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<h2>Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. Probationers
(engl)</h2>

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<h2>PROLOGUE</h2>

A massive red and white coach arrived. Departure was announced.
- Alright, off you go, - said Daugeh.
Bykov grumbled:
- We'll make it. By the time they all board...
He watched sullenly how the other passengers entered the bus at
leisure, one by one. About a hundred people were boarding.
- This will take fifteen minutes, at least, - Grisha remarked
knowingly.
Bykov gave him a strict look.
- Button up your shirt, - he said.
- Dad, I'm hot, - Grisha said.
- Do up your shirt, - Bykov repeated. - Don't walk around like a
slouch.
- Don't look at me, - said Yurkovski. - I am allowed, whilst you aren't
yet.
Daugeh looked at him and shifted his eyes. Didn't feel like looking at
Yurkovski - seeing his self-assured flabby face with a surly drooping lower
lip, his heavy monogrammed satchel, his stylish suit made from rare
stereosynthetics. Rather felt like looking up above into the transparent
sky, clear, blue, with not one cloud, not even birds - above the airfield
they were dispersed with ultrasound sirens.
Bykov-junior watched closely by Bykov-senior was buttoning up his
collar. Yurkovski languidly declared:
- In the stratoplane I will order a bottle of mineral water and

indulge...

Bykov-senior suspiciously inquired:

- The liver?

- Why necessarily 'the liver'? - said Yurkovski. - I am simply hot. And it's about time you knew that mineral fizz doesn't help liver bouts.

- Have you at least packed your pills? - asked Bykov.

- Why are you bothering him? - said Daugeh.

Everyone looked at him. Daugeh lowered his eyes and said through clenched teeth:

- So don't forget, Vladimir. The packet must be handed to Arnautov directly, immediately after you arrive on Syrt.

- If Arnautov is on Mars, - said Yurkovski

- Yes, naturally. I just don't want you to forget.

- I will remind him, - promised Bykov.

They fell silent. The queue at the coach shrunk.

- You know what, please go now, - said Daugeh.

- Yes, its time, - Bykov sighed. He approached Daugeh and hugged him. - Don't feel sad, Johannovich, - he said softly. - Good-bye. Don't be sad.

He firmly gripped Daugeh with his long bony hands. Daugeh gave him a weak push.

- Calm plasma to you, - he said.

He shook Yurkovski's hand. Yurkovski's eyes fluttered repeatedly, he wanted to say something, but only licked his lips. He reached over, lifted his magnificent satchel off the grass, shuffled it in his hands and lowered it back on the grass. Daugeh wasn't looking his way. Yurkovski lifted the satchel again.

- Ah, don't look so sour, Gregory, - he said with a pained voice.

- I'll try, - Daugeh replied dryly.

On the side, Bykov was quietly admonishing his son.

- Whilst I am on a voyage, stay close to mother. None of those subaquatic stunts.

- Ok, Dad.

- No record setting.

- Yes Dad. Don't worry.

- Pay less attention to girls, think more about mother.

- Ok, alright Dad.

Daugeh quietly said:

- I am off.

He turned and plodded towards the terminal. Yurkovski followed him with his eyes. Daugeh looked shrunk, humped, greatly aged.

- Good-bye, Uncle Volodya, - said Grisha.

- Good-bye, old chap, - said Yurkovski. He was still looking in Daugeh's direction. - Will you visit him or something... Just like that, come in, for a cup of tea - and that's all. He is fond of you, I know...

Grisha nodded. Yurkovski offered him his cheek, patted him on the shoulder and walked after Bykov to the bus. With some effort, he ascended the stairs, sat next to Bykov and said:

- It would be good if the flight was cancelled.

Bykov stared at him with amazement.

- What flight? Ours?

- Yes, ours. Would be easier for Daugeh. Or if we were discharged by the medics.

Bykov breathed heavily but remained quiet. When the coach started moving, Yurkovski said:

- He did not even want to hug me. And rightly so. No reason for us to fly without him. Its wrong. Unfair.

- Cut it out, - said Bykov.

Daugeh went up the granite stairs and looked back. The red dot of the coach was dragging slowly somewhere on the horizon. There, in a crimson haze, the conical silhouettes of vertical launch liners could be seen.

Grisha asked:

- Where should I drop you off, Uncle Grisha? At the institute?

- One can go to the institute, - replied Daugeh.

I don't feel like going anywhere, he thought. Absolutely nowhere that I'd like to go. How difficult... I never imagine it'd be so difficult. Indeed nothing new or unexpected happened. Everything is acknowledged and determined. And settled quietly, ahead of time, since no one likes to appear infirm. All in all, everything is fair and just. Fifty years of age. Four radiation attacks. A worn-out heart. Nerves that aren't worth anything. Even the blood - not his own. Therefore rejection, he isn't accepted anywhere. Whilst Volodya Yurkovski gets accepted. As for you, Gregory Johannovich, it's enough to eat whatever you are given and sleep wherever we put you. It's time, Gregory Johannovich, to teach the youngsters. What's the use of teaching them? Daugeh glanced sideways at Grisha. Look at him, he's robust and sharp-toothed. Teach him courage? Or fitness? Indeed, besides these, nothing else is needed. That's how one becomes isolated. Plus a hundred articles, now archaic. Plus a few books that are quickly becoming obsolete. Plus fame, that's quickest to turn obsolete.

He turned and entered an echoing cool foyer. Grisha Bykov walked along. His shirt was unbuttoned. The foyer was filled with quiet conversations and the rustling of newspapers. Some film was being projected onto a large concave screen mounted on the wall; a few people sunken in their chairs were watching it, holding the shiny phonodemonstrator boxes at the ear. A chubby eastern-looking foreigner was fumbling at the automated buffet.

At the bar entrance Daugeh suddenly stopped.

- Come on, my namesake buddy, let's go in and have a drink, - he said.

Grisha looked at him with surprise and sympathy.

- What for, Uncle Grisha? - he asked pleadingly. - What for? No need.

- You think, there is no need? - Daugeh asked musingly.

- Of course, there's no need. It's pointless, honestly.

Daugeh, tilting his head and squinting, looked at him.

- Have you, by any chance, imagined, - he said venomously, - that I turned sour, because I was put in reserve? What, that I cannot survive without all those mysterious abysses in space? I beg your pardon, old pal! I couldn't care less about those abysses! But the fact that I am now left alone... Understand? Alone! For the first time in life I am alone!

Grisha looked around in confusion. The chubby foreigner was looking at them. Daugeh was soft-spoken, but Grisha felt as though everyone in the hall heard him.

- Why am I now alone? What have I done? Why me, individually... why should I, specifically, be alone? Indeed I am not the oldest one, dear namesake. Michael is older, and your father also...

- Uncle Misha is also taking his last voyage, - Grisha reminded him timidly.

- True, - conceded Daugeh. - Our Misha has aged too... Alright, let's go get a drink.

They entered the bar. The bar was empty, except for a table by the window where some attractive woman sat. She was sitting over an empty glass, resting the chin on her interlocked fingers, looking at the bitumen field outside the window.

Daugeh stopped and leaned heavily on the closest table. He had not seen her in twenty years, but recognised instantly. His throat became dry and bitter.

- What is it, Uncle Grisha? - alarmed, asked Bykov-junior.

Daugeh stood straight.

- This is my wife, - he said calmly. - Come.

"What wife?" - thought Grisha with some fear.

- Perhaps I should wait for you in the car? - he asked.

- Nonsense, rubbish, - said Daugeh. - Come.

They approached the table.

- Good day, Masha, - spoke Daugeh.

The woman raised her head. Her eyes widened. She reclined slowly in the chair.

- You... didn't leave? - she said.

- No.

- Are you leaving later?

- No. I am staying.

She kept looking at him with widely opened eyes. Her eyelashes were heavily made up. A lattice of wrinkles under the eyes. And plenty of wrinkles on the neck.

- What does it mean - 'I am staying'? - she asked with distrust.

He grabbed the back of the chair.

- Can we join you? - he asked. - This is Grisha Bykov. Bykov's son.

Then she smiled at Grisha with that habitually-promising gleaming smile, which Daugeh hated so much.

- Pleased to meet you, - she said. - Sit down, boys.

Grisha and Daugeh sat.

- I am Maria Sergejevna, - said she, examining Grisha. - I am the sister of Vladimir Sergejevich Yurkovski.

Grisha lowered his eyes and bowed slightly.

- I know your father, - she continued. She stopped smiling. - I owe him much, Gregory... Alexeyevich.

Grisha stayed quiet. He felt awkward. He understood nothing. Daugeh said in a strained voice:

- What will you drink, Masha?

- Jaymou, - she replied, with a dazzling smile.

- Is that strong? - asked Daugeh. - However, its all the same. Grisha, can you please bring two Jaymou's.

He was looking at her, the smooth tanned hands, smooth open shoulders, a light thin dress with cut a little too low. She kept amazingly well for her years, even her braids stayed exactly the same, bulky and thick, the sort that nobody wears any more, bronze, without one grey strand, layered around her head. He chuckled, slowly unzipped his thick warm coat and pulled off a thick layered helmet with earflaps. Her face twitched when she saw his bare scalp with sparse silver coloured bristles around the ears. He chuckled again.

- At last we have met, - said he. - And why are you here? Waiting for someone?

- No, - she said. - I am not waiting for anyone.

She looked out the window, and he suddenly realised.

- You were seeing someone off, - he said quietly.

She nodded.

- Whom? Us, really?

- Yes.

His heart froze.

- Was it me? - he asked. Grisha came and placed two chilled misty glasses on the table.

- No, - she answered.

- Volodya then? - he said bitterly.

Grisha left discreetly.

- Such a nice boy, - she said. - How old is he?

- Eighteen.

- Really eighteen? How funny! You know, he looks nothing like Bykov. Not even red-haired.

- Yes, time flies, - said Daugeh. - And I stopped flying already.

- How come? - she inquired nonchalantly.

- It's health.

She glanced at him quickly.

- Yes, you don't look too well. Tell me... - she paused. - Bykov will soon quit flying, too?

- What? - he asked with surprise.

- I don't like when Volodya goes on a voyage without Bykov, - she said, looking out the window. She fell silent again. - I fear for him. You know what he is like, don't you.

- And what does this have to do with Bykov? - Daugeh asked with hostility.

- It's safe with Bykov, - she said simply. - And how are things with you, Gregory? Somehow it's unusual, you - and no longer flying.

- I will be working at the institute, - said Daugeh.

- Working... - she shook her head. - Working... Look at what you are. Daugeh smiled crookedly.

- You, on the other side, did not change at all. Married?

- What for? - she remarked.

- I stayed a bachelor as well.

- Not surprisingly.

- How so?

- You don't fit for a husband.

Daugeh gave an awkward laugh.

- No need to attack me, - he said. - I just wanted to talk.

- Before you were fascinating to talk to.

- What, are you bored already? We have only been speaking for five minutes.

- No, what gave you that thought? - she said politely. - I am always glad to hear you out.

The stayed silent. Daugeh was stirring his drink with a straw.

- And I always see Volodya off, - she said. - I have friends at the command centre, and I always know when you depart. And where from. And I always come to see him off. - She removed the straw from her glass, crumpled it and threw it into the ashtray. - He alone is the closest person to me. - She lifted her glass and took a few sips. - A crazy world. Idiotic times, - she said wearily. - People have forgotten how to have a life. Work, work, work... All meaning of life is within work. Always looking for something. Always building something. What for? I can understand, this was necessary previously, when we lacked everything. When there was this economic struggle. When we still had to prove, that we can do not just as well, but better than they can. We proved it. But the struggle remained. Some hidden, unclear struggle. I can't understand it. Perhaps you can, Gregory?

- I understand, - said Daugeh.

- You always understood. You always understood the world in which you live. Both you, and Volodya, and this dull Bykov. Sometimes I think that all of you are simply narrow-minded. You simply cannot pose a question - "what for?" - She took another sip. - You know, recently I met this school teacher. He teaches kids these awful things. He tells them, that to work is a lot more interesting then to find entertainment. And they all believe him. Do you understand? But this is scary! I talked to his students. They seemed to shun me. Why? Because I want to live my individual life how I wish?

Daugeh clearly imagined the conversation of Maria Yurkovskaya with fifteen-year old lads and girls from the local school. Indeed, how would you understand, he thought. How would you understand, when for weeks, for months you desperately smash against a dead end wall, scribble away mountains of paper, cover tens of kilometres walking around your cabinet or a desert, and it seems, that there never was a solution and that you are a brainless blind worm, and you no longer believe, that it has been like this before, and then this wonderful moment arrives, when you open, at last, a gate in the wall, and another dead end is behind you, and you are god again, and the universe is in your palm. However, this ought not be understood. It must be felt. He said:

- They also wish to live their lives the way they wish. But you want different things.

She retorted abruptly:

- But what if I happen to be right?

- No, - said Daugeh. - They are the right ones. The never ask this question "what for?"

- And what if they simply cannot think objectively?

Daugeh chuckled. What do you know about objective thinking, he thought.

- You drink cold water on a hot day, - he said patiently. - And you never ask - "what for?". You simply drink it, and feel good...

She interrupted him:

- Yes, I feel good. So let's have me drinking my cold water, and they can drink theirs!

- Let's, - Daugeh agreed calmly. He felt, with surprise and gladness, how the loathsome pressing anxiety is disappearing somewhere. - That's not what we are talking about. You want to know who is right. Well then. Human beings - they are already not animals. Nature gave them intelligence. This intelligence must inevitably develop. And you are extinguishing the intelligence within you. Extinguishing it artificially. You have devoted your entire life to this. And there are many more people on this planet, extinguishing their intelligence. They are called philistines, petty bourgeois.

- Thanks.

- I didn't wish to offend you, - said Daugeh. - But it seemed to me, that you wanted to offend us. Objectivity of thought... What objectivity of thought could you hold?

She finished her drink.

- You speak very nicely today, dear, - she remarked, laughing unsympathetically, - explaining everything so well. Then, please be so kind, explain to me one more thing. You worked your entire life. Throughout your whole life you developed your intellect, stepping over simple worldly pleasures.

- I never denounced worldly pleasures, - said Daugeh. - I was quite naughty, even.

- Let's not argue, - she said. - As I see it, you have been. And I have been extinguishing intelligence my whole life. All my life I was busy nurturing my lowly instincts. And which one of us is more fortunate r i g h t n o w?

- Me, naturally, - said Daugeh.

She gave him a candid look and laughed.

- No, - she said. - I am! At worst both of us are equally unfortunate. A talentless cuckoo bird - I believe that's what Volodya calls me? - or a hard-working ant - the end is the same: old age, isolation, emptiness. I gained nothing but you lost everything. What, then, is the difference?

- Ask Grisha Bykov, - Daugeh said calmly.

- Ah, t h e s e o n e's! - She scornfully waived her hand. - I know what they shall say. No, I am interested what you will say! And not now, when its sunny and people all around, but at night, when there's insomnia, and the volumes that you are sick of looking at, and useless minerals from useless planets, and a silent phone, and nothing, nothing ahead of you.

- True, that happens, - said Daugeh. - It happens to everyone.

He suddenly imagined all this - both the silent phone and nothing waiting ahead - but not the written volumes and minerals, but flasks of perfume, dead glow of golden jewellery and a merciless mirror. I am swine, he thought with repentance. A self-assured indifferent swine. Indeed she asking for help!

- Will you let me see you tonight? - he said.

- No. - She got up. Tonight I am having guests over.

Daugeh set aside his untouched glass and also stood up. She took him by the elbow and they walked out into the foyer. Daugeh was trying his hardest not to limp.

- Where are you off to now? - he asked.

She stopped in front of a mirror and straightened her hair, which did

not require straightening.

- Where to? - she asked. - Somewhere. Still, I am not fifty and my world belongs to me for now.

They came down the white staircase onto a sun-lit square.

- I could give you a lift, - said Daugeh.

- Thank you, I have my own car.

Unhurriedly, he pulled on his helmet, checked whether his ears are covered and buttoned up his coat.

- Farewell, oldster, - she said.

- Farewell, - he replied, smiling tenderly. - Forgive me if I spoke harshly... You really helped me today.

She gave him a baffled look, shrugged her shoulders, smiled and walked to her car. Daugeh watched as she walked, swaying her hips, remarkably slender, proud and pitiful. She had a splendid step and she was still attractive, amazingly attractive. People followed her with their eyes. Daugeh thought with dreary spite: "Here. Here is all her life. Drape the flesh with something expensive and pretty and draw attention. And so many of them, and how tenacious are they."

When he came to the car, Grisha Bykov was sitting, knees against the stirring wheel, reading a thick book. The car stereo was on at full blast: Grisha loved loud music.

Daugeh got in, turned off the stereo and sat quietly for some time. Grisha put the book aside and started the engine. Daugeh said, looking ahead of him:

- Life gives a person three joys, namesake. Friends, love and work. But how seldom do they come together!

- One can, naturally, do without love, - said Grisha thoughtfully.

Daugeh gave him a quick look.

- True, one can, - he agreed. - But that means one joy less, and there are just three.

Grisha said nothing. He believed it would be unfair to start an argument hopeless for his opponent.

- To the institute, - said Daugeh, - and try to make it by one. We won't be late?

- Nope, I will be quick.

The car came onto the highway.

- Uncle Grisha, are you cold? - asked Grisha Bykov.

Daugeh moved his nose and said:

- Yes, buddy. Let's close the windows.

<h2>MIRZA-CHARLIE. RUSSIAN BOY.</h2>

The duty officer at passenger communications was very sympathetic towards Yura Borodin. She could not help him at all. Regular passenger commuting with the Saturn system did not exist. There wasn't yet any regular cargo commuting. Automated cargo vessels were sent there two-three times a year, and piloted ships even less frequently. The officer twice sent a request to the electronic dispatch, shuffled through some weighty directory, rang somebody a few times, but all in vain. Probably because Yura looked really miserable she said afterwards, with sympathy:

- Cheer up a little, dear. It's such a distant planet. Besides, why do you need to travel so far?

- I fell behind after others left, - Yura said with distress. - Thank you greatly. I will go now. Perhaps somewhere else...

He turned and walked to the exit, head down, looking at the worn out plastic floor under his feet.

- Wait, dear, - the officer called out to him. Yura immediately turned around and walked back. - You see, dear, - said the duty officer hesitantly, - sometimes special flights turn up.

- Really? - said Yura with hope.

- Yes. But our centre does not receive information about these.
- And will they take me along on a special flight? - asked Yura.
- I don't know, dear. I don't even know, where you can find out about them. Possibly, with the director of the cosmodrome? - She looked at Yura questioningly.

- It's probably impossible to get through to the director, - said Yura sombrely.

- Why don't you try anyhow.

- Thanks, - said Yura. - All the best. I will try to.

He left the space commuter centre and looked around. On the right, over the green arches of the trees the hotel building was raised into a hot whitish sky. On the left a colossal glass dome glittered intolerably under the sun. Yura saw that dome already at the aerodrome. From the aerodrome, only that dome and the golden spike of the hotel could be seen. Yura, naturally, asked what it was and was laconically told: "EMCS". What "EMCS" meant, Yura did not know.

Right in front of the command centre lay a wide road, covered with large-size red sand granules. On either side of the road passed irrigation channels, alongside the channels acacia trees grew closely. About twenty paces from the entrance to the centre, in the shade of the acacias stood a small white squarish atomocar. Above the windshield motionlessly extended two big blue helmets with white writing "International Police. Mirza-Charlie."

For two minutes or so Yura stood in complete indecisiveness. At first there wasn't anyone on the road. Then, from some place on the right, appeared, walking broadly, a tall, red-tanned man wearing a white suit. Upon approaching Yura he stopped, took off a giant white beret and fanned his face. Yura looked at him with curiosity.

- Ho-at! - said the man in a white suit. - And how are you? - He spoke with a strong accent.

- Very hot, - said Yura.

The man in a white suit plonked the beret on his burned out hair and produced a flat glass flask from his pocket.

- A dre-enk? - he said, stretching his mouth to the ears.

Yura shook his head.

- I don't drink, - he said.

- I also don't drink, - announced the man in a white suit and plunged the flask back into his pocket. - But I always keep whiskey, in case someone does drink.

Yura laughed. He liked the man.

- Ho-at, - once more said the man in a white suit. - That's our disaster. Inta-nashional cosmodrome in Greenland - and I freeze there. Inta-nashional cosmodrome in Mirza-Charlie - me soaked, sweaty. Ay?

- Awfully hot, - said Yura.

- And where are we flying to? - inquired the man in a white suit.

- I need to be on Saturn.

- O-o! - said the man in a white suit. - Ve-eary young and already to Saturn. Zh-hat meansh we will meet and meet!

He patted Yura on the shoulder and suddenly noticed the police car.

- Inter-nashional police, - he said solemnly. - Zhey musht have all honours. He nodded off with dignity and walked on. When he came level with the police atomocar, he braced himself and placed an index finger to the temple. The blue helmets behind the windshield tilted slowly in unison and became motionless again.

Yura sighed and leisurely walked to the hotel. He had to find the cosmodrome director somewhere. The road was empty, and he could not ask anyone. Sure, he could ask the police officers, but Yura did not wish to approach them. She did not like the way they sat, motionless. Yura briefly regretted that he did not ask the man in the white suit about the director, but then suddenly realised that the friendly duty officer would definitely

know everything about Mirza-Charlie. He even stopped for a second, but then walked further. Ultimately, it's not polite to take so much of these people's time. Never mind, I will find out somewhere, he thought and walked faster.

He was walking along the very edge of the irrigation ditch, trying not to walk in the sun, past the brightly coloured vending machines with soda and juices, past the empty benches and recliners, past the small white houses, hidden in the shade of the acacias, past the roomy bitumen yards filled with empty atomocars. One of the yards did not have a tent above it, and ripples of hot air rose from the shiny polished roofs of the vehicles. It was a pitiful sight, seeing all these cars, possibly left standing for hours under the merciless sun. Past the giant billboards, promising, in three languages, herculean health to all those who drink vitamised goats milk "Golden Horns", past some really strange dishevelled people, sleeping right on the grass, having placed packages, backpacks and suitcases under their heads, past the automated street cleaners frozen at the kerb, past tanned kids, splashing around in the irrigation ditch. A few times he was overtaken by empty buses. He walked beneath a poster, stretched above the road: "Mirza-Charlie welcomes disciplined drivers." The sign was done in English. He passed the blue booth of the traffic controller and came out on to the Friendship walk - the main street in Mirza-Charlie.

The main walk was also empty. Shops, cinemas, bars, cafes were shut. Siesta, thought Yura. It was unbearably hot on the street. Yura stopped by a vendomat and drank a glass of hot orange juice. Raising his eyebrows he walked to the next vendomat and drank a glass of hot soda water. Yep, he thought. Siesta. Wouldn't it be nice to crawl inside a refrigerator.

The sun scorched the street - white, as if enveloped by a haze. There was no shade. At the end of the main walk, in a hot mist the bulk of the hotel was radiating crimson and blue. Yura started on his way, feeling the blistering pavement through the shoes. At first he walked fast, but he couldn't walk fast - he was running out of breath and sweat was pouring down his face, leaving itchy trails.

A long narrow vehicle with outstretched top panels rolled up to the kerb. The Driver wearing big dark glasses opened the door.

- Listen, pal, where is the hotel around here?

- Straight ahead, at the end of the main walk, - said Yura.

The driver looked, nodded and asked:

- Aren't you going there?

- I am, - Yura answered with a sigh.

- Jump in, - said the driver.

Yura climbed in with gratitude.

- One can tell straight away, that you are a newcomer, like me, - said the driver. He drove the vehicle very slowly. - All locals stay in the shade. I was warned, that I must come by night time, but that's me - did not feel like waiting. And I was wrong to hurry. It's a dreamy kingdom.

The cabin was full of cool clean air.

- I think, - said Yura, - it's a very curious town. I have never been in international cities before. Everything is so amusingly mixed up here. Kara-kumas desert and the international police. Did you see them - all wearing blue helmets?

- Saw them, - said the driver gloomily. - Over there on the highway. - He tilted his head, - about thirty men. The trucks collided.

- How do you mean - collided? - said Yura. - What trucks? Automatics?

- Not at all, not automatics, - grumbled the driver. - These... 'Varangian' visitors. Got their hands on it... Drunk scoundrels.

He stopped the vehicle in front of the hotel and said:

- Here we are. I am turning into the first street on the right.

Yura climbed out.

- Thank you so much, - he said.

- It's nothing, really, - said the driver. - See you later.

Yura walked up into the hall and went up to the hotel administrator. The administrator was speaking on the phone and Yura, sitting down in a chair, began staring at the paintings on the walls. Here, everything has also been mixed up quite amusingly. Next to the traditional Shishkin's "Three bears" a large canvas was hanging, covered with fluorescent dye and not exhibiting anything in particular. For a while, Yura compared the paintings with quiet joy. It was very amusing.

- How can assist you, mister, - said the administrator, folding her hands on the desk.

Yura laughed.

- You see, I am not a 'mister', - said he. - I am a simple soviet citizen.

The administrator laughed as well.

- Frankly speaking, I thought so too. But I did not want to risk it. Here we get foreigners, who become upset when they are called 'comrades'.

- Such odd fellows, - said Yura.

- Oh yes, - said the administrator. - Now, how can I help you, comrade?

- You know, - said Yura, - I really need to see the cosmodrome director. Could you suggest anything?

- What's there to suggest? - the administrator was surprised. She lifted the receiver and dialled a number. - Valya? - she asked. - Oh, Zoya? Listen, Zoya dear, this is Kruglova speaking. When is your boss taking appointments today? Ah, ok... I understand... No, just this young man... Yep... Ok, well, thank you, sorry to bother you.

The videophone screen stayed blank throughout the conversation and Yura counted that as a bad omen. "Bad luck" - he thought.

- Well then, this is the deal, - said the administrator. - The director is very busy and you could only see him after six o'clock. I will write down the address and the phone number... - she hastily scribbled on a hotel form. - Here. Call around six or just go straight there. It's nearby.

Yura stood up, took the paper and thanked her.

- And where are you staying? - asked the administrator.

- You see, - said Yura, - I haven't checked in anywhere yet. And I don't wish to. I must leave today.

- Ah, - said the administrator, - well, bon voyage. Calm plazma, as our interplanetary pilots say.

Yura thanked her again and went out on the street.

In a shady side street, close to the hotel, he saw a cafe where the siesta has either ended or has not yet begun. Under a broad flowery marquee, right on the grass stood the tables and the roast pork smell was present. Over the marquee a sign was hanging: "Your old Mickey Mouse" with the image of the famous Disney character. Yura hesitantly walked into the marquee. Naturally, such cafes only exist in foreign cities. Behind a long metallic stand with colourful bottles in the background stood a bold red-cheeked barman in a white jacket with rolled up sleeves. His large hairy arms were lazily resting amongst silver lids, covering the dishes with free snacks. On barman's left stood an bizarre silver device, from which aromatic steam puffs rose. On the right, under a glass cover, various sandwiches stood in splendour on cardboard plates. Above the barman's head two posters were affixed. One, written in English, informed patrons, that "The first drink is free, second one - twenty four cents, all others - eighteen cents each". The other poster, in Russian, announced: "Your old Mickey Mouse is competing for the superior service award".

The cafe only had two patrons. One of them was sleeping at the table in the corner, his uncombed head resting on his arms. Next to him on the grass lay a shrivelled greasy backpack.

The other visitor, a bulky man in a chequered shirt was eating a stew with gusto, unhurriedly, and talking to the barman across two rows of tables. When Yura walked in, the barman was saying:

- I am not mentioning photon powered rockets and atomic reactors. I

want to talk about cafes and bars. That's where I know a thing or two. Take, for instance, your soviet cafes and our western cafes here, in Mirza-Charlie. I know the turnover of each place in town. Who goes to your soviet cafes? And, above all, why? Women come to your soviet cafes to eat ice-cream and to dance with non-drinking pilots at night...

Then the barman noticed Yura and paused.

- Her is a lad, - said he. - This is a Russian lad. He came to "Mickey Mouse" during the day. Consequently, he is a newcomer. He wants to eat.

The man in a chequered shirt looked at Yura with curiosity.

- Good afternoon, - said Yura to the barman. - I am, in fact, hungry. How is it done here with you?

Barman gave an echoing laugh.

- Here, with us, it is done precisely how it is done with you, - said he. - Expediently, tastily and politely. What would you like to have, my lad?

- Joyce, bring him the okroshka and a pork schnitzel. And you, comrade, take a sit next to me. First of all, there is a nice unexplained fresh draft, and secondly it would be easier for us to continue an ideological campaign against old Joyce.

The barman laughed again and disappeared under the bar. Yura, smiling with embarrassment, sat next to the chequered shirt.

- I am perpetuating this ideological struggle with "Mickey Mouse", - explained the man in a chequered shirt. - It has been five years of trying to prove to him, that things exist in the solar system, other than drinking bars.

The barman appeared from behind the stand, carrying a tray with a deep cardboard plate full of okroshka and a serving of bread.

- I am not even offering you a drink, - said he and skilfully placed the tray on the table. - I understood immediately, that you - are a Russian lad. All of you have this peculiar facial expression. I can't say, Ivan, that I like it, but the sight of it extinguishes thirst. And I feel like competing for some kind of award, even against own profit.

- Conscience speaking inside a free entrepreneur, - said Ivan. - Only a year ago I was able to convince him, that selling liquor to innocent people is immoral.

- Especially if it is done without charge, - said the barman and laughed. Evidently, he was hinting at the first free drink offer.

Yura was listening, enjoying the chilled, amazingly delicious okroshka. On the edge of the plate a line was printed, and Yura translated it as: "Eat to the bottom, find a surprise".

- The point, Joyce, is not even that due to your clientele there is a need to keep international police in Mirza-Charlie, - Ivan said lazily. - And, for the time being, I am ignoring the issue that, exactly because of the advantages of the western cafes over the soviet ones people get an amazingly easy opportunity to lose their regular human features. It's unfortunate to witness you, Joyce. Not as a barman, but as a human being. A man full of life, hairy hands of gold, by far not a mediocre person. And what does he do? He hangs around the bar, like an old commercial vendomat, and every night, spitting on his fingers, he counts dirty notes.

- You won't understand this, Ivan, - majestically said the barman.

- Such concept as prestige and turnover of a venue are foreign to you. Who doesn't know "Mickey Mouse" and Joyce? In every corner of the universe my bar is known. Where do pilots go after returning from some Jupiter? To "Mickey Mouse"! Where do our enlisted tramps spend their last day on Earth? At "Mickey Mouse"! Right here! At this very bar stand! Where does come go to drown their sorrows or spruce up their success? To me! And where do you dine, Ivan? - He laughed.

- You come to old Joyce! Naturally, you would never visit me at night. Perhaps as a civil watch patrol member. And I know, that deep in your heart, you prefer your soviet cafes. But somehow, you still come here! To "Mickey

Mouse" and old Joyce, - you must like something, right? That's why I am proud of my establishment.

The barman caught his breath and raised his fat thumb.

- And another thing, - he said. - This very dirty notes, that you were speaking about. In your crazy country everyone knows, that money - is dirt. But in my country everyone knows that dirt - is, regrettably, not the same as money. Money must be procured! For this our pilots fly, for this our workers enlist. I am an old man, and, perhaps, because of that I cannot understand at all, how success and prosperity is measured on your side. Indeed on your side everything is upside down. And with us, everything is clear and understandable. Where is the conqueror of Hannimex, captain Upton now? The director of a company "Minerals Ltd". Who is the famous navigator Cyrus Campbell? The owner of two largest restaurants in New York city. Naturally, once the entire world knew them, and now they are in the shade, but before they were servants and went wherever they got sent, and now they have servants of their own and send these wherever they like. I also do not wish to be a servant. I also want to be a master.

Ivan said pensively:

- You have achieved something already, Joyce. You do not wish to be a servant. Now the least bit is left - to cease wanting to be a master.

Yura finished his okroshka and saw the surprise. On the bottom of the plate was a line: "This dish was cooked by an electronic kitchen machine "Orpehus" made by "Cybernetics Ltd". Yura pushed the plate aside and announced:

- I believe it is really boring to spend your whole life standing behind the bar.

The barman adjusted an English sign on the wall saying: "Possession of firearms in Mirza-Charlie is punishable by death" and said:

- What do you mean - boring? What is boring work and what is fun work? Work is work.

- Work must be interesting, - said Yura.

The barman shrugged his shoulders:

- What for?

- What do you mean "what for"? - wondered Yura. - If work is interesting, one must... must... But who needs it, boring work? What purpose do you achieve, if you work without taking an interest in it?

- You tell this old fella, - said Ivan.

The barman stood up with an effort and announced:

- This is unfair. You are recruiting allies, Ivan. And I am alone.

- There are two of you, - said Ivan. He pointed at the sleeping man with his finger.

The barman looked, shook his head, and after collecting dirty plates, went behind the bar.

- What a tough nut, - said Ivan in a low voice. - How did he speak about the prestige of the establishment, hey? Now you should try arguing with him. You would never understand each other. I am still trying to find a common language with him. All in all, he is really a swell bloke.

Yura shook his head obstinately.

- No, - he said. - He is not at all swell. He is self-satisfied and dull. And I pity him. Well, what does a person live for? He will eventually save money and return home. And then what?

- Joyce! - bellowed Ivan. - We have one more question for you!

- Coming! - shouted the barman.

He appeared from behind the bar stand and placed before Yura the plate with a shnitzel and a misty bottle of grape juice.

- On the house, - said he, pointing to bottle, and sat down.

Yura said:

- Thank you, you shouldn't have.

- Listen, Joyce, - said Ivan. - The Russian boy is asking, what will you do when you become rich?

Joyce watched Yura closely for some time.

- Fair enough, - said he. - I know what answer the boy is waiting for. Therefore I will ask. The boy will grow up and become a mature man. All his life he will engage in... how do you say it... interesting work. But one day, he will become old and won't be able to work any more. What will he do then, this boy?

Ivan leaned on the back of the chair and looked at the barman with pleasure. His face read: "What a tough nut, this one, hey!" Yura felt how his ears became hot. He lowered the fork and said in confusion:

- I... I don't know, somehow I never thought about it... - he grew silent. The barman was looking at Yura seriously and sombrely. The awful moments dragged slowly. Yura said with despair: - I will try to die before I will cease being useful... - The barman's eyebrows rose to his forehead, he looked at Ivan with apprehension. Totally dumbfounded, Yura announced: - Anyway, I believe that its most important in life for a man to die a beautiful death!

The barman silently stood up, patted Yura on the back with his broad hand and retreated behind the bar. Ivan said:

- Well, buddy, thanks a lot. What a help you were. This way you will collapse all my ideological work.

- Come on now - mumbled Yura. - Old age... Stop working... A person must struggle all their life. Isn't that true?

- It is all true, - said the barman. - I, for instance, struggle to avoid taxes all my life.

- Yeah, but that's not what I meant, - said Yura, waived his hand and buried his face in the plate.

Ivan took a sip of the grape juice that was on the house and leisurely said:

- By the way, Joyce. One very interesting detail. Although my ally said nothing intelligent, given his tender age, take notice, he prefers to die rather than to live in the old age like you. It simply never entered his head, what he will do when he turns old. And you, Joyce, have been thinking about it all your life. And all your life you are preparing for old age. That's how it is, Joyce buddy.

The barman scratched his bald patch in reflection.

- Possibly, - said he.

- That's what the difference is, - said Ivan. - And the difference, I think, is not in your favour.

The barman thought about it for a while, scratched his bald spot again, and, without saying a word, disappeared through the door behind the bar.

- Well then, - said Ivan with satisfaction. - Today I got the better of him. By the way, where are you from, fair child?

- From Vyaz'ma, - Yura said melancholically. He was acutely feeling the unsoundness of his life experience.

- And what for?

- I need to get to Rhea. - He looked at Ivan and clarified: - Rhea - it's one of Saturn's satellites.

- Oh, that's what it is, - said Ivan. - Fascinating. And what did you miss on Rhea?

- There is a new construction, and I am a vacuum-welder. There were eleven of us and I fell behind the group, because I... Well, basically, for family reasons. Now I don't know how to get there. I shall go and see the cosmodrome director at six.

- To see Maikov?

- N-no, - said Yura. - That is, I don't know his name. To see the cosmodrome director, in general.

Ivan watched him with interest.

- What is your name?

- Yura... Yura Borodin.

- Well then, Yura Borodin, - said Ivan and sorrowfully shook his head.

- I am afraid, you will have to die a beautiful death. Trouble is, that the cosmodrome director comrade Maikov, as I am personally informed, has flown out to Moscow... - he looked at his watch, - twelve minutes ago.

This was a terrifying blow. Yura's heart sunk instantly.

- How so... - he mumbled. - But I was told...

- Come on now, - said Ivan. - Cheer up a little. Your old age hasn't yet arrived. Every director, when going to Moscow, leaves a deputy behind.

- That's right! - said Yura and exalted. - Please forgive me: I got to make a phone call immediately.

- Go and make the call, - said Ivan. - The payphone is right around the corner.

Yura jumped up and ran to the phone booth.

When Yura returned, Ivan was standing on the path in front of the cafe.

- Well? - he asked.

- No luck, - Yura said mournfully. - The director has really left whilst his deputy can only see me after seven tomorrow night.

- Tomorrow night? - Ivan asked again.

- Yes, after seven tomorrow night.

Ivan pensively stared somewhere at the acacia crowns.

- At night, - he repeated. - Yes, that is too late.

- I have to now spend the night at the hotel, - said Yura with a sigh.

- I will go and book a room.

Down the path approached, busily shuffling his shirt feet, a chubby man dressed with chic wearing a colonial helmet. His face was swollen, with distended eyes. Under his left eye a dark, thickly powdered abrasion was protruding. Within ten meters of approaching Ivan, the man ripped the helmet off his head, and bending his body almost in half, hurriedly sneaked into the cafe. Ivan bowed back gallantly.

- What's with him? - said Yura in astonishment

- Come on, let's go, - said Ivan. - It's on the way.

- One minute, - said Yura. - I will just go and pay.

- I paid already, - said Ivan, - Let's go.

- No, what for, - said Yura with dignity. - I have money... We were each handed money...

Ivan looked across the shoulder at the cafe.

- And this ass-licker, - said he, - is my good friend. Pride and joy of the international cosmoport Mirza-Charlie. - Yura also looked back. The "pride and joy of Mirza-Charlie" has already climbed onto the highest stool at the bar. - The king of stinkers. An underground recruiter. The most prosperous bastard in town. Two days ago he got drunk like a swine and was stalking a girl in the street. That's when I gave him a few knocks. Now he is very amicable with me.

They were leisurely walking down a shady green side street. It got cooler. Disorderly engine hum was reaching them from the Friendship street.

- But whom does he recruit? - asked Yura.

- Workers, - replied Ivan. - By the way, who recommended you to work on Rhea?

- Our plant has recommended us, - said Yura. - And who are this workers? Do our own really enlist?

Ivan was surprised.

- Why would they be ours? The folk from the West. All kind of unfortunate ones, who since childhood keep thinking about old age and dream of becoming some kind of proprietors. There are plenty over there. Listen, Yura, - said he, - and what if you won't get to Rhea? What then?

- Now, don't say that, - said Yura. - I will definitely get to Rhea. It will be really unfair to all the guys if I won't make it. There were one hundred and fifty volunteers and only eleven of us were chosen. How can I not make it? I must get there.

They walked in silence for some time.

- Ok, so they get recruited, - said Yura. - And then where to?

- Then they get put on ships and sent to asteroids. The recruiters receive commission per head placed in ship's hold. That's why, disguised as sales agents, they hang around Mirza-Charlie. And other international cosmodromes.

They came on to the Friendship walk and turned to the hotel. Ivan stopped next to a large white building.

- That's where I have to go, - he said. - Good bye, Yura Borodin.

- Good bye, - said Yura. - Thanks so much. And I am sorry for talking rubbish back there, in the cafe.

- It's nothing, - said Ivan. - The main thing is, you were earnest.

They shook hands.

- Listen, Yura, - said Ivan and paused.

- Yes? - said Yura.

- About Rhea, - said Ivan. He paused again, looking to the side. Yura was waiting. - Yes, about Rhea. Why don't you, buddy, come in sometime around nine o'clock tonight into hotel room three hundred and six.

- And what then? - asked Yura.

- What will come out of that, I don't know, - said Ivan. - In that suite you will see a man who looks quite ferocious. Try to convince him that you must really get to Rhea.

- And who is he? - asked Yura.

- Good bye, - said Ivan. - Don't forget: number three hundred and six, after nine o'clock.

He turned and disappeared inside the white building. Above the entrance to the building a black plastic board was hanging with white writing:

"The public order patrol headquarters. Mirza-Charlie".

- Number three hundred and six, - repeated Yura. - After nine.

<h2>Mirza-Charlie. The hotel, suite three hundred and six.</h2>

Yura was killing time. In a few hours he covered almost the entire city. He really enjoyed walking around unfamiliar cities and find out what there is. In Mirza-Charlie there was EACS. No one was allowed under the giant transparent dome but now Yura knew that EACS - is the Electronic Administration and Control System, the electronic brain of the cosmodrome. Walking north from EACS, you would get to a large park with an open sky cinema, two shooting galleries, a big stadium, the ride "Man inside a rocket", music cabins, swings, dancing areas and a great clear lake, around which araucarias and pyramid poplars grew and in which Yura enjoyed a swim. On the southern outskirts of the city Yura discovered a low red building, immediately past which the desert began. Next to the building were parked a few red squarish atomocars and a blue policeman was walking around with a gun. The policeman announced to Yura that the red building is the prison and that the Russian lad shouldn't go there. To the west of EACS lay the residential suburbs. There were lots of small and large, pretty and not so pretty houses. The streets were narrow, unsealed. Living there must have been, as it looked, not bad at all - cool, shady and close to the centre. Yura really liked the city library building but did not go inside. On the western city border the administrative buildings were situated, and behind them the industrial area began, a huge territory occupied by warehouses.

The warehouses were endlessly long, grey-coloured, made from corrugated plastic, with giant white numbers painted on the walls. Here Yura discovered such an abundance of trucks and cargo helicopters that he had never seen in his life. His ears were becoming blocked from the continuous steady hum of engines. Yura had barely walked ten paces, when behind him a siren wailed nastily and he jumped to the side, to some wall, but then the wall opened and through the gates, as wide as the Arch of Triumph, right towards Yura, crawled a huge red and white beast on wheels the size of two human heights,

and from the two-storey height the driver wearing a beanie shouted at Yura. The humongous truck slowly reversed in a narrow passage between the warehouses and right behind it another one was crawling out already, and a third one following the second. Yura carefully manoeuvred along the walls, radiating heat, deafened by the roar, the rumbling and heavy clink of unseen mechanisms.

Then he saw a low platform, onto which familiar cylindrical containers with vacuum welding mix were being loaded. He walked closer, and smiling cheerfully, stood next to the man conducting the loading with the help of a remote control on his neck. He stood and watched for some time as the arms of the crane accurately placed the packed container stacks on top of each other. Then he said knowingly:

- No, this won't do.
- What won't do? - asked the man with interest and looked at Yura.
- This very container won't do.
- Why?
- You can see that. The valve is crooked.

The man wavered for a few seconds.

- It's nothing, - he said. - They will work it out there.
- Not quite, - disagreed Yura. - We won't be working it out over there.

Remove this stack.

The man took his hands off the remote and stared at Yura. The arm of the crane stopped, the next stack, rocking quietly, hung in mid-air.

- It's a mere trifle, - said the man.
- It's a trifle here, - Yura rebutted again.

The man shrugged his shoulders and placed his hands on the remote again. Yura incessantly watched the unloading of the defective container, thanked the man politely and walked on. Very soon he discovered that he is lost. The warehouse territory was like a whole city, with streets and side-streets ending in the desert. At the end of such side-streets stood huge signs with warnings: "Go back! Hazardous radiation zone!". It was getting dark quickly and Yura followed some column of vehicles riding on broad elastic tracks and without realising ended up on a highway.

Yura knew that the city is on his right, but to the left, where the column had gone, multicoloured lights were flashing nearby, and Yura turned left. Dessert lay on either side of the highway. There were no trees, no irrigation ditches, just an even black horizon. The sun had set a long time ago, but the air was still hot and dry.

The multicoloured lights were flashing above the crossing arms. On the side of the crossing stood a small mushroom-like house. Next to the house, beneath a street light a policeman was sitting, holding his blue helmet in his lap. Another policeman was walking in front of the crossing. Upon seeing Yura, he stopped and walked towards him. Yura's heart jumped. The policeman came close and stretched out his hand.

- Papers, - he said in a barking voice.

I think I am stuck now, thought Yura. If I get detained... By the time they will work it out... Why did I only walk here!.. He hastily reached into his pocket. The policeman was waiting with his hand outstretched. The other policeman put on his helmet and stood up.

- Weit a minut, - mumbled Yura. - Hang on. Right this minute... Damn, oh no, just where could it be...

The policeman lowered his hand.

- Are you Russian? - he asked.

- Yes, - said Yura. - Hang on... You see, all I have is a workplace reference... The steelworks plant in V'yazma... he finally produced the reference.

- No need, - said the policeman suddenly in a kind tone.

The second policeman approached and asked:

- What's the matter? The chap hasn't got his papers?
- Nope, - said the first policeman. - He is Russian.

- Oh, - said the other one with indifference. He turned and walked back to his bench.

- I just wanted to have a look at what's here, - said Yura.

- Here we have the cosmodrome, - the policeman explained readily. - Over there, - he pointed beyond the crossing with his hand. - But you cannot go there.

- No, no, - Yura said hastily. - Just to have a look.

- You can have a look, - said the policeman. He walked to the crossing. Yura followed him. - This is the cosmodrome, - the policeman repeated.

Under the bright middle-eastern starts a flat, almost glaciated plateau shimmered. Far ahead, where the highway was leading, clouded glares flashed up and searchlight rays scurried, displacing gigantic hazy silhouettes from the dark. From time to time a weak thundering blare rolled across the plateau.

"Space ships", - Yura thought with pleasure. Of course, he knew, that Mirza-Charlie, like all other cosmodromes on Earth, was used only for intra-planetary communication, that real planetary vessels, the photon rockets types such as "Cheous", "John Brown", "Yang-Tze" are too immense and powerful to take off directly from Earth, but these dark contours over the horizon also seemed quite formidable.

- Rockets, rockets, - the policeman spoke leisurely. - How many people fly out there, - he raised a blue fluorescent baton to the dark sky. - Everyone with their dreams. And how many of them return in sealed zinc coffins! Right here, by this very crossing, we assemble the honorary guard. Their determination takes your breath away. And nevertheless, over there must be, - he raised the baton again, - there must be someone, who really dislikes this determination...

The horizon suddenly lit up with a blinding flash, a long fiery stream hit the sky and dispersed into a fountain of sparks. The bitumen under their feet trembled. The policeman brought the watch to his eyes.

- Twelve past twenty, - he said. - The nightly lunar.

There was thunder in the sky. The booming peals weakened as they faded away and finally died altogether.

