha." The captain tore off his dust mask in disgust. "Private Gaal. Yes, I know, you're leaving us. Too bad. But I'm glad for you. I hope you'll serve as conscientiously in the capital."

"Yes, sir, captain!" said Guy. He was very fond of Captain Tolot, an educated officer and former high school teacher. The captain had singled him out.

"You may sit down, private." The captain went behind the counter to his desk. Still standing, he scanned some papers and picked up the phone. Guy turned toward the window tactfully. Nothing had changed outside. His buddies were marching information to dinner. Guy watched them sadly. Any minute they'd be entering the mess hall, and Corporal Serembesh would order them to remove their berets for "grace." Thirty throats would bellow while the steam was rising from the pots, the bowls were glistening on the counter, and old man Doga was getting ready to release one of his prize jokes about a soldier and a cook. Too bad he had to leave. True, it was dangerous here and the climate was unhealthy and the rations were monotonous -- canned stuff -- but. Here, at least, you knew you were needed, that they couldn't manage without you; here you took the ominous pressure of the forest on your own shoulders, and you felt it. Lord, how many of his buddies were buried here. Beyond the settlement stood a whole grove of poles topped with rusted helmets.

On the other hand -- the capital. Not just anyone was sent there. And once you got there, you were constantly on the move. They said all the capital's parade grounds were visible from the Creators' headquarters, so that every formation was observed by one of the Creators. Not every formation, really. But they did spot-check. Suddenly imagining himself being summoned from a formation, Guy was thrown into a panic. He takes two steps and slips and falls on his face at the commander's feet as his submachine gun clatters on the pavement. Damn, what a clumsy ox. And his beret flies off to God knows where. Phew! Guy took a deep breath and looked around furtively. God forbid. Yes, that was the capital for you. Everything was under watchful eyes. Oh well, never mind -- others were serving there. Besides, his sister Rada lived there. And silly old Unc with his prehistoric bones and antediluvian tortoises. Damn it, how he missed both of them!

When he glanced out the window again, his mouth dropped open. Two men were walking along the street toward the CO's office. One he knew -- red-bearded Zef, sergeant major of the 14th Sappers' Detachment, a condemned man who earned the right to remain alive by clearing roads through the forest. But the other was weird-looking. At first Guy took him for a degen, but then reasoned that Zef would hardly bother dragging in a degen to headquarters. He was a healthy young man, almost naked, deeply tanned, strong as a bull, and wore only a pair of odd-looking pants made of shiny cloth and cut well above the knee. Zef had his gun with him but he didn't appear to be escorting this fellow under guard. They were walking side by

side, and the queer-looking stranger kept waving his arms absurdly. He was attempting to communicate something to Zef, who was panting from their rapid pace and looking totally lost. "Some kind of savage," thought Guy. "But where did he come from? The road through the forest? Maybe he was raised by animals. It's happened before. Damn, what muscles!"

He watched the pair approach the sentry. Zef wiped his face as he attempted to explain something, but the sentry, the recent re-emit, didn't know Zef and thrust a gun into his ribs, ordering him to withdraw to the distance specified by regulations. The naked fellow entered the conversation with his arms still flying. The strange expression on his face was as elusive as quicksilver, and his eyes were expressive and dark. "Oh, now the sentry's lost his cool. Going to raise a ruckus." Guy turned around.

"Captain, permission to speak? The sergeant major of the 114th has brought someone in. Would you mind taking a look?"

The captain went to the window. His eyebrows went up. Opening the window, he stuck out his head.

"Sentry, let them pass!"

Guy was closing the window when he heard tramping in the corridor. Zef and Ms savage companion entered the office. Close on their heels and crowding them, the chief sentry officer and two other men on sentry duty burst in. Standing at attention, Zef coughed and fixed his impudent blue eyes on the captain.

"Sergeant Major Zef, One hundred and fourteenth Sappers' Detachment, reporting, sir. This fellow was arrested on the road. Captain, from all outward signs, he's insane. He eats poisonous mushrooms, doesn't understand a word, speaks unintelligibly, and, as you see, walks around nearly naked."

While Zef was delivering his report, the prisoner scanned his surroundings and presented a strange smile to everyone present. His teeth were even and as white as sugar. Folding his hands behind his back, the captain went up closer and inspected him from head to foot.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The prisoner smiled even more strangely, slapped his palm against his chest, and pronounced something that sounded like "Mac Sim." The chief sentry guffawed, the sentries sniggered, and the captain smiled. At first Guy saw nothing humorous in his response; then he realized that "mac sim" in thieves' slang meant "I ate the knife."

"He's probably one of yours," said the captain to Zef.

Zef shook his head, throwing out a cloud of dust from his beard.

"Definitely not. Mac Sim is what he calls himself, but he doesn't understand Moves' language. So he's not one of us."

"Probably a degen," suggested the chief sentry officer. (They gave him an icy look.) "Naked," explained the sentry officer as he retreated toward the door. "May I go now, captain?"

"You may. Send for our staff physician. Dr. Zogu. Where did you catch him?" he asked Zef.

Zef explained that his detachment had been clearing quadrant23/07

during the night, had destroyed four self-propelled ballistic missiles and one device of unknown function, and had lost two men in an explosion; everything was in order. Around seven in the morning this stranger came off the road from the forest to their campfire. They spotted him from a distance, followed him unnoticed by taking cover in the bushes, and captured him at an opportune moment. At first Zef had assumed he was a fugitive, then decided he was a degen and was about to shoot him, but changed his mind because this fellow... Zef, embarrassed, ran his fingers through his beard and concluded: "Because I realized he wasn't a degen."

"How did you reach that conclusion?" asked the captain. The prisoner stood quietly, arms folded across his powerful chest, glancing alternately at him and Zef.

Zef said it would be rather difficult to explain.

"In the first place this guy wasn't afraid of anything. Further-more, he took the broth from the fire and ate exactly one-third, as if he was entitled to it, as a good friend. But before eating, he shouted into the woods, probably because he felt we were near-by. Next point: he wanted to treat us to mushrooms. The mush-rooms were poisonous, and we wouldn't eat them or let him, either. But he tried to treat us -- I suppose to show his gratitude. And last: as everyone knows, no degen is better endowed physically than a normal weakling. On the way here he kept up a wild pace, walked over fallen trees as if he were on level ground, and skipped across ditches and waited for me on the other side. And for some reason or other -- maybe to show off -- he actually picked me up and ran two hundred steps."

The captain listened to Zef attentively. But scarcely had Zef finished his story when the captain turned sharply to the prisoner, stared at him hard, and barked in Khonti: "Your name? Rank? Assignment?"

Guy admired the captain's clever approach, but it was obvious that the prisoner did not understand Khonti. Again he revealed his beautiful teeth and thumped himself on the chest, saying "Mac Sim." He jabbed his finger into his captor's ribs, saying "Zef," and then began to speak slowly, with long pauses, pointing alternately at the ceiling and the floor, and waving his arms, Guy thought he caught some familiar words in this speech, but the words had no bearing on the matter at hand. When the prisoner stopped talking. Corporal Varibobu spoke up.

"In my opinion this man is a clever spy and we should report this to the brigadier."

The captain ignored him.

"You may go now, Zef," he said. "You've done a good job and it will be taken into account."

"I'm very grateful to you, captain!" Zef was about to leave when the prisoner uttered a low cry, leaned over the counter, and grabbed a pile of blank forms lying on the desk.

Frightened out of his wits, Varibobu recoiled and flung his pen at the savage. The savage snatched it out of the air and, perching himself on the counter, began to sketch on the paper. Guy and Zef grabbed him by the shoulder, but he shrugged them off.

"Leave him alone!" ordered the captain, and Guy obeyed with a sense of relief. Restraining this brown beast would be as difficult as stopping a tank by grabbing its treads.

The captain and Zef flanked the prisoner and studied his scribbling.

"I think it's a map of the world," said Zef uncertainly.

"H'm," responded the captain.

"Well, of course! Here in the center he has the World Light. Around it is the World. And here is where he thinks we are."

Guy finally managed to squeeze between the prisoner's firm shoulder and Zef's coarse, sweaty jacket. The sketch amused him. That was how a six-year-old would portray the World: a small circle representing the World Light, and around it a large circle representing the World Sphere. And on the circle a duck dot, to which need only be added little hands and feet -- and then you have it: "Ibis is the World and this is me." The poor lunatic couldn't even draw the circle properly, making some sort of oval shape. It was obvious that he was abnormal. On top of that, he drew a dotted line going beneath the World to another point, as if he were trying to explain how he got where he now was.

Meanwhile the prisoner took a second form and rapidly sketched two small World Spheres in opposite corners, joined them with a dotted line, and added some flourishes. Zef let out a whistle: it was a hopeless case. There was no point in staying any longer.

"May I leave, sir?"

The captain shook his head.

"Uh, Zef, you were working in the Zone?"

"Yes, sir."

The captain paced up and down.

"Perhaps you could -- how shall I put it -- give me your opinion of this man? From, let's say, a professional point of view."

"Impossible, sir," replied Zef. "You know I've lost the right to speak in a professional capacity."

"I understand. That's all very true. And I must compliment you for your honesty. But..."

Zef stood at attention. The captain was clearly embarrassed, and Guy understood his predicament well. This was a serious case. (Suppose the savage is a spy?) Dr. Zogu was certainly a great officer, a brilliant legionnaire, but still he was only an army doctor. Zef, on the other hand, had really known his stuff before he was arrested.

"Well now," said the captain, "there's nothing we can do about that. But between you and me..." He halted in front of Zef. "You understand what I mean? Simply between you and me, do you really think this fellow is insane?"

Zef paused before replying.

"Just between you and me?" he repeated. "Well, of course, as a layman, and laymen do make mistakes. I'm inclined to believe that this is a clear-cut case of a split personality, where the real ego is ejected and replaced by an imagined ego. Purely as a layman, mind you, I would recommend

electric shock therapy and tranquilizers."

Mac Sim began to speak again, addressing the captain and Zef alternately. The poor fellow was trying to say something -- some-thing was bothering him. But just then the door opened and the doctor, obviously out of sorts because his dinner had been interrupted, entered the room.

"Hello, Tolot," he said cantankerously. "What's the matter? I'm quite relieved to find you alive and well. Who the hell is this?"

"The rehabs caught him in the forest. I suspect he's insane."

"He's not insane. He's a malingerer," growled the doctor, pouring water for himself from a pitcher. "Send him back to the forest. Let him work."

"He's not ours," protested the captain. "And we don't know where he came from. I think he may have been captured by degens, gone off his head, and escaped to us."

"Right," grumbled the doctor. "You'd have to go off your rocker to come running to us." He went over to the prisoner and reached out to examine his face. The prisoner grinned and gently pushed him away. "No, no!" said the doctor. "Stand still!"

The prisoner submitted. The doctor examined his eyes, thumped him, felt his neck and throat, flexed his hand, tapped his knees, and then returned to the pitcher and poured himself another glass of water.

"Heartburn," he explained.

Guy looked at Zef, who was standing off to one side and staring at the wall with studied indifference. The doctor quenched his thirst and returned to the examination. He palpated the prisoner, looked at his teeth, punched him in the abdomen twice; then he took a flat box from his pocket, plugged it into a socket, and applied the box to various parts of the savage's body.

"Nothing special," he said. "Is he a mute, too?"

"No," replied the captain. "He can talk, but he speaks in some savage language. He doesn't understand us. Here are his drawings."

The doctor studied them.

"Well, well, very amusing." He grabbed the corporal's pen and rapidly sketched a cat as a child might, using stick lines and small circles. "What do you say to that, friend?" he asked, handing the drawing to the lunatic.

Without a moment's hesitation, Mac Sim took the pen and began to draw. Beside the doctor's cat he sketched a strange animal covered with a great deal of hair and wearing a hostile expression. Although this animal was unfamiliar to Guy, he realized it was not a child's drawing. It was a fine drawing -- in fact, remarkably good. Even a little frightening to look at. The doctor reached for the pen, but the lunatic drew back his hand and sketched still another animal -- with enormous ears, wrinkled skin, and, in place of a nose, something resembling a very long tail.

"Beautiful!" shouted the doctor, slapping his sides.

The lunatic didn't stop there. Now, instead of animals, he sketched some sort of apparatus that resembled a large transparent land mine. Then he very skillfully drew a little man sitting inside. He tapped the tiny figure with his finger and then tapped himself on the chest, saying: "Mac Sim."

"He could have seen this thing by the river," said Zef softly as he

moved closer. "We burned a similar object last night. A real monster." He shook his head.

The doctor appeared to notice Zef for the first time.

"Ah, my dear professor!" he shouted with exaggerated pleasure. "Something stinks in this room. My dear colleague, be so kind as to deliver your profound judgments from the other side of the room. I shall be greatly indebted to you."

Varibobu snickered and the captain said sternly: "Zef, stand by the door, and don't forget yourself."

"Well, that's better," said the doctor. "Tolot, what do you think we should do with him?"

"That depends on your diagnosis. If he's a malingerer, I'll hand him over to the state prosecutor's office. They'll look into it. If he's insane..."

"Tolot, he's not a malingerer!" The doctor was adamant. "The office of the state prosecutor is not the place for him. But I do know a place that will be very interested in him. Where's the brigadier?"

"He's on patrol in the forest."

"Well, no matter. You're the duty officer today, aren't you? Send this young stranger to this address." The doctor wrote something on the back of the last sketch.

"What's that?" asked the captain.

"Oh, it's a place that will be very grateful to us for this lunatic. I can promise you that."

The captain twisted the paper in his fingers hesitantly, then went to the far corner of the room and beckoned to the doctor. They whispered for some time and only an occasional remark of Zogu's was audible. "The Propaganda Department... Send him with an escort. It's not that much of a secret! I guarantee you... Order him to forget the whole thing. Damn it -- the kid won't understand a thing anyway!"

"Good," the captain finally agreed. "Corporal Varibobu! Write up escort papers!"

The corporal rose slightly.

"Are Private Gaal's travel orders ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Insert Mac Sim's name in the orders as being under escort. Private Gaal!"

Guy clicked his heels and snapped to attention.

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to deliver the prisoner to the address on this paper before you proceed to your new post. After you have carried out these orders, you must present this paper to the duty officer at your new station. Forget the address. This is your last assignment, Gaal, and I know you will execute it as befits a good legionnaire."

"It will be done, sir," shouted Guy, flattered by the captain's confidence.

Suddenly a hot wave of indescribable ecstasy swept over him and bore him aloft. "Oh, the sweet moments of joy, those unforgettable moments when one is on wings, those moments of sweet contempt for everything crude, material, and physical. Moments when you long to hear the command that will join you to fire, fling you into its flames against thousands of enemies, into the very thick of wild hordes, to face a hail of bullets. Fire! Flame! Fury! And now he is rising, this strapping, handsome fellow, the pride of the brigade, our own Corporal Varibobu. Like a fiery torch, like a statue of glory and fidelity. And he leads the singing, and we all join in as one!

Forward, legionnaires, men of iron!

Forward, sweeping away fortresses with fire in our eyes!

We shall smash the foe with an iron boot!

Let drops of fresh blood sparkle on our swords...

"And everyone is singing with me, including the brilliant Captain Tolot, model legionnaire, cream of the Legion, for whom I would gladly give my life, my soul, my everything, this very instant. And Dr. Zogu is singing, too -- a model brother of mercy, rough and tough as a real soldier, but tender as a mother, too. And our Corporal Varibobu, ours to the core, an old warrior, a veteran grown gray in skirmishes with the enemy. Oh, how his buttons sparkle and his stripes shine on his worn, well-earned uniform. For him there is nothing but to serve, to serve!

Our iron fist sweeps away all obstacles.

The All-Powerful Creators are pleased!

How the enemy weeps! Show him no mercy!

Onward, legionnaires, brave warriors!

"But what's this? *He's*He's not singing. He's leaning on the counter and rolling his idiotic brown head. His eyes keeping roving and he doesn't stop grinning. Who are you grinning at, you scum? Oh, how I'd like to smash my iron fist into that toothy grin. But no, I must not: such behavior is ill befitting a legionnaire. After all, he's a lunatic, a pitiful cripple. He can never know real happiness. He's blind, worthless, half-human. And that red-haired bandit is squirming in the corner in unbearable pain. You lousy criminal, here's a kick in the ass for you. Up on your feet, scum! Stand at attention when a legionnaire sings his marching song. Here's something for your empty head and your filthy face, and your insolent eyes. Take that, and that!"

Guy flung Zef back against the wall and, clicking his heels, turned to the captain. As usual after such fits of ecstasy, his ears rang and the world floated and swayed pleasantly before his eyes.

Corporal Varibobu, blue-gray from the strain, coughed, holding his chest. The doctor, sweaty and flushed, drank water greedily straight from the pitcher and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. The captain frowned vacantly as if trying to remember something. Red-haired Zef, looking like a

pile of dirty rags, writhed in pain. His face had been battered to a bloody pulp and he was moaning weakly. And Mac Sim had stopped smiling. His face had stiffened: his lips were parted as he stared at Guy, wide-eyed.

"Private Gaal," said the captain. "Something I wanted to tell you -- hold it, Zogu, leave me at least one swallow of water."

3.

Maxim woke up with a heavy head. It was stuffy in the room; the window had been closed all night again. With the city so near him, it was senseless to open the window. A grayish-brown cap of noxious fumes was visible over the city. The wind carried them here, and neither distance, nor his fifth-floor room high above the street, nor the park below offered relief. "God, how I'd love to take an ion shower now and leap stark naked into our garden -- not into this foul, rotting garden with its stinking fumes, but into ours, near Gladbach, on the shore of the Nirs. I'd race ten miles around the lake at top speed, swim across it, then walk along its bottom for about twenty minutes to exercise my lungs. Then climb up the slippery boulders." He jumped up, opened the window, stuck out his head into the drizzle, inhaled the damp air, and coughed -- the air was full of industrial wastes, and the rain-drops left a metallic taste on his tongue. Cars whizzed by along the nearby superhighway. Below, beneath the window, wet foliage gleamed yellow, and something glistened on the high stone wall. At the city's edge, as usual, thick columns of poisonous smoke curled lazily from two high stacks and drooped toward the ground.

A suffocating world. A miserable, sick world. So bleak and sad. Like that government office where people, suddenly, without rhyme or reason, howled and sang themselves hoarse. And Guy, such a fine, handsome young man, completely unexpectedly had beaten Redbeard Zef to a pulp. And the victim hadn't even resisted. An unhappy world. A radioactive river, a ridiculous iron drag-on, polluted air. And that clumsy two-tiered metal box moving along on wheels, spewing pollution. And its slovenly passengers. And that barbaric incident in the metal box on wheels, when rude people reduced an elderly woman to tears with their boisterous laughter and gestures and no one interceded. The box was jammed, but everyone turned away. Only Guy jumped up, white with anger (maybe it had been fear) and shouted at them, and they cleared out. But even Guy, who seemed to be a decent sort would suddenly be seized by unexplainable rages, would quarrel violently with the passengers in his compartment, stare at them and then just as suddenly become totally prostrated.

Yet the others behaved no better. They would sit peacefully for hours, resting, chatting softly, even laughing; and suddenly someone would begin to growl at his neighbor. The neighbor would respond with a nervous snarl. And the other passengers did nothing to break it up. Instead of calming down the

quarreling pair, they joined in. And the row would grow until everyone was yelling, threatening, shoving. Even the children would howl at the top of their lungs until their ears were boxed. Then everything would gradually subside; people would get sulky and avoid conversation. And sometimes the row would turn into a really disgusting affair. Eyes would practically pop out of their sockets faces would flush with red blotches, voices would rise to blood-curdling shrieks, and someone would laugh hysterically. Some would pray, others sing. A madhouse.

Maxim left the window and paused briefly in the center of his cramped room, feeling weak, apathetic, and exhausted. Forcing himself to take positive action to overcome his deteriorating physical and mental state, he began to exercise, using a bulky wooden chair as barbells. "You can sure go to pot this way " he thought. "I suppose I can take it for another day or so. Then I'll have to get out of here. Maybe roam the forest awhile. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to run off to the mountains. Nice there And wild. Pretty far -- you couldn't make it in one night. What did Guy call them? Zartak. I wonder if that's the name of those mountains or their word for mountains? Well, whatever they are I'd better forget about them for now. I've been here ten days and haven't made any progress yet."

He squeezed into the stall shower and for several minutes rubbed himself down in the dense artificial rain, as disgusting as their real rain. True, it was slightly colder, but hard and caustic. He dried himself with a sterile towel.

Annoyed with everything -- the bleary morning, this suffocating world, his idiotic situation, the lousy, greasy breakfast he would eat shortly -- he returned to his room to make his bed. Breakfast was waiting for him, fuming and stinking on the table. Fishface was closing the window.

"Íállî," said Maxim in the local language. "Window. Mustnot."

"Hello," she replied as she turned the window's many bolts. "Must. Rain. Bad."

"Fishface," said Maxim in Lingcos. Her real name was Nolu, but Maxim had instantly renamed her. Fishface she would always be, for her expression and her imperturbability.

She turned and looked at him with unblinking eyes. For the nth time, she touched her finger to the tip of her nose and said "woman," then pointed at Maxim and said "man," then pointed to the baggy jump suit hanging on the back of a chair. "Clothes. Must." Shorts weren't enough. For her, a man had to be covered from the neck down.

While he dressed, she made his bed, although Maxim always insisted he could do it himself. She pushed the chair to the middle of the room (Maxim had moved it against the wall) and resolutely opened the radiator valve that Maxim always turned off. His persistent use of "must not" shattered her no less than his persistent "must."

After buttoning his jump suit at the neck, Maxim went to the table and picked at his breakfast with a two-pronged fork. The usual exchange followed.

"Don't want. Must not."

"Must. Food. Breakfast."

"Don't want breakfast. Tastes bad."

"Must eat breakfast. Good."

"Fishface," Maxim exploded in Lingcos, "you are a very cruel woman. If you were to come to Earth, I would run myself ragged trying to find food you liked."

"I don't understand," she said blankly. "What is 'fishface'?"

While disgustedly chewing a greasy chunk of food, Maxim took a piece of paper and sketched a sunfish full face. She studied it carefully and put it in the pocket of her smock. She appropriated all of Maxim's drawings and took them somewhere. Maxim drew a great deal and enjoyed it. During free moments and at night when he could not sleep, there was absolutely nothing else to do. So he drew animals and people, charts and diagrams, and anatomical cross sections. He drew Professor Megu like a hippopotamus, and hippopotamuses like Professor Megu. He constructed an encyclopedic chart of the Lingcos language, schematics of machines, and diagrams of historical chronology. The reams of paper he consumed all disappeared into Fishface's pocket without any visible evidence that he had succeeded in communicating with his hosts. Hippo -- Professor Megu -- had his own approach to the problem and had no intention of changing it.

The encyclopedic chart of Lingcos, whose study would enable them to initiate communication with Maxim, held absolutely no interest for Hippo. Fishface was the only person teaching the stranger the local language, and then only the most basic terms for communication -- "Close the window," "Put on your jumpsuit," and the like. Not a single communications specialist was assigned to his case. Hippo, and only Hippo, was occupied with Maxim.

True, he had a rather powerful research tool at his command -- mentoscopic equipment -- and Maxim spent from fourteen to six-teen hours a day in the testing chair. Moreover, Hippo's mento-scope was very sensitive. It permitted rather deep memory penetration and possessed an extremely high resolution capability. With such equipment it was possible to manage without language.

But Hippo used the mentoscope in a rather peculiar manner. He categorically refused to show his own mentograms to anyone and was even somewhat angered by suggestions that he do so. And his attitude toward Maxim's mentograms was strange. Maxim had organized his recollections so that the natives would receive a rather comprehensive picture of Earth's social, economic, and cultural life. But these mentograms failed to arouse an enthusiastic response from Hippo. He would make a wry face, mumble, walk away, make phone calls, or harass his assistant, frequently repeating a succulent-sounding word, "massaraksh." When the screen showed Maxim blowing up an icy crag that was bearing down on his ship, or tearing an armored wolf to pieces, or rescuing a field laboratory from a gigantic, stupid pseudo-octopus, nothing could drag him away from the mentoscope. He would squeal softly, clap his head in delight, and yell at his exhausted assistant, who was making recordings of the images. The sight of a

chromospheric protuberance would send the professor into raptures, as if he had never seen anything like it before. And he was very fond of love scenes, extracted by Maxim from movies for the specific purpose of giving the natives some idea of Earthlings' emotional life.

The professor's absurd reaction to this material depressed Maxim. He wondered if Hippo was really a professor and not simply a mentoscope engineer preparing material for the real commission set up for communication with visitors from outer space. Hippo seemed a rather primitive individual, like a kid interested only in the battle scenes in *War and Peace* and *War and Peace*. It was humiliating, Maxim felt, to have such a serious matter as his presentations of Earth taken so lightly. He was entitled to expect a more serious partner in his attempt to communicate.

Of course, it was possible that this world was located at an intersection of interstellar routes, so that visitors from outer space were commonplace -- in fact, so commonplace that special commissions were not established for each new arrival. Officials simply limited themselves to eliciting the most essential information from them. In his case, for example, the people with shiny buttons, obviously not experts, had examined his situation and, without further ado, sent him, a new arrival, to the designated place. But, he thought, perhaps some nonhumanoids had made such a bad impression that the natives reacted to all recent arrivals from other planets with a decided but justifiable suspicion. Therefore, all Professor Hippo's fussing with the mentoscope was merely a delaying action, only a semblance of communication, until some higher authority decided his fate.

"One way or another," concluded Maxim, gagging on the last piece of food, "I'm in a mess. If I'm going to get anywhere, I had better hurry up and learn their language."

"Good," said Fishface, removing his plate. "Let's go."

Maxim sighed and rose. They entered the corridor. It was long, dirty blue, and lined with doors, like the one to Maxim's room. Maxim never encountered anyone here, but occasionally he heard excited voices coming from behind closed doors. Possibly other strangers were being kept here to await decisions on their fate.

Fishface walked in front of him with a long masculine stride, straight as a stick, and Maxim felt very sorry for her. Apparently this country was still uninitiated in the cosmetic arts, and poor Fishface had been left to her own devices. The professor's assistant treated her with contempt, and Hippo took no notice of her at all. Reminding himself of his own inattentive attitude, his conscience began to bother him. He caught up with her, patted her bony shoulder, and said: "Nolu, fine girl. Good girl."

She lifted a cold face to him, pushed away his hand, frowned, and declared sternly: "Maxim bad. Man. Woman. Must not."

Embarrassed, Maxim dropped back again.

When they reached the end of the corridor, Fishface pushed open a door and they entered a large light room that Maxim thought of as a reception room. Its windows were decorated tastelessly with rectangular gratings of

thick iron rods. A high door upholstered in leather led to Hippo's laboratory. For some reason two huge natives were always stationed by the door. Never responding to greetings, they sat almost motionless and appeared to be in a constant trance.

As always, Fishface went straight into the laboratory, leaving Maxim in the reception room. Maxim, as usual, greeted the natives posted by the door and, as usual, received no response. The door to the laboratory was slightly ajar and he could hear Hippo's loud, irritated voice and the clicking of the mentoscope. Maxim went to the window, gazed briefly at the wet landscape, the wooded plain, and the superhighway, at the tall metal tower scarcely visible in the fog, and quickly became bored. He decided to enter the laboratory without waiting to be called.

It was filled, as usual, with the pleasant smell of ozone. Double screens flickered. The bald, overworked assistant with an impossible name, whom Maxim had nicknamed Floorlamp, pretended he was tuning the equipment as he listened to the argument going on in the laboratory.

In Hippo's chair, behind Hippo's desk, sat a stranger with a square, peeling face and swollen, bloodshot eyes. Hippo stood in front of him, shrieking, legs thrust apart, hands against his sides, and leaning over slightly. His neck veins bulged, his bald spot had turned a fiery sunset-purple, and spray flew in all directions from his mouth.

Trying not to attract attention, Maxim passed to his work station quietly and greeted the assistant in a low voice. Floorlamp, his nerves worn to a frazzle, recoiled in terror and slipped on at hick cable. Maxim barely managed to grab him by the shoulders. Floorlamp went limp. What a strange man. He was deathly afraid of Maxim. Fishface appeared out of nowhere with a small uncorked bottle that she stuck under Floorlamp's nose. Floorlamp hiccupped and revived. Before he could slip into unconsciousness again, Maxim leaned him against a steel cabinet and with-drew quickly.

After he sat down in the testing chair he noticed that the stranger had stopped listening to Hippo and was observing him intently. Maxim smiled warmly. The stranger tipped his head slightly. At that instant. Hippo banged his fist on the table and grabbed the telephone. Taking advantage of the pause, the stranger uttered a few words, but Maxim could distinguish only "must" and "must not." Then the stranger picked up a sheet of thick bluish paper with a bright green border and waved it in front of Hippo's face. Annoyed, Hippo brushed it aside and immediately began to bark into the phone. The words "must," "must not," and the puzzling "massaraksh" came from his lips repeatedly, and Maxim even caught the word "window." It ended with Hippo slamming down the receiver angrily, bellowing at the stranger, and after raining curses on him, marching out and slamming the door.

Then the stranger rose from his seat, opened a long flat box ly-ing on the window ledge, and took out a dark garment.

"Come here," he said to Maxim. "Put this on."

Maxim looked at Fishface.

"Go on!" said Fishface. "Put it on. Must."

Maxim realized that someone, somewhere, had made the decision he had been awaiting and that he was in for a change. He flung off the ugly jump suit and, with the stranger's help, put on the new garment. Maxim thought it was neither handsome nor comfortable, but it was identical to the suit worn by the stranger. Perhaps the stranger had given him a spare suit of his own, for the jacket sleeves were too short and the trousers were baggy. But everyone else was pleased with Maxim's appearance. The stranger mumbled his approval. Fishface's features softened as she smoothed the shoulders and straightened the jacket. Even Floor-lamp smiled wanly from behind the control panel.

"Let's go," said the stranger as he moved toward the door.

"Good-bye," said Maxim to Fishface. "And thank you," he added in Lingcos.

"Good-bye," replied Fishface. "Maxim good. Strong. Must go."

She seemed upset. Or, perhaps, concerned that the suit didn't fit too well. Maxim waved to the pale Floorlamp and hurried after the stranger.

They passed through several rooms cluttered with bulky archaic apparatus. They descended to the first floor in a rattling elevator and entered the low-ceilinged vestibule where Guy had de-posed Maxim days ago. Now, as then, he had to wait until some documents were prepared, until a funny little man in absurd head-gear scratched something on pink cards, and the stranger scratched something on green ones, and a girl wearing optical amplifiers punched notches in them. Then everyone exchanged their cards and everything got all mixed up, and finally the little man in the absurd headgear appropriated two green cards and a pink one. And the stranger received two pink ones, a thick blue one, and a round metal tag with an inscription on it. And a minute later he handed all this to a burly man with shiny buttons who was standing by the exit. When they were already outside, the burly fellow suddenly began shouting hoarsely, and the stranger re-turned again; it seems he had forgotten to take the blue card with him.

Maxim was seated to the right of the stranger in a ridiculously long automobile. The stranger was furious about something. Puffing and panting, he kept repeating Hippo's favorite expletive: Massaraksh."

The car growled, moved away gently from the curb, maneuvered through a stationary herd of cars, rolled along the broad asphalt square in front of the building, passed a large bed of wilted flowers, then a yellow wall, rolled on to the highway's entrance ramp, and braked sharply.

"Massaraksh!" hissed the stranger as he turned off the engine.

An endless column of identical trucks stretched along the high-way. A row of stationary circular objects of wet shiny metal protruded above the side panels. The trucks moved slowly, maintaining appropriate intervals, their engines gurgling rhythmically. They spread a terrible stench of exhaust fumes everywhere.

Maxim studied the little door next to him, figured out how the window worked, and raised it. Without turning toward him, the stranger uttered a lengthy and completely incomprehensible sentence.

"I don't understand," said Maxim.

The stranger turned to him with a surprised expression and, judging from his intonation, asked a question. Maxim shook his head.

The stranger seemed even more surprised. He dug into his pocket, pulled out a small flat box with little white sticks, stuck one in his mouth, and offered the rest to Maxim. Out of courtesy, Maxim accepted the little box and began to examine it. It was made of cardboard and smelled strongly of some kind of dried leaves. Maxim took out one of the little sticks, bit off a piece, and chewed it. He rolled down the window quickly, put his head out, and spat. It was not food.

"Must not," he said, returning the box. "Taste bad."

The stranger stared at him and his mouth dropped open. The white stick hung from his lip. Maxim, conforming with what appeared to be the local custom, touched a stick to the end of his nose and introduced himself: "Maxim."

The stranger mumbled something. A spark suddenly appeared in his hand; he touched the tip of the white stick to it and instantly the car was filled with nauseating smoke.

"Massaraksh!" shouted Maxim angrily and he flung open the door. "Must not!"

Now he realized what these sticks were: when he was traveling with Guy, almost all the men had poisoned the air with the very same kind of smoke, but instead of white sticks they inserted in their mouths short and long wooden objects which looked like the little wooden whistles children used in ancient times. Apparently they inhaled some kind of narcotic -- undoubtedly a very harmful custom. Maxim recalled how relieved he was to learn that Guy was also opposed to this custom.

The stranger quickly tossed the narcotic stick out the window and waved his palm in front of his face. To be on the safe side, Maxim waved his hand, too, and then introduced himself again. He learned that the stranger's name was Fank, and with that the conversation ended. They sat and waited for about five minutes, exchanged friendly glances, and pointing out to each other the endless column of trucks, kept repeating: "Massaraksh!" Finally the endless column ended and Fank turned onto the highway.

He seemed to be in a great hurry. At any rate, he accelerated the engine into a velvety roar; then he switched on some evil-sounding device and, ignoring all safety rules, started to pass the column of trucks, narrowly missing the cars speeding toward him.

They passed the column of trucks. Nearly flying onto the shoulder, they swerved around a red vehicle with a lone driver; leaped past a wooden cart with enormous wobbly wheels drawn by an ancient tailless beast; forced a group of pedestrians wearing canvas capes into a ditch; sailed beneath a canopy of wet trees planted in even rows along both sides of the road -- and Fank kept accelerating. Realizing that the car had not been designed for such speeds -- it was much too unstable -- Maxim felt uneasy.

Soon the road was lined with buildings. The car had burst into the city, and Fank had to reduce his speed sharply.

The streets were disproportionately narrow and jammed with vehicles. Hemmed in on all sides by vehicles of every conceivable description, Fank's car hardly moved. A van ahead of them, its rear covered with flashy signs and gaudy images of people and animals, almost blocked out the sky. On their left crawled two identical cars, crowded with gesticulating men and women. Beautiful women, colorful, unlike Fishface. Further to the left rolled some sort of gyromat packed with passengers. On the right was a stationary strip of asphalt closed to transport. People dressed in strange violet and black clothing bumped, passed, and dodge done another as they shouldered their way through the crowds.

There were many pale, drawn faces, very similar to Fishface's. Almost everyone was ugly, painfully thin, too pale, awkward, and angular. Yet they appeared to be content: they laughed often and seemed relaxed, their eyes sparkled, and animated voices filled the air. "Perhaps," thought Maxim, "this is a well-organized society after all." The houses seemed cheerful -- lights were shining in almost all the windows, which meant there was no shortage of electric power. Many-colored lights above rooftops blinked gaily. Streets were washed clean. Almost everyone was neatly dressed. But although this world appeared prosperous on the surface, something was wrong: there were too many haggard faces.

Suddenly there was an abrupt change of mood. Excited cries rang through the air. A man climbed onto a glass kiosk and began to shout, waving a free hand as he hung on with the other. Singing broke out on the sidewalk. Pedestrians halted in their tracks, tossed their hats in the air, and sang and shouted themselves hoarse, lifting their drawn faces to enormous colored signs flashing across the street.

"Massaraksh!" hissed Fank, and the car swerved sharply. Maxim looked at him. Fank's face was deathly white and contorted. He pulled his hands back from the wheel with difficulty and stared at his watch.

"Massaraksh!" he groaned. He uttered several other words, but Maxim caught only "I don't understand."

Fank glanced over his shoulder, and his face grew even more contorted. Mac looked back, too, but saw nothing unusual. Only a bright yellow box-shaped automobile.

By now the shouting and shrieking on the street had reached fever pitch, but Maxim had no time to think about it. Fank had lost consciousness and the car was still moving. The van in front of them slammed on its brakes, and a massive gaudy wall came at Maxim head-on. Then, a dull thud, a sickening crunch, and the hood of their car sprang up.

"Fank!" shouted Maxim. "Fank! Must not!"

Fank lay there moaning, his body slumped over the wheel, Brakes squealed, traffic stopped, and sirens howled. Maxim shook Fank by the shoulder and then opened the window, shouting, "Hurry! Hurt!"

The singing, yelling mob converged on the car. Maxim was to-tally bewildered. Either these people were outraged by the accident, or they were insanely overjoyed about something, or they were threatening someone. It would be pointless to shout for help; he couldn't even hear himself. So he

returned to Fank. Now Fank's head was thrown back against the seat; and with all his strength he was kneading his temples and cheeks. Saliva oozed from the corners of his mouth. Realizing that Fank was in terrible pain, Maxim grasped him firmly by the elbows and braced himself quickly, preparing to transfer the pain to his own body. He wasn't sure it would work with a non-Earthling, and he searched in vain for a point where he could establish nerve contact. To make matters worse, Fank pulled his hands from his temples and with all his remaining strength tried to push Maxim away, mumbling desperately and tearfully. Maxim understood only "Go, go!" He was sure that Fank was out of his mind.

The door next to Fank opened wide. Two faces beneath black berets forced their way into the car. Rows of metal buttons glittered, Maxim's door was opened, and strong hands gripped his shoulders, side, and neck. They pulled him away from Fank and dragged him from the car. He did not resist. As he was pushed into the noisy mob, he saw two men in berets dragging the writhing Fank to the yellow car, while three others in berets cleared a path through the arm-waving crowd. Then, with a roar, the crowd closed in on the wrecked car; the car lurched clumsily, rose in the air, and turned onto its side. The crowd descended on it, still shouting and singing. Everyone had been seized by a frantic ecstasy.

Maxim was driven back to the wall of a building and pressed against a wet shop window. Craning his neck, he spotted the yellow car. It set off with a brassy wailing noise. Forcing its way through the mob, it disappeared from sight.

4.

By late evening Maxim had had it with the city. He was ravenous. He had been on his feet all day, seen a great deal but understood almost nothing. He did pick up several new words by eavesdropping on conversations and could now identify some of the letters on signs and posters, but that was it. The accident with Fank had disturbed him, yet he was relieved to be on his own again. Independence was very important to him; it was something he had lacked during his confinement in Hippo's fifth-floor termite's nest with its miserable ventilation. Reviewing the entire situation, he decided not to return to Hippo for the time being but to lose himself for a while. Sure, courtesy to your hosts was important, but the chance to gather information was something to be considered as well. Yes, it was damned important to establish communication with these people, but a better opportunity to gather information on his own would probably never turn up again. So communication would have to wait.

The city amazed him. It bugged the earth. All movement took place either along the ground or beneath it. The vast areas between buildings and the sky above them were filled only with smoke, rain, and fog. The city was

gray, smoky, and drab. There was a sameness everywhere. Not in its buildings -- some were rather beautiful -- nor in the monotonous swarming of crowds on its streets; not in its eternal dampness, nor in the striking lifelessness of its solid mass of stone and asphalt -- its sameness resided in something all-embracing, something very basic. It resembled the gigantic mechanism of a clock in which every part is different, yet everything moves, rotates, meshes, and unmeshes in a single, endless rhythm; where a change in rhythm means only one thing -- faulty mechanism, breakdown, stoppage. A strange world, so unlike anything he had ever seen! It was probably a very complex society governed by many laws. But there was one that Maxim had already discovered for himself: conform, do as everyone else does in the same way as everyone else. And this was precisely what he was doing. Melting into the crowd, he entered gigantic stores under dirty glass roofs; together with the crowds he left them, descended into the earth, squeezed into jammed electric trains, and sped off somewhere amid incredible thundering; then, swept along by the crowd, he ascended to the surface again to streets identical to the ones he had just left.

Evening had fallen, and the feeble streetlights suspended high above the ground had gone on. The main streets were now congested. Retreating from the crowds, Maxim found himself in a half-deserted, poorly lit lane. He decided that he'd had enough of the city for the day and halted.

He noticed three luminous gold spheres, a blinking blue sign made of fluorescent glass tubes, and a door leading to a cellar cafe. He had already learned that the three spheres meant a place where food was available. Descending some chipped steps, he saw a small low-ceilinged room with a dozen tables, a floor thickly coated with clean sawdust, and glass shelves crammed with bottles of iridescent liquids. The cafe was almost empty. Behind a counter in front of the shelves a flabby elderly woman moved sluggishly; a short distance away, a short but strong-looking fellow with a thick black mustache sat casually at a small table.

Maxim entered, chose a table in a recess away from the counter, and sat down. The old woman glanced in his direction and said something in a hoarse but loud voice. The man looked at him vacantly, turned away, picked up a tall glass of transparent liquid, and took a sip. A door opened, and an attractive young girl wearing a white lace apron entered the room. Noticing Maxim, she went to his table, but instead of meeting his eyes, she stared over his head. She had clear delicate skin, light down on her up-per lip, and beautiful gray eyes. Maxim brought his finger to the tip of his nose gallantly and introduced himself: "Maxim."

The girl looked down at him in amazement as if seeing him now for the first time. She was so lovely that Maxim couldn't restrain a broad smile. Then she smiled and pointed to her nose: "Rada."

"Good," said Maxim. "Supper."

She nodded and asked a question. To be on the safe side, Maxim nodded and smiled. He watched her as she walked away. Her slim graceful figure reminded him that this world, too, had its beautiful people.

The old woman uttered a lengthy comment and vanished behind the

counter. Maxim noticed that the man was staring at him. Rather hostilely, too. Oh, well, forget it. He probably didn't appear particularly friendly himself.

Rada reappeared and served Maxim a bowl of steaming porridge with meat and vegetables and a thick glass mug filled with a foaming liquid.

"Good," said Maxim. He motioned to her to join him.

If only she would sit with him and talk to him while he ate. What a pleasure it would be to hear her voice. He was anxious for her to know that he liked her and would enjoy her company.

But Rada merely smiled and shook her head. She said some-thing -- Maxim caught the words "to sit," and she returned to the counter. Too bad, thought Maxim. He picked up the two-pronged fork and began to eat, trying to compose a sentence from the thirty words he knew, a sentence that would express friendship and his need to communicate.

As she leaned against the counter with her arms folded across her chest, Rada glanced at him from time to time. Each time their eyes met, they smiled at each other, and Maxim was somewhat surprised when Rada's smiles grew progressively weaker and more hesitant. He had very mixed feelings. He enjoyed looking at Rada, although his pleasure was marred by a growing uneasiness. And he was pleased that the meal had turned out to be surprisingly tasty and nourishing, but at the same time he felt the man's oppressive sidelong glances and the disapproval in the eyes of the old woman. He took a sip from the mug. Yes, it was beer -- cold and fresh, but, he thought, too strong.

The man said something, and Rada went over to his table. Just as a smothered conversation began, a fly attacked Maxim and he had to struggle with it. Powerful, blue, and impudent, it seemed to jump in all directions at once; it buzzed and whined, as if declaring its love for Maxim. It insisted on staying with him and his plate. It walked on it, licked it. It was stubborn and verbose. The escapade ended with the fly falling into his beer when Maxim swung at the wrong moment. He set the mug down squeamishly on another table and continued eating. Rada returned, this time unsmiling; she looked away and asked him something.

"Yes," replied Maxim, playing it safe again. "Rada good."

She gazed at him in undisguised fright, moved off to the counter, and returned carrying a small glass of brown liquid on a saucer.

"Tasty," said Maxim, looking at the girl with warmth and concern. "What is bad? Rada, sit here. Talk. Must talk. Must not go."

To Maxim's surprise, his carefully prepared speech made a poor impression on Rada. He thought she was about to cry. She whispered something and ran from the room. The old woman behind the counter uttered several angry words. "I'm doing some-thing wrong," thought Maxim, upset. "But what?" Obviously the man and the woman did not care to have Rada sit and talk with him. But since they clearly were neither government officials nor guardians of the law, and since he apparently had not violated any laws, the best thing would be to ignore their hostile stares.

The man drained his glass, took a thick black polished cane from under the table, and walked slowly toward Maxim. He sat down opposite him, placed the cane across the table, and without looking at Maxim but obviously addressing him, spoke slowly and laboriously, repeating frequently "Massaraksh." The hostility and enmity in Ms speech were strangely diluted by the indifference in his intonation and facial expression and by the emptiness of his colorless glassy eyes.

"I don't understand," said Maxim angrily.

The man slowly turned a blank face to him and seemed to look right through him. Slowly and distinctly he asked Maxim a question, then suddenly whipped a long shiny knife out of his cane. Maxim was bewildered. Not knowing what to say or how to react, he picked up a fork and twirled it in his fingers. The effect was startling. The man jumped back, knocking over his chair. Holding his knife in front of him, he crouched down absurdly. The old woman let out a piercing shriek. Taken by surprise, Maxim jumped up. Suddenly the man was beside him. At that instant Rada appeared, planted herself between them, and shouted, first at the man, then at Maxim. At this point Maxim was totally con-fused. The man picked up his cane, returned the knife to its hiding place, and walked toward the exit quietly. He turned around in the doorway, muttered something, and vanished.

Rada, pale and trembling, picked up the overturned chair, wiped up the brown puddle on the table, and cleared away the dirty dishes. She returned and said something to Maxim, to which he replied, as usual, "Yes." It was hopeless. Rada repeated the same words, but this time she sounded angry, although Maxim felt that she was more frightened than angry. "No," he replied, and instantly the woman behind the counter began to yell so hard her cheeks shook. Finally Maxim admitted, "I don't under-stand."

The woman sprang out from behind the counter, flew over to Maxim, and planted herself in front of him. She grabbed him by his shirt and rummaged through his pockets. Maxim was so stunned that he didn't resist, but only repeated "Must not" and looked plaintively at Rada. The old woman, behaving as though she had suddenly come to a fateful decision, rushed back behind the counter and grabbed the telephone.

"Fank!" said Maxim with emotion. "Fank hurt! Go. Bad."

The tension broke suddenly. Rada said something to the old woman that convinced her to put down the phone. She sputtered a bit more, then calmed down. Rada sat Maxim down again, served him a fresh mug of beer, and to his delight and relief joined him. For a while everything went smoothly. Rada asked questions, and Maxim, beaming with pleasure, answered them with "I don't understand." Maxim laboriously constructed another sentence and declared: "Rain, massaraksh, bad, fog." Rada broke out laughing. Then another girl arrived and greeted them. Rada and she left the room, and after a while Rada re-turned, but without her apron. She was wearing a bright red cape and carrying a large handbag.

"Let's go," she said, and Maxim jumped up.

They were unable to leave immediately. The old woman began to shout again. She was angry about something, demanding some-thing. She waved a pen

and sheet of paper in the air. Rada argued with her for a while, but the other girl came over and took the woman's side. Rada finally relented. Then the three of them con-fronted Maxim. At first they repeated the same question, singly and then in chorus, which Maxim, of course, didn't understand. At last Rada ordered everyone to keep quiet; she clapped Maxim lightly on the chest.

"Mac Sim?"

"Maxim," he corrected her.

"Max? Im?"

"Maxim. Max -- must not. Im -- must not. Maxim."

Rada brought her finger to the tip of her nose and said, "Rada Gaal. Maxim."

"Gaal?" he said. "Guy Gaal?"

Dead silence. They were stunned.

"Guy Gaal," repeated Maxim, overjoyed. "Guy good man."

Suddenly there was a commotion as the women all began to talk at once. Rada tugged at Maxim and asked something. Obviously she was terribly interested in learning how he knew Guy. "Guy, Guy, Guy" bobbed up in a stream of incomprehensible words.

"Massaraksh!" said the old woman as she burst into laughter. And the girls joined in. Rada took Maxim by the arm, and they went out into the rain.

They walked to the end of a poorly lit side street and turned into an even dimmer lane where rickety wooden houses lined a muddy road paved with uneven cobblestones. Then they made two more turns. The narrow crooked streets were deserted. Not a single pedestrian was out.

At first Rada chattered animatedly, repeating Guy's name frequently. Maxim interjected occasionally that Guy was a fine per-son, but added in Lingcos that one should not beat people in the face, that this was a strange custom, and that he, Maxim, could not understand it. As the streets they passed through grew narrower, darker, and muddier, Rada's chatter broke off more frequently. Sometimes she stopped and peered into the darkness. At first Maxim thought she was trying to find a drier path, but it was something else she was searching for, because she walked straight through the puddles. Maxim had to guide her away from them gently and lead her onto drier ground. Where there wasn't any, he lifted her under the arms and carried her, which appeared to please her. But each time her delight would quickly be smothered by fear.

The farther they walked from the cafe, the more fearful she be-came. At first Maxim tried to establish nerve contact with her, but, as with Fank, he was unsuccessful. They left the slums and came out on a muddy unpaved road. An endless fence, topped with rusty barbed wire, extended along the right side, and on the left was a pitch-dark, putrid wasteland. Here Rada became completely unnerved and almost burst into tears. To boost her spirits, Maxim sang the most cheerful songs he knew, at the top of his lungs. For a short time it helped -- until they reached the end of the fence. Here were more

houses, long, low, with dark windows. The few street lights burned dimly, and in the distance, beneath a solitary archway, stood a group of rain-drenched, bunched-over, shivering figures. Rada halted.

Grasping his arm, she began to speak in a faltering whisper. She pulled him back and he obeyed, thinking it would make her feel better. Then, realizing that she had acted impulsively, out of desperation, he refused to budge.

"Let's go," he said to her gently. "Let's go, Rada. Not bad. Good."

Like a child, she obeyed. Although he didn't know the way, he led her and suddenly realized that she was afraid of the wet figures. He was very surprised because they didn't appear dangerous; they were ordinary natives, hunched over in the rain and shivering from the dampness. At first there were two of them; then a third and a fourth appeared with those glowing narcotic sticks hanging from their lips.

Maxim walked along the deserted street between the rows of yellow houses, directly toward them, and Rada kept pressing closer to him. He placed his arm around her shoulder. It suddenly occurred to him that he was mistaken, that Rada must be shaking from the cold and not from fear. There was certainly nothing dangerous about those rain-soaked figures. He walked past them. Hands thrust deep inside their pockets and stamping to warm themselves, those pitiful souls, poisoned by narcotics, didn't appear to notice Rada or him, didn't even raise their eyes, although he passed close enough to hear their sick, irregular breathing. Now, he thought, Rada could relax. But as they passed the arch-way another group of four, as wet and pitiful as the first, sprang out in front of them and blocked their path. Their leader held along thick cane. Maxim recognized both him and the cane. The stranger in the cafe.

From the top of the peeling archway a bare bulb dangled in the draft. The walls were covered with mold, and below his feet lay cracked concrete marked by the muddy tracks of many feet. Sounds of shuffling feet came from the rear. Maxim turned around. The first four were catching up, gasping for breath and tossing away those repulsive narcotic sticks. Rada let out a muffled cry and let go of his hand. Suddenly he was hemmed in, pressed against the wall. He could see two of them holding Rada by the arms. The one with the cane went up to her, shifted the cane to his left hand, and raising his right with a deliberate motion, struck her on the cheek.

Maxim lost all sense of reality. Something clicked in his brain and the people vanished. Only he and Rada were there. No one else. Near them dangerous animals stamped clumsily through the mud. City, archway, naked bulb -- all were gone. For him there were only the impassable mountains in the Land of Oz-on-Pandora. And a cave, a trap set by naked apes. And a pale, yellow, apathetic moon looking into the cave. He had to fight for his life. And now he began to fight as he had fought then on Pandora.

Time slowed down obediently. Seconds became hours, and during the span of a single second he could perform many maneuvers, deliver many blows, and see all his adversaries simultaneously. The animals were not very agile.

They were used to tangling with another kind of beast. They didn't have time to realize that they had chosen the wrong victim and that it would have been wiser to run away. They tried to fight. Maxim seized one of the animals by the jaw, yanked up its pliant head, and chopped its pale pulsating neck with the edge of his hand. Instantly he turned to the next one and grabbed, jerked, and chopped, in a cloud of stinking, predatory breathing, in the cave's echoing silence, in the yellow, dripping semidarkness. Dirty crooked claws tore at his neck and slid off; yellow fangs sank deep into his shoulder and slid off.

Now he was alone. Their leader was rushing toward the cave's exit with his club because he, like all leaders, possessed the sharpest reflexes and was the first to realize what was happening. For an instant, Maxim felt sorry for him: how slowly he seemed to react -- the seconds stretched out, and their fleet leader had scarcely moved his legs when Maxim, slipping between the seconds, caught up with him. Maxim hacked him on the run and halted.

Time resumed its normal flow again: the cave was now an archway; the moon, a bare bulb; and the Land of Oz-on-Pandora, an enigmatic city on an enigmatic planet. Even more enigmatic than Pandora.

Maxim stood there, resting. The leader crawled about painfully on the ground. Blood trickled from Maxim's wounded shoulder. Sobbing, Rada took his hand and ran his palm across her wet face. He looked around; bodies lay like sacks on the dirty concrete. Mechanically, he counted them. Six, including the leader; two, he thought, had managed to escape. Rada's touch felt indescribably pleasant, and he knew that he had taken the proper course; he had done what had to be done. No more, no less. He didn't bother to pursue those who had escaped, although he could have overtaken them easily. Even now he could hear their heels clicking at the end of the street.

The ones who had failed to escape lay on the ground; some would die, and some were already dead. These, he realized, were people, too, not apes or armored wolves, although their breath was foul, their touch dirty, and their thoughts repulsive and predatory. He felt a certain regret, sensed that he had lost something, something fine and pure, a part of his soul, and he realized that the old Maxim had disappeared forever. In spite of this loss, he felt a kind of strange pride stirring within him.

"Let's go, Maxim," Rada said quietly.

He followed her submissively.

"In short, you let him slip through your fingers."

"What could I do, Strannik? You know how it is."

"Damn it, Fank'. You didn't have to do a damned thing. All you had to do was take a driver with you."

"All right, it was my fault. But who could have expected...?"

"OK. Enough. What measures have you taken?"

"As soon as I was released, I phoned Megu. Megu didn't know anything about it. If he returns, Megu will let me know immediately. Next, I put all insane asylums under surveillance. He can't go far. He sticks out like a

sore thumb."

"And?"

"I alerted our people in the police department. I ordered them to follow up every case, even petty traffic violations. He doesn't have documents. I'll be informed if anyone arrested doesn't have identification papers. He can't hide, even if he wants to. It's just a matter of two or three days. A simple matter."

"Simple, you say? What could be simpler than getting into a car, driving to the telecenter, and transporting a man here? But you couldn't even handle that."

"OK, it's my fault. But such a coincidence -- "

"Enough about coincidences. Do you really think he's crazy?"

"It's hard to say. He's more like a savage. Like a well-washed, well-groomed savage from the mountains. But I can easily imagine a situation in which he'd act like a lunatic. Then there's that idiotic smile, the imbecilic speech. And he's a complete fool."

"Of course. You've taken the proper steps. But there's something else, Fank. Contact the underground."

"What?"

"If you don't find him in the next few days, he'll undoubtedly turn up in the underground."

"I do not understand what a savage would be doing in the underground."

"There's lots of them in the underground. Don't ask stupid questions -- just do what I tell you. If you lose him again, you're fired."

"It won't happen again."

"Good. What else do you have for me?"

PART TWO: LEGIONNAIRE

5.

Captain Chachu completed the briefing and barked: "Corporal Gaal, remain. The rest are dismissed."

After the other platoon leaders had filed out, the captain, swiveling in his chair and whistling the old soldier's song "Cool It, Mama," studied Guy for some time. Captain Chachu bore no resemblance to Captain Tolot. He was stocky and swarthy, with a large bald spot, much older than Tolot and, not long ago, had fought in eight coastal actions. He had received the Fiery Cross and three other medals for bravery under fire. People still talked

about his fantastic duel with a white submarine: his tank had received a direct hit and caught fire, but he continued firing until he lost consciousness from severe burns. It was said that his entire body was covered by skin transplants. Three fingers were missing from his left hand. He was blunt and coarse, a real fighter. Unlike the reserved Captain Tolot, he never thought it necessary to conceal his emotions from his subordinates or superiors. When he was in a good mood, the entire brigade knew it, but when he was out of sorts and whistled "Cool It, Mama," well, watch out.

Looking him straight in the eye, Guy was dismayed by the thought that he had somehow disappointed and angered this remarkable man. He quickly reviewed in his mind all his own minor offenses and those of his platoon but could recall nothing that hadn't been dismissed with a careless wave of the captain's crippled hand and a throaty, grumpy response: "OK, that's what the Legion's all about. The hell with it!"

The captain stopped swiveling and whistling.

"I don't like a lot of talk and scribbling," he said. "Either you recommend Candidate Sim or you don't. Which is it?"

"Yes, sir, I recommend him," said Guy quickly. "But..."

"No 'buts,' corporal! Do you or don't you?"

"I do, sir."

"Then what's the meaning of these two pieces of paper?"

The captain pulled some papers from his pocket and unfolded them on the desk, holding them down with his crippled hand. "Here it says: 'I recommend the aforementioned Mac Sim, a loyal and capable person' -- well, that's clear -- 'for appointment to the noble calling of candidate in the ranks of the Fighting Legion.' And here's your second note: 'In connection with the aforementioned, I feel it is my duty to call the attention of the command to the need for a thorough check of the designated candidate for the Fighting Legion, Mac Sim.' Massaraksh! What the hell do you really mean, corporal?"

"Captain!" Guy was very agitated. "I really don't know what to say. I know Candidate Sim is a loyal citizen, devoted to the Legion's ideals. I'm sure that he will have much to contribute. But since only men of impeccable integrity belong in the Legion, I thought -- "

"You thought!" the captain snapped. "Corporal, here's what you'll do. You'll take one of these two notes right now and tear it up. You must understand that I cannot go to the brigadier with two statements. It's got to be either yes or no. This is the Legion, corporal, not a philosophy department! You have two minutes to think it over."

