Chapter I

"TODAY'S GOING TO BE A GREAT DAY," Vadim said aloud.

He was standing in front of the wide-open wall, slapping himself on his bare shoulders and looking out into the garden. It had rained during the night, and the grass was wet, the bushes were wet, and the roof of the neighboring house was wet. The sky was overcast, but puddles shone on the path. Vadim hitched up his shorts, hopped down onto the grass, and started running along the path. Inhaling the raw morning air deeply and noisily, he ran past the drenched chaise longues, past the wet boxes and packages, past his neighbor's wooden fence, where a half-disassembled Hummingbird was flaunting its innards, through wet, luxuriant bushes, between the trunks of wet pines. Without stopping, he plunged into the pond, swam across it, and clambered out on the opposite side, covered with sedge, and from there, flushed and very happy with himself, constantly increasing the tempo, he raced back, leaping over the enormous, calm puddles and startling the small gray frogs, straight to the lawn in front of Anton's house, where the *Ship* was standing.

The *Ship* was quite young, not yet two years old. Its dull black sides were completely dry and heaved barely noticeably, and its sharp-pointed nose was tilted at an extreme angle toward the point in the gray sky where the sun was hiding behind the clouds: out of habit the *Ship* was collecting energy. The tall grass around it was covered with frost, withered and turning yellow. All the same, it was a decent, well-behaved starship of the tourist type. During the night a passenger starship would have frozen the entire forest for ten kilometers around.

Vadim, sliding on the turns, ran around the *Ship* and headed home. While he was drying himself off with a furry towel, groaning with pleasure, his neighbor, Uncle Sasha, came out of the dacha across the way with a scalpel in his hand. Vadim waved to him with the towel. His neighbor was 150 years old, and he spent all his time monkeying around with his helicopter, but it was all in vain—the Hummingbird did not feel like flying. Uncle Sasha looked at Vadim thoughtfully.

"Do you have any space bioelements?" he asked.

"Why, did they burn out?"

"I don't know. They show an abnormal curve."

"I can contact Anton, Uncle Sasha," Vadim offered. "He's in the city now. Let him bring you a few."

Uncle Sasha walked up to the helicopter and tapped it on the nose with his scalpel.

"Why don't you fly, you fool?" he said angrily.

Vadim started to get dressed.

"Bioelements . . ." Uncle Sasha grumbled, plunging the scalpel into the Hummingbird's innards. "Who needs it? Living mechanisms. Semiliving mechanisms. Almost dead mechanisms. No mechanics, no electronics. Just nerves! Excuse me, but I'm not a surgeon." The Hummingbird had just had a spasm. "Take it easy, you animal! Stand still!" He withdrew the scalpel and turned toward Vadim. "When all's said and done, it's just not humane!" he declared. "The poor spoiled wreck is suffering! Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I feel sorry for it. Do you understand?"

"Me, too," Vadim mumbled, pulling on his shirt.

"What?"

"I asked if I could help."

Uncle Sasha kept looking from the helicopter to the scalpel and back.

"No," he said decisively. "I don't want to give in to circumstances. I will get it to fly myself."

Vadim sat down to breakfast. He turned on the stereovision and placed *Recent Methods for Tracking Takhorgs* in front of him. The book was ancient, made of paper, its pages worn by his grandfather. On the cover was a landscape of the planet-preserve Pandora, with two monsters in the foreground.

Vadim ate, flipping through the book and glancing up with pleasure at the pretty announcer from time to time; she was saying something about the critical battles over emotiolism. The announcer was new, and she had pleased Vadim for a whole week already.

"Emotiolism!" Vadim said with a sigh and took a bite of a goat-cheese sandwich. "My lovely lass, the word itself is phonetically repulsive. Come along with us and leave emotiolism behind on Earth. It will have died out by the time we get back, you can be sure of it."

"Emotiolism as a movement is very promising," the announcer continued imperturbably, "since it alone now provides real deep perspectives for a radical reduction in the entropy of emotional information in art, since it alone . . ."

Vadim stood up and, sandwich in hand, walked over to the open wall. "Uncle Sasha," he called, "does the word *emotiolism* mean anything to you?"

His neighbor, his hands behind his back, was standing in front of the disemboweled helicopter. The Hummingbird was quivering, like a tree in the wind.

"What?" Uncle Sasha asked without turning around.

"The word *emotiolism*," Vadim repeated. "In it I hear a funeral knell, see an elegant crematorium, smell the scent of faded flowers."

"You were always a tactful child, Vadim," the old man said with a sigh. "But the word is really terrible."

"Completely illiterate," Vadim asserted. "I'm glad you also feel it. . . . Wait a minute, where's your scalpel?"

"I dropped it inside."

Vadim stared at the helicopter, which was quaking in torment.

"Do you know what you've done, Uncle Sasha? The scalpel turned on its digestive system. I'll get in touch with Anton right away, have him bring you another scalpel."

"And this one?"

Vadim waved his hand with a sad smile.

"Look," he said, showing Uncle Sasha the sandwich. "You see?" He put the sandwich in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

"So?" Uncle Sasha asked curiously.

"That is a visual representation of your scalpel's fate."

Uncle Sasha looked at the helicopter. It had stopped vibrating.

"That's it," Vadim said. "Your scalpel is no more. But your Hummingbird is now charged. For about thirty hours of uninterrupted flight."

Uncle Sasha walked around the helicopter, aimlessly touching it in various places. Vadim broke out laughing and returned to his table. He was finishing a second sandwich and a second glass of yoghurt when the lock on the informator snapped open and a quiet, calm voice said, "No calls or visitors. Anton, upon leaving for the city, wished you a good morning and proposed that after breakfast you begin the renunciation of all earthly desires. The institute has received nine new problems—"

"No details," Vadim requested.

"Problem nineteen has still not been solved. Pel Minchin proved the theorem on the existence of a polynomial operation over a ku-field of Simonian structures. Address: Richmond, seventeen-seventeen-seven. That is all."

The informator clicked, was silent for a moment, and then added sententiously, "Envy is bad, envy is bad."

"Blockhead!" Vadim said. "I'm not envious. I'm delighted. Great work, Pel!" He fell into thought, staring out into the garden. "No," he said, "now is no time for that. I have to renounce all earthly desires."

He shoved his dirty dish into the disposal and yelled out, "Bring on the takhorgs! We will adorn Pel Minchin's study, at Richmond, seventeen-seventeen-seven with a takhorg skull!" And then he sang out:

> Let takhorgs wail in holy fright,
> Let takhorgs hide in fog and mist,
> He stalks them all to war and fight,
> The most structuralist-est linguist.

"So now," Vadim said, "where's the radiophone?" He dialed a number. "Anton? How are things?"

"I'm standing in line," Anton answered.

"What's up—everybody going to Pandora?"

"Many people are. There's a rumor that hunting takhorgs is going to be prohibited."

"Will we make it?"

Anton paused before answering. "We will."

"Are there girls in line?" Vadim asked.

"How could there not be?"

"And are they going?"

"I'll ask them. . . . They say they are."

"Please relay to them the greetings of a well-known structural linguist, six feet in height, with a noble bearing. Oh, Anton, before I forget. Please bring Uncle Sasha a scalpel. And a couple of BE-6s. And you might as well throw in a BE-7."

"I might as well throw in a new helicopter. What did the old guy do with his scalpel?"

"What do you think? What can you do to a scalpel?"

"I have no idea," Anton answered, after a pause to consider the question. "Scalpels last forever. Like the Baalbek platform."

"He dropped it into his Hummingbird's stomach."

Several voices tittered. The people in line were having fun.

"All right, then," Anton said. "I'll be back soon. Be my forklift and start loading."

Vadim shoved the radiophone into his pocket and estimated the distance, across three rooms, to the exit. "Feet's spirit, weak," he recited. "Hands' might, evil."

He stood on his hands and ran sprightly to the exit. On the front steps he did a somersault and fell on all fours in the grass, yelling out a mighty "Ah-hah!" He stood up and, dusting off his hands, proclaimed:

> In battles, skirmishes, and duels,
> He wins the prize, he heads the list,
> Symbol of joy, and merriment's jewels,
> The most structuralist-est linguist.

Then he unhurriedly set off to the pathway where the packages and boxes were stacked. There was quite a lot of freight. They had to take weapons, ammunition, food supplies, clothing—two sets, one for hunting and one for visiting the famous Hunter Café on the flat peak of Everina, where a pungent breeze wafts through the little tables; where, over a three-hundred-meter cliff, impassable black thickets crowd together like thunderheads; where briar-lacerated hunters drain potbellied bottles of Takhorg's Blood with loud laughter and wrench their shoulders in vain attempts to dem-

onstrate the size of the takhorg skull they would have taken—if only they had known which end of a rifle was which; where in the dark green dawns couples glide along on tired legs to "Light Rhythm"; where tremulous flattened moans rise in the starless sky above the Range of the Bold.

Vadim squatted down with his back against the heaviest box, got set, and lifted the box with a jerk to his shoulder. The box contained weapons—three automatic rifles with sights for shooting in fog and six hundred cartridges in flat plastic clips. Bouncing with each step, Vadim carried the box across the garden to the *Ship*. He approached it on the receiving side and gave it a kick. The membrane covering the oval hatch split open, and Vadim dumped the box into the darkness, which gave off a smell of coldness.

Vadim walked back, picking huge berries off some new hybird bushes as he went. Each bush discharged a cold heavy rain onto him.

I've got to take no fewer than five takhorgs, he thought. One skull for Pel Minchin of Richmond. She should learn what a nice guy I am. One skull for Mama. She wouldn't take—she's a serious person—so then I can give it to the first girl who walks past me on the corner of Nevsky Prospect and Sadovaya Avenue—after ten o'clock in the morning. I'll hit Samson with the third to moderate his skepticism; he acted strangely at Nelly's when I was telling her about my last trip to Pandora. The fourth goes to Nelly, so she believes me and not Samson. And the fifth I'll hang over the stereovision. He imagined with delight how marvelous the pretty announcer would look under the grinning skull of a takhorg.

He carried four large boxes of living meat to the *Ship*, eight boxes with vegetables and fruit, two soft packages with clothing, and one big box with gifts for the Pandoran old-timers, with "Case for Pandora" clumsily written on it.

Somewhere behind the clouds the sun rose higher and higher, and it grew hot. In the empty dachas the walls opened with a rustle. Uncle Sasha hung his hammock and sprawled out alongside his Hummingbird with a newspaper. Vadim finished hauling the baggage and sat down near a gooseberry bush.

"So, you're leaving," Uncle Sasha said.

"Mmmm."

"For Pandora?"

"Yup."

"The paper says that they're planning to close the preserve. For several years."

"It's O.K., Uncle Sasha," Vadim said. "We'll make it in time."

Uncle Sasha fell silent, then said softly: "I'll be bored here by myself."

Vadim stopped chewing. "But we're coming back, Uncle Sasha! In a month."

"Just the same. I'll go back to town for the month. What will I do, all alone here with five dachas?" He looked at his helicopter. "With this idiot. Semilive."

In the sky there was a muffled snorting.

"There's another one of them, flying up there," Uncle Sasha said.

Vadim threw his head back. A bright red Rhamphorynchus was doing a figure eight right over the dachas. On its gaunt belly a white number stood out clearly.

"That I can do, too," Uncle Sasha said. "But, my beauty, if only you could do a spiral dive without tilting on your side and landing in the pond. . . ."

The Rham flew away. On the concrete road beyond the garden they heard a car's gasping.

"Our little village is getting lively," Uncle Sasha said. "Traffic like on Nevsky Prospect."

"It's Anton!" Vadim jumped to his feet and ran over to his friend.

Anton raced the car into the garage. As he stepped out he said, "Everything's in order, Vadim. I registered the navigator's log and got the O.K."

"But?" the perspicacious Vadim asked.

"But what?"

"I heard a 'but' in your voice."

Anton said, with reluctance, "I stopped by Galka's. She's not going."

"Because of me?"

"No . . ." Anton paused. "Because of me."

"Well . . ." Vadim said pensively.

Anton asked, "How did you make out with the cargo, forklift?"

"Everything's in order, skipper. We can blast off."

"And the house? Did you straighten up?"

"No, skipper. Sorry, skipper. I just finished loading, skipper."

The Red Rham buzzed the dachas' roofs again. Anton looked up.

"What's going on?" he said in amazement. "TS-268 again. I guess I'm the object of constant attention. That red Rham has been chasing me all the way from Leningrad."

"Perhaps there's a woman involved?" Vadim inquired.

"I don't think so. So far no woman has ever chased after me."

"They can start any time," Vadim said, but then a new idea struck him. "Maybe it's a member of the Secret Society for the Protection of Takhorgs?"

The Rham flew over their heads again, disappeared, and suddenly went silent.

"Must be for Uncle Sasha," Vadim said. "Coming for spare organs. The poor Rham! By the way, did you bring them?"

"I did," Anton said, looking right past Vadim. "No, structural forklift, it's not for Uncle Sasha."

A tall, bony man appeared from behind the bushes, wearing a loose white blouse and white pants. He had a very dark face with bushy eyebrows and large ears. He was carrying a capacious briefcase.

"It's the man in white." Anton said. "He was hanging around the line the whole time. And staring at everyone."

"I will now explain to him the nature of takhorgs," Vadim said quickly, "and he will understand."

The man in white walked straight up and carefully inspected both hunters.

"Do you know that takhorgs attack humans and sometimes seriously injure them?" Vadim said. "Sometimes they maim them for life."

"What's that?" the man in white said. "Takhorgs. First time I've heard of them. But that's not my specialty. I have come to you with a request. Hello." He touched two fingers to his forehead.

"Hello," Anton said. "You're here to see me?"

The stranger dropped the briefcase at his feet and wiped the perspiration off his forehead. Something in the briefcase made a muffled clang. It was a huge receptacle, jammed full, very worn, with an enormous number of straps and bronze clasps.

The stranger uttered his answer slowly: "Yes, I'm here to see you." He squinted and once more ran his palm over his forehead. "Only, please, don't ask why I picked you. It's a matter of chance. I could have picked someone else."

"We are unusually lucky," Vadim said brightly. "It's simply amazing how lucky we've been today."

The stranger looked at him without smiling.

"Are you the captain?" he asked.

"I am the captain—potentially," Vadim answered. "And kinetically I'm the forklift and the senior specialist on takhorgs. If you like, an amateur takhorgologist."

Vadim was carried away. He just had to get the stranger to smile, even if it were only a polite smile.

"In addition, I am the second amateur pilot," he said. "Just in case the captain is suddenly afflicted with salt deposits or housemaid's knee."

The stranger listened in silence. Anton said softly, "Most amusing."

Silence set in.

"As I understand it, you are flying to Pandora," the stranger said, looking at Anton.

"Yes, we're going to Pandora." He glanced at the briefcase. "Do you want to send something with us?"

"No," the stranger answered. "I don't have anything to send. It's something quite different. . . . I have a proposition to make you. You are going for recreation?"

"Yes," Anton answered.

"If a dangerous hunt can be considered recreation," Vadim added ominously.

"It's great relaxation," Anton said. "A tourist flight and hunting."

"Tourist flight," the stranger said slowly, as though surprised. "Tourists—listen, young men, you don't look like tourists. You're young, healthy discoverers. Why should you want terraform planets, electrified wildernesses, with soda machines? Why don't you take an unknown planet?"

Anton and Vadim exchanged glances.

"And what planet do you have in mind?" Anton asked.

"Does it matter? Any at all. Where no man has ever been." The stranger suddenly opened his eyes wide. "Or aren't there any more?"

He wasn't joking. It was completely obvious, and the two exchanged glances again.

"Of course there are," Anton said. "As many as you want. But all winter we've been planning to hunt on Pandora."

"Personally," Vadim interjected, "I have already made gifts of the skulls of my as-yet-unkilled takhorgs."

"And then, what would we do on a new planet?" Anton said weakly. "Perhaps you have something in mind?"

The stranger lowered his bushy eyebrows. "I haven't anything at all in mind," he said curtly. "It's just I need an unknown planet. And the question is: will you help me or not?"

Vadim started to fiddle with the zipper on his jacket. The stranger's tone of voice grated on his nerves: it was not the tone Vadim was used to. But nonetheless the situation was serious. It's hard for a person traveling for pleasure to argue with a person traveling on business. Vadim had no arguments and was about to find fault with the man's manner when something strange took place.

A dog barked on the other side of the trees. It was Uncle Sasha's German shepherd, Trofim, a decrepit, dumb dog with signs of aristocratic inbreeding and an exceptionally deep bark. He most likely barked because a bee was sitting on his nose and he didn't know what to do about it, but the stranger's face suddenly twisted in terror. He crouched down and leaped far to the side. After jumping, the stranger straightened up and with deliberately unhurried steps returned to where he had been standing. His forehead was covered with perspiration again. Vadim glanced over at Anton. Anton's face was thoughtfully calm.

"Well now," he said soberly. "In the second neighborhood there are many yellow dwarfs with respectable Earth-type planets. Let's try it. Take, say, EN 7031. I've been meaning to fly there but have kept putting it off. It seems interesting. Volunteers don't like yellow dwarfs—give them giants, or better yet, multiple stars. Will EN 7031 suit you?"

"Yes, completely," the stranger answered. He had already regained control of himself. "As long as it really is an uninhabited planet."

"It's not a planet," Anton politely corrected him. "It's a star. A sun. But it has planets. In all likelihood, uninhabited. And what's your name?"

"My name is Saul," the stranger said, and smiled for the first time. "Saul Repnin. I'm a historian. Twentieth-century. But I'll try to be

helpful. I can cook, drive land vehicles, sew, repair shoes, shoot . . ." He paused. "And in addition, I know how people used to do those things. And I know several languages: Polish, Slovak, German, a little French and English."

"A shame you can't drive a starship," Vadim sighed.

"Yes, it is," Saul said. "But that's not important—you do."

"Don't sigh, Vadim," Anton said. "It's time you too looked upon the strange landscapes of nameless planets. You can dance in a café right here on Earth."

"I sigh from ecstasy," Vadim shot back. "After all, what is a takhorg, really? A clumsy and all-too-familiar beast."

Saul inquired politely, "I hope I didn't force your agreement? I hope your agreement is sufficiently voluntary and free?"

"But," Vadim said, "what indeed is freedom? The consciousness of necessity. Everything else is quibbling."

"Passenger Saul Repnin," Anton said, "we take off at twelve zero-zero. You will have the third cabin, unless you'd rather have the fourth, fifth, sixth, or seventh. Come on, I'll show you."

As Saul bent over for his briefcase, a large black object slipped out of his blouse and thudded heavily on the grass. Anton raised his brows. Vadim took a close look and then raised his eyebrows, too. It was a scorcher—a heavy, long-barreled disintegrator pistol, shooting million-volt charges. Vadim had seen them only in the movies. There were no more than a few hundred specimens of that fearful weapon left on the entire planet, and they were issued only to super-long-distance starships.

"How clumsy of me," Saul muttered, picked up the scorcher, and shoved it under his arm. Then he picked up his briefcase and announced, "I'm ready."

For a short while Anton just stared at him, as though he intended to ask him a question. Then he said, "Let's go, Saul. And Vadim, you straighten up the houses and take the old man his scalpel. It's in the trunk."

"Yes, sir, skipper," Vadim said and went to the garage.

It's tough being an optimist, he mused. For what is an optimist? He remembered that in some ancient vocabulary it was written that an optimist is a man with optimism. And one entry above it was written that optimism is a cheerful, life-affirming sense of being, in which man believes in the future, in success. It was good to be a

linguist—everything falls into place immediately. All he had to do now was to reconcile a cheerful, life-affirming sense of being on board in the presence of a heavily armed lunatic.

He took the scalpel and bioelements out of the trunk and headed for Uncle Sasha's. The old man was stretched out under the red Rham.

"Uncle Sasha," he said. "Here's your new scalpel and—"

"You shouldn't have bothered," Uncle Sasha said. He crawled out from under the Rham. "Thanks. I was just given this one here." He slapped the Rham on its polished side. "They say these are really hardy."

"It was given to you?"

"Yes, by a young man, dressed in white."

"So that's it," Vadim said. "So he must have been sure that we'd take him. Or maybe he planned on fighting his way on board."

"What?" Uncle Sasha asked.

"Uncle Sasha, do you know what a scorcher is?"

"A scorcher? Of course I know. It's a microdischarging assembly on weaving machines. Although nowadays they don't use them, but I remember, seventy years ago.... So that man in white is a weaver, too?"

"He might be a weaver, too, but the scorcher he has, Uncle Sasha, is no microdischarger."

Vadim, lost in thought, went back to his dacha. He threw the bedsheets into the disposal, turned the housekeeping unit to the "absent" mode, and on the front steps wrote a message in pencil on the door: "Went away on vacation. Please do not occupy." Then he set off for Anton's. Straightening up the dacha, he continued his musing. After all, he thought, all is not lost. Takhorgs, it must be admitted, are basically boring. Pandora, to be honest, is only a fashionable resort. I should be amazed that I have already sat out three seasons there. Indeed there was a time when I would brag about a necklace of takhorg teeth and tell wild tales of Pandora! To hurl a takhorg's head at Samson—what childishness! Samson is worth more, so Samson will be immortalized! An unknown planet may be just an unknown planet, but on an unknown planet there are unknown animal species. The poor ignorant wretches still don't know their names. But I already know. There I will take the first

ever odd-toed samson, or, say, a complete-toothed, crest-rumped samson. Clobbering Samson with a samson's skull, that's something.

When he returned to the glade, the *Ship* was ready to take off. Its nose no longer followed the sun and the frost on the grass had disappeared.

