

TALE OF THE TROIKA

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky

The story began like this. One day, at the peak of my work rush, as I was sweating over a lost shipment intended for the Kitezhgrad Magicotechnical Plant, my friend Eddie Amperian showed up in my office. Being a polite and well-brought-up person, he did not materialize unceremoniously right in the rickety visitor's chair, or barge in obnoxiously through the wall, or hurtle through the open transom like a catapulted cobblestone. Most of my friends are always in a hurry, late for something, or behind schedule, and they always materialize, or barge in, or hurtle through shamelessly whenever they feel like it, eschewing normal communications. Eddie was not like them: he modestly entered through the door. He even knocked, but came in before I had time to answer.

He stopped in front of me, said hello, and asked:

"Do you still need the Black Box?"

"Box?" I muttered, my mind still on the lost goods. "What can I tell you? What box do you mean?"

"I'm disturbing you, aren't I?" polite Eddie said carefully. "I'm sorry, but the boss sent me over. You see, approximately an hour from now the new elevator system will be launched for its first run beyond the thirteenth floor. We've been offered a ride."

My mind was still saturated with the noxious fumes of inventory jargon, and all I could say was:

"We were supposed to have lost an elevator at the thirteenth floor of this year?"

But then the first few bits of Eddie's information penetrated my gray matter. I laid down my pen and asked him to repeat what he had said. Eddie did so, patiently.

"Really?" I asked in a faint whisper.

"Absolutely," Eddie said.

"Let's go," I said, getting the folder with the requisitions out of my desk.

"Where?"

"What do you mean where? To the seventy-sixth floor."

"Not just like that," Eddie said, shaking his head. "First we have to drop in to see the boss."

"What for?"

"He asked us to. There's some problem involved with the seventy-sixth floor. The boss wants to brief us."

I shrugged without arguing. I put on my jacket, pulled out the requisition for the Black Box from the folder, and we set off to see Eddie's boss, Fedor Simeonovich Kivrin, head of the Department of Linear Happiness.

An unbelievable hubbub reigned on the platform of the first floor in front of the elevator cage. The door of the shaft was open, as was the door into the elevator itself. Many lights were burning, the mirrors were sparkling, and the polished surfaces gleamed. Under the old, peeling banner that proclaimed "Let's Get the Elevator Up by the Holiday!" huddled a crowd of curiosity seekers and people wanting rides. They were all listening politely to Modest Matveevich Kamnoedov, the deputy director, who was giving a speech before some electricians from the Solovetsk Boiler Supervisor's Department.

"This must be stopped," Modest Matveevich exhorted. "This is an elevator, not some spectroscope or microscope. The elevator is a powerful means of locomotion—that's primary. It is also a means of

transportation. The elevator must be like a dump truck: it gets you there, dumps you out, and comes back. That's point one. The administration has long been aware that many of our fellow scientists, and that includes some academicians, do not know how to use an elevator. We are combating this, and we will put an end to it. There will be examinations for licenses for operating an elevator, and past services to us will not be taken into consideration ... the establishment of the title of Senior Elevator Operator ... and so on. That's my second point. And on their part the electricians must guarantee uninterrupted service. There's no use in falling back on objective conditions as an excuse. Our slogan is 'elevators for everyone.' No matter who. The elevator must be able to withstand the entrance of the least-educated academician."

We made our way through the crowd and moved on. The pomp of that improvised meeting impressed me greatly. I had the feeling that today the elevator would actually, finally, be running and would continue running maybe for as much as twenty-four hours. That was impressive. The elevator had always been the Achilles' heel of the institute and of Modest Matveevich, personally. Actually, there was nothing special about it. It was an elevator like any other, with its good points and its bad points. As befits a proper elevator, it constantly strove to get stuck between floors, was always occupied, burned out the bulbs that were screwed into it, and demanded irreproachable behavior and a deft touch with the gate. Getting into the elevator, one could never say with any certainty where and when one would be getting out.

But our elevator did have one unique trait. It could not stand going above the thirteenth floor. I mean, of course, that there are recorded instances in the history of the institute of individual skilled craftsmen who managed to overcome the contrariness of the mechanism and, giving it its head, went up to absolutely fantastic heights. But for the average man, the endless territory of the institute looming above the thirteenth floor was just a blank. There were all kinds of rumors, some contradictory, about those territories, almost completely cut off from the world and the influence of the administration. It was maintained, for example, that the one hundred twenty-fourth floor had an exit into an adjoining space with different physical properties, that on the two hundred thirtieth floor lived a mysterious race of alchemists—the spiritual descendants of the famous Union of the Nine established by the enlightened Indian king Asoka, and that on the one thousand seventeenth floor, the old man, his wife, and the Golden Fish still lived on the shore of the Blue Sea.

The floor that interested me the most, and Eddie too, was seventy-six. It was there, according to Inventory Control, that the Ideal Black Box was kept, indispensable to a computer lab. A talking bedbug lived there too, and the Department of Linear Happiness had long needed it. As far as we could tell, the seventy-sixth floor was a sort of storehouse for the anomalies of nature and society, and many of our employees were eager to dig their claws into that treasure trove. Fedor Simeonovich Kivrin, for example, dreamed of the granulated Grounds for Optimism that were supposed to be there. The guys from the Department of Social Meteorology were desperate for at least one qualified Cold Shoulder—three were indicated as being there, and all three had an effective temperature close to absolute zero. Old Christobal Joséeovich Junta, director of the Department of the Meaning of Life and doctor of the most unexpected sciences, was champing at the bit to catch the sole remaining specimen of the Wingless Earthbound Dream and stuff it. Over the past twenty-five years he had tried no less than six times to break through all the barriers to the seventy-sixth floor, using his formidable powers of vertical translocation. But even he was unsuccessful: all the floors above thirteen, according to the clever plans of the ancient architects, were solidly blocked against any type of translocation. Thus a successful launching of the elevator would have signified a new epoch in the life of our collective.

We stopped outside Fedor Simeonovich's office, and the old house spirit Tikhon, clean and presentable, cheerily opened the door for us. We went in.

Fedor Simeonovich Kivrin was not alone. Olive-hued Christobal Joséeovich Junta was casually draped in the soft armchair behind his large work table, sucking on a smelly Havana cigar. Fedor Simeonovich himself, his large fingers tucked in his colorful suspenders, was walking up and down the office with his

head bowed. He was trying to step along the very edge of the Persian carpet. Crystal vases on the table held the Fruits of Paradise: the large, rosy apples of the Knowledge of Evil and the completely inedible-looking, but nevertheless worm-eaten, apples of the Knowledge of Good. The porcelain dish at Christobal Joséeovich's elbow was full of cores and butts.

Detecting our presence, Fedor Simeonovich stopped in his tracks.

"And here they are in person," he said without his customary smile. "P-p-please sit down. T-t-time is short. K-K-Kamnoedov is a blowhard, but he'll be through soon. Ch-Christo, why don't you ex-ex-explain the circumstances, it always comes out badly when I try."

We sat down. Christobal Joséeovich, his right eye squinting from the smoke, looked at us critically.

"I'll explain, if you wish," he said to Fedor Simeonovich. "The circumstances are such, young men, that the first people to reach the seventy-sixth floor should be those of us who are experienced and wise. Unfortunately, the administration feels that we are too old and too venerable to go on the first experimental launch. Therefore, you are going, and I warn you right now that this will not be a simple trip, but reconnaissance, and perhaps reconnaissance under fire. You'll need stamina, courage, and the utmost discretion. Personally, I do not observe any of these qualities in you, but I defer to the recommendation of Fedor Simeonovich. And in any case, you must know that you will most likely be in enemy territory—a merciless, cruel enemy who will stop at nothing."

That preface made me start sweating, but then Christobal Joséeovich began explaining how things stood.

It turned out that on the seventy-sixth floor lay the ancient city of Tmuskorpion, seized as a trophy of war, way back when, by the vengeful Prince Oleg the Prophetic. From time immemorial Tmuskorpion was the center of strange phenomena and the site of strange events. Why this was so, no one knew, but everything that could not be rationally explained at any stage of scientific and technological progress was sent there to be preserved for better times.

Back in the days of Peter the Great, at the same time that his famous museum, the *Kunstkamera*, was being founded in St. Petersburg, the local Solovetsk authorities, in the person of Lieutenant Bombadier Ptakha and his company of grenadiers, established "His Imperial Majesty's Kamera of Marvelous and Amazing Kunsts with a Prison and Two Steambaths" in Tmuskorpion. In those days, the seventy-sixth floor was the second floor, and it was a lot easier to get into His Imperial Majesty's Kamera of Kunsts than into the baths. But later, as the Edifice of Knowledge grew, access to it became increasingly difficult, and ceased completely with the appearance of the elevator. Meanwhile the Kamera of Kunsts kept growing, enriched by new exhibits, and became the Imperial Museum of Zoological and Other Natural Wonders under Catherine the Great, the Russian Imperial Preserve of Magical, Spiritual, and Occult Phenomena under Alexander II, and finally, the State Colony of Unexplained Phenomena under the Research Institute for Magic and Wizardry of the Academy of Sciences.

The destructive consequences of the invention of the elevator impeded the exploitation of the treasure trove for scientific research. Business correspondence with the administration was extremely difficult and inevitably drawn-out: cables lowered with correspondence snapped under their own weight; carrier pigeons refused to fly that high; radio communications were shaky because of the backwardness of Tmuskorpion's technology; and the use of lighter-than-air craft merely led to needless expenditure of the limited supplies of helium. But all that is history now.

Some twenty years ago the berserk elevator dropped off the Inspection Commission of the Solovetsk Committee on Municipal Economy on the seventy-sixth floor. They had come simply to discuss the stopped-up plumbing in the labs of Professor Vybegallo on the fourth floor. What precisely went on remains unknown. Vybegallo, who was waiting for the commission on the fourth floor, recounts that the elevator rushed up past him with a terrifying roar, the glass door showing a glimpse of distorted faces, and then the horrifying vision passed. Exactly an hour later the elevator car was discovered on the

thirteenth floor in a lather, snorting, and still trembling from excitement. The commission was not in the car. A note was glued to the wall, written on the back of a form for reporting unsatisfactory conditions. It said: "Am going out to examine. I see a strange rock. Comrade Farfurkis has been reprimanded for going into the bushes. Chairman of the Commission, L. Vuniukov."

For a long time, no one knew on what floor L. Vuniukov and his subordinates had disembarked from the elevator. The police came, and there were many awkward questions. A month later, two sealed packages addressed to the head of the Municipal Economic Committee were found on the roof of the car. One package contained a packet of decrees on cigarette paper that recorded reprimands of Comrade Farfurkis or Comrade Khlebovovodov, for the most part for displaying individualism and some inexplicable "Zuboism." The second package contained the materials for a report on the plumbing in Tmuskorpion (the conditions were acknowledged to be unsatisfactory) and an application to Accounting for extra pay for high-altitude duty.

After this, correspondence from above became rather regular. First came the minutes of the meetings of the Inspection Commission of the Municipal Economic Committee, then of the Special Commission on Examining the Situation, then suddenly the Temporary Troika on Examining the Activity of Commandant Zubo of the Colony of Unexplained Phenomena, and finally, after three reports in a row on "criminal negligence," L. Vuniukov signed in as Chairman of the Troika on the Rationalization and Utilization of Unexplained Phenomena. The newly formed triumvirate stopped sending down minutes and began sending instructions and decrees. These documents were terrifying in form and content. They gave incontrovertible evidence that the former commission of the Committee on Municipal Economy had usurped power in Tmuskorpion and that it was incapable of wielding such power rationally.

"The greatest danger," Christobal Joséévich continued in his even voice, sucking on the extinguished cigar, "is the fact that these rascals have the well-known Great Round Seal in their hands. I hope that you realize what this means."

"I understand," Eddie said quietly. "You can't hack it out even with an ax." His clear face clouded over. "What if we use the humanizer?"

Christobal Joséévich looked at Fedor Simeonovich.

"You can try, of course," he said, shrugging. "However, I'm afraid that things have gone too far."

"N-n-no, why do you say that?" Fedor Simeonovich countered. "T-try it, t-try it, Eddie. They're not automatons up there. B-by the way, V-V-Vybegallo is up there, too."

"How come?"

It seemed that three months ago a demand had been sent down for a scientific consultant at a fantastic salary. Nobody believed the salary offer, least of all Professor Vybegallo, who at that time was just finishing up a major project on developing, through reeducation, a worm that would bait itself on a hook. Vybegallo announced to all ears at the academic council his distrust of the offer and ran away that same evening, leaving everything behind. Many saw him, briefcase in his teeth, clambering up the inner wall of the elevator shaft, getting out on floors divisible by five to replenish his strength at the snack bars. A week later a decree was lowered, stating that Professor A. A. Vybegallo had been appointed scientific consultant to the Troika at the promised salary, with bonuses for his knowledge of foreign languages.

"Thanks," said polite Eddie. "That's valuable information. Shall we go?"

"Go, go, my dear friends," Fedor Simeonovich said, touched to the quick. He peered into the magic crystal. "Yes, it's time. Kamnoedov is g-getting to the end of his s-s-speech. B-be careful up there. It's a c-creepy, terrifying place."

"And no emotions!" Christobal Joséévich insisted. "If they don't give you your bedbugs and boxes—it doesn't matter. You are scouts. We will maintain one-way telepathic communications with you. We will follow your every move. Gathering information is your primary goal."

"We understand," said Eddie.

Christobal looked us over one more time.

"They should take Modest with them," he muttered. "Fight fire with fire." He gave a hopeless wave of the hand. "All right, go. Good luck."

We left, and Eddie said that now we had to drop into his lab and pick up the humanizer. He had been quite active in practical humanization lately. Six cabinets in his lab housed an experimental apparatus whose functional principle boiled down to the fact that it repressed primitive urges in the person subjected to its rays and brought to the surface and directed outward all that was rational, good, and eternal. With the aid of this experimental humanizer, Eddie managed to cure a philatelist, return two out-of-control hockey fans to the bosoms of their families, and bring a chronic slanderer under control. Now he was trying to cure our close friend Vitya Korneev of insolence, unsuccessfully thus far.

"How are we going to lug all this?" I asked, looking at the cabinets in horror.

But Eddie calmed me down. It seemed that his portable version was almost ready. It was less powerful, but adequate, Eddie hoped, for our needs. "I'll finish soldering it there," he said, putting the flat metal box in his pocket.

When we got back to the landing, Modest Matveevich was winding up his speech.

"We'll put an end to this, too," he maintained in a slightly hoarse voice. "Because, first of all, the elevator safeguards our lives. That's point one. And it saves work time. The elevator costs money, and we categorically forbid smoking in it. Which of you are the volunteers?" he asked, turning to the crowd unexpectedly.

Several voices responded, but Modest Matveevich turned down the candidates. "You're too young to ride around in elevators," he announced. "This is no spectroscope, you know." Eddie and I silently made our way to the front of the crowd.

"We want to go to seventy-six," Eddie said quietly.

There was a respectful silence. Modest Matveevich looked us over from head to toe with great doubt.

"You look weak to me. Too green. Do you smoke?"

"No," said Eddie.

"Occasionally," said I.

Tikhon the house spirit ran out of the crowd and whispered in Modest Matveevich's ear. Modest Matveevich pursed his lips.

"We'll have to check that," he said and took out his notebook. "What's your business up there, Amperian?" he asked grumpily.

"The Talking Bedbug."

"And you, Privalov?"

"The Black Box."

"Hmm." Modest Matveevich flipped through his book. "Correct, they are located there—The Colony of Unexplained Phenomena. Let's see your requisitions."

We showed him.

"Well, all right, go on up. You won't be the first, and you won't be the last."

He saluted us. Sad music began playing. The crowd hushed. We entered the elevator cab. I was sad and scared and I remembered that I had not said good-bye to Stella. "They'll wipe them out up there," Modest Matveevich was explaining to someone. "Too bad, they're nice guys. Amperian doesn't even

smoke; cigarettes don't touch his lips." The metal gate clanged shut. Eddie pushed the button for seventy-six without looking at me. The door closed automatically, a sign flashed saying "No smoking! Fasten your seatbelts!"—and off we went.

At first it moved slowly and lazily, at a half-hearted trot. You could tell that it did not like going anywhere. Familiar corridors, the sad faces of our friends, and the homemade posters saying "Heroes!" and "You won't be forgotten!" floated down past us. On the thirteenth floor they waved to us for the last time, and the elevator headed for uncharted territories.

Seemingly uninhabited rooms appeared and disappeared, the jolts became less frequent and weaker, and it felt as though the elevator was falling asleep en route. It came to a complete halt on the sixteenth floor. We had barely exchanged a few words with some armed guards, who turned out to work in the Department of Enchanted Treasure, when the elevator reared up on its hind legs and galloped off wildly toward the zenith with a metallic whinny.

Lights lit up and relays clicked. The acceleration was pushing us into the floor. Eddie and I clung to each other to stay on our feet. The mirrors reflected our sweaty, tense faces, and we had prepared for the worst when the gallop changed to a canter and the force fell to one and a half g's. We cheered up. Making our hearts skip, the elevator parked itself at the fifty-seventh floor. The door opened and a heavy-set middle-aged man came in, carrying an open accordion. He casually extended "Greetings to one and all!" and pushed sixty-three. When the elevator started moving, he leaned against the wall and, rolling his eyes, started playing "Little Bricks" softly.

"From below?" he inquired indolently, without turning to us.

"From below," we replied.

"Kamnoedov still there?"

"Yes."

"Well, say hello," the stranger said and paid no more attention to us. The elevator rose slowly, trembling in time with the song.

Eddie and I were so embarrassed that we set ourselves to learning the "Rules of Operation" etched on a brass plate. We learned that it was against the rules: for bats, vampires, and flying squirrels to settle in the car; to exit through the walls in case of an emergency stop between floors; to transport flammable and explosive materials as well as vessels containing genies or dragons without fireproof muzzles; and for house spirits to use the elevator without accompanying humans. Also everyone without exception was forbidden to create mischief, be involved in sleeping, or to hop.

We did not have the chance to read all the rules. The car stopped, the stranger got out, and Eddie pressed seventy-six one more time. At that very second the elevator rushed up with a ferocity that made us blank out. When we came to, the elevator was motionless and the door was open. We were on the seventy-sixth floor. We looked at each other and went out bearing our requisitions over our heads like white flags. I do not know for sure what it was we expected, but it was bound to be bad.

However, nothing terrible happened. We found ourselves in a round, empty, and very dusty room with a low gray ceiling. A white boulder, looking like an antitank stake placement, grew out of the parquet floor. Old yellowed bones were scattered around the boulder. There was the smell of mice, and it was murky. Suddenly the elevator gate clanged shut. We shuddered and turned around, but all we saw was the roof of the descending car. An evil roar filled the room and died down. We were trapped. I desperately wanted to get back downstairs immediately, but the lost look that crossed Eddie's face gave me strength. I stuck out my jaw, folded my hands behind my back, and headed for the boulder, maintaining an independent and skeptical air. Just as I had expected, the boulder was a road marker, often encountered in fairy tales. The sign over it looked something like this:

No.1. If you go to the right, you'll lose your head.

No.2. If you go to the left, you'll get nowhere.

No.3. If you go straight, you'll

"They've scraped off the last part," Eddie explained. "Aha. There's something else written in pencil: 'We are here ... we consulted the people ... and the opinion is ... that we should go ... straight. Signed: L. Vuniukov.' "

We looked straight ahead. Our eyes had adjusted to the diffused light, and we saw the doors. There were three of them. The doors leading to what might be considered the right and the left were boarded shut, and there was a path going around the boulder through the dust from the elevator to the middle door.

"I don't like any of this," I said with courageous forthrightness. "These bones ... "

"I think they're ivory," Eddie said. "But that's not important. We can't go back, can we?"

"Maybe we could write a note and throw it down the shaft? Otherwise we'll disappear without a trace."

"Alex, don't forget that we are in telepathic communication. It's embarrassing. Get yourself together."

I got myself together. I stuck out my jaw again and resolutely strode toward the middle door. Eddie walked next to me.

"The Rubicon is crossed!" I announced and kicked the door.

The effect was wasted. There was a barely noticeable sign on the door that said "Pull," and the Rubicon had to be crossed a second time, without the grand gestures and with the humiliating application of force to the powerful springs.

There was a park bathed in sunlight on the other side of the door. We saw sandy paths, trimmed hedges, and warning signs: "Do not walk on the lawn and do not eat the grass." There was a cast-iron park bench with a broken back, and a strange man wearing a pince-nez was sitting on it, reading a newspaper and wiggling his bare toes. Seeing us, he became embarrassed for some reason, and without lowering the paper, removed the pince-nez agilely with his toes, wiped the lenses on his trousers, and put it back. Then he set aside the paper and rose. He was tall, very hairy, and wore a clean white vest and blue linen pants with suspenders. The gold-rimmed pince-nez squeezed the broad bridge of his nose and gave him a foreign look. He resembled something out of a political cartoon in the central newspapers. His big pointy ears twitched, and he took several steps toward us and spoke in a hoarse but pleasant voice:

"Welcome to Tmuskorpion, and allow me to present myself. I am Fedya the Abominable Snowman."

We bowed silently.

"You're from below, no? Thank God. I've been waiting for you for over a year—ever since I was rationalized. Let's sit down. There's still an hour until the evening session of the Troika. I would very much like, with your permission, for you to appear at the meeting with some preparation. Of course, I do not know that much, but permit me to tell you all that I do."

CASE 42: OLD MAN EDELWEISS

We crossed the threshold of the meeting room exactly at five o'clock. We had been briefed, we were prepared for anything, and we knew what to expect. Or so I thought. I must admit that Fedya's explanations had calmed me somewhat. But Eddie had become depressed. I was surprised by his depression, but I attributed it completely to the fact that Eddie had always been a man of pure science far removed from lost shipments, paper punching, and expense forms. And so his depression made me, a man of wider experience, feel superior. I felt more mature and I was ready to act accordingly.

There was only one man in the room—judging by Fedya's descriptions, it was Comrade Zubo, the Commandant of the Colony. He sat at a small table, holding an open folder, and was blinking with barely repressed excitement. He was emaciated, his lips were in constant motion, and his eyes were white, like an antique statue's. He did not notice us at first, and we quietly found seats under the sign on the wall that said "Representatives." The room was three windows wide, and a bare demonstration table stood by the door. Another table, a huge one covered with green baize, stood against the opposite wall. A hideous brown safe towered in the corner; the commandant's table, littered with manila folders, huddled next to it. There was still another table in the room, under the "Scientific Consultant" sign, as well as a gigantic cloth banner, covering a wall and a half, that read: "The people do not need unhealthy sensationalism. The people need healthy sensationalism." I looked over at Eddie. He was staring at the banner, utterly crushed.