The captain took a thick folder from a drawer and disgustedly tossed it on the desk. Guy looked at his watch despondently. It was a difficult decision to make. It was dishonest and unworthy of a legionnaire to conceal from the authorities his incomplete knowledge of the man he was recommending, even if it was Mac. On the other hand, it was dishonest and unworthy of a legionnaire to avoid responsibility by shifting the decision onto the captain, who had seen Maxim only twice, and then only in formation. "Well, all right, I'll go over it again. Points in favor: He has accepted the Legion's ideals heart and soul; he passed the physical without a hitch;

he was sent by Captain Tolot and Doctor Zogu to some top-secret institution, evidently for a thorough investigation, which he passed. True, I'm taking Maxim's own word for this last statement -- he claims he lost all his documents. And last, he's a brave, natural-born fighter. He made short work of Ratso's gang, single handed. He's open in his dealings with others, good-natured, and absolutely unselfish. And extraordinarily gifted. Points against: We've absolutely no idea who he is and where he came from; either he remembers nothing of his past or he refuses to tell us. And he doesn't have any documents. But why should that bother us? After all, the government now controls only the borders and the central region. Two-thirds of our country is still torn by anarchy and plagued by starvation and epidemics. People are fleeing those areas and none of them have documents -- the younger ones don't even know what documents are. And how many of them have lost their memory! And how many degens! But we know one thing for sure, the most important -- Maxim is not a degen."

"Well, corporal?" asked the captain.

"Yes, sir!" said Guy rather recklessly. "May I?"

He picked up the note containing his suggestion that Maxim be checked and tore it up slowly.

"Cor-rect decision! Well done, legionnaire! Notes, reports, checks -- rubbish! Combat will be the proving ground! When we get into our tanks and head for the atomic trap zone, we'll find out damn quick who is with us and who isn't."

"Yes, sir," said Guy without particular conviction. He understood the old soldier, but he felt that the hero of the coastal actions was mistaken. Combat, of course, was important, but one's integrity was something else. Anyway, the question had nothing to do with Maxim's case. Maxim was honest to the core.

"Massaraksh!" barked the captain. "The Health Department certified him and the rest is our business." He looked at Guy angrily and added: "A legionnaire has complete trust in his friend. If he doesn't, he's certainly no friend and he ought to kick him out. I'm surprised at you, corporal. OK, back to your platoon. There's very little time left. I'll watch the candidate myself during the operation."

Guy clicked his heels and left. Safely outside, he smiled. The old soldier had taken the responsibility on himself after all. Now, with a clear conscience, he could consider Maxim his friend. Mac Sim. His real surname was a mouthful. Either he had imagined it in a delirious state or he actually was related to those mountain people. H'm, what was the name of their ancient king. Zaremichakbeshmucaray. Guy walked over to the parade ground and scanned it for his platoon. Tireless Pandi was driving the men through the top-floor window of a dummy three-story building. They were soaked from the effort, and with only an hour left before the operation, that wasn't so good.

"As you were!" shouted Guy from afar.

"As you were!" yelled Pandi. "Fall in!"

The platoon fell into formation quickly.

"Attention!" Pandi shouted. He marched up to Guy smartly and reported: "Corporal, the platoon is learning to take a town by assault."

"Stand at attention," ordered Guy, trying to express disapproval by his tone of voice, as Corporal Serembesh was so skilled at doing. He strode back and forth in front of the formation, hands clasped behind his back, looking into the familiar faces of his men.

Bulging eyes -- gray, brown, blue -- followed his every movement, ready to execute his orders. Ibis was his life, these twelve strong men -- six full privates of the Fighting Legion on the right flank and six candidates aspiring to be regular privates on the left flank; all wearing smart black jump suits with shiny buttons, glistening combat boots, and berets tipped jauntily over their right eyebrows. And in the center of the formation, on the candidates' right flank, lowered Maxim, his favorite, even though it was wrong for a platoon leader to single out one over the others. "Hey, what's this? Those strange brown eyes of his aren't rigid like the others. Well, all right, he'll learn that in time... And what's this?"

Guy went up to Maxim and jabbed at his open top button. Then, standing on tiptoe, he adjusted his beret. "Damn, there goes that stupid grin again. Well, give him time, he'll outgrow it. After all, he is the youngest recruit in the platoon."

To avoid any semblance of favoritism, Guy straightened the buckle on Maxim's neighbor, although it was unnecessary. Then he stepped back three paces and ordered the platoon to stand at ease.

"Men," said Guy, "today we're going to take part in a regular operation as part of the company. We're going to neutralize the agents of a potential enemy. The operation will be conducted according to Plan Thirty-three. I know that you regular privates remember your part, but I think it would help to refresh the memories of those candidates who neglect to fasten all their buttons. Each platoon is assigned one entrance to the building. The platoon divides into four teams: three teams of three for the inside job, and a backup team outside. The inside teams of two privates and one candidate will go through all the apartments systematically, and remember, without making a commotion. After a patrol has entered an apartment, it will do as follows: the candidate will guard the front door; a private will occupy the rear entrance and not permit anything to divert him: and the team leader will inspect the apartment. The outside backup team of three candidates commanded by the platoon leader -- in this case, me -- will remain below at the building's entrance, prepared to render immediate assistance to any inside team requiring it. You know the makeup of the inside teams and the backup teams. Attention!" He withdrew one step. "Fall into teams!"

After a brief shuffling, the platoon regrouped into teams. Each man stood in his proper place. No one had fumbled with his submachine gun, slipped, or lost his beret, as usually happened during exercises. Maxim, with a broad grin on his face again, lowered above the backup team's right flank. An absurd thought suddenly occurred to Guy -- that Maxim viewed the entire operation as an amusing game. Damn it, it couldn't be true! It was

just that damn idiotic smile.

"Not bad," grumbled Guy, giving Pandi an approving look. The old man had done a fine job -- really drilled the men. "Attention! Platoon, fall in!"

A brief shuffling again, neat and precise -- beautiful -- and the platoon stood before him in a straight row. Good! Simply remarkable! A shiver ran through him. Hands clasped behind his back, he strode up and down in front of the platoon.

"Legionnaires!" he said. "We are the strength and hope of the All-Powerful Creators. In fulfilling their great mission they have only us to rely on." This was the truth, the real truth; and there was a certain fascination in it. It gave one a sense of superiority to the rest of society. "The Fighting Legion is the iron fist of history. It has been called upon to sweep aside all obstacles on our proud path. The sword of the Fighting Legion has been tempered in fire; it burns in our hands, and only streams of the enemy's blood can cool it. The enemy is cunning. He is cowardly, but stubborn. The All-Powerful Creators have commanded us to smash this treacherous resistance, to tear out by the roots those forces that drag us down into chaos and depraved anarchy. That is our duty and we are happy to fulfill it. We make many sacrifices. We disturb the tranquillity of our mothers, brothers, and children. We deprive the honest worker, the honest civil servant, the honest tradesman and industrialist of much deserved rest. They know why we must invade their homes, and they welcome us as their best friends, as their protectors. Remember this, and do not let anything divert you from your mission. A friend is a friend, but an enemy is an enemy. Are there any questions?"

"No!" bellowed the platoon.

"Attention! Thirty minutes to rest and check your equipment. Dismissed!"

The platoon scattered and headed for the barracks in twos and threes. Guy followed slowly, and Maxim, smiling, waited for him a short distance away. "Guy, how about a fast round of the word?"

Guy groaned to himself. He'd have to shut this kid up! Gag him! God, imagine a candidate bugging his corporal with such idiotic nonsense a half-hour before an operation.

"This isn't the time for games," he said as coldly as possible.

"Are you upset about something?" asked Maxim sympathetically.

Guy shook his head in exasperation. What the hell could he do with him? It was utterly impossible to silence such a good-natured giant, who was on top of everything else his sister's savior and a man far superior to himself in everything but military drill. Guy glanced around and then pleaded: "Listen, Mac, you're putting me in a damned awkward position. When we're in the barracks, I'm your boss, I give the orders, and you obey. I've been pounding that into your dumb head."

"But I am ready to obey you. Go ahead, give an order! I know what discipline is."

"I already have. Check your equipment."

"Excuse me Guy. But that isn't the order you gave us. You ordered us to check equipment and rest. Have you forgotten? Well I've checked my equipment and now I'm resting. So, how about the word game? I've thought up a good one."

"Mac, get this! A subordinate has the right to address his superior officer only according to regulations. And only in regard to military matters."

"Yes, I remember. Paragraph Nine. But that's only when we're on duty. At the moment, we're resting."

"How do you know I'm resting?" asked Guy. They stood behind an enclosure, where, thank God, they could not be seen. No one could see this tower leaning against the fence and tugging his corporal by the buttons. "Look, Mac, I rest only at home, but even there I would never permit a subordinate to... now let goof my buttons and button up your own."

Maxim fastened his buttons.

"Guy, I don't understand you. On duty you behave one way at home another. Why?"

"Let's not go into that again. I'm sick of telling you the same thing over and over. And that grin of yours -- when are you going to stop smiling in formation?"

"There's nothing in the regulations that says you can't smile," replied Mac slowly. "As far as repeating the same thing over and over to me, Guy, there's something I want to tell you. Now, don't be offended at what I'm going to say. I know you're not a -- speaker -- a reciter..."

"A what?"

"You're not a person who can speak beautifully."

"Orator?"

"Orator. Yes, that's the word. You're not an orator. But that doesn't matter. Today you made a speech to us. You spoke the right words, good words. But at home when you spoke about the Legion and the job it had to do and about conditions in your country, it was very interesting. It came from you, it was really you speaking. But here you repeat the same thing over and over and it's not really you speaking. Everything you say here is true, but it's always the same. And very boring. You're not offended, are you?"

No, of course Guy wasn't offended, but a fine icy needle had just pricked his ego: until now he had thought he had always presented things to his men as smoothly and convincingly as Corporal Serembesh. And the captain, too, had been repeating the very same speech for three years. There was nothing surprising or disgraceful about it. After all, nothing had really changed in the country's domestic or foreign policy in the past three years.

"And where does it say, Mac, that a subordinate should reprove his superior?"

"The regulations say just the opposite," admitted Maxim. "I think that's wrong. Look, you take my advice when you're trying to solve ballistics problems, and you accept my suggestions when you make a mistake in your calculations."

"But that's at home! Anything goes at home."

"Well, suppose you give us the wrong sighting during gunnery practice? Suppose you miscalculate the wind factor? What then?"

"Under no circumstances do you question a superior's orders."

"Even in such a case?"

"You fire as ordered," said Guy sternly. "Mac, you've said enough in the past ten minutes to put you in the stockade for two months. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't. But, suppose, in combat...?"

"Suppose what in combat?"

"You give a wrong sighting? What then?"

Guy had never commanded a platoon in combat. He suddenly recalled how Corporal Bakhtu had read the map incorrectly during a reconnaissance in force. The entire platoon was driven within firing range of an adjoining company. He himself had remained behind and sent half the platoon to their death. They knew damn well that he was wrong but no one dreamed of correcting him.

"Good Lord," thought Guy suddenly, "it never would have occurred to us to correct him. Maxim doesn't understand anything. Everything's simple, but he won't admit it. How many times have we gone through this! He takes the most self-evident facts and turns them upside down, and it's impossible to convince him that he's wrong. Instead, just the opposite happens: you begin to doubt yourself. Your head starts spinning and before you know it you're completely confused. Yet he's certainly not that stupid. He learned to speak our language in one month and mastered reading and writing in two days. Then read everything I own in two more days. Knows mathematics and mechanics better than our experts. Or take, for example, his discussions with Uncle Kaan.

"Lately, all the old man's discussions at dinner have been directed at Maxim. And he keeps insisting to us that Maxim is the only man alive today with such an unusual knowledge of fossil animals and such an interest in them. He sketched some weird looking animals for Maxim, and Maxim sketched some that were even weirder. And they argued about which was the more ancient, which descended from which, and why. Unc even brought in scientific books from his library, and still Maxim barely conceded a point to him. One minute, Unc was shouting himself hoarse -- the next, he was tearing the sketches to bits and stamping on them. He called Maxim an ignoramus, a bigger fool than Shapshu. Then he began to run his hands through the sparse gray hair at the back of his head and mumble with a nervous smile: 'Bold, massaraksh, bold. Young man, you certainly have an imagination!'

"He knows mathematics and mechanics; knows military chemistry very well; and paleontology? Who in this day and age knows paleontology? Draws like an artist, sings like a professional. And he's so generous, almost unnaturally generous. Drove off a gang of bandits, killed most of them, single-handed, with his bare hands. Anyone else caught in such a trap would have taken off like a rocket. He didn't give a damn about them, yet was

upset, couldn't sleep, became annoyed when he was praised and thanked, and even blew up once. He turned white and shouted that it was wrong to praise someone for murder. And what a job it was to persuade him to join the Legion! He understood everything, agreed to everything, wanted to join, but, he said, he'd be required to shoot. At people. So I told him: not at people, at degens, at rabble, worse than thieves. We agreed, thank God, that at the beginning, until he got used to the idea, he would simply disarm his opponents. Amusing, yet somehow frightening. No wonder he's always blabbing about coming from another world. I know that world. Unc has a book about it: *The Misty Land of Zartak*. It says that Zartak is inhabited by a happy people and lies in the Alebastro Mountains. According to the book, they're all like Maxim. But if one of them leaves the valley, he immediately forgets where he came from and everything about his past life. He remembers only that he came from another world. Unc says that no such valley exists, that it's pure poppycock, that there is the Zartak range, but the range was so thoroughly blasted by superbombs during the war that the mountain people suffer from permanent loss of memory."

"Why so silent, Guy? Are you thinking about me?"

Guy looked away.

"Look here, Mac. I must ask you to do one thing for me. For the sake of discipline never show that you know more than I do. Watch how the others behave, and behave exactly as they do."

"I've been trying to," said Maxim sadly. He paused and added: "It's difficult to get used to the idea. We don't do things that way."

"By the way, how's your wound?" Guy tried to change the subject.

"It's healing quickly," replied Maxim absentmindedly. "Listen, Guy, let's go straight home after this operation. I miss Rada a lot. Don't you? We'll drop the others off at the barracks and then head for home in the truck."

Guy inhaled deeply. At that instant the loudspeaker's silver box, hanging almost above their heads, roared out the duty officer's command: "Sixth Company, fall out on the drill field! Attention, Sixth Company."

"Candidate Sim! No more talk!" Guy barked. "Get into formation!" Maxim started to rush off, but Guy caught him with the barrel of his gun. "Please, Mac, remember," he said. "Like the I others! No different! The captain himself is going to observe you today."

Within three minutes the company was in formation. It had grown dark, and searchlights played over the drill field.

Truck engines rumbled softly at the formation's rear. The brigadier, accompanied by Captain Chachu, reviewed the company in silence, inspecting every legionnaire, a procedure followed before the start of every operation. He was calm; his eyes were narrowed, and his lips were turned up at the corners in a rather kindly way. Then, without a word, he nodded to the captain and left. Waddling and waving his crippled hand, the captain planted himself before the formation and turned his swarthy face toward the legionnaires.

"Legionnaires!" he bellowed in a voice that sent shivers up and down Guy's spine. "You have a job to do. Do it well. Company, attention! To your trucks! Corporal Gaal, front and center!"

When Guy reached the captain and snapped to attention, the captain said softly: "Your platoon has a special assignment. When you arrive at your destination, remain in your vehicle. I myself will take command of your platoon."

6.

The shock absorbers were in terrible shape, and the ride on the miserable cobblestone roads was particularly jolting. His submachine gun pressed between his legs. Candidate Sim held Guy by his belt solicitously, reasoning that it would be unbecoming for the corporal, so concerned about his image, to go flying head over heels. Either Guy did not object or he failed to notice his subordinate's precaution. After his conversation with the captain, Guy appeared to be very disturbed about something, so Maxim was happy that the orders required him to remain at Guy's side and render assistance if necessary.

The trucks passed the Central Theater, rolled along the stinking Imperial Canal, then turned down Boot Street, a long thoroughfare deserted at this hour, and began to zigzag through the winding streets of some suburb that Maxim had never seen before. Recently he had visited many sections and had come to know the city well. He had learned a great deal in those forty or so days and finally understood the difficult position he was in. It proved to be far less comforting and far more incredible than he had expected.

He had still been plodding through his ABC's when Guy had persisted in asking him where he came from. It was useless to show him drawings: Guy would accept them with a strange smile on his face and continue to repeat the same question: "Where are you from?" Irritated, Maxim finally pointed to the ceiling with his pencil and said: "From the sky." To Maxim's surprise, Guy thought this a completely natural explanation and began to rattle off words that Maxim at first assumed were the names of planets in their solar system. But Guy opened a map, and Maxim saw that they were not the names of planets but of antipodal countries. Maxim shrugged his shoulders, used up his entire stock of negative expressions, and began to study the map. The conversation had ended there for the time being.

One evening, several days later, Maxim and Rada had been watching television. A very strange program was being shown that resembled a movie without beginning or end. It had no plot, just an endless stream of actors, rather weird individuals who, from the point of view of any humanoid, behaved rather savagely. Rada watched with interest, shrieked, grabbed Maxim's sleeve, and twice burst into tears. Maxim became bored quickly and

was about to doze off to some gloomy music when, suddenly, something familiar flashed across the screen. He rubbed his eyes. There, on the screen, was Pandora. A morose takhorg was dragging itself through the jungle, crushing trees. Suddenly Peter appeared with a decoy in his arms. Very engrossed and serious, he backed away, tripped on a snag, and flew backward into a swamp. Maxim was startled to recognize his own mentogram. Then came another, and still another, without narration, and with the identical musical background.

And Pandora disappeared, yielding the screen to an emaciated blind man who crawled along a ceiling covered by a dusty spider web. "What's that?" asked Maxim, pointing to the screen.

"A TV program," snapped Rada. "It's interesting. Watch it."

It made no sense to him. It suddenly occurred to him that these might be the mentograms of other visitors from outer space. But he quickly rejected this thought: the worlds portrayed on television were too terrible, too monotonous: stuffy little rooms; endless corridors cluttered with furniture that suddenly sprouted gigantic thorns; spiral staircases winding into the impenetrable gloom of narrow stairwells; basements, with barred windows, jammed with crawling bodies, and immobile faces locked in pain peering through the bars. These images were closer to a grotesque delirium than to real worlds. In comparison, Maxim's mentograms sparkled with realism.

Similar programs were repeated almost daily and were called *Magic Journey*. But Maxim could never understand their point. In reply to his questions, Guy and Rada merely shrugged their shoulders in bewilderment. "It's a TV program. That's the way it's done to make it interesting. It's a magic journey. A fairy tale. Watch it! Sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's frightening." Maxim began to doubt very seriously that the purpose of Professor Hippo's research was to facilitate communication between his planet and visitors from outer space.

About ten days later this intuitive conclusion was confirmed indirectly. Guy had passed the entrance exams for the Independent Study Program of Officer's Candidate School and was cramming for his mathematics and mechanics courses. The diagrams and formulas used in their elementary ballistics studies puzzled Maxim. He nagged Guy. At first Guy did not understand what he was driving at. Then, grinning condescendingly, he explained to Maxim the cosmography of his world. It turned out that the inhabited island was neither a sphere nor a geoid; in fact, it wasn't a planet at all.

According to Guy, the inhabited island was the World, the only world in the universe. Beneath the natives' feet lay the firm surface of the World Sphere. Above them was a gigantic gaseous sphere of finite volume and unknown composition, whose physical characteristics were still not understood. There was a theory that the density of this gas increased rapidly toward the center of the gaseous bubble and certain mysterious processes produced periodic changes in the intensity of the World Light, thus giving day and night. Besides the short-term daily changes in the World

Light, there were long-term changes that generated seasonal fluctuations in temperature and the seasons themselves. Gravity acted away from the center of the World Sphere, perpendicular to its surface. In short, the inhabited island was located on the inner surface of an enormous bubble in an infinite firmament filling the rest of the universe.

Completely stunned, Maxim began to argue, but it soon became quite apparent that they did not speak the same language, that it was more difficult for them to understand each other's thinking than for a staunch Copernican to understand a follower of Ptolemy. Maxim believed that the unusual characteristics of this planet's atmosphere were the key to the matter. In the first place, its unusually high index of refraction lifted up the horizon and from time immemorial had inspired the natives' peculiar conception of their land as being neither flat nor convex but concave. "Stand on the seashore," suggested schoolbooks, "and follow the path of a ship leaving a pier. At first it will appear to be moving on a plane, but the further it goes, the higher it will rise, until it vanishes in the atmospheric haze covering the rest of the World." In the second place, the atmosphere was very dense and phosphoresced day and night, so that no one ever saw the stars. Isolated instances of observation of the sun were recorded in chronicles and served as the basis for countless attempts to create a World Light theory.

Maxim realized that he was caught in a gigantic trap, that contact with Earth could not be established until he succeeded in turning inside out the natural concepts that had developed over thousands of years. Evidently, attempts had been made to do this, judging from the popular expletive "massaraksh," which meant, literally, "world inside out." Guy had told him about an abstract mathematical theory that analyzed the World differently. The theory was formulated in ancient times, but its adherents had been persecuted by the official religion, and it had its martyrs. Through the efforts of certain brilliant mathematicians of the last century, the theory was expressed in exact mathematical form. But it had remained a purely abstract theory, although, finally, like most abstract theories, it found practical application -- very recently, when super-long-distance military weapons were developed.

After weighing all the information he now had about their planet, Maxim realized two things: that all this time the natives must have considered him insane and therefore had deliberately selected his mentograms for the *Magic Journey*; and that, for the time being, he had better keep his mouth shut about coming from another planet -- unless he wanted to be returned to Hippo. This meant that he could expect no help from the inhabited island, that he must depend only on himself, that the construction of a coil transmitter must be postponed indefinitely, and that he was stranded for a long time to come, perhaps, massaraksh, forever.

The hopelessness of his situation was demoralizing, but he got a grip on himself and forced himself to think rationally. His mother would face a painful period. It would be terribly difficult for her, and this thought

alone smothered any desire to think rationally. "Damn this place, this dull, claustrophobic world! OK, now, Mac, you have a choice: dwell on the impossible and bite your nails, or pull yourself together and live. Live as you've always wanted to live. Love your friends, work toward a goal, fight, win, take it and dish it out. Anything, but stop moping around." He dropped the conversation with Guy about the structure of the universe and took an entirely new tack: he began to quiz Guy about the inhabited island's history and social system.

Their discussion of history was not particularly productive. Guy's knowledge was scanty, and he didn't own any serious books on the subject. Nor did the city library. But Maxim managed to extract a few facts. He learned that the country now sheltering him had been significantly larger at one time and had possessed numerous overseas colonies and that these colonies had been the cause of a highly destructive war with neighboring states whose names were already forgotten. The war had enveloped the entire World; millions upon millions had perished; thousands of cities had been destroyed; dozens of large and small nations had been wiped off the face of the planet; and chaos had reigned throughout the World. Famine and epidemics followed. Popular uprisings were suppressed with nuclear weapons. This country -- along with the rest of the world -- had been headed for total destruction until the All-Powerful Creators had come to the rescue. The facts suggested that an anonymous group of young staff officers with two divisions at their command, unhappy about being sent to the slaughter in an atomic mincing machine, organized a coup and seized power. Since then the situation had stabilized considerably, and the war seemed to have petered out, although a formal peace treaty had never been concluded.

Maxim realized that the country's political system was far from ideal. But it was clear that the All-Powerful Creators were extremely popular, and among all classes of society. Maxim could not understand the economic reasons for this popularity, but apparently it was related to their tactics: the military clique curbed the appetites of the industrialists, thereby gaining favor with the workers. And by subjugating the workers, they gained favor with the industrialists. But this was only guesswork on his part. Guy was surprised when Maxim presented the problem from this point of view, because the concept of class meant absolutely nothing to him, nor could he imagine contradictions between social groups.

The country's foreign relations were still extremely tense. Two large independent nations, Khonti and Pandeya, were located to the north. Although no one knew anything about their domestic affairs, it was common knowledge that these countries harbored the most aggressive designs. They sent in saboteurs and spies, provoked border incidents, and were preparing for war. The purpose of such a war was not clear to Guy. He had never really given it any thought. For him they were simply enemies to the north. That was all he needed to know.

To the south, beyond the borderland forests, lay a desert, land that had been totally defoliated by nuclear explosions. The desert covered the territories of a whole group of countries that had once been the most active

militarily. No one seemed to know what was happening in those millions of square miles, nor were they interested in knowing. The southern borders were subject to constant attack by hordes of half-savage degens who infested the forest beyond the Blue Snake River. The problem of the southern border was an extremely critical one. It was so rough that the Fighting Legion's elite forces were concentrated there. Guy had served there for three years and told many incredible stories about his experiences.

It was possible that other countries still existed further south of the desert, at the other end of the planet's only continent, but they kept themselves well isolated. On the other hand, the Island Empire, on three mighty archipelagos in the arctic zone, constantly made its menacing presence known. A huge fleet of white submarines, equipped with the latest technology of destruction, plied the radioactive waters with their crews of specially trained cutthroats. Like phantoms, the submarines terrorized the coastal regions with their unprovoked shellings and raiding parties. The Legion had also to turn back the White threat.

Maxim was shaken by this picture of chaos and destruction. Here was a planet with a glimmer of intelligent life, but life was on the point of extinguishing itself once and for all.

Maxim heard Rada's calm and terrible account of how her mother had received the news of her father's death. Her father, an epidemiologist, had refused to leave a plague-ridden region, and since the government in those days had neither the time nor the means to cope with an epidemic, a bomb was simply dropped. After her mother's death, young Rada, to support little Guy and helpless Uncle Kaan, worked eighteen hours a day as a dishwasher at a deportation center, then as a chambermaid in a luxury hotel for speculators. Later she spent some time in prison. After that she was unemployed and had to beg for several months.

Maxim heard Uncle Kaan's story, too. Unc, once an eminent scientist, told how the Academy of Sciences had been abolished during the first year of the war and the Battalion of His Imperial Majesty's Academy had been formed; how, during the famine, the founder of evolutionary theory had gone insane and hanged himself; how they had made broth from grasshoppers and weeds; how a starving crowd had attacked the zoological museum and seized specimens preserved in alcohol, for food.

Maxim listened to Guy's ingenuous tales of the antiballistic missile towers; how cannibals stole up to the construction sites at night and kidnapped rehabs and Legion sentries; how ruthless vampires -- part human, part beast, part dog -- struck in the darkness like silent ghosts. He listened to his ecstatic praise of the ABM network, built at great sacrifice during the final years of the war. By defending the country from the air, the ABM network had halted enemy operations. Even today, the ABMs were their only guarantee against aggression from the north. And those scoundrels were now planning attacks on the ABM towers; those mercenary murderers of women and children were being bought with Khonti's and Pandeya's filthy money. Guy's face twitched with hatred. "That's where our real job is." He banged

his fist on the table. "That's why I joined the Legion rather than go to work in a factory or office. Yes, I joined the Legion, which is now fighting to save everything we hold dear."

Maxim listened greedily, as if to a horror story. And it was all the more terrifying and fantastic because it had actually happened and was still happening; at any moment the most horrible atrocities could happen again. His own problems were trivial beside this.

The trucks turned sharply into a narrow street with tall brick buildings. Pandi announced: "We're here, men." Pedestrians turned away, shielding their eyes from the dazzling headlights. One truck stopped, and a long telescopic antenna shot up above the cab.

"All out!" barked the leaders of the Second and Third Platoons. The legionnaires hopped out.

"First Platoon, stay where you are!" ordered Guy.

Pandi and Maxim, about to jump out, sat down again.

"Fall into threes!" yelled the corporals on the sidewalk. "Second Platoon, forward! Third Platoon, follow. Forward, march!"

Hobnailed boots thundered along the pavement, and someone shrieked ecstatically: "Long live the Fighting Legion!"

"Hurrah!" shouted the pale-faced figures who had pressed against the wall to clear the way for the men. The pedestrians were used to legionnaires.

Candidate Zoiza, on Maxim's right, was still a kid. The lanky youngster, with yellowish fuzz on his cheeks, poked Maxim in the ribs with his sharp elbow and smiled happily. Maxim smiled back. The other platoons had already vanished through the entrances; only the corporals, standing staunchly at the doors with impassive faces, remained behind. The door of a truck cab slammed and Captain Chachu barked: "First Platoon, out of the trucks and fall in!"

Maxim leaped over the side. When the platoon was lined up, the captain, with a wave of his hand, stopped Guy, who was running over to report. Then he planted himself in front of the formation.

"Put on your helmets!"

The regular privates had expected this command, but the candidates were slow to respond. The captain waited impatiently for Zoiza to adjust his chin strap. Then he shouted: "Right turn" and "Forward, on the double." He ran in front of them, waving his crippled hand, leading the platoon through a dark archway and into a narrow courtyard. Then he turned under another archway, just as gloomy and foul, and halted before a chipped door.

"Attention!" he barked. "The first team and Candidate Sim will follow me. The rest of you stay here. Corporal Gaal, when I whistle, send another team up to me on the fourth floor. Don't let anyone out. Take them alive. Shoot only when absolutely necessary. First team and Candidate Sim, follow me!"

He pushed the door open and disappeared. Maxim passed Pandi and followed the captain. Behind the door was a dimly lit, steep stone staircase

with steel handrails. Taking three steps at a time, the captain dashed upstairs. Maxim caught up with him and saw the pistol in his hand. On the run, Maxim slipped the gun from around his neck. For an instant he felt sick at the thought of having to shoot people. Then, remembering that these weren't people, just animals, he felt relieved. The repulsive slime beneath his feet, the bleary light, the spit-spattered walls, all served to confirm his conclusion.

Second floor. Kitchen odors. The terrified face of an old woman showed through the slit of a slightly opened door. A half-crazed cat leaped from under Maxim's feet with a loud meow. Third floor. Some blockhead had left a bucket of slop in the middle of the landing. The captain knocked it over and the slop flew into the stairwell. "Massaraksh!" roared Pandi from below. "Out of the way. Downstairs!" barked the captain at a couple embracing in a dark corner. Fourth floor. An ugly brown door. A scratched tin plaque: "Hobbi, Dentist. No appointment necessary." A drawn-out cry behind the door. The captain stopped and grunted: "Locked!" Sweat rolled down his dark face. Maxim didn't understand. Pandi ran up, pushed him aside, aimed his gun at the door, below the doorknob, and released a burst of machine-gun fire. Sparks and pieces of wood flew through the air. Instantly, shots rang out from behind the door, through a prolonged scream. More chips started flying. Something hot and solid whizzed over Maxim's head. The captain flung open the door.

The room was dark; yellow flashes illuminated puffs of smoke. "After me!" yelled the captain, and he dove headfirst toward the flashes. Maxim and Pandi tore after him. A hall -- stuffy heat, powder smoke. Danger on the left. Maxim threw out his hand, caught a hot muzzle, jerked the weapon away. Someone's dislocated joints crunched softly but distinctly, and a large soft body stiffened as it fell. Ahead, in the smoke, the captain barked: "Don't shoot. Take them alive!" Maxim threw down his gun and rushed into a lighted room. It was filled with books and pictures, and there was no one to shoot. Two men were writhing on the floor. One was screaming. A woman lay unconscious in an easy chair, head flung back. Pale, almost transparent. The captain stood over the screaming man, looked around, jammed his pistol into his holster. Pandi gave Maxim a powerful shove and burst into the room. Behind him were legionnaires, dragging the stocky body of the man who had been shooting.

Sweaty and excited. Candidate Zoiza handed Maxim his abandoned gun. The captain turned his frightening, dark face toward them. "Where's the other one?" he snarled, and instantly a blue curtain fell and a lanky man in a stained white smock jumped from the window ledge and headed straight for the captain. Slowly he raised two enormous pistols to eye level. His eyes were glassy with pain. Zoiza screamed.

Maxim was standing sideways and didn't have time to turn. He sprang as hard as he could, but the man managed to pull the trigger once. Face singed, choking from powder fumes, Maxim grabbed his wrists and the pistols clanked to the floor. The man fell to his knees, and his neck went limp. When Maxim released him, he collapsed to the floor.

"Well, well, well," said the captain. "Set this one over here," he ordered Pandi. "And you," he said to pale, perspiring Zoiza. "Run downstairs and tell the platoon leaders where I am. Have them report what they've done." Zoiza clicked his heels and rushed toward the door. "And tell Gaal to come up here... Stop yelling, you scum!" he shouted at the man groaning on the floor and kicked him lightly in the side with the toe of his boot. "Useless. No-good trash. Search them!" he ordered Pandi. "Line them up. Right here, on the floor. That woman, too."

Maxim went over to the woman, picked her up gently, and carried her to the bed. He was confused and disturbed. This wasn't the sort of thing he had expected.

"Candidate Sim!" barked the captain. "I said *on the floor* on the floor!" He looked at Maxim with his unnaturally transparent eyes; his lips twitched almost convulsively. Maxim decided that it was not for him to prescribe what was right or wrong. He was still a stranger in this country; he had yet to learn what they chose to love or hate. He lifted the woman and placed her on the floor next to the stocky man who had been firing in the hall. Pandi and another legionnaire turned the prisoners' pockets inside out. All five were unconscious.

The captain sat down in the easy chair, threw his cap on the table, lit a cigarette, and beckoned to Maxim. Maxim clicked his heels smartly and went over to him.

"Why did you throw down your gun?" the captain asked in a low voice.

"You ordered us not to shoot."

"Sir."

"Yes, sir. You ordered us not to shoot, sir."

The captain's eyes narrowed as he blew a stream of smoke toward the ceiling.

"If I had ordered you to stop talking, I suppose you would have bitten off your tongue, eh?"

Maxim remained silent. This exchange irritated him, but he remembered Guy's instructions.

"What does your father do?"

"He is a scientist, sir."

"Is he alive?"

"Yes, sir."

The captain looked hard at Maxim.

"Where is he?"

Maxim realized what he had blurted out. Now he would have to extricate himself.

"I don't know, sir. Rather, I don't remember, sir."

"But you remembered that he was a scientist. What else do you remember?"

"I don't know, sir. I remember many things, but Corporal Gaal believes that my memory is deceptive."

Hurried footsteps echoed through the stairway. Guy entered the room and

snapped to attention.

"Get to work on this half-dead scum," ordered the captain. "You have enough handcuffs?"

Guy glanced over his shoulder at the prisoners.

"With your permission, sir, we'll have to borrow a pair from Second Platoon."

"Get busy."

Guy ran out. More boots echoed through the stairway as platoon leaders appeared to report that everything was proceeding according to plan. Two suspicious characters had been arrested. The tenants, as always, had rendered active assistance. The captain ordered them to finish up quickly and, when they had completed their assignments, to radio the code word "Tamba" to headquarters. When the platoon leaders had gone, he lit another cigarette and remained silent for some time. He watched the legionnaires remove books from the shelves, leaf through them, and fling them onto the bed.

"Pandi," he called in a low voice, "get busy with the pictures. But be careful with this one. Don't spoil it. I'll take it for myself." He turned to Maxim again. "What do you think of it?"

Maxim looked at it. A seashore, a broad expanse of water without a horizon, dusk and a woman emerging from the sea. It was windy, chilly. The woman looked cold.

"A fine painting, sir," said Maxim.

"Do you recognize the place?"

"Not at all, sir. I've never seen that sea."

"Well, what sea have you seen?"

"A completely different one, sir. But it's my deceptive memory again, sir."

"Nonsense. It's the same sea. Except that you weren't looking at it from the shore, but from a ship's bridge. And below you was a white deck. At the stem was another bridge, somewhat lower. On the shore, instead of this dame, there was a tank. And you were aiming for the turret. Massaraksh."

"I don't understand," said Maxim coldly. "I've never aimed anything anywhere."

"How can you be so sure of that? After all. Candidate Sim, you don't remember anything!"

"But I do remember that I never aimed anything anywhere."

"Sir!"

"I do remember that I never aimed anything anywhere, sir. And I don't understand what you're talking about, sir."

Guy entered, accompanied by two candidates. They began to place heavy handcuffs on the prisoners.

"These people are human, too," the captain said suddenly. "They have wives, children. They loved someone, someone loved them."

The captain was obviously mocking him, but Maxim said precisely what he thought: "Yes, sir. They appear to be human, too."

"You didn't expect that?"

"No, sir. I expected something quite different."

Through the corner of his eye he could see Guy's frightened expression. But he was sick and tired of lying, and he added: "I thought they would really be degenerates, like naked... animals."

"Naked idiot," snapped the captain. "You're not in the forest, you know. Here they look like people. Good, kind people who get excruciating headaches when they're under stress -- just like you do," he added unexpectedly.

"I never get any aches or pains, sir. Do you?"

"What?"

"You sound so irritated that I thought..."

"Captain!" Guy shouted in a tremulous voice. "I beg to report, sir, that the prisoners have regained consciousness."

The captain looked at him and smiled ironically.

"Don't worry, corporal. Your buddy proved himself today to be a real legionnaire. If it weren't for him, Captain Chachu would be stretched out here with a bullet in his brain." He looked up at the ceiling and blew out a dense cloud of smoke. "You have a good nose, corporal. I'd promote this rascal to regular private on the spot; massaraksh, I'd even make him an officer! He has the makings of a brigadier: he loves to ask officers questions. But, corporal, now I understand. You had good reasons for your report. So we'll wait a while before promoting him." The captain rose, clumped around the table, and halted before Maxim. "We won't even make him a regular private yet. He's a fine fighter, but still wet behind the ears. We'll get him into shape... Attention!" he shouted suddenly. "Corporal Gaal, remove the prisoners! Private Pandi and Candidate Sim, take my painting and all papers in this apartment and bring them to me in the truck."

He turned and left the room. Guy looked at Maxim reproachfully but said nothing. The legionnaires kicked and jabbed the prisoners to their feet and led them to the door. They did not resist but swayed and buckled like blobs of jelly. The stocky man who had been firing in the hall groaned loudly and swore under Ms breath. The woman's lips moved soundlessly; her eyes were glazed.

"Hey, Mac," said Pandi. "Take the blanket from the bed and wrap the books in it. Drag it downstairs -- I'll take the picture. Yeah, and don't forget your gun, you blockhead! You're wondering why the captain raked you over the coals, eh? You threw away your gun. Imagine, throwing away your gun during a battle! You nut!"

"Cut it, Pandi," said Guy angrily. "Take the picture and go."

In the doorway Pandi turned around to Maxim, tapped himself on the forehead, and vanished. They could hear him singing "Cool It, Mama" at the top of his lungs as he walked down the stairs. Maxim laid his gun on the table and walked over to the pile of books that had been dumped on the bed and floor. Never before on this planet had he seen so many books in one place, except perhaps in the city library. Of course, the bookstores had many more books, but not more titles.

The pages were yellowed with age. Some books were singed, and some, to Maxim's surprise, were perceptibly radioactive. He didn't have time to examine them properly.

Maxim packed up two bundles and paused to look around the room. Empty twisted shelves, dark stains where pictures had been hanging -- the pictures had been torn from their frames and trampled. Not a trace of dental equipment. He picked up the bundles and started for the door, then remembered his gun and returned. On a desk, beneath plate glass, lay two photographs. One was of a pale woman dandling a boy of about four on her knees. She was young, content, proud. The other showed a beautiful spot in the mountains, dark clumps of trees, and an old tumbled own tower. Maxim slung the gun across his back and returned to the bundles.

7.

Every morning after breakfast the brigade assembled on the drill field to hear the orders of the day before dispersing to their assignments. For Maxim this was the most disturbing part of the day, with the exception of evening roll call. The reading of orders always ended in a frenzied display of loyalty and zeal. Maxim forced himself to suppress his revulsion at this paroxysm of insanity that seized the entire brigade from the commander to the lowliest candidate. He reproached himself for harboring the skepticism of an outsider, an alien; he tried to inspire himself, to convince himself that he must understand their enthusiasm and steep himself in it. But he could not.

Schooled since childhood to show self-restraint, to question, and to dislike high-sounding phrases, he had to control his irritation with his comrades during formation. Following the reading of an order sentencing some candidate to three days in the stockade for arguing with a private, the men would suddenly lose their good nature and sense of humor. Their mouths would fly open and they would begin to roar "Hoorah" with wild enthusiasm. Then, with tears in their eyes, they would sing "The Fighting Legion March," repeating it as many as four times. Even the cooks ran out and joined in, waving pots and knives frenziedly. Reminding himself that in this world he must conform, he forced himself to join in the singing and to suppress his sense of the ridiculous. But the contrived enthusiasm disgusted him.

Today a burst of enthusiasm followed Order 127, promoting Private Dimbas to corporal; Order 128, citing Candidate Sim for his courageous act during an operation; and Order 129, placing Fourth Company's barracks under repair. Scarcely had the brigade adjutant returned the orders to his leather map case than the brigadier tore off his cap, took a deep breath, and shouted in a rasping falsetto: "Forward, Legionnaires! Men of Iron!" And on and on. Maxim felt especially uncomfortable today when he saw tears rolling down Captain Chachu's dark cheeks. The legionnaires bellowed like bulls,

beating time with their gun butts on their massive belt buckles. To avoid the sight and sound of this spectacle, Maxim squinted and roared like an enraged takhorg, and his voice drowned out all the others -- at least it seemed that way to him. "Forward, fearless men!" he roared, now hearing only his own voice. My God, what idiotic words. Probably composed by some corporal. To go into combat with such words you'd have to be awfully in love with your work. He opened his eyes and saw a flock of black birds, startled, fly silently over the drill field. "A diamond coat of mail will not save you, oh, foe."

Everything ended as abruptly as it had begun. The brigadier's glassy eyes scanned the formation. Suddenly he remembered where he was and ordered: "Officers, take your companies to their assignments!" The men, still dazed, looked at each other dumbfounded. Captain Chachu had to shout "Right dress" twice before the ranks came to order. The company was marched off to the barracks, and the captain ordered: "First Platoon is assigned to escort duty. The other platoons will go to their regular duties, Fall out!"

They dispersed. Guy drew up his platoon and distributed assignments. Maxim and Private Pandi were assigned the interrogation room, and Guy hurriedly explained to Maxim his duties: stand to the prisoner's right; if he makes the slightest attempt to rise from his seat, use force; obey your brigade commander; Private Pandi will be in charge. In short, watch Pandi and do exactly what he does.

"If it were up to me, I wouldn't have assigned you to this post, It's never given to candidates, but the captain ordered it. Keep a sharp lockout, Mac. I can't figure out the captain. Either he's trying to push you up quickly -- he talked a lot about you at yesterday's operation review with platoon leaders and cited you in an order -- or he's checking you out. Why, I don't know. Maybe it's my fault -- the report I submitted. Or maybe it's your fault -- for blabbing so much." He inspected Maxim anxiously. "Clean your boots, tighten your belt, and put on dress gloves. Oh, you don't have any -- candidates don't get them. OK, run over to the supply room. Make it snappy. We leave in thirty minutes."

At the supply room Maxim met Pandi, who was changing a cracked beret insignia.

"Take a look at this guy, corporal!" said Pandi to the quartermaster, clapping Maxim on the shoulder. "Ever seen the likes of him? Nine days in the Legion and a citation already. They put him on duty with me in the interrogation room. Probably ran down here for white gloves. Corporal, give him a real good pair. He's earned it. This guy is a hero!"

The corporal grunted, dug through the shelves piled with supplies, tossed several pairs of white cotton gloves on the counter in front of Maxim, and said contemptuously: "Here! You call yourselves heroes, with those lunatics you catch? Sure, when their guts are splitting with pain, all you have to do is pick 'em up and shove 'em in a sack. Even my grandfather could be a hero there. With his hands tied behind his back."

"Your grandfather would have hotfooted it out of there like crazy if someone jumped him with two pistols," said Pandi. "I almost thought the

captain was done for."

"Done for!" grumbled the quartermaster. "After six months on the southern border, you'll really be done for. You'll have had it, boy. Then we'll see who hotfoots it out like crazy."

When they were outside, Maxim asked in a most respectful tone: "Private Pandi, sir, why do the degens have such pains? And they all seem to get them at the same time. How come?"

"It's fear that does it. They're degens. Understand? Mac, you've got to read more. There's a pamphlet -- *The Degens: Their Habits and Origins*. Be sure and read it or you'll never get anywhere. Courage alone won't get you very far." He paused. "Look, we normal people get excited, angry, or scared, and nothing happens. Maybe we sweat or tremble. But their bodies are abnormal. Degenerate. If they get angry at someone or get the jitters or anything like that, they suddenly get terrific headaches and pains all over. Maddening pains. Get it? That's how we can identify them. And, of course, we arrest them. Say, those gloves are OK. Just my size, too. What do you think?"

"Too tight for me, sir," complained Maxim. "Let's trade."

The exchange pleased both of them. Suddenly Maxim remembered how Fank had writhed in pain in the car. And patrolling legionnaires had arrested him. "What could have frightened him? Or angered him? He didn't seem agitated, drove the car calmly, even whistled. But he turned around and saw a patrol car. Or was that afterward? True, he was in a terrific hurry and a van was blocking the way. Maybe he got angry? Good God, what am I saying? Anyone can have a fit of anger. And he was probably arrested because of the accident. I wonder where he was taking me and who he is? I've got to find Fank."

He polished his boots, groomed himself in front of a large mirror, slung the gun around his neck, and reexamined himself in the mirror. At that instant he heard Guy's order to fall out. After an eagle-eyed inspection of his men and a check of their knowledge of their assignments, Guy ran to the company office to report. Soon Captain Chachu emerged with Guy. He, too, inspected each man carefully. "Take your platoon, corporal." The platoon marched toward headquarters.

At headquarters the captain ordered Private Pandi and Candidate Sim to follow him, and Guy led away the rest of the platoon. Pandi and Maxim entered a small room with heavily curtained windows. It smelled strongly of cigarette smoke. At the far end stood a large empty table surrounded by three-legged chairs. An old painting depicting an ancient battle hung on the wall. Ten steps from the table and to the right of the door. Maxim saw a metal seat. Its single leg was bolted solidly to the floor.

"To your stations!" ordered the captain. He walked ahead and sat down.

Pandi carefully placed Maxim to the right and rear of the prisoner's seat, posted himself to the left, and whispered to him to stand at attention. Both men stiffened. The captain sat with legs crossed, smoking and watching the legionnaires nonchalantly. But Maxim was sure the captain

was studying him.

The door opened in back of Pandi. Pandi took two steps forward, one step to the right, and did a left face. Maxim was about to follow suit, but realized that he wasn't blocking the way. He snapped to attention again. There was something contagious about this adolescent game, although it seemed primitive and obviously inappropriate for a country in such dire straits.

"Attention!" barked Pandi.

The captain rose, crushed his cigarette in an ashtray, clicked his heels lightly, and greeted the new arrivals to the table: the brigadier, a stranger in civilian clothes, and the brigade adjutant with a thick folder under his arm. The sour brigadier sat down toward the middle of the table and stuck a finger under his embroidered collar to loosen it. The civilian, a small ugly man with a roughly shaven, flabby face, moved silently to a seat beside him. The brigade adjutant, still standing, opened the folder and sorted through the papers, passing some of them to the brigadier.

After standing for a few minutes in apparent indecision, Pandi returned to his original position with the same crisp movements. The men at the table were talking in low voices.

"Are you going to the meeting today, Chachu?" asked the brigadier.

"Can't, I have some business to take care of," replied the captain.

"Too bad. We're having an important discussion there today."

"I remembered it too late. Anyway, I've already expressed my opinion."

"Not very effectively," the civilian remarked softly to the captain.

"Besides, the situation is changing. Opinions are changing."

"Not for us in the Legion," said the captain coldly.

"Now, really, gentlemen," said the brigadier. "Come to today's meeting anyway."

"I hear they've brought in fresh lake mushrooms," said the adjutant, still digging through his papers. "In their own juice."

"Hear that, captain?" said the civilian.

"No, gentlemen," said the captain. "I have one opinion and I've already expressed it. As for the lake mushrooms ..." He added something else that Pandi and Maxim couldn't hear, and the entire group burst into laughter. Captain Chachu leaned back in his chair, looking pleased. The adjutant stopped digging through his papers and whispered something to the brigadier. The brigadier nodded several times. The adjutant sat down and, as if he were addressing the empty seat, called out: "Nole Renadu."

Pandi pushed the door open, thrust his head into the corridor, and repeated in a loud voice: "Nole Renadu."

Movement was heard in the corridor, and an elderly man, expensively dressed but somewhat battered and disheveled, entered the room. His legs were slightly unsteady, so Pandi took him by the elbow and planted him in the prisoner's seat. The door clicked shut. The man coughed loudly, rested his hands on his knees, and raised his head proudly.

"So-o..." drawled the brigadier, studying the papers. He rattled off something that sounded like a tongue twister: "Nole

Renadu-fifty-five-years-old-homeowner-member-of-the-city council. So-o. Member of the Veteran's Association." The civilian beside the brigadier yawned, slipped a magazine from his pocket, set it on his knees, and leafed through it. "The prisoner... removed during a search... then and there. So-o. What were you doing at Number Eight Trumpeter Street?"

"I'm the owner of the building," said Renadu with dignity. "I was having a conference with my manager."

"Have you checked his documents?" The brigadier turned to the adjutant.

"Yes, sir. Everything is in order."

"So-o," said the brigadier. "Mr. Renadu, do you know any of the prisoners?"

"No, I do not," said Renadu, shaking his head vigorously. "Not personally. But the name of one of them -- Ketshef -- I think someone by that name lives in the building. But I don't remember. Maybe I'm mistaken. Maybe not in this building. I have two more, and one of them --"

"Excuse me," interrupted the civilian without raising his eyes from the magazine. "What were the other prisoners in the cell talking about? Didn't you listen?"

"Uh... I... uh," hesitated Renadu. "I must confess... well, your cell has... insects. So most of the time we were busy with them. Someone was whispering in a comer, but I was too busy fighting off the insects." He laughed nervously.

"Of course," agreed the brigadier. "Well, now, I don't think an apology is necessary, Mr. Renadu. Here are your documents. You are free. Chief escort!" he called out.

Pandi opened the door wide and shouted: "Chief escort, report to the brigadier!"

"I wouldn't even consider discussing the question of apologies," said Renadu gravely. "I and I alone am to blame. More precisely, my damned heredity. May I?" he asked Maxim, pointing to the table where his documents lay.

"Stay where you are," said Pandi in a low voice.

Guy entered. The brigadier handed him the documents and ordered the return of confiscated property. Mr. Renadu was released.

"Rashe Musai," said the adjutant to the iron stool.

"Rashe Musai," repeated Pandi through the open door.

A thin, utterly exhausted man wearing a shabby robe and one slipper entered. He had scarcely sat down when the brigadier shouted: "So, you murderer, you've been hiding?" Rashe responded with a lengthy, muddled explanation. He had not been hiding, he had a sick wife and three children, his rent wasn't paid, he had been arrested twice and released, he was now employed in a factory as an upholsterer, and he had not done anything wrong. Maxim was certain he would be released, but the brigadier rose suddenly and declared that Rashe Musai, age forty-two, married, twice arrested, was sentenced to seven years in accordance with the law on preventive detention. For an instant Rashe Musai appeared not to understand the sentence. Then a

terrible scene erupted. The upholsterer sobbed, pleaded incoherently to be forgiven, and continued to shout and cry while Pandi dragged him out into the corridor. Maxim caught Captain Chachu's eye on him again.

"Kivi Popshu," announced the adjutant.

A broad-shouldered fellow whose face was disfigured by some skin disease was pushed through the door. This housebreaker, a repeater, caught at the scene of the crime, behaved in an insolently ingratiating manner. First he begged the authorities not to sentence him to a cruel death, then he laughed hysterically, made wisecracks, and told stories about himself, all of them beginning in the same way: "I entered a house..." He would not give anyone else a chance to speak. After several unsuccessful attempts to question him, the brigadier leaned back in his chair and looked to his right and left indignantly. Captain Chachu said in a monotone: "Candidate Sim, shut him up!"

Not knowing how to silence the prisoner, Maxim simply grabbed Kivi Popshu by the shoulder and shook him hard. The prisoner's jaws snapped shut; he bit his tongue and fell silent. Then the civilian, who had been observing the prisoner, said:

"I'll take this one. He'll be useful."

"Fine," said the brigadier and ordered the escort to return Kivi Popshu to his cell.

When the prisoner had been led out, the adjutant said: "That finishes the small fry. Now for the group."

"Begin with their leader," suggested the civilian. "What's his name -- Ketshef?"

The adjutant glanced at his papers and again addressed the prisoner's seat: "Gel Ketshef."

A handcuffed man was led into the room. His eyes were red, his face swollen. He sat down and fixed his gaze on the picture above the brigadier's head. "Is your name Gel Ketshef?" asked the brigadier.

"Yes."

"You are a dentist?"

"I was."

"What is your relationship to the dentist Hobbi?"

"I bought his practice."

"Why aren't you in practice now?"

"I sold my equipment."

"Why?"

"Financial problems."

"What's your relationship to Ordi Tader?"

"She's my wife."

"Any children?"

"We had a son."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"What did you do during the war?"

"I fought."

"Why did you decide to engage in antigovernment activity?"

"Because in the history of the World there has never been a more loathsome government," said Ketshef. "Because I loved my wife and child. Because you've killed my friends and corrupted my people. Because I've always hated you. Isn't that enough?"

"Enough," said the brigadier calmly. "More than enough. Now tell us how much the Khontis are paying you? Or is it Pandeya?"

The man broke into laughter -- but it was an oppressive laughter, the laughter of a dead man.

"Come off it. Let's put an end to this farce. What good will it do you?"

"Are you the leader of this group?"

"I was."

"Who are the members of your organization?"

"I don't know."

"You're sure?" the civilian asked suddenly.

"Yes."

"You know, Ketshef," said the civilian gently, "your position is extremely serious. We know everything about your group. We even know something about your group's connections. But whether your name or another's is given out as our source depends completely on you."

Ketshef lowered his head and remained silent.

"You!" shouted Captain Chachu. "You, an ex-combat officer! Do you understand what they're offering you? Not your life, massaraksh! But your honor!"

Ketshef began to laugh again but did not answer. Maxim felt that this man feared nothing. Neither death nor dishonor. He had already endured everything there was to endure and considered himself as good as dead. The brigadier shrugged his shoulders and declared that Gel Ketshef, age fifty, married, a dentist, was sentenced to death in accordance with the law for the protection of public health. Sentence to be carried out within forty-eight hours. Should the condemned agree to give testimony, the sentence could be changed.

After Ketshef had been led out, the brigadier, displeased, said to the civilian: "I don't understand you. I think he spoke rather willingly. From your point of view -- a regular chatterbox. No, I don't understand."

The civilian laughed. "Listen, my friend, you stick to your job and I'll stick to mine."

The brigadier was offended. "The leader of a group... is inclined to philosophize. I don't understand you."

"Have you ever seen a philosophizing corpse?"

"Nonsense."

"Well, have you?"

"And have you?" asked the brigadier.

"Yes, just now," said the civilian with authority. "And, take note, this isn't the first time. I'm alive. He's dead. So what's there to

discuss?"

The captain rose suddenly, went over to Maxim, and whispered into his face: "Watch your posture, candidate. Attention! Eyes straight ahead!" He studied Maxim for several seconds, then returned to his seat.

"So," said the adjutant. "We still have Ordi Tader, Memo Gramenu, and two others who refuse to give their names."

"We'll start with them," suggested the civilian.

Number 7313, a lean, sinewy man with painfully swollen lips, entered and sat down. He, too, was in handcuffs, although he had an artificial arm.

"Your name?" asked the brigadier.

"Which one?" asked the one-armed prisoner cheerfully.

Maxim winced -- he had been certain the man would remain silent.

"Do you have so many? Give your real name."

"My real name is Seven-Three-One-Three."

"So-o. What were you doing in Ketshef's apartment?"

"I was lying unconscious. For your information, I'm very good at it. If you like, I can give you a demonstration."

"Don't trouble yourself," said the civilian. He was very angry. "Save your skill for later. You'll be needing it."

The prisoner burst out laughing. He laughed heartily, as if he were still a young man, and Maxim realized with horror that this laughter was genuine. The men sitting around the table stiffened as they listened to him.

"Massaraksh!" The prisoner wiped his tears with his shoulder. "Some threat!" He turned to the civilian. "But you, you're still a young man. You must learn to do your job coolly, officially -- for the money. It makes an enormous impression on the victims of your inquisition. What an appalling state of affairs when you find yourself being tortured not by an enemy but by a bureaucrat. Take a look at my left arm. His Imperial Majesty's specialists sawed it off in three stages; and each order was accompanied by a lengthy official correspondence. Those butchers were just doing a disagreeable, boring, unrewarding job. While they were sawing off my arm, they cursed their wretchedly low pay. And I was terrified. I had to strain my willpower to keep from talking. And now... I can see how you hate me. You -- me, and I -- you. Fine! But you have been hating me less than twenty years, and I -- you, for more than thirty. You, young man, were still toddling under the table and tormenting the cat."

"Ah," said the civilian, "an old-timer. I thought we'd already killed all of you off."

"Don't count on it," replied the prisoner. "You still have a lot to learn."

"I think that's enough," said the brigadier, turning to the civilian.

The civilian wrote something rapidly on the magazine and, passed it to the brigadier. The brigadier was surprised and looked at the civilian dubiously. The civilian smiled. Then, shrugging his shoulders, the brigadier addressed the captain: "Captain Chachu. You were a witness. How did the accused conduct himself when arrested?"

"He was sprawled on the floor," replied the captain glumly.

"In other words, he did not resist. So-o." The brigadier paused briefly again, rose, and pronounced sentence: "Prisoner Seven-Three-One-Three is sentenced to death. Until the date is set, the prisoner will be sent into exile for reeducation." Captain Chachu looked scornful and bewildered. The one-armed prisoner laughed softly and shook his head as they led him out.

Number 7314 was brought in. This was the man who had lain screaming and writhing on the floor. Although he was very frightened, he behaved defiantly. As soon as he appeared in the doorway, he shouted that he would not answer questions or beg for leniency. And he did remain silent and refused to answer a single question, even the civilian's question about mistreatment while under arrest. The interrogation ended when the brigadier looked at the civilian and blinked inquiringly. The civilian nodded and said: "Yes, give him to me." He seemed very pleased.

The brigadier ran through the remaining papers and said:

"Let's go, gentlemen. Let's get something to eat."