Vadim sat himself down comfortably in the hatch, dangling his legs over the edge. Yes, friend samson, my odd-toed brother, he thought vengefully. Maybe samsons are okay against biblical lions, but you're no match for a structural linguist.... But the amusing thing is that it would never have occurred to me to go relax on an unknown planet if it hadn't been for the old guy in white. How slow-witted we are, even the best of structural linguists. Always drawn to domesticated planets.

Trofim, Uncle Sasha's dog, stepped out into the glade. He winked his tearing eyes at Vadim, yawned, sat down, and started scratching behind an ear with his hind foot. Life is beautiful and full of surprises, Vadim thought. Take Trofim. He's old, dumb, good-natured but, just beware, he can still throw a scare into someone. Maybe lunatics fear dogs' barks? But really, why have I decided that Saul Repnin is a lunatic, or whatever you want to call it? Why such an artificial proposal? It's simpler to suppose that the historian Saul is no historian but just some humanoid race's spy on Earth. Like Bennie Durov on Tagora. That would be just great—a whole month of unknown planets and mysterious strangers. And that would explain everything! He can't get off Earth by himself, he's afraid of dogs, and he needs to go to an unknown planet, so that they can send a ship to pick him up there—on neutral soil, so to speak. He'll go home and say: This happened, and that, they're okay people, full of optimism, and they will enter into normal humanoid relations with us.

Vadim came out of his trance and yelled down the corridor, "Anton, I'm on board."

"Finally," Anton yelled back. "I was just about ready to believe you had deserted."

Insolently wagging its tail, the lean red Rham flew out from behind the trees and, whining unnaturally, began to describe the circle of honor around the *Ship*. Uncle Sasha threw the door open, and waved something white. Vadim waved in answer.

"Take off!" Anton warned.

The *Ship* trembled and, with a gentle leap upward—Vadim managed to push off from the ground with his leg—began to ascend into the sky.

"Vadim!" Anton yelled. "Close the hatch. There's a draft."

Vadim waved to Uncle Sasha for a last time, stood up, and drew the door shut.

Chapter 2

ANTON LET THE CYBER NAVIGATOR TAKE CONTROL and, folding his hands over his stomach, stared pensively at the viewscreen. The *Ship* was traveling north along the meridian. All around was the thick violet sky of the stratosphere, and far below a turbid white shroud of clouds floated by. The shroud looked smooth and level, and only now and then was there a hint of the gaps of gigantic funnels over the macroweather stations—the weathermen, having drenched northern Europe with rain, were rounding up the clouds in traps.

Anton was reflecting on human foibles. He remembered the strange people he had known. Yakov Osonovsky, the captain of the *Hercules*, couldn't stand bald men. He simply despised them. "And don't try to convince me," he would say. "Just show me a bald man who is a real man." Most likely, some unpleasant association linked all bald men in his mind, but he would never say what it was. He didn't even change his mind when he himself went billiard-ball bald during the Sarandak catastrophe. He would only exclaim, with marked bitterness, "The only one. Take note, the only one!"

Walter Schmidt of the Matteria base behaved just as strangely toward doctors. "Doctors," he would spit out with an indecent scorn. "Medicinemen they were, medicinemen they remain. Before there was dusty spider web and rotten snake's blood, now there are psychodynamical fields, about which no one knows anything. Whose business is it what's inside me!"

Volkov was called Dreadnought, and he was content: Dreadnought A. Volkov. Kaneko never ate anything hot. Ralph Pinetti

believed in levitation and practiced stubbornly for years. The historian Saul Repnin is afraid of dogs and doesn't want to live with people. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out that he doesn't want to live with people just because he's afraid of dogs. Strange. But he's no worse because of it.

Foibles. But not really that strange, just rough spots. The external evidence of the unfathomable tectonic activity in the depths of human nature, where reason fights to the death against prejudices, where the future fights to the death against the past. But we demand that everyone around us be smooth, as we dream them up in our feeble fantasy; we want to be able to describe them in terms of the elementary functions of childhood images: nice man, greedy man, boring man. A frightening man. A fool.

So Saul is not odd because he is afraid of dogs. And Kaneko is not odd because he can't stand anything hot. Just like Vadim would never dream that his foolish rhymes might seem odd rather than amusing to someone. To Galka, for example.

Or take me. Here I had decided to go to Pandora. If Captain Malyshev, say, found out, he'd look at me in amazement and say, 'If you plan to rest, you couldn't find a better place than Earth. And if you plan to work, take the black system EN 8742, which is next in our plan, or EN 6124, for some reason the specialists on Tagora are interested it it." And Malyshev would be right. And for Malyshev to understand and stop looking at me in amazement, I'd have to say that I missed Vadim and that Vadim wanted to shoot takhorgs.

Anton grinned. Why so complicated? Just about everyone is going to Pandora now, and once Galka said that she would like to, too. And that's how flights are arranged. And that's how easily plans are changed. But could I admit to Malyshev that the whole thing is Galka? Why can't men ever learn to live simply? From somewhere in the bottomless patriarchal depths vanity, pride, wounded self-esteem keep crawling to the surface. And for some reason there is always something to hide. And always something to be ashamed of.

Anton looked at the bouquet of carnations lying in front of the screen. Ah, Galka, he thought. He breathed on the control panel and in the circle of condensed vapor started to write "Ah, Galka!" The letters quickly melted away; he didn't even have time to put

an exclamation point at the end. He breathed on the panel again and put the exclamation point, by itself. Then he leaned back in his chair and for the hundredth time attempted to solve the problem logically: "I love a woman, the woman doesn't love me, but treats me well. What should I do?"

He visualized Galka, remembered how she spoke: her head turning slightly to the side and her lashes lowered over her eyes. Why is it all arranged so stupidly: a man can be saved from any minor ill—from sickness, indifference, death—but from the real ill, from love, no one and nothing can save him. A thousand advisers could be found, and each would give different advice. And the victim, the fool, does not want to be helped—that's what's crazy.

"Pardon me, but where are you going?" Saul asked loudly.

"To the control center," Vadim answered.

"Wait a moment! You know, we've never had a chance to really get acquainted."

The door to the control center was open. Anton kept hearing snatches of conversation from the lounge, about takhorgs, thickets, and the theory of historical succession. Then he began to listen carefully.

"So your name is Vadim?" Saul asked.

"As a rule," Vadim answered seriously. "But sometimes I'm called the structuralist-est, sometimes the Flying Bull, and on special occasions, Dimochka."

"Consequently, Vadim. And how old are you?"

"Twenty-two local Earths."

"Local ... well, of course. What did you say? Local Earths?"

"Yes. In old stellar I did not take part."

"Quite true. That's what I thought. And who, if you will excuse my asking, might your father be?"

"Might be? He might be a doctor or a lawyer, but he is a specialist in land improvement."

"Ah, I see, I see. That's what I had in mind."

Silence set in.

"A very elegant table," Saul said forcedly.

Another silence.

"A good table, solid," Vadim finally managed.

"And your mama?"

"Mama? She's a stationmaster. Works at a mesonuclear station."

Anton could hear Saul drumming his fingers nervously on the table.

"Please, Vadim," Saul said. "You mustn't pay any attention to my ways. Of course, I speak oddly, and it's probably a little funny. But, you see, there's a reason for it. My way of living ... my modus vivendi, so to speak ... I'm a narrow specialist. Completely in the twentieth century. As they used to say, a bookworm. Always in museums, always with old books."

"The influence of your environment."

"Yes, yes, that's precisely it. I only rarely see people. But now I have to. Do you know Professor Arnautov?"

"No."

"A major specialist. My scholarly enemy. He asked me to verify several aspects of his new theory. I couldn't refuse, could I? So I had to ... be weaned. So ... but let's not just talk about me! You, it seems, are a structural linguist?"

"Yes."

"Interesting work?"

"Is there any uninteresting work?"

"Yes, of course there is. And what are you occupied with?"

"Structural analysis. The packing of disconnected structures."

"Why is it needed?"

"What do you mean, *why?*"

"I mean, who will find it useful?"

"Anyone who's interested in it. For example, a universal translator is now being planned. A universal translator must be able to pack disconnected structures."

"Tell me, Vadim, can you listen to music here on the *Ship?*"

"Of course. What would you like? Scheer's *Trills?* The *Ship* runs marvelously to that music."

"How about Bach?"

"Oh, Bach. I think we have some Bach, too. Listen, Saul, I really think it would be a great pleasure to listen to music with you."

"Why?"

"I can't say exactly. It's always a pleasure to listen to music with a person who knows it well. Do you like Mendelssohn?"

"You know Mendelssohn?"

"Saul! Mendelssohn is the best of the old composers! I hope you like him. Of course, the *Ship* isn't the right place to listen to him. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I think so. . . . I always listen to Mendelssohn in my own study."

They're really warmed up to each other, Anton thought. He glanced at the clock. The *Ship* was entering the takeoff zone over the North Pole. On the screen the dark dots of the starships awaiting takeoff appeared against the violet depths. Anton yelled through the door, "Excuse me for interrupting. We'll be taking off soon. Vadim, show Saul how to use the noninertial chamber."

Anton transmitted a request for a program for the flight, and thirty minutes later, during which the *Ship* had floated through the stratosphere with two dozen other large and small starships, he received an entrance program, and seven variants of a return-trip program, and permission to enter subspace. Then he asked the passengers to take shelter in the chambers, entered one himself, and gave the *Ship* the command to take off.

As always, Anton felt extremely nauseous. A red-hot wave passed through his entire body, his face and back broke out in a cold sweat. With a glazed stare Anton followed the red arrow jerking across the scale, marking the rapidly changing curvature of space. Two hundred riemanns, four hundred, eight hundred, sixteen hundred riemanns per second. The space around the *Ship* was bending tighter and tighter. Anton knew what it looked like from the outside. The distinct black cone of the *Ship* became blurry, slowly dissolved, and suddenly disappeared entirely, and in its place an enormous cloud of solid air blazed out. The temperature for a hundred kilometers around fell sharply five to ten degrees. Three thousand riemanns. The fiery arrow stopped. Epsilon determination was finished, and the *Ship* had entered subspace condition. To an observer on Earth it was now smeared out over the entire distance of one hundred and fifty parsecs between the Earth and EN 7031. Now the reverse flight would take place.

In exiting from subspace there was always the danger of appearing too near to an attractive body, or even inside it, although the danger was purely theoretical. The probability was much less than the chance of dropping something out of a stratoplane over Leningrad and having it land in the Hermitage's chimney. In any case, it hadn't happened during the entire course of human history. Anton's

ship successfully leaped out into normal space at a distance of two astronomical units from the yellow dwarf EN 7031.

Anton recovered his breath, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and left the chamber. Everything was in order in the control room. He walked along the control panel, slid a glance over the viewscreen, then turned off the automatic flight control. The bouquet of carnations lay in the same place in front of the screen. Anton stopped. "Pitiful," he muttered. He touched the bouquet with a finger and the flowers disintegrated into a greenish dust. "Poor things," Anton thought. They couldn't take it. But what can? He remembered the passengers and stepped down into the lounge.

The lounge was a large round room, with eight doors leading to the cabins and a hatch to the lower level, where the storerooms, synthesizer, kitchen, shower, and so on were located. Anton looked around at the table, the chairs, adjusted the lid on the disposal unit, and went into Vadim's cabin. He moved the inner hermetic door aside, and Vadim collapsed onto him. He was pale and drenched with perspiration.

"It's bad?" Anton asked sympathetically.

Vadim sang out in a chesty voice:

> The wind of distant journeys howls,
> An eerie whistle through the air has hissed,
> Into subspace he has brought his bowels,
> The most structuralist-est linguist.

All the same, he immediately unfolded his couch and sat down.

"That's why I never became a starpilot," he said slightly hoarsely, and stretched out on his side.

"You say that every time," Anton said. Vadim didn't respond. "Let me go liberate Saul," Anton said.

"Did you hear our conversation?" Vadim asked, his eyes closed.

"Yes."

"An interesting person, isn't he?"

"I don't know," Anton said. "If you ask me, he's a man in trouble."

Vadim unexpectedly broke out in an ominous whisper. "Blind one, oh, you blind fool! No, don't go away. I too feel rotten. Don't you know who he really is?"

"What do you mean?"

Vadim, finally, sat up. "He doesn't know anything about linguistics," he said. "I hope you noticed."

"And what do you know about history?"

"Go ahead and tell me that he's a bookworm. We both know a worm like that—he's called Bennie Durov. Talk about him with the Tagorians."

Anton forced a smile. "All right," he said. "Restrain yourself. I can take you in strong doses, but to a stranger you can sometimes be overwhelming. A little less wild optimism and a little more tact."

"Yes, sir, skipper," Vadim said seriously. "Right, skipper."

Anton walked away. As he walked around the table he smiled again: with Vadim you were never bored. In cabin three he first unfolded the sofa and only then rolled back the inner hermetic door, bracing himself to catch a collapsing body. Instead, a deep blue smoke came billowing out of the chamber. Anton recoiled.

"Over so soon?" Saul's voice boomed from behind the smoke.

Anton peered in. Saul was sitting on his briefcase, which was standing upright, and smoking a long black pipe. His expression was absentminded and placid.

"You're not nauseous?" Anton asked, stepping back and sitting down on the sofa.

"Not at all. Can I leave now?"

"Please," Anton said.

Saul stood up, picked up his briefcase, and left the chamber, stooped over.

"We're almost there," Anton said. "We just have to select a planet and decide where to land."

Saul sat down beside him.

"Are we far from Earth?" he asked.

"One hundred and fifty parsecs. Almost the limit for the *Ship.*"

Vadim yelled out of his cabin: "Saul! Ask for a terraform planet. You wouldn't like it in a space suit, and an oxygen mask is just as bad."

"I really don't care what planet," Saul said quietly. "But of course one where you can breathe would be better." He suddenly grinned. "It's very important to be able to breathe." Anton stared at him. "But the most important thing is that there's no one there."

"Well now, Saul," Anton said, "we'll find you your planet. That's easy. On board we have a portable six-man dome, a glider, food supplies for the initial phase, and a good radio station. We'll help you set up and then leave right away. O.K.?"

Saul sat down, his head slumped.

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "That would be best. Most likely."

"So then, we agree." Anton pushed the door open. "I'll go to the control center and you—If you want, you can come along."

In the control center Anton turned on the ship catalogue and checked the data on EN 7031. The data were not particularly interesting. Four planets and two asteroid belts circled the yellow dwarf. The second planet seemed most appropriate: it was terraform and located at a distance of one and one-half astronomical units from its sun. Anton gave its coordinates to the cyber navigator.

Anton could hear voices from the lounge.

"How did you hold up under the passage, Saul?"

"What passage? I didn't notice any."

"That's what I thought."

"What?"

"That you wouldn't notice. Do you want to take a shower?"

"No. Will it be long now?"

"Most likely not. Do you feel it?" The *Ship* was quavering and the floor floating out from under their feet. "That's him setting his course. Shall we go to the control center?"

"We won't be in the way?"

"Of course not. We're not tourists. In an exploratory or passenger starship they wouldn't permit it. Why are you carrying your briefcase?"

"It's dear to me."

"Then make sure you don't set it down near the disposal unit."

Anton was carefully inspecting the image of the planet on the viewscreen. It was light blue, like the Earth, covered with a white veil of clouds, but the outline of the continents was unfamiliar. One large continent stretched out along the equator, another, smaller, seemed attracted to the pole.

"There's your planet, Saul," Anton said, and took a sheet of paper that was falling out of the antenna-analyzer unit. "A beautiful planet. Normal pressure. The day is twenty-eight hours, gravity, one and one-tenth. No poisonous gases. A lot of oxygen. A little short on the carbon dioxide, but nothing to worry about."

He glanced at Saul. Saul was looking at his planet with a very strange expression. His bushy eyebrows were raised in arcs, and it seemed to Anton that he was about to break out crying. Anton was touched.

"Comrades!" Vadim said suddenly. "Let us name this planet Saula."

"Let it be named Saula!" Anton said. He bent the microphone of the ship's log in front of him, and dictated: "Julian day twenty-five forty-two nine hundred sixty-seven. The second planet of the EN 7031 system is named Saula, after a member of the crew, the historian Saul Repnin."

Saul was unusually moved. He muttered, "Thank you, thank you, friends," and shook Vadim's hand. It was very touching.

Meanwhile the planet had been growing larger. When the continent sprawling along the equator filled the screen, Anton asked, "So where should we set down, Saul?"

Saul pointed to the middle of the continent. It appeared to Anton that he squinted as he did so.

"Comrades," Vadim drawled, "why not make it closer to the shores?"

It was clear that he felt like swimming. Swimming in the ocean of Saula, in waves that had never yet bathed a single Earthman, that, perhaps, had never yet bathed a single intelligent being.

"Well . . . near the shore, if you want," Saul said without assurance. He looked at Anton. "For my purposes"—he cleared his throat—"the choice of a location is not essential."

"Marvelous," Vadim said. He sat down agilely in the chair alongside Anton. "Enough!" he announced. "The captain has been seized by paralysis and has been taken away to his cabin in serious condition. The broad-shouldered and well-proportioned second pilot has taken command." He put his fingers on the biocontrol contacts, and the *Ship* immediately hurled down into the abyss. The continent on the screen began to spin giddily. Vadim proclaimed:

> From terror everyone gyrates,
> Like a quavering asp begins to twist,
> He now commands their fates,
> The most structuralist-est linguist.

"Vadim, at least tell me where you're aiming," Anton requested.

"There," Vadim answered cryptically, "where the blue waves caress the sands."

The *Ship* tilted to the right.

"Gently, gently," Anton said. "Less emotion. You won't hit the continent."

"Perhaps I shall."

"Brakes! Can't you see the drift?"

"I see all and know all."

"Oh, he'll crash us," Anton said.

"Most likely I shall," Vadim said.

The screen turned muddy. The *Ship* had entered the atmosphere. A rainbow flared up through the clouds of dense air, then vanished. Black and white spots blinked fleetingly.

"Deep breath," Anton advised.

"I know . . ."

"Ach—you're toppling and going crooked."

Vadim said rapidly, "If you take over control, you're no friend of mine."

"Vadim, really, don't miss," Saul said tentatively.

The carousel on the screen came to a stop. A white field approached rapidly. Then the screen went dark. The *Ship* shuddered.

"That's it," Vadim said. He stretched his arms, cracking his fingers.

"That's it?" Saul asked. "It's broken?"

"We've landed," Anton said. "Welcome to Saula."

"Nonetheless, you're a dashing pilot," Saul said to Vadim.

"Quite dashing," Anton agreed. "Do you know how much you missed by, Vadim? Two hundred kilometers. But you did manage to turn off the screen."

"Force of habit," Vadim said casually.

Anton stood up. "By the way, what's a quavering asp?"

Vadim stood up, too. "That, Anton, is a murky question. It's an archaic figure of speech. When an asp is approached, it trembles all over, even though it's one of the most dangerous snakes."

Saul suddenly broke out in a fit of laughter. He laughed resonantly, wiping the tears off his cheeks with his sleeve. Anton and Vadim didn't understand why, but in a minute they were laughing, too.

"A curious phenomenon, isn't it?" Vadim said, half choking from laughter.

"Really, Saul, what are you laughing at?" Anton asked.

"Oh," Saul said, "I'm happy that I've finally reached my planet."

Vadim stopped laughing. "After all, I'm not a historical linguist," he said, with forced dignity. "My specialty is structural linguistics."

"Enough," Anton said. "Let's go outside."

They all left the control center. Vadim, walking at Saul's side, said, "It's not my idea. It's the most widely accepted interpretation."

"It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter," Saul answered quickly. "Your interpretation is so far from the truth that I couldn't help it. I didn't mean to offend you."

"And what is your view?" Vadim asked.

Saul, with evident annoyance, said, "The quavering asp is not the snake, but the quavering aspen, the tree."

"But how could a tree be afraid? And where does the term asp for aspen come from? It's preposterous!"

Anton unsealed the hatch membrane. A blast of freezing air surged into the *Ship*. Saul pushed Vadim aside and shouted, "Wait! Let me go first, please!"

Anton, who already had one leg over the side, stopped. Saul, holding his scorcher high, squeezed his way forward.

"You want to be the first to set foot on your planet?" Anton asked with a smile.

"Yes," Saul mumbled. "Better let me go first."

He crawled through the narrow hatch, and then stopped, blocking the way. Anton, crawling behind him, rammed him with his head.

"Forward, Saul," he said.

Saul seemed petrified. Vadim impatiently rapped on Anton's bent back.

"Let us past, Saul," Anton requested.

Saul finally moved aside, and Anton stepped outside. All around there was snow. And more snow was falling, in huge flakes. The *Ship* was standing in the midst of monotonous round hills, barely noticeable against the white plain. At Anton's feet, short, pale green grass protruded from the snow, along with many tiny blue and red flowers. And ten paces from the hatch, lightly sprinkled with the powdery snow, a man was lying.

Chapter 3

VADIM WAS THE LAST to crawl out of the *Ship* and immediately turned to Saul: "The simplest thing would be to check in the ancient dictionaries. But on board—"

At that point he noticed that Saul was not listening to him. Saul was holding his scorcher in firing position, the barrel across his bent elbow, and his expression was troubled. His eyes were roaming over the entire area. Vadim looked around and saw the man. "Well, I'll be damned," he said in dismay.

Anton walked up to the man, while Saul remained where he was. Is it possible that I killed him in landing the *Ship?* Vadim thought in horror. Everything inside him cringed from the thought. He dashed after Anton and also bent over the body. He took just one glance, then immediately straightened up, and looked away. All around there stretched the gloomy hills, snow-covered and identical; the sky was clouded over, and the pale outline of a mountain range could be divined on the horizon. What a sad planet, he thought.

The fields and mountains:

> Softly the snow stole everything.
> All at once, emptiness.

Anton dropped to his knees and felt the hand of the body. The hand was narrow, white, with thin porcelain fingers and long nails that glittered gold.

"Well?" Vadim said and swallowed hard.

Anton stood up and carefully wiped the snow from his bare knees. "He froze to death. Several days ago. And he is very emaciated."

"It's hopeless?"

"Yes. He's already like a rock."

"Rock," Vadim repeated. "How can it be? Look, he's just a kid."

He forced himself to look the dead man in the face. "Look, he resembles Valery! Do you remember Valery?"

Anton put his hand on Vadim's shoulder. "Yes, a close resemblance."

"I was really scared. I thought I had killed him in landing."

"No, he's been lying here several days already. He collapsed from exhaustion and froze."

"Listen Anton—why is he wearing just a shirt?"

"I don't know. Let's go back to the *Ship*."

Vadim didn't budge. "I don't understand. So we're not the first?"

He glanced around, looking for Saul. Saul was gone. "Anton, maybe you're wrong? Maybe we can still do something?"

"Let's go, Vadim."

"But how could . . . ?"

"How should I know? Let's go."

They spotted Saul. He was slowly descending a slope, sliding on the damp snow. They stood and waited until he reached them. His expression was gloomy, and large snowflakes were melting on his cheeks. His knees were covered with snow. He walked up, took his extinguished pipe from his mouth, and said, "Things are bad, my young friends. There are four more over there." He looked at the dead man. "Also without coats. What do you intend to do?"

"Let's go inside the *Ship*," Anton said. "We can think everything over there."

Back in the lounge they sat down in the chairs and were silent for a while. Vadim shivered all over, and for some reason felt like talking.

"What a planet!" he said. "Never heard of anything like it. Can't understand a thing. Where are they from? What are they doing down here? After all, we were supposed to be the first ones. And most important—it's a kid. How did a kid turn up here?" He fell silent and closed his eyes, trying to chase away the vision of the snow-sprinkled face.

Anton stood up and started to pace around the table, his head hanging. Saul packed his pipe.

"Mind if I smoke?" he asked.

"Go ahead, please," Anton said distractedly. He stopped his pacing. "Here's what we'll do now," he said decisively. "We have the glider. We'll take food and clothing and conduct a spiral

search around the *Ship*. There might be some people still alive in the hills."

His voice was hard, the tone unfamiliar to Vadim. Vadim glanced at him with curiosity, and Anton noticed.

"Look here, friends," he said more amiably. "The tourist flight is over. The situation, in my opinion, is highly unusual. It is up to me as captain to take command, and up to you to follow orders." He looked at Saul and shrugged his shoulders. "You see, Saul, there's nothing that can be done."

"Yes," Saul said. "Yes. Of course. I'm ready. Go ahead and give orders."

"You've already figured everything out?" Vadim asked.

"We'll discuss it later," Anton said. "Right now we have to grow the glider. Let's go, Vadim."

Saul set his pipe down and also stood up, adjusting the scorcher strap over his shoulder.

"Thanks, Saul, but we'll manage by ourselves," Anton said.

"I'd like to come along," Saul said. "I won't get in the way, captain."

They carried the egg outside and set it down on a hilltop a short distance from the *Ship*. The snow was coming down heavier, the flakes tickled their cheeks, and Vadim angrily smeared them across his face. A wind was blowing and it was cold standing there watching Anton unhurriedly and efficiently fastening the activators onto the smooth surface of the mechano-embryo. The wind burned their bare arms and legs, and Vadim suddenly thought that perhaps somewhere beyond the hills, at that very moment, barefooted people in long gray shirts were wandering, collapsing in the snowdrifts.

Anton straightened up and blew on his reddened hands. "I think that does it," he said. "Check it, Vadim."

Vadim inspected the emplacement of the activators. Everything was in order. They headed back to the *Ship*. On the way, Vadim picked several flowers and lamented how pathetic and pale they were.

The living and the dead,
Softly the snow stole everything:
All at once, emptiness.

The snow was coming down heavier and heavier, and as they approached the *Ship*, Saul said, "Soon everything will be buried. It might be good to do an autopsy."

"Why?" Anton said. "He's dead beyond hope."

"That's precisely why. We should determine the cause of their death."

"They froze," Anton said. "And we don't need an autopsy."

"It seemed to me . . ." Saul started, but immediately broke off and crawled through the hatch.

When they were all seated in the lounge, Anton said, "Remember, I'm not a real doctor. And I . . . just don't want to."

"I understand," Saul said.

"Vadim," Anton said, "pack the food. All available supplies. Saul, you said you knew how to sew. We have to throw together some suits. And I'll get the medicines together."

The jumpsuits were all one size, made of a stretch material, but the difference in height between Saul and Anton was great. The jumpsuit had to be compressed for Anton and expanded for Saul. And it immediately became clear that Saul did not know how to sew. Apparently historians, sitting in their cozy studies, hadn't the slightest idea of such simple things. Probably they were more interested in how things used to be done. Vadim had to take the nozzle away from Saul and show him how it was done. To his amazement, the historian turned out to be a quick learner, and in several minutes each was busy with his own job.

Vadim finished packing the sack, fastened it shut, and sat down at the table. "Were the other four also young?" he asked.

"Yes," Saul answered. "Just kids. Almost adolescents. Much younger than you."

"Five years ago," Vadim said, "some of the guys and I wanted to take a ship and fly out to Tagora. We didn't get permission. . . . Maybe they had more luck?"

"I can't understand it," Anton said. "Only an experienced pilot can receive a ship. And how could any of them have experience? Just kids! I just can't understand it. Golden nails. Weird shirts and bare bodies! But the main question is how they got here."

"Very simple," Vadim said. "Someone was planning a flight, left the starship in the yard, they sneaked in at night and took off. Playing Rumata the Explorer. And climbed out here and got lost. The cold hit them fast. That's it."

"What you say," Anton said coldly, "is totally impossible. Even if it had been that way, I would have known. They died several days ago. On Earth, a global search would have been declared."

"But if they came with someone older?"

Anton was silent.

"Then let's find the older ones," he said finally.

"One thing bothers me," Vadim said. "Those unimaginable shirts—"

"They're not shirts," Saul said unexpectedly.

Anton and Vadim turned toward him.

"They're bags, with holes for the heads and arms. Coarse burlap bags. They don't make them anymore," he grinned sadly. "You know, Vadim, the kids would have found it easier to get a scorcher or a bathysphere than just one bag like that. I'm really troubled by the fact that they were wearing bags instead of clothes."

Saul unfolded a jumpsuit, held it up with outstretched arms, and looked around.

"Therefore I don't agree with you," he continued. "I think that they're local inhabitants. And—I don't know whether you'll understand me—during the times of burlap sacks strange things happened. It seems to me that the young people were stripped naked. And abandoned here, in the wilderness. Try it on, Anton."

Anton took the jumpsuit. "So, in your opinion, a civilization exists on Saula?" he asked mistrustfully. "And this is the era of burlap bags?"

"How could I know, captain? I'm only inferring from what I see. I see burlap bags, I know that burlap bags don't exist on Earth in our time. Therefore, they're not Earthlings. Maybe they were pillaged. Maybe they're pilgrims. Fanatics. They vowed to worship the holy power, walking, in accordance with their vow, in sackcloth, strayed from the road, ended up in a blizzard. . . . Who knows?"

Vadim was unfavorably impressed by all this. All those words, "pilgrim," "holy power," "vow," were familiar to him; they were somehow connected with religious rites, but they did not have any real significance for him. For a flash he thought with respect that

apparently Saul was a real specialist. But that wasn't what impressed him most.

"Excuse me," he said. "Consequently, a civilization? So . . . we've gone out for a stroll and just happened to discover a civilization! I don't believe it," he announced.

"Incidentally," Anton said thoughtfully, "EN 7031 was listed in planned explorations, but the expedition never took place. And meanwhile EN 7031 is on the list of stars lying on the hypothetical path of the Wanderers."

"Never heard of such a list," Vadim said.

"It exists. The Gorbovsky-Bader list. So there was a chance of finding a civilization, Vadim. Or maybe Saul is right—they are local kids. And whatever connection they have to the Wanderers is a separate question."

Vadim was sitting at the table, leaning on his elbows with his head in his hands. Some civilization, he thought. All right, suppose they are the victims of pillaging. But it's all absurd: healthy sixteen-year-olds allowing themselves to be undressed without resistance and freezing submissively. But they're not fanatics! He imagined a fanatic. A bald, emaciated old man with wild eyes, an enormous rusty chain over his shoulder. No, he thought, those are no fanatics! Maybe it's the Wanderers themselves! Yes. In burlap bags. The thought of the cyclopean structures that the Wanderers had left on Vladislava and sadness seized him. A similar sadness avalanched down on him whenever he took on a problem beyond his grasp.

"Anton," he said, "how's the glider?"

Anton glanced at the clock. "It's time," he said. "Let's go. Dress carefully and everyone take a sack each."

"Excuse me, but I'd like to determine more exactly," Saul said, "what we'll be looking for."

It seemed to Vadim that Anton was wavering.

"We'll be looking for disaster victims."

Saul buttoned up his jumpsuit. "And suppose that no one else here is a victim. I have in mind the hypothesis with brigands."

"With that variant I would not be concerned," Vadim muttered.

"In any variant," Anton said, enunciating distinctly, "I ask you to do absolutely nothing without an order from me."

He walked to the door.

"You're not taking weapons?" Saul asked.

"We will have no need for weapons," Anton answered.

"There are enough corpses here already," Vadim said.

They left the *Ship* and immediately plunged into deep snow. The glider was barely visible behind the white curtain. It was an antigrav Cricket, a reliable six-passenger vehicle, very popular with landing parties and trackers. It was standing in the middle of a thawed-clear pit, from which thick steam arose, and its smooth sides were still warm. Inside the cockpit it was even hot.

They dumped the sacks into the trunk and clambered into the glider under the smooth transparent canopy.

"Damn it," Anton said suddenly. "Vadim, won't you need the analyzer for translating?"

"What translating?" Saul asked.

Vadim rubbed his chin. "Not only the analyzer," he said slowly. "Without the mnemocrystals you can't manage at all. Someone has to return to the *Ship*."

"Ugh," Anton said, and climbed out of the glider. "How many do you need?"

"A pair would be enough. Only get the ones with rubber suckers, so I don't have to hold them in my hands all the time."

Anton ran across the snow toward the *Ship*.

"What were you talking about?" Saul inquired.

"We'll have to communicate with people, presuming we find them," Vadim answered.

He turned on the engine, gently lifted the glider, and set it down again.

"And you speak so casually about it," Saul commented.

Vadim looked at him with surprise. "And how should I speak?"

"Well, naturally . . ."

A strange man, Vadim thought. Has he really spent his whole life in his study listening to Mendelssohn?

"Saul," he said, "since Sugimoto's work, communication with humanoids is a purely technical question. Don't you remember how Sugimoto entered into an agreement with the Tagorians? It was a great triumph, and much was written about it—"

"Of course!" Saul proclaimed enthusiastically. "How could I forget something like that! But for some reason I thought . . . that . . . that only Sugimoto was capable of it."

"No," Vadim said scornfully. "It is something any structural linguist can do."

Anton returned, handed Vadim a box and the crystals, and climbed into his seat. "Onward," he said.

"Listen," Vadim said, looking at the barely perceptible mound of snow near the ship, "it's not right to leave them that way. Maybe we could bury them first?"

"No," Anton said. "Frankly, we don't have the right to do even that."

Vadim understood: they're not our dead, and it's not for us to bury them according to our customs. He took the handle of the steering mechanism and turned on the engine. The glider lifted smoothly over the drifts and rushed into the white haze.

Vadim was sitting, round-shouldered as usual, and barely moving the steering mechanism, just enough to test its stability. Snow rushed at him. He saw only a white, thousand-tailed star, the center of which floated slowly before his eyes. He turned on the search locators.

The glider leaped out of the blizzard. It skimmed over the snow-covered hilly plain. Vadim gradually increased the speed; the motor hissed deeply, and rounded hilltops whirled by under the fuselage. Low above the horizon to their right a blinding dot showed—EN 7031—and to the north the outline of mountains became visible. The blinding dot slowly shifted to the right and backward: the glider was circling the *Ship* at a distance of ten kilometers. And ahead, and to the right, and to the left there were hills, more hills, and still more hills. Anton suddenly said, "Look, a herd!"

Vadim applied the brakes and swung the glider around. It hung motionless. In a ravine between two hills a group of some sort of animals was moving rapidly. They were medium-sized quadrupeds, similar to hornless deer, and leaped along, constantly floundering in the snow, straining with all their might, raising their black-muzzled heads high. Their thin legs stuck in the drifts, and they fell, raising clouds of snow, and once again leaped up, curving their bodies with each leap. Behind them stretched a furrow of ploughed-over snow. And along the furrow, bending their stretched necks low to the ground, enormous ostrichlike birds raced along on long featherless legs. But the beaks did not resemble os-

triches'—theirs were powerful, hooked, fearsome downward-curving blades.

Vadim swooped down and flew along the ravine. The herd ran right under the glider, not even noticing it, but the birds—all three of them—stopped short, squatted down, and raising their heads at the glider, opened their breaks threateningly. What hunting! Vadim thought in a flash. What hunting it would make! He lifted the glider again and put it into the jump mode. Right nearby, almost scratching the spectrolite of the canopy, monstrous beaks snapped and then immediately disappeared. Now the glider raced along in two-kilometer leaps, soaring up toward the low sky, and each time the plain would seem to fling itself wide open, and it was evident that for tens of kilometers around a snowy wilderness stretched without end.

Some civilization, Vadim thought. They couldn't even organize a search. They permitted the kids to leave, naked, weaponless. Here, apparently, you couldn't make a move without weapons. And the kids must have been adventuresome.

The glider completed the ten-kilometer circle and began the second, at twenty kilometers. And immediately Anton said: "That must be where they're from. Thirty degrees to the right."

At the edge of the plain, under the gray-blue mass of the mountain range, dim dark spots, regular in form, could be seen.

"Looks like a large inhabited area," Saul said. "Don't you have binoculars?"

The spectrolite of the canopy dispersed the haze, and Vadim, bending over the eyepiece, could distinguish the outlines of buildings, jagged walls, and domes.

"A city," he said. "What should we do?"

"A city?" Saul asked. "Curious. How far away?"

"About fifteen kilometers."

"So . . . about thirty kilometers from the city to the *Ship*. With a little endurance, that can be covered even barefoot."

Vadim grimaced. "I wouldn't want to try it," he muttered.

The glider, trembling slightly when struck by gusts of wind, was hanging about twenty meters above the ground. How ridiculously everything is arranged, Vadim thought. Where are the search parties? Where are the gliders and helicopters with volunteers? And the

birds were completely out of place here. They should have been beaten off a hundred years ago, not protected in a preserve so close to the city. And what's taking Anton so long? Why don't we just go to the city and set the inhabitants on the true path? Really, the formalities of the first contact with an alien civilization can be disregarded in a case like this.

He glanced at Anton.

Anton was taking his time. He was sitting bolt upright, squinting his eyes narrowly and biting his lips. The expression on his face looked like he was solving mentally a navigating problem.

"What now, skipper?" Vadim said.

Anton's face resumed its usual expression.

"To be frank," he said, "we should return to the *Ship*. But . . . onward. Stop at the outskirts. And stay higher."

The glider covered the distance to the city in three leaps and by the end of the second Vadim understood that it was not a city. At any rate, he understood why no one was concerned about the fate of the missing kids.

"A terrible explosion happened here," Saul murmured behind his back.

The glider hovered over the edge of a gigantic crater, similar to that of an active volcano. The crater, a half-kilometer wide, was filled to the brim with a dense, swirling smoke. The smoke was a delicate blue-gray, and it floated lazily in layers and swayed gently. It was evidently much denser than the air, because not even a single spray extended above the edge. From the side it seemed that it was not smoke but a liquid. At the edge of the crater there clung snow-laden ruins. The gnawed-clean remains of many-colored walls, tilting towers, twisting metallic constructions, and pierced domes protuded from the snowdrifts.

Vadim, stunned, looked below. Saul mumbled indistinctly, "So very familiar. A bomber attack . . . blew up the ammunition dumps . . . and not long ago—the smoke still hasn't dispersed, something is still burning."

Vadim shook his head. "It's impossible to live in a city like that. Of course people ran off wherever they could. It's surprising we found only five."

"The others are in there," Saul said, looking at the crater.

"It's not a civilization, it's a monstrosity," Vadim muttered.

"What empty-headedness! Who would conduct such experiments in a city? You'd have to be the stupidest—"

Anton interrupted softly. "And over there some vehicles are moving."

From the north the narrow, barely noticeable ribbon of a road ran up to the crater. Along it black dots crawled densely and unhurriedly. Aha, Vadim thought, all is not lost. He turned the glider and flew over the crater. They caught sight of a superb road reaching right into the smoke, and on the road an endless column of vehicles. The vehicles filled the road's entire length. They drove in a solid mass from the north. There were flat green ones, similar to passenger atomcars but without any windshield; small white and blue ones, dragging a long tail of empty flatbeds behind them; orange ones, similar to field synthesizers; huge black towers on caterpillar treads; and little ones with broad, spread-open wings—and all of them rolled invincibly down the road, row after row, in perfect order, maintaining absolutely precise intervals, and then disappeared, row by row, into the blue-gray smoke.

"They're only robots," Vadim said.

"Yes," Anton said.

"Therefore someone is sending them. Most probably to restore production. And we will find people at the other end of the road." Vadim hesitated. "Listen, Saul," he continued, "were there similar machines in the burlap bag era?"

Saul did not respond. As though enchanted, he stared at the ground, and his face expressed delight and reverence. He raised his wide-open eyes to Vadim. His bushy eyebrows were halfway up his forehead.

"What technology!" he exclaimed. "The magnitude of it! What grandeur! There's no end to it."

Vadim was surprised and also looked down. "So what?" he asked. "The magnitude? An ugly magnitude. To restore production, a few dozen cybers would be enough."

"I happen to like it," Saul said. "It's actually beautiful. You mean you really can't see that it's beautiful?"

"Vadim," Anton said, "try along the road. Let's see what we can figure out."

Vadim set the glider in motion. The stream of vehicles below melted into a many-colored strip.

"Now it's beautiful," Vadim said. "But you didn't answer me, Saul. Are burlap bags compatible with that technology?"

"Why not? The people fled the destroyed cities without taking anything with them. You're really hung up on those burlap bags! Burlap bags were used for several centuries. They were cheap and convenient. For carrying kindling, for example."

"Kindling?"

"To start fires. To light a stove."

Vadim recalled their previous dispute on word history and fell silent. Neither the end of the road nor the end of the column was visible. On both sides of the road the plain, its snow undisturbed, stretched to the horizon. Vadim accelerated. A senseless undertaking, he mused. The vehicles disappeared into the smoke as into an abyss. He estimated the dimensions of the crater and the quantity of vehicles falling into it. The result was crazy. But I'm no engineer. Your average humanoid on Tagora—they were all engineers—would decide that the road was a rather large conveyor belt, carrying parts of some medium-sized machine that is assembled underground. But then your simple bucolic Leonidian would be convinced that it was a herd of animals being driven from pasture to slaughterhouse.

"Anton," he called out. "Can you imagine Leonidians in our place?"

Anton answered. "A stupid Leonidian would think that everything was clear; an intelligent person would say that there is insufficient information."

Yes, the information was insufficient. All the vehicles were moving south, and not one was returning. If in actuality they were restoring the city, they were doing it with themselves as raw material. And indeed why not?

"You know," Saul said suddenly, "I feel somehow frightened. How far have we traveled? Forty kilometers? And they keep coming."

"They should have applied all this technology to finding the survivors."

"You're wrong there," Saul objected. "In a mess like this there's no time to worry about individuals."

"What do you mean, no time to worry about individuals? Then

who are they rebuilding the city for? Those kids are beyond needing a city."

Saul waved his hand scornfully. "In the blast tens of thousands of kids like that most likely died. It's sad, of course, but there's no time for them."

Vadim became enraged. The glider yawed to the side. "You, Saul, will excuse me, but your cozy study and study of history have had a strange effect on you. You think like no one I know. Next you'll be telling us that the end justifies the means."

"Well now," Saul agreed coolly, "sometimes it does."

Vadim restrained himself. A paperweight fossil, he thought. But just leave him without his pants in the snow and he'd be insulted if the entire technology of the planet did not hasten to his aid. Right then Vadim saw a side road and jammed on the brakes. The road left the main road and headed east, looping between the hills.

"It's the first side road," Vadim stated. "Should we turn off?"

"Not worth it," Saul said. "What could we find interesting?"

Anton hesitated. Why does he keep vacillating, Vadim thought with irritation. It is as though another person had taken his place. "Well now, what to do," he said. "I'm for following the main road."

"Me, too," Saul said. "We can always come back, can't we, Vadim?"

"All right, fly straight ahead," Anton said indecisively. "Fly straight ahead. Although . . . keep in mind . . . All right, fly straight ahead."

Vadim raced the glider along the main road again.

"What's the matter with you today, Anton?" Vadim inquired.

"Ahead, look ahead," Anton answered calmly.

Vadim shrugged his shoulders and started to stare ahead with a deliberate exaggeration. Five minutes later he saw a gray spot.

"Another pit with smoke," he said.

It was an identical crater. Its edges were powdered with snow; in it the identical blue-gray smoke swayed, and out of the smoke vehicles emerged in a ceaseless stream.

"I expected something like this," Anton said.