The commandant suddenly looked up, sniffed with his big nose, and unearthed our presence.

"Outsiders!"

We stood and bowed. The commandant, keeping his eyes fixed on us, got up from his little table, took a few stealthy steps, and stopped before Eddie and extended his hand. Polite Eddie, smiling weakly, shook hands and introduced himself, then stepped back and bowed once more. The commandant seemed shaken. For a few seconds he remained in position, then brought his hand up to his face and examined it suspiciously. Something was wrong. The commandant blinked rapidly and then anxiously examined the floor at his feet, as though looking for something he had dropped. Then I got it.

"The documents! Show him the documents!"

The commandant, smiling nervously, kept looking around him. Eddie quickly shoved his ID and requisition at him. The commandant came to life. His movements became rational. His eyes devoured the requisition, then the photograph on the papers, and then Eddie himself for dessert. The resemblance between the photograph and the original brought him obvious joy.

"Very pleased!" he exclaimed. "The name is Zubo. Commandant. Glad to welcome you. Make yourself comfortable, Comrade Amperian, make yourself at home, you and I still have a lot of work ahead of us." He stopped and looked at me. I already had my papers in my hand. The process of devouring was repeated.

"Very pleased!" the commandant exclaimed with exactly the same intonation. "The name is Zubo. Commandant. Glad to welcome you. Make yourself comfortable, Comrade Privalov, make yourself at home."

"What about a hotel?" I asked in a businesslike manner. I felt that that would be the right tone to take with him. But I was wrong. The commandant let my question fall on deaf ears. He was examining the requisition.

"Box, Black, Ideal," he muttered. "We do have one, it hasn't been examined yet. The Talking Bedbug has been rationalized, Comrade Amperian. I don't know, I don't know. It all depends on Lavr Fedotovich. I'd be worried if I were you."

He suddenly clammed up, listened, and dashed back to his seat. There were footsteps, voices, and coughing in the foyer. The door opened, pushed by a powerful hand, and the Troika, that mighty triumvirate, appeared in the room in full complement—all four of them.

Lavr Fedotovich Vuniukov, in complete agreement with the description, white, sleek, and strong, moved to his seat without looking at anyone. He sat down, set his large briefcase in front of himself, opened it with a flourish, and started arranging on the green baize all the objects necessary for a successful chairmanship: a blotter trimmed in alligator leather, a selection of pens in a calfskin holder, a pack of Herzegovina-Flor cigarettes, a lighter in the shape of the Arc de Triomphe, and a pair of prismatic opera glasses.

Rudolf Arkhipovich Khlebovovodov, shriveled and yellow, sat on Lavr Fedotovich's left and

immediately began whispering in his ear, letting his eyes roam aimlessly from corner to corner.

Redheaded and baggy Farfurkis did not sit at the table. Democratically, he seated himself on a wooden chair across from the commandant, opened a fat notebook with a tattered cover, and immediately made a notation.

The scientific consultant, Professor Vybegallo, whom we recognized without any description, looked us over indifferently, frowned, glanced up at the ceiling, as though trying to remember where he had seen us. He may have remembered, maybe not, but he sat at his table and prepared for his important duties. He began setting up *The Small Soviet Encyclopedia*, volume by volume, on his table.

"Harrumph," Lavr Fedotovich said and looked around with a gaze that penetrated walls. Everyone was ready: Khlebovvodov was whispering, Farfurkis made a second notation, the commandant, like a student making last-minute preparations, was hysterically leafing through his papers, and Vybegallo set up Volume Six. As for the representatives, that is, us, we apparently were of no significance. I looked at Eddie and quickly turned away. Eddie was close to total demoralization—Vybegallo's appearance was the last straw.

"The evening session of the Troika is hereby declared opened," Lavr Fedotovich said. "Next! Your report, please, Comrade Zubo." The commandant jumped up, and holding the open folder, began speaking in a high-pitched voice:

"Case 42. Surname: Mashkin. Name: Edelweiss. Patronymic: Zakharovich."

"When did he suddenly become Mashkin?" Khlebovvodov demanded disdainfully. "Babkin, not Mashkin! Babkin, Edelweiss Za-kharovich. I worked with him way back when in the Committee on Dairy Affairs. Eddie Babkin, a stout fellow, loved heavy cream. And, by the way, he's no Edelweiss, either. He's Eduard. Eduard Petrovich Babkin."

Lavr Fedotovich slowly turned a stony face to him.

"Babkin?" he said. "I don't remember. Continue, Comrade Zubo."

"Patronymic: Zakharovich," the commandant continued, his cheek twitching. "Year and place of birth: 1942. City of Smolensk. Nationality ... "

"E-dul-weiss or E-dol-weiss?" asked Farfurkis.

"E-del-weiss," said the commandant. "Nationality: Belorussian. Education: Incomplete secondary general, incomplete secondary technical. Knowledge of foreign languages: Russian, fluent, Ukrainian and Belorussian, with a dictionary. Place of occupation ... "

Khlebovvodov suddenly smacked himself loudly on the forehead.

"Of course not!" he shouted. "He died!"

"Who died?" Lavr Fedotovich asked woodenly.

"That Babkin! I remember as if it happened yesterday—he died of a heart attack in 1956. He had become financial director of the All-Russian Society of Nature Experimenters and he died. So there must be some mistake here."

Lavr Fedotovich took his opera glasses and studied the commandant, who had lost his faculty of speech.

"Does your report reflect the fact of his death?" he inquired.

"As God is my ... " babbled the commandant. "What death? He's alive, he's in the waiting room."

"Just a minute," Farfurkis interrupted. "Allow me, Lavr Fedotovich? Comrade Zubo, who is waiting in the room outside? But be precise. Surname, name, and patronymic."

"Babkin!" the commandant said in despair. "No, no, what am I saying? Not Babkin—Mashkin! Mashkin is waiting. Edelweiss Za-kharovich."

"I understand," said Farfurkis. "And where is Babkin?"

"Babkin died," said Khlebovvodov authoritatively. "I can tell you that for sure. In 1956. Of course, he did have a son. Pavel, I think. That means his name was Pavel Eduardovich. He runs a textile remnants store in Golitsyn, which is south of Moscow. He's a good businessman, but I don't think his name is Pavel after all."

Farfurkis poured a glass of water and gave it to the commandant. In the gathering stillness, we could hear the commandant's resonant gulps. Lavr Fedotovitch kneaded a cigarette.

"No one is forgotten and nothing is overlooked. That is good. Comrade Farfurkis, I will ask you to enter into the minutes, in the verification section, that the Troika feels it would be valuable to take measures to find the son of Babkin, Eduard Petrovich, in order to determine his name. The people do not need nameless heroes. We do not have them."

Farfurkis nodded and began writing rapidly in his notebook.

"Have you had enough water?" Lavr Fedotovitch inquired, looking at the commandant through his opera glasses. "Then continue your report."

"Place of occupation and profession at present time: Retired inventor," the commandant read unsteadily. "Travel abroad: None. Brief description of the unexplained: A heuristic machine, that is, an electronic and mechanical apparatus that solves engineering, scientific, sociological, and other problems. Nearest relatives: Orphan, no brothers or sisters. Address of permanent residence: Novosibirsk, 23 Shchukinskaia Street, apartment 88. That's all."

"Any motions?" asked Lavr Fedotovitch, lowering his heavy lids. "I move we let him in," said Khlebovvodov. "Why do I suggest this? Because what if he is Pavel?"

"Any other motions?" asked Lavr Fedotovitch. He felt around the table for the button, could not find it, and addressed the commandant. "Let the case come in, Comrade Zubo."

The commandant hurled himself at the door, stuck out his head, and immediately returned, backing all the way to his seat. Behind him, bent by the weight of a huge black case, came a wizened little old man in a long belted blouse and military jodhpurs with orange braid. On the way to the table, he tried several times to stop his forward motion and give a dignified bow, but the case's powerful inertia dragged him ever forward. There might have been casualties if Eddie and I had not grabbed the little old man just inches away from the trembling Farfurkis. I recognized the old man—he had come to the institute many times, and to many other institutes, and once I had seen him in the reception room of the Deputy Minister of Heavy Machine-building, where he was first in line, patient, clean, and brimming with enthusiasm. He was a nice little old man, and harmless, but unfortunately he could think of himself only as an instrument of scientific and technological progress.

I took the heavy case and lugged his invention up on the demonstration table. Freed at last, the old man bowed and said in a quavering voice:

"My respects. Edelweiss Zakharovich Mashkin, inventor."

"That's not him," Khlebovvodov said in a low voice. "That's not him and it doesn't even look like him. I guess it's a completely different Babkin. Just someone with the same name, I guess."

"Yes, sir," agreed the little old man, smiling. "I've brought this to be judged by the public. Professor Vybegallo, here, God grant him health, recommended it. I'm ready to demonstrate it, if you like, because I sure have been overstaying my welcome in your Colony."

Lavr Fedotovitch, who was scrutinizing him attentively, laid down his opera glasses and cocked his head. The old man bustled around. He took the cover off the case, revealing a bulky, ancient typewriter, took a bundle of wiring from his pocket, stuck one end into the bowels of the machine, unwound the wiring, and plugged it in.

"There, if you please, you have the heuristic machine," said the old man. "A precise electromechanical

apparatus for answering any questions, specifically scientific and economic ones. How does it work? Being short of funds and being held up by various amounts of red tape, I have not been able to make it fully automatic yet. The questions are posed orally, and I type them and enter them inside, bring them to its attention, so to speak. Its answers, again due to incomplete automation, are typed by me again. I'm a type of middleman here, hee hee! So, if it pleases you, let us begin."

He moved up to the machine and switched it on with a grand gesture. A neon light went on in its bowels.

"Please," repeated the old man.

"What's that light in there?" Farfurkis asked curiously.

The old man immediately struck the keys, then quickly tore the paper from the roller, and raced up to Farfurkis. Farfurkis read it aloud.

"Question: What is that ... hum ... that lo ... lofjt. Or is it pofit? What's this lofjt?"

"That's 'light', " said the old man, giggling and rubbing his hands together. "That's code." He grabbed the paper from Farfurkis and ran back to the typewriter. "That was the question," he explained, putting the paper back in the roller. "And now let's see what it answers."

The members of the Troika watched with interest. Professor Vybegallo glowed with fatherly pride and with refined and flowing movements picked litter from his beard. Eddie had settled into an apathetic gloom. Meanwhile the old man typed away. He pulled out the paper again.

"Here's the answer, if you please."

Farfurkis read it.

" 'Insade, I have a neon ... hum ... a neonette.' What's a neonette?"

"*Eine Sekunde!*" the inventor cried, grabbed the paper, and scurried back to the typewriter.

The affair went on. The machine gave an illiterate explanation of a neon bulb, then answered Farfurkis by telling him it spelled "in-sade" according to the rules of grammar, and then:

Farfurkis: "What grammar?"

Machine: "Why our own Russian grmr."

Khlebowodov: "Do you know Eduard Petrovich Babkin?"

Machine: "No how."

Lavr Fedotovich: "Harrumph. What motions are there?"

Machine: "To acknowledge me as a scientific fact."

The old man ran back and forth and typed with unbelievable speed. The commandant jumped up and down excitedly in his chair and kept giving us a thumbs-up sign. Eddie slowly regained his psychic balance.

Khlebowodov (irritably): "I cannot work under these conditions. Why is he racing back and forth like a tincan in the wind?"

Machine: "Because of my eagerness."

Khlebowodov: "Will you get that paper away from me? Can't you see that I am not asking you anything?"

Machine: "Yes, I can."

The Troika finally understood that if they ever wanted to end that day's meeting they would have to stop asking questions, even rhetorical ones. Silence reigned. The old man, who was quite worn out by then, perched on the edge of a chair, and panted, mopping himself with his handkerchief. Vybegallo looked around proudly.

"There is a motion," said Farfurkis, carefully choosing his words. "Let the scientific consultant make an expert judgment and report on his decision."

Lavr Fedotovitch looked at Vybegallo and regally bowed his head. Vybegallo rose. Vybegallo smiled politely. Vybegallo pressed his right hand to his heart. Vybegallo spoke.

"*C'est ...*" he said. "It's not right, Lavr Fedotovitch. Be it as it may, but *j'ai recommended ce noble vieux*. There will be talk, that this is nepotism, favoritism. And nevertheless this is a rare event and an obvious case, perfectly valuable, rationalization is called for. *C'est* clear from the experiment. I would not like to end a bright beginning, nip initiative in the bud. What would be better? It would be better if some other expert gave his opinion, someone impartial, it would be better. Here among the representatives from below I see Comrade Alexander Ivanovich Privalov (I shuddered). A comrade specializing in computers. And impartial. Let him. I feel that it would be of value."

Lavr Fedotovitch raised his opera glasses and examined each of us in turn. Eddie had come to life and was whispering: "Alex, you must! Give it to them! This is our chance!"

"There is a motion," said Farfurkis, "to ask comrade representative from below to collaborate with the work of the Troika."

Lavr Fedotovitch put down his opera glasses and gave his consent. Now everyone looked at me. I, of course, would not have become involved in this affair at all if it had not been for the old man. *Ce noble vieux* was batting his reddened lids at me so pathetically and his whole appearance screamed that he would pray for me for the rest of his life. I couldn't resist. I reluctantly rose and went over to the typewriter. The old man smiled at me. I looked over the apparatus.

"Well, all right. By heuristic programming we mean the attempt to imitate human thought processes in digital computer. Here we have a Remington typewriter, made in 1906, in fairly good condition. The type is prerevolutionary and also in good condition." I caught the old man's pleading look, sighed, and turned on the switch. "In short, the typing construction contains nothing new. Only the very old."

"Insade!" the old man whispered. "Look insade, where there's an analyzer and a thinker."

"The analyzer," I said. "There's no analyzer here. There is a serial rectifier, also ancient. A plain neon bulb. A switch. A good switch, it's new. There is also a cord, brand new. That, I guess, is that."

"And your conclusion?" Farfurkis inquired in a lively tone.

Eddie was nodding at me approvingly, and I let him know that I would try.

"My conclusion," I said. "The described Remington typewriter, in conjunction with a rectifier, neon bulb, switch, and cord does not represent anything unexplainable."

"What about me?" the old man shouted.

Eddie showed me that it was time for a left hook, but I just couldn't.

"Well, of course," I mumbled. "This evinces a lot of work. (*Eddie grabbed his hair.*) I, of course, understand ... the good intentions. (*Eddie looked at me with contempt.*) But really, the man tried his best, you can't just ..."

"Have fear of God," Eddie said clearly.

"Why not? Let the man keep on working, if it interests him. I'm only saying that there is nothing inexplicable about this. But it's actually quite clever."

"Are there any questions for our scientific consultant pro tern?" asked Lavr Fedotovitch.

Hearing an interrogative intonation, the old man made a dash for the machine, but I stopped him by grabbing him round the waist.

"That's right," said Khlebovvodov. "Hold on to him. It's hard to work otherwise. This isn't an evening of twenty questions, you know. Why don't you unplug it for now, anyway? I don't like it eavesdropping."

I freed a hand and clicked off the switch. The light went out and old man quieted down.

"But I still have a question," Khlebovvodov went on. "How does it answer?"

I looked at him flabbergasted. Eddie was himself again and was glaring at the Troika. Vybegallo was pleased. He pulled out a long twig from his beard and stuck it between his teeth.

"Rectorizers and switches," said Khlebovvodov. "Comrade pro tem explained all that rather well. But he did not explain one thing: he did not explain the facts. And the incontrovertible fact is that when you ask a question, you get an answer. In written form. And even when you ask someone else a question, you get an answer. In written form. And you say, comrade pro tem, that there is nothing inexplicable here. The ends do not meet. We do not understand what science has to say on the subject."

Science as embodied by me had lost its power of speech. Khlebovvodov had cut me, stabbed me in the back, killed and buried me. But Vybegallo reacted in time.

"*C'est*, " he said. "That's what I said, a valuable beginning! There is an element of the unexplained, that's why I recommended it. *C'est*, " he turned to the old man. "*Mon cher*, explain what is what to our comrades."

The old man exploded.

"The highest achievements of neutron megaloplasm!" he thundered. "The rotor of the field of divergence gradates along the back and there, insade, turns the matter of the question into spiritual electrical whirlwinds, from which the synecdoche of the answering arises ... "

I was beginning to see spots before my eyes, bile was rising, and my teeth ached, and the damned *noble vieux* went on talking. His speech was smooth—it was a cleverly rehearsed and often repeated speech, in which every adjective, every intonation was quivering with an emotional charge. It was a true work of art. The old man was no inventor, but he was an artist, a genius of an orator, a worthy successor to Demosthenes, Cicero, and John Chrysostom. Reeling, I stepped to the side and leaned my forehead on the cool wall.

Then Eddie quietly clapped his hands, and the old man stopped. For a second I thought that Eddie had stopped time, because everyone was still, listening to a deep medieval silence that was draped like velvet in the room. Then Lavr Fedotovitch pushed back his chair and rose.

"According to the regulations and all the rules, I should speak last," he began. "But there are times when the regulations and rules do not apply, and they must be thrown out. I am speaking first because this is one of these times. I am speaking first because I can not wait in silence. I am speaking first because I do not expect nor will I allow any objections."

But there could be no thought of an objection. The rank and file members of the Troika were so impressed by this unexpected flurry of oratory that they only exchanged glances.

"We are the guardians of science," continued Lavr Fedotovitch. "We are the portals to its temple, we are the unprejudiced filters that protect it from falsehood, from frivolity, from error. We guard the seeds of knowledge from attack by philistinism and false wisdom. And when we do this, we are not human, we do not know compassion, pity, or hypocrisy. We have but one measure: the truth. Truth distinct from good or evil, truth distinct from man and humanity, but only as long as good and evil and man and mankind exist. If there is no humanity—who needs truth? If no one is seeking knowledge, that means there is no humanity, and there is no need for truth! If there are answers to all the questions, that means there is no need to seek knowledge, that means there is no humanity, and then what need is there for truth? When the poet said: 'And there are no answers to the questions' he described the most horrible condition of human society—its final state.

"Yes, this man standing before us is a genius. He embodies and expresses the final state of humanity. But he is a killer, for he kills the spirit. Moreover, he is a terrible killer, for he kills the spirit of humanity. And that is why we can no longer remain unprejudiced filters, and we must remember that we are men,

and as men we must protect ourselves from a killer. And we should not be discussing it, we should be judging him! But there are no laws for such a judgment, and therefore we must not judge, but mete out punishment, the way those who are in the grip of horror punish. And I, as the senior member, breaking the regulations and the rules, I say: Death!" The rank and file shuddered and all spoke at once. "Which one?" asked Khlebovvodov, who had apparently understood only the final word.

"*Impossible!*" Vybegallo whispered, clasping his hands.

"Allow me, Lavr Fedotovich!" Farfurkis babbled.

"All this is correct, but do we have ... "

Then Eddie clapped his hands again.

"Harrumph!" Lavr Fedotovich said and sat, turning his neck. "There is a motion to consider the fact that the dusk has gathered, and, accordingly, to turn on the lights."

The commandant jumped up and turned on the lamp. Lavr Fedotovich, like an eagle looking at the sun, regarded the light without squinting and turned to the Remington.

"Expressing the general consensus," he said; "it has been decided: Case 42 is considered rationalized. Moving to the question of utilization, I ask Comrade Zubo to read the resolution."

The commandant began leafing through the case file, while Professor Vybegallo got up from his table, and emotionally shook hands with the old man and then, before I could turn away, with me. He was glowing. I did not know what to do with myself. I did not dare look at Eddie. While I was considering whether I should heave the Remington at Lavr Fedotovich, the old man grabbed me. He attached himself to my neck like a tick and kissed me three times, scratching me with his stubble. I do not remember how I got back to my seat. I do remember Eddie whispering: "Alex, Alex! Well, all right, it can happen to anyone."

Meanwhile the commandant had gone through the file and announced that there had been no requisitions in this case. Farfurkis immediately protested and cited the paragraph in the regulations that made it clear that rationalization without utilization was nonsense and could be acknowledged only provisionally. Khlebovvodov began shouting that these tricks would not work, that he did not wish to take money for nothing, and that he would not allow the commandant to flush four hours of work time down the tubes. Lavr Fedotovich blew into his cigarette with a look of approval, and Khlebovvodov increased his attack.

"And what if he is a relative of my Babkin?" he yelled. "What do you mean there are no requisitions? There has to be! You just look at what a little old man he is! A unique and interesting figure he is! How can we squander little old men like that?"

"Public opinion will not allow us to squander little old men," Lavr Fedotovich noted. "And public opinion will be right."

"That's it," barked Vybegallo. "It's public opinion! And it won't allow it! How can it be, Comrade Zubo, that there are no requisitions? Why aren't there any?" He rushed up and threw himself in a fury on the mound of papers in front of the commandant. "How can there not be any? What's this? A common pterodactyl. Good. And this? Pandora's Box. Why don't you think it's a box? All right, make it Mashkin's Box, and not Pandora's. We can't stand on formality, you know. And what's this: Talking Bedbug. Talking, writing, typing. Ah! What do you mean, there's no requisition? Comrade Zubo, what is this, hah? Black Box! A requisition for the Black Box. And you said there was none."

I was stunned.

"Wait!" I said, but no one listened to me.

"But that's not the Black Box!" the commandant shouted, clutching his chest. "The Black Box has a completely different requisition number."

"What do you mean, it's not black?" Vybegallo shouted back, grabbing the black case of the Remington. "What color do you think this is? Green, maybe? Or white? You're busy misinforming the people? Squandering society's little old men?"

The commandant was trying to justify himself, saying that this, too, was a black box, and not green and not white, obviously black, but the wrong box, that black box was under Case 907, and the requisition was signed by Comrade Alexander Ivanovich Privalov, he had received it just today, and that black box here was no black box, but a heuristic machine and it was Case 42, and there was no requisition for it at all. Vybegallo was shouting that there should be no juggling of figures here and no squandering little old men either; black was black, it was not white or green, and there was no point in trying Machist tricks and all sorts of empiriocriticism, and just let the comrade members of the authoritative Troika look for themselves and say whether this was a black box, or a green one. Khlebovovodov was shouting something about Babkin, Farfurkis was demanding that there be no deviations from the letter of the regulations, Eddie was joyously shouting "Out with him," and I, like a stuck record, kept repeating: "My Black Box—it's not a box. My Black Box—it's not a box."

Finally Lavr Fedotovich became aware of a certain disorder.

"Harrumph!" he said, and everything quieted down. "Are there difficulties? Comrade Khlebovovodov, get rid of them."

Khlebovovodov strode firmly over to Vybegallo, took the case in his hands, and examined it carefully.

"Comrade Zubo," he said. "For what is that requisition you have?"

"For the Black Box," the commandant said glumly. "Case 907."