The court adjourned. Maxim and Pandi were permitted to stand at ease. When the captain, too, had left the room, Pandi said indignantly: "Did you see those animals? Worse than I snakes. If they didn't get headaches, how could you tell they I were degens? It's frightening to think what would happen."

Maxim did not reply. He was in no mood for conversation. His picture of this world, which had seemed so clear-cut and logical only yesterday, was now eroded and blurred. Pandi continued talking, not needing any response from Maxim. Removing his white gloves to avoid soiling them, he took a bag of roasted nuts from his pocket and offered some to Maxim. He began to tell him how he detested this assignment. First of all, he was deathly afraid of catching something from the degens. Second, some of them, like this one-armed fellow, behaved so disrespectfully that he could scarcely control himself. Once he had taken it as long as he could and then given one of them a good punch in the jaw. He was almost broken to candidate. Thanks to the captain, all he got was twenty days in the stockade plus forty days without leave.

Maxim chewed the nuts in silence, scarcely listening to Pandi's chatter. "Hate," he thought. "These hate the others, and they hate back. But why? 'The most loathsome government.' Why is it loathsome? Where did he get the idea? Corrupted his people. How? What does all this mean? And that civilian... was he really hinting at torture? That sort of thing died out centuries ago, in the Middle Ages. But what about fascism? Hitler. Auschwitz. Race theory, genocide. World destruction. Guy -- a fascist? And Rada? Unlikely. The captain? I wish I understood the connection between those terrible headaches and their disobeying the authorities. Why is it that only degens are trying to destroy the ABM network? And why not all degens?"

"Corporal Pandi," he asked, "what about the Khontis -- are they all degens?"

Pandi became very thoughtful.

"H'm, how can I explain it? Well, our job is to handle the city degens and the wild ones in the forest. The army people are trained to deal with anything they come up against in Khonti or anywhere else. All you need to know is that the Khontis are our worst enemies. Before the war they obeyed us, but now they are getting their revenge. And that's it. Got it?"

"More or less," replied Maxim. Pandi reprimanded him instantly. "That's no way for a legionnaire to answer. A legionnaire says 'Yes, sir' or 'No, sir.' 'More or less' is for civilians, for the corporal's sister. You don't answer like that in the service."

With a subject so inspiring and dear to his heart and with such an attentive and respectful audience, Pandi would have babbled on indefinitely. But the officers were returning. Pandi broke off in midsentence, whispered "Attention," and froze into position--after completing the required maneuvers between the table and the prisoner's seat. Maxim followed suit.

The officers were in fine spirits. Captain Chachu, with a contemptuous expression on his face, was telling them in a loud voice how, in '96, they had stuck some dough on red-hot armor and it turned out delicious. The brigadier and civilian retorted that fighting spirit was damned important, but the Fighting Legion's mess should be second to none; the less canned food, the better. With half-closed eyes the adjutant rattled off some recipes from memory. The others fell silent and listened to him with strange tenderness in their eyes. Then the adjutant choked with emotion and coughed to clear his throat. The brigadier, sighing, said: "Yes. Splendid. But we'll have to get back to work now."

Still coughing, the adjutant opened the folder, dug through the papers, and announced: "Ordi Tader."

The woman entered, looking as pale and as transparent as she had yesterday. When Pandi extended his hand to take her by the elbow and seat her, she recoiled sharply, as if from a snake, and Maxim thought she was going to strike Pandi. She didn't; she was handcuffed. She just calmly and distinctly told him to keep his ; filthy hands off her and walked around him and sat down.

The brigadier asked her the usual questions. She did not reply. The civilian reminded her of her child and husband, but still she refused to answer. She sat straight and tall. Maxim could not see ' her face, only her tense thin neck beneath disheveled hair.

Suddenly she said in a low voice: "You are real swine. All of you. Murderers! But you will all die. You, brigadier -- I am seeing you for the first and last time. You will die a cruel death. Not by my hands, unfortunately, but it will be a cruel, cruel death. And you, you bloodthirsty animals. I personally finished off two like you. If these two idiots weren't standing behind me, I'd kill you this instant." She caught her breath. "And you, you fat-headed cannon fodder, we'll get you yet. But you'll die an easy death. Gel missed, but I know people who won't."

They did not interrupt her but listened attentively.

They seemed ready to listen to her for hours, when suddenly she rose and stepped toward the table. Pandi caught her by the shoulder and threw her

back on the seat. Then she spat with all her strength but failed to reach the table. Suddenly she went limp and began to cry. They watched her cry for some time. Then the brigadier rose and sentenced her to death, the sentence to be carried out within forty-eight hours. Pandi took her by the arm and pushed her through the door. The civilian rubbed his hands, smiled, and said: "That was luck. Fine escorts." The brigadier replied: "Thank the captain."

Captain Chachu said only: "Ssh." Everyone fell silent.

The adjutant summoned Memo Gramenu and skipped the usual formalities because it was a clear-cut case. When he was placed under arrest he had shown armed resistance. They did not bother to interrogate him. While the brigadier read the death sentence, he looked at the ceiling indifferently, nursing his injured right hand with his left. The dislocated fingers were bound with a rag. Maxim could not understand the prisoner's unnatural calm and his cold indifference to the proceedings.

Gramenu was being led out when the adjutant, with a sigh of relief, gathered the papers into his folder, and the brigadier started a conversation with the civilian about the promotion system. Captain Chachu went over to Pandi and Maxim and ordered them to leave. Although Maxim clearly saw a threat in his transparent eyes, he was too preoccupied to care. He wondered about the man who would have to execute the woman. Impossible! But someone would have to do the job in the next forty-eight hours.

8.

Guy pulled on his pajamas, hung up his uniform, and turned to Maxim. Candidate Sim was sitting on a small sofa that Rada had placed in an empty corner for him. One boot was off and he had started on the other. His eyes were turned to the wall. Guy crept up to him from the side and tried to jab him playfully. As usual, he missed his mark: Mac jerked his head back just in time.

"What's on your mind?" asked Guy playfully. "Pining for Rada? You're out of luck, brother; she's on the night shift today."

Mac smiled weakly and started on the other boot.

"Why out of luck?" he said absentmindedly. "Guy, I know you wouldn't lie to me." He stopped tugging. "You're always saying they get paid for their work."

"Who? The degens?"

"Right. You've talked about it a lot, to me and the men. Paid agents of the Khontis, you said. And the captain gives us the same story every day."

"What else is there to say about them?" Oh, God, there goes Mac again with one of his boring conversations. "You're really a funny guy, Mac. Nothing's changed with them, so there's nothing new to say. Degens have

always been degens, and that's the way it is now. They've always received money from our enemies. They do it now, too. For example, just last year, a group of them were caught red-handed with a cellarful of dough. How could an honest man have that much money? They weren't bankers."

Mac set his boots neatly by the wall, rose, and began unbuttoning his jump suit.

"Guy," he said, "There's something I don't understand about you people. You're told something about a person, but when you look at him, you know it can't be true. That it's a mistake."

"That happens," said Guy, frowning. "But if you're referring to degens ..."

"Precisely. I watched them today. They're ordinary people... like everybody else. Some a little better, some a little worse. Some are brave, others cowardly. But they certainly aren't the animals I expected. Or that all of you think they are. Wait, don't interrupt me. I don't know if they are dangerous. Everything seems to indicate that they are. But I don't believe they're bought."

"Why can't you believe it? Look, let's say you don't believe me; I'm a little guy. But what about the captain? And the brigadier?"

Maxim threw off his jump suit, went over to the window, and stared out, pressing his forehead against the pane.

"And if mistakes are made?"

"Mistakes?" Guy was bewildered. "Who makes mistakes? The brigadier? Mac, you areare a jerk!"

"OK." Mac turned around. "But we're not discussing him now. We're talking about the degens. Let's take you, for example. You would die for your cause, right?"

"Right! And so would you."

"OK, so we would. And that's precisely my point. We would die for a cause, not for the Legion's rations or for money. Offer me a billion of your paper bills and I wouldn't be willing to die for it. And you're the same way."

"Of course," said Guy, thinking what a character Mac was, always getting strange ideas.

"Well?"

"What do you mean -- well?"

"Well, all right," said Maxim impatiently. "You wouldn't agree to die for money. Neither would I. But you think the degens would? Ridiculous!"

"Sure they would!" Guy was steamed up. "That's why they're degens! Money means more to them than anything else. Nothing's holy to them. Strangling a child is no big deal to them, They've done it! Get this, Mac: if a man tries to destroy the ABM network, what kind of man can he be? I'll tell you -- a cold-blooded murderer!"

"I'm not so sure about that. Some of them were interrogated today. If they had named their confederates, they could have saved their necks, gotten off with hard labor in a penal colony, But they didn't. So doesn't that mean that their confederates mean more to them than money? More than life

itself?"

"You can't say that for sure," replied Guy. "According to the law, all the degens would be sentenced to death, without a court trial. You yourself saw them tried."

He looked at Mac and saw that he was confused and wavering. He was really good-hearted but so naive; he didn't understand that cruelty to the enemy was unavoidable. He should really lay it on the line, tell him to stop talking nonsense, to shut up and listen to his superiors. Mac was no blockhead or ignorant kid; if things were explained to him properly, he'd understand.

"No!" said Mac stubbornly. "You can't hate for money alone. And the degens do hate -- more than I believed possible for people to hate. You hate them less than they hate you. And I want to know why."

"Now listen. I'll explain it to you again. In the first place, they are degens. They hate all normal people. By nature they're vicious, like rats. And second, we interfere in their affairs. They would like to do their dirty work, get their dough, and live in clover. And what do we do? We say to them: 'Freeze! Hands up!' What do you expect them to do, love us?"

"If they're all as vicious as rats, what about that landlord? H they're all bought, as you say they are, why was he released?"

Guy laughed.

"That landlord is a coward. There are plenty of those, too. They hate us, but they're afraid. They know it pays to be nice to us. Besides, he's a landlord, a rich man. You can't buy him off so easy. He's not like that dentist. Mac, you're funny; you're like a kid! You know that all people aren't alike, and neither are the degens."

"Of course I know," interrupted Mac. "But, take the dentist. I'll bet my shirt he wasn't bought. I can't prove it to you, but I feel it in my bones. That dentist is a courageous, decent man."

"You mean degen!"

"Have it your way. A courageous, decent degen. I saw his library. He's well educated. He knows a thousand times more than you or the captain. Why is he against us? If everything is as you say, why doesn't an educated man like that know it? Even when threatened with death, he tells us straight to our faces that he's for the people and against us. Why?"

"An educated degen is doubly dangerous," Guy lectured him. "Just being a degen, he hates us. But if he's educated, he can spread that hatred everywhere. Education, my dear friend, is not always a blessing. Like a gun, it depends on who has it."

"Education is always a blessing."

"I disagree. I'd rather see all the Khontis ignorant. Then, at least, we could live like people instead of being always afraid that they'll get us. If they were uneducated, we could control them better."

"Yes," said Mac in a strange tone, "we know how to do that all right. We know very well how to be cruel."

"You're talking like a child again. We'd be very happy to convince them

by rational persuasion. It certainly would be less expensive and less bloody. But what would you do if persuasion didn't work?"

"That means they do have convictions, doesn't it?" Mac interrupted. "If a well-educated person like that dentist is convinced he's right, then where does Khonti money come into the picture?"

Guy was fed up with Mac's arguments, so as a last resort he began to cite the Creators' Code. But Mac broke in, calling out suddenly: "Rada! You've had enough sleep! Your legionnaires are starving to death and want your company!"

Guy was surprised to hear Rada's voice come from behind the screen.

"I've been awake for a long time. You've been shouting as if you were on the drill field."

"What are you doing home?" asked Guy.

Wrapping her robe more closely around her, she came out from behind the screen.

"Lost my job," she announced. "Mama Tei closed down her place. She inherited some money and is going off to the country. But she recommended me for a good job. Mac, why are your things all over the place? Put them in the closet. I've asked you both a dozen times not to come in with your boots on! Guy, set the table, we'll eat right away. Mac, you've lost weight. My goodness, what are they doing to you there?"

"Come on, come on!" said Guy. "Let's have some dinner."

Rada went to the kitchen. As she left the room, Mac watched her with a tender expression on his face.

"Pretty, isn't she?" asked Guy. He was startled to see Mac's face harden abruptly. "What's the matter with you?"

"Listen," said Mac. "They can do anything. Even torture a person. You know more about that than I do. But to shoot women, to torture women." He grabbed his boots and left the room.

Guy grunted, scratched his head vigorously, and began to put out plates. Their discussion had left him with an unpleasant aftertaste and conflicting feelings. Of course Mac was still green, and not from their world. But it was amazing how these arguments with Mac always turned out. He certainly was remarkably logical. Although he had been talking nonsense this time, too, everything had shaped up so logically! Guy had to admit that, if not for this conversation, he would hardly have reached a basically simple conclusion, namely: that the main objection to the degens was that they were degens. Discount this, and all the other accusations against them turned out to be nonsense. "Yes, the whole point is that they are degens and hate everything normal. This is sufficient reason for them to oppose us without Khonti's gold. Does that mean the Khontis are degens, too? We've never been told they are. If they aren't, then our degens should hate them as they hate us. Oh, massaraksh! Darn this logic!"

When Mac returned. Guy pounced on him.

"How did you know Rada was home?"

"What do you mean -- how? It was quite obvious.

"If it was so obvious to you, why didn't you warn me? And why,

massaraksh, do you blab so much in the presence of outsiders? I've told you dozens of times, massaraksh!"

"Massaraksh, who's an outsider here? Rada? Rada is less an outsider to me than all your captains!"

"Massaraksh! What do the regulations say about military secrets?"

"Massaraksh and massaraksh! Why are you badgering me? I thought you knew she was home! I thought you were kidding about the night shift. Besides, what the hell kind of military secrets were we discussing anyway?"

"Anything concerning the service is -- "

"Damn you and your service! You can't even talk in front of your own sister! You've got your lousy secrets everywhere. It's impossible -- we can't even open our mouths!"

"Who do you think you are, shouting at me? Remember, I'm the one who's teaching you, you fool! And you have the nerve to shout at me?"

Before Guy could finish, Mac had calmed down. Mac walked over to him, and then Guy felt powerful arms seize him, the room began to spin, and the ceiling rushed toward him. He let out a muffled cry, and Mac, carrying him carefully above his head, walked over to the window.

"Well, where should I throw you and your secrets? Out the window?"

"What an idiotic joke, massaraksh!" shouted Guy, waving his arms wildly.

"So you don't want to be thrown out the window? Well, then stay here."

Mac carried Guy behind the screen and threw him down on Rada's bed. Guy sat up, straightened his pajamas, and muttered: "Some joke."

Guy had cooled down too; he might as well save his anger for the degens.

They set the table. Rada came in with a pot of soup. Behind her was Unc Kaan with his precious flask. It alone, he assured everyone, protected him from colds and a host of geriatric ailments. They sat down and started on the soup. Unc drained a wine glass, took a deep breath, and began to talk about his enemy. Shapshu, he said, had written an article about the function of certain bones in some ancient lizard, and the entire article was based on idiocy, contained nothing but idiocy, and was written for idiots.

As far as Unc Kaan was concerned, everyone was an idiot, including his faculty colleagues and his assistants. And the students? The height of idiocy. So the fate of paleontology was a foregone conclusion. Guy wasn't particularly distressed -- what use would it ever be to anyone? But Rada was very fond of Unc and always grieved along with him when he complained about his colleagues or the university's failure to supply funds for an expedition.

Today the dinner conversation took a different turn. Rada, who had heard everything from behind the screen, asked Unc how the degens differed from normal people. Guy glowered at Maxim and asked Rada not to ruin their appetites. He suggested that she read the literature on degens.

Unc declared that this literature was prepared for downright idiots; that the people in the Department of Education believed everyone to be as

ignorant as themselves; that the degen problem was certainly not as simple as the literature deliberately portrayed it. "Either we behave like cultured people or like our brave but ignorant barracks officers." Unc drained another glass of wine and launched into a theory now current in scientific circles: the degens were nothing other than a new biological form that evolved as a result of radiation exposure.

"The degens are dangerous -- no doubt about that," said Unc, raising his finger, "But they are far more dangerous than you think, Guy. They are fighting for a place in this world, for the survival of their species, and this struggle is not a question of social conditions. It will end only when either the last man or the last de-gen-mutant leaves the arena of biological history victorious. Khonti gold? Nonsense! Diversions against the ABM network? Trivial. Look beyond the Blue Snake River, my friends. Yes, beyond the Blue Snake River! That's where your real danger comes from. The prolific colonies of humanoid monsters will come from down there to trample us, to annihilate us! Guy, you are blind. And your commanders, too. You must fight to save an entire civilization, not just one people, not simply our mothers and children, but *all* humanity!"

Guy became furious. He was hardly concerned, he said, with the fate of humanity. He didn't believe this theory nonsense. If he was told that it was possible to set the wild degens against Khonti, he would devote his whole life to the task. Unc called him a blind fool. He said that the All-Powerful Creators were real martyrs and were truly engaged in unequal battle if all they had at their command were such miserable, blind supporters.

Guy decided not to argue with him because Unc understood nothing about politics. Mac tried to get involved in the argument and began to talk about the one-armed degen, but Guy cut short his feeble attempts to publicize a service secret. He told Rada to serve the second course and asked Mac to turn on the television set. "Too much yak-yakking today," he said. "We're on leave; let's relax."

But his imagination had been aroused, and since there was | nothing worthwhile on TV, Guy began to tell stories about the wild degens. Having fought them for three years, he knew a thing or two about them. He hadn't sat it out in the rear like those philosophizing types. Rada felt sorry for the old man and called her brother a braggart. Still, Unc and Mac defended him and asked him to continue. Guy refused: his feelings had been hurt, and besides, he couldn't think of a single example to refute the old souse's arguments. Suddenly he remembered what Zef, first sergeant of the 114th Unit of condemned prisoners, had once told him, and he presented this theory to Unc with pleasure. Zef had said that degens were becoming increasingly active because the radioactive desert was closing in on them. Their only hope for survival was to fight their way into areas free of radioactivity.

"Who told you that?" asked Unc scornfully. "What idiot ever concocted that simplistic explanation?"

Guy looked at him, gloating, and replied with authority: "That happens to be the opinion of Allu Zef, one of our most eminent psychiatrists."

"Where did you meet him?" inquired Unc even more scornfully. "In the

company kitchen?"

Guy bit his tongue and focused his attention on the TV weatherman.

Massaraksh, Mac barged into the argument again.

"All right, I am ready to grant you that those monsters in the south are some new species. But tell me -- what does that landlord Renadu have in common with them? Renadu is also considered a degen, but clearly he doesn't belong to this new species."

Since this had never occurred to Guy, he was relieved what Unc jumped in to answer the question. After calling Mac all sort of names, Unc explained that the undetected degens, the city ones, were actually the surviving remnants of the new specie who, in the central regions, had been almost completely wiped out in the cradle. They still remembered those horrors. Many were killed at birth, sometimes together with their mothers. Only the ones in whom the new species traits were invisible to the naked eye survived. Uncle Kaan drained a fifth glass of wine, dropped all restraint, and developed for his audience an efficient program for the medical inspection of the entire population. This, he insisted, must be undertaken sooner or later, and better sooner than later. Absolutely no exceptions! Weeds must be torn with the roots without mercy.

With this, dinner ended. Rada cleared the dishes from tit table. Without waiting for his listeners' reactions, Unc triumphantly corked his flask and started for his room. Guy follow"l| him with his eyes -- the old man in his threadbare jacket, patched trousers, darned socks, and worn shoes. Damned war! Before the war the entire apartment had belonged to Uncle. He had a servant, wife, son, fancy china, lots of money, even a country home somewhere. But now his dusty book-crammed study served as bedroom and what have you. Secondhand clothing, loneliness, oblivion. A sorry state. Guy pushed the easy chair closer to the TV, stretched out, and began to watch the screen drowsily. Mac sat beside him for a while, then rose silently, and disappeared into another comer. He browsed in Guy's small collection of books, selected a textbook, and began to leaf through it.

After Rada had finished the dishes, she sat down beside Guy and crocheted, glancing up at the screen occasionally. All was peaceful and serene. Guy dozed off.

He had a ridiculous dream: he caught two degens in a railroad tunnel, began interrogating them, and suddenly discovered that one of them was Mac. The other one, smiling gently, said to Guy: "All this time you've been making a big mistake. Your place is with us. The captain is just a hired killer. He's no patriot. He just likes to kill." Guy was crushed by doubts, but then sensed that everything was about to become crystal clear. Just one more second, and all Ms doubts would vanish. Ibis strange situation was so agonizing that his heart skipped several beats, and he woke up abruptly.

Mac and Rada were quietly chatting about trivial things. About swimming in the sea, about sand and cockleshells. A thought suddenly occurred to him: was he really capable of doubling, of vacillating? What did the doubts in his dream mean? Could they happen during his waking life? For some time he

tried to recall the dream in all its details, but it slipped away like a bar of wet soap. Relieved, Guy passed it off as nonsense.

The TV program was boring, so Guy suggested a few beers. Rada went to the kitchen and brought two bottles from the refrigerator. They drank and chatted, and in the course of their aimless conversation it came out that Mac had absorbed an entire textbook on geopolitics in the preceding half-hour. Rada was delighted, but Guy refused to believe it. He insisted that a person might be able to leaf through it in half an hour, but certainly not read it and assimilate it. Impossible! Mac demanded a test and they made a bet: the loser would tell Uncle Kaan straight to his face that his colleague Shapshu was a superior intellect and a brilliant scientist.

Guy opened the book at random, found questions at the end of a chapter, and read: "Explain our government's moral magnanimity with respect to northern expansion." Mac answered in his own words but correctly summarized the text, adding that in his opinion moral magnanimity had nothing to do with expansion; he viewed the entire problem as stemming from Khonti's and Pandeya's aggressive regimes. Guy scratched his head, turned several pages, and asked: "What is the average cereal yield in the northwestern regions?" Mac laughed and said that there were no data for the northwest. Guy's inability to trip up Mac delighted Rada. "What is the population pressure at the mouth of the Blue Snake River?" continued Guy. Mac stated a figure, cited an error in calculation, and did not fail to add that the concept of population pressure troubled him. He couldn't understand why it had been introduced. Guy started to explain that population pressure was a measure of aggressiveness, but Rada interrupted him. Guy, she said, was deliberately changing the subject, trying to squirm out of their bet because he realized how poorly he was doing.

Dismayed by the prospect of confronting Uncle Kaan, Guy stalled for time by starting an argument. Mac listened for a while. Then, out of the blue, he declared that Rada should not accept the job as a waitress but should return to school. Relieved at the change of subject. Guy shouted that he had told her the same thing a thousand times and had suggested she apply for the Women's Legion Corps, where she would be turned into a useful citizen. But the conversation fell flat. Mac merely shook his head, and Rada, as she had on previous occasions, spoke about the WLC in the most disrespectful terms.

Guy didn't bother to argue with her. He threw aside the textbook, went over to the closet for his guitar, and tuned it. Mac and Rada pushed the table aside and faced each other, preparing dance to the accompaniment of "Yes -- Yes, No -- No." Guy played for them. As he watched them dance, he thought what splendid couple they made. But apartments were impossible find. If they got married, he would have to move to the barracks.

Oh well, that wouldn't be so bad. Many of the corporals lived in the barracks. On the other hand, Mac didn't act as though he planning to get married. He treated Rada more like a friend, although with unusual tenderness and respect. Yet it was clear that Rada had fallen in love with him. How her eyes sparkled! How could a girl not fall in love with such a

man! Even that old hag, Madame Go, stuck her skull out the door and grinned as soon as she heard Mac walking down the corridor. Every tenant in the building was fond of him. The legionnaires, too. Only captain treated him strangely... although he didn't deny that Mac was a firebrand.

The couple danced on and on, until they were about to drop from exhaustion. Mac took the guitar from Guy, retuned it in his own special way, and began to sing his mountain songs. Dozens of them, but not one familiar tune. Yet they had a strange effect on Guy. Although he didn't understand a single word, sometimes he would feel like crying, sometimes like laughing. Rada had already memorized some of them and tried to hum them now. One of her favorites was a funny song about a girl who sat on a mountain, waiting for her boyfriend. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not reach her -- one obstacle after another blocked his path.

The doorbell rang, but they did not hear it through the music. Then a loud knocking, and Captain Chachu's orderly burst into the room.

"Corporal, sir, may I speak with you?" he bellowed, casting a furtive glance at Rada.

Mac stopped playing.

"What is it?" said Guy.

"The captain has ordered you and Candidate Sim to report to company headquarters at once. A car is waiting below."

Guy jumped up.

"Go wait for us in the car. We'll be down in a few minutes. Hurry and dress," he said to Maxim.

Rada took the guitar and cradled it in her arms like a baby. Then she turned and walked to the window.

"What's it all about?" asked Mac.

"How should I know? Maybe it's a practice alert."

"I don't like it."

Guy looked at him and turned on the radio. Nothing alarming. They dressed hurriedly.

"Well, Rada, we're going," said Guy.

"Then go," said Rada without turning around.

"Let's go, Mac." Guy pulled his beret over his eye.

"Call me if you're delayed," said Rada.

The orderly obligingly opened the door for Guy. They climbed into the car and set off for headquarters. Evidently they had been summoned because of an emergency. Turning the siren up full blast, the driver raced toward their destination. Guy thought, with some regret, about the pleasant evening they had left behind. But that was the life of a legionnaire. In a few minutes they would receive their orders, pick up their guns, and start shooting. Right on top of a cozy evening: beer, warm pajamas, singing to the accompaniment of the guitar. Ah, yes, that was the life of a legionnaire, the best of all possible lives. Wives, girlfriends? No need of them. Mac didn't want to marry Rada. Never mind, she'd wait. If she loved him, she'd wait.

The car tore onto the parade ground and braked at the entrance to the barracks. Guy leaped out and ran up the steps. He stopped short at the door, checked his beret and belt buckle, gave Mac a quick once-over and fastened his collar -- massaraksh, it was always open! -- and knocked.

"Come in!" barked a familiar voice.

Guy entered and reported for duty. Captain Chachu, wearing a cap and woolen cape, sat behind his desk, smoking and drinking coffee. The cartridge case in front of him was filled with butts. Two submachine guns rested against the side of the desk. He rose slowly, leaning heavily on the desk with both hands. Staring at Mac, he began to speak.

"Candidate Sim! You have shown yourself to be an extraordinary fighter and a loyal comrade. I applied to the brigade commander for your early promotion to the rank of regular private in the Fighting Legion. You passed the test by fire very successfully. Now you will be tested by blood."

Guy was overjoyed: he hadn't expected this to happen so soon. "There's an old soldier for you!" he thought. "What a fool I was to think he had it in for Mac." Guy glanced at Mac, and his joy paled at the sight of Mac's wooden countenance and bulging eyes. All according to regulations. But at this particular moment it wasn't necessary.

"I am about to hand you an order. Candidate Sim," continual the captain, handing Mac a document. "It is the first order addressed to you personally. And I hope not the last. Read it and sign it."

Mac took the order and skimmed through it. Guy's heart skipped again -- not from joy, but from a vague and fearful premonition. Mac's face remained immobile, and everything appeared to be in order, except that he hesitated almost imperceptibly before he picked up the pen and signed the document. The captain examined the signature and placed the paper in his map case.

He picked up a typed envelope from his desk. "Corporal Gaal, go to the guardroom and bring the condemned prisoners here. Take a gun -- no, here, take this one."

Guy took the envelope, slung the gun over his shoulder, ei-ecuted an about-face, and marched toward the door. He could still hear the captain telling Mac: "Don't worry, candidate. No need to get jittery. It's only frightening the first time."

Guy crossed the field on the double, heading toward the guardhouse. He handed the chief sentry the envelope, signed in the designated places, and received the necessary receipts in turn. The condemned prisoners were turned over to him. They were the recent conspirators: the stocky man whose fingers Mac had dislocated and the woman. Massaraksh, this was too much! The woman -- it was absolutely unnecessary! This was no job for Mac. He led the prisoners to the drill field and prodded them toward the barracks. Nursing his hand, the man dragged himself along, while the woman walked straight as a rod, her hands thrust deeply into her jacket pockets. She appeared to be oblivious to everything around her. "Massaraksh, and why not Mac? Why the hell not? The broad is just as bad as the other degen bastards. Why should we make an exception of her? And why, massaraksh, should we make an exception for Candidate Sim? Let him get used to it!"

The captain and Mac were waiting in the truck. The captain was behind the wheel; Mac sat in the back with his gun resting between his knees. Guy opened the door and the prisoners climbed in. "On the floor!" he ordered. They sat down obediently on the steel floor, and Guy sat opposite Mac. He tried to catch Mac's eye, but Mac was looking at the prisoners. No, he was looking at the woman, who was huddled up on the floor, clutching her knees. Without turning around the captain asked if they were ready. The truck pulled out.

They rode in silence. The captain drove at top speed, evidently anxious to finish the job. Mac kept looking at the woman, as if he were trying to get her attention, and Guy kept trying to catch Mac's eye. The condemned prisoners clung to each other and squirmed on the floor. The man started to talk to the woman, but Guy shouted at him. The car sped out of the city, passed the southern gate, and turned into a familiar deserted village. A very familiar village. It led to Pink Caves. The captain turned the car again, braked sharply, and eased it into a quarry. He switched off the engine and ordered everyone out.

It was almost dawn, and a light mist was spreading through the quarry. Its windswept stone walls emitted a faint pink glow. Long ago marble had been mined here.

Matters were coming to a head. Mac continued to behave like a model soldier. Not a single superfluous movement. His face was impassive, and his eyes were focused on the captain in anticipation of an order. The stocky man behaved well, with dignity. No, he wouldn't give them any trouble. But the woman went to pieces toward the end. She kept clenching her fists convulsively, pressing them to her chest and then dropping them. Guy expected some hysterics, but it didn't appear that they'd have to drag her to the execution spot.

The captain lit a cigarette, looked up at the sky, and said to Mac, "Take them along this path. You'll come to a cave. You'll know where to stand them. When you're finished, be sure to check them and, if necessary, give them the coup de grace. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mac woodenly.

"You're lying, boy. You don't know. It means -- in the head. Get going, candidate. You'll return here a regular private."

Suddenly the woman spoke. "If one of you is a real man... tell my mother. Duck Village, Number Two. It's the next village. Her name is -- "

"Don't lower yourself," boomed the stocky man's deep voice.

" -- her name is Illi Tader."

"Don't lower yourself," he repeated, raising his voice. The captain punched him in the face. He stopped talking, put his hand to his cheek, and glared at the captain.

"Get going, candidate," repeated the captain.

Mac turned to the prisoners and motioned to them with his gun. They started along the path. The woman turned around shouted again: "Duck Village, Number Two. Illi Tader!"

Mac walked behind them slowly with his gun raised in front of him. The captain flung open the car door and sat down sideways behind the wheel with his feet stretched out.

"O. K. We'll wait about fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir," replied Guy mechanically.

He followed Mac with his eyes until the group disappeared behind a pink ledge. "I'll have to buy a bottle on the way back," he thought. "Get him good and drunk. They say it helps."

"You may smoke, corporal," said the captain.

"Thank you, sir, but I don't smoke."

The captain spat through his teeth.

"Aren't you worried that your friend will let you down?"

"Absolutely not, sir," said Guy, but without conviction. "Although, if I may say so, sir, I'm very sorry that he got the woman. He's from the mountains and they -- "

"He's no more from the mountains than you or me," said the captain. "Anyway, it's not a question of women. Well, we'll see what happens. By the way, what were you doing when you were summoned to headquarters?"

"We were singing, sir."

"What were you singing?"

"Mountain songs, sir. He knows a lot of them."

The captain got out of the car and paced up and down along the path. He had stopped talking, and about ten minutes later began whistling the "Legion March." Guy kept listening for shots but didn't hear any. He began to grow anxious. Could they have escaped from Mac? Impossible! Disarmed him? Even more impossible. Then why the hell wasn't he firing? Maybe he had led them beyond the usual spot? The stench there was pretty strong, and Mac had a very keen sense of smell. He was so squeamish about that sort of thing, he could very well have gone another mile or so.

"Well, Corporal Gaal," said the captain, halting, "that's it. I'm afraid we can't wait any longer for your buddy. And I'm afraid you won't be called corporal after today."

Guy looked at him in dismay. The captain grinned.

"What the hell's the matter with you? You look as if your eyes are about to pop out. Your friend ran away, deserted. He's a coward and a traitor. Do you understand. Corporal Gaal?"

Guy was stunned. Not so much by what the captain said as how he said it. The captain was ecstatic. He looked as if he had just won a large bet. Guy looked into the quarry mechanically and suddenly saw Mac. He was returning alone, carrying his gun by its strap.

"Massaraksh," the captain said hoarsely. He, too, was stunned.

They stopped talking and watched Mac approach them -- slowly, stepping easily over the stone fragments. They watched his calm face with its strange eyes. Guy's head was spinning. What happened to the shots? Had he strangled them? Or smashed them with the butt of his gun? He, Mac, do that to a woman? Never! But the shots? There hadn't been any,

Five paces away, Mac halted and, looking the captain straight in the

eye, flung the gun at his feet.

"Good-bye, captain," he said. "I released them, and now I want to leave. Take your gun! Take your clothes!" He turned to Guy and, unbuckling his belt, said to him: "Guy, this is a dirty business. They've been lying to us."

He pulled off his boots and jump suit, tied everything into a bundle and stood there, almost naked, in his silver shorts and barefoot, just as Guy had seen him for the first time on the southern border. He went over to the truck and placed the bundle on the hood. Guy was shocked. He looked at the captain -- then almost froze in horror.

"Captain!" he shouted. "Don't! He's out of his mind! He -- "

"Candidate Sim!" snapped the captain, his hand on his holster. "Get into the car! You're under arrest."

"That's what you think. I'm free. I've come for Guy. Let's go, Guy. They've made a sucker out of you. They're dishonest people. Before I had doubts about them, but now I'm sure. Let's go, Guy."

Guy shook his head. He wanted to say something, to explain something, but he had neither the time nor the words to express it. The captain had drawn his pistol.

"Candidate Sim! Into the car!"

"Are you coming?" asked Mac.

Guy shook his head again. He looked at the pistol. Only one thought ran through his head: Mac was about to be shot. Oh God, what should he do?

"OK," said Mac. "I'll find you. I'll find out everything and I'll find you. You don't belong with them. Give Rada my love."

He turned and began to walk away, striding over the stone fragments as easily as if he were wearing boots. Guy stared mutely at his triangular back and waited for the shot and the black hole beneath his left shoulder blade.

"Candidate Sim," said the captain without raising his voice. "For the last time, I'm ordering you to return. I'm going to shoot."

Mac halted and turned toward him again.

"Shoot?" he said. "Why? Well, the reason doesn't matter. Put down your pistol."

Holding the pistol at his hip, Chachu aimed at Mac.

"I'm counting to three. Get into the truck, candidate. One!"

"Come, hand over your pistol." Mac extended his hand and advanced toward the captain.

"Two!"

"Don't!" shouted Guy.

The captain fired. Mac was close to him. Guy saw the bullet hit his shoulder. Mac staggered back, as if he had run into an obstacle.

"You fool!" said Mac. "Hand over your gun, you vicious fool!"

Mac continued to advance toward the captain, his hand reaching out for the weapon. Blood was spurting from his shoulder. With a strangely unsteady cry, the captain retreated and fired three shots in rapid succession into the broad tanned chest. Mac fell on his back, rose, and fell again. The

captain fired three more shots. Mac fell forward and lay still.

Guy felt giddy and his legs buckled. He sank down on the truck's running board. The repulsive crunching sound of bullets penetrating the body of his closest friend still ran through his head. Soon he recovered his strength, but still unsure of his legs, rested a little longer.

Mac's motionless body lay like a rock among the pink and white fragments. The captain returned to where he had been standing, held his gun in readiness, and lit up a cigarette, inhaling greedily. He didn't look at Guy. Smoking the cigarette down to the last puff, he burned himself; he threw the butt away and took two steps toward the dead man.

"Massaraksh!" grunted the captain, replacing his pistol in its holster.

He fumbled for a long time, trying to fasten it, and finally gave up. He walked over to Guy, grabbed his clothing at the chest with his crippled hand, and jerked him up. Breathing noisily in Guy's face, he spoke unsteadily.

"OK, boy, we won't bust you to private. But you're finished in the Legion. You'll write out a request for transfer to the army. Get in the van."

PART THREE: TERRORIST

9.

His escort murmured: "Wait here," and vanished into the brush. Maxim sat down on a stump in the middle of a clearing, thrust his hands deep inside the pockets of his canvas pants, and waited. The forest was old, and the undergrowth was strangling it. The ancient tree trunks smelled of rotting mold. Maxim shivered from the dampness. He felt faint and wanted to sit in the sun, where he could warm his shoulder.

Someone was in the bushes nearby, but Maxim ignored it. Although he had been followed from the moment he left the village, he wasn't concerned. It would have been strange if they had believed his story at once.

A little girl wearing an oversized blouse and carrying a bucket entered the clearing from one side. As she passed, her eyes were riveted on Mac, and she kept stumbling in the tall grass. A squirrel-like animal streaked through the bushes, darted up a tree, looked down, took fright, and disappeared. It was quiet except for the distant, irregular clacking of a machine cutting bulrushes on the lake.

The man in the bushes did not go away. The feeling that he was being

watched was unpleasant, but he had to get used to it. He must expect this from now on. The inhabited island had turned against him: one group had shot him, another distrusted him. Maxim dozed off. Lately he had been dozing at the most inappropriate times. He'd fall asleep, wake up, and fall asleep again. Realizing that his body knew best what it needed, he did not attempt to fight it. This would pass.

He heard the rustle of footsteps and his escort's voice: "Follow me."

Maxim rose and followed. They went deep into the forest, weaving in and out, describing circles and complicated loops as they gradually approached a dwelling that was actually very close to the clearing. Finally deciding that he had sufficiently confused Maxim, the escort took a shortcut over some fallen trees. He made a great deal of noise, like a city dweller unaccustomed to walking through woodland, so Maxim could no longer hear the footsteps of the man who was creeping along behind them.

After they had passed the fallen trees. Maxim saw a meadow and a ramshackle log cabin with boarded-up windows. The meadow was covered with high grass, but Maxim noticed both fresh and old tracks running through it. Whoever came here approached cautiously, trying to reach the cabin by a different route each time. They entered a dark, musty room. The man following them remained outside. The escort pulled up a trapdoor and said: "Come over here. Be careful." In the darkness Maxim descended a wooden staircase.

The cellar was warm and dry. Several people sat around a wooden table and their eyes strained, trying to make out Maxim in the darkness. The odor of a snuffed-out candle suggested to Maxim that they didn't want him to see their faces. He recognized only two: Ordi, Illi Tader's daughter, and Memo Gramenu, who sat by the staircase with a machine gun on his knees. Upstairs the trapdoor slammed shut.

"Who are you," someone asked. "Tell us about yourself."

"May I sit down?" asked Maxim.

"Yes, of course. Come over here, toward me. There's a bench."

Maxim sat down at the table and glanced around him. Four people sat around the table. They appeared gray and flat, like images in a very old photograph. On his right sat Ordi. The broad-shouldered man sitting opposite her, who bore an unpleasant resemblance to Captain Chachu, spoke out. "Tell us about yourself," he repeated.

Maxim sighed. He detested the thought of introducing himself with a pack of lies, but he had no choice.

"I don't know anything about my past," he explained. "They say I'm from the mountains. Maybe I am. I don't remember. My name is Maxim. My surname -- Kammerer. In the Legion my name was Mac Sim. I can remember only as far back as the moment I was arrested in the forest near the Blue Snake River."

The lies were over with and the rest went more easily. He told them his story, trying to be brief but not to skip what was important.

"I led them as far as possible into the quarry, ordered them to run, and took my time returning. Then the captain shot me. I regained consciousness that night, made my way out of the quarry, and wandered into a

pasture. In the daytime I hid in the bushes and slept; at night I crawled over to the cows and drank some milk. In a few days I felt better. I borrowed rags from the shepherds, reached Duck Village, and found Illi Tader there. You know the rest."

There was a long pause. Then a man with an impassive face and shoulder-length hair spoke. "I don't understand why he doesn't remember his past. I don't think that's likely. I'd like to hear the doctor's opinion."

"It happens," explained the doctor, a thin man who looked overworked. Evidently anxious to smoke, he twirled a pipe in his hands.

"Why didn't you escape with the prisoners?" asked Broadshoulders.

"Guy was still back there. I hoped he would come with me." Maxim paused, recalling Guy's pale bewildered face, the captain's hate-filled eyes, the burning, stabbing pains in his chest and abdomen, and his wounded feelings and sense of helplessness. "Of course it was stupid of me to think he would," he added. "But I didn't understand then."

"Did you take part in Legion operations?"

"I've already told you about that."

"Tell us again!"

"I took part in only one operation, when Ketshef, Ordi, you, and two others who wouldn't identify themselves were seized. One had an artificial arm."

"Your captain certainly was in a hurry. How do you account for it? Before a candidate is tested by blood, he must participate in at least three operations."

"I don't know. I only know he didn't trust me. I myself can't understand why he sent me to shoot -- "

"Why did he shoot you?"

"I think he was frightened. I wanted to take away his gun."

"I don't understand," said the long-haired man. "Let's see if I've got it straight: he didn't trust you, so, to check you out, he sent you to execute -- "

"Hold on, Forester," said Memo, "this is a lot of hot air. Words don't mean a damn thing. If I were you, doctor, I'd examine him. There's something fishy about his story."

"I can't examine him in the dark," said the doctor.

"Light the candle," suggested Maxim. "I see you anyway."

For a moment there was dead silence. Then Broadshoulders asked: "What do you mean -- you see us?"

Maxim shrugged his shoulders. "I can see in the dark."

"Bullshit!" said Memo. "If you can see, describe what I'm doing now."

Maxim turned around.

"You've aimed your carbine at me. Rather, you think it's at me, but actually it's aimed at the doctor. You are Memo Gramenu -- nicknamed Hoof of Death, or just Hooper. I recognize you. You have a scratch on your right cheek that wasn't there before."

"Noctalopia," muttered the doctor. "Let's have some light. This is

stupid. He sees us and we don't see him." He groped for the matches.

"Yes," said Memo, "of course it's stupid. Either he leaves here as one of us or he doesn't leave at all."

"May I?" Maxim reached out, took the matches from the doctor, and lit the candle.

Unaccustomed to the light, everyone squinted. The doctor lit his pipe quickly.

"Undress," he ordered.

Maxim pulled his canvas shirt over his head. Everyone stared at his chest. The doctor rose and crossed over to Maxim. He turned him in various directions and felt him with strong, cold fingers. It was quiet. Then Longhair said sympathetically: "A handsome boy. My son was... too."

No one answered. He rose heavily, fumbled around in a corner of the room, and hoisted a large wickered jug onto the table. He set out three mugs.

"We can take turns. If anyone's hungry, there's cheese. And bread."

"Wait, Forester," said Broadshoulders. "Push your jug away. I can't see a thing. Well, what do you think, doctor?"

The doctor again ran his cold fingers over Maxim, enveloped himself in clouds of smoke, and sat down.

"Forester, pour!" he said. "Something like this calls for a drink. Get dressed," he said to Maxim. "And stop smiling like a scarecrow. I have a few questions for you."

Maxim got dressed. The doctor took a sip from the mug and asked: "When did you say you were shot?"

"Forty-seven days ago."

"What did you say you were shot with?"

"A pistol. An army pistol."

The doctor took another sip and addressed Broadshoulders:

"I'll bet this tough guy was shot with an army pistol, and from a very short distance. But not forty-seven days ago. At least one hundred and forty-seven. Where are the bullets?" He turned to Maxim suddenly.

"My body eliminated them, and I threw them away."

"Listen, what's your name ... Mac! You're lying! Tell us the truth!"

Maxim bit his lip.

"I am telling the truth. You have no idea how rapidly wounds heal for us. I am not lying." He paused. "I can prove it easily. Cut my hand. If it's not a deep cut, it will heal in ten or fifteen minutes."

"That's true," said Ordi, speaking up for the first time. "I saw it myself. He was peeling potatoes and cut his finger. A half-hour later there was only a white scar, and the next day, not a trace of anything. I believe him when he says he's from the mountains. Gel used to talk about mountain folk medicine. They know how to heal wounds."

"Bah, mountain medicine." The doctor sent up a cloud of smoke again. "All right, let's say his mountain folk medicine exists. But a cut finger is one thing, and seven bullets fired point-blank is another. There are seven holes in this young man; at least four of them should have been lethal."

"The hell you say!" Broadshoulders made a gesture of disbelief.

"You'd better believe it," said the doctor. "One bullet through the heart, one through the spine, two through the liver. Add to this the loss of a great deal of blood and inevitable blood poisoning. Plus the total lack of evidence of treatment. Massaraksh, one bullet in the heart should have been enough to kill him."

"Explain it." Broadshoulders turned to Maxim.

"He's wrong. About the shots, his diagnosis is correct, but he's wrong: for us those wounds are not lethal. Now, if the captain had shot me in the head... but he didn't. Doctor, you have no idea how viable the heart and liver are."

"True," said the doctor.

"One thing I do know," said Broadshoulders. "They would hardly have sent us such a crude piece of work. They know very well that we have doctors."

There was a long pause. Maxim waited patiently. "Would I believe such a story in their place? I suppose I would. I'm too gullible for this world. Although, I must say, less than I used to be. Take this Memo fellow, for example. I don't like that guy. He's practically afraid of his shadow. Sits there among his own comrades with a machine gun on his knees. Probably is afraid of me, too. Scared I'll grab his gun and dislocate his fingers again. Well, maybe he's right. Hell, I'm not going to let anyone ever take a shot at me again." He remembered that freezing night in the quarry, the luminous, lifeless sky and the cold, sticky puddle he lay in. "No, I've had enough of that. From now on, I'll do the shooting."

"I believe him," said Ordi suddenly. "What he says doesn't make sense, but that's because he's an unusual man. It's impossible to make up a story like that: it would be too ridiculous. If I didn't believe him, I'd shoot him right after hearing such a story. Maybe he's crazy. That's possible. But he's not a provocateur. I'm for him," she added.

"That's enough, Ordi," said Broadshoulders. "Shut up for a while." He turned to Maxim. "Were you examined by the commission at the Public Health Department?"

"Yes, I was."

"And you were certified?"

"Of course."

"Any restrictions?"

"The card just said 'Certified.'"

"What is your opinion of the Fighting Legion?"

"I think that it is a mindless weapon controlled by others, most likely the All-Powerful Creators. But there's still too much that I don't understand about it."

"What is your opinion of the All-Powerful Creators?"

"I think they are the ruling clique of a military dictatorship. They are unscrupulous, but I'm not familiar with their aims."

"And what is your opinion of the degens?"

"I think the term is unfortunate. I think you are conspirators. I don't quite understand your aims. But I like the people I've seen. All of them seem honest and -- how should I put it -- well aware of their actions."

"All right," said Broadshoulders, "what about the pains... do you get them?"

"Those splitting headaches? No, never."

"Why ask him about that?" said Forester. "If he did, he wouldn't be sitting here now."

"That's exactly what I want to know. Why is he here?" Broadshoulders turned to Maxim. "Why did you come to us? Do you want to fight with us?"

Maxim shook his head.

"I couldn't say that. It wouldn't be true. I want to find out what it's all about. Right now I'd rather be with you than them. But I know so little about you, too."

His questioners exchanged glances.

"We don't operate that way, my friend," said Forester. "Here's the way we work: either you're one of us and you go out and fight, or you're not. In that case, then we... you know what I mean. Where did you say you'd have to get it, in the head, eh?"

The doctor sighed and knocked out his pipe against the bench.

"An unusual and difficult case. I have a suggestion. Let him question us. You do have questions, don't you, Mac?"

"That's why I'm here."

"He has a lot of questions." Ordi grinned. "He didn't give my mother a moment's peace. And bothered me, too."

"Shoot," said Broadshoulders. "You, doctor, will answer them. We'll listen."

"Who are the Creators and what do they want?" began Maxim.

"The Creators," said the doctor, "are an anonymous group of the most skillful schemers in finance, politics, and the military. They have two motives. Their principal motive is to stay in power, and their secondary motive is to derive maximum gratification from this power. They're all thieves, sensualists, sadists. And they're all power hungry. Enough?"

"What about their economic program?" asked Maxim. "Their ideology? Their power base? Who do they count on for support?"

Everyone exchanged glances again. Forester stared open-mouthed at Maxim.

"Economic programs?" said the doctor. "You expect too much of us. We are not theoreticians. We are realists. The overriding issue for us is their desire to destroy us. We are literally fighting for our lives." He stuffed his pipe.

"I didn't intend to offend anyone. I am only trying to understand what it's all about." He would have explained the theory of historical necessity, but their language lacked the necessary words. "What is it that you want? Besides your struggle for survival, what are your goals? And who are you?"

"Let me answer him," said Forester suddenly. "Let me tell him. My friend, I don't know how it is with you mountaineers, but I can tell you how

people in our country feel. We want to live, we love life. And you ask what else we want? For me that's enough. Do you think that's so little? Oh, you're a brave one, all right! But try hiding out in a cellar, away from your home, your wife and family, when everyone has turned from you. Cut out the fine words."

"Take it easy, Forester," said Broadshoulders.

"No, why should I? A fine one he is with his twaddle about society and economic programs."

"Easy, Forester," said the doctor. "Don't get all worked up. You see, this fellow doesn't understand anything." He turned to Maxim. "Our movement is very heterogeneous. We don't have a unified political program -- it's not possible. We kill them because they're killing us. You must understand. We are all condemned men and women with little hope of survival. For us biology obscures politics. Survival is our main goal. We've no time to worry about theoretical foundations. So if you were to come out with some sort of social program, nothing would come of it."

"But what's behind all this? Why are they trying to destroy you?" asked Maxim.

"We are considered degenerates. No one remembers how it all started. But the Creators have something to gain by exterminating us: it distracts the people from domestic problems, from the financiers' corruption, from the enormous profits made on the sales of munitions and the construction of the ABM towers."

"Now it's beginning to make sense," said Maxim. "So money is the reason. Which means that the Creators are serving the moneyed interests. And who else are they shielding?"

"No, they aren't serving or shielding anyone. The Creators themselves are the moneyed interests. They are everything. Yet, in a way, they're nothing because they are anonymous and continually devour each other... He should talk with Vepr," he suggested to Broadshoulders. "They'd find a common language."

"Good. I'll talk with Vepr about the Creators. But now..."

"Too late for that," said Memo angrily. "Vepr's been shot."

"The one-armed fellow," explained Ordi. "Yes, you should know about that."

"I do," said Maxim. "But he wasn't shot. He was sentenced to exile in the penal colony, for reeducation."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Broadshoulders. "Vepr?"

"Yes," replied Maxim. "Gel Ketshef was sentenced to death. Vepr, to the penal colony. Another fellow who refused to give his name -- the civilian took him. Probably for counterintelligence."

Again there was a long pause. The doctor sipped his drink. Broadshoulders sat quietly. Forester groaned and looked at Ordi sympathetically. She stared at the table, her lips pressed together tightly. This was a dangerous subject and Maxim was sorry he had raised it. Everyone was shaken -- except Memo, who appeared more afraid than upset. "People like

him should not be given machine guns, " thought Maxim. "He'll gun us all down."

"Well, now," said Broadshoulders, "do you have any more questions?"

"I certainly do. Many. But I'm afraid they may strike you as tactless."

"Let's have them anyway."

"All right, just one more. What do the ABM towers have to do with you? How do they interfere with your lives?"

Everyone laughed scornfully.

"There's a fool for you," said Forester. "OK, he wants to know the reason, he wants a theoretical foundation. So give it to him."

"They're not ABM towers," explained the doctor. "They're our curse. They invented a radiation-transmission device which they use to create 'degenerates.' Most people, like you, for example, are totally unaffected by this radiation, but because of certain peculiarities in their physiology an unfortunate minority experience excruciating pain during radiation strikes. Some can tolerate the pain, others cannot, and they scream; one-third lose consciousness; one-fourth go insane or die. The towers deliver nationwide strikes twice daily. While we lie in the streets, helpless with pain, we are caught and arrested. There are also short-range radiation devices in patrol cars. In addition there are self-activated devices and random radiation strikes at night. There's no place we can hide from them. There are no shields, We go mad, shoot ourselves, do all sorts of senseless things out of desperation. We're dying out."

The doctor fell silent, grabbed the mug, and drained it. His face twitched as he inhaled furiously on his pipe.

"It's pointless to tell him," said Memo suddenly. "He doesn't have the slightest idea of what it means to live like this -- to wait each day for the next radiation strike."

"Well," said Broadshoulders, "in that case, there's nothing further to discuss. Ordi has expressed herself in favor of him. Who else is in favor, and who is opposed?"

"I want to explain why I'm in favor of him," Ordi said. "First of all, I believe him. I've already said that, and maybe it's not so important because it concerns only me. But this man possesses talents that can be useful to all of us. He can heal not only his own wounds, but others' too. No offense intended, doctor, but far better than you can."

The doctor sniffed. "Forensic medicine is my field."

"But that's not all," continued Ordi. "He knows how to remove pain."

"How's that?" asked Forester.

"I don't know how he does it. He massages the temples, whispers something, and the pain passes. I had two radiation seizures at my mother's house, and he helped me both times. Not very much the first time, but still I didn't lose consciousness the way I usually do. And the second time I didn't feel any pain at all."

The mood in the room changed abruptly. A few minutes ago they were his judges, deciding whether he should live or die. Now the judges had vanished, and in their places sat tormented, doomed people who had suddenly caught a

glimmer of hope. They looked at him expectantly, as if here and now he would sweep away the nightmare that had been tormenting them every minute of every day and night for years on end. "Well," thought Maxim, "here, at least, I will be needed to cure and not to kill." But something was missing. To cure was not enough. "The towers -- what a sick idea. Only a sadist could have thought them up."

"Can you really do it?" asked the doctor.

"Do what?"

"Remove pain."

"Remove pain? Yes.'"

"How?"

"I can't explain it to you. Your language doesn't have the words, and you don't know enough. But there's something I don't understand: don't you have any sort of painkilling drugs?"

"There are none. The only relief is from a lethal dose."

"Listen," said Maxim, "I'm willing to try to help you, to remove your pain. But that isn't a real solution! A mass drug must be developed. Do you have chemists?"

"We have everything," said Broadshoulders, "but the problem is not solvable. If it were, the prosecutor would not be suffering these agonizing pains, too. Believe me, he would get his hands on that drug damn fast. But before each radiation strike, he gets drunk and soaks in a hot tub."

"The state prosecutor is a degen?" Maxim was bewildered.

"So go the rumors," replied Broadshoulders coldly. "But we're getting off the subject. Have you finished your piece, Ordi? Who else wants to speak?"

"Just a minute, general," said Forester to Broadshoulders. "What does it all add up to? Is he going to be our savior?" He turned to Maxim. "Can you take away my pain? Comrades, this man is so valuable I won't let him out of this cellar! My pains art unbearable, I can't take it any longer. Maybe he will really come up with some powder, eh? No, comrades, such a man must be guarded like a treasure."

"Then you're in favor of him," said the General.

"More than that. If anyone so much as lays a finger on him..."

"We get the point. What about you. Doctor?"

"I was in favor of him anyway. Cure or no cure." The doctor puffed on his pipe. "I have the same impression as Ordi. Although he's not yet one of us, he will be. It can't be otherwise. In any case he's no good to them. He's too clever."

"All right," said the General. "What about you. Hooper?"

"I'm in favor," said Memo. "He'll be useful."

"Well, then," said the General, "I'm in favor of him, too. I'm very happy for you, Mac. I'd hate to have to get rid of you." He looked at his watch. "Let's go," he said. "The radiation strike is about due, and Mac will have a chance to show us his skill. Forester, pour him some beer, and let's have some of your cheese, Hooper, get going and take over for Green. He

hasn't eaten since morning."

10.

The General held a final pre-operation briefing at the Castle of the Twin-headed Horse. It was the ruins of an old museum outside the city, destroyed during the war. Overgrown with ivy and grass, it was a wild, lonely place. City dwellers never visited it because of its proximity to a malarial swamp, and it had a reputation among the local population as a hideout for bandits and thieves, Maxim arrived on foot with Ordi; Green came on his motorcycle with Forester. The General and Memo-Hoofer were waiting for them in a drainage pipe that led directly into the swamp. The General was smoking, and Memo was frantically waving away the mosquitoes with a scented stick.

"Did you bring it?" he asked Forester.

"Of course." Forester removed a tube of insect repellent from his pocket.

Each person smeared himself, and the General opened the briefing.

Memo spread out a map and went over the entire operation again, even though everyone had already memorized it. Between 12:00 P.M. and 1:00 A.M. the group would creep up to the barbed-wire barrier from four directions and set linear charges. Forester and Memo would work alone, coming from the north and west, respectively. The General and Ordi would come together from the east. Maxim and Green would come from the south. The charges would detonate simultaneously at precisely 1:00 A.M., and the General, Green, Memo, and Forester would rush through the breach in the barbed wire and hurl grenades at the guardhouse. As soon as firing from the guardhouse ceased or slowed down. Maxim and Ordi would run over to the tower with magnetic mines and lay them, after tossing two more grenades at the guardhouse to be sure it was knocked out. Then they would light the fuses, collect the wounded -- only the wounded! -- and head east through the woods toward a village. Shorty would be waiting for them there with a motorcycle. The seriously wounded would be loaded onto the motorcycle; those with minor wounds would escape on foot. Forester's cabin would be the reassembly point. They were to wait there not more than two hours. After that they must leave the usual way. Any questions? No? That was that.

The General threw away a butt, slipped his hand under his shirt, and drew out a vial of yellow tablets. "Attention!" he said. "The staff has decided on a minor change in our plan. The starting time has been advanced to twenty-two hundred."

"Massaraksh!" said Memo. "What the hell now?"

"Don't interrupt!" said the General. "At precisely twenty-two hundred the evening radiation strike begins. A few seconds before, each of us will take two tablets. The rest of the operation is the same, with one exception:

Ordi and I will throw the grenades. Mac will have all the mines and will blow up the tower alone."

"How come?" said Forester as he studied the map. "It doesn't make sense: twenty-two hundred is radiation time. I'll be flat on my back and not even a jab with a bayonet could get me to my feet."