"But there aren't any people here," Vadim said in dismay. "Again we're not going to find out anything."

A strange thought struck him. He glanced at the compass and

leaned over to the eyepiece. There were no ruins around the edge of the crater. It was a different crater.

"Amazing," Saul said. "They arise out of smoke and disappear into smoke."

"Let's turn around," Vadim said impatiently. He fixed his eyes on Anton. Again that disgusting indecision was written all over Anton's face.

"A shame," Saul said. "To pass by such a marvelous phenomenon —"

"What's so marvelous!" Vadim screamed out. "Why are you so thrilled? Some mediocre engineer is throwing machines around through subspace. . . . Really picked a great spot for null transport! Wrecked a city, the talentless idiot. Anton, what are you thinking about so quietly?"

"Somehow it's gotten noisy in here," Anton said, staring to the side.

"But what's the matter? What's with you? Don't tell me you're interested in the local manufacturing techniques?"

"Of course not," Anton said weakly. "What concern is it of mine?"

Vadim turned around in his chair, clasped his hands over his knees, and began to look over Anton and Saul. Anton looked like he was falling asleep. His hands were joined together over his stomach. And Saul was looking at Vadim with an expression of amazed delight and tenderness. His mouth was half-open.

"What's going on?" Vadim said. "Are you both drunk?"

Saul came to life. "Yes, of course," he exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of it right away? It all makes sense; we have two holes eighty kilometers apart. The vehicles come out of one hole, travel along a superb highway, and without any apparent effect disappear into the second hole. From the second, they return by an underground passage to the first."

Vadim sighed deeply. "They don't return to the first. It's null transport, do you understand?" Saul was nodding wildly at each and every word. "Elementary null transport. Someone is using this spot to transport technology over long distances by the shortest path. Maybe over thousands of kilometers. Maybe over thousands of parsecs. You really don't understand?"

"Of course I do. I understand everything," Saul exclaimed, although he looked quite dumbfounded. "What's to understand? Just ordinary null transport."

"So all right," Vadim said. "And it's no concern of ours. We have to look for the people!"

"Yes," Anton said. "We'll look. Turn down the side road."

Vadim swung the glider around and raced it back along the road. "Anton, what's the matter? Don't you feel well?" he asked after a short silence.

"I don't feel that great," Anton said. "Later on don't forget to corroborate that if they ask you."

"Who will ask?"

"They will," Anton said. "There will be people . . . interested."

Vadim did not pursue his questioning. It was clear that it was all senseless. He looked at the vehicles below, then at the speedometer.

"Primitive robots," he grumbled. "Constant speed, constant intervals. As though it were worth curving space for them."

They reached the side road.

"How should I set the course?" Vadim asked. "Over the road or on a straight line?"

"Over the road," Anton answered. "And get lower."

Vadim, with pleasure, lowered the glider practically to the ground and flew exactly over the road; he liked immensely fast flights with sharp turns.

"Look, more birds," Saul said angrily.

Ahead, on the road itself, several of the legged monsters were tramping along. They were shoveling snow away from drifts with their talon-covered feet and groping around in the loosened snow. As the glider approached, they all sat down at once, raised their heads, and opened their black beaks wide. Something resembling rags hung from their beaks.

"What miserable beasts!" Saul said with disgust. He turned around in his seat and looked back. "What is it they're digging up?"

Vadim suddenly realized what they were digging up, but it was so horrible that he couldn't believe it.

"You've never seen takhorgs, Saul," he said with a strained liveliness. "Compared to takhorgs these are just fluffy chicks. We should shoot one down. How about it, Anton?"

"You can," Anton said.

Saul stopped looking behind. "I don't like the way they keep digging," he said gloomily.

No one answered him. They flew on in silence for another ten minutes. The snow on the side road was a kind of nasty manure color. On it were visible tracks—not exactly treads, not exactly wheels—and to the right and left on the untouched snow there stretched chains of human footprints.

"Another one," Saul said.

The bird was standing on a hilltop. As soon as it caught sight of the glider it rushed to head it off. It ran lifting its legs high, extending its little wings, stretching its sinewy neck forward, its beak bent down to the snow. Its little fiery eyes were fixed on the glider.

"Too late!" Vadim said regretfully.

But the bird was not too late. "Ooh," Vadim groaned with pleasure. The glider shuddered. A stretched-out taloned foot flashed in the air. Anton and Saul turned around immediately.

"It's still running!" Saul reported. "An unusually nasty bird . . . uff!" he exclaimed in amazement.

Vadim flicked on the rear viewscreen. The tousled bird was already on its feet and, limping slightly, chasing the glider again. It looked infuriated. Soon it fell behind and was lost beyond a curve.

"If we meet people," Vadim said, "I'll propose wiping out that monstrosity from the whole plain. If they're not up to it—What do you think, Anton?"

"We'll see," Anton answered.

Chapter 4

THE HILLS BECAME LOWER and suddenly ahead there appeared a high swell of snow. Anton immediately noticed tiny black figures swarming on its crest. Well, it's started, he thought, and then said, "Stop."

"Why?" Vadim retorted. "Can't you see? There are people there!"

"I told you stop!"

"All right," Vadim said, dissatisfied, but he obeyed.

Now he'll turn around and look at me disapprovingly, Anton thought. It's very, very hard.

He did find it hard. The chance of conflict with an unknown civilization was exceptionally small but real, and every starpilot knew the instructions of the Commission on Contacts that forbade independent contact with unknown civilizations. It would be silly to withdraw now, he thought. We should have left the planet as soon as we saw the bodies. We should have. . . . Only no one would. But all the same there are the instructions. And they were formulated for just such a case—when you have one person in your crew who is just dying to take action, and the other wants the devil knows what. And you yourself are torn by contradictions. It's almost certain that somewhere nearby thousands of people are suffering from a calamity. Like those people aimlessly wandering on the crest over there. And Vadim is looking with disapproval. And Saul is looking with a completely inappropriate curiosity. The historian with the scorcher. By the way, don't forget about the scorcher. And the instructions, very sensible and very simple: "No independent contact with aboriginals." Very simple; I got out, looked around, noticed signs of a living civilization. "It is urgent to leave the planet immediately, carefully destroying all traces of your presence." And I'm leaving an enormous hole from the glider, and alongside the pit, five corpses.

"What's the matter?" Vadim asked. "A fit of melancholy?"

It went without saying that structural linguists and historians hadn't the slightest idea of the instructions. Explain it to them and they'll see it as a personal affront: "We're not children! We ourselves know what's good and what's bad."

At that point Anton discovered that the glider was crawling slowly in the direction of the slope. And he decided.

"Fly up to the crest," he said. "Set down at a distance from the people. And listen close, comrades, I beg you. Don't try any brotherhood-between-civilizations business."

"We're not children," Vadim said and accelerated.

The glider soared up to the crest. Vadim slid back the canopy, stuck his head out, and whistled in amazement. At the bottom of the snowbank stretched an enormous hollow, filled with men and vehicles. But Anton was not looking down.

He was looking with horror and pity at a hunched-over man, blue

from the cold, wearing a torn burlap sack, who was walking straight toward the glider, slowly, each step requiring enormous effort. His face was a patchwork of scabs, and his naked arms and legs were covered with red blotches. The man slid an indifferent glance over the glider, walked around it, and moved on along the crest. He stumbled and groaned pitiably, but as though it were a regular occurrence. That's not a man, Anton thought, it only looks like a man.

"My God!" Saul exclaimed in a hoarse voice. "Look at what's going on down there!"

Then Anton looked down. On the floor of the hollow, on dirty, trampled snow, amid dozens of vehicles of various types, swarms of people, barefooted in long gray shirts, were sitting and even lying down, strolling and running around. All around on the edge of unbroken snow, other people were standing in uneven, broken columns. There were many of them—hundreds, maybe even thousands. They stood dejectedly, staring at their feet. Here and there bodies were lying in the middle of the columns, but no one paid any attention to them.

There were several dozen vehicles in the hollow. Several of them were bogged down, others were hidden under snow, but Anton saw immediately that they were the same kind as the ones on the endless road. Several vehicles jerked convulsively, splattering clumps of mud and snow, without any signs of order or purpose.

It suddenly dawned on Anton that it was strangely silent. Thousands of people were there, but only the muffled grumbling of the vehicles and an occasional mournful shout could be heard.

And coughing. From time to time someone somewhere would start coughing hoarsely, hacking, gasping, and wheezing so that your own throat began to tickle. The cough would be taken up by dozens of throats and within several seconds the hollow would be filled with the shattering dry sounds. The movement of the people would stop for a while, then mournful shouts, and sharp blows, like gunshots, would resound, and the coughing would stop.

Anton was twenty-six and had already worked for years as a starpilot. He had seen a lot. He had had to see how a person becomes crippled, how friends are lost, how one loses faith in oneself, how one dies—he himself had lost friends and he himself had died a little,

alone with indifferent silence. But this was something else. This was a dark misery, an anguish and complete hopelessness; here you felt an indifferent despair, when no one hopes for anything, when a man falling down knows that no one will help him up, when ahead there is absolutely nothing but death, alone in an apathetic crowd. It can't be, he thought. It's just a terrible calamity. I've just never seen anything like it.

"We'll never be able to help them," Vadim muttered. "Thousands of people, and they have nothing."

Anton came to. Two dozen freight starships, he thought. Clothing. Five thousand units. Food, dozens of field synthesizers. A hospital, sixty buildings. Or was that too little? Maybe this wasn't all? Maybe it wasn't just here?

It would have been a fine thing if I had ordered a return to the *Ship*, he thought with satisfaction.

They were standing in silence, not leaving the glider. What the people in the hollow were doing was incomprehensible. They were fussing around with the vehicles. Most likely, the vehicles were their only hope. Maybe they wanted to use them to escape the snowy wilderness.

Vadim sat down and turned on the motor.

"Hold on," Anton said. "Where are you going?"

"To Earth," Vadim answered. "We can't handle it."

"Turn off the engine. Watch out. Our nerves are acting up."

"What do nerves have to do with it? You can't feed them with what we have."

Anton picked up the bag with medicine and threw it over the side. Then he picked up the bag with food.

"Take it," he said to Saul. "Vadim, get your translator ready. You will translate."

"Why?" Vadim said. "Why make things so complicated. We're just losing time. They're dying every minute."

Anton tossed the food sack over the side.

"We'll find out how many there are. We'll find out what they need. We'll find out everything. Do you plan to go back to Earth without information?"

Vadim, without saying a word, jumped down into the snow and hoisted the sack with medicines to his shoulder. Anton looked at Saul expectantly. Saul took his pipe out of his mouth,

"You're right about everything," he said. "But don't take the food."

"Why? We can feed the weakest right away."

"Don't do anything so stupid. They'll see the food. They'll see the clothing. They'll trample you and your sacks to pieces."

"It's not for everyone," Anton said instructively. "We'll explain that it's for the weakest."

For several seconds Saul, with a strange expression of pity, stared at him. Then he asked, "Do you know what a crowd is?"

"Take the sack," Anton said softly. "We can discuss what a crowd is later."

With a deep breath, Saul raised the sack to his shoulder and leaned over for his scorcher lying on the seat.

"No, leave that behind," Anton asked.

"No, I'm taking it," Saul objected. Breathing heavily, he stuck his head through the scorcher strap.

"Please, Saul. You're afraid and might shoot."

"Of course I'm afraid. I'm afraid for you."

"I understand that it's not for yourself," Anton said patiently.

Saul, grinning, climbed down to the ground.

"Saul Repnin," Anton said in a steely tone, "give me your weapon."

Saul sat down on the edge of the glider. "You don't know how to shoot," he declared.

"I do," Anton said, staring him in the eyes.

Each time it's the same thing, he thought with annoyance. Every time, at the most critical moment, someone comes down with nerves. And you have to bring them around instead of getting on with business.

Saul handed over the scorcher. Anton shoved it inside his shirt and jumped down into the snow next to Vadim. Vadim was standing with the sack on his shoulder, his head bent, watching the skipper's actions while adjusting the mnemocrystals on his temples.

"So I'll take the third sack," Saul said as though nothing had happened.

"Yes, please," Anton said courteously.

They began the descent into the hollow.

"If something happens," Saul said, "fire in the air. They'll all scatter."

Anton didn't answer. He was thinking what to do next.

"Vadim," he called, "will you be able to negotiate with them?"

"I'll manage. The main thing is you. If you were a real doctor, I wouldn't be worried about a thing."

Yes, Anton thought, if I were a real doctor. . . . Of course, they're humanoids. And their anatomy shouldn't differ very much from our own. But their physiology—he remembered the disastrous consequences caused by the use of codeine on the humanoids on Tagora.

"It would be good to figure out how their vehicles work," Vadim said anxiously. "We could transport them away from here. Maybe. That's all they need. Only why isn't anyone helping them? What a ridiculous planet! I wouldn't be surprised if all their cities had blown up at exactly the same time."

They had descended halfway down the slope when Saul said, "Wait a moment."

They all stopped.

"What's up?" Anton asked. "Tired?"

"No," Saul said. "I never get tired." He was peering fixedly at something below. "Do you see that ugly truck on the edge? That one, the closest? On the fender is a man in gray."

"I see him," Anton said uncertainly

"Well . . . young eyes are sharp."

Anton strained his vision.

"The man is sitting, wearing fur clothing," Vadim announced. "That's what I see. Wrapped in fur up to his ears."

"I can't understand it," Anton said. "Perhaps he's a sick patient?"

"Perhaps," Saul said. "And over there are two more patients. I've been watching them for a while. Only it's far away."

On the opposite side, two black shadowy figures stood out against the whitish sky. They were standing absolutely motionless, their legs spread well apart, holding long thin poles in their lowered hands.

"What are they holding?" Vadim asked. "Antennas?"

"Antennas?" Saul repeated, taking a careful look. "I think I know what kind of antennas those are."

A shrill shout filled the hollow. Anton shuddered. Somewhere a motor let out a deafening roar, a many-voiced mournful wailing resounded, and they saw one of the vehicles, cumbersome, similar

to a deep-water tank, spin in place with a gnashing sound and then suddenly start to crawl, constantly picking up speed and knocking other vehicles aside, straight at the column of people. Several human figures clambered out of its depths and hurled themselves headlong into the trampled snow. The column did not budge. Anton held a hand over his mouth to avoid crying out. Above the thunder and roar a high-pitched, mournful voice rang out, and the column suddenly closed ranks to form a dense crowd and then advanced to meet the tank. Anton couldn't take it—he closed his eyes. It seemed to him that through the roar he heard a horrible wet crunching.

"My God," Saul murmured in his ear. "Oh, my God."

Anton forced himself to open his eyes. Where the tank had been, an enormous, swirling heap of men was piled high, tilting to the side more and more. Behind it a broad, bright red stripe stretched over the snow, looking like ink on a blotter. Around the pile of bodies there was emptiness, only four men in fur coats walked unhurriedly along, keeping pace with the man-plastered tank.

Anton looked mechanically at the men with the poles. They were standing in the same place, in their previous poses, absolutely motionless. One of them shifted the pole from one arm to the other in a slow movement and then was motionless again. Apparently, he didn't even look downward.

The roar of the engine ceased. The tank had been turned on its side, and the people were slowly crawling off it and walking to the side. Then Vadim, without saying a word, hurled his sack down the slope and took off after it with gigantic strides. Anton also started running. Through the noise in his ears he heard Saul, hard at his heels gasping for breath and shouting, "The scum. The bastards."

When Anton reached the tank, the people in the sacks had already re-formed in a column, and the people in the fur coats were walking among them and shouting in mournful, groaning voices. Vadim, dragging his blood- and mud-smeared sack behind him, crawled on all fours among the bodies crushed by the tank and was in despair. He raised his pale face to Anton and said, "Only the dead. Here they're all dead already."

Anton looked around. Gasping for breath, damp from perspiration and melting snow, barely protected by their torn gray sacks, the people were staring at him with dull, immobile eyes. And the people in the fur coats, gathered in a group a short distance away,

were also staring at him. For a second it seemed to him that he was looking at an ancient naturalistic painting: they were all motionless and staring at him, hundreds of pairs of motionless eyes.

He regained control over himself. The ones Vadim was looking for were standing in the column—a tall bony old man with a scraped moist-red face; a young kid holding an unnaturally dislocated arm against his chest; a completely naked gray-faced man clutching his stomach with outstretched fingers with golden nails; a man with closed eyes dangling one leg, from which black blood spurted out. All the living were standing in the column.

"Easy does it," Anton said aloud. He bent over, opened the sack with the medicines, and got a jar of colloid. Unscrewing the lid as he walked, he approached the man with the crushed leg. Vadim followed on his heels with an armful of tampoplasters.

A terrible wound. The muscles are crushed, the blood is almost not flowing. Why doesn't he sit down? Why doesn't anyone help him? The colloid . . . now the plaster . . . why is it so quiet? That one is even worse . . . his stomach is torn open . . . he's dead already. How does he manage to stand? The dislocated arm, that's nothing. Hold tight, Vadim! Tighter! Why doesn't he scream? Why doesn't anyone scream? Someone over there has already fallen . . . lift him up, you over there, you healthy ones!

Someone touched him on the shoulder, and he turned about brusquely. A man in a fur coat was standing in front of him. He had a rosy, dirty face and slanted eyes, and a drop of turbid liquid was hanging from his nose. His fur-mittened palms were joined in front of his chest.

"Hello, hello," Anton said. "Later—Vadim, talk to him."

The man in the fur coat shook his head and started to speak rapidly, and Vadim immediately responded with a similar intonation. The man fell silent, looked with astonishment at Vadim, then at Anton again, and stepped back. Anton, with a gesture of vexation, shifted the heavy scorcher inside his shirt and turned back to the wounded man. The wounded man was standing, hiding his face behind his hands. And all the people on both sides of Anton were standing with their hands hiding their faces—all except the dead man, with the gray face, who was still clutching his stomach.

"It's O.K., it's O.K.," Anton said tenderly. "Put your hands down, don't be afraid. Everything will be all right."

But at that very moment, the high-pitched mournful voice shouted something, and all the men in burlap turned to their right. The men in fur trotted along the column. The mournful voice shouted again, and the column set off.

"Stop!" Anton yelled. "Are you crazy?"

No one even turned around. The column marched past, and all of them, as they passed Anton, covered their faces with their hands. Only the man with the ripped-open stomach remained standing, and then someone bumped into him and he fell over noiselessly into the snow. The column had gone.

Anton wiped his damp palm across his eyes in dismay and looked around. He saw the tremendous tank on its side, the tall, dark Saul alongside, the wild-eyed Vadim staring at the departing column, and several dozen bodies on the trampled snow. And it became absolutely quiet, only occasional shouts could be heard in the distance.

"Why?" Vadim asked. "What were they afraid of?"

"They were afraid of us," Anton said. "And most likely it was our medicine they were afraid of."

"I'll overtake them and try to explain."

"Definitely not. It has to be done very tactfully. What's your opinion, Saul?"

Saul, turned with his back to the wind, was puffing on his pipe.

"My opinion. . . ." he said. "I think this is a terrible place."

"Yes, Vadim chimed in, "a kind of terrible, unhealthy misfortune."

"Why do you call it misfortune?" Saul interrupted. "Who do you think those bastards in fur coats are?"

"Why do you call them bastards?" Vadim countered.

"So who are they, in your opinion?"

Vadim did not answer.

"Robust, well-fed men in fur coats," Saul said in a strange tone. "They order people to throw themselves under a tank. They don't work, just watch others work. They stand on the wall with pikes ready. Who are they, these men?"

Vadim did not answer.

"Think about it," Saul said. "It's something worth thinking about."

Anton, staring at the sky, said, "It's getting dark. Let's inspect the vehicle, as long as we're here. We'll have to sooner or later."

"O.K., let's go," Saul said.

Anton neatly fastened the sack with the medicines, and they went over to the tank. Vadim didn't budge. He was staring gloomily at the slope, over which a black dotted line was slowly crawling—the tail of the departing column.

The oval armor of the tank was split open. The body was partitioned by a membranous wall. Anton turned on a flashlight and they started to examine the corrugated walls of the cockpit, the coupling of the engine, some kind of curved mirrors on elbow-shaped poles, which resembled bamboo, and the floor of the cockpit—bowl-shaped, covered with hundreds of tiny openings, like a gigantic perforated spoon.

"Hmmmm," Saul drawled out. "A curious piece of machinery. Where's the steering?"

"Possibly it's a cyber," Anton said distractedly. "But no, hardly . . . too much empty space."

He climbed into the engine compartment. It was a rather primitive quasiliving mechanism with high-frequency feeding.

"A powerful machine," Saul said with respect. "Only how is it steered?"

They returned to the cockpit.

"Same kind of holes," Saul muttered. "Where's the steering stick?"

Anton tried to squeeze his index finger into one of the holes. It wouldn't fit. Then he tried his pinky. He felt a short painful stabbing, and simultaneously something in the engine turned over with a snarl.

"Well, it's all clear now," Anton said, inspecting his pinky.

"What's clear?" Saul asked.

"We can't control this vehicle . . . and they can't either."

"Who can?"

"I can't be completely sure, but apparently it's some of the Wanderers' equipment. You see? It's not for humanoids."

"What are you saying?" Saul murmured.

For a short while they stood silently in front of the cockpit, trying to imagine the creature that felt as comfortable in that per-

forated spoon as they themselves did in the pilot's seat in front of a control panel and screens.

"For some reason I expected it," Saul declared. "It's too much of a paradox: burlap bags and null transport."

"Vadim!" Anton called out.

"What?" a gloomy voice floated down. Vadim was standing on top of the tank.

"Did you hear what we said?"