- I got to go, - said Yura. - What's the quickest way to get into town?

- Keep walking, - replied the policeman. - At the turn to the warehouse hail down any car.

When at ten-thirty Yura reached the hotel, he looked somewhat dishevelled and bewildered. Mirza-Charlie at night was totally unlike Mirza-Charlie during the day. Down the streets, bisected by sharp dark shadows, the cars moved in a solid tide. The flashing billboards lit up the crowds on the side walk. The doors of all cafes and bars were wide open. Inside the music roared and the air was bluish with tobacco smoke. Drunk foreigners were trudging down the street, hugging, in threes or fours, bawling unfamiliar songs. Across every twenty-thirty steps the police stood with stony faces under the helmets worn low. Through the pulsing crowd, trios of solid young lads wearing red armbands moved calmly and leisurely. Yura saw how one such patrol walked inside a bar, and immediately the silence fell and even the music stopped playing. The patrolmen had bored and squeamish faces. From another bar, much closer to the hotel, the two with tiny moustaches threw out onto the street some unfortunate soul and began kicking him. The poor fellow was screaming loudly in French: "Patrol! Help! Murder!" Yura, clenching his teeth with loathing, already took aim for a punch into the ear of a whiskered man, when he was unceremoniously shoved aside and a long strapping arm with a red band grabbed one of the whiskered men by the collar. The other whiskered fellow crouched and jumped into a bar. The patrol negligently passed the catch into the arms of approaching police, and they, twisting the men's arms behind his back, almost in a rush, dragged him into the nearest side-street. Yura managed to notice, how one of the policemen, looking around stealthily, hit the whiskered fellow hard on

the head with a fluorescent baton. Pity I didn't give it to him, thought Yura. For a moment he even lost the desire to fly to Rhea. He wished he could put on a red band and join these firm, confident young guys.

- Some customs you have here! - upon returning to the hotel, Yura told the administratrix with agitation. - Some nest of bloodsuckers!..

- What are you on about? - asked the administratrix with fear. Yura came to his senses.

- Well, you see, on the street, - he said, - such a dump!..

- An international port, we must put up with this for now, - said the administratrix with a smile. - And how are things with you?

- Don't know yet, - said Yura. - Tell me please, how do I get to room three hundred and six?

- Go up in a lift, third floor, turn right.

- Thanks, - said Yura and walked to the lift.

He came up to the third floor and found the door to three hundred and six straight away. In front of the door he stopped and for the first time thought how, what, and most importantly, to whom he will be talking. He recalled what Ivan said about a fierce-looking man. He thoroughly combed his hair and looked himself over. Then he knocked.

- Come in, - said a low husky voice behind the door. Yura walked in.

In the room, behind a round table covered with a white tablecloth, sat two mature men. Yura was dumbfounded: he recognised them both, and this was so unexpected that for a moment he imagined he must be in the wrong suite. Ahead of him, staring directly in his face with small hostile eyes, sat the well-known Bykov, the captain of the legendary "Takhmaseeb", sombre and ruddy - the way he looked on a stereophoto above the desk of Yura's older brother. The face of the other man, sprawled out in a light straw chair, genteel, long, with a squeamish fold beside his full lips was also amazingly familiar. Yura just couldn't remember his name, but was absolutely certain, that he had seen him once or perhaps even a few times. On the table stood a long dark bottle and one glass.

- What do you want? - Bykov asked in a muffled voice.

- Is this room three hundred and six? - Yura asked with hesitation.

- Ye-es, - the man with a genteel face answered in a velvety rolling voice. - Who are you after, young man?

This must be Yurkovski, remembered Yura. The interplanetary explorer from Venus. There was a film about them...

I... I don't know... - he spoke. - You see, I really must get to Rhea... Today this one comrade...

- Surname? - said Bykov.

- Whose? - Yura couldn't understand.

- Your surname!

- Borodin... Yuri Mikhailovich Borodin.

- Occupation?

- Vacuum-welder.

- Documents.

For the second time that day (and in his entire life) Yura reached for his documents. Bykov was staring at him, waiting. Yurkovski lazily held the bottle and poured himself some wine.

- Here you are, please, - said Yura. He placed his reference on the table and moved a few steps away.

Bykov produced from his shirt-pocket great old-fashioned glassed and, holding them up to his eyes, very attentively and, as Yura decided, twice in a row, read the document after which it was handed to Yurkovski.

- How did it happen, that you fell behind your group? - he asked sharply.

- I... You see, it's a family matter...

- In more detail, young man, - thundered Yurkovski. He was reading the professional reference, holding it in an outstretched hand and taking sips from the glass.

- You see, my mum suddenly became ill, - said Yura. An appendicitis attack. You see, there was no way I could leave. My brother is in an expedition... Dad is at the North Pole at the moment... I couldn't...

- Does your mum know, that you volunteered to go into space? - asked Bykov.

- Yes, of course.

- She agreed?

- Y-yes...

- Are you engaged?

Yura shook his head. Yurkovski carefully folded the recommendation and laid it on the edge of the table.

- Tell me, young man, - he asked, - why weren't you... er... replaced?

Yura blushed.

- I really pleaded with them, - he said quietly. - And everyone thought that I will catch up. I came just one day late...

Silence set in and one could here, how on Friendship walk the 'Varangian guests' yelled discordantly. Either drowning their sorrows or sprucing up their fortune. Possibly, at Old Joyce's.

- Do you have... err... acquaintances at Mirza-Charlie? - Yurkovski asked cautiously.

- No, - said Yura. - I only arrived today. I just met this one comrade in a cafe. His name is Ivan and he...

- And where did you go for inquiries?

- To the duty officer at passenger communications and the hotel administrator.

Bykov and Yurkovski swapped glances. It seemed to Yura, that Yurkovski shook his head with slight negation.

- Well, this is not such a big deal, - grumbled Bykov.

Yurkovski suddenly spoke sharply:

- I really cannot understand, why we need a passenger.

Bykov was thinking.

- Honestly, I will not get in anyone's way, - said Yura with conviction. - And I am ready to do anything.

- Even ready to die a beautiful death, - muttered Bykov.

Yura bit his lip. My chances are crap, he thought. God, how badly stuffed I am. Oh, how badly...

- I really need to get to Rhea, - he said. He suddenly realised with perfect lucidity, that this is his final chance and he cannot count on tomorrows meeting with the director's deputy.

- Hmm? - said Bykov and looked at Yurkovski. Yurkovski shrugged his shoulders and, lifting his glass, began staring at it through the light. Then Bykov got up from the table - Yura even stepped back, for he seemed so huge and bulky - and, dragging his feet in slippers, headed for the corner, where on the back of a chair hung a worn leather jacket. From its pocket he produced a flat shiny radiophone case. Yura, holding his breath, was watching his back.

- Charles? - Bykov inquired in muffled voice. He was pressing a flexible cord with a metallic ball to his ear. - This is Bykov. Do you still have the "Takhmaseeb" log? Insert into the crew list for special voyage 17... Yes, I am taking a probationer... Yes, the head of the mission does not object. (Yurkovski grimaced strongly, but said nothing.) What? Hang on, - Bykov turned to Yura, held out his hand and clicked his fingers impatiently. Yura rushed to the table, grabbed the reference and placed it between the fingers. - Now... Right... Signed by the collective of steelworks plant in V'yazma... God, Charles, this is absolutely none of your business! After all, this is a special voyage!.. Yes. Here: Borodin Yuri Mikhailovich... Eighteen years of age. Yes, precisely eighteen. Vacuum-welder... Probationer... Included under my order from yesterday's date. Please Charles, prepare his documents immediately. No, he won't, I will get them myself... Tomorrow morning. Good bye Charles, thanks.

Bykov slowly wound up the cord and shoved the radiophone back into the jacket's pocket.

- This is illegal, Alexey, - Yurkovski said quietly. Bykov returned to the table and sat down.

- If you only knew, Vladimir, - said he, - how many regulations I can do without in space. And how many regulations we shall do without on this flight. Probationer, you may sit, - he told Yura. Yura sat down hastily and very uncomfortably. Bykov lifted the receiver. - Zhilin, come see me now. - He hung up the phone. - Take your papers, probationer. You will answer immediately to myself. The ship's engineer Zhilin, who will come shortly, will outline your duties to you.

- Alexey, - Yurkovski said majestically. - Our... err... cadet still does not know, who he is dealing with.

- Nope, I know, - said Yura. - I recognised you straight away.

- Oh! - Yurkovski was surprised. - We are still recognisable?

Yura had no time to answer. The door opened and on the threshold appeared Ivan in that same chequered shirt.

- Here I am, Alexey Petrovich, - he announced cheerfully.

- Collect your god-son, - grouched Bykov. - This is our probationer. He is now your responsibility. Make a note in the log. And now take him with you and don't leave him out of sight until we take off tomorrow.

- Understood, - said Zhilin, took Yura off the chair and lead him into the corridor. Yura was slowly realising what has happened.

- This is you - Zhilin? - he asked. - Ship's engineer?

- Zhilin did not answer. He placed Yura before him, stepped a foot back and said in a menacing voice:

- Do you drink vodka?

- No, - Yura answered fearfully.

- Do you believe in God?

- No.

- A truly interplanetary soul! - Zhilin said with content. - When we get on "Takhmaseeb", I will let you kiss the ignition key.

<h2>Mars. Astronomers.</h2>

Matti, covering his eyes from the blinding sun, was looking at the dunes. The crawler was nowhere to be seen. Above the dunes hung a large cloud of reddish dust, a weak wind was slowly shifting it sideways. All was quiet, only at the five meter height the anemometer propeller was rustling. Then Matti heard the shots - "pok, pok, pok, pok" - four shots in a row.

- Missed, of course, - he said.

The observatory was standing on a tall flat hill. In summer the air was always very clear and from the hilltop the white domes and parallelepipeds of Warm Syrt five kilometres to the South and grey ruins of the Old Base on an identical flat high hill three kilometres to the West could be clearly seen. But right now the Old Base was hidden by a cloud of dust. "Pok, pok, pok", - was heard again there.

- Sharp-shooters, - Matti lamented. He examined the watch post. - What a rotten beast, - he said.

The wide-angle camera was overturned. The meteo-box was leaning on the side. The wall of the telescoping pavilion was smothered with some yellow crap. Above the pavilion door shone a fresh hole from an explosive bullet. The light above the entrance was shattered.

- Sharp-shooters, - Matty reiterated.

He walked to the pavilion and palpated the edges of the tear with his fingers in a fur-lined glove. He thought about what mess an explosive bullet can invoke in a pavilion and he quivered. In the pavilion stood a very nice telescope with a beautifully repaired lens, the scintillation recorder, blink-autoshutters - all rare, capricious and complex apparatus.

Blink-autoshutters are harmed even by dust, and must be covered with a hermetic core. But what can the core do against an explosive bullet?

Matti did not go into the pavilion. "They should see it themselves, he thought. - They were the ones shooting, let them be the ones to see it". Frankly speaking, he was simply too scared to go inside. He placed the carbine on the sand and, with some effort, lifted the camera. One foot of the tripod was bent and the camera was standing unevenly.

- Rotten scoundrel! - said Matti with hatred. He was conducting the meteorite filming and the camera was his sole instrument. He walked across the entire ground to the meteo-box. The dust over the ground was dug over. Matti was stomping with disdain upon the characteristic rounded craters - the traces of the "flying leech". "Why does she always barge in on the observation ground? - he was thinking. - Fine, she could at least crawl around the house. At least break into the garage. But no, she must climb onto the ground. Does it smell of human flesh or something?"

The door of the meteo-box was bent and would not open. Matti hopelessly waived his hand and returned to the camera. He swivelled the camera off the base, removed it with an effort and laid it upon the outstretched tarpaulin, groaning. Then he lifted the tripod and carried it into the house. He stood the tripod in the workshop and peeked inside the dining hall. Natasha was sitting by the radio.

- Reported it already? - asked Matti.

- You know, I get so discouraged by this, - she said grudgingly. - Honestly, it would have been easier to run over there

- And what is it? - asked Matti.

Natasha abruptly turned the volume regulator. A low and weary voice hummed inside the room: "Number seven, number seven, this is Syrt. Why is there no summary? Hear me, number seven? Send the summary now!" Number seven started muttering numbers.

- Syrt! - said Natasha. - Syrt! This is number one!

- Number one, don't interfere, - said the weary voice. - Have some patience.

- Here you are, then, - said Natasha and turned the volume control the other way.

- And what exactly are you going to tell them? - asked Matti.

- About what has happened, - Natasha replied. - This is an emergency.

- Can't call it an emergency, - disagreed Matti. - Every night we have such an emergency.

Natasha pensively rested her cheek on a fist.

- You know, Matti, - she said, - indeed this is the first time the leech came during the day.

Matti placed his entire hand over his face. It was true. Previously the leeches came either late at night or right before dawn.

- Right, - he said. - R-r-right. This is how I see it: total insolence.

- That's how I see it as well, - Natasha remarked. - What's out there, on the ground?

- You better see for yourself, - said Matti. - My camera was wrecked. I won't be observing tonight.

- Are the guys there? - Natasha asked.

Matti stumbled.

- Yes, basically there, - said Matti and waived his hand vaguely.

He suddenly imagined, what Natasha would say, when she sees the bullet hole above the pavilion door.

Natasha turned to the radio again and Matti closed the door quietly behind him. He left the house and saw the crawler. The crawler was flying at maximum speed, skipping boldly from dune to dune. Behind it, a solid wall of dust shot up to the very stars and against this red and yellow background the mighty figure of Pen'kov, standing at full height with a carbine resting against his waist was outlined very effectively. Naturally, Sergey was driving the crawler. He directed the vehicle right onto Matti and locked

the brakes at five feet. A thick dust cloud wrapped the observation ground.

- Centauri, - said Matti, cleaning his glasses. - An equine face on a human torso.

- What of it? - said Sergey, jumping off. Behind him, Pen'kov descended leisurely.

- Escaped, - he said.

- I think you got it, - said Sergey.

Pen'kov nodded pompously.

- I think so, too, - he said.

Matti approached him and strongly grabbed the right sleeve of his fur-lined coat.

- Let's take a walk, - he said.

- Where to? - Pen'kov inquired, resisting him.

- Come on, come on, sniper, - said Matty. - I will show you, where you definitely struck.

They approached the pavilion and stopped in front of the door.

- Holy cow, - said Pen'kov.

Sergey, saying nothing, rushed inside.

- Natashka saw all this? - Pen'kov asked quickly.

- Not yet, - said Matty.

Pen'kov was feeling the edges of the hole with a cogitative expression.

- This can't be readily sealed, - he said.

- Yep, there is no spare pavilion on Syrt, - Matti said venomously.

A month ago, Pen'kov, whilst shooting leeches at night, pierced the meteo-box. At that time he headed to Syrt and found a spare one somewhere. He hid the meteo-box he'd shot in the garage.

Sergey shouted from the pavilion:

- I think it's alright.

- Is there an exit opening? - asked Pen'kov.

- There is...

A soft hum was heard, the roof of the pavilion separated and sealed again.

- I think, we are lucky, - Sergey announced and got out of the pavilion.

- My tripod was also bent, - said Matti. - And the meteo-box was so badly wrecked that we will need to get a new one.

Pen'kov quickly glanced at the box and continued looking at the gaping hole. Sergey was standing beside him and was staring at it as well.

- I will fix the meteo-box, - Pen'kov said dolefully. - But what can be done about this...

- Natasha is coming, - Matti warned quietly.

Pen'kov made a movement as though he was about to disappear somewhere, but only pulled his head in between the shoulders. Sergey spoke quickly:

- This is a tiny gash, Natashen'ka, but this is not significant, we will quickly patch it up today, and everything is safe inside...

Natasha came close to them, looked at the gash.

- Guys, you are swines, - she said quietly.

Now everyone felt like vanishing somewhere, even Matti, who wasn't guilty of anything and was the last one to run out onto the flat when it was all over. Natasha entered the pavilion and turned on the light. Through the open door they could see how she is removing the covers from the blink-autoshutters. Pen'kov sighed, melancholically and protractedly. Sergey said quietly:

- I am going to park the car.

No one answered him, he climbed into the crawler and started the motor. Matti silently returned to his camera and, bent in half, dragged it towards the house. In front of the pavilion remained only Pen'kov's sombre, absurdly cumbersome figure.

Matti pulled the camera inside the workshop, took off the oxygen mask, the hood and fumbled for a long time with his loose parka. Then, not taking

of his snow steppers, he sat on the table next to the camera. Through the window he could see, how unusually slowly, almost on toe-tips, the crawler rolled inside the garage.

Natasha left the pavilion and shut the door tight behind her. Then she walked across the ground, stopping in front of the devices. Pen'kov was trudging behind her, and, judging by all signs, was sighing, melancholically and protractedly. The dust clouds have already settled, the tiny reddish sun was sitting above the black, as if gnawed at, ruins of the Old Base, overgrown by the prickly Martian haloxylon. Matti looked at the low sun, at the quickly darkening sky, realised that he is on duty tonight, and headed for the kitchen.

During supper Sergey said:

- Our Natashen'ka is very serious tonight, - and gave her a peering look.

- Shame on you, really, - said Natasha. She ate, not looking at anyone, very upset and frowning.

- Our Natashen'ka is really cross, - said Sergey.

Pen'kov let out a melancholic and protracted sigh. Matti shook his head sorrowfully.

- She doesn't like us tonight, our Natashen'ka, - Sergey added tenderly.

- I mean, really, what is all this, - Natasha spoke. - Indeed we agreed not to go on shooting at the observation ground. This isn't a shooting gallery, after all. There are appliances... Had you smashed the blinks tonight, where would you go? Where would we get them?

Pen'kov was looked at her with devout eyes.

- How can you, Natashen'ka, - said Sergey. - How can one shoot a blink

- We only shoot at streetlights, - Matti grumbled.

- And you have punctured the pavilion, - said Natasha.

- Natashen'ka! - Serezha shouted. - We shall bring another pavilion. Pen'kov will run over to Syrt and bring one. He is so robust!

- Ah, forget you, - said Natasha. She was no longer angry.

Pen'kov livened up.

- Where can we shoot at her, other than on the observation ground?.. - he began, but Matti stepped on his foot under the table, and he shut up.

- You, Volodya, are so cumbersome, it's scary, - said Natasha. - A huge beast the size of a cupboard, and you keep missing it for a whole month.

- I am surprised, too, - frankly admitted Pen'kov and forcefully scratched his head. - Perhaps, the cross-sight has been dislodged?

- Bending of the barrel, - Matti said venomously.

- Doesn't matter guys, all these games are now over. Everyone looked at her. - I spoke to Syrt. Today the leeches attacked the group lead by Azizbekov, the geologists, a new construction section and us here. All this in broad daylight.

- And all this to the West of and North of Syrt, - said Sergey.

- Yes, indeed, - said Natasha. - I didn't even think of that. Well, however it is, it has been decided we conduct a hunt.

- That's excellent, - said Pen'kov. - Finally.

- Tomorrow morning there will be a meeting, they are recalling the heads of all groups. I shall go, and you will be in charge, Serezha. Yes, and one more thing. We won't be conducting observations tonight. The administration issued orders to postpone all night-time works.

Pen'kov quit eating and looked sadly at Natasha. Matti said:

- I don't care, my camera is stuffed. But for Pen'kov, his program will be ruined, if he misses a couple of nights.

- I know, - said Natasha. - Everyone's program is being ruined.

- What if I do it somehow, very slowly, - said Pen'kov, - out of sight. Natasha shook her head.

- Don't even want to hear it, - she said.

- And what if... - Pen'kov started saying, and Matti stepped on his

foot once more.

Pen'kov thought: "Indeed, why waste my breath. Everyone will be observing anyway".

- What day is it today? - asked Sergey. He meant the day of the decade.

- The eighth, - said Matti. Natasha blushed and started looking into everyone's eyes in succession.

- Somehow Rybkin has taken long to come, - said Sergey, pouring coffee for himself.

- Yes, that's right, - Pen'kov stated profoundly.

- And the hour is a late one, - Matti added. - The night is drawing close, yet Rybkin's missing still...

- Ah! - said Sergey and lifted his finger. The partition door clinked in the lobby. - It's him! - Sergey announced in solemn whisper.

- You are silly, so silly, - said Natasha and laughed timidly.

- Leave Natashen'ka alone, - Sergey insisted. - Don't you dare laugh at her.

- Just wait till he comes, he will be laughing himself, - said Pen'kov.

There was a knock on the door of the dining room. Sergey, Matti and Pen'kov simultaneously placed their fingers on their lips and gave Natasha a significant glance.

- Well, what is it with you? - Natasha whispered. - Please, somebody respond...

Matti, Sergey and Pen'kov shook their heads in unison.

- Come in! - Natasha said in despair.

Rybkin walked in, accurately dressed and sharp as always, in clean overalls, a snow-white shirt with a turn-down collar, shaven beyond reproach. His face, like all Pathfinders, created a strange impression: cheek-bones and forehead with pitch black sunburn, white spots around the eyes and the lower portion of the face, where the skin was covered by the goggles and the oxygen mask.

- May I? - he said in a low voice. He always spoke in a low voice.

- Sit down, Felix, - Natasha invited him.

- Will you have supper? - Matti asked.

- No, thank you, - said Rybkin. - Rather a cup of coffee.

- Somehow you were late today, - said the straightforward Pen'kov, pouring him the coffee. Sergey pulled a ghastly face, and Matti kicked Pen'kov under the table.

Rybkin calmly accepted the coffee.

- I came half an hour ago, - he said, - and took a stroll around the house. I see, you have also been visited by the leech.

- Today we had a battle here, - said Natasha.

- Yes, - said Rybkin. - I saw the gash in the pavilion.

- Our carabines suffer from the bending of the barrel, - explained Matti.

Rybkin laughed. He had small even white teeth.

- And have you ever had a chance to shoot at least one leech? - Sergey asked.

- Most likely, no, - said Felix. - They are really hard to shoot.

- That much I know myself, - Pen'kov muttered.

Natasha, with her eyes to the table, was crumbing the bread.

- Today one was shot in Azizbekov's sector, - Rybkin said.

- You serious? - Pen'kov was amazed. - By whom?

Rybkin laughed again.

- No one, in fact, - he said. He quickly glanced at Natasha. - A funny thing - the excavator's arm came loose and squashed it. Perhaps someone had shot the cord.

- Now that is a shot, - said Sergey.

- We can do that too, - Matti said. - Whilst running, thirty paces away straight into the light above the door.

- You know, guys, - Sergey said, - I get the impression that on Mars

all carabines suffer from the bending of the barrel.

- No, - Felix said. - Afterwards they discovered, that Azizbekov's leech had taken six bullets.

- Indeed there will be a hunt soon, - Pen'kov said, - and then we'll get them in the neck.

- And I am not the least happy about this hunt, - said Matti. - Since the beginning of time we had it like that: bang-shoot-bang, destroy all living creatures, and then start setting up sanctuaries.

- What are you on about? - said Sergey. - They are a nuisance.

- Indeed everything is a nuisance to us, - said Matti. - Lack of oxygen is a nuisance, excess oxygen - a nuisance, too many forests - a nuisance, cut it down... Who are we, after all, that everything is a nuisance to us?

- Was the salad that bad? - Pen'kov said pensively. - But you were the one who made it...

- Now, now, don't get caught Pen'kov, - Sergey said. - He simply wants to start a general conversation. To get Natasha talking.

Felix looked at Sergey with attention. He had large bright eyes and seldom blinked. Matti laughed.

- What if, perhaps, they are not in our way, - he said, - but we are in theirs.

- Huh? - Pen'kov grouched.

- I am offering a working hypothesis, - said Matti. - The flying leeches are the indigenous intelligent inhabitants of Mars, regardless of being at a low developmental stage still. We occupied the regions, where water exists and they are inclined to expel us.

Pen'kov looked at him with astonishment.

- Well, then, - he said, - Possibly.

- Everything supports my hypothesis, - Matti went on. - They live in underground cities. They always attack from the right - because it's their taboo. And... umm... they always collect their wounded...

- Well, brother... - Pen'kov said with disappointment.

- Felix, - said Sergey, - demolish this elegant speculation.

Felix said:

- Such a hypothesis had already been advanced. (Matti raised his eyebrows in astonishment). Long ago. Before the first leech had been killed. Nowadays more fascinating hypotheses are being advanced.

- Well? - asked Pen'kov.

- To date, no one had explained, why leeches attack people. One cannot exclude the possibility, that this is a very ancient habit. A thought suggests itself, what if a race of erect bipeds, in fact, inhabits Mars.

- Inhabit it does, - said Sergey. - Inhabits it for thirty years already.

Felix smiled politely.

- One can hope, that the leeches will direct us to that race.

For a while, everyone stayed quiet. Matti looked at Felix with envy. He always envied people, who are faced with such tasks. To track the flying leeches - a task captivating in itself, but when such a mission is added to it...

...Matti examined, in his head, all interesting tasks he had to solve by himself during the last five years. The most interesting one was the construction of a discreet hunter-detective based on chemostaders. The patrol camera would become a giant inquisitive eye, detecting the appearance and movement of "extraneous" light spots in the night sky. Sergey was running across the dunes, flashing his torch from time to time, and the camera would, silently and creepily, reverse behind him, watching over his every step... "Oh well, - Matti thought, - that was interesting, too."

Sergey suddenly said with disdain:

- How much do we not know still! (Pen'kov stopped sipping the coffee noisily from his cup and looked at him.) And how strongly do resist the endeavours to know! Day by day, decade after decade we walk, in dreary

trivialities up to our necks... Messing with electronics, plotting graphs, writing petty articles, reports... Disgusting! - He grabbed his cheeks and rubbed his face with force. - Right outside the perimeter, an absolutely unfamiliar, foreign world has stretched for thousands of kilometres. And it's so tempting to give this all up, and walk on, without direction, across the desert, to look for real things... Shame on us, guys. This is a joke and a shame, to sit on Mars and see nothing for twenty four hours each day, except blink's registogrammes and Pen'kov's sad physiognomy...

Pen'kov said mildly:

- Why don't you give it all up, Serega. And off you go. Ask the builders to take you in. Or, even, join Felix. - He turned to Felix. - Will you take him, no?

Felix shrugged his shoulders.

- Oh no, Pen'kov, mate, this won't help. - Sergey, tight-lipped, waved his light fringe. - One must be able to do something. And what can I do? Fix blinks... Count to two and integrate on minor computers. I can drive the crawler, but not even professionally... What else am I good at?

- You can whine professionally, - said Matti. He felt awkward for Sergey in front of Felix.

- I am not whining. I am angry. How self-satisfied and self-limited we are! Just where does it come from? Why is it established, that to find a spot for an observatory is more significant than to cross the planet down the meridian, from pole to pole? Why is it more significant to search for oil, than for mysteries? What - don't we have enough oil?

- What - don't you have enough mysteries? - said Matti. - I wish you'd sit down and solve a constrained T-problem...

- But I don't want to solve it at all! It is boring to solve it, my poor little Matti! Boring! I am a healthy, robust bloke, I bend iron nails with my fingers... Why must I peer over paper?

He stopped talking. The silence was heavy, and Matti thought it'd help to change the topic, but had no idea how.

Natasha said:

- I don't really agree with Serezhka, but this is true - we have become somewhat bogged down in the routine. And it gets so frustrating sometimes... Ok, let it not be us, let someone finally get to work on Mars as a new territory. After all, this isn't an island, not even a continent - terra incognita, - this is indeed a planet! And we sit here quietly for thirty years and timidly cling to water and cosmodromes. And there are so few of us, it's ridiculous. It is, indeed, annoying. Somewhere in the directorate a grey-maned senior with a wartime past probably sits and keeps grumbling: "Too early, too early".

Having heard the word "early", Pen'kov shivered and looked at his watch.

- Oh, far out, - he muttered, standing up from the table. - I have already sat through two stars here with you. - Here he looked at Natasha, opened his mouth and hastily sat down again. His face was so amusing, that everyone, even Sergey, laughed out loud.

Matti jumped up and went to the window.

- And what a night it is! - he said. - The image quality tonight will probably astonish you. - He glanced at Natasha across the shoulder.

Felix livened up.

- Natasha, - he said. - If you want, I can stand guard whilst you will be working.

- But how will you... Don't you need to go soon... - Natasha blushed. - I meant to say, that usually you leave us around this time...

- What's the use of guarding us? - said Matti. - I can stand guard myself. My camera has been wrecked anyway.

- I'll go get dressed then, - said Pen'kov.

- Alright then, - Natasha gave in. - As an amendment to my order from seven pm tonight.

Pen'kov left already. Sergey also got up and without looking at anyone, walked out. Matti started clearing the table.

- Let me help you, - Felix offered and accurately rolled up his sleeves.

- What's there to help with, - objected Matti. - Five cups, five plates...

He looked at Felix and stopped short.

- And what's that for? - he asked with surprise. On each of Felix's right and left wrists were two sets of watches. Felix said seriously:

- This is also a hypothesis. So you will wash up by yourself?

- By myself, - said Matti. "Still, that Felix is a weird fellow", - he thought.

- Then I shall go, - said Felix and left.

The radio in the corner of the room suddenly hissed, clicked, and a thick tired voice said:

- Number One, this is Syrt. Syrt calling Number One.

Matti yelled:

- Natasha! Syrt is calling.

He came to the microphone and said:

- Number one listening!

- Call the head of the group, - said the voice from the speaker.

- One minute.

Natasha ran in, her parka undone, with an oxygen mask on her chest.

- This is the group leader, - she said.

- Confirming the directive once more, - said the voice, - the night works are called off. The Warm Syrt is surrounded by leeches. I repeat...

Matti was listening and drying the plates. Pen'kov and Sergey walked in. Matti observed with interest, how their faces grew long.

- ...Warm Syrt is surrounded by leeches. Is that clear?

- Loud and clear, - said Natasha with disappointment. - Syrt is surrounded by leeches, all night works are called off.

- Good night, - the voice said, and the speaker stopped hissing.

- Good night, Pen'kov, - said Sergey and began unbuttoning his parka.

Pen'kov did not respond. He was standing in the door, small, solid, with a disproportionately big carabine at his foot.

- How will you go? - said Matti.

Felix made a gesture with his fingers, showing how he'd walk.

- You are nuts, - said Matti.

Felix smiled with surprise.

- What is it with you, really?

- Did you listen to the radio? - Natasha said quickly.

- Yes, I have, - said Felix. - But I am not subordinate to the commander of Syrt. After all, I am a Pathfinder.

He pulled the mask over his face, lowered the goggles, waived his hand in a glove and walked out. Everyone looked at the door, dumbfounded.

- How can this be? - Natasha said, perplexed. - Truly, he will be eaten alive...

Sergey suddenly jumped from his spot, and doing up his parka, ran after him.

- Where to?! - shouted Natasha.

- I will give him a ride! - Sergey responded, running, and slammed the door.

Natasha ran after him. Matti caught her hand.

- Where are you going, what for? - he said calmly. - Serezha made the right decision.

- And who let him? - Natasha asked in a heated tone. - Why doesn't he listen?

- Somebody had to help the fellow, - Matti reasoned.

They felt a minor vibration of the floor. Sergey drove the crawler out. Natasha sank onto a chair, clasped her hands.

- It's alright, - said Matti. - He'll be back in ten-fifteen minutes.
- And what if they lunge at Serezha, when he'll be coming back?
- There was never a time when a leech would attack a vehicle, - said Matti. - Anyhow, Serezha was only too happy to go...

They sat and waited. Matti suddenly thought, that Felix Rybkin had come to visit them at the observatory at night about ten times already and had always left this late. And the leeches are found at Syrt every night. A brave guy, that Felix, Matti thought. A weird guy. However, not at all that weird. Matti looked at Natasha. The means of courting, perhaps, are a tad strange: a timid siege...

Matti looked out the window. In black emptiness only sharp non-blinking stars could be seen. Pen'kov entered, carrying a stack of papers, announced, not looking at anyone:

- Well, who shall help me plot the graphs?

- I can, - said Matti.

Pen'kov began settling noisily at the table. Natasha sat, back straight, listening intently. Pen'kov, having laid out his papers, spoke with agitation:

- This turns out to be a really interesting moment, guys! Do you recall Degas' law?

- We recall, - said Matti. - Secant to the power of two thirds.

- No such secant to the power of two thirds on Mars! - Pen'kov said triumphantly - Natash', check this out... Natasha!

- Leave her alone, - said Matti.

- How come? - Pen'kov asked in a whisper.

Natasha jumped up.

- Coming! - she said.

- Who? - asked Pen'kov.

The floor under their feet trembled, then all became quiet; the partition door clinked. Sergey came in, peeling the frosted mask off his face.

- Such a freeze - it's horrible! - he said cheerfully.

- Where were you? - Pen'kov asked, bewildered.

- Driving Rybkin to Syrt, - Sergey said.

- What a champ, - said Natasha. - You are such a champion, Serezhka!
Now I can sleep easy.

- Good night, Natashenka, - the boys said discordantly. Natasha left.

- Why didn't you take me with you? - Pen'kov said grudgingly.

The smile vanished from Sergey's face. He came to the table, sat down and shifted the papers aside.

- Listen, guys, - he said in a low voice. - I couldn't, in fact, find Rybkin anywhere. Drove all the way to Syrt, beeped, flashed the lights - didn't see him at all. As if he dropped through the ground.

Everyone kept quiet. Matti came to the window again. It seemed to him, that somewhere around the Old Base a faint light is moving slowly, as if somebody is carrying a torch.

<h2>MARS. OLD BASE.</h2>

At seven o'clock in the morning heads of all groups and sectors in the Warm Syrt system gathered in the cabinet of the system's director, Alexander Phillipovich Lyamin. Altogether, around twenty-five people came, and everyone sat around a long low table used at meetings. The fans and ozonators were set at full power. Natasha was the only female in the cabinet. She was seldom invited to general meetings and many of those attending did not know her. She was looked upon with well-wished interest. Natasha heard someone saying to another in a hoarse whisper: "I'd have shaved, had I known".

Lyamin asked, without getting up:

- First question, comrades, outside today's schedule. Had everyone had

breakfast? I can ask for preserves and hot chocolate to be brought here.

- Isn't there anything nice, Alexander Phillipovich? - inquired a full-bodied crimson-cheeked man with bandaged hands.

The room rumbled noisily.

- There isn't anything special, - Lyamin replied and sorrowfully shook his head. - Unless you care for processed chicken...

Voice were heard:

- You are right, Alexander Phillipovich! Let them bring it! We had no chance to eat!

Lyamin waived to someone.

- It will be brought in a moment, - he said and stood up. - Has everyone come? - He looked around those present. - Azizbekov... Gorin... Barabanov... Nakamura... Malumyan... Natasha... Van... Can't see Jefferson... Oh, here, sorry... And where is Opanasenko?... Is there anyone from the Pathfinders?

- Opanasenko is in a raid, - a low voice said, and Natasha saw Rybkin. For the first time she was seeing him unshaven.

- In a raid? - said Lyamin, - Alright then, let's begin without Opanasenko. Comrades, as you know, during the last weeks the flying leeches have become active. In the last two days, an absolute outrage had begun. The leeches started attacking during the day. Luckily, we had no casualties, but a number of heads of groups and sectors requested decisive measures to be applied. I want to stress, comrades, that leeches - are an old problem. All of us here are fed up with them. We argue about them too much unnecessarily, sometimes we even fight about them, the field groups, evidently, are hindered greatly by these beasts, and generally, it is time to come to some final decision about them, leeches that is. Basically, we have come up with two points of view on this matter. The first one - an immediate round-up and destruction of leeches as far as it is feasible. The second one - continuation of the passive defence policy as a palliative measure, up until such time when the colony gains sufficient strength. Comrades, - he held his arm to his chest, - I ask you now to speak out individually, in no particular order. However, please, try to avoid personal comments. We really don't need them. I know, that all of us are tired, irritated and everyone is frustrated with something. But I cogently ask you now to forget everything besides the importance of today's business. - His eyes narrowed. - Those particularly hotheaded will be removed from the meeting regardless of their rank.

He sat down. Immediately a tall, extremely thin man, his face spotted from sunburn, unshaven, with inflamed eyes, stood up. This was director's deputy in the construction area, Victor Kiryllovich Gaidadymov.

- I do not know, - he began, - how long your hunt will last - a decade, a month, perhaps half a year. I do not know, how many people you will need for the hunt - evidently, this will be the best people, perhaps all of them. I do not know, finally, if anything useful will result from this hunt. But this is what I know well and believe it to be my duty to bring it to your attention. Firstly, due to the hunt, we will have to postpone the erection of residential quarters. And, by the way, in two months time we are getting reinforcements, whilst the settlement crisis can be felt already. On Warm Syrt I have no opportunity to allocate rooms even to those who are married. Incidentally, whilst this won't make our foreign friends proud, they are overly concerned with this matter. But this is irrelevant. Secondly, because of the hunt the construction of the building materials plant will be delayed. What the building materials plant means in our situation, you must understand already. I won't even mention the greenhouses and conservatories, that we will not get even this summer, because of the hunt. Thirdly, this is the most significant thing. The hunt will mistime the construction of the regenerative plant. In a month the autumn storms will begin and this construction will have to be abandoned. - He clenched his teeth, closed and then opened his eyes. - You know, comrades, we are all hanging on a fine

thread here. Perhaps I am revealing some administrative secrets, but forget that, after all: we are all mature and experienced people. The water resources underneath Warm Syrt are expiring. They have, in fact, expired. Already we are delivering water from twenty-six kilometres away, using sand tanks. (At the table there was noise and movement, someone shouted: "Where were you looking before?!") If we don't finish the regeneration plant by the end of the month, then this autumn we will end up on starvation rations and during winter we will have to shift Warm Syrt two hundred kilometres away. I have finished.

He sat down and downed a glass of cold chocolate in one go. After a minute's pause Lyamin said:

- Who is next?

- I am, - someone said. A small bearded man in dark glasses stood up - the head of the repair workshops, Zakhar Josefovich Puchko. - I agree totally with Victor Kiryllovich, - he removed his glasses and looked around the table weak-sightedly. - Somehow everything we do comes out so childishly - a hunt, bang-bang-oh-ah-oh... And I am going to ask you: using what, exactly, are you going to chase the leeches? Perhaps, atop a magic wand, hey? Just now Victor Kiryllovich had very well explained: we use the sand tanks to carry water over. And what tanks they are? They are a disaster, not tanks. A quarter of our vehicle inventory is standing at our workshops with no one to repair them. Those, who know how to fix them don't wreck them, and those able to wreck them, cannot fix them. Treating tanks as if they are a fountain pen - chucked one out and bought a new one. Natasha, I had a look at your crawler. One must try hard to bring the vehicle into such a state! One could think, you run through the walls on it...

- Zakhar, Zakhar, closer to the topic, - said Lyamin

- I just want to say this. I know these hunts, know them well. Half the vehicles will remain in the desert, the other half will, perhaps, crawl to me, and I will be told: fix them. And what will I be fixing them - my feet? I don't have enough hands. And so it will begin. Puchko this and Puchko that. Puchko imagines, that it's not the workshops for the benefit of Syrt, but Syrt for the benefit of the workshops. I will begin asking comrade Azizbekov for people, and he won't give them to me. I will start asking for people from comrade Nakamura - forgive me, from mister Nakamura, - and he shall say, that his program is being ruined as it is...

- Closer to business, Zakhar, - Lyamin said impatiently.

- Closer to business will begin, when we shall have no vehicles left. Then we will be carrying food and water on our humps over one hundred kilometres, and then I will be asked: "Puchko, where were you when the hunt took place?"

Puchko put his glasses on and sat down.

- Things are crap, - someone muttered.

Natasha was sitting, dumbstruck. Gosh, what sort of a foreman am I, she thought. Indeed I knew none of this, and could not even suppose, and even criticised them for being bureaucratic...

- Allow me, - a soft voice was heard.

- Senior areologist of our system, Livanov, - said Lyamin.

Livanov's face was also covered by spotty sunburn, a broad squarish face with dark, closely positioned eyes.

- The objections towards the hunt, expressed here, - he spoke, - appear quite meaningful and significant to me. (Natasha looked at Gaidadymov. Gaidadymov was sleeping, his head slumbered infirmly on his arms.) And nevertheless, the hunt must be conducted. Here are some statistical figures. During the thirty years of human presence on Mars the flying leeches committed over fifteen hundred registered attacks on people. Three persons were killed, twelve were disfigured. The population of the Warm Syrt system combines a thousand two hundred people, out of whom eight hundred people are constantly engaged in the field and, consequentially, are permanently under threat of attack. Up to a quarter of scientists are compelled to perform

security tasks causing detriment to government and individual scientific plans. But that's not all. Beside moral damages, the leeches are causing quite significant property damage. During the last five weeks alone, and only with areologists, they have irreparably destroyed five unique installations and damaged twenty-eight valuable devices. It is evident, that this cannot continue. The leeches are placing the entire scientific progress of the Warm Syrt system under threat. My intentions do not, in any way, include the desire for diminishing the importance of considerations advanced here by comrades Gaidadymov and Puchko. These considerations were addressed during the production of round-up plan, which I have here to be presented to the meeting on behalf of areologists and Pathfinders.

Everyone roused and became still again. Gaidadymov shuddered and opened his eyes. Livanov continued in a well-paced tone:

- Observations have shown, that the apex of leeches distribution in the area around Warm Syrt happens to be the zone of the so-called "Old Base" - marked point 211 on the map. The operation begins one hour before dawn. A group of forty well-trained shooters in four sand tanks with a three-day food supply occupies the "Old Base". Two groups of beaters, approximately two hundred men in each one, - in tanks and crawlers disperse into a skirmish line from the following areas: first group - one hundred kilometres west of Syrt, the second group - one hundred kilometres north of Syrt. At one hundred hours both groups commence slow advance towards northeast and south, respectively, in transit causing as much noise as possible and exterminating the leeches trying to break through the line. Moving slowly and methodically, both groups join flanks, displacing the leeches to the "Old Base" sector. In this manner, the entire mass of leeches will be localised in the sector of the "Old Base" and destroyed. That is part one of the plan. I would like to hear possible queries and objections.

- Gradually and methodically - that's all well, - said Puchko. - But still, how many vehicles will be required?

- And people, - said Gaidadymov. - And days.

- Fifty vehicles, four hundred and fifty people and a maximum of seventy-two hours.

- How do you intend to exterminate the leeches? - Jefferson asked.

- We know very little about the leeches, - Livanov said. - At the moment we can rely on two means only: toxic bullets and flamethrowers.

- And where shall you get these?

- The bullets can be easily toxinized, whilst with the flamethrowers, we are building them based on pulp-monitors.

- Building already?

- Yes.

- A good plan, - said Lyamin. - What do you think, comrades?

Gaidadymov stood up.

- I do not object to such a plan, - he said. - Just try not to take away my builders. And please excuse me now.

There was a shuffle around the table. "A great plan, no doubt!" - "And where will you get sharp-shooters?" - "They will turn up! It's the builders we are short of, the shooters we will have plenty!" - "Hey, we will have fun shooting!"

- I have not yet finished, comrades, - Livanov said. - There is a second part of the plan. Evidently, the Old Base territory is hollowed out by cracks and caverns, through which the leeches come up to the surface. And there, no doubt, must be a heap of subterranean hollows. When the loop will close and we finish off all the leeches, we can either cement these caverns, cracks and tunnels, or continue pursuit below the ground. In both cases we are in dire need of the Old Base blueprint.

- No, we shouldn't give any thought to underground pursuit, - someone said. - It is way too dangerous.

- Well, it would have been interesting, - mutter a pink chubby man with bandaged hands.

- Comrades, we will finalise that question after the conclusion of the round-up, - said Livanov. - At the moment we need the blueprint of the Old Base. We have contacted the archives, but the blueprint was not there for some reason. Perhaps one of the old-timers has a plan.

A lot of people at the table were exchanging puzzled looks.

- I cannot understand, - an old bony areo-surveyor said with annoyance.
- What blueprint are we talking about?

- About the plan of the Old Base.

- The Old Base was built fifteen years ago, right before my eyes. It was a cement dome, and it had none of the caverns and cracks. However, I had to fly to Earth, perhaps it was built in my absence.

Another areo-surveyor said:

- By the way, the Old Base is not located at point 211, but at point 205.

- Why 205? - Natasha said. - It's point 211! This is to the west of the observatory.

- What does this have to do with the observatory? - The bony areo-surveyor became absolutely furious. - The Old Base is located eleven kilometres south of Warm Syrt...

- Wait, wait! - Livanov shouted. - We are contemplating the Old Base, located at point 211, three kilometres to the west of the observatory.

- Ah! - the bony areo-surveyor said. - Then, what you have in mind, are the Grey Ruins - the remains of the original settlement. Norton try to set up over there, I think.

A commotion went up.

- Quiet, quiet! - Lyamin said and tapped his hand on the table. - Stop arguing. We must clarify, does anyone know anything about the Old Base or the Grey Ruins, whichever you like, in other words, the elevation marked 211?

Everyone stayed quiet. No one liked to visit the ruins of old settlements, plus there wasn't time.

- In other words, no one knows, - Lyamin said. - And we have no blueprint.

- I can provide a reference, - said the director's secretary, also his deputy. Also the archivist for the scientific section. - This "Old Base" is some sort of nonsense. This base isn't marked on Norton's reported sketch-maps, then it appears at point 211, and two years later on an official report memo signed by Vel'yaminov, who was seeking permission to investigate the ruins of the "Old Base", the then head of the expedition Yurkovski personally deigned to inscribe, - the secretary raised a yellowed sheet of paper above his head: - "Couldn't understand anything. Learn how to read the map properly. The mark is not 211, but 205. Permission granted. Yurkovski".

Everyone laughed in surprise.

- May I suggest, - Rybkin said in a low voice. Everyone looked at him.
- We can go to point 211 right now and draw sketches of the "Old Base".

- Why, that's right, - Lyamin said. - Whoever has the time - can go there. Comrade Livanov is appointed as the senior. The meeting will resume at eleven o'clock.

It was around six kilometres on the straight between Warm Syrt and the Old Base. They departed there in two sand tanks. There were many volunteers - more than came to the meeting - and Natasha decided to take her crawler. The tanks, roaring and clattering, rolled to the outskirts of Syrt. To avoid the dust, Natasha turned the crawler around. Driving past the central meteo-tower, she suddenly saw Rybkin. The tiny Pathfinder walked at a habitual fast pace, his hands resting on a long carabine, hanging on his neck. Natasha pressed the breaks.

- Felix! - she yelled. - Where are you off to?

He stopped and came to the crawler.

- I decided to walk, - he said, looking calmly at her from below. - There was no space for me.

- Jump in, - Natasha said. She suddenly felt at ease with Felix, quite unlike at night, in the observatory. Felix effortlessly climbed onto a seat next to her, removed the carabine off his neck and placed it between his knees. The crawler took off.

- I was really scared yesterday night, when you left alone, - Natasha admitted. - Did Sergey find you quickly?