"Just a minute," said the General. "I'll repeat it again: at ten seconds beforebefore twenty-two hundred, everyone will take this painkiller. Do you understand. Forester? You will take it! So, by twenty-two hundred --"

"I know those pills," said Forester. "Two minutes of relief and that's it. Then you're completely tied up in knots. We know, we've tried them."

"These are different," explained the General patiently. "They are effective up to five minutes. We'll have time to make a dash for the guardhouse and throw our grenades. Mac will take care of the rest."

Silence fell. They were thinking. Forester, who was a little slow on the uptake, scratched his head. The idea was sinking in slowly. He stopped scratching, looked around with an expression, of sudden insight, brightened, and slapped his knees. Forester had taken a lot of hard knocks in life but still didn't understand what it was all about. He wanted nothing more than to be left in peace and to return to his family. He had spent the entire war in a the trenches, where he feared his corporal more than the atomic weapons. He had grown very fond of Maxim and was deeply grateful to him for curing an old leg injury. Since then he firmly believed that nothing could happen to him as long as Maxim was present. Maxim had slept in his cellar all month, and every evening before retiring Forester would tell him the same story, but each time with a different ending. Maxim could not imagine Forester taking part in any bloodshed, although he had heard that he was a skillful and ruthless fighter.

"The new plan has the following advantages," said the General. "First of all, they aren't expecting us: the element of surprise. Second, the first plan was made a long time ago and there's the danger that the enemy is aware of it. This time we're going to strike first. It increases our chances of success."

Green kept nodding approvingly, and his face glowed with malicious delight. He was a man who enjoyed taking risks; he loved the unexpected. His past was very shady: he had been a thief and a swindler; he had spent time in prison, made a daring escape, tried to return to his underworld pals, but times had changed. They wouldn't tolerate a degen and wanted to turn him in, but he beat them off and escaped again. He hid in the countryside until the late Gel Ketshef had found him. Green was clever, a romantic, believed the earth to be flat and the sky solid. It was precisely because of his ignorance and wild imagination that he was the only person on the inhabited island to suspect that Maxim was not from the mountains, not a strange quirk of nature, but a visitor from an impossible place, maybe from beyond the heavenly firmament. He had seen mountaineers -- in all shapes and sizes. Green never mentioned his thoughts directly to Maxim, but dropped hints and treated him with a deference that bordered on bootlicking. "You're going to

be the top man here," he would say. "And under you, I'll really show my stuff." How and where he planned to show his stuff was not at all clear, but one thing was certain: Green loved risky jobs and hated routine tasks. Maxim disliked his wild, primitive cruelty. He was an ape in barely domesticated form.

"I don't like this operation," said Memo morosely. "It's too risky. No preparation. No checking into anything. No, I don't like it."

Memo Gramenu, the Hoof of Death, was perpetually discontented and always appeared to be afraid of something. His past was kept secret because he had once held a very high position in the underground. He had fallen into the hands of the police and somehow survived. Crippled by torture, he was dragged out by his cellmates who had arranged an escape. Thereafter, in keeping with the rules of the underground, he was removed from his position, although he was unquestionably above suspicion. He was appointed Gel Ketshef's assistant. He had fought in attacks on towers, blown up patrol cars, pursued and shot the commander of a Legion brigade, and was known for his fanatic daring and excellent marksmanship.

On the eve of his appointment as leader of a group in some small town in the southwest. Gel's group was caught. Hooper remained above suspicion and was appointed leader of the group, but he was haunted by the belief that his comrades were uneasy about him. Actually his fears weren't justified, although they very well could have been. People who were too lucky were not especially liked in the underground. He was a silent but carping type, well versed in the art of conspiracy and a stickler for the rules, even the most trivial ones. Nothing, he felt, was worthwhile discussing except matters related to the underground; all his energies were devoted to the group. He saw to it that it was fully supplied with weapons, food, money, and safe meeting places. Even a motorcycle. Although Maxim sensed his dislike for him, he didn't understand the reason for Memo's attitude and preferred not to question him about it. Memo wasn't the kind of person one could have a frank conversation with. Perhaps Memo disliked him because Maxim was the only one to sense his constant fear. The others would never have believed that morose Hooper, one of the founders of the underground movement and a dedicated terrorist who treated staff representatives as his equals, could be afraid of anything.

"I can't understand the staff's reasoning," continued Memo, smearing another dose of repellent on his neck. "This isn't the first time I've heard about the plan. The staff has wanted to try it a hundred times but always rejected it because it means almost certain death. While there's no radiation, we still have a chance to get away in case we fail, and can live to strike somewhere else. But with this plan, the very first failure means we'll all be killed. It seems very strange to me that the staff can't see such an obvious fact."

"You're not quite right about one thing, Hooper," replied Ordi. "Now we have Mac. If anything goes wrong, he can pull us out and maybe even blow up the tower."

She smoked languidly, gazing into the distance at the swamp. Cool and calm, she was ready for anything. People were intimidated by her because she perceived them as more or less useful mechanisms of destruction. There was nothing shady or questionable about her past or present. She came from an educated family. Her father had died in the war; her mother was still employed as a teacher in Duck Village. Ordi, too, had worked as a teacher until she had been fired as a degen. She hid, tried to escape to Khonti, and finally met Gel, who was smuggling weapons. He turned her into a terrorist. Purely idealistic considerations had dictated her initial devotion to the cause: she fought for a just society where each individual would be free to think and do as he or she wished and was capable of doing.

Then, seven years ago, the police had tracked down Ordi and taken her child as hostage in an effort to force her to surrender her husband and herself. The underground staff would not permit her to do this because she knew too much. She had heard nothing more about her child and considered him dead, although deep down she didn't believe it. These last seven years she was driven primarily by hatred for the enemy. Her dream of a just society remained only a remote and faded ideal. Although she had loved him deeply, she accepted the loss of her husband with surprising serenity. Long before his arrest she had probably reconciled herself to the idea that she must not get attached to anything at all. Now, like Gel at his trial, she was a living corpse, but a very dangerous one.

"Mac is a greenhorn," said Memo. "How do we know he won't lose his head when he's alone? It's ridiculous to rely on this plan and reject an old reliable one just because we have this greenhorn. I said it once and I'll say it again: it's too risky."

"Drop it, Hooper," said Green. "It's our work. Old plan, new plan -- what's the difference? They're all risky. What else can you expect? We can't do our job without taking some risk, and these pills reduce it. When we hit them at ten o'clock, those guys under the tower won't know what happened. At ten they're probably drinking whiskey and singing their lungs out. That's when we strike. Maybe they haven't even loaded their guns; they're too drunk. Yes, I like the plan. Right, Mac?"

"I feel the same way," said Forester. "If this plan is a surprise to me, imagine what it'll be for the legionnaires. Green is right: they won't know what hit them. Besides, those pills will give us an extra five minutes. And before you know it, Mac will have that tower knocked out and everything will be great. Oh, it damn well will be great!" he said suddenly, as if struck by a new idea. "And we'll be the first guys in the underground to topple a tower. Just think how long it will take them to repair it! We'll live like human beings for at least a month without attacks from that son-of-a-bitch tower."

"Hooper, I'm afraid you misunderstood me," said the General. "Nothing has really changed in this plan. We're just launching a surprise attack, with additional help from Ordi. And our withdrawal will vary only slightly from the usual procedure."

"If you're worried that Mac won't be able to drag us all out of there,"

said Ordi, "don't forget, he'll have to get only one of us, at most two. He's strong enough to do it."

"Yes," agreed the General. "That's true."

The General was in love with Ordi. Only Maxim was aware of his feelings, but he realized that it was an old and hopeless love. It had begun when Gel was still alive, but now it seemed even more hopeless. He was not a real general. Before the war he had j been a worker on an assembly line, then was admitted to a school for junior officers, fought in the infantry, and finished the war as a captain. He knew Captain Chachu well and had old scores to settle with him -- there had been some sort of trouble right after the war. Anyway, he had been pursuing Chachu for a long time without success. Although he was attached to underground headquarters, he frequently fought in operations and was a good soldier and a competent commander. He enjoyed working in the underground but could scarcely imagine what the future would be like after victory. Actually, he really didn't believe in victory. A born soldier, he adjusted easily to any and all conditions and never looked beyond the next ten to twenty days. His ideas had been picked up haphazardly, a little here and a little there; from one-armed Vepr, from Ketshef, from headquarters. But the ideas hammered into him at the school for junior officers remained foremost in his consciousness. Expounding his theories, he would display a strange mixture of opinions: the power of the wealthy must be overthrown (this from Vepr, who Maxim assumed was some sort of socialist or communist); engineers and technicians should be our country's leaders (this from Ketshef); cities should be leveled and we should live in communion with nature (from some bucolist at headquarters). All this could be accomplished by absolute obedience to one's superiors and with considerably less discussion of abstract subjects.

Maxim had clashed with him twice. Why destroy towers, sacrificing courageous comrades, time, money, and weapons, contended Maxim, when the towers would be restored in ten days anyway? Everything would continue the same as before, except that the inhabitants of neighboring villages would be convinced that the degens were inhuman devils. The General could not explain clearly to Maxim why they engaged in these diversions against the towers. Either he was concealing something, or he himself did not understand why they were necessary. He would repeat the same phrases on each occasion: orders are not to be discussed; every attack on a tower was a strike against the enemy; people must not be prevented from fighting back or hatred would corrode them and they would have nothing to live for,

"We must find the Center!" Maxim would insist. "We must strike at the Center with all our forces at once! What kind of brains do they have at headquarters if they can't understand such a simple thing?"

"Headquarters knows what it's doing," the General would thunder. "In our situation, discipline comes first! We don't need any anarchists, thank you. Mac, everything has its time. You'll get your Center, too, if you live long enough." Still, the General respected Maxim and eagerly sought his help when radiation strikes caught him in Forester's cellar.

"I'm still against it," said Memo stubbornly. "Suppose they pin us down with their fire? Suppose we need six minutes rather than five to do the job? It's an insane plan."

"We'll be using linear charges for the first time," explained the General. "Using our old method of tearing through the barbed wire, the fate of the operation will be decided in three or four minutes. If we catch them by surprise, we'll have one or even two minutes to spare."

"Two minutes is a long time," said Forester. "In two minutes I could strangle them all with my bare hands. If I could get my hands on them."

"Yeah, if we could get our hands on them." Green grimaced. "Right, Mac?"

"Mac, don't you want to say anything?" asked the General.

"I already have. The new plan is better than the old one, but still poor. Let me do the job myself. Take the risk."

"We won't go into that." The General was irritated. "And that ends the matter. Do you have anything practical to add?"

"No," replied Maxim, regretting that he had reopened the discussion.

"Where did you get these new pills?" Memo asked suddenly.

"They are the same as the old ones," explained the General, "but Mac managed to make them a little more effective."

"Ah, yes, Mac..." Memo's disparaging tone made everyone feel uneasy. It conveyed the notion that here was a greenhorn, not really one of them, an alien who might even be setting them up.

"Yes, Mac," said the General sharply. "Enough talk. The order is from headquarters. Obey it, Hooper!"

"I am." Memo shrugged his shoulders. "I'm opposed to it, but I'm obeying it. What else can I do?"

Maxim looked at them sadly. A completely heterogeneous group. Under normal circumstances it would probably never occur to them to associate with each other. Ex-farmer, ex-criminal, ex-teacher. What they were about to undertake seemed so senseless; in a few hours most of them would be dead and nothing in their world would have changed. Those who survived would have, at best, a brief respite from those excruciating pains. But they would be wounded or exhausted from the ordeal. They would be pursued like dogs and would have to hide out in stifling holes. And the cycle would begin again. To act in concert with them was folly, but to abandon them would be unconscionable. He had to choose the former. Maybe that was the way you had to work here if you wanted to accomplish anything. You would have to endure folly, senseless bloodshed, even treachery. What miserable, stupid, evil people. But what could one expect from such a miserable, stupid, evil world? Folly springs from weakness, and weakness from ignorance, from ignorance of the correct path. It's impossible that the correct one can't be found. "I've tried one already, and it was wrong. It's evident that the one I'm about to take is wrong, too. Who knows, I might choose the wrong one again and again and find myself at a dead end. To whom am I trying to justify my actions? And why should I? I like these people and I can help them. For the present, that's all I need to know."

"We'll split up now," said the General. "Hooper, you go with Forester. Mac with Green. Ordi with me. At twenty-one hundred we meet at the boundary marker. Don't take the roads; go through the woods. Each of you is responsible for your partner, so stick together. Let's go now. Memo and Green first." He brushed the butts onto a sheet of paper, rolled it up, and put it in his pocket.

Forester rubbed his knees. "My bones ache. It's going to rain. That means a fine night for us -- good and dark."

11.

They had to crawl from the edge of the woods to the barbed wire. Green crawled ahead, dragging a pole with a linear charge and swearing at the barbs pricking his hands. Behind him crawled Maxim with a sack of magnetic mines. Clouds covered the sky, and it was drizzling. The grass was wet; within a few minutes they were drenched. Green followed his compass faithfully, never once straying off course. As the odor of damp rust drifted toward them. Maxim saw three rows of barbed wire and beyond them the dim outline of the tower's massive girders. Raising his head slightly, he could make out a squat triangular structure at the tower's base. The guardhouse. Three legionnaires were sitting there with a machine gun. Indistinguishable voices drifted through the patter of the rain; then a match was lit and the long gunport glowed with a faint yellow light.

Green, on all fours, shoved the pole under the barbed wire. "Ready," he whispered. "Back!" They crawled back ten paces and began to wait. Green looked at the luminous hands of his watch. The detonator was clenched in his fist. He was trembling. Maxim could hear his chattering teeth and labored breathing. Maxim was trembling, too. He put his hand into the sack and touched the mines; they felt rough and cold. As the rain grew heavier, all other sounds were drowned out. Green rose slightly on all fours and kept whispering something: he was either praying or cursing. "OK, you bastards!" he shouted suddenly as he made a sharp movement with his right hand. The click of the blasting cap was followed by a hissing, and up ahead a sheet of red flames spouted from the earth. And far to the left, another broad sheet leaped up, blasted their ears, and scattered hot wet earth, clumps of smoldering grass, and chunks of red-hot metal. Green darted forward. Suddenly a blinding light lit up the entire area. Maxim squinted. A cold shiver ran down his spine as a thought flashed through his brain: "We've had it." But there wasn't any shooting, and only rustling and hissing broke the silence.

When Maxim opened his eyes, he saw the gray guardhouse, a large gap in the barbed wire, and small solitary figures on the vast empty expanse surrounding the tower.

The figures were running as fast as they could toward the guardhouse,

silently, soundlessly, stumbling, falling, jumping up and running again. Then Maxim heard a plaintive groan: Green was sitting on the ground behind the barbed wire and rocking from side to side with his head in his hands. Maxim rushed to him and pulled his hands away from his face. His eyes bulged and saliva bubbled on his Ups. Still no firing. An eternity had passed, but the guardhouse was silent. Suddenly a familiar song rang out.

Maxim turned the slobbering Green on his back and fumbled in his pocket with his other hand. Lucky thing that the General had been overcautious and had given Maxim a supply of painkillers. He pried open Green's mouth and forced him to swallow them, Then he grabbed Green's submachine gun and turned around, looking for the source of the blinding light. Still no firing, and the solitary figures continued to run. One was now quite close to the guardhouse, another not far behind him, and a third, running from the right, suddenly flung his arms out as he fell and tumbled head over heels. "Oh, how the enemy weeps!" bellowed the singing voices. And the light beat down from above, from a height of some dozen meters, probably from the tower, which he couldn't make out now. There were five or six blinding blue and white disks. Maxim raised his gun, aimed at the disks, and pulled the trigger. The homemade weapon, small, awkward, and unfamiliar, trembled in his hands. As if in reply, red flashes sparked in the gunport. Suddenly Green tore the gun from Maxim's hands, rushed forward, stumbled, and fell.

Maxim got down and crawled back to his sack. Behind him guns crackled away rapidly. Then, at long last, a grenade exploded, then another, then two more simultaneously, and the machine gun fell silent. Only the submachine guns kept clattering. Explosions boomed again. An inhuman scream rent the air and it became quiet. Maxim grabbed the sack and ran. A column of smoke rose above the guardhouse. There was a smell of gunpowder, and the surrounding area was bright and deserted except for a dark round-shouldered figure trudging alongside the guardhouse, hugging the wall. The figure reached the gunport, tossed something into it, and dropped to the ground. The gunport glowed red. Then came a loud bang. And everything was quiet again.

Maxim stumbled and almost fell. After several more steps he stumbled again and noticed short stakes protruding from the ground. Triggers to booby traps concealed in the grass. "So that's it! God, am I a damn fool! If the General had let me have my way and I had gone out alone, I would have lost both legs and would be lying here as good as dead. Me and my big mouth!" Now the tower was quite close. He ran cautiously, avoiding booby traps.

When he reached one of the tower's enormous iron paws, he put down his sack of magnetic mines. Oh, how he would have loved to plaster one of those pancakes on this wet steel. But he still had the guardhouse to worry about. The steel door was slightly ajar, and lazy tongues of flame rolled out from behind it. A legionnaire lay on the steps -- it was all over with here. Maxim circled the guardhouse and found the General. He was sitting on the ground, leaning against the concrete wall; his eyes stared vacantly, and Maxim realized that the pills had lost their effect. He glanced around, lifted the General, and carried him away from the tower. About twenty steps

away, Ordi lay in the grass, with a grenade in her hand. She was lying face down, but Maxim could tell that she was dead. Searching further, he found Forester, also dead. Green, too. Who could he leave the General with?

Stunned by all the deaths, he walked around the field. Only minutes ago he had thought himself prepared to face this eventuality. Now he was no longer eager to return and blow up the tower, to finish the job they had started. First he must see how Memo was doing. He found him lying alongside the barbed wire. He had been wounded, probably had tried to crawl away and lost consciousness. Maxim placed the General beside him and ran toward the tower again. How strange to think that these two hundred miserable yards could be crossed so easily now.

He attached the mines to the tower's supports, two to each, to be doubly sure. Although he had time, he hurried; the General and Memo were losing blood. And probably, somewhere along the highway, trucks loaded with legionnaires were on their way. Guy had most likely been called out, and he and Pandi were now bouncing along the cobblestones. In neighboring villages, people were waking up: men were grabbing their guns; children were crying; and women were cursing the bloodthirsty spies who had deprived them of their sleep. He sensed the drizzly darkness stirring, springing to life, coming alive with danger.

Maxim set up the five-minute fuses, activated them, and started to run back to the General and Memo. Feeling that he had forgotten something, he paused, looked around, and remembered. Ordi. He returned to her, lifted her light body onto his shoulder, and broke into a run again toward the barbed wire. He headed for the north breach in the wire where the General and Memo were lying. Halting next to them, he turned around to look at the tower.

There it was. At long last the terrorists' senseless dream had been fulfilled. In rapid succession the mines detonated, and the tower's base was shrouded in smoke. The blinding lights went out and it suddenly became pitch dark. In the darkness the earth rumbled and leaped up again and again.

Maxim glanced at his watch. Seventeen past ten. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he could see the shattered barbed wire and the tower again. The tower lay to one side of the guardhouse, its girders spread out and twisted by the explosion.

"Who's there?" said the General hoarsely.

"It's Maxim." He bent over. "Time to leave. Where did you get hit? Can you walk?"

"Wait! What about the tower?"

"The tower's finished."

Ordi still lay over his shoulder. How could he break the news to the General?

"Impossible," said the General, rising slightly. "Massaraksh! The tower's really finished, eh?" He laughed and lay down in the grass.

"Listen, Mac, I'm kind of confused. What time is it?"

"Ten twenty."

"So, everything's all right. We've finished it off. Pine job, Mac. Wait

a minute -- who's that lying next to me?"

"Memo."

"He's breathing," said the General. "Hold on, who else is still alive? Who's that you've got there?"

"Ordi," said Maxim with difficulty.

The General said nothing for several seconds.

"Ordi," he repeated hesitantly and rose, swaying. "Ordi," he repeated again and placed his palm on her cheek.

They were silent for a while. Then Memo asked hoarsely:

"What time is it?"

"Ten twenty-two."

"Where are we?"

"We must leave now," said Maxim.

The General turned and walked through the gap in the barbed wire. He was very wobbly. Bending over. Maxim raised Memo, slung him across his other shoulder, and followed the General. When he had caught up with him, the General stopped.

"Only the wounded," he said.

"I can manage her, too."

"It's an order! Only the wounded."

Stretching out his arms and groaning with pain, he took Ordi's body from Maxim's shoulder. The weight was too much, and he placed her on the ground.

"Only the wounded." His voice sounded distant. "Let's go! On the double!"

"Where are we?" asked Memo. "Who's here? Where are we?"

"Hold onto my belt," Maxim instructed the General. They began to run.

Memo screamed and went limp. His head wobbled, his arms dangled, and his feet kept jabbing Maxim in the back. Gasping loudly and holding tightly onto Maxim's belt, the General followed close on his heels.

They ran into the woods. Wet branches lashed their faces. Dodging the trees rushing toward him and leaping over the stumps springing up from the ground was much tougher than Maxim had expected. He realized he was in rotten shape. And the air here was foul. And everything seemed all wrong. The whole mess seemed so unnecessary and senseless. In their wake lay a bloodstained trail of broken branches. He was sure that by this time the road had been cordoned off, that the bloodhounds were straining at their leashes, and that Captain Chachu, pistol in hand and barking orders, was running pigeon-toed along the road. Chachu would be the first to plunge into the woods. Behind them lay that idiotic tower, toppled. And incinerated legionnaires. And three dead comrades. With him now were two wounded men, half dead, with scarcely a chance of escaping alive. All for the sake of a tower, an idiotic, senseless, dirty, rusty tower. One of thousands like it.

"I'll never let myself get involved in anything so stupid again. I'll tell them no. All that blood for a pile of useless rusty steel; a young, foolish life sacrificed for rusty steel, and an old foolish life for the hope of living like a normal human being for a few days, and a love ended by

bullets. Listen, I'll say to them, you people keep talking about wanting to survive. If that's what you want, then why die, and die so cheaply? Massaraksh! Well, I won't let them die. I'm going to make sure they live; I'm going to teach them how to live! What a blockhead I am! How could I have done such a thing? How could I have let them do it?"

Dragging the General under the arms, and with Memo on his shoulder, he leaped onto a road and looked around. Shorty was running toward him, wet and frightened.

"Is that all?" He was horrified, and Maxim was thankful for his reaction.

They dragged the wounded to the motorcycle and stuffed Memo into the sidecar. Then Maxim set the General on the rear seat and fastened him to Shorty with a belt. It was quiet in the forest, but Maxim wasn't taken in by the stillness.

"Get going," he said. "Don't stop. Break through."

"I know," replied Shorty. "What about you?"

"I'll try to divert them to me. Don't worry. I'll get away."

"It's hopeless," said Shorty sadly. He pushed the starter and the motorcycle roared. "Did you blow up the tower?"

"Yes," replied Maxim. Shorty sped away.

Alone now. Maxim stood immobile for several seconds and then dashed back into the woods.

At the first clearing he tore off his jacket and flung it into the bushes. He returned to the road on the double, and ran as fast as he could toward the city. Then, halting, he unhooked the grenades from his belt, scattered them on the road, forced his way through the brush on the other side, trying to break as many branches as possible, and threw his handkerchief behind the bushes. Only then did he continue through the forest, trying to maintain a steady pace for another ten or fifteen miles.

As he ran he concentrated on holding his course to the south-west and avoiding obstacles. He crossed roads twice: first a deserted road, then Route 11, also deserted. Here he heard the barking of dogs for the first time. Unable to determine if they were bloodhounds, he decided to play it safe and make a large detour. Half an hour later he found himself jogging between warehouses in the city's freightyard.

Lights glowed, locomotives whistled, and people scurried. News of the incident had probably not reached here yet, but he had better stop running before he was taken for a thief. He slowed down to a walk, and when a heavy freight train plowed past him toward the city, he hopped into the first sand-filled car he spotted; he lay there until it reached a cement plant. Then he hopped off, shook off the sand, and considered his next move.

It would be pointless to make his way to Forester's house, although it was the only safe hideout in the vicinity. He could try to spend the night in Duck Village, but that would be dangerous. Captain Chachu knew that area well. Besides, the thought of appearing suddenly at old Illi's home and confronting her with the news of her daughter's death was too much for him.

Where else could he go? He entered a shabby little tavern frequented by workers, ate some sausages, drank some beer, and dozed off, leaning back against the wall. All the other customers were as grimy and tired as he; these were workers who had come off the night shift and missed the last streetcar home.

He dreamed about Rada. Guy was out on a raid. Good! Rada loved him, welcomed him warmly, let him change his clothes and wash. The civilian clothes Fank had given him were still there. Then, in the morning, he would head east where a second safe hiding place was located. At that point he woke up. Throwing a crumpled bill on the counter, he left.

It was a short safe walk to her place. The streets were deserted except for a man stationed at the entrance to the apartment house. The porter. He was asleep on his stool. Maxim tiptoed past him, walked upstairs, and rang the bell. It was quiet behind the door. Then he heard something stirring, footsteps, and the door opened. It was Rada.

She stifled a cry. Maxim hugged and kissed her. It was like coming home after having been given up for dead. He closed the door behind him and they entered the room quietly. Rada burst into tears. The room hadn't changed, except that his little sofa was missing. Guy, sitting on his bed in his pajamas, stared at Maxim, stunned and frightened. Several minutes passed as Maxim and Guy looked at each other and Rada cried.

"Massaraksh!" Guy said weakly. "You're alive!"

"Hello, Guy. I'm sorry you're home. I didn't want to get you into trouble. Say the word and I'll leave."

Rada clutched his arm.

"No, you won't! You're not going anywhere. Just let him try... if you go, I go, too!"

Guy flung off the blanket, hopped out of bed, and walked over to Maxim. He touched Maxim's shoulders and grimy hands, and wiped his own brow, smudging it.

"Impossible! I can't believe it! I give up," he said. "You're alive. Where did you come from? Rada, stop howling! Are you wounded? You look awful. And there's blood on you."

"It's not mine."

"I give up," repeated Guy. "But you really are alive! Rada, make some tea! No, wake up the old man and ask him for some whiskey."

"Be careful," warned Maxim. "No noise. They're looking for me."

"Who is? Why? What nonsense. Rada, let him change his clothes. Come, Mac, sit down. Or do you want to lie down? What happened? How come you're alive?"

Seating himself carefully on the edge of the chair, and placing his hands on his knees to avoid soiling anything, he looked at them, looked at them with affection, for what might be the last time. And with a certain curiosity, too. How would they react to what he was about to tell them?

"My friends. I'm a criminal now. I just blew up a tower."

He wasn't surprised that they understood him immediately, understood

what tower he was talking about, and did not question him about it. Rada only clenched her fists and could not tear her eyes from him. Guy grunted and, with a familiar gesture, ran his hands through his hair and looked away.

"You blockhead! So you decided to get revenge. Against who? Oh, Mac, you're still as crazy as ever. You're like a little kid. But remember, you didn't say anything and we didn't hear anything. I don't want to know anything more. Rada, make some tea. And no noise. We don't want to wake anyone. Take off your clothes, Mac. What a mess. Where the hell have you been?"

Maxim rose and undressed. He stripped off his dirty wet shirt (Guy saw the scars and swallowed hard) and pulled off his filthy boots and trousers. All his clothing was covered with dark stains.

"Well, that's a lot better." He sat down again. "Thanks, Guy. I won't be staying long. Only till morning, and then I'll leave."

"Did the porter see you?" "He was sleeping."

"Sleeping?" Guy was dubious. "Well, maybe he really was. He has to sleep sometime."

"What are you doing home?" asked Maxim.

"I'm on leave."

"What do you mean--on leave? The whole damn Legion is probably out there scouring the countryside."

"But I'm no longer a legionnaire." Guy smiled wryly. "Mac, I've been kicked out of the Legion. I'm just an ordinary army corporal now. I teach the country bumpkins how to tell their right foot from their left. Then off they go to the Khonti border, into the trenches. So, Mac, that's the way things are with me now."

"On account of me?"

"Well, yes."

They looked at each other and Guy looked away. Suddenly it struck Maxim that if Guy turned him in immediately, he could probably return to the Legion and the Officer's Independent Study Program. He also realized that such an idea never would have crossed his mind two months ago. He felt uneasy and wanted to leave, but Rada ordered him to go and wash. While he cleaned himself up, she prepared something to eat and a pot of tea. Guy sat in his usual place, propping up his downcast face between his fists. Apparently fearful of hearing something devastating, something that would pierce the last line of his defenses and sever the last link of his friendship with Mac, he asked no questions. Nor did Rada. Perhaps she was still too upset. But her eyes never left him, and she held on to his hand tightly, sobbing from time to time, afraid that he might suddenly disappear. Disappear forever. Realizing that time was growing short, Maxim pushed away his unfinished cup of tea and began to tell them his story.

He told them how a terrorist's mother had helped him after Captain Chachu had wounded him, how he met the degens, what kind of people they were and why, about the towers' real function, and what a cruel invention they were. He described what had happened during the night, how people had

charged a machine gun and died one after another, how the steel pile had collapsed, and how he had carried on his shoulder a dead woman whose child had been taken from her and whose husband had been executed.

Rada listened greedily. Eventually Guy displayed interest and began to ask questions. Sarcastic, hostile questions. Stupid and cruel questions. Maxim realized that Guy did not believe him, that he did not want to believe him, that it was all he could do to keep himself from interrupting. When Maxim finished, Guy said with a smirk: "They sure twisted you around their little finger."

Maxim looked at Rada, but she turned away. Biting her lip, she said hesitantly: "I don't know. Of course there might have been one tower like that. Mac, believe me, what you're telling me can't be true."

She spoke in a soft faltering voice, obviously trying not to hurt him. Guy suddenly flared up and insisted that the story about the towers' real function was a lot of nonsense, that Maxim had no idea of the number of towers throughout the country, how many were built each year, each day, and that it was insane to think that billions would be spent for the sole purpose of inflicting misery on a lousy bunch of freaks!

"Can you imagine how much money is spent on security alone?" he added after a brief pause.

"I've thought about it," said Maxim. "I'm sure it's not all that simple. But Khonti money has nothing to do with this. Listen, Guy, I saw for myself how their pains vanished when the tower collapsed. As far as the ABMs are concerned -- look, Guy, you have far too many towers for air defense. Your air space could be protected with many fewer towers. And why do you have ABMs on your southern border? Do you really believe that those wild degens have missiles?"

"There's a lot more to it than you think," replied Guy hostilely. "You don't know anything and you believe everything you're told. Pardon me for saying so, Mac, but if you weren't you... oh, we're all too gullible," he added bitterly.

Maxim didn't feel like arguing any longer. How were they getting along, he wanted to know. Where was Rada working? Why hadn't she enrolled in school? How was Uncle Kaan? And their neighbors? Rada grew animated and began to talk freely. Suddenly she broke off, rose, cleared away the dishes, and went into the kitchen. Guy ran his hands through his hair, frowned at the dark window, and finally summoned up the courage for a serious talk with Mac.

"Mac, we're very fond of you. I like you. Rada likes you, even though you cause a lot of trouble and things have gone badly for us because of you. Rada not only likes you, but -- well, she loves you. When you disappeared, she cried the whole time; in fact she even got sick the first week. She's an attractive, practical girl and has many admirers. I don't know how you feel about her, but let me give you a piece of advice. Forget all this nonsense. It's not for you; it will foul you up, destroy you, and you'll wreck the lives of many innocent people. And all for nothing. Go back to your

mountains, find your own people. Even if your head doesn't remember, your heart will tell you where your home is. No one will look for you there. You'll settle down and put your life in order. Then, come back for Rada and you'll both be very happy. Maybe by then we'll have finished off the Khontis. We'll clamp down even harder on Pandeya. Peace will come eventually and we'll begin to live like people."

If he were from the mountains, thought Maxim, he probably would take Guy's advice. He would return to his homeland and live peacefully with his young bride and forget about all the complicated problems here. Hell no, how could he forget about them? He knew what he would do: he would organize a defense system in his homeland that would be so effective that the Creators' officials wouldn't dare stick their noses over the frontier. And if the legionnaires dared to come near them, he would fight them on his own doorstep until he had wiped out every last one.

"The only problem is that I'm not from the mountains. So that takes care of that," thought Maxim. "My work is here, and I don't intend to sit around and do nothing. And Rada? Well, if she really cares for me, she'll understand. She must. Damn it, I don't want to think about it now. This is no time to get involved."

Something was happening in the building, but he was so caught up in his thoughts that he was not aware of it. Someone was walking along the corridor; someone was whispering behind the wall. Suddenly there was a commotion in the corridor and a desperate cry: "Mac!" It was Rada. Then, abrupt silence -- as if someone had put a hand over her mouth. He leaped to his feet and rushed to the window, but it was too late. The door flew open and Rada appeared in the doorway, her face drained white. There was a familiar barracks odor and the stomping of hobnailed boots. Rada was shoved into the room. Behind her crowded men in black jump suits. Pandi trained his gun on him, and Captain Chachu, his usual cunning and clever self, stood next to Rada. With one hand he held her by the shoulder; with the other he jammed his pistol into her back.

"Don't move!" he shouted. "One move and I shoot!"

Maxim froze. It was too late.

"Hold out your hands!" ordered Chachu. "Corporal, handcuffs! Two sets! Get a move on, massaraksh! ' ' "

Pandi, whom Maxim had tossed around many times during training exercises, approached him cautiously, unhooking a heavy chain from his belt. His ferocity had quickly changed to concern for his safety.

"Don't try anything," he warned Mac. "One wrong move and Captain Chachu will give it to your girlfriend."

He snapped the handcuffs on Maxim's wrists, then squatted and tied his feet. Maxim prepared to break out, but he had underestimated the captain, who refused to release Rada. Together they descended the stairs, together they climbed into the truck, with the captain's gun constantly at Rada's back. Guy, shackled, was shoved into the truck. Dawn was a long way off and it was still drizzling. The legionnaires plopped down on benches in the rear of the truck. At the entrance to the building, the porter stood leaning

against the door jamb, hands folded on his stomach. He was dozing.

12.

The state prosecutor leaned back in his chair, tossed some dried fruit into his mouth, chewed it, and drained a jigger of mineral water. Frowning and pressing his fingers against his tired eyes, he listened carefully. All was well for hundreds of yards around. A night rain drummed monotonously against the window; the screaming sirens, screeching brakes, and clanking elevators had quieted down for the night. The Department of Justice was deserted except for his assistant, who sat quietly in the reception room, anxiously awaiting orders. The prosecutor unwound slowly. Through the colored spots floating before his eyes, he glanced at the custom-made visitor's chair. "I must take that chair with me when I leave. The table, too; I'm used to it. Yes, it will be hard to leave. I've made a nice little nest for myself here. But why should I leave? How strange human nature is: confronted with a ladder, man feels compelled to climb to the very top. It's cold and drafty up there -- bad for the health -- and a fall can be fatal. The rungs are slippery. It's a funny thing: you're aware of the dangers, and you're practically ready to drop from exhaustion, yet you keep fighting your way up. Regardless of the situation, you keep climbing; contrary to advice, you keep climbing; despite the resistance of your enemies, you keep climbing; against your better instincts, your common sense, your premonitions, you climb, climb, climb. If you don't keep climbing, you fall to the bottom. That's for sure. But if you do keep climbing, you fall anyway."

His thoughts were interrupted by the beeping of the intercom. Annoyed, he picked up the receiver.

"What's the matter? I'm busy."

"Your honor," said his assistant, "a party by the name of Strannik is on your personal line and insists on speaking with you."

"Strannik?" The prosecutor perked up. "Put him on."

A click. Then a familiar voice with a Pandeyan accent, carefully articulating each word.

"Smart? Hello, how are you? Are you very busy?"

"For you, no."

"I must talk with you."

"When?"

"Now, if possible."

"I'm at your service," said the prosecutor. "Come on over."

"I'll be there in ten or fifteen minutes. Wait for me."

The prosecutor hung up and sat immobile for some time, biting his lower lip. "So, my friend, you've turned up out of the blue again. Massaraksh, I've thrown away so much money on that man, more than on all the others put

together, and I know no more about him than anyone else. A dangerous character. Unpredictable. Ruined my evening." The prosecutor looked angrily at the papers lying on his desk, then shoved them into a pile and stuffed them into a drawer. "How long has he been here? Yes, two months. As usual. Disappears God knows where, no news for two months, then pops up like a jack-in-the-box. No, I'll have to do something about that man. We can't go on this way. I wonder what he wants from me? I wonder what's happened in those two months? Crafty was dumped. But I doubt that he was involved. True, he hated Crafty. But he hates everyone. Nothing has happened here that would concern him, and he certainly wouldn't come to see me about such nonsense. He'd go directly to Chancellor or Baron. Maybe he's run into something interesting and wants to make a deal? God forbid! If I were in his place, I wouldn't make any deals with anyone. Maybe he's coming about the trial? No, the trial has nothing to do with it. Why speculate? I'll just play it by ear."

Sliding out his secret drawer, he activated all the tape recorders and hidden cameras. "We'll preserve this scene for posterity. Well, Strannik, where the hell are you?" His nerves started to act up in anticipation of his visitor. To calm himself, he tossed more fruit into his mouth, chewed slowly, closed his eyes, and began to count. As he reached seven hundred, the door opened.

There he was. That gangling, insolent cynic. Pushing the assistant aside, he strode into the room. Strannik, the Creators' fair-haired boy. Despised and adored, he had managed to stay on top. The prosecutor rose to meet his visitor, around-shouldered man with round green eyes and a head as bald as an egg. He was wearing the same ridiculous jacket he always wore. A sorcerer, ruler of destinies, devourer of billions. With him you went straight to the point. No mincing of words.

"Greetings, Strannik. Come to tell me of your triumphs?"

"What triumphs?" Strannik dropped into a chair that forced him to draw up his knees awkwardly. "Massaraksh, I always forget about this diabolical device of yours. When will you stop insulting your visitors?"

"A visitor should be uncomfortable and should feel ridiculous. Otherwise these sessions can be very dull. For example, the sight of you right now really cheers me up."

"Ah, yes, I know; you have such a sunny personality. Only your sense of humor is not very exacting. By the way, why not make yourself comfortable? Have a seat."

The prosecutor realized that he was still standing and that, as usual, Strannik had evened the score quickly. The prosecutor sat down, settled himself comfortably, and sipped some mineral water.

"Well?" he said.

Strannik came right to the point.

"You have a man I need. By the name of Mac Sim. You had him sent off for reeducation. Remember?"

"No, I don't." The prosecutor was sincere, but somewhat disappointed. "When did I send him? What for?"

"Recently. For blowing up the tower."

"Ah, yes, I remember the case. Well, what about it?"

"That's all there is to it. I need him."

"Just a minute." The prosecutor was annoyed. "Someone else tried the case. You can't expect me to remember every convict."

"I thought they were all your people."

"Only one of mine was there. The rest were genuine. What did you say his name was?"

"Mac Sim."

"Mac Sim," repeated the prosecutor. "Ah, that mountaineer spy. I remember. Yes, there was a strange story about him. He was shot, but it didn't finish him off."

"Apparently not."

"A man of unusual strength. Yes, there was a report on him, Why do you need him?"

"The man is a mutant," replied Strannik. "He has interesting mentograms and I need him for my work."

"Are you planning to dissect him?"

"Possibly. My people spotted him a long time ago, when he was being used at the Special Studio. But he escaped."

Extremely disappointed, the prosecutor stuffed his mouth with fruit.

"All right. By the way, how are things going?"

"Splendidly, as usual. I hear the same about you. You really did a job on Puppet. My congratulations. So, when do I get my Mac?"

"I'll send a dispatch tomorrow. He'll be delivered to you in five to seven days."

"Gratis?"

"Well, my friend, what do you have to interest me?"

"The very first protective helmet."

The prosecutor laughed.

"And the World Light in the bargain," he said. "By the way, keep this in mind: it's not your first helmet I need. I need the only one. Incidentally, is it true that your bunch was assigned to develop a directional radiation emitter?"

"Maybe," replied Strannik.

"Listen, what the hell do we need it for? We have enough problems without it. You could sit on it, couldn't you?"

Strannik grinned. "Are you afraid. Smart?"

"Yes, I am. Aren't you? Or maybe you think your great friendship with the Count will last forever? He'll do you in with your own emitter."

Strannik grinned again. "You win. It's a deal." He rose. "I'm on my way to Chancellor. Any message for him?"

"Chancellor is angry with me," said the prosecutor. "It's damned unpleasant for me."

"All right. I'll tell him that."

"Joking aside, if you could put in a word for me..."

"You're a clever chap," said Strannik, parodying Chancellor. "I'll try."

"Is he at least satisfied with the trial?"

"How should I know? I just got here."

"Try to find out. And about your -- what's his name? Give it to me again, I'll make a note of it."

"Mac Sim."

"Fine. I'll take care of it tomorrow."

"Good luck," said Strannik, and he left.

The prosecutor frowned as he watched him disappear through the door. "Yes, one can only envy a man like that. He really has it made. Our defense against radiation rests in his hands. Too late (or regrets. But it might be a good idea to get close to him. But how? He doesn't need anything. He's so damn important that we're all totally dependent on him; we all address our prayers to him. I'd like to get a man like that by the throat! If only there was something important he wanted. All he needs is some lousy convict, Oh, yes, very valuable! Sure, interesting mentograms. But I wonder -- that convict is from the mountains, and lately Chancellor has been referring to the mountains frequently. Maybe I should look into this. But Chancellor is Chancellor. Massaraksh, I'm too damn tired, can't do another stitch of work today."

He spoke into the intercom: "Kokh, what do you have on the convict Sim?" He suddenly remembered: "I think you compiled a dossier."

"Yes, your honor. I had the honor of bringing the case to your attention."

"Bring it here. And more water, too."

No sooner had he switched off the intercom than his assistant glided unobtrusively through the doorway. A thick folder appeared before him; a glass tinkled softly; water gurgled; and a filled glass stood alongside the folder.

"'Abstract of the Mac Sim Case (Maxim Kammerer). Prepared by Assistant Kokh.' Pretty thick. Not a bad abstract." He opened the folder and removed the first sheaf of papers.

Captain Tolot's testimony. Defendant Gaal's testimony. A rough sketch of the border region beyond the Blue Snake River. "He was wearing no other clothing. His speech appeared to be coherent but was absolutely incomprehensible. An unsuccessful attempt was made to communicate with him in Khonti." He was wearing no other clothing. His speech appeared to be coherent but was absolutely incomprehensible. An unsuccessful attempt was made to communicate with him in Khonti. Oh, those stupid border captains! Imagine, a Khonti spy on the southern border! *The prisoner's drawings were very artistic.* The prisoner's drawings were very artistic. Well, there're plenty of amazing things beyond the Blue Snake. Unfortunately. The facts surrounding this fellow's appearance don't seem especially unusual, judging from what we know about that region. Although, of course... well, we'll see."

The prosecutor put aside the first sheaf, selected two dried berries,

and looked at the next page. *"The conclusions of a special commission from the Textile and Garment Institute. We, the undersigned... using all known methods of analysis, tested the object of clothing delivered to us by the Department of Justice. "The conclusions of a special commission from the Textile and Garment Institute. We, the undersigned... using all known methods of analysis, tested the object of clothing delivered to us by the Department of Justice. -- What nonsense! -- and arrived at the following conclusion: (1) The specified object is a pair of trousers, one quarter of standard length, that could be worn by either men or women; (2) The style does not conform to any known standard pattern and cannot, therefore, properly be called a style, as the trousers were not sewn or made by any known method; (3) The trousers are made of a resilient silvery cloth that cannot properly be called cloth, as microscopic analysis failed to reveal its structure. The material is fire-resistant, wrinkle-resistant, and unusually tear-resistant. Chemical analysis...and arrived at the following conclusion: (1) The specified object is a pair of trousers, one quarter of standard length, that could be worn by either men or women; (2) The style does not conform to any known standard pattern and cannot, therefore, properly be called a style, as the trousers were not sewn or made by any known method; (3) The trousers are made of a resilient silvery cloth that cannot properly be called cloth, as microscopic analysis failed to reveal its structure. The material is fire-resistant, wrinkle-resistant, and unusually tear-resistant. Chemical analysis... .H'm, strange trousers. We must find out what they are. I'll have to make a note of this."* (He wrote in the margin: *"Kokh. Why no accompanying explanation? Where do the trousers come from?"*) *"So. The technology is unknown in ourThe technology is unknown in our country as well as in other civilized nations (according to prewar data)country as well as in other civilized nations (according to prewar data)."*

The prosecutor put aside the conclusion. *"That's enough about trousers. Trousers are trousers. Let's see what else we have here. Record of Medical Examination. Record of Medical Examination. Interesting. What a low blood pressure! And his lungs! Oh, what's this? Traces of four lethal wounds. Peculiar, sounds like mysticism. Aha! See testimony of witness Chachu and defendant Gaal. See testimony of witness Chachu and defendant Gaal. But, seven bullets! Some discrepancy here: Chachu testifies that he used the gun in self-defense, but Gaal states that Sim only wanted to take away Chachu's pistol. Well, that's none of my business. Two bullets in the liver -- too much for a normal man. Twists coins, can run with a man on his shoulders. Aha, I've gone over this already. I remember thinking when I read it that this fellow was abnormally strong and that such types are usually stupid. That's as far as I got. What's this? Ah, my old friend. Abstract from Report of Agent 711. Sees without difficulty on a rainy night (can even read) and in complete darkness (distinguishes objects, sees facial expressions up to ten yards away); possesses a very keen sense of smell and taste: identified individuals in a group by odor; to settle a dispute, identified drinks in*

tightly corked containers; can orient himself anywhere in the world without a compass; can determine exact time without a watch... The following incident occurred: a precooked fish was purchased which he forbade us to eat, claiming it to be radioactive. He himself ate the fish, stating that it was not dangerous for him. He did not become ill, although radiation exceeded three times the permissible level (almost seventy-seven units)."

Abstract from Report of Agent 711. Sees without difficulty on a rainy night (can even read) and in complete darkness (distinguishes objects, sees facial expressions up to ten yards away); possesses a very keen sense of smell and taste: identified individuals in a group by odor; to settle a dispute, identified drinks in tightly corked containers; can orient himself anywhere in the world without a compass; can determine exact time without a watch... The following incident occurred: a precooked fish was purchased which he forbade us to eat, claiming it to be radioactive. He himself ate the fish, stating that it was not dangerous for him. He did not become ill, although radiation exceeded three times the permissible level (almost seventy-seven units)."

The prosecutor leaned back in his chair. "Well, this is just too much to swallow. Maybe he's even immortal? Yes, Strannik must be interested in all this. Let's see what else we have here. Ah, here's an important one. *Conclusion of a Special Commission of the Department of Public Health. Subject: Mac Sim. No reaction to white radiation. No contraindications to service in the special forces.* Conclusion of a Special Commission of the Department of Public Health. Subject: Mac Sim. No reaction to white radiation. No contraindications to service in the special forces. That was when he was recruited into the Legion. White radiation, massaraksh. Butchers, damn them! Here's their special testimony for the inquiry: *Although subject was tested with white radiation of varying intensities, up to the maximum, there was no reaction. Zero reaction in both senses to A-radiation. Zero reaction to B-radiation. Remarks: We consider it our duty to add that the subject (Mac Sim, approximately twenty years old) presents a danger-to society in view of potential genetic consequences. Complete sterilization or destruction is recommended.* Although subject was tested with white radiation of varying intensities, up to the maximum, there was no reaction. Zero reaction in both senses to A-radiation. Zero reaction to B-radiation. Remarks: We consider it our duty to add that the subject (Mac Sim, approximately twenty years old) presents a danger-to society in view of potential genetic consequences. Complete sterilization or destruction is recommended. Oh, ho! These guys don't fool around. Who's in that department now? Ah, yes, Lover. I remember Stallion telling me a good one about him. Massaraksh, can't remember it. Ah, I'm glad I'm alone now. I'll have another berry and a sip of water. Ugh, what terrible stuff. But they say it helps. Let's see what's next.

"So he's been there, there, too! Well, well. Probably zero reaction again. *When subjected to forced measures, said subject Sim did not give testimony. In keeping with Paragraph 12, relative to avoiding visible physical injury to subjects under investigation who are scheduled to appear*

at an open trial, only the following methods were used: (A) Deep-needle surgery, penetrating ganglions. Reaction: paradoxical: subject fell asleep. (B) Chemical treatment of ganglions with alkaloids and alkalis. Same reaction. (C) Light chamber. No reaction. Subject expressed surprise. (D) Steam chamber. Weight loss without unpleasant sensations. Forced measures were then terminated. When subjected to forced measures, said subject Sim did not give testimony. In keeping with Paragraph 12, relative to avoiding visible physical injury to subjects under investigation who are scheduled to appear at an open trial, only the following methods were used: (A) Deep-needle surgery, penetrating ganglions. Reaction: paradoxical: subject fell asleep. (B) Chemical treatment of ganglions with alkaloids and alkalis. Same reaction. (C) Light chamber. No reaction. Subject expressed surprise. (D) Steam chamber. Weight loss without unpleasant sensations. Forced measures were then terminated. Br-r-r, what a document! Yes, Strannik is right: the man must be a mutant. A normal man wouldn't react that way. Yes, I've heard that successful mutations do occur, although rarely. That explains everything -- except those pants. As far as I know, pants don't mutate."

He looked at the next page, which proved to be interesting: it was the testimony of the Special Studio's director. "An idiotic institution. They record the ravings of various psychos for the entertainment of our most esteemed public. I remember... the studio was the brainchild of Kalu Swindler, who was a little crazy himself. Swindler is long since gone, but his wild idea lives on. The director's testimony indicates that Sim was an ideal subject and it would be extremely desirable to have him back. Oh, what's this? Transferred to the custody of the Department of Special Research in keeping with order number such-and-such on such-and-such date. Ah, here it is -- the order, signed by Fank. H'm, I smell Strannik's hand in this. No, let's not jump to conclusions." He counted to thirty to calm himself, then picked up the next thick sheaf of papers: *Abstract From the Records of the Special Ethnolinguistic Commission's Inquiry Into the Possible Mountaineer Origin of M. Sim.*

Abstract From the Records of the Special Ethnolinguistic Commission's Inquiry Into the Possible Mountaineer Origin of M. Sim.

Still thinking about Fank and Strannik, he began to read mechanically. Suddenly he found himself absorbed in the material. It was an intriguing study. All reports, evidence, and testimony related in any way whatsoever to the question of Mac Sim's origin had been brought together and discussed: anthropological, ethnographic, and linguistic data, and analysis of that data; the results of radiation phonograms, mentograms, and the subject's own drawings. It read like a novel, although the conclusions were very meager and cautious. The commission did not relate M. Sim to any known ethnic group on the continent. (Attached was a separate opinion, written by the eminent paleoanthropologist Shapshu, who saw in the subject's cranium a remarkable resemblance to the fossilized cranium of so-called ancient man. The latter had inhabited the Archipelago more than fifty thousand years ago.) The

commission confirmed the subject's complete psychological normality at the present moment but assumed that he had recently suffered a form of amnesia in conjunction with considerable displacement of real memory by a false one. The commission conducted a linguistic analysis of the phonograms preserved in the Special Studio's archives and came to the conclusion that the language spoken by the subject at that time could not belong to any known group of modern or dead languages. Therefore, the commission believed the language could have been a product of the subject's imagination (fish language), particularly in view of the fact that the subject, according to his own statement, no longer remembered this language.

The commission refrained from drawing conclusions but was inclined to believe that in Mac Sim it was dealing with a mutant of a previously unknown type. "Clever ideas come to clever minds at the same time," thought the prosecutor enviously. He rapidly scanned the special opinion of Professor Porru, a member of the commission. Himself a mountaineer by birth, the professor reminded the commission of the existence of a semilegendary land, Zartak, in the mountains' remote reaches. It was inhabited by a tribe, the Birdcatchers, who still had not received the attention of anthropologists. Mountain peoples in contact with civilization claimed that the tribe was skilled in the magical arts and could fly without mechanical aids. According to stories he had heard, the Birdcatchers were unusually tall, possessed extraordinary physical strength and endurance, and had brownish-gold skin. All these facts coincided with the subject's physical features. The prosecutor toyed with his pencil above Professor Porru's statement. Then he put the pencil aside and said aloud: "I suppose those pants would fit in under this opinion. Fire-resistant pants."

He studied the next page: "*Abstract of the Trial Stenogram*. Abstract of the Trial Stenogram. H'm, what's all this for?"

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: You wouldn't deny that you are an educated man?

DEFENDANT: I am educated, but I have a very poor understanding of history, sociology, and economics.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Don't be modest. Are you familiar with this book?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Have you read it?

DEFENDANT: Of course.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Why, while in prison, under surveillance, did you read the monograph *Tensor Calculation and Modern Physics*?

Tensor Calculation and Modern Physics?

DEFENDANT: I don't understand your question. For entertainment, I suppose. It has some very imaginative pages.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: I think it is obvious to the Court that only a very educated man would read such a highly specialized work for entertainment and pleasure.

"What kind of rubbish is this? Why palm off this junk on me? Now, what else have we here?"

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Do you know what funds the All-Powerful Creators allocate to fight juvenile crime?

DEFENDANT: What is juvenile crime? Crimes committed against children?

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: No. Crimes committed by children.

DEFENDANT: I don't understand. Children cannot commit crimes.

"Amusing. Now, let's see what we have at the end."

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: I hope I have succeeded in demonstrating to the Court my client's naiveté, which amounts to downright imbecility. The ideas of juvenile delinquency, philanthropy, and welfare assistance are completely unknown to him.

The prosecutor smiled and put aside the page. "Yes, I see, Really a strange combination: mathematics and physics for pleasure, but doesn't know the simplest things. Exactly like an eccentric professor from some trashy novel."

The prosecutor studied several more pages. "Mac, I can't understand why you are so attached to this -- what's her name? -- Rada Gaal. You aren't on intimate terms with her; you owe her nothing; you have nothing in common with her. That idiotic prosecuting attorney is trying without success to implicate her in the underground. But, Mac, my boy, one gets the impression that if she's kept within gunsight, you can be compelled to do anything we damn please. For us that's very useful, but most awkward for you. What all this testimony amounts to is that you are a slave to your word and an inflexible person. You'll never make a politician. And why should you? Photographs. You're quite handsome. Nice face -- very, very nice. Your eyes are rather odd. Where were these taken? On the defendants' bench. Well, look at that! Fresh and fit, cheerful, clear-eyed, relaxed. Where did you learn such poise? Such posture? That defendants' bench is no more comfortable than the visitor's chair in my office; impossible to relax on it. But all this is trivial. There's got to be something bigger here."

The prosecutor left his desk and paced the floor. Something tantalizing tickled his brain, something prodded and excited him. "Damn it, I've stumbled on something in that folder. Something important, something very, very important. Fank? Yes, that's important because Strannik uses Fank only for the most important matters. But Fank just confirms my intuition. Now, what is the essential thing here? The pants? Nonsense. Ah, I know what it is. But it's not in the folder." He switched on the intercom.

"Kokh, give me the details of the attack on the convoy."

"Fourteen days ago," began his assistant's rustling voice, as if he were reading from a prepared text, "at eighteen hours and thirty-three minutes, an armed attack was made on police cars transporting defendants in Case Six-nine-eight-one-eight-four from the courtroom to the city jail. The attack was repulsed, and one of the attackers was badly wounded in the crossfire and never regained consciousness. The body was not identified. The

investigation has been closed."

"Whose work was this attack?"

"That has not been clarified, Your Honor. The official underground had nothing to do with it."

"Any ideas?"

"It could have been the work of terrorists attempting to free defendant Dek Pottu, alias the General, known for his close connections with the left wing."

The prosecutor slammed down the receiver. Maybe it was true, and maybe it wasn't. Well, we'll go through the folder again. Southern border, idiot captain. Trousers. Escapes, carrying man on shoulders. Radioactive fish -- seventy-seven units. Reaction to A-radiation. Chemical treatment of ganglions. Wait! Reaction to A-radiation: "Zero reaction to A-radiation in both senses." Zero, in both senses. The prosecutor pressed his hand to his chest. Idiot! *Zero in both senses!*

Zero in both senses!

He grabbed the receiver again.

"Kokh! Prepare a special messenger and security guard at once. A private train to the south. No! Use my electric truck. Massaraksh!" He thrust his hand into a drawer and switched off all the recording devices. "Make it snappy!"

Still pressing his left hand to his chest, he took out a personal order form from the desk and wrote rapidly but carefully: "State business. Top secret. To the Commanding General of the Special Southern District. You are personally responsible for the immediate execution of this order. Transfer to the custody of the bearer, convict Mac Sim, Case 6983. From the moment of transfer, consider rehab Mac Sim missing, and retain appropriate supportive documentation in your files. By order of the State Prosecutor."

He grabbed another form: "Order. I hereby order all personnel in the military, civil, and railroad administrations to render assistance to the bearer of this order, the State Prosecutor's special courier and security guard, according to category EXTRA. By order of the State Prosecutor."

He drained his glass and filled it again. Slowly, deliberating over each word, he wrote on a third form: "Dear Strannik: Sorry to give you some bad news. We have just been informed that the material you requested is missing, as frequently happens in the southern jungles."

PART FOUR: PRISONER

13.

The first shot shattered the caterpillar track, and for the first time in over twenty years the monster abandoned its well-traveled course. Overturning chunks of concrete, it tore into a grove and turned slowly in place. Its broad forehead bored into the underbrush and, with a crunch, shoved aside the trembling trees.

When the immense, muddy rear end tipped up, its iron plating dangling on rusty rivets, Zef landed an explosive charge in the engine with a clean shot aimed to avoid the reactor. It tore into the tank's muscles, sinews, and nervous system; the machine gasped metallically, puffed white-hot smoke from its joints, and stopped forever. But something still lived within its evil armored heart; some surviving nerves continued to send out random signals; its emergency systems still switched themselves on and off, murmuring and spewing foam; and it shuddered sluggishly, clawing the earth with its surviving tread. Menacingly and senselessly, like the belly of a crushed wasp, the latticed tube of the rocket launcher rose and fell above the expiring dragon. Zef watched its death throes for several seconds, then turned and went into the woods, dragging a grenade thrower by its strap. Maxim and Vepr followed. When they reached a quiet clearing that Zef had undoubtedly noted on their way, they dropped down on the grass.

"Cigarette break," said Zef.