"I did. So much the worse for them." Vadim thudded into the snow. "It's time to get back," he said. "It's getting dark."

He hoisted the sacks onto his shoulders, and they began to walk up the slope.

What a mess, Anton thought. Machines left by nonhumanoids. Humanoids who had lost their human nature and were trying desperately to figure the machines out. They must have been trying to figure them out. That must be, in their eyes, the only hope for salvation. But of course nothing comes of it. And those strange men in fur.

"Saul," he said, "what are pikes?"

"Spears," Saul answered, clearing his throat.

"Spears?"

"Long wooden poles," Saul said with irritation. "On the end, a sharp steel point, often toothed. It is used to perforate your neighbor." Saul paused, breathing heavily. "Maybe I should explain to you what a sword is."

"We know what a sword is," Vadim said without turning around.

"Well then, each of those bastards in the fur coats had a sword," Saul said. "Listen, my young friends, let's stop and catch our breath."

They sat down on the sacks.

"You smoke too much," Anton said. "It's very unhealthy."

It had become quite dark. The hollow was filled with twilight shadows. The sky had cleared, and stars were coming out. On their left the greenish shimmering of the sunset melted on the horizon. Anton's ears were frozen, and with a shudder he thought of the unfortunate people now wandering barefoot over the crackling snow. Where were they headed? Maybe somewhere nearby there was a shelter? And it was only yesterday that Vadim and I were

sitting on the front steps basking in the warmth, and a marvelous scent carried from the garden, the cicadas were shouting, and Uncle Sasha was calling to us from his dacha to come have a fruit drink he had just prepared. . . . Why is it Saul is so set against those men in the fur coats?

Saul stood up with a grunt, and said, "Let's get moving."

They plunged into the glider, slid the canopy closed, and Vadim immediately turned on the heat full blast. Anton unbuttoned his jacket, pulled out the warm scorcher, and threw it on the seat next to Saul. Saul was angrily breathing on his hands. The frost on his bushy eyebrows was melting.

"So, Vadim," he said, "what have you thought up?"

Vadim sat down in the pilot's seat. "We'll think later," he declared. "Now it's time to act. People need help and—"

"Why have you drawn the conclusion that the people need help?"

"I hope you're joking," Vadim said.

"I'm not up to jokes now," Saul said. "I'm amazed that you don't seem to want to understand what's happening here. Why do you keep repeating over and over: 'They need help, they need help!' "

"And what's your idea? That they don't?"

Saul leaped to his feet, hitting his head against the canopy. He was silent for several seconds. "I will again point out to you," he said finally, "the extremely important fact that in the hollow by no means all of the people needed clothing and other things. That in the hollow we saw healthy, satisfied, and armed people. And for those people the situation did not seem as hopeless as it does to you. You want to help the victims of a calamity. Very praiseworthy. Love your stranger, so to speak. But doesn't it seem to you that in doing so you would enter into conflict with the established order?" He fell silent, staring fixedly at Anton.

"It doesn't seem that way," Vadim said. "I don't want to consider the people any worse than myself. I have no basis for believing myself better than others. Yes, down there in the hollow there is inequality. And the fur coats seem really out of place. But I'm totally convinced that there is a very human reason for all of it. And help by Earthmen will never be harmful." He paused to catch his breath. "And as for the pikes and swords, why, somebody has to protect the victims! I hope you haven't forgotten the friendly birds back there on the plain."

Anton nodded his head thoughtfully. That was the way it was on the *Flower*, he thought. We sat for two weeks on half rations of oxygen and didn't eat or drink. The engineers were repairing the synthesizers and we gave them everything we had. And our appearance at the end of the second week would have hardly been any better than these people's.

Saul bent his head down and cracked his knuckles.

"Platitudes, platitudes," he muttered. "Always the same platitudes, just like thousands of years ago."

Anton and Vadim waited for him to continue.

"You're tremendous people," Saul said softly. "But looking at you now I don't know whether to laugh or cry. You don't notice what is completely obvious to me. And I can't blame you for it. But listen to one short parable. In days long gone by, some aliens (possibly those Wanderers of yours) left behind on Earth some kind of automatic apparatus. It consisted of two parts: an automatic robot and an apparatus for controlling the robot from a distance. The robot could be controlled only with the aid of thought. These things disappeared somewhere in Arabia for several millennia. And then the control unit was found by an Arabian boy named Aladdin. You most likely know the story of Aladdin. He thought the unit was a lamp. He rubbed it, and with a terrible clap of thunder a black and maybe even fire-breathing robot came running up from out of nowhere. He caught the simple thoughts in which Aladdin's simple desires were expressed, and he destroyed cities and built palaces. You have to imagine a poor, dirty, ignorant Arabian boy. His world is a world of spirits and magicians, and the robot to him is of course a djinn, the slave of the unit that resembled a lamp. If someone had attempted to explain to him that the djinn was the work of human hands, the boy would battle to his last breath defending his world, striving to remain within the limits of his conceptions. And you are acting the same way. You are defending the integrity of your view of the world, striving to maintain the dignity of reason. And you just don't want to understand that here we are not dealing with an accident, a natural or technological calamity, but with a definite order of things. With the system, my young friends. And it's very natural. Only two and one-half centuries ago half of mankind was convinced that a leopard could never change his spots and that man had always been an animal, and an animal he would always remain. And there were sufficient grounds for such a belief." At this point Saul gnashed his teeth. "I don't want you to get mixed up in this. Here they will kill you. You have to return to Earth and forget about all this." He looked at Anton. "But I am staying."

"Why?" Anton asked.

"I have to," Saul said slowly. "I did something stupid. And I have to pay the consequences."

Anton thought feverishly, what can I say to this strange man?

"You, of course, can remain," he said finally. "But it's no longer just a question of you. We will stay, too. And for the time being, let's stick together."

"They'll kill you," Saul said hopelessly. "You just don't know how to shoot people."

Vadim slapped his thigh and, full of emotion, said, "We understand you, Saul! But the historian in you is speaking, and you, too, cannot get beyond your preconceptions. No one is going to kill us. Let's keep it simple. We don't need any clever complications. We're people, so let's act like people."

"Let's," Saul said wearily. "And let's eat. There's no way of knowing what's ahead."

Anton didn't feel like eating, but he felt even less like arguing. Saul was right, and Vadim was right, and, as always, the Commission on Contacts was right, and now more than anything else he needed information.

Vadim was digging reluctantly into a can of food with a spoon. Saul ate with great relish, mumbling indistinctly. "Eat, eat . . . the basis of each and every undertaking is a full stomach."

Anton considered the plan for action. Natural calamity or social calamity, it didn't matter. And intervention was inevitable. But they shouldn't dash back to Earth in a frenzy, without looking around, with a cry of "Help!"—nor should they in a frenzy plunge into the thick of events, waving their meager amount of supplies. He was sorry for Saul, but Saul had to be ignored for the time being. So, above all, information.

He said, "Now we'll fly along the trail of the column. I think there's a village somewhere nearby."

Saul nodded in agreement.

"We'll find someone with a head on his shoulders," Anton continued, "and you, Vadim, will find out everything from him. And then we'll see."

"Let's take an informant," Saul suggested, licking his spoon. "Right?"

For several seconds Anton tried to figure out what Saul was talking about. Then he remembered a sentence from an old book: "Go, lieutenant, and don't come back without an informant." He shook his head from side to side.

"No way, Saul, no prisoners. Everything has to be quiet, peaceful. But just in case, you had better keep to the rear. Remain in the glider. You've never been in dangerous situations, and I'm afraid that you might lose control over yourself."

Saul stared at him for several seconds with his sunken eyes. "Yes, of course," he said slowly. "A bookworm, so to speak."

Night had already fallen when the glider took off, hopped over the hollow, and raced along the trampled path that led to the east. A small brilliant moon rose above the plain, and to the west a purplish narrow sickle hung over the mountain range. The path veered, going around a high hill, and they saw several rows of snow-covered buildings.

"Here," Anton said. "Vadim, descend."

Chapter 5

VADIM LANDED THE GLIDER on the first street they saw. He slid back the canopy and a foul stench burst into the cockpit—the stink of excrement in the freezing air, the anguished smell of great suffering. Along the sides of the streets there were ramshackle, dilapidated hovels with no windows; caps of clean snow on their flat roofs sparkled silver in the moonlight, but the drifts near the entrances were a repulsive black. The street was empty, and the village seemed deserted, but the silence was full of wheezes, grunts, and the muddled crackling of coughs.

Vadim drove the glider slowly along the street. The stinking cold

air burned his face. Not a soul was to be seen, neither on the street nor in the dark lanes to the side.

"They're exhausted," Vadim said. "They're sleeping. We'll have to wake them." He stopped the glider again. "You wait here and I'll run over and take a look."

"Well then, let's go," Anton said.

"No reason for both of us to go," Vadim objected, hopping onto the street. "I'll just take a look and come right back. If nothing turns up here we'll go on ahead."

Anton said, "Saul, sit here. We'll be right back."

"Don't make a racket," Saul warned.

Vadim had stopped indecisively in front of the narrow filth-strewn path leading to the hovel. It was terrifying and disgusting to walk there. He glanced around. Anton was already standing beside him.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Forward."

Vadim stepped decisively onto the path, slipped, and almost fell down. He felt nauseous, and strode along with his head held high, so he wouldn't see the path. The door opened out toward him with a creak, and out of the darkness fell a completely naked, stick-thin man. He bounced off the ice-covered snowdrift and banged against the wall of the hovel. Vadim bent over him. It was a corpse, stiff. How many of them I've seen today, Vadim thought. Inside the hovel, people were coughing, and suddenly a high rasping voice broke out in a song. It resembled a howl. The voice spun out only wordless roulades. And perhaps it was not a song but just a cry.

Vadim glanced around again. He saw the black lump of the glider in the road, with Saul's motionless silhouette jutting up. Under the brilliant moon the snow on the deserted street gleamed eerily. And the voice beyond the door continued its long drawn-out lament. Anton poked Vadim gently in the side.

"Frightening, isn't it?" he asked in a whisper. His face was white, as though frozen.

Vadim didn't answer. He opened the door wide and turned on his flashlight. The foul, oppressive air struck him in the face, and he gasped. The circle of light fell on the damp earth floor, covered with pale trampled grass. Vadim caught sight of dozens of twisted bodies clinging to one another, interlaced thin naked legs with huge

feet, wizened faces distorted by harsh shadows, gaping black mouths—the people were sleeping on the bare earth and one on top of the other! It looked like they were stacked several persons deep, and they trembled in their sleep. And the howl continued without a break, not diminishing. Vadim could not make out the singer right away, and then caught him in a circle of light. The man, his arms around his bony knees, was sitting on someone's back. He stared glassy-eyed into the flashlight and sang, protruding his cracked lips.

"Comrade," Vadim said,"listen to me. Stop singing. Say something."

The man did not budge. It was as though he didn't see the light or hear the voice.

"Comrade," Vadim repeated, "listen."

The singer suddenly ended his song with a hoarse yelp, sprawled out face first, and froze. He was immediately mixed up with the sleepers, and Vadim would have been unable to find him. He swallowed convulsively, took a step forward, and touched someone on the bare leg. The leg was icy, dead. Vadim touched another. And it was also icy, dead. The he turned around and staggered, colliding with something broad and warm.

"Quiet," Anton's voice said.

Vadim shook his head, trying to regain control over himself. He had completely forgotten Anton.

"I can't," he muttered. "It's hopeless."

Anton grabbed him by the arm and led him to the door. The icy air now seemed to Vadim pure and sweet.

"I can't," he repeated. "There are no living people here. They're all stiff. Dead." He turned away from Anton and carefully walked up the path to the road. Saul's silhouette was still sticking up over the glider. Vadim noticed that his flashlight was still on and turned it off, shoved it in his pocket, and climbed into the glider. Saul stared at him silently. Anton walked up, leaned against the side, and also began to stare at Vadim. Vadim buried his head in the arc of the steering wheel and sobbed between his clenched teeth. They're not human. Human beings can't be that way." He suddenly raised his head. "They're cybers! The humans are the ones in fur coats! But they're cybers, who look just like humans!"

Saul sighed deeply. "Hardly, Vadim," he said. "They're humans who look just like cybers."

Anton climbed into the cockpit and sat down in his seat. "Let's get control over ourselves," he said. "Let's not lose time. We need an informant." He slapped Vadim on the back. "Take action, lieutenant, and don't return without an informant."

Saul uttered a sound halfway between a sob and a laugh. "If you want, I'll go into the hovel and take anyone you want," he offered. "Only I don't think that's what we need."

"Then they work by day and die by night," Vadim persisted. "What a monstrous practical joke."

"Right," Saul said. "A monstrous practical joke, and we have to catch one of the jokers. In the fur coats."

Vadim looked along the street. "Optimism," he said, "is the cheerful, life-affirming view of the world, in which—"

In the moonlight he saw, in the distance, crossing the street, a file of gray shadows in shirts.

"Look," he said.

People kept strolling across the street, about twenty of them, and behind them two in furs with long poles.

"The beast runs at the hunter," Saul said ominously. "The trick is to take him."

"What do you think about those?" Anton said indecisively.

"Do you intend to search each and every shack? Jokers don't live in shacks, I can assure you. Let's get moving, or we'll lose them."

Vadim took a deep breath and put his hands on the glider controls. The glider moved slowly down the street. He tried to picture how they would grab by the arms a frightened man who couldn't comprehend a thing, drag him to the glider, and shove him into the cockpit, while he would be shouting and struggling pitifully. If they tried it with me, he thought, I'd take care of them all. He listened carefully. Saul was saying, "Don't worry. I know how it's done. He won't get away from me."

"You haven't understood me correctly," Anton said patiently. "There's no question of using any violence at all."

"Listen, let me handle it. You'll just ruin everything. They'll run you through with a spear, and there will be such a bloody commotion. . . ."

Listen to the bookworm! Vadim thought in amazement.

"It's like this, Saul. I don't like you. Sit in the glider and don't dare to try anything."

"Oh, Lord," Saul sighed and fell silent.

Vadim turned at an intersection, and in the distance they saw a two-story house with a pleasing appearance, alongside which there was a crowd of people illuminated by the red light of torches. People in burlap squeezed together in a clump, while people in coats bustled around them. Vadim drove extremely slowly, keeping the glider on the side of the street in shadow. He hadn't the slightest notion where to begin or what to do. Neither did Anton, to judge by everything. In any case, he was silent.

"Here is where the jokers live," Saul said. "You see what a nice, warm, comfortable house it is? And somewhere nearby there's an outhouse. That's the best place—capture the informant near the outhouse. By the way, have you noticed that there's not a single woman here?"

The door to the house opened, and two men stepped out onto the porch and halted. A long-drawn-out mournful yell resounded. The crowd of people in burlap set in motion, formed ranks, and suddenly set off straight toward the glider. Several voices were screaming near the porch. Vadim quickly put on the brakes and landed the glider.

He strained his vision but couldn't understand a thing. Anton was breathing heavily at his side. The people in burlap approached and then in a rapid pace marched right by. Vadim cried out in surprise. Two dozen barefooted people were harnessed to a clumsy heavy sleigh, in which a man in a fur coat and conical hat was lounging under fur robes. In his hands he held vertically a long spear with a fearsome toothed blade. The faces of the harnessed men expressed joy, and they yelled out loudly and triumphantly. Vadim glanced at Saul. Saul followed with his gaze the strange team, and his mouth was agape.

"Enough of these riddles," Anton said suddenly. "Drive up to the house."

Vadim pulled the steering wheel toward himself, and the house rushed toward the glider. The men in fur coats, standing on the porch, looked at the approaching glider for several seconds and then with startling speed spread out in a semicircle with their spears leveled outward. A round shaggy giant was hopping on the porch, shouting something mournful. He waved a wide, gleaming blade over his head.

Vadim landed the glider right in front of the spears and climbed out of the cockpit. The people in coats stepped back, closing their ranks. The tips of the spears were pointed straight at Vadim's chest.

"Peace," Vadim said, and raised his arms.

The men stepped back a little further. They gave off a steamy, goaty odor. Under their hoods their frightened eyes and bared teeth shone. The fat man on the porch let loose with a lengthy speech. He was incredibly fat and huge. He had a gigantic trembling face. His face was covered with sweat. He squatted down and then straightened up agian and even stood on tiptoes, thrust his sword at his feet, then at the sky and squealed in an unnaturally high female voice. Vadim listened, his head lowered. The mnemocrystals on his temples fixed the unknown words and intonations, analyzed them, and was already giving the first provisional translation variants. It was about some threat or other, about something enormous and strong, about cruel punishments. The fat man suddenly fell silent, wiped his sweaty face with his sleeve, and, straining, squealed out something short and abrupt. His voice expressed suffering. The men with the spears suddenly bent over and moved at Vadim very slowly.

"So, now you see," Saul said. "Should we begin?"

He rested the barrel of the scorcher on the side of the glider.

"Stop it, Saul," Anton said. "Vadim, into the cockpit."

"What are you dreaming about?" Saul said angrily. "They're scum, SS scum!"

The men kept moving forward with short little steps. When the broad glimmering blades were almost touching his chest, Vadim stepped away and, turning his back, climbed into the glider.

"A typical root-isolating language," he reported, taking a seat. "Very limited vocabulary. They don't want peace, that's clear."

"At least throw some fear into them," Saul said. "One blast in the area, and they'll shit in their pants!"

Anton slammed the canopy closed. The men returned to the porch and raised their spears. They were all staring at the glider. A scornful sneer flashed on the fat man's immeasurable face.

"Ugh," Saul said. "Do you need an informant or not? Let's capture the fat one. He's a real *Rapportführer.*"

"You have to understand," Anton said with desperation. "They

don't want to talk with us. And that's their right! So what can we do?"

"Do you need the informant or not?" Saul repeated. "We've already lost the advantage of surprise. We won't get away without a battle. But there's still that bastard who drove away in the sleigh."

Oh, what a vocabulary he has, Vadim thought with respect. Real twentieth century. What a remarkable specialist! He glanced at Anton. Anton looked pale and confused. Vadim had never seen him that way.

"Either one or the other," Saul continued. "Either we want to know what's going on here, or we fly back to Earth and let them send someone more decisive. And we have to decide quickly, while we have only spears aimed at us."

We're dawdling, Vadim thought. We keep dawdling. And in the hovels they're dying. "Anton," he said, "let's catch up with the sleigh. There was only one man with a spear, it will be easier. Take away his spear and invite him to the *Ship.*"

"They're sneering at us, the scum," Saul said, looking through the spectrolite.

He threatened the fat man with his fist. The fat man shook his jowls and no less expressively waved his sword.

"Did you see," Saul said with a joyful rage, "how we understand each other?"

"I'll try again," Anton said, and threw open the canopy. The fat man screamed. One of the spearmen wound up, having pushed the sleeve of his coat over his shoulder, and with a great strian hurled the heavy spear. The steel tip screeched against the spectrolite. Saul ducked down.

"So, seven-eight," he said incomprehensibly, but exceptionally energetically. Anton managed to grab his arm. His eyes were like black slits.

"All right now," he said ominously and took a deep breath. "Vadim, turn away."

Vadim turned the glider.

"After the sleigh!" Anton ordered, and slumped back in his chair. "We're not going to find out anything here," he muttered. "What impenetrable dumbness!"

"One blast over their heads," Saul said scornfully, "and you can take them bare-handed."

Anton was silent. The glider sped along the deserted street and in several minutes flew out into a field.

"I'll say just one thing," Anton said suddenly. "Later on we'll all be very ashamed."

"But what can we do?" Vadim asked. "People are dying."

"If only I knew what to do," Anton said. "The commission never dreamed of a situation like this."

Vadim wanted to ask what commission, but Saul spoke first: "Knock off the timidity. If you want to do good, let it be an active good. Good must be more active than evil, otherwise everything will come to a stop."

"Good, good, good," Anton muttered. "Who wants to be an obliging fool?"

"Precisely," Saul said. "But a fool's conscience is at peace."

They overtook the sleigh about five kilometers from the settlement. The men were running through open country, stumbling and getting stuck in drifts, and the man in the sleigh would every once in a while poke a laggard with his spear.

"I'm descending," Vadim said.

"Set down in front of the team," Anton ordered, "and talk with him. Saul, hand over the scorcher. And stay in the glider—he's not a bastard but a human."

"All right," Saul said. "Here's the scorcher. But suppose he gets it into his head to spear Vadim, instead of discussing things?"

Vadim said, "In that case, I'll take the spear away from him. We'll have to cut the men loose from the harness and hand out food and clothing."

"Right," Anton said.

The glider plopped into the snow right in front of the team, and the human horses stopped as though they were rooted to the ground. Vadim jumped out. The men in burlap were standing with their hands covering their faces. They were breathing heavily, whimpering. Running past them, Vadim shouted out happily, "It's over, friends. Now you can go home!"

He headed for the sleigh, thinking as he ran about the best way to take away the spear. The man in the fur coat was on his knees and staring at him in amazement and terror. He was holding the spear horizontally.

"Let's go," Vadim suggested, and grabbed the shaft.

The man immediately let go of the spear and pulled a sword out of nowhere. He was now standing up.

"That's not necessary," Vadim said, tossing the spear aside.

The man suddenly yelled, a slow and mournful cry. Vadim took him by the arm holding the sword and pulled the man toward him. He felt awkward. The man was struggling to free himself. Vadim tightened his grip.

"Hey, take it easy. Everything's going to be O.K., everything's going to be fine," he said persuasively, unclasping the man's sweaty fist. The sword dropped into the snow. Vadim put his arm around the man's shoulders and led him to the glider. He murmured soothing words, trying to give his voice the local intonations. Then Saul let out a warning shout, and Vadim felt someone trying to knock him over. Someone's hands grabbed at his face, someone was hanging on to his neck, several hands clasped his legs—weak, trembling hands.