- Sergey? - He looked at her. - Yeah... reasonably quickly. That was a smart idea.

They stayed quiet. Half a kilometre to the left the tanks moved, leaving in their wake a thick motionless cloud of dust above the desert.

- It was an interesting meeting, right? - Natasha said.

- Very interesting, - Rybkin said. - And there is something strange with the Old Base.

- I have gone there with the guys, - Natasha said. - When they were still building our observatory. Nothing special. Cement blocks, all cracked up, grown over by haloxylon. You also think, that the leeches crawl from under there?

- I am certain of it, - Rybkin said. - There is a huge leeches' nest, Natasha. Right under the hill there is a giant cavern. And, possibly, it connects to other underground hollows. Although I never found these passages.

Natasha looked at him, terrified. The crawler swerved. On the right, from behind the dunes, the observatory appeared. On the observation deck stood Matti, tall like a mast, waiving his hand. Felix waved back politely. The domes and buildings of Old Syrt disappeared behind the near horizon.

- Aren't you afraid of them? - Natasha asked.

- I am, - Felix said. - Sometimes, Natasha, I get scared to death. You should see, what size jaws they have. But, they are even bigger cowards themselves.

- You know what, Felix, - Natasha said, staring straight ahead of her, - Matti says, that you are a strange person. I also think, that you are a very strange person.

Felix laughed.

- You are flattering me, - he said. - To you, naturally, it seems strange, that I always come to you at the observatory late at night, just to drink coffee. But I cannot come during the day. I am busy during the day. And I am almost always busy in the evening. And when I have spare time, I always come to you.

Natasha felt that she is starting to blush. But the crawler was already at the foot of a flat hill, the same one which was displayed as a curved oval marked 211 on areographic maps. On top of the hill, amongst uneven grey boulders people where rummaging already.

Natasha parked the crawler away from the sand tanks and turned the engine off. Felix was standing below, looking at her seriously with an outstretched hand.

- No need, thanks, - Natasha muttered, but leaned on his hand anyway.

They walked amongst the ruins of the Old Base. Strange ruins they were: looking at them, it was impossible to understand, what the original appearance, or at least, the structural layout looked like. Fractured domes supported by hexagonal foundations, collapsed galleries, stacks of cracked cement blocks. All this was thickly covered by Martian burr and lay sunk in sand and dust. In a few spots under the grey arches shadowy clefts gaped open. A few lead down somewhere, into deep, impenetrable darkness.

Above the ruins rose a flurry of voices.

- Yet another cavern! No amount of cement will ever be enough!

- What an idiotic layout!

- And what do you expect from the Old Base?

- Burrs, so many prickly burrs! As if we are in a salt-marsh...
- Willy, don't go there!
- It's empty, nobody there...
- Comrades, let's start the filming, finally!
- Good morning there, Volodya! We started a while ago...
- Look, here are footprints from boots!
- Yes, someone must visit here... Over there, too...
- Pathfinders, probably...

Natasha looked at Felix. Felix nodded.

- It was me, - he said.

He suddenly stopped, squatted and began examining something.

- Here, - he said. - Have a look, Natasha.

Natasha leaned over. Out of a crack in the cement hung a fat haloxylon stem with a tiny flower on the tip.

- So cute! - she said. - And I didn't even know that the burr plant bears flowers. It is so pretty - red with blue...

- The burr plant flowers very rarely, - Felix said slowly. - It is known, that it flowers once every five Martian years.

- We are lucky, - Natasha said.

- Every time, when a flower drops, in its spot a new shoot sprouts, and where the flower used to be, a shiny ring is formed. Like this one, see?

- Interesting, - Natasha said. - This means, it can be calculated, how old this haloxylon is... One... Two... Three... Four...

She stopped and glanced at Felix.

- It has eight rings, - she said hesitantly.

- Yes, - said Felix. - Eight. The flower - is the ninth. This crack in the cement is eighty Earth years old.

- I don't understand, - Natasha said and suddenly realised. - Does this mean, that this base is not one of ours? - she spoke in a whisper.

- Not ours, - Felix said and stood straight.

- You knew about this! - Natasha said.

- Yes, we know about this, - Felix said. - This building was not built by people. This isn't cement. This isn't simply a hill. And leeches are attacking erect bipeds for a reason.

Natasha looked at him for several seconds, and then turned and shouted out loud:

- Comrades! Over here! Quickly! Everyone come here! Look! Look, what there is! Here!

The Warm Syrt system director's office was filled to capacity. The director was drying his bald patch with a handkerchief and waiving his head in a daze. Areologist Livanov, having lost composure and correctness, was shouting, at the top of his lungs, trying to speak above the noise:

- This is simply mind-boggling! Warm Syrt exists for six years. During these six years no one figured out, what here is and isn't ours. Nobody even cared to take any interest in the Old Base!

- What is there to be interested in? - Azizbekov was yelling. - I have passed it twenty times. Ruins like any other ruins. Haven't the original settlers left enough ruins behind?

- But I was there two years ago! I had look - and I saw a rusted track from a crawler. I looked at it and went on my way.

- Is it laying there still?

- What's there to even talk about? In the centre of the Base, since time immemorial, stands a trigonometrical sign. Perhaps, the Martians placed it there too?

- The Pathfinders have simply embarrassed themselves, it's shameful to look at them now!

- How come, now? After all, they discovered it!

The head of the Pathfinders group, Opanasenko, who arrived only a few minutes ago, massive, broad-shouldered, grinning, was fanning his face with

a folded map and saying something to the director. The director was shaking his head.

Puchko, stepping on everyone's feet, was making his way to the table. His beard was messed up, he was holding his glasses high above his head.

- Because there is quiet bedlam happening in this system! - he screamed in a high-pitched voice. - Soon the Martians will come to me and ask for a tank or a crawler to be fixed, and will go and fix it! I already had cases, when unfamiliar people come and ask for repairs! Because I can see - there are some unfamiliar people walking around the city! I don't know, where they come from, and I don't know where they go off to! And, what if, they come from the Old Base and go away to the Old Base!

The commotion inside the office suddenly died.

- Perhaps, you would like an example - my pleasure! One such comrade has been sitting here with us since morning! I am talking about you, comrade!

Puchko pointed at Felix Rybkin with his glasses. The office burst out laughing. Opanasenko said in an echoing bass voice:

- Come on, Zakhar, this is our Rybkin.

Felix shook his head, scratched it at the back and looked at Natasha askance.

- And so what, that this is Rybkin? - Puchko shouted. - And how do I know, that he is Rybkin? That's what I am talking about, its necessary, that everyone be known... - he waived his hand and started climbing to his seat.

The director stood up and loudly banged a pencil on the desk.

- Enough now, enough, comrades, - he said sternly. - We had our fun and that's it. The discovery, which the Pathfinders have made, represents an enormous interest, but that's not why we have assembled. The plan of the Old Base is available now. We shall begin the round-up in three days. The order regarding the round-up will be issued this evening. I am informing you in advance, that the head of the round-up group is Opanasenko, with Livanov - as his deputy. And now I urge everyone, besides my deputies, to leave this office and proceed to your workplaces.

There was only one door in the office and it emptied out slowly. A jam occurred in the doorway.

- A radiogram for the director! - someone shouted.

- Pass it along!

A folded sheet floated above the heads. The director, arguing about something with Opanasenko, received it and spread it open. Natasha saw him grow pale, and then blush.

- What happened? - Opanasenko said deeply.

- This is insane, - the director said with despair. - Yurkovski is arriving here tomorrow.

- Volodya? - Opanasenko said. - That's good!

- Volodya to some, - the director said with quiet despair, - and a chief inspector of the International board of cosmic communications <IBCC> to others.

The director read the radiogram once more and sighed.

<h2>"Takhmaseeb". THE CHIEF inspector and others.</h2>

A soft whistle of the alarm woke up Yura at exactly eight in the morning ship's time. Yura raised himself on an elbow and looked at the alarm angrily. The alarm waited a little and whistled again. Yura moaned and sat up on the bunk. No, I won't read at night any more, he thought. Why is it that at night one never feels sleepy, and in the morning one experiences such torment?

It was cool, even cold inside a cabin. Yura clutched his bare shoulders and cluttered his teeth. Then he put his feet on the floor and walked out into the corridor. The corridor was even colder, but there stood Zhilin, mighty, muscular, wearing only briefs. Zhilin was exercising. For some time,

Yura stood, clutching his shoulders, and watched how Zhilin did his exercises. In each hand Zhilin held a ten-kilogram dumbbell. Zhilin was conducting a fight with his shadow. His shadow was in trouble. A wind rustled around the corridor, stirred by awesome blows.

- Good morning, Vanya, - Yura said.

Zhilin turned immediately and soundlessly and with sliding steps moved towards Yura, rhythmically swaying his whole body. His face was serious and composed. Yura assumed a fighting stance. Then Zhilin lowered the dumbbells to the floor and jumped into the fight. Yura jumped at him, and grew hot in a few minutes. Zhilin was beating him with painful snaps of a semi-open palm. Yura hit him on the forehead three times, and every time a smile of content appeared on Zhilin's face. When Yura became soaked, Zhilin said "Break!" - and they stopped.

- Good morning, probationer, - Zhilin said. - How did you sleep?

- T-th... a-ank... you, - Yura said. - A-all... right.

- In the shower! - Zhilin ordered.

The shower room was small, fitted out for one person, and beside the door Yurkovski was already standing with a squeamish grin, in a superb red and gold robe, with a colossal fluffy towel across the shoulder. He was speaking through the door:

- In any case... err... I remember very well, that Krayukhin refused to ratify that project back then... What?

From behind the door, sounds of water streams, splashing and an undiscernible high tenor were barely audible.

- I cannot hear anything, - Yurkovski said with indignation. He raised his voice. - I was saying, that Krayukhin sidelined this project, and if you are going to write, that this was a historical error, then you will be right... What?

The shower room door unclosed and from within, still continuing to dry himself, came out the navigator of "Takhmaseeb", Michael Antonovich Krutikov, pink and energetic.

- You were saying something just then, Voloden'ka, - he said kind-heartedly. - But I couldn't hear anything. The water is very noisy.

Yurkovski looked at him with regret, walked into the shower and closed the door behind him.

- Lads, he didn't get cross, did he? - Michael Antonovich inquired anxiously. - Somehow, it seemed to me that he became cross.

Zhilin shrugged his shoulders, and Yura said hesitantly:

- I reckon, it's nothing.

Michael Antonovich suddenly yelled:

- Oh, oh! The porridge will be boiled to pulp! - and ran quickly down the corridor to the galley.

- I hear, we are arriving on Mars today? - Yura said.

- Such a rumour had passed, - Zhilin said. - However, at thirty-three ahead on course a ship had been detected, flying a Gay Roger flag, but I suppose we will dodge them. - He suddenly stopped and listened attentively. Yura also listened in. The water was flowing abundantly in the shower cubicle. Zhilin's nostrils fluttered. - I sense it, - he said.

Yura focused on the scent as well.

- It's the porridge, no? - he asked, unsure.

- No, - Zhilin said. - The unpaired phasal cyclotron is playing pranks. Awfully naughty, that unpaired phasal cyclotron. I sense, that I shall have to tune it today.

Yura looked at him with doubt. It could be a joke, but could also be true. Zhilin possessed an amazing ability for sensing mechanical faults.

Yurkovski vacated the shower room. He glanced majestically at Zhilin and even more majestically at Yura.

- Er.. - he said, - cadet and lieutenant. And who is on galley duty today?

- Michael Antonovich, - Yura said bashfully.

- This means porridge, again, - Yurkovski said with a grand air and walked to his cabin.

Yura followed him with a glance full of rapture. Yurkovski astounded his imagination.

- Ah? - Zhilin said. - The thunderer! Zeus! Ah? Go on and wash.

- No, - said Yura. - You first, Vanya.

- Let's go together, then. What are you going to hang around here for, by yourself? We'll squeeze in somehow.

After the shower they got dressed and appeared at the ward-room. Everyone was sitting at the table already, and Michael Antonovich was distributing the porridge on the plates. Upon seeing Yura, Bykov looked at his watch and then back at Yura. He did it each morning. Today no reprimand followed.

- Sit down, - said Bykov.

Yura sat at his place - next to Zhilin and across from the captain, - and Michael Antonovich, with a kind look, presented Yura with porridge. Yurkovski was eating porridge with visible distaste and was reading some thick bound typewritten report, having laid it on a bread basket in front of him.

- Ivan, - Bykov said, - the unpaired phasal cyclotron is losing calibration. Take care of it.

- Alexey Petrovich, I will take care of it, - Ivan said. - During the last few voyages all I do is taking care of it. Either the design must be changed or a duplicate cyclotron must be installed.

- The design needs to be changed, Aleshen'ka, - Michael Antonovich said. - All this had become obsolete - the phasal cyclotrons, and vertical reaming, and tele-pacers... Now, I remember, we travelled to Uranus on "Khius-8"... in two thousand and one...

- Not in two thousand and one, but in ninety-nine, - Yurkovski said, engrossed in the report. - Some memoirist...

- And I think... - said Michael Antonovich and stopped to think.

- Don't you listen to him, Michael, - Bykov said. - Whose business is it anyway, when this all happened? The main thing is - who navigated. What they navigated in. How they navigated.

Yura stirred in his seat slightly. A traditional morning conversation was initiating. The warriors recalled the days of old. Michael Antonovich, in preparation for his retirement, was writing memoirs.

- What do you mean? - Yurkovski said, lifting his eyes away from the typescript. - And the priority?

- What priority, exactly?

- My priority.

- Why do you all of a sudden require priority?

- I think, that it is very enjoyable to be ... err... the first one.

- But what use being the first holds for you? - Bykov wondered.

Yurkovski thought for a while.

- Honestly, I do not know, - he said. - It's just a nice feeling for me.

- Personally, I am totally indifferent to it.

Yurkovski, smiling condescendingly, waived an index finger in the air.

- Is that so, Alexey?

- Perhaps it is not such a bad thing, to be the first one, - Bykov said, - but to bend over backwards to be the first one - is an immodest task. For scientists, at least.

Zhilin winked at Yura. Yura interpreted it as follows: "Take a note of that".

- I don't know, I don't know, - Yurkovski said, making a demonstrative return to his report. - In any event, Michael is bound to adhere to historical facts. In the year ninety-nine, an expeditionary group under Daugeh and Yurkovski for the first time in the history of science had discovered and explored with detonating probes a so called amorphous field

at the northern pole of Uranus. The successive exploration of the field was conducted a year later.

- By whom? - Zhilin asked with great interest.

- I cannot recall, - Yurkovski said absent-mindedly. - Perhaps, it was Lecrois. Michael... can we perhaps... er... vacate the table? I need to work.

The sacred hours when Yurkovski was working were about to begin. Yurkovski always worked in the ward-room. He was used to it. Michael Antonovich and Zhilin went to the command post. Yura wanted to follow them, it was fascinating to watch them tune the unpaired phasal cyclotron, - but Yurkovski stopped him.

- Err... cadet, - he said, - I hope you won't find it too difficult - please bring me the organiser from my cabin. It's lying on the bunk.

Yura went to get the organiser. When he returned, Yurkovski was typing something on a portable electronic typewriter, carelessly flinging the fingers of his left hand across the keys. Bykov was already sitting at the usual spot, in a large personal chair; next to him on a table heaved a large stack of newspapers and magazines. On Bykov's nose sat a pair of big old-fashioned glasses. At first, Yura was confounded when looking at Bykov. On board the ship everybody worked. Zhilin was fine-tuning the drive and control systems daily, Michael Antonovich was computing and recomputing the course, feeding additional commands into the cyberpilot, completing a comprehensive textbook and somehow managing to leave time for his memoirs. Yurkovski kept reading some kind of bulky reports, receiving and sending countless radiograms, deciphering and encoding something on an electronic typewriter, late into the night. And the captain of the ship, Alexey Petrovich Bykov was reading newspapers and magazines. Once a day, however, he kept a regular watch. But all the other time he would spend in his cabin, or in the ward-room. This shocked Yura. After three days he couldn't hold back and asked Zhilin, what is the captain needed for on their ship. "To preserve responsibility, - Zhilin said. - If, say, someone gets lost". Yura's face grew long. Zhilin laughed and said: "the captain answers for the entire organisation of the flight. Prior to the voyage he doesn't have a single spare minute. Have you noticed what he is reading? These newspapers and magazines date two months back". - "And during the flight?" - Yura asked. They were standing in the corridor and have not noticed how Yurkovski came to them. "During the flight the captain is only required when a catastrophe occurs, - said Yurkovski with a strange smirk. - And then he is needed more, than anyone else is".

Yura, walking on tiptoes, laid the organiser beside Yurkovski. The organiser looked splendid, as did everything Yurkovski possessed. In the corner of the organiser a golden plaque reading "IV International Congress of Planetologists. 20.02.02. Conakry." was inserted.

- Thank you, cadet, - Yurkovski said, leaned back in his chair and looked reflectively at Yura. - Why don't you sit down and have a small chat with me, an old man, - he said softly. - Because in ten minutes they will bring radiograms and the daily carousel will begin. - Yura sat down. He was immeasurably happy. - Right before I talked about priority, and, I think, flew into passion a little. Indeed, what does one name mean in an ocean of human efforts, amongst the storms of human thought, in grand ebbs and lows of human intellect? Just think, Yura, hundreds of people in different corners of the universe collected the necessary information for us, the duty officer at Sat-five, weary, with eyes red from insomnia, received and encoded it, other assistants programmed the transmission equipment, and then someone else yet will push the start button, the giant reflectors will stir, searching for our vessel in space, and a powerful quantum, saturated with information, will leap off the tip of the antenna and head into space in our wake...

Yura was listening, his gaze fixed. Yurkovski continued:

- Captain Bykov is, undoubtedly, right. One's own name on a map should

not mean a great deal to a genuine man. One must relish their success with modesty, when one is alone. And with friends one must share only the joy of exploration, the joy of a chase and a deadly struggle. You know, Yura, how many people there are on Earth? Four billion! And each one of them has a job. Or is chasing something. Or searching. Or fighting to death. Sometimes, I try to imagine these four billion all at once. Captain Fred Dolittle is piloting a passenger liner, and one hundred megametres before landing the main supply reactor fails, and Fred Dollittle's head turns grey in five minutes, but he puts on a big black beret, goes to the ward-room and laughs together with his passengers, the same passengers, who will never know any of this and shall depart from the cosmodrome the next day and will once and for all forget the very name of Fred Dolittle. Professor Kanayama devotes his entire life to the creation of stereosynthetics, and on one hot and humid morning he is found dead in a chair at the laboratory desk, and who out of the hundreds of millions, that shall wear the amazingly beautiful and durable clothes made from stereosynthetics of professor Kanayama, will remember his name. And Yuri Borodin, working in extremely tough conditions, will be erecting the residential domes on small rocky Rhea, and one can be sure, that none of the future occupants of these domes shall ever hear the name of Yuri Borodin. And you know what, Yura, it is really fair. Since Fred Dolittle has also forgotten the names of his passengers, whilst they are now preparing to for a deadly storm landing on an alien planet. And professor Kanayama has never seen those, who wear the clothes made with his fabrics, - but these people fed him and clothed him whilst he was working. And you, Yura, will probably never find out about the heroism of scientists, who will settle in the domes, that you shall build. Such is the world we are living in. A very fair world.

Yurkovski finished talking and looked at Yura with such an expression, as if waiting for Yura to undergo a change for the best immediately. Yura stayed quiet. This was called "chatting with an old man". Both of them liked these chats. There wasn't anything new for Yura in these conversations, naturally, but he was always left with an impression of something enormous and bright. Probably, the source lay in the very image of the great planetologist - somehow he was all scarlet and gold.

Zhilin walked into the ward-room, placed the radiogram reels in front of Yurkovski.

- The morning mail, - he said.

- Thanks, Vanya, - in a relaxed voice said Yurkovski. He picked a random reel, inserted it into the machine and switched on the decoder. The machine rapped feverishly.

- Here we are, - Yurkovski said in the same relaxed voice, pulling a sheet of paper out of the machine. - The program on Ceres has not been completed again.

Zhilin grabbed Yura firmly on the wrist and lead him to the command room. Behind them Yurkovski's voice was gaining amplification:

- He must be removed, for hell's sake, and be given a position on Earth, let him become a museum tour guide...

Yura was standing behind Zhilin's back and watched how the phasal cyclotron was being tuned. I cannot understand any of this, he thought with gloom. And I shall never understand. The phasal cyclotron was part of the combined reflector controls and served to measure the density of the radiation stream of the reflector's functional scope. The tuning of the phasal cyclotron was monitored via two displays. One each screen bluish sparks and curved lines flashed and slowly extinguished. Sometimes they merged into a single luminescent cloud, and Yura would think that all is lost and the tuning must be started from scratch, but Zhilin kept saying "Excellent. And now another half of a degree". Then everything really started again.

Two steps behind Yura, Michael Antonovich was sitting on a stand, writing memoirs. Sweat poured in beads down his face. Yura knew already,

that the archive section of the International Board of Cosmic Communications compelled Michael Antonovich to write his memoirs. Michael Antonovich diligently scraped the paper with a stylus, rolled his eyes, counted something on his fingers and, from time to time, launched into singing happy songs in a sad voice. Michael Antonovich was a kind soul, rare to find. On the very first day he gave Yura a bar of chocolate and asked him to read a part of the composed memoirs. He accepted the criticism of candid youth with great anguish, but ever since Yura was considered to be an undisputable authority in the sphere of memoirical literature.

- Listen to this, Yurik, - he called out. - And you, Vanyusha, listen as well.

Michael Antonovich coughed to clear his voice and began reading:

"I met captain Stepan Afanasievich Varshavski on the sunny and azure shores of Tahiti for the first time. Bright stars shimmered above the great boundless, or pacific, ocean. He approached me and asked for a smoke, calling to witness the fact that he forgot his pipe at the hotel. Unfortunately, I did not smoke, but this had not prevented us from striking a conversation and find out more about each other. Stepan Afanasievich made the most delightful impression on me. This happened to be the nicest, most charming person. He was very kind, intelligent, with the broadest range of interests. I was amazed at the depth of his knowledge. His sympathetic treatment of people, to me seemed extraordinary at times..."

- Not bad, - said Zhilin, when Michael Antonovich stopped and looked at them demurely.

- I was only attempting to present a portrait of that superb person, - Michael Antonovich said.

- Well, it isn't bad, - Zhilin repeated, watching the displays closely. - How does it go: "Above the sunny and azure shore stars were shimmering brightly". Very refreshing.

- Where? Where? - Michael Antonovich asked hastily. - I mean, this is only a typing error, Vanya. Come on, don't joke like this.

Yura was stressing his brains, thinking of something to pick on. He really wanted to uphold his reputation.

- I have read your script before, Michael Antonovich, - he said finally. - Right now I won't touch upon the literary side of the matter. But why are they all so delightful and superb? I mean, they really must be nice folk, but it is impossible to discern them from one another.

- That is quite right, - Zhilin said. - Out of all people, captain Varshavsky clearly stands out. How does he usually say it? "Dinosaurs, scoundrels, sad lazy asses".

- No, I am sorry Vanyusha, - Michael Antonovich said with dignity, - he never said anything like this to me. A most polite and cultured person.

- Tell me, Michael Antonovich, - Zhilin said, - what will be written about me?

Michael Antonovich became confused. Zhilin turned his back to the controls and looked at him with great interest.

- Vanyusha, I wasn't planning to... - Michael Antonovich suddenly livened up. - Hey, that's an idea, boys! Although, I will write one chapter. It shall be the conclusive chapter. I will call it accordingly: "The last voyage". And in it I will write, how we are flying together now, both Alesha, and Volodya and you, boys. Yes, that's a good idea - "The last voyage".

And Michael Antonovich returned to his memoirs again.

Having successfully finished another round of tuning the unpaired phasal cyclotron, Zhilin invited Yura to go down into the engine pit of the vessel - to the base of the photon reactor. The base turned out to be cold and uncomfortable. Zhilin unhurriedly began his daily check-up. Yura was walking slowly behind him, hands deep inside his pockets, trying not to touch the frosty surfaces.

- This is so cool, - he said enviously.

- What exactly? - Zhilin asked.

He was throwing open and banging shut some clinking lids, shifted translucent covers, behind which a tangle of microchips was glittering cabalistically, activated tiny screens, on which bright impulse dots appeared, skipping across the web of coordinates, thrust his strong nimble fingers into something unimaginably complex, multicoloured, flashing, and did it all so casually and smoothly, without thinking, and so deliciously well, that Yura immediately wished he could change professions and govern the giant organism of this imagination-sweeping photon wonder, just as effortlessly.

- It's mouth-watering, - Yura said.

Zhilin laughed.

- Seriously, - said Yura. I don't know, perhaps for you all this is, surely, routine and habitual, perhaps you are even sick of it, but it's cool anyway. I like it when there is a huge complex mechanism - and just one man next to it... The master. It's fantastic when man is master.

Zhilin clicked something, and on the rugged wall six screens lit up in a rainbow.

- Man is master for a long time already, - he said, looking closely at the screens.

- You probably must be proud, that you are so...

Zhilin deactivated the screens.

Perhaps, - he said. - I am glad, proud and so on and so forth. - He proceeded further along the frosted control panels. - I, Yurochka, have been a master for ten years already, - he said in a somewhat strange tone.

- And you are... - Yura wanted to say "sick of it", but kept quiet.

Zhilin was unscrewing a heavy lid, immersed in thought.

- The main thing! - he said all of a sudden. - In any life, like in any undertaking, the main element is - to determine the main element. - He looked at Yura. - Let's not talk about it today, ok?

Yura nodded quietly. "Oh-oh-oh, - he thought. - Is Ivan really sick of it? It must probably be awfully hard, when you have been doing something that you love for ten years and then, suddenly, it turns out that you have lost the passion for it. It must feel so miserable, I guess. But somehow it doesn't look like Ivan is miserable..."

He looked around and said, to change the topic:

- There must be ghosts around this place...

- Shhh! - said Zhilin fearfully and also looked around. - There are heaps of them. Right here, - he pointed at the dark passage between two panels, - I have found... just don't tell anyone... a little baby bonnet!

Yura started laughing.

- You ought to know, - Zhilin continued, - that our "Takhmaseeb" - is quite an old ship. It had been on many planets, and on each planet the local ghosts came on board. In droves. They hang around the ship, moan, groan, get stuck in the controls, and disturb the phasal cyclotron operation... You see, they are really annoyed by the spirits of bacteria, killed during disinfective sessions... And we have no way to get rid of them.

- You should try holy water on them.

- I've tried, - Zhilin waved his hand, opened a large cover and descended his lower body into it. - I have tried everything, - he said with an echo from inside the shaft. - Both the regular holy water, and deuterium, and tritium water. Doesn't impress them. But I have an idea how to do away with them. - He climbed out of the shaft, sealed the membrane and looked at Yura with serious eyes. - "Takhmaseeb" must jump through the Sun. Do you understand? There was never a case of a ghost that could withstand the temperature of a thermonuclear reaction. Jokes aside, haven't you seriously heard about my intersolar craft project?

Yura shook his head. He could never determine the moment, when Zhilin quit joking and began talking seriously.

- Come on, - said Zhilin, taking him by the hand. - Let's go upstairs,

I will tell you in detail.

At the top of the stairs, however, Bykov had caught Yura.

- Probationer Borodin, - he said, - follow me.

Yura sighed dolefully and looked at Zhilin. Zhilin made a slightly noticeable helpless gesture. Bykov lead Yura into the ward-room and sat him at the table opposite Yurkovski. The most unpleasant lay ahead: two hours of compulsory studies in metal physics. Bykov resolved that a probationer must use his flight time wisely and set Yura to study the theory of welding from day one. Frankly speaking, it was not altogether tedious, but Yura was besieged by the thought of himself, an experienced worker, being forced to study like a school novice. He did not dare protest, but studied with much lassitude.

It was much more interesting to observe Yurkovski work.

Bykov returned to his chair and for a few minutes watched, how Yura turns the pages without enthusiasm, and then opened another newspaper. Yurkovski suddenly stopped tapping on his electric typewriter and turned to Bykov.

- Have you heard anything about the statistics on outrageous work practices?

- What outrages?

- I meant, the outrages... err.. in space. The number of disgraceful conduct and unlawful acts rises sharply when moving away from Earth, peaks around the asteroid belt and then declines at the outer limits of... err... the solar system.

- It's not surprising, - Bykov grumbled, without lowering the paper. - You yourselves have permitted all kinds of cheapskates, such as "Space Pearl" to rummage around asteroids, so what exactly do you expect now?

- We have permitted? - Yurkovski became irritated. - Not us, but these London dimwits. And now they don't know themselves, what is to be done...

- You are the chief inspector, you are calling the shots, - Bykov said. Yurkovski peered silently over the papers for some time.

- I am going to get these b-bastards! - he said suddenly and went on generating typewriter noises.

Yura knew already, what the special voyage 17 was about. Around some parts of the giant network of outer space settlements, spanning the entire solar system, things were going astray, and the International Board of Cosmic Communications decided to end this at once and, where possible, once and for all. Yurkovski was the chief IBCC inspector and had seemingly unlimited authority. He had the right to demote, issue warnings, chastise, dismiss, make appointments, even use force, apparently, and judging by every sign, was inclined to do it all. From shreds of conversations and from that which Yurkovski read out loud, it followed, that the photon-powered spacecraft "Takhmaseeb", following a brief stop-over on Mars shall continue through the asteroid belt, stay in the Saturn system, fly over-sun to Jupiter, and travelling through the asteroid belt again, shall return to Earth. Exactly over which heavenly bodies the menacing shadow of the chief inspector was hanging, Yura still have not understood. Zhilin only told Yura, that "Takhmaseeb" will land Yura on Iapetus, and from there the local communication vessels will transport him, that is, Yura, onto Rhea.

Yurkovski stopped making typewriter noises once again.

- I am really concerned by the scientists around Saturn.

- Uh-uh, - was heard from behind the newspaper.

- Can you imagine, they still haven't managed to get going... err... and, at last, initiate their program.

- Uh-uh.

Yurkovski said angrily:

- Please do not imagine, that I am concerned over this program because it is mine...

- I am imagining nothing.

- I think, I will have to give them a push-start, - Yurkovski

announced.

- Well then, we are off to a good start, - said Bykov and turned over a newspaper sheet.

Yura felt, that this whole conversation - both Yurkovski's odd nervousness and Bykov's deliberate indifference - carries some double meaning. It seemed, that chief inspector's boundless authority still had limits somewhere. And that Bykov and Yurkovski knew these limits perfectly well.

Yurkovski said:

- I say, isn't it time for dinner? Cadet, could you possibly cook dinner using the vacuum method?

Bykov said from behind the paper.

- Stop interfering with our work.

- But I want to eat! - Yurkovski said.

- You will survive, - said Bykov.

<h2>MARS. the chase.</h2>

At four o'clock in the morning Felix Rybkin said: "It's time", and everyone started getting ready. Yura pulled two pairs of downy socks on his feet, lent to him by Natasha, heavy fur-lined pants, which Matti gave to him, clipped the battery belt above the pants and stepped into the high fur boots. Felix's Pathfinders, gloomy and sleepy, drank hot coffee in a hurry. Natasha was running to the kitchen and back, carrying sandwiches, hot coffee and thermal flasks. Someone asked for hot chicken soup - Natasha rushed to the kitchen and brought the soup. Rybkin and Zhilin were squatting in the corner of the room over a flat open case, from which the shiny tails of rocket grenades were protruding. The rocket launchers were brought to Mars by Yurkovski. Matti, for the final time, was checking the heating element inside a jacket intended for Yura.

The Pathfinders drank their fill of coffee and silently proceeded to the exit, pulling the oxygen masks over their faces with habitual movements. Felix and Zhilin lifted the case with grenades and also headed out.

- Yura, are you ready? - Zhilin asked.

- Hang on, wait, - replied Yura.

Matti helped Yura array himself into the jacket and personally connected the heating elements to the batteries.

- Now run outside, - he said. - Or you will start sweating.

Yura shoved his hands into mittens and ran after Zhilin.

It was completely dark outside. Yura crossed the observation deck and went down to the tank. Here, in the dark, people were talking quietly, the clinking of metal against metal could be heard. Yura bumped into someone, from the darkness advice came to put his on the specs. Yura advised not to get in the way.

- You are funny fellow, - he was told from the darkness. - Put on your heat sensor goggles.

Yura remembered about the infrared goggles and pulled them over his eyes. It didn't improve things a great deal, but now Yura could vaguely distinguish the silhouettes of people and the wide stern of the tank, heated by the nuclear reactor. At first Yura was handing boxes over, but then he resolved, that there might not be enough space in the tank, and then he will be left at the observatory for sure. He quietly moved close to the tank and climbed onto the stern. There, two people in hoods pulled over their very noses were taking the boxes in.

- Who the devil is this? - one of them asked kindly.

- 'Tis me, - Yura responded.

- Ah, the capital-city boy? - the other said. - Go in the back, start pushing the boxes under the seats.

"The capital-city boy" was the name given to Yura by local welders, whom he helped last night to install the rocket launcher turrets in tanks and demonstrated the latest vacuum-welding methods in rarefied atmospheres.

In the back of the tank the temperature remained at eighty-three degrees below zero, and the heat sensor goggles didn't help. Yura was enthusiastically dragging the boxes across the thudding floor and groped around to shove them under the seats. Then there was nothing to haul. The reticent Pathfinders started climbing over tall starboard and began settling down, clanking their carabines. Yura's feet were painfully stomped over a few times and somebody pulled the hood right over his eyes. From the front of the cabin shocking creaking was heard - it appeared, Felix was testing the turret. Then someone said:

- Here they come.

Yura peeked over the starboard with care. He saw the grey wall of the observatory and projector beams, gliding across the observation deck. These were the three approaching tanks of the central group. Felix's voice said softly:

- Malinin!

- Here, - called out the Pathfinder, sitting next to Yura.

- Petrovsky!

- Here.

- Homeriki!

Having finished the roll call (Yura's and Zhilin's surnames weren't called out for some reason), Felix said:

- Let's go.

The sand tank "Mimicrodont" grumbled its engine, clanked, and listing heavily, started to climb uphill maintaining its speed. Yura was looking up. The stars were invisible - shrouded by dust. There was absolutely nothing to look at. The tank was jolting mercilessly. Yura was being constantly thrown off his coarse seat, bumping against the same sharp rough parts. Finally, the Pathfinder sitting next to him asked:

- Hey, why are you jumping around all the time?

- How would I know? - Yura said grumpily.

He grabbed onto some rod, sticking out of the wall, and things became a little easier. From time to time, amongst the clouds of dust hanging over the tank, the projector lights flashed, and then against the lit background Yura would see the black turret ring and a long barrel of the rocket launcher, craned up into the sky. The Pathfinders were conferring amongst themselves.

- I visited those ruins yesterday.

- And how was it?

- I was disappointed, frankly speaking.

- Yes, the architecture appears strange only at first glance, and then you get the feeling that you have already seen it somewhere.

- Domes, parallelepipeds...

- Exactly. Just like Warm Syrt.

- Because it never occurred to anyone, that it isn't ours.

- Not surprising... After the wonders of Phoebus and Demos...

- Personally, I find this particular similarity quite odd.

- Has the data been analysed?

Yura felt uncomfortable, bumpy and somewhat isolated. Nobody paid attention to him. The people seemed alien, indifferent. A savage frost blistered his face. Into the tanks bottom below his feet fountains of sand from under the tracks were pounding with brutal force. Zhilin was somewhere close by, but he could neither be seen nor heard. Yura even felt some grudge against him. He wished the sun would rise sooner, and it would become bright and warm. And that the jarring would stop.

Bykov let Yura off on Mars with great reluctance, and under Zhilin's personal supervision. Bykov himself stayed on the ship with Michael Antonovich and was now circling along with Phoebus at a distance of nine thousand kilometres above Mars. Where Yurkovski was at the moment, Yura had no idea. Perhaps, he was also taking part in the round-up.

They could have at least given be a carabine, Yura thought with

dejection. I have, in fact, welded the turrets for them.

Everyone around him carried carabines, and probably felt so calm and relaxed because of that.

Indeed, it's part of human nature to be thankless and indifferent, Yura thought bitterly. And more so with age. If only our fellows were here, everything would be the other way. I would have a carabine, I would know where we are going and why. And I would know what I need to do.

The tank stopped completely. The projector lights, rushing across the clouds, lit everything up. Everyone became silent in the cabin, and Yura heard an unfamiliar voice:

- Rybkin, proceed to the western slope. Kuzmin - to the eastern. Jefferson, stay on the southern.

The tank started moving again. The projector beam fell into the cabin, and Yura saw Felix, standing at the turret with a radiophone in his hand.

- Move into position with the starboard facing west, - Rybkin told the driver.

The tank tilted heavily, and Yura spread his elbows, in order not to slide to the bottom.

- Now, that's good, - Felix said. - Move her forward a bit. The ground is more even there.

The tank stopped again. Rybkin spoke into the radiophone:

- Rybkin is in position, comrade Livanov.

- Good, - Livanov said.

All Pathfinders were standing, looking over the sides. Yura looked also. Nothing could be seen, except thick dust clouds, descending gradually in the lights of the projectors.

- Kuzmin is in position. However, there is some tower adjacent to us.

- Go lower.

- Understood.

- Attention! - Livanov said. This time he spoke through a loudspeaker, and his voice rolled in a thunder across the desert. - The round up will begin in a few minutes. There is one hour before sunrise. The beaters will arrive here in half an hour. Turn on the howlers in thirty minutes. Shooting is permitted. I have finished.

The Pathfinders stirred. The appalling grind of the turret was heard anew. The sides of the tank bristled up with carabines. The dust was receding, and people's silhouettes waned slowly, blending into the night darkness. The stars became visible again.

- Yura! - Zhilin called softly.

- What? - Yura said grumpily.

- Where are you?

- Here.

- Come here, now, - Zhilin said sternly.

- Where? - Yura asked and climbed towards the voice.

- Here, to the turret.

In the back lay a great abundance of boxes. Just where did they come from? - Yura thought. Zhilin's powerful hand gripped his shoulder and dragged him underneath the turret.

- Sit here, - Zhilin said strictly. - You will be helping Felix.

- But how? - Yura asked. He was still upset, but getting over it already.

Felix Rybkin said quietly:

- Here are the boxes with grenades, - he flashed his torch. - Lift the grenades one by one, remove the cap from the tail section and pass them to me.

The Pathfinders were talking amongst themselves.

- Can't see a thing.

- It is very cold tonight, everything has cooled down.

- Yes, the autumn is coming soon. The temperature is low each day...

- I, for instance, can see some dome up there against the stars, and I

am aiming at it.

- What for?

- It's the only thing that I can see.

- Can we sleep also?

Above Yura's head Felix said quietly:

- Guys, I am watching the east side. Don't shoot just yet, I want to test the weapons.

Yura immediately picked up a grenade and took off the cap. A dead silence fell for a few minutes.

- Natasha is a really great girl, don't you think? - someone whispered.

Felix made a motion. The turret squeaked.

- She shouldn't cut her hair that short, - someone responded from the western side.

- What do you know...

- She looks like my wife. Except her hair is shorter and lighter.

- I wonder, why is Serezhka so slow? Such a dashing fellow, this isn't like him.

- What Serezhka?

- Serezhka Belyi, the astronomer.

- Married, I guess.

- No.

- They all like her a lot. Just as friends. She is exceptionally nice. And smart. I know her from Earth a bit.

- No wonder you made her run around to get you chicken soup.

- And what's the big deal?

- It simply wasn't nice. She worked the whole night, then cooked breakfast for us. And then, all of a sudden, it hits you to ask her for chicken soup...

- Sh-h-h!

In an instantly formed silence, Felix said quietly:

- Yura, would you like to see a leech? Look!

Yura stuck his head out immediately. At first he only saw the black jagged silhouettes of the ruins. Then something moved soundlessly over there. A long limber shadow rose above the towers and undulated slowly, covering and exposing the bright stars. The turret squeaked again and the shadow froze. Yura held his breath. Now, he thought. Now. The shadow coiled up, as if folding in, and at the same moment the rocket launcher fired.

A long hissing sound was heard, sparks gushed, a fiery trail stretched to the hilltop, something burst with a boom, flashed radiantly, and the silence set in again.

- Who made the shot? - the loudspeaker roared.

- Rybkin, - Felix said.

- Got it?

- Yes.

- Alright, good luck, - the loudspeaker boomed.

- The grenade, - Felix said quietly. Yura hastily shoved a grenade in his hand.

- This is cool, - one of the Pathfinders said with envy. - Right in half.

- Yeah, this is no carabine.

- Felix, and how come they didn't give them to all of us?

Felix replied:

- Yurkovski only brought twenty-five units.

- Pity. It's a sound weapon.

All of a sudden there was shooting on the eastern side. Yura was waving his head with excitement, but couldn't see anything. Above the ruins, hissed and burst a rocket, launched from some other tank. Felix fired one more time.

- The grenade, - he said loudly.

The cannonade, with short intervals, lasted about twenty minutes. Yura

couldn't see anything. He was handing up one grenade after another. There was now shooting from each side of the tank. Felix was swinging the launcher on the turret with a horrible grinding noise. Then the howlers came on. A harsh dreary wail floated across the desert. Yura's teeth ached and heels itched. The shooting stopped, but it was impossible to talk.

It was rapidly getting sunnier. Yura could now see the Pathfinders. Almost all of them were sitting; backs against the wall, ruffled up, with hoods pulled down tightly. On the bottom stood open plastic crates with shreds of torn colourful cellophane, discarded bullet shells and empty magazines lay in abundance. Before Yura, on a crate, Zhilin was sitting, holding a carbine between his knees. On his exposed cheeks a layer of frost silvered delicately. Yura stood up and looked at the Old Base. Grey corroded walls, prickly bushes, rocks. Yura was disappointed. He expected to see piles of smoking corpses. Only after looking more closely, he noticed a yellowish wrinkled body, stuck in a gorge amongst the burr, and also something shining wetly and obscenely on one of the domes.

Yura turned and looked into the desert. The desert was grey under a dark purple sky, covered by grey ripples of dunes, dull and barren. But high above an even horizon Yura saw a bright yellow streak, tufted, jagged, stretching across the whole of the western edge of the sky. The streak was spreading rapidly, growing, turning brighter.

- The beaters are coming! - someone yelled, barely audible in the wail of sirens.

Yura realised, that the bright yellow streak above the horizon is a dust cloud, stirred by the chase. The sun was rising toward the beaters, red stains of light fell upon the desert, and then suddenly the massive red cloud cloaking the horizon lit up.

- The beaters, the beaters! - Yura yelled out.

All of the horizon - straight ahead, to the right, to the left - became covered with black dots. The dots were appearing and vanishing, and appearing again on crests of distant dunes. One could see already, that the tanks and crawlers were advancing at maximum speed and each was dragging a long puffing dust train. Along the entire horizon glared bright rapid flashes, and it was not clear - were they the gun shot flashes, grenade explosions, or just simply the sun sparkling off the windscreens.

Yura was kicked in the side, and he sat down, stumbling, on top of the crates. Felix Rybkin was dashingly turning his long grenade launcher on the turret. A few Pathfinders rushed to the left plank. The beaters were approaching swiftly. Now they were just five-seven kilometres away, at most. The horizon became completely shrouded, and one could see, that in front of the beaters, a smoky line full of flashes is rolling down the desert. The loudspeaker roared, drowning the sirens wail:

- Fire into the desert! All firepower into the desert!

People began shooting from the tank. Yura watched, how Zhilin's broad shoulders shudder after each shot, watched the white flashes above the starboard, and still couldn't figure out, where they are shooting, and who they are shooting at. Felix smacked him on the hood, Yura quickly handed over a grenade and ripped the cap off the next one. The sirens wailed with stolid determination, the shots blasted, and everyone was very busy, and no one could be asked, what is going on. Then Yura saw, how a long red jet of fire, resembling a spit, leaped off one tank and plunged into the dusty streak in front of the beaters. Then he understood. Everyone was shooting at that dusty streak: the leeches were there. And the streak was approaching.

From behind the hill, stern afront, Kuzmin's tank rolled out slowly. The tank has not yet stopped, when its hatch flew open, and a giant black tube drew out. The tube began tilting toward the sky, and when it froze at a forty-five degree angle, Kuzmin's Pathfinders scattered across the sides, like peas from a pod, and climbed under the tracks. Thick black fumes poured from the cabin, the pipe expelled a colossal tongue of flame with a drawn-out wheeze, after which clouds of dust enveloped the tank. The

shooting stopped for a minute. On a dune crest, about three hundred metres away, not making great sense, billowed a bushy mushroom cloud of smoke and dust.

Felix smacked Yura over the hood again. Yura handed up two grenades in straight succession and turned to look at Kuzmin's tank. Through the dust, he could see how the Pathfinders were straining to pull the pipe from the cabin. It even seemed to Yura, that he can hear muffled curses through the roar and cracking of the explosions.

The smoky streak, inside which lights of explosions glared, advanced closer and closer. Then finally, Yura could see. Leeches resembled giant greyish-yellow tadpoles. Nimble, incredibly agile despite their size, and probably, ample weight, they rapidly leaped out of the dust cloud, soared a few tens of metres through the air, and disappeared into the dust again. Right behind them, almost on their tail, skipping across the dunes, charged square tanks and tiny crawlers, sparkling with flashes of explosions. Yura bent over for more grenades, and when he straightened out, the leeches were quite close already, flashes of volleys disappeared, the tanks slowed down, people were jumping out onto cabin roofs and waving their hands, and then from somewhere on the left, double passing Kuzmin's vehicle, a sand tank leaped out at an insane speed and shuffled through and through the thick pack of leeches. Its passenger bay was empty. Right down its path a second empty tank leaped out of the dust, a third one followed it, and then nothing could be made out in the yellow, impenetrably thick dust.

- Stop the fire! - the loudspeaker roared.

- Crush them! Crush them! - the loudspeakers echoed on the beaters' side.

The dust obscured everything. Twilight fell.

- Watch out! - Felix yelled and bent down.

A long dark body flew over the tank. Felix straightened out and abruptly swung the rocket launcher in the direction of the Old Base. Suddenly the sirens went out, and immediately the rumbling of tens of engines, clanking of tracks and shouting became audible. Felix was not shooting any more. He was slowly shifting the launcher, first to the left, then to the right. From the dust appeared a small number of people with carabines. They ran to the tank, and hastily climbed aboard.

- What happened? - Zhilin asked.

- Our crawler flipped, - someone answered quickly.

Another said, after a nervous laugh:

- Slow and methodic movement.

- Total mess, - the third one said. - We have no idea how to wage war.

The rumbling of engines grew close, past them two tanks crawled, slowly and unsurely. Behind the tracks of the last one, something formless, covered with dust, was being dragged.

An surprised voice suddenly said:

- Fellows, the sirens have actually stopped!

Everyone started laughing and talking amongst themselves.

- Such horrible dust.

- As if an autumn storm has begun.

- What shall we do, Felix? Hey, commander!

- We'll wait, - Felix said softly. - The dust will settle soon.

- Did we really get rid of them?

- Hey you, the beaters, have you shot down a few?

- Plenty for one supper, - one of the beaters replied.

- The scoundrels, they escaped into caverns.

- Over here only one had passed. They are afraid of sirens.

The dust was settling gradually. A dull circle of the sun became visible, the purple sky appeared. Then Yura saw a dead leech - probably, the same one which jumped over the cabin. It lay on the slope of the hill, straight like a stick, covered by coarse reddish bristles. From the tail towards the head, it distended like a funnel and Yura was looking at its

maw, feeling a chill down his spine. The maw was completely round, half a metre in diameter, spiked with large flat triangular teeth. One got nauseous looking at it. Yura looked around him and saw that the dust has almost settled and there were lots of tanks and crawlers around. People were jumping overboard and were walking slowly up the slope to the ruins of the Old Base. The engine noise died. Over the hill hung a hubbub of voices and the haloxylon, inexplicably set on fire was crackling weakly.

- Let's go, - Felix said.

He lifted the launcher off the turret and climbed over the side. Yura was about to follow him, when Zhilin caught his sleeve.

- Slow down, slow now, - he said. - You are coming with me, buddy.

They got out of the tank and started climbing after Felix. Felix was heading towards a large group of people, crowding some five metres away from the ruins. The people stood around a cavern - a deep dark cave, descending steeply beneath the ruins. At the entrance, hands placed on his hips, stood a man with a carbine on his neck.

- And did many... err... penetrate through, - he was asking.

- Two leeches for sure, - replies came from the crowd. - Maybe even more.

- Yurkovski! - Zhilin said.

- How, then, did you fail to ... err... detain them? - Yurkovski asked with reproach.

- Well, they did not... err... elect to be detained, - the crowd explained.

Yurkovski said disdainfully:

- You ought to have... err... detained them! - he took off the carbine. - I'll go have a look, - he said.

No one managed to say a word, as he stooped and dived into the darkness with unexpected agility. Felix followed him like a shadow. Yura quit hesitating. He said: "Excuse me, comrade", - and seized a carbine from his neighbour. An astounded neighbour did not resist.

- Where are you off to? - surprised Zhilin asked, looking back from the threshold of the cave. Yura moved decidedly towards the cavern. - No-no, - Zhilin pattered, - you can't go there. - Yura, head lowered, walked at him. - You can't, I said! - Zhilin growled and pushed into his chest. Yura flopped with all his might, raising plenty of dust. There was laughing in the crowd. Past him ran the Pathfinders, disappearing inside the cave one by one.

Yura jumped up, he was enraged.

- Let me through! - he yelled. He jumped forward and ran into Zhilin, as if he were a wall. Zhilin asked in a pleading tone:

- Yurik, forgive me, but you really shouldn't go there.

Yura was trying to burst through in silence.

- Well, what are you pushing in for? You can see, I stayed behind as well.

Hollow shooting sounds thudded in the cave.

- See, they did fine without you and me.

Yura clenched his teeth and stepped back. He shoved the carbine silently to a freshly recovered beater and stepped into the crowd dejectedly. He felt, that everybody was looking at him. What a shame, what horrible shame, he thought. Just short of getting his ears tweaked. Fair enough, had it been one on one - after all, Zhilin is - Zhilin. But not in front of everyone... He remembered, how ten years ago, he got into his older brother's room and coloured in his prints with crayons... He wanted but the best. And how his older brother lead him out onto the street by the ear, and what a disgrace it was!

- Don't get flustered, Yurka, - Zhilin said. - I didn't mean to. I totally forgot, that gravity here is less.

Yura kept obstinately quiet.

- Come on, stop worrying, - Zhilin said kindly, fixing up his hood. -

Nothing will happen to him. You know, Felix is there next to him, and Pathfinders... And I also rushed, thinking that the old fellow will perish, but then, thanks to you, I came to my senses...

Zhilin was saying something else now, but Yura didn't hear another word. I wish he'd have tweaked my ears, he thought with desolation. Slapped me in public, instead. A kid, snotty-faced, a disgraceful egoist! Ivan acted rightly, when he smacked me. He should have smacked me harder still. Yura even hissed through his teeth, feeling utterly ashamed. Ivan cared about me and about Yurkovski, and he hasn't got any doubt, that I was also concerned about Yurkovski and about him... And I?.. When Yurkovski jumped into the cave, I merely took it as permission for heroic deeds. Not for a second did I think, that Yurkovski is under threat... Idiot, I was keen to combat the leeches and gain fame... Thankfully, Ivan doesn't know...

- Wa-atch it! - someone yelled from behind.

Yura stepped aside unconsciously. A crawler climbed through the crowd to the cave, dragging along a trailer with a huge silvery cistern. A metallic hose with a strange long tip extended from the cistern. A man sitting in the front seat held the tip.

- Here? - the man inquired in a business-like manner, and without waiting for reply, directed the tip of the hose at the cave. - Bring her closer, - he said to the driver. - Come on guys, move off, - he spoke to the crowd. - Further, further, go further. Come on, move it, I am talking to you! - he yelled out to Yura.

He aimed the tip of the hose at the dark crevasse of the cave, but then one of the Pathfinders appeared at the cave's threshold.

- And what is this now? - he asked.

The man with the hose plonked down.

- Holy cow, - he said. - What are you doing there?

- Hey guys, this is a flamethrower! - guessed somebody among the crowd. The bewildered flame thrower man scratched under his hood.

- You shouldn't do this, - he said. - We must really be warned.

There was such fierce shooting underground, that Yura thought he saw shreds flying out of the cave.

- Why did you start all this? - the flamethrower officer asked.

- It was Yurkovski, - an answer came from the crowd.

- Which Yurkovski? - the officer asked. - Not the son, really?

- No, peer [de France].

One after another three more Pathfinders walked out of the cave. One of them, upon seeing the flamethrower said:

- This is good. The rest of us are coming out now and we shall really give it to them.

People were walking out of the cave. The last to come out were Felix and Yurkovski. Yurkovski was talking, out of breath:

- Ok then, this tower here above us must be something akin to... err... water tower. Quite... err... possible! You are a champion, Felix. - He saw the flamethrower and stopped. - A-ah, the flamethrower! Well, then... err... it's possible. Permission to work given. - He nodded benevolently at the flamethrower man.

The flamethrower man livened up, jumped of his seat and walked to the threshold of the cave. The crowd drew back. Yurkovski was left standing alone next it to the flamethrower man, with his hands on the hips.

- Isn't he the Thunderer, ey? - Zhilin said over Yura's ear.

The flamethrower man took aim. Yurkovski suddenly seized his hand.

- Hold on. Why actually... err... is all this necessary? The surviving leeches are long since... err... dead, and the dead ones... errr... will be needed by biologists. Isn't that so?

- Zeus, - Zhilin said. Yura just moved his shoulder. He was embarrassed.

Pen'kov downed his cup in one gulp, caught his breath and spoke with reflection:

- Should I, perhaps, drink another cup of coffee?
- Let me pour you one, - said Matti.
- But I want Natasha to, - Pen'kov said.

Natasha poured the coffee for him. Outside the window was a dark, crystal clear night, the kind that often occur in the end of summer, ahead of autumn storms. In the dining room corner fur jackets, battery belts, boots, carabines heaved in a disorderly pile. The electric clock above the workshop door clicked cosily. Matti said:

- I still cannot understand, have we exterminated the leeches or not? Serezha tore himself away from a book.

- The communique from headquarters, - he said. - On the battlefield remained sixteen leeches, one tank and three crawlers. According to unconfirmed facts, one more tank became stranded in the salt-marches in the very beginning of the pursuit, and at present could not be extracted.

- That I know, - Matti announced. - What I am interested in, is whether I can now walk to Warm Syrt at night?

- You can, - Pen'kov said, puffing out the air. - But a carbine must be taken, - he added, after some thought.

- I see, - Matti said with unusual sarcasm.

- And why, in fact, do you need to be at Warm Syrt at night? - Sergey asked.

Matti looked at him.

- This is why, - he said ingratiatingly. - For instance, the time comes for comrade Sergey Alexandrovich Belyi to go out for observation. It's three a.m. and comrade Belyi, as you understand, is not at the observatory. Then I walk over to Warm Syrt to the Central meteorostation, go up to the second floor...

- Laboratory Eight, - Pen'kov put in.

- I get it, - Sergey said.

- But how come I don't know anything? - Natasha asked grudgingly. - How come no one ever tells me anything?

- Somehow Rybkin hasn't come for a while, - Sergey spoke pensively.

- Yes, indeed, - Pen'kov said with a thoughtful air.

- The night is drawing close, - Matti announced, - yet Rybkin's missing still.

Natasha sighed.

- I am so fed up with all of you, - she said.

In the lobby the partition door clinked.

- When he gets here now, he will laugh for us, - Pen'kov.

There was knocking on the dining room door.

- Come in, - said Natasha and looked angrily at the guys.

Rybkin entered, accurate and sharp, wearing clean overalls, a snow-white shirt, impeccably shaven.

- May I? - he asked in a low voice.

- Come in, Felix, - Matti said and poured coffee into a cup he put out beforehand.

- I came a little late today, - Felix said. - There was a meeting held by the director.

Everyone looked anxiously at him.

- They talked about the regeneration plant for most part. Yurkovski ordered to stop all scientific works for two months. All scientists shall be mobilised to the workshops and the construction sites.

- Everyone?

- Everyone. Even the Pathfinders. The order comes out tomorrow.

- Stuffed is my program, - Pen'kov said gloomily. - Just why can't this administration of ours ever co-ordinate the work properly?

Natasha remarked earnestly:

- Be quiet, Volodya! You don't even know anything!..

- Yes, - Sergey spoke reflectively. - I heard, that we are not doing too well with water. So what else was there at the meeting?

- Yurkovski gave a long speech. He said, that we became lost in daily routine. That we like living under a schedule too much, that we love our comfortable spots, and over thirty years we managed to erect... how did he put it... "boring and complex traditions". That our brain curves, responsible for curiosity, have smoothed out, which is the only way to explain the anecdote over the Old Base. In general, he talked about the same things, as you Sergey, remember, last decade? That mysteries are all around, and we are dawdling... A very heated speech - I think, impromptu. Then he complimented us for the round-up, said that he came to give us a push, and is very glad, that we have ventured to carry it out ourselves... And then Puchko made a speech, and demanded Livanov's head. He was yelling, that he will show to him, what it means "slowly and methodically"...

- But what is the matter?

- The tanks were damaged quite seriously. And in two months our group is being transferred to the Old Base, so we'll become neighbours.

- And is Yurkovski leaving? - Matti asked.

- Yes, tonight.

- It's interesting, - Pen'kov said pensively, - why does he haul that welder around?

- To weld the turrets, - Matti said. - People say, that he intends to carry out a few more round-ups - on asteroids.

- With Yurkovski I had one incident, - Sergey said. - Back in the institute, still. I was once sitting an examination on theoretical planetology, and he kicked me out via really original means.

"Give me, - he says, - comrade Belyi, your record book, and open the door, please". I walk over and open the door, with great amazement. Then he chucks my record-book out into the corridor and says: "Go and come back in a month".

- Well? - said Pen'kov.

- Well, so I went.

- And why was he so rough? - Pen'kov asked with displeasure.

- Well, I was young back then, - Sergey said. - Audacious.

- You are quite refined now, still, - Natasha suggested.

- So have we, in fact, killed the leeches or not? - Matti asked.

Everyone looked at Felix.

- Hard to say, - Felix said. - Sixteen were killed, and we never expected that there will be more than ten. Practically speaking, we probably killed them.

- And did you come with a carabine? - Matti asked.

Felix nodded.

- Understandable, - Matti said.

- And is it true, that Yurkovski was almost incinerated with a flamethrower? - Natasha asked.

- And me along with him, - Felix said. - We descended into the cavern, and the flamethrowers did not know, that we are there. In two months we shall begin working from that cavern. There, I think, the remnants of the water main have been preserved. The water main is quite strange - the pipes are not round, but oval.

- You are still hoping you will find erect bipeds? - Sergey asked.

Felix shook his head.

- No, we won't find them here, of course.

- Where 'here'?

- Around water.

- I don't get it, - Pen'kov said. - On the contrary! If they are not here, here at the water, that means they don't exist at all.

- No-no-no, - said Natasha. - I think, I understand. On our Earth, the Martians would be looking for people in the desert. It really is natural. Far away from poisonous greens, away from regions, shrouded by clouds. They

would look somewhere in Gobi. Right, Felix? I mean, I also think so.

- Then, we must look for Martians in deserts? - Pen'kov said. - Nice one! Then why do they need water-mains?

- Perhaps these are not water-mains, - Felix said, - but water drains. Like our drainage ditches.

- Well, you are going too far, I think, - Sergey said. - Rather they do, in fact, live in underground hollows. However, I don't know myself, why they rather would, but still - what you say, it is way too bold. Abnormally bold.

- It cannot be done otherwise, - Felix said quietly.

- Mother dear! - said Pen'kov and got up from the table. - I got to go already!

He walked across the room to the pile of fur clothing.

- Time for me to go as well, - Natasha said.

- And me, - Sergey said.

Matti started cleaning up the table. Felix accurately rolled up his sleeves and started helping him.

- So why do you have so many watches? - Matti asked, looking askance at Felix's wrists.

- Forgot to take them off, - Felix mumbled. - Now, it's probably useless.

He was washing the dishes expertly.

- And when were they useful?

- I was testing one hypothesis, - Felix said quietly. - Why the leeches always attack from the right. There was only one case, when a leech attacked from the left - with Kreitzer, who was left-handed and wore a watch on his right hand.

Matti stared at Felix with astonishment.

- You think, the leeches are afraid of clocks ticking?

- That's is what I wanted to determine. Personally, the leeches did not attack me once, and I was walking in really dangerous places.

- Strange guy you are, Felix, - Matti said and started washing the dishes again.

Natasha walked into the dining room and asked merrily:

- Felix, are you coming? Let's go together.

- I am coming, - said Felix and headed to the lobby, rolling down his sleeves as he walked.

<h2>"Takhmaseeb". The Value of instructions.</h2>

Zhilin was reading, seated behind the desk. His eyes skimmed across pages, glimmering wetly, from time to time, in the bluish light of the desk lamp. For a while, Yura watched Zhilin, and suddenly caught himself realising, that he is enjoying looking at him. Ivan had a heavy, brown face, clear-cut like an engraving. Such a truly manly face of a genuine person.

A nice guy, Vanya Zhilin. You can come to him at any time and sit and chat, about whatever comes into your mind, and you will never bother him. Such people exist in the world, and it's great. Zhen'ka Segal, for instance. With him, one can go into any enterprise, take any risk, and know for sure, that he won't have to be hurried, for he can hurry anyone himself. Yura imagined Zhen'ka on Rhea, where he and the guys are welding fricative constructions in dark vacuum. White oxitian flame is flickering over the siliquet visor, and he is shouting songs all over the airways, holding up the mixer tank, which is hanging on his chest, and not on the back, as the instructions specify. It is easier for him, and there is no way to convince him of the opposite, until someone wearing the tank on their back overtakes him on a momentum seam, a longitudinal juncture or even on a simple oblique-angled strut without a hawser. That's when he will take notice, and possibly, will throw the tank over onto his back, but not even that is definite. "Instructions - it is for those, who do not yet know how". But

musical hearing, this he doesn't have. His singing is just awful. And that is good, even, since what is the use of a person, who has no faults? A decent person must always have an aptitude gap, better even have a few, and then he becomes truly pleasant. Then you know for sure, that he isn't some kind of 'pearl'. Take Zhen'ka - once he starts singing, it's clear to all, that he is no 'pearl', but a nice guy.

- Vanya, - said Yura, - do you have musical hearing?

- Come on now, buddy, - said Zhilin, without lifting his head from the book. - Who do you take me for?

- That's what I thought, - Yura said with contentment. - And what book do you have there?

Zhilin lifted his head, looked at Yura for some time, then uttered slowly:

"The rules of sanitary discipline for life-guards of Their Royal Highness".

Yura snorted. It was, however, clear, that Ivan does not wish to say, what book it is. Well, there's nothing special in this...

- Today, I have finally conquered the "Metal Physics", - said Yura. - What a bore. How can one write such books? Alexey Petrovich gave me a quick examination, - Yura pronounced the last word with great disgust, - and picked at things all the time. Why does he always pick on me, do you know, Vanya?

Zhilin closed the book and put it away inside the desk.

- It only seems this way to you, - he said. - Captain Bykov never looks for faults. He just demands that, which ought to be demanded. He is a very just person, our captain.

For a few minutes Yura pondered, whether it would be fitting and fair to say, what he feels like saying. Telling this to Bykov's face, he could not risk it. Talking behind his back is wrong. But he really wants to say it...

- Vanya, and what kind of people don't you like the most?

Zhilin answered immediately:

- People, who never ask questions. They exist - self-assured ones...

He screwed up an eye, looked at Yura, grabbed a pencil and quickly drew his portrait. Probationer Borodin, rather like him, with such a nose, sitting, face twisted, peering over a corpulent "Metal Physics" textbook.

- And I really dislike the boring ones, - Yura announced, looking over the drawing. - May I take it? Thanks... I personally, Vanya, really don't like the boring ones. They have such a boring, tedious life. At work they write up petty documents or calculate on computers, that they haven't invented, and to invent something themselves - they never even try. It never enters their head to invent something. They do everything "like others". Then they start reasoning: these boots are nice and strong, and these aren't, and they can never manufacture nice furniture in Vyaz'ma, now we have to order it from Moscow, and about this book, people say that it ought to be read, and how about we go mushrooming tomorrow, rumour has it that the mushrooms are really good this year... Holy cow, nobody in the world could ever make me go look for those mushrooms!

Zhilin was listening, immersed in thought, assiduously depicting an enormous integral number from zero to infinity on paper.

- They always have loads of free time, - Yura continued, - and they never know what to do with that time. Driving around in cars in huge ridiculous groups and its revolting to watch how they do it like idiots. First they go mushrooming, then they go to a cafe and eat - by mere idleness, then they start racing on highways, only on the finest and best-equipped ones, where, it appears, it's safe and the repair robots are at hand, and motels and whatever you want. Then they get together at some holiday house, and do nothing still, won't even talk to each other. Let's say, they sort through their miserable mushrooms and argue, which one's a brown-cap and which one's an orange-cap boletus. And when they do come to

having an argument about something worthwhile, then it's time to run for your life. How come, just imagine this, they are still not allowed into space. But go and ask, what use it is to them, - they cannot tell you anything sensible, just grumble something about their rights. They enjoy terribly talking about their rights. But the most detestable thing about them is that they always have loads of time, and they kill this time. Here on "Takhmaseeb" I don't know where to run from idleness, I can't wait to start working, but they would be here like fish in water...

Yura lost the train of thought and lapsed into silence. Zhilin kept putting ornaments over his integral; his face became wistful for some reason. Then he said:

- And what does this have to do with captain Bykov?

Yura recalled where he had begun from.

- Alexey Petrovich, - he mumbled unsure of himself, - he is... somewhat dullish...

Zhilin nodded.

- That's what I thought, - he said. - But you are making a mistake, buddy, if you are piling everything into one heap - both Bykov and the lovers of safe highways...

- I meant something completely different...

- I understand you. Well, then. Bykov loves his job - number one. Cannot see himself in any other capacity - number two. And then, you know, Alexey Petrovich keeps working even when he is reading magazines or snoozing in his chair. Have you ever given it any thought?

- N-no...

- You should have. Do you know, what Bykov's job consists of? Always being ready. It is a very complex task. Arduous, exhausting. One must be Bykov, to withstand all this. To adapt to constant strain, to a state of constant uninterrupted readiness. You don't follow?

- Don't know... If it is really so...

- But it is really so! He is a soldier of space. One can only be envious of him, Yurochka, since he found the paramount within himself and the world. He is needed, essential and difficult to replace. You understand?

Yura nodded hesitantly. In front of him appeared the abominable picture - the glorified captain wearing slippers and striped socks in his favourite chair.

- I know, Vladimir Sergeevich has won your heart. Well, that's understandable. On one hand there is Yurkovski, who reckons that life - is a fairly dull racket with rather dull affairs and one must seize every chance to unload in a magnificent burst. On the other hand, there's Bykov, who believes the true life exists within unrelenting strain, doesn't recognise any chances, since he is ready for any chance, and no chance will ever be a surprise to him... But then there is a third side. Imagine, Yura, - Zhilin laid his palms on the table and reclined in the chair, - a colossal building of human culture: everything that man had created himself, snatched from nature, re-evaluated and created anew in such a way, that nature could never have. Such a splendid building! Built by people, who know their job well and love their job greatly. For instance, Yurkovski, Bykov... So far, there are fewer of these people than there are others. Simply honest people, who perhaps, don't even know what they do and do not like. They do not know, had no chance to find out, what they can and cannot do. They simply work there, where life had placed them. And these people, by and large, support on their shoulders the palace of thought and spirit. From nine till three they support it, and then they go mushrooming... - Zhilin kept quiet for a moment. - Naturally, it's desirable for everyone to support and to build. But that takes time. And strength. This state of affairs must also be created, you know.

Yura was thinking. There was something in Ivan's words. Something unwonted. This had to be thought over yet.

Zhilin put his hands behind his head.

- I keep remembering one story, - he spoke. He was looking straight at the light; his pupils became like dots. - I had a friend called Tolya. We went to school together. He was always so inconspicuous, always stuck to trivial things. Assembling some notebooks, gluing boxes together. He especially enjoyed binding old worn-out books. He was a real kind soul, so kind that would not understand hurtful jokes. Took them somehow strangely, and in our view at that time, quite outrageously. It happened, we would sometimes stick a triton in his bed, and he would pull it out, lay it on his palm and look it over for a long time. We are ogling all round him, because it is funny, and he'd say quietly: "Poor thing" - and would carry it to the pond. Then he grew up and became a statistician somewhere. Everyone knows, this job is quiet and unnoticeable, and we all thought, that this is what he deserves and that our Tolya isn't fit to do anything else. He worked honestly, without any interest, but earnestly. We would fly to Jupiter, uncover the permafrost, build new factories, whilst he sat in his institution and calculated on computers, which he did not invent himself. An exemplary little man. You could even cover him with cotton wool and place in a museum under a glass lid with a corresponding label: "A typical self-sufficing man around the end of the twentieth century". Then he died. Neglected an insignificant medical disorder, because he was afraid of the operation, and died. It happens to small people, though no one ever writes about it in newspapers.

Zhilin became quiet, as if listening in to something. Yura waited.

- This was in Karelia, on the banks of a forest lake. His bed stood on a glassed verandah, and I sat next to him, and saw at once both his dark unshaven face... dead face... and a huge blue cloud over the forest on the other side of the lake. The physician said: "He is dead". And straight away, thunder struck with force unseen, and the storm that broke out was such that are rare even in the southern seas. The wind was crushing trees and throwing them against wet crimson rocks, where they burst into splinters, but not even their crackle could be heard in the roaring of the wind. The lake was advancing in a wall onto the shore, and into this wall battered bright lightning bolts, so unusual for the North. Roofs were being torn from houses. Clocks had stopped everywhere - no one knows why. It was a furious, brutal storm, as if the entire still world pranced up. And he lay there, quiet, ordinary, and, as always, it did not concern him. - Zhilin listened in again. - Yurik, I am a man who is not timid, relaxed [even], but I was scared then. I suddenly thought: "So that's what you were like, our little boring Tolik. Quietly and inconspicuously, not suspecting a thing yourself, you held on your shoulders the equilibrium of the World. You died, the equilibrium crashed and the World pranced up". If, back then, someone yelled into my ear, that Earth ran off its orbit and headed for the Sun, I would only nod my head. And I also thought then... - Zhilin kept quiet for a moment. - I thought: why was he so small and so boring? You know, he was a very boring man, Yura. Very. If this storm happened before his eyes, he would most likely yell: "Oh! Slippers! My slippers are drying on the porch!" And he would run to rescue his slippers. But why, how did he turn that way?

Zhilin fell silent, and looked at Yura strictly.

- But it was his own fault... - Yura said bashfully.

- Wrong. No one can ever be at fault entirely by themselves. People shape us into that, which we become. That's what it is. And we... How often do we fail to pay this debt... Almost always. Yet there is nothing more important than that. That's the main thing. Before, the chief priority was to give people their freedom, to become what one wishes to be. And now the main priority - is to show people, who they should become, in order to find regular human happiness. That alone is now the main thing, - Zhilin looked at Yura and asked suddenly: - Right?

- Probably, - said Yura. It was all right, but somehow foreign to him. Somehow it didn't move him. The whole affair seemed hopeless. Or boring...

Zhilin sat, listening in wakefully. His eyes stopped moving altogether.

- What happened? - Yura asked.

- Quiet! - Zhilin got up. - This is strange, - he said. He kept listening to something. Yura suddenly felt the floor shudder quietly under his feet, and at that same moment a siren wailed piercingly. He jumped up and rushed to the door. Zhilin caught him by the shoulder.

- Easy, - he said. - You know your post according to the schedule?

- Yes! - said Yura and choked.

- Your responsibilities also? - Zhilin let him go. - March!

Yura rushed into the corridor.

He was running down the circular corridor into the vacuum-chamber, where his place was under the emergency schedule, running quickly, but still holding his composure, so as not to rush with all his speed. A probationer ought to be "calm, composed and constantly prepared", however, when a dreary ominous wail sweeps across the ship, when the ship trembles in convulsions, like a man hurt, when his wound is being touched by clumsy fingers, when you don't understand too well, what you must do, and don't understand at all, what is happening... At the end of the corridor the red lamps flashed. Yura couldn't help it and ran at full speed.

Leaning with all his weight, he rolled open a heavy door and flew into a grey room, where along the walls the dark screens of vacuum-suit boxes were visible. He had to raise all screens, check the complete set up of each suit, pressure in the tanks, energy supply, shift the fastening of each suit into the emergency position and do something else... Then he had to put on his suit with the visor open and await further instructions.

Yura carried all of this out quite fast, and as it seemed to him, sensibly, though his fingers shook greatly and he felt a strain throughout his entire body, strong and unpleasant, resembling a prolonged spasm. The siren became quiet, an inauspicious silence fell. Yura finished off the last space suit and looked around. Inside boxes with raised screens shone a strong blue light, the huge suits with outstretched arms were gleaming, resembling ugly decapitated statues. Yura pulled his suit out and climbed into it. The suit was a little too large for him, it felt rough and uncomfortable inside, nothing like the welder's suit, snug, flexible, cosy. And this one made him hot straight away. Yura switched on the sweat detector, then, heavily shuffling his feet, clinking steel against steel, walked to the door.

The ship kept shuddering, everything was quiet, along the corridor red emergency signals were shining under the ceiling. Yura leaned his back against one side of the doorframe and rested his body against the other. (It was odd reading this part of the instructions, where it prescribed to guard the vacuum-chamber during periods of emergency. Guard against whom? What for?) Entry into the chamber during the alert was permitted only to those persons - crewmembers or passengers - in relation to whom the captain personally announced "Let them through." For that purpose a radiophone was installed into the doorframe, always tuned to the wavelength of captain's radiophone. Yura looked at the radiophone and remembered what he has not done yet. He poked his wiry finger into the call button.

- I am listening, - Bykov's voice said. The voice was, as always, rasping and nonchalant.

- Probationer Borodin has secured the post according to schedule.

- Very well, - said Bykov and switched off the connection immediately.

Yura looked at the radiophone angrily and spoke in a rasping voice: "Very well". "Wood plank", - he thought and pulled a face, poking out his tongue. The spaceship shook and he almost bit his tongue. He looked around with embarrassment, and then a thought came into his head: what if the omniscient and all-foreseeing Bykov shook their vessel on purpose, to pinch the tongue of an audacious probationer. It was easy to imagine Bykov doing just that. "Probably, his life wasn't an easy one, - Yura thought. - Probably, life scoured him and ground him until it ripped off the husk of every emotion, which aren't, generally speaking, that necessary, but in

their absence a man is no longer a man but a wooden plank. Zhilin once said, that over the years people change in only one respect - they become more tolerant. To Bykov, this possibly doesn't apply..."

The spaceship shuddered again and Yura set himself more securely. It was unclear, what was going on. Doesn't look like a meteorite attack, even less like a collision of some kind. Misha Ushakov said that danger in space is like a rapier strike, it either causes you to die straight away or never... This was announced by Mishka Ushakov, who was in space only during the construction welding practice and makes judgements about space using terminology of musketeer novels.

Yura's calf became cramped and he changed to the other foot. Along the corridor red lights were shining. Yura kept trying to recall, what it resembles to him, and could not, but there was some unpleasant recollection, he knew that definitely. Wish someone would come, he thought. Wish I could ask, what happened, what I must wait for. Perhaps I should speak to Bykov directly: "Comrade the captain, please explain to me my mission..." Then Yura suddenly imagined, how many probationers before him stood over here, sweaty from stress, foot set against the frame; worried awfully, trying to understand, what is going on, and kept guessing: "Will I have time to close the visor or won't I?" These were first-rate guys, with whom one can play a splendid game of back-up-stay or have a yack about the meaning of life. Now they are all experienced and sagacious, now they are all at command-posts and their ships roam across the space... and sometimes they also tremble and shudder... From these thoughts, out of the blue, he imagined Bykov's face, flooded with sweat and blood, expressing positively human anxiety, looking with motionless eyes at something, that could not have been accounted for, and which is now looming with absolute inevitability...

Everything floated in Yura's eyes; he lost his balance and found himself on the floor. There was clanking and rumbling under the low ceiling. Yura, hastily scraping his boots against the metallic floor, flipped onto his stomach, stood up and rushed in the door. He stood in his old position and set himself against the sides of the doorframe, as firmly as he could.

Now the "Takhmaseeb" was vibrating constantly, as if it, too, were afraid. Yura tensed up, trying to contain the shiver. I wish somebody would come, I wish I'd understand what is going on, wish that Bykov would order something to be done... Mum would grieve terribly - how will they tell her? Who could be found to tell her? She can die, even, she was operated upon just recently, her heart, its no good at all, she cannot be told any of this... Yura bit his lip and clenched his teeth tightly. It hurt, but the jitters would not stop. Well, what is this, really... No, I must go there immediately and have a look. Stick my head inside the deck chamber and fling a casual remark: "Well, how much longer?" - and leave... And what if they have all been killed? Yura looked into the corridor, terrified, waiting that any moment now Zhilin will crawl from around the corner, take a look at him with extinguished eyes and drop his head onto stiff hands...

Yura lowered his head, pushed away from the frame and made a few hesitant steps along the corridor. Down the quivering floor, past the red lights, towards the lift, towards the one, who is crawling... He stopped and returned to the door. "Stay calm, - he said and coughed, to stop the croaking in his throat. Imagination likes to play jokes, but it plays them meanly and unfairly. Not one's friend - imagination." He set himself firmly against the doorframe once more. So that's what it is like, he thought all of a sudden. That's what it's like - to wait and always be ready, wearing slippers and striped little socks, with yesteryear's paper, so that no one would ever notice and never think... To know nothing definitely, and always stay ready...

Vibrations amplified and faded and increased again. Yura envisaged the "Takhmaseeb", a kilometre construction of titanium alloys, resembling a giant wineglass. Right now, across the ships entire body, from the cargo bay to the edge of the reflector, vibration spasms are travelling in one wave.

Intensifying one moment, dropping off at another... Here one doesn't have to be extra sensitive, to figure out, what is going on. If, let's say, it was the oxitian sensor vibrating like this, everything would be clear - the compressor needs tuning or, at least, the extinguisher must be replaced... Yura distinctly felt how the ship is sloping on its side - it became noticeable through the pressure against his foot. With every jerk his head would shake, and everything within it, too... What is this, Yura pondered, pushing against the doorframe with all his might. What's going on over there, with all of them, eh?.. And then in the terrifying dull silence someone's steps sounded. Unhurried, confident, unfamiliar steps, or perhaps Yura simply failed to recognise them. He was looking down the corridor, and the steps were drawing nearer all the time, and then from behind the turn Zhilin appeared, wearing industrial overalls, with the flat tester box on his chest. His face was serious, and, seemingly, displeased, a light fringe hanged over his eyes. Zhilin came up close, and patting Yura on the knee, said quietly:

- Come on...

He wanted to enter the vacuum-chamber. Yura opened and closed his mouth, but did not remove his foot. This was Zhilin, dear, swell guy, long-awaited Zhilin, but Yura did not take his foot away, and asked instead:

- What have you got there?

He wanted to say it casually, but at the last syllable he swallowed, and the impression was ruined.

- Ah, what can we have there... - Zhilin said reluctantly. - Come on, let me through, - he said. - I need to get something there...

Yura's head was muddled, and in this muddle out of Yura's personal principles and notions only the instructions remained intact.

- Hold on, Vanya, - he mumbled and pressed the call button.

The captain wouldn't answer.

- Yurka, - Zhilin said, - just what is it with you, brother? Come on, let me through, inside the space suit I've left...

- I cannot, - said Yura and licked his lips. - How can I?.. The captain will respond now...

Zhilin was looking at him intently.

- And what if he won't respond?

- Why wouldn't he respond? - Yura stared at Zhilin with round eyes and then suddenly grabbed him by the sleeve. - What happened?

- Ah, nothing happened. - Zhilin suddenly began smiling. - So you won't let me through?

Yura shook his head in desperation.

- You know I can't, Vanya... You must understand this! - he even addressed him as "You" from excessive emotion, he really felt like crying, and at the same time good and calm for no reason, and he knew, that he would not allow Zhilin to pass, no matter what. - You were a probationer once yourself.

- R-right... - Zhilin drawled vaguely, examining him. - Complying with the letter and spirit of the instructions?

- I don't know... - mumbled Yura. He was really embarrassed and at the same time he knew, that he wouldn't lower his foot. "If you really need to enter, then don't stand like this, - he was calling out mentally to Zhilin. - Punch me in the jaw and take what you need here..."

- Captain Bykov speaking, - came from the radiophone.

Yura was still unable to gather his thoughts.

- Alexey Petrovich, - Zhilin spoke into the radiophone - I want to go into the vacuum-chamber, but the probationer wouldn't let me pass.

- Why do you need to go into the vacuum-chamber? - Bykov inquired.

- I left behind a "sirius" there the last time... left it inside a space suit.

- Right, - said Bykov. - Probationer Borodin, allow the ship's engineer Zhilin to pass.

Bykov disconnected. Yura removed his foot with enormous relief. Only now he noticed, that the ship is no longer vibrating. Zhilin looked at him kindly and patted him on the shoulder.

- Vanya, please don't be angry... - Yura mumbled.

- On the contrary! - said Zhilin. - Watching you was exceptionally interesting.

- I have such a muddle in my head...

- Exactly right... - Zhilin stopped in front of his space suit. - For this one instance instructions are being written. It's a good idea, right?

- Don't know. Now, I somewhat can't understand, what's going on. What has, in fact, happened?

Zhilin grew dull again.

- What can happen to us? - he said through gritted teeth. - Artificial nutrition. Pills instead of thrills. A practice drill, probationer Borodin, that's all. A routine exercise, no less than once or twice during a voyage. Aimed at auditing knowledge of instructions. A grand matter - instructions! - He pulled a white cylinder as thick as a thumb out of the space suit and banged the screen shut with anger. - Time for me to escape from here Yura. To run as fast as I can, before I am sick of it.

Yura sighed deeply and looked inside the corridor. The red lights were no longer on. The floor did not vibrate any more. Yura saw how Yurkovski came out of a cabin, looked at Yura, nodded majestically and disappeared behind a corner in no hurry.

Zhilin grumbled:

- A fish seeks deeper water, and a man - where life's worse. Did you understand, Yurka? Here, everything's well. All drills are practices, all accidents are pretend ones. But in some places - it's a tad worse. That's where one must go, and not wait, until he's taken there... Are you listening to me, probationer? According to the instructions, you must listen to me...

- Vanya, wait, - Yura said, knitting his brow. - I feel, that I haven't yet recovered...

<h2>EUNOMIA. DEATH-PLANETers.</h2>

- Probationer Borodin, - said Bykov, folding up the newspaper, - time to go to sleep probationer. Yura stood up, closed the book, and after faltering for a bit, put it into the book cabinet. I won't read tonight, he thought. I must, finally, get some sleep.

- Good night, - he said.

- Good night, - replied Bykov, and opened another newspaper.

Yurkovski, without looking up from his papers, waved his hand nonchalantly. When Yura walked out, Yurkovski asked:

- What do you think, Alexey, what else must he like?

- Who?

- Our cadet. I know that he enjoys and is capable of welding in a vacuum. I have seen it on Mars. But what else does he like?

- Girls, - said Bykov.

- Not girls, but a girl. He has a photo of a girl.

- I didn't know.

- One could guess. Twenty years of age, leaving on a distant mission, everyone takes with them photographs, and then they don't know what to do with them. In books it is written, that one must look at these photographs stealthily, and that your eyes must be full of tears at that instance, or at the very least, grow dimmed. But there is never enough time for that. Or never enough of something else, that's more significant. But let's return to our probationer.

Bykov set the paper aside, removed his glasses and looked at Yurkovski.

- Have you finished work for today? - he asked.

- No, - said Yurkovski with annoyance. - Haven't finished, and don't wish to talk about it. All this idiotic red tape makes my head swell. I wish

to unwind. Can you answer my question?

- The best person to answer this question for you, would be Ivan - said Bykov. - He spends every spare moment time with him.

- But since Ivan isn't here, I am asking you. It seems very clear to me.

- Don't worry so much, Volodya, or your liver will hurt. Our probationer is still just a boy. Skilled hands, but as far as liking goes, he doesn't like anything in particular, since he doesn't know anything. Alexey Tolstoy he likes. And Wells. But Galsworthy is boring for him, and the "Road of all roads" is boring. Also he likes Zhilin and does not like one barman from Mirza-Charlie. He's still a boy. A sprout.

- At his age, - Yurkovski said, - I really enjoyed composing poems. I dreamed of becoming a writer. And then I read somewhere, that writers somehow resemble the deceased: they like when people talk positively about them, or say nothing at all... Yep. Why am I talking about it?

- Don't know, - said Bykov. - I think, you are just shirking your duties.

- No-no, I beg yours... Yes! I am interested in the inner world of our probationer.

- A probationer's a probationer, - said Bykov.

- No two probationers are alike, - Yurkovski argued. - You are a probationer too, and I am a probationer. We are all probationer in future's service. Old probationers and young probationers. We spend our entire lifetime on probation, each in our own way. And when we die, our descendants appraise our work and hand out a diploma of eternal existence.

- Or don't hand out one, - said Bykov pensively, looking at the ceiling. - As a rule, unfortunately, they don't hand one out.

- Well then, it's our fault, and not our misfortune. By the way, do you know whom the diploma always goes to?

- Yes?

- To those, who bring up a successive generation. The ones like Krayuhin.

- Perhaps, - said Bykov. - And what is interesting: these people, as an exception to great many others, are not in the least concerned about diplomas.

- And incorrectly so. For instance, a question has always interested me: are we really becoming better from one generation to the next? That's why I began talking about the cadet. Old people always say: "Such youngsters we have nowadays! And how we used to be!"

- That's what very silly oldsters say, Vladimir. Krayuhin never spoke like this.

- Krayuhin simply didn't like theory. He took the young ones, chucked them into a furnace and watched, what'd come out of it. If they didn't burn out, he'd recognise them as equals.

- And if they did burn?

- As a rule, we never burned.

- Well then, you have just answered your own question, - said Bykov and grabbed the newspaper again. - Probationer Borodin is now on his way to the furnace, in the furnace he is unlikely to burn out, ten years down the track you shall meet him, he will call you an old sandpit, and you, being an honest man, shall agree with him.

- Hold on, - Yurkovski objected, - but some responsibility also lies on our shoulders. The boy must be taught something!

Into the lounge walked Michael Antonovich, wearing pyjamas, slippers on bare feet, with a big thermal flask in his hand.

- Good evening, boys, - he said. - I just felt like having some tea.

- Tea - that's not bad, - Bykov livened up.

- Tea it is, - Yurkovski said and started gathering his papers.

The captain and the navigator set up the table, Michael Antonovich poured the jam into rosettes, and Bykov poured tea for everyone.

- And where is Yurik? - Michael Antonovich asked.
- Sleeping, - replied Bykov.
- And Vanyusha?
- On duty, - Bykov answered patiently.
- Very well then, - said Michael Antonovich. He gulped some tea, closed his eyes and added: - Boys, never agree to write memoirs. Such a tedious chore, so tedious!
- Why don't you fantasise a bit more, - Bykov offered.
- How is that?
- Like in novels. "A young Martian girl closed her eyes and reached towards me with semi-opened lips. I embraced her passionately lengthwise."
- "Entirely", - Yurkovski added.
Michael Antonovich blushed.
- How'd you like that, ya old fogey, - Yurkovski said. - Been there, Misha?
Bykov laughed loudly and choked on his tea.
- Fie! - said Michael Antonovich. - Shame on you! - He pondered and announced suddenly: - You know what, boys? Stuff those memoirs. I mean, what can they do to me?
- You better explain this to us, - said Bykov. - How can we positively influence Yura?
Michael Antonovich became startled.
- But what has happened? Has he done some mischief or something?
- Not yet. But Vladimir here thinks, that he must be influenced.
- I think, we are having an influence on him as it is. He never leaves Vanyusha's side, and he simply worships you, Voloden'ka. He had spoken about twenty times, how you went after the leeches inside the cave.
Bykov raised his head.
- After what leeches exactly? - he asked.
Michael Antonovich squirmed compunctiously.
- Ah, these are legends, - Yurkovski said, without batting an eyelid. - That was still back... err... a long time ago. So this is the question: how do we effect a positive influence upon Yura? The boy received a one of a kind chance to witness the world of better people. To us that would be simply... err...
- Voloden'ka, you see, - said Michael Antonovich. - Yura is a really great boy. He was very well cultured at school. Into him have been placed... How can I put it... The foundations of a decent person. Try to understand, Voloden'ka, Yura will never more confound good with bad...
- A genuine person, - Yurkovski spoke with authority, - is distinguished by a broad range of interests.
- That's right, Voloden'ka, - said Michael Antonovich. - Yurik, too...
- A genuine person is moulded only by genuine people, workers and only by a real life, accomplished and hard.
- But our Yurik also...
- We must seize the chance and show Yura the real people leading a real, uneasy life.
- That's right, Voloden'ka, and I am certain, that Yurik...
- I am sorry Michael, but am have not finished yet. Tomorrow, for instance, we will pass ridiculously close to Eunomia. Do you know, what Eunomia is?
- How wouldn't we? - said Michael Antonovich. - An asteroid, greater semi-axis - two and sixty four astronomical units, eccentricity...
- I am not talking about that, - Yurkovski said impetuously. - Are you aware, that for three years now, a physics gravitational research station, the only one in the world, has been functioning on Eunomia?
- How wouldn't we, - said Michael Antonovich, - that's where...
- People are working in exceptionally difficult conditions, - Yurkovski continued with enthusiasm. Bykov eyed him intently. - twenty-five people, tough as diamonds, smart, courageous, I'd even say - awfully courageous! The

pick of humanity! Now that's a perfect opportunity to acquaint Yura with real life!

Bykov remained silent. Michael Antonovich kept quiet, too.

- To see real people in the process of authentic work, isn't that marvellous?

Bykov remained silent.

- I think, it would be very beneficial for our probationer, - said Yurkovski and added in a lower voice: - Even I wouldn't mind to have a look. I have been interested in the death-planeters working conditions for a long time.

Finally, Bykov spoke:

- Well then, - he said. - Indeed, not altogether without interest.

- I assure you, Alexey! - Yurkovski exclaimed. - I think, we will make a stop there, won't we?

- Hmm-ok, - Bykov muttered ambiguously.

- Well, that's perfect then, - said Yurkovski. He looked at Bykov and asked: - Is something bothering you, Alexey?

- This is what's bothering me, - said Bykov. - On my course map Mars exists. On the course map is Bamberga with these wretched mines. There are some Saturn satellites. There is the Jupiter system. And a few other things. One thing's not there. Eunomia is not there.

- W-well, how shall I put it... - Yurkovski said, having lowered his eyes and tapping on the table. - Let's presume, that this is an oversight by the board, Alesha.

- You will have to visit Eunomia on another occasion, Vladimir.

- Hold on, hold on, Alesha... err... After all, I am the chief inspector, I could give an order, proclaim... err... for the alteration of the course...

- Well, you should have given it straight away. Instead he is polluting my head with pedagogical objectives.

- W-well, pedagogical issues also, naturally... yeah.

- Navigator, - said Bykov, - the general inspector is ordering us to change course. Plot a course to Eunomia.

- Understood, - said Michael Antonovich and looked at Yurkovski with concern. - You know, Voloden'ka, we have little fuel. Eunomia - it's a loop... We'll have to decelerate twice, you know. And accelerate once. Wish you'd have told us about this a week ago.

Yurkovski drew himself up proudly.

- Err... ok then, Michael. Are there autofuellers nearby?

- There are, how could there not be, - said Michael Antonovich.

- We will have fuel, - Yurkovski said.

- We will have fuel - we will have Eunomia, - Bykov said, got up and walked to his chair. - Well, Michael and I have set up the table, and you, chief inspector, can tidy it up.

- Voltairians, - said Yurkovski and began cleaning up the table. He was very pleased with his little victory. Bykov could have refused to obey. The captain of the ship carrying the chief inspector had very broad powers as well.

The physics observatory "Eunomia" moved around the sun in approximately the same place, where the asteroid Eunomia once used to exist. A giant rock, some two hundred kilometres in diameter had been, in the last few years, almost fully annihilated in the process of experiments. All that remained of the asteroid was just a meagre swarm of relatively small fragments and a seven hundred kilometre long cloud of cosmic dust, a great silvery sphere, already stretched slightly by the tide force. The actual physics laboratory differed slightly from the heavy artificial Earth satellites: it was a system of torus's, cylinders and spheres, connected by shiny cables, rotating around a common axis. In the laboratory worked twenty-seven

physicists and astrophysicists, "tough as diamonds, smart, courageous" and often "awfully courageous". The youngest of them was twenty-five years old, the oldest - thirty-four.

The crew of "Eunomia" was engaged in the research of cosmic rays, experimental analysis of unitary field theories, vacuum, ultra-low temperatures, and experimental cosmogony. All minor asteroids within a twenty-megametre radius of "Eunomia" have been declared death-planets: they had either been destroyed or subject to destruction. In general, the cosmogonists and relativists. The eradication of small planets was carried out in different ways. They were transformed into a swarm of shale, or a cloud of dust, or a burst of light. They were destroyed in natural conditions and in a powerful magnetic field, instantly and gradually, stretching the process to decades or months. This was the only cosmogonical ground in the solar system, and now when the near-earth observatories discovered a newly flared up star with odd spectral lines, the question would initially arise: where "Eunomia" was at that moment and had the new star flared up in "Eunomia's" region? The International board of cosmic communications had declared the area around "Eunomia" restricted to all regular-route spacecraft.

"Takhmaseeb" slowed down near "Eunomia" two hours prior a scheduled experiment. The relativists were going to convert to radiation a rock fragment the size of Everest and with a mass, calculated to the nearest few grams. Another death-planet was moving on the periphery of the ground. Over there ten cosmoscaphes with observers and apparatus had already been sent, and at the observatory only two people remained - the head of the station and a duty control officer.

The control officer met Yurkovski and Yura at the caisson. He was a lanky, very pale, freckled man. His eyes were pale-blue and indifferent.

- Err... hello, - said Yurkovski. - I'm Yurkovski, the IBCC chief inspector.

By the look of things, the blue-eyed man had met chief inspectors more than once. Gradually, without hurrying, he looked Yurkovski over and said:

- Well then, come in.

The blue-eyed man calmly turned his back to Yurkovski and, clattering his magnetic soles, walked down the corridor.

- Hold on! - Yurkovski yelled out. - Where is your... err... supervisor?

The blue-eyed man said, without turning:

- I am taking you there.

Yurkovski and Yura hurried after him. Yurkovski kept saying:

- Such odd... er... customs. Astonishing...

The blue-eyed man opened a round hatch at the end of the corridor and climbed into it. Yurkovski and Yura then heard:

- Kostya, you have visitors...

One could hear, how somebody was shouting in a clear cheerful voice:

- Number six! Sashka! Where are you going, nutcase? Don't you feel sorry for your kids?! Move one hundred kilometres back, it's dangerous there, you know! Number three! Number three! I am talking in Russian to you! Stay in alignment with me! Number six, stop grumbling at your command! Your command has shown concern, and you are bored already!...

Yurkovski and Yura climbed into a small room, tightly lined with equipment. In front of a concave screen sat a lean, very swarthy lad, about thirty, wearing blue trousers with creases and a white shirt with a black tie.

- Kostya, - called out the blue-eyed man and became silent.

Kostya turned a cheerful good-looking face with an aquiline nose to the newly arrived, examined them for a few minutes, greeted them daintily, and then turned back to the screen. On the screen a few multi-coloured dots were transiting slowly along the lines of the coordinates grid.

- Number nine, why have you stopped? Have you lost the enthusiasm? Come

on, take a walk a bit further ahead... Number six, you are making progress. I have a headache already from you. Are you flying back to Earth, or something?

Yurkovski coughed significantly. The cheerful Kostya pulled a shiny ball out of his right ear and, turning to Yurkovski, asked:

- Guests, who are you?

- I am Yurkovski, - Yurkovski said with much authority.

- What Yurkovski? - Kostya asked cheerfully and impatiently. - I knew one, he was called Vladimir Sergeevich.

- That is I, - said Yurkovski.

Kostya rejoiced tremendously.

- How appropriate! - he exclaimed. - Then go and stand at that console. You will be turning the fourth regulator - it has an Arabic "four" written on it, - so that a star over there would not leave that little circle...

- But hold on, now...

- Just don't tell me that you did not understand! - Kostya shouted. - Or I will become disappointed in you.

- The blue-eyed man floated over to him and began whispering something. Kostya heard him out, and plugged his ear with a shiny ball.

- So let him feel good about it, - he said and yelled in a chiming voice: - Observers, listen to me, I am commanding again! Everyone is positioned well now, like the Zaporozhian Cossacks on Repin's painting! Just don't touch your controls any more! Over and out for two minutes! - He pulled the shiny ball out again. - So you have become a chief inspector, Vladimir Sergeevich? - he asked.

- Yes, I have, - said Yurkovski. - And I...

- And who is this young man? Is he a chief inspector also? Ezra, - he turned to the blue-eyed man, - let Vladimir Sergeevich hold the axis, whilst the boy can have a practical play with something. Best of all, put him next to your screen and let him watch...

- Perhaps I will be allowed to say a couple of words, after all? - Yurkovski asked into space.

- Of course, speak, - said Kostya. - You still have a whole ninety seconds.

- I wanted to... err... get onto one of the cosmoscaphes, - Yurkovski said.

- Whoa! - said Kostya. - Why didn't you ask for a trolley bus wheel instead? Or even better, if you would like to rotate regulator number four. Even I cannot go on the cosmoscaphes. It's all packed there, like at the Bloomberg's concert. And by turning the regulator with precision, you will improve the precision of the experiment by one and a half percent.

Yurkovski shrugged his shoulders majestically.

- W-well, all right, - he said. - I see, that I shall have to... But why... err... isn't it automated here?

Kostya was already putting the shiny ball in his ear. The lanky Ezra hooted, as if into a keg:

- Equipment. Crap. Obsolete.

He switched on a large screen and motioned Yura to come over with his finger. Yura came up to the screen and turned to look at Yurkovski. Yurkovski, with sorrowfully distorted eyebrows, was holding onto the regulator and looking at the screen, in front of which Yura was standing. Yura started looking at the screen as well. On the screen glowed a few bright circular spots, resembling either inkblots or burdock. Ezra poked his bony finger at one of the spots.

- A cosmoscaphe, - he said.

Kostya began giving orders again:

- Observers, you haven't fallen asleep yet? What is moving slowly? Oh, the time is? Shame and shame on you, Sasha, you know that only three minutes are left. Washtub? Oh, the photon-powered washtub? That's the chief inspector, which had arrived. Attention, I am all serious now. Thirty

remaining... twenty nine... twenty eight... twenty seven...

Ezra poked his finger into the centre of the screen.

- Over here, - he said.

- ...fifteen... fourteen... Vladimir Sergeevich, hold the axis... ten... nine...

Yura was watching with wide-open eyes. Ezra was also rotating a regulator, he must have been holding some axis, too.

- ...three... two... one... Zero!

In the centre of the screen a bright white dot flared. Then the screen turned white, then became blinding and then dark. Somewhere above the ceiling shrill alarms chirped briefly. Red lights flashed and went out on the console beside the screen. And again, circular dots resembling burdock appeared on the screen.

- That's it, - said Ezra and switched off the screen.

Kostya descended to the floor skilfully.

- The axis doesn't need to be held any more, - he said. - You can get undressed, I am starting with the treatment.

- What is? - Yurkovski asked.

Kostya produced a box of pills from under the console.

- Feel free to take, - he said. - This, of course, is no chocolate, but much more wholesome.

Ezra came over and took two pills in silence. One he handed to Yura. Yura looked at Yurkovski with hesitation.

- I am asking, what is it? - Yurkovski repeated.

- Gamma-radiophagus, - Kostya explained. He glanced back at Yura. - Please, please have some, young man, - he said. - You have just received four roentgen, and this must be reckoned with.

- Yes, - said Yurkovski. - True.

He reached for the box his hand. Yura put the pill in his mouth. The pill was very bitter.

- So now, now can we help the chief inspector? - Kostya inquired, hiding the box back under the console.

- As a matter of fact, I wanted to... err... be present during an experiment, - said Yurkovski, - and, whilst I am at it, also... err... to clarify the state of affairs at the station... staff needs... complaints, finally... What? Now I see, the laboratory is poorly sheltered from radiation... It's cramped. Poor automation, obsolete equipment... What?

Kostya said with a sigh:

- Yes, that's the truth, the truth, bitter as the gamma-radiophagus. But if you were to ask me, what do I have to complain about, I would be compelled to tell you, that I have nothing to complain about. Of course, we have complaints. How can it be without complaints in this world? But these aren't our complaints, these are complaints against us. And you must agree, it would be funny, if I would begin telling you, the chief inspector, why they are complaining about us. By the way, are you hungry? It's really good, that you are not. Try and find something edible in our pantry... The earliest supplies tanker will arrive only tonight or tomorrow morning, and that, believe you me, is really sad, since the physicists have become used to eating daily, and no logistical mistakes can break this habit. And, if you really want to know my opinion on the complaints, I shall tell you everything terse and clear, like talking to a girl I love: this diploma-holding haphazarders from IBCC are always complaining about something. If we work fast they complain that we quickly wear out precious, a.k.a. unique, equipment, that work melts in our hands, and they cannot keep up with us. And if we work slowly... Though, what am I saying? There has not yet been anyone original enough, who would complain of us working slowly. By the way, Vladimir Sergeevich, you once were a decent planetary scientist, we all used to learn from your fabulous books and all kinds of reports! Why have you joined IBCC and then became involved with general inspections on top of that?

Yurkovski was looking at Kostya, astounded. Yura tensed up, anticipating an imminent storm. Ezra stood there, blinking his yellow bovine eyelashes with total indifference.

- Er-rr... - Yurkovski dragged out, frowning, - as a matter of fact, why not?

- I shall explain to you, why not, - said Kostya, pushing his fingers into Yurkovski's chest. - You are such a good scientist, you are indeed the father of contemporary planetology! From birth, there was a fountain of ideas gushing out of you! That gigantic planets must have rings, that planets may condense without a central luminary star, that Saturn's ring has an artificial origin, - go and ask Ezra, who came up with all of these? Ezra will tell you straight away: Yurkovski! And you have left all those tasty morsels to be torn to pieces by all kinds of odd mackerel, and chose to become a haphazarder instead!

- Well, come on now! - Yurkovski said good-naturedly. - I am just a... err... an ordinary scientist...

- You were an ordinary scientist! Now you are, forgive me for saying this, an ordinary chief inspector. Now, tell me seriously: why have you come here? You can neither ask about anything properly, nor advise anything, I am not even talking of being able to assist. Ok, let's say, I will, out of courtesy, take you around all laboratories, and we shall be walking like two lunatics, and letting each other go first through the hatches. And we shall stay cordially silent, since you don't know how to ask, and I have no idea how to answer. I mean, we must assemble all twenty seven people here, to explain what is happening at the station, and twenty seven people could never fit here, despite all their respect for the chief inspector, since the place is jam-packed and one of us here is actually living in an elevator...

- You are wrong to think that... err... this makes me happy, - Yurkovski interrupted him in an official tone. - By this I mean such... err... overcrowding of the station. As far I am aware, the station is designed for a crew of five gravity surveyors. And if you, being the station's director, would comply with the existing procedure, ratified by IBCC...

- But it's true, Vladimir Sergeevich! - the mirthful Kostya exclaimed. - Comrade chief inspector! The people really want to work! Do the gravity surveyors want to work? They do. Do the relativists want to? They do as well. I am not even talking about the cosmogonists, who squeezed in here right over my dead body. And on Earth, another hundred and fifty are eager as anything... Big deal, sleeping in a lift! What else, should they wait till IBCC finishes the construction of a new station? No, Yurkovski the planetologist would reason altogether differently. He wouldn't tell me off for overcrowding. And he would not insist on me explaining everything to him. Especially because, he is not Heisenberg, and would not understand more than half of it, anyway. No, Yurkovski the planetologist would say: "Kostya! What I need, is for you to provide an experimental basis for my new grand idea. Let's do it, Kostya!" And then I would give up my bunk for you, and sleep in the emergency elevator myself. And we would work together until such time, when everything would be as clear as Sunday morning! Instead you come to collect complaints. What complaints can a man with an interesting job have?

Yura sighed with relief. The thunder has not struck, after all. Yurkovski's face was becoming more and more pensive, even gloomy.

- Yes, - he said. - I guess, you are right... err... Kostya. I really should not have come here in this... err... capacity. And I am... err... jealous of you. With you I would be delighted to work. But... err.. there are stations and there are... err... stations. You can't even imagine, Kostya, how many disgraceful goings-on exist in our system. And hence Yurkovski the planetologist was compelled to... err... become a chief inspector.

- Disgraceful goings-on, - Kostya said quickly, - are matters for

cosmic police...

- Not always, - said Yurkovski, - unfortunately, not always.

Something clanked and rattled in the corridor. Disorderly clattering of magnetic soles could be heard. Someone yelled out:

- Kostya-a! We have a forestalling! Of three milliseconds!...

- Ah! - said Kostya. - Here come my workmen, they will be demanding food now. Ezra, - he said, - what's the gentlest way of informing them that the tanker is only coming tomorrow?

- Kostya, - said Yurkovski, - I will give you a case of tinned rations.

- You're joking! - Kostya rejoiced. - You are god. One who gives in time, gives two-fold. Consider that I owe you two cases of rations!

Into the hatch, one after another squeezed four people, and the room immediately became crammed. Yura was jammed into a corner and fenced off by broad backs. The only thing he could see well was the lean shaggy back of Ezra's head, someone's mirror-smooth scalp and one more muscular neck. Besides that, Yura could see feet - they were arranged above the heads, and giant boots with shiny worn-out plates that were moving cautiously two centimetres away from the shaved scalp. In the gap between back and necks, Yura could occasionally see Kostya's aquiline profile and a thick-bearded face of the fourth operative. Yurkovski could not be seen, most likely he had also been jammed. Everyone was speaking at once.

- The dispersion of coordinates is really small. I was calculating in a hurry, but three milliseconds, I think, go without any question...

- But it's still only three, and not six!

- That's not the point! The point is, it lies outside the error margin!

- Wish we could blow up Mars, now that would give us precision.

- Yep, buddy, then we could remove half the graviscopes.

- What a hateful device - the graviscope. Just who had come up with it!

- Be grateful, that we even have these. Do you know, how we used to do it before?

- Get this, he doesn't like graviscopes!

- Are we getting food?

- Yes, about food. Kostya, we have finished all our radiophagus.

- Right, right, it's good that you have remembered. Kostya, give us some pills.

- Guys, I think I just lied to you. It's not three milliseconds, but four.

- Total boloney. Give it to Ezra, Ezra will calculate properly.

- That's a good idea... Ezra, here, take this, sweetie, you are the most cold-blooded of us, because my hands are already shaking from greed.

- The flash today was of amazing beauty. I almost went blind. I just love annihilative detonations! You feel a kind of creator, the man of tomorrow...

- Listen, Kostya, why is Pagava saying, that we will now be conducting only localised explosions? And what about us?

- And do you have a conscience? What, have you imagined that this is a gravitational observatory? And the cosmogonists, they are just mere boys?

- Oh, Panas, don't you get involved in that row. Kostya is our director, after all. And why does a director exist. To make sure everything is fair.

- Then what is the point of having your buddy as the director?

- Whoa! I am no longer good enough as a director? What's this, mutiny? Fetch my jack boots, laced cuffs and pistols!

- By the way, I wouldn't mind eating something.

- I have computed, - said Ezra.

- Well?

- Don't you rush him, he can't go that fast.

- Three and eight.

- Ezra! Your every word is gold!

- Error margin is plus or minus two and two.

- How loquacious is our Ezra today!
Yura couldn't take it any longer and whispered straight into Ezra's ear:

- What happened? Why is everyone so happy?
Ezra, turning his head slightly, muttered:

- Got a forestalling. Proved. That gravitation spreads. Faster than light. Proved for the first time.

- Three and eight tenths, guys, - the man with a shaved head announced, - this means that we have stuck one up this haphazarder from Leningrad. What's his name...

- An excellent start. All we have to do now is eat, thrash the cosmogonists and start working seriously on this thing.

- Listen, scientists, why isn't Kramer here?

- He had been lying, that he has two tins of preserves. Right now he is looking for them amongst the old documents. Let's throw a feast of the scrawny with one tin for fourteen people.

- A feast of scrawny-bodied, and poor in spirit.

- Quiet, scientists, and I shall make you happy!

- What preserves had Valerka been lying about?

- Rumour has it, he's got a tin of canned peaches and a tin of zucchini marrow...

- Some sausage would be nice now...

- Are you going to listen to me here or not? Attention, you, scientists! That's better. I can inform you, that amongst us we have one general inspector - Yurkovski Vladimir Sergeevich. He is granting us a box of tinned rations from his own table!

- Yeah? - someone said.

- Nah, this is not even amusing. Who would joke like this?
From the corner somewhere they heard:

- Err... hello.

- Bah! Vladimir Sergeevich? How did we miss you?

- How boorish have we become, brothers, death-planeters!

- Vladimir Sergeevich! Is it true about the preserves?

- Absolutely true, - said Yurkovski.

- Hooray!

- And one more time...

- Hooray!

- And one more time...

- Ho-o-ra-ay!

- The preserves are with meat, - said Yurkovski.

A hungry groan carried through the room.

- Oh, why do we only have weightlessness here? Such a man must be chaired up! Carried around in a stretcher!

Yet another beard peered through the open hatch.

- Why are you all screaming here? - it asked gloomily. - Got the forestalling, but that there is no grub - did you know that? The tanker will shuffle here only tomorrow.

For a while everyone observed the beard. Then the man with a muscular neck said reflectively:

- I recognise a cosmogonist by his eloquent expression.

- Hey guys, he must be hungry, don't you reckon.

- No wonder! Cosmogonists are always hungry!

- Do you think we should send him to deliver the preserves?

- Paul, my dear friend, - said Kostya, - right now you will be going to get the preserves. Go and put on the vacuum-suit.

- Yura, - said Yurkovski, - please accompany this comrade to "Takhmaseeb". Or, never mind, I will go myself.

- Good day, Vladimir Sergeevich, - said the bearded man, breaking into a smile. - How did you make it to us?

He stepped away from the hatch, letting Yurkovski pass. They left.

- A good man, Yurkovski. A kind man.
- Then why inspect us.
- He hasn't come to inspect. As far as I understood, he is simply curious.
- Then let him.
- Is it possible for him to negotiate the expansion of our program?
- Expansion of the program - that's one thing. I hope he won't be cutting staff. I'd better go and get my sleeping gear from the elevator.
- Yeah, inspectors don't like it when people live in elevators.
- Scientists, don't be afraid! I have already told him everything. He is not like that. This is Yurkovski!
- Guys, let's go find a dining room. The library, perhaps?
- Cosmogonists have cramped up the library.

Everyone began climbing in turn through the hatch. Then the man with a muscular neck came up to Kostya and said quietly:

- Can you give me another pill, Kostya. I feel somewhat dizzy.

Eunomia lay far behind. "Takhmaseeb" set its course for asteroid Bamberga - into the realm of the mysterious "Space Pearl Limited". Yura woke up late at night - the injection under the shoulder blade was aching and itching, he had an awful thirst. Yura heard heavy erratic steps in the corridor. It even seemed he had heard a constrained moan. "Ghosts, - he thought with frustration. - That's all we need now". Without getting off his bunk, he opened the door slightly and looked out. In the corridor Yurkovski stood in his splendid bathrobe, strangely lopsided. His face was flaccid, eyes closed. His breathing was fast and heavy, his mouth distorted.

- Vladimir Sergeevich! - Yura called out, frightened. - What's wrong with you?

Yurkovski opened his eyes quickly and tried to straighten out, but folded up again.

- Si-lence! - he said quickly in a menacing tone and twisting all over, walked to Yura. Yura moved aside and let him inside the cabin. Yurkovski shut the door tightly and carefully sat next to Yura.

- Why aren't you sleeping? - he asked in a whisper.

- What is it with you, Vladimir Sergeevich? - Yura mumbled. - Are you feeling ill?...

- It's rubbish, just my liver. - Yura was looking in horror at his hands, spasmodically clasped to the sides, as if frozen. - A mean thing, she is always like that after a radiation attack... But still, our stop at Eunomia hadn't been in vain. These are the people, Yura! Genuine people! Workers. Pure. And no haphazarders will ever get in their way, - he carefully leaned his back against the wall, and Yura hastily put a pillow under it. - A funny word "haphazarders" - isn't it, Yura? But soon we will see a different sort of people... Altogether different... Rotters, trash... Worse than the Martian leeches... You, of course, won't see them, however, I will have to... - He closed his eyes. - Yura... I am sorry... I might fall asleep here... I took... some medicine... If I fall asleep... go and sleep... in my room...

<h2>BAMBERGA. POOR IN SOUL.</h2>

Bela Barabash stepped over the coaming and shut the door tightly behind him. On the door a black plastic sign hung in splendour: "The General Manager of Bamberga Mines. Space Pearl Limited". The sign was cracked. It was in one piece only yesterday. The bullet hit the lower left corner of the sign, and the crack passed through the capital "B". Rotten sluggard, Bela thought. "I can assure you, there are no weapons at the mines. Only you have it, Mr Barabash, and the policemen also. Even I don't have any". Scoundrel.

The corridor was empty. Right in front of the door a cheerful poster

was hanging: "Remember - you are a stakeholder. Company's interests - are your interests". Bela clasped his head, closed his eyes and stood like that for some time, swaying a little. My God, he thought. When will all this end? When will they take me away from here? I mean, what sort of a commissioner am I? Indeed, I can't get anything done. I don't have the energy any more. Can you understand me? I have no strength left. Take me away from here, please. Yes, I am ashamed and all that. But I can't take it any longer...

Somewhere a hatch shut with a clang. Bela lowered his hands and shuffled his feet down the corridor. Past the loathsome advertisement posters on the walls. Past the locked cabins of engineers. Past the tall narrow door of the police station. I wonder, whom could they be shooting at on the administration's floor? Of course, they won't tell me who the shooter was. But, perhaps, I will be able to find out, whom they were shooting at? Bela walked into the police room. At the table, holding up his cheek with his hand, sergeant Higgins, the police chief, one of the three policemen on Bamberga mines, was dozing. In front of Higgins on the table stood a microphone, on his right - the radio, on the left lay a magazine with a bright cover.

- Hello, Higgins, - said Bela

Higgins opened his eyes.

- Good day, mister Barabash.

A manly voice, a little husky.

- What's news, Higgins?

- "Geya" arrived, - said Higgins. - Brought the mail. My wife writes, that she misses me a lot. As if don't miss her. There are also four packages for you. I said that they should deliver them to you. I thought, you were in your cabin.

- Thank you, Higgins. Do you know, who was shooting today on this floor?

Higgins thought about it.

- I just can't remember that there was any shooting today, - he said.

- What about yesterday evening? Or during the night?

Higgins said reluctantly:

- Someone shot at engineer Meyer at night.

- Did Meyer tell you that? - Barabash asked.

- I wasn't there. I was on duty at the saloon.

- You see, Higgins, - Barabash said. - I have just gone to see the head manager. The head manager had assured me for the tenth time, that only you have weapons here. The policemen.

- That may very well be.

- Then, one of your subordinates was shooting at Meyer?

- I don't think so, - said Higgins. - Tom was with me at the saloon, and Konrad... Why would Konrad shoot the engineer?

- Therefore, somebody else has got a weapon?

- I haven't seen it, that weapon, Mr Barabash. If I saw it - I would confiscate it. Because all weapons are forbidden. But I didn't see it.

All of a sudden Bela felt totally indifferent about the whole thing.

- Alright, - he said listlessly. - After all, upholding the law - is your business, not mine. My business is to inform IBCC how you carry out your duties.

He turned around and walked out. He took the lift down to the second floor and walked across the saloon. No one was in the saloon. Along the walls vending machines blinked with yellow lights. Should I get drunk, or something, Bela thought. Get pissed as a swine, get into bed and sleep for two days. And then get up and get loaded again. He passed the saloon and walked down a long wide corridor. The corridor was called "broadway" and stretched from the saloon to the toilets. Here posters hung too, reminding passers-by that "company's interests - are your interests", movie programs for the current decade were hanging, stockmarket reports, lottery results, tables of baseball and basketball matches conducted on Earth were hanging,

and also the tables of boxing and freestyle wrestling competitions, taking place here, on Bamberga. The doors of both movie theatres and library doors all faced "broadway". The gymnasium and the church were located one floor below. At night, "broadway" was jam-packed, and multi-coloured lights of absurd advertisements blinded the eyes. On the other hand, not so absurd, after all - they reminded workers nightly, what awaits them on Earth, when they return to their homes with a full wallet.

Right now "broadway" was empty and semi-dark. Bela turned into one of the corridors. On the right and on the left identical doors stretched. The dorms were situated here. Smells of tobacco and eau de cologne reached through the doors. In one of the rooms Bela saw a man lying on a bunk and walked in. The lying man's face was covered with plaster patches. A lonely eyed looked dolefully up into the ceiling.

- What's wrong, Joshua? - Bela asked, coming closer.

Joshua's forlorn eye turned to him.

- I am lying down, - said Joshua. - I ought to be in a mineshaft, and I am lying down. And losing a heap of money every hour. I am even afraid to count, how much I am losing.

- Who bashed you up?

- How would I know? - Joshua answered. - I got so drunk yesterday, that I don't remember a thing. What the hell made me do it... I was bracing myself for a whole month. And now I have drunk through a whole day's wages, I am lying down and I will keep lying down. - He resumed staring dolefully into the ceiling.

- Yeah, - said Bela.

Well, what would you do with him, he thought. Convincing him, that drinking is harmful - he knows that himself. When he gets up, he will sit in a mineshaft for fourteen hours each day, to catch up on lost hours. And then he will return to Earth and he will get black radiation paralysis and won't have any kids or will produce mutants

- Do you know, that working longer than six hours in a mineshaft is dangerous? - Bela asked.

- Go and..., - Joshua said quietly. - This ain't your business. You ain't the one working.

Bela said with a sigh:

- Well, then, I hope you'll get better.

- Thank you, mister commissioner, - Joshua grumbled. - You ain't worrying about the right stuff. Why don't you make sure, that the saloon gets closed down. And that the boot-leggers be tracked down.

- Alright, - Bela said. - I'll try.

Here we are, he was thinking, heading back to his room. If we just tried to close the saloon, you will be the first one to yell at a meeting, that all sorts of communists are sticking their noses into others' business. There is no way out of this circle. None.

He walked into his room and saw engineer Samuel Livingston sitting there. The engineer was reading an old newspaper and eating sandwiches. In front of him on the table lay a chessboard with the figures set up. Bela greeted him and wearily sat at the table.

- Shall we play? - engineer suggested.

- In a moment, I'll just have a look at what they sent me.

Bela unsealed the packets. In three packets were books, in the fourth one - a letter from his mother and some postcards with the views of New Pest. On the table also lay a small pink envelope. Bela knew what was in that envelope, but opened it nevertheless. "Mister commissioner! Get the hell out of here. Stop stirring up trouble, whilst you are still in one piece. Well-wishers". Bela sighed and set the note aside.

- Your move, - he said.

The engineer moved a pawn.

- Trouble again? - he asked.

- Yes.

He emulated the Karo-Kann defence. The engineer received a small positional advantage. Bela took a sandwich and began chewing pensively, looking at the board.

- You know, Bela, - the engineer said, - when I shall see you happy for the first time, I will declare, that I have lost an ideological war.

- You will see it still, - Bela said without any great hope.

- No, - said the engineer. - You are doomed. Look around, you can see yourself, that you are doomed.

- I? - Bela asked. - Or us?

- All of you with your communism. People can't be idealists in our world.

- Come on, we were told that twenty times in the last one hundred years.

- Check, - the engineer said. - They told you right. A few things, of course, they have underestimated and hence often talked rubbish. It would be a joke to say, that you will yield to military force or will lose in economic competition. Every strong government and every sufficiently wealthy nation in our times is unbeatable in military and economic terms. Yep, yep, communism, as an economic system, has taken over, it's clear. Where are they now, glorious empires of Morgans, Rokefellers, Krupps, all those Mitsui and Mitsubishi? All blown up, and forgotten already. What remains are pitiful fragments, like our "Space Pearl", respectable enterprises engaged in production of luxury mattresses for a niche market... And even those ones are compelled to cover up with slogans of universal prosperity. Check, once more. And a few million of stubborn hotel owners, real estate agents, despondent craftsmen. All these are doomed as well. All of this is holding together only by the fact, that in both Americas currency is still circulating. But here you have hit a dead end. There is a force which even you cannot overcome. What I mean is petty bourgeoisie. Inertness of small people. Petty bourgeois cannot be overcome with force, because, for that, you would have to exterminate them physically. And they cannot be overcome with an idea, since petty bourgeois are narrow minded and won't accept any new ideas.

- Have you ever been to a communist country, Sam?

- I have. And have seen petty bourgeois there.

- You are right, Sam. We, too, have them still. We have them still, and that you have noticed. But you haven't noticed, that we have a lot fewer of them than you do, and that ours are the quiet ones. We don't have warrior bourgeois. One generation will pass, another one will and we won't have any at all.

- So I am taking your bishop, - the engineer said.

- Please try, - said Bela.

For a while the engineer was thinking it over, then took the bishop.

- Two generations later, you are saying? Or perhaps, two hundred thousand generations later? Take a reality check for once, Bela. There they are all around you, these little people. I am not taking into account adventurers and milksops, who pretend to be adventurers. Take people like Joshua, Smith, Blackwater. Those, whom you call "conscientious" or "peaceful", depending on your mood. But they have so few desires, that you cannot offer anything to them. And that, which they desire, they will achieve without any communism. They will become the owners of cafes, acquire a wife, kids and will live quietly, enjoying their life. Communism, capitalism - what do they care? Capitalism is even better, since capitalism encourages this mode of being. A man is just a working beast according to his nature. Give him a full manger, no worse than what his neighbour has, let him fill his gut and let him giggle at some simple show. Now you are going to tell me: we can offer him something greater. But what does he need anything greater for? He will tell you: this is none of your business. A little indifferent beast.

- You are slandering people, Sam. Joshua and the company look like

working beasts to you, only because you have put a lot of effort into making them what they are. Who convinced them from birth, that the most important thing in life - is money? Who taught them to be envious of millionaires, property owners, the next door milk bar owner? You crammed their head with ridiculous films and ridiculous books and told them, that one cannot jump above god. And drummed into their heads, that there is a god, a home and a business and nothing more in the entire world. That's how you turn people into working beasts. But a man is not a beast, Sam. Tell him from the cradle, that the most important things in life - - are friendship and knowledge, that, besides his cradle, there is a great big world, which he and his friends are going to win over - only then you will have a genuine person. Here we are, I let the rook slip.

- You can take another turn, - the engineer said. - I won't argue with you. Perhaps, the role of education is really as great as you say. Although, even despite your way of education, despite the national intolerance of petty bourgeoisie, they still manage to spring up, those... how do you say it in Russian... thistles. And over on our side, with our education, those whom you call genuine people, somehow contrive to grow up. Naturally, you have far less Philistines than we do... Check... Anyway, I still have no idea, what you are going to do with the two billion of Philistines of the capitalist world. We don't intend to re-educate them. True, capitalism - is a corpse. But it is a dangerous corpse. And on top of that you have opened the borders. And whilst borders stay open, petty bourgeoisie in all guises shall flow through these borders. I hope you won't choke on it... Check again.

- I don't recommend it, - said Bela.

- And what is the matter?

- I will retreat to G-eight, and your queen is under attack.

The engineer pondered over it for a while.

- Yes, you may be right, - he said. - There won't be a check.

- It would be foolish to deny the danger of Philistinism, - Bela said.

- One of your political leaders had rightly said that ideology of a petty proprietor, presents a greater danger to communism, than the now forgotten hydrogen bomb. But he had addressed that danger incorrectly. Not to communism, but to the entire humanity is Philistinism a danger. Because in your musings, Sam, there is one mistake. A Philistine - is still a person, after all, and he always wants something greater. But since he is a beast at the same time, this urge for something greater assumes the most horrific form, out of necessity. The craving for power, for example. The craving for worship. The craving for popularity. When two such people come head to head, they tear each other to shreds, like dogs. And when two such people come to an agreement, they tear others around them to shreds. And then funny stuff begins, such as fascism, segregation, genocide. And primarily because of that, we are conducting a war against Philistinism. And soon you will be compelled to start a similar war simply to being stifled by your own manure. Do you remember the teachers' march to Washington two years ago?

- I remember, - Livingston said. - But I think, that struggling against Philistinism - is as good as chopping water with a knife.

- My engineer, - Bela said, mockingly, - this contention is as unsubstantiated, as apocalypse. You are simply a pessimist. How does it go?.. "The miscreants shall rise above the heroes, the sages shall stay silent, and the fools shall be saying: none of that which people think, shall come to be".

- Oh well, - said Livingston. - There were such times, too. And I am, of course, a pessimist. Why would I exactly be an optimist? And you, too.

- I am not a pessimist, - said Bela. - I am just a bad worker. But the time of poor in spirit had passed, Sam. It had passed long ago, as it says in those same apocalyptic writings.

The door flung open and on the threshold stood a tall man with a high forehead and a pale, slightly flabby face. Bela froze, looking closely at

him. A second later, he recognised him. Well, that is it, he thought with anguish and relief. That is the end. The man briefly looked the engineer over, and stepped inside the room. Now he was looking only at Bela.

- I am the chief inspector of IBCC, - he said. - My name is Yurkovski.

Bela stood up. The engineer also stood up respectfully. Following Yurkovski a huge tanned man wearing loose blue overalls walked into the room. He briefly looked Bela over and began staring at the engineer.

- Please excuse me, - said the engineer and walked out. After walking a few paces down the corridor, he stopped and whistled pensively. Right, he thought. The ideological struggle on Bamberga is entering a new phase. Urgent measures must be taken.

Engrossed in thought, he walked down the corridor, accelerating his pace constantly. When he got to the lift, he was almost running. Having come to the top floor, he headed for the radio room. The radio operator looked at him with surprise.

- Anything's the matter, mister Livingston? - he asked.

Livingston ran his hand across a damp forehead.

- I got bad news from home, - he said abruptly. - When is the nearest session with Earth?

- In half an hour, - the radio operator said.

Livingston sat at the nearest table, ripped a sheet out of a notepad and quickly wrote down a radiogram.

- Send this urgently, Michael, - he said, handing the sheet to the operator. - This is very important.

The radio operator looked at the sheet and whistled in surprise.

- What do you need that for? - he asked. - Who would sell "Space Pearl" at the end of the year?

- I need cash urgently, - said the engineer and walked out.

The radio operator put the paper down in front of him and became engrossed in thought.

Yurkovski sat down and pushed the chessboard to the side with his elbow. Zhilin sat away from them.

- You have covered yourself with shame, comrade Barabash, - Yurkovski said in a low voice.

- Yes, - said Bela and swallowed.

- How do spirits get onto Bamberga, have you worked that out?

- No. Most likely spirits get distilled right here.

- During last year, the company had sent to Bamberga four transports with pressed fibre. What works on Bamberga require such amount of fibre?

- I don't know, - said Bela. - I don't know any such works.

- I don't know either. They distil spirits from fibre, comrade Barabash. That would be clear even to a hedgehog.

Bela stayed silent.

- Who has weapons on Bamberga? - Yurkovski asked.

- Don't know, - said Bela. - I could not find out.

- But weapons still exist?

- Yes.

- Who sanctions the over-time works?

- No one prohibits them.

- Have you addressed an appeal to the general manager?

Bela clenched his hands.

- I have addressed an appeal to that scoundrel twenty times. He doesn't want to hear anything. He sees nothing, hears nothing and understands nothing. He is deeply sorry, that I have poor information sources. You know what, Vladimir Sergeevich, either you transfer me the hell out of here or give me an authority to shoot the bastards. I can't do anything. I have talked sense into them. I begged them. I threatened them. This is a wall. For all workers, the IBCC commissioner is a red scarecrow. Nobody would

Speak to me. "I don't know nothing and it's not any damn business of yours". They don't give a hoot about the international trade laws. I can't go on like this any more. Have you seen the posters on the walls?

Yurkovski looked at him pensively, rotating a white queen between his fingers.

- I have nobody I can rely on here, - Bela continue. - These are either bandits, or quiet scum, who only dream about stuffing their pockets and don't give a damn if they will crank over after it or not. Real people don't come here, you know. Garbage, failures. Lumpen-proletarians. My hands shake at night after all of this. I cannot sleep. Two days ago they invited me to sign an accident report. I refused: it was clear as day, that a man's vacuum-suit was cut open with autogenous welding gear. Then this bastard, the union secretary, said that he will complain about me. A month ago, on Bamberga, three girls appear and vanish in one morning. I go to the general manager, and this prick laughs me in the face: "You are hallucinating, mister commissioner, you must go back to your wife, you are seeing girls already". After all, I was shot at three times. Yes, yes, I know that not a single idiot was aiming at me. But it doesn't make my life any easier. Just think about it, I was put in here to protect the lives and well being of these blockheads! They can all go to...

Bela stopped talking and cracked his fingers.

- Come on now, easy, Bela, - Yurkovski said strictly.

- Allow me to leave, - said Bela. - This comrade, - he pointed at Zhilin, - he, I presume, is the new commissioner...

- This isn't the new commissioner, - said Yurkovski. - Please, meet "Tahkmaseeb's" engineer, Zhilin.

Zhilin bowed slightly.

- Of what "Tahkmaseeb"?

- It's my ship, - said Yurkovski. - This is what we are going to do now. We'll go to the general manager, and I will say a few words to him. And then we'll talk to the workers. - He got up. - It's alright, Bela, don't be disappointed. You are not the first one. I have had this Bamberga up to here.

Bela said worriedly:

- We really need to take a few of our men. There can be a fight. The manager here keeps a gang of thugs at hand.

- What 'our men'? - Yurkovski asked. - You have just told me that you cannot rely on anyone here.

- So you have come alone? - Bela asked in horror.

Yurkovski shrugged his shoulders.

- Yeah, naturally, - he said. - I am not your general manager, you know.

- Alright, - said Bela.

He unlocked the safe and took a handgun. His face was pale and decisive. The first bullet I will plant into that slug, he thought with acute joy. Let anyone shoot at me then, but Mr Richardson is getting the first bullet. Into his fat, smooth, foul mug.

Yurkovski looked at him closely.

- You know what, Bela, - he spoke in a sincere voice, - I'd leave the gun here if I were you. Or give it to comrade Zhilin. I am afraid, you won't be able to resist.

- And do you think, he will resist?

- Resist I will, - said Zhilin, smiling.

Bela gave him the gun with regret.

Yurkovski opened the door and stopped. Before him appeared the swagging sergeant Higgins wearing full clean-pressed uniform and a blue helmet. Higgins saluted him distinctly.

- Sir, - he said, - the chief of police of Bamberga mines sergeant Higgins has arrived under your command.

- Glad to see you, sergeant Higgins, please follow us, - said

Yurkovski. They passed a short corridor and walked out onto the "broadway". The clock has not yet struck six, but "broadway" was flooded with bright light and tightly packed with workers. "Broadway" hummed with worried voices. Yurkovski was walking leisurely, smiling courteously and looking closely into the workers faces. He could see these faces well under the even fluorescent light - sunken cheeks, with sickly sallow skin, with bags under their eyes, apathetically nonchalant, angry, curious, spiteful, full of hate. The workers parted, letting him pass, and behind Higgins' back drew closer again and followed them. Sergeant Higgins kept yelling out:

- Make way for the chief inspector! Don't push, guys! Make way for the chief inspector!

Walking like this they came to the lift and went up to the administration floor. Here the crowd was even denser. And no one would give way here. Amongst the tired faces of the workers flickered some cheerful and audacious mugs. Now sergeant Higgins walked ahead, pushing through the crowd with a blue baton.

- Move aside, - he was saying in a low voice, - let us pass... Move off...

The back of his head between the edge of the helmet and the collar became engorged with blood and glistened with sweat. Zhilin closed the procession. The audacious mugs pushed towards the front rows, calling to one another:

- Hey guys, which one of them is the inspector?

- Can't tell, they are all red, like tomato juice...

- They are red throughout, inside and outside...

- I don't believe it, wanna see...

- Have a look, I won't stop you...

- Hey sergeant! Higgins! What a company have you landed yourself into!

Zhilin was tripped. He did not turn around, but started looking carefully at his feet. Upon noticing another boot made from soft cord, he stepped on it assiduously, with all his weight. Someone wailed next to him. Zhilin looked into a twisted face with whiskers that had gone white and said:

- Please forgive me, I am so clumsy!

He was wearing huge, unusually heavy boots with rifled magnetic soles.

The noise was rising. By now everyone was yelling.

- Who called them here?

- Hey, you! Don't stick your nose in other people's business!

- Let us work the way we want to! We aren't meddling in your affairs!

- Go back home and give orders there!

Sergeant Higgins, wet as a mouse, finally made it to the door with the cracked sign and flung it open before Yurkovski.

- In here, sir, - breathing heavily, he said.

Yurkovski and Bela walked in. Zhilin stepped over the coaming and looked back. He saw a lot of audacious mugs and only behind them, in the tobacco smoke, the workers' hardened gloomy faces. Higgins also stepped over the coaming and shut the door.

The office of Mr Richardson, the mine manager, was spacious. Along the walls stood large soft chairs and glass cabinets with mineral samples and imitations of the largest "cosmic pearls", found on Bamberga. From behind the table, a pleasant noble-looking man wearing a black suit got up to meet Yurkovski.

- Ah, mister Yurkovski, - he thundered, and having circled the table walked to Yurkovski, stretching his hands out. - I am infinitely glad...

- Don't bother, - said Yurkovski, circling the table from the other side. - I won't shake your hand anyway.

The general manager stopped, smiling pleasantly. Yurkovski sat behind the desk and turned to Bela.

- Is this the general manager? - he asked.

- Yes! - said Bela with delight. - This is the chief mine manager Mr

Richardson.

The manager shook his head.

- Oh, Mr Barabash, - he said with reproach, - do I really owe to you such unfriendliness on behalf of mister inspector?

- Who issued the patent for the management of this mine? - Yurkovski asked.

- As it is done in the western world, mister Yurkovski, by the board of directors.

- Present it to me.

- Please, - the manager said quite courteously. He slowly crossed the room, unlocked a large safe, built into the wall, produced a large folder made from brown leather and extracted from the folder a sheet of thick paper with golden edges. - Please, - he repeated and laid the sheet before Yurkovski.

- Lock the safe, - said Yurkovski, - and hand the keys to the sergeant.

Sergeant Higgins accepted the keys, stone-faced. Yurkovski looked through the patent, folded it in four, and shoved it in his pocket. Mister Richardson kept smiling. Zhilin thought, that never in his life had he seen a man of such pleasant appearance. Yurkovski placed his elbows on the table and looked at Richardson with reflection. Richardson thundered:

- I would be pleased to know, mister Yurkovski, what the meaning of all these strange actions is.

- You are charged with a number of offences under the international law, - Yurkovski said casually. Mister Richardson raised his hands, exceptionally surprised. - You are charged with breaching the prescribed legal rights within cosmic space. - There was no bound to Mr Richardson's astonishment. - You are charged with the murder - at this stage, not premeditated - of sixteen workers and three women.

- Me? - Mr Richardson cried out, insulted. - I am charged with murder?

- Inter alia, murder, too, - said Yurkovski. - I am relieving you of your post, and shortly you will be arrested and sent to Earth, where you will front the international tribunal. But right now don't let me hold you any longer.

- I give in to brute force, - said Mr Richardson with dignity.

- And you are doing the right thing, - said Yurkovski. - Present yourself here in an hour to transfer all current matters to your successor.

Richardson turned abruptly, walked to the door and flung it open.

- My friends! - he spoke out loud. - These people have detained me! They don't like your high earnings! They want you to work for six hours a day and remain destitute!

Yurkovski was looking at him with curiosity. Higgins, undoing his holster, retreated to the desk. Richardson was swept aside. Into the door burst screaming hoodlum, but they were immediately pushed aside and the office became filled with workers. A dense wall of grey overalls and malicious, gloomy faces stopped before the table. Yurkovski looked around and saw, that Zhilin is standing on his right, hands shoved into his pockets, and Bela, curved up, clutching the back of the chair, without pulling his gaze away, is staring at Mr Richardson.

- No unlawful actions, guys, easy now, guys, take it easy...

Joshua, covered with plaster, pushed through the crowd.

- We don't wish to quarrel with anyone, mister inspector, - he spoke hoarsely, staring at Yurkovski with a spiteful eye. - But we won't have any of your tricks around here.

- What tricks? - Yurkovski inquired.

- We have come here, in order to earn money...

- And we have come here, in order to stop you from rotting alive...

- And I am telling you, that it's none of your business! - Joshua shouted. He turned to the crowd and asked: - Right, guys?

- Oo-o-o! - the crowd roared, and at this moment someone fired.

Behind Yurkovski the glass display clinked, falling apart. Bela

groaned, lifted a chair with an effort, and brought it down onto the head of Mr Richardson, who was standing in the front row, with eyes raised and hands folded in a prayer. Zhilin took his hands out of pockets and prepared to jump at someone. Joshua drew back, scared. Yurkovski stood up and said angrily:

- Who was that idiot shooting? He almost got me. Sergeant, why are you standing still like a chair? Seize that idiot's weapon!

Higgins dutifully climbed into the crowd. Zhilin shoved his hands into pockets again and sat on the corner of the desk. He looked at Bela and laughed. Bela's face gleamed with bliss. He was watching Richardson with delight. Two thugs were raising Richardson up, looking with spite and confusion at Bela, at Yurkovski, and at the workers. Richardson's eyes were shut; a dark bruise was spreading over his high smooth forehead.

- By the way, - said Yurkovski, - all of you, surrender all weapons that you have here. I am telling you this now, you spongers! From this moment on, anyone who is found in possession of a weapon is subject to summary execution. I am investing commissioner Barabash with the requisite powers.

Zhilin slowly walked around the table, took out his gun and handed it to Barabash. Barabash, staring closely at the closest gangster, slowly pulled back the lock. In a silence that set in the lock made a loud clink. An empty space immediately formed around the gangster. He grew pale, took a gun out of his back pocket, and threw it on the floor. Bela kicked the gun into the corner and turned to the thug holding Richardson up.

- You!

The thug let go of Richardson and, smiling crookedly, shook his head.

- I haven't got any, - he said.

- Well, then, - said Yurkovski. - Sergeant, help these characters disarm. Let's get back to our conversation. We were interrupted here, - he said, addressing Joshua. - I believe, you were saying that I shouldn't meddle in your affairs, right?

- Right, - said Joshua. - We are free people and came here ourselves, for earnings. And you should stop getting in our way. We aren't getting in your way and you shouldn't stop us, too.

- The question of who is getting in whose way, we'll leave aside for now, - said Yurkovski. - And now I would like to tell you something. - He produced from his pocket and threw on the desk a few dazzlingly sparkling multicoloured stones. - Here are the so-called space pearls, - he said. - You all know them very well. These are ordinary precious and semi-precious stones, which have been, for long periods of time here on Bamberga, subjected to the force of cosmic radiation and low temperatures. They don't bear any particular character, except for their really pretty glitter. Rich dames pay insane money for them, and from this double-dyed idiocy your company has sprung up. Enjoying high demand for these stones, your company collects lofty profits.

- And so do we, - someone shouted from the crowd.

- And so do you, - Yurkovski agreed. - But this is the thing. During the eight years of company's existence, around two thousand men have worked on Bamberga under a three-year contract. But did you know, how many of those who had returned, are still alive? Less than five hundred. An average workers lifespan after their return does not exceed two years. You bust your gut here on Bamberga for three years, only to rot alive for two years on Earth. First and foremost, this happens because nobody sticks to the resolution of the international commission, forbidding work in your mines for more than six hours a day. Back on Earth all you do is get treatment, suffer because you cannot have children, or give birth to deformed babies. This is the corporation's crime, but we aren't talking about the corporation right now.

- Hold on, - said Joshua and raised his hand. - Let me have a say, too. We have heard this all already. Mister commissioner has dinned it into our

ears. I dunno about others, but I don't care about those who died. I am a healthy man and don't intend to die.

- Right-o, - the crowd hummed. - Let the milksops die.

- Kids or no kids - that's my business. And getting medical treatment is not for you, but me. Thank god, I am long since an adult and I answer for my actions. I don't wish to hear any speeches. Here you have confiscated gangsters' weapons, I say: well done. Find the distillers, shut the saloon. Right? - He turned to the crowd. The crowd began murmuring ambiguously. - What are you mumbling about? I am talking sense here. Where have you seen this - one drink for two dollars? Take care of some bribe-takers. That would be right as well. But don't interfere with my work. I have come here to earn money, and I will earn them. Once I decide to open my business - I will do that. But I have no use for your speeches. Words alone won't buy a house...

- That's right, Joe! - people shouted in the crowd.

- Not right at all, - said Yurkovski. His eyes suddenly became bloodshot and he yelled: - What do you think, we will let you croak just like this? My dear fellows, this is not the nineteenth century! Your business, our business, - he started talking in a normal voice again. - There are at best four hundred of you, fools, over here. And four billion - of us. And we don't want you to die. And you will not die. Fair enough, I am not going to talk to you about your spiritual poverty. As far as I can see, you aren't capable of understanding this. Only your kids will understand this, if you will ever have them. I will talk to you in a language you can understand. The language of the law. Humanity had passed legislation, which forbids running yourself into the grave. A law, do you understand? A law! The company will be held accountable under this law, and you should remember the following. Humanity doesn't need your mines. Mining on Bamberga can be shut at any moment, and everyone will only sigh with relief. And keep this in mind: if the IBCC commissioner will report just one more instance of some violation, no matter what kind - overtime, bribes, spirits, shooting, - the mines will be shut down, and Bamberga will be fused with cosmic dust. This is the law, and I am telling this to you on behalf of humanity.

Yurkovski sat down.

- We can kiss our money good-bye, - someone said loudly.

The crowd became noisy. Someone shouted:

- So that means, shut the mines, and we are out the street?

Yurkovski got up.

- Don't talk rubbish, - he said. - What kind of absurd impression of life do you have? There is so much work on Earth and in space! Genuine work, really urgent, needed by everybody, can you understand? Not by a handful of satisfied dames, but by everybody! By the way, I have a proposition from IBCC to you: volunteers can settle up with the company and transfer to building and technical works on other asteroids and satellites of large planets. You know, if you would here all together vote to shut these stinking mines, I would do it immediately today. And there will be more work than you can imagine.

- And what are the rates? - someone shouted.

- The rates are, of course, about five times less, - Yurkovski answered. - But you will have work for the rest of your life, and good friends, genuine people, who will make genuine people out of you as well. You will both stay healthy and will be the participants of the greatest development in the world.

- What's the point of working for someone else's business? - said Joshua.

- Yeah, it's no good to us, - the crowd began talking.

- What kind of business is this?

- Everyone will be telling you what you can and can't do...

- Spend your whole life a labourer this way...

- Businessmen! - with ineffable contempt said Yurkovski. - Well, it is time to wind up. Bear in mind, this gentleman, - he pointed to mister

Richardson, - I have arrested this gentleman, he will go on trial. Elect a temporary manager and let me know. I will be with commissioner Barabash.

Joshua told Yurkovski gloomily:

- This is a wrong law, mister inspector. How is it fair not to let workers earn money? And you, communists, keep bragging that you are pro-workers.

- My friend, - Yurkovski said gently, - communists support an altogether different kind of workers. Workers, and not petty proprietors.

In Barabash's room Yurkovski suddenly slapped himself on the forehead

- Bonehead, - he said. - I left the stones on general manager's desk.

Bela laughed.

- Well, you won't see them any more, - he said. - Someone will become a petty proprietor.

- Stuff them, - said Yurkovski. - But your nerves... err... Bela, are really... not that great.

Zhilin laughed.

- How did he get him with the chair!..

- A really nasty face, isn't it? - Bela asked

- Why, no, - Zhilin said. - A very cultured and urbane man.

Yurkovski noted with disgust:

- A courteous brute. And look at the facilities here, comrades? They have built such a palace here, whilst death-planeters live in elevators. No, I am going to take care of this, I am not letting this drop.

- Want to have dinner? - Bela asked.

- No, we'll go have dinner on "Takhmaseeb". Soon all these long proceedings will end...

- My god, - Bela said dreamily. - To sit at a table with good ordinary people, not to hear about dollars, or shares, or that all people are scum... Vladimir Sergeevich, - he said in a pleading tone, - could you just send someone else to be here with me.

- Just bear it a little longer, Bela, - Yurkovski said. - This business will soon stop.

- By the way, about shares, - Zhilin said. - There must be total bedlam in the radio-room right now...

- Most likely, - Bela said. - Selling and buying spots in a queue to the radio operator. Eyes bulged, faces in foam... Oh, when will I get out of here!...

- Come on, come on, - said Yurkovski. - Let me have a look at your records. - Bela walked to the safe. - Buy the way Bela, will anyone here make a more or less decent manager, at least?

Bela was rummaging in the safe.

- Why not, - he said. - Someone can be, of course. Engineers here - are decent people, after all. Petty businessmen.

There was a knock on the door. A gloomy Joshua, covered with plaster, walked in.

- Let's go, mister inspector, - he said dismally. Yurkovski, groaning, got up.

- Let's go, - he said.

Joshua stretched out an open palm to him.

- You forgot your stones there, - he said in a sullen voice. - I picked them up. 'Cause we have all kind of folk here.

<h2>"Takhmaseeb". A GIANT FLUCTUATION</h2>

It was the hour of pre-dinner study. Yura was tormented by the "Metals theory course". Dishevelled, sleepy Yurkovski was indolently shuffling through another report. From time to time he would yawn voluptuously, delicately covering his mouth with his hand. Bykov was sitting in his chair,

finishing the last magazines. It was the twenty-fourth day of the journey, somewhere between the Jupiter's orbit and Saturn.

"The transformation of cadmium type crystal lattice in relation to temperature in regions of low temperatures is determined, as we had observed, by the correlation..." - read Yura. He thought: "I wonder, what would happen when Alexey Petrovich runs out of journals?" He remembered Caldwell's story, where a boy was paring a tiny stick with a knife on a hot afternoon, and how everyone waited, for what would happen, when the stick runs out. He chuckled, and at the same moment Yurkovski abruptly turned to Bykov.

- If you only knew, how sick I am of all this, Alexey, - he said, - how much do I want to stretch out...

- Take Zhilin's dumbbells, - Bykov advised.

- You know perfectly well, what I am talking about, - Yurkovski said.

- I suspect it, - Bykov grumbled. - I've been suspecting it for a while now.

- And what do you think... err... about this?

- You restless old man, - said Bykov and closed his magazine. - You are not twenty-five any more. Why do you always look for trouble?

Yura began listening with enjoyment.

- Why for... err... trouble? - Yurkovski was surprised. - It will be a small-scale, totally safe search...

- And perhaps, enough is enough? - said Bykov. - First a totally safe search into a cave with leeches, then a safe search with death-planeters - by the way, how is your liver? - then a completely fanfaronade run-in at Bamberga.

- Excuse me, but that was my duty, - said Yurkovski.

- Your duty was to summon the general manager to "Takhmaseeb", we would jointly give him a dressing-down here, threaten to burn the mines with our reactor, ask the workers to give up the gangsters and alcohol distillers - and everything would work out without any foolish shooting. What is this manner of yours to choose the most dangerous variant out of all others?

- What do you mean - dangerous? - said Yurkovski. - Danger is a subjective concept. To you it seems dangerous, and to me - not in the least.

- Ok, very well then, - said Bykov. - I find the search in Saturn's Ring dangerous. And then I will not allow you to conduct that search.

- Well, all right, fine, - said Yurkovski. - We'll have another talk about it, - he flipped a few pages of the report with frustration and turned to Bykov again. - Sometimes you simply amaze me, Alexey! - he announced. - If I came across a man, who would call you a coward, I would spread the impudent bastard across the wall, but sometimes I look at you and... - he shook his head and flipped a few more report pages.

- There is foolish bravery, - Bykov said admonishingly, - and there is also rational bravery!

- Rational bravery - it's a catachrâsis! "The serenity of a mountain spring, the cool of a summer sun", - as Kipling would say. To the madness of valiant we sing this song!..

- Enough singing, - said Bykov. - In our times we ought to work, and not sing. I don't know what a catachrâsis is, but sensible bravery - this is the only kind of bravery, acceptable in our times. Without any of those... deceased. Who needs deceased Yurkovski?

- What utilitarianism! - Yurkovski exclaimed. - I don't wish to say, that I am the only one right! But please don't forget, that people exist with different temperaments. I, for instance, simply draw enjoyment from risky situations. I am bored living just plainly! And thank God, I am not the only one...

- You know what, Volodya, - said Bykov. - Next time take Bagrat as your captain - if he'll still be alive by then - and fly with him to the Sun, if you wish. And I do not intend to indulge in your amusements.

They both fell quiet angrily. Yura started reading again: " The

transformation of cadmium type crystal lattice in relation to temperature...". Can Bykov be right, he thought. How boring would it be, if he were right. It's true then, what they say - the most sensible things are the most boring ones...

Zhilin came out of the deck-cabin. He came up to Bykov and said quietly:

- Here, Alexey Petrovich, this is from Michael Antonovich...

- What's this? - Bykov asked.

- The program for cyber-pilot for the voyage from Japheth.

- Fine, leave it here, I will have a look, - said Bykov.

"There already is a program for the voyage past Japheth, - Yura thought. - They will fly somewhere else still, but I won't be here". He looked at Zhilin sombrely. Zhilin was wearing the same chequered shirt with rolled up sleeves.

Yurkovski suddenly said:

- Try to understand this, Alexey. I am already old. In a year, or two, I will stay on Earth forever, like Daugeh, like Misha... And, perhaps, the current voyage - it's my last opportunity. Why don't you want to let me go?..

Zhilin tiptoed across the cabin and sat on the sofa.

- I don't wish to let you go, not so much because it is dangerous, - Bykov spoke slowly, - but more because this is senselessly dangerous. Come on, Vladimir, what an insane idea - the artificial origin of Saturn's rings. This is geriatric senility, honestly...

- You were always devoid of imagination, Alexey, - Yurkovski said dryly. The cosmogony of Saturn's rings isn't clear, and I think that my hypothesis has no less of a right to existence, than any other, more, so to speak, rational one. A hypothesis must also have moral significance - it must rouse imagination and compel people to think...

- What does this have to do with imagination? - said Bykov. - This is a clear calculation. The probability of aliens arriving exactly in our solar system is tiny. The probability, that they will, all of a sudden, decide to demolish satellites and construct a ring from them is, I think, lower still...

- What do we know of probability? - Yurkovski declared.

- All right, fine, let's say you are right, - said Bykov. - Let's say, that indeed, in times immemorial aliens had come to the solar system and for some reason built an artificial Ring around Saturn. Made their mark, so to speak. But do you expect to find the confirmation of your hypothesis in this first and only search in the Ring?

- What do we know of probability? - Yurkovski repeated.

- I know one thing, - Bykov said angrily, - that you have absolutely no chance, and this entire idea is insane.

They fell silent again and Yurkovski went back to the report. His face looked really sad and very aged. Yura felt unbearably sorry for him, but he did not know how to help. He looked at Zhilin. Zhilin was thinking with concentration. Yura looked at Bykov. Bykov was pretending to be reading a journal. It was obvious, that he also feels very sorry for Yurkovski.

Zhilin said suddenly:

- Alexey Petrovich, why do you think that, if the chances are low, then one should have no hope?

Bykov lowered the journal.

- And you think otherwise?

- The world is vast, - said Zhilin. - I really liked Vladimir Sergeevich's words: "What do we know of probability?"

- Well, and what don't we know of probability? - Bykov asked.

Yurkovski, without lifting his eyes from the report, became alert.

- I remembered one man, - said Zhilin. - He had a really curious fate... - Zhilin paused hesitantly. - Perhaps I am disturbing you, Vladimir Sergeevich?

- Tell us, - Yurkovski demanded and shut the report decisively.
 - This will take some time, - Zhilin warned.
 - Even better, - said Yurkovski. - Tell us.
- And Zhilin began telling.

<h2>THE STORY ABOUT A GIANT FLUCTUATION</h2>

Back then I was still a kid and did not understand many things then and had forgotten a lot, perhaps the most interesting things. It was night, and I did not manage to look closely at this man's face. And his voice was really ordinary, a little sad and husky, and he would cough from time to time, as if from confusion. In other words, if I will see him once more in the street somewhere, or, say, at a party somewhere, I probably won't recognise him.

We met on the beach. I have just had a swim and was sitting on a rock. Then I heard pebbles sliding behind me - that was him coming down from the embankment, - I could smell tobacco smoke, and he stopped next to me. As I already told you, it was night time. The sky was covered in clouds, and a severe storm was gathering at sea. Along the beach a strong warm wind was blowing. The stranger was smoking. The wind was striking long orange sparks from his cigarette, that would float and disappear over the deserted beach. It was very beautiful, and I remember that very well. I was only sixteen, and I did not even think, that he would talk to me. But he spoke. He began in a strange way.

- The world is full of amazing things, - he said.

I decided, that he is simply thinking out loud, and stayed quiet. I turned around and looked at him, but saw nothing, it was too dark. And he repeated:

- The world is full of amazing things, - and then took a puff, spraying me with a shower of sparks.

I said nothing again: back then I was shy. He finished smoking his cigarette, lit up a new one and sat on the stones next to me. From time to time he would mumble something, but the water noise concealed his words, and I would only hear incomprehensible hum. Then he announced out loud:

- No, this is too much. I must tell this to someone.

And he addressed me directly, for the first time since the moment of his appearance.

- Please don't refuse to hear me out.

Naturally, I did not refuse. He said:

- Only I will have to start in a roundabout way, because, if I were to tell you, what it is, you won't understand and you won't believe me. No one believes me, and now this has gone so far...

He kept quiet for a bit and informed me:

- This began during my childhood. I was learning how to play a violin and broke four glasses and one saucer.

- How do you mean? - I asked. I immediately remembered some joke, where one woman tells her friend: "Can you believe this, yesterday the dvornik was throwing firewood over to us, and broke the crystal chandelier". There is this old joke.

The stranger chuckled somewhat sadly and said:

- Just imagine this. During the first month of learning to play. Already back then my teacher said that he had not seen anything like this in his life.

I kept quiet, but also thought, that it must look quite strange. I imagined, how he is waving the bow around and, from time to time, hits the cupboard. This could really lead him very far.

- This is a common law of physics, - he explained unexpectedly. - The notion of resonance. - And, without stopping, he outlined to me a corresponding anecdote from school physics, about a column of soldiers

walking across a bridge, keeping their step, and then the bridge collapsed. Then he explained to me, that glasses and saucers can also be shattered by resonance, if one can pick the sound vibrations of appropriate frequencies. I must say, that exactly from that day I began to understand clearly, that sound - is also a vibration.

The stranger explained to me, that in daily life (in the household, as he would put it) resonance is an unusually rare thing, and was delighted with the fact, that some ancient code of laws covered such a trifling possibility and provided a penalty for the owner of a rooster who shatters a neighbour's jug with its crowing.

I agreed, that this must be, indeed, a rare phenomenon. Personally, I have never heard of anything of this sort.

- Very, very rare, - he said. - Whilst I have shattered four glasses and a saucer in one month with my violin. But it was only the beginning.

He lit up another cigarette and informed me:

- Very soon, my parents and friends noted, that I am breaking the law of the sandwich.

Here I did not want to lose face and said:

- A strange last name.

- What last name? - he asked. - Oh, the law? No, that is not a surname. This is... how can I put it... something jocular. You know, there is a whole bunch of sayings: got what you deserved... the sandwich always falls face down on the floor... In the sense that the negative happens more often than the positive. Or, expressed scientifically: the probability of a desired event is always less than half.

- Half of what? - I asked and immediately realised that I made a fool of myself. He was really surprised at my question.

- Aren't you familiar with the theory of probability? - he asked.

I told him we have not yet covered that in school.

- Then you won't understand anything, - he said with disappointment.

- Why don't you explain, - I said grumpily, and he obediently began explaining. He announced, that probability - is a quantitative characteristic of the likelihood of some event taking place.

- And what does this have to do with sandwiches? - I asked.

- The sandwich may fall either face down or face up, - he said. - So then, generally speaking, if you are going to throw the sandwich by chance, it will fall down either this or that way. In half the cases it will land face up, in another half - face down. Is that clear?

- Clear, - I said. All of a sudden I remembered that I haven't yet had supper.

- In these situations, it is said that the probability of a desired outcome equals is half - or one second.

Later he told me, that if you throw the sandwich, for instance, one hundred times, that it may not fall face up fifty times, but fifty five or twenty times, and that only if you throw it for a while and a lot, then butter will stay on top in approximately half of all cases. I imagined to myself this poor sandwich with butter (and, possibly, even with caviar) after it had been thrown on the floor a thousand times, even if the floor wasn't too dirty, and asked, whether there really were people who did it. He began telling, that for this purpose people chiefly used not sandwiches but coins, as in a game of heads and tails, and began explaining how it is done, getting even more bogged down in explanations, and soon I stopped understanding him and sat there, looking at the gloomy sky, and thought, that, probably, it will rain soon. All that I remembered from this first lecture on the theory of probability was the semi-familiar term "mathematical expectancy". The stranger applied this term more than once, and each time I imagined a large room, something like a transit lounge, with a tiled floor, where people sit with briefcases and folders, and, throwing coins and sandwiches up to ceiling from time to time, are awaiting something with concentration. To this day I often see it in my dreams. But then the

stranger stunned me with a resounding term "maximum theory of Mouavre-Laplais" and said that none of this is relevant.

- You know, I wanted to talk to you about something altogether different, - he said in a voice devoid of former vivacity.

- Forgive me, you probably are a mathematician? - I asked.

- No, - he replied dismally. - What kind of a mathematician would I make? I am a fluctuation.

I stayed silent to be polite.

- Oh yes, I think I still haven't told you my story, - he remembered.

- You were talking about sandwiches, - I said.

- You know, my uncle was the first one to note this, - he continued. - You know, I was absent-minded and would drop sandwiches often. And my sandwiches always landed with the butter up.

- Well, so that's good, - I said.

He sighed dolefully.

- It is good, if it's occasional... But when it's always! You understand - always!

I did not understand anything and told him that.

- My uncle knew maths a little and was interested in the theory of probability. He suggested that I should throw a coin. We were throwing it together. Back then, I did not immediately understand that I am a lost case, but my uncle understood that. He even told me so then: "You are a lost case!"

I still could not understand a thing.

- The first time I flipped a coin a hundred times, and my uncle flipped it a hundred times, too. He got heads fifty-three times, and I got it ninety-eight times. You know, my uncle's eyes bulged to his forehead. And mine, too. Then I threw the coin another two hundred times, and can you imagine, the heads came up one hundred ninety-six times for me. I ought to have realised back then, what these things finally lead to. I ought to have understood, that a night like this one will come eventually, too! - Here, I think, he sobbed. - But, you see, at that time, I was very young, younger than you. It all seemed really interesting to me. I thought it was very amusing to feel myself the convergence point of all wonders in the world.

- To feel what? - I was dumbfounded.

- Err... convergence point of wonders. I cannot pick another word, though I tried.

Gradually, he calmed down and began telling everything in order, continuously smoking and coughing from time to time. He told his story in detail, assiduously describing all parts and invariably supporting all the narrated events with a scientific basis. He amazed me, if not with the depth, then with the versatility of his knowledge. He showered me with terms from physics, mathematics, thermodynamics and kinetic theory of gases, such that later, having grown up, I often wondered, why this or that term seemed so familiar to me. Often, he would launch into philosophical discourse, and sometimes he would seem plainly incapable of self-criticism. Thus, he repeatedly branded himself a "phenomenon", a "wonder of nature" and a "gigantic fluctuation". Then I understood, that it was not a profession. He announced to me, that wonders don't exist, and only low-probability events take place.

- In nature, - he spoke with admonition, - the most likely events materialize most often, whilst the least likely events occur much more infrequently.

He meant the law of constant entropy, but at that time for me it all sounded impressive. Then he made an attempt at explaining to me the concept of the most probable state and fluctuation. My imagination was shaken then by this famous example of air, which concentrated fully in one half of the room.

- In this case, - he was saying, - everyone, who sat in the other half, would asphyxiate, and the rest would consider it to be a miracle. And this

is far from a miracle, this is one quite real, though unusually improbable fact. This would be a giant fluctuation, an insignificant deviation from the most probable state of things.

According to his words, he was that kind of deviation from the most probable state of being. He was surrounded by miracles. For instance, seeing a twelve-time magnified rainbow was a trifle for him - he had seen it six or seven times.

- I can beat any amateur synopticalist, - he boasted despondently. - I witnessed the northern lights in Alma-Ata, the Brocken phantom in Kavkaz Mountains, observed the famous green ray or "the sword of famine", as it is called, twenty times. I arrived in Batumi and drought began there. Then I went to travel in the Gobi dessert, and got caught by tropical rain three times.

During his studies at school and university he passed many exams and would always draw the examination question number five. Once he was sitting an examination for a special subject, and it was known for a fact that there will only be four questions - according to the number of students, - and he still drew question number five, because one hour before the exam the lecturer suddenly decided to add another question. His sandwiches kept falling with the butter up. ("I guess, I am doomed to experience this till the end of my days, - he said. - It will always remind me, that I am not some ordinary person, but a gigantic fluctuation"). Twice he happened to be present at the formation of large air lens ("these are macroscopical fluctuations of air density", - he explained ambiguously), and both these times the lens would light a match in his hand.

All wonders, which he came across, he divided into three groups. Into pleasant, unpleasant and neutral ones. The sandwiches with the butter up, for instance, fell into the first group. An invariable cold, regular and independent of the weather that began and ended on the first of every month fell into the second group. To the third group belonged various rarest natural phenomena that had the honour of occurring in his presence. Once, in his presence, the transgression of the second law of thermodynamics took place: water in a vessel containing flowers suddenly started to draw heat from the surrounding atmosphere and brought itself to boiling point, whilst frost fell in the room. ("After that, I walked around totally dumbstruck, and, you know, to this day, I test water with my finger prior to, let's say, drinking it...") Repeatedly, into his tent - he travelled a lot - lightning globes would fly in and hang under the ceiling for hours. Eventually he became used to it, and used the lightning globe as electric lamps: for reading.

- Do you know, what a meteorite is? - he asked suddenly. Youth is inclined to make crass jokes, and I replied that meteorites - are falling stars, that have nothing whatsoever in common with stars that do not fall.

- Meteorites sometimes strike houses, - he said reflectively. - But that is a very rare event. And there is only one registered case, you know, when a meteorite struck a person. A single case of its kind, you see...

- So what? - I asked.

He leaned over to me and whispered:

- So that person - is me!

- You are kidding, - I said, with a shudder.

- Not at all, - he said gloomily.

It turned out, that all this happened in Ural Mountains. He was walking across the highlands, stopped for a minute, to tie a lace on his boot. A sharp rustling trill was heard and he felt a nudge against his, you know, rear part of the body and pain from the burn.

- On my pants there was a hole about that big, - he was telling me. - Blood was flowing, you know, but not much. Pity that it's dark now, or I would show you the scar.

He picked up a few suspicious stones there and kept them in his desk - perhaps, one of them, is indeed that meteorite.

Things absolutely inexplicable from the scientific viewpoint also happened to him. At least for now, with the current level of scientific progress. Thus, one time he became a powerful magnetic field emitter all of a sudden. This manifested itself when all ferromagnetic objects, present in the room, leaped from their places and dashed towards him along the lines of force. A steel fountain pen pierced his cheek, something hit him painfully on the head and the back. He covered himself with his hands, shaking in horror, covered from head to toe with knives, forks, scissors, and suddenly it all finished. The phenomenon lasted no more than ten seconds, and he had absolutely no idea how to explain it.

Another time, having received a letter from a friend, after the very first line, to his amazement he discovered, that he had already received an identical letter a few years ago. He even recalled, that on the back of the page, next to the signature, was supposed to be a big inkblot. Having turned the letter over, he really saw an inkblot.

- All these things never repeated, - he informed me sadly. - I regarded them as the most remarkable in my collection. But, you see, only until tonight.

Generally, he often cut himself off, just to announce: "All this, you see, would have been very good, but today... It is really too much, I assure you".

- But don't you think, - I asked, - that you present an interest to science?

- I had thought about it, - he said. - I wrote away. I offered, you know. Nobody believes me. Even my family doesn't. Only my uncle believed me, but now he had died. Everyone finds me original and an irrepressible comedian. I cannot even imagine, what they will think after today's incident. - He sighed and threw down the cigarette butt. - Yes, perhaps it's even better this way, that no one believes me. Let's presume that someone did believe me. They would form a commission, they would walk behind me everywhere waiting for miracles. And I'm naturally a reclusive person, and on top of everything I have lost my good disposition totally. Sometimes I don't sleep at night - I am afraid.

On the topic of the commission I did not agree with him. Because, after all, he could not produce miracles by his will. He was only the convergence of miracles, a point in space, as he said, where improbable events occur. It could not be done without a commission and without observation.

- I wrote a letter to one well-known scientist, - he continued. - In general, to tell the truth, it was about the meteorite and the water in the vase. But you see, he treated this with humour. He replied, that the meteorite fell not on me at all, but on some driver, Japanese, I think he was. I became really interested in this driver. I thought that he could perhaps also be a giant fluctuation - you understand it yourself, it is possible. But it turned out that he had died many years ago. Yes, you see... - He became lost in thought. - So I went to see a doctor anyway. It turned out, that from medicine's viewpoint, I represent nothing extraordinary. But he did find some imbalance of the nervous system and sent me here, to the sea resort. And I went. How could I have known, what will happen here?

He suddenly grasped my shoulder and whispered:

- An hour ago my girlfriend flew away!

I did not understand.

- We were walking, up there, in the park. After all, I am human and I had the most serious intentions. We met in the cafe, went for a walk in the park, and she flew away.

- Where? - I yelled.

- I don't know. We were walking, suddenly she cried out "oh oh", took off and rose up in the air. I had no time to think, just grabbed her by the foot, and here...

He shoved some hard object into my hand. It was a sandal, an ordinary light-coloured sandal medium-sized.

- You see, this is absolutely impossible, - the phenomenon was mumbling. - Chaotic movement of gas molecules, Brown's movement of particles in a live colloid became ordered, she was torn away from earth and carried somewhere I cannot even imagine. Very, very improbable... Just tell me now, please, should I consider myself a murderer?

I was shattered and stayed silent. For the first time a thought entered into my head, that perhaps he had made it all up. And he said with anguish:

- And you know, that is not even it. After all, she could have got stuck in a tree somewhere. You know, I never went looking for her, because I was afraid that I wouldn't find her. But this, you see... Before all these miracles only affected me. I really disliked fluctuations, but fluctuations, you see, really liked me. And now? If such things will start happening to my friends, too?.. Today a girl flies away, tomorrow a colleague drops through the ground, the next day... Take you even, for instance. Indeed, you are not secure against anything right now.

That I already understood myself, and I felt wondrously intrigued and creepy. How cool, I thought. Wish it were sooner! It suddenly seemed to me, that I am taking off, and I clutched the stone under me with both hands. The stranger suddenly got up.

- You know, I better go, - he said sorrowfully. - I don't like meaningless casualties. You sit here, and I will go. How did I not think of it before!

He hurriedly walked along the shore, slipping on the stones, and the suddenly shouted from a distance:

- Please forgive me, if something happens to you! You know, it all depends on me!

He was walking further and further away and soon turned into a small dark figure against the background of barely phosphorescent waves. It appeared to me that he took a swing and threw something white into the waves. Perhaps it was the sandal. That is how we parted.

Unfortunately, I could never recognise him in a crowd. Unless some miracle would happen then. I never heard anything more about him, and I think, nothing special happened at the seaside that summer. Perhaps his girl did, in fact, catch onto some tree branch, and they got married afterwards. Because he always had the most serious intentions. All I know is this. If at any time, when I am shaking a hand of a new acquaintance, I suddenly feel, that I am becoming a source of a powerful magnetic field and would also notice that my new friend smokes a lot, keeps coughing repeatedly, just like - ahem, ahem, that means that he is a phenomenon, you see, a convergence of miracles, a giant fluctuation.

Zhilin concluded his story and looked victoriously at his audience. Yura liked the story, but as always, he still did not understand, whether Zhilin had made it all up or told the truth. Just in case, he kept smiling sceptically throughout the whole story.

- Marvellous, - said Yurkovski. - But most of all I liked the moral.

- So what is this moral? - said Bykov.

- The moral is such, - Yurkovski explained. - Nothing is impossible, only the improbable exists.

- And besides that, - Zhilin said, - the world is full of wonderful things - first of all. And secondly. What do we know of probability?

- Don't try to get round me, - said Bykov and stood up. - I see that you, Ivan, are made uneasy by Michael Antonovich's literary laurels. You can include this story into your own memoirs.

- I will definitely include it, - said Zhilin. - A good story, wasn't it?

- Thank you, Vanyusha, - said Yurkovski. - You have dispersed my mood perfectly. I am curious, how he could have acquired an electro-magnetic field.

- Magnetic, - Zhilin corrected him. - He told me about the magnetic

one.

- Mm-yes, - said Yurkovski and became engrossed in thought.

After dinner the three of them stayed in the ward-room. Michael Antonovich, who had just come off his watch, climbed into Bykov's chair with enjoyment to read "The Tale of Prince Genji" before bedtime, and Yura and Zhilin settled in front of the magnetivisor screen to watch something light. The lights were dimmed in the ward-room and only the ghastly jungle played with gloomy colours, along which the pioneers walked, and the navigator's shiny bald spot gleamed under the bracket lamp. And it was totally quiet.

Zhilin had seen "The Pioneers" already, it was much more interesting for him to observe Yura and the navigator. Yura was looking at the screen, without shifting his eyes, and would only adjust the thin photodemonstrator band on his head occasionally. He really liked the pioneers, and Zhilin was chuckling to himself and was thinking, how absurd and primitive this film is, especially if you are not watching it for the first time and you are well past thirty. These exploits, resembling enraptured self-torture, absurd from beginning to end, and this commander Sanders, who ought to be removed immediately, given a dressing down and sent back to Earth as an archivist, to stop him from becoming insane and destroying innocent people without a right of contradicting him. And in the first place, finish off that hysterical Praskovina, I think that's her name, - send her alone into the jungle, if she is so dead bent on going. What a crew did they assemble! Sheer suicides with infantile intellect. The doctor wasn't too bad, but the author finished him off at the very start, seemingly so that no one would counter the idiotic plot of an insane commander.

The most amusing part is that Yura obviously cannot refuse to notice any of this, but just try pulling him away from the screen now and sit him down with, let's say, the same old prince Genji!.. Long since this has been the way and perhaps it will remain forever, that every normal youngster before a certain age will prefer the drama of chasing, pursuit, selfless destruction of one's self to the drama of the human soul, to the most delicate emotions, when nothing more complex, fascinating and tragical exists in the world... Oh, of course he will concede that Lev Tolstoi is great as a testimony to the human soul, that Galsworthy is monumental and outstanding as a sociologist, and Dimitry Stroganov knows no equal in the exploration of the inner world of the new man. But all these would be words, derived from without. The time will, of course, come, when he will be stunned, upon seeing count Andrew, alive among the living, when his breath will be taken away with horror and compassion, having understood Sommes to the end, when he will experience enormous pride, upon perceiving the dazzling sun, that shines within the soul of Strogov's Tokmakov... But this will happen later, after he will acquire experience in the workings of his own soul.

Another story - is Michael Antonovich. At this moment he had lifted his head and began staring into the darkness of the room, and in front of him right now is, of course, a distant handsome man wearing odd clothes and an odd hairdo, with a useless sword behind his sash, a delicate and sarcastic sinner, Japanese Don Juan - just the way he was when he leaped from under the quill of a brilliant Japanese woman inside a lavish and filthy Hejan palace and went off to wander the world invisible, until equally brilliant translators were found for him, too. And Michael Antonovich perceives him now in such a way as though the nine centuries and one and a half billion kilometres don't lay between them, and only he alone sees him, and Yura is not capable of it yet, and will only become capable in about five years, when into Yura's life will enter both Tokmakov, and the Forsyths, Katya and Dasha, and many, many others...

The last pioneer died beneath a hoisted flag and the screen went blank. Yura pulled the photodemonstrator off his head and spoke reflectively:

- Yeah, the movie is superbly produced.
- Delightful, - Zhilin replied seriously.
- Such people, hey? - Yura tugged a tuft of hair at the top of his head. - Like a steel blade... Heroes till their last step. Only Praskovina is somewhat artificial.

- Mm-yes, perhaps...
- But then Sanders! How much does he resemble Vladimir Sergeevich!
- To me they all resemble Vladimir Sergeevich, - said Zhilin.
- Oh, come on now! - Yura turned to look, saw Michael Antonovich and switched to a whisper: - Of course, they are all genuine, pure, but...
- Why don't we go to my quarters instead, - Zhilin suggested.

Yura was saying:

- They are all good, I am not arguing against that, but Vladimir Sergeevich - that, of course, is something totally different, he is somehow more powerful than they are, more significant...

They walked into the room. Zhilin sat down and started looking at Yura. Yura was saying:

- And what a swamp! How amazingly it was all done - brown slush with gigantic white flowers, and someone's shiny slippery skin covered with mire... And the cries of the jungle...

He became silent.

- Vanya, - he said cautiously, - I see, you found the movie not too..?
- No, what are you on about! - Zhilin said. - I have simply seen it already, plus I am also a bit old for all these swamps, Yurik. I had wandered across them and I know, what there, in fact, is...

Yura shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't pleased.

- Come on now, buddy, this is not about swamps. - Zhilin leaned on the back of his chair and assumed his favourite pose: tilted his head back, locked his fingers under it and spread his elbows wide. - And please don't think, that I am hinting at the difference between our age. No. You know, it is not true that there are kids and there are adults. In real life everything is much more complicated. There are adults and there are adults. For instance, you, me and Michael Antonovich. Would you now, being of sound mind and clear memory read "The Tale of Genji"? I read the answer on your face. And Michael Antonovich is re-reading "Genji" for almost the fifth time, whilst I had fully perceived his charm only this year... - Zhilin stayed quiet awhile and explained: - The book's charm, naturally. I had perceived Michael Antonovich's charm much earlier.

Yura was looking at him with hesitation.

- Of course, I know, that it's a classic and all that, - he declared. - But I would not be reading "Genji" five times. In it everything is intertwined, complicated... Whilst life is, essentially, simple, much more simple than it portrayed in such books.

- And life is, essentially, complicated, - said Zhilin. - Much more complicated than described by movies such as "The Pioneers". If you wish, let's try and look into it. Here is commander Sanders. He has a wife and a son. He has friends. And yet, how easily does he go off to his death. He has a conscience. How easily does he lead his people towards death...

- He had forgotten about all of that, because...

- All of that, Yurik, is never forgotten. And most important in the film should not be the part where Sanders had died a hero, but the part how he managed to make himself forget. Because his death was indeed imminent, buddy. That is not in the film, and so everything seems simple. And if it were there, you would find the film boring...

Yura was silent.

- W-Well? - said Zhilin.

- It may be so, - Yura uttered reluctantly. - But I still think, that one must treat life more simply.

- It will pass, - Zhilin promised. They stayed quiet. Zhilin, was looking at the light, squinting. Yura said:

- There is cowardice, there are exploits, there is work - interesting and uninteresting. Must it all be confused and then pass cowardice for a heroic feat and vice versa?

- And who is confusing it, who is that bastard? - Zhilin cried out.

Yura began laughing.

- I have just pictured schematically, how it can be in some books. They will take some character, drool all over him and then you get what is called "an elegant paradox" or "a contradictory figure". And he is a character's character. Same as Genji.

- We are all horses a bit, - Zhilin said with heartfelt sincerity. - Each one of us is a horse in our own way. Its life that mixes it all up. Her majesty life. That blessed scamp. Life compels proud Yurkovski to beg implacable Bykov. Life compels Bykov to refuse his best friend. So which one of them is a horse, that is, a character? Life forces Zhilin, who is entirely in agreement with Bykov's iron policy, to conjure up a fairy tale about a giant fluctuation, so that he can somehow express his protest against the very immutability of this policy. Zhilin is also a character. All drool and no firm convictions. And the famous vacuum-welder Borodin? Did he not perceive the meaning of life in laying his life at a suitable altar? And who made him doubt it - not with logic, but simply with a facial expression? A rotting tavernkeeper from the Wild West. He made you doubt things, ey?

- W-well... in some sort of sense...

- Now, isn't that Borodin a character? Now, isn't life simple? You have chosen a principle for yourself - and off you go. But the only good in principles is that they grow obsolete. They become obsolete faster than people do, and people are only left with the ones dictated by history alone. For instance, in our age history had bluntly announced to all Yurkovski's: enough! No discoveries are worth a single human life. Risking one's life is only allowed for the sake of life. People didn't make this up. History dictated this, and people only made this history. But there, where general principles clash with individual principles - there simple life ends and a complex one begins. Such is life.

- Yes, - said Yura. - Perhaps.

They became quiet, and again Zhilin experience an agonising sense of split personality, that wouldn't leave him for a few years already. As though each time, when he leaves on a voyage, on Earth remains some incredibly important business, a thing most important to all people, incredibly important, more important than the rest of the Universe, more important than the most wonderful creations at the hands of the humanity.

Back on Earth remained people, youngsters, kids. There remained millions and millions of these Yurik's, and Zhilin felt that he can really help them. No matter where. In a boarding school. Or in a community club. Or in a Youth centre. Help them enter life, help them find themselves, determine their place in the world, teach them a desire for many things at once, teach them to want to work without obstacles.

Teach them not to bow down to authority, but to study it and compare its teachings with life.

Teach them to treat the experience of wise people with caution, because life changes remarkably quickly.

Teach them to despise the wisdom of petty bourgeois.

Teach them, that to love and to cry because of love is not shameful.

Teach them, that scepticism and cynicism in life both cost cheap, that this is much easier and much more boring than to wonder at and find joy in life.

Teach them to trust the movements of the soul of those closest to them.

Teach them, that it's better to be disappointed twenty times in one person, than to treat everyone with suspicion.

Teach them, that the point is not in what influence others may have on you, but in how you influence other people.

And teach them, that one person is worth nothing alone.

Yura sighed and said:

- Vanya, let's play a game of chess.

Let's, - said Zhilin.

<h2>DIONA. ON ALL FOURS.</h2>

Yurkovski had known the observatory director on Diona for a long time, back when the director was still a post-graduate student in the Institute of planetology. Vladislav Kimovich Shershen was then attending Yurkovski's special course "Giant planets". Yurkovski remembered him and admired his audacious intellect and exceptional sense of purpose.

Shershen walked out to meet his old former mentor at the caisson.

- Really now, didn't expect seeing you here, - he was saying, leading Vladimir Sergeevich under the arm to his office.

Shershen was no longer the same. There no longer existed a tall dark-haired lad, always tanned and a little melancholic. Shershen had turned pale; he became bold, obese and kept smiling all the time.

- Really I didn't expect you! - he kept saying with delight. - How is it that you have decided to visit us, Vladimir Sergeevich? And no one ever informed us...

In the office he sat Yurkovski behind his desk, moving aside a spring press with a pile of photocorrections, and sat himself at the low chair opposite him. Yurkovski was gazing around, nodding favourably. The office was small and bare. A true scientist's work post at an interplanetary station. And Vladislav himself matched the place well. He was wearing worn-out, but well-pressed overalls with rolled sleeves, his full face was thoroughly shaven, and a limp semi-grey tuft on top of his head was well combed.

- Indeed you have aged, Vladislav, - Yurkovski said with regret. - And... er... your form is not the same. I remember you were an athlete, Vladislav.

- Six years here, almost without leave, Vladimir Sergeevich, - Shershen said. - Gravity pull here is fifty times less than on the planet, exhausting myself with expanders, like our youngsters do, I cannot afford to for lack of time, plus my heart is playing up also, so I grow fat. And what use would I have for slenderness, Vladimir Sergeevich? My wife doesn't care what I look like, and to lose weight for the sake of girls - I don't have the same temperament, and my position precludes me, as well...

They laughed together.

- But you, Vladimir Sergeevich, have changed little.

- Yes, - said Yurkovski. - Less hair, more sense.

- What's new at the institute? - Shershen asked. - How is Gabdul Kadyrovich doing?

- Gabdul is stuck, - said Yurkovski. - Waiting keenly for your results, Vladislav. In fact, the entire Saturn planetology rests on you. You have spoiled them, Vladislav... er... really spoiled.

- Well, then, - said Shershen, - we won't hold things up. Next year we will begin deep launches... I only wish you would boost me up with people, Vladimir Sergeevich, with specialists. Experienced, solid specialists...

- Specialists, - Yurkovski said, chuckling. - Everybody needs specialists. Only that, incidentally, is your task, Vladislav, to prepare specialists. You, you must supply them to the institute, not the institute to you. And I have heard that Muller had left you to go to Tefia. Even what we had given you, you have squandered.

Shershen shook his head.

- Dear Vladimir Sergeevich, - he said, - I need to work here, not to raise specialists. Big deal, Muller. Ok, he is an all right atmosphericist, with two tens of O.K. papers. But then we have to carry out the program on Diona, not go around chasing crafty-minded Mullers. And let the institute

keep people like this Muller to itself. Nobody will fall for them. And here we need young, disciplined people... Who is now running the coordination department? Is it still Barkan?

- Yes, - said Yurkovski.

- That's what it looks like.

- Come on, now, Vladislav, Barkan is a good worker. But right now five new observatories have opened in Space. And they all need people.

- Well, come on then, comrades! - said Shershen. - One must use sense when planning! We have extra observatories, and no additional specialists? This can't go on!

- Alright, - said Yurkovski cheerfully, - your... err... displeasure, Vladislav, I will most certainly pass onto Barkan. And in general, Vladislav, get your complaints and objections ready. About people, about equipment. Seize the moment, Vladislav, since for the time being I am invested with power to sanction and to arrest, under the highest authority, Vladislav. - Shershen raised his eyebrows in wonder. - Yes, Vladislav, you are talking to IBCC's chief inspector.

Shershen jerked his head up.

- Oh... so that's how it is? - he said slowly. - I really didn't expect! - He suddenly started smiling again. - And I am twisting my brains, like an idiot: how did it happen, that the head of global planetology had so suddenly, without warning... I am interested, what aspersions have cost our little Diona the honour of the chief's visit?

They laughed again.

- Look... err... Vladislav, - said Yurkovski. - We are happy with the observatory's work, you know that. I am really pleased with you, Vladislav. You work... err... with distinction. And I was not at all going to trouble you in my, how shall I put it... err... official capacity. But then there is that same question over people. You see, Vladislav, a certain - I would even call it legitimate - doubt is raised by the fact that you have... err... say, here you have finished twenty projects during the last year. Good projects. Some of them simply superb. For instance... err... this one, about the determination of exospheric sections depth according to the configuration of ring shadows. Yes. Good works. But there's not a single independent one among them. Shershen and Shatrova... A question crops up: where do you have just Averin and Shatrova? Where is simply Svirski? That is, one gets the impression, that you are leading your youngsters on a pair of braces. Naturally, results are most important, nobody judges the victors... err... but with all your workload you have no right to neglect the training of specialists. Because, sooner or later, they will have to work independently. And, in turn, teach other people. How does it work with you?

- It's a legitimate question, Vladimir Sergeevich, - said Shershen, after a moment of silence. - But how do I answer it - I can't imagine. And it looks suspicious. I would even say, nasty. You know, I have tried to refuse co-authorship a number of times already, simply to save face. And can you imagine, the guys won't let me. And I understand them! Take Tolya Kravetz. - He tapped his hand on photocorrections. - A superb observer. A master of precision measurement. A wonderful engineer. But... - he made a helpless gesture, - he doesn't have enough practical experience, or something, I don't know... Enormous, most fascinating observations' material - and a virtually complete lack of ability to conduct a quality analysis of the results. You see, Vladimir Sergeevich, I am a scientist, it hurts me to see this material going to waste, and to publish it in raw form, to let Gabdul Kadyrovich draw the conclusions, is also, not the best idea, you know. I can't help it, I sit down and begin interpreting it personally. And then... the boy also has his pride... That's how you get Shershen and Kravetz.

- Mm-yeah, - said Yurkovski. - It happens. Don't you worry, Vladislav, no one is contemplating anything grave... We know you perfectly well. Yes,

Anatoly Kravetz. I think I do... err... remember him. Such a solid fellow. Very well mannered. Yes-yes, I remember. He was a really hard-working student, as I recall. Somehow I imagined he is on Earth, at Abastumaine... Er... yeah. You know what, Vladislav, tell me about your staff, please. I have already forgotten all of them.

- Well, - said Shershen. - That is not difficult. There are only eight of us here on entire Diona. Now, we can exclude Ditz and Oleneva, they are control engineers. Great, talented guys, not one accident in three years. We also won't talk about me, so in we are left with only five in total, astronomers, in fact. Now, there is Averin. An astrophysicist. I anticipate he will become a really valuable contributor, but he still squanders a lot of his efforts. Personally I've never appreciated that in others. That's why it never worked out between Muller and me. Right. Svirski, Vitaly. Also an astrophysicist.

- Hold on, hold on, - said Yurkovski, his face brightening. - Averin and Svirski! Yes, how can I... They were a wonderful pair! I recall, once I was in a cranky mood and failed Averin, and Svirski refused to be examined by me. It was a really touching rebellion, I recall... Yes, they were great friends.

- Now things have cooled down between them, - Shershen said ruefully.

- But what... err... had happened?

- A girl, - Shershen said crossly. - They both fell head over heels for Zina Shatrova...

- I remember! - Yurkovski exclaimed. - This tiny one, lively, eyes blue like... err... forget-me-nots. Everyone courted her and she would keep dismissing it with jokes. A really cheery girl, that one.

- Now she no longer cheery, - Shershen said. - I am lost in all these matters of the heart, Vladimir Sergeevich. No, it is your call. I have always spoken out against you on this matter, and will keep speaking out. There is no place for young girls on remote bases, Vladimir Sergeevich.

- Leave it, Vladislav, - said Yurkovski, frowning.

- That's not the point, after all. Though I also expected a great deal from this pair - Averin and Svirski. But they requested unconnected research subjects. Now their old theme is being developed by Averin and myself, and Svirski is working on his own. So, about Svirski. Calm, composed, though a little phlegmatic. I intend to leave him as my deputy when I go on leave. Not fully confident yet, must be assisted. Now, I have told you about Tolya Kravetz. Zina Shatrova... - Shershen became quiet and scratched the back of his head vigorously - A girl! - he said. - Knowledgeable, of course, but... She has this, you know, vagueness over everything. Emotions. However, I don't have any specific issues with her work. I guess she justifies her being on Diona. And, finally, Bazanov.

Shershen fell silent and became absorbed in thought. Yurkovski threw a quick glance at the photocorrections, then he couldn't resist and moved the lid off the press, covering the title page. "Shershen and Kravetz, - he read. - The dust composite of Saturn's bands". He sighed and began staring at Shershen.

- So what is it then? - he asked. - What about... err... Bazanov?

- Bazanov - is a great worker, - Shershen said decisively. - A little impulsive, but has an able, clear mind. Though, it is somewhat hard to deal with him.

- Bazanov... Somehow I can't recall... What does he do?

- An atmosphericist. You know, Vladimir Sergeevich, he is so punctilious. The project is ready, Muller was helping him as well, and it's time to publish it - but no! He is still unhappy with something, something seems unfounded to him... You know, there are such... Really self-critical people. Self-critical and stubborn. We have been using his findings for a long time already... It becomes a silly situation, we have no opportunity to make references. But, frankly speaking, I am not worried too much. And he is also awfully stubborn and irritable.

- Yes, - said Yurkovski. - Such a... err... really independent student he was. Yes... really. - He stretched his hand out to the photocorrections, as if by accident, and began shuffling through them, as though his mind was absent. - Yes... err... interesting. And this particular project I have not yet seen, Vladislav, - he said.

- This is my latest one, - Shershen said with a smile. - I will, most likely, deliver the corrections to Earth myself, when I take my leave. Paradoxical results have been obtained, Vladimir Sergeevich. Simply marvellous! Just look here...

Shershen rounded the table and bent down to Yurkovski. There was a knock on the door.

- Excuse me, Vladimir Sergeevich, - said Shershen and stood up straight. - Come in!

A pale bony fellow, bent in two, crouched through a low oval-shaped hatch. Yurkovski recognised him - this was Petya Bazanov, good-natured, very even-handed boy, smart and kind. Yurkovski already began smiling favourably, but Bazanov only gave him a cold nod, walked to the table and laid the folder before Shershen.

- The calculations, - he said. - Coefficients of absorption.

Yurkovski said calmly:

- What is it Peter... err... forgot your patronymic, you don't even wish to say good day to me?

Bazanov slowly turned his lean face towards him and, squinting his eyes, looked in his direction.

- I beg your pardon, Vladimir Sergeevich, - he said. - How are you? I am afraid, I was a bit out of line.

- I am afraid, you have really stepped a little out of line, Bazanov, - Shershen said in a low voice.

Bazanov shrugged his shoulders and walked out, slamming the hatch behind him. Yurkovski stood up sharply, and he was carried up from behind the desk. Shershen caught him by the hand.

- Magnetic boots here are supposed to be kept on the floor, comrade chief inspector, - he said, laughing. - This isn't your "Takhmaseeb".

Yurkovski was looking at the closed hatch. Is this really Bazanov, he thought with amazement.

Shershen's look became serious.

- Don't be amazed by Bazanov's behaviour, - he said. - We have had a squabble with him over these coefficients of absorption. He finds it below his dignity to calculate these coefficients and has been terrorising the observatory for two days now.

Yurkovski narrowed his eyebrows, trying to remember. Then he waved his hand.

- Let's forget it, - he said. - Alright, Vladislav, show us your paradoxes.

From "Takhmaseeb's" reactor coil a thin cord was stretched across the rocky plain to the cylindrical elevator tower. Yura was moving gradually and cautiously along the line, feeling content, that his weightlessness training did not go to waste. Ahead of him, about fifty paces ahead, Michael Antonovich's space suit was gleaming in Saturn's yellow light.

The giant crescent of Saturn peeked from behind his shoulder. Ahead of them, above the near horizon a greenish waning moon shone brightly - this was Titan, the largest satellite of Saturn and the biggest in the entire solar system. Yura turned to look at Saturn. The rings could not be seen from Diona, Yura only saw a thin silvery ray, dissecting the crescent in half. The unlit part of Saturn's disk was weakly shimmering with green light. Somewhere behind Saturn Rhea was moving now.

Michael Antonovich waited for Yura, and together they pushed through the low semi-circular trap door. The observatory was located underground, on

the surface remained only the meshed interferometer towers and antennae parabolae, which resembled colossal saucers. In the caisson, whilst getting out of the space suit, Michael Antonovich said:

- Yurik, I'll go to the library, and you might want to go for a wander, see things around here, the crew here are all young, you will make friends quickly... And then I will meet you in about two hours... Or you can go straight back to ship...

He patted Yura on the shoulder and clanking his magnetic bootcaps walked down the corridor to the left. The corridor was spherical, lined with matted plastic, with just a narrow steel pathway under his feet, scratched by bootcaps everywhere. Pipes stretched along the corridor, something was bubbling and gurgling in them. The air smelled of pine forest and heated metal.

Yura walked past an open hatch. There was nobody inside, only multi-coloured lights flashed on control panels. So quiet, thought Yura. Nobody to be seen or heard. He turned into an adjacent corridor and heard music. Somewhere, someone was playing a guitar, drawing out a sad melody, confidently and unhurriedly. Is it like this on Rhea as well? - Yura thought all of a sudden. He liked when it was noisy, when everyone stayed together, and laughed, and made jokes, and sang. He felt blue. Then he thought, that everyone here is, probably, working but still could not manage to shrug off the impression that people cannot avoid being bored inside empty round corridors - whether here or on other distant planets. Most likely, it was the guitar's fault.

Then right above his ear someone said in a spiteful voice: "Now this has nothing to do with you any more! Do you understand? Nothing whatsoever!" Yura stopped. The corridor was still empty. Another voice, gentle and pleading, said:

- I did not mean any harm, Vitaly. You know, no one needs this, neither you, nor her, nor Vladislav Kimovich. Nobody at all. I just wanted to tell you...

A spiteful voice interrupted him:

- I have heard it before and I am sick of it! Just leave me alone, you and your Averin, don't poke into my affairs! I am only asking one thing: let me finish my three years - and you can all go to hell...

On Yura's left a hatch flipped open and a light-haired fellow jumped into the corridor. His pale hair was messed up, his flushed face in a twist. He shut the hatch noisily with satisfaction and stopped in front of Yura. They were looking at each other for about a minute.

- Who are you? - the light-haired fellow asked.

- I am... - said Yura, - I am from "Takhmaseeb".

- Oh, - said the light-haired fellow with disgust. - Another favourite pet!

He walked around Yura and started fast down the corridor, repeatedly flying up to the ceiling and mumbling: "Why don't you all go to hell! To hell, all of you..." Yura followed him with a cold: "Have you jammed your finger or something, young man?" The light-haired one did not even turn.

Well, well, thought Yura. This place is not so boring, after all.

He turned to the hatch and discovered another person standing before him, most likely the one who talked in a pleading voice. He was solidly built, broad-shouldered and dressed not without elegance. He had a nice haircut and a sad pink-cheeked face.

- Are you from the "Takhmaseeb"? - he asked quietly, nodding amicably.

- Yes, - said Yura.

- With Vladimir Sergeevich Yurkovski? How are you, - the man stretched out his hand. - My name is Kravetz. Anatoly. Will you be working with us?

- No, - said Yura. - I am just passing through.

- Oh, just passing? - said Kravetz. He was still holding Yura's hand. His hand was dry and cool.

- Yuri Borodin, - said Yura.

- Nice to meet you, - said Kravetz and released Yura's hand. - So you are passing through. Tell me, Yura, has Vladimir Sergeevich really come here for an inspection?

- Don't know, - said Yura.

Kravetz's pink face became totally dismal.

- Yes, well of course, you wouldn't know... Over here, you see, this obscure rumour has spread... How long have you known Vladimir Sergeevich?

- A month, - Yura said with reluctance. He already understood, that he doesn't like Kravetz. Perhaps, because he talked to the light-haired fellow in a pleading voice. Or maybe, because he kept asking questions all the time.

- Well, I know him better, - said Kravetz. - I studied under him. - He suddenly realised something. - Why are we standing here? Come on in!

Yura stepped into the hatch. This seemed to be the computer laboratory. Transparent sections of computer processors stretched along the walls. In the centre was a matted white control panel and a large desk piled with documents and diagrams. On the desk stood a few smaller electric machines for manual calculations.

- This is our brain, - said Kravetz. - Have a seat.

Yura remained standing. The silence became protracted.

- We have the same machine on "Takhmaseeb", - Yura informed him.

- Right now everyone is on observations, - said Kravetz. - You see, no one is here. We, generally, do a lot of observation work. Doing really long hours. Time just flies by without anyone noticing. Sometimes we have such fights over our work... - he waved his hand and laughed. - Our astrophysicists have had a total falling out. Each one has his own idea, and each one considers the other to be a fool. They communicate through me. And, in turn, I must cope with the flak.

Kravetz stopped talking and looked at Yura with anticipation.

- Oh well, - said Yura, looking down. - It happens.

Of course, he thought, no one wants to wash others dirty linen.

- There are only a few of us here, - said Kravetz, - we are all really busy, our director, Vladislav Kimovich, is a really nice person, but he is also busy. So at first it might seem, that everything is really boring around here. But the truth is, we all sit here with our work around the clock.

He looked at Yura with anticipation once more. Yura said politely:

- Yes, of course, what else would one do here. Cosmos is really for work, and not for amusements. Though it is really somewhat empty around here. Just one guitar playing somewhere.

- Ah, - said Kravetz, with a smile, - this is our Ditz immersed in thought.

The hatch opened and a small girl with a great pile of papers pushed awkwardly into the laboratory. She closed the hatch with her shoulder and looked at Yura. Perhaps she had just woken up - her eyes were a little swollen.

- Good day, - said Yura.

The girl moved her lips soundlessly and quietly walked to the table. Kravetz said:

- This is Zina Shatrova. And this, Zinochka, is Yuri Borodin, he arrived together with Vladimir Sergeevich Yurkovski.

The girl nodded, without lifting her eyes. Yura was trying to grasp, are all of those people who had come with Yurkovski on "Takhmaseeb" being treated so oddly. He looked at Kravetz. Kravetz was looking at Zina and, it seemed, was calculating something. Zina was quietly going through the papers. When she moved an electric calculator towards her and began clicking loudly on the number keys, Kravetz turned to Yura and said:

- Well, Yura, would you like to...

The soft singing of a radiophone call interrupted him. He excused himself and hastily pulled a radiophone from his pocket.

- Anatoly? - a dense voice asked.
- Yes, this is me, Vladislav Kimovich.
- Anatoly, please go and visit Bazanov. He is in the library.
Kravetz looked at Yura.

- I have here... - he began saying.
The voice in the radiophone suddenly grew distant.

- Welcome, Vladimir Sergeevich... Yes-yes, I have prepared the schematic diagrams...

Rapid busy signals came through. Kravetz shoved the telephone into his pocket and looked hesitantly at Zina and at Yura.

- I must leave, - he said. - The director has asked me to help our atmosphericist... Zina, be so kind, show the observatory to our guest. Don't forget, he is Vladimir Sergeevich's good friend, we must accommodate him as well as we can.

Zina made no reply. It seemed she did not hear Kravetz and only lowered her face closer to the machine. Kravetz grinned a sad smile at Yura, raised his eyebrows, lifted his hands slightly and left.

Yura walked to the control panel and looked furtively at the girl. She had a pretty and somewhat hopelessly weary face. What does it all mean: "has Vladimir Sergeevich really come here for an inspection?" "Don't forget, he is Vladimir Sergeevich's good friend". "Go to hell, all of you!" Yura sensed, that all this means something nasty. He felt a pressing urge to get involved in something. It was decidedly impossible to go away and leave everything the way it was. He looked at Zina again. The girl was diligently doing her work. Never before did he see such a pretty girl being so sad and quiet. Surely someone must have hurt her, he thought suddenly. It's clear as day, that someone had hurt her. A person is hurt before your eyes - and it is your fault, - he remembered unconsciously. Alright, then...

- What's this? - Yura asked in a loud voice and poked his finger at random at one of the blinking lamps. Zina shuddered and lifted her head.

- That? - she said. She lifted her eyes to him for the first time. Here eyes were incredibly blue and big. Yura said bravely:

- Exactly, that one.

Zina was still looking at him.

- Tell me, - she asked, - will you be working here with us?

- No, - said Yura and walked close to the table. - I am not going to work here with you. I am just passing. And I am no friend of Vladimir Sergeevich, we are only slightly acquainted. And I am no favourite pet. I am a vacuum-welder.

She brushed her hand over her face.

- Hold on, - she mumbled. - A vacuum-welder? Why a vacuum-welder?

- And why not? - said Yura. He sensed, that in some inconceivable way this is of outmost importance, and for this pretty sad girl it is really good, that he is precisely a vacuum-welder, and not someone different. Never before had he been so glad that he is a vacuum-welder.

- I am sorry, - said the girl. - I confused you with someone else.

- With whom?

- Don't know. I was thinking... I don't know. It doesn't matter.

Yura walked around the table and stood at her side, looking at her from above.

- Tell me, please, - he demanded.

- What?

- Everything. Everything that goes on here.

And suddenly Yura saw, how quick droplets began falling onto the shiny polished desktop. He felt a lump at his throat.

- Come on, not this, - he said grumpily.

Zina shook her head. He looked at the hatch with alarm and said firmly:

- Stop bawling! What a shame!

She lifted her head. Her face was damp and pitiful, eyes swelled even more.

- Try... like this... yourself, - she uttered. He produced a handkerchief and placed it on her wet palm. She began wiping her cheeks.

- Who did this to you? - Yura asked quietly. - Kravetz? Then I will now go and smash his face in, do you want me to?

She folded the handkerchief and tried to smile. The she asked:

- Listen, are you really a vacuum-welder?

- Really. But please, just don't cry. It's my first meeting with a person, who cries when they see a vacuum-welder.

- And is true that Yurkovski had brought his protege to the observatory?

- What protege? - Yura was amazed.

- They have been talking here, that Yurkovski wants to place some favourite astrophysicist of his at Diona...

- What sort of garbage is this? - said Yura. - On board there is only the crew, Yurkovski and I. No astrophysicists.

- Is it true?

- Of course it is true! And just to think - Yurkovski's favourites! One must really think hard for this! Who had told you this? Kravetz?

She shook her head again.

- Alright, - Yura found a chair with his foot and sat on it. - Go on and tell me anyway. Tell me everything. Did someone hurt you?

- No one, - she said quietly. - I am simply a poor achiever. With unbalanced psyche as well, - she smiled gloomily. - Our director doesn't like women at the observatory, in general. I am thankful he did not reassign me back on the Planet. I would die from shame if that had happened. On Earth I would have had to change professions. And I really do not want to. Here, although I cannot get anything finished, at least I am at the observatory, with a prominent scientist. You know, I really love all this work, - she swallowed spasmodically. - You know, I used to think this was my calling...

Yura said through clenched teeth:

- I have never seen a person who enjoys their work and who cannot accomplish anything.

Her shoulder twitched.

- You like your work, don't you?

- Yes.

- And you cannot get anything done?

- I am giftless, - she said.

- How can this be?

- Don't know.

Yura bit his lip and began thinking.

- Listen, - he said. - Listen, Zina, and what about the rest of you here?

- Who?

- Other guys...

Zina sighed convulsively.

- Here they have become totally different from what they were like on Earth. Bazanov hates everyone, and these two fools have imagined god knows what, had a complete falling out and now won't talk neither to me nor with each other...

- And Kravetz?

- Kravetz - is a lackey, - she said with indifference. - He doesn't give a damn about anything. - She suddenly looked at him in confusion. - But please don't tell anyone what I had told you now. Otherwise my life here will be absolute hell. There will be all kinds of reproachful comments, general discussions about the essence of female nature...

Yura looked at her with narrowed eyes.

- How can this be? - he said. - And nobody knows about this?

- And who would be interested? - She smiled miserably. - You know, the best of all distant observatories...

The hatch flipped open. The recently seen light-haired fellow pushed

his torso into the room, gazed at Yura, wrinkling his nose in displeasure, then glanced at Zina and began gazing at Yura again. Zina stood up.

- Let me introduce you, - she said in a trembling voice. - This is Svirski, Vitaly Svirski, an astrophysicist. And this is Yuri Borodin...

- Turning over your duties? - Svirski inquired in an ill-tempered tone. - Alright, do not let me disturb you.

He started closing the hatch, but Yura raised his hand.

- One minute, - he said.

- You can have five, - Svirski grinned obligingly. - But on another occasion. And right now I do not wish to disrupt your tete-e-tete, dear colleague.

Zina sighed quietly and covered her face with one hand.

- I am not your colleague, idiot, - Yura uttered quietly and walked at Svirski. Svirski was looking at him with frenzied eyes. - And we'll talk right now, do you understand? But first of all you will apologise to the girl, for being a swine.

Yura was five steps away from the hatch, when Svirski, with a bestially jutted jaw began climbing into the room towards him.

Bykov was pacing along the ward-room, hands behind his back and head lowered. Zhilin was leaning against the door leading to the command post. Yurkovski, with his fingers clenched, was sitting behind the table. All three of them were listening to Michael Antonovich. Michael Antonovich was talking passionately and excitedly, pressing his short hand into the left side of his chest.

- ...And believe me, Voloden'ka, never in my life have I heard that much dirt about anyone. Everybody is nasty and stupid, only Bazanov is the good one. You see, Shershen is a tyrant and a dictator, he'd exhausted everyone, boldly dictating his will. Everyone is afraid of him. There was one courageous man on Diona, Muller, and even he was ousted by Shershen, you see. No-no, Bazanov does not denounce Shershen's scientific achievements, you see, he even admires them, and the fact that the observatory enjoys such fame is precisely Shershen's merit, but at the same time, you see, inside it reigns absolute decadence. Shershen has a special informer and provocateur, this talentless Kravetz. This Kravetz, you see, eavesdrops on everyone and then peaches against them, and then, on director's orders spreads rumours and causes quarrels between everyone. Divide and reign, so to speak. Incidentally, whilst we were talking, this poor fellow Kravetz walked into the library to get some book. How did Bazanov yell at him! "Get the hell out!" - he screamed. Poor Kravetz, such a nice sympathetic young man, didn't even have a chance to introduce himself. He blushed all over and left, didn't even take his book. Naturally, I could not hold back and reprimanded Bazanov thoroughly. I told him straight: "What are you doing, Petya? How can you be like this?"

Michael Antonovich caught his breath and wiped his face with a handkerchief.

- Well, so, - he continued. - You see, Bazanov is incredibly morally upright. He cannot bear, when someone is courting someone else. There is a young crewmember here, Zina, an astrophysicist, so he endowed her with two simultaneous suitors and then imagined that they had a fight over of her. And she, you see, makes advances on this and that one, whilst they are like fighting cocks... Although he himself, keep this in mind, admits that these are mere rumours, he maintains that a fact remains a fact and all three had had a falling out. Moreover, Bazanov doesn't just have squabbles with all the astronomers, he had drawn the control engineers into his squabbles, too. Everyone is a moron, milksop, no one knows how to work, half-educated lot... My hair stood on end, when I was hearing this! Just think about it, Voloden'ka... Do you know whom he sees as the chief culprit behind all this?

Michael Antonovich drew an effectual pause. Bykov stopped and looked at

him. Yurkovski, squinting heavily, was twisting his flabby cheeks.

- You! - said Michael Antonovich in a broken voice. - I could not believe my ears! The chief inspector of IBCC covers up all these disgraceful things, more so, he hauls some mysterious protege's around the laboratories, finds places for them, whilst the ordinary workers he fires for some petty mistake and sends them back to Earth. That everywhere he had fixed his puppets, ones like Shershen! That I could no longer bear. I told him: "Excuse me, - I said, - my dear boy, kindly mind what you are saying".

Michael Antonovich drew another breath and fell quiet. Bykov began pacing across the ward-room.

- Right, - said Yurkovski. - How did your conversation end?

Michael Antonovich said proudly:

- I could not stand to listen to him any more. I couldn't listen to all the dirt poured over you, Voloden'ka, and over the crew of the best distant observatory. I got up, bid him an acrimonious farewell and left. I hope he was ashamed of himself.

Yurkovski was sitting with his eyes lowered. Bykov said with a smirk:

- You have got them living a fine life on your bases, chief inspector. In peace and harmony.

- If I were in your place, Voloden'ka, I would take measures, - said Michael Antonovich. - Bazanov must be returned to Earth removing his right to work on distant stations. Such people are indeed really dangerous, Voloden'ka, you know that yourself...

Yurkovski spoke, without lifting his eyes:

- Very well. Thank you, Michael. Measures will have to be taken.

Zhilin said quietly:

- Perhaps, he is simply worn out?

- Does it make anyone's life easier? - said Bykov.

- Yes, - said Yurkovski and sighed heavily. - Bazanov will have to be removed.

From the corridor a hurried tapping of magnetic soles could be heard.

- Yura is coming back, - said Zhilin.

- Well then, let's have dinner, - said Bykov. - Are you eating dinner with us, Vladimir?

- No. I am having dinner with Shershen. I still have a lot of matters to arrange with him.

Zhilin was standing at the entrance to the command post and saw Yura first. His eyes bulged and he lifted his eyebrows. Then everyone else turned to Yura.

- What is the meaning of this, probationer? - Bykov inquired.

- What's with you, Yurik? - exclaimed Michael Antonovich?

Yura looked blameworthy. A red and blue bruise covered his left eye, nose was deformed, lips swollen and gone black. He was holding his left hand suspended, the fingers of his right hand were stuck round with plaster. Dark, hastily washed stains could be seen on the front of his jacket.

- I had a fight, - Yura said gloomily.

- Who did you have a fight with, probationer?

- I fought with Svirski.

- Who is that?

- It's a young astrophysicist at the observatory, - Yurkovski explained impetuously. - Why did you have a fight, cadet?

- He insulted a girl, - said Yura. He was looking straight into Zhilin's eyes. - I demanded that he apologised.

- Well?

- Well, and we had a fight.

Zhilin gave a barely noticeable nod of approval. Yurkovski stood up, walked around the cabin and stopped in front of Yura, hands shoved deep into his pockets.

- This is how I see it, cadet, - he said coldly, - that you have caused a reprehensible debauch at the observatory.

- No, - said Yura.
- You have bashed up an observatory crewmember.
- Yes, - said Yura. - But I couldn't do otherwise. I had to make him apologise.

- Did you? - Zhilin asked quickly.
Yura wavered a bit, then said evasively:

- Basically, he made an apology. Later.

Yurkovski said with irritation:

- Hell, Ivan, what does this have to do with anything?

- Forgive me, Vladimir Sergeevich, - Ivan said humbly.

Yurkovski turned to Yura again.

- Anyway, that was a debauch, - he said. - It looks that way, in any event. Listen, cadet, I quite readily believe that you acted with best intention, but you will have to apologise.

- To whom? - Yura asked immediately.

- First of all, to Svirski, of course.

- And secondly?

- Secondly, you will have to apologise to the director of the observatory.

- No! - said Yura.

- You will have to.

- No.

- What does it mean - no? You have started a fight in his observatory. That is despicable. And you are refusing to apologise?

- I won't apologise to a scumbag, - Yura said in an even voice.

- Quiet, probationer! - roared Bykov.

Silence set in. Michael Antonovich was sighing lamentfully and shaking his head. Yurkovski was staring at Yura in amazement.

Zhilin suddenly pushed away from the wall, came up to Yura and laid a hand on his shoulder.

- Forgive me, Alexey Petrovich, - he said. - I think, we ought to let probationer Borodin tell us everything as it happened, in order.

- And who is stopping him? - Bykov said annoyed. It was obvious, that he is really displeased with the entire situation.

- Tell us, Yura, - said Zhilin.

- What is there to tell? - Yura began quietly. Then he started to yell:
- This must be seen! And heard! These idiots must be rescued immediately! You keep saying - observatory, observatory! But this is a brothel! People cry here, do you understand? They cry!

- Easy, cadet, - said Yurkovski.

- I can't take it easy! You are telling me to apologise... I am not going to apologise to an inquisitor! To a bastard, who sets dummies against each other and against a girl! Where are your eyes, chief inspector? This entire establishment is long overdue for an evacuation to Earth, they will soon get on all fours, and they will start biting each other!

- Calm down and tell us what happened, in order, - said Zhilin.

And Yura did tell. How he met Zina Shatrova, and how she cried, and how he understood, that he must get involved immediately, and he began with Svirski, who had grown so primitive with fur, that believed all kinds of foul things about a girl he loved. How he made Averin and Svirski have a "heart-to-heart" talk with one another, and how they discovered that Svirski never called Averin giftless and a sucker up, and that Averin did not even suspect being repeatedly expelled from Zina's room late at night. How they took the guitar away from controller Ditz and found out that he had never spread any rumours about Bazanov and Tanya Oleneva... And how it instantly became apparent, that it was all the doing of Kravetz, and that Shershen cannot be unaware of it, and that he is, in fact, the biggest scoundrel...

- The guys have sent me to you, Vladimir Sergeevich, so that you would do something. And you'd better do something, otherwise they will act themselves... They are ready to.

Yurkovski was sitting in his chair behind the desk, and his face was so old and pitiful, that Yura stopped and looked at Zhilin in confusion. But Zhilin gave him another barely noticeable nod.

- You will answer for these words also, - Shershen muttered through clenched teeth.

- Shut up! - yelled the little dark-skinned Averin, sitting next to Yura. - Don't you dare interrupt us! Comrades, how dares he interrupt us all the time?

Yurkovski waited for the commotion to settle and continued:

- All this is so sickening, that I have altogether excluded any possibility of such a phenomenon, and it took an involvement by a complete stranger, a young boy, just to... Yeah. Disgusting. I did not expect that of you, my young ones. How easy was it - to restore you to the primeval state, place you on all fours: three years, one ambitious maniac and one provincial intriguer. And you yielded to it, grew feral, lost your human face... Young, cheerful, decent guys... Such a shame!

Yurkovski made a pause and looked the astronomers over. All this is useless now, he thought. They don't have time for me now. They were sitting in a pack and looking at Shershen and Kravetz with hatred.

- Alright. A new director will be sent to you from Titan. For two days you may hold meetings and think. Do think. You, poor and weak ones, I am telling you: think! And now leave.

They got up and, heads sunken, went out of the cabinet. Shershen also stood up and, balancing ridiculously on magnetic soles, came up close to Yurkovski.

- This is autocracy, - he said hoarsely. - You are disrupting the observatory's schedule.

Yurkovski distanced him with repulse.

- Listen, Shershen, - he said. - I would shoot myself if I were you.

<h2>"RING-1". THE BALLAD ABOUT A ONE-LEGGED ALIEN.</h2>

- You know, - said Bykov, - looking at Yurkovski above his glasses and above the "Metal Physics", - come to think of it, Shershen actually considers himself to be undeservedly insulted. After all, it's the best observatory and so on...

- Shershen doesn't interest me, - said Yurkovski. He slammed his folder shut and stretched out. - What I am interested in, is how could these guys come to such an existence... And Shershen - he is dust, a small fry.

Bykov kept thinking for a few minutes.

- And what would it be according to you? - he asked, finally.

- I have one theory... Rather, a hypothesis. I believe, that they have already forfeited immunity against socially harmful behaviour, needed in the past, but their individual anti-social tendencies have not yet disappeared.

- Make it simpler, - said Bykov.

- With pleasure. Let us take you. What would you do, if a gossip bearer came to you and said that... err... let's say, Michael Krutikov steals and trades food supplies? You have seen many gossipers in your time, you know their worth, and you would tell him to... err... depart. Now let us take our cadet. What would he do, if he was told... err... um, let's say, the same thing? He would take everything at face value and would immediately run over to Michael for an explanation. And would momentarily understand, that this is all rubbish, he would come back and... err... thrash the bastard.

- Uh-uh, - said Bykov with satisfaction.

- Well, so it is then. And our friends on Diona - that's no longer you but not quite our cadet, still. They take filth for face value, but their unutilised superficial pride halts them from working everything out.

- Oh well, - said Bykov. - Perhaps, that's the way it is.

Yura came in, squatted before an open engineering bookcase and began choosing a book to read for the night. The events on Diona have totally shaken him over and he still could not recover from it. His farewell with Zina Shatrova was silent and very moving. Zina had not so much as recovered at all. True, she was smiling already. Yura really wanted to stay on Diona until Zina will start to laugh. He was confident, that he could manage to cheer her up, to help her forget, in some way, the terrifying days of Shershen's reign. He really regretted that he could not stay. However in the corridor he caught the light-haired Svirski and demanded, that they be especially attentive to Zina. Svirski gave him a frenzied look and answered astray: "We are still going to smash his face".

- Er... Alexey, - said Yurkovski. - Am I going to be a nuisance to anyone at the command post?

- You are the chief inspector, - said Bykov. - Who can you be a nuisance to?

- I wish to establish communication with Titan, - said Yurkovski. - And to listen to the airways in general.

- Go ahead, - said Bykov.

- And can I be allowed, too? - asked Yura.

- And you can be allowed, too, - said Bykov. - Everyone is allowed everything.

In the morning Bykov finished reading the last magazine, examined the cover long and hard, and it seemed, even checked out the price. Then he sighed, carried the magazine to his cabin, and when he returned, Yura understood that "the boy had peeled the stick to the end". Bykov was now very kind, outspoken and allowed everything to everybody.

- I guess I will come with you, - said Bykov.

All three of them barged inside the command post. Michael Antonovich looked at them in amazement from his podium, beamed a smile and waved his little hand.

- We won't get in your way, - said Bykov. - We want the radio.

- Just remember, boys, - warned Michael Antonovich, - we are going to have weightlessness in half an hour.

At Yurkovski's directions "Takhmaseeb" was proceeding to station "Ring-1", an artificial satellite of Saturn, moving adjacent to its Ring.

- And why can't we go without weightlessness? - Yurkovski asked capriciously.

- You see, Voloden'ka, - Michael Antonovich said with a guilty look, - it's really cramped here for our "Takhmaseeb". We must manoeuvre all the time.

They moved past Zhilin, who was rummaging in the controller combinations, and sat in front of the radio. Bykov began manipulating the regulators. The speaker wailed and shrieked.

- The music of celestial spheres, - Zhilin commented from the rear. - Connect the decoder, Alexey Petrovich.

- Yes, that's right, - said Bykov. - I somehow thought, that this is interference.

- Some radio operator, - Yurkovski said with contempt.

The speaker suddenly roared in an abnormal tone:

- ... minutes listen to Alexander Bloomberg, retranslation from Earth. I repeat...

The voice sailed away and was replaced by drowsy wheezing. Then somebody said: "...thing I can do. You will have to wait, comrades". - "And what if send our shuttle over?" - "Then you won't have to wait as long, but you'll still have to wait". Bykov turned on auto-seek and the marker crawled along the dial, temporarily stopping at each working station, "...eighty hectares of selenium batteries for the green-houses, forty kilometres of copper wire six hundredths, twenty kilometres...", "...no butter, no sugar, we have one hundred packets of "Hercules" porridge left, crackers and

coffee. Yeah, and also we are out of cigarettes ...". "...and hear me? I am not going to stand this impudence... Hear me? I'm...". "Q-2, Q-2, we did not understand anything... What kind of radio receiver does he have?.. Q-2, here are my coordinates for calibration. One, two, three...", "...really miss you. When will you come back at last? And how come you stopped writing? Kisses, your Anna. Period", "...Chan, don't worry, this is really basic. You take a three-dimensional integral across the hyperbola until H...", "Number seven, number seven, sector three has been cleared for you...", "...Sasha, there are rumours, that some chief inspector has arrived. Almost seems it is Yurkovski himself..."

- Enough, - said Yurkovski. - Find me Titan. Scoundrels, - he grumbled.
- They know already.

- It's interesting, - Bykov said with a thoughtful air. - There are only about one hundred and fifty people in Saturn's system, but how much noise...

The radio was croaking and wailing. Bykov optimised the channel and began talking into a microphone:

- Titan, Titan. This is "Takhmaseeb". Titan. Titan.

- Titan listening, - said a woman's voice.

- Chief inspector Yurkovski requests a session with the director of the system. - Bykov looked cheerfully at Yurkovski. - Am I saying this right, Volodya? - he asked into the microphone. Yurkovski gave a favourable nod.

- Hello, hello, "Takhmaseeb"! - the woman's voice became slightly anxious. - Hold on a minute, I will connect you to the director.

- Waiting, - said Bykov and moved the microphone over to Yurkovski.

Yurkovski cleared his throat.

- Lisa, darling! - somebody shouted from the speaker. - Please get me the director, sweetheart! Quickly!

- Clear the frequency, - the woman's voice said sternly. - Director is busy.

- How is this - busy? - the voice said in outrage. - Ferentz, is that you? Out of turn, again?

- Clear the frequency, - Yurkovski said firmly.

- Everyone clear the frequency now, - a drawn out squeaky voice sounded. - The director is listening to chief inspector Yurkovski.

- Wow, guys... - someone said in awe. Yurkovski gave Bykov a smug look.

- Zaitzev, - he said. - Hello, Zaitzev.

- Hello, Volodya, - squeaked the director. - What brings you here?

- I... err... am conducting a slight inspection. Arrived yesterday. Straight on Diona. I have dismissed Shershen. Details later. So, we'll... do this. Send Muller to replace Shershen. Endeavour to send Shershen to Earth as soon as possible. Send back Shershen and another one there. Kravetz is his surname. Young, but an early beginner. Oversee their departure personally. And keep in mind, that I am not pleased with you. This matter... err... you could have dealt with personally, and much earlier. Further... - Yurkovski became quiet. An astounding silence reigned the airways. - I have set the following route for myself. At the moment I am proceeding to "Ring-1". I will be delayed there for two-three days, and then I will visit you on Titan. Order that the fuel for "Takhmaseeb" be made available. And, finally, this. - Yurkovski became silent again. - I have a young man on board. He is a vacuum-welder. One from the group of volunteers, that are working with you on Rhea. Be so kind, let me know where I can set him down, so that he can be immediately sent to Rhea. - Yurkovski fell silent once more. The airways were quiet. - So now I am all yours, - said Yurkovski.

- One minute, - said the director. - They are making inquiries now. What, are you on "Takhmaseeb"?

- Yes, - said Yurkovski. - I've got Alexey right here with me.

Michael Antonovich shouted from the navigator's compartment:

- Send my regards to Feden'ka, say hello!

- Here, Misha is sending his greetings to you.

- And is Gregory there with you?
 - No, - said Yurkovski. - Don't you know?
 The airways stayed silent. Then a squeaky voice asked cautiously:
 - Had something happened?
 - No-no, - said Yurkovski. - He was simply restricted from flying. It's been a year already.
 There was a sigh in the airways.
 - Yep..., - said the director. - Soon we'll be just like that.
 - Not too soon, I hope, - Yurkovski said dryly. - Well, what's going on with your inquiries?
 - Alright, - the voice said. - One minute. Listen. Your welder doesn't need to go to Rhea. We have transferred the volunteers to "Ring-2". They need them more over there. If you are lucky, you can send him to "Ring-2" straight from "Ring-1". And if you are not - we'll send him from here on Titan.
 - What is this - if I am lucky?
 - Twice a decade the Swiss travel to the Ring, delivering supplies. Perhaps you will catch the Swiss shuttle on "Ring-1".
 - Got you, - said Yurkovski. - Well, alright then. I have nothing more for you. See you.
 - Calm plasma to you, Volodya, - said the director. - Careful you don't drop down into Saturn.
 - Stuff you, - Bykov grumbled and turned off the radio.
 - All clear, cadet? - asked Yurkovski.
 - All clear, - said Yura and sighed.
 - Are you unhappy, or something?
 - Not at all, it doesn't matter where I work, - said Yura. - That's not the matter.

The "Ring-1" observatory was moving within the plane of Saturn's Ring along a circular orbit and completed a full rotation in fourteen and a half hours. The station was new-sprung, its construction was finished only a year ago. Its crew consisted of ten planetologists, engaged in the study of the Ring, and four control engineers. Control engineers had much to do: some units and systems at the observatory - heaters, oxygen regenerators, and the hydrosystem - were still not calibrated completely. Associated discomfort did not concern the planetologists in the least, the more so as the greater part of their time was spent in cosmoscaphes, floating above the Ring. The work of planetologists in the Ring carried great significance in Saturn's system. Planetologists hoped to find water, iron, and rare materials inside the Ring - which would provide the system with autonomy over fuel and material supplies. However, even if these searches were successful, making full use of such findings did not appear quite possible yet. No missile has ever been created, capable of entering the gleaming bulk of Saturn's rings and making a safe return.

Alexey Petrovich Bykov guided "Takhmaseeb" to the exterior docking line and moored carefully. Approaching artificial satellites - is a delicate matter, requiring master skills and jeweller-like intricacy. On such occasions Alexey Petrovich would get up from his chair and go up to the command post. At the exterior docks some shuttle stood already, judging by the hull lines - a food supplies tanker.

- Probationer, - said Bykov. - You are in luck. Pack your suitcase.
 Yura said nothing.
 - The crew is allowed ashore, - Bykov announced. - If you get invited for supper - don't get too excited. This is not a hotel for you. Best of all, carry preserves and mineral water.
 - Increase its natural cycle, - Zhilin said in an undertone.

Squeaking and grinding was heard from the outside - it was the duty inspector adjusting a hermetic bridge to "Takhmaseeb's" outer hatch. Five

minutes later he announced over the radio: "You can come out. Just dress warm". - "And why is that?" - Bykov inquired. "We are regulating the conditioning", - the duty dispatcher said and rang off.

- What does it mean - warm? - Yurkovski was full of indignation. - What should I wear? Flannels? Or how was it called - valenki? Stitched wool coats? Quilted jackets?

Bykov said:

- Wear a jumper. Put on warm socks. A fur-lined jacket would be nice. With electric heating.

- I will wear a jumper, - said Michael Antonovich. - I've got a really nice jumper. With a sail on it.

- And I have nothing, - Yura said sadly. - I guess I can wear a few t-shirts.

- This is a disgrace, - said Yurkovski. - I've got nothing as well.

- Put on your bathrobe, - Bykov advised him, and headed for his cabin.

They all stepped down together on the observatory, dressed quite diversely and warmly. Bykov wore a Greenland fur-lined jacket. Michael Antonovich also put on a jacket and pulled fur boots onto his feet. The fur boots were devoid of magnetic soles, and Michael Antonovich was towed, like an anchored blimp. Zhilin put on a jumper and gave one jumper to Yura. Besides that, Yura wore Bykov's fur-lined pants, which he fastened under his armpits. Yurkovski wore Zhilin's fur-lined boots. And also, Yurkovski wore Michael Antonovich's jumper with a sail and a really pretty white blazer.

At the caisson the duty dispatcher met them wearing a singlet and shorts. Inside the caisson stood suffocating heat, like a Swedish sauna.

- Good day, - said the dispatcher. He looked the guests over and frowned. - Didn't I tell you: dress warmly. You are going to freeze in boots.

Yurkovski said in a sinister voice:

- I beg your pardon, young man, are you going to pull jokes on me?

The dispatcher gave him a baffled look.

- Pulling what jokes? It's minus fifteen inside the ward-room.

Bykov wiped the sweat from his forehead and grumbled:

- Let's go.

From the corridor blew a freezing chill, puffs of steam rushed in. The dispatcher, clutching his shoulders with his hands, yelled:

- Hurry up, please!

Interior lining of the corridor was removed in some places, and the yellow lattice of thermal elements was gleaming shamelessly in the bluish light. Near the ward-room they bumped into a control engineer. The engineer wore an incredibly long fur coat, with a blue singlet sticking from underneath. On the engineer's head a fur hat with raised flaps was standing in full splendour.

Yurkovski moved his shoulders under the chill and opened the door to the ward-room.

Inside the ward-room behind the table sat, buckled to their chairs, five men in fur coats with raised collars. They looked like the early policemen from the times of Tsar Alexey the Peaceful and were sucking hot coffee from transparent thermal flasks. Upon seeing Yurkovski, one of them pulled down the collar and, releasing a cloud of steam, said:

- Good day, Vladimir Sergeevich. I see you have dressed somewhat lightly. Have a seat. Coffee?

- What is going here? - asked Yurkovski.

- We are regulating, - said someone.

- And where is Markushin?

- Markushin is waiting for you in a cosmoscaphé. It's warm there.

One of the planetologists got up and floated into the corridor with Yurkovski. Another one, a lanky, mop-headed fellow, said:

- Tell me, are there any more chief inspectors among you?

- No, - said Bykov.

- Then I'll tell you straight: we have a dog's life here. Yesterday the temperature across the entire observatory was plus thirty, and inside the ward-room even thirty-three. During the night the temperature suddenly fell. I, personally, got a frost-bitten foot, nobody feels like working under such temperature fluctuations, so we take turns working in cosmoscaphes. They have autonomous air-conditioning. Does it happen to you as well?

- It happens, - said Bykov. - During accidents.

- And you live a whole year like this? - Michael Antonovich asked with pity and dismay.

- No, not at all! Only for about a month. Earlier, the temperature fluctuations were not so significant. But we have organised a team to help the engineers, and now... You can see for yourself.

Yura was diligently sucking up hot coffee. He felt he is starting to freeze.

- Br-r-r, - said Zhilin. - Tell me, do you have some sort of an oasis here?

The planetologists looked at each other.

- Perhaps inside the caisson, - one said.

- Or in the bathroom, - said another. - But its muggy in there.

- It's really uncomfortable, - Michael Antonovich complained.

- Well, then, - said Bykov. - Let's all go with us.

- Ooh, - said the lanky planetologist. - And then coming back here?

- Come on, let's go, - said Michael Antonovich. - We can talk there as well.

- This isn't really in the order of hospitality, - the lanky fellow said hesitantly.

Silence ensued. Yura said:

- We are sitting so funny - four against four. Almost like a chess game.

Everyone looked at him.

- Come on, let's go with us, - said Bykov, getting up decisively.

- This is somehow awkward, - said one of the planetologists. - Let's sit here. Maybe we can still have a proper conversation.

Zhilin said:

- It's warm there. One slight turn of the regulator - and we can make it hot. We shall sit in beautiful light garments. We won't snuffle.

A gloomy man in a fur coat worn over a naked body stuck his head inside the ward-room. Looking at the ceiling he said inhospitably:

- I beg your pardon, but why don't you all go to your cabins, really. We are going to shut off the air here in five minutes.

The man disappeared. Bykov, not saying a word, moved towards the exit. Everyone followed him.

In grave silence they crossed the corridor, choked on hot air inside an empty caisson and stepped on board the "Takhmaseeb". The lanky planetologist hastily pulled off his fur coat and blazer and began rolling the scarf off his neck. The warm ammunition was shoved inside a wall wardrobe. Then the introductions and mutual handshakes took place. The lanky planetologist was called Raphael Gorchakov. The other three, as it became apparent, were Joseph Vlchek, Eugene Sadovskiy and Pavel Shemyakin. Having thawed, they turned out to be cheerful talkative guys. Soon it became known, that Gorchakov and Sadovskiy are investigating turbulent motions inside the Ring, are not married, like Graham Greene and Strogov, prefer cinema to theatre, at the present moment are reading Montaigne in the original, do not understand neorealistic painting, but do not exclude the possibility that there is something in it; that Joseph Vlchek is searching for iron ore inside the Ring using the neutron reflection method and flash-bombs, that he is a professional violinist, was Europe's champion in the four-hundred metre hurdle races, and ended up in Saturn's system as a revenge on his girlfriend's cold and insensitive treatment of him; finally, that Pavel Shemyakin is, on the contrary, married, has kids, works as an assistant in

the institute of planetology, vehemently defends the hypothesis of the artificial origin of the Ring and intends to "lay his life at transforming the hypothesis to theory".

- The biggest trouble, - he was saying passionately, - is that our cosmoscaphes do not stand up to any scrutiny as the explorer's missiles. They are extremely slow and really fragile. When I sit inside a cosmoscaph above the Ring, I really feel like crying with grief. It's a stone throw away... And to go down into the Ring we are expressly forbidden. And I am absolutely confident, that the very first search inside the Rng would yield something interesting. Some sort of clue, at the very least...

- What sort, for instance? - asked Bykov.

- W-well, I don't know!..

- I know, - said Gorchakov. - He hopes to find a print of a bare foot on some boulder. Do you know, how he operates? Descends as closely as possible to the ring and inspects fragments through a forty-time zoom binocular. Pasha winds his eyes onto the binocular, and while he winds off it, another asteroid...

- Well, that is stupid, - Shemyakin said crossly. - If it could be shown, that the Ring - is the product of fission of some body, that would mean a great deal already, but in the meantime, we are restricted from catching the fragments.

- It's easy to say - catching a fragment, - said Bykov. - I know that job. You get all sweaty and never know to the very end, who caught whom, and then it turns out that you have knocked off an emergency rocket and you don't have enough fuel to make it to base. Nah, they are right to forbid this nonsense.

Michael Antonovich suddenly said, rolling his eyes in reverie:

- But then, boys, how fascinating it is! What a lively, delicate task!

Planetologists looked at him reverent surprise. Yura, too. It never entered his mind, that the kind chubby Michael Antonovich conducted asteroid hunts once upon a time. Bykov gave Michael Antonovich a cold look and coughed loudly. Michael Antonovich looked at him in fright and said hastily:

- But that, of course, is really dangerous... Unjustified risk... And one shouldn't anyway...

- By the way, about footprints, - Zhilin said pensively. - You here are detached from information sources, - he looked the planetologists over. - And, perhaps, don't know...

- And what is it? - Sadovski asked. From his face it was obvious, that he was thoroughly starved of information.

- On the island of Honshu, - said Zhilin, - not far from the Danno-ura harbour, in the gorge between the mountains Siramine and Titigatake, in an impenetrable forest, archaeologists have discovered a system of caves. Inside these caves they found various primeval utensils and - what is most interesting - many fossilised traces of primeval people. Archaeologists think, that inside the caves two hundred centuries ago dwelled the early Japanese, whose descendants were later slaughtered by the Yamato tribes lead by emperor Jimmu-tenno, the divine grandson of heaven-radiant Amaterasu.

Bykov grunted and held onto his chin.

- This finding agitated the whole world, - said Zhilin, - perhaps, you have heard about it.

- We wish... - Sadovski said despondently. - We are torn off from everyone here...

- And in the meantime there was a lot said and written about it, but that's not the point. The most fascinating finding was made comparatively recently, when the central cave was properly cleared. Imagine this: in the fossilised clay stood over twenty pairs of naked footprints with big toes shifted far to the side, and among them... - Zhilin looked his listeners round with wide open eyes. It was all clear to Yura, but the effective pause made a great impression on him nevertheless. - A boot print... - Zhilin said in a regular voice. Bykov got up and started walking out of the ward-room.

- Aleshen'ka! - Michael Antonovich called out. - Where are you going so soon?

- I know this story already, - said Bykov, without turning around. - I have read. I will be back soon.

- A boot trace? - Sadovski repeated. - From what boot?

- Approximately size forty-five, - said Zhilin. - Rifled sole, low heel, a blunt square toe.

- This is crazy, - Vlchek said decisively. - A hoax.

Gorchakov laughed and asked:

- Was there an imprint of "Skorohod" company brand name, by any chance?

- No, - said Zhilin. He shook his head. - If there was just some kind of writing! Simply a boot print... slightly traced across by a naked footprint - somebody stepped on it later.

- Come on, this is a hoax! - said Vlchek. - It's so obvious. Mass-scale poaching of mermaids on the island of Man, Buonaparte's spirit possessing the Massachusetts super-computer...

- "Solar spots are positioned as a sketch of Pythagorean theorem!" - Sadovski announced. - "The Solar Population are seeking to make contact with IBCC!"

- Vanyusha, I think that you are a little... You know... - Michael Antonovich said with distrust.

Shemyakin stayed quiet. Yura, too.

- I read a re-print from the scientific appendix to "Asahi-shinbun", - said Zhilin. - At first, I also thought that this was a hoax. This report did not appear in our news media. But the article was signed by professor Usodzuki - a prominent man, I have heard about him from the Japanese guys. There, he actually writes, that wishes to put an end to the stream of misinformation with his article, but is not going to give any commentaries. To me it seems that they don't know how to explain it themselves.

- "A fearless European in the paws of mad synantropes!" - announced Sadovski. - "Eaten alive, all that remains is an imprint of a "Shoes Majestic" boot"! Get yourselves "Shoes Majestic" products, if you wish to leave some kind of trace".

- These weren't synantropes, - Zhilin said patiently. - The big toe can be distinguished with a naked eye. Professor Usodzuki calls them nachonantropes.

Finally, Shemyakin could not take it any longer.

- And why, in fact, does it have to be a hoax? - he asked. - Why do we always choose the most probable of all hypotheses?

- Really, why? - said Sadovski. - Traces were, of course, left by an Alien, and the first contact ended tragically.

- And why not? - said Shemyakin. - Who could be wearing a boot two hundred years ago?

- Holy cow, - said Sadovski. - If we are to talk seriously, then this is the footprint of one of the archaeologists.

Zhilin shook his head.

- First of all, the clay had completely fossilised there. The age of the imprint leaves no doubts. Do you really think, that Usodzuki did not consider such a possibility?

- Then it's a hoax, - Sadovski said obstinately.

- Tell us, Ivan, - said Shemyakin, - did they by any chance include a photo of the imprint?

- Of course, - said Zhilin. - Both the photo of the imprint, and the photo of the cave, and Usodzuki's photo... By the way, don't forget, that the biggest size for Japanese is forty-two. At best, forty-three.

- Let's put it this way, - said Gorchakov. - Let's think that we have a task of constructing a logically consistent hypothesis that explains this Japanese finding.

- Please, go ahead, - said Shemyakin. - I suggest - an Alien. Now find inconsistency in this hypothesis.

Sadovski waved his hand.

- Aliens again, - he said. - Simply some kind of brontosaurus.

- It's easier to assume, - said Gorchakov, - that it is still a footprint of some European. Some tourist.

- Yes, it's either some unknown animal, or a tourist, - said Vlchek. - Animal footprints sometimes have really curious form.

- The age, the age... - Zhilin said quietly.

- Then simply an unknown animal.

- A duck, for instance.

Bykov returned, made himself comfortable in the chair with an air of dignity and asked:

- Well, what have you got here?

- Here the comrades are trying to explain the Japanese boot print somehow, - said Zhilin. - Suggested items: an Alien, a European, and an unknown animal.

- And what about them? - said Bykov.

- All these hypotheses, - said Zhilin, - even the hypothesis about an Alien, comprise one horrendous inconsistency.

- Which one? - asked Shemyakin.

- I forgot to tell you, - said Zhilin. - The floor area of the cave is forty square metres. The boot print is located in the very middle of the cave.

- And, so what? - asked Shemyakin.

- And it's a solitary one, - said Zhilin.

For a while everyone stayed quiet.

- Mm-yeah, - said Sadovski. - The ballad about a one-legged Alien.

- Perhaps, other traces have rubbed out? - Vlchek proposed.

- Absolutely impossible, - said Zhilin. - Twenty pairs of absolutely distinct footprints of naked feet over an entire cave and one distinct boot print in the middle.

- Ok, this is how it is, - said Bykov. - The Alien was one-legged. He was brought into the cave, stood upright, and, after things were worked out, was eaten alive.

- And why not? - said Michael Antonovich. - I think, that it's logically consistent. Why not?

- The down part is that he is one-legged, - Shemyakin said pensively. - It's difficult to imagine a one-legged intellectual being.

- Perhaps, he was an invalid? - Gorchakov suggested.

- One foot could have been eaten immediately, - said Sadovski.

- God knows, what rubbish we are talking about here, - said Shemyakin.

- Let's go and do some work.

- No, I am sorry, hold on, - said Vlchek. - We must investigate. I have this hypothesis: the Alien had a really wide step. They are all abnormally long-legged over there.

- He would have cracked his head against the dome of the cave, - Sadovski objected. - Most likely he had wings - flew inside a cave, saw an unfriendly welcome ready for him, pushed off and flew away. And what do you think, Ivan?

Zhilin opened his mouth to answer, but instead raised his finger and said:

- Attention! The chief inspector!

Into the ward-room walked a red and sweltering Yurkovski.

- Ph-hew! - he said. - How nice and cool! Planetologists, the supervisors are calling you. And remember, that it's about forty degrees there right now. - He turned to Yura. - Get ready, cadet. I have arranged it with the captain of the tanker, he will drop you off at "Ring-2". - Yura shuddered and stopped smiling. - The tanker leaves in a few hours, but it's best to go there before launch. Vanya, you will see him off. Yes! Planetologists! Where are the planetologists? - He looked out into the corridor. - Shemyakin! Pasha! Get me the photos that you have made above the

Ring. I need to have a look. Michael, don't go, wait a minute. Stay here, Alexey, drop your book, I need to talk to you.

Bykov set the book aside. In the ward-room remained only him, Yurkovski and Michael Antonovich. Yurkovski, balancing awkwardly, ran from one corner to another.

- What is it with you? - Bykov inquired, watching his evolutions suspiciously.

Yurkovski stopped suddenly.

- This is the deal, Alexey, - he said. - I have arranged with Markushin, he will let me have his cosmoscaphé. I want to fly above the Ring. An absolutely safe trip, Alexey. - Yurkovski became angry unexpectedly. - Well, why do you look at me like that? The guys have been making such trips twice a day for a whole year now. Yes, I know that you are obstinate. But I do not intend to get inside the Ring. I want to fly above the Ring. I obey your instructions. Please respect for my request, too. I am begging you in earnest, bloody hell. After all, are we friends or not?

- What, exactly, is the matter? - Bykov said calmly.

Yurkovski ran across the room again.

- Give me Michael, - he said abruptly.

- Wha-a-at? - said Bykov, rising slowly.

- Or I will fly solo, - Yurkovski said immediately. - And I don't know cosmoscaphes well.

Bykov stayed silent. Michael Antonovich was turning his eyes from one to the other in confusion.

- Boys, - he said. - I mean, I would love to... What's there to talk about?

- I could have taken another pilot at the station, - said Yurkovski. - But I am asking for Michael, because Michael is a hundred times more experienced and careful, than all of them put together. Do you get it? He's more careful!

Bykov stayed silent. His face turned dark and sullen.

- We'll be extremely careful, - said Yurkovski. - We'll proceed at the altitude of twenty or thirty kilometres above the median plane, no closer. I will make a few large-scale shots, make some visual observations, and in two hours we'll come back.

- Aleshen'ka, - Michael Antonovich said timidly. - You know, the stray fragments above the Ring are very rare. And they are not all that harmful. A little bit of concentration...

Bykov was quietly looking at Yurkovski. "Well, what am I to do with him? - he thought. - What am I to do with this old maniac? Michael has a sick heart. It's his last voyage. His reaction has become dull and all cosmoscaphes have manual controls. And I cannot fly a cosmoscaphé. And Zhilin can't. And I can't let a young pilot go with him. They'll convince each other to dive inside the Ring. Why have I, an old idiot, not learned to fly a cosmoscaphé?"

- Alesha, - said Yurkovski. - I really beg of you. You know, I will probably never see Saturn's rings again. I am old, Alesha.

Bykov got up and, not looking at anyone, walked out of the ward-room in silence. Yurkovski covered his face with his hands.

- Oh no, what a disaster! - he said with vexation. - Why, how come I have such a horrible reputation? Why, Michael?

- So reckless you are, Voloden'ka, - said Michael Antonovich. - Really, you are the culprit.

- And why be careful? - asked Yurkovski. - Come on, tell me please, why? To reach an age of total spiritual and physical infirmity? To wait for the moment, when life will become loathsome, and die from boredom in bed? Come on Michael, after all, trembling over one's life like this is ridiculous.

Michael Antonovich shook his head.

- What a character you are, Voloden'ka, - he said quietly. - How can

you not see, my dear, you alone will die - and that's that. But, you see, people will remain after you, friends. Do you know, how painful it will be for them? And you just go on about yourself, all about yourself.

- Ahh, Michael, - said Yurkovski, - I don't feel like arguing with you. You better tell me, is Alexey going to agree or not?

- I think, he'd already agreed to it, - said Michael Antonovich. - Can't you tell? Because I know him well, fifteen years on the same ship.

Yurkovski ran across the room again.

- And what about you, Michael, do you, at least, want to fly or not? - he shouted. - Or are you also... "agreeing to it"?

- I really want to, - said Michael Antonovich and blushed all over. - Just once before we go.

Yura was packing a suitcase. He never managed to pack up well, and now he was also rushing, so that no one could tell, how much he doesn't want to leave the "Takhmaseeb". Ivan was standing by, and it was awfully sad to think, that now they will have to say goodbye and that they will never meet again. Yura was carelessly shoving into the suitcase his clothes, study notes, books - among them "The road of all roads", of which Bykov said: "When you will begin to like this book, you can consider yourself an adult". Ivan, whistling, was watching Yura with cheerful eyes. Finally, Yura shut the suitcase, sadly looked around the cabin and said:

- That's it, I think.

- Well, if that's it, let's go say good-bye, - said Zhilin.

He took the weightless suitcase from Yura and they walked down the circular corridor, past the ten-kilogram dumbbells floating up in the air, past the shower-room, past the kitchen, from which the aroma of oatmeal spread, into the ward-room. Yurkovski was alone inside the ward-room. He sat behind an empty table, clutching a balding head with his palms, and before him lay a lonesome clean sheet of paper, fastened with clamps to the table.

- Vladimir Sergeevich, - said Yura. Yurkovski lifted his head.

- Ah, the cadet, - he said, smiling sadly. - Well then, let's say good-bye.

They shook each other's hands.

- I am really thankful to you, - said Yura.

- Come on, - said Yurkovski. - What are you on about, really. You know, that I didn't want to take you along. And was wrong about it. What to wish you before you leave? Always keep working more, Yura. Working with your hands, working with your head. Especially, don't forget to work with your head. And remember, that real people - are those who think a great deal about many things. Don't let your brain go mouldy. - Yurkovski looked at Yura with a familiar expression: as if he was expecting, that Yura will right now, immediately, change for the better. - Alright, off you go.

Yura bowed awkwardly and walked out of the ward-room. At the door to the command post he looked back. Yurkovski followed him pensively with his eyes, but, seemingly, did not see him already. Yura went up to the command post. Michael Antonovich and Bykov were talking next to the control panel. When Yura walked in, they became quiet and looked at him.

- Right, - said Bykov. - You are ready, Yuri. Ivan, in that case you will see him off.

- Good-bye, - said Yura. - Thank you.

Bykov silently stretched out his huge palm.

- A big thank you to you, Alexey Petrovich, - Yura repeated. - And to you, Michael Antonovich.

- It's alright, it's really alright, Yurik, - spoke Michael Antonovich. - Good luck with your job. Make sure you write me a letter. You haven't lost the address yet?

Yura silently patted his shirt pocket.

- Well, that's good, that's wonderful. Write to us, and if you want to

- come over. Really, once you get back to Earth, come straight away. We always have fun. Lots of young people. You can read my memoirs.

Yura smiled weakly.

- Good-bye, he said.

Michael Antonovich waved his hand, whilst Bykov thundered:

- Calm plasma to you, probationer.

Yura and Zhilin walked out of the command post. For the last time the caisson door opened and closed behind Yura.

- Good-bye, "Takhmaseeb", - said Yura.

They walked down an endless observatory corridor, where it was hot, like in a sauna, and walked out onto the second docking deck. At the opened tanker hatch on a small bamboo footstool sat a long-legged red-haired man wearing an unbuttoned uniform jacket with golden buttons and a pair of striped shorts. Looking into a small mirror, he was combing his red sideburns with his palm, and, jutting his jaw, played some Tirole motif on a pipe. Upon seeing Yura and Zhilin, he put the mirror into his pocket and stood up.

- Captain Korf? - said Zhilin.

- Ya, - said the red-haired man.

- Onto "Ring-2", - said Zhilin, - you will deliver this particular comrade. The chief inspector had talked to you, didn't he?

- Ya, - said the red-haired captain Korf. - Viery gut. Baggage?

Zhilin handed him the suitcase.

- Ya, - said captain Korf for the third time.

- Bye, Yurka, - said Zhilin. - Don't look so unhappy, please. Come on, what sort of a habit is it?

- I don't look unhappy at all, - said Yura sorrowfully.

- I know very well, why you look unhappy, - said Zhilin. - You have imagined, that we will never meet again, and were quick to make a tragedy out of it. And there is no tragedy. You have another hundred years of meeting all kinds of good and bad people. And can you answer this question: how does one good person differ from another good person?

- Don't know, - said Yura with a sigh.

- I will tell you, - said Zhilin. - There is no substantial difference. For instance, tomorrow you will be with your guys. Tomorrow everyone will be jealous of you, and you will be bragging to them. Like, me and inspector Yurkovski... You will tell them, how you shot the leeches on Mars, how you have brought down mister Richardson on Bamberga with a chair just like this one, how you rescued a blue-eyed girl from the evil Shershen. About the death-planeters, you will make up something, too.

- Come on, Vanya, - said Yura, smiling feebly.

- Well, and why not? You have a lively imagination. I can imagine, how you will sing to them the ballad about a one-legged Alien. But remember. Frankly speaking, there were two boot prints. I did not have time to talk about the second boot print. The second boot print was up on the ceiling, precisely above the first one. Don't forget. Well, good-bye.

- Tee-la-la-la ee-a! - captain Korf sang quietly from behind.

- Good-bye, Vanya, - said Yura. He shook Zhilin's hand with both hands. Zhilin patted him on the shoulder, turned around and walked into the corridor. Yura could hear shouting from the corridor:

- Ivan! There is one more hypothesis! There was no Alien inside that cave. Only his boot was there.

Yura smiled meekly.

- Tee-la-la-la ee-a! - captain Korf kept singing behind him, combing his red sideburns.

<h2>"RING-1". MUST SURVIVE.</h2>

- Voloden'ka, move over a little, - said Michael Antonovich. - Because I am pushing right into you with my elbow. If, for instance, we were to make

a steep turn...

- Sure, sure, - said Yurkovski. - Only, I have no room, actually. It's amazingly cramped in here. Who, indeed, built these... err... machines.

- Ok, this way now... And it's fine, really fine, Voloden'ka...

It was really cramped inside a cosmoscaphe. A small round rocket was designed for only one person, but generally two people would climb in. As if that was not enough, under the work safety rules above the Ring the crew were obliged to wear space suits with an open head piece. Being together, as well as wearing space suits, and with headpieces hanging behind their backs, there was no room to make a turn in the cosmoscaphe. Michael Antonovich got the comfortable navigator chair with soft seat belts, and he was really upset, that his dear friend Voloden'ka is compelled to twist somewhere between the regenerator cover and the charge-release controls.

Yurkovski, pushing his face into the binocular frame, was clicking the photocamera trigger from time to time.

- Slow down a little, Misha, - he kept repeating. - Right... stop... Sheesh, how unwieldy is this device...

Michael Antonovich, spinning the control wheel with enjoyment, was looking, without turning his gaze, at the teleprojector screen. The cosmoscaphe was slowly floating twenty five kilometres above the median plane of the Ring. Below them, to the right and left, across the entire screen, a giant flat glittering field stretched across the whole screen. In the distance it was cloaked with a greenish haze and it seemed, that the giant planet is dissected into two. And beneath the cosmoscaphe crept a rocky hash. Iridescent scatterings of angular fragments, tiny pebbles, sparkling glittering dust. Occasionally strange whirlpool motions appeared in this hash and then Yurkovski would say: "Slow down, Michael... That's it..." - and snap the shutter a few times. These inexplicable and unfamiliar motions drew Yurkovski's special attention. The Ring was not a handful of rocks, thrown into terminal inactive movement around Saturn; it lived its own strange unfathomable life, and there still lay a task of sorting out this life's natural laws.

Michael Antonovich was elated. He squeezed tenderly the receptive control handles, savouring with delight how smoothly and obediently the rocket responds to each finger movement. How fantastic was it - to navigate a ship without the cyberpilot, without any old electronics, bionics and cybernetics, to rely solely upon yourself, to revel in one's full and boundless confidence in oneself and to know, that between you and the ship - is only this soft and comfortable control wheel and you don't have to habitually force out the thought, that beneath your feet bubbles, although suppressed but fierce energy, capable of blowing an entire planet to bits. Michael Antonovich possessed a rich imagination, deep inside he was always slightly retrograde, and the sluggish cosmoscaphe with its meagre engine seemed to him cosy and homely compared with the photon monster that "Takhmaseeb" was and with other similar monsters that Michael Antonovich had to deal with in his twenty-five year career as a navigator.

Beside that, the iridescent glitter of the diamond scatterings in the Ring, as always, stirred quiet admiration in him. Michael Antonovich always had a weakness for Saturn and for its rings. The Ring was astonishingly beautiful. It was much more beautiful, than Michael Antonovich could describe it, and still, every time when he saw the Ring, he wanted to tell others about it.

- It's so nice, - he said, finally. - Look how it shimmers. I, perhaps, cannot...

- Slow down now, Misha, - said Yurkovski.

Michael Antonovich decelerated.

- There are sleep-walkers, for instance, - he said. - And I have the same weakness...

- Slow down more, - said Yurkovski.

Michael Antonovich became quiet and decelerated more. Yurkovski was

snapping the shutter. Michael Antonovich stayed silent for a bit and called into the microphone:

- Aleshen'ka, are you listening to us?

- I am listening, - Bykov responded in a bass voice.

- Aleshen'ka, we are all fine here, - Michael Antonovich informed him hastily. - I just wanted to share this with you. It's so beautiful here, Aleshen'ka. The sun glitters so on the rocks... and the dust shimmers so... What a champion you are, Aleshen'ka, for letting us go. At least to have a glimpse one last time... Oh, if only you could see, how this one rock glitters! - Overwhelmed by emotion, he fell silent again.

Bykov waited a while and then asked:

- Do you intend advancing towards Saturn for long?

- A long, long time! - Yurkovski said with irritation. - I wish you would go, Alexey, and find something to do. Nothing will happen to us.

Bykov said:

- Ivan is running prophylactic maintenance. - He stayed silent for some time. - So am I.

- Please don't worry, Aleshen'ka, - said Michael Antonovich. - No freak boulders here, everything is really calm and safe.

- It's good that there aren't any freak boulders, - said Bykov. - But please pay a touch more attention, still.

- Slow down, Michael, - Yurkovski ordered.

- What have you got there? - Bykov asked.

- Turbulence, - replied Michael Antonovich.

- Oh, - said Bykov and stayed quiet.

About fifteen minutes passed in silence. The cosmoscaphe ventured already three hundred kilometres away from the edge of the Ring. Michael Antonovich was turning the wheel and suppressing the desire to accelerate as fast as he could, so that the glittering fragments below would flow as one whole sparkling strip. It would be very pretty. Michael Antonovich liked doing these things, when he was a little younger.

Yurkovski suddenly said in a whisper:

- Stop.

Michael Antonovich slowed down.

- Stop, I am telling you! - said Yurkovski. - Well?

The cosmoscaphe hovered motionless. Michael Antonovich looked back at Yurkovski. Yurkovski had pushed his face into the binocular frame so hard, as though he wished to puncture the cosmoscaphe's body and peer outside.

- What's there? - asked Michael Antonovich.

Yurkovski did not answer.

- Michael! - he yelled suddenly. - Alongside the Ring's orbit... Do you see a long black fragment below us? Cruise right above it... precisely above it, without overtaking...

Michael Antonovich turned to the screen, found the long black fragment below and guided the cosmoscaphe, trying not to lose the fragment from the optical marker.

- What have you got there? - Bykov asked again.

- Some fragment, - said Michael Antonovich. - Long and black.

- Escaping, - Yurkovski said through clenched teeth. - Slow down by one meter! - he shouted.

Michael Antonovich reduced the speed.

- No, this won't work, - said Yurkovski. - Misha, look, the black splinter, do you see? - He was talking very fast and whispering.

- I see.

- Right on course, two degrees away from it is a cluster of rocks...

- I see, - said Michael Antonovich. - There is something pretty glittering there.

- That's right... head for that glitter... Just don't lose it... Or have I got something in my eye?

Michael Antonovich moved the glittering dot inside the optical marker

and put its maximal magnification up on the teleprojector. He saw five rounded, strangely identical white rocks, and between them - something shiny, unclear, resembling a silvery shadow of a spider spread out. As though the stones were undulating, whilst the spider clung onto them with bare spread legs.

- How funny! - cried out Michael Antonovich.

- What the hell have you got there? - Bykov hollered.

- Hold on, hold on, Alexey, - Yurkovski muttered. - We must descend here...

- Here we go, - said Bykov. - Michael! Not one meter lower!

The agitated Michael Antonovich, without realising, was already guiding the cosmoscaphe down. It was so amazing and bizarre, five identical round boulders and a shadow with totally unfamiliar contours between them.

- Michael! - Bykov roared and stayed silent.

Michael Antonovich came to his senses and slowed down sharply.

- Well, what are you doing? - Yurkovski shouted in a frenzied voice. - You are letting it go!

Slowly, barely perceptible to the naked eye, the long black splinter was drawing over the strange rocks.

- Aleshen'ka! - Michael Antonovich called out. - There is really something strange here! Can I go a little lower? We can't see very well!

Bykov stayed silent.

- You are, you are letting it get away, - Yurkovski was roaring.

- Aleshen'ka! - Michael Antonovich screamed desperately. - I'll go lower! Five kilometres down, alright?

He was clutching the control handles spasmodically, trying not to release the shiny object from the markers. The black splinter was advancing slowly and implacably. Bykov would not answer.

- Come on now, go lower, - Yurkovski said in an unexpectedly calm voice.

Michael Antonovich looked in desperation at the peacefully shimmering screen of the meteorite locator and guided the cosmoscaphe down.

- Aleshen'ka, - he kept mumbling. - Just a tiny bit, just so I won't lose it from sight. It's all quiet and empty around here.

Yurkovski was hastily clicking the photocamera's shutters. The long black splinter was crawling and crawling across, and finally moved up, covering the white rocks and the glittering spider among them.

- Ahh, - said Yurkovski. - With your Bykov...

Michael Antonovich slowed down.

- Aleshen'ka! - he said. - It's all over.

Bykov kept quiet, and then Michael Antonovich looked at the radio. The reception was turned off.

- Oh-oh-oh! - cried Michael Antonovich. - How could I... With my elbow, perhaps?

He turned on the reception.

- ...chael, get back! Michael, get back! Michael, get back!.. - Bykov repeated monotonously.

- I hear, I hear you, Aleshen'ka! I have accidentally switched off reception here.

- Come back immediately, - said Bykov.

- Now, now, Aleshen'ka! - said Michael Antonovich. - We have finished everything and everything's fine... - he became silent again. The elongated black splinter was gradually floating off, revealing the cluster of white stones again. The silvery spider glittered once more in the light.

- What is happening down there? - asked Bykov. - Can you give me a proper explanation or not?

Yurkovski, shoving Michael Antonovich aside, leaned down to the microphone.

- Alexey! - he shouted. - Do you remember the tale about the gigantic fluctuation? I think, we got our one in a billion chance after all!

- What chance?
- It looks like we have found...
- Look, look, Voloden'ka! - Michael Antonovich muttered, looking at the screen in panic. A mass of dense grey dust was advancing from the side, and above it tens of shiny angular boulders floated across. Yurkovski groaned even: in a moment it will pull away, conceal, crumple and drag those odd white rocks and this silvery spider god knows where, and no one will ever know, that it happened...
- Down! - he screamed. - Michael, down!..
The cosmoscaphe budged.
- Get back! - shouted Bykov. - Michael, I am ordering you: get back!
Yurkovski stretched out his hand and switched off the reception.
- Down, Misha, down... Only down... And hurry!
- What are you saying, Voloden'ka! I can't - it's an order! What are you doing! - Michael Antonovich turned towards the radio. Yurkovski caught his hand.
- Look at the screen, Michael, - he said. - In twenty minutes it will be too late... - Michael Antonovich was pushing towards the radio in silence. - Michael, don't be an idiot... We got one chance in a billion... They'll never forgive us... Why can't you understand it, you old fool!
Michael Antonovich finally reached the radio and turned the reception on. They heard Bykov's heavy breathing.
- No, they can't hear us, - he said to someone.
- Misha, - Yurkovski whispered hoarsely. - I will never forgive you in my entire life, Misha... I'll forget, that you ever were my friend, Misha... I'll forget, that we were at Golconda together... Misha, this is the very meaning of my life, please understand... I waited for it all my life... I believed in it... These are Aliens, Misha... - Michael Antonovich looked him in the face and shut his eyes: he did not recognise Yurkovski. - Misha, the dust is getting closer... Get us under the dust, Misha, please, I beg you... We'll be quick, we'll just set up a radio buoy and come back straight away. This is perfectly simple and safe, and no one is going to know...
- Here we go, how in the world can you deal with them? - Bykov screamed.
- They found something, - Zhilin's voice said.
- You know we can't. Don't ask, We can't. You know I promised. He is going to lose his mind from stress. Don't ask...
The grey dust shroud moved up close.
- Let me, - said Yurkovski. - I'll navigate myself.
He started to pull Michael Antonovich from his chair in silence. It was so bizarre and awful that Michael Antonovich became totally lost.
- Alright, fine, - he mumbled. - Sure, ok... Just wait... - He still could not recognise Yurkovski's face, it all seemed like a nightmarish dream.
- Michael Antonovich, - Zhilin called out.
- Here, - Michael Antonovich said weakly, and Yurkovski smashed the regulator with all his might. The metallic glove severed the handle like a razor.
- Down! - roared Yurkovski.
Horrorified, Michael Antonovich plunged the cosmoscaphe down into a twenty kilometre abyss. He was shuddering all over with pity and terrible premonition. A minute had passed, then another...
Yurkovski suddenly said in a clear voice:
- Misha, Misha, I really get it now...
The porous stone blocks on the screen were growing, turning slowly. Yurkovski pushed the transparent space suit helmet over his head in a habitual movement.
- Misha, Misha, I really get it now, - Zhilin heard Yurkovski's voice.
Bykov was sitting hunched up in front of the radio, clutching the stand of a useless microphone with both hands. He could only listen, and try to

understand, what is happening, and wait, and hope. They come back - I'll beat them up without mercy, he thought. Both this goody-goody navigator and this brilliant bastard. No. I won't beat them. Just pray they come back. Nearby - hands in his pockets - the gloomy Zhilin stayed silent.

- The rocks, - Michael Antonovich said plaintively, - the rocks...

Bykov closed his eyes. Rocks inside the Ring. Sharp, heavy. Flying, crawling, swivelling. Surrounding you. Nudging, squeaking revoltingly against the metal. A thrust. Then a harder thrust. This is still a trifle, no big deal, the crawling fragments pouring like peas over the plating, and this is also no big deal, but somewhere from behind that very fast and heavy one, as though propelled from a giant catapult, is closing in, and the radars cannot see it yet behind the shroud of dust, and when they will, it will be too late anyway... The hull bursts, all bulkheads fold up like pleats, for one moment the sky swarming with rocks will flash through the crack, and people turn white and fragile like ice... They are wearing space suits, though. Bykov opened his eyes.

Zhilin, - he said. - Go to Markushin and find out, where the second cosmoscaphe is. Ask him to get a pilot ready for me.

Zhilin disappeared.

- Misha, - Bykov said soundlessly. - Somehow, Misha... Somehow...

- There he is, - said Yurkovski.

- Oh-oh-oh-oh, - said Michael Antonovich.

- About five kiolmetres?

- What are you talking about, Voloden'ka! Much less... Isn't it really nice when there are no rocks?

- Slow down gradually. I will start getting the buoy ready. What a moron I was to break the radio, I am such an idiot...

- What could it this be, Voloden'ka? Look, what a monster!..

- He is holding them, see? That's where they are, the aliens. And you were nagging before!

- How can you, Voloden'ka? Did I really nag you? I was just...

- Park it somehow, so that god forbid, you don't brush against it...

Silence set in. Bykov was listening intently. Perhaps somehow, it will work out, he thought.

- Well, why are you pulling a face?

- I don't know, really. Somehow it all seems so strange to me... Something doesn't feel right...

- Go out under the shank and drop down the magnetic drag.

- Alright, Voloden'ka...

What have they found there, Bykov was thinking. What the hell is that shank? Why are they wasting time? Can't they hurry up?

- Missed it, - said Yurkovski.

- Hold on, Voloden'ka, you don't know how to. Let me.

- Look, it's as if it had rooted itself in the rock... And did you notice, that they are all identical?

- Yes, all five. I found it odd from the beginning...

Zhilin returned.

- There is no cosmoscaphe, - he said.

Bykov wouldn't even ask, what that means - no cosmoscaphe. He left the microphone, got up and said:

- Let's go over to the Swiss.

- It won't work this way, - said the voice of Michael Antonovich. Bykov stopped.

- Yes, indeed... What other means have we got?

- Hold on, Voloden'ka. Let me get out now and do it all manually.

- That's right, - said Yurkovski. - Let's get out.

- Oh no, Voloden'ka, you sit here. You are not a huge help... Anything could happen...

Yurkovski said, after some silence:

- Alright. I'll make a few more shots.

Bykov hurried towards the exit. Zhilin walked out of the command post after him and locked the hatch with a key. Bykov said whilst walking:

- We'll take the tanker, find the bearing of that place and wait for them there.

- That's right, Alexey Petrovich, - said Zhilin. - So what did they find there?

- Don't know, - Bykov said through clenched teeth. - And don't want to know. Go to the command post and work on the bearing, while I talk to the captain.

In the observatory's corridor Bykov caught the sweltering duty officer and ordered:

- We are going out in the tanker now. You will remove the bridge and seal the hatch.

The duty officer nodded.

- The second cosmo-scaph is coming back, - he said. Bykov stopped. - No-no, - the officer said with regret. - It will be a while yet, about three hours.

Bykov moved on silently. They passed the caisson, walked past the bamboo footstool and climbed up into the tanker's command post through a cramped narrow shaft. Captain Korf and his navigator were standing over a low desk and inspecting a blueprint.

- Good day, - said Bykov.

Zhilin, without saying a word, walked to the radio and began tuning it to the cosmo-scaph's frequency. The captain and navigator stared at him in astonishment. Bykov came up to them.

- Who's the captain? - he asked.

- Captain Korf, - said the red-headed captain. - Who aur yew? Hau kome?

- I am Bykov, "Takhmaseeb's" captain. I am asking you to help me.

- I happy, - said captain Korf. He looked at Zhilin. Zhilin was tampering with the radio.

- Two of our comrades have gone inside the Ring, - said Bykov.

- O! - perplexity showed on captain's face. - How reckless!!!

- I need a ship. I am asking for your ship.

- My ship, - Korf repeated confusedly. - Go inside the Ring?

- No, - said Bykov. - Inside the Ring only as a last resort. If a disaster happens.

- And where is your ship? - Korf asked suspiciously.

- Mine's a photon freighter, - answered Bykov.

- Ah, - said Korf. - Yes, zhat impossible.

Yurkovski's voice came from the control room:

- Hold on, I'll get out in now.

- And I am telling you, stay put, Voloden'ka, - said Michael Antonovich.

- You are taking forever.

Michael said nothing back.

- Is it them in the Ring? - Korf asked, pointing at the radio.

- Yes, - said Bykov. - Are you willing?

Zhilin came and stood next to him.

- Yes, - Korf said reflectively. - Need to help.

Suddenly the navigator began speaking so fast and incoherently, that Bykov could only understand isolated words. Korf was listening and nodding. Then, blushing severely, he told Bykov:

- The navigator doesn't want to fly. It's not his duty.

- He can go, - said Bykov. - Thank you, captain Korf.

The navigator repeated a few more phrases.

- He is saying, that we are heading for certain death, - Korf translated.

- Tell him to go, - said Bykov. - We must hurry.

- Perhaps, it would be better for mister Korf to disembark, too? - Zhilin asked cautiously.

- Ho-ho-ho! - said Korf. - I am captain!

He waved to the navigator and walked to the controls. The navigator left, not looking at anyone. One minute later the outer hatch boomed with an echo.

- Girls, - said captain Korf, without turning, - they make us weak. Weak, like them. But one must resist. Let's get ready.

He reached into his side pocket, pulled out a photo and fixed it on the panel in front of him.

- Like this, - he said. - And it can't be otherwise, if the voyage is dangerous. Take your seats, gentlemen.

Bykov sat at the controls next to the captain. Zhilin buckled up in a chair in front of the radio.

- Dispatcher! - said the captain.

- Dispatcher here, - the duty officer at the observatory responded.

- Requesting take-off!

- Clear to take off!

Captain Korf pushed the starter, and everything shifted. And then Zhilin suddenly remembered: "Yurka!" For a few seconds he was looking at the radio that was moaning Michael Antonovich's rueful sighs. He simply did not know what to do. The tanker already left the observatory's zone, and captain Korf, manoeuvring the rudders, was putting the ship onto the bearing. Let's not panic, Zhilin thought. Things aren't all that bad. So far nothing terrible has happened.

- Michael, - Yurkovski's voice called. - Will you be done soon?

- Now, Voloden'ka, - responded Michael Antonovich. His voice sounded somewhat strange - either weary or confused.

- Ho! - Yura's voice said behind them. Zhilin turned around. Yura was walking into the command post, sleepy-eyed and very excited. - You are going to "Ring-2" as well? - he asked.

Bykov looked at him in frenzy.

- Himmeldonnerwetter! - captain Korf whispered. He had also fully forgotten about Yura. - Passenger! In-nn yor cabin! - he shouted with a threat. His ruddy sideburns stood out menacingly.

Michael Antonovich suddenly said in a loud voice:

- Volodya... Be so kind, move the cosmoscaphe about thirty meters away? Will you manage?

Yurkovski grumbled with annoyance.

- Well, I'll try, - he said. - And why is this necessary?

- I'll be more comfortable like this, Volodya. Please.

Bykov suddenly got up and pulled harshly on his jacket's fastenings. Yura was looking at him in with horror. Bykov's face, always brick-red, turned a whitish blue. Yurkovski suddenly screamed:

- A rock! Misha, there's a rock! Get back! Drop everything!

A faint moan could be heard, and Michael Antonovich said in a trembling voice:

- Voloden'ka, go away. Go quickly. I can't.

- The speed, - Bykov said hoarsely.

- What does it mean - I can't? - Yurkovski squealed. His heavy breathing could be heard.

- Go away, go, don't come here... - Michael Antonovich was muttering. - Nothing will come out of it... Don't do it, don't...

- So that's what it is, - said Yurkovski. - Why did you keep quiet? Well, that's no big deal. We'll get you right now... Right now... Gee, how did you get so messy...

- The speed, the speed... - Bykov kept roaring.

Captain Korf, twisting his freckled face, hovered above the control buttons. Gravity overload intensified.

- Right now, Mishen'ka, right now... - Yurkovski kept saying cheerfully. - Like this... Damn, I wish I had a crow bar...

- Too late, - Michael Antonovich said with sudden calmness.

In the silence that set in their heavy, wheezing breath could be heard.

- Yes, - said Yurkovski. - It's too late.

- Leave me, - said Michael Antonovich.

- No.

- It's pointless.

- No matter, - said Yurkovski, - it'll be quick.

A dry laugh was heard.

- We won't even notice it. Close your eyes, Misha.

And after a brief silence someone - not clear who it was, - called out softly and wistfully:

- Alesha... Alexey...

In silence, Bykov threw captain Korf away, like a kitten, and dug his fingers into the buttons. The tanker jumped. Pushed into his chair by a tremendous overload, Zhilin just managed to realise "Forced acceleration!" He lost consciousness for a second. Then through the noise in his ears he heard a short scream that was cut off, as though from tremendous pain, and through the red fog covering his eyes, saw that the arrow on the auto bearing finder twitched and swung feebly from side to side.

- Misha! - Bykov screamed. - Guys!

He fell head down on the controls and began crying, loudly and awkwardly...

Yura felt sick. He was nauseous, his head hurt terribly. He was tormented by some obscure twofold delirium. He was lying on his bed in a cramped, dark cabin on "Takhmaseeb", and at the same time it was his big bright room at home on Earth. His mother would walk into the room, place a cool pleasant hand on his cheek and say in Zhilin's voice: "No, still sleeping". Yura felt like saying, that he is not sleeping, but somehow it was impossible to do it. Some people, familiar and unfamiliar, and among them - one wearing white overalls - leaned over and knocked Yura hard over his smashed head, and immediately Michael Antonovich said ruefully: "Alesha... Alexey...", and Bykov, terrifying, pale as a ghost, grabbed the controls, and Yura was thrown down the corridor head against something sharp and hard. Tearfully sad music was playing and someone's voice was talking: "...During exploration of Saturn's Ring the chief inspector of the international board of cosmic communications Vladimir Sergeevich Yurkovski and the oldest navigator-astronaut Michael Antonovich Krutikov perished..." And Yura cried, like even the adult people cry in their sleep, when they dream of something sad...

When Yura came round, he saw that he is really inside a cabin on "Takhmaseeb", and next to him a doctor is standing, wearing white overalls.

- Here we are, it's about time, - said Zhilin, smiling plaintively.

- Were they really killed? - Yura asked. Zhilin nodded silently. - And Alexey Petrovich? - Zhilin didn't say anything.

The doctor asked:

- Does your head hurt much?

Yura concentrated for a moment.

- No, - he said. - Not too much.

- That's good, - said the doctor. - Stay in bed for about five days, and you'll be well.

- I won't be sent back to Earth? - Yura asked. Suddenly he became really scared that he would be sent back to Earth.

- No, why, - the doctor was surprised, and Zhilin cheerfully informed him:

- They already asked about you at "Ring-2", they want to come and visit.

- Let them, - said Yura.

The doctor told Zhilin, that Yura must be given the mixture every three hours, warned them that he will come in one day, and left. Yura closed his

eyes again. Perished, he thought. No one will ever call me a cadet and won't ask me to sit down and have a small chat with an old man, and no one is going to read his memoirs about the nicest, most charming people. This will never happen. The most awful is - that it will never happen. You can smash your head against the wall, you can tear your shirt - still, you could never see Vladimir Sergeevich again, the way he is standing outside the shower room in his splendid robe and a giant towel across the shoulder and how Michael Antonovich is scooping the inevitable porridge into the bowls and smiling kindly. Never, never, never... Why - never? How can this be so, never again? Some stupid stone in some stupid Ring of the stupid Saturn... And the people, who must stay, simply have to stay, because the world will become worse without them, - these people are no longer and will no longer be...

Yura remembered vaguely, that they had found something down there. But that was irrelevant, that wasn't the main thing, though they did think, that that was the main thing... And, of course, everyone, who doesn't know them, will also think, that that was the main thing. It is always like that. If you don't know the one who accomplished a feat, the main thing for you - is the feat. And if you do know - what is that feat to you then? A feat - is all very well, but the person must live on.

Yura thought that he will meet his mates in a few days. They will, naturally, start asking what and how straight away. They will ask neither about Yurkovski nor about Krutikov, they will be asking what Yurkovski and Krutikov found. They will be literally burning with curiosity. They will be interested the most in what Yurkovski and Krutikov managed to report about their findings. They will marvel at Yurkovski and Krutikov's valour and will exclaim with envy: "Now these were real men!" And most remarkable to them will be the fact that they both died on active duty. Yura even felt nauseated with resentment and anger. But he already knew what he will say to them. So as not to yell at them "Snotty faced idiots!", so as not to start crying, not to start a fight, I will tell them: "Hold on. There is a story...", and I will begin it like this: "On the island of Honshu, in the Titigatake mountain gorge, in an impenetrable forest, a cave was found..."

Zhilin walked in, sat at the foot of Yura's bed and patted him on the knee. Zhilin was wearing a chequered shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His face was sunken and weary. He was unshaven. And how is Bykov, Yura wondered suddenly and asked:

- Vanya, so how is Alexey Petrovich?

Zhilin didn't say anything.

<h2>EPILOGUE.</h2>

The bus rolled noiselessly to the low white barrier and stopped in front of a large motley crowd of people waiting. Zhilin was sitting at the window and looking at the cheerful faces, reddened with frost, at the snow mounts glistening in the sun before the aero-terminal building. The doors opened, chilled air rushed inside the bus. The passengers followed each other to the exit, cracking final jokes with the stewardess. A lively hubbub came from the crowd - at the door people were hugging, shaking hands, kissing. Zhilin searched for familiar faces, did not find anyone, and sighed with relief. He looked at Bykov. Bykov was sitting motionless, face lowered into the furry collar of his Greenland jacket.

The stewardess took her bag from the baggage locker and said cheerfully:

- Well, what are you waiting for, comrades? We are here! This bus won't go any further.

Bykov got up with an effort and, without taking his hands out of pockets, walked across an empty bus to the exit. Zhilin followed him with

Yurkovski's satchel. The crowd had already dispersed. People were heading to the terminal in groups, laughing and talking among themselves. Bykov stepped into the snow, stood for a while, squinting gloomily at the Sun, and also walked to the terminal. Snow was squeaking intensely under the boots. At the side a long bluish shadow scurried. Then Zhilin saw Daugeh.

Daugeh was hurriedly hobbling towards him, leaning heavily on a polished walking stick, tiny, muffled up, with a dark wrinkled visage. In his hand, in a warm furry mitt, he clutched a pitiful little bouquet of forget-me-nots. Looking straight in front of him, he walked up to Bykov, shoved the bouquet to him and pressed his face into the Greenland jacket. Bykov hugged him and grumbled:

- Come on now, you should have stayed at home, you see how chilly it is...

He held Daugeh under the arm, and they walked slowly to the terminal - a huge stooped Bykov and a tiny humped-up Daugeh. Zhilin was walking behind them.

- How are the lungs? - Bykov asked.

- So-so... - said Daugeh, - neither better nor worse...

- You must go to the mountains. You are not a little boy, you must look after yourself.

- Don't have time, - said Daugeh. - There is much to be finished. A great many things have been started, Alesha.

- Well, and so what? You must get treatment. Or you won't even have a chance to finish.

- The main thing is - to begin.

- All the more so.

Daugeh said:

- The question of sending an expedition to Transpluto has been finalised. They insist on you going. I asked them to wait until you come back.

- Well, then, - said Bykov. - I'll go home, get some rest... Sure.

- They appointed Arnautov as the chief.

- Doesn't matter, - said Bykov.

They started climbing up the stairs of the terminal. Daugeh was uncomfortable; it seemed that he still had not gotten used to his walking stick. Bykov was holding him under the elbow. Daugeh said quietly:

- You know, I did not even hug them, Alesha... I hugged you, Vanya, and them I didn't hug...

Bykov stayed silent and they walked into the lobby. Zhilin walked up the stairs and suddenly saw in the shadows behind the column a woman, who was looking at him. She turned away immediately, but he still managed to notice her face under a fur hat - once upon a time, probably a very pretty face, and now an old, drooping one, almost hideous. Where have I seen her? - Zhilin thought. I know I have seen her many times. Or does she resemble someone?

He pushed the door and walked into the lobby. So, then, Transpluto now, also known as Cerberus. Ever so faraway. Far away from everything. Far away from Earth, far away from people, far away from the main things. Once more, a steel box, once more the alien, glaciated, and such unimportant rocks. The main things remain on Earth. As the always have, however. But this isn't right, it's unfair. Time to decide, Ivan Zhilin, it's time! Of course, some people will say - with regret or tauntingly: "His nerves gave in. It happens". Alexey Petrovich may think that. Zhilin stopped even. Yes, that's exactly what he'll think: "His nerves gave in. And what a solid fellow he was". But this is splendid! At least he won't feel as bad, that I am deserting him now, when he is left all alone... Of course, it will be easier for him to think that my nerves gave in, than seeing, that I don't give a damn about all these transpluto's. I know he is stubborn and extremely firm in his convictions... and deceptions. Stone-firm deceptions...

The main things are on Earth. The main things always remain on Earth,

and I will stay on Earth. I have decided, he thought. It's decided. The main things are - on Earth...

<i>1960.</i>

<i><h2>CONTENTS</h2></i>

<i><h2>PROLOGUE</h2></i>

*<i>Okroshka (rus.)</i> - cold kvass soup with chopped vegetables and meat
Here: a ten day period*

A.S.Pushkin, the poem *<i>" Queen of Spades"</i>*, rephrased.

<i>Areologist</i> - specialising in Martian geology

Original - *<i>(fr.) renome [rus. ðáííîá]</i>*

Verbal play: *<i>cook</i> - 1. *<i>Prepare a meal</i>; 2. *<i>weld [metal]*
[rus. ââðèðü]</i>**

Lit. - to get a hiding, to be punished like a child [rus. íââðàü óøè]

Verbal play altered: orig. - *<i>rus. òââéèòèè [pills]</i> consonant with
*<i>rus. êîðèèòèè [rissoles]</i>**

Verbal play orig: *<i>[rus. Ðúáâ èùâò, áâá äëóáæâ, à +âêîââê - äââ ðóæâ]</i>*

Alexey Tolstoy, a Soviet writer, author of popular children's tales and science fiction novels

<i>Torus</i> (lat.) - a three-dimensional cylindrical ring-shaped figure, a doughnut shape

Relativists - physicists developing the theory of relativity

Ilya Repin's classical painting "Zaporozhian Cossacks writing a letter of reply to the Turkish Sultan"

<i>Katakhrâsis (gr.) -</i> semantically incorrect combination; an oxymoron

Dvornik (rus.) - Worker who takes care of the yard and pavement in front of the house *[rus. äâíðíêê]*

Originally an English phrase in text

Valenki (rus.) - Loose fitting thick felt boots designed for snowy conditions *[rus. ââëâíêê]*

"Skorohod" - formerly a popular footwear brand in USSR

Untranslatable verbal play: *[rus. óðêâ]* means 1) duck; 2) newspaper hoax

Äðêääëé è Áíðêñ Ñòðóääöêêâ. **Ñòàæáðú**

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. **Probationers**

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