He rolled a cigarette for one-armed Vepr, gave him a light, and lit Ms own. Resting his chin on his hands, Maxim lay on the ground and watched the dying iron dragon through the sparse woods. Its drive wheels jangled mournfully. With a whistle, it shot streams of radioactive steam from its shattered guts.

"Now, that's the way to do it, and the only way to do it," declared Zef didactically. "If you don't, I'll yank your ears off."

"Why?" asked Maxim. "I wanted to stop it."

"Because," replied Zef, "a grenade can ricochet into the rocket launcher. Then we'd all be kaput."

"I aimed at the tread."

"You have to aim at the rear end." Zef inhaled. "And, in general, while you're still new at this stuff, don't ever make the first move. Unless I ask you to. Is that clear?"

"It is."

Neither Zef's fine points of instruction nor Zef himself interested Maxim. Vepr did. But Vepr, resting his artificial arm on the dilapidated casing of the mine detector, maintained his usual indifferent silence. Nothing had changed, and Mac was restless.

A week ago, when the new prisoners formed in front of the barracks, Zef had gone up to Maxim and selected him for Ms 104th Sappers Unit. Maxim was delighted. Not only did he recognize the flaming red beard and square stocky figure at once, but Zef recognized him, too, in that suffocating crowd of convicts in checkered prison uniforms, where no one gave a damn about anyone

else.

Besides, Maxim had every reason to believe that Allu Zef, the once eminent psychiatrist and an educated, intelligent man, unlike the half-criminal rabble jammed into the train's prison car, was connected somehow with the underground. And when Zef led him to the barracks and showed him his bunk next to one-armed Vepr, Maxim thought that his future had finally taken shape. But he soon learned he was wrong: Vepr didn't want to talk. He listened that night with a vacant expression to Maxim's rapidly whispered story of the group's fate, the tower's destruction, and the trial. "Sometimes it turns out differently," he muttered through a yawn and then turned over and went to sleep. Maxim felt let down.

Then Zef climbed onto his bunk. "Stuffed myself to the gills," he announced to Maxim, and without beating around the bush began to badger him crudely and brazenly for names and information. Perhaps he had once been an eminent scientist, an educated man; perhaps he had even been a member of the underground; but that night he impressed Mac as being a well-fed provocateur who, having nothing better to do before going to sleep, had decided to harass a dumb newcomer. With some difficulty. Maxim managed to get rid of him, and long after he heard Zef snoring healthily, he lay awake recalling the many times he had been deceived by people and events on this planet.

His nerves were spent. He recalled the trial, obviously prepared well before the group had even received the order to attack the tower; he recalled the written reports of some filthy informer who knew everything about the group, and, perhaps, had been a member of it; and he recalled the film taken from the tower during the attack, and his shame when he recognized himself on the screen: there he was, firing away with his submachine gun at the searchlights -- more precisely, at the stagelights illuminating the actors of that horrifying play. In the tightly sealed barracks -- suffocating, stinking, and crawling with vermin -- rehabs raved in their sleep, while in a far corner, in the light of a single candle, other prisoners played cards and shouted hoarsely at each other.

The following day he felt let down again: this time by the forest. It was impossible to take a step without running into steel: dead steel, rusted through; lurking steel, ready to Mil at any moment; invisible steel, aiming at you; mobile steel, blindly plowing up the remains of roads. The soil and grass reeked of rust, and radioactive puddles had accumulated at the bottoms of hollows; birds didn't sing but wailed hoarsely, as if in their death throes. There were no animals, nor was there woodland stillness. To the left and right explosions pounded and thundered. Gray cinders eddied among the branches, and the roar of worn engines drifted through the forests on gusts of wind.

And so it had gone: day -- night, day -- night. In the daytime they worked in the forest, which was not really a forest but an old fortified region. It was crawling with military devices, armored cars, ballistic missiles, rockets on caterpillar treads, flamethrowers, and poison-gas ejectors, all automatic and self-propelled. And all this was still very much alive twenty years after the war; everything continued to live its useless

mechanical life -- to aim, to sight, to belch lead, fire, and death. All this had to be crushed, blown up, and demolished to clear a road for the construction of new radiation towers. At night Vepr maintained his usual silence, and Zef harassed Maxim with questions, alternating between a directness bordering on the absurd and a surprising cunning and agility. And there was the almost inedible food, the prisoners' strange melodies, and the beatings by the legionnaires. And twice daily everyone in the barracks and the forest writhed in pain under the radiation emitter's blows. Bodies of escapees swung in the wind. Day -- night, day -- night. Auschwitz. Death camp. Fascism.

"Why did you want to stop the tank?" asked Vepr suddenly, Maxim sat up quickly. This was the first question Vepr had ever asked him.

"I wanted to examine its construction."

"Planning to escape?"

Maxim cast a sidelong glance at Zef. "Of course not. I'm just curious."

"Why are you so interested in a military weapon?" He spoke as if the red-bearded provocateur weren't present.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not sure myself. Are there many like that one?"

"There are plenty of machines -- and always plenty of fools, too," intruded Zef. "You can't imagine how many times the damn fools have tried. They climb in, fiddle around a while, and finally give up. One damn fool, something like you, blew himself up."

"Don't worry, I won't blow myself up," said Maxim coldly. "Those machines aren't that complicated."

"But why are you so interested in them anyway?" asked Vepr. Lying on his back, he smoked, holding the cigarette between his artificial fingers. "Suppose you fix up one. Then what?"

"He'll break through across the bridge." Zef guffawed.

"And why not?" asked Maxim. He was completely baffled by this man: how should he behave toward him? Maybe Zef wasn't a provocateur after all. Massaraksh, why were they suddenly giving him a hard time?

"You'll never make it to the bridge," said Vepr. "They'll riddle you like a piece of cheese. And if you do make it, you'll find the bridge drawn up."

"And along the bottom of the river?"

"The river is radioactive." Zef spat. "If it were clean, you wouldn't need tanks to get across. Right now you could swim across anywhere: the banks aren't guarded." He spat again. "If it were clean, it would be guarded. Young man, forget your wild ideas. You're here to stay. Settle down, and get the hang of things. When you do, you'll find enough to keep you busy. If you don't listen to your elders, you won't even last until tomorrow."

"It wouldn't be difficult to escape," said Maxim. "I could do it right now."

"You're really something, aren't you?"

"Are you going to keep kidding around, or be serious about it?" Maxim

directed his remark to Vepr. Zef interrupted him again.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do." Zef rose. "I'm going to meet today's quota. Or else we get no chow. Let's go!"

He walked ahead, waddling between the trees. Maxim asked Vepr: "Is he really a member of the underground?"

Vepr shot him a rapid glance. "What are you saying? How could he be?"

They walked behind Zef, trying to follow in his tracks. Maxim brought up the rear.

"What's he here for?"

"For jaywalking."

Again, Maxim lost all desire for conversation.

They had taken less than a hundred steps when Zef ordered them to halt, and work began. "Down!" shouted Zef, and they hit the dirt. Ahead of them a stout tree turned with a drawn-out creaking sound, disgorged a long thin gun barrel, and rocked it from side to side, as if trying to aim it. There was a buzz, a click, and a small cloud of yellow smoke rose lazily from the black barrel. "It's dead... finished," announced Zef in a very businesslike tone. He rose first and brushed the dust from his pants. They had blown up the tree and its cannon. Next, a mine field to clear. After that, a hillock with an active machine gun that kept them pinned down for a long time. Then they stumbled into a jungle of barbed wire, and barely struggled through it. When they finally did, firing opened up somewhere overhead, and everything around them began to explode and burn.

Maxim was confused, but Vepr remained silent and lay on the ground calmly, face down, while Zef fired his grenade thrower. "Follow me, on the double!" shouted Zef, and they ran. The spot they had just left burst into flames. Zef swore, using unfamiliar words, and Vepr chuckled. When they reached a dense grove, something suddenly whistled overhead, and a greenish cloud of poison gas swooshed through the branches. Again they had to run and force their way through underbrush. Zef repeated the unfamiliar words. Vepr looked quite ill.

Exhausted, Zef finally called a halt. They built a fire. As the youngest member of the team, Maxim prepared dinner, heating canned soup in their pot. Zef and Vepr, grimy and ragged, lay on the ground. Vepr looked utterly exhausted. He was not a young man, and this life was harder on him than on the others.

"It doesn't make sense. How could we have managed to lose the war with this incredible concentration of weapons?" asked Maxim.

"What do you mean 'managed to lose'?" replied Vepr. "Nobody won the war. Everyone lost except the Creators."

"Unfortunately, few people understand that." Maxim stirred the soup.

"I'm not used to that kind of talk anymore," said Zef. "All you get here is 'Shut up, rehab!' and 'I'm counting to three.' Hey, boy, what's your name?"

"Maxim."

"Yes, right. You, Mac, keep stirring. See that it doesn't stick."

Maxim stirred until Zef said it was time to serve the soup; he couldn't

hold out any longer. They ate in complete silence. Maxim sensed a change in mood and was sure that today he'd betaken into their confidence. But after dinner Vepr lay down again and stared at the sky, while Zef, mumbling to himself, took the pot and wiped up the bottom with a crust of bread.

"We ought to shoot something," he muttered. "My belly is so empty. I feel like I haven't eaten a tiling but just woke up my appetite."

Maxim tried to draw them into a conversation about hunting in this area, but no one picked it up. Vepr now lay there with his eyes closed, apparently asleep. After Zef had finished listening to Maxim's views, he growled: "Hunting? Here? Everything's filthy, radioactive." He, too, stretched out.

Maxim sighed, took the pot, and walked to a nearby stream. The water was clear and appeared to be clean and tasty. Tempted to drink, he scooped some up in his hand. But he could neither drink nor wash the pot here: the stream was noticeably radioactive. Maxim squatted, set down the pot, and became lost in thought.

His thoughts, for some reason, turned first to Rada. She always washed the dishes after meals and would not let him help her, giving the absurd excuse that it was woman's work. Remembering that she loved him, he felt proud: she was the first woman to love him. As much as he longed to see her, he realized that this was no place for his Rada. Nor for the most evil of men. Thousands upon thousands of robots, not men, should be sent here to clear the region. Either that, or the entire forest and everything in it should be razed. Let a new one arise, any kind, bright or gloomy, but a pure one. And if it must be gloomy, let it be a natural gloom, not one imposed by man.

When he reminded himself that he had been exiled here for life, he was struck by the naivet(of his judges. Without exacting an oath from him, they fully expected him to remain here, voluntarily, forever, and on top of everything else, to help them build a network of radiation towers through the forest. En route, in the prisoners' boxcar, he had heard that the forest extended hundreds of miles to the south and that military equipment littered the desert, too. "Massaraksh, one day I knock out a tower, the next I'm expected to clear a path for them. Oh, no. I'm not staying here. I've had enough of this."

He settled down and forced himself to clarify his plans.

"Vepr doesn't trust me. He trusts Zef, but not me. And I don't trust Zef, though I guess I'm being unfair. I probably seem as troublesome and suspicious to Vepr as Zef seems to me. Well, all right, Vepr doesn't trust me. So that means I'm alone again. Of course it's possible I might run into the General or Memo, but that's highly unlikely. I suppose I could try and put together a group of strangers, but massaraksh, I had better be honest with myself: I'm no good at that sort of thing. I'm too damn trusting. Hold on, now. Think! What do I want?"

He considered the problem for several minutes.

"If only Guy were here. But Guy was sent to a special unit with a

strange name -- something like Blitztr(ger, 'Lightning Bearers.' Most likely I'll have to operate alone.

"In any case I must get out of here. Of course I'll try to form some sort of group, but if I can't, I'll leave alone. A tank is a must. There are enough guns here to equip a hundred armies. After twenty years they're in pretty bad shape, but I'll do what I can with them. So, Vepr really won't trust me?" he thought, almost in despair. He grabbed the pot and ran back to the fire.

Zef and Vepr were awake now; they lay head to head and were arguing softly, but vehemently, about something. Noticing Mac, Zef said quickly: "Enough!" and rose. Scratching his red beard and opening his eyes wide, he shouted: "Where did you disappear to, massaraksh? Who gave you permission to leave? You've got to work if you want some grub!"

Mac became furious. For the first time in his life he found himself shouting at someone at the top of his lungs.

"Damn you, Zef! Can't you think of anything else but your stomach? All I ever hear from you is grub, grub, grub! You can have my rations if it will make you feel any better!"

He flung down the pot, grabbed his knapsack, and put his hands through the straps. Stunned by the unexpected acoustic blow, Zef stared at him. Then Zef's roaring laughter rolled through the forest. Vepr joined in, and Maxim, unable to restrain himself, laughed, too, somewhat crestfallen.

"Massaraksh. Boy, some voice you've got there!" Zef turned to Vepr. "You mark my words. OK now, enough. On your feet!" he yelled. "Let's go, if you want some... some grub this evening."

They shouted and laughed for a while but then quieted down and pushed on through the forest. With demonic energy Maxim cleared land mines, destroyed coaxial machine guns, and unscrewed warheads from anti-aircraft rockets. More firing, hissing streams of tear gas, the repulsive stench of rotting carcasses of animals killed by submachine guns. They became dirtier, angrier, and more ragged, and Zef urged Maxim onward: "Keep going, keep going if you want to eat!" Poor Vepr, utterly exhausted, barely dragged himself behind them, leaning for support on his mine detector.

During these wearisome hours Maxim grew increasingly disgusted with Zef. So when Zef suddenly let out a roar and dropped through the ground, Maxim was delighted. Wiping his sweaty forehead with his grimy hand, he walked up to the spot leisurely and halted at the edge of a dark narrow crevice covered with grass. It was deep and pitch-black, and cold, damp air drifted from it. Nothing was visible; only a crunching and indistinct swearing rose from the hidden trap.

Vepr hobbled over to it, looked down, and asked Maxim: "Is he down there? What happened to him?"

"Zef!" called Maxim, bending over. "Zef, where are you?"

Zef's voice rumbled from the trench. "Come on down! Jump, it's soft here."

Maxim looked at Vepr. Vepr shook his head.

"That's not for me," he said. "You jump, and I'll drop a rope down to

you."

"Who's there?" they heard Zef roaring from below. "I'll shoot, massaraksh!"

Maxim dropped his legs over the side of the crevice, gave himself a push, and jumped. Almost instantly he found himself ankle-deep in soft dirt. He sat down. Zef was somewhere nearby. To adjust to the darkness, Maxim sat with eyes closed for several seconds.

"Mac, come over here. There's someone here," called Zef. "Vepr!" he shouted. "Jump!"

Vepr replied that he was dog-tired and would be just as happy to rest a while.

"Suit yourself," said Zef. "But I think this is *thethe* Fortress. You'll be sorry later."

Vepr replied indistinctly: he felt ill again, too miserable to worry about fortresses.

Maxim opened his eyes and looked around. He was sitting on a mound of earth in the middle of a long corridor lined with rough concrete walls. A gap in the ceiling was either an opening for ventilation or a breach made by some missile. Standing some twenty steps away from him, Zef surveyed Ms surroundings with a flashlight.

"What's this?" asked Maxim.

"How should I know? It could be some sort of shelter. Or maybe it really is *thethe* Fortress. Do you know about the Fortress?"

"No," said Maxim, crawling off the mound.

"You don't...," said Zef absentmindedly. He kept looking around, sweeping the light along the walls. "Then what the hell do you know! Massaraksh! Someone or something has just been here."

"Human?" asked Maxim.

"I don't know. It crept alongside the wall and disappeared. And the Fortress, Mac, is something very, very special. In one day we could finish up all our work out there. Aha, tracks."

He squatted. Maxim squatted beside him and made out imprints in the dirt along the wall.

"Strange tracks."

"I've never seen anything like them."

"Looks as if someone was walking on his fists." Maxim clenched his fist and made an impression next to the tracks.

"Very similar," admitted Zef. He aimed the beam deep inside the corridor. Something shimmered faintly, reflecting either a turn or dead-end. "Should we take a look?"

"Shh," said Maxim. "Shut up and don't move!"

Although it was silent, he sensed the presence of life in the corridor. Someone or something was standing up ahead; something small, with a strange weak odor, was hugging the wall. Maxim could not tell precisely what or where it was. It was observing them and seemed annoyed by their presence. It defied identification and its intentions were elusive.

"Do we have to investigate?" asked Maxim.

"I'd like to."

"Why?"

"We must take a look. Maybe this really is the Fortress. If it is, things are going to be a lot different from now on. I'm not sure it is, but since there are so many rumors, who can tell, maybe there's some truth to them."

"Someone is there," said Maxim. "I can't figure out who."

"You think so? If this is the Fortress, then according to legend, either the survivors of a garrison live here, or... The garrison just stays on here, you know, unaware that the war ended. During the war they declared themselves neutral, locked themselves in, and swore to blow up the continent if anyone came near them."

"And could they?"

"If this is the Fortress, they could do anything. Yes, indeed. Because of explosions and firing above ground, they probably believe the war is still going on. Some prince or duke was their commander here. I'd like to meet and talk with them."

Maxim listened for sounds again. "No, it's no prince or duke. It's some kind of animal, perhaps. Or..."

"Or what?"

"Remember, you said 'either the survivors of a garrison, or...?'"

"So I did. Well, it's nonsense, old wives' tales. Let's go take a look."

Zef loaded the grenade thrower, heaved it on to his shoulder, and moved forward, lighting the way with his flashlight. Maxim walked beside him. They wandered along the corridor for a few minutes, came up against a wall, and turned to the right.

"You're making an awful racket," said Maxim. "Something's going on in there, but you're breathing so hard..."

"What am I supposed to do -- stop breathing?" Zef bristled.

"And your flashlight is bothering me."

"What do you mean -- bothering you? It's dark here."

"I can see in the dark," explained Maxim, "but with your flashlight on, I can't make out a thing. Let me go on ahead, and you stay here. Otherwise we won't find out anything."

"We-ell, suit yourself," said Zef hesitantly.

Maxim narrowed his eyes again, resting them from the flickering light. Then, crouching, he moved alongside the wall as silently as possible. The mysterious creature was somewhere nearby, and Maxim drew closer to it with each step. The corridor seemed endless. Locked steel doors lined the right side. A draft blew toward him. The air was dampish and smelled heavily of mold and something else, something elusive, but warm and alive. Behind him Zef rustled cautiously; uneasy and afraid to remain alone, he had decided to follow Maxim. Maxim laughed to himself. He was distracted for only a split second, but at that instant the mysterious creature vanished. The creature had been in front of him, almost beside him; then, in a flash, it seemed to

vanish into thin air, only to reappear close behind him.

"Zef!" called Maxim.

"Yes!" boomed Zef.

Maxim imagined that the strange creature was standing between them. He turned his head toward Zef's voice. "It's between us. Don't shoot!"

"OK," said Zef. "I can't see a damn thing. What does it look like?"

"I don't know. It's soft."

"An animal?"

"Doesn't seem to be."

"You said you could see in the dark."

"Not with my eyes," said Maxim. "Shut up!"

"Not with your eyes," muttered Zef.

The creature stood still for a short time, then crossed the corridor, disappeared, and soon reappeared up ahead. "Its curiosity has also been aroused," thought Maxim. He strained hard, trying to empathize with the mysterious creature, but something interfered -- probably, he thought, the discordant combination of a humanoid intellect and a semianimal body. He edged forward again. The creature retreated, maintaining a constant distance between them.

"Anything yet?" asked Zef.

"Nothing new. It might be leading us somewhere or luring us into a trap."

"Can we handle it?"

"It's not going to attack us," replied Maxim. "It's as curious as we are."

Nothing more was said because the creature had vanished again, and Maxim sensed that the corridor had ended. He was in the midst of a spacious chamber. It was too dark for Maxim to distinguish anything, although he sensed the presence of metal, rust, and high voltage. For several seconds Maxim stood motionless before figuring out the location of the switch. He reached out for it, but at that instant the creature reappeared. This time with another creature, similar but not identical. They stood beside the wall where Maxim now stood. He could hear their rapid breathing. Hoping they would come closer, he remained motionless, but they wouldn't. Then, with a tremendous effort, he contracted his pupils and pressed the switch.

Apparently, something was wrong with the circuit: lights flashed on for a fraction of a second; fuses crackled somewhere, and the lights went out again. But Maxim had managed to get a glimpse of the mysterious creatures. They were small, about the size of a large dog, stood on all fours, were covered with dark wool, and had large heavy heads. Maxim hadn't had time to look at their eyes.

The creatures vanished so quickly that it seemed as if they hadn't been there at all.

"What's going on?" demanded Zef, alarmed. "What was that flash?"

"I switched on a light," replied Maxim. "Come over here."

"Where is it? Did you see it?"

"Almost didn't. They do look like animals, like dogs with large heads."

The reflection from his flashlight skipped along the wall. Zef spoke as he walked. "Ah, dogs. I know that there are animals like that living in the forest. I've never seen live ones, but I've seen their bodies."

"No." Maxim hesitated. "They're not animals."

"They're animals, all right." Zef's voice echoed beneath the high vaulting. "We were scared for nothing. At first I thought they might be vampires. Massaraksh! Yes, this is the Fortress!"

He halted in the center of the chamber, sweeping the beam along the walls, along a row of dials and a switchboard, where glass, nickel, and faded plastic glittered.

"Congratulations, Mac. We found it all right. How stupid of me not to believe in it. Stupid. Hey, what's that? An electronic brain. Oh, damn, if only Blacksmith were here! Listen, do you understand anything about this stuff?"

"What exactly?" Maxim crossed over to him.

"The mechanics of the whole works. This is a control panel. If we can figure it out, the entire region will be ours! All the aboveground weapons can be operated from here. Massaraksh, if we can only figure it out!"

Maxim took Zef's flashlight and set it down so that light diffused throughout the chamber. The dust of many years lay everywhere, and on a table in the corner a fork and a soiled, blackened plate rested on a sheet of decayed paper. Maxim walked alongside the control panels, tried to turn on an electronic device, and grabbed hold of a knife-switch. The handle came off in his hand.

"I doubt that anything can be operated from here. First of all, the entire setup is too elementary. Most likely, it's an observation post of one of their control substations. Everything here seems to be auxiliary equipment. The computer is too weak. It couldn't guide even a dozen tanks. And everything is falling apart. There is current, but the voltage is below normal: the reactor is probably jammed. No, Zef, it isn't as simple as you think."

Suddenly he noticed long tubes projecting from the wall, capped by a rubber eye shield. Pulling over an aluminum chair, he sat down and put his face to the eye shield. To his surprise, the optics were in excellent condition; but he was even more surprised at what he saw. A totally unfamiliar landscape: a pale yellow desert, sand dunes, the shell of a metal structure. A strong wind blew, streams of sand rai along the dunes, and a misty horizon curled up like a saucer.

"Take a look, Zef. Where is this?"

Zef leaned the grenade thrower against the control panel and took Maxim's place.

"That's odd." Zef paused briefly. "It's the desert all right. But it's about four hundred miles from here." He leaned back and looked up at Maxim. "Imagine how much time and effort went into all this. The bastards! And what for? Now the wind blows over the sands -- but what a beautiful place it used to be. When I was a kid, before the war, we used to go to a resort there,

you know." He stood up. "Let's get the hell out of here," he said bitterly, picking up his flashlight. "You and I won't be able to figure out this place. We'll have to wait until Blacksmith is caught and sent down here. Except they won't send him; he'll be shot for sure. Well, let's clear out."

"Yes, let's go." Maxim examined the strange tracks on the floor. "This is far more interesting."

"Oh, it's useless. Probably all sorts of animals running around here."

He heaved the grenade thrower across his shoulder and walked toward the chamber's exit. Glancing back at the tracks, Maxim followed him.

"I'm starved," said Zef.

They walked along the corridor. Maxim suggested breaking down one of the doors, but Zef thought it was pointless.

"This place is too big a job to be taken lightly. We're wasting time here now. We still have a quota to fill, and we must come here with someone who knows a lot about this kind of equipment."

"If I were you," retorted Maxim, "I wouldn't be so quick to count on this Fortress of yours. In the first place, everything here is rotten; and in the second place, it's already occupied."

"By whom? You and your dog theories again? You're like the rest of them, with their vampires."

Zef paused. A guttural cry tore through corridor; bouncing off the walls, it echoed repeatedly, then died down. Instantly it was followed by another, from somewhere in the distance. They were very familiar sounds, but Maxim could not recall where he had heard them before.

"So that's what's been screaming at night!" exclaimed Zef. "And we always thought it was birds."

"It's a strange cry."

"Strange -- I don't know, but it's damned frightening. When those screams start tearing through the forest at night, you get the shakes. How many stories we've heard about those cries. In fact, one prisoner even bragged that he understood their language. Translated it."

"What did they say?"

"Oh, rubbish! You call that a language?"

"Where's the prisoner now?"

"Disappeared," replied Zef. "He was in a construction unit and his team got lost in the forest."

They turned left. Ahead, in the distance, they thought they saw a faint spot of light. Zef turned off the flashlight and put it in his pocket. Now he took the lead, and when he halted abruptly, without warning, Maxim almost bumped into him.

"Massaraksh!" muttered Zef. A human skeleton lay crosswise on the floor of the corridor. Zef removed the grenade thrower from his shoulder and looked around. "This wasn't here before."

"You're right," said Maxim. "They just put it there."

Suddenly from far behind them, from the depths of the underground

complex, a chorus of guttural wails rang out. The wails, amplified by their echoes, sounded like a thousand throats crying out. They wailed in unison, as if chanting some strange four-syllable word. Maxim sensed that they were sneering at the intruders, mocking and challenging them. Suddenly the chorus ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

Zef sucked in his breath noisily and lowered the grenade thrower. Maxim looked at the skeleton again.

"I guess they're trying to drop a gentle hint."

"Sure looks like it. Let's get the hell out of here."

They reached the gap in the ceiling quickly, climbed onto the mound of earth, and saw Vepr's anxious face peering down at them. He was lying with his chest over the edge of the hole, dangling a rope with a loop at the end.

"What happened?" he asked. "Was that you screaming?"

"Tell you in a minute," replied Zef. "Is the rope fastened?"

When they reached the surface, Zef rolled cigarettes for Vepr and himself. He lit them and then sat in silence for some time, apparently trying to make sense of his recent adventure.

"All right," he said finally. "Here's what it's all about. This is the Fortress. Below are control panels, an electronic brain, and the like. Everything's in bad shape, but energy is available, and if we're to use it to our advantage, we must find knowledgeable people to help us. Next: from all appearances, I'd say that the place is inhabited by dogs. And what dogs! With enormous heads. How they howled! But when you start thinking about it, you wonder if it was them, because, you see... how can I put it? Well, while Mac and I were wandering through the place, someone placed a human skeleton in the corridor. And that's the whole story."

Vepr glanced from Zef to Mac.

"Mutants?"

"Possibly," replied Zef. "I didn't see a damn thing, but Mac claims he saw dogs -- but not with his eyes. Massaraksh, how did you see them?"

"Oh, I saw them with my eyes, too. And there was nothing else there except the dogs. I'd have known if there was. And those dogs of yours, Zef, are not what you think they are. They're not animals."

Vepr said nothing. He rose, wound up the rope, and sat down again beside Zef.

"God knows," muttered Zef. "Maybe they aren't animals--anything is possible here. After all, this is the South."

"Maybe those dogs really are mutants?" suggested Maxim.

"No," said Zef. "Mutants are just very deformed people. They can be the offspring of the most normal parents. Mutants -- do you know what they are?"

"I do," replied Maxim. "But the point is, how far can a mutation go?"

After a rather lengthy pause Zef said: "Well, if you're so well-educated, there's no need to waste time talking. Up on your feet! We've little time left and a lot to do. And I have a craving for grub." He winked at Maxim. "A downright pathological craving. Do you know what *pathological* means?"

Although they had not yet worked the last quarter of the south-west

quadrant, they found nothing to clear. Something very powerful had probably exploded there some time ago. Only half-decayed fallen tree trunks and burnt stumps remained of the old forest, and in its place a new, young, sparse forest was rising. The soil was charred and full of rust. Realizing that no mechanical device could have survived such an explosion, Maxim concluded that Zef had other reasons for leading them there.

A grimy man in baggy prison clothes emerged from the bushes and walked toward them. Maxim recognized him: it was the first native he had met on this planet, Zef's old melancholy buddy.

"Wait," said Vepr. "I'll talk to him."

Zef ordered Mac to sit, sat down himself, and changed his boots, whistling a prisoner's tune, "I'm a Dashing Lad, Known O'er the Frontier." Vepr went over to the man and retreated with him into the bushes, where they conversed in whispers. Although Maxim heard every word distinctly, he understood nothing, because they were using unfamiliar slang. Several times he recognized the word "post office." Soon, he stopped listening. He felt grimy and exhausted; there had been too much senseless work and needless nervous tension today; he had breathed too much filthy air and received too much radiation. Again, another totally unproductive day had passed, and he detested the thought of returning to the barracks.

The man disappeared, and Vepr returned and sat down on a stump in front of Maxim.

"Well, let's talk."

"Is everything in order?" asked Zef.

"Yes," replied Vepr.

"I told you I had an instinct for people," said Zef.

"Well, Mac," said Vepr, "we've checked you out as thoroughly as possible under the circumstances. The General vouches for you. From now on you'll be taking orders from me."

"Glad to hear that." Mac smiled wryly. He wanted to say: "But the General didn't vouch for you to me." Instead, he added: "I'm at your command."

"The General says that you aren't affected by radioactivity or the radiation emitters. Is that true?"

"It is."

"So you could swim across the Blue Snake River at any time and you wouldn't be harmed?"

"I've already told you that I could escape right now if I wanted to."

"We don't want you to escape. So, as I understand it, the patrol cars don't bother you either?"

"You mean the mobile emitters? No, they don't bother me."

"Very good," said Vepr. "Then your assignment for the present is completely settled. You'll be our messenger. When I give the order, you'll swim across the river and send telegrams from the nearest telegraph office. Is that clear?"

"Yes, that much is clear, but something else isn't."

Vepr lîkåd at Mac without blinking. This aloof, sinewy, crippled old man was a cold and merciless soldier, a fighter since birth, a terrifying and intriguing product of a world where human life was worthless; he knew nothing but struggle, had experienced only struggle, pushed aside everything but struggle. In his attentive narrowed eyes Maxim read his own fate.

"Yes?" said Vepr.

"Let's settle this right now," said Maxim firmly. "I don't want to act blindly. I don't intend to get involved in operations that I feel are foolish and unnecessary."

"For example?"

"I know the meaning of discipline. And I know that without it our work is useless. But I feel that discipline should be rational, that a subordinate should feel that an order makes sense. You are ordering me to be a messenger, and I'm prepared to be one. I can perform more demanding tasks, but, if necessary, I'll be a messenger. But I must know that the telegrams I send out will not result in senseless deaths."

Zef started to interrupt, but Vepr and Maxim gestured to him to wait.

"I was ordered to blow up the tower," continued Maxim. "I was not told why it was necessary. I saw that it was a foolish and deadly plan, but I carried out the order. I lost three comrades, and then it turned out that the whole operation was a trap set by government provocateurs. Well, I'm telling you right now that I've had enough of that kind of stuff. I refuse to blow up any more towers! And I'll do everything in my power to block similar plans."

"Well, you are a damned fool!" said Zef. "A pantywaist."

"Why do you call me that?"

"Hold on, Zef," said Vepr, his eyes still riveted on Maxim. "In other words, Mac, you want to know all the staff's plans?"

"Right. I don't want to work blindly."

"You're downright insolent," declared Zef. "Just too damned insolent! Listen, Vepr, I still like him. And I know -- I've got a good eye for the right material."

"You're demanding far too much trust from us," said Vepr coldly. "That kind of trust must be earned."

"And for that, I suppose I'll be expected to knock over those idiot towers? True, I've been in the underground only a few months, but I've heard only one thing all this time: towers, towers, towers. I don't want to topple towers. It's senseless. I want to fight tyranny, hunger, corruption, lies. Of course I realize that the towers are torturing you, torturing you physically. But you don't even know how to fight the towers. Your approach is idiotic. It's very obvious that the towers are relays. You must strike at the Center, not try to pick them off one by one."

Vepr and Zef began to speak at the same time.

"How do you know about the Center?" asked Vepr.

"And where would you find the Center?" asked Zef.

"Any fool of an engineer knows there must be a Center," said Maxim scornfully. "But how to find it -- that's the real problem. Forget about

machine guns and killing people uselessly. Find the Center!"

"In the first place we know all this without you." Zef was seething. "In the second place, massaraksh, no one has died uselessly! Any fool of an engineer, you snotty bastard, would certainly realize that we could destroy the relay system and liberate an entire region by toppling several towers. But for that, we have to know how to topple them. And we're learning how. Do you or don't you understand? And if you say another word about our people dying in vain, I'll -- "

"Now, wait," said Maxim. "You were saying 'liberate a region.' Fine. Then what?"

"Then all sorts of pantywaists come and tell us that we're dying for nothing," said Zef.

"Come on, Zef, then what?" Maxim persisted. "The legionnaires will bring up mobile emitters and finish you off. Right?"

"Like hell!" said Zef. "Before they get a chance to bring them up, the population of that region will have come over to our side, and it won't be so easy for those legionnaires to butt in. It's one thing to deal with a dozen degens but something else to deal with ten thousand or a hundred thousand enraged citizens."

"Zef, Zef!" Vepr cautioned him.

Zef waved him away impatiently.

"Hundreds of thousands of city dwellers, farmers, and, maybe, soldiers, who understand and can never forget how shamefully they have been duped."

Vepr waved his hand and turned away in frustration.

"Now, wait a minute," said Maxim. "What are you saying? Why on earth should they suddenly understand? They'll tear you to pieces. After all, they believe those towers are part of an antiballistic missile network."

"And what do you think they are?" asked Zef, smiling strangely.

"Oh, well, I know, of course. I've been told."

"By whom?"

"The doctor. And the General. It's no secret, is it?"

"Maybe that's enough on this subject," said Vepr softly.

"Why enough?" Zef replied softly, and his speech now had a cultured ring. "Is it, strictly speaking, enough, Vepr? You know what I think about this. You know why I'm staying here, playing my part, I'll remain here for the rest of my life. So why is it enough? Both you and I believe that it must be shouted from the rooftops; but when it comes time to act, we suddenly remember about discipline and play docilely into the hands of our great leaders, those outstanding liberals, those pillars of enlightenment. And now we have this boy before us. You can see what sort of person he is. Should such people not know?"

"Maybe it's precisely this kind that shouldn't," replied Vepr in the same quiet voice.

Puzzled, Maxim kept shifting his glance from one to the other. Suddenly both men seemed to wilt as the same expression appeared on their faces. No longer did Maxim see the steely Vepr, the Vepr who had defied the prosecutor

and the drumhead court. And Zefs reckless vulgarity had vanished. Something else had broken through: a sadness, a hidden despair, a sense of deep hurt, a submissiveness. It was as if they had suddenly remembered something, something that should have been forgotten, that they had tried hard to forget.

"I'm going to tell him," declared Zef, without asking for permission or consulting Vepr. Vepr remained silent and Zef began his story.

What he described was incredible. Incredible in itself, incredible because it left no room for doubt. While Zef spoke, softly, calmly, in impeccably precise language, pausing politely when Vepr interjected brief remarks, Maxim strained hard to find a loophole in this new image of their world. But in vain. The emerging picture was coherent, primitive, and hopelessly logical: it covered all the facts known to Maxim, leaving nothing unexplained. It was the most frightening discovery Maxim had made on his inhabited island.

It was not for the degens that the towers had been designed. The radiation strikes affected the nervous system of every human being on the planet. The physiological mechanism was unknown, but, in essence, the brain of an individual exposed to radiation lost its capacity to analyze reality critically. Thinking man was transformed into believing man, into one who believed rabidly, fanatically, despite the evidence of his own eyes. The most elementary propaganda techniques could convince anyone inside the radiation field of anything: he would lovingly accept whatever was presented as the shining truth, the only truth, a truth for which he would gladly live, suffer, and die.

The field was everywhere. Invisible, omnipresent, all-pervasive. A gigantic network of towers enmeshing the entire country emitted radiation around the clock. It purged tens of millions of souls of any doubts they might have about the All-Powerful Creators' words and deeds. The Creators controlled the minds and energy of millions. They inculcated in people an acceptance of the repugnant ideas of violence and aggression; they could drive millions against cannons and machine guns; they could compel these millions to kill one another in the name of anything they pleased; they could, should the whim strike them, stir up a mass epidemic of suicides. Nothing was beyond their control.

Twice daily, at ten in the morning and at ten in the evening, the network was turned on full blast; and for thirty minutes people lost all their humanity. All the hidden tensions which had accumulated in their subconscious as a result of the gap between what they had been led to believe and reality were liberated in a paroxysm of delirious enthusiasm, in an impassioned, servile ecstasy. The radiation strikes suppressed natural reflexes and instincts completely and replaced them with a fantastic complex of behavior patterns. These patterns involved the worship of the Creators. The radiated individual lost his capacity to reason; he behaved like a robot.

The only threat to the Creators came from people who, because of certain physiological quirks, were immune to this mass-hypnosis. They were

called degens. The constant field had no effect on their thought processes, but the strikes did cause them agonizing pains. There were comparatively few degens -- something like one percent of the population -- but they alone were awake in this kingdom of somnambulists; they alone possessed the ability to evaluate a situation soberly, to perceive the world as it really was, to influence their environment, to change it, to govern. The most abominable aspect was that the degens themselves provided society with its ruling elite, the All-Powerful Creators. All the Creators were degens, but comparatively few degens were Creators. Those who could not or would not become involved in this governing elite were declared enemies of the state and were treated accordingly.

Maxim was overwhelmed by despair: his inhabited island was populated by puppets. Hitler's enormous propaganda apparatus was erode beside this system of radiation towers. One could have turned off the radio; one could have chosen not to listen to Goebbels' speeches; one could have chosen not to read the newspapers. But here it was impossible to evade the radiation field. It had no equal in the history of humankind. There was nothing in Earth's experience to look to for guidance. There was nothing to rely on. Zefs plan to seize some important region was no more than a gamble. They were confronted by an enormous machine, too simple to change by evolutionary methods and too enormous to destroy with small forces. There wasn't a force in the country that could liberate such a huge nation, a nation that had no idea that it was not a free people, and that, as Vepr expressed it, had swerved from the course of history. This machine was invulnerable internally. Minor revolts did not disturb its basic stability. Partially destroyed, it recovered rapidly; irritated, it reacted immediately and in kind to the irritant, ignoring the fate of its individual elements.

There remained but one hope: the machine had a Center, a control panel, a brain. Theoretically, this Center could be destroyed; then the machine would die in unstable equilibrium. And the moment would come when an attempt must be made to shift this world onto other tracks, to return it to the course of history. But the Center's location was a well-kept secret. Besides, who would destroy it? It was far more complicated than attacking a tower. Such an operation would require a great deal of money and, above all, an army of people immune to radiation. Yes, either people immune to radiation, or simple, easily accessible protective devices to protect those who were not immune. Neither had ever been available, nor was their availability foreseen. Several hundred thousand degens were dispersed, isolated, and persecuted. Many belonged to the category of so-called legal degens. But even if they could be united and armed, the Creators could destroy their small army by sending out mobile emitters to meet them.

Silence reigned long after Zef had finished his story. Maxim continued to sit there, his head hanging down as he scratched the dry black soil with a twig.. Then Zef coughed and said awkwardly: "Yes, that's the way it is."

"What are you counting on?" asked Maxim.

Zef and Vepr remained silent. Maxim raised his head, saw their faces

and muttered: "I'm sorry. I... it's all so... I'm sorry."

"We must fight," said Vepr in an even voice. "We are fighting and shall continue to fight. Zef outlined one of the staff's strategies to you. There are other plans just as vulnerable to criticism and never tested. You must understand that we are a very young movement."

"Tell me," said Maxim slowly, "this radiation, does it have the same effect on all nations in your world?"

Vepr and Zef exchanged glances.

"I don't understand," said Vepr.

"Here's what I have in mind. Is there any country that might have even several thousand like me?"

"I doubt it," replied Zef. "Unless, among those... those mutants. Massaraksh, don't be offended, Mac, but obviously you are a mutant. A lucky mutation. One chance in a million."

"I'm not offended. So, there are mutants. Deeper in the forest?"

"Yes," said Vepr. He looked intently at Maxim.

"What, exactly, is there farther on?"

"Forest, then desert."

"And mutants?"

"Yes. Semianimal. Crazy savages. Listen, Mac, forget it."

"Have you ever seen them?"

"Only dead ones," said Vepr. "Sometimes they're captured in the forest. Then they're hung in front of the barracks as morale boosters."

"But why?"

"Fool!" barked Zef. "They're animals! They're incurable and more dangerous than any animal. I've seen them with my own eyes. In your worst dreams you've never seen anything like them."

"Then why are the towers being extended in that direction? Do you want to tame them?"

"Drop it, Mac," said Vepr again. "It's hopeless. They hate us. But do what you think best. We don't hold anyone back."

They sat in silence. Suddenly a familiar roar tore through the forest. Zef rose slightly.

"Rocket tank," he said. "Should we knock it out? It's not so far. The eighteenth quadrant. No, we'll wait until tomorrow."

Maxim suddenly made a decision. "I'll take care of it. Go back, I'll catch up to you."

Zef looked at him dubiously. "Can you handle it? You can still get blown up."

"Mac," said Vepr. "Think!"

Zef looked at Maxim and grinned.

"Oh ho, so that's why you need a tank! The kid is not dumb! No, you can't fool me. OK, go on, I'll save your supper for you, in case you change your mind. And remember, many self-propelled tanks are mined. So be careful. Let's go, Vepr. He'll catch up to us, if he wants."

Vepr was about to add something, but Maxim had already risen and started for the path through the underbrush. He didn't care to engage in

further conversation. He walked rapidly, without turning around, and held the grenade thrower under his arm. Having made a decision, he felt relieved. The mission before him depended on him alone.

14.

By morning Maxim had maneuvered the self-propelled tank onto the road and turned its nose southward. He could have kept going. Instead, he climbed out of the control compartment, jumped down to the broken pavement, sat down at the edge of the road, and wiped his dirty hands in the grass. Beside him the rusty monster rumbled peacefully, pointing its rocket's sharp tip into the murky sky.

Although he had worked through the night, he wasn't tired. The natives had built well: the tank was in pretty good shape. It wasn't mined, and he was surprised to find manual controls. If anyone were blown up in such a tank, it would be due either to a worn-out reactor or its driver's technical incompetence. True, the reactor was functioning at only twenty percent of capacity, and its chassis was rather battered, but Maxim was satisfied. It exceeded all his expectations.

It was almost six in the morning and quite light. It was the hour when the convicts were drawn up into columns, fed hastily, and driven out to work. Surely his absence had been noticed by now, and most likely he was already considered a fugitive and condemned to death. Or perhaps Zef had invented some excuse -- like a sprained ankle or a bad wound.

The forest had grown still. The "dogs," who had been calling out to each other through the night, had quieted down and had probably returned to their underground world. They were probably rubbing their paws together gleefully, recalling how they had frightened those two-legged creatures the preceding day. These dogs would have to be investigated, but he must leave them behind for the time being. He wondered if they were immune to radiation. Strange creatures.

During the night, while he was working on the engine, two of them observed him quietly from the bushes. Then a third arrived and climbed into a tree, to see better. Leaning out of the hatch, he waved to it; and, for kicks, he reproduced, as closely as possible, the four-syllable word the chorus had chanted yesterday. The creature in the tree became furious; its eyes glittered, its wool bristled, and it began to scream guttural insults. The two in the bushes were evidently shocked by this outburst; they rushed off and never returned. The creature cursing in the tree stayed for a long time, unable to calm down. It hissed, spat, made threatening gestures, as if it were about to attack, and bared its white fangs. It was nearly morning when it finally departed, convinced that Mac had no intention of accepting its challenge to do honorable battle. They were hardly intelligent in a human sense, but they were interesting creatures. Most likely they had some

sort of social organization. After all, they had driven a military garrison, commanded by the duke, from the Fortress. The information about them was very meager, only rumors and legends... Oh, how he'd like to soak in a nice hot tub right now. His skin was burning; the reactor leaked. If Zef and Vepr agreed to join him, he'd have to shield the reactor with three or four plates -- strip the armor from the sides.

A distant thud echoed through the forest: the sappers had begun their working day. How utterly senseless. Another thud. A machine gun began to clatter, continued for a long time, and then was still. It was a clear day and quite bright. The cloudless sky was a luminous milky white. The concrete on the road glittered with dew, but the ground around the tank was dry: its armor radiated an unhealthy heat.

Suddenly Zef and Vepr emerged from the underbrush onto the road. When they spotted the tank they ran faster. Maxim rose to meet them.

"You're alive." Zef greeted him. "I'm not surprised. But I brought you some bread. Eat up, fast!" "Thanks." Maxim took the thick slice of bread.

Leaning on his mine detector, Vepr stood there watching him.

"Get it down fast, Mac, and take off!" said Zef. "They've come for you back there."

"Who?" Maxim stopped chewing.

"We don't know the details. Some idiot with buttons from head to toe. He was shouting at the top of his lungs. Wanted to know why you weren't there. And I was almost shot. So I stared at him hard and reported that you were killed in a mine field and your body was not found."

Zef walked around the tank. "What lousy luck." He sat down and rolled a cigarette.

"That's strange," said Maxim, biting off a piece of bread. "Why? For further interrogation?"

"Could it be Fank?" asked Vepr in a low voice.

"Fank? Medium height, square face, scaly skin?"

"Not likely!" said Zef. "This was a big lanky fellow covered with pimples. A real imbecile -- the Legion."

"That's not Fank."

"Maybe on Fank's orders?" asked Vepr.

Maxim shrugged his shoulders and stuffed the last crust of bread into his mouth.

"I don't know," he said. "I used to think that Fank was connected somehow to the underground, but now I don't know what to think."

"I think you'd better get out of here," said Vepr. "Although, to tell the truth, I don't know what's worse, the mutants or that Legion bureaucrat."

"All right, let him go," said Zef. "He wouldn't work for you as a messenger anyway. And this way, at least he'll bring back some information -- if he survives."

"I suppose you aren't coming with me."

Vepr shook his head. "No. I wish you luck."

"Get rid of the rocket," suggested Zef. "Or you'll blow yourself up."

Now, here's the situation. There are two more outposts ahead of you. You can slip past them easily. They face south. Farther on it gets worse. The radiation is terrible, nothing to eat, mutants. And still farther -- sand and no water."

"Thanks," said Maxim. "Good-bye."

He jumped onto the tread, flung open the hatch, and climbed into the hot semidarkness. He was about to pull the levers when he remembered that he had one more question. He put his head out.

"Why is the real purpose of the towers kept from the rank-and-file underground?"

Zef frowned and spat, and Vepr replied sadly: "Because most of the staff hope to seize power someday and use the towers in the same way, but in their own interests."

For several seconds they looked each other straight in the eye, Zef turned away and carefully glued a cigarette with his tongue. "I hope you make it," said Maxim, turning to the levers.

Rumbling and clanging, its treads crunching, the tank began to roll forward.

Driving the tank was difficult. There was no seat for the driver, and the pile of branches and grass that Maxim had arranged at night fell apart very quickly. Visibility was terrible, and the tank wouldn't pick up speed. At twenty miles an hour, something in the engine began to rumble and sputter, and it was burning oil. But the tank's ability to negotiate any terrain was still excellent. Road or no road -- it didn't matter: it tore calmly through bushes, rolled over shallow ruts, and crushed fallen trees. It ignored saplings growing through the shattered pavement, and it snorted with pleasure as it crossed over a deep hole filled with black water. It held its course beautifully, but turning it was difficult.

Since the road was quite straight and it was dirty and stuffy in the compartment, Maxim finally set the manual gas lever, climbed out, and settled himself comfortably on the edge of the hatch, beneath the rocket's latticed mount. The tank forged ahead as if this were the route it had originally been programmed for. There was something smug and simple about its behavior, and Maxim, who loved machines, patted its armor affectionately.

Ah, life could be pleasant! To the right and left the forest slipped away, the engine rumbled, the radiation above was negligible, and the comparatively clean breeze felt good on his hot skin. Maxim raised his head and glanced at the rocket's swaying nose. He must get rid of it: it was excess weight. No, it wouldn't explode -- it had been inoperative for a long time: he had checked it out last night. But it weighed some ten tons and there was no point in dragging it along.

As the tank crawled forward, Maxim climbed along the rocket mount to look for a release device. He found it, but it was badly rusted, and he had to work on it for some time. While he was busy, the tank turned off the road twice, howling indignantly and knocking down trees. Each time Maxim had to

rush back to the controls, calm down the iron fool, and maneuver it back onto the road. Finally the release device was repaired, and the rocket reeled heavily, crashed to the pavement, and rolled ponderously into the drainage ditch. The tank moved more easily. At that moment, Maxim spotted the first outpost.

At the edge of the forest stood two large tents and a van. Smoke curled above a field kitchen. Two legionnaires, stripped to the waist, were washing -- one was pouring water over the other from a mess tin. A sentry in a black cape stood in the middle of the road and looked at the tank. On the right were two columns joined by a crossbar; something long and white, almost touching the ground, hung from it. Maxim dropped down into the compartment so his checkered prison uniform would not be visible and thrust his head through the hatch. The sentry gaped at the tank, withdrew to the shoulder, and looked around absentmindedly at the van. The half-naked legionnaires stopped washing and stared at the tank. Several more men, attracted by the tank's rumbling, came running from the tents and van. One wore an officer's uniform. They were surprised but not alarmed. The officer pointed to the tank, made a remark, and everyone laughed. When Maxim reached the sentry, the sentry shouted something that was drowned out by the engine, and Maxim shouted in reply: "Everything's in order. Stay where you are!"

The sentry couldn't make out his words either, but the expression on his face indicated that he was satisfied. Waving the tank on, he returned to his position in the middle of the road. Everything had turned out all right.

Turning his head, Maxim saw at close range what was swinging from the crossbar. He glanced at it for a split second, sat down quickly, frowned, and grabbed the controls. "Oh, God, I shouldn't have looked. What the hell possessed me to turn my head! I should have kept going and never would have known anything." He forced himself to open his eyes. "Damn it, I have to face it! I have to get used to it. Now that I've undertaken this mission, I don't have the right to look away. It must have been a mutant; even death couldn't disfigure a person so terribly. Life itself can. It will do it to me, too. I can't hide from it: must get used to it. Ahead of me may be hundreds of miles of roads covered with gallows."

When he thrust his head through the hatch again and looked back, neither the outpost nor its lone gallows by the road were visible. If only he could go home right now! He'd keep going in this tank, and, at the end of his journey, there it would be -- home. His parents and friends. He'd wake up in the morning, wash, and, at breakfast, describe his nightmare about an inhabited island. He tried to picture Earth, but he couldn't: it was almost beyond his imagination to conceive of a place in the universe with clean, cheerful cities, billions of good, intelligent people, and mutual trust everywhere. "Well, you were looking for a job," he thought, "and you got it all right. A rough job, a dirty job, but I doubt that you'll ever find one more important."

Ahead of him, on the other side of the road, appeared some sort of vehicle, crawling slowly southward. It was a small caterpillar tractor, pulling a trailer piled with metal trusswork. In its open cab sat a man in a

prison uniform smoking a pipe. He glanced indifferently at Maxim and the tank and then turned away. "I wonder what kind of framework that is," thought Maxim. "It certainly looks familiar." He suddenly realized that it was a section of a tower. "I ought to shove the works into a ditch and roll over it a few times." He looked around; the expression on his face evidently had intimidated the tractor's driver. The driver braked suddenly, getting ready to jump out and run. Maxim turned away.

About ten minutes later he spotted the second outpost. It was the advance outpost of a vast army of slaves in prison uniforms (although maybe these slaves were, in a sense, the freest people in the country). There were two modern houses with shiny zinc roofs. A squat gray guardhouse with gunports like black slits rested on a small man-made hill. The first sections of the tower were already rising above it; around the hill stood cranes and tractors, and steel girders lay scattered about. For several hundred yards to the right and left of the road, the forest had been destroyed, and men in checkered clothing pottered about here and there along the clearings. A long low barracks was visible behind the cottages. A gray rag was drying on a clothesline in front of it. A short distance away, next to the road, stood a wooden tower with a platform; a sentry in a gray uniform paced along the platform, where a machine gun rested on a tripod. More soldiers were gathered beneath the platform; their faces showed the strain of coping with boredom and insects. All were smoking.

"I'll probably get through here, too, without any fuss," thought Maxim. "This is the end of the world, and they don't give a damn about anything." He was wrong. The soldiers stopped waving away the insects and stared at the tank. One of them, a gaunt fellow who looked very familiar, straightened his helmet, walked out to the middle of the road, and raised his hand. "You're wasting your time, buddy," thought Maxim. "I've made up my mind to get through here, and nothing's going to stop me." He slid down toward the controls, made himself more comfortable, and put his foot on the accelerator. The soldier continued to stand in the road with his hand raised. "Now I'll give it the gas," thought Maxim. "Let out a good, loud roar and scare him out of the way. If he doesn't move -- well, war is war."

Suddenly he recognized the soldier. It was Guy. Thin, hollow-cheeked, in baggy army fatigues.

"Oh, my God," mumbled Maxim.

He slid his foot off the accelerator and switched off the ignition. The tank slowed down and stopped. Guy dropped his hand and walked toward him slowly. Maxim began to laugh: everything had turned out well after all. He turned on the ignition again and steadied himself.

"Hey," shouted Guy, tapping the armor with his gun butt. "Who are you?" Maxim did not respond.

"Is anyone in there?" A note of doubt had crept into Guy's voice.

His hobnailed boots clanked along the armor, the hatch opened from the left, and Guy thrust his head into the compartment. When he saw Maxim, his mouth dropped open. Maxim grabbed him by his fatigues, pulled him inside,

pushed him down on the branches beneath his feet, and stepped on the accelerator. The tank roared and leaped forward. "I'll ruin the engine," thought Maxim. Guy twisted and turned; his helmet had ridden down over his face; he could see nothing and kicked blindly, trying to pull out his gun from under him. Suddenly the thunder and clatter of guns filled the compartment: machine-gun fire was hitting the rear of the tank. It was safe inside, but most unpleasant, and Maxim watched impatiently as the forest's walls advanced toward them. Closer and closer they came. At last, the first bushes. A checkered figure recoiled from the road. Now he was surrounded by forest; the clatter of bullets against the armor had ceased, and the road ahead was clear for hundreds of miles.

Finally, Guy managed to pull out the gun; at the same time, Maxim tore off Guy's helmet and saw his sweaty, snarling face. He laughed when the rage, terror, and thirst to kill dissolved first into bewilderment, then amazement, and finally joy. Guy's lips moved, forming "massaraksh!"

Maxim left the controls and embraced him. Holding him by the shoulder, he said: "Guy, buddy, am I glad to see you!"

It was impossible to hear through the noise of the engine. Maxim looked through the peephole. The road ahead was straight, so he set the manual accelerator again, climbed out of the compartment, and pulled Guy after him.

"Massaraksh!" said the bedraggled Guy. "It's you again!"

"Am I glad to see you!" repeated Maxim.

"What's this all about?" shouted Guy. His initial joy had already subsided, and he looked around him anxiously. "Where are you going? Why?"

"To the South," said Maxim. "I've had enough of your hospitable country!"

"Escape?"

"Yes!"

"You're crazy. They spared your life."

"Who spared my life? It's my life! It belongs to me!"

It was difficult to talk; they had to shout over the engine. Somehow the conversation deteriorated into a heated exchange. Maxim leaped through the hatch and slowed down the engine. The tank moved more slowly, but the roaring and clanging lessened. When Maxim climbed back, Guy was frowning, and his face was set in a determined expression.

"It's my duty to take you back," he announced.

"And it's my duty to drag you away from here," replied Maxim.

"I don't understand. You're completely out of your mind. It's impossible to escape. You must return. Massaraksh, I can't take you back. You'll be shot. And in the South, you'll be eaten by those cannibals. Damn you and your crazy ideas!"

"Hold on, Guy, don't shout. Give me a chance to explain."

"I don't want to hear anything. Stop the tank!"

"Now, wait a minute," persisted Maxim. "Let me talk!"

Guy was unrelenting. He demanded that the illegally seized tank be stopped immediately and returned. The engine's roar drowned out a string of curses. The situation, massaraksh, was horrendous. It was hopeless,

massaraksh! Ahead, massaraksh, waited certain death. To go back, massaraksh, would lead to the same. Maxim was a blockhead and a lunatic, but this escapade would be his last.

Maxim deliberately refrained from interrupting Guy's tirade. He realized that the range of the last tower's radiation field ended somewhere in this area, had perhaps ended: the last outpost was supposedly located at the outer limit of the most distant radiation field. Let the poor devil get it off his chest; talk was cheap on the inhabited island. "Curse all you want to," he thought to himself, "but I'll drag you out of here anyway. This country is no place for you. We must begin with someone, and you're the first. I don't want you to be a puppet, even if you enjoy it."

When Guy had finished cursing out Maxim, he jumped through the hatch and tinkered with the controls, trying to stop the tank. Unsuccessful, he climbed out again, wearing his helmet. He was silent and determined. Obviously he intended to jump off and return to his post. He was furious. Maxim caught him by his pants, pulled him back, and began to explain the situation.

He spoke for over an hour, pausing occasionally to turn the tank. At first Guy tried to interrupt, plugged his ears, and attempted to jump off the moving vehicle. But Maxim persisted, talking on and on, repeating the same thing over and over again, explaining, persuading, dissuading. Finally, Guy began to pay attention. He grew pensive, upset, ran both hands under his helmet and scratched his head; then he took the offensive and began to quiz Maxim. Where, he wanted to know, did he get all his facts, and who could prove that they weren't a pack of lies? Maxim kept hammering away with facts, and when he had exhausted his supply, he swore that he had been telling the truth. When Guy still failed to respond, he called him a blockhead, puppet, and robot. Meanwhile the tank continued to roll southward, deeper and deeper into the land of mutants.

"Well, all right. We'll check it out right now." Maxim was seething. "According to my calculations, we left the radiation field quite a while ago, and it's now about ten minutes before ten. What do all of you do at ten o'clock?"

"At ten o'clock -- formation."

"Exactly. And you form up into even ranks and yell your lungs out about being ready to shed blood for your cause. Remember?"

"And it comes straight from our hearts," said Guy.