"What's the matter with you, have you gone crazy?" Saul yelled as though he were offended. "Anton, stop them!"

The man in the fur coat was struggling furiously again. Someone threw a stinking bag over Vadim's head, and he could not see a thing. He could hardly keep his feet in the cluster of swarming bodies, pressing the man in the fur coat against himself as hard as he could. Then he felt a sharp blow to his side, and pain. He let his informant go, moved his shoulders, and, freeing himself, tore the stinking bag from his head. He saw the men floundering in the snow and Anton, who was making his way toward him, stepping over bodies. He turned around. A naked man with a sword stood before him, up to his knees in the snow.

"Why?" Vadim asked.

The man swung full force, but the sword turned in his hand and landed flat against Vadim's shoulder. Vadim pushed the man in the chest, and he fell into the snow and remained motionless. Vadim picked up the sword and hurled it far away to the side. He felt something hot and wet crawling down his thigh. He looked around.

The men in the snow were lying stock still, as though they were dead. The man in the fur coat was not among them.

"Are you alive?" Anton shouted, gasping for breath.

"One hundred percent," Vadim said. "But where's our informant?"

He caught sight of Saul, striding along, dragging the man in the fur coat behind him by the scruff of the neck.

"He took it into his head to run away," Saul declared. "That's the way these bastards are."

"Let's get out of here," Anton said.

They walked to the glider, carefully stepping over the motionless bodies. Saul jerked the man to his feet and led him away, pushing him between the shoulder blades.

"Move, you son of a bitch! Move, you fat pig! He stinks terribly," Saul announced. "Probably hasn't washed in a year."

When they reached the glider, Anton took the informant by his furry shoulder and pointed to the cockpit. The man whirled his head desperately, and his hat fell off. Then he sat down in the snow.

"Let's not play games!" Saul yelled.

He lifted the man up by his coat and pushed him into the glider. The man fell noisily to the floor of the cockpit and was quiet.

"Pfui," Anton said. "What a job!"

He took two sacks, standing alongside the glider, and dragged them to the team. He unpacked the sacks, got out the clothing, and spread it on the snow. He did the same with the food. The men seemed lifeless but drew in their legs as Anton walked past.

Vadim was leaning exhaustedly against the warm side of the glider and looking at the plowed-up snow, at the overturned sleigh, at the bodies lying contorted in the moonlight. He heard Anton say sadly, "Commission on Contacts, where are you?"

Vadim felt his side. It was still bleeding. He felt faint and weak, and climbed into the cockpit. Nothing was right, everything turned out bad. The prisoner was lying face down, his head shielded by his arms, to all appearances he was awaiting death, and maybe torture. Saul was sitting over him, not taking his fierce eyes off him. Anton walked up and also climbed into the cockpit.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Vadim answered with great effort. "You know, Anton, they wounded me. I feel helpless now."

Anton looked at him for a second. "Well, then, undress," he demanded.

"Ugh," Saul cried out in annoyance.

Vadim pulled off his jacket. He felt sick, and everything went

black before his eyes. He saw Anton's concentrated expression and Saul's face, wrinkled with pity. Then he felt cool fingers on his side.

"A knife," Saul said. It was as though his voice were coming from behind the walls. "The whole thing was dumb! I could have taken him with one hand tied behind my back!"

"It wasn't him," Vadim muttered. "It was with a sword . . . a naked man . . ."

"Naked?" Saul said. "That even I can't understand."

Anton answered something, but right then Vadim saw circles and stars floating before his eyes, and he lost consciousness.

Chapter 6

"LOOK, ANTON," Saul broke out. "Anton! He's fainted, do you see?"

"He's sleeping," Anton said. He was examining the wound attentively. The wound was jagged and rather deep. The blow had landed under the ribs and the sword had divided the muscles into layers. Anton gave a sigh of relief. Saul was watching over his shoulder, gasping excitedly.

"Bad?" he asked in a whisper.

"No, it's nothing," Anton said. "In an hour everything will be better." He pushed Saul to the side. "Only sit down please."

Saul leaned back in a chair and fixed a malicious stare on the motionless informant. Anton unhurriedly unsnapped the sack, took out a jar of colloid, and poured it thickly over the wound. The orange jelly turned pink, and a thin film of tiny pink arrows formed, like froth on milk. Now that's blood for you, Anton thought. Vadim's really a strong guy. He looked at his face. It was slightly paler than usual, but as calm and peaceful as when he was sleeping. And he was breathing, as always, through his nose—deeply and noiselessly. Anton put his fingers on the edge of the wound and closed his eyes.

The simplest psychosurgical procedures were part of a starpilot's training. Every pilot knew enough to open and close living tissue, using psychodynamical resonance. It required great effort and concentration. In medical installations neurogenerators were used, but in the field one had to do it à la shaman, and every time Anton felt pity for shamans.

As though in a dream Anton heard Saul breathing heavily and fidgeting behind him, and the prisoner mumbling and whining. An unpleasant sour smell from the prisoner had filled the cockpit.

Anton opened his eyes. The wound had grown together, pushing out the colloid, and now it was just a pink scar. I hope that does it, Anton thought. Otherwise I won't be able to fly the glider. He was damp all over.

"Well, that's it," he said, taking a breath.

Saul sat up and looked at the wound.

"Damn it anyway," he grumbled. "How do you do that?"

Anton looked around and shuddered. Terrifying faces, emaciated, with sunken cheeks and bared teeth were pressed up against the canopy. There was a primeval terror in it: as though ghouls were peeking into your house. A shiver ran over Anton's skin. Saul raised his bushy eyebrows and threatened them with his fist. The bony fists knocked quietly against the spectrolite.

"Go home! Go home!" Saul said loudly.

Anton began to dress Vadim. "We'll take off now," he said.

"You should kill them off."

Anton shook his head from side to side and climbed into the driver's seat. The glider trembled and began to ascend slowly. The faces on the canopy disappeared. A long bony hand with torn fingernails slid along the spectrolite and also disappeared.

Turning the glider to the *Ship*'s beacon, Anton went full speed. He was in a hurry; it was already midnight.

"What do they see in him?" Saul muttered. "An SS officer, an animal. I saw myself how he stuck them with the spear, driving them along."

Anton was silent.

"Oh, Lord!" Saul said. "Look at all the filth on him. Just crawling —"

"What's crawling?"

"Something like fleas. We'll have to wash him down and disinfect everything."

Something else to do, Anton thought. Saul, as though reading his mind, added, "Never mind, I'll take care of it. As long as he doesn't kick off because of the shock."

Anton drove the glider at top speed, staying a hundred meters above the ground. The small brilliant moon had almost reached the zenith, the red sickle had set long ago, and a third moon, pink and flattened, was rising from beyond the white horizon. Vadim tossed in his sleep, yawned loudly, and after muttering "You healed me?" went back to sleep.

"What's the informant doing?" Anton asked. He was so tired he didn't even want to turn around.

"He's lying here, stinking. It's been a long time since I smelled anything like that."

A long time, Anton thought. And I've never smelled anything like it. I don't want to. Saul's right; it was dumb to have gotten ourselves involved. Saul's a bright guy. It really is the system. A slave-owning culture. Slaves and masters. Although I used to think that loyal slaves were found only in bad novels. A loyal slave—what a rotten thing! All right, it's over and done with, and it's too late to back out now, and too stupid. At least we'll find out everything for sure. But that's not what's essential. Even if I suddenly figured everything out, I still couldn't turn my back on it. On the hollow where tanks crush people. On the filth-strewn barracks. It will be interesting to find out whether the World Council will tolerate the existence of a planet with a slave-owning social system.

He suddenly felt the full enormity of the problem. Never before had there been such a choice: to intervene in the fate of an alien planet or not to intervene. The inhabitants of Leonida and Tagora were too distant from human beings. Leonidian psychology is a riddle to this day, and no one can say what their social structure is. And the humanoids on Tagora need so little from nature that it's incomprehensible that they matured to the point where they could create their technology. But here, on Saula, it was completely different. Nowhere else had social relationships acquired such an ugly and, at the same time apparently necessary, form. Mankind's own brother—very youthful, very immature, and very cruel. And on top of everything else, those crazy alien vehicles.

Far ahead in the light blue plain a small black dot appeared. The *Ship*, Anton thought. And alongside, under the snow, the bodies. How strange—only one day has passed and I'm already used to it. Just as though I had spent my while life amid naked corpses in the snow. Man gets used to things so easily. Psychological accommodation. Strange. Perhaps it's because they are, after all, strangers. Perhaps on Earth I would have gone mad from all this. No, I've just sunk into a torpor.

Reducing speed, he circled the *Ship*. The *Ship* looked welcoming, the familiar black cone over the blue hills. And two sharply defined shadows: a short black one and a long pinkish one. The glider set down in front of the entrance. The snow around the *Ship* had frozen over into a solid icy field. Anton slapped Vadim on the knee.

"What is it, what is it," Vadim asked sleepily.

"Rise and shine."

"Come off it."

"Get up, Vadim. We're going on board the *Ship*."

"Right away," Vadim said and smacked his lips. "Just one more minute."

"Tickle him," Saul proposed matter-of-factly. Vadim immediately opened his eyes and stood up. "Oh, it's the *Ship* . . . I understand."

They climbed out onto the hard slippery ice. The icy air took their breath away. Anton could hear Vadim's teeth chattering. Saul held on to the prisoner by the scruff of the neck.

"You go straight up to the lounge," Saul said, "and I'll take him straight to the showers."

They entered the *Ship* and drew the hatch shut, and Anton, urging Vadim onward, went up to the lounge. Vadim, his teeth chattering, was dozing off. Below, the prisoner let out a terrible shout. Vadim roused himself.

"What are they doing down there?" he asked nervously.

"He was taken down to be washed," Anton explained. "He was covered with parasites."

They heard Saul's voice: "Get in there or I'll force you in—you're not going to die."

The door to the shower slammed. Anton and Vadim went into the lounge and collapsed into chairs.

"The good *Ship*," Vadim said. "How nice, how clean."

Anton lay back with closed eyes. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

"It tingles."

"That means everything is O.K. Listen, what do you need for your work?"

"The computer," Vadim answered. "Half the memory. Both analyzers. A lot of coffee and some delicious food for our informant. Within two hours he'll be sitting here at the table and discussing the meaning of life with you."

From below came the sound of howling and the slap of bare feet against the floor.

"Where you going?" Saul roared. "Stand still. Come here!"

"Saul's really doing a job on him," Vadim said, full of respect. "Probably got some soap in his eye. But Saul's intonation isn't right. All that roaring is perceived by our prisoner as pleading babble. Here's the intonation for a command." Vadim, stretching his neck, mournfully and unbearably squealed.

"You stepped on a kitten's head," Anton said.

"That's it!"

"O.K., you use the control center. I'll bring everything."

Vadim looked at him attentively.

"You're squeezed dry, like a lemon," he said.

"I need to eat something. Your wound isn't very serious, but it took a lot out of me. You know how exhausting it is?"

"Get some sleep. I'll manage alone. And Saul will bring what I need."

"Get a move on," Anton said. "I'll take care of things. Go on," he waved his hand. "Get ready."

Vadim stood up. "I still advise you to sleep awhile." He went to the control center and suddenly stopped. "Did they take the clothing?"

At first, Anton didn't understand, then answered, "I honestly can't say. I don't remember. But they were very unhappy with us."

"What a mess," Vadim said. "I can't understand it. Why did he stab me with the sword?"

He shook his head in wonderment and went into the control center. Anton immediately dozed off. He dreamed that he had gone to the kitchen, made a pot of coffee, brought the coffeepot and bread and jam to the control center, and Vadim was busy and

snapped at him, and then he went to his cabin, sat at the desk to select the return flight program, but he wanted to sleep and kept finding old programs from his earlier flights. Then Saul awakened him.

"Here," Saul said.

In front of Anton was standing a well-proportioned, bright-faced man in shorts and a tetrakanethylene jacket, black-eyed and petrified.

"Good?" Saul asked sarcastically.

Anton broke out laughing. "A handsome race," he said. "Hello, young brother."

Young brother stared at him, his eyes round with fear. A really tremendous guy, Anton thought.

"And here's what he had under his coat," Saul said, putting a solid packet on the table.

The prisoner made a motion toward the package.

"Watch it," Saul threatened. "Again? I'll show you!"

The prisoner backed off. Apparently he had already caught on to Saul's intonation. Anton took the package, looked it over, and opened it. Inside the envelope of superbly crafted leather lay an intricately folded sheet of paper, a sketch of something, and several pieces of bloody tampoplaster.

"You understand?" Saul said. "They tore off the tampoplasters you put on the wounded man."

Anton recalled the mutilated men in the column and ground his teeth.

"It's most likely a report," he said, after a brief silence, "on our arrival. Vadim!" he called.

The prisoner suddenly started talking. He spoke rapidly, striking his chest with his palm, his face expressing horror and despair, and that conflicted strangely with the harsh and even sarcastic intonations of his voice. Vadim came down to the lounge and stood behind the prisoner, eavesdropping. The prisoner fell silent and covered his face with his hands.

"Take a look, Vadim," Anton said, handing over the sheet of paper.

"Oh!" Vadim said. "A letter! A real delight! It cuts the work in half!"

He took the prisoner by the arm and led him into the control

center, looking at the paper as he went. The prisoner followed submissively. Saul was studying the drawing.

"I'm not a specialist," he said, "but I think it's an exact representation of the inside of that tank. Remember, in the hollow?"

He tossed the drawing over to Anton. The drawing had been done in dark blue paint, very accurately, but there were many traces of dirty fingers on the paper. It was a blueprint of the perforated-spoon cockpit—apparently an exact one. Several openings were marked with crudely drawn *x*'s, several simply blacked out. Anton yawned and wiped his eyes. So now, he thought tiredly, excellent blueprints drawn by slave owners.

"Listen, captain," Saul said. "Go to sleep. It doesn't make any difference. Until our linguist finishes, you're not needed here."

Anton closed his eyes and stopped fighting it. He slept uneasily, waking often and opening his eyes. He saw Saul walking past on tiptoe, in one hand he had an empty jam jar, in the other the coffeepot. The next time Saul walked into the control center with a tray, and the lounge smelled of tomatoes. Then Saul appeared at the table. He was absentmindedly sucking on an empty pipe and attentively studying Anton. Above, in the control center, voices were talking monotonously. *"Suuu mu-u-u, bu-u-u"* Vadim would say, and a mechanical voice would repeat *"Suuu, muu, bu.* Work—*ka-ro-su-u.* Worker—*ka-ro-bu* . . . became a worker . . . *ka-ro-mu-u."* Sleep floated the words back and forth. Vadim's voice pontificated incomprehensibly: "Shining . . . great and mighty cliff . . . *iday-kbikari* . . . *tika-udo,"* and the prisoner's squeaky voice would correct him: *"Tiko-o* . . . *udo-o."* Vadim would yell, "Saul! Coffee!" "The third pot," Saul grumbled discontentedly.

Then Anton woke up and felt he didn't want to sleep anymore. Saul wasn't in the lounge. Vadim's hoarse voice was pronouncing carefully: *"Sorinaka-bu* . . . *torynakaby* . . . *saponuri-su."* The prisoner answered something in a bass voice. Anton looked at his watch. It was three in the morning, local time. Oh, you most structuralist-est, Anton thought with respect. Suddenly he was seized by impatience.

"Vadim!" he shouted. "How's it going?"

"You woke up?" Vadim answered. "We were waiting for you. We'll be right down."

Saul's head appeared in his cabin door.

"Already?" he asked. Through his half-open door smoke poured out.

"Come on in, Saul," Anton said. "We're just beginning."

Saul sat down in an easy chair and tossed the drawing on the table. The prisoner stepped down from the control center, walking unsteadily. His cheeks were smeared with jam. Without paying attention to anyone, he stood still and started to stare at the ceiling with an expression of doglike respectfulness in his eyes. Vadim also stepped down into the lounge, holding in his embrace a large shining box, the portable analyzer. He walked up to the table, set the analyzer down, and plopped into a chair. His face was triumphant.

"I'm a genius," he announced hoarsely. "I am one bright guy. The Great and Mighty Cliff! *Kbikari-tikoo-udoo!"*

At these words the prisoner stopped licking his fingers and folded his hands respectfully over his chest.

"Ah?" Vadim shouted, holding out his hand to him. Then he announced:

> On board the *Ship* in outer space
> If you should need a specialist—
> The great and mighty, with his mace,
> The most structuralist-est linguist.

Anton looked at him with satisfaction. The little yellow horns of the mnemocrystals were protruding from Vadim's temples. The prisoner also had little yellow horns protruding from his temples. They both looked a little like good-natured young demons, although the prisoner had a greater resemblance to a calf. Saul was also smiling, sucking on his pipe.

"I warn you," Vadim announced, "that you shouldn't ask him abstract questions. He's an incredible blockhead. Second-grade education." He stood up and handed a pair of mnemocrystals to both Anton and Saul. "He thinks only in concrete terms." He turned to the prisoner and said, *"Ringa bosi-mu?"*

Anton understood: "Do you want jam?"

The prisoner smiled ingratiatingly and once again folded his arms in front of his chest.

"You see?" Vadim said. "He wants more jam. But he'll have to wait. Let's get down to business."

Anton suddenly felt confused. He discovered that he hadn't the slightest idea about how to conduct an interrogation. Vadim and Saul were looking at him expectantly. The prisoner was dejectedly shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"What's your name?" Anton asked very gently. He was unhappy that the prisoner was still feeling ill at ease and undoubtedly experiencing fear.

The prisoner looked at him in bewilderment. "Hayra," he answered, and stopped fidgeting.

Anton understood: "Of the hill clan."

"Pleased to meet you," he said. "My name is Anton."

The bewilderment on Hayra's face grew.

"Tell me, please, Hayra, what kind of work you do."

"I don't work. I am a warrior."

"Look now," Anton said, "you must be offended by the violence that we were compelled to use against you. But you shouldn't be. We really had no choice."

The prisoner put one hand against his chest, protruded his lower lip, and began to stare right through Anton. Saul coughed resonantly and started drumming his fingers on the table.

"You mustn't be afraid," Anton continued. "We won't do anything bad to you."

A decided expression of arrogance came over the prisoner's face. He looked around, took two steps to the side, and sat down cross-legged on the floor with his side toward Anton. He's feeling at home, Anton thought. That's good.

Vadim, sprawled back in his chair, was watching the proceedings with contentment. Saul had stopped drumming his fingers and was now rapping his pipe against the table.

"We only want to ask you a few questions," Anton continued with great enthusiasm, "because it is essential that we learn what is going on here."

"Jam," Hayra said unpleasantly. "And fast."

Vadim chuckled with pleasure. *"Quel petit cochon,"* he said.

Anton blushed and looked over at Saul. Saul was slowly standing up. His expression was motionless and bored.

"Are you bringing the jam?" Hayra inquired, directing his question at the ceiling. "And let everyone be silent while I ask questions. And bring jam and a blanket, because the floor is hard."

Silence reigned. Vadim stopped smiling and stared at the analyzer with doubt written all over his face.

"Que penses-tu?" Anton said. *"Faut-il lui apporter de la confiture?"*

Saul, without responding, walked slowly over to the prisoner. The prisoner was sitting stony-faced. Saul turned to Anton. *"Vous n'êtes pas dans le bon chemin,"* he said. *"Ça ne marche pas avec les Gestapo."* He lowered his hand to Hayra's neck. Hayra looked worried. *"C'est un pithécanthrope, c'est quoi,"* Saul said mildly. *"Il se méprend sur votre traitement. Il pense que votre politesse est un signe de faiblesse."*

"Saul, Saul!" Anton said excitedly.

"Ne parlez qu'en français," Saul quickly warned them.

"Where's the jam?" the prisoner asked hesitantly.

With a powerful jerk, Saul lifted the prisoner to his feet. Hayra's stony expression changed to confusion. Saul walked slowly around him, looking him over from head to foot. What a spectacle, Anton thought with involuntary fright and disquiet. Saul's appearance was most unattractive. But Hayra folded his arms across his chest again and smiled ingratiatingly. Saul returned to his chair unhurriedly and sat down. Hayra was now looking only at him. A deathly silence settled in.

Saul started filling his pipe, glancing at Hayra out of the corner of his eye from time to time.

"Maintenant, c'est moi qui interrogerai," he said. *"Et vous, ne mêlez-vous-en pas. Si vous voulez me parler, parlez en français."*

"D'accord," Vadim said, and flicked a switch on the analyzer. Anton nodded in agreement.

"Qu'avez-vous fait avec cette boîte?" Saul asked suspiciously.

"J'ai pris des mesures," Vadim answered. *"Nous ne voulons pas qu'il apprenne le français, n'est-ce pas?"*

"Très bien," Saul said. He lit his pipe. Hayra looked at him in terror, bending his body away from the clouds of smoke.

"Name?" Saul asked sullenly.

The prisoner trembled and bowed his head. "Hayra."

"Your rank?"

"Spear carrier. Guardsman."

"Your superior?"

"Kadayra." ("Of the whirlwind clan" Anton understood.)

"Your supervisor's rank?"

"Bearer of the Excellent Spear. Leader of the Guard."

"How many guardsmen are there in the camp?"

"Twenty."

"How many men in the shacks?"

"There are no men in the shacks."

Anton and Vadim exchanged glances. Saul continued impassively. "Who lives in the shacks?"

"Criminals."

"Aren't criminals men?"

A look of genuine puzzlement appeared on Hayra's face. Instead of answering he smiled indecisively.