"I am not asking you the case number. I am asking: Do you have a requisition for a Black Box?"

"I do," the commandant confessed.

"Whose requisition?"

"Comrade Privalov from the Research Institute for Magic and Wizardry. There he is."

"Yes," I said vehemently. "But my Black Box—it's not a box, rather, it's not only a box."

But Khlebovovodov paid no attention to me. He examined the case under the light, then leaned up into the commandant's face and hissed:

"Why are you spreading this bureaucracy around here? You can't see what color it is? The rationalization was carried out before your very eyes, there's the comrade representing science sitting in front of you, he's waiting, waiting for the requisition to be carried out, it's way past dinner time, it's dark outside, and all you do is juggle numbers!"

I felt a depression coming on and sensed that my future was about to become a dreary nightmare, irreparable and completely irrational. But I did not understand what was happening and only went on babbling that my box was not just a black box, or rather, not a box at all. I wanted to clear things up. The commandant was also muttering something very convincing, but Khlebovovodov threatened him with his fist and returned to his seat.

"Lavr Fedotovich, the box is black," he announced triumphantly. "There can be no mistake, I looked at it myself. And there is a requisition for it, and the representative is right here."

"It's not the same box!" the commandant and I wailed in unison. But Lavr Fedotovich examined us thoroughly with his opera glasses and, obviously finding us lacking, decided to follow the will of the people and suggested that they get on with immediate utilization. There was no argument and all the responsible faces were nodding in agreement.

"The requisition!" demanded Lavr Fedotovich.

My requisition was laid before him on the green baize.

"The resolution!"

The resolution fell on the requisition.

"The Seal!"

The door of the safe creaked open, letting out a current of stale office smells, and the brass of the Great Round Seal gleamed before Lavr Fedotovich. And then I understood what was about to happen. Everything inside me went dead.

"Don't!" I begged. "Help!"

Lavr Fedotovich took the Seal in both hands and raised it above the requisition. I gathered my strength and jumped up.

"That's the wrong box!" I howled at the top of my voice. "What is this? Eddie!"

"Just a minute," Eddie said. "Please stop and hear me out."

Lavr Fedotovich halted his inexorable movement.

"A stranger?" he inquired.

"Not at all," said the commandant, panting. "A representative. From below."

"Then he does not have to be removed." Lavr Fedotovich tried to renew the process of applying the Great Round Seal, but there was a problem. Something was interfering with the Seal. At first Lavr Fedotovich merely pushed on it, and then he rose and fell on it with his whole weight, but the Seal would not touch the paper—there was a space between the Seal and the paper, and the size of the space obviously did not depend on Comrade Vuniukov's efforts. It seemed as though the space was filled with an invisible but very firm matter that prevented application. Lavr Fedotovich had apparently grasped the futility of his efforts and sat down, holding his elbows with his hands and looking at the Seal sternly, but without any surprise. The Seal hung motionless an inch above my requisition.

The execution had been stayed, and I began to perceive my surroundings again. Eddie was saying something, beautifully and feverishly, about reason, economic reform, goodness, the role of the intelligentsia, and the governmental wisdom of those present. He was fighting the Seal, my dear good friend, saving me, fool that I was, from the disaster that I had brought on my own head. Those present were listening to him politely but with displeasure, and Khlebovvodov was squirming in his seat and looking at his watch. Something had to be done. I had to do something immediately.

"And seventh of all, and finally," Eddie was saying reasonably, "any specialist, and especially such an authoritative organization, should see, comrades, that the so-called Black Box is nothing more than a term used in information theory, and has nothing to do with the specific color or specific shape of some real object. Certainly there is no way that the term 'Black Box' could be applied to this Remington typewriter coupled with the simplest of electronic gadgets, which can be purchased in any electronics store, and it seems strange to me that Professor Vybegallo is burdening an authoritative organization with an invention that is no invention, and a decision that could undermine the organization's authority."

"I protest," said Farfurkis. "First of all, comrade representative from below violated all the rules of order for the meeting, took the floor, which no one had given him, and went over the time limit, on top of it. That's point one (*I was horrified to see that the seal had dropped by a fraction of an inch.*) Furthermore, we can not allow the comrade representative to malign our best people, to blacken our honored professor and official scientific consultant, Professor Vybegallo, and to whitewash the black box, already passed on by the Troika. That's point two. (*The seal dropped another fraction of an inch.*) Finally, comrade representative, you should be made aware that the Troika is not interested in any inventions. The object of the Troika's work is unexplained phenomena, which is what the already examined and rationalized black box is, that is, the heuristic machine."

"We could be sitting here until nightfall," Khlebovvodov added in a hurt voice, "if every representative got the floor."

The seal settled even lower. The space was no more than a tenth of an inch.

"It's not the same black box," I said and lost a hundredth of an inch. "I don't need this box! (*Another hundredth.*) Why the hell do I need that beat-up old Remington? I'm going to file a complaint."

"That is your right," Farfurkis said generously and won another hundredth of an inch.

"Eddie," I begged.

Eddie started talking again. He called on the spirits of Lomonosov and Einstein, he cited editorials in the central newspapers, he sang the praises of science and our wise organizers, but it was to no avail. Lavr Fedotovitch was finally bored by this impediment, and interrupting the oration, he spoke only one word:

"Unconvincing."

There was a heavy thud. The Great Round Seal had pierced my requisition.

MISCELLANEOUS CASES

We were the last ones to leave the meeting room. I was crushed. Eddie was leading me by the arm. He was also depressed, but under control. Old Edelweiss whirled around us, pulled by the weight of his contraption. He was whispering words of undying love to me, promising to wash my feet and drink the water, and demanded traveling expenses and a per diem. Eddie gave him three rubles and bade him look in the day after tomorrow. Edelweiss managed to sucker him out of another fifty kopecks for hazardous work conditions and disappeared. Then I felt better.

"Don't despair," Eddie said. "All is not lost. I have a plan."

"What?" I asked weakly.

"Did you pay attention to Lavr Fedotovitch's speech?"

"I did. Why do you ask?"

"I was checking to see whether or not he had any brains," Eddie explained.

"So, what's the opinion?"

"You saw for yourself that he does. He has brains, and I got them started. They had not been activated at all. Pure bureaucratic reflexes. But I convinced him that he had a real heuristic machine before him and that he was not Vuniukov, but a real administrator with a broad mind. As you see, there was some result. Of course, his psychic rigidity is enormous. When I removed the field, there were no signs of residual deformation. He remained just as he had been. But that was just a trial test. But now I'll do the proper calculations, adjust the apparatus, and then we'll see. I cannot believe that he can't be changed. We'll turn him into a decent man, and things will be good for us, and for everybody, and for him."

"I doubt it," I said.

"You see," Eddie said, "the theory of positive humanization states that any creature that has at least an iota of reason can be made into a decent creature. It's another matter that every case needs special methods. So we'll look for the right approach. Everything will be all right."

We went out into the street. Snowman Fedya was waiting for us. He got up from the bench and the three of us went down First of May Street arm in arm.

"Was it difficult?" Fedya asked.

"Terrible," said Eddie. "I'm tired of talking, tired of listening, and on top of that, I think I've become decidedly stupider. Fedya, is it noticeable that I'm stupider?"

"Not yet," Fedya replied shyly. "It's usually apparent an hour or so later."

I said: "I'm hungry. I want to forget. Let's go somewhere and forget. Drink some wine. Have some ice cream."

Eddie was all for it, and Fedya had no objections, but he did apologize for not drinking wine and having no taste for ice cream.

The streets were crowded, but there was nobody just hanging around the way they do on summer evenings in big cities. The descendants of Oleg's armies and Peter's grenadiers sat quietly and culturedly on their stoops shelling seeds in silence. They ate watermelon seeds, sunflower seeds, and pumpkin seeds. They sat on carved stoops with patterns, carved ones with figures, and carved ones with balustrades or on stoops made of simple smooth boards. But they were marvelous stoops, and some were of museum quality, hundreds of years old; those had been taken under government custody and therefore disfigured by metal supports. Somewhere in the background an accordion was playing.

Eddie, looking around with interest, was asking Fedya about life in the mountains. Fedya had developed an abiding love for Eddie and answered readily.

"The worst thing," Fedya was saying, "are the mountain climbers with guitars. You can't imagine how terrible it is, Eddie, when in your own quiet mountains, where the only sound comes from avalanches, and then only occasionally, you suddenly hear someone start strumming away and singing about some guy whose love is lost in the misty mountains. It's a disaster, Eddie. Some of us get sick from this, and the weaker ones actually die."

"At home I have a clavichord," he continued dreamily. "Up on the peak I have a clavichord, on top of the glacier. I like to play it on moonlit nights, when it's quiet and there's no wind at all. Then the dogs in the valley can hear me and they howl along. Really, Eddie, tears come to my eyes when I think how beautiful it is and how sad. The moon, the music resounding in the distance, and the dogs howling, far far away."

"How do your friends feel about that?" Eddie asked.

"They're not there at that time of night. Only one boy usually stays, but he doesn't disturb me. He's lame. But this must be boring you."

"On the contrary, it's fascinating."

"No. But you might like to know where I got the clavichord. Can you imagine, it was brought up by mountain climbers. They were setting some record or other, and they had to bring a clavichord up there. We've got a lot of strange things up on the peak. Some guy will decide to climb up there on a motorcycle—so we have a motorcycle, even if it's damaged. We've got guitars, bicycles, various statues, anti-aircraft guns. One record nut decided to climb to the top in a tractor, but he couldn't find one. So he tried with a steamroller. You should have seen him struggling. So much effort! But he failed. He couldn't get it up to the snow level. Five or ten more yards, and we would have had a steamroller, too. Ah, here's Gabby, I'll introduce you."

We had reached a café. On the brightly lit steps of the imposing stone entrance, right by the turnstile, Gabby the Bedbug was struggling. He was dying to get in, but the doorman would not let him. Gabby was having a fit, and consequently exuding an odor strongly reminiscent of Courvoisier cognac. Fedya quickly introduced us, put Gabby in a matchbox, and ordered him to sit still and be quiet. And the bedbug was quiet, but when we got into the café and sat down at an empty table, he lounged in his chair and beat his fist on the table, demanding a waiter. Naturally, he himself could not eat or drink anything in a café, but he demanded justice and a complete correspondence between the work of the waiters' brigade and the lofty calling that the brigade was striving for. Besides, he was obviously showing off for Eddie. He already knew that Eddie had come to Tmuskorpion specifically to see him and offer him employment. Eddie and I ordered a home-style omelet, shrimp salad, and a bottle of dry wine. They knew Fedya well in the café, and they brought him a plate of grated raw potatoes, carrot tops, and cabbage stumps. Gabby got a plate of stuffed tomatoes, which he had ordered on principle.

Having eaten the salad, I realized that I was insulted and injured, dog-tired, that my tongue refused to function, and that I had no desire to do anything. Besides that, I was jumpy, because in the crowd I could hear the squeaky "I'll wash your feet and drink the water!" and "the thinker is inside it!" But old Gabby was in fine fettle and was enjoying showing Eddie his philosophical turn of mind, independent opinions, and tendency to universalize.

"What senseless and unpleasant creatures!" he said, looking around the café with a superior air. "Truly, only such clumsy, cud-chewing animals are capable of creating the myth, born out of their inferiority complex, that they are the rulers of the earth. I ask you: How did this myth come about? For instance, we insects consider ourselves the rulers of the earth, and rightly so. We are numerous and ubiquitous, we multiply plentifully but do not waste precious time on senseless worries about posterity. We have sensory organs that you humans can only dream of. We can fall into anabiosis for centuries without any harm to ourselves. The more intelligent representatives of our class are famous as great mathematicians, architects, and sociologists. We have discovered the ideal system of society, we control gigantic territories, and we establish ourselves anywhere we want. Let us put the question this way: What can you humans—by the way, the most highly developed of the mammals—what can you do that we might want to do but can't? You brag a lot about your ability to create tools and use them. Forgive me, but that is laughable! You're like cripples who brag about their crutches. You build yourselves dwellings, tortuously, with such expenditures of effort, using unnatural forces like fire and steam, you've been building them for thousands of years, and never the same way twice, and still you can't find a comfortable and rational form of dwelling. Even the pathetic ants, whom I truly despise for their crudeness and glorification of brute strength, solved that simple problem a hundred million years ago—and solved it once and for all. You brag that you are constantly developing, and without limit. We can only laugh. You are searching for something that has been found, patented, and in use since time immemorial, namely: a rational social order and a meaningful existence."

Eddie was listening with professional attention, and Fedya, chewing on a cabbage stump with his excellent teeth, spoke:

"I'm a weak dialectician, of course, but I was brought up to believe that the human mind is nature's greatest achievement. We in the mountains are used to fearing human wisdom and bowing down before it, and now that I have been educated to a certain degree, I never cease being amazed by the boldness and cleverness with which man has created and continues to create a second nature. The human mind is ... is ... " He shook his head and stopped talking.

"Second nature!" the bedbug said sarcastically. "The third element, the fourth kingdom, the fifth estate, the sixth wonder of the world. A wise human could have asked what you need a second nature for. You've ruined one, and now you're trying to replace it with another. I've said it before, Fedya: a second nature is a cripple's crutches. As for reason, it's not for you to talk or for me to listen. For a hundred centuries these skins stuffed with a nourishing mixture have been mouthing off about reason, and they still can't agree what it is they're talking about! They agree only on one point: no one but they themselves has reason. That's really amazing! If a creature is small, if it's easy to poison with some chemical or simply to squash with a finger, then they look down at it. Such a creature naturally has nothing more than instinct, a primitive irritability, the lowest form of nervous activity. Typical world view of conceited imbeciles. But, after all, *they* are rational and they have to establish a foundation for everything, so that they can squash insects without guilt pangs.

"And look, Fedya, at their rationalization. Let's say that a digger wasp lays her eggs in her nest burrow and goes off to look for food for her future young. What do those bandits do? The barbarians steal the eggs and then, reveling in idiotic pleasure, they watch the wretched mother cement up the empty hole. Therefore, the mother is stupid, does not see what she is doing, and therefore she only has instincts, blind instinct, you understand, and not reason—and if necessary, she can be squashed. Do you see how this is vile juggling with terminology? The a priori assumption is that the wasp's main goal in life is to reproduce and protect her young, and therefore if she is incapable of fulfilling her major goal, then what is

she worth? They, humans, they have the cosmos-shmosmos and photosynthesis-shmyntesis and the pathetic wasp has nothing but reproduction, and that only on a primitive instinctual level. Those mammals can't even imagine that the wasp has a rich spiritual life, that in the short span of her life she wants to succeed in science and in art, those warm-blooded beasts can't see that she simply doesn't have the time or the desire to look back at her young, particularly since they are only senseless eggs.

"Of course, wasps have their laws, their behavioral norms, their morals. Since wasps are rather thoughtless by nature when it comes to propagating their kind, the law, of course, stipulates certain punishments for not fulfilling parental obligations. Every decent wasp must follow a prescribed sequence of behavior. She must dig a pit, lay her eggs, bring back a number of paralyzed caterpillars, and block off the hole. This is inspected by silent observers, and a wasp must always assume that an inspector may be lurking behind the nearest rock. Of course, the wasp sees that the eggs have been stolen or that her food stores have been depleted. But she can't lay the eggs over again and she has no desire to waste time gathering more food. Fully realizing the incongruity of her actions, she makes believe that she has noticed nothing and finishes the program to the very end, because the last thing she wants to do is make the rounds of the nine departments of the Committee for the Preservation of Appearances.

"Fedya, picture a highway, smooth and flat from horizon to horizon. Some experimenter sets up a roadblock with a detour sign. Visibility is fine, and the driver sees that there is nothing threatening him on the other side of the roadblock. He even suspects that it's a foolish practical joke, but he follows the rules and regulations like a decent driver, he turns off onto the disgusting side road, and gets shaken and jolted, splashed with mud, and wastes a lot of time and energy to get back on the same highway two hundred yards down the road. Why? For the same reasons: he's law-abiding, and he doesn't want to be hauled to traffic court, all the more because like the wasp, he has reason to suspect that it's a trap and that behind those bushes there is a cop on a motorcycle. And now let us suppose that the invisible experimenter sets up the experiment to gauge man's intellect and that the experimenter is a conceited fool like the one who destroyed the nest. Ha, ha, ha! What conclusion do you think he would come to?" Gabby slapped the table in ecstasy with all his legs.

"No," said Fedya. "Somehow you oversimplify things, Gabby. Of course, a man can't shine intellectually when he's driving."

"No more so than a wasp laying eggs," the crafty bedbug interrupted. "You know, that's no time for intellect."

"Wait a minute, Gabby, you keep interrupting me. I want to say ... Now, see, I forgot what I was about to say. Oh yes! In order to enjoy the grandeur of human reason you have to peruse all the edifices of that reason, all the achievements of science, all the achievements of literature and art. You scoffed at the cosmos, yet the sputniks and rockets are a great step forward—they're amazing, and you must agree that not a single arthropod is capable of doing it."

The flea wiggled his antennae in disgust.

"I could argue by saying that arthropods have no need for the cosmos," he said. "But people don't need it either, and therefore we will not discuss it. You don't understand the simplest things, Fedya. Every species has its own dream, historically formed and passed down from generation to generation. The realization of such a dream is what is usually termed a great achievement. Humans have had two such dreams: one was to fly, arising from their envy of insects, and the other to travel to the sun, arising from their ignorance of the distance to the sun. But it cannot be expected that different species, not to mention different classes and phyla, should have the same Great Idea. It would be absurd to imagine that flies dream from generation to generation of free flight, that octopuses dream of the ocean depths, and that we bedbugs—*Cimex lectularius*—dream of the sun, which we cannot tolerate. Everyone dreams of an unattainable goal that promises pleasure. The hereditary dream of the octopus, as everyone knows, is to travel freely on dry land. And the octopuses spend a lot of time thinking about it in their briny homes. The hereditary and evil dream of viruses is absolute control of the world, and even though their methods are

deplorable, you must give them credit for perseverance, inventiveness, and the capability of self-sacrifice for a greater goal.

"And how about the inspired dream of the spiders? Many millions of years ago they rashly climbed out of the sea, and since then they have been struggling to get back into their native element. You should hear their songs and ballads about the sea! Your heart would bleed with pity and compassion. By comparison the heroic myth of Daedalus and Icarus is a joke. And what of it? They've made some headway, and in very clever ways, I might add, since arthropods in general are given to ingenious solutions. They're getting what they want by creating new species. First they created water spiders, then diving spiders, and now they're going full speed ahead on a water-breathing spider.

"I'm not even talking about us bedbugs. We achieved our dream long ago—back when these skins with nourishing mixture in the veins first appeared. Do you follow me, Fedya? Each species has its own dream. Don't brag about your achievements before your planetary neighbors. You risk seeming foolish. Those to whom your dreams are foreign will think you stupid, and those who have realized their dreams will think you pathetic boasters."

"I cannot answer you, Gabby," Fedya said, "but I must admit that I don't enjoy listening to you. First of all I don't like it when crafty casuistry is used to disprove self-evident facts, and secondly, I too am human."

"You are an abominable snowman. You are the missing link, and that's all. If you must know, you're even inedible. But why do I get no argument from *Homo sapiens*? Why don't they step in to defend their species, their genus, their class? I will explain; it's because they have no refutation."

Attentive Eddie let this challenge slip by. I had an argument, that windbag was irritating me beyond reason, but I controlled myself because I knew that Fedor Simeonovich was watching in his magic crystal and could see it all.

"No, no, allow me," said Fedya. "Yes, I am a snowman. Yes, everyone insults us, even humans, who are our closest relatives and our hope, the symbol of our faith in the future. No, no, Eddie, let me speak my piece. We are insulted by the ignoramuses and lowest strata of human society who call us by the dastardly name Yeti, which, as you know, sounds like the Swiftian Yahoo, and by the name *golub yavan* which means either huge ape or abominable snowman. We are insulted by the most progressive representatives of humanity as well, who call us missing links, humanoid apes, and other scientific-sounding but derogatory names. Perhaps we are worthy of a certain disdain. We think slowly, we are not ambitious, our striving for something better is very weak, and our reason is still slumbering. But I believe, I know, that it is a human reason, which finds the greatest pleasure in transforming nature—first the environment, and then itself."

Fedya looked at the bedbug sternly. "You, Gabby, are just a parasite. Forgive me, but I'm using the term in the scientific sense. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but you are a parasite, and you don't understand what a great pleasure it is to transform nature. And what a future the pleasure has! After all, nature is infinite, and it can be transformed infinitely. That's why man is called the ruler of nature. Because he not only studies nature, and not only finds a lofty but passive pleasure in communing with it, but because he transforms nature, sculpts it according to his wishes."

Gabby immediately counterattacked. "Yes! And meanwhile, man takes a certain Fedya by his hairy shoulders and brings him on stage and asks this Fedya to demonstrate the process of an ape's humanization for a crowd of seed-cracking hicks. Attention, step right up!" the bedbug shouted. "Tonight the club presents a lecture on Darwinism Versus Religion by Candidate of Sciences Vyalobuev-Frankenstein with a live demonstration of the humanization of an ape! Act One—Ape. Fedya sits under the lecturer's table, scratching his underarms and gazing nostalgically around the room. Act Two—Ape-Man. Fedya, clutching a broom handle, wanders around the stage, looking for something to hit. Act Three—Man-Ape. Fedya, under the watchful eye of a fireman, starts a small fire on a metal grid and acts out simultaneous terror and joy. Act Four—Man Creates Labor. Fedya, using a broken

hammer, plays a prehistoric smithy. Act Five—Apotheosis. Fedya sits at the piano and plays the Turkish March. Lecture begins at six p.m. and after the lecture a new foreign film, *On the Last Shores*, and a dance!"

Fedya, extremely flattered, smiled shyly.

"Well, of course, Gabby," he said, touched. "I knew that we had no basic disagreement. Of course, that's exactly how reason creates its beneficial miracles, slow and easy, promising future Archimedes, Newtons, and Einsteins. But you shouldn't exaggerate my role in this cultural undertaking. Though I understand, you're just trying to be nice."

The bedbug looked at us, flabbergasted, and I snickered maliciously. Fedya was worried.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"You're just fine," I said. "You put him in his place so well it'll take him days to recover. Look, he's even eating the stuffed tomatoes."

"Yes, Gabby, I'm listening to you with great interest," Eddie said. "I have no intention of arguing with you, of course, because I hope we'll have many arguments ahead of us on much more important topics. I would like to say, however, that unfortunately I find too much of the human in your thinking and too little of the original, the unique psychology of *Cimex lectularius*."