"No, it's hammered into your empty skulls. Never mind, we'll find out very soon where it comes from. What time is it?"

"Seven minutes before ten," replied Guy dejectedly.

"Well?"

Guy looked at his watch and sang in a faltering voice: "Forward, legionnaires, men of iron..."

Maxim gave him a mocking look. Guy became confused and mixed up the words.

"Stop staring at me," he said angrily. "You're upsetting me. Besides,

it's hard to sing well out of formation."

"Don't give me that stuff. You used to do just as well outside of formation. It was frightening to watch you and Uncle Kaan. You'd be bellowing 'Men of Iron,' and Unc would be drawling 'Glory to the Creators.' And Rada, too. So, Guy, what has suddenly happened to your intense desire to burn and slaughter for the glory of the Creators?"

"Don't you dare talk that way about the Creators! If what you say is true, it means only that the Creators were duped."

"Who duped them?"

"Well... there are many people who..."

"So the Creators are not all-powerful?"

"I don't want to discuss the subject," declared Guy. His face grew even more gaunt, his eyes lost their luster, his lower lip dropped.

His markedly changed appearance reminded Maxim of two prisoners on the train en route to the penal colony. They were addicts, unfortunate people addicted to very powerful narcotics. Deprived of their poison, they could neither eat nor sleep and would sit for days at a time like Guy, eyes dull, lower lip drooping.

"What's wrong, Guy? Are you in pain?"

"No," replied Guy dejectedly.

"Why are you so sulky?"

"Oh, I don't know." Guy tugged at his collar. "I feel sort of lousy. Maybe I'll lie down."

He climbed through the hatch and lay down on the branches with his knees drawn up. "So that's how it is," thought Maxim. "It's not as simple as I thought." He grew uneasy. "We moved out of the field's range almost two hours ago, so Guy did not receive his usual radiation dose. He's been living inside that field all his life. Maybe he needs it. Suppose he gets sick?" He looked through the hatch at the pale face and grew increasingly fearful. Finally, unable to restrain himself any longer, he jumped into the compartment, turned off the engine, dragged Guy outside, and laid him on the grass by the side of the road.

Guy muttered and twitched in his sleep. Then he began to shiver; he hunched himself up, as if trying to warm his body. Maxim placed Guy's head on his knees, pressed his fingers to his temples, and tried to concentrate. He hadn't performed psychomassage for a long time, but he knew that everything except the patient must be excluded from one's consciousness. He must assimilate the patient into his own healthy system. For ten or fifteen minutes he maintained the same position, and when he returned to his normal state of consciousness, he saw that Guy had improved. His color had improved, his breathing was regular, and his shivering had ceased. Maxim made a pillow out of grass and sat next to him for a while, chasing away the insects. Suddenly he remembered the long journey ahead of them and the leaky reactor. That was dangerous for Guy; he must figure something out. He rose and returned to the tank.

It took him some time to remove several sheets of armor plating, held fast by rusted rivets, from the side of the tank; then he fastened the

sheets to a ceramic shield that separated the reactor and engine from the control compartment. As he was about to attach the last sheet, he sensed the approach of a stranger. He thrust his head through the hatch cautiously. A cold shiver ran through him.

On the road, about ten paces from the tank, stood three figures. Maxim did not realize immediately that they were humans. True, they wore clothing, and two of them were holding a pole across their shoulders, from which dangled the bloody head of a small hoofed animal, like a deer. And a huge rifle of unfamiliar make was slung across the pigeon breast of the third figure. "Mutants. These are the mutants." All the tales and legends he had heard suddenly came to mind and appeared quite plausible: cannibals, savages, animals. Clenching his teeth, he jumped onto the armor plating and rose to his full height. The figure holding the rifle shuffled his short bowed legs comically, without moving from the spot. He raised his hand with its two long multijointed fingers, hissed loudly, and then said in a scratchy voice: "Do you want to eat?"

Maxim relaxed. "Yes."

"You won't shoot?"

"No," Maxim smiled. "I promise."

15.

Guy sat at the crude homemade table and cleaned his gun. It was almost 10:45 A.M., and the world for him was gray and colorless, cold and joyless, dreary and painful. He had no desire to think, to see, to hear. Or even to sleep. All he wanted was to lay his head on the table and die.

The room was small, with a single paneless window. It looked out on a vast rust-colored wasteland cluttered with ruins and overgrown with wild bushes. The wallpaper in the room was dried up and curling, from either heat or age; the parquet flooring had shrunk and was burned to a crisp in one corner. Nothing remained from its former owner except a large framed photograph beneath broken glass. Close up one could make out an elderly man with ridiculous sideburns wearing a silly hat that looked like a tin plate.

His eyes would have preferred not to see their surroundings; he would have liked to howl like a homeless dog, but Maxim had issued strict orders: "Clean that gun!" And banging his fist against the table, he had shouted to Guy, "Every time you feel that rotten sensation coming on, sit down and clean that gun." So he had to clean it.

Still the same Mac. If not for Mac, he would have lain down a long time ago and died. He had pleaded with Mac: "For God's sake, don't leave me alone. Stay with me, cure me." Mac refused. Now he must cure himself. Mac had assured him that his illness wasn't fatal, that it would pass, but he must fight it and cope with it himself.

"All right," thought Guy sluggishly. "I will. I'll cope with it. Yes,

still the same Mac. Neither man, nor Creator, nor god." And Mac had also advised him: "Let yourself get good and mad! When that rotten feeling comes on, remember where it came from, who addicted you, and why. Get damn mad and hold onto your hatred. You'll need it soon. You're not alone. There are forty million like you who've been turned into fools, poisoned." Massaraksh, it was hard to believe after spending his whole life in the service, where you always knew where you stood. Everything was simple, everyone was together, and it was great to be like everyone else. Then Mac came along, ruined his career, literally dragged him away from the service, and took him off to another life that didn't make sense to him; where, massaraksh, he had to think for himself, make his own decisions, do everything himself. Yes, Mac had dragged him away and forced him to take a good look at his country, his home, at everything dear to him, and had shown him a cesspool of abominations and lies. You looked back... and, true, there was little beauty. It was nauseating to recall how he and his Legion buddies had behaved. And that Captain Chachu!

In a fit of anger Guy drove the bolt into place. But, again, he was overwhelmed by inertia and apathy, and he no longer had the will to insert the magazine. He felt utterly lost.

The squeaky warped door opened, and a small serious face poked through. If it weren't for the bald skull and inflamed eyelids, it would be almost likable. It was Tanga, the kid next door.

"Uncle Mac wants you on the square at once! Everyone there is waiting for you."

He cast a sidelong glance at her, morosely; at the puny body in the little dress of rough cloth, at the abnormally thin matchstick hands covered with brown spots, at the bowed legs swollen at the knees; and he felt ashamed at his revulsion. She was only a child, and who was to blame for her condition? He turned away and said: "I'm not going. Tell him I don't feel well. I'm sick."

The door squeaked, and when he raised his eyes again the girl was gone. Irritated, he threw the gun down on the bed, went over to the window, and leaned out. With amazing speed, the little girl skimmed along between the ruins of walls, along what had once been a street. A toddler tagged along behind her for a few steps, caught hold of her dress, fell down, raised her head for a few seconds, and bawled in an awful bass voice. Her mother sprang from the ruins. Guy recoiled sharply, shook his head, and returned to the table. "I'm sorry, but I can't get used to it. I know how rotten I am. If I ever run into the individual responsible for this, I won't miss. Why can't I get used to it? I've seen enough in this one month for a hundred nightmares."

Most mutants lived in small communes. Others roamed, hunted, and looked for better places to live; they searched for a route leading to the North, a route skirting the legionnaires' machine guns, skirting the terrible regions where they died on the spot of excruciating headaches. Others had settled on farms in hamlets, after surviving the war and three atom bombs. One had been dropped on this city, and two in the suburbs, leaving miles of defoliated

earth covered with glistening slag. The settlers sowed scrawny, degenerate wheat; cultivated their weird vegetable gardens where tomatoes were as small as berries and berries as large as tomatoes; and they raised ghastly cattle whose appearance took away your appetite. These were a pitiful people -- mutants, the wild southern degens about whom all sorts of stupid tales and legends had been told. He, too, had woven such stories. They were quiet, sickly, deformed caricatures. Only the old folk here were normal, but very few were left; all of them were ill and doomed to die soon. Their children and grandchildren were not long for this world either. They bore many children, but almost all of them died at birth or in infancy. Those who survived were weak and suffered constantly from unknown ailments. The deformed ones were horrors to behold. But all of them appeared to be intelligent. There was no denying that the mutants were good, kind, hospitable, peaceful people. But, thought Guy, it was impossible to looklook at them. Initially Maxim, too, agonized at the sight of this strange spectacle, but he quickly grew accustomed to it. After all, he was the master of his emotions.

Guy inserted the magazine in his gun, rested his head in his hands, and pondered his predicament.

No question about it. This time Maxim had undertaken an obviously senseless mission. He was rounding up the mutants, arming them, and planning to drive back the Legion, for the beginning at least, to the Blue Snake River. Ridiculous! They could scarcely walk; many would die if they had to walk a mile. Merely lifting a sack of grain was enough to kill some of them -- and he wanted to attack the Legion with them! Untrained, weak -- totally unfit. Even if he rounded up those... their intelligence agents... their entire army could be wiped out by one captain single-handed. That is, their army without Maxim. And with Maxim, one captain and his company could finish them off. Guy thought, "Maxim has been running around the forest for a solid month, from village to village, from commune to commune, trying to persuade the old men and influential citizens to support him. I've been running around, too, and he's dragged me with him everywhere. He's given me no peace. The old men don't want to join him, nor will they permit their intelligence agents to join him. So now they are having a meeting about it -- but I'm not going!"

The world seemed brighter to him now. Looking around him, he didn't feel quite as miserable; his pulse had quickened and vague hopes stirred within him, hopes that today's meeting would end in failure, that Maxim would return and say: "OK, enough. There's nothing more we can do here." They would move on, further south, to the desert. They said it was also inhabited by mutants, but not as ghastly and sick as these. More like people. Supposedly they had some sort of government, even an army. Maybe they could make some headway with them. True, everything was radioactive there; one bomb after another had been dropped on them in order to contaminate the region. He had heard about such special contamination bombs.

Reminded about radioactivity, Guy dug into his bag for the container of

yellow tablets. He swallowed two of them and writhed from the penetrating burning sensation. The miserable stuff had to be taken; this place was contaminated too. In the desert, he'd probably have to consume them by the handful. Without these pills he'd be done for. He was grateful to the duke for them. The duke was an unusual man. Nothing bothered him, nothing discouraged him, even in this hell. He helped people, treated them, made rounds, and even set up a plant to produce drugs and medicines.

The door burst open. Wearing only a pair of shorts, Maxim strode into the room angrily.

"No excuses. Let's go!"

"I don't want to," replied Guy. "The hell with all of them! It makes me sick to look at them. I can't."

"Nonsense. They're fine people and have a great deal of respect for you. Stop acting like a child."

"Oh, sure, they respect me."

"They certainly do! Recently the duke asked that you remain here. He said he would die soon and needed a real man to replace him."

"Oh, sure, replace him," muttered Guy, succumbing to Mac's pleading.

"Boshku is nagging me, too. He's too shy to speak to you directly. 'Let Guy stay,' he says. 'He'll teach us, protect us, train some fine fighters.' Do you know how Boshku talks about you?"

Guy gave in. "Well, all right. Should I take my gun?"

"Take it. You never can tell."

Guy put the gun under his arm and they left the room. They descended the rotten staircase, stepped across some children playing in the dirt by the door, and walked down the street toward the square. "How many people perished here when that bomb was dropped! They say this once was a beautiful city. Those bastards ruined the country. They not only killed and crippled people, but bred evil, the like of which has never been seen. And not only here."

The duke had told them that animals resembling dogs had lived in the forest before the war. He forgot what they were called. They were intelligent and well-behaved, and it was a pleasure to train them. Naturally, they were trained for military purposes. Then a linguist turned up who had deciphered their language. They actually had one, and a rather complex one at that. They loved to imitate, and the physiology of their throats made it possible to teach some of them some fifty to seventy words. On the whole they were amazing animals. We should have befriended them, said the duke, taught each other, and helped each other. "You'll hear they died out, but that isn't true. They were trained to fight, to penetrate enemy territory for military intelligence. Then war broke out and there was no time for them, or for anything else. And they, too, mutated -- so now we are faced with the vampires. Very dangerous creatures." An order to fight them was even issued in the Special Southern Zone, and the duke admitted quite frankly: "This is the end for us. Vampires will eventually take over the entire region."

Guy recalled how Boshku and his hunters had once shot a deer in the

forest. "It was being pursued by vampires, who decided to fight for it. And what kind of fighters were Mac's friends? They fired a single shot from their ancient rifles, flung them down, dropped to the ground, and covered their eyes with their hands so they wouldn't see themselves mauled to pieces. And Maxim, too, lost his head. Well, not exactly, but he didn't want to fight the vampires. I had to do their dirty work for them. Clips were all gone, so I used my gun butt. Luckily, there weren't many of them. Six, in all. Two were killed, one escaped, and three were knocked unconscious. We bound them and planned to take them to the village in the morning and execute them. Well, that night I took a look and what did I see? Maxim had gotten up quietly and gone to them. He sat with them, nursed them, applied hand massage, then untied them. They weren't fools. Naturally, they took to their heels. I said to him: 'Mac, why the hell did you do that?' 'I don't know myself,' he said, 'but I feel that it's wrong to execute them. Wrong to kill people, or even these things. They are neither dogs nor vampires.'

"If they aren't vampires, what are they? Flying mice? The hell they are: they're flying horrors. What else could be roaming through the village at night, stealing children? And they don't even enter the house, but the children, still asleep, go out to them. Suppose it is a pack of lies -- but I've seen a thing or two myself. I still remember the day the duke took us to see the closest entrance to the Fortress. We saw this beautiful, peaceful green meadow. And a knoll. In the knoll was a cave. We looked and saw the entire meadow in front of the cave's entrance strewn with dead vampires. About two dozen of them, at least, and they weren't crippled or wounded. Not a drop of blood on the grass. But most surprising was Maxim's diagnosis after he had examined them. Not dead, he said, but in a trance, as if they had been hypnotized. The question is how did it happen. It's certainly an uncanny place. You can go there only in the daytime, and even then you have to be careful. If it weren't for Maxim, I'd have taken off like a streak of lightning. But where could I have gone? It's all forest, and the forest is full of evil spirits. No tank -- our tank sank in a swamp. Could I have run back to my own country? That would have seemed the natural thing to do -- to run back to my own people. But are they mine now? They, too, are freaks, puppets. Maxim is right. What kind of people are they, that they can be controlled by machines? No, I've no use for them."

Maxim and Guy entered the square, a wasteland; in its center stood the fused metal remains of a monument. They turned toward the one surviving cottage where the city's representatives gathered to exchange rumors and advice on sowing or hunting, or simply to sit, doze, or listen to the duke's stories of bygone days.

The people had already assembled in a large, clean room. How repulsive it was to look at them. Even at the duke. Although apparently not a mutant, he too was disfigured. Bums and scars covered his face. They entered, exchanged greetings, and sat down in a circle on the floor. Boshku, who was sitting beside the stove, removed a teapot from the coals, and served each of them a cup of good strong tea. Without sugar. Guy accepted his cup -- a

cup of unusual beauty, priceless, made of royal porcelain. He set it down in front of him, leaned the butt of his gun on the floor between his knees, pressed his forehead against its ribbed barrel, and closed his eyes to avoid seeing them.

The duke opened the meeting. He had been the Fortress' chief surgeon. When the atom bombs began falling on the Fortress, the garrison revolted and hung out a white flag. For hanging out the white flag of surrender, their own forces dropped a thermonuclear bomb on them immediately. The real duke commanding the Fortress was torn to pieces by the soldiers. In their fury they killed all their officers. They suddenly realized that they were leaderless and that without a leader they were lost: the war was still raging, both the enemy and their own side were attacking them, and none of the soldiers knew the layout of the entire Fortress. They were caught in a gigantic mousetrap. Then came bacteriological warfare -- germ bombs. An entire arsenal was dropped on them, and plagues broke out. Half the garrison escaped, scattering in different directions; three-fourths of the remaining soldiers died, and the chief surgeon assumed command of the survivors. They acquired the habit of calling him duke initially as a joke, but the title stuck.

"Friends!" said the duke. "We are here to discuss the proposals made by our friend Mac. They are very important proposals. How important they are, you can judge by the fact that the Wizard has honored us with his presence and may even speak to us."

Guy raised his head. It was true: in the corner, leaning against the wall, sat the Wizard himself.

Although he was awesome to look at, Guy felt compelled to do so. Even Maxim was awed and had said to Guy: "The Wizard is really an unusual person."

The Wizard was small, stocky, and neat; his hands and feet were short but strong, and he was not too disfigured. In any case, the word "disfigured" did not properly describe him. He had an enormous skull covered with thick coarse hair, like silvery fur; a small mouth with strangely shaped lips that made him look as if he were about to whistle through his teeth; and a lean face with bags under his eyes. And the eyes themselves were long and narrow, with vertical pupils, like a snake's. He rarely spoke or appeared in public -- he lived alone in a basement at the far end of the city -- but he enjoyed tremendous prestige. First of all, he was very intelligent and wise, although he was no more than twenty years old and had never set foot outside the city. Whenever problems arose, his advice was sought. As a rule he did not reply to a question; his silence meant that the issue was trivial and would resolve itself satisfactorily. But if it were a vital question -- about weather, what and when to sow -- he always answered and never made a mistake. Only the city's elders visited him, and they never discussed their visits, but people were convinced that the Wizard never opened his mouth, even when offering advice. All he did was look at them and they knew what had to be done. Second, he possessed unusual power over

animals. He never demanded food or clothing from the public: animals of all kinds, including insects and frogs, supplied his needs. His chief servants were enormous bats with whom he could communicate. It was said, too, that he knew the *unknown*. It was beyond all comprehension and Guy thought that it was no more than a set of words: a black, empty World preceding the appearance of the World Light; a dead, icy World when the World Light was extinguished; an endless Wasteland with many World Lights. No one could explain what this meant, and Mac would only shake his head and mutter with admiration: "There's a mind for you!"

The Wizard sat in his corner, staring off into space. On his shoulder was perched a nightbird. From time to time, the Wizard drew bits of something from his pocket and put them into its beak; then it would stand stock-still for a second, crane its neck, and swallow the morsel with apparent difficulty.

"These are very important proposals," continued the duke. "So I beg you to pay attention. And you, Boshku, my good man, brew the tea a bit stronger, because I see someone dozing off. Don't fall asleep. Please! Pull yourself together, friends; perhaps your fate will be decided here today."

The gathering mumbled approvingly. A white-maned man, about to doze off against a wall, was dragged away and planted in front of the speaker.

"I wasn't asleep," he muttered. "Just a couple of winks, that's all. But keep your speech short, or by the time you get to the end, I'll forget the beginning."

"All right," agreed the duke, "I will. The soldiers are pressing us southward, into the desert. They will give us no quarter and will not negotiate. Of those families that tried to make their way to the North, none has returned. We assume they have perished. In ten or fifteen years, they will have driven us into the desert altogether, and there we shall perish from the lack of food or water. They say that the desert regions are inhabited by humans. I don't believe that, but many respected leaders do. They say that the desert dwellers are as cruel and bloodthirsty as the soldiers. We, a peace-loving people, do not know how to fight. Many of us are dying and will not live to see the end of our people. But we are governing our people; therefore, it is our duty to think not only of ourselves, but of our children... Boshku," he said, "please give our dear Mr. Baker a cup of tea. I think he's dozed off."

Baker was awakened, and a cup of hot tea was placed in his mottled hand. The duke continued.

"Our friend Mac has proposed a way out. He has come to us from the soldiers. He hates the soldiers and says we can expect no mercy from them. They have been duped by their tyrants and are bent on destroying us. At first Mac wanted to arm us and lead us into battle, but now he is convinced that we are too weak and cannot fight. Then he decided it would be wise to contact the desert dwellers. He, too, believes in their existence and wants to negotiate with them and lead them against the soldiers. What is required of us? He wants us to approve this undertaking, to permit the desert people passage through our land, and to supply them with food while they are

engaged in warfare. Our friend Mac has also proposed that we give him permission to assemble all our intelligence agents who are willing to join him. He will train them to fight and will lead them across the Blue Snake River to stir up an insurrection there. That, in brief, is the situation. We must come to a decision today, and I beg you to express your opinions."

Guy cast a sidelong glance at Maxim, huge and immobile as a rock. No, not a rock, but a gigantic storage battery, ready to discharge its tremendous reserve of energy. Mac was looking at the Wizard in the far corner of the room but sensed Guy's glance and turned to him. Guy realized how his friend had changed. Mac had not flashed his famous dazzling smile or sung his mountain songs for a long time; his eyes lacked their former warmth and had grown hard and glazed like Captain Chachu's. No longer did Mac dash about like a lively puppy prying into every corner. He showed restraint now. A certain severity and purposefulness had come over him, as if he were aiming at a target visible to him alone. Yes, since the day that heavy army pistol had discharged its bullets into him, Mac had changed drastically. Well, maybe it had to be.

But what he was planning now was frightening: there was bound to be a slaughter, a terrible slaughter.

"There's something I don't understand," declared a balding freak who, judging from his attire, was a stranger. "What the devil does this man want? Those barbarians to come here, to us? They'll kill us all off. Don't you think I know what those barbarians are like? They'll kill us all off."

"They will come here in peace or not at all," replied Mac.

"It would be better if they didn't come at all," said the balding stranger. "It's better not to have any dealings with those barbarians. I'd rather face the soldiers with their machine guns."

"What he says is true, of course," said Boshku thoughtfully. "But, on the other hand, the barbarians could drive away the soldiers and not bother us. Then everything would turn out all right."

"What makes you think they won't bother us?" said the white-maned man. "Everybody else has been bothering us from time immemorial. Why are they going to be an exception?"

"But he'll make a deal with them," explained Boshku. "'Hands off our forest folk,' he'll say, 'otherwise, don't come.'"

"Who? Who'll negotiate?" asked Baker, turning his head.

"Mac, of course. Mac will negotiate."

"Oh, Mac. Well, if Mac negotiates, maybe they won't touch us."

The white-maned man rose suddenly.

"I'm leaving," he announced. "No good will come of this. They'll kill Mac and us, too. Why should they spare us? We'll all be finished in about ten years anyway. No children have been born in my commune for two years. Let me live out my years in peace. Decide for yourselves as you wish. I don't care."

He exited clumsily, stumbling out the doorway.

"Mac," said Leech, "you must excuse us, but we can't trust anyone. How

can we trust the barbarians? They live in the desert, eat and drink sand. They are terrifying people, made of iron wire. They don't know how to laugh or cry. What are we to them? Nothing more than moss beneath their feet. So they'll come, kill the soldiers, squat here, and burn our forest. What do they need our forest for? They love the desert. Again, it will mean the end for us. No, I don't trust them. Mac, I don't trust them. Your scheme is hopeless."

"No, Mac," said Baker, "we don't need this. Let us die in peace; don't bother us. You hate the soldiers, you want to destroy them, but that's none of our business. We don't hate anyone. Have pity on us, Mac. No one else ever has. Although you are a decent man, you feel no pity for us. You don't, do you, Mac?"

Guy glanced at Mac again and turned away his eyes, embarrassed.

Maxim turned red. "That's not true," he said. "I do feel pity for you. But not only for you. I..."

"No-o, Mac," insisted Baker. "Pity us, and us alone. We are the most unhappy people in the world, and you know that. Forget about your hatred. Pity us, and that's all."

"Why should he pity us?" came the voice of Ore, who was swathed in bandages right up to his eyes. "He's a soldier himself. When did soldiers ever pity us? The soldier has yet to be born who will pity us."

"I'll tell you how it will turn out," said the bald-headed stranger soberly. "Let's say the barbarians are stronger than the soldiers. They'll kill the soldiers, destroy their towers, and seize the entire North. All right. We would feel no pity for the soldiers. Let them all be slaughtered. But what do we gain? It will still be the end for us: we'll have barbarians in the South, barbarians in the North, barbarians on top of us. They won't need us, and so they'll destroy us. That's one possibility. Now, let's say the soldiers repulse the barbarians. They repulse the barbarians, and the war rolls through our land and into the South. What then? Again, we'll be done for: soldiers in the North, soldiers in the South, and soldiers on top of us. And we know those soldiers."

The people buzzed approvingly. The stranger had expressed their sentiments well. But he hadn't finished yet.

"Let me finish!" He was angry. "Settle down. You haven't heard everything yet. It's also possible that the soldiers will kill off the barbarians, and the barbarians, the soldiers. Then, it seems, we'd be able to live. But no, it still won't work. Because there are still the vampires. While the soldiers are alive, the vampires hide; they fear bullets. The soldiers have orders to shoot the vampires on sight. But once the soldiers are gone, we'll really be done for. The vampires will devour us and not even leave our bones."

"He's right, he's right!" voices rang out. "Yes, brothers, we forgot about the vampires. They're not asleep; they're biding their time. We don't need anything, Mac. Let things be as they are. We've managed to live these past twenty years for better or for worse, and we'll last another twenty. Then we'll see."

"We must not give him our intelligence agents!" The stranger's voice rose. "It doesn't matter what they themselves want. What do they care -- they don't live at home anyway. Those six-fingered guys spend all their days and nights on the other side. They steal and live it up. They get along fine there; they aren't afraid of the towers. No headaches for them, no pains. And what about us here? The wild game is moving northward. Only our agents can drive it back to us. No, don't give him our agents! We must regain control over them. They've gotten out of hand. They murder, kidnap soldiers and torture them. They don't behave like human beings. No, don't let them go, or they'll be completely corrupted!"

"Don't let them go! No! No!" the people shouted in support.

The stranger finally quieted down, took his seat, and gulped down his tea, which had grown cold. The meeting settled down. The old men sat immobile, trying not to look at Maxim.

Boshku nodded sadly. "You must understand, Mac, how miserable our lives are. There is no salvation. What have we done to anyone to deserve this?"

"We never should have been born," said Ore. "And we, too, are having children. Only to perish. Yes, to perish."

"Balance." A loud, hoarse voice suddenly interrupted the debate. "I've told you that already, Mac. You didn't want to understand me."

The source of the voice was puzzling. The room grew still; the people bowed their heads solemnly. Only the bird on the Wizard's shoulder shifted about, opening and closing its yellow beak. The Wizard himself sat motionless, his eyes closed, his thin lips tightly compressed.

"But I hope you understand now," continued the voice. It seemed as if the bird itself were speaking. "You want to destroy this balance. Well, that certainly is possible; it is within your power. But the question is, why should you? Who is asking you to? No one. What, then, is driving you?"

The bird bristled and tucked its head beneath a wing, but the voice continued. Guy understood now that it was the Wizard himself speaking, without moving a muscle on his face or parting his lips.

It was very frightening, not only to Guy but even to the duke. Maxim alone looked at the Wizard, sullenly, almost defiantly.

"Yes," continued the Wizard, "I know what is driving you. The impatience of a troubled conscience! Your conscience has been spoiled by constant attention; it groans at the slightest discomfort, and your reason bows before it respectfully instead of scolding it and putting it in its proper place. Your conscience is disturbed by the existing order of things, and your reason obediently and hastily seeks a way to change that order. But order has its own laws, laws that develop from the aspirations of human beings and that can change only with a change in these aspirations. On the one hand, we have the aspirations of human beings; on the other your conscience, embodying your aspirations. Your conscience drives you to change the order of things, that is, to destroy the laws of this order, laws determined by the aspirations of the masses; drives you to change the aspirations of those millions of human beings to conform to your own. It's

absurd -- it lacks an understanding of history. Your reason, clouded and stunned by your conscience, has lost the ability to distinguish what is truly good for the people from what you imagine to be good, the imagined good dictated by your conscience. You must keep your reason pure. If you don't want to or can't, then it will be the worse for you. And not only for you. You will tell us that in the world you come from people cannot live with a bad conscience. So stop living. That's not a bad alternative, either -- for you as well as others."

The Wizard fell silent and all eyes focused on Maxim. Guy could not fully comprehend what was going on. Evidently it was the echo of an old argument. It was also clear that the Wizard considered Maxim an intelligent but capricious individual who acted more out of whim than necessity. That offended Guy. Of course Maxim was somewhat eccentric, but he never spared himself and wanted only good for everyone. And this stemmed from deep conviction, not from shallow whim. Naturally, forty million people duped by radiation were utterly opposed to change. But, after all, they had been duped. The Wizard's judgment was unfair.

"I can't agree with you," said Maxim coldly. "Conscience, driven by its own pain, sets the task; reason carries it out. Conscience sets ideals; reason searches for the path to fulfillment. That, precisely, is reason's function: to find that path. Without conscience, reason works only for itself; that is, it runs idle. In respect to the contradiction between my aspirations and those of the masses, let me say this -- there exists a clear ideal: man must be free spiritually and physically. The people in this world still are unaware of this ideal, and the path to it is a difficult one. But a beginning must be made sometime. And I intend to begin right now."

"True," agreed the Wizard. "Conscience does set ideals. But ideals are called ideals because of their striking disparity with reality. All I want to say is this, and I repeat: don't baby your conscience, but expose it a little more frequently to reality's dusty winds, and don't worry if a few spots or rough scabs appear on it. But you yourself understand that. You simply have not yet learned to call things by their right names. But you will. For example, your conscience proclaimed the task of overthrowing the tyranny of the Creators. Your reason weighed the situation and offered advice: 'Since it is impossible to destroy this tyranny from within, we'll strike from without; we'll throw the barbarians at it. What if the forest folk are crushed and the Blue Snake River is clogged with corpses; what if it triggers a major war -- it's all for the sake of a noble ideal.' 'Well then,' said your conscience, I must become a little less civilized for the sake of a great cause.' "

"Massaraksh!" sputtered Maxim, angrier than Guy had ever seen him. "Yes, massaraksh! Everything is as you say! But what is to be done? The people beyond the Blue Snake have been turned into puppets."

"True, true," said the Wizard. "Another thing, your plan is a poor one: the desert barbarians will smash themselves against the towers and be rolled back. Our intelligence agents are not really fit for any serious task. Within the framework of your plan you could ally yourself, for example, with

the Island Empire. But that's not the point. I'm afraid you're too late, Mac. But don't think I'm trying to dissuade you. It's quite obvious to me that you are a real force. And your appearance among us signifies in itself the inevitable disturbance of the balance on the surface of our little world. Don't stop. But don't let your conscience prevent you from thinking clearly, and don't let your reason be shy about pushing aside your conscience when necessary. I advise you to remember this: I don't know how it is in your world, but in ours no force remains long without a master. There is always someone who tries to tame it -- either covertly or on some noble-sounding pretext. That's all I want to say."

With surprising agility, the Wizard rose, slid along the wall on his short legs, and vanished behind the door. Immediately, the entire meeting followed him out. Although they had only a vague understanding of the exchange between the Wizard and Maxim, they were obviously satisfied that their situation remained unchanged, that the Wizard had not permitted this dangerous undertaking to be implemented. The Wizard, they felt, pitied them and had seen to it that no harm would come to them. Perhaps now they could live as before; ahead of them stretched a whole eternity -- some ten years, maybe even more. Boshku, with his empty teapot, was the last to leave, and only Guy, Mac, the duke, and Baker were left in the room. Baker was fast asleep in a corner, exhausted from the mental strain. Guy felt troubled and depressed. "How unlucky I've been all my life. During the first half I was a puppet, a fool. And now I must live out the second half as a vagabond, a man without a country. Without friends. Without a past."

"I suppose you're disappointed, eh, Mac?" The duke wore a guilty expression.

"No, not very," replied Maxim. "On the contrary, I feel relieved. The Wizard is right; my conscience isn't ready to undertake such tasks. I must travel about more, see more, train my conscience. Duke, what would you suggest?"

The aged duke rose, rubbing his numbed side. He paced the room.

"First of all, I would advise you against going into the desert," he said. "Whether it is or isn't inhabited by barbarians, you will find nothing worth your while. As the Wizard suggested, there might be a point to establishing contact with the Island Empire, although I really wouldn't know how to go about it. I suppose you'll have to go to the sea and start from there -- that is, if the Island Empire is not a myth and if they want to talk to you. I think the wisest move would be to return to the North and work on your own. Remember what the Wizard said: you, Mac, are a force. And, as you say, the tower network must have a Center. And power over the North rests in the hands of whoever controls that Center. You should gain control of it."

"I'm afraid that's not for me," said Maxim slowly. "I can't give you the reason why now, but I feel that it's not for me. I don't want to control the Center. You are right about one thing: there is nothing for me to do either here or in the desert. The desert is too far. And here, there's no

one to rely on. But there's a lot more I must find out: there's still Pandeya, Khonti, the mountains, and the Island Empire -- somewhere... Have you heard about the white submarines? You haven't? But I have, and Guy, too. And we know a man who has seen them and fought them. So there you are: the Island Empire can fight. Well, fine." Maxim jumped up. "There's no reason to linger. Let's go, Guy."

They went out to the square and stopped beside the monument's fused remains. Guy looked around sadly. Yellow ruins bobbed and swayed in the hot haze. Although it was stifling and stinking, he no longer cared to leave this terrible but now familiar place; to drag himself through the forest and abandon himself to arcane hazards lying in wait for a man at every step. At this very moment he would like to return to his little room and play with poor little Tangle. He would make the whistle he had promised her, from a cartridge case.

"Where do you plan to go?" asked the duke, shielding his face from the dust with his crushed, faded hat.

"West," replied Maxim. "To the sea. Is it very far from here?"

"Two hundred miles, and you have to pass through some very contaminated areas. Wait, I have an idea." He paused for a long time, and Guy began to shift uneasily from one foot to the other. Maxim waited patiently. "Oh, what good is it to me!" said the duke finally. "To tell the truth, I've been saving it for myself all this time. I thought that if the situation deteriorated too rapidly here and my nerves gave out. I'd fly home, even though I could be shot down once I reached there. But now -- well, it's too late."

"A plane?" asked Maxim, looking at the duke hopefully.

"Yes, *Mountain Eagle*. Mountain Eagle. Does its name mean anything to you? No, of course not. And you, young man? It means nothing to you either. At one time it was a very famous bomber. The personal bomber of His Imperial Majesty Prince Kirnu. So I kept it. At first I wanted to evacuate the wounded on it, but there were too many of them. When all the wounded died -- I won't go into that. Take it, my friend. Fly away. It has enough fuel to go halfway around the world."

"Thank you, duke," said Maxim. "I'm very grateful to you. I'll never forget you."

"Don't worry about me," said the old man. "It's not for my sake that I'm giving it to you. If you should succeed in what you are trying to do, don't forget about these poor people."

"I'm sure I'll succeed. I must, massaraksh! Conscience or no conscience! And I shall never forget any of you."

16.

This was Guy's first airplane flight. In fact, it was the first time in

his life he had seen an airplane. He had seen police helicopters and the military command's flying platforms many times. Once he had even participated in an assault operation from the air: his platoon had been loaded into a helicopter and landed by a road where a crowd of rehabs, who had revolted because of the flood, were trudging toward a bridge. He had the most unpleasant memories of that aerial assault: the helicopter had flown very low, and he had been bounced around so violently that his insides churned. And he recalled the rotor's stupefying roar, the gasoline fumes, and the fountains of machine oil spraying everywhere.

How different this was!

Guy was electrified by His Majesty's own bomber. It was a machine of such monstrous proportions that he could not imagine how it could get off the ground. Its narrow ribbed body, decorated with golden emblems, was as long as a city block. Beneath its gigantic wings, spreading menacingly and majestically through space, an entire brigade could take cover. The blades of six enormous propellers, reaching as high as a rooftop, almost touched the ground. The bomber rested on three wheels, each several times the height of a man. Two wheels supported the front, and a third, the shelf-like tail. A light aluminum staircase, like a silver thread, led to the dizzying heights of a cockpit enclosed in shining glass. This was a real symbol of the old Empire, a symbol of a great past, a symbol of bygone power extending over an entire continent. Craning his neck, Guy trembled with awe, and Mac's words struck him like a thunderbolt: "What a crate! Sorry, duke, I couldn't help it."

"That's all we have," replied the duke coolly. "It happens to be the best bomber in the world. In its day. His Imperial Majesty flew -- "

"Yes, yes, of course," Mac agreed hastily. "I was just so surprised."

Guy, seated in the cockpit, was ecstatic. It was completely enclosed in glass. Here were scores of strange instruments, amazingly comfortable soft chairs, puzzling levers and devices, little bundles of colored wires, strange-looking helmets lying in readiness. The duke explained something to Mac hurriedly, pointing to instruments and shaking levers. Mac kept muttering absentmindedly, "Yes, yes, that's clear."

The bomber stood in an old hangar at the edge of the forest. Before it stretched a long, level, grayish-green field without a single hillock or bush. The forest began again about five miles beyond the field. The white sky seemed almost close enough to touch from the cockpit. In his excitement Guy scarcely remembered taking leave of the aged duke. The duke had said something, Mac had made a remark, they laughed, and the little door slammed shut. Guy suddenly discovered that he was fastened to his seat with broad straps, and Maxim, in the pilot's seat beside him, was manipulating levers and pedals quickly and confidently.

The dials on the instrument panel flashed on and off. Then came a crackle and the thunderous boom of the exhaust; the cockpit quivered and everything was swallowed up in the racket. Far below stood the tiny duke, clutching his hat with both hands and backing away. Guy turned around and saw the blades of the gigantic propellers vanish, fusing into enormous hazy

circles. The broad field began to crawl toward them, faster and faster. Everything had disappeared: the duke, the hangar -- there was only the field, rushing headlong toward them, and the merciless jolting and thunderous roar. Turning his head with difficulty, Guy discovered to his horror that the gigantic wings were swaying, as though they were about to drop off. Abruptly the jolting ceased, the field beneath the wings slipped away, and a pleasant sensation, as if he were floating in soft cotton, enveloped his entire being. The field below the bomber had vanished, and the forest, too. The forest had been transformed into a dark green brush, into a vast ragged blanket, and the mottled blanket slid away slowly. Guy realized that he was flying.

Enraptured, he looked at Maxim. Mac was completely relaxed, his left arm on an elbow rest, his right hand barely moving the largest and, probably, main lever. His eyes were narrowed, and his lips were pursed as if he were whistling. This, thought Guy, was truly a great man. Great and unfathomable. "He can probably do anything. He's piloting a complicated machine that he never laid eyes on until today. This is no tank or truck, but an airplane, a legendary vehicle. I didn't even know that any of them had been preserved. And that guy handles it like a toy, as if he's been flying all his life. It's simply beyond human understanding. But I suppose there are lots of things he sees for the first time, yet can figure out very quickly. And it's not just machines that know he's the boss. If he had wanted to, he could have had Captain Chachu eating out of his hand. Even the Wizard considered him his equal. And the duke, a learned man, a chief surgeon, an aristocrat, you might say, sensed something special about Mac right away. Look at the machine he entrusted to him. And to think that I wanted to marry him off to Rada! What is Rada to him? What could she mean to him? A man like that should have a countess, a princess. And he befriends an ordinary guy like me. If he told me this instant to jump. I'd do it. How much I've seen and learned because of him! I could never have done it in a lifetime. And how much more I'll see and learn because of him."

Sensing Guy's gaze, his delight and devotion, Maxim turned his head and, for the first time in months, broke into one of his broad smiles. Guy could scarcely contain an impulse to seize his powerful tanned hand and express his deep gratitude. "Oh, my dear master, my protector, my pride -- only give the command! I stand before you, I am here, I am ready. Throw me into the fire, unite me with the flames, send me against thousands of enemies, to face their gaping muzzles and millions of bullets. Oh, where are they, those enemies of yours? Where are those blind, unquestioning, repulsive people in loathsome uniforms? Where is that vicious officer who dared raise a hand to you? Oh, you scoundrel, I'll tear you apart with my bare hands. I'll... no, not now. What's that? My master is ordering me to do something; he wants something.

"Mac, Mac? Yes, I certainly am stupid. I don't understand what you're saying. I can't hear you through the roar of this machine. Oh, what an idiot I am -- of course, there's the helmet with the earphones. Ah, now I can hear

you! Give your orders, I am yours to command. I want to die for you. Order what you will. The tower? What tower? Yes, I see a tower. Those bastards, cannibals, child murderers. They've planted their towers everywhere. But we'll sweep away those towers; we'll smash them with an iron boot; we'll sweep them away with fire in our eyes. Take your machine to that tower and give me a bomb. I'll jump with it and won't miss. You'll see! Give me a bomb! A bomb!"

Guy inhaled deeply and tore at his collar. His ears rang, and the world floated and swayed before his eyes. The world was shrouded, but the haze dissolved rapidly. His throat felt dry and his muscles ached. He noticed Maxim's face -- dark, frowning, even harsh. For an instant, the memory of something sweet and pleasant flared up, then vanished. He had a sudden urge to stand at attention and click his heels, but he realized that it was inappropriate; it would irritate Maxim.

"Mac, I feel as if I did something wrong. Did I?" He looked around guiltily.

"I did, Guy, not you. I had completely forgotten about that stuff."

"What stuff?"

Maxim turned back in his seat, put his hand on the lever, and looked straight ahead. "The towers."

"What towers?"

"I turned too far north. We got caught in a radiation strike."

Guy felt embarrassed. "Did I sing 'Men of Iron'?"

"Worse. In the future, we'll be more careful."

Feeling very uneasy, Guy turned away, trying desperately to remember what he had said and done. He searched for clues in the world below. Nothing! No tower, airstrip, or hangar. Only that same ragged blanket still crawling below them. And a river, a tarnished metal snake, disappearing in a hazy wisp of smoke in the distance, where the sea rose like a wall into the sky. "I wonder what sort of nonsense I babbled. Mac seemed so upset, it must have been pretty awful. Massaraksh, I wonder if I began spouting that Legion stuff again? Where is that damn tower? Good time to chuck a bomb at it."

Suddenly the bomber lurched violently. Guy bit his tongue. Maxim grabbed the lever with both hands. Something was wrong. Guy looked around cautiously and was relieved to discover that the wing was in place and the propellers were spinning. Then he looked up. Coal black blobs, like ink drops on water, floated through the white sky above his head.

"What are they?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Maxim. "It's strange. An attack by... sky rocks. Damn it, not again! The probability is absolutely nil. Why do I seem to attract them?"

Guy was about to ask what sky rocks were, but through the corner of his eye he caught a strange movement down below, to the right, heavy and yellowish and swelling slowly above the dirty-green blanket. At first he didn't realize that it was smoke. Then, in the bowels of the swelling, something flashed, and a long black body slid from it. Instantaneously the

horizon shifted crazily, looming in front of them like a wall. His gun slid from his knees and rolled along the floor. "Massaraksh," hissed Maxim's voice through Guy's earphones. "Damn it! What an idiot I am!" The horizon straightened out again. Guy looked in vain for the yellow cloud of smoke. Suddenly a fountain of colored spray rose above the forest again, cutting right into their path. Again a yellow cloud welled up like a mountain; then a flash, and again a long black body rose slowly into the sky and burst like a dazzling white ball.

Guy covered his eyes with his hand. The white ball darkened rapidly and drifted away like a giant inkblot. The floor beneath his feet caved in. Guy opened his mouth wide, gasping for air. The cockpit darkened; jagged black smoke rolled toward him. The horizon turned again; the forest appeared quite close on their left. Guy frowned and shivered, anticipating the fatal blow, pain, and death. As he gasped for air, everything around him shook and trembled. "Massaraksh," hissed Maxim's voice through the earphones. Something rapped briefly and violently along the wall beside him, as if someone were firing point-blank from a machine gun. An icy blast struck his face and his helmet was torn off. Guy cowered, shielding his head from the terrible roar and the onrushing wind. "This is the end," he thought. "They'll knock down our plane and we'll bum up." But nothing happened. The bomber lurched several times, dropped, and zoomed up again. The roar of the engine ceased abruptly and an eerie silence followed, broken only by the wind wailing through the breach.

Guy waited a little, then raised his head cautiously, trying to shield his face from the icy blast. Maxim was here. Beside him. He sat tensely, hoping the lever with both hands, alternately looking ahead and at the instruments. The muscles of his tanned face tightened. The bomber was flying strangely; its nose stuck up at a peculiar angle. The engines were silent. Guy looked around at the wing and froze.

It was burning.

"Fire!" he yelled, trying to jump up. But the straps held him back.

"Calm down and stay where you are!" ordered Maxim without turning around.

Getting a grip on himself, Guy looked straight ahead. The bomber was flying quite low. The sea's glittering steel-gray surface rushed toward them. "We'll be smashed to hell." Guy's heart sank. "Damned duke and his damned bomber. And the Island Empire, too. If we had left quietly on foot, we wouldn't have had such bad luck. Now we're going to bum, and if we don't bum, we'll be smashed to pieces. Sure, Maxim will make it somehow, but it will be the end for me. Damn it, I don't want to die!"

"Stop jumping around!" said Maxim. "Hold tight. Now -- "

The forest ended abruptly. Guy closed his eyes as the sea's steel-gray surface rushed toward them.

A blow. A tremendous hissing. Another blow. And another. Everything was flying to hell. This was it. The end! Guy howled in terror. A powerful force seized him and tried to tear him out of his safety harness, but, frustrated, threw him back. Everything was crashing and breaking up around him.

Something was burning, and then warm water touched his skin. The noise died down. Only splashing and murmuring broke the silence. Something was hissing and crackling, and the floor began to bob slowly. Maybe he could open his eyes now and see what the next world looked like?

Guy opened his eyes and saw Maxim hanging over him, unfastening his safety belt.

"Can you swim?"

They were alive, after all.

"Yes," he replied.

"OK, let's go!"

Guy rose cautiously, expecting to feel the pain of a bruised, broken body, but he had escaped injury. The bomber rocked quietly on a small wave. Its left wing was gone, and the right was still dangling from a riddled metal strip. Its nose faced the shore squarely, as if it had swung around sharply on landing.

Maxim slung his gun across his back and opened the cockpit door. Water rushed in, and there was a powerful smell of gasoline. The plane began to list.

"Jump!" ordered Maxim, and Guy, squeezing past him, leaped obediently into the waves.

He floated to the surface, lifted his head out of the water, and headed for shore. It was close and appeared safe enough. Maxim swam beside him, cutting through the water soundlessly; he swam like a fish, as if he had been born in the water. Puffing hard, Guy moved his arms and legs with all his strength; it was very difficult to swim in clothing and boots. When his foot finally touched sandy bottom, he was overjoyed. Although it was still some distance to shore, he rose and plowed his way through the filthy, oily water. Maxim continued to swim, overtook him, and stepped onto the sloping shore before him. When Guy reached him, Maxim was standing with his feet apart and his face turned skyward. Guy looked up, too. Scores of black blobs were drifting through the sky.

"We were very lucky," said Maxim. "About ten of them were launched."

"Ten what?"

"Rockets. I had completely forgotten about them."

Guy, too, was annoyed at himself for not having thought of it sooner. Two hours ago he could have warned Mac about the rockets when the duke had offered them his bomber, and they could have refused it. He looked back at the sea. The *Mountain Eagle* had almost disappeared from sight; only its shattered tail stuck up over the surface.

"Well," said Guy, "I suppose we can't make it to the Island Empire now. What are we going to do?"

"First of all," replied Maxim, "let's take our pills. Get them out."

"Why?" asked Guy. He hated the duke's pills.

"Filthy water. Very radioactive. Every inch of my skin is burning. We'll take four apiece immediately -- make it five."

Guy hurriedly took out a vial and spilled out ten yellow pills, which

they took at once.

"OK, let's go. Take your gun," ordered Maxim.

Guy took his gun, spat out the bitter taste in his mouth, and floundered through the sand after Maxim. It was hot. His clothes dried quickly, but his boots were still soggy. Maxim walked rapidly and with assurance, as if he knew exactly where he must go, although nothing was visible except the sea on their left and a vast expanse of beach ahead of them and to their right. High sand dunes rose a mile from the sea, and the disheveled crowns of forest trees cropped up behind the dunes from time to time.

They walked about two miles. Guy kept wondering where they were and where they were going. He checked an impulse to ask Mac, deciding to figure it out for himself. But after sifting through all the facts, he could deduce only that the mouth of the Blue Snake River lay somewhere ahead of them and that they were moving north. Where and why they were going was a mystery to him. Finally, he caught up with Mac and asked him bluntly what his plans were.

Maxim explained that they would have to play it by ear. They could only hope that a white submarine would approach the shore and that they could reach it before the legionnaires did. Since the prospect of waiting amid these hot, dry sands for such an event was not particularly attractive, they would try to reach Resortia, which must be nearby. The city itself had been destroyed a long time ago, but its springs should still be active and they would find some sort of shelter. They would spend the night in the city and then decide on their next move. Perhaps they would have to spend weeks on the coast.

Guy remarked cautiously that the plan seemed rather strange to him. Maxim immediately agreed and hopefully asked Guy if he had any better ideas. Unfortunately, said Guy, he didn't, but they must keep in mind the Legion's tank patrols, which penetrated deep into the South along the coast. Maxim frowned; that was bad news. They must keep a sharp lookout and not be caught off guard. He grilled Guy about the patrols' tactics. He was relieved to learn that the tanks were more interested in patrolling the sea itself than the shore areas, and that it was easy to hide from them among the dunes. Maxim relaxed and began to whistle.

Guy kept wondering what they should do if they were spotted by a patrol. Hitting upon a plan, he outlined it to Maxim.

"If we're found," he explained, "we'll say that I was kidnapped by degens. You pursued them and fought them off. Then we wandered through the forest for days until we finally came out here."

"And where will that get us?" Maxim was not enthusiastic.

"Well," said Guy angrily, "at least they won't bump us off on the spot."

"They damned well won't. I'm not letting anyone bump me off. Or you either."

"What if there's a tank?"

"What about it?" Maxim paused briefly. "You know, it wouldn't be a bad

idea to capture a tank. Guy, that's a great idea. That's exactly what we'll do. Listen carefully: as soon as they appear, you fire into the air. I'll put my hands behind my back, and you'll take me to them as your prisoner. I'll take care of the rest. But stay out of the way and, most important, don't fire any more shots!"

Unable to contain his enthusiasm, Guy suggested immediate implementation of their plan. They would walk along the dunes, so they could be spotted from a distance.

Up they climbed, onto the dunes.

As soon as they reached the top, they saw a white submarine.

Behind the dunes a small shallow bay opened up, and a submarine lay exposed above the water, a hundred yards from shore. It scarcely resembled a white submarine. At first Guy thought it was either the corpse of some gigantic twin-humped animal or a rare rock formation that had mysteriously burst through the sands. Maxim realized at once what it was.

When they reached the bay and walked down to the water, Guy saw that its long hull and both superstructures were covered with rust; its white paint was chipped; its gun mounts were awry; and its cannon pointed down, toward the water. Black holes with sooty edges yawned in the planking. Nothing could have survived.

"What do you think, Guy? Is it really a white submarine? Have you seen them before?"

"I think it is. I never served on a coast patrol, but we were shown photographs and mentograms, and we heard descriptions of them. There was even a mentogram called 'Tanks in Our Coastal Defense System.' Yes, that's a white sub, all right. A storm must have driven it into the bay, grounded it on a shoal, and a patrol spotted it. Do you see how riddled it is? It looks more like a sieve than a sub."

"Shall we have a look?" muttered Maxim, peering at it.

"Well, uh... I suppose we could."

"What's the matter? Something wrong?"

"Well, Mac, I'm not sure I can explain it to you." How could he? Corporal Serembesh, a veteran campaigner, had told them a story about a white submarine one evening, in the dark barracks, just before they hit the sack. The subs, he said, were not manned by ordinary seamen, but by dead ones serving a second hitch. Sea demons swept along the ocean floor, catching drowned seamen to fill out the crews. How could he tell Mac such a story! He would laugh, and this was no laughing matter. Then there was the story he had heard from Private Leptu, who had been busted from officer to private for some unknown reason. "Listen, you guys," he had said to them one day when he was high, "your degens, mutants, radiation -- all that is kid stuff. You can survive it, even live with it. But you'd better pray to the Good Lord not to drop you on a white sub. You'd be better off drowning right away than touching one of those things. I should know." Before his demotion, Leptu had served on the coast and commanded a patrol launch.

"You know, Mac, there are all sorts of superstitions and legends about

the subs. I'm not going to tell you about them. But Captain Chachu, for instance, said that all those subs were contaminated by radiation. We were forbidden to board them."

"All right. You stay here, and I'll go. I'll take a look and see how badly contaminated it is."

Before Guy could open his mouth, Maxim dove into the water and disappeared for a long time. Guy held his breath waiting for him to surface. Then a mop of dark hair bobbed up by the sub's chipped side, directly under a gaping hole. Adroitly, without effort, like a fly climbing a wall, the tanned figure scrambled onto the listing deck, on to the superstructure at the bow, and vanished. Guy sighed and paced up and down by the water, his eyes riveted on the rusty monster.

It was quiet. Even the waves rolled silently in the dead bay. There was nothing here but a blank white sky and lifeless white dunes. Everything was dry, hot, and hardened. Guy looked at the rusty skeleton hatefully. "Damn it, what bad luck! Other guys serve for years and never see a sub. We walk an hour or so, and bang! -- there it is. Dropped right from heaven. Welcome aboard! How did I ever let myself get into this mess? It's all Mac's doing. He sure has a way with words. Makes you feel there's nothing to worry about. Maybe I wasn't really scared when I saw the sub because I had always imagined it would be very different -- alive, white and elegant, with sailors all in white on its deck. Now I see it's only an iron corpse. In fact this whole place seems dead. Not a bit of wind." Guy looked around sadly, sat down on the sand, placed his gun by his side, and began to pull off his right boot. "Damn it, it sure is quiet! Suppose he doesn't come back? That iron monster has swallowed him and he's vanished without a trace. Damn!"

A drawn-out, eerie sound rose over the bay. Startled, he dropped his boot. "Good Lord, it's only a rusty hatch opening. Damn, it sure made me sweat! So he opened the hatch. That means he'll be out in a minute. No, he isn't coming out."

Craning his neck, Guy studied the submarine for several minutes and listened closely. Dead silence. The same terrifying silence as before, made even more terrifying by that eerie, rusty wail. "Maybe he... maybe the hatch didn't open... maybe it closed? Closed by itself." Before Guy's terrified eyes rose a vision: a heavy steel door swings shut, by itself, behind Maxim, and a heavy bolt moves slowly into place. Guy licked his dry lips and tried to shout with his parched throat: "Hey, Mac!" Scarcely a whisper. If only he could make himself heard! "He-ey!" he howled. "He-ey!" the dunes responded gloomily. And silence fell again.

Dead silence. He no longer had the strength to shout. His eyes still riveted on the submarine, Guy fumbled with his gun; his trembling fingers released the safety. He fired a burst into the bay. There was a brief thud, as if the shots had struck a bale of cotton. A fountain sprayed above the water's smooth surface where circles formed and drifted away, growing larger and larger. Guy raised the barrel a little higher and pulled the trigger

again. Success! The bullets rattled off the metallic surface, squealing as they ricocheted. Then, nothing. Absolute, dead nothingness, as if he were alone in the world; as if he had been alone for an eternity; as if he had arrived here by magic, had been dropped into this dead place as in a nightmare. Except he could not wake up, and must remain here forever.

His mind in a whirl, wearing only one boot, Guy entered the water, slowly at first, then faster and faster; then running, raising his legs high, sobbing and swearing. The rusty hulk drew closer. He finally reached the side of the submarine and tried to climb aboard, but couldn't. He skirted the stern, grabbed hold of a rope, and, skinning his hands and knees, scrambled onto the deck. He stopped to catch his breath. Tears trickled down his cheeks. "Hey!" he shouted.

Silence.

The deck was deserted. The bow's superstructure hung above his head like an enormous speckled mushroom, and a broad jagged scar gaped in the armor. Guy skirted the superstructure and noticed a metal ladder, still wet, leading up above. Slings his gun onto his back, he climbed. For what seemed like an eternity, he climbed in the stifling silence toward inevitable death, toward eternal death. He scrambled to the top and froze, remaining on all fours. The monster was waiting for him: the hatch was wide open. Guy crawled to the gaping black hole and peered in. Suddenly his head began to spin and his stomach churned. He imagined that Mac was down there, fighting for his life against a whole pack of devils, and calling out: "Guy! Guy!"; that the heavy silence, grinning, was swallowing his cries, stifling every last sound, suffocating and crushing Mac. Unable to bear it any longer, Guy climbed through the hatch.

In his panic he lost his foothold and went crashing down to a sandy floor. It was an iron corridor, dimly lit by a few dusty bulbs. The floor directly below the shaft was covered by fine sand, blown in over the years. Guy jumped up, still rushing, afraid he would be too late, and ran through the corridor shouting: "Mac, I'm here! I'm coming! I'm coming!"

"What the hell are you screaming about?" asked Maxim, popping up out of nowhere. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

Guy stopped short. Feeling faint, he leaned against the bulkhead. His heart pounded in his ears like a drumbeat. He was tongue-tied. Maxim stared at him in surprise. Then, apparently realizing what had happened to Guy, he squeezed into the corridor, took him by the shoulder, and gently shook him. Slowly, Guy recovered his senses.

"I thought... I thought that you..."

"Never mind, never mind. It's my fault. I should have called you to come right away. But I got involved; there are so many unusual things here."

"I kept calling and calling you," said Guy angrily. "I called out, then I fired a volley. The least you could have done was answer."

"Massaraksh, I didn't hear a thing," said Maxim guiltily. "The receiver here is superb. I didn't think you knew how to produce such powerful equipment."

"Receiver, receiver." Guy squeezed through the half-opened door.

"You've been amusing yourself here while I almost went out of my mind because of you. All right, what's so unusual?"

It was a rather large room with rotted carpeting. Only one of three semicircular light fixtures attached to the ceiling worked. In the middle of the room stood a large round table surrounded by chairs. Strange photographs and pictures hung on the walls. The remains of velvet upholstery dangled like rags. A large receiver crackled and howled in the corner. Guy had never seen one like it before.

"It seems to be the wardroom," said Maxim. "Walk around, take a look. There's plenty to see."

"What about the crew?"

"Not a soul here. The lower compartments are flooded. I think they all drowned down there."