"All right. How many criminals are there in the camp?"

"A lot. No one counts them."

"Who sent the criminals here?"

The prisoner spoke at length and inspiredly, but Anton caught only, "They were sent by the Great and Mighty Cliff, Shining in Battle, with One Foot in Heaven, Until the Machines Disappear."

"Aha!" Saul said. "They know the word *machine*."

"No," Vadim chimed in. "It's me who knows the word. He has in mind the vehicles in the hollow and on the road. And the Great and so forth—that's most likely the local king."

The prisoner listened to the conversation with an expression of dull despair.

"Well, all right," Saul said. "Let's continue. What are the criminals guilty of?"

"There are criminals who want to replace the Cliff. There are criminals who take others' belongings. There are criminals who have killed people. There are criminals who want strange things."

"I understand. Who sent the guards here?"

"The Great and Mighty Cliff with One Foot on the Earth."

"Why?"

The prisoner was silent. He even closed his eyes. Saul glared at the prisoner.

"So! What do the prisoners do here?"

The prisoner, his eyes shut tight, began to shake his head.

"Talk!" Saul snapped so violently that Anton shuddered. Commission on Contacts, he thought sorrowfully, where are you now?

The prisoner started groaning pitiably. "They'll kill me if I tell you."

"We'll kill you if you don't," Saul promised. He took his penknife out of his pocket and opened it. The prisoner quivered.

"Saul," Anton said. "*Cesse-le.*"

Saul began to clean his pipe with the knife. "*Cesse quoi?*" he inquired.

"The criminals make the machines move," Hayra uttered, barely audibly. "The guards watch."

"What do they watch?"

"How the vehicles move."

Saul took the diagram and shoved it in the prisoner's face. "Tell me everything," he demanded.

Hayra spoke lengthily, but inconsistently, getting many things mixed up. Saul kept after him and corrected him. Apparently, it was a matter of the local authorities attempting to gain control over the vehicles. The methods they used to accomplish this were barbaric to the extreme. The criminals were forced to poke their fingers into the holes, to turn the knobs, and to put their hands into the engines, and the guards watched what happened. Most often, nothing at all happened. Sometimes, the vehicles would explode. Less frequently, they would start moving, crushing, and maiming everyone around. And extremely rarely they succeeded in getting the vehicle to move in a controllable way. During the work the guards would sit at a good distance from the vehicle being tested, and the criminals would run back and forth between them and the machine to inform them into which hole or which button a finger was going to be stuck. The information was carefully noted on a diagram.

"Who makes the diagrams?"

"I don't know."

"I believe you. Who brings the diagrams?"

"The leaders on birds."

"He means our feathered friends," Vadim clarified. "Apparently they domesticate them."

"Who needs the machines?"

"The Great and Mighty Cliff, Shining in Battle, with One Foot in Heaven, Until the Machines Disappear."

"And what does he do with the machines?"

"Who?"

"The Cliff."

The prisoner looked confused.

"It's a title, Saul," Vadim said. "Use the full form."

"O.K. What does the Great and Mighty Cliff with One Foot in Heaven . . . or on Earth? Damn it, I don't remember . . . Living Until—"

"Until the Machines Disappear," Vadim prompted.

"What nonsense!" Saul said angrily. "What do the machines have to do with it?"

"It's all part of the title," Vadim explained. "A symbol of eternity."

"Listen, Vadim. Ask him what he does with the vehicles."

"Who?"

"The goddamned Cliff!"

"Say it simply," Vadim said. "The Great and Mighty Cliff."

Saul inhaled deeply and put his pipe on the table. "So, what does the Great and Mighty Cliff do with the machines?"

"No one knows what the Great and Mighty Cliff does," Hayra answered with pride.

Anton couldn't stand it anymore and broke out laughing. Vadim roared, bracing himself against the arms of his chair. The prisoner stared at them in terror.

"Where do the diagrams come from?"

"From beyond the mountains."

"What is beyond the mountains?"

"The world."

"How many men are there in the world?"

"Very many. It is impossible to count them."

"Who drives the machines?"

"The criminals."

"From where?"

"From the hard road. There are many machines there." The prisoner thought for a moment and added, "It is impossible to count them."

"Who makes the machines?"

Hayra smiled in amazement. "No one makes the machines. They are."

"Where did they come from?"

Hayra pronounced a lengthy speech. He wiped his face, rubbed his sides, and glanced at the ceiling. He rolled his eyes and even broke into song. The story was as follows.

Long, long ago, when no one had yet been born, big boxes fell from the red moon. In the boxes there was water. Thick and sticky, like jam. And it was dark red, like jam. First the water made a city. Then it made two holes in the ground and filled them with the smoke of death. Then the water turned into a hard road between the holes, and the machines were born out of the smoke. Since that time one smoke gives birth to the machines. The other smoke swallows them up, and thus shall it ever be.

"That we already know," Saul said. "And if the criminals don't want to move the vehicles?"

"They are killed."

"Who kills them?"

"The guards."

"Have you killed any?"

"I have killed three," Hayra said proudly.

Anton closed his eyes. A kid, he thought. An attractive, likable kid. And yet he talks about it with pride.

"How did you kill them?"

"One I killed with my sword. I proved to my superior that I could cut a body in two with one blow. He knows now that I can. Another I killed with my fist. The third one I ordered thrown on my spear."

"Whom did you order?"

"The other criminals."

Saul paused for a minute.

"It's boring," the prisoner said. "It is a proud calling but boring. No women. No intelligent conversation. Boring," he repeated and sighed.

"Why don't the criminals run away?"

"They do. But just let them. Out on the plain there is nothing but the snow and the birds. There are guards in the mountains. The smart ones don't run away. They all want to live."

"Why do some of them have golden fingernails?"

The prisoner answered in a whisper. "Those were men of great wealth. But they wanted strange things—some even wanted to replace the Cliff. They are disgusting, offal," he said loudly. "The Great and Mighty Cliff, Shining in Battle, sends them here with their whole family. Except for the women," he added with regret.

"You know," Saul said, "I feel an enormous desire to hang him first, then all the other sword and spear carriers on this plain. But unfortunately it wouldn't do any good." He filled his pipe again. "I have no more questions. Ask away, if you want."

"You can't hang me," Hayra said quickly, his face white. "The Great and Mighty Cliff with One Foot in Heaven will punish you cruelly."

"Screw your Great and Mighty One," Saul said. His hands were trembling. "Are you going to ask questions or not?"

Anton shook his head no. He had never in his whole life experienced such revulsion. Vadim walked over to Hayra and tore the mnemocrystals from his temples.

"What will we do?" he asked.

"Such is man," Saul muttered pensively. "On his path to you he must pass through all this and much besides. He will remain a beast for ages after he rises on his hind legs and takes tools in his hands. These people can be forgiven—they have no idea of freedom, equality, and brotherhood. But they have it ahead. They will still attempt to save civilization with gas chambers. They will become philistines and put their world on the brink of disaster. But all the same, I'm satisfied. In this world the Middle Ages reign, that's completely obvious. All these noble-sounding titles, all this grandiloquent word-mongering, gilded fingernails, and abysmal ignorance. . . . But at least there are already people who want strange things. That is beautiful, men who want strange things! And those men, of course, are feared. Those men also have a long road ahead of them. They will be burned at the stake, crucified, imprisoned behind iron bars, then behind barbed wire . . . yes." He fell silent. "And what a weird practical joke!" he exclaimed. "To gain control over vehicles without having the slightest idea of what a vehicle is! Can you imagine it? What a bold mind it was? Now, of course, they'd send him to a camp. Now it's all routine, something like a rite in honor of the mighty ancestor. Now, most likely, no one knows. No one wants to know the purpose of it all. Except as an excuse to create death camps. But at one time it was a real idea. . . ." He fell silent and started to rasp on his pipe.

Anton said, "Why then are you so gloomy, Saul? They won't have to pass through the gas chambers and all that. After all, we are already here."

"We!" Saul grinned. "And what can we do? There are three of us here and we all want to do good actively. But what are we capable of? Of course, we can go up to the Great Cliff as emissaries of reason and ask him to renounce slave owning and to give the people freedom. We'd be hauled off and thrown into the hollow. We can squeeze into long white robes and go among the people. You, Anton, will be Christ, Vadim will be Saint Paul, and I, of course, Thomas. And we will preach socialism and even, perhaps, perform a few miracles. Something like null transport. The local Pharisees will impale us on the stake and the people we wanted to save will cast excrement on us, whooping for joy!" He stood up and paced around the table. "True, we do have the scorcher. We can, for example, kill off the guards, line the naked up in columns and break through the mountains, burn the sovereign and vassals with their castles and pompous titles, and then the Pharisees' cities will smolder, and we'll be caught by spears or more likely hacked down from behind, and chaos will reign throughout the country and some Sadducees will manage to survive it. That's what we can do."

He sat down. Anton and Vadim were smiling.

"There are not just three of us," Anton said. "There are, my dear Saul, twenty billion of us. Probably twenty times the number of people on this planet."

"So what?" Saul said. "Do you understand what you're trying to do? You're trying to break the natural course of history! And do you know what history is? It's humanity itself. And you can't break the backbone of history and you can't break the backbone of humanity."

"No one is intending to break backbones," Vadim objected. "There were times in the course of history when whole nations and peoples leaped straight from feudalism to socialism. And no backbones were broken. Are you afraid of war? There won't be any war. Two million volunteers, a beautiful, well-designed city, its gates open wide—that there will be. And you will have doctors and teachers and engineers, scholars, and actors! Do you want it to be like Earth? Of course. And so do we! A pack of stinking feudals against a colony—no problem! Of course, it won't happen immediately. We'll have to work, for at least five years."

"Five!" Saul said, throwing his hands in the air. "Why not five hundred fifty-five? What great educators! It's a whole planet, re-

member! Not a tribe, or a people, or even a country. A whole planet! A planet covered with ignorance, a quagmire. Actors! Scholars! And what will you do when you have to shoot? Because you will have to shoot, Vadim, when some filthy monks are crucifying some schoolteacher friend of yours. And you will have to shoot, Anton, when your doctor friend is being beaten to death by a club-wielding, rusty-helmeted gang. And then you will become animals yourselves and your colonists will turn into colonialists."

"Pessimism," Vadim said, "is a gloomy sense of the world, in which man is inclined to see the bad side of everything."

Saul stared at him wildly for several seconds.

"You shouldn't joke," he said finally. "It's no laughing matter. Communism is first and foremost an idea. And not a simple one. It was earned through blood. You can't teach it in five years by visual aids. You shower a hereditary slave, a natural egotist, with abundance, and do you know what happens? Either your colony becomes a wet nurse for fattened idlers who have no incentive to work, or some energetic bastard, with the help of your very own gliders, scorchers, and other paraphernalia, drives you off the planet, and takes over all that abundance for himself, and history continues down its natural path."

Saul snatched back the lid of the disposal and furiously began to empty his pipe.

"No, my fine friends. Communism has to be earned through suffering. For communism you have to fight with people like this" —he pointed his pipe toward Hayra— "with your ordinary simpleminded person. Fight him when he has a spear, fight him when he has a musket, fight him when he has a Schmeisser. And that's not all. When he throws away his Schmeisser, falls face down in the mud, and crawls toward you—that's when the real fight begins! Not for a piece of bread, but for communism! You lift him out of the mud, wash him off . . ."

Saul stopped talking and threw himself into a chair.

Vadim scratched his head thoughtfully.

Anton said, "You would know best, Saul, you're the historian. Of course, it won't be easy. Vadim, as usual, was spouting off. Vadim and I together, or the three of us, will never solve the problem, even in theory. But we know one thing: humanity has never set itself a task and failed to complete it."

Saul mumbled something incomprehensible.

"How it will be done in practice . . ." Anton shrugged. "And if it is necessary to shoot, we will remember how it's done, and we will shoot. Only, I think, we will manage without the shooting. We will invite those men who want strange things to Earth. We'll begin with them. They would probably want to get away from here."

Saul glanced upward, and then lowered his gaze. "No," he said. "That's not the way. A real man will not want to leave. And a not-real man . . ." He raised his eyes again and looked straight at Anton. "And a not-real man won't find anything to do on Earth. Who needs him, the deserter?"

For some unknown reason they all fell silent. And for some reason Anton felt unbearably sorry for Saul and afraid for him. Saul, beyond doubt, had suffered a great calamity. And a very complex calamity, as unusual as Saul himself, as his words and actions.

Vadim cried out with a forced enthusiasm, "Say, we almost forgot! Why did those poor unfortunate men stab me with the sword? We should have that clarified."

He ran up to Hayra, whose legs were giving way because of fatigue and foreboding, and fastened the mnemocrystals to his temples again.

"Listen here, pithecanthropus," he said. "Why did the criminals pulling your sleigh attack us? Do they love you that much?"

Hayra answered, "At the command of the Great and Mighty Cliff, Shining in Battle, with One Foot in Heaven, Living Until the Machines Disappear, the prisoners are imprisoned here until the machines disappear—"

"That is, forever," Vadim explained.

"—but if a criminal gets a machine to move, he is granted a pardon and returns beyond the mountains. The criminals pulling my sleigh were going home. They were almost men. At the checkpoint I was to let them go and ride the rest of the way on a bird. But they were unable to protect me, even though they wanted to, because they wanted to live. Now they will be impaled." He yawned nervously and added, "If the sun has already arisen, they have been impaled."

Anton jumped to his feet, knocking over his chair.

"Oh, God!" Saul said, and dropped his pipe.

Chapter 7

THE SPEAR CARRIER of the hill clan was seated between Saul and Anton. Once again he was wrapped in his fur coat, which now smelled of insecticide. He was sitting peacefully, wrinkling his short nose nervously and sniffing. It was five o'clock in the morning, and a pale, icy dawn was breaking. And it was very cold.

Vadim drove the glider at top speed and kept thinking the same thing over and over: "Will we make it or not? If only those poor men had decided not to return to the settlement immediately." But he understood that they had nowhere else to go. It was their only hope—to try to assuage the Leader of the Guard with a story about their heroic defense of his envoy. That vicious beast would have them killed immediately, Vadim thought bitterly. If we don't make it in time. He imagined how he would stand Hayra in front of the fat Bearer of the Excellent Sword and how he, Vadim, would say, *"Kayra-me sorinata-mu karo-sika!"*—"Here's your man"—and how he would shriek, *"Tatimata-ne kori-su!"*—"Don't dare to kill these free men!" He kept repeating these sentences in his mind, and finally they lost all meaning. It was just not that simple.

Perhaps it would be necessary to conduct a lengthy discussion. And it was not very likely that the bearer of the sword would agree of his own free will to fasten the mnemocrystals to his unwashed, overbearing head.

Anton asked, "What was in the message?"

Vadim took a crumpled sheet of paper out of his pocket and, without turning around, held it back over his shoulder. "I edited it a little," he said. "The translation is written in pencil between the lines."

Anton took it and began to read it in a low voice: "To the Radiant Wheel in Golden Furs, the Bearer of the Fearsome Arrow, the

servant under the very seat of the Great and Mighty Cliff, Shining in Battle, with One Foot in Heaven, Living Until the Machines Disappear, at your feet I deposit this report, the miserable guardsman of the whirlwind clan, the Bearer of the Excellent Sword. I report first: a large machine of the warrior-dome type was set in motion by a finger in opening five and a finger in opening forty-seven, and the motion was invincible, rapid, and straight. I report second: three persons, not knowing speech, appeared in an unheard-of machine; they were not bearing arms, and did not understand regulations, and wanted strange things. Not knowing their nature, I await orders from on high. I report third: the coal is running out, and we because of our ignorance and stupidity are unable to burn the corpses as fuel. To this I attach: first, a diagram of the large machine of the warrior-dome type and, second, samples of the material fastened by the unknown people to the wounds of criminals."

"Well, nothing new here," Anton said.

"Feudalism of the worst kind," Saul said. "Don't be all that polite with them, or you'll end up on their spears."

Well, I'm not in the mood for politeness, Vadim thought. And not because of the spears. The prisoner suddenly started fidgeting and implored in a coarse, gruff voice: *"Rinea."*

"Sentu!" Vadim screeched.

The prisoner froze.

"Asking for more jam," Vadim said.

"He'll manage without it," Saul said. "Eat and drink, fight and die, that's a soldier's life."

"It's O.K.," Vadim said. "We'll get him to want strange things."

"Vadim," Anton requested, "give me a couple of crystals. I want to talk with him."

"In my right pocket," Vadim said, without turning around.

"Listen, Hayra," Anton said. "If we return you to the settlement, will your superior release the freed criminals who defended you?"

"Yes," Hayra said quickly. "And will you return me to the settlement?"

"Of course we will," Anton said. "We're not going to kill you."

Vadim glanced over his shoulder. Hayra had assumed a dignified expression.

"My superior is strict," he declared. "My superiors, perhaps, will not release them and will send them back to the hollow. But you may count on his mercy. Perhaps he will even release you, if you give him valuable gifts. Do you have valuable gifts?"

"We do," Anton said absentmindedly. "We have everything."

"What's he saying?" Saul interjected. "Vadim, where are my crystals? Ah, here they are!"

"Maybe we should try to buy them off," Anton said pensively. "Not create an ugly incident. I certainly don't want that."

Hayra started talking again, and his voice was firm and shrill.

"And you will give me that jacket there," he poked Saul's jacket. "And that box. And all the jam. It doesn't matter, they're going to take it all away before they send you to the hollow. You decided wisely not to create an incident. Our spears are sharp and jagged, and when we pull them back, they pull the enemy's guts out. And I'll take these boots. And these, too. For everything between land and sky belongs to the Great and Mighty Cliff. And I'll take these, too."

Hayra worriedly stopped talking. Vadim, bursting with laughter, turned around. Anton was absorbed in looking out the window—it was evident he wasn't listening. Hayra was sitting on the floor, his legs folded, staring at Anton's shoes. Saul was watching Hayra, holding a crystal to his temple. Catching Vadim's eyes, he gave a forced smile.

Hayra said sententiously, "When they strip you, do not forget to say that this"—he pointed—"and this and this are mine. I'm first."

"Shut up," Saud said softly.

"Shut up yourself," Hayra said with dignity. "Or we will bludgeon you to death."

"Saul," Anton said, "knock it off. Why are you acting like a child?"

"Yes, he is not smart," Hayra said. "But his jacket is good."

So he really is convinced that we are in his power, Vadim thought. He is already picturing how they will strip us and hurl us into the hollow, and we will sleep on the dirt floor covered with filth, and we will always be silent, and he will drive us barefoot over the snow, poking us with his spear, striking us in the face so we don't lag. And all around, men who think only of themselves, Who dream only of getting their finger in the right opening, and then being

harnessed, joyful and triumphant, to a sleigh and driven over the snow to freedom, barefoot, over the snow-covered mountains under the seat of the Great and Mighty . . .

Vadim's head started swimming from the pain, he was biting his lip very hard. I'd arrange a picnic for them, he thought with hatred. It was a strange feeling, hatred. From it you grew cold inside and all your muscles tensed. He had never before experienced hatred of people. He heard Saul breathing roughly behind him. Hayra was humming a song.

Below, the dirty hollow sprung into view. On the bottom the machines were clumped together in disorder, absurd and barbarous instruments of humiliation and death. Damn you, you aliens, Vadim thought. But why blame you! You're not even humanoid. Water from the sky . . . jam . . .

He dropped the glider low and, braking, followed the street straight to the guardhouse. Hayra, recognizing his old surroundings, let loose with a joyful yell, which even the powerful analyzer couldn't take.

A crowd had gathered in front of the house. In the greenish light of the dawn the snow was glittering. On the snow, huddled together, the two dozen miserable, naked prisoners stood with their heads drooping. Around them, leaning on their spears, with their legs spread wide, stood the guards in fur coats. The Bearer of the Excellent Sword towered above them on the porch. He held the excellent sword in front of him and, turning a protruding ear toward the sword, felt the blade with his thumb. Then he noticed the descending glider and froze motionless, his black maw gaping.

Vadim set the glider down right in front of the porch. He threw open the canopy and shouted, "*Kayra-me sorinata-mu karo-sika. Tatimata-ne kori-su!*"

He jumped up from behind the controls, lifted up the carrier of the spear of the hill clan in his arms, and set him down on the steps. The leader lowered his sword and snapped his mouth shut. Hayra bowed and with rapid little steps shuffled over to him.

"Why haven't you been killed yet?" the leader asked in amazement.

Hayra, folding his arms, started cooing in a rapid and deep voice. "What should happen has happened! I told them of the majesty and

might of the Great and Mighty Cliff, Shining in Battle, with One Foot in Heaven, Living Until the Machines Disappear, and they in fear pissed in their pants. They fed me with delicious food and spoke to me like obedient servants. And they have come here to bow down before you."

The spearsmen deferentially closed ranks near the porch. Only the twenty naked men remained in place, submissively awaiting their fate. The officer thrust his sword into his scabbard pompously and slowly. He did not look at the glider anymore. He began to interrogate Hayra unhurriedly and impassively.

"Where do they live?"

"They have a big house on the plain. It's very warm."

"Where did they get this machine?"

"I don't know. Most likely from the road."

"You must tell them that all the heavens and all the earth belongs to the Great and Mighty Cliff."

"I told them. But their boots, and one jacket, and the shining box belong to me. Please do not forget, bright and strong one."

"You are a fool," the officer said scornfully. "Everything belongs to the Great and Mighty Cliff. And you will receive what is allotted to you. Where is the message?"

"They took it away from me," Hayra said disappointedly.

"You are once more a fool. That will cost you your hide."

Hayra wilted. The officer stared somewhere between Vadim and Anton and proclaimed, "Let them show me their boots."

Saul snarled something and edged over to the glider.

"Easy does it," Anton said.

The officer melancholically blew some snot onto the porch.

"And what food did you eat?" he asked.

"Jam. Not exactly like our jam, but it is sweet and brings joy to your tongue."

The officer showed some sign of animation.

"Do they have much of this jam?"

"Very much!" Hayra answered enthusiastically. "But please don't order that I be beaten."

"I have decided," the officer said. "Let them return home and bring to my feet all the jam. And all the rest of their food. Do they have coal?"

Hayra looked inquiringly at Anton. Anton said sharply, "Demand freedom for these criminals!"

"What is he saying?" the officer asked.

"He is asking you not to kill these prisoners."

"And how is it that you understand his speech?"

Hayra pointed with both hands to the little horns on his temples. "If you place these against your head, you hear foreign speech and understand it as though it were your own."

"Hand them over," the officer demanded. "These, too, belong to the Great and Mighty Cliff."

He took the mnemocrystals from Hayra and after several unsuccessful attempts fastened them to his forehead. Anton said immediately, "Let these people go immediately; they have earned freedom."

The officer looked at him with amazement. "You cannot speak that way," he said. "I forgive you because you are an abject slave and do not know words. Come here. And bring the letter and the diagram."

He turned to the spearsmen, who were listening to him respectfully, and yelled out, "Why are you just standing there, you corpse lovers. There's no need for you to sniff their pants! The pants of all who speak with me stink alike! Get to work. Drive that carrion to the hollow. Hup! Hup!"

The spearsmen let out a cackle and ran down the street at a trot, driving the formerly freed slaves before them. The officer amiably slapped Hayra on the side of the head and ordered him to clear out. Hayra, reeling from the blow, disappeared through the door in a flash. Alone now, the officer looked at the sky, looked at the barracks, yawned an enormous yawn, accompanied by a whimpering sound, looked at the glider, lazily cleared his throat, and looking aside, said in a bored tone, "Do what I have commanded. Return to your house and bring me all the jam and all the other food and go to the hollow, if you want to live."

Vadim looked at the enormous, filthy figure and felt a strange weakness in all his limbs. He felt as though he were in a dream, trying to climb a slippery steep wall. Alongside him Anton mumbled, "Watch out, Vadim, watch out. This is no kid like Hayra."

"I can't take it," Saul said in a strange lifeless tone. "I'll crush him right now."

"Not under any conditions," Anton said.

The officer barked a command through the open doorway: "Roast me some meat, Hayra, you carrion lover! And warm my bed! I'm feeling good today." Then he stood sideways to the glider and, looking at the mountains, began to speak, pointing his filthy index finger in the air. "Now you are still unintelligent and are petrified with fear. But you must know that in the future, when you speak with me, you must bow at the waist and place your hands on your chest. And do not look at me, for you are abject slaves and your eyes are impure. Today I forgive you, but tomorrow I will have you beaten with speark shafts. And you must also remember that the greatest virtue consists in obedience and silence." He poked his index finger into his mouth and began picking his teeth. His words became indistinguishable. "When you return here with the jam, the letter, and the diagram, you will undress and leave everything on the porch. I will not come out to see you. You then go to the barracks and take shirts from the corpses. You must not take two." He broke out in a loud laugh. "Or else you'll sweat too much at work. You can take shirts from the living, too, but only from the ones with golden fingernails."

Hayra leaned out the half-open door. "Everything is ready, bright and strong one," he said.

The officer continued. "Your fate will be easy. The Great and Mighty Cliff needs men who can move the machines. For at long last there will be war for the world that belongs to him! And the Great and Mighty Cliff"—he raised his index finger—"Shining in Battle, with One Foot in Heaven and One Foot on Earth, Living Until the Machines Disappear—"

"Bastard!" Saul bellowed deafeningly. The blue steel barrel of the scorcher gleamed dully.

"Don't!" Anton screamed.

Saul pushed Vadim away and grabbed the controls.

"Don't?" he shouted. "What am I supposed to do? Endure and wait until the machines disappear?"

A powerful jerk shot Vadim sprawling between the seats. Without closing the canopy, Saul threw the glider into the air. Something snapped, and a split beam flew over the cockpit. An icy wind

howled in their ears, and the glider listed steeply. Vadim managed to catch sight of the officer on all fours on the porch, his immense rear end raised high in the air, and the roof of the house, whirling and disintegrating, falling on the middle of the street. Vadim tried to close the canopy, but the pressure was too strong.

"Saul!" Vadim shouted. "Lower your speed."

Saul didn't answer. He raced the glider over the street, along which chains of prisoners were already walking, straight toward the hollow. He hunched over, shielding his face behind the small windshield. The scorcher lay on his knees. The glider flew along in uneven spurts, and the head wind was trying to turn it over.

Vadim kept trying to close the canopy with one hand while with the other he was holding on to the analyzer box, which had fallen on his lap. Saul was saying through clenched jaws, "The bastards ... the sons of bitches ... torturers. You want machines? You'll get them! You want to conquer other lands! You'll get your other lands!"

Vadim finally managed to climb up onto the seat. He looked around. The glider was racing straight for the hollow. Anton, clasping onto the armrests and squinting from the wind, stared in silence at the back of Saul's head.

"You want jam?" Saul snarled. "I'll show you jam! Sweets ... carrion lovers!"

The glider soared over the hollow. Saul stopped talking and, leaning out of the glider, fired the scorcher straight down. Vadim recoiled from the blast. A blinding purplish flame hurled itself up from the hollow, and a clap of thunder tore his ears, and then everything was behind them.

Vadim, straining so much that everything inside him seemed to crunch, finally slammed the canopy shut. It was quiet.

"I'll teach them a different idea of eternity," Saul said, and then fell silent.

"But perhaps we shouldn't," Vadim said meekly. He still hadn't understood what Saul was driving at. Well, what can you do with them he thought. Dull, ignorant people. But how could you get really angry at people like that?

The glider roared over the hilltops, kicking up clouds of snowy dust. Saul was a terrible pilot, he put too much energy into the

engine, and the engine was half idling. But behind the glider stretched a solid wall of hoarfrost. Several birds threw themselves across it and immediately disappeared into the snowy whirlwind. And behind, over the sparkling turbulence, a smoky column rose into the sky.

"One thing is a pity, one thing," Saul started up again. "It's a pity that you can't destroy with one blow all the stupidity and cruelty without destroying man at the same time. Or even just one stupid thing in this immeasurably stupid land."

"You're flying to the main road?" Anton asked calmly.

"Yes. And don't try to stop me."

"I wasn't even considering it," Anton said. "Just be careful."

Vadim finally understood and fixed his gaze on the scorcher. It looks like it's beginning, he thought. Something I'll never ever be able to describe, something I'll never ever be able to understand.

On the highway everything was still the same. Like the day before, and like a hundred years before, the machines were moving noiselessly in even rows. They left the smoke and returned to the smoke. And it could go on forever. But Saul landed the glider twenty meters from the highway, slid back the canopy, and rested the scorcher on the side of the glider.

"I cannot stand anything eternal," he said, unexpectedly calm, and fired.

The first blast hit an enormous turtle-shaped machine. Its armor plating flew apart like an eggshell and burst into flames, and the frame spun in place on one tread, knocking aside and overturning the little green carts that were following it.

"You can't change the laws of history," Saul said.

A huge black tower on wheels exploded into flames, and another just like it turned on its side and blocked part of the highway.

"But you can correct certain historical errors," Saul said, taking aim.

A million-volt flash of lilac lightning flashed underneath an orange machine similar to a field synthesizer. Disintegrating into pieces, it soared high into the air.

"These errors must be corrected," Saul said, firing without stop. "Feudalism is a filthy enough affair even without this."

Then he fell silent. On the right a heap of red-hot fragments grew and one on their left the highway was empty—for the first time, most likely, in thousands of years, only a few machines that had accidentally broken through the fiery curtain were advancing. Then the flaming mountain fell apart with hissing and crackling, a tall column of sparks and ashes ascended, and through the cloud of smoke new rows of machines burst ahead. Saul growled and leaned his head against the scorcher. Once again the blasts thundered. The machines exploded into flames, and once again a heap of red-hot fragments grew. Thick black clouds of dust, cut by showers of sparks, hung in the air. Ashes fell in furry flakes, and the snow turned black and steamed. The ground around the highway was soon bare.

Vadim sat with his feet on the analyzer, shuddering and blinking at each burst. Then he got used to it and stopped blinking. Again and again the flaming mountain would rise in the middle of the highway; again and again it would crumble, throwing off burning fragments, noisily exhaling waves of intolerable heat, but the machines kept coming in an invariable stream, indifferent to all the destruction, and there was no end to them.

"Isn't that enough, Saul?" Anton asked.

It was useless, Vadim thought. Saul stopped shooting—the scorcher was out of charges—and dropped his head into his hands. The hot muzzle of the scorcher was pointing at the sky. Vadim looked at Saul's soot-covered arms and head and felt an enormous tiredness. I don't understand it, he thought. All in vain. Poor Saul.

"History," Saul said hoarsely, without raising his head. "You cannot stop it."

He sat up straight and looked at Vadim and Anton. "My heart couldn't endure it," he said. "Forgive me. My heart couldn't stand it anymore. I just couldn't. I had to do something."

They sat and watched the highway for a long time. The machines rolled along, row after row, pushing the fragments to the side of the road, sweeping away the ashes, and soon everything was the way it had been, except that a scarlet stripe running across the highway was slowly cooling off, the sullied snow showed black all around, and the smoky veil overhead took a long time to disperse—through

which, trembling, the red distorted disk, the yellow dwarf EN 7031, peeked.

Saul closed his eyes and said incomprehensibly, "It's like the ovens. If you destroy only the ovens, they just build new ones."

Somewhere nearby mournful shouts, disgustingly familiar, resounded. Without thinking, Vadim turned his head. On the side road, right near the highway, a crowd of emaciated men in sacks and guards in fur coats and with spears were racing around. What are they doing here? Vadim thought. The guards drove an unlucky man out of the crowd with the shafts of their spears. Trembling and glancing around, he walked across the black snow and stepped onto the highway. An immense shining tower rolled softly toward him. The man glanced at the guards in desperation. They shouted out something, their hands cupped around their mouths. The prisoner closed his eyes and stretched out his arms. The machines knocked him over and kept rolling. Saul stood up. The scorcher thudded against the floor of the cockpit.

"I want to beat the crap out of them," Saul said, flexing his fingers.

Anton grabbed him by his jacket.

"Really, Saul," he said, "that's useless, too."

"I know." Saul sat down. "You think I don't know? But why can't I do anything? Why can't I do anything, here or there?"

The guards pushed another prisoner onto the road. The first remained stretched out on the pavement, flat as an empty sack. The second stretched out his arms and stood in the path of a red platform with a cubic box on it. The platform slowed down and stopped two paces in front of him. The guards shouted. The prisoner raised his arms, and started to back off the highway. The red machine, as though fastened to him, crawled after him. It turned onto the side road, rocking wildly when it hit potholes. The prisoner kept backing up, leading it from the highway to the hollow. And on the highway the machines kept coming.

"I really made a mess of things," Saul said woefully. "Curse me out. But all the same you have to start with something like that. You'll come back here, I know. So remember you always have to begin by sowing doubts. Well, why aren't you cursing me out?"

Vadim just sighed convulsively, and Anton said affectionately, "What for, Saul? You didn't do anything bad. You just did something strange."

Chapter 8

"VADIM," ANTON SAID, "go see how Saul's doing."

Vadim stood up and walked out of the control center. He went down into the lounge and looked in on Saul. He was struck by a gust of stale smoke. Saul was lying on the sofa in exactly the same position they had placed him in after the passage: his legs with his enormous feet stretched out, his head thrown back, and his bristling Adam's apple protruding sharply. Vadim squatted down alongside and touched Saul's forehead. It was burning. Saul was murmuring incoherently: "Rusks, we need rusks. What are you going to do to me with those scissors? The scissors are in tailor's . . . not for manicures . . . I'm asking you about the rusks . . . and you tell me about scissors." He suddenly shuddered and gasped, "*Zum Befehl, Herr* . . . no sir, we're killing lice . . ."

Vadim patted him on his limp hand. It was painful to look at Saul. It was always painful to see a strong, confident man in such a helpless state. Saul openened his eyes slowly.

"Ah," he said. "Vadim . . . Vadim, my friend . . . don't worry . . . it's always unpleasant to watch an interrogation. Don't think bad things about me . . . I'll come back . . . it was just weakness. Now I've rested a little and I'll come back."

His eyes began to roll. Vadim stared at him with pity.

"We're burning again," Saul mumbled. "Burning like firewood. Stepanov is burning! Into the grove! Into the grove!"

Vadim sighed and stood up. He looked around the cabin. It was a terrible mess. The absurd briefcase, disgorging its contents, was lying on the floor. The contents were strewn about: strange gray cardboard cases filled with paper, decorated with a stylized representation of some kind of bird with folded wings. One of the cases had come undone, and the papers were scattered over the whole cabin. There were also papers on the desk. Vadim wanted to straighten up but noticed that Saul had fallen asleep. He tiptoed out of the cabin, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Anton was sitting at the controls, his fingers on the contacts, and was watching the viewscreen, lost in thought. The crowns of pine trees, distant gleaming buildings, and the red lights of the energy receiver slowly crawled across the screen.

"He's bad off," Vadim said. "Hallucinations. At least he fell asleep just now."

He sat down on the armrest and fixed his eyes on the wall, covered with drawings of human figures and various objects.

"I guess I dirtied up the wall for no good reason," Vadim said. "I should have asked Saul for some paper. He has a whole briefcase full. Incidentally, Hayra was scared silly when I began to draw."

"You know, Vadim," Anton said thoughtfully, "Saul is of course a strange man. But for a grown man not to have had his bioblockade shots . . ." He shook his head.

"Can you guess what he's sick with?"

"I already told you I can't. He became infected with something from Hayra."

Vadim considered all the infectious things on Hayra, frowned, and lowered himself into his seat.

"I like Saul," he declared. "He's an eccentric, with his own weird ideas. And he's a fascinating riddle. I've never heard such puzzling ravings."

"And how many times have you ever heard ravings?"

"That's not important, I've read about them. By the way, he said that his escape from Earth was just a weakness. 'Now,' he said, 'I've rested a little and I'll come back.' I'm happy for him, Anton."

"He said that in his delirium?"

"No. It was when he was awake." Vadim looked at the screen. The *Ship* was floating over Hibiny. "What do you think, how much time has passed?"

"A thousand years," Anton said.

Vadim grinned. "An unusually meaningful vacation. We were really great there, weren't we?" Smiling blissfully, he began to recall the heroic events, rehearsing the next day's performance for Nelly and Samson. Even without any skulls I'll make Samson turn green with envy: I'll show him my scar.

"Too bad," he said aloud.

"What?"

"Too bad he struck me in the side. It would have been better on the face. Can you see it? A scar from the left temple across the eyes to the chin!"

Anton looked at him. "You know, Vadim, I don't think I'll ever get used to you."

"Don't worry, Anton. You were O.K., too. True, you were indecisive. I'll tell Galka that you're a great commander."

Anton grimaced. "No! It's better if you don't tell her anything." He fell silent. "Was I really that indecisive?"

"I think so."

"You have to understand, I couldn't do a thing with myself. I've never been in such a tight spot before. A lot of things have happened, but never, Vadim, a situation like that, where you have to do something but there's nothing that can be done, where it's so essential to improve things but you know you can only make them worse . . . of course I vacillated."

Vadim examined Hibiny. "But still you did a good job commanding. It was fascinating to see you in that role. Listen, I bet right now Hayra is lying on his stinking furs and thinking, 'What boots, nobody has boots like that!' Anton, friend, can you go a little faster?"

"I can't. Not here."

"No end of things you're not supposed to do. Let me pilot."

"No," Anton said. "This whole escapade will cost me my pilot's license as it is."

"But what did you do?"

"I put my foot in it. I assure you, my second flight to Saula will not be as a starpilot but as an amateur doctor."

Vadim was surprised. What did we do? We did everything we could and everything we should have. What else could we have done? There were only three of us. If there were twenty of us, we could have disarmed the guards, and that would have been the end of it. In any case, there's nothing they can yell at us about. True, things didn't work out well for the guys who were pulling Hayra. But how could we have known? No sir, no matter what you say we handled the reconnaissance very well. Honorably. Now we have to roll up our sleeves and get the guys together. First, a committee. Anton and I, without question. I'll talk Saul into it. We need Saul, we need a skeptic. And he's a real fighter, a decisive person, a real twentieth-century man. And then Samson. An excellent engineer,

despite his sharp tongue. Nelly, a real actress—she'll charm them. Grisha Barabanov is essential: first, he's a teacher himself, and second, he knows a whole bunch of other teachers, good people. A doctor! We need a doctor! There has to be at least one doctor in all those teachers. And we'll need hunters. That's what we'll need—to get those big-headed samson birds. Vadim chuckled. And then we as an entire committee will present ourselves to the Earth, raise the alarm.

Vadim's heart was leaping for joy when he imagined the entire scope of this brilliant new undertaking. Squadrons of passenger D-starships, packed full of bold volunteers, synthesizers, medicines. Tons and tons of embryomechanical eggs that grow into gliders, houses, weather installations in half an hour. And twenty thousand, thirty thousand, one hundred thousand new acquaintances!

"The entire space fleet is dispersed," Anton said.

"What?"

"I said, the entire space fleet is dispersed. I estimated that for a start we needed at least ten passenger Phantoms. There are only fifty-four of them and they're all at EN 117 now for the jump beyond the Blind Spot."

"We'll build new ones," Vadim decided.

Anton looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "Once more your head is full of glittering glop. Vadim, remember that you will most likely not be permitted to return to Saula."

"What do you mean, not be permitted?"

"Very simple. Twenty-year-old enthusiasts aren't needed, but professionals, in the real sense of the word. I can't imagine that that many professionals can be taken away from the planets. And that's only half the problem."

"All right, then," Vadim encouraged. "And the other half?"

"And the other half, my fine friend . . ." Anton sighed. "For two centuries already there's been an inconspicuous organization, the Commission on Contacts. And it has several interesting characteristics: first, without its permission not a single starpilot takes a seat behind the controls and, second, there aren't any enthusiasts among the members, only serious, intelligent people who are alert to the consequences of action."

Anton was talking seriously, but Vadim went ahead and asked, "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely serious." Anton ran his finger over the contacts and said, "Maybe I'll let you land, as a consolation. No, I won't. We've had enough corpses."

The *Ship* descended softly and noiselessly onto the glade, almost exactly on same spot they had taken off from thirty-nine hours before. Anton turned off the engine and sat for a while, affectionately caressing the control panel.

"So that's it," he said. "First of all, let's get Saul."

Vadim, pouting, was staring into space. Anton turned on the ship's radiophone and set it to the medical emergency frequency.

"Point eleven-eleven," a calm female voice said.

"We need an epidemiologist," Anton stated. "A man is sick, after returning from a new terraform planet."

The receiver was silent for a while. Then a surprised voice asked, "Excuse me, what did you say?"

"Please hurry. He has never received his bioblockade shots," Anton explained.

"That's strange. All right. Your bearing?"

"I'm sending it."

"Thank you. Received. Wait ten minutes."

Anton looked at Vadim.

"Don't sulk, most structuralist-est. It will pass. Let's go see Saul.'"

Vadim slowly got out of his seat. They stepped down into the lounge and immediately noticed that the door to Saul's cabin was open. Saul wasn't there. Nor were his briefcase and papers, but the scorcher lay on the night table.

"Where can he be?" Anton asked.

Vadim raced to the exit. The hatch was unsealed, and outside he saw a warm starry night. The cicadas were screaming loudly.

"Saul!" Vadim called.

No one answered. Confused, Vadim took several steps across the soft grass.Where could he have gone? He was sick, he thought, and once again cried out, "Saul!"

Once again no one responded. A warm breeze was blowing. It caressed Vadim's face tenderly.

"Vadim," Anton called out softly. "Come here."

Vadim went back to the illuminated hatch. Anton handed him a sheet of paper.

"Saul left a note," he said. "Put it under the scorcher."

It was a scrap of course gray paper, torn out with dirty fingers. Vadim read, "My dear young friends, forgive me for the deception. I am not a historian. I am just a deserter. I escaped to you because I wanted to save my hide. You won't understand this. I wanted to save my hide. You won't understand this. I had only one cartridge left, and I was overcome with anxiety. You return to Saula and do your job, and I will finish mine. I still have a whole cartridge. I am going. Farewell. S. Repnin."

"But he was sick!" Vadim said, dismayed. "Let's run after him!"

"Look at the other side," Anton said.

Vadim turned the paper over. On the other side, in big, clumsy letters there was following, written in German:

To Herr Rapportführer
Oberscharführer Herr Wirth,
from Prisoner 658517, barber for
Block Six.

REPORT

With this I inform you that according to information gathered by me, prisoner 819360 is not the criminal nicknamed Saul but the former Red Army tank commander Saul Petrovich Repnin, taken prisoner by the German army near Rzhevsk in an unconscious state. The above-mentioned prisoner 819360 is a covert communist and, beyond a doubt, a person dangerous to the state. I have determined that he is preparing an escape and participates in the group about which I reported to you in my report of July 1943. I am also reporting that they are preparing . . .

Here, the text broke off. Vadim fixed his eyes on Anton.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Neither do I."

A bright light fell on the glade. The ambulance ship *Spark* was descending slowly.

"Go explain to the doctor," Anton said with an ambiguous grin, "and I'll go contact the council."

"And what do I tell him?" Vadim muttered, glancing down at the scrap of paper.

The Kid from Hell