"All right, all right," the bedbug yelled in exasperation. "All well and good. But, perhaps, at least one representative of *Homo sapiens* would deign to give a straight answer to the questions I was permitted to raise here? Or, I repeat, has he nothing to say? Or does rational man have as little to do with reason as a glass snake has to do with a drinking glass? Or does he have no arguments that would be accessible to the understanding of a creature who has only primitive instincts?"

That's where I lost my patience. I had an argument accessible to his understanding and I used it with pleasure. I showed Gabby my index finger and then made a motion like wiping a drop from the table top.

"Very witty," said the bedbug, blanching. "Now that's really on the level of higher reasoning."

Fedya timidly asked us to explain the meaning of the pantomime, but Gabby announced that it was all nonsense.

"I'm tired of this place," he said in an exaggeratedly loud voice, looking around in a lordly manner. "Let's get out of here."

I paid up, and we went out into the street, where we stopped, trying to figure out where to go next. Eddie suggested going to a hotel and reserving a room, but Fedya said hotels were no problem in Tmuskorpion. The only residents of the hotel were the members of the Troika, and the rest of the rooms were empty. I looked at the subdued bedbug and felt the pangs of conscience, so I suggested a moonlight walk along the banks of the Skorpionka River. Fedya supported me, but Gabby protested. He was tired, he was bored by endless conversation, and, finally, he was hungry, and he'd better be off to the movies. We felt so sorry for him—he was so shaken and shocked by my gesture, which had been tactless—that we decided to go to the movies with him.

Suddenly old man Edelweiss came barreling out of a beer hall. He held a beer mug in one hand and his contraption in the other. With a liquor-thickened tongue he swore allegiance to science and to me personally and demanded a per diem, high-altitude pay, and expenses for equipment. I gave him a ruble, and he headed straight back into the bar.

On the way to the movies, the bedbug could not settle down. He boasted, picked on passers-by, sparkled with aphorisms and *bon mots*, but we could tell that he still was not himself. To keep him quiet, Eddie told him what great contributions to the Theory of Linear Happiness they expected from him and transparently hinted at world fame and the inevitability of lengthy trips abroad, including some exotic countries. His emotional balance obviously restored, Gabby cheered up, and as soon as the theater lights went out he went crawling around looking for victims to bite. Eddie and I got no pleasure from being at

the movies. Eddie was afraid that someone would squash Gabby, and I was afraid there would be a row. It was stuffy in the theater, the movie was sickening, and we heaved a sigh of relief when it was over.

The moon was shining and there was a cool breeze from the Skorpionka. Fedya told us with embarrassment that he had a schedule and it was his bedtime. We decided to walk him to the Colony. We went along the river. Below the steep banks, the ancient Skorpionka carried poisonous sewage in its crystal currents. On the other shore, meadows spread out in the moonlight. Uneven crowns of a distant forest dotted the horizon. A small flying saucer was circling some dank, decrepit towers marked with warning lights.

The walk turned out to be marvelous. Fedya explained the universe to us, and incidentally, we discovered that he could see Saturn's rings and the red spot on Jupiter with his naked eye. The envious bedbug heatedly tried to prove that all that was nonsense, and in reality, the universe was shaped like a mattress spring. Kuzma, a shy common pterodactyl, hovered around us. We never did get a good look at him in the dark. We could hear him tromping ahead of us or rustling in the nearby bushes with a feeble quack, and sometimes he would fly up, blocking the moon with his spread wings. We called to him, promising candy and friendship, but he never did come closer.

In the Colony we also met Konstantin, the visitor from outer space. Konstantin was very unfortunate. His flying saucer made a forced landing last year. The saucer was totaled, and Konstantin couldn't remove the protective force field that was automatically created at landing. The field did not allow anything foreign to pass through. Konstantin could carry his clothes and engine parts through its lavender membrane without any problems. But the family of field mice that happened to be in the landing site had to stay there, and Konstantin was forced to feed them with his rapidly depleting supplies, since he couldn't get earth food inside the protective shield even in his own stomach. Also left inside the shield were a pair of sneakers, forgotten by somebody on a park path, and these were the only earthly goods that were of any use to Konstantin. Besides the sneakers and the mice, the shield had trapped two bushes of spurge laurel, part of an ugly park bench, carved with all kinds of graffiti, and a quarter acre of damp soil that never dried out.

Things were bad for Konstantin. He couldn't repair his ship. The local repair shops naturally did not have the right spare parts or the special tools he needed. He could have gotten some things from the scientific centers of the world, but for that he needed to work through the Troika. Konstantin had been waiting impatiently for many months to be allowed to see them. He had some hopes of being helped by earthlings, thinking that they would at least be able to remove the damned protective field and bring some famous scientists on board. But generally he was rather pessimistic, prepared for the fact that earth technology would be of no use to him for at least two hundred years.

Konstantin's flying saucer, glowing like a huge gaslight, was parked not far from the road. His feet were sticking out from under the ship, shod in size twelve sneakers. The family of mice was staring at the feet, persistently demanding their supper. Fedya knocked on the shield, and Konstantin, seeing us, slid out from under the saucer. He yelled at the mice and came out to greet us. The famous sneakers naturally remained inside, and the mice immediately turned them into a temporary home. We were introduced, expressed our sympathy, and asked how things were going. Konstantin announced heartily that things seemed to be getting started, and listed two dozen items we had never heard of that he needed. He turned out to be a very convivial and friendly rational creature. Or maybe he had just grown lonely for company. We asked questions and he answered them readily. But he did not look at all well, and we told him that it was bad to work so much and that it was time for sleep. Ten minutes later we had explained what "sleep" was, and he allowed as how it did not interest him a bit and that it would be better if he didn't take it up. And besides, it was time to feed the mice. He shook our hands and crawled back under the saucer. We bade Fedya and the bedbug goodnight and headed for the hotel. It was late, and the city was falling asleep—only far away we could hear accordion music and sweet pure girlish voices singing:

*I told my three-eyed beau
That we shouldn't kiss.
That it was in reasoning
That we would find our bliss.*

CASE 72: KONSTANTIN, THE VISITOR FROM OUTER SPACE

The morning sun had turned the corner and rushed in through the open windows of the meeting room when stone-faced Lavr Fedotovitch appeared in the door and immediately moved that the blinds be drawn. "The people do not need this," he explained. Khlebovvodov appeared next, nudging Vybegallos before him. Vybegallos, waving his briefcase, was heatedly telling him something in French, and Khlebovvodov kept muttering, "All right, all right, don't get excited." After the commandant had closed the curtains, Farfurkis appeared in the doorway. He was chewing something and wiping his mouth. He mumbled a quick apology for being late and gulped down the food. Then he shouted:

"I protest! Are you crazy, Comrade Zubo? Remove those curtains immediately! What's the meaning of this—sealing us off from the world? Do you want to cast a shadow over the proceedings?"

An extremely unpleasant incident ensued. All during the time that the incident worked itself out, while Farfurkis was humiliated, tied in knots, and used to wipe the floor, Vybegallos pointedly shook his head and looked meaningfully in our direction, as if to say: "These are the fruits of evil!" Then they let the trampled, torn, tarred-and-feathered Farfurkis slink back ignominiously to his seat, while they caught their breath, rolled down their sleeves, cleaned the bits of skin from under their nails, licked clean their bloody fangs, and took their seats at the table and announced that they were ready for the morning session.

"Harrumph," Lavr Fedotovitch said, giving one last look at the crucified remains. "Next! Report, Comrade Zubo!"

The commandant dug his hands into the open file, looked over the papers one last time at his beaten foe, kicked the floor with his hind legs one last time, and cleared his throat. When he inhaled the sweet smell of decay through his greedily dilated nostrils, he finally calmed down.

"Case 72," he called. "Konstantin Konstantinovich Konstantinov, 213 B.C., city of Konstantinov, planet Konstantina, star Antares."

"I must ask of you," Khlebovvodov interrupted. "What are you reading? Are you reading us a novel? Or some farce? Look, brother, you're reading a form to us and you make it sound like a farce."

Lavr Fedotovitch took his opera glasses and aimed them at the commandant. The commandant sank.

"I remember, it was in Syzran," Khlebovvodov continued, "they threw me in as head of the qualifying courses for intermediary personnel, and there was this fellow there, he refused to sweep the street. No, it wasn't in Syzran, as I recall, it was in Saratov, that's right, in Saratov! First I upgraded the school for master flour grinders, and then, they threw me into those courses. That's right, in Saratov, in fifty-two, in the winter, it was as cold as Siberia. No," he said sorrowfully, "it wasn't Saratov. It was in Siberia, but I can't remember the city—it's gone clear out of my head. I knew it just yesterday, I was thinking how nice it had been in that city."

He stopped talking with his mouth open. Lavr Fedotovitch waited a bit, inquired if there were any questions for the speaker, was assured that there were none, and then suggested that Khlebovvodov continue.

"Lavr Fedotovitch," Khlebovvodov spoke movingly. "You see, I've forgotten the city. I've plumb forgotten it. Let him go on reading, and I'll think of it. But make sure he reads the form right, point by point, without skipping around, it's a mess otherwise."

"Go on with your report, Comrade Zubo," Lavr Fedotovitch said.

"Point five," the commandant read meekly. "Nationality."

Farfurkis allowed himself to move slightly and immediately froze in fright. However, Khlebovovodov had caught the movement and shouted at the commandant:

"From the beginning! Start at the beginning!"

While he read it from the beginning I examined Eddie's humanizer. It was a flat shiny box with windows, like a little toy car. Eddie was very deft in its use. I could never be like that. His fingers moved like snakes. I was staring.

"Kherson!" Khlebovovodov suddenly shouted. "It was in Kherson, that's where! Go on, go on," he told the commandant. "I just remembered it, you know." He leaned over to Lavr Fedotovich's ear and bursting with laughter, he whispered something that made Comrade Vuniukov's wooden features begin to soften, and he had to hide his face from the democratic masses behind a broad hand.

"Point six," the commandant read on uncertainly. "Education: Higher syn ... cri ... ere ... tical."

Farfurkis twitched and squealed but did not dare speak. Khlebovovodov rushed in jealously.

"What? What kind of education?"

"Syncretical," the commandant repeated in one breath.

"Aha," said Khlebovovodov and looked over at Lavr Fedotovich.

"That's good," Lavr Fedotovich pronounced portentously. "We like people to be self-critical. Continue, Comrade Zubo."

"Point seven. Knowledge of foreign languages: All without dictionary."

"What, what?" asked Khlebovovodov.

"All of them. Without dictionaries."

"Some self-criticism," said Khlebovovodov. "Well, we'll see about that."

"Point eight. Profession and place of work at the present time: Reader of poetry, amphibrachist, at present on a short-term leave. Point nine ... "

"Wait," said Khlebovovodov. "Where does he work?"

"At present he is on leave," the commandant explained. "Short term."

"I understood that without you," countered Khlebovovodov. "I asked what his specialty was."

The commandant raised the file to his eyes.

"Reader," he said. "I guess he read poems."

Khlebovovodov slammed his fist on the table.

"I'm not deaf," he shouted. "I heard what he reads. He reads and let him go on reading in his spare time. I want to know his specialty! Where does he work, what does he do!"

Vybegallo kept quiet, and I couldn't stand it any longer.

"His specialty is reading poetry," I said. "He specializes in reading amphibrachs."

Khlebovovodov looked at me suspiciously.

"No, I understand amphibrachs—that's, um, well ... What am I trying to clear up here? I want to make clear what it is that he is paid a salary for?"

"They do not have salaries," I clarified.

"Ah! He's unemployed!" he exulted. But then he became wary.

"No, no, it doesn't work. Your ends don't come together here. No salary, but he gets a vacation. You're trying to pull something off here."

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch. "There is a question for the speaker and for the scientific consultant as well. The profession of Case 72."

"Reader of poetry," Vybegallo said quickly. "And as, also, he is ... an amphibrachist."

"Place of work at present time?"

"On a short-term vacation. Resting, that is, for a short term."

Lavr Fedotovitch, without turning his head, looked in the direction of Khlebovvodov.

"Are there any other questions?" he inquired.

Khlebovvodov squirmed longingly. Anyone could see that the lofty glory of solidarity with management opinion was struggling with the equally lofty feeling of civic duty. Finally civic duty won out, though suffering noticeable damage.

"I have something I must say, Lavr Fedotovitch!" Khlebovvodov began. "Here is what I must say! An amphibrachist, that's completely understandable. The amphibrach is, um, well, um ... And everything is perfectly clear about the poetry, too. That's your Pushkin, Mikhalkov, and Korneichuk. But, reader. That's the problem. There is no such profession! And I can understand why not. Because what would happen then? Here I am, reading limericks to myself, and for that I get wealth, for that I get vacations? That's what I must clear up."

Lavr Fedotovitch trained his opera glasses on Vybegallo.

"We will hear the opinion of the consultant," he announced.

Vybegallo rose.

"That is," he said and ran his fingers through his beard. "Comrade Khlebovvodov correctly raises the question and puts the accents in the right place. The people like poetry—*je vous parle à coeur ouvert*. But do the people need all kinds of poetry? *Je vous demande un peu*, do they need all kinds? You and I know, comrades, that it's not all kinds. That is why we must strictly follow, *c'est ... a specific*, that is, of course, and not lose sight of our landmarks and, *c'est, le vin est tiré, il faut le boire*. My personal feeling is this: *Aides-toi et Dieu t'aidera*. But I would suggest that we also listen to the representative from below, Comrade Privalov, call him as a witness, so to speak."

Lavr Fedotovitch turned his opera glasses on me.

"Well, why not. He's always interrupting anyway, he has no patience, he might as well clear things up if he knows so much."

"Voilà," Vybegallo said hotly. "*L'éducation qu'on donne aux jeunes hommes d'aujourd'hui*."

"That's just what I said. Let him talk," said Khlebovvodov.

"They have a lot of poets there," I explained. "They all write poetry, and naturally every poet wants to have a reader. Readers are unsystematic beings and do not understand that simple fact. They love to read great poetry and even commit it to memory. And they don't want anything to do with bad poetry. Inequity arises, unfairness. And since the inhabitants there are very sensitive and try to make everyone happy, they created a special profession—reader. Some specialize in reading iambic poetry, others trochaic. Konstantin Konstantinovich is a renowned specialist in amphibrachs and now he is mastering the alexandrine, developing a second specialty. This is a hazardous field, of course, and readers are entitled to double rations, as well as frequent short-term leaves."

"I understand all that!" Khlebovvodov's shriek pierced the air. "Iambs, and those alexandrines. There's one thing I don't understand. What are they paying him for? All right, so he sits and reads. I know it's hazardous. But reading is a quiet business, an internal one, how are you going to check whether he's reading or faking? I remember, I used to run a section in the Department of Inspecting and Quarantine of Plants, and once I had this ... He would just sit at meetings and look as if he was listening, even writing something in his notebook, but actually the sneak was sleeping! Now many throughout the

offices of the land have learned how to sleep with their eyes open! So I don't understand how it works. What if he's lying? There should not be professions where inspection is impossible. How can you tell if the man is working or sleeping?"

"It's not that cut-and-dried," Eddie interrupted, tearing himself away from tuning the humanizer. "He not only reads; they send him all the poems written in amphibrachs. He must read them all, understand them, find the root of exquisite pleasure in each and every one, love them, and naturally find some fault with them. Then he must regularly send the authors his feelings and thoughts on the poems and give readings at evenings devoted to the poets and at readers' conferences, and read them so well that the poets are satisfied and feel that they are needed. This is a very demanding profession," he concluded. "Konstantin Konstantinovich is a true hero of labor."

"Yes," said Khlebovvodov. "Now I understand. It's a valuable profession. And I like the system. It's a good, fair system."

"Continue your report, Comrade Zubo," said Lavr Fedotovitch.

The commandant again raised the file to his eyes.

"Point nine. Have you been abroad? Yes. In connection with engine problems, I spent four hours on Easter Island."

Farfurkis squeaked indistinctly, and Khlebovvodov picked up on it right away.

"Whose territory is it now?" he asked Vybegallo.

Professor Vybegallo, smiling jovially, motioned to me with an expansive, condescending gesture.

"I give the floor to youth."

"Chilean territory," I explained.

"Chile, Chile," Khlebovvodov muttered, anxiously peering at Lavr Fedotovitch. Lavr Fedotovitch smoked calmly. "Well, if it's Chile, all right then," said Khlebovvodov reluctantly. "And only four hours. All right. What's next?"

"I protest," Farfurkis whispered with unbelievable courage, but the commandant had resumed reading.

"Point ten. A brief description of the unexplainable: A rational being from the star Antares. Pilot of a space ship called a flying saucer."

Lavr Fedotovitch had no objections. Khlebovvodov looked at him, nodded approvingly, and the commandant continued.

"Point eleven. Statistics on close relatives—There's a long list here."

"Read on, read on," said Khlebovvodov.

"There are seven hundred seventy-six people," warned the commandant.

"And don't argue. Your job is to read. So read. And clearly."

The commandant sighed and began.

"Parents—A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H . . . "

"What are you doing? Hold it, wait!" said Khlebovvodov, who had lost his gift of politeness from the shock. "Where are you, in school? What do you think we are, children?"

"I'm reading what's written," the commandant snarled and went on, raising his voice: "I, J, K . . . "

"Harrumph," Lavr Fedotovitch said. "There is a question for the speaker. The father of Case 72. Surname, name, and patronymic."

"Just a minute," I interrupted. "Konstantin Konstantinovich has seventy-seven parents of seven distinct sexes, ninety-six spouses of four sexes, two hundred seven children of seven sexes, and three hundred

ninety-six siblings of seven sexes."

The effect of my statement exceeded all expectations. Lavr Fedotovitch was so confused that he raised his opera glasses to his lips. Khlebovvodov kept licking his lips, and Farfurkis avidly flipped through his notes.

We could not count on Vybegallo, and I prepared myself for a major battle—I deepened the trenches, mined the tank-endangered approaches, and protected cut-off positions. The magazines were overflowing with ammunition, the artillery men were glued to their weapons, and the infantrymen were issued a shot of vodka each. The silence dragged on, thunderclouds glowered, the air was charged with electricity, and my hand was on the telephone—I was ready to call for an atomic attack. But all the expected screams, noise, and shouting came out as a whimper. Khlebovvodov suddenly broke out in a grin, bent over to whisper in Lavr Fedotovitch's ear, his oily eyes glancing back and forth, and Lavr Fedotovitch lowered his bespittled opera glasses, covered his face with his hand, and said in a quavering voice:

"Continue your report, Comrade Zubo."

The commandant readily put away the list of relatives and reported:

"Point twelve. Place of permanent residence: The Galaxy, star Antares, planet Konstantina, state of Konstantia, city of Konstantinov, call number 457 point 14—9. That's all."

"I protest," shouted Farfurkis.

Lavr Fedotovitch looked at him kindly. The silent treatment was over, and Farfurkis, tears of joy glistening in his eyes, spoke: "I protest! There was an obvious discrepancy in the age description. The form gives the date of birth as 213 B.C. If that were so, then Case 72 would be over two thousand years old, which exceeds the known maximum by two thousand years. I demand that the date be corrected and the guilty party punished."

Khlebovvodov said jealously:

"Maybe he's from one of those places in the Caucasus where people live a long time? How do you know?"

"But allow me," Farfurkis sputtered. "Even in the Caucasus . . . "

"I will not allow it," said Khlebovvodov. "I will not allow you to downplay the achievements of our glorious Caucasus dwellers! If you must know, their maximum possible age has no limit!" And he looked triumphantly at Lavr Fedotovitch.

"The people," said Lavr Fedotovitch, "the people are eternal. Space visitors come and go, but our people, our glorious people, will live on through the ages."

Farfurkis and Khlebovvodov stopped to think, trying to figure out in whose favor the chairman had spoken. Neither one wanted to risk it. One was at the top and did not wish to fall from the peak over some lousy visitor. The other, deep down below, was hanging over a precipice but he had just been thrown a lifeline. And then Lavr Fedotovitch spoke.

"Is that all, Comrade Zubo? Any questions? No questions? Then the motion is to call in the case known as Konstantin Konstantinovich. Any other motions? Let the case come in."

The commandant bit his lip, pulled out a mother-of-pearl marble from his pocket, and, closing his eyes, squeezed it. There was a sound like a cork popping, and Konstantin appeared next to the demonstration table. He must have been summoned while he was working: he was wearing coveralls smeared with fluorescent grease, his front hands were in metallic work gloves, and he was wiping his back hands on his pants. All four eyes still were engrossed in the repairs. There was a strong smell of chemicals in the room.

"Hello," said Konstantin, happily discovering where it was he was. "You have summoned me at last."

Of course, my problem is slight, I'm almost embarrassed to bother you with it, but I've reached a dead end and the only way out is to ask for help. So that I do not burden your attention for too long, I will tell you what I need." He commenced ticking off the points on his fingers. "A laser drill—but of the highest power. An acetylene torch, I know you already have those. Two incubators with a capacity of a thousand eggs each. That will hold me for the beginning, but it would be nice to also have a qualified engineer, and to have permission to work in the laboratories of FILIL."

"What kind of alien from outer space is this?" Khlebovvodov demanded with amazement and indignation. "What kind of alien can he be, I ask you, when I see him in the hotel dining room every day? Look here, citizen, who are you really and how did you get here?"

"I am Konstantin from the Antares system." Konstantin was perplexed. "I thought you knew all that. I filled in forms, I was interviewed." He saw Vybegallo and smiled at him. "It was you, wasn't it, who interviewed me?"

Khlebovvodov also turned to Vybegallo.

"So this, in your opinion, is a visitor from outer space?" he asked acidly.

"He is," said Vybegallo with dignity. "Contemporary science does not deny the possibility of visitors from outer space, Comrade Khlebovvodov, you should keep in touch. This is an official opinion, not just mine, but of much more responsible scientific workers. Giordano Bruno, for instance, has made completely official statements on this subject, so has Academician Levon Alfredovich Volosianis ... and ... *c'est* ... writers, like Wells, for instance, or say, Chugunets."

"Strange things are going on here," said Khlebovvodov suspiciously. "The space aliens seem awfully strange lately."

"I'm examining the picture that's included in the file," Farfurkis chipped in, "and I see that while there is a general resemblance, the comrade in the photo has two arms, and this unknown citizen has four. How can this be explained from the point of view of science?"

Vybegallo released a very long citation in French, the point of which was that some guy named Arthur liked to go to the sea in the mornings after having a cup of hot chocolate. I interrupted him.

"Konstantin, please face Comrade Farfurkis."

Konstantin obeyed.

"Ah, I see," said Farfurkis, "the matter has been cleared up. I must tell you, Lavr Fedotovich, that the resemblance between this comrade and the photograph is indisputable. I see four eyes here, and four eyes there. No nose. Yes. Crooked mouth. Everything's in order."

"Well, I don't know," said Khlebovvodov. "It had been clearly stated in the press that if there were visitors from outer space, they would announce themselves. And since they do not, then they do not exist and are no more than a hoax perpetrated by scoundrels. Are you a visitor from space?" he croaked at Konstantin.

"Yes," Konstantin said, backing away from him.

"Did you announce yourself?"

"No," said Konstantin. "I wasn't planning on landing. And that's not the point here."

"Oh, no, dear citizen, you just drop that. That is precisely the point. If you had announced yourself, then welcome aboard, share our bread, drink and make merry. But since you didn't, then it's not our fault. Your amphibrach is fine, but we have to make a living here, too. We have work to do, and can't be sidetracked. That is my general opinion."

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovich. "Any one else have an opinion?"

"I do, if I may," said Farfurkis. "Comrade Khlebovvodov has given a correct picture of the situation in general. However, it seems to me that despite our work load, we should not dismiss our comrade. I feel

that we should treat this one instance with a more individualized approach. I am for a more thorough examination of the problem. No one should be able to accuse us of hastiness, bureaucracy, and heartlessness, on the one hand, or of negligence, exuberance, or a lack of vigilance, on the other hand. With Lavr Fedotovitch's permission, I would like to recommend a supplementary interview with Citizen Konstantinov with the aim of determining his identity."

"Why should we try to replace the police?" said Khlebovvodov, feeling that his vanquished enemy was inexorably scaling the heights once again.

"I beg your pardon!" Farfurkis said. "We will not replace the police, but we will be complying with the spirit and letter of the regulations, where in Paragraph 9, Chapter i, Part 6, it says in this regard . . . " He raised his voice to a solemn peal. " 'In cases when the identification made by the scientific consultant with the representative of the administration, who knows well the local conditions, produces doubt among the Troika, a supplementary investigation into the case with the aim of determining the identification is called for either by a plenipotentiary of the Troika or at one of the sessions of the Troika.' And that's what I'm suggesting."

"The regulations, the regulations," said Khlebovvodov nasally. "We'll follow the law and he'll waste our time, the four-eyed crook, he'll steal our time. The people's time!" he shouted, casting a martyred eye in Lavr Fedotovitch's direction.

"Why am I a crook?" Konstantin demanded. "You are insulting me, Citizen Khlebovvodov. And I can see that you don't give a fig whether I'm a visitor or not, all you want to do is to undermine Citizen Farfurkis and make yourself look good in the eyes of Citizen Vuniukov."

"Slander!" yelled Khlebovvodov, turning deep red. "He's libeling me! What's this, comrades? For twenty-five years I've gone where they sent me. Not one reprimand. Always with a promotion."

"You're lying again," Konstantin said calmly. "You were kicked out twice without any promotion."

"This is calumny! Lavr Fedotovitch! Comrades! You're taking on a big responsibility, Citizen Konstantin! We'll see just what your hundred parents did, what kind of parents they were. He's collected himself a whole institute of relatives."

"Harrumph," Lavr Fedotovitch muttered. "There is a motion to end the debate and to conclude the session. Are there any other motions?"

There was silence. Farfurkis barely hid his glee. Khlebovvodov was mopping himself with his handkerchief. Konstantin was staring deep into Lavr Fedotovitch, vainly trying to read his thoughts or at least get a glimpse of his soul, but it was obvious that all his efforts were wasted. His four-eyed, noseless face displayed the growing disillusionment of a professional archaeologist who rolls back an ancient stone, sticks his arm into the age-old treasure trove, and feels nothing there but insubstantial dust, sticky cobwebs, and some blobs of indeterminate origin.

"Since there are no other motions before the floor," Lavr Fedotovitch announced, "we shall proceed to the investigation of the case. The floor goes to . . . " He paused for a long time, during which Khlebovvodov grew faint. "Comrade Farfurkis."

Khlebovvodov found himself at the bottom of the pit and followed with wild eyes the narrowing circles of the buzzard flying in the official skies now beyond his reach. Farfurkis was in no rush to begin. He circled a few more times, splattering Khlebovvodov with his droppings, and then perched on the peak, preened and, casting a coquettish glance at Lavr Fedotovitch, began speaking.

"You maintain, Citizen Konstantinov, that you are a visitor from another planet. What documents do you have to substantiate this claim?"

"I could show you my ship's log," said Konstantin. "But first of all, it can't be moved, and second, I would not like to be bothered or to bother you with proofs. I came here to ask for help. Any planet that subscribes to the cosmic convention is obligated to help accident victims. I have already told you what I

need, and now I await your answer. If perhaps you are incapable of giving me that help, then it would be better to tell me straight out. There is nothing to be ashamed of."

"Just a minute," Farfurkis interrupted. "We'll set aside the question of the competence of the present committee to aid representatives from other planets. Our problem now is to verify your identity as that visitor. Just a minute, I haven't finished. You mentioned your log and said that unfortunately it could not be transported. Then perhaps the Troika could have the opportunity to examine the log on board your ship?"

"No, that is impossible as well," Konstantin sighed. He was studying Farfurkis carefully.

"Well, that's your right," Farfurkis said. "But in that case, perhaps you could offer some other document to certify your identity and background?"

"I see that you actually do want proof that I am an alien," said Konstantin with some surprise. "True, your motives aren't clear to me. But let's not talk about that. As for proof, surely my physical appearance must lead you to think that I am from space?"

Farfurkis sorrowfully shook his head.

"Alas," he said, "nothing is that simple. Science does not give us a clear enough concept of what man is. That is natural. If, for instance, science defined man as a creature with two arms and two eyes, then certain elements of the population who have only one arm or no arms at all would find themselves in a tenuous position. On the other hand, contemporary medicine is performing miracles. I myself recently saw a dog with two heads and six legs on TV and I have no right ... "

"Then, perhaps, seeing my ship. It is not typical of your earth technology."

Farfurkis shook his head again.

"You must understand," he said softly, "that in our atomic age it would be difficult to impress the members of an authoritative organ, who have top-priority clearance, with any technological contraption."

"I can read minds," Konstantin offered. He was clearly interested.

"Telepathy is unscientific," Farfurkis said softly. "We don't believe in it."

"Is that so?" Konstantin was surprised. "That's strange. But listen to this. You are about to tell me of the special case of the *Nautilus*, and Citizen Khlebovvodov ... "

"Calumny!" shouted Khlebovvodov, and Konstantin stopped.

"Understand us correctly," said Farfurkis, pressing his hands to his plump chest. "We do not maintain that telepathy doesn't exist. We only maintain that telepathy is unscientific and that we don't believe in it. You mentioned the case of the submarine *Nautilus*, but it is well known that this was just a bourgeois decoy to divert the attention of the peoples of the world from the pressing problems of the day. Thus your telepathic abilities, whether actual or imagined by you, are merely a fact of your personal biography, which at this moment in time is the object of our research. Do you see the logical fallacy?"

"I do," agreed Konstantin. "What if I were to fly around for you a bit?"

"That would be very interesting, of course. But unfortunately we are at work now and can not expend time on performances, no matter how absorbing they might be."

Konstantin looked at us quizzically. I felt that his position was hopeless and I had no time for jokes. Konstantin did not know it, but the Great Round Seal was suspended over him like the sword of Damocles. Eddie was still fooling around with his toy, and I didn't know what to do. I had to stall for time.

"Go ahead, Konstantin," I said.

Konstantin did. First he was rather tentative, afraid to break things, but then he got carried away and demonstrated a series of magnificently impressive exercises with the space-time continuum, with various

transformations of a living colloid and with the critical state of the reflective organs. When he had stopped, I was dizzy, my pulse was crazy, my ears were humming, and I could barely hear the space creature's tired voice.

"Time is flying. I have no more time. Tell me what you have decided."

No one answered him. Lavr Fedotovich was meditatively twirling the dictaphone mike with his long fingers. His intelligent face was calm and pensive. Khlebovvodov was not paying attention to anything, or making believe that he was not. He scribbled off a note and tossed it to Zubo, who read it carefully and let his fingers run silently over the keyboard of the computer. Vybegallo was suffering. He bit his lip, frowned, and even sighed quietly. A white card plopped out of the computer, and Zubo passed it to Khlebovvodov.

I looked at Eddie. He had the humanizer on his knee and was keeping an eye on the mirrored window while he fiddled with a tiny knob. I held my breath and watched.

"A thousand-year leap," Vybegallo said softly. "A leap backward,"

Farfurkis muttered through his teeth. He was still leafing through a reference book.

"I don't know how we'll be able to work now," Vybegallo said. "We have glimpsed the future, where all the answers are."

"But you didn't see the answers, did you?" Farfurkis mocked. "Do you want to see them?"

"What's the difference once we see that they do exist? It's dull and boring to go on searching for answers that we know someone else has already found."

The visitor was waiting impatiently. He was uncomfortable in the low armchair and he had to sit up unnaturally straight. His large unblinking eyes glowed an unpleasant red. Khlebovvodov threw away the card, wrote another note, and Zubo bent over the keyboard again. "I know that we must refuse," said Vybegallo, "and I know that we will curse ourselves twenty times over for having done so."

"That's not the worst thing that could happen to us," said Farfurkis. "It would be worse if we were cursed twenty times over by others."

"Our grandchildren and maybe even our children would simply take it for granted."

"We should not be indifferent to what our children will take for granted."

"The moral criteria of humanism," said Vybegallo giving a short laugh.

"We have no other criteria," Farfurkis countered. "Unfortunately."

"Fortunately, my colleague, fortunately. Every time that mankind has turned to others, it suffered cruelly."

"I know that. I would rather not know even that." Vybegallo looked over at Lavr Fedotovich. "The problem before us has not been stated correctly. It is based on confused conceptions, vague formulations, and intuition. As a scientist I do not take it upon myself to solve it. That would not be serious or responsible. There is only one thing left: to be a man. With all the resulting consequences. I am against contact. But not for long!" he shouted excitedly. "You must understand us correctly. I am sure that this will not be for long. Give us time, we have been out of chaos for such a short time. We are still waist-deep in chaos." He stopped and dropped his head to his hands.

Lavr Fedotovich looked at Farfurkis.

"I can only repeat what I said before." Farfurkis said in a low voice. "No one has changed my mind about that. I am against any contact for a long period. I am absolutely sure," he added, "that the other treaty-negotiating party would take any other decision on our part as proof of presumptuousness and social immaturity." He bowed curtly in the direction of the visitor.

"You?" asked Lavr Fedotovich.

"I am categorically against any contact," replied Khlebovvodov, still scribbling away. "Categorically and unequivocally." He threw Zubo another note. "I will not state my reasons just yet, but ask to be able to say a few more words on the subject in ten minutes."

Lavr Fedotovitch carefully set down the dictaphone mike and rose slowly. The visitor also stood up. They stood opposite each other, separated by the huge table piled high with reference works, cases of microbooks, and reels of videotape.

"It is difficult for me to speak right now," he began. "Difficult because, for one thing, circumstances demand lofty rhetoric and words that are not only precise but also solemn. However, here on earth, lofty words have suffered from inflation in the past century. So I will aim only for accuracy. You offer us friendship and cooperation in all aspects of civilization. This offer is unprecedented in the history of man, just as the fact of the arrival of a creature from another planet is unprecedented and our answer to your offer is unprecedented. We answer with a refusal on all points of the agreement you offer, we categorically refuse to offer any counteragreement, we categorically demand a complete end to any contact whatsoever between our civilizations and between individual representatives of them. We wish to announce that we find the idea of contact between two different civilizations in the cosmos to be fruitful and promising in principle. We wish to stress that the idea of contact has long been held as one of the most cherished and noble goals of our humanity. We wish to assure you that our refusal in no way must be seen by you as a hostile act, based on hidden enmity or connected in any way with physiological or other instinctual prejudices. We would like you to know the reasons for our refusal, and for you to understand and if not approve, then at least to keep them in mind."

Vybegallo and Farfurkis had their eyes fixed on Lavr Fedotovitch. Khlebovvodov received an answer to his last note, put the cards together in a neat pile, and also looked at Lavr Fedotovitch.

"The inequality between our two civilizations is enormous," continued Lavr Fedotovitch. "I'm not speaking of biological differences—nature bestowed a greater wealth upon you than upon us. There's no need to speak of social inequalities—you have long passed the stage of social development that we are just entering. And of course, I do not speak of scientific and technological inequalities—even the most conservative estimates put you several centuries ahead of us. I will speak about the direct result of these three aspects of inequality—about the gigantic psychological inequality that in fact is the major reason for the failure of our negotiations.

"We are separated by a gigantic revolution in mass psychology, preparations for which we have only begun and which you have probably already forgotten. This psychological gulf does not allow us to obtain a correct understanding of the aims of your arrival. We do not understand how our friendship and cooperation could benefit you. We have only emerged from a state of constant warfare, from a world of bloodshed and violence, from a world of lies, baseness, and greed; we have not yet washed off the dirt of that world. When we come up against a phenomenon that our reason cannot yet grasp, when all we have at our command is our vast but as yet not assimilated experience, our psychology prompts us to create a model of the phenomenon in our own image. Crudely put, we do not trust you the way that we still do not trust each other.

"Our mass psychology is based on egotism, utilitarianism, and mysticism. The establishment and development of contact with you first of all threatens unthinkable complications of the already complex situation on our planet. Our egotism, our anthropocentrism, the thousand years of education by religions and naive philosophers who taught us to trust in our primordial superiority, in our uniqueness, and in our privileged position in the universe—all this suggests that there will be a monstrous psychological shock, an irrational hatred of you, a hysterical fear of the unimaginable possibilities that you present, a feeling of sudden debasement, and a dread that the rulers of nature have been dethroned.

"Our utilitarianism will lead to a desire in the majority of our people to participate in the wealth of material progress, obtained without effort, for free, and will turn many to parasitism and consumerism, and God knows, we have trouble enough struggling against this as a result of our own scientific and

technological progress. As for our ingrained mysticism, for our age-old hope for benevolent gods, benevolent tsars, and benevolent heroes, our hopes for the intervention of a trustworthy authority who would relieve us of all our cares and responsibilities, as for this reverse side of the coin of our egotism, I think that you cannot even imagine what the results of your appearance on our planet would be.

"I hope that you can see now that permission for contact would destroy what little we have managed to do to prepare the way for a revolution in psychology. And you must understand that the cause of our refusal lies not in you, not in your good points or in your bad—the cause is only in our unpreparedness. We understand this perfectly well, and while categorically turning from contact with you today, we do not plan to make this position permanent. Therefore, on our part, we propose ... "

Lavr Fedotovitch raised his voice, and everyone stood.

"We propose that exactly fifty years after your takeoff a meeting be held between authorized representatives of both civilizations on the north pole of the planet Pluto. We hope that by that time we will be better prepared to undertake a thought-out and fruitful cooperative venture between our civilizations."

Lavr Fedotovitch finished, and we all sat down. Only Khlebovvodov and the visitor remained standing.

"While subscribing wholly and completely to the content and form of the statement of the chairman," Khlebovvodov said harshly and drily, "I feel it my duty, however, to leave no doubt in the mind of the other party of our determination to use all our might to resist contact until the agreed-upon time. While completely acknowledging the technological, and therefore military, superiority of your civilization, I nevertheless feel it is my duty to leave no room for misunderstanding: any attempt to force contact upon us will be seen from the moment of your takeoff as an act of aggression and will be met with the entire power of earth's armaments. Any ship that appears in the range of our military might will be destroyed without warning."

"Is that enough?" asked Eddie in a whisper.

Everyone froze, as if in a photograph.

"I don't know," I said. "It seems a pity. I could listen forever."

"It did come out rather well, didn't it?" said Eddie. "But I must stop it. Such an expenditure of brain energy ... "

He turned off the humanizer, and Farfurkis started whining immediately.

"Comrades! It's impossible to work, what are we doing?"

Vybegallo chewed on his lip, looked around blankly, and scratched his beard.

"That's right!" Khlebovvodov said and sat down. "We have to finish up. I'm in the minority here, but who am I? It doesn't matter! If you don't want to turn him over to the police, then don't. But rationalizing this trickster as an unexplained phenomenon is pointless. Big deal, so he grew himself another two arms."

"It isn't taking!" Eddie said bitterly. "It's rough going, Alex. They have no humanity, these plumbers."

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch, and delivered a short speech that made it clear that the public did not need unexplained phenomena that could, but would not for one reason or another, present the credentials that proved that they were unexplained. On the other hand, the people have long demanded a ruthless paring down of bureaucratic red tape in all departments. Therefore, Lavr Fedotovitch expressed his opinion that the examination of Case 72 should be postponed until December of this year in order to give Comrade K. K. Konstantinov time to get back to his permanent residence and return with the appropriate documents. As for giving Comrade K. K. Konstantinov material aid, the Troika has the right to give such aid or to facilitate it only in those instances where the request comes from what has been certified by the Troika as an unexplained phenomenon. And since Comrade K. K. Konstantinov has not yet been certified as such, then the question of giving him aid is also postponed until December—and

more precisely, until the moment of his certification.

The Great Round Seal did not appear on the scene and I heaved a sigh of relief. Konstantin, who never did grasp the situation fully and who had been getting angrier and angrier, spat demonstratively on the floor, very humanly, and disappeared.

"That's an attack!" Khlebovvodov shouted gleefully. "Did you see him spit? The whole floor is wet!"

"That's disgusting!" Farfurkis concurred. "I consider this an insult!"

"I told you he was a crook!" said Khlebovvodov. "We have to call the police. Let them give him fifteen days, let him sweep the streets with his four hands."

"No, no, Comrade Khlebovvodov," Farfurkis argued. "This is no police matter anymore, you underestimate the gravity of the situation. This was spitting in the face of the public and the administration. He should be tried!"

Lavr Fedotovitch did not speak, but his freckled fingers were agitatedly scampering across the table—he was looking for some button, or maybe the telephone. It began to reek of political crime. Vybegallo, who didn't give a damn about Konstantin, did not respond. I coughed and asked for their attention. Attention was granted, but not very readily—their eyes were glistening excitedly, their fur was bristling, their fangs were ready to tear, and their claws to scratch.

Trying to speak as pompously as possible, I reminded the Troika that it was in their interest to hold galactocentric and not anthropocentric positions. I pointed out that the customs and expressions of emotion might and probably do differ greatly in extraterrestrial creatures. I fell back on the weary analogy of the customs of the different tribes and peoples of Planet Earth. I expressed my confidence that Comrade Farfurkis would not be satisfied with rubbing noses for a greeting, in common usage among several northern peoples, but neither would he consider such rubbing to be degrading to his position as a member of the Troika. As for Comrade Konstantinov, the custom of spitting out a liquid of a certain chemical composition that forms in the oral cavity, a custom that among several peoples of the earth signifies dissatisfaction, irritation, or the desire to insult one's interlocutor, might and must mean completely the opposite for an extraterrestrial creature, including gratitude for your attention. The so-called spitting of Comrade Konstantinov could also have been a purely neutral act, related to the physiological functioning of his organism.

"Don't give me that function stuff!" shouted Khlebovvodov. "He spat all over the floor, the bandit, and ran away!"

"And finally," I concluded, ignoring him, "we must not rule out the possibility that the above-mentioned physiological act of Comrade Konstantinov might have been an action connected with his lightning-like movement through space."

I was warbling like a nightingale and watched with relief as Lavr Fedotovitch's fingers kept slowing down, finally coming to rest on the blotter. Khlebovvodov was still barking threats, but the sensitive Farfurkis had caught the change in the wind and brought the brunt of the blow on an unexpected victim. He suddenly attacked the commandant, who, thinking himself safe from danger, was enjoying the spectacle with simple curiosity.

"I have long been noticing," thundered Farfurkis, "that the educational system in the Colony of Unexplained Phenomena is very poorly organized. There are almost no political education lectures. The visual aids in agitation reflect yesterday's lessons. The Evening Institute of Culture barely functions. All of the cultural events in the Colony boil down to dances, foreign films, and tacky variety shows. The slogan-making industry has fallen into neglect. The colonists are left to their own devices, many of them are morally bankrupt, almost no one understands the international situation, and the most backward of the colonists, for example, the ghost of one Weiner, do not even comprehend where they are. The results are amoral behavior, hooliganism, and complaints from the populace. The day before yesterday Kuzma the Pterodactyl left the territory of the Colony and, definitely not sober, flew over the Club of Working

Youth, biting off the bulbs that spell out WELCOME. One Nikolai Dolgonosikov, self-styled telepathist and spiritualist, tricked his way into the women's dormitory of the pedagogical technicum and carried on discussions and actions that were classified by the administration as religious propaganda. And today we have run across another sad consequence of Comrade Zubo's criminally negligent attitude toward education and propaganda as commandant of the Colony. Whatever the meaning of Comrade Konstantinov's expectoration of liquids found in his oral cavity, it proves that he does not fully appreciate where he is and how he must behave, and this in turn proves that it is the fault of Comrade Zubo, who has not taught the colonists the meaning of the folk saying 'Don't bring your own rules to somebody else's monastery.' And I feel that we must warn Comrade Zubo and order him to raise the level of educational work in the Colony that is entrusted to him!"

Farfurkis tapered off, and Khlebovvodov took on the commandant. His speech was muddled, but full of vague hints and threats so terrifying that the commandant faltered completely and openly swallowed pills. Khlebovvodov bellowed: "I'll show you! Don't you understand, or are you completely crazy?"

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch finally and began setting matters straight. Comrade Zubo was reprimanded for behavior unworthy of the Troika, expressed in the expectoration by Comrade Konstantinov, and also for losing the administrative aura. Comrade K. K. Konstantinov was given a warning for walking on the ceiling and walls in his shoes. Farfurkis was given a verbal reprimand for always going over the time limit when he had the floor, and Khlebovvodov for violating administrative ethics by trying to lie to Comrade K. K. Konstantinov. Vybegallo was reprimanded verbally for appearing at the session unshaven.

"Are there any other motions?" inquired Lavr Fedotovitch. Khlebovvodov immediately leaned over and whispered in his ear. Lavr Fedotovitch listened and then added: "There is a motion to remind certain representatives from below to participate more actively in the work of the Troika."

Now everybody had gotten it. No one had been forgotten, and nothing had been overlooked. The atmosphere cleared up, and everyone, including the commandant, cheered up. Only Eddie frowned, deep in thought.

"Next," said Lavr Fedotovitch. "Report, Comrade Zubo."

"Case 2," read the commandant. "Surname: Blank. Name: Blank. Patronymic: Blank. Nickname: Kuzma. Year and place of birth: Uncertain. Probably the Congo."

"What is he, mute?" asked Khlebovvodov jovially.

"He doesn't know how to talk. He only quacks."

"Has he been that way from birth?"

"I would assume so."

"That means poor heredity," Khlebovvodov grumbled. "That's why he became a bandit. Is there a criminal record?"

"Whose?" the confused commandant asked. "Mine?"

"No, why yours? Does he have one, that bandit? What's his nickname? Vaska?"

"I protest," said Farfurkis. "Comrade Khlebovvodov is operating under the mistaken prejudice that only bandits have nicknames. However, the regulations state in Paragraph 8, Chapter 4, Part 2, that nicknames will be given to phenomena classified as animate creatures without reason."

"Ah!" said the disappointed Khlebovvodov, "it's some dog, I guess. And I thought it was a bandit. When I was in charge of the box office of the Mutual Aid Fund of Theater Figures under the auspices of the VTO, I had a bookkeeper ... "

"I protest!" Farfurkis wailed. "This is in violation of the regulations! We won't get out of here before nightfall!"

Khlebovvodov glanced at his watch.

"That's right," he said. "Forgive me. Go ahead, brother, where did you stop?"

"Point five. Nationality: Pterodactyl."

They all shuddered, but it was getting late, and no one said a word.

"Education: Blank," continued the commandant. "Knowledge of foreign languages: Blank. Profession and place of work at present time: Blank. Have you been abroad? Probably."

"Oh, that's bad," Khlebovvodov muttered. "Bad! Oh, vigilance! A pterodactyl, you say? What color? Is he white or black?"

"He's sort of gray."

"Aha!" said Khlebovvodov. "And he can't talk. Only quacks. Well, all right, go on."

"Brief summary of the unexplainable: considered to be extinct fifty million years ago."

"How many?" Farfurkis demanded.

"Fifty million it says here," the commandant said.

"That can't be serious," Farfurkis grumbled and looked at his watch. "Read on," he moaned. "Read on."

"Data on close relatives: Probably all died out. Place of permanent residence: Kitezgrad, Colony of Unexplained Phenomena."

"Has he been given papers?" Khlebovvodov demanded severely.

"Sort of. When he arrived he was written in the register of honored visitors, and he's been here ever since. You might say that Kuzma has grown to live here." A tender note had crept into the commandant's voice. It was obvious Kuzma was his protégé.

"Is that all?" inquired Lavr Fedotovich. "Then there is a motion to call in the case."

There were no other motions. The commandant pulled back the curtains and called lovingly:

"Here, Kuz, Kuz, Kuz, here boy. There he is, sitting on a chimney, the bum," he said tenderly. "He's shy, very shy. Kuz, Kuz, Kuz, here. He's coming," he announced, stepping away from the window.

There was a leathery rustle and a whistle, a huge shadow blocked the sky for a second, and Kuzma, his membranes quivering, smoothly lowered himself onto the demonstration table. He folded up his wings, raised his head, opened his big toothy jaw, and quacked softly.

"He's saying hello," the commandant explained. "He's very polite, the little bugger. Understands everything."

Kuzma looked over the Troika, met the deathly gaze of Lavr Fedotovich, and suddenly became terribly shy. He tucked his head under his wing, hiding his jaws on his chest, and peeked out from under his leathery wings with one eye—it was a huge green anachronistic eye. He was a dream, that Kuzma. Of course, on an unprepared person, he could have a terrifying effect. Just to be safe, Khlebovvodov dropped a pencil under the table and slid down after it. "I thought it would be a quacking dog or something," he muttered.

"Does he bite?" asked Farfurkis.

"Of course not!" the commandant said, "he's a docile animal, he runs away if anyone says boo. Of course, if he gets angry—but he never gets angry."

Lavr Fedotovich examined the pterodactyl through his opera glasses, throwing the poor thing into a complete panic. Kuzma quacked nervously and tucked his head completely under his wing.

"Harrumph!" Lavr Fedotovich said with satisfaction and put away the opera glasses.

The situation was shaping up well.

"I thought it was some kind of horse," Khlebovvodov muttered, crawling around under the table.

"Allow me, Lavr Fedotovitch," said Farfurkis. "I can see definite difficulties with this case. If we were involved in examining an unusual phenomenon, I would be the first to call for immediate rationalization. Indeed, a crocodile with wings is a rather unusual phenomenon in our climate. However, our goal is to examine unexplained phenomena, and here I have my doubts. Is there an element of the unexplained in Case 2? If there isn't, then why are we examining the case? If, on the other hand, there is, what precisely is it? Perhaps, our comrade the scientific consultant could say a few words in this regard?"

Comrade scientific consultant could indeed say a few words. In his mixed French and Russian he informed the Troika that Marie Briboa's hairdo definitely pleased all the hunting guests gathered at the Baron de Baudreille's, and that the scientific consultant must admit that the inexplicability of the pterodactyl Kuzma lies, that is to say, in one plane, which, he, the scientific consultant, feels it is his bitter, but honorable, duty to remind his, the scientific consultant's, friends in science; and that the winged state of the crocodile, or rather, the fact that some crocodiles have two or more wings has not yet been explained by science, and therefore, he, the scientific consultant, would ask your gardener to show him those marvelous tuberose flowers that you spoke about last Friday; and finally, he, the scientific consultant, sees no particular reason to put off the rationalization of the case in question but on the other hand would like to have the right to disagree with the above at a later time.

While Vybegallo was killing time, working up a sweat to earn his ridiculous salary, I quickly devised a plan for the coming battle. I liked Kuzma a lot and one thing was clear to me: if we did not intervene right now, things would be bad for him.

"Harrumph," Lavr Fedotovitch said. "Questions for the speaker?"

"I have no questions," said Khlebovvodov, who, once assured that Kuzma did not bite, had become obnoxious. "But I feel that this is a simple crocodile with wings and nothing more. And the scientific consultant is throwing dust in our eyes for nothing. And then, I notice that the commandant has developed favorites within the colony and is feeding them on government funds. I do not want to imply that there is nepotism involved or that the commandant is taking bribes from the crocodile, but the facts are obvious. A crocodile with wings is a simple enough thing, but he is being treated like something special. He should be chased out of the colony. He should be working."

"Working at what?" asked the commandant, worried about Kuzma.

"Working! Everyone works here! Look at the creature. He should be hauling logs, or loading stones at a quarry. Are you going to say that his arteries are weak? I know these crocodiles, I've seen all kinds, with wings, and all."

"How can that be?" the commandant worried. "He's not human, you know, he's an animal. He has a special diet."

"So what! Animals work here too. Horses for instance. Let him go to work as a horse! He has a diet—well so do I, and I'm missing lunch because of him."

But Khlebovvodov realized that he had gone a bit too far. Farfurkis was giving him a mocking look, and Lavr Fedotovitch's pose led one to think. Taking all the above circumstances into account, Khlebovvodov made a sharp U-turn. "Hold on, hold on!" he yelled. "What Kuzma is this here? Isn't this the Kuzma who ate up the light bulbs at the club? Why yes, it's the very same! Well, what do you have to say about this? Does this mean that the law doesn't apply to him either? Don't try to weasel out of this, Zubo. Just tell me, was action taken on the matter?"

"It was," the commandant answered hotly.

"What precisely?"

"He was given a laxative." It was clear that he would defend Kuzma to the death.

Khlebovvodov slammed his fist down on the table, and a small puddle appeared under the frightened Kuzma. I lost my temper and shouted, directly at Lavr Fedotovich, that this was a mockery of a valuable scientific specimen. Farfurkis objected that Khlebovvodov was trying to hang other duties on the Troika. As for Lavr Fedotovich, he sucked his index finger and then brusquely flipped several pages of his minutes, a sure sign of extreme irritation. There were storm warnings.

"Eddie," I begged.

Eddie, carefully following developments, aimed the humanizer at Lavr Fedotovich. Lavr Fedotovich rose and took the floor.

He spoke of the aims of the Troika entrusted to him, expressed in its authority and its responsibilities. He called on his listeners to increase their mortal struggle for increased labor discipline, against red tape, for high moral levels for one and all, for healthy criticism and healthy self-criticism, against dehumanization, for increased fire protection, for personal responsibility for everyone, for exemplary contents in bookkeeping, and against underevaluation of personal strength. The people will thank us if we fulfill these goals even more actively than before. The people will not forgive us if we do not fulfill these goals even more actively than before. What concrete motions will be made to organize the Troika's work in view of the changes in conditions?

I took malicious pleasure in the lack of concrete motions. Khlebovvodov kept blowing hot air from habit and offered to take on more responsibilities—for example, making sure that with the increased authority of the Troika, Comrade Commandant Zubo lengthen his work day to fourteen hours and that Comrade Scientific Consultant Vybegallo skip lunch. However, this partisan decision was not met with enthusiasm. On the contrary, it drew a heated rejection from the named parties. A brief flurry ensued, in the course of which it was revealed that the lunch hour had long been upon them.

"There is an opinion," Lavr Fedotovich wound up, "that it is time to rest and have lunch. The Troika meeting is closed until eighteen hundred hours." Then he turned to the commandant in the best of spirits. "And as for your crocodile, Comrade Zubo, we will put him in the zoological park. What do you think?"

"Oh!" said the heroic commandant. "Lavr Fedotovich! Comrade Vuniukov! As Christ is my witness, our Savior, the city does not have a zoological park."

"It will!" Lavr Fedotovich promised. And then made a folksy joke: "We have a regular park, we have a kiddie park, and now we'll have a zoological one, too. The Troika likes threes."

The roar of sycophantic laughter caused Kuzma to perform another impoliteness. ,

Lavr Fedotovich gathered his accoutrements of chairmanship into his briefcase, stood, and moved sedately toward the exit. Khlebovvodov and Vybegallo, knocking the unalert Farfurkis to the floor, rushed to open the door for him, pushing each other out of the way.

"Now a steak, that's meat," Lavr Fedotovich explained to them condescendingly.

"Rare!" shouted Khlebovvodov loyally.

"Why rare?" Lavr Fedotovich's voice floated in from the reception area.

Eddie and I opened all the windows. From the stairs came: "Now, please, Lavr Fedotovich. Allow me to say that a steak that is not rare, Lavr Fedotovich, is worse than drinking on an empty stomach." "Science assumes, *c'est, c'est*, with onions, of course." "The people love good meat—for instance, steak."

"They're driving me to an early grave," the commandant said. "They are the death of me, my seven plagues of Egypt."

CASE 15 AND FIELD SESSIONS

There was no evening session. Officially we were informed that Lavr Fedotovitch, as well as Comrades Khlebovvodov and Vybegallo, were poisoned at lunch by mushrooms, and that the doctor recommended bed rest all night. However the ever-meticulous commandant was not satisfied by the official version. He called his friend, the hotel maître d'. It turned out that at lunch Lavr Fedotovitch and Professor Vybegallo had ganged up on Comrade Khlebovvodov on the issue of the relative merits of well-done versus rare steak. Striving to determine which of these two states of steak was more beloved by the people, and with the aid and sustenance of cognac and velvety Pilsner, each consumed four experimental portions from the chef's stores. Now they were quite ill, flat on their backs, and could not appear in public before morning.

The commandant rejoiced like a kid whose favorite teacher had unexpectedly fallen ill.

We said good-bye to him, bought two ice-cream cones, and went back to our hotel. We spent the evening in our room, discussing our situation. Eddie admitted that Christobal Josévich had been right: the Troika was a tougher nut to crack than he had expected. The rational part of their psyche turned out to be supernaturally conservative and superrigid. True, it did yield to the humanizer's powerful field, but immediately returned to square one as soon as it was removed. I suggested that Eddie leave the field on, but he rejected my suggestion. The Troika's reserves of the rational, good, and eternal were very limited, and Eddie was afraid that lengthy exposure to the humanizer would deplete them. Our business is to teach them to think, said Eddie, not to think for them. But they are not learning. These ex-plumbers have forgotten how. But all is not lost. There is still the emotional side of their psyche. Since we can not awaken their reason, we must try to awaken their consciences. And that was precisely what Eddie planned to do at the very next session.

We discussed that problem until the excited Gabby burst in on us without knocking. It turned out that he had applied to be seen out of turn by the Troika to weigh a suggestion of his. He had just heard from the commandant that they would, and he wanted to know whether we would be present at the morning meeting, which would be historic. Tomorrow we would understand everything. Tomorrow we would learn just what he was. When grateful humanity carried him on their shoulders, he would not forget us. He shouted and waved his little legs, ran around the walls, and distracted Eddie from his planning. I had to take him by the scruff of his neck and toss him out into the hall. He did not take offense, he was above all that. Tomorrow everything would be clear, he promised, then asked for Khlebovvodov's suite number and disappeared. I went to bed, and Eddie shuffled papers and sat over his dismantled humanizer for several hours.

When the bedbug was called in, he did not enter the meeting room immediately. We could hear him in the reception area squabbling with the commandant, demanding an honor guard. Eddie was getting worried, and I had to go out into the reception area and tell Gabby to stop fooling around or things would go badly for him.

"But all I'm demanding is that he take three steps toward me!" the bedbug said angrily. "Even if there is no honor guard, there has to be some pomp! After all, I'm not asking him to meet me at the door, hat in hand! Let him take three steps in my direction and nod!"

"Who are you talking about?"

"What do you mean, who? What's his name, your chief—Vuniukov, is it?"

"You jerk!" I shouted. "Do you want them to listen to you? Get in there! You have thirty seconds!"

Gabby gave in. Muttering something about breaking all the rules, he went into the meeting room and obnoxiously lolled on the demonstration table without greeting anyone. Lavr Fedotovitch, his eyes puffy and yellow from yesterday's debauch, peered through his opera glasses. Khlebovvodov, suffering from bilious gas, started the session.

"What do we have to listen to him for? Everything is decided already. He's just going to drive us crazy."

"Just a minute," Farfurkis said, bright and cheery as usual. "Citizen Gabby," he addressed the bedbug, "the Troika deemed it possible to receive you out of turn and hear what you described as your very important announcement. The Troika suggests that you be as brief as possible and not take up too much of its valuable work time. What do you wish to announce? We are listening."

Gabby maintained an orator's silence for a few seconds. Then he gathered himself up noisily, struck a haughty pose, and puffing up his cheeks, began.

"The history of the human race," he said, "contains many shameful incidents of barbarism and stupidity. A rough ignorant soldier bumped off Archimedes. Lousy priests burned Giordano Bruno. Rabid fanatics attacked Charles Darwin and Galileo Galilei. The history of bedbugs also contains references to victims of ignorance and obscurantism. Everyone remembers the unbearable sufferings of the great encyclopedist bedbug Sapukol, who showed our ancestors, the grass and tree bugs, the path of true progress and prosperity. Imperutor, the creator of the theory of blood types, died a forgotten and impoverished bedbug, as did Rexophobe, who solved the problem of fertility, and Nudin, who discovered anabiosis.

"The barbarism and ignorance of both our races could not avoid leaving its mark on their interrelationship. In vain have the ideas of the great Utopian bedbug Platun been preserved. He preached the idea of a symbiotic relationship between man and bedbug, no longer based on the age-old parasitism of the bedbug—a bright and shining future of friendship and mutual assistance. We know of instances when man proffered peace, protection, and patronage to the bedbug, under the slogan: 'We are of one blood, you and I,' but the greedy, always hungry bedbug masses ignored this call, repeating over and over: 'We drank, we drink, and we will drink.' "

Gabby gulped down a glass of water, wiped his lips, and continued, increasing in tempo and volume. "Now for the first time in the history of our two races we face a situation where the bedbug offers humanity peace, protection, and patronage, demanding only one thing in return: acknowledgment. For the first time, the bedbug has found a common tongue with man. For the first time, the bedbug communicates with man not in bed but across a conference table. For the first time, the bedbug seeks not material wealth but spiritual communication. Now at the crossroads of history, standing at the turn that may lead both races to undreamed-of heights, dare we waste time through indecision, follow once more the road of ignorance and hostility, rejecting the obvious and refusing to acknowledge the miracle that has taken place? I, Gabby Bedbug, the only talking bedbug in the universe, the only link between our races, say to you in the name of millions upon millions: come to your senses! Throw away your prejudices. Throw off the shackles of stagnation, muster all that is good and reasonable in you and look with open and clear eyes into the eyes of a great truth: Gabby Bedbug is an exceptional individual, an unexplained phenomenon, and perhaps an inexplicable one!"

Yes, the vanity of that insect was enough to stun the most jaded imagination. I felt that this would come to no good and nudged Eddie with my elbow. There was a chance that the digestive prostration that afflicted the larger, and better, part of the Troika would preclude any show of passion. Another hopeful factor was the absence of the dissipated Vybegallo, who was still bedridden. Lavr Fedotovitch was not well, he was pale and sweating profusely. Farfurkis did not know what course of action to take and kept looking over at him uncertainly. I thought that perhaps it would pass, when suddenly Khlebovvodov spoke up.

" 'We drank, we drink, and we will drink!' Who do you think they're talking about? Us! He's talking about us, the bugger! Our blood! Hah!" He looked around wildly. "I'll squash him right now, I will! Get no sleep at night from them, and now they torture us in the daytime too! Torturers!" And he set about scratching furiously.

Gabby was frightened but continued to carry himself with dignity. However, he was eyeing a convenient corner in case it came to that. The odor of very strong cognac spread through the room.

"Bloodsuckers!" Khlebovvodov rasped, as he jumped up and lunged forward. My heart stopped.

Eddie grabbed my hand—he was frightened too. Gabby just squatted in horror. But Khlebovvodov, clutching his stomach, raced past the demonstration table, opened the door, and ran out. We could hear his footsteps on the stairs. Gabby wiped the cold sweat from his brow and dispiritedly lowered his antennae.

"Harrumph," Lavr Fedotovich said pathetically. "Who else would like the floor?"

"Allow me," said Farfurkis. I realized the machine was starting up. "Citizen Gabby's announcement has created a unique impression on me. I am sincerely and categorically incensed. And not only because Citizen Gabby is giving a perverted history of the human race as the history of the suffering of exceptional individuals. I am also willing to leave the orator's totally un-self-critical pronouncements as to his own person to his conscience. But his idea, his offer of union—even the idea of such a union sounds, to me, both insulting and blasphemous. Just what do you take us for, Citizen Gabby? Or perhaps the insult was intentional? Personally, I am inclined to classify it as intentional. And on top of that, I looked through the minutes of the earlier meeting on the case of Citizen Gabby and noted with chagrin that, as far as I am concerned, there is a total lack of the necessary interlocutory decree for the case. This, comrades, is our mistake, our oversight, which we must correct with all due speed. What do I mean? I mean that in the person of Citizen Gabby we are confronted by nothing more than a typical talking parasite, in other words a sponging loafer with means of support that can only be classified as illegal."

At that moment the exhausted Khlebovvodov appeared in the doorway. As he walked past Gabby he brandished his fist at him and muttered, "You tailless, six-legged cur!" Gabby ducked his head. He finally understood that things were bad. "Alex," Eddie whispered to me in a panic. "Alex, think of something." I feverishly looked for a way out, while Farfurkis droned on.

"Insulting humanity, insulting an authoritative body. This is typical parasitism, which belongs behind bars. Is this not a little much, comrades? Are we not displaying spinelessness, toothlessness, bourgeois liberalism, and abstract humanism? I don't know the feelings of my respected colleagues in this matter, and I don't know what decision will be reached in this case; however, as a man who is not malicious by nature but who is principled, I permit myself to address you, Citizen Gabby, with a word of warning. The fact that you, Citizen Gabby, have learned to speak, or rather to gab, in Russian, may be a temporizing factor in our attitude toward you. But beware! Don't pull the string too tight!"

"Squash the parasite!" rasped Khlebovvodov. "Here, I've got a matchstick." He started patting his pockets.

Gabby's face was blank. So was Eddie's. He was feverishly tinkering with the humanizer. And I still had not come up with a way out.

"No, no, Comrade Khlebovvodov," said Farfurkis, grimacing in disgust, "I am against illegal acts. Why this lynch law? We're not in America, you know. Everything must be done according to the law. First of all, if Lavr Fedotovich has no objections, we must rationalize Citizen Gabby as an unexplained phenomenon, which will therefore put him in our competence."

Gabby, the fool, cheered up at those words. Ah, vanity!

"Then," continued Farfurkis, "we will classify the rationalized unexplained phenomenon as a dangerous one, and therefore one that can be expunged during the utilization procedure. The rest is ridiculously simple. We will write the decree along these lines: the decree on expunging the talking bedbug, hereafter referred to as Gabby."

"That's right!" rasped Khlebovvodov. "We'll get him with the Seal!"

"This is arbitrary rule!" squeaked Gabby.

"Excuse me!" Farfurkis was on the attack. "What do you mean arbitrary? We are expunging you in accordance with paragraph 75 of the Appendix on Expunging Social Vestiges, where it most clearly states ... "

"It's still arbitrary!" Gabby was shouting. "Executioners! Gendarmes!"

And that's when I finally figured it out.

"Hold on," I said. "Lavr Fedotovitch! I beg you to intervene! This is squandering your cadres!"

Lavr Fedotovitch barely managed his "Harrumph." He was so sick that he didn't care.

"Do you hear that?" I asked Farfurkis. "And Lavr Fedotovitch is absolutely right! You must pay less attention to form and look more closely at content. Our injured feelings have nothing to do with the best interests of the people's resources. Why this administrative sentimentality? Is this a boarding school for young princesses? Or courses for improving qualifications? Yes, Citizen Gabby is rude and impertinent and uses questionable parallels. Yes, Citizen Gabby is far from perfect. But does that mean that we should expunge him as being unnecessary? What are you thinking of, Comrade Farfurkis? Or are you perhaps prepared to pull out another talking bedbug from your pocket? Maybe your circle of acquaintances includes a talking bedbug? Why this lèse majesty? 'I don't like the talking bedbug, let's write off the talking bedbug.' And you, Comrade Khlebovvodov? Yes, I can see that you are a man who has suffered deeply from bedbugs. I sympathize deeply with your sufferings, but I ask you: perhaps you have already found a means of combating these bloodsucking parasites? These pirates of the bed, these gangsters of the people's dreams, these vampires of rundown hotels?"

"That's just what I'm saying," said Khlebovvodov. "Just squash him without any to-do. All these decrees and nonsense . . ."

"Oh, no, Comrade Khlebovvodov! We forbid it! We will not allow you to take advantage of the scientific consultant's sickness to introduce and apply crude administrative methods instead of scientific administrative methods. We will not allow voluntarism and subjectivism to reign once more! Don't you understand that Citizen Gabby here is the only opportunity we have so far to begin a reeducation program among these frenzied parasites? In the past, some homegrown talent turned peaceful vegetarian bugs to their present disgusting *modus vivendi*. Don't you think that our contemporary, educated bedbug, enriched with the full power of theory and practice, is capable of doing the reverse? Armed with carefully composed instructions and the latest techniques of pedagogy, knowing that all of humanity supports him, he could become the Archimedean lever with whose help we will turn the tide of bedbug history back to the forests and fields, to Nature's bosom, to a pure, simple, and innocent existence. I beg the commission to take all these thoughts into consideration and carefully examine them."

I sat down. Eddie, pale with joy, gave me a thumbs-up sign. Gabby was on his knees, fervently praying. As for the Troika, it was dumbstruck by my oratorical power. Farfurkis stared at me with joyous amazement. I could tell that he thought my idea was a stroke of genius and that he was feverishly examining the best way to take over the command of this new undertaking. He was picturing how he would write a wide-ranging, detailed instruction manual; he could see the paragraphs, chapters, appendixes, and footnotes in his mind's eye; in his imagination he was consulting with the bedbug, organizing courses in Russian for gifted bedbugs, being named head of the State Committee on Propaganda for Vegetarianism Among Bloodsuckers, whose expanding sphere of activity would also include mosquitoes and gnats, midges and leeches.

"Grass bugs are no joy either, let me tell you," grumbled the conservative Khlebovvodov. He had already capitulated, but he did not want to admit it, so he was picking on minor points.

I shrugged expressively.

"Comrade Khlebovvodov is thinking along rigid, narrow lines," countered Farfurkis, pulling ahead by half a length.

"They're not narrow at all," said Khlebovvodov weakly. "They're quite broad, those . . . whatchamacallits. Boy, do they stink! But I realize that can be fixed up in the process, too. I mean, do you think we can trust this upstart. He just doesn't seem serious—and he has no good record of anything."

"I have a motion," said Eddie. "Perhaps a subcommittee should be set up, headed by Comrade Farfurkis, to study this matter. I would suggest Comrade Privalov, a man who is impartial, as a scientific consultant pro tem."

Lavr Fedotovitch stood up. Anyone could see that he had been seriously impaired by yesterday's lunch. Ordinary human weakness shone through his usually stony countenance. Yes, there was a crack in the granite, the bastion was breached, but despite all that he stood firm and powerful.

"The people," began the bastion, rolling his eyes in pain. "The people do not like being locked within four walls. The people need room. The people need fields and rivers. The people need the wind and the sun."

"And the moon," added Khlebovvodov, loyally looking up at the bastion.

"And the moon," Lavr Fedotovitch confirmed. "The health of the people must be safeguarded, it belongs to the people. The people need work in the great outdoors. The people can not breathe without the open air."

We didn't understand. Even Khlebovvodov was still trying to figure it out, but the perceptive Farfurkis had already gathered his papers, packed up his notebook, and was whispering to the commandant. The commandant nodded and inquired respectfully:

"Do the people like to walk or drive?"

"The people," announced Lavr Fedotovitch, "prefer to ride in a convertible. Expressing the general consensus, I move that we postpone the present session and hold at once the field session scheduled for this evening. Comrade Zubo, take care of the details." With those words Lavr Fedotovitch fell back heavily into his chair.

Everyone started bustling. The commandant ordered the car, Khlebovvodov plied Lavr Fedotovitch with mineral water, and Farfurkis dug around for the necessary documents. I took advantage of the bustle, grabbed Gabby by the leg, and threw him out. Gabby did not protest: this experience had shaken him profoundly and changed him for a long time to come.

The car arrived. Lavr Fedotovitch was led out by both arms and seated in the front. Khlebovvodov, Farfurkis, and the commandant, fighting and scratching, shared the back seat with the safe containing the Great Round Seal. "The car seats five," Eddie said worriedly. "They won't take us." I replied that that was fine with me, I had talked enough to last me a month. It was all a waste of time. We wouldn't change them in a hundred years. We saved the stupid bedbug, fine, let's go for a swim. However, Eddie said that he would not go swimming. He would follow in invisible form and try one more session—in the open air. Maybe that would be more effective.

They were shouting in the car. Farfurkis and Khlebovvodov were tangling. Khlebovvodov, who was getting sicker from the smell of the gas, demanded an immediate departure. And he was yelling that the people love fast driving. Farfurkis, feeling that he was the only businesslike person in the car, responsible for everything, maintained that the presence of a strange and untried driver had turned the closed session into an open one, and besides, according to the regulations, the absence of the scientific consultant made it impossible to have a session, so that even if it were held, it would be null and void.

"Difficulties?" inquired Lavr Fedotovitch in a slightly firmer voice. "Comrade Farfurkis, get rid of them." Farfurkis, emboldened, took to getting rid of them with zeal. And before I could blink an eye, I found myself co-opted as a temporary replacement for the scientific consultant, the driver was let go, and I was in his seat. "Go ahead, go ahead," invisible Eddie whispered in my ear. "Maybe you'll be of some help to me." I was nervous and kept looking around. The car was surrounded by a crowd of kids. It was one thing to be in a room with the Troika and another thing to expose oneself in their company to the public eye.

"Can't we go?" Khlebovvodov begged in a dying voice. "With a stiff breeze . . . "

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch. "There is a motion to go. Any other motions? Driver, go."

I started the engine and turned carefully, picking my way through the crowd of children.

At first Farfurkis drove me crazy with his backseat instructions. He wanted me to stop in no-stopping zones; or not to drive so fast, reminding me of the value of Lavr Fedotovitch's life; or to drive faster, because the breeze did not cool Lavr Fedotovitch enough; or not to pay attention to the stoplights, since that undermined the authority of the Troika. But when we finally got out of the white suburbs of Tmuskorpion and into the country, when the green fields stretched before us and we could see the blue waters of a lake in the distance, and when the car bounced along on the gravel, peace descended on the car. Everyone stuck his face into the oncoming breeze, everyone squinted in the sun, and everyone felt good. Lavr Fedotovitch lit up his first Herzegovina-Flor of the day, Khlebovvodov hummed an old folk song, and the commandant napped with the case files clutched to his breast.

Only Farfurkis, after a brief struggle, was able to overcome the relaxation that overtook the others. He unfurled a map of Tmuskorpion and environs and diligently marked out our itinerary, which, however, was of no use, since Farfurkis had forgotten that we were traveling by car and not by helicopter. I suggested my version: the lake, the swamp, the hill. At the lake we had to look into the case of the plesiosaur; at the swamp, to rationalize and utilize the mysterious sounds; and at the hill, to examine the so-called enchanted place.

Farfurkis, to my surprise, had no objections. It turned out that he had total confidence in my driver's intuition, and moreover, he had always had a high regard for my abilities. He would be very happy working with me in the bedbug subcommittee, he had long had me in mind, and in general he always had our wonderful, talented youth in mind. His heart is always with youth, even though he does not close his eyes to its fundamental faults. Today's youth does not struggle enough, does not pay enough attention to the struggle, has no desire to struggle more, to struggle to make struggling the true, primary goal of the struggle, and if our wonderful talented youth struggle so little, then they will have little chance of becoming a truly struggling youth, always involved in the struggle to become a true struggler who struggles to make the struggle ...

We sighted the plesiosaur from a distance—something looking like an umbrella handle was sticking out of the water a mile from shore. I drove up to the beach and parked. Farfurkis was still struggling with grammatical permutations in the name of struggling youth, but Khlebovvodov had jumped out of the car and opened the door for Lavr Fedotovitch. Lavr Fedotovitch did not wish to get out. He looked benevolently at Khlebovvodov and announced that there was water in the lake, that the session was officially declared open, and that Comrade Zubo had the floor.

The commission settled in the grass around the car. The mood was somehow different. Farfurkis unbuttoned his shirt, and I took mine off, so as not to miss an opportunity to work on my tan. The commandant, breaking all the rules as he went along, rattled off the file on the plesiosaur called Liza, and nobody listened to him. Lavr Fedotovitch dreamily looked at the lake, seemingly trying to decide whether the people needed it or not, and Khlebovvodov was telling Farfurkis *sotto voce* how he was once chairman of the Musical Comedy Theater Kolkhoz, where he used to get fifteen piglets a year from each sow. Oats rustled not twenty feet from us, cows grazed in distant pastures, and the inclination to agricultural subjects was understandable.

When the commandant had finished reading the brief section on the unexplained, Khlebovvodov made a new remark—that pleurisy was a dangerous disease and he was shocked that it was allowed to be on the loose around here. Farfurkis and I spent quite a while trying to explain that pleurisy and plesiosaurs were two entirely different things. Khlebovvodov, however, maintained his position, referring us to *Ogonek* magazine, which had many precise descriptions of fossilized plesiosaurs. "You can't confuse me," he said. "I'm a well-read man, even if I've had no higher education." Farfurkis gave up, but I continued arguing until Khlebovvodov suggesting calling over the plesiosaur and asking it. "It can't talk," the commandant said, squatting down next to us. "It doesn't matter," Khlebovvodov said. "We'll figure it

out. After all, we have to see it anyway. At least this way, there'll be some use out of it."

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch. "Are there any questions for the speaker? No? Call in the case, Comrade Zubo."

The commandant jumped up and started running along the shore. First he shouted hoarsely: "Liza, Liza!" But since the plesiosaur seemed to be deaf, the commandant tore off his jacket and started waving it, like a shipwreck victim hailing a sail on the horizon. Liza gave no sign of life. "She's asleep," the commandant said in dismay. "I'll bet she's had her fill and she's asleep." He ran around and waved some more and then asked me to honk. I beeped the horn. Lavr Fedotovitch, leaning over the hood, examined the plesiosaur with his opera glasses. I honked for two minutes or so and then said that any more honking would wear down the battery. The whole thing seemed hopeless.

"Comrade Zubo," Lavr Fedotovitch spoke without putting down his glasses. "Why is the case not responding?"

The commandant blanched and could not come up with a reply.

"Discipline is lacking here, too," Khlebovvodov piped up. "You've let your subordinates get out of hand."

"This is a case of undermined authority," Farfurkis noted. "You should sleep at night and work during the daytime."

The commandant began undressing in despair. There was no alternative. I asked him if he could swim. It turned out that he did not know how, but that it did not matter to him. "Never mind," Khlebovvodov said bloodthirstily. "He'll be supported by authority." I carefully voiced my doubts about the wisdom of the planned course. The commandant would undoubtedly drown, I said, and was it really necessary, I asked, for the Troika to take on duties that had nothing to do with its function, that is, becoming a lifeguard station. Besides, I reminded them, if the commandant did drown, the goal would still remain unreached and someone else, that is either Farfurkis or Khlebovvodov, would have to swim out after the case. Farfurkis rejoined with the information that calling the cases was the function and prerogative of the representative of the local authorities, or, in his absence, of the scientific consultant. So that my words could be seen as an attack and an attempt to shift responsibility. I announced that in the present situation I was less the scientific consultant and more the driver of an official car, which I could not leave for more than a distance of twenty feet. "You should know the appendix to the Statutes of Driving on Streets and Roads," I said accusingly, risking nothing. "Paragraph 21." There was a tense silence. The black umbrella handle still stood lighthouse-straight on the horizon. We watched anxiously as Lavr Fedotovitch's head turned slowly, like the turret of a battleship. We were all in the line of fire, and none of us wanted to be hit.

"As God is my witness." The commandant cracked first, kneeling in his underwear. "Jesus Christ our Savior, I'm not afraid of swimming or of drowning. But what does she care, that Liza. She's got a gullet like a subway! She can swallow a cow! And she'll be drowsy."

"Actually," Farfurkis said nervously. "Why call her? Actually, we can see from here that she presents nothing of any interest, anyway. I suggest that we rationalize her and expunge her as unnecessary."

"Expunge her right away!" Khlebovvodov added. "So she can swallow a cow, big deal! I can swallow one, too. But try getting fifteen piglets from one. Now that's real work!"

Lavr Fedotovitch finally rolled out the artillery. However, instead of a horde of scrabbling individuals, instead of a nest of teeming, contradictory passions, instead of undisciplined spiders undermining the Troika's authority, his sights showed him a workers' collective, full of solidarity, enthusiasm, and zeal, burning with a single desire: to write off that scourge Liza and move on to the next problem. There was no salvo. The turret made a 180-degree turn, and the terrifying muzzles pointed at the unsuspecting umbrella handle on the horizon.

"The people," we could hear from the conning tower. "The people look into the distance. The people

see a plesiosaur. The people do not need ... "

"The plesiosaur!" Khlebovvodov shot from a pistol and missed.

It turned out that the people desperately need plesiosaurs, that certain members of the Troika have lost their sense of perspective, that certain commandants have forgotten whose bread they are eating, that certain representatives of our glorious scientific intelligentsia have revealed a tendency to view the world through a glass darkly, and that, finally, Case 8 must be postponed until some winter month when it can be reached along the ice. There were no other motions, and certainly no questions for the speaker. And that was the final decision.

"Let's move on to the next question," announced Lavr Fedotovitch, and the members of the Troika pushed their way into the back seat. The commandant was hurriedly dressing, muttering: "You'll pay for this. I gave you the best pieces—like my own daughter, you floating pig."

Then we took the road along the lake shore. The road was horrible, and I thanked heaven that the summer was dry, or it would have been the end of us. However, I had thanked the heavens too soon, because the closer we got to the swamp the more the road displayed a tendency to disappear and turn into two damp ruts with grass growing in them. I downshifted and tried to estimate my passengers' physical strength. It was perfectly clear that fat, flabby Farfurkis would be of little help. Khlebovvodov looked sturdy enough, but I did not know if he had recovered sufficiently from his stomach attack. Lavr Fedoto-vich would probably not even get out of the car. That left the commandant and me if anything went wrong, because Eddie would not reveal himself just to push a two-thousand-pound car out of the mud.

My pessimistic thoughts were interrupted by a gigantic black puddle on the road. This was no bucolic, patriarchal puddle, no smalltown puddle that everyone had driven through and that was used to everything. Nor was it a muddy urban puddle, lazily spreading amid the litter of a construction site. This was a calm, cold-blooded puddle, vicious in its morbid appearance, casually stretching between the two ruts in the road, as mysterious as the eye of a sphinx, as perfidious as a wicked witch—evoking nightmarish thoughts of drowned trucks. I braked sharply.

"That's it. We're here."

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch. "Comrade Zubo, read the file."

I could see the commandant vacillating in the silence. It was still rather far to the swamp, but the commandant could also see the puddle blocking our only approach. He sighed and rustled his papers.

"Case 38," he read. "Surname: Blank. Name: Blank. Patronymic: Blank. Nickname: Cow's Muck Swamp."

"Just a minute!" Farfurkis interrupted anxiously. "Listen!"

He raised his finger. We listened, and we heard.

Somewhere in the distance silver horns sang out victoriously. The sound pulsed, grew, and seemed to come closer. The blood froze in my veins. That was the trumpeting of mosquitoes, and not even all of them were calling to battle—only the company commanders or maybe even only the battalion commanders and higher. With the mysterious inner vision of a trapped animal, we saw around us acres and acres of marshy mud, overgrown with thin sedge, covered with layers of decaying leaves, with rotten stumps sticking out here and there, all under the canopy of emaciated aspens. And all these acres, every square inch of them, had detachments of the reddish cannibals, ruthless, starved, and frustrated.

"Lavr Fedotovitch!" babbled Khlebovvodov. "Mosquitoes!"

"There is a motion!" Farfurkis shouted. "To postpone the examination of this case until October ... November!"

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch in surprise. "The public doesn't understand."

Suddenly the air around us was filled with movement. Khlebovvodov squealed and slapped his face as hard as he could. Farfurkis replied with the same. Lavr Fedotovitch started to turn slowly and in surprise, and then the impossible happened: a huge redheaded pirate landed smoothly on Lavr Fedotovitch's forehead and drove his sword right between the poor man's eyes. Lavr Fedotovitch reeled. He was shocked, he did not understand, he could not believe it. And then it really began.

Shaking my head like a horse, waving the mosquitoes away with my elbows, I tried to turn the car around in the narrow space between the aspen groves. Lavr Fedotovitch was roaring and squirming on my right, and from the back seat came such a volley of smacks that it sounded as though a whole company of uhlans and hussars had embarked on an evening of mutual insults. By the time I had the car turned around, I was completely swollen. My ears were hot doughnuts and my cheeks were pound cakes, and there were millions of horns on my forehead.

"Forward!" they shouted from all sides. "Back! Give it gas! Get moving! I'll have you tried, Comrade Privalov." The motor was roaring, clumps of mud flew in all directions, and the car bounced like a kangaroo, but our speed was low, disgustingly low, and meanwhile new squadrons and armadas were taking off from innumerable airfields. The enemy was indisputably superior in the air. Everybody except me was busy indulging in furious self-criticism, even self-torture. I could not tear my hands away from the wheel, and I could not even use my legs to fight them off. I had one foot free, and with it I scratched everything it could reach. Finally we got to the lake. The road was better and it was uphill. I felt a breeze on my face. I stopped the car. I caught my breath and started scratching. I lost myself in scratching. When I did manage to stop I realized that the Troika was finishing off the commandant.

The commandant was accused of planning and executing a terrorist act. They were holding him accountable for every drop of blood lost by the Troika, and he paid dearly for each and every drop. What was left of the commandant when I could see, hear, and think again could not accurately be called the commandant anymore: a few bones, an empty stare, and a weak mumble: "As God is ... In the name of Jesus Christ ... "

"Comrade Zubo," said Lavr Fedotovitch finally. "Why did you stop reading the report? Please continue."

The commandant began gathering the scattered papers from his files.

"Go right to the brief description of the unexplained," demanded Lavr Fedotovitch.

The commandant, giving one last sob, read in a quavering voice:

"A large swamp, from which come occasional sighs and moans."

"So?" asked Khlebovvodov. "What's next?"

"Nothing. That's it."

"What do you mean that's it?" Khlebovvodov whined. "You killed me! Destroyed me! And for what? For some lousy sighs? Why did you drag us here, you terrorist? Why did we shed our blood? Just look at me—how can I show up at the hotel like this? You've undermined my authority for life! When I get through with you, you won't even be able to sigh or moan!"

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch. Khlebovvodov shut up.

"There is a motion," continued Lavr Fedotovitch. "In view of the extreme danger that Case 38 poses for the people, the above-named case should be rationalized in the highest degree—that is, it should be classified as irrational and transcendent, and therefore, not really existing, and as such, it should be expunged from the memory of the people, that is, from geographic and topographic maps."

Khlebovvodov and Farfurkis applauded wildly. Lavr Fedotovitch extracted his briefcase from under his seat and placed it squarely in his lap.

"The decree!" he called.

The decree of the highest degree fell on the briefcase.

"Signatures!!"

The signatures fell on the decree.

"Seal!!!"

The safe door clanged open, a wave of office staleness engulfed us, and the Great Round Seal hovered before Lavr Fedotovich. Lavr Fedotovich took it in both hands, raised it over the decree, and lowered it forcefully. A dark shadow passed over the sky, the car settled on its shocks, and Lavr Fedotovich put his briefcase back under the seat and continued.

"To Colony Commandant Comrade Zubo for irresponsibility, harboring the irrational, transcendent, and therefore nonexistent Cow's Muck Swamp, for not ensuring the safety of the Troika's work, and also for displaying heroism at the swamp, we announce our gratitude and enter it in the record. Are there any other motions? Next. What else do we have on the agenda, Comrade Zubo?"

"The enchanted place," said the relieved commandant. "Not far from here, two miles or so."

"Are there mosquitoes?" inquired Lavr Fedotovich.

"As Christ is my witness," swore the commandant. "None. Some ants, maybe."

"Well ... " Lavr Fedotovich hesitated. "Wasps? Bees?" he said, revealing great perspicacity and vigilant concern for the welfare of the people.

"By no means."

Lavr Fedotovich was silent for a long time.

"Wild bulls?" he finally asked.

The commandant assured him that bulls were entirely unknown in the area.

"How about wolves?" asked Khlebovvodov suspiciously.

But the area had neither wolves nor bears, which Farfurkis had remembered. While they did their zoology exercises, I studied the map, trying to figure out the shortest route to the enchanted place. The decree of the highest degree had taken effect: the map indicated Tmuskorpion, the Skorpionka River, Zverinoe Lake, and Lopukhi, but Cow's Muck Swamp, which used to lie between the lake and Lopukhi, was gone. There was just an anonymous white spot, like the ones for Antarctica on old maps. I was ordered to go on, and we drove off. We went around the oats, through the herds of cows, around Kruglaia Grove, across Studenyi Brook, and a half hour later we found ourselves in the enchanted place.

It was a hill, covered by a forest on one side. Probably there used to be dense forests all over, all the way to Kitezhgrad, but they had been felled, and now the only trees left were on the hill. There was a blackened shack at the very top; two cows with a calf grazed along the slope in front of us, guarded by a big German shepherd. Chickens scratched in the dirt in front of the porch, and there was a goat on the roof.

"Why did you stop?" Farfurkis asked. "You should drive right up. You don't expect us to walk."

"And it looks as if they have milk," Khlebovvodov added. "I could go for a glass of milk. You understand, when you've had mushroom poisoning, it's very good to drink milk. Come on, come on, let's go!"

The commandant tried to explain that it was impossible to drive up the hill, but his explanations were greeted with icy wonderment on the part of Lavr Fedotovich, infected with the thought of steaming milk, and with Farfurkis' moans of "Sour cream! From the cellar!" He did not try to argue. To tell the truth, I did not understand either, but I was curious.

I started the engine, and the car sped merrily toward the hill. The odometer clicked off the miles, the wheels whirred in the grass, Lavr Fedotovich stared straight ahead, and the back seat, in anticipation of

sour cream and milk, started an argument about what mosquitoes feed on in swamps. Khlebovvodov based his argument on experience and maintained that they feed exclusively on responsible workers on expeditions. Farfurkis, giving way to wishful thinking, maintained that mosquitoes live by cannibalism. The commandant babbled on about God's solicitude, about something called God's dew, and fried locusts and wild honey. We drove on this way for twenty minutes. When the odometer showed eight miles, Khlebovvodov gasped.

"But what's happening?" he said. "We're moving all right, but the hill is just where it was. Speed it up, driver. What's the holdup?"

"We'll never get to the hill," the commandant said meekly. "It's enchanted. You can't drive there, you can't walk there. We're just wasting gas."

Everyone stopped talking after that, and the odometer racked up another four miles. The hill was not even a foot closer. The cows, attracted by the sound of the engine, looked in our direction for a while, then lost interest and went back to their grazing. Indignation mounted in the back seat. Khlebovvodov and Farfurkis exchanged several remarks that were maliciously businesslike. "Sabotage," said Khlebovvodov. "Sabotage," said Farfurkis. "Premeditated sabotage." Then they started whispering, and I heard snatches of conversation: "Set on blocks. That's right, the wheels turn, but the car doesn't move. The commandant? Maybe, and the scientific consultant pro tem as well—gas—undermining the economy—then they'll write off the car as heavily used, while it's practically brand-new." I paid no attention to the malicious parrots, but then the back door slammed shut and Khlebovvodov's passionate howl receded in the distance. I braked hard. Lavr Fedotovich, still moving, smashed into the windshield. I saw stars from the impact, and Farfurkis' false teeth clacked right in my ear. The car swerved. When the dust had settled, I saw Comrade Khlebovvodov far behind us, running and waving his arms. "Difficulties?" inquired Lavr Fedotovich. "Get rid of them, Comrade Khlebovvodov."

We had been rid of the difficulties for quite some time. I had to go get Khlebovvodov, who lay some thirty yards back on the road, ragged, in torn trousers, and very surprised. It turned out that he had suspected the commandant and me of conspiring to set the car on blocks and to run up the mileage for our own benefit. Impelled by a sense of duty, he decided to get out and reveal our plot by looking under the wheels. The commandant and I dragged him back to the car and laid him down so that he could see for himself. Then we went to help Farfurkis, who was looking for his glasses and upper dentures in the car. The commandant found them on the road.

The confusion was done away with completely, Khlebovvodov's arguments turned out to be rather superficial, and Lavr Fedotovich, who finally realized that there would never be any milk, ever, moved that we not waste gas, which belongs to the people, and get on with our primary responsibilities.

"Comrade Zubo," he said. "Read the report."

Case 29, as was to be expected, had neither surname, nor name, nor patronymic. It was provisionally called Enchantings. The date of birth was lost in the mists of time, but the place of birth was given with extremely precise coordinates. Enchantings' nationality was Russian, it had no education, spoke no foreign languages, its profession was being a hill, and its place of work was again given by the same coordinates. Enchantings had never been abroad, its closest relative was Mother Earth, and its place of permanent residence was again those same coordinates. As for the brief summary of its unexplainability, Vybegallo had wasted no words: "First of all, you can't drive there, and second of all, you can't walk there."

The commandant glowed. The case was definitely proceeding to rationalization. Khlebovvodov was pleased with the application form. Farfurkis was enjoying the self-evident unexplainable factor that did not threaten the people in any way, and it looked as if Lavr Fedotovich had no objections. In any case, he confided to us that the people need hills, as well as dales, ravines, gullies, Elbrus Mountains, and Kazbek Ranges.

But then the door to the shack opened, and an old man dressed in long shirt tied at the waist came out onto the porch, leaning on a stick. He stood on the porch, looked at the sun, shielding his eyes, shook his stick at the goat to get it off the roof, and finally sat on the steps.

"A witness!" said Farfurkis. "Shouldn't we call the witness?"

"So he's a witness," the commandant said sadly. "Isn't everything clear? If you have questions, I can ..."

"No!" said Farfurkis, peering at him suspiciously. "Why shouldn't we call him? Remember, you don't live here. He's a local."

"Call him, call him," said Khlebovvodov. "He can bring us milk."

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovitch. "Comrade Zubo, call the witness for Case 29."

"Ah!" exclaimed the commandant, throwing his hat on the ground. The case was falling apart before his very eyes. "If he could come here, do you think he'd be sitting over there? He's a prisoner, you see. He can't get out! He's stuck there, and there he'll stay!"

In total despair, under the suspicious scrutiny of the Troika, anticipating new difficulties and therefore becoming very talkative, the commandant told us the Kitezgrad legend about the forester Feofil. How he had lived peacefully with his wife, how he was still young and hearty then, how green lightning struck the hill and horrible things started to happen. His wife was in town at the time and when she came back she couldn't get up the hill to the house. And Feofil tried to get to her. He ran nonstop for two days—to no avail. And so he stayed there. Him up there, and her in town. Then of course, he got used to it in time. You have to go on living. And so he has. He got used to it.

Having heard this horrible tale and having posed several tricky questions, Khlebovvodov suddenly made a discovery. Feofil had avoided the census takers, had never been subjected to any educational activity, and for all we knew could still be an exploiter, a kulak.

"He has two cows," Khlebovvodov said, "and look, a calf. And a goat. And he doesn't pay taxes." His eyes lit up. "If he's got a calf, he must have a bull, too, hidden away somewhere!"

"He has a bull, that's right," the commandant admitted glumly. "It must be grazing on the other side."

"Well, brother, you really run things well here," Khlebovvodov said. "I knew you were a phoney, but I didn't expect something like this, even from you. That you would be a kulak's henchman, that you would cover up for a kulak."

The commandant took a deep breath and wailed. "Holy Mother of God. In the name of the twelve original Apostles."

"Attention!" whispered invisible Eddie.

Feofil the forester suddenly looked up and, shading his eyes from the sun, gazed in our direction. Then he tossed his stick aside and started walking down the hill slowly, slipping and sliding in the tall grass. The dirty white goat trailed after him like a puppy. Feofil came up to us, sat down, and rubbed his chin with his bony brown hand in puzzlement. The she-goat sat next to him and stared at us with her yellow devilish eyes.

"You're regular people," Feofil said. "Amazing."

The goat looked us over and settled on Khlebovvodov.

"This here is Khlebovvodov," she said. "Rudolf Arkhipovich. Born in 1910 in Khokhloma. His parents got the name out of a romantic novel. Education, seventh grade. He is ashamed of his parents' background, studied many foreign languages, speaks none."

"*Oui*," Khlebovvodov confirmed, giggling with embarrassment. "*Naturalichjawohl!*"

"Has no profession as such. At the present time is a public administrator. Traveled abroad to Italy,

France, both Germanics, Hungary, England, and so on—a total of forty-four countries. Has bragged and lied everywhere. His distinguishing character trait is a high degree of tenacity and adaptability, based on his fundamental stupidity and an unwavering desire to out-orthodox orthodoxy."

"Well," said Feofil. "Is there anything you could add to that, Rudolf Arkhipovich?"

"No way!" Khlebovvodov said gleefully. "Except maybe that ortho—ortho—doro—orthxy, it isn't quite clear!"

"To be more orthodox than orthodoxy is sort of like this," explained the goat. "If the authorities are displeased by some scientists, you declare yourself to be an enemy of science in general. If the authorities are displeased by some foreigner, you are ready to declare war on everyone on the other side of the border. Understand?"

"Absolutely," said Khlebovvodov. "How else could it be? Our education is awfully limited. Otherwise, I might make a mistake."

"Does he steal?" asked Feofil casually.

"No," said the goat. "He picks up things that fall off the gravy train."

"Murder?"

"Don't be silly," laughed the goat. "Personally, never."

"Say something," Feofil asked Khlebovvodov.

"There have been mistakes," Khlebovvodov said quickly. "People are not angels. Anyone can make a mistake. Horses have four legs and still they stumble. He who makes no mistakes does not exist, that is, does not work."

"I understand," said Feofil. "Are you going to go on making mistakes?"

"Never!" Khlebovvodov said firmly.

"Thank you," said Feofil. He looked at Farfurkis.

"And this kind gentleman?"

"That's Farfurkis," said the goat. "No one has ever used his name and patronymic. Born in 1916 in Taganrog, higher education in law, reads English with a dictionary. Profession, lecturer. Candidate of oratorical sciences. Has never been abroad. Outstanding character trait is perspicacity and caution. Sometimes he risks incurring the wrath of his superiors, but his actions are always calculated to lead eventually to their gratitude."

"That's not quite right," Farfurkis said softly. "You're mixing your terms a bit. Caution and perspicacity are part of my character whether I deal with my superiors or not. They're in my chromosomes. As for my superiors, well that's my job, pointing out the legal parameters of their competence."

"And if they go outside the parameters?" asked Feofil.

"You see," said Farfurkis. "I can tell you're not a lawyer. There is nothing more flexible than a legal parameter. You can delineate one, but you can't overstep one."

"How do you feel about perjury?" asked Feofil.

"I'm afraid that that's a rather old-fashioned term," Farfurkis said. "We don't use it any more."

"How's he on perjury?" Feofil asked the goat.

"Never," she replied. "He always believes every word he says."

"Really, what is a lie?" said Farfurkis. "A lie is a denial or a distortion of a fact. But what is a fact? Can we speak of facts in our increasingly complex life? A fact is a phenomenon or action that is verified by witnesses. But eyewitnesses can be prejudiced, self-interested, or simply ignorant. Or, a fact is a phenomenon or action that is verified by documents. But documents can be forged or tampered with. Or

finally, a fact is a phenomenon or action that is determined by me personally. However, my sensations can be dulled or even completely deceived under certain circumstances. Thus, it is evident that a fact is something ephemeral, nebulous, and unverifiable, and the elimination of the concept becomes necessary. But in that case falsehood and truth become primitive concepts, indefinable through any other general categories. There exist only the Great Truth and its antipode, the Great Lie. The Great Truth is so great and its validity is so obvious to any normal man, such as myself, that it is totally futile to try to refute or distort it, that is, to lie. And that is why I never lie and never perjure myself."

"Tricky," said Feofil. "Very neat. Of course, Farfurkis' philosophy will remain after him?"

"No," said the goat with a laugh. "I mean, the philosophy will remain, but Farfurkis had nothing to do with it. He didn't invent it. He hasn't invented anything at all, except his dissertation, which will be his only legacy, a model of such works."

Feofil was thinking.

"Do I understand correctly?" asked Farfurkis. "Is everything finished? Can we continue our work?"

"Not yet," Feofil replied, awakening from his meditations. "I would like to ask a few questions of this citizen."

"What!" shouted Farfurkis. "Lavr Fedotovich?"

"The people ... " said Lavr Fedotovich, gazing into the distance through his opera glasses.

"Question Lavr Fedotovich?" muttered Farfurkis in shock.

"Yes," the goat said. "Livr Fedotovich Vuniukov, born in ____ "

"That's it," said Eddie. "I've run out of energy. That Lavr is a bottomless barrel."

"What's this?" shouted Farfurkis in dismay. "Comrades!! What's going on? It's improper!"

"That's right," said Khlebovovodov. "It's not our concern. Let the police take care of it."

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovich. "Are there any other motions? Questions to the speaker?"

Expressing the general consensus, I move that Case 29 be rationalized as an unexplained phenomenon that should be of interest to the Ministry of the Food Industry and the Treasury. As part of preliminary utilization Case 29, known as Enchantings, should be turned over to the district attorney's office of the Tmuskorpion Region."

I looked toward the top of the hill. Feofil the forester leaned heavily on his stick, standing on his porch, and peered into the sunlight, shading his eyes. The goat wandered in the garden. I waved my beret at him in farewell. Eddie's bitter sigh sounded in my ear simultaneously with the thud of the Great Round Seal.

EPILOGUE

The next morning, before I was fully awake, I immediately sensed how bitter and hopeless it all was. Eddie was sitting at the table in his shorts, his disheveled head in his hands. The shiny parts of the humanizer were spread out before him on a sheet of newspaper. I could tell that Eddie was also depressed and without hope.

I threw off my blanket, put my feet on the floor, and reached over to get cigarettes from my jacket pocket. I lit up. Under other circumstances this unhealthy action would have gotten an immediate reaction from Eddie, who could not stand moral weakness or air pollution. Under other circumstances I would not have tried to smoke in front of Eddie. But today we did not care. We were destroyed, we were hanging over an abyss.

First of all, we hadn't had enough sleep. That was point one, as Modest Matveevich would have put it. We had glumly tossed and turned until three A.M., toting up the bitter sum of our experiences, opening

windows, closing windows, drinking water. I had even chewed my pillow.

It was bad enough that we found ourselves helpless before those plumbers. We could have lived with that. After all, no one had taught us how to deal with them. We were too weak, and, I guess, too green.

It was bad enough that our hopes of at least getting out the Black Box and our Talking Bedbug were completely shattered after the historic conversation in front of the hotel. After all, the enemy was armed with the Great Round Seal, and we couldn't counter that.

But now it was a question of our own future.

The historic conversation in front of the hotel had gone something like this. No sooner had I driven the dusty car up to the hotel than Eddie appeared on the steps out of nowhere. He was grumpy.

Eddie: Excuse me, Lavr Fedotovich. Could you spare me a few minutes?

(Lavr Fedotovich breathes heavily, licks mosquito bites on arm, waits for the car door to be opened for him.)

Khlebovovodov (peevishly): The session is over.

Eddie (frowning): I would like to know when our requisitions will be complied with.

Lavr Fedotovich (to Farfurkis): Beer is good to drink.

Khlebovovodov (jealously): That's right! The people love beer.

(Exeunt all from car.)

Commandant (to Eddie): Don't you worry, we'll look into your requisitions the very next year.

Eddie (suddenly satanic): I demand an end to this red tape! *(He stands in the doorway, blocking the path.)*

Lavr Fedotovich: Harrumph. Difficulties? Comrade Khlebovovodov, get rid of them.

Eddie (exploding): I demand immediate consideration of our requisitions!

Me (gloomily): Drop it, it's hopeless.

Commandant (frightened): Jesus Christ, in the name of Our Lady of Tmuskorpion, I beg you.

(Tumultuous scene. Khlebovovodov stops in front of Eddie and measures him from head to toe with his eyes. Eddie quickly releases his excess rage in the form of small bolts of lightning. A gathering of curiosity-seekers. Shout from an open window: "Let 'im have it! What are you staring at? Right in his ugly mug!" Farfurkis whispers to Lavr Fedotovich.)

Lavr Fedotovich: Harrumph. There is an opinion that our talented young people should be promoted. The motion is to establish Comrade Privalov as chauffeur to the Troika and to name Comrade Amperian as official replacement for our ailing Comrade Vybegallo, with the salary difference paid in full. Comrade Farfurkis, please write a draft of the decree. A copy goes below. *(Walks straight at Eddie. Eddie's innate politeness wins out. He lets the older man pass and even holds the door for him. I am stunned, can barely see or hear.)*

Commandant (joyously shaking my hand): Congratulations on your promotion, Comrade Privalov! See, everything is working out.

Lavr Fedotovich (stopping in doorway): Comrade Zubo!

Commandant: Yes sir!

Lavr Fedotovich (joking): You sweated it out today, Comrade Zubo, so why don't you go down to the steambaths?

(Horrible laughter of exiting Troika. Curtain.)

Remembering that scene and remembering that from now on I was fated to be the Troika's chauffeur, I stubbed my cigarette and rasped:

"We have to beat it."

"We can't," Eddie said. "It would be disgraceful."

"And staying isn't?"

"That's disgraceful, too," Eddie agreed. "But we are scouts. No one has relieved us of our duties. We have to bear the unbearable. We must, Alex! We have to go to the session."

I groaned but could not think of a rejoinder.

We washed, we dressed, we even had breakfast. We went out into the city, where everyone was busy with useful and necessary work. We bore our pain stoically. We were pitiful.

At the entrance to the Colony, I was attacked by old man Edelweiss. Eddie pulled out a ruble, but it did not have its usual effect. Material goods no longer interested the old man: he was seeking spiritual riches. He wanted me to join in as sponsor of his project to perfect his heuristic aggregate. I was to start by drawing up a plan that would cover the period the old man would spend in graduate school.

Five-minutes' conversation was enough to blacken my vision and bring bitter words to the tip of my tongue. Terrible impulses clamored for release. In desperation I began spouting some nonsense about self-teaching computers. The old man listened to me, mouth agape, drinking in every syllable—I think he memorized the nonsense word for word. Then it came to me. Like an experienced provocateur, I asked him if his machine were a complex enough aggregate. He began assuring me passionately that it was unbelievably complex, that sometimes even he himself did not know what went where.

"Wonderful," I said. "It is a well-known fact that complex electronic machines can teach themselves and propagate themselves. We don't need self-propagation just yet, but it is our duty to teach Mashkin's machine to type texts on its own, without a human intermediary, as soon as possible. How will we do this? We will use the well-known and widely used method of protracted training."

"The Monte Carlo method," added Eddie.

"That's right, the Monte Carlo method. The best feature of this method is its simplicity. You take a sufficiently long text, like Bream's *Animal Life*, for instance. Mashkin sits at his aggregate and starts typing word for word, line for line, page for page. The analyzer will analyze. (*And the thinker will think, Eddie added.*) That's right, think. And thus the aggregate will start to learn. Before you can say boo, it will start typing on its own. Here's a ruble to get you started. Go to the library and pick up a copy of *Animal Life*."

Edelweiss hopped off to the library, and we went off on our way, cheered by our little victory over the local forces, our first victory on the seventy-sixth floor, and happy that Edelweiss would no longer get underfoot, driving us crazy with his nonsense. Now he would be sitting at his Remington, pounding the keys with the utmost dedication. It would take him a long time to get through Bream. And when he did, we would give him the thirty-volume Dickens, and then, God willing, we would take on the ninety-volume Tolstoy—with all the prefaces, articles, notes, and commentaries.

As we entered the meeting room, the commandant was reading aloud, and the plumbers and Vybegallo were listening and nodding. We sat down quietly, got a grip on ourselves, and started listening, too. For some time we didn't understand a thing and didn't even try to, but we finally gathered that they were looking into the complaints, applications, and declarations received from the populace. Fedya had told us that they did this once a week.

It befell us to listen to several letters.

The schoolchildren of the village of Vuniukhino reported the local hag Zoia. Everybody says that she is a witch, that she causes crop failures, and that she turned her grandson, a former straight A student, Vasili Kormilitsyn, into a juvenile delinquent and a dropout just because he took her leg down to the

refuse heap. The schoolchildren asked them to investigate this witch, in which they did not believe, being good Pioneers, and have the scientists explain how she ruined crops and turned good students into bad, and couldn't they change her faults into strengths, so that she could change failing students into top ones.

A group of tourists had seen a green scorpion the size of a cow around Lopukhi. The scorpion's mysterious rays put the guards to sleep, and he made off into the woods with a month's supply of groceries. The tourists offered their services in catching the monster, as long as their travel expenses were taken care of.

An inhabitant of Tmuskorpion, P. P. Zaiadlyi, expressed his un-happiness with the fact that the municipal park was littered with all kinds of monsters that made a simple walk impossible. It was all the fault of Commandant Zubo, who used the leftovers from the colony kitchen to feed three personal pigs and his parasitic no-good brother-in-law.

A country doctor from the village of Bubново wrote to tell them that during a stomach operation on Citizen Pantsermanov, age 115 years, he discovered an ancient Sogdian coin in his appendix. The physician called their attention to the fact that the late Pantsermanov had never been to Middle Asia and had never seen the discovered coin before. The remaining forty-two pages of the letter revealed the highly erudite doctor's views on telepathy, telekinesis, and the fourth dimension. He appended tables, graphs, and full-scale photographs of the coin, obverse and reverse.

Action was taken thoughtfully and leisurely. After the reading of each letter, there was a long pause, filled with profound interjections. Then Lavr Fedotovitch would take a Herzegovina-Flor, turn his gaze to Vybegallo, and ask the comrade scientific consultant to draft an answer for the Troika. Vybegallo would smile broadly with his red lips, smooth his beard with both hands, and asking permission not to rise, would give the reply. He did not spoil the correspondents with variety. He had a standard reply: "Dear Sir (Madam, Sirs): We have received and read your interesting letter. The facts you relate are well known to science and are of no interest to it. Nevertheless we thank you warmly for your alertness and wish you success in your work and personal life." Signature. That was it. In my opinion it was Vybegallo's best invention. One could not help but experience great satisfaction in sending that letter in reply to a declaration that "Mr. Shchin has drilled a hole in my wall and is sending poisonous gases through it."

The machine went on with deadening monotony. The commandant droned on nasally. Lavr Fedotovitch burped. Vybegallo smacked his lips. A deadly apathy overpowered me. I knew that this was decay, that I was falling into a quagmire of spiritual entropy, but I did not want to struggle any longer. "All right," I thought. "So what? People live this way too. Everything rational is actual, and everything actual is rational. And as long as it is rational, it must be good. And since it's good, it's probably eternal. And really, what difference is there between Lavr Fedotovitch and Fedor Simeonovich Kivrin? They're both immortal, and they're both omnipotent. So why argue? I don't understand. What does man need? Mysteries? I don't need them. Knowledge? Why know things when the salary is so high anyway? Lavr Fedotovitch even has his good points. He does no thinking himself and doesn't let others do it either. He doesn't allow his fellow workers to strain themselves. He is a good man, and an attentive one. And it will be easy to get ahead under him. It'll be easy to get rid of Farfurkis and Khlebovvodov. After all, they're fools, they only undermine the authority of the leadership. And authority must be supported. If God did not give the leader a brain, he must at least be allowed to have authority. You give him authority, and he gives you everything else. The important thing is to become useful to him, his right hand, or at least his left."

And I would have perished, poisoned by the horrible emanations from the Great Round Seal and the band of plumbers, and at best I would have ended my life as an exhibit in our institute's vivarium. Eddie too would have perished. He was still moving, he was still striking poses, but it was all a show. Actually, as he later confessed to me, he was trying to figure out how to get rid of Vybegallo and get a piece of land in the suburbs to build on. Yes, we surely would have perished. They would have trampled us,

taking advantage of our despair and depression.

But at that moment silent thunder shook our universe. We came to our senses. The door opened, and Fedor Simeonovich and Christobal Joséévich stood before us.

Their rage was indescribable. They were terrible to behold. Their gaze made walls smoke and windows melt. The poster about the people and sensationalism went up in flames. The house shook and shuddered, the parquet floor buckled, and the chairs squatted on their terror-weakened legs. It was impossible for even the Troika to endure it.

Khlebovvodov and Farfurkis, pointing at each other with trembling fingers, howled in unison: "It wasn't me! It's all his fault!" and turned into yellow smoke and disappeared without a trace.

Professor Vybegallo yelped "*Mon Dieu!*" and dove under his table. Pulling out his large briefcase, he handed it over to the thundergods—" *C'est*, all the materials, that is, I have the goods on these scoundrels, all here!"

The commandant tore at his collar and fell on his knees.

As for Lavr Fedotovich, he sensed some discomfiture around him. Turning his head anxiously, he rose, leaning on the green baize.

Fedor Simeonovich approached us, put his arms around us, and hugged us to his ample stomach. "There, there," he said as we fell against him, bumping our heads, "It's all r-r-right, b-b-boys. You held out for th-th-three d-d-days. M-m-marvelous " Through my tears, I saw Christobal Joséévich, brandishing his cane, approach Lavr Fedotovich and address him through clenched teeth:

"Get out."

Lavr Fedotovich slowly registered surprise.

"The people ... " he said.

"OUT!!!"

They eyeballed each other for a second. Something human flickered across Lavr Fedotovich's face—maybe shame, maybe fear, maybe anger. He slowly put his accoutrements of chairmanship into his briefcase.

"There is a motion: in view of special circumstances the session of the Troika will be postponed for an indefinite period."

"Forever," said Christobal Joséévich Junta, laying his cane on the table.

"Harrumph," said Lavr Fedotovich doubtfully.

He majestically circled the table, without looking at anyone, and went to the door. Before leaving, he announced:

"There is an opinion that we shall meet again in another place and at another time."

"I doubt it," said Junta with disdain, biting off the end of his cigar.

We really did run into Lavr Fedotovich in another place and at another time.

But, of course, that's another story.

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