Guy looked at him in amazement. Maxim turned away with a worried expression.

"Guy, we were damned lucky not to make it to the Island Empire. Go on, take a look around."

Maxim sat down at the receiver and adjusted the fine tuner. Meanwhile Guy scanned the room, not knowing where to begin. He went over and studied the photographs. It took him a while to realize that they were X rays. The dim images of grinning skulls stared back at him. Illegible inscriptions, like autographs, had been attached to each picture. Members of the crew? Celebrities? Guy shrugged his shoulders. Maybe Uncle Kaan could figure it out.

He noticed a large bright-colored poster in the far corner, beautiful even though it had been touched by mold. It showed a blue sea, and from the sea emerged a handsome, very muscular, orange-colored figure with a disproportionately small head, half of which consisted of a powerful neck. One foot had stepped onto the black shore. The warrior clutched a scroll with an incomprehensible inscription in one hand, and, with the other, thrust a flaming torch into the ground. A city was set afire by the torch, and hideous freaks writhed in the flames. Another dozen freaks scattered on all fours in every direction. Something was written at the top of the poster in sweeping letters. The letters were familiar, but the words they formed were utterly unpronounceable.

The longer Guy studied the poster, the less he liked it. It reminded him of a poster in the barracks: a black-uniformed eagle-legionnaire (also with a small head and powerful muscles) boldly beheading hideous, warty snake with a gigantic pair of shears. He recalled the inscription on the blades: on one, "Fighting", on the other, "Legion." "Aha," said Guy to himself as he cast a last glance at the poster, "we'll see who burns who, massaraksh!"

He turned away from the poster, took several steps, and froze. A familiar face, square, with an auburn forelock over its brow and a perceptible scar on its right cheek, stared at him with glassy eyes from an elegantly varnished shelf. It was Captain Pudurash, an Iron Hero, a company

commander in the Brigade of Immortals, nemesis of white submarines (he had sunk eleven of them) who had perished in unequal combat. His bust, crowned with a wreath of immortelle, adorned every parade ground. Here his head, shrunken and yellowed, was displayed as a trophy. Guy stepped back. Yes, it was real thing. And over there was another head, an unfamiliar pointed face. And another, and still another. Lord, how many of them!

"Mac! Did you see this?"

"Yes. Take a look at the albums on the table," said Maxim. With difficulty Guy tore his eyes away from this eerie collection and hesitantly went over to the table. The receiver shouted something in an unfamiliar language; music played briefly, static crackle, and someone spoke again in a velvety, authoritarian voice: "Extermination, complete and final extermination..."

Guy selected one of the albums at random and flung back its hard leather-bound cover. A portrait. An inhuman long face with bushy side whiskers hanging from cheeks to shoulders, hooker nose, oddly set nostrils. A nasty face -- impossible to imagine it smiling. Strange uniform -- two rows of badges or medals. Quite a character. Probably some big shot.

Guy turned the page. The same character with other figures on the bridge of a white submarine; still morose, although his companions were grinning. Out of focus in the background was something that looked like a shore, some strange buildings and the blurred silhouettes of bizarre trees. Next page. Guy caught his breath; a burning "dragon" with its turret toppled over on one side; the body of a Legion tank driver hanging from an open hatch; two more bodies off to one side and, standing over them, that same character with a pistol in his hand. Dense black smoke issued from the dragon, but the places were familiar -- the same shore, sandy beach, and dunes. Turning the page, Guy braced himself. A crowd of some twenty mutants, naked, all tied together with a rope; several efficient-looking pirates holding smoking torches; and that same character, evidently giving orders, extending his right hand and laying his left on the handle of a dagger. Those freaks were so ghastly that it was frightening to look at them. But what followed was even more frightening.

The same group of mutants, but their flesh consumed by fire. The same character, his back to the corpses, sniffing a little flower and chatting with another man.

An enormous tree in the forest, loaded with swaying corpses. Some hanging by their hands, some by their feet -- and these were not mutants. One wore the checkered uniform of a rehab; another, the black jacket of a legionnaire.

An old man tied to a post. Face distorted, he was shouting something. Same character, with a concerned expression, checking a hypodermic needle.

More bodies hanging from trees, burned and burning mutants, rehabs, legionnaires, fishermen, peasants, men, women, old men, children. Panoramic snapshot: beach, four vehicles on the dunes, everything burning; two black-clothed figures with hands raised. Enough! Guy slammed down the cover and flung the album to the floor. He paused for a few seconds; then,

cursing, he threw all the albums on the floor.

"And you want to negotiate with these... these...?" he shouted at Maxim. "You want to bring these killers to us?! That butcher?" He kicked the album hard.

Maxim turned off the receiver.

"Calm down," he said. "I don't want anything anymore. And there's no reason to shout at me if your world is to blame. Your world has overslept, damn it, and descended to the level of animals. What should I do with you now? What? You don't know? Well, speak up!"

Guy remained silent.

"I know," Maxim said gloomily. "It's over for now. No negotiating. We must not bring anyone against the North now. We're surrounded by beasts, and it's them we must --" He picked up one of the albums from the floor and flipped the pages. "God, what a beautiful world you've defiled! What a world! Just take a look, see what a beautiful world it was!"

Guy looked over his shoulder. There were no horrors in this album, only landscapes, color snapshots of startling beauty and clarity: blue bays bordered by magnificent foliage, a dazzling white city perched above the sea, a waterfall in a canyon, a splendid highway with a stream of vivid automobiles, ancient castles, snow-covered peaks above the clouds, a skier gliding along a mountain slope, and laughing girls playing in the surf.

"Where is all that now?" asked Maxim. "What did you do with it, damn you? Exchange it for your iron junk? You call yourselves people?" He threw the album on the table. "Let's go!"

He stormed to the door, flung it open, and marched into the corridor. When they reached the deck, he asked Guy: "Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"OK, we'll eat in a few minutes. Into the water -- let's go!"

Guy reached shore first, removed his boot, undressed, and laid out his clothes to dry. Maxim was still in the water, and Guy watched for him anxiously: Mac had made a deep dive and had been underwater a long time. Finally he came up, dragging an enormous fish by the gills. It wore a baffled expression; it couldn't understand how it could have been caught with only bare hands. Maxim threw it onto the beach.

"I think it will be safe. Barely radioactive. Probably a mutant. We'll take our pills, and I'll prepare it right away. We can eat it uncooked. I'll show you how. You've never tried it? Give me the knife."

Guy handed it to him and Maxim filleted the fish deftly and rapidly.

After they had finished eating, they lay down naked on the beach.

"If we got caught by a patrol and gave ourselves up, where would they take us?" asked Maxim after a lengthy silence.

"What do you mean -- where? Wherever you were serving your sentence. And me -- to my army post. Why do you ask?"

"You're sure about that?"

"I couldn't be more sure. Those are the commanding general's orders. Why do you want to know?"

"We're going to start looking for legionnaires right now."

"Capture a tank?"

"No, Guy, we'll use your story. You were kidnapped by degens and a convict rescued you."

"Give yourself up?" Guy sat down. "And me, too? Back to the radiation field? What are you talking about?"

Maxim didn't reply.

"Mac, I'll become a damned fool blockhead again."

"No," replied Maxim. "Well, unfortunately, Guy... yes. But it won't be the same as before. You will be believing in something else from now on, in a just cause. Look, I know it's not the best way. But still, it's better, much better."

"But why? Why?" shouted Guy in despair. "Why must you do it?"

Maxim passed his hand over his face.

"Guy, war has broken out. It came through the receiver. I don't know how it started: either we attacked the Khontis, or they attacked us. At any rate, it's war!"

Guy stared at him horrified. War. And Rada? The same thing all over again.

"Our place is there," continued Maxim. "A general mobilization has been declared. They've even declared an amnesty for the prisoners and ordered them into the ranks. We must join them, Guy. If only I could get into your unit."

Guy scarcely heard him. Clutching his head, he rocked from side to side and kept repeating to himself: "Why, why? Damn you! Damn you!"

Maxim shook him by the shoulder.

"Get a grip on yourself!" he said sternly. "This is no time to go to pieces. We're going to have to fight very, very soon." He rose and wiped his face again. "Get your things on quickly and let's go. We have to hurry."

"Make it snappy, Fank, I'm late."

"Yes, sir. About Rada Gaal... she's been removed from the state prosecutor's jurisdiction and we have her now."

"Where?"

"At a private residence. The Crystal Swan. I feel it is my duty to tell you that I question the wisdom of this action. I doubt that such a woman can help us control Mac. Women like that are forgotten quickly, and even if Mac --" "Do you think that Smart is stupider than you are?"

"No, but..."

"Does Smart know who took her?"

"I'm afraid he does."

"All right, so he does. Enough about that. What else do you have to report?"

"Sandy Chichaku met with Puppet. Apparently Puppet agreed to bring the Count and Sandy together on condition that --"

"I'm not interested in the underground at the moment. Do you have anything on the Mac Sim case? OK, then listen. This war has messed up all

our plans. I'm leaving now and will return in thirty or forty days. I want you to finish the Mac Sim case in that time. By the time I return, Mac must be here, in this building. Give him a job, let him work, and don't interfere with his freedom. But let him know -- very discreetly -- that Rada's fate depends on him. Under no circumstances must they meet. Show him the institute, show him what we're working on -- within reasonable limits, of course. Tell him about me, describe me as an intelligent, fair person, an eminent scientist. Give him my articles, except the top-secret ones. Drop casual hints about my opposition to the government. He must not have the slightest desire to leave the institute. That's all I have to say. Any questions?"

"Yes. What about security guards?"

"None. That would be foolish."

"Should we put a tail on him?"

"OK, but use tact. No, better not. Don't frighten him. The main thing is that he shouldn't want to leave the institute. Massaraksh, what a time for me to have to leave! Is that all now?"

"One last question. Excuse me, Strannik."

"Yes?"

"Who is he really? Why do you need him?"

Strannik rose, went to the window, and said without turning around: "I'm afraid of him, Fank. He is a very, very dangerous man."

17.

When the troop train was held up on a siding next to a dingy, dirty station about two hundred miles from the Khonti border, Private Second Class Zef ran to the tank for boiling water and returned with a portable radio. He informed his companions that bedlam had broken out at the station, where two brigades were being shipped out; and the generals were barking at each other. While mingling with the crowd of orderlies and adjutants, he had managed to liberate a radio.

The trainload of soldiers greeted this announcement with shouts of approval. All forty of them quickly crowded around Zef. For a long time they were unable to settle down; they shoved, swore, and complained until Maxim finally yelled: "Shut up, you bastards!" When they quieted down Zef turned on the radio and tuned in one station after another.

Within minutes they learned some very strange things. First of all, it turned out that hostilities had not begun yet; there had been no bloody battles. The Khonti Fighting League was shouting righteously that those bandits, those usurpers, the All-Powerful Creators, were using their hirelings, the so-called Khonti Union for Justice, for treacherous provocation and were now concentrating their forces on the borders of long-suffering Khonti. The Khonti Union, in turn, castigated the Khonti

League, those paid agents of the All-Powerful Creators, and described in detail how such-and-such a unit with superior forces had driven a small unit exhausted by previous engagements across the border and kept it pinned down. These were the facts, and they served as a pretext for the so-called All-Powerful Creators to launch their barbaric invasion, which was expected at any moment. Both the League and the Union, in almost identical statements, dropped veiled hints about atomic traps lying in wait for the invasion forces of the treacherous enemy.

Zef also tuned in on some broadcasts in languages that only he could understand. He told them that the Ondol Principality still existed as a sovereign state and, moreover, continued to launch its murderous attacks on Khazzalg Island. But the ether was filled mainly with cross-invective between the commanders of units trying to force their way through to the main bridgehead along two disorganized rail lines.

The ordinary prisoners felt that their main goal should be to cross the border, where each man would become his own master; the political prisoners were inclined to a pessimistic view of the situation. They were of the opinion that they were being sent to be blown up by atomic mines. None would survive the holocaust. Therefore it would be a good idea, when they arrived at the front, to hide until it all blew over. The men held such conflicting views that a coherent discussion was out of the question, and the dispute deteriorated very rapidly into monotonous invective directed at the dirty bastards serving in the rear who hadn't served them any grub for two days and had probably ripped off all their whiskey rations. The soldiers in the penal battalion would spend the rest of the night developing variations on this theme, so Maxim and Zef forced their way through the crowd and climbed into their crude bunks.

Zef, hungry and irritated, was about to fall asleep, but Maxim wouldn't let him. "You'll sleep later. We'll probably be at the front tomorrow and we haven't come to agreement about anything yet." Zef muttered that there was nothing to agree about; that one's mind was always sharper in the morning; that Maxim was not blind and must see what a quagmire they were in; and that you couldn't go anywhere with these feeble-minded sons of bitches. Maxim replied that he wasn't concerned with that at the moment. The cause of the war, who needed it and why, was the issue he wanted to discuss -- his understanding of it was still fuzzy.

Zef muttered, yawned, and rewound his foot bindings, but after being nagged and cajoled long enough, he finally acquiesced and expounded his views on the cause of the war.

There were at least three possible causes. The primary one was economic. Everyone knew that when a country's economy was in rotten shape, the easiest dodge was to start a war as a pretext for gagging everyone immediately. Vepr, who knew a lot about the influence of economics on politics, had predicted this war several years ago. You can deceive people about the towers, but poverty is another story. How long can you tell a hungry man that he's got a full belly? He'll eventually go berserk; and it's hardly pleasant to govern a country of madmen, especially when you consider

that lunatics are not affected by radiation. Another possible cause was related to the colonial question -- markets, cheap slave labor, raw materials, all sources of profit for the Creators' personal investments. Finally, it had to be kept in mind that the Department of Public Health and the military had been bickering for years. Dog eat dog. The Department of Public Health was an insatiable organization, but if the military achieved any degree of success, the generals would make short work of the department. On the other hand, if the war ended in a stalemate, the department would make short work of the generals. Therefore, the possibility could not be excluded that the whole affair was a clever provocation concocted by the Department of Public Health. It could be the case, judging from the general chaos now rampant, and also from the fact that we had been shouting at the top of our lungs for a week and military operations hadn't begun. And maybe they wouldn't.

Just as Zef reached this point, the coupling buffers screeched, the car shuddered, shouting and whistling filled the air outside, and the troop train lurched forward. The ordinary prisoners struck up a song: "We Get No Whiskey Once Again."

"All right," said Maxim. "What you've said sounds quite plausible. Now, if the war does begin, how will it go for us? What will happen?"

Zef growled that he wasn't a general, then launched into an exposition of his views. "During a brief respite between the end of the World War and the beginning of the Civil War, the Khontis fenced themselves off from their former suzerain with a powerful line of atomic mine fields. In addition, they undoubtedly had atomic artillery, and their politicians had the foresight not to exhaust all these riches during the Civil War but to save them for us. So the invasion picture looks roughly like this: Three or four penal tank brigades will be drawn up at the spearhead of the assault; an army corps will support them to their rear; and a detachment of legionnaires in heavy tanks equipped with emitters will follow. Degens like myself will rush forward, fleeing the radiation whips, and the army corps will race forward in a frenzy of enthusiasm induced by the same emitters. Those who fail to respond properly -- and there will be some -- will be destroyed by Legion fire. If the Khontis aren't fools, they will open fire with their long-range guns and destroy the tanks, but the Khontis, we assume, are fools and hence will be engaged in mutual destruction. In the midst of this confusion, the League will attack the Union, and the Union will sink its teeth into the League's throat. Meanwhile, our courageous forces will penetrate deep into enemy territory, and the most interesting part will begin -- which we, unfortunately, will not see. Our glorious armored columns will break ranks and spread out through Khonti. If you are right about Guy, the men will then experience radiation withdrawal symptoms. And the symptoms will be especially severe because the legionnaires will have given them a super-radiation dose during the breakthrough into enemy territory.

"Massaraksh!" howled Zef. "I can just see those idiots climbing from their tanks, lying down on the ground and pleading to be shot. And the

kindly Khonti citizenry, to say nothing of Khonti soldiers, enraged by the disgraceful state of affairs, will not deny their request. There'll be a slaughter."

The train picked up speed and the car swayed violently. In a far comer, prisoners were shooting dice; a light swung back and forth beneath the ceiling; and someone was mumbling in a monotone -- probably praying.

Their eyes were burning from the dense tobacco smoke.

"I think the General Staff will take this into account and therefore there won't be a sudden breakthrough. What we'll have is trench warfare, and the Khontis, for all their stupidity, will figure out what's going on, and they'll start hunting for the emitters. I'm not sure what will happen," he concluded. "I don't even blow if we'll get grub tomorrow morning. I'm afraid we won't get anything more. Why on earth should they feed us now?"

There was a long pause.

"Are you sure we're doing the right thing? That our place is here?" asked Maxim.

"It's a staff order," muttered Zef.

"An order is an order," retorted Maxim. "OK. But we, too, have brains in our heads. Maybe we should have bolted to the capital with Vepr? Maybe we could have been more useful there?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Vepr is counting on a nuclear attack. Lots of towers will be destroyed, and regions liberated. But suppose there isn't any bombing? No one knows anything, Mac. I can imagine the bedlam at headquarters now." He grew thoughtful and stroked his beard. "Vepr fed us this nonsense about bombing, but I don't think that was the reason he bolted for the capital. I know him; he's been trying to get to those underground leaders for a long time. So it's entirely possible that heads will start rolling at headquarters."

"So there's bedlam there, too," said Maxim slowly. "They aren't prepared either."

"How can they be prepared? Some of them hope to destroy the towers, others to save them. The underground is not a political party, but a hodgepodge of ideas."

"Too bad. I was hoping that the underground was planning to use the war -- you know, the difficulties, confusion -- to take advantage of a potential revolutionary situation."

"The underground doesn't know a damn thing," said Zef gloomily. "How can we know what it's all about with emitters breathing down our necks?"

"Your underground isn't worth a damn." Maxim could restrain himself no longer.

Zef flared up. "Not so fast there! Who are you to judge us? Who are you, massaraksh, to make demands on us? You wanted a military assignment? OK, you got it. Watch everything, survive, return, and report. Does that sound too simple for you? Great! So much the better for us. Enough of this. I'm tired. Leave me alone, massaraksh. I want to sleep."

He turned his back to Maxim and shouted at the men shooting dice: "Hey,

you gravediggers! Hit the sack! Make it snappy, or else!"

Maxim lay down on his back, folded his hands behind his head, and stared at the low ceiling. Something was crawling along it. The gravediggers cursed each other softly as they bedded down for the night. The man on Maxim's left groaned and cried out in his sleep: he had been condemned to death and was sleeping, perhaps, for the last time. And everyone around him was snoring, wheezing, and muttering probably for the last time. The world was a dreary yellow, stifling and hopeless. The wheels rumbled, the locomotive wailed, and fumes drifted through the tiny barred windows.

"Everything is rotten here," thought Maxim. "There isn't one real man among them. Not a single clear head. And I've gotten myself into a mess again because I relied on other people. You can't rely on anyone or anything here. Only on yourself. But I'm of no use alone: I know enough history to realize that. Alone, a man can't accomplish a damned thing. Maybe the Wizard was right. Maybe I should stand aside from all this? But I can't. It goes against my grain. And this business of arriving at a balance of forces is frightening. But the Wizard did say that I was a force. And since we do have a definite enemy, we have a point where this force can be applied. Sure, I'll be knocked offshore. No question about it. But not tomorrow! Not until I can show that I'm a real force. We'll see... The Center. Yes, the Center. We must find it. All the underground's efforts must be focused on this one task now. And I'm going to lead the way. Working with me, they will be doing real work, doing what must be done. Yes, Zef, you're going to get down to some real work now... Listen to that guy snore. Snore away. Tomorrow I'm dragging you out of here. When will I ever get a decent night's sleep? In a clean, spacious room, between two clean sheets? Massaraksh, what a strange custom they have here -- sleeping night after night on the same sheets. Ah, yes, clean sheets, and a good book before I turn out the light and fall asleep. The train is still moving and we haven't stopped for a long time. I suppose someone decided that the war couldn't get going without us. I wonder how Guy is doing in the corporals' car. I haven't thought about Rada for a long time... Enough now, Mac, you hunk of cannon fodder. Get some sleep."

He didn't get much sleep. The train halted, a heavy door scraped open, and a stentorian voice barked: "Fourth Company. Out, on the double!" It was five o'clock in the morning and dawn was breaking. It was foggy and drizzling. Yawning and shivering in the morning chill, the penal detachment trudged sluggishly from the car. The corporals were already at their posts; angrily and impatiently they grabbed legs, pulled men off the train, and smacked them around, yelling: "Break up into teams! Take your positions! Where do you think you're going? What's your platoon? You, fathead, how many times do I have to tell you? Step lively. Take your positions!"

They split up into teams and fell in beside the cars. Some poor devil who had strayed in the fog ran around searching for his platoon and was yelled at from all sides. Zef, glum and tired, his beard all frizzy, called out in a wheezy but distinct voice: "Come on, step it up, fall in. You'll get your bellyful of combat today." A passing corporal slapped him in the

face. Maxim reacted instantly, and the corporal rolled in the mud. The delighted prisoners laughed heartily. "Brigade, attention!" shouted an invisible figure. Battalion commanders shrieked orders; company commanders echoed them down the line, and platoon leaders began running. No one stood at attention: the shock troops were running in place to warm up; the lucky ones were smoking; there was grumbling in the ranks about food -- it looked as if they wouldn't be getting grub again -- and there was cursing: "To hell with their damn war!"

"Brigade, at ease!" shouted Zef. "Fall out! Take a leak!" The crews were about to fall out, but the corporals rushed about again, and suddenly legionnaires in shiny black raincoats spread out in a thin line and ran with drawn guns along the cars. A frightened silence followed in their wake; the crews fell in quickly and straightened up their ranks.

An iron voice pierced the fog: "If any of you bastards open your traps, I'll have you shot!" Everyone froze. The anxious waiting dragged on. The fog had dispersed somewhat, revealing an ugly station, wet rails, and telegraph poles. On the right, in front of the brigade, stood a dark crowd of people. Low voices drifted from it, and someone snapped: "Carry out your orders!"

Maxim glanced back out of the corner of his eye: to their rear stood motionless legionnaires, staring at them with suspicion and hatred from beneath their black rain hoods.

A baggy figure in camouflage fatigues emerged from the crowd. It was brigade leader Anipsu, an ex-colonel basted and imprisoned for trading government fuel on the black market.

Twirling his cane, he addressed the men:

"Soldiers! I know I am not mistaken when I address you as soldiers, although all of us, myself included, are still social outcasts. Be grateful that you are being permitted to enter into battle today. In a few hours most of you will be dead, and that will be to your honor. But those of you who survive will live well: soldiers' rations, whiskey, and the rest. We'll set out for our positions now, and when you reach them you'll get into your tanks. Then about a hundred miles -- no big deal. You're not real tank soldiers, but you know that whatever you get will be yours. There is no turning back; whoever retreats will be shot on the spot. There will be no questions. Brigade! Right face! Forward! Close order, march! Blockheads! I said close order! Corporals, massaraksh! What the hell are you looking at? Cattle! Break up into fours. Corporals, break them up into fours! Massaraksh!"

With the legionnaires' assistance the corporals arranged the brigade into columns of four, and the order to come to attention was repeated. Maxim was standing rather close to the brigade commander. The ex-colonel was blind drunk. He swayed, leaned on his cane, shook his head now and then, and wiped his hand across his savage bluish face. Battalion commanders, also blind drunk, stood behind him: one giggled senselessly; another tried stubbornly to light a cigarette; a third grabbed his holster and staggered through the ranks. The men sniffed the whiskey fumes enviously, and an approving murmur ran through the ranks. "Let's go, let's go," muttered Zef. "You'll get your

bellyful of combat today." Maxim, irritated, poked him with his elbow.

"Shut up," he said through his teeth. "I'm sick of listening to that."

Two men approached the colonel: a Legion captain, clenching a pipe between his teeth, and a heavysset man, a civilian wearing a long raincoat with a turned-up collar. The civilian seemed familiar to Maxim, and he studied him more closely. The civilian whispered something to the colonel. "Hub?" answered the colonel, looking at him dully. The civilian began again, pointing at the penal columns. The Legion captain puffed on his pipe indifferently. "What do you need him for?" yelled the colonel. The civilian took out a document, but the colonel waved it away. "You can't have him," he said. "They must die together, as one man." The civilian insisted. "The hell with you!" replied the colonel. "And your department, too. They will all die, every one of them. Am I right?" he asked the captain. The captain agreed. The civilian grabbed the colonel's sleeve and jerked him forcefully. The colonel almost fell, and his face darkened with anger; he slipped his hand into his holster and pulled out an army pistol. "I'm counting to ten," he announced to the civilian. "One. Two." The civilian spat and walked away alongside the penal column, peering into the men's faces. The colonel continued to count; when he reached ten, he fired. The captain, alarmed, got him to put away his gun. "They're all going to croak, every last one," declared the colonel. "Together with me... Brigade!gade! Forward march! Damn you all to hell!"

The brigade moved along the bumpy tracks made by caterpillar treads. The column, the men slipping and grabbing onto each other, descended into a swampy hollow and slogged away from the rail line. Here the platoon leaders overtook their columns. Guy moved up beside Maxim. His face was pale and tense, and he said nothing for a long time, although Zef had asked him what he had heard. The hollow widened gradually, bushes appeared, and a grove loomed up ahead. A clumsy tank of ancient vintage, equipped with a small square turret, stuck up from the shoulder of the road where it had tipped over into a muddy ditch. Morose figures in grease-stained jackets dawdled by the tank. Then came the shock troops, hands in pockets, rigid collars upturned, marching loosely, out of formation. Many glanced around cautiously, hoping to slip away into the underbrush. The bushes were very tempting, but black-clothed figures with submachine guns were stationed every two or three hundred paces. Three fuel trucks plunged into potholes and crawled toward the troops. Their glum drivers ignored the shock troops as they passed. The rain grew heavier, and the troops more dejected. They walked in silence, submissively, like cattle, glancing around less and less frequently.

"Listen, corporal," muttered Zef, "is it true we're not getting any grub?"

Guy took a piece of bread from his pocket and gave it to him.

"That's it," he said, "until we're dead."

Zef slipped the crust through his beard and chomped away at it.

"This is insane," thought Maxim. "Everyone knows that he's headed for

certain death. Still they go, like cattle. Maybe they are counting on something unexpected? Docs each man have some sort of private plan? These fools know nothing about the emitters. Each one thinks that somewhere along the way he'll jump out of the tank and hide, while the other fools advance. We should prepare leaflets about the emitters; we should set up radio stations, although the radios work only on two frequencies. No matter, we could still get our message through to the people -- during pauses, during station breaks. Our underground people should be spreading counterpropaganda, not knocking down towers. But all that will have to come later; we must not divert our attention now. We must be vigilant and find the tiniest loopholes. We didn't see a single cannon at the tank stations, only the Legion's marksmen posted everywhere. I must keep that in mind. The hollow is a good, deep spot, and the guards will probably be removed as soon as we pass through. Guards? Everyone, including the guards, will dash forward as soon as the emitters are turned on."

With amazing clarity he could see what lay ahead. The emitters would be turned on. The shock troops' tanks would race forward with a roar, and the army would follow en masse behind them. The entire prefrontal zone would be deserted. "It's difficult to determine the depth of the zone, since we don't know the emitters' effective radius -- surely a good two miles. So for two miles inside the zone there won't be a single clear head left, except mine. No, not for just two miles. More than that. All the stationary units and all the towers will be turned on, too, and full blast for sure. The entire border region will go crazy. Massaraksh, what about Zef? He won't be able to hold out with a dose like that." Maxim cast a sidelong glance at the red-bearded former psychiatrist moving peacefully through the woods. "No, he'll hold out. At worst, I'll have to help him, although I'm afraid there may not be time. And Guy -- I can't take my eye off him for a minute. It's going to be rough. Anyway, I'll still be the boss in this murky whirlpool, and no one is going to stop me or even try to stop me."

As soon as they passed the grove, they heard the hum of loudspeakers, the roar of exhausts, and exasperated cries. Ahead, on a gentle grassy slope rising to the north, stood three rows of tanks. Men were wandering among them, through a veil of blue-gray smoke.

"Well, men, there are your coffins!" shouted a cheerful voice ahead of them.

"Take a look at what they're giving us," said Guy. "Prewar machines, junk, tin cans. Mac, what's going to happen to us? Are we really going to die here?"

"How far is it to the border?" asked Maxim. "And what's beyond the crest of the hill?"

"A plain," replied Guy. "Flat as a pancake. It's about two miles to the border. Then the lulls begin and they go as far as --"

"A river?"

"No."

"Ravines?"

"No. I don't remember. Why?"

Maxim caught his arm and squeezed it firmly.

"Don't give up, Guy. Everything will be all right."

"You mean that? Otherwise, I can't see any way out of this. They've taken away our weapons, given us blanks instead of real ammo. No machine guns. No matter which way we turn, we're going to die."

"Aha!" gloated Zef, picking at his teeth. "So, Guy, you've finally gotten your feet wet. It's not as simple as giving your prisoners a smack across the mouth."

The column straggled into the rows of tanks and halted. It was difficult to carry on a conversation over the noise. Huge loudspeakers had been set up on the grass, and a taped voice kept repeating: "Beyond the crest a treacherous enemy lies in wait. Forward! Forward! There is no retreat! Pull your accelerators back and go forward. Against the enemy. Forward! Beyond the crest a treacherous enemy lies in wait. Forward! Forward!..." Then the voice broke off in the middle of a sentence, and the colonel began to shout. He stood on the hood of his jeep while battalion leaders held his legs steady.

"Soldiers!" shouted the colonel. "Enough talk! Get into your tanks! And drivers, watch out, because I don't give a damn about you: if any one of you remains behind, I'll..." He drew out his pistol and waved it in the air. "Do you understand, you numb-skulls? Captains, lead your crews to the tanks. "

Pandemonium broke out. The colonel, swaying on the hood, continued to shout, but he was drowned out by the loudspeakers, repeating the same taped message. The shock troops dashed to the third row of tanks. A fight erupted and hobnailed boots flew through the air. A huge gray crowd swarmed slowly around the last row of tanks. Some tanks began to move, and people scattered. The colonel turned blue trying to make himself heard above the loudspeakers and in desperation fired over the soldiers' heads. Legionnaires, like a long black chain, came running from the woods.

"Let's go." Maxim gripped Guy and Zef firmly by the shoulders and led them, on the double, to the last tank in the first row.

"Wait a minute," babbled Guy, bewildered. "We're in the Fourth Company; we're supposed to be over there, in the second row."

"Keep going, don't stop!" said Maxim angrily. "Maybe you still want to lead your platoon?"

"It's the soldier in his bones," said Zef.

Someone grabbed Mac from the rear by his belt. Without turning, Maxim tried to free himself but couldn't. He looked around. Behind his back, hanging onto him stubbornly with one hand and wiping a bloody nose with the other, trailed the fourth member of the crew, the driver. A criminal, nicknamed the Hook.

"Oh," said Maxim, "I forgot about you. Come on, make it snappy."

Annoyed at himself, he made a mental note of his oversight; in all the commotion he had forgotten about a man who had been assigned an important role in his plan. At that instant, the Legion's submachine guns opened fire, and a hail of bullets pinged and hopped along the armor of surrounding

tanks, forcing Maxim to bend over and race headlong toward the last tank. When they reached it, Maxim halted.

"Obey my orders," he said. "Hook, you drive. Zef, to the turret! Guy, check the lower hatches. And thoroughly, or I'll have your head!"

He circled the tank and examined its treads. Bullets were flying all around him and the loudspeakers grumbled monotonously, but he had promised himself not to let anything divert him. He made another mental note: the loudspeakers -- Guy -- don't forget. The treads were in fairly good condition, but the front drive wheels didn't exactly inspire confidence. "Never mind, it will do. We won't be riding this monster for long." Guy, covered with mud, crawled out from under the tank.

"The hatches are rusty!" he shouted. "I didn't close them. I left them open. OK?"

"Beyond the crest, a treacherous enemy lies in wait!" repeated the taped voice. "Forward! Forward! Pull your accelerators back."

Maxim caught Guy by the collar and pulled him close.

"You're my buddy, right?" He stared hard into Guy's wide-open eyes. "You trust me, don't you?"

"Of course!"

"Obey only me! No one else! Everything else you hear is a pack of lies. I am your buddy. You can trust only me and no one else. Remember that! I am giving you an order: remember it!"

Guy nodded hastily and repeated: "Yes, yes. Only you. No one else."

"Mac!" someone shouted into his ear. Maxim swung around. Before him stood that strangely familiar man in the long raincoat. Massaraksh. That square, peeling face, those bloodshot eyes. It was Fank. He had blood on his cheek, and his lip was cut badly.

"Massaraksh!" yelled Fank, trying to be heard over the noise. "Are you deaf? Don't you recognize me?"

"Fank!" said Maxim. "What are you doing here?"

Fank wiped the blood from his lip.

"Let's go!" he shouted. "Hurry!"

"Where?"

"Let's get the hell out of here!"

He grabbed Maxim by his belt and pulled him. Maxim pushed away his hand.

"We'd be killed!" shouted Maxim. "The legionnaires!"

Fank shook his head.

"Let's go! I have a pass for you." Maxim refused to budge. "I've been searching for you all over the country. I almost didn't find you. We must go, at once!"

"I'm not alone!" shouted Maxim.

"I don't understand."

"I'm not alone," snapped Maxim. "There are three of us. I won't go without the others."

"Nonsense! What kind of idiotic nobility is that? Are you tired of living?" Fank choked from the strain of shouting.

Maxim looked around. Pale, his lips trembling, Guy clung to his sleeve and looked at him. He had heard everything.

In the next tank two legionnaires were beating a soldier with their gun butts.

"One pass!" yelled Fank, coughing and choking. "One!" He held up one finger.

Maxim shook his head.

"There are three of us!" He held up three fingers. "I'm not going anywhere without the others!"

Zef's red beard stuck out from the side hatch. Fank bit his lips. Obviously he didn't know what to do.

"Who are you?" shouted Maxim. "Why do you need me?"

Fank glanced at him for an instant, then looked at Guy.

Is this fellow with you?" he shouted.

"Yes," replied Maxim, "and this one, too!"

Fank's eyes grew wild. He slid his hand under his raincoat, pull out a pistol, and aimed it at Guy. Maxim struck Fank's hand upward with all his strength, and the pistol flew into the air Fank bent over, tucking his injured hand beneath his arm. With a short accurate blow Guy struck him in the neck, and he collapsed. Suddenly legionnaires appeared beside them teeth clenched, faces taut with rage.

"Into the tank!" Maxim bent over and grabbed Fank under the arms.

Fank was fat and Maxim had trouble shoving him. Maxim dived in after him, receiving a parting blow from a gun butt. Inside the tank it was as dark and cold as a crypt. Zef pulled Fank away from the hatch and laid him on the floor.

"Who is this?" he snapped. Maxim didn't have a chance to reply. After tugging at the starter for a long time, Hook finally got the tank rolling. Maxim climbed through the turret and stuck his head out. The rows between the tanks were deserted now except for legionnaires. All the engines had been started, and the roar was incredible. Dense clouds of exhaust obscured the slope. Some tanks were moving: here and there heads protruded from turrets. The shock trooper in the next tank thrust his head out, signaled to Maxim, made a wry face, then disappeared. The tanks moved forward and up the slope.

Suddenly Maxim felt someone grab him around the waist and try to pull him down. Bending over, he saw Guy's eyes staring at him idiotically. Massaraksh, it was the bomber scene all over again! Guy grabbed him with both hands and kept muttering; his face grew repulsive as all its youthful charm vanished and sheer inanity and murderous impulses seized control. "It's begun," thought Maxim, struggling to loosen Guy's grip. "Yes, it's begun all right. The emitters have been turned on."

The tank climbed onto the crest, and clods of earth shot out from under its treads. Blue-gray smoke blocked visibility to the rear, and a gray, clayey plain suddenly opened ahead of them. In the distance stretched Khonti's low hills, and the avalanche of tanks swept toward them

relentlessly. No longer in formation, the tanks raced forward, brushing against each other now and then and swinging their turrets around comically. A tread flew from one tank racing full speed; the vehicle spun in place like a top and turned over; its other tread tore off and flew into the sky like a shiny snake; its front wheels continued to spin, and two men in gray jumped from its lower hatches. They landed on the ground, waved their arms, and rushed forward, forward, toward the treacherous enemy. A shell burst through the clanging and roaring tanks with a resounding crash. Long red tongues leaped simultaneously from the tanks' guns. The tanks crouched, leaped up, and shrouded themselves in dense black gunsmoke. Within minutes everything was covered by a blackish-yellow cloud. Maxim was too fascinated to tear his eyes away from this spectacle, so impressive in its criminal absurdity. Meanwhile he patiently loosened Guy's tenacious grip on him, while Guy called out and pleaded, consumed with a desire to shield Maxim from all perils with his own body.

Maxim remembered that he must take over the controls. As he dropped down, he slapped Guy on the shoulder; then grabbing onto metal braces and choking from the gasoline fumes, he surveyed the scene in the cramped, swaying box. He glanced at Fank's dead-white face and at Zef, writhing under the ammunition case. He shoved Guy aside, and made his way to the driver.

Hook had pulled the accelerator back all the way, as hard as he could; and he sang so loudly that he could be heard over all the noise. Maxim could distinguish the words of "The Hymn of Thanksgiving." He must tranquilize him somehow, take his place at the controls, and look around in this smoke for a convenient ravine or deep hollow where they could shield themselves from nuclear explosions.

No sooner had he begun to unclench Hook's fists, frozen on the levers, than faithful Guy, angered that his master was not being obeyed, lunged and struck half-crazed Hook on the temple with a heavy wrench. Hook crumpled, releasing the levers. Enraged, Maxim shoved Guy aside. There was no time to react with horror or sympathy. He pulled the body away, sat down, and took the controls.

Almost nothing was visible through the observation hatch: only a small patch of grass, and beyond that a dense shroud of blue-gray fumes. It would be impossible to find anything in this haze. He could do only one thing: slow down and move cautiously until the tank had made its way deep into the hills. But it would be dangerous to slow down: if the atomic mines went off before he reached the hills, they would be incinerated. Guy kept clinging to him, hoping to hear a command.

"Never mind, buddy," muttered Maxim, pushing him away with his elbows. "It will pass. You'll get over it. Hold out a little longer."

The tank slipped through a thick stream of black smoke, and as they emerged they had to swerve sharply to the left to avoid a man flattened by tank treads. When the smoky shroud had partially cleared, Maxim saw brown hills not far away and the muddy romp of a tank crawling at an oblique angle to the rest of the tank force. Then he saw a burning tank. Turning to the left, he headed for a deep brush-covered hollow nestled between two hills.

Just before he reached it, a flame sputtered toward them, and the whole tank vibrated from the heavy blow. Maxim reacted instantly, racing the tank at top speed. Bushes and a cloud of whitish smoke leaped toward them; white helmets, faces distorted with hate, raised fists flashed by; then something made of steel crackled as it burst beneath the treads. Maxim clenched his teeth, made a sharp right, and maneuvered the heavily listing vehicle farther away, along the slope. It almost overturned as it skirted a hill. Finally he entered a narrow hollow overgrown with saplings. He decided to stop here.

He flung open the forward hatch and looked around. It was a suitable spot; high brown hills crowded the tank on all sides. No sooner had Maxim muffled the engine than Guy howled some nonsense, absurdly rhythmic words, a homemade ode in honor of his great and beloved master, Mac Sim.

"Shut up!" ordered Maxim. "Get the others outside and lay them next to the tank. Wait, I haven't finished yet! These are my best friends, and yours, too, so take it easy. Be very gentle."

"Where are you going?" Guy was terrified.

"Nowhere. I'll be right here, nearby."

"Don't go away. Or can I go with you?"

"I gave you an order. Do as you're told. And remember, gently."

Guy protested, but Maxim ignored him. He climbed from the tank and ran up the slope. Somewhere in the distance, tanks were rolling, engines roaring full blast, treads clattering, and cannons thundering. A shell whined high in the sky. Crouching, Maxim ran to the top, squatted between the bushes, and congratulated himself for choosing such a suitable refuge for their tank.

Below, seemingly within arm's reach, a wide corridor stretched between the hills, and tanks rolled through it from the smoke-covered plain. Low, snub-nosed, powerful, with enormous flat turrets and long cannons, the tanks streamed by in a solid mass. This was not the penal battalion, but the regular army. Maxim observed this awesome spectacle for several minutes, as if he were watching a historical film. Although the air reeled and shuddered from the frenzied thundering and roaring and the lull trembled beneath his feet like a frightened animal, Maxim felt as if the tanks were moving in sullen silence. He knew very well that beneath the armored plates half-crazed soldiers were gasping for breath. But all the hatches were sealed, and it seemed that each tank was a solid block of metal. When the last tanks had passed, Maxim glanced below at his own tank listing among the trees. It looked like a pitiful tin toy, a decrepit parody of a real military weapon. Yes, one army had passed below, to confront an opposing, more fearsome army. Maxim hastened back to the grove.

He skirted the tank and stopped short.

They lay in a row: Fank, his blood-drained face almost as blue as a dead man's; the writhing, groaning Zef, his dirty fingers clutching his mop of red hair; and the cheerfully smiling Hook, with the dead eyes of a puppet. His order had been executed to the letter. But Guy, in tatters and

covered with blood, lay there, too, a short distance away; his face, wearing a hurt expression, was turned away from the sky, and his arms were flung apart. The grass around him was crushed and trampled; a flattened white helmet with dark stains lay in the mud, and a pair of boots protruded from some broken bushes.

"Massaraksh," muttered Maxim, imagining with horror how only a few minutes ago two snarling and howling dogs had grappled here to the last, each for the glory of his master.

At that instant, the opposing army inflicted a reciprocal blow. It caught Maxim in the eyes. He snarled with pain, closed his eyes as tightly as possible, and fell on Guy, trying to shield him with his body, although he knew Guy was already dead. It was an automatic reflex: he had no time to think about anything, to feel anything except the pain in his eyes. He was still falling when he blacked out.

Probably no more than several seconds had elapsed before he regained consciousness, but he was drenched in sweat. His throat was parched and his ears rang as if he had been hit on the head with a two-by-four. The world had suddenly changed: it had turned crimson. It was strewn with leaves and broken branches, with scorching air, with bushes torn up by their roots. Burning twigs and clods of hot, dry earth fell like rain from a red sky. The silence was morbid. Guy, spattered with leaves, lay face down about ten steps away. Next to him sat Zef, still clutching his head with one hand and shielding his eyes with the other. Fank had rolled into a gully, and was thrashing around and rubbing his face in the dirt. The tank had been swept below, where it had overturned. Thrown back against a tread. Hook was still smiling.

Maxim jumped up and pushed aside the fallen branches. He ran to Guy, grabbed him, lifted him, looked into his glassy eyes, and pressed his cheek to Guy's. He cursed this world where he was so alone and helpless, where the dead were dead forever, where there was no way of restoring them to life. He cried, beat the ground with his fists, trampled the white helmet; but he recovered his senses when Zef screamed with pain. Now filled only with hatred and a thirst to kill, Maxim, without turning, plodded back up the hill to his observation post.

Here, too, everything had changed. The bushes had vanished, the baked clay smoked and crackled, and the hill's northern slope was burning. To the north the crimson sky fused with a solid wall of blackish-brown smoke, and above the wall rose oily bright orange clouds, which swelled before his very eyes.

Maxim looked down at the corridor between the hills. It was deserted. The clay, plowed up by tank treads and burned by the nuclear strike, was smoking; thousands of flames danced on it. The plain to the south seemed very broad and deserted. It was no longer obscured by the haze of burning gunpowder; it was red beneath the red sky, and on it rested lonely boxes, the blackened ruins of the penal battalion tank corps. Along the plain, approaching the hills, rolled a thin broken chain of strange vehicles.

They resembled tanks, except that instead of gun turrets a high latticed cone with a dull circular object at its tip was mounted on each vehicle. They moved rapidly, rocking gently on the uneven ground. They were neither black, like the tanks of the ill-fated shock troops, nor grayish-green like the army tanks at the breakthrough; they were yellow, a vivid yellow, like the Legion's patrol cars. Beyond the hills, the ranks of the right flank were no longer visible. Maxim managed to count eight emitters. How brazen they were, as if they knew they were masters of the situation. Imagine -- plunging into combat without cover or camouflage! They deliberately flaunted their garish yellow paint, their ugly five-meter protuberance, and their absence of weapons. Their drivers probably believed themselves to be completely safe. From the way they rushed ahead, it appeared that they scarcely gave safety any thought. They spurred on the iron herd with their radiation whips, a herd now rolling through hell. Yet they themselves knew nothing about the whips, were unaware that they were lashing themselves. Maxim spotted an emitter on the left flank heading for the hollow. He set out to meet it.

He walked erect. He realized that force must be used to extract the black-uniformed legionnaires from their iron shells, and that was precisely what he wanted now. Never before had he craved the feel of human flesh beneath his fingers. By the time he had descended into the hollow, the emitter was very close. The yellow vehicle rolled straight at him, staring blindly with its glass periscopes. Its latticed cone rocked ponderously, out of phase with the vehicle's bobbing motion. Now Maxim could make out a silver sphere, thickly covered with long shiny needles, rocking at the cone's peak.

Realizing that they had no intention of stopping, Maxim yielded the road, let them pass, and ran alongside the vehicle for several yards. Then he jumped onto its armor plating.

PART FIVE: EARTHLING

18.

The state prosecutor slept lightly. The telephone awakened him instantly. Without opening his eyes, he removed the receiver and said hoarsely: "Hello."

His assistant's whiny voice announced apologetically: "Seven o'clock, your honor."

"Yes," said the prosecutor, his eyes still closed. "Yes. Thank you."

He turned on the light, threw off the covers, and sat on the edge of the bed. Staring at his pale, skinny legs, he sat there for some time, reflecting on his lot in sad surprise: he could not recall a single day in the past sixty years when his sleep hadn't been interrupted. Someone was always waking him up. When he was a lieutenant, that pig of an orderly would awaken him after a drinking spree. When he was chairman of the Black Tribunal, that idiot secretary would awaken him for his signature on death sentences. As a schoolboy, he would be awakened for school by his mother, and that was the most miserable of all awakenings. He was always told: You must! You must, your honor. You must, Mr. Chairman. You must, my dear little boy. Now he was telling himself that he must. He rose, threw off his robe, splashed eau de cologne over his face, inserted his bridgework, stared at himself in the mirror as he massaged his cheeks, then entered his study.

A glass of warm milk and a dish of salted crackers under a starched napkin waited for him on his desk. Before partaking of his special diet, he went to the safe, removed a green folder, and placed it on the desk beside his breakfast. While he munched crackers and sipped milk, he inspected the folder thoroughly, until he was convinced that no one had tampered with it since last night. How much had changed, he thought. Only three months had passed, but how everything had changed! He glanced mechanically at the yellow telephone and could not tear his eyes from it for several seconds. The phone was silent -- as bright and frivolous as a toy, but as frightening as an infernal time bomb that cannot be defused.

The prosecutor seized the green folder with both hands and frowned. He sensed fear getting the better of him and hastened to check it. No, this wouldn't do: he must remain absolutely calm, must reason with total objectivity. "Besides, I have no choice. If I'm taking a risk, well, I'll simply have to take it. But I must keep it to a minimum. And I will. Yes, massaraksh, to a minimum!... So, you aren't so sure about that, eh. Smart? Oh, so you doubt it? You're always doubting. Well, let's try and dispel your doubts. Have you ever heard of a certain Maxim Kammerer? Have you really? Aha, you only think you have. You've never heard of the man before. Well, get set. Smart, you're going to hear about him right now for the first time. Hear this out and form the most objective and unbiased judgment of him. Smart, it's very important for me to know your objective opinion: my hide, you know, depends on it."

He chewed the last cracker and drained the milk.

"All right, Mr. Smart, let's get down to business!" he said aloud.

He opened the folder. "The man's past is hazy. A rather feeble introduction to our acquaintance. But we not only know how to deduce the present from the past; we can deduce the past from the present. And if we need to know the past of our friend Mac, we can eventually deduce it from the present. We call that extrapolation. So, what do we have here? Our Mac begins his present with his escape from the penal colony. Suddenly. Unexpectedly. Precisely at the moment when Strannik and I were about to lay our hands on him. Here's the commanding general's panicky report, the

classical howling of an idiot who has screwed something up and doesn't expect to escape punishment: he is completely innocent, he merely carried out orders; he did not know that the subject had volunteered for service with a sapper detachment of condemned men and that said subject was blown up in a mine field. He didn't know. Nor did Strannik and I. But we should have known! The subject is an unpredictable individual, and you should have anticipated something of the sort, Mr, Smart. Yes, at the time I was shocked by the news, but now we understand what happened: someone told Mac the truth about the towers; he decided that he could not accomplish anything in the Land of the All-Powerful Creators, so he escaped to the South, pretending he had perished." The prosecutor rubbed his forehead sluggishly. "Yes, that was the beginning of everything. It was the first miss in a series of misses: I believed that he had perished. And why shouldn't I have? What normal man would escape to the South? Anyone would have believed that he had perished. But Strannik didn't."

The prosecutor picked up the next report. "Oh, that Strannik! Clever! A genius! That's the way I should have operated, like him! I was sure Mac was dead. After all, the South is the South. Strannik saturated the other side of the river with his agents. Fat Fank -- too bad I never got to him, never took him in hand. That greasy pig wore himself out running around the country, sniffing, spying. He lost Kura to malaria on Route Six, and Rooster was captured by mountaineers; and then Fifty-five -- whoever he is -- was grabbed by pirates on the coast. But Fifty-five managed to get a message through: Mac, he said, had turned up and surrendered to the patrols.

"That's how people with brains operate: they don't believe a damn thing or feel sorry for anyone. That's how I should have acted. I should have pushed everything else aside and concentrated on finding Mac. Even then I realized very well what an awesome force Mac was. But instead of working on his case exclusively, I hooked up with Puppet and lost the game. Then I got involved in this idiotic war and lost again. And now I would have lost again if I hadn't had a stroke of luck: Mac turned up in the capital, in Strannik's lair, and I learned about it before Strannik did. Yes, Strannik, you boney-eared bastard, you're the loser now. You had to dash off somewhere on business. And I don't know where or why you went, but that doesn't disturb me in the least. Well and good! Naturally you relied on your Fank for everything, and your Fank delivered Mac to you. But what bad luck -- your Fank collapsed from his strenuous military exploits and is lying unconscious in the palace hospital. Ah, yes, he's a very important figure: only the big shots get hospitalized there! And this time I won't miss. This time he'll lie there as long as I consider it necessary. You aren't here, Fank isn't, but our boy Mac is, and that is a lucky break. ' '

The joy of triumph surged through him. He stifled it at once. "There go my emotions again, massaraksh. Calm down. Smart. You are getting to know a new man, by the name of Mac, and you must be very objective. Especially since this new Mac bears no resemblance to the old one. He's no longer a child; he knows now what finance and juvenile delinquency are all about. Our

Mac has grown a good deal wiser and more serious. For example, he made his way into the underground's leadership (his sponsors, Memo Gramenu and Allu Zef) and hit them like a bolt out of the blue with a proposal to expose the real purpose of the towers to the entire underground. The staff screamed bloody murder, but Mac convinced them. He frightened and confused them. They accepted his proposal and assigned Mac the task of working it out. He learned the ropes very quickly and sized up the entire situation correctly. They understood this and realized who they were dealing with. Ah, here's the last report: a faction of educators among the leadership involved him in a discussion of a plan to reeducate the population, and he agreed to it with enthusiasm. Immediately he proposed a host of ideas. Lord only knows what they were, but that's not important. The whole idea of reeducation is idiotic. What's important is that he is no longer a terrorist, has no desire to blow up anything or kill anyone; that he is now busy with his career, building prestige among the underground leadership, delivering speeches, criticizing, and moving upward; that he has ideas and is anxious to implement them -- and that, my dear Mr. Smart, is precisely what you need."

The prosecutor leaned back in his chair.

"Ah, here's something else I need: a report on his life style. He works hard in the laboratory and at home; still remembers that girl, Rada Gaal; takes part in sports; doesn't smoke, rarely drinks, and eats in moderation. On the other hand, he clearly leans toward a luxurious life style and knows his worth. For example, cars. After expressing dissatisfaction with a staff car's low power and ugly appearance, he appropriated it as if it were due him. He is also dissatisfied with his apartment; he feels it is too small and lacks basic comforts. He has decorated his quarters with original paintings and antiquarian art, spending almost his entire advance on them. And so on. Good material, very good. I wonder how much money he has at his disposal? So-o, he's a project leader in a chemical synthesis laboratory. They set him up rather elegantly, and probably promised him still more. I wonder what reasons they gave Mac for Strannik's needing him? Fank, the fat pig, knows, but he'd die rather than breathe a word. If only I could drag it out of him. Then it would give me great pleasure to finish him off. How much unnecessary worry he's caused me. And he stole Rada from me. How useful she could be to me now. Rada -- an excellent weapon when you're dealing with pure, honest, courageous Mac! Well, maybe things haven't worked out so badly after all. Mac, I'm not the one who's holding your girl under lock and key. It's all Strannik's doing, that blackmailer."

The prosecutor started: the yellow phone jingled softly. He passed his trembling fingers across his forehead. No, it had to be a mistake. Of course it was. The call was not for him. The telephone is a complicated device; some wires had probably crossed. He wiped his hands on his robe. At that instant the ringing of the telephone tore through him like a bullet, like a dagger in the throat. He picked up the receiver.

"State prosecutor speaking."

"Smart? This is Chancellor."

There it was. Any moment he'd hear: "I'll expect you in an hour,

Smart."

"I recognized your voice," he said weakly. "How are you?"

"Have you read the report?"

"No." He was waiting for him to say: "You haven't? Well, come over and I'll read it to you myself."

"You've really screwed up the war."

The prosecutor swallowed. He must say something. He must -- immediately. Some good-natured banter. But tactfully. Please God, tactfully!

"You've nothing to say? What did I tell you? Keep your nose out of it. Stick to civilian matters and leave military affairs alone."

"You know, Chancellor, we are all your children. And children don't always listen to their parents."

Chancellor tittered. "Children. But where is it said: 'If your child fails to obey you...' How does the rest of it go. Smart?"

"Oh, God!" thought the prosecutor, "I remember. Those were his very words then: 'Wipe it from the face of the earth.' And Strannik had picked up a heavy black pistol from the desk, raised it slowly, and fired twice, and Chancellor's child had clasped its balding head with both hands and sunk to the floor."

"Has your memory failed you? So, what are you going to do, Smart?"

"I made a mistake," he said hoarsely. "A mistake. It was all because of Puppet."

"So, you made a mistake. Well, all right, think about it. Smart. Think it over. I'll call you again."

And that was it. Chancellor had hung up, and he didn't know where to phone him -- to cry, to plead. "Oh, how stupid, how stupid of me. All right, hold on. Get a grip on yourself, you coward!" With all his might he struck his open hand against the edge of the desk, to draw blood, to inflict pain, to stop the trembling. It helped a little. Still bent over, he opened the lower desk drawer with his other hand, removed a flask and took a few swallows. The warmth coursed through him. "Now, that's the way. Take it easy. This thing isn't over yet. The race is to the swiftest. You're not finished with Smart yet. You won't get him so easily. If you could have, you would have done it already. The call doesn't mean a thing. He always does that. There's still time. Two, three, even four days. Yes, there's time!" he shouted to himself. "Don't get hysterical." He rose and began to circle the room rapidly.

"You see, I have a hold over you. I have Mac. I have a man who doesn't fear radiation. A man for whom no obstacle exists. Who wants to change the system. Who hates us. A man so pure he is open to all temptations. A man who believes in me. Who wants to meet me. He is anxious to meet me: my agents have told him many times that the state prosecutor is a good man, a just man, and a fine legal expert, a real guardian of the law; that the Creators detest him and tolerate him only because they distrust each other. My agents have already pointed me out to him in secret, and he was favorably impressed. And most important of all, a hint was dropped to him in the

strictest confidence that I knew the Center's location. Although he has excellent control over his physical expressions, I was told that he gave himself away that time. Yes, that's the kind of man I have -- a man who is eager to seize the Center. The only man who can do it. Of course, I don't actually have this man in my hands yet, but the line has been cast, the bait swallowed, and today I'll set the hook. Otherwise, I'm finished. Yes, finished."

He turned sharply and stared at the yellow telephone.

His imagination went wild. He visualized the cramped room upholstered in purple velvet, stuffy, sour-smelling, windowless, with a bare dilapidated table and five gilded chairs. "And the rest of us stood there: myself, Strannik with murderous eyes, and that bald-headed butcher. He must have known where the Center was: God, how many people he'd killed to find out. What a drunkard and braggart! How could he blab about such monstrous deeds to his relatives? And to what relatives! And he's the chief of the Department of Public Health, the Creators' eyes and ears, the nation's sword and shield. I remember Chancellor's words: 'Wipe him from the face of the earth!,' and Strannik fired point-blank twice. And Baron was annoyed: 'You've spattered the upholstery again.' Then they argued about why the room reeked, and my legs felt like water, and I thought: 'Do they or don't they know?' Strannik stood there, grinning and looking at me knowingly. But he didn't know a thing. Now I understand why -- he always took great pains to prevent anyone from learning the secret of the Center. He always knew its location and was waiting for a chance to seize it himself. Too late, Strannik, too late. And you, too, Chancellor, are too late. You, too. Baron. And you. Puppet -- well, there's no point talking about you."

He pushed aside the drapes and pressed his forehead against the cold glass. He had almost stifled his terror. Attempting to stamp out the last vestige of fear, he tried to visualize Mac bursting into the Center's control room.

"Of course, Voldyr could have done it, too, with his personal bodyguard, that gang of relatives -- cousins, nephews, adopted brothers, and prot(g)s, those dregs who have always known only one law: shoot first. You had to be a Strannik to dare point a finger at Voldyr. That same evening they had attacked Strannik at the gates of his mansion, shot up his car, killed his chauffeur and secretary, and then, in some mysterious fashion, every last one of them was knocked out, all twenty-four of them and their two machine guns. Yes, Voldyr, too, could have made it to the control room, but he wouldn't have gotten any farther, because a barrier, a depression emitter, maybe two by now, would have stopped him. Actually, one is sufficient. No one could get through it: a degen would pass out from pain, and an ordinary, loyal citizen would fall to his knees and cry quietly, overcome by a severe depression. Mac alone could get through, thrust his skillful hands into the generator, and switch the Center and the entire tower network onto the depression field. I can see it now: with nothing to bar his way, he climbs to the radio studio and broadcasts a taped speech simultaneously on all frequencies. The entire country, from the Outlands to

the Khonti border, is overcome by depression; millions of idiots drop to their knees and drown in tears, sunk in total apathy. And the loudspeakers roar full blast that the All-Powerful Creators are criminals, their names are so-and-so, they are now at such-and-such place, kill them, save the nation. This is Mac Sim addressing you, Mac Sim, a living god (or the legitimate heir to the Imperial Throne -- or the great dictator -- whichever Mac prefers). To arms, my Legion! To arms, my army! To arms, my subjects! While the tape is playing, he returns to the control room and switches the generators to the heightened attention field; then the entire country listens, open-mouthed, trying to catch every word, memorizing and repeating everything silently. The loudspeakers roar on, the towers blast away, and all this continues for another hour. Then he switches the emitters to 'ecstasy,' thirty minutes of ecstasy, and that ends the broadcast. When I come to, after ninety minutes of agonizing pains -- which I must bear -- Chancellor and the rest of them will be wiped out. There will be only Mac, the Great God Mac, and his loyal adviser, the former state prosecutor, now chief of the Great Mac's government. I'll be safe. Mac is not the kind who abandons useful friends, or even those who aren't. And I shall be a very useful friend. Oh, what a useful friend I'll be!"

He interrupted his reverie and returned to his desk. Casting a sidelong glance at the yellow telephone, he smiled ironically, picked up the receiver of the green telephone, and called the deputy chief of the Department of Special Investigation.

"Hed? Good morning. This is Smart. How are you feeling? How's your stomach? Well, that's fine. Strannik's still away? Baron's office called, asked us to take a look at your department. No, no, it's a mere formality. I don't have the slightest understanding of your work, anyway. So prepare a report. You know, conclusions regarding the inspection and that sort of thing. Be sure that everyone is in his place, not like the last time. Around eleven o'clock. Arrange things so I can be out of there with all the documents by noon. See you later. Emitters go on in a few minutes. Well, let's go suffer. You do, don't you? Or maybe you figured out some defense against it a long time ago and are keeping it from the authorities. Take it easy. I'm only kidding. So long."

He hung up and glanced at the clock. Nine forty-five. He began to groan loudly and dragged himself to the bathroom. That nightmare again. Thirty minutes of agony. No defense against it. No escape from it. God, all you want to do is die. How humiliating: Strannik must be spared. We'll need him.

The tub was already filled with hot water. The prosecutor flung off his robe, pulled off his nightshirt, and placed an analgesic under his tongue. And so it went, day after day. One twenty-fourth of his life was pure hell. More than four percent. Not counting the times he was summoned to the palace. That part would be over soon, but he must tolerate the four percent for the rest of his life. "Well, we'll see about that, too. When everything is settled, I'll take Strannik in hand myself." He climbed into the tub, made himself comfortable, relaxed, and began to devise ways of taking

Strannik in hand. He didn't get very far; the familiar pain struck him in the temple, traveled down his spine, dug its claws into every nerve, every cell, and began beating, methodically, ruthlessly, to the rhythm of his madly pounding heart.

When everything was over, he lay a little while longer in languid exhaustion. Yes, those infernal pains had their compensation: the half-hour nightmare was succeeded by a few minutes of heavenly bliss.

He climbed out, dried himself in front of the mirror, opened the door slightly, and received a fresh towel from his valet, dressed, returned to the study, drank another glass of warm milk, ate a bowl of thin gruel with honey, sat idly for a while until he had completely recovered from his ordeal, then phoned his assistant and ordered his car.

A road reserved for government vehicles, deserted at this hour, led to the Department of Special Investigation. Ignoring traffic lights, the chauffeur turned on a loud, deep-throated siren from time to time. At three minutes to eleven they reached the department's high yellow gates. A legionnaire in dress uniform crossed over to the car and glanced in. Recognizing the prosecutor, he saluted. Instantly, the gates swung open, revealing a thickly planted garden, yellow and white apartment houses, and, behind them, the institute's gigantic rectangular building.

As they rolled slowly along the narrow road posted with speed-limit signs, they passed a playground, a squat building that housed a swimming pool, and the club restaurant's colorful building. All of this was bathed in clouds of dense foliage and the purest air. It had a fragrance that no field or forest could duplicate. "Ah, that's Strannik for you. It's all his doing. What a mint of money he's squandered on this project. But it certainly has produced results. His employees like him. This is the way to live; this is the way to do it. A mint of money was squandered, and Sultan was terribly annoyed, and still is. What about the risk? Of course there was one; Strannik took it, but the result is that the department is really his. His people would never betray him or scheme against him. He has five hundred employees working for him, mostly young people. They don't read newspapers or listen to the radio; they don't have time -- they're too involved in important research. So the emitters are missing their mark here; or rather, they're aiming elsewhere, where it benefits Strannik. Yes, Strannik, if I were in your place, I'd take my time with those protective helmets. Most likely you are. But, damn it, how can I get my hands on you? If only I could find another Strannik. No, there isn't another brain like his in the whole world, and he knows it. He keeps a sharp eye out for talent. Gets a solid hold on a person when he's young; is very kind to him; takes him away from his parents -- and the parents, the fools, are tickled pink! -- and another little soldier joins his ranks. What a lucky break for me that Strannik is away now!"

The car halted and his assistant opened the door wide. The prosecutor climbed out, walked up the steps to a glass-enclosed lobby. Hed and his assistants were waiting for him. Deliberately assuming a bored expression,

he shook Hed's hand flaccidly, glanced at his assistants, and allowed them to escort him to the elevator. They filed in according to protocol: first the state prosecutor, next the deputy chief of the department, then the state prosecutor's assistant and the deputy chief's senior assistant. The rest remained in the lobby. The group proceeded to Hed's office and filed in according to protocol again: the state prosecutor, then Hed; the prosecutor's assistant and Hed's senior assistant remained in the reception room. As soon as they entered the inner office, the prosecutor sank into an armchair wearily and Hed busied himself at once. He pressed the buttons at the edge of the desk; when a whole horde of secretaries came running into his office, he ordered tea.

To amuse himself, the prosecutor spent the first few minutes studying Hed. He had an uncommonly guilt-ridden face. He avoided direct eye contact, smoothed his hair, nibbed his hands convulsively, and made numerous senseless, restless movements. He always behaved this way. It constituted, so to speak, his basic capital. Constantly arousing suspicions of a guilty conscience, he was continuously subjected to meticulous checks. The Department of Public Health investigated his life around the clock. And since it was impeccable, every new check merely confirmed his surprising innocence. Hed's rise up the ladder was spectacular.

The prosecutor knew all this very well: he had checked Hed personally on three occasions, and yet, while studying him now and amusing himself with his antics, he suddenly caught himself wondering if the old fox knew where Strannik was and was scared stiff that the information would be dragged out of him. The prosecutor couldn't resist the temptation.

"Regards from Strannik," he said casually, tapping his fingers on the arm rest.

Hed focused on the prosecutor for an instant and then looked away.

"Yes," he said, biting his lip. "Uh, we'll have tea in a minute."

"He asked that you phone him," said the prosecutor even more casually.

"What? Uh... all right. The tea will be exceptionally good today. My new secretary is an expert at brewing tea... that is... uh... where should I call him?"

"I don't understand," said the prosecutor.

"I mean that if I'm to phone him, I need his number. He never leaves his number." Flushing painfully, Hed began to fuss about the desk, slapping it here and there until he found a pencil. "Where did he say I should call him?"

The prosecutor abandoned his probe.

"I was only kidding."

Flickers of suspicion crossed Hed's face. "Ah! So you were kidding?" He roared with forced laughter. "You sure put one over on me. Some joke! And I really thought... ha-ha-ha! Ah, here's the tea."

The prosecutor accepted a glass of strong tea from the well-groomed secretary's well-groomed hands.

"All right, Hed, let's get down to business. I don't have much time. Where's the report?"

After making many superfluous movements, Hed drew the inspection report from his desk and handed it to the prosecutor. His hesitant manner suggested that the report was full of false information, was aimed at misleading the inspector, and had been composed with subversive intentions.

"Well now." The prosecutor sipped his tea. "Let's see what you have here. 'Inspection Report.' Well. Interference Phenomena Laboratory. Integral Radiation Laboratory. I don't understand anything. It beats me! How do you manage to understand this stuff?"

"I... you know, I don't understand it either. I'm really an administrator. Yes, an administrator. My job is to provide general guidance and leadership."

Hed avoided the prosecutor's eyes, bit his lips, and ruffled his hair with a sweeping gesture. It was now quite clear that this man was not an administrator but a Khonti spy with very highly specialized training.

The prosecutor returned to the report. He made a profound remark about the power amplification sector's overexpenditure of funds; he asked who Zon Barutu was, and if he wasn't related to Moru Barutu, the well-known writer and propagandist; he reproved Hed for acquiring a lensless refractometer that had cost an outlandish sum and still hadn't been put into operation. He summed up the work of the radiation research and development sector by saying that evidence of significant progress was lacking ("And thank God!" he added to himself) and that this opinion must be included in the final draft of the Inspection Report.

He was even more casual about the part of the report dealing with the work of the antiradiation sector. It was engaged in research on protective devices.

"You're on a treadmill, Hed. You've made no progress with either physical or physiological defense. The physiological approach is all wrong: if I were to let you cut me up, you'd turn me into an idiot. Your chemists, on the other hand, are doing a fine job. They've won another minute for us. One minute last year, and a minute and a half the year before. Now when I take a pill, I experience only twenty-two minutes of agony instead of thirty. Well, not bad. Almost a thirty percent reduction. Insert my opinion in your report: increase the tempo of work on physical defense, encourage the personnel in the chemical defense sector. That's all."

He tossed the report back to Hed. "Have a final draft typed up and include my opinion. And now, for the sake of formality, take me to... well, I visited your physicists last time. Take me to your chemists; I'd like to see what they're doing."

Hed jumped up and struck the buttons on his desk again. Wearing an expression of utter fatigue, the prosecutor rose from his chair.

Accompanied by Hed and his day assistant, he toured the chemical defense laboratories at a leisurely pace, smiling politely at personnel with one service stripe on the sleeves of their smocks, slapping the stripeless ones on the shoulder, pausing by the two-strippers to shake hands, nodding in a knowing way and inquiring if there were any complaints.

There weren't any. They all were working or pretending they were. Lights flickered on various devices, liquids bubbled in vessels, some stuff emitted a terrible odor, and somewhere in the laboratory animals were being tormented. The laboratory was clean, bright, and spacious; people seemed satisfied and serene. They didn't display enthusiasm and conducted themselves very correctly with the inspector, but without any warmth and, in any case, without servility.

Strannik's portrait adorned the walls of many offices and laboratories: it hung above work counters, next to charts and graphs, in wall space between windows, above doors, sometimes beneath plate glass on desk tops. There were photographs, pencil and charcoal sketches, even a portrait in oils. Here was Strannik playing ball; Strannik delivering a lecture; Strannik chewing an apple; Strannik meditating, fatigued, furious, and even roaring with laughter. Those sons of bitches had also drawn caricatures of him, which they hung in the most visible places. Shocking! Just imagine, thought the prosecutor, entering the office of junior attorney Filtik and finding a caricature of himself there. Massaraksh, that would be inconceivable, impossible!

He continued smiling, slapping shoulders, shaking hands, thinking all the while that this was his second visit to the laboratory since last year and nothing seemed to have changed. But until today he had never paid any serious attention to it. "Today I must," he thought to himself. "What did Strannik mean to me a year or two ago? Formally he was one of us; in reality, a cabinet officer without any influence on policy, without a role in policy-making, without political aspirations. Since then he has made a great deal of progress: the nationwide operation to clean up foreign spies was Strannik's doing." The prosecutor himself had conducted the trials and was shaken when he realized that they were dealing not with your ordinary spy-degens but with real, experienced intelligence agents planted everywhere by the Island Empire to gather scientific and economic information. Strannik had caught them all, down to the last one, and since then he had become the permanent chief of Special Counterintelligence.

It was Strannik who had exposed the conspiracy engineered by Voldyr. That character had been solidly entrenched in his position and had been dangerously undermining Strannik's control over counterintelligence. Not trusting anyone else to do the job, Strannik had knocked him off himself. He always operated openly and alone. No coalitions, no temporary alliances. He had overthrown three successive chiefs of the War Department in the same manner (before they could even open their mouths, they were summoned upstairs), until he finally secured Puppet's appointment. Puppet was scared stiff of war. It was Strannik who, a year ago, had killed Project Gold, presented upstairs by the Imperial Union of Industry and Finance. At that time it appeared that Strannik would be sacked at any moment because Chancellor himself was very enthusiastic about the project. Somehow Strannik convinced him that the project's benefits were very temporary, and in ten years there would be an epidemic of insanity and utter devastation. "He always manages to prove what he wants to prove to them; no one but Strannik

is successful at that. Generally, one can understand why. He never fears anything. True, he hid himself in his office for a long time, but eventually he realized his power. He realized that we all needed him, regardless of who we were and how we fought among ourselves. Only Strannik is capable of developing a defense against radiation; only Strannik can save us from its torments. And to think that those snotnoses in white smocks draw caricatures of him."

His assistant opened the door. He caught sight of Mac. Mac, in a white smock with one stripe on his sleeve, was sitting on a window ledge and looking out. If any attorney were to take the liberty of sitting on a window ledge to count shingles during working hours, one could with an easy conscience have him deported as a downright loafer, even a saboteur. But in this case, massaraksh, one had to keep quiet. Try taking him by the scruff of the neck and he'd tell you off in a hurry: "Excuse me! I am performing a mental experiment! Kindly move aside and don't disturb me!"

The Great Mac was counting shingles. He glanced briefly at the visitors, started to return to his work, then glanced around again for a closer look. "He's recognized me," thought the prosecutor. "Ah, he's recognized me, my clever boy." He smiled politely at Mac and clapped a youthful laboratory assistant on the shoulder. Halting in the middle of the room, he glanced around.

"Well," he said, standing between Mac and Hed, "what do we have here?"

"Mr. Sim," said Hed, flushing. "Explain to the inspector what you are --"

"I believe I know you," said the Great Mac. "Pardon me if I'm mistaken, but aren't you the state prosecutor?"

Dealing with Mac was not an easy matter: his carefully thought out plan had just gone down the drain. Mac wouldn't think of concealing anything; he feared no one and was curious about everything. Drawn up to his full height, the giant looked down at the prosecutor as if he were gazing at some exotic animal. He would have to play it by ear.

"Yes, I am." The prosecutor stopped smiling and looked at Mac in cold surprise. "As far as I know, I am the state prosecutor, although I don't understand..." He frowned and looked into Mac's face. Mac smiled broadly. "Well, well, of course. Mac Sim. Maxim Kammerer. Pardon me, but you were supposed to have perished. Massaraksh, how did you ever get here?"

"It's a long story," replied Mac, waving his hand. "By the way. I'm surprised to see you here. I never realized that the Department of Justice was interested in our work."

"The most surprising people are interested in your work." He took Mac by the arm and led him to a far window. In a confidential whisper he inquired: "When will you have those pills for us? Real ones, that will last a full half hour?"

"Are you one, too?" asked Mac. "That's right, you'd have to be."

The prosecutor shook his head sadly. "It's our blessing and our curse. The good fortune of our state and the misfortune of its rulers. Massaraksh,

I'm awfully glad you're alive and well, Mac. I must tell you that your trial was one of the few in my career that left me with a most unhappy feeling. No, no, don't try to dismiss it: according to the letter of the law you were guilty. From that point of view everything was proper. You attacked a tower and evidently killed a legionnaire. For such an action, as you well know, one doesn't deserve a pat on the head. But I must confess that my hand trembled when I signed your sentence. Please don't be offended, but I felt as if I were sentencing a child. When it comes down to brass tacks, it must be said that the escapade was of our rather than your making, and the entire responsibility --"

"I'm not offended. What you say isn't far from the truth: the tower escapade was childish. Thank God you didn't have us shot."

"It was all I could do for you. I remember how upset I was when I learned of your death." He laughed and gave Mac's shoulder a friendly squeeze. "Awfully glad that everything turned out all right. Delighted to meet you." He glanced at his watch. "By the way, Mac, why are you here? No, no. I'm not going to arrest you. That's not my job; let the military authorities worry about you. But what are you doing in this institute? Are you really a chemist? And this, too." He pointed to the service stripe on his sleeve.

"You might say I'm a little bit of everything. Part chemist, part physicist --"

"And part underground conspirator." The prosecutor laughed good-naturedly.

"A very small part of me," said Mac firmly.

"Part conjurer," said the prosecutor.

Mac looked at him attentively.

"Part dreamer," continued the prosecutor, "part adventurer."

"That's no longer a profession," replied Mac. "It is, if I may say so, simply a trait possessed by any decent scientist."

"And decent politician."

"A rare combination of words," quipped Mac.

For a moment the prosecutor looked at him quizzically, then laughed again.

"Yes," he said, "political activity has its unique character. Never lower yourself to politics, Mac. Stay with your chemistry." He looked at his watch unhappily: "Oh, damn it. I'm terribly pressed for time. I would have liked to stay and chat with you. I looked at your dossier. You're a very interesting individual. Well, I suppose you're terribly busy, too."

"Yes," replied his clever Mac. "Although not as busy, naturally, as the state prosecutor."

"Come now, Mac, your chief assures me that you work day and night. Now, take me, for example... I can't say that about myself. The state prosecutor does have some free evenings. You'll be surprised to know that I have lots of questions for you. I must confess that I wanted to talk with you, even then, after the trial. But I had so many cases, an endless stream of cases."

"I'm at your service," said Mac. "Especially since I have a lot of

questions for you."

"Now, now, Mac!" the prosecutor thought to himself. "Don't be so open about it. We're not alone." He said aloud, calmly: "Fine! I'll do my best. Now I must ask you to excuse me. I must run."

He shook Mac's enormous hand. Ah, yes, he had finally hooked his Mac. He was all his now. "He fell right into my hands. He's anxious to meet with me, and now I'll set the trap." The prosecutor paused in the doorway, snapped his fingers, and said as he turned around: "Oh, Mac, what are you doing this evening? I just realized that I'm free tonight."

"This evening? Well, tonight I have --"

"Then come together!" exclaimed the prosecutor. "That's even better. You'll meet my wife and we'll have a fine evening. Is eight o'clock all right? I'll send a car for you. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

The prosecutor was jubilant. He made the rounds of the chemistry sector's remaining laboratories, smiling, clapping shoulders, and shaking hands. "He agreed!" he thought as he signed the re-port in Hed's office. "He agreed, massaraksh, agreed!" he chortled to himself triumphantly on the way home.

He gave instructions to his chauffeur and ordered his assistant to inform the department that the prosecutor was occupied. "Don't admit anyone, disconnect the phone. Go to the devil, get out of my sight, but stay within easy reach." He summoned his wife, kissed her on the neck, remembering in passing that they hadn't seen each other in about ten days. He asked her to arrange a supper -- a light, tasty meal for four -- to be a good hostess, and to be prepared to meet a most interesting person. Be sure, he added, to have plenty of wine. An assortment of the very best.

He shut himself up in his study, laid out the case in the green folder, and reviewed it again, from the very beginning. Only once was he disturbed, when a messenger from the War Department delivered the latest bulletin from the front. The front had collapsed. Someone had drawn the Khontis' attention to the yellow vehicles, and last night they had destroyed ninety-five percent of the emitter-equipped tanks with nuclear weapons. No news had been received yet about the fate of the army. It was the end. The end of the war. The end of General Shekagu and General Odu. The end of Ochkarik, Chainik, Tucha, and other rather minor figures. Very possibly the end of the Count. And it certainly would mean the end of Smart, too, if Smart weren't so clever.

He dissolved the report in a glass of water and paced around his study. He felt a tremendous sense of relief: now, at least, he knew precisely when he would be summoned upstairs. "First they will finish off Baron, and it will take at least twenty-four hours to choose between Puppet and Zub. Then they will have to deal with Ochkarik and Tucha. That will take another twenty-four hours. While they're at it, they'll knock off Chainik. It will take them at least two days to knock off General Shekagu. And that will be it."

He didn't leave his study until his guest had arrived.

The guest made a most pleasant impression. He was splendid. So splendid that the prosecutor's wife, a cold high-society matron, shed twenty years and behaved in an incredibly feminine manner from the moment she laid eyes on Mac... as if she knew the role Mac would play in her future.

"Why are you alone?" She was surprised. "My husband ordered supper for four."

"Yes, I did," said the prosecutor. "I thought you would be coming with your girlfriend. I remember that girl. Because of you she almost got into a lot of trouble."

"She did," said Mac calmly. "But, with your permission, we'll discuss that later."

They dined for a long time; they laughed a lot, drank a little. The prosecutor repeated the latest gossip; his wife told some very risqué jokes; and Mac described his flight on the bomber. As he roared with laughter, the prosecutor thought to himself with horror what would have happened to him if even one rocket had hit its mark.

When supper was over, the prosecutor's wife excused herself. The prosecutor took Mac by the arm and led him into his study for a wine that no more than three dozen people in the country had had the chance to savor.

They settled down in comfortable chairs on either side of a coffee table in the study's coziest corner, sipped the precious wine, and looked at each other. Mac wore a very serious expression. He obviously knew what was coming, so the prosecutor abruptly rejected his original plan for their discussion, a clever plan built on innuendoes and the gradual recognition of each other's goals. Rada's fate, Strannik's intrigues, the Creators' machinations -- all these issues had lost their significance. He recognized with an amazing clarity that reduced him to despair that all his skill in conducting such conversations was superfluous with this man. Mac would either agree to his proposals or reject them outright. It was extremely simple, as simple as the question of the prosecutor's fate; he would either live or be crushed in a few days. His fingers trembled; he set the wineglass on the table quickly and went straight to the point.

"I know, Mac, that you are a member of the underground, a member of its staff, and an enemy of the existing order. And that you are an escaped convict who murdered the crew of a special operations tank. Now, about myself. I am the state prosecutor, a trusted government official with access to the highest state secrets, and also an enemy of the existing order. Here is my proposal: I am preparing a coup. You are to overthrow the Creators. When I say 'you,' I mean you and only you: this does not concern your organization. You must understand that any interference by the underground will lead to total disaster. The conspiracy I am proposing to you is based on my knowledge of the highest state secret. I shall tell you this secret. Only you and I must know it. If a third party should learn it, we will be exterminated very quickly. Keep in mind that the underground and its staff are teeming with provocateurs. So don't consider trusting anyone, not even

your closest friends."

Without savoring its contents, he drained the glass of wine. Then, leaning toward Mac, he continued.

"I know where the Center is. You are the only man capable of seizing control of it. I am now proposing a plan I've worked out for the Center's capture and subsequent measures. You will execute this plan and become Chief of State. I shall remain with you as your political and economic adviser, since you are completely unschooled in such matters. I am familiar with the general features of your objectives. I am not opposed to them. I support them simply because nothing can be worse than what we have now. That's it. I'm finished. Now it's your turn."

Mac said nothing. He twirled the wineglass in his fingers and remained silent. The prosecutor waited: he felt a peculiar sense of detachment from his body, as if he were not in it, but suspended somewhere in space; as if he were looking down upon this softly illuminated cozy corner, upon the silent Mac, and upon something stiff, unseeing, and lifeless propped in a chair beside Mac.

Finally Mac broke the silence.

"When I capture the Center, what are my chances of survival?"

"Fifty-fifty. Maybe better. I don't know."

Mac paused again for a long time.

"It's a deal," he said finally. "Where is the Center?"

19.

Toward noon the phone rang. Maxim picked up the receiver. It was the prosecutor.

"I would like to speak with Mr. Sim."

"Speaking," replied Maxim. "Hello." He sensed instantly that something had happened.

"He's back. Can you begin at once?"

"Yes," replied Mac in a low voice. "But you promised me something...."

"I didn't have time." There was a note of panic in his voice. "And there isn't time now. Begin at once. We can't delay another minute! Mac, do you hear me?"

"Yes. Fine. Is that all?"

"He's on his way to the institute now. He'll be there in thirty or forty minutes."

"I understand. Anything else?"

"That's all. Get going, Mac. Good luck!"

Maxim hung up the receiver and sat there for several seconds, pondering his next move. "Massaraksh, what a mess. But I still have time to think." He grabbed the receiver again. "Professor Allu Zef, please."

"Speaking!"

"This is Mac."

"Massaraksh, I asked you not to disturb me today."

"Keep quiet and listen. Go down to the lobby immediately and wait for me."

"Massaraksh, I'm busy!"

Maxim ground his teeth and cast a glance at his assistant. He was diligently computing on the calculator.

"Zef, get down to the lobby right now! Do you understand? Now!" He hung up and dialed Vepr's number. He was in luck: Vepr was home. "This is Mac. Go outside and wait for me. It's urgent!"

"Fine," said Vepr. "I'm on my way."

Maxim hung up, thrust his hand into a desk drawer, and pulled out the first folder he could lay his hands on. While he leafed through it mechanically, he feverishly reviewed in his mind the preparations he had made. "The car is in the garage. The bomb is in the trunk. And we have a full gas tank. No weapons. The hell with it, we don't need them. The documents are in my pocket, and Vepr is waiting. It's a good thing I thought about taking Vepr. True, he might refuse to go along with this. No, I doubt that he will; I wouldn't. Well, that seems to be about everything." He gave instructions to his assistant. "If anyone calls, tell them I'm at the Construction Department. I'll return in an hour or two. See you later."

He tucked the folder under his arm, left the laboratory, and ran down the stairs. Zef was already pacing the lobby. When he spotted Maxim, he halted, placed his hands behind his back, and scowled.

"What the hell's going on? Massaraksh!"

Maxim grabbed him by the arm and pulled him toward the exit.

"What the hell is going on here?" muttered Zef. "Where are we going? Why?"

Maxim shoved him out the door, pulled him along the asphalt path and around the corner toward the garage. The area was deserted except for a lawn mower chugging in the distance.

"Where the hell are you taking me?" shouted Zef.

"Shut up and listen! Get all our people together at once. All of them. Whoever you can lay your hands on. To hell with their questions! Listen! Whoever you can get. And with weapons. There's a pavilion opposite the gate. You know where it is? Dig in and wait. In about thirty minutes. Are you listening to me, Zef?"

"Well?" said Zef impatiently.

"In about thirty minutes Strannik will arrive at the gate."

"He's back?"

"Don't interrupt me. Strannik will probably arrive at the gate in about thirty minutes. If he doesn't -- fine. Just sit tight and wait for me. If he does come -- shoot him."

"Have you gone out of your mind?" asked Zef. Maxim kept walking, and Zef ran after him, cursing. "We'll all be killed, massaraksh! There are guards! Police spies all over the place!"

"Do your best. Strannik must be shot."

They walked up to the garage. Maxim leaned his weight against the bolt and rolled open the door.

"This is insane," said Zef. "Why Strannik? He's not that bad a guy; everyone likes him."

"Suit yourself!" said Maxim coldly. He opened the trunk, felt the fuse and timing device through the oiled paper, and slammed it shut again. "I can't tell you anything right now. But we have a chance. Our only chance." He sat behind the wheel and inserted the ignition key. "And keep this in mind: if you don't finish him off, he'll finish you off. You don't have time. Get going, Zef!"

He turned on the engine and backed out of the garage slowly.

Zef stood in the doorway. It was the first time Mac had ever seen Zef like this -- frightened, stunned, bewildered.

The car rolled toward the gate. A stony-faced legionnaire recorded the license number unhurriedly, opened the trunk, looked in, closed it, returned to Maxim.

"What do you have in the trunk?"

"A refractometer," said Maxim, extending his pass and a permit to transfer equipment.

"Refractometer RL-seven, inventory number...", muttered, the legionnaire. "I'll write it down in a minute."

He poked around in his pocket for a pad.

"Hurry, please. I'm in a rush," said Maxim.

"Who signed this permit?"

"I don't know. Probably Hed."

"You don't know? If I could make out his signature, everything would be OK."

Finally he opened the gate and Maxim drove onto the road. "If this doesn't work out," he thought, "and I manage to survive, I'll have to escape. Damn Strannik, he sensed that something was up and returned. Suppose we're successful -- then what? Nothing is ready, we don't have a plan of the palace. Smart didn't have time to get it, and he didn't get those photos of the Creators either. Our people aren't prepared; we don't have a plan. Damn Strannik! If it weren't for him. I'd still have three days left to work out a plan. And then there's the army and the staff, too, to worry about. Massaraksh! They're going to get moving fast. We'll have to take care of them. Well, that's Vepr's job. He'll be glad to do it. He knows how to handle it."

Maxim turned off the main thoroughfare into a narrow lane between two gigantic pink stone skyscrapers and drove along the cobblestones toward a ramshackle blackened cottage. Vepr was waiting for him, leaning against a lamp post and smoking a cigarette. When the car pulled up, he threw away the butt, squeezed through the small door, and sat down beside Maxim. As usual, he was calm.

"Hi, Mac. What's up?"

Maxim swung the car around and returned to the main thoroughfare.

"Do you know what a thermal bomb is?"

"I've heard about them," replied Vepr.

"Good. Have you ever handled synchronized fuses?"

"Only yesterday," said Vepr.

"Excellent."

They rode in silence for some time. The traffic was heavy. Tuning out everything, Maxim concentrated exclusively on breaking through, on squeezing between huge trucks and old buses without hitting anyone or being hit, on making green lights and maintaining his speed, as slow as it was. Finally, they broke through onto a familiar expressway lined with enormous trees.

"It's strange," thought Maxim suddenly. "I entered this world on this very same route -- or, I should say, Fank brought me into it. It's entirely possible that I shall leave this world, and all worlds, by the very same route, and take a good man with me." He cast a sidelong glance at Vepr's serene face: he sat there with his artificial arm hanging out the window, waiting patiently for an explanation from Mac. Perhaps he was surprised or excited, but his face remained impassive. Maxim felt proud that a man of his caliber trusted him and relied on him implicitly.

"I'm very grateful to you, Vepr," he said.

"How's that?" asked Vepr, turning to him.

"Do you remember how you called me aside once at a staff meeting and gave me some good advice?"

"I do."

"So, I'm grateful to you for it. I listened to you."

"Yes, I noticed. But you disappointed me a little, too."

"You were right then," said Maxim. "I took your advice. As a result, a very special opportunity has just presented itself: the opportunity to capture the Center."

Vepr started.

"Now?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, now. We must hurry. I didn't have time to prepare anything. It's possible that I'll be killed; then the whole thing will be a waste. That's why I brought you along."

"Keep talking."

"I'll enter the building, and you'll stay in the car. An alarm will go off after a while and shooting may begin. Don't let that bother you. Stay put in the car and wait. Wait twenty minutes. If you receive a radiation strike during that time, it means that everything went OK. You can pass out with a happy smile on your face. If there's no radiation strike, step out of the car. You'll find a bomb in the trunk. It has a synchronized fuse set for ten minutes. Unload the bomb on the roadway, turn on the fuse, and leave. Panic will break out. Play it for all it's worth."

Vepr pondered Mac's instructions.

"Can I make a call?"

"No."

"Listen, Mac, if you're still alive, you'll need people who are prepared to fight. If you're dead, I'll need them. That's why you brought me

along. If I'm alone, all I can do is begin. And then there will be too little time. So people must be warned beforehand. I'd like to warn them."

"The underground staff?" asked Maxim hostilely.

"Certainly not. I have my own group."

Maxim said nothing. A familiar gray five-story building with a stone wall along its pediment loomed ahead of them. Somewhere along its corridors wandered Fishface, and enraged Hippo was shouting and sputtering. This was the Center. He had come full circle.

"OK," agreed Maxim. "There's a phone booth by the entrance. When I enter -- but no sooner -- you can leave the car and call."

"Good," said Vepr.

As they approached the exit ramp from the expressway, thoughts of Rada crossed Maxim's mind; he wondered what would become of her if he failed to return. She would have a bad time of it. Perhaps nothing would happen, and they would release her. "Still, she'll be all alone. With Guy gone. And myself, too. Poor girl."

"Do you have a family?" he asked Vepr.

"Yes, a wife."

Maxim bit his lip.

"I'm sorry that things turned out so awkwardly."

"Forget it, Mac," said Vepr calmly. "I said my farewells. I always do when I leave the house. So this is the Center. Whoever would have thought?"

Maxim parked the car, maneuvering it between a shabby compact and a luxurious state limousine.

"Well, I guess that's it," he said. "Wish me luck, Vepr."

"With all my heart." Vepr's voice broke. "Still, I've lived to see this day."

Maxim rested his cheek on the wheel.

"If only we live through this day," he said. "To see the evening."

Vepr looked at him anxiously.

"It's hard for me to go, Vepr," explained Maxim. "Damned hard. By the way, remember this and be sure to tell it to your friends: you people do not live on the inner surface of a sphere, but on the outer surface. The universe has many more such spheres. The inhabitants of some are far worse off than you, and the inhabitants of others live much better than you. But I can tell you this: nowhere else in the universe do people live more stupidly than you. You don't believe it? Then the hell with you. I'm going."

He opened the door and climbed out. He walked through the parking lot and ascended the stone steps. Step by step he went up, groping in his pocket for the entrance pass prepared for him by the prosecutor, for the building pass that the prosecutor had stolen, and for the plain pink piece of cardboard, representing another pass that the prosecutor could neither counterfeit nor steal for him. It was hot, and the inhabited island's impenetrable sky glistened like aluminum. The steps seemed to burn through his soles. What a senseless venture! "Why the hell go through with it if we didn't have the time to prepare properly? Suppose, instead of one officer in

that little room, there are two, even three, waiting for me with their guns? Captain Chachu used a pistol, but there's going to be a lot more bullets this time. I was in much better condition then, and Chachu almost did me in. This time they won't let me slip away. I'm a fool. I was a fool then and I still am. The prosecutor sure hooked me. But how come he trusted me? I can't figure it out. Ah, how nice it would be to escape from all this and run off to the mountains, breathe the pure, fresh mountain air. I never did manage to get to them. Such a clever, distrustful man -- yet he trusted me with such a precious secret! His world's supreme treasure!"

He opened a glass door and handed a legionnaire his entrance pass. Crossing the lobby, he went past a bespectacled girl stamping passes and an administrator exchanging curses with someone on the telephone. He showed his building pass to another legionnaire at the corridor entrance. The legionnaire nodded amicably to the familiar figure: Mac had been coming here daily for the past three days.

He kept walking.

He passed through the long, doorless corridor and turned left.

This was his second visit here. Yesterday, he had been here "by mistake." ("What room are you looking for, sir?" "Sixteen, corporal." "You're in the wrong corridor, sir. It's in the next one." "Sorry, corporal. Thank you.")

He handed the corporal his building pass and cast a sidelong glance at two strapping legionnaires, armed with submachine guns and standing stiffly at either side of the door opposite him. Then he looked at the other door, through which he would be passing in a few seconds. "Department of Special Transportation." The corporal inspected his pass carefully and pressed a button on the wall. A bell rang behind the door. "Now the officer sitting beside the green drapes has been alerted. Maybe two officers. Or even three. They are waiting for me to enter. If I frighten them and jump back, I'll run into the corporal and those legionnaires guarding the other door. And that room is probably crawling with soldiers."

The corporal returned the pass and said: "Please have your documents ready."

Taking out the pink piece of cardboard, he opened the door and entered the room.

Massaraksh! Not one room. But three. A suite of rooms, green drapes at one end. A runner beneath his feet, leading directly to the green drape. Thirty meters, at least.

And not two officers, or three. Six!

In the first room, two in army gray. Guns already trained on him. In the second room, two in Legion black. Guns not aimed, but drawn. In the third room, two in civilian clothes, on either side of the drapes.

One turned his head.

"Go to it, Mac!"

He sprang forward with a tremendous leap and wondered in that split second if he would pull a tendon. Air rushed into his face.

"There it is: the green drapes.

"Civilian on the left is looking to one side. Give it to him -- a chop in the neck.

"Civilian on the right blinks. His eyes freeze.

"Now, clobber him, and then into the elevator.

"The elevator is dark. Where's the button? Massaraksh, where is it?"

Alone submachine gun clattered slowly, echoing through the corridors. Instantly, a second one joined in.

"But they're still firing at the door, where they saw me last. They haven't realized yet what happened. Purely a reflex.

"The button! Where is it? Massaraksh, here it is, in the most obvious place."

He pressed the button and the car descended. The car moved rapidly: it was an express elevator. His foot began to hurt. "Did I sprain my ankle? Forget it, that's unimportant now. Massaraksh, I got through!"

The car stopped, Maxim jumped out, and the shaft rumbled and rang as chips started to fly. Three guns kept firing from above at the roof of the car. "Fire away. You'll realize in a minute that you're wasting your time, that you have to get the elevator back upstairs so you can come down yourselves. You missed your chance."

He glanced around. "Massaraksh, wrong again. Not one entrance, but three. Three absolutely identical tunnels. Aha, two are only spare generators. While one's working, the others are being overhauled. Which one is working now? Looks like this one."

He dashed into the middle tunnel. The elevator growled behind his back. "You guys are too late. You'll never make it, even though the tunnel is long and my ankle hurts. Ah, here's a turn. You turds will never get me now." He reached the generators rumbling beneath a steel plate and rested for a few seconds. "Most of the job is finished; the rest is easy. In a few minutes they'll come down in the elevator and barge into the tunnel. But they don't know that the depression emitter will drive them back. What else could happen now? They might toss a tear-gas shell down the corridor. But I doubt it: they probably don't have any. They've probably sounded the alarm by now. Of course the Creators could turn off the depression barrier. But they won't bring themselves to do it. And they couldn't do it in time even if they wanted to. Five of them would have to assemble with five keys, and all agree on a decision; first, they would have to consider whether one of their number is playing a trick, or some sort of provocation is involved. After all, who in this world could breakthrough the radiation barrier? Possibly Strannik, if he has secretly invented a protective device. But those six armed guards up-stairs would have stopped him. And there's nobody else."

Submachine guns were chattering away around the comer in the dark tunnel. "Fire away, jerks. I don't mind." He bent over the power switchboard, removed the casing carefully, and tossed it into the corner. "Yes, a very primitive device. It's a good thing I read up on their electronics. Suppose I hadn't? And suppose Strannik had returned two days ago? Yes, my fine friends, here I am like a novice mechanic who must

troubleshoot in a big hurry. I don't even know what to look for. Massaraksh, what kind of design is this -- no insulation! Aha, there you are. Well, good luck, as the state prosecutor would say!"

He sat down on the floor in front of the power switchboard and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He had done his job: the powerful blows of a depression field were overwhelming the entire country, from the Outlands to the Khonti frontier, from the ocean to the Alebastro Mountains.

The guns were quiet. The guards had been laid low by the depression field. "I'll have to see how they look when they're sunk in depression.

"For the first time in his life the prosecutor is welcoming a radiation strike. But I'm really not interested in seeing how he looks. The Creators never knew what hit them and are now writhing in pain, hoofs up, as Captain Chachu used to say. He's been laid low, too, with the rest of them. And I'm damn glad.

"Zef and the boys are lying there, too, hoofs up.

"Strannik! Great! That bastard Strannik is down, too, hoofs up, with those enormous ears of his spread out on the floor. The biggest ears in the whole country. Maybe they've shot him by now. That would be even better.

"Rada, my Rada, is lying somewhere in a fit of depression. Never mind, it probably isn't painful, and it will soon be over.

"Vepr."

He jumped up. How much time had passed? He dashed back through the tunnel. Vepr had probably been laid low, too. But if he had heard the shooting before the strike, he might not have stayed put.

He ran toward the elevator and paused briefly to glance at the officers laid out by the strike. It was a distressing scene: all three had flung down their guns and were crying; they were even too weak to wipe away their tears. "Fine, cry, it will do you some good. Cry over my buddy Guy; cry over Ordi; over Gel; over my friend Forester. From the looks of you, you haven't cried since you were kids; in any case, you've never cried over those you've killed. So cry, at least, before your own death."

The elevator carried him to the surface quickly. The suite of rooms was full of officers, noncoms, legionnaires, civilians -- all armed, all sitting or lying and grieving. Sobbing, mumbling, shaking their heads, and beating their breasts. "Massaraksh, what a sight. The black radiation... I can see why the Creators were saving it for a rainy day."

He ran into the lobby, leaping over bodies stirring feebly on the floor. After nearly toppling head over heels down the stone steps, he halted in front of his car and caught his breath. Vepr's nerve shad held out after all: he lay on the front seat with his eyes closed.

Maxim dragged the bomb from the trunk, removed it from the wrapping, and returned to the elevator unhurriedly. He examined the fuse thoroughly, set the timer, laid the bomb inside the elevator, and pressed the "down" button. The car vanished, carrying into the nether world a fiery spirit that would explode into freedom in ten minutes.

Returning to his car, he propped Vepr into an upright position and maneuvered the car from its parking space. The gray building rose above him,

heavy, stupid, doomed, packed with doomed people who could neither walk nor understand what was happening.

"The place is a nest, a snake's nest, full of the most choice trash, trash collected with great care, gathered here for the ex-press purpose of converting into more trash all those within reach of the emitters' sorcery. All of them are enemies of the people, and not one of them would hesitate for a moment to shoot, betray, or crucify me, Vepr, Zef, Rada -- all my friends. Still, it's just as well that my thoughts didn't run this way before. If they had, they would have gotten in my way. I would have remembered Fishface. She's the only person in this doomed snake's nest who -- why am I so concerned about Fishface? What do I really know about her? That she taught me their language? And made my bed? Forget about her; you realize very well that there's much more at stake here than Fishface. The point is that from now on, you must fight in dead earnest, as everyone else does. And you will have to struggle against fools, vicious fools created by the radiation strikes; against clever, ignorant, greedy idiots who directed the radiation strikes; against well-meaning idiots who, using the same emitters, would be glad to transform vicious, diabolic puppets into ingratiating, quasidecent puppets. And every one of them will try to wipe out you, your friends, and your cause. The Wizard said: 'Don't let your conscience interfere with clear thinking, and let your reason learn to stifle your conscience when circumstances demand it.' He was right. A bitter truth. Yes, what I accomplished here today, my friends would call a feat! Vepr lived to see the day; and he believed in it as in a fairytale with a happy ending. So did Forester, Ordi, Green, and Gel Ketshef, and my buddy Guy, and dozens of others, and hundreds and thousands of people I've never laid eyes on. Yet, I feel bad. But if I want people to trust and follow me in the future, I must never tell anyone that the most courageous moment for me today was not when I leaped and ran through a hail of bullets, but now, right now, when there is still time to turn back and deactivate the bomb, and I'm speeding away from this accursed place."

He drove along the straight expressway, where Fank had driven him six months ago in a luxurious limousine and had passed an endless column of armored vehicles. Fank had driven at a furious speed to deliver him to Strannik. Now he understood why Strannik wanted him. "He knew then that I was immune to radiation, that I was very naive, that he could manipulate me as he pleased. Yes, Strannik knew all right. Damn him! He's the devil himself; the most terrifying man in the country, perhaps on the entire planet. 'He knows everything,' the prosecutor said. No, not everything. You've gained the upper hand, Mac. You've won around from the devil. Now you must kill him before it's too late, before he manages to recover his senses. Maybe they've killed him already -- right at the gates of his own den. No, I don't believe they got him; he's too much for them. Even with twenty-four relatives and a couple of machine guns, Voldyr couldn't get him. Massaraksh! Too bad I didn't have time to contact the General. He's serving time in the penal colony. I wanted him to be prepared to start an insurrection among the

political prisoners and send them here by troop train. But whatever happens there, I must knock off Strannik. Yes, I must knock him off and hold out for several hours until the army and the Legion are overwhelmed by radiation deprivation. None of them know about radiation deprivation -- not even Strannik. How could he?"

The expressway was strewn with cars parked at every conceivable angle; some had toppled over the shoulder into the drainage ditch. Drivers and passengers were overwhelmed by the depression strike: some sat grieving on running boards; others were drooped over their seats or sprawled along the shoulders. It slowed Maxim down, forcing him to skirt vehicles and bodies, to brake, to detour. He failed to notice a bright yellow car speeding toward him from the city. It, too, skirted and detoured but rarely slowed down.

The two vehicles met on a relatively deserted section of the expressway and almost collided as they sped past each other. Maxim caught sight of a bare skull, round green eyes, and enormous protruding ears, and his heart sank. Everything was fouled up again. "Strannik! Massaraksh! The whole country is knocked out by the depression field, every degen is out cold, and this bastard, this devil, has managed to escape it. Which means that he's invented a protective device. And I don't have a gun on me." Maxim glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the long yellow car turn around. "Well, I'll have to manage without one. My conscience won't bother me in the least when I finish off that guy." Maxim pushed the accelerator to the floor. "Step on it, let's go. Come on, baby." The flat, yellow hood moved closer and closer until a pair of steely green eyes were visible behind the wheel. "Come on, Mac!"

Shielding Vepr with one hand, Maxim braced himself and slammed on the brakes. Amid the squealing and screeching of brakes, the grinding and crunching of metal, the yellow hood smashed into his trunk, collapsed like an accordion, and stood on end. Glass scattered everywhere. Kicking out the door, Maxim tumbled out. Pain wracked his body, tearing through his heel, broken knee, and skinned arm, but it was quickly forgotten at the sight of Strannik standing before him. Strannik! Impossible! Butt here he was. Diabolical Strannik, cool and menacing, his arm raised to strike a blow.

Maxim rushed at him, swinging at him with every ounce of his remaining strength. Missed! A terrific blow at the back of his head sent him reeling. Regaining his balance, he saw Strannik looming before him again: the bare skull, the steely green eyes, and the arm raised to strike again. His face a frozen mask, Strannik stared over Maxim's head. Maxim lunged at him again, and this time he hit his mark. The dark, lanky figure folded up and sank to the pavement slowly. Maxim caught his breath and turned around.

The Center, a cube, was clearly visible. But then it flattened before his eyes, flowing downward and collapsing inward. Above it rose shimmering hot air, steam, and smoke; and something blindingly white, whose heat was felt even at this distance, showed through the long vertical girders and window frames. OK, everything was going according to plan. Maxim turned to Strannik triumphantly. The devil lay on his side, eyes closed, clasping his stomach with his long arms. Maxim approached him cautiously. Vepr stuck his

head out of the twisted car. Wriggling and squirming, he tried to force his way out. Maxim halted next to Strannik and leaned over, debating how and where he should deliver the final blow. As he raised his arm over the sprawled figure, Strannik opened his eyes slightly and gasped hoarsely in Lingcos: "Idiot!" Maxim felt himself go limp.

"You goddamn idiot! You snotnose!" continued Strannik.

Out of the gray emptiness came Vepr's voice, loud and clear: "Step aside, Mac, I have a gun."

Maxim caught Vepr's hand.

Strannik sat up with difficulty, still clasping his stomach. "Damn it," he whispered painfully. "Don't just stand there. Find a car. Get a move on!"

Maxim looked around vacantly. The expressway had sprung to life again. The Center had vanished: it was now a puddle of molten metal, steam, and stench. The towers were not functioning, the puppets had ceased to be puppets. Stunned figures tramped around near their cars, trying to figure out what had happened to them, how and why they had come here, and what to do next.

"Who are you?" asked Vepr.

"None of your business," said Strannik in Lingcos. He was in obvious pain.

"I don't understand," said Vepr, raising his gun.

"Kammerer," called Strannik, "get your terrorist to shut up. And go find a car."

"A car?" said Maxim vacantly and helplessly.

"Massaraksh," groaned Strannik, still pressing his hand against his stomach. He managed to rise to his feet, then walked unsteadily to Maxim's car, and crawled inside. "Sit down!" he said from the driver's seat. He glanced over his shoulder at the flame-tinged column of smoke. "What the hell did you plant there?"

"A thermal bomb."

"In the basement or lobby?"

"In the basement."

Strannik groaned, rested briefly with his head thrown back, and then started the engine. The car shook and rattled.

"For God's sake, get in!" he yelled.

"Who is he?" asked Vepr. "A Khonti?"

Maxim shook his head, jerked open the jammed rear door, and ordered Vepr to get in.

Maxim walked around the car and sat down beside Strannik. The car lurched, then wobbled along the expressway.

"What are you planning to do now?" asked Strannik.

"Hold on," said Maxim. "At least tell me who you are."

"I'm an agent of the Galactic Security Council," replied Strannik bitterly. "I've been here five years. We've been laying the groundwork for an important operation; we're trying to save this planet. We've been planning thoroughly, taking into consideration all possible consequences."

All! Do you understand? Then you came along. Who the hell are you to stick your nose into other people's affairs and mess up everything, set off explosions? Who do you think you are?"

"How was I supposed to know?" Maxim's voice fell.

"You knew damn well that independent intervention was forbidden. As a member of the Independent Reconnaissance Unit, you should have known. Back on Earth your mother is going out of her mind with worry, your girlfriends keep phoning, your father quit his job. What the hell were you going to do?"

"Shoot you," replied Maxim.

"What?"

The car swerved sharply.

"Yes," said Maxim submissively. "What else could I have done? I was told that you were responsible for all the evil I saw."

"And that wasn't so hard to believe, was it?"

"No, it wasn't."

"Well, all right. Then what were you planning to do?"

"A revolution was supposed to begin."

"For whose benefit?"

"Well, with the Center destroyed and no more radiation, I thought that..."

"You thought what?"

"That they would understand at once that they were being oppressed, that their lives were miserable, and that they would revolt."

"Why would they revolt?" said Strannik sadly. "Who would revolt? The Creators are alive and thriving; the Legion is intact and unharmed; the army is mobilized, and the country is at war. What were you counting on?"

Maxim bit his lip. Of course he could tell Strannik about his plans and goals, but it would be pointless since nothing was ready and everything had turned out this way...

"It's up to them to take care of the rest." Maxim pointed over his shoulder to Vepr. "This man, for example. Let him take over. My job was to give them the opportunity to do the planning themselves."

"Your job," muttered Strannik, "was to stay put until I caught you."

"I'll keep that in mind next time."

"You will return to Earth today!" commanded Strannik.

"I don't think I will," replied Maxim.

"You will return to Earth today!" Strannik raised his voice. "I've enough trouble on this planet without you. Pick up your Rada and clear out."

"Do you have Rada?"

"Yes. She's alive and well. Don't worry."

"Thank you for taking care of her," said Maxim. "I'm very grateful to you."

The car rolled into the city. The main street was jammed with weaving, honking cars, and reeked of exhaust fumes. Strannik turned into a side street and passed through the slums. Everything was dead here. On street corners military police in combat helmets, hands clasped behind their backs, stuck up like lamp posts. The reaction to events had been very rapid here: a

general alarm had been sounded, and everyone was at his station as soon as he recovered from the depression strike. "Maybe I blew up the Center too soon. Maybe I should have stuck to the prosecutor's plan? No, massaraksh! It's just as well. Let them figure out for themselves what's what." Strannik turned onto the main thoroughfare again. Vepr tapped Strannik on the shoulder gently with his pistol. "Please drop me off. Over there. Where those people are standing."

Beside a newsstand five figures huddled, their hands thrust deep inside the pockets of their long gray raincoats. The sidewalks were deserted. Apparently, the depression strike had frightened people badly and sent them scurrying for cover.

"What are your plans?" asked Strannik, slowing down.

"To breathe the fresh air," replied Vepr. "The weather is exceptionally beautiful today."

"He's one of us," Maxim explained to Vepr. "Feel free to say anything you want."

The car stopped by the shoulder. The raincoated figures retreated cautiously behind the newsstand and peered out.

"One of us?" Vepr raised his eyebrows.

Maxim looked at Strannik awkwardly, but Strannik made no attempt to help him.

"I believe you, Mac," said Vepr. "We must get to work on the staff now. That's where we must begin. You know what I'm talking about. There are people on it who must be removed before they dominate the movement."

"Good thinking," muttered Strannik. "By the way, I think I know you. You are Tik Fesku, alias Vepr. Am I right?"

"Yes, you are. Mac, get to work on the Creators. It's a tough job, but right up your alley. Where can I get in touch with you?"

"Hold on, Vepr, I almost forgot," said Maxim. "In a few hours the entire country will be knocked out by radiation deprivation. Everyone will be completely helpless."

"Everyone?" Vepr was dubious.

"Everyone except the degens. You will have to take advantage of those few days."

Vepr thought about it.

"That's great if it's true. Then we'll get to the degens at once. Where can I reach you?"

Maxim didn't have time to reply.

"Same phone number as before," said Strannik. "Same place. Now, here's what you must do. Organize your committee. Revive the organization that existed under the Empire. Some of your people work for me at the institute. Massaraksh! We don't have enough time or people. Damn you, Maxim!"

"The main thing," said Vepr, placing a hand on Maxim's shoulder, "is that the Center is gone. You've done a great job, Mac. Thanks." He squeezed Mac's shoulder, and dangling his artificial arm, climbed from the car clumsily.

The car darted forward. Maxim glanced back. Vepr was standing in a cluster of men in gray raincoats, talking to them and waving his pistol with his good arm. The men remained impassive. They didn't understand yet. Or didn't believe.

The street was deserted. Armored trucks filled with legionnaires rolled toward them. Up ahead, where the road turned into the institute, vehicles had already straddled the road, and men in black were pouring from them. A revoltingly familiar bright yellow patrol car, equipped with a long telescopic antenna, appeared among the column of armored trucks.

"Massaraksh," muttered Maxim. "I completely forgot about them."

"You seem to have forgotten about a lot of things," said Strannik. "You forgot about the mobile emitters; you forgot about the Island Empire; you forgot about economics. Do you know that the country is about to collapse, economically? That it's threatened by famine? That the soil is not producing? Do you know that you failed to set aside grain reserves and medical supplies? Do you know that your radiation deprivation will lead to insanity in twenty percent of the cases?" He wiped his forehead with his palm. "We need doctors, twelve thousand of them. We need protein synthesizers. We must, for a beginning, decontaminate one hundred million acres of contaminated soil. We must halt the deterioration of the biosphere. Massaraksh, we need at least one Earthling on the Islands. Our own people can't hold out there; they can't even give us a clear picture of what's going on."

Maxim said nothing. They approached the roadblock. A strangely familiar stocky officer moved toward them, waving his hand, and demanded to see their documents. Strannik thrust a shiny badge under his nose. The officer saluted glumly and glanced at Maxim. It was Captain... no, not Captain, but Brigadier Chachu of the Fighting Legion!

"Is this man with you, your excellency?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm in a hurry. Order them to let me through at once."

"I beg your pardon, your excellency, but this man --"

"Let me through at once!" ordered Strannik.

Brigadier Chachu saluted again, swung around on his heels, and waved to his men. One of the trucks moved aside, and Strannik sped into the open corridor.

"You see how it is, Mac," he said. "One-two, you thought, and the whole thing would be over. Shoot Strannik, hang the Creators, drive the cowards and fascists out of the underground staff, and your revolution would be over."

"No, I never thought it would be that simple." Maxim felt defenseless and stupid.

Strannik glanced at him and smiled sadly. Maxim realized that he was neither devil nor monster, but a very kind and very vulnerable elderly man, burdened by enormous responsibilities, tormented by the loathsome disguise of a cold-blooded killer, and frustrated by another setback to a meticulously worked out plan. And he was particularly upset now because one of his own, an Earthling, had been the culprit.

"I didn't reach you in time," he said regretfully. "I underestimated you. Thought you were just a kid. Felt sorry for you." He smiled ironically. "You boys in the Independent Reconnaissance Unit are fast workers."

"I don't think you should be so hard on yourself," said Maxim. "I'm certainly not tormenting myself. By the way, what's your name?"

"Call me Ernst."

"No, I'm not tormenting myself, Ernst, and I don't intend to. I'm going to get down to work. We're going to make a revolution."

"I think you had better go home," Strannik advised him despairingly.

"But I *amam* home." Maxim was impatient. "Let's change the subject. I'm interested in the mobile emitters. What should we do about them?"

"Nothing," replied Strannik. "Think what you should do about famine."

"I'm asking you about the emitters."

Strannik sighed.

"They're powered by batteries. They can be charged up only in my department. They'll go dead in about three days. The invasion will begin in about a month. Usually we've managed to throw the subs off course, and only a few reached the coast. This time they're preparing an armada. I had counted on the depression emitter, but now we'll have to sink them." He paused briefly. "So you're home. Well, let's see. What exactly are you planning to do now?"

They drove up to the department. The heavy gates were tightly shut, and the stone wall enclosure was studded with the dark slots of newly installed gun embrasures. The department resembled a fortress, ready for battle. Three figures stood near the pavilion, and Zef's red beard burned through the foliage like an exotic flower.

"I don't know," replied Maxim. "I'll do anything that people who understand this world tell me. If necessary, I'll work on economics. If I have to, I'll sink submarines. But I'm damned sure about one thing: I'll never permit another Center to be built as long as I live. Even with the best of intentions."

Strannik remained silent. The gates were now close by. Zef shouldered his way through a hedge and came out onto the road. His gun hung from his shoulder, and even from afar it was clear that he was angry and bewildered. Now, amid a string of curses, he would demand an explanation. Why, massaraksh, had he been dragged away from his work, sold all that bull about Strannik, and forced to sit like a garden statue in a bed of petunias for two hours straight!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

BORIS STRUGATSKY is an astrophysicist and computer expert who worked at the famous Pulkovo Observatory. ARKADY STRUGATSKY is a specialist in Japanese literature and has translated works from Japanese into Russian. Their works include *Prisoners of Power*, *Roadside Picnic/Tale of the Troika*, *Prisoners of Power*, *Roadside Picnic/Tale of the Troika*, and *Noon: 22nd Century*.

Noon: 22nd Century.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

HELEN SALTZ JACOBSON is a longtime enthusiast of Soviet science fiction and has translated several books from the Russian, including *RUSSIAN SCIENCE FICTION* (1968).

ABOUT THE SERIES

In the Soviet Union, as in the U.S.A., the fascination with the possibilities of science and technology has led to a rich and long tradition of science fiction. Macmillan's *BEST OF SOVIET SCIENCE FICTION* is now presenting the major works in lively, readable translations, allowing the American reader to explore -- for the first time -- the wide range of visions of space, time, and man's future in the other major SF tradition.

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