

ROADSIDE PICNIC

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Translated from the Russian

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Cryptomaoist Editions

FROM AN INTERVIEW BY A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT FROM HARMONT RADIO WITH DOCTOR VALENTINE PILMAN, RECIPIENT OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN PHYSICS FOR 19..

"I suppose that your first serious discovery, Dr. Pilman, should be considered what is now called the Pilman Radiant?"

"I don't think so. The Pilman Radiant wasn't the first, nor was it serious, nor was it really a discovery. And it wasn't completely mine, either."

"Surely you're joking, doctor. The Pilman Radiant is a concept known to every schoolchild."

"That doesn't surprise me. According to some sources, the Pilman Radiant was discovered by a schoolboy. Unfortunately, I don't remember his name. Look it up in Stetson's History of the Visitation -- it's described in full detail there. His version is that the radiant was discovered by a schoolboy, that a college student published the coordinates, but that for some unknown reason it was named after me."

"Yes, many amazing things can happen with a discovery. Would you mind explaining it to our listeners, Dr. Pilman?"

"The Pilman Radiant is simplicity itself. Imagine that you spin a huge globe and you start firing bullets into it. The bullet holes would lie on the surface in a smooth curve. The whole point of what you call my first serious discovery lies in the simple fact that all six Visitation Zones are situated on the surface of our planet as though someone had taken six shots at Earth from a pistol located somewhere along the Earth-Deneb line. Deneb is the alpha star in Cygnus. The Point in the heavens from which, so to speak, the shots came is the Pilman Radiant."

"Thank you, doctor. My fellow Harmonites! Finally we have heard a clear explanation of the Pilman Radiant! By the way, the day before yesterday was the thirtieth anniversary of the Visitation. Dr Pilman, would you care to say a few words to Your fellow townsmen on the subject?"

"What in particular interests you? Remember, I wasn't in Harmont at the time."

"That makes it even more interesting to hear what you felt when your hometown became the site of an Invasion from a supercivilization from space."

"To tell the truth, I first thought it was a hoax. It was hard to imagine that anything like that could possibly happen in our little Harmont. Gobi or Newfoundland seemed more likely than Harmont."

"Nevertheless, you finally had to believe it."

"Finally -- yes."

"And then?"

"It suddenly occurred to me that Harmont and the other five Visitation Zones -- sorry, my mistake, there were only four other sites known at the time -- that all of them fit on a very smooth curve. I calculated the coordinates and sent them to Nature."

"And you weren't at all concerned with the fate of your hometown?"

"Not really. You see, by then I had come to believe in the Visitation, but I simply could not force myself to believe the hysterical reports about burning neighborhoods and monsters that selectively devoured only old men and children and about bloody battles between the invulnerable invaders and the highly vulnerable but steadfastly courageous Royal Tank Units."

"You were right. I remember that our reporters really botched the story. But let's return to science. The discovery of the Pilman Radiant was the first, but probably not the last, of your contributions to our knowledge of the Visitation!"

"The first and last."

"But surely you have been carefully following the international research in the Visitation Zones?"

"Yes. Once in a while I read the Reports. "

"You mean the Reports of the International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures?"

"Yes."

"And what, in your opinion, has been the most important discovery in these thirty years?"

"The fact of the Visitation itself."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The fact of the Visitation itself is the most important discovery not only of the past thirty years but of the entire history of mankind. It's not so important to know just who these visitors were. It's not important to know where they came from, why they came, why they spent so little time here, or where they disappeared to since. The important thing is that humanity now knows for sure: we are not alone in the universe. I fear that the Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures will never be fortunate enough to make a more fundamental discovery."

"This is very fascinating, Dr Pilman, but actually I was thinking more of advances and discoveries of a technological nature. Discoveries that our earth scientists and engineers could use. After all, many very important scientists have proposed that the discoveries made in the Visitation Zones are capable of changing the entire course of our history."

"Well, I don't subscribe to that point of view. And as for specific discoveries -- that's not my field."

"Yet for the past two years you've been Canadian consultant to the UN Commission on Problems of the Visitation."

"Yes. But I have nothing to do with the study of extraterrestrial cultures. On the commission my colleagues and I represent the international scientific community when questions come up on implementing UN decisions regarding the internationalization of the Zones. Roughly speaking, we make sure that the extraterrestrial marvels found in the Zones come into the hands of the International Institute."

"Is there anyone else after these treasures?"

"Yes."

"You probably mean stalkers!"

"I don't know what they are."

"That's what we in Harmont call the thieves who risk their lives in the Zone to grab everything they can lay their hands on. It's become a whole new profession."

"I understand. No, that's not within our competence."

"I should think not. That's police business. But I would be interested in knowing just what does fall within your competence, Dr. Pilman."

"There is a steady leak of materials from the Visitation Zones into the hands of irresponsible persons and organizations. We deal with the results of these leaks."

"Could you be a little more specific, doctor?"

"Can't we talk about the arts instead? Wouldn't the listeners care to know my opinion of the incomparable Godi Muller?"

"Of course! But I would like to Finish with science first. As a scientist, aren't you drawn to dealing with the extraterrestrial treasures yourself?"

"How can I put it? I suppose so."

"Then, we can hope that one fine day Harmonites will see their famous fellow citizen on the streets of his home town?"

"It's not impossible."

1. REDRICK SCHUHART, AGE 23, BACHELOR, LABORATORY ASSISTANT AT THE HARMONT BRANCH OF THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL CULTURES

The night before, he and I were in the repository -- it was already evening, all I had to do was throw off my lab suit and I could head for the Borscht to put a drop or two of the stiff stuff into my system. I was just standing there, holding up the wall, my work all done and a cigarette in my hand. I was dying for a smoke -- it was two hours since I'd had one, and he was still puttering around with his stuff. He had loaded, locked, and sealed one safe and was loading up the other one -- taking the empties from the transporter, examining each one from every angle (and they're heavy little bastards, by the way, fifteen pounds each), and carefully replacing them on the shelf.

He had been struggling with those empties forever, and the way I see it, without any benefit to humanity or himself. In his shoes, I would have said screw it long ago and gone to work on something else for the same money. Of course, on the other hand, if you think about it, an empty really is something mysterious and maybe even incomprehensible. I've handled quite a few of them, but I'm still surprised every time I see one. They're just two copper disks the size of a saucer -- about a quarter inch thick, with a space of a foot and a half between.

There's nothing else. I mean absolutely nothing, just empty space. You can stick your hand in them, or even your head, if you're so knocked out by the whole thing -- just emptiness and more emptiness, thin air. And for all that, of course, there is some force between them, as I understand it, because you can't press them together, and no one's been able to pull them apart, either.

No, friends, it's hard to describe them to someone who hasn't seen them. They're too simple, especially when you look close and finally believe your eyes. It's like trying to describe a glass to someone: you end up wriggling your fingers and cursing in frustration. OK, let's say you've got it, and those of you who haven't get hold of a copy of the institute's Reports -- every issue has an article on the empties with photos.

Kirill had been beating his brains out over the empties for almost a year. I'd been with him from the start, but I still wasn't quite sure what it was he wanted to learn from them, and, to tell the truth, I wasn't trying very hard to find out. Let him figure it out for himself first, and then maybe I'd have a listen. For now, I understood only one thing: he had to figure out, at any cost, what made one of

those empties tick -- eat through one with acid, squash it under a press, or melt it in an oven. And then he would understand everything and be hailed and honored, and world science would shiver with ecstasy. For now, as I saw it, he had a long way to go. He hadn't gotten anywhere yet, and he was worn out. He was sort of gray and silent, and his eyes looked like a sick dog's--they even watered. If it had been anyone else, I would have gotten him roaring drunk and taken him over to some hard-working girl to unwind. And in the morning I'd have boozed him up again and taken him to another broad, and in a week he would have been as good as new -- bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Only that wasn't the medicine for Kirill. There was no point in even suggesting it -- he wasn't the type.

So there we were in the repository. I was watching him and seeing what had happened to him, how his eyes were sunken, and I felt sorrier for him than I ever had for anyone. And that's when I decided. I didn't exactly decide, it was like somebody opened my mouth and made me talk.

"Listen," I said. "Kirill."

And he stood there with his last empty on the scales, looking like he was ready to climb into it.

"Listen," I said, "Kirill! What if you had a full empty, huh?"

"A full empty?" He looked puzzled.

"Yeah. Your hydromagnetic trap, whatchamacallit . . . Object 77b. It's got some sort of blue stuff inside."

I could see that it was beginning to penetrate. He looked up at me, squinted, and a glimmer of reason, as he loved to call it, appeared behind the dog tears.

"Hold on," he said. "Full? Just like this, but full?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying."

"Where?"

My Kirill was cured. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

"Let's go have a smoke."

He stuffed the empty into the safe, slammed the door, and locked it with three and a half turns, and we went back into the lab. Ernest pays 400 in cash for an empty empty, and I could have bled him dry, the son of a bitch, for a full one, but believe it or not, I didn't even think about it, because Kirill came back to life before my eyes and bounded down the steps four at a time, not even letting me finish my smoke. In short, I told him everything: what it was like, and where it was, and the best way to get at it. He pulled out a map, found the garage, put his finger on it, and stared at me. Of course, he immediately figured it out about me -- what was there not to understand?

"You dog, you," he said and smiled. "Well, let's go for it. First thing in the morning. I'll order the passes and the boot for nine and we'll set off at ten and hope for the best. All right?"

"All right," I said. "Who'll be the third?"

"What do we need a third for?"

"Oh no," I said. "This is no picnic with ladies. What if something happens to you? It's in the Zone," I said. "We have to follow regulations."

He gave a short laugh and shrugged.

"As you wish. You know better."

You bet I did! Of course, he was just trying to humor me. The third would be in the way as far as he was concerned. We would run down, just the two of us, and everything would be hunky-dory, no one would suspect anything about me. Except for the fact that I knew that people from the institute didn't enter the Zone in two's. The rule is: two do the work and the third watches, and when they ask him about it later, he tells.

"Personally, I would take Austin," Kirill said. "But you probably don't want him. Or is it all right?"

"Nope," I said. "Anybody but Austin. You can take Austin another time."

Austin isn't a bad guy, he's got the right mix of courage and cowardice, but I feel he's doomed. You can't explain it to Kirill, but I can see it. The man thinks he knows and understands the Zone completely. That means he's going to kick off soon. He can go right ahead, but without me, thanks.

"All right, then," Kirill said. "How about Tender?" Tender was his second lab assistant. An all-right kind of guy, on the quiet side.

"He's a little old," I said. "And he has kids."

"That's all right. He's been in the Zone before."

"Fine," I said. "Let's take Tender."

He stayed to pore over the map and I made a beeline for the Borscht, because I was starving and my throat was parched.

I got back to the lab in the morning as usual, around nine, and showed my pass. The guard on duty was the lanky bean pole of a sergeant that I beat the hell out of last year when he made a drunken pass at Guta.

"Fine thing," he said to me. "They're looking for you all over the institute, Red." I interrupted him right there, polite-like.

"I'm not Red to you," I said. "Don't try that palsy-walsy stuff on me, you Swedish dolt."

"God, Red! Everybody calls you that."

I was all wound up before going into the Zone and cold sober to boot. I hauled him up by his shoulder belt and told him in precise detail just what he was and what maternal line he was descended from. He spat on the floor, returned my pass, and said without any of the niceties:

"Redrick Schuhart, your orders are to appear immediately before Chief of Security Captain Herzog."

"That's better," I said. "That's the ticket. Keep plugging away, sergeant, you'll make lieutenant yet."

Meanwhile I was thinking, what was this curve coming my way? What did Captain Herzog need me for during working hours? All right, I went off to make my appearance. His office was on the third floor, a nice office, with bars on the windows just like a police station. Willy was sitting at his desk, puffing on his pipe, and typing some kind of gibberish. Some little sergeant was digging through the metal file cabinet in the corner. A new guy I'd never seen. We have more sergeants at the institute than at division headquarters. They're all well-built healthy fellows. They don't have to go into the Zone and they don't give a damn about world issues.

"Hello," I said. "You called for me?" Willy looked right through me, moved away from the typewriter, laid a hefty file on the desk, and started leafing through it.

"Redrick Schuhart?"

"The same," I answered, feeling a nervous laugh welling up. I couldn't help it, it was funny.

"How long have you been with the institute?"

"Two years, starting my third."

"Family?"

"I'm alone," I said. "An orphan."

Then he turned to his little sergeant and gave him an order in a stern tone.

"Sergeant Lummer, go to the files and bring back case number one-fifty."

The sergeant saluted and disappeared, and Willy slammed the file shut and asked gloomily:

"Up to your old tricks again?"

"What old tricks?"

"You know what tricks. There's new material on you here."

So, I thought.

"Where from?"

He frowned and banged his pipe against the ashtray in irritation.

"That doesn't concern you," he said. "As an old friend, I'm warning you. Knock it off, knock it off for good. If they get you a second time, you won't get off with six months. And they'll kick you out of the institute once and for all, understand?"

"I understand," I said. That I can understand. I just don't understand what bastard could have squealed.

But he was looking through me again, puffing on his empty pipe and flipping through the file. That meant that Sergeant Lummer had returned with case #150.

"Thank you, Schuhart," said Capt. Willy Herzog, also known as the Hog. "That's all I wanted cleared up. You're free to go."

So I went to the locker room, pulled on my lab clothes and lit up. All along I kept thinking where the rumor could have come from. It had to be all lies if it came from within the institute, because nobody there knew anything about me and there was no way that anyone could. If it had been a report from the police -- again, what could they know there except for my old sins? Maybe they had gotten Buzzard? That bastard, he'd drown his own grandmother to save his skin. But even Buzzard didn't know anything about me now. I thought and thought and didn't come up with anything very pleasant. So I decided the hell with it. The last time I had gone into the Zone at night was three months ago, and I had gotten rid of most of the stuff and had spent almost all of the money. They hadn't caught me with the goods, and I was too slippery for them to catch me now.

But then, just as I was heading up the stairs, I suddenly saw the light, and saw it so well that I had to go back to the locker room, sit down, and have another cigarette. It meant that I couldn't go into the Zone today. Nor tomorrow, nor the day after. It meant that those toads had their eye on me again, that they hadn't forgotten me, or if they had forgotten, then somebody had reminded them. And now it no longer mattered who had done the reminding. No stalker, unless he was completely off his rocker, would go near the Zone even at gunpoint, not if he knew that he was being watched. I should have been burrowing into the deepest, darkest corner at that very moment. Zone? What Zone? I hadn't been in any Zone, even with a pass, for months! What are you harassing an honest lab worker for?

I thought the whole thing through and even felt a sense of relief that I wouldn't be going into the Zone that day. But what would be the nicest way of informing Kirill of the fact?

I told him straight out.

"I'm not going into the Zone. What instructions do you have?"

At first, of course, he just stared at me bug-eyed. Then he seemed to understand. He led me by the elbow into his little office, sat me down at his desk, and sat on

the windowsill facing me. We lit up. Silence. Then he asked me, careful-like:

"Has something happened, Red?"

What could I tell him?

"No," I said. "Nothing happened. Yesterday I blew twenty bills at poker -- that Noonan is a great player, the louse."

"Wait a minute," he said. "Have you changed your mind?"

I made a choking noise from the tension.

"I can't," I said to him through clenched teeth. "I can't, do you understand? Herzog just had me up in his office."

He went limp. He got that pathetic look again and his eyes looked like they were a sick poodle's again. He shuddered, lit a new cigarette with the butt of the old one, and spoke softly.

"You can trust me, Red. I didn't breathe a word to anyone."

"Skip it," I said. "Nobody's talking about you."

"I haven't even told Tender yet. I made out a pass in his name, but I haven't even asked him if he'll go."

I said nothing and went on smoking. It was funny and sad. The man didn't understand a thing.

"What did Herzog say to you?"

"Nothing in particular," I said. "Someone squealed on me, that's all."

He looked at me kind of strange, hopped off the sill, and started walking up and down. He ran around his office and I sat blowing smoke rings in silence. I was sorry for him, of course, and I felt bad that things hadn't worked out better. Some cure I came up with for his melancholy. And whose fault was it? My own. I tempted a baby with a cookie, but the cookie was in a hiding place, and the hiding place was guarded by mean men... Then he stopped pacing, came up close to me, and looking off to the side somewhere, asked awkwardly:

"Listen, Red, how much would a full empty cost?"

At first I didn't understand him. I thought at first that he was hoping to buy one somewhere. Where would you buy one? Maybe it was the only one in the world and besides he couldn't possibly have enough dough for that. Where would he get the money from? He was a foreign scientist, and a Russian one at that. And then the thought struck me. So the bastard thinks that I'm doing it for the greenbacks? You so and so, I thought to myself, what do you take me for? I opened my mouth to tell him off. And I shut up. Because, actually, what else could he take me for? A stalker is a stalker. The more green stuff the better. He trades his life for greenbacks. And so it looked to him that yesterday I had cast my line and today I

was reeling him in, trying to raise my price.

The thought made me tongue-tied. And he kept staring at me intently, without blinking. And in his eyes I saw not contempt but a kind of understanding, I guess. Then I calmly explained it to him.

"No one with a pass has ever gone to the garage before. They haven't laid the tracks to it yet. You know that. So here we come back from the Zone and your Tender brags to everybody how we headed straight for the garage, picked up what we needed, and came right back. Like we just went down to the warehouse or something. And it will be perfectly clear to everyone," I said, "that we knew ahead of time what we wanted there. And that means that someone set us on to it. And which of us three that could have been -- well, there's no point in spelling it out for you. Do you understand what's in store for me here?"

I finished my little speech. We sat staring into each other's eyes, saying nothing. Suddenly he clapped his hands, rubbed his palms together, and announced in a hearty tone:

"Well, if you can't, you can't. I understand you, Red, and I can't pass judgment. I'll go alone. Maybe it'll go fine. It won't be the first time."

He spread out the map on the windowsill, leaned on his hands, and bent over it. All his heartiness seemed to evaporate before my eyes. I could hear him muttering.

"Forty yards, maybe forty-one, another three in the garage itself. No, I won't take Tender along. What do you think, Red? Maybe I shouldn't take Tender? He does have two kids, after all."

"They won't let you out alone," I said.

"They will," he muttered. "I know all the sergeants and all the lieutenants. I don't like those trucks! They've been exposed to the elements for thirty years and they're just like new. There's a gasoline carrier twenty feet away and it's completely rusted out, but they look like they've just come off the assembly line. That's the Zone for you!"

He looked up from the map and stared out the window. And I stared out the window, too. The glass in our windows is thick and leaded. And beyond the windows -- the Zone. There it is, just reach out and you can touch it. From the thirteenth floor it looks like it could fit in the palm of your hand.

When you look at it, it looks like any other piece of land. The sun shines on it like on any other part of the earth. And it's as though nothing had particularly changed in it. Like everything was the way it was thirty years ago. My father, rest his soul, could look at it and not notice anything out of place at all. Except maybe he'd ask why the plant's smokestack was still. Was there a strike or something?

Yellow ore piled up in cone-shaped mounds, blast furnaces gleaming in the sun, rails, rails, and more rails, a locomotive with flatcars on the rails. In other words, an industry town. Only there were no people. Neither living nor dead. You could see the garage, too: a long gray intestine, its doors wide open. The trucks were parked on the paved lot next to it. He was right about the trucks -- his brains were functioning. God forbid you should stick your head between two trucks. You have to sidle around them. There's a crack in the asphalt, if it hasn't been overgrown with bramble yet. Forty yards. Where was he counting from? Oh, probably from the last pylon. He's right, it wouldn't be further than that from there. Those egg-head scientists were making progress. They've got the road hung all the way to the dump, and cleverly hung at that! There's that ditch where Slimy ended up, just two yards from their road. Knuckles had told Slimy: stay as far away from the ditches as you can, jerk, or there won't be anything to bury. When I looked down into the water, there was nothing. This is the way it is with the Zone: if you come back with swag -- it's a miracle; if you come back alive -- it's a success; if the patrol bullets miss you -- it's a stroke of luck. And as for anything else -- that's fate.

I looked at Kirill and saw that he was secretly watching me. And the look on his face made me change my mind. The hell with them all, I thought. After all, what can those toads do to me? He really didn't have to say anything, but he did.

"Laboratory Assistant Schuhart," he says. "Official -- and I stress official -- sources have led me to believe that an inspection of the garage could be of great scientific value. I am suggesting that we inspect the garage. I guarantee a bonus." And he beamed like the June sun.

"What official sources?" I asked, and smiled like a fool myself.

"They are confidential. But I can tell you." He frowned. "Let's say, I found out from Dr. Douglas."

"Oh," I said. "From Dr. Douglas. What Dr. Douglas?"

"Sam Douglas," he said dryly. "He died last year."

My skin crawled. You so-and-so fool. Who talks about such things before setting out? You can beat these eggheads over the head with a two-by-four and they still don't catch on. I stabbed the ashtray with my cigarette butt.

"All right. Where's your Tender? How long do we have to wait for him?"

In other words, we didn't touch on the subject again. Kirill phoned PPS and ordered a flying boot. I looked over his map to see what was on it. It wasn't bad. It was a photographic process -- aerial and highly enlarged. You could even see the ridges on the cover that was lying by the gates to the garage. If stalkers could

get their hands on a map like that ... but it wouldn't be of great use at night when the stars look down on your ass and it's so dark you can't even see your own hands.

Tender made his entrance. He was red and out of breath. His daughter was sick and he had gone for the doctor. Apologized for being late. Well, we gave him his little present: we're off into the Zone. He even stopped puffing and wheezing at first, he was so scared. "What do you mean the Zone?" he asked. "And why me?" However, talk of a double bonus and the fact that Red Schuhart was going too got him breathing again.

So we went down to the "boudoir" and Kirill went for the passes. We showed them to another sergeant, who handed us special outfits. Now they are handy things. Just dye them any other color than their original red, and any stalker would gladly pay 500 for one without blinking an eye. I swore a long time ago that one of these days I would figure out a way to swipe one. At first glance it didn't seem like anything special, just an outfit like a diving suit with a bubble-top helmet with a visor. Not really like a diver's -- more like a jet pilot's or an astronaut's. It was light, comfortable, without binding any where, and you didn't sweat in it. In a little suit like that you could go through fire, and gas couldn't penetrate it. They say even a bullet can't get through. Of course, fire and mustard gasses and bullets are all earthly human things. Nothing like that exists in the Zone and there is no need to fear things like that in the Zone. And anyway, to tell the truth, people drop like flies in the special suits too. It's another matter that maybe many many more would die without the suits. The suits are 100 percent protection against the burning fluff, for example, and against the spitting devil's cabbage... all right.

We pulled on the special suits. I poured the nuts and bolts from the bag into my hip pocket, and we trekked across the institute yard to the Zone entrance. That's the routine they have here, so that everyone will see the heroes of science laying down their lives on the altar of humanity, knowledge, and the holy ghost. Amen. And sure enough -- all the way up to the fifteenth floor sympathetic faces watched us off. All we lacked were waving hankies and an orchestra.

"Hup two," I said to Tender. "Suck in your gut, you flabby platoon! A grateful mankind will never forget you!"

He looked at me and I saw that he was in no shape for joking around. And he was right, this was no time for jokes. But when you're going out into the Zone you can either cry or joke -- and I never cried, even as a child. I looked at Kirill. He was holding up under the strain, but was moving his lips, like he was praying.

"Praying?" I asked. "Pray on, pray. The further into the Zone the nearer to Heaven."

"What?"

"Pray!" I shouted. "Stalkers go to the head of the line into Heaven."

He broke out in a smile and patted me on the back, as if to say don't be afraid, nothing will happen as long as you're with me, and if it does, well, we only die once. He sure is a funny guy, honest to God.

We turned in our passes to the last sergeant, only this time, for a change of pace, it was a lieutenant. I know him, his father sells grave borders in Rexopolis. The flying boot was waiting for us, brought by the fellows from PPS and left at the passageway. Everyone else was waiting, too. The emergency first-aid team, and firemen, and our valiant guards, our fearless rescuers -- a bunch of overfed bums with a helicopter. I wish I had never set eyes on them!

We got up into the boot, and Kirill took the controls and said:

"OK, Red, lead on."

Coolly, I lowered the zipper on my chest, pulled out a flask, took a good long tug, and replaced the flask. I can't do it without that. I've been in the Zone many times, but without it -- no, I just can't. They were both looking at me and waiting.

"So," I said. "I'm not offering any to you, because this is the first time we're going in together, and I don't know how the stuff affects you. This is the way we'll do things. Anything that I say you do immediately and without question. If someone starts fumbling or asking questions I'll hit whatever I reach first. I'll apologize now. For example, Mr. Tender, if I order you to start walking on your hands you will immediately hoist your fat ass into the air and do what I tell you. And if you don't, maybe you'll never see your sick daughter again. Got it? But I'll make sure that you do get to see her."

"Just don't forget to give me the order," Tender wheezed. He was all red and sweating and chomping his lips, "I'll walk on my teeth, not just on my hands, if I have to. I'm not a greenhorn."

"You're both greenhorns as far as I'm concerned," I said. "And I won't forget to give the orders, don't worry. By the way, do you know how to drive a boot?"

"He knows," Kirill said. "He's a good driver."

"All right then," I said. "Then we're off, Godspeed. Lower your visors. Low speed ahead along the pylons, altitude three yards. Halt at the twenty-seventh pylon."

Kirill raised the boot to three yards and went ahead in low gear. I turned around without being noticed and spit over my left shoulder. I saw that the rescue squad had climbed into their helicopter, the firemen were standing at attention out of respect, the lieutenant at the door of the passage was saluting us, the jerk, and

above all of them fluttered the huge, faded banner: "Welcome, Visitors." Tender looked like he was about to wave to them, but I gave him such a jab in the ribs that he immediately dropped all ideas of such ceremonious bye-byes. I'll show you how to say good-bye. You'll be saying good-bye yet! We were off. The institute was on our right and the Plague Quarter on our left. We were traveling from pylon to pylon right down the middle of the street. It had been ages since the last time someone had walked or driven down this street. The asphalt was all cracked, and grass had grown in the cracks. But that was still our human grass. On the sidewalk on our left there was black bramble growing, and you could tell the boundaries of the Zone: the black growth ended at the curb as if it had been mown. Yeah, those visitors were well-behaved. They messed up a lot of things but at least they set themselves clear limits. Even the burning fluff never came to our side of the Zone -- and you would think that a stiff wind would do it.

The houses in the Plague Quarter were chipped and dead. However, the windows weren't broken. Only they were so dirty that they looked blind. At night, when you crawl past, you can see the glow inside, like alcohol burning with blue tongues. That's the witches' jelly breathing in the cellars. Just a quick glance gives you the impression that it's a neighborhood like any other, the houses are like any others, only in need of repair, but there's nothing particularly strange about them. Except that there are no people around. That brick house, by the way, was the home of our math teacher. We used to call him The Comma. He was a bore and a failure. His second wife had left him just before the Visitation, and his daughter had a cataract on one eye, and we used to tease her to tears, I remember. When the panic began he and all his neighbors ran to the bridge in their underwear, three miles nonstop. Then he was sick with the plague for a long time. He lost all his skin and his nails. Almost everyone who had lived in the neighborhood was hit, that's why we call it the Plague Quarter. Some died, mostly the old people, and not too many of them. I, for one, think that they died from fright and not from the plague. It was terrifying. Everyone who lived here got sick. And people in three neighborhoods went blind. Now we call those areas: First Blind Quarter, Second Blind, and so on. They didn't go completely blind, but got sort of night blindness. By the way, they said that it wasn't any explosion that caused it, even though there were plenty of explosions; they said they were blinded from a loud noise. They said it got so loud that they immediately lost their vision. The doctors told them that that was impossible and they should try to remember. But they insisted that it was a powerful thunderbolt that blinded them. By the way, no one else heard the thunder at all.

Yes, it was as though nothing had happened here. There was a glass kiosk,

unharméd. A baby carriage in a driveway -- even the blankets in it looked clean. The antennas screwed up the effect though -- they were overgrown with some hairy stuff that looked like cotton. The eggheads had been cutting their teeth on this cotton problem for some time. You see, they were interested in looking it over. There wasn't any other like it anywhere. Only in the Plague Quarter and only on the antennas. And most important, it was right there, under their very windows. Finally they had a bright idea: they lowered an anchor on a steel cable from a helicopter and hooked a piece of cotton. As soon as the helicopter pulled at it, there was a pssst! We looked and saw smoke coming from the antenna, from the anchor, and from the cable. The cable wasn't just smoking -- it was hissing poisonously, like a rattler. Well, the pilot was no fool -- there was a reason why he was a lieutenant -- he quickly figured what was what and dropped the cable and made a quick getaway. There it was, the cable, hanging down almost to the ground and overgrown with cotton.

So we made it to the end of the street and the turn nice and easy. Kirill looked at me: should he turn? I signaled: as slow as possible! Our boot turned and inched over the last feet of human earth. The sidewalk was coming closer and the boot's shadow was falling on the bramble. That's it. We were in the Zone! I felt a chill. Each time I feel that chill. And I never know if that's the Zone greeting me or my stalker's nerves acting up. Each time I think that when I get back I'll ask if others have the same feeling or not, and each time I forget.

All right, so there we were crawling quietly over what used to be gardens. The engine was humming evenly under our feet, calmly -- it didn't care, nothing was going to hurt it here. Then old Tender broke. We hadn't even gotten to the first pylon when he started gabbing. All the greenhorns usually run off at the mouth in the Zone: his teeth were chattering, his heart thumping, his memory fading, and he was embarrassed and yet he couldn't control himself. I think it's like a runny nose with them. It doesn't depend on the person at all -- it just flows and flows. And what nonsense they babble! They flip out over the landscape or they express their views on the Visitors, or they talk about things having no relation to the Zone -- like Tender, who got all wound up over his new suit and couldn't stop. How much he had paid for it, how fine the wool was, how the tailor changed the buttons for him....

"Shut up."

He looked at me pitifully, flopped his lips, and went on: how much silk it took for the lining. The gardens had ended by now, the clayey lot that used to be the town dump was under us. And I felt a light breeze. Except there was no wind at

all, and suddenly there was a gust and the tumbleweed scattered, and I thought I heard something.

"Shut up, you bastard!" I said to Tender.

No, he couldn't shut himself up. He was on the pockets now. I had no choice.

"Stop the boot!" I said to Kirill.

He braked immediately. Good reflexes, I was proud of him. I took Tender by the shoulder, turned him toward me, and smacked him in the visor. He cracked his nose, poor guy, against the glass, closed his eyes, and shut up. And as soon as he was quiet, I heard it. Trrr, trrr, trrr... Kirill looked over at me, jaws clenched, teeth bared. I motioned for him to be still. God, please be still, don't move a muscle. But he also heard the crackle, and like all greenhorns, he had the urge to do something immediately, anything. "Reverse?" he whispered. I shook my head desperately and waved my fist right under his visor -- cut it out. Honest to God, with these greenhorns you never know which way to look, at the field or at them. And then I forgot about everything. Over the pile of old refuse, over broken glass and rags, crawled a shimmering, a trembling, sort of like hot air at noon over a tin roof. It crossed over the hillock and moved on and on toward us, right next to the pylon; it hovered for a second over the road -- or did I just imagine it? -- and slithered into the field, behind the hushes and the rotten fences, back there toward the automobile graveyard.

Damn those eggheads! Some thinking to lay the road over the dump! And I had been really sharp myself -- what was I thinking of when I raved over their stupid map?

"Low speed forward," I said to Kirill.

"What was that?"

"The devil knows. It was, and now it's gone. Thank God. And shut up, please, you're not a human being now, do you understand? You are a machine, my steering wheel." I suddenly realized that I was running off at the mouth.

"Enough. Not another word."

I wanted another drink. Let me tell you, these diving suits were nonsense. I lived through so much without a damn suit and will live through so much more, but without a big glug at a moment like this -- well, enough of that!

The breeze seemed to have died down and I didn't hear anything bad. The only sound was the calm, sleepy hum of the motor. It was very sunny and it was hot. There was a haze over the garage. Everything seemed all right, the pylons sailed past, one after the other, Tender was quiet, Kirill was quiet. The greenhorns were getting a little foolish. Don't worry, fellows, you can breathe in the Zone, too, if

you know what you're about. We got to Pylon 27; the metal sign had a red circle with the number 27 in it. Kirill looked at me, I nodded, and our boot stopped moving.

The blossoms had fallen off and it was the time for berries. Now the most important thing for us was total calm. There was no rush. The wind was gone, the visibility good. It was as smooth as silk. I could see the ditch where Slimy had kicked off. There was something colored in it -- maybe his clothes. He was a lousy guy, God rest his soul. Greedy, stupid, and dirty. Just the type to get mixed up with Buzzard Burbridge. Buzzard sees them coming a mile away and gets his claws into them. In general, the Zone doesn't ask who the good guys are and who the bad ones are. So thanks to you, Slimy. You were a damned fool, and no one remembers your real name, but at least you showed the smart people where not to step... Of course, our best bet would have been to get onto the asphalt. The asphalt is smooth and you can see what's on it, and I know that crack well. I just didn't like the looks of those two hillocks! A straight line to the asphalt led right between them. There they were, smirking and waiting. Nope, I won't go between them. A stalker commandment states that there should be at least a hundred feet of clear space either on your left or your right. So, we can go over the left hillock. Of course, I didn't know what was on the other side. There didn't seem to be anything on the map, but who trusts maps?

"Listen, Red," whispered Kirill, "why don't we jump over? Twenty yards up and then straight down, and we're right by the garage. Huh?"

"Shut up, you jerk," I said. "Don't bother me."

He wants to go up. And what if something gets you at twenty yards? They'll never find all your bones. Or maybe the mosquito mange would appear somewhere around here, then there wouldn't even be a little damp spot left of you. I've had it up to here with these risk-takers. He can't wait: let's jump, he says. It was clear how to get to the hillock. And then we'd stay there for a bit and think about the next move. I pulled out a handful of nuts and bolts from my pocket. I held them in my palm and showed them to Kirill.

"Do you remember the story of Hansel and Gretel? Studied it in school? Well, we're going to do it in reverse. Watch!" I threw the first nut. Not far, just like I wanted, about ten yards. The nut got there safely. "Did you see that?"

"So?" he said.

"Not 'so.' I asked if you saw it?"

"I saw it."

"Now drive the boot at the lowest speed over to the nut and stop two feet away

from it. Got it?"

"Got it. Are you looking for graviconcentrates?"

"I'm looking for what I should be looking for. Wait, I'll throw another one. Watch where it goes and don't take your eyes off it again."

The second nut also went fine and landed next to the first one.

"Let's go."

He started the boot. His face was calm and clear. Obviously he understood. They're all like that, the eggheads, the most important thing for them is to find a name for things. Until he had come up with a name, he was too pathetic to look at -- a real idiot. But now that he had some label like graviconcentrate, he thought that he understood everything and life was a breeze.

We passed the first nut, and the second, and a third. Tender was sighing and shifting from foot to foot and yawning nervously -- he was feeling trapped, poor fellow. It would do him good. He'd knock off ten pounds today, this was better than any diet. I threw a fourth nut. There was something wrong with its trajectory. I couldn't explain what was wrong, but I sensed that it wasn't right. I grabbed Kirill's hand.

"Hold it," I said. "Don't move an inch."

I picked up another one and threw it higher and further. There it was, the mosquito mange! The nut flew up normally and seemed to be dropping normally, but halfway down it was as if something pulled it to the side, and pulled it so hard that when it landed it disappeared into the clay.

"Did you see that?" I whispered.

"Only in the movies." He was straining to see and I was afraid he'd fall out of the boot. "Throw another one, huh?"

It was funny and sad. One! As though one would be enough! Oh, science. So I threw eight more nuts and bolts until I knew the shape of this mange spot. To be honest, I could have gotten by with seven, but I threw one just for him smack into the middle, so that he could enjoy his concentrate. It crashed into the clay like it was a ten-pound weight instead of a bolt. It crashed and left a hole in the clay. He grunted with pleasure.

"OK," I said, "we had our fun, now let's go. Watch closely. I'm throwing out a pathfinder, don't take your eyes off it."

So we got around the mosquito mange spot and got up on the hillock. It was so small that it looked like a cat turd. I had never even noticed it before. We hovered over the hillock. The asphalt was less than twenty feet away. It was clear. I could see every blade of grass, every crack. It looked like a snap. Just throw the nut and

be on with it.

I couldn't throw the nut.

I didn't understand what was happening to me, but I just couldn't make up my mind to throw that nut.

"What's the matter?" asked Kirill. "Why are we just standing here?"

"Wait," I said. "Just shut up."

I thought I'd toss the nut and then we'll quietly move along, like coasting on melted butter, without disturbing a blade of grass. Thirty seconds and we're on the asphalt. And suddenly I broke out in a sweat! My eyes were blinded by it. And I knew that I wouldn't be throwing the nut there. To the left, as many as you want. The road was longer that way, and there was a bunch of pebbles that didn't seem too cozy, but I was ready to throw in that direction. But not straight ahead. Not for anything. So I threw the nut to the left. Kirill said nothing, turned the boot, and drove up to the nut. Then he looked over at me. I must have looked pretty bad because he looked away immediately.

"It's all right," I said. "The path around is faster." I tossed the last nut onto the asphalt.

It was a lot simpler after that. I found the crack, and it was still clean, not overgrown with any garbage, and unchanged in color. I just looked at it and rejoiced in silence. It led us to the garage door better than any pylons or signposts.

I ordered Kirill to descend to four feet. I lay flat on my belly and looked into the open doors. At first I couldn't see anything because of the bright sunlight. Just blackness. Then my eyes grew accustomed and I saw that nothing seemed to have changed in the garage since the last time. The dump truck was still parked over the pit, in perfect shape, without any holes or spots. And everything was still the same on the cement floor -- probably because there wasn't too much witches' jelly in the pit and it hadn't splashed out since that time. There was only one thing that I didn't like. In the very back of the garage, near the canisters, I could see something silvery. That hadn't been there before. Well, all right, so there was something silvery, we couldn't go back now just because of that! I mean it didn't shine in any special way, just a little bit and in a calm, even a gentle way. I just got up, brushed myself off, and looked around. There were the trucks on the lot, just like new. Even newer than they had been the last time I was here. And the gasoline truck, the poor bastard was rusted through and ready to fall apart. There was the cover on the ground, just like on that map of theirs.

I didn't like the looks of that cover. Its shadow wasn't right. The sun was at our backs, yet its shadow was stretching toward us. Well, all right, it was far enough

away from us. It seemed OK, we could get on with our work. But what was the silvery thing shining back there? Was it just my imagination? It would be nice to have a smoke now and sit for a spell and mull it all over -- why there was that shine over the canisters, why it didn't shine next to them, why the cover was casting that shadow. Buzzard Burbridge told me something about the shadows, that they were weird but harmless. Something happens here with the shadows. But what was that silvery shine? It looked just like cobwebs on the trees in a forest. What kind of spider could have spun it? I had never seen any bugs in the Zone. The worst part was that my empty was right there, two steps from the canisters. I should have stolen it that time. Then we wouldn't be having any of these problems now. But it was too heavy. After all, the bitch was full, I could pick it up all right, but as for dragging it on my back, in the dark, on all fours... If you haven't carried an empty around, try it: it's like hauling twenty pounds of water without a pail. It was time to go. I wished I had a drink. I turned to Tender.

"Kirill and I are going into the garage now. You stay here. Don't touch the controls without my orders, no matter what, even if the earth catches fire under you. If you chicken out, I'll find you in the hereafter."

He nodded at me seriously, as if to say, I won't chicken out. His nose looked like a plum, I had really given him a solid punch. I lowered the emergency pulley ropes carefully, checked out the silvery glow one more time, waved Kirill on, and started down. On the asphalt, I waited for him to come down the other rope.

"Don't rush," I said. "No hurry. Less dust."

We stood on the asphalt, the boot swaying next to us, and the ropes wriggling under our feet. Tender stuck his head over the rail and looked at us. His eyes were full of despair. It was time to go.

"Follow me step for step, two steps behind me, keep your eyes on my back, and stay alert."

I went on. I stopped in the doorway to look around. It's a hell of a lot easier working in the daylight than at night! I remember lying in that same doorway. It was pitch black and the witches' jelly was shooting tongues of flame up from the pit, pale blue, like burning alcohol. It didn't make things any lighter. In fact, the bastards made it seem even darker. And now, it was a snap! My eyes had gotten used to the murky light, and I could even see the dust in the darkest corners. And there really was something silvery over there -- there were silvery threads stretching to the ceiling from the canisters. They sure looked like a spider's web. Maybe that's all it was, too, but I was going to keep away from it. That's where I made my mistake. I should have stood Kirill right next to me, waited for his eyes to

grow accustomed to the light, too, and then pointed out the web to him. Point it out to him. But I was used to working alone. I saw what I had to see, and I forgot all about Kirill.

I stepped inside and went straight for the canisters. I crouched over the empty. There didn't seem to be any web on the empty. I picked up one end and said to Kirill:

"Here, grab one, and don't drop it -- it's heavy."

I looked up and felt a catch in my throat. I couldn't utter a sound. I wanted to shout "Stop! Freeze!" but I couldn't. And I probably wouldn't have had time, anyway, it all happened so fast. Kirill stepped over the empty, turned his back to the canisters, and got his whole back into the silver web. I shut my eyes. I went numb and the only thing I heard was the web tearing. It was a weak crackly noise. I was crouched there with my eyes shut, unable to feel my arms or my legs, when Kirill spoke.

"Well, shall we get on with it?"

"Let's go."

We picked up the empty and headed for the door, walking sideways. It was terrifically heavy, the bitch, it was hard for the two of us to drag it. We came out into the sun and stopped by the boot. Tender reached out for it.

"OK," said Kirill. "One, two..."

"No," I said. "Let's wait a sec. Put it down first."

We set it down.

"Turn around. Let's see your back."

He turned without a single word. I looked -- there was nothing on his back. I turned him this way and that, but there was nothing. I looked back at the canisters, and there was nothing there either.

"Listen," I said to Kirill, still looking at the canisters. "Did you see the spider web?"

"What web? Where?"

"All right. We were lucky."

But to myself I thought: actually, there's no way of knowing that yet.

"All right, let's heave-ho."

We stuffed the empty into the boot and fixed it so that it wouldn't move around. There it was, the pussycat, shiny new and clean, the copper gleaming in the sun. Its blue filling sifted cloudily in slow streams between the disks. We could see that it wasn't an empty at all, but something like a vessel, like a glass jar with blue syrup. We looked at it some more and then clambered into the boot and set off on

the return trip without messing around.

These scientists sure have it easy! First of all, they work in daylight. And second, the only hard part is getting into the Zone. On the way back, the boot drives itself. In other words, it has a mechanism, a coursograph, I guess you'd call it, that controls the boot and drives it exactly along the course it took coming in. As we floated back, it repeated all our maneuvers, stopping and hovering for a bit, and then continuing. We went over each of my nuts and bolts. I could have gathered them up if I had wanted to.

My greenhorns were in a great mood, of course. They were turning their heads every which way and their fear was almost all gone. They started gabbing. Tender was waving his arms around and threatening to come right back after dinner to lay the road to the garage. Kirill plucked at my sleeve and started explaining his graviconcentrate phenomenon to me -- that is, the mosquito mange spot. Well, I set them straight, but not right away. I calmly told them about all the jerks who blew it on the way back. Shut up, I told them, and keep your eyes peeled, or the same thing will happen to you that happened to Shorty Lyndon. That worked. They didn't even ask what had happened to Shorty Lyndon. We floated along in silence and I only thought about one thing. How I would unscrew the cap. I was trying to picture my first gulp, but the web kept glistening before my eyes.

In short, we got out of the Zone, and we were sent into the delouser -- the scientists call it the medical hangar -- along with the boot. They washed us in three different boiling vats and in their alkaline solutions, smeared us with some gunk, sprinkled us with some powder, and washed us again, then dried us off and said, OK, friends, you're free! Tender and Kirill dragged the empty. There were so many people who had come to gawk that you couldn't push your way through them. And it was so typical. They were all just watching and grunting words of welcome, but not one was brave enough to lend a hand to the tired returnees. All right, that was none of my business. Now nothing concerned me any more.

I pulled off my special suit, threw it on the floor -- let the bastard sergeants pick it up -- and headed straight for the showers, because I was sopping wet from head to toe. I locked myself in a stall, got my flask, unscrewed the cap, and attached myself to it like a lamprey. I sat on the bench, my knees empty, my head empty, my soul empty. Gulping down the strong stuff like it was water. Alive. The Zone had let me out. It let me out, the bitch. The damn, treacherous bitch. I was alive. The greenhorns could never appreciate that. Only a stalker could. Tears were streaming down my cheeks, from the booze or what, I don't know. I sucked the flask dry. I was wet, and the flask was dry. It didn't have that one last gulp that I

needed, of course. But that could be fixed. Everything could be fixed now. Alive. I lit a cigarette. I sat there and felt that I was coming round. The bonus pay came into my mind. That was a good deal we had at the institute. I could go right now and pick up the envelope. Or maybe they'd bring it to me here in the showers.

I started undressing slowly. I took off my watch, and saw that we had spent five hours in the Zone. My God! Five hours. I shuddered. God, there really is no time in the Zone. Five hours. But if you think about it, what's five hours to a stalker? A snap. How about twelve? Or how about two days? If you don't manage in one night, you spend the whole day face down on the ground. And you don't even pray, but mutter deliriously, and you don't know if you're dead or alive. And then you finish up the second night and get to the patrol point with your swag. The guards are there with their machine guns. And those bastards, those toads really hate you. There's no great joy in arresting you, they're terrified that you're contaminated. All they want to do is bump you off and they've got all the aces -- go prove that you were killed illegally. So that means you bury your face in the dirt again and pray until dawn and until dark again. And the swag lies next to you and you don't know whether it's just lying there or slowly killing you. Or you could end up like Knuckles Itzak, who got stuck at dawn in an open space. He got off the track and ended up between two ditches. He couldn't go right or left. They shot at him for two hours, but couldn't hit him. For two hours he made believe he was dead. Thank God, they finally believed it and left. I saw him after that. I couldn't even recognize him. He was a broken man, no longer human.

I wiped my tears and turned on the water. I showered for a long time. First hot, then cold, then hot again. I used up a whole bar of soap. Then I got bored. I turned off the shower. Someone was banging on the door. Kirill was shouting:

"Hey, you stalker! Come on out of there! There's a scent of the green around here."

Greenbacks, that's always good. I opened the door. He was standing there, half naked, in his shorts. He was ecstatic, his melancholy gone. He handed me the envelope.

"Here," he said. "From a grateful humanity."

"I spit on your humanity. How much is there?"

"In view of your bravery beyond the call of duty, and as an exception, two months' pay!"

Yes, I could live on that kind of money. If I could get two months' pay for every empty, I could have sent Ernest packing a long time ago.

"Well, are you pleased?" He was glowing, positively radiant, grinning from

ear to ear.

"Not bad. And you?" He didn't answer. He hugged my neck, pressed me to his sweaty chest, pushed me away, and disappeared into the next stall.

"Hey!" I shouted after him. "How's Tender? Washing out his underpants, I bet?"

"No way. Tender is surrounded by reporters. You should see him. He's such a big shot. He's telling them authoritatively... ."

"How is he telling them?"

"Authoritatively."

"OK, sir. Next time I'll bring my dictionary along, sir." Then it was like an electric shock. "Wait, Kirill. Come out here."

"I'm naked."

"Come out. I'm not a dame."

He came out. I took him by the shoulders and turned his back toward me. Nope. I must have imagined it. His back was clean. The rivulets of sweat dried up.

"What's with you and my back?" he asked.

I kicked him in his bare can and dove into my stall and locked the door. Damn my nerves. I was seeing things there, and now I was seeing them here. The hell with it all! I'd get tanked up tonight. I'd really like to beat Richard, that's what I'd like. That bum can really play cards. Can't beat him with any hand. I tried reshuffling, even blessing them under the table.

"Kirill," I shouted. "Are you going to the Borscht tonight?"

"It's not the 'Borscht,' it's pronounced 'Borshch.' How many times do I have to tell you."

"Skip it. It's spelled B-O-R-S-C-H-T. Don't bug us with your customs. Are you going or not? I'd love to beat Richard."

"Oh, I don't know, Red. You simple soul, you don't understand what it is we've brought back."

"And I suppose you do?"

"Well, I don't either. That's true. But now for the first time we know what the empties are for, and if my bright idea works, I'll write a monograph. I'll dedicate it to you personally: To Redrick Schuhart, honored stalker, with respect and gratitude."

"And they'll put me away for two years."

"But you'll go down in science. That's what they'll call it, 'Schuhart's jar.' Like the sound of it?"

While we were bulling, I dressed, put the empty flask in my pocket, counted my money, and left.

"Good luck, you complicated soul."

He didn't answer. The water was making a lot of noise.

There was Tender in person in the corridor. Red and puffed up like a turkey. Surrounded by coworkers, reporters, and a couple of sergeants (fresh from eating and picking their teeth), he was babbling on and on. "The technology that we command," he blathered, "almost completely guarantees success and safety." Then he saw me and dried up a bit. He smiled and made little waving motions with his hand. Well, I'd better split, I thought. I made for the door, but they caught me. I heard footsteps behind me.

"Mr. Schuhart! Mr. Schuhart! A few words about the garage!"

"No comment." I broke into a run. But there was no getting away.

There was one with a mike on my right, and another with a camera on my left.

"Did you see anything strange in the garage. Just two words!"

"No comment!" I said, trying to keep the back of my head to the camera. "It's just a garage."

"Thank you. How do you feel about turboplatforms?"

"Most wonderful." I started edging toward the john.

"What do you think about the Visitation?"

"Ask the scientists," I said, and slid behind the bathroom door.

I could hear them scratching at the door. So I called out: "I heartily recommend that you ask Mr. Tender how his nose came to look like a beet. He's too modest to bring it up, but that was our most interesting adventure there."

They shot down the corridor. Faster than racehorses. I waited a minute. Silence. Stuck out my head. Nobody. And I went on my way, whistling a tune. I went down to the lobby, showed my pass to the bean-pole sergeant, and saw that he was saluting me.

I guess I was the hero of the day.

"At ease, sergeant," I said. "I'm pleased."

He showed so many teeth, you'd think I was flattering him beyond all reason.

"Well, Red, you sure are a hero. I'm proud to know you," he said.

"So now you'll have something to tell the girls about back in Sweden?"

"You bet! They'll just melt in my arms!"

I guess he's right. To tell the truth, I don't like guys who are that tall and rosy-cheeked. Women go nuts over them, and I don't know why. Height is not the important thing. I was walking down the street and thinking along these lines. The sun was shining and there was no one around. And suddenly I wanted to see Guta right then and there, just like that. To look at her and hold her hand a while.

After the Zone that's about all you can manage -- to hold hands. Especially when you think of those stories about what stalkers' children turn out like... Who needs Guta now? What I really needed was a bottle, at least a bottle, of the hard stuff.

I went past the parking lot. There was a checkpoint there. There were two patrol cars in all their glory -- low-slung and yellow, armed with searchlights and machine guns, the toads. And of course, the cops had blue helmets, too. They were blocking the whole street. There was no way to get through. I kept walking with my eyes lowered, because it would be better for me not to see them right now. Not in daylight. There's two or three characters there that I'm afraid to recognize, because if I do, that'll be the end of them. It was a good thing for them that Kirill lured me into working for the institute. Otherwise, by God, I would have found the snakes and finished them off.

I shouldered my way through the crowd, I was almost past it when I heard someone shout "Hey, stalker!" Well, that had nothing to do with me, so I went on, rummaging for a cigarette in my pocket. Someone caught up with me and took me by the sleeve. I shook off the hand and half turned toward the man and said politely:

"What the hell do you think you're doing, mister?"

"Hold it, stalker," he said. "Just two questions."

I looked up at him. It was Captain Quarterblad. An old friend. He was all dried up and kind of yellow.

"Ah, greetings, captain. How's the liver?"

"Don't try to talk your way out of this, stalker." He was angry and his eyes bored into me. "You'd be better off telling me why you don't stop immediately when you're called."

And right behind him were two blue helmets, hands on holsters. You couldn't see their eyes, just their jaws working under the helmets. Where in Canada do they find these guys? Have they been sent out here to breed? In general I have no fear of the patrol guards in daytime, but they could search me, the toads, and I wasn't too crazy about the idea just then.

"Were you calling me, captain?" I said. "You were calling some stalker."

"Are you trying to tell me that you're not a stalker?"

"Once the time I spent thanks to you was over, I went straight. Quit stalking. Thanks to you, captain, my eyes were opened. If it hadn't been for you..."

"What were you doing in the Prezone Area?"

"What do you mean, what? I work there. Two years now."

To bring the unpleasant conversation to a close, I showed Captain Quarterblad

my papers. He took my book and examined it page by page, sniffing and smelling every stamp and seal on it. He returned the book and I could see how pleased he was. His eyes lit up and there was color in his cheeks.

"Forgive me, Schuhart," he said. "I didn't expect it of you. I'm glad to see that my advice wasn't wasted on you. Why, that's marvelous. You can believe me or not, but even back then I knew that you would turn out all right. I just couldn't believe that a fellow like you..." He went on and on like a record. Looked like I had saddled myself with another cured melancholic. Of course, I listened, eyes lowered modestly, nodding, spreading my arms innocently, and if I recall, shyly scuffing the sidewalk with my foot. The gorillas behind the captain's back listened a bit, and then got bored and went off some place more exciting. Meanwhile the captain was painting glorious vistas for my future: education was the light, ignorance was darkness, and the Lord loves and appreciates honest labor, and so on and so forth. He was slinging the same bull the priest used to give us in prison every Sunday. And I really needed a drink -- my thirst wouldn't wait. All right, I thought to myself, Red, you can put up with this too. You have to, so be patient. He can't keep it up for much longer. Look, he's losing his breath already. A lucky break. One of the patrol cars started signaling. Captain Quarterblad looked around, heaved a sigh of dismay, and gave me his hand.

"Well, I'm glad I met you, Honest Mr. Schuhart. I would have been happy to drink to this acquaintance. I can't have whiskey, doctor's orders, but I would have enjoyed a beer. But, duty calls. We'll meet again," he said. God forbid. But I shook his hand and blushed and shuffled my feet, just like he wanted me to. He finally left me and I headed swift as an arrow for the Borscht.

It's always empty that time of day in the Borscht. Ernest was behind the bar, wiping glasses, and holding them up to the light. It's amazing, by the way, that whenever you come in, bartenders are always wiping glasses, as though their salvation depended on it or something. He'll just stand there all day -- pick up a glass, squint at it, hold it up to the light, breathe on it, and start rubbing. He'll rub and rub, look it over again (this time from the bottom) and then rub some more.

"Hi, Ernie! Leave the poor thing alone. You'll rub a hole through it."

He looked at me through the glass, muttered something indistinct and without a further word poured me four fingers of vodka. I climbed up on a stool, took a sip, made a face, shook my head, and had another sip. The refrigerator was humming, the jukebox was playing something soft and low, Ernest was laboring over another glass. It was peaceful. I finished my drink and put the glass back down on the bar. Ernest immediately poured me another four fingers.

"A little better?" he muttered. "Coming round, stalker?"

"Stick to your wiping, why don't you. You know, one guy rubbed until he got a genie. Ended up on easy street."

"Who was that?" Ernest asked suspiciously.

"It was another bartender here. Before your time."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Why do you think the Visitation happened. It was all his rubbing. Who do you think the Visitors were?"

"You're a bum," Ernie said with approval.

He went to the kitchen and came back with a plate of grilled hot dogs. He put the plate in front of me, moved the catsup over toward me, and went back to his glasses. Ernest knows his stuff. His trained eye recognizes a stalker returned from the Zone with swag and he knows what a stalker needs after a visit to the Zone. Good old Ernie. A humanitarian.

I finished the hot dogs, lit a cigarette, and started calculating how much Ernie must make on us. I'm not sure of the prices the loot goes for in Europe, but I'd heard that an empty can get almost 2,500, and Ernie only gives us 400. Batteries there cost at least 100 and we're lucky if we can get 10 from him. Of course, shipping the loot to Europe must cost plenty. Grease this palm and that one... and the stationmaster must be on his payroll too. When you think about it, Ernest really doesn't make that much, maybe fifteen or twenty percent, no more. And if he gets caught, it's ten years at hard labor.

Here my honorable meditations were interrupted by some polite type. I hadn't even heard him walk in. He announced himself next to my elbow, asking permission to sit down.

"Don't mention it. Please do."

He was a skinny little guy with a sharp nose and a bow tie. His face looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. He climbed up on the stool next to me and said to Ernest.

"Bourbon, please!" And then turned to me. "Excuse me, but don't I know you? You work in the International Institute, don't you?"

"Yes. And you?"

He speedily whipped out his business card and set it in front of me.

"Aloysius Macnaught, Agent Plenipotentiary of the Emigration Bureau."

Well, of course, I knew him. He bugs people to leave the city. As it is, there's hardly half the population left in Harmont, yet he has to clear the place of us completely. I pushed away his card with my fingernail.

"No thanks. I'm not interested. My dream is to die in my hometown."

"But why?" he jumped in quickly. "Forgive my indiscretion, but what's keeping you here?"

"What do you mean? Fond memories of childhood. My first kiss in the municipal park. Mommy and daddy. My first time drunk, right here in this bar. The police station so dear to my heart..." I took a heavily used handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed my eyes.

"No, I can't leave for any amount!"

He laughed, took a tiny sip of bourbon, and spoke in a thoughtful way.

"I just can't understand you Harmonites. Life is tough in the city. There's military control. Few amenities. The Zone right next to you -- it's like sitting on a volcano. An epidemic could break out any day. Or something worse. I can understand the old people. It's hard for them to leave. But you, how old are you? Twenty-two, twenty-three? Can't you understand that the bureau is a charitable organization, we don't profit by this in any way. We just want people to leave this hellhole and get back into the mainstream of life. We underwrite the move, find you work. For young people like you, we pay for an education. No, I just don't understand!"

"Do you mean nobody wants to leave?"

"Not nobody. Some are leaving, particularly the ones with families. But the young folk and the old people -- what do you people want in this place? It's a hick town, a hole."

I let him have it.

"Mr. Aloysius Macnaught! You're absolutely right. Our little town is a hole. It always has been and still is. But now it is a hole into the future. We're going to dump so much through this hole into your lousy world that everything will change in it. Life will be different. It'll be fair. Everyone will have everything that he needs. Some hole, huh? Knowledge comes through this hole. And when we have the knowledge, we'll make everyone rich, and we'll fly to the stars, and go anywhere we want. That's the kind of hole we have here."

I broke off here, because I noticed Ernest watching me in amazement. I felt uncomfortable. I don't usually like using other people's words, even when I agree with them. Besides, it was coming out kind of funny. When Kirill speaks, you listen and forget to close your mouth. And even though I seem to be saying the same things, it doesn't come out the same. Maybe it's because Kirill never slipped Ernest any loot under the counter...

Ernie snapped to attention and hurriedly poured me six fingers of booze at

once, as if to bring me back to my senses. The sharp-nosed Mr. Macnaught took another sip of his bourbon.

"Yes, of course. Eternal batteries, the blue panacea. But do you really believe things will be the way you described them?"

"It's none of your business what I really believe. I was speaking for the city. As for myself, what do you have in Europe that I haven't seen? I know about your boredom. You knock yourself out all day, and watch TV all night."

"It doesn't necessarily have to be Europe."

"It's all the same, except that it's cold in Antarctica."

The amazing part was that I believed it in my guts as I said it to him. Our Zone, the bitch, the killer, was a hundred times dearer to me at that second than all of their Europes and Africas. And I wasn't drunk yet, I had just pictured for a minute how I would drag myself home in a herd of cretins just like myself, how I would be pushed and squeezed in the subway, and how I was sick and tired of everything.

"And what about you?" he asked Ernest.

"I have a business," he replied self-importantly. "I'm no punk. I've invested all my money in this business. The base commander himself comes in once in a while, a general, you understand? Why should I leave here?"

Mr. Aloysius Macnaught tried to make some point, quoting a lot of figures. But I wasn't listening. I took a good long gulp, pulled out a lot of change from my pocket, got off the stool and pumped the jukebox. There's a song on there: "Don't Come Back If You're Not Sure." It has a good effect on me after a trip to the Zone. The jukebox was howling and rocking. I had taken my glass into the corner where I was hoping to even old scores with the one-armed bandit. And time flew like a bird. I was putting in my last nickel when Richard Noonan and Gutalin crashed into the hospitable arms of the bar. Gutalin was blotto, rolling his eyes and looking for a place to rest his fist. Richard Noonan was tenderly holding him by the elbow and distracting him with jokes. A pretty pair! Gutalin is a huge black ape with knuckles down to his knees, and Dick is a small round pink creature that all but glows.

"Hey!" shouted Dick. "There's Red! Come over and join us!"

"R-r-right!" roared Gutalin. "There are only two real men in this whole city -- Red and me! All the rest are pigs or Satan's children. Red, you also serve the devil, but you're still human."

I came over with my glass. Gutalin peeled off my jacket and seated me at the table.

"Sit down, Red! Sit down, Satan's servant. I like you. Let's have a cry over

the sins of mankind. A good long bitter wail."

"Let's wail," I said. "Let's drink the tears of sin."

"For the day is nigh," Gutalin announced. "For the white steed is saddled and his rider has put his foot in the stirrup. And the prayers of those who have sold themselves to Satan are in vain. Only those who have renounced him will be saved. You, children of man who were seduced by the devil, who play with the devil's toys, who dig up Satan's treasures -- I say unto you: you are blind! Awake, you bastards, before it's too late! Trample the devil's trinkets!" He stopped, as though he had forgotten what came next. "Can I get a drink here?" he suddenly asked in a different voice. "You know, Red, I've been canned again. Said I was an agitator. I keep explaining to them: Awake, blind ones, you're falling into the pit and taking others with you! They just laughed. So I punched the shop leader in the nose and split. They'll arrest me now. And for what?" Dick came over and put the bottle on the table.

"It's on me today!" I called to Ernest.

Dick gave me a sidelong look.

"It's perfectly legal," I said. "We're drinking my bonus check."

"You went into the Zone?" Dick asked. "Bring anything out?"

"A full empty," I said. "For the altar of science. Are you going to pour that or not?"

"An empty!" Gutalin echoed in sorrow. "You risked your life for some empty! You survived, but you brought another devil's artifact into the world. How do you know, Red, how much of sorrow and sin..."

"Can it, Gutalin," I said severely. "Drink and rejoice that I came back alive. To success, my friends."

It went over well, the toast to success. Gutalin fell apart completely. He was weeping, the tears streaming like water from a spout. I know him well. It's just a phase. Weeping and preaching that the Zone is the devil's temptation. That we should take nothing out of it and return everything that we've taken. And go on living as though the Zone were not there. Leave the devil's things to the devil. I like him. Gutalin, I mean. I usually like weirdos. When he has money, he buys up the swag without haggling, for whatever price the stalkers ask, and totes it back at night into the Zone and buries it. He was waiting. But he would be stopping soon.

"What's a full empty?" Dick asked. "I know what a plain empty is, but this is the first time I've ever heard of a full one."

I explained it to him. He nodded and smacked his lips.

"Yes, that's very interesting. Something new. Who did you go with? The

Russian?"

"Yes, with Kirill and Tender. You know, our lab assistant."

"They must have driven you crazy."

"Nothing of the kind. They behaved quite well. Especially Kirill. He's a born stalker. He just needs a little more experience, to break him of his hurrying, and I'd go into the Zone every day with him."

"And every night?" he asked with a drunken smirk.

"Drop it. A joke's a joke."

"I know. A joke's a joke, but it can get me into a lot of trouble. I owe you one."

"Who gets one?" Gutalin got excited. "Which one is it?"

We grabbed him by the arms and got him back in his chair. Dick stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. We calmed him down. Meanwhile more and more people were coming in. The bar was crowded and many of the tables were taken. Ernest had gotten his girls and they were bringing drinks to the customers -- beer, cocktails, vodka. I noticed that there were a lot of new faces in town lately, mostly young punks with long bright scarves hanging to the floor. I mentioned it to Dick. Dick nodded.

"What do you expect? They're starting a lot of construction. The institute is putting up three new buildings and besides that they're planning to wall off the Zone from the cemetery to the old ranch. The good times are over for the stalkers."

"When were the good old days for stalkers?" I said. There you go, I thought, what's all this new stuff? I guess I won't be able to make a few bucks on the side any more. Maybe it's for the best. Less temptation. I'll go into the Zone in the daytime, like a decent citizen. The money's not the same, of course, but it's a lot safer. The boot, the special suit, and so on, and no worries with the border patrol. I can live on my salary, and I'll booze it up on the bonuses. Then I got really depressed. Penny-pinching again: I can afford this, I can't afford that. I'd have to save up to buy Guta the crummiest rag, no more bars, just cheap movies. It was bleak. Every day was gray, and every evening, and every night. I was sitting there thinking, and Dick was yelling in my ear.

"Last night at the hotel I went into the bar for a nightcap. There were some new guys there. I didn't like their looks at all. One comes over to me and starts a conversation in a roundabout way, lets me know that he knows me, knows what I do, where I work, and hints that he's ready to pay good money for various services."

"An informer," I said. I wasn't very interested. I've had my fill of informers and little talks about services.

"No, buddy, not an informer. Listen. I chatted for a bit, carefully, of course,

led him on. He's interested in certain objects in the Zone. Serious ones, at that. Batteries, itchers, black sprays, and other such baubles do nothing for him. He only hinted at what he did want."

"What was it?"

"Witches' jelly, as far as I could understand," Dick said and looked at me strangely.

"Oh, so he wants the witches' jelly, does he? How about some death lamps while he's at it?"

"I asked him the same thing."

"And?"

"Would you believe that he wants some, too."

"Yes?" I said. "Well, let him go get it himself. It's a snap. There are cellars full of witches' jelly. Let him take a bucket and bail out as much as he wants. It's his funeral."

Dick said nothing and watched me without even smiling. What the hell was he thinking? Was he thinking of hiring me? And then I got it.

"Hold on," I said. "Who was that guy? You're not allowed to study the jelly even at the institute."

"Right." Dick was speaking slowly and watching me. "It's research that holds potential danger for mankind. Now do you understand who that was?"

I understood nothing.

"The Visitors, you mean?" He laughed, patted my hand, and said:

"Why don't we just have a drink instead. You're such a simple soul!"

"OK by me," I said. But I was angry. The sons of bitches think I'm such a simpleton, eh? "Hey, Gutralin," I said. "Gutralin! Wake up, let's drink!"

Gutralin was fast asleep. His black cheek lay on the black tabletop and his hands drooped down to the floor. Dick and I had a drink without him.

"All right, now," I said. "Simple soul or complicated, I'll tell you what I would do about that guy. You know how much love I have for the police, but I'd turn him in."

"Sure. And the police would ask you why this guy turned to you rather than someone else. Then what?" I shook my head.

"It doesn't matter. You, you fat jerk, you've only been in the city three years and haven't been in the Zone once. You've only seen the witches' jelly in the movies. You should see it in real life and what it does to a human being. It's a horrible thing and it shouldn't be brought out of the Zone. You know yourself that stalkers are a rough bunch, all they want is money and more money, but even

the late Slimy wouldn't have gone in on a deal like that. Buzzard Burbridge wouldn't go for it either. I hate to think who would need witches' jelly and for what."

"Well, you're right about all that," said Dick. "But you see, I'd hate to be found one morning in bed having committed suicide. I'm not a stalker, but I am a practical person anyway, and I like living, you know. I've been doing it for a long time and I've gotten into the habit."

Ernest shouted from the bar:

"Mr. Noonan! Telephone!"

"What the hell!" Dick said angrily. "Must be Shipping Adjustment again. They find you everywhere. Excuse me, Red."

He got up and went to the phone. I stayed behind with Gutralin and the bottle, and since Gutralin was of no help at all, I attacked the bottle on my own. Goddamn that Zone. You can't get away from it. Wherever you go, whoever you talk to, it's always the Zone, the Zone, the Zone. It's easy for Kirill to talk about the eternal peace and harmony that will come from the Zone. Kirill is a fine fellow and no fool -- on the contrary, he's really bright -- but he doesn't know a damn thing about life. He can't even imagine what kind of scum and criminals hang around the Zone. Now somebody wants to get his hands on the witches' jelly. Gutralin may be a drunk and a religious nut, but maybe he's got something there. Maybe we should leave the devil's things to the devil? Hands off.

Some punk in a bright scarf sat in Dick's chair.

"Mr. Schuhart?"

"So what?"

"My name is Creon. I'm from Malta."

"So how are things in Malta?"

"Things are fine in Malta, but that's not what I wanted to talk about. Ernest put me on to you."

So, I thought. That Ernest really was a bastard. Not a drop of pity in him. Here's this young guy -- tan, and clean, and pretty. Hasn't ever shaved or kissed a girl. But Ernest doesn't care. He just wants to send more people into the Zone. One out of three will come back with swag, and that's money for him.

"So how's old Ernest?" I asked.

He looked over at the bar.

"He looks well. I wouldn't mind trading places with him."

"I would. Want a drink?"

"Thanks, I don't drink."

"A smoke?"

"Forgive me, but I don't smoke, either."

"Damn you then. What the hell do you need the money for?"

He blushed and stopped smiling.

"Probably," he said in a low voice, "that concerns only me, doesn't it, Mr. Schuhart?"

"You're absolutely right," I said and poured myself another four fingers. My head was beginning to buzz and I was feeling a nice looseness in my limbs. The Zone had let go of me completely. "I'm drunk right now. I'm celebrating, as you can see. I went into the Zone and came back alive and with money. It doesn't happen very often that people come back alive and even more rarely that they come back with money. So why don't we postpone any serious discussions."

He jumped up and excused himself. I saw that Dick was back. He was standing by his chair and I could see in his face that something had happened.

"Your tanks losing their vacuum again?"

"Yep," he said. "Again."

He sat down, poured himself a drink, freshened mine, and I could see that whatever it was, it had nothing to do with faulty goods. To tell the truth, he couldn't care less about the shipments -- a model worker!

"Let's have a drink, Red." Without waiting for me he gulped down his drink and poured himself another. "You know Kirill Panov died."

I was so stoned that I didn't quite understand. Someone died. So what.

"Well, let's drink to the departed."

He looked at me with his round eyes and only then did I feel as if a string had snapped inside my body. I remember that I got up and leaned against the table. I looked down at him.

"Kirill?" The silver web was before my eyes and I could hear it cracking again as it tore. And through the eerie sound of the cracking I could hear Dick's voice as though he were in another room.

"Heart attack. They found him in the shower, naked. Nobody knows what's happened. They asked about you. I told them you were in perfect shape."

"What's to understand? It's the Zone."

"Sit down. Sit down and have a drink."

"The Zone," I repeated. I couldn't stop saying it. "The Zone, the Zone..."

I couldn't see anything around me except for the silver web. The whole bar was caught in the web and as people moved around, the web crackled softly as they touched it. The Maltese boy was standing in the middle. His childlike face was surprised -- he didn't understand a thing.

"Little boy," I said gently. "How much do you need? Will a thousand be enough? Here, take it. Take it!" I shoved the money at him and started shouting: "Go to Ernest and tell him that he's a bastard and scum. Don't be afraid! Tell him! He's a coward, too. Tell him and then go straight to the station and buy a ticket for Malta! Don't stop anywhere." I don't remember what else I shouted. I do remember ending up in front of the bar and Ernest giving me a glass of soda.

"You're in the money today?" he asked.

"Yes, I've got some."

"How about a little loan? I have to pay my taxes tomorrow."

I realized that I had a bundle of money in my hand. I looked at the wad and muttered:

"That means he didn't take it. Creon of Malta is a proud young man, it seems. Well, it's out of my hands. Whatever happens now is fate."

"What's the matter with you?" my pal Ernie asked. "Had a little too much?"

"Nope, I'm fine," I said. "Perfect shape. Ready for the showers."

"Why don't you head on home? You've had a little too much."

"Kirill died." I said to him.

"Which Kirill? The one-armed one?"

"You're one-armed yourself, you bastard. You couldn't make one man like Kirill from a thousand like you. You rat, you son of a bitch, you lousy scum bastard. You're dealing in death, you know that? You bought us all with your dough. You want to see me tear your little shop apart?"

And just when I reared back to lay a good one on him I was grabbed and hauled off somewhere. I couldn't understand anything then and I didn't want to. I was shouting and fighting and kicking and when I came to I was in the john, all wet, and my face was in lousy shape. I didn't even recognize myself in the mirror. My cheek was twitching, I'd never had that before. Outside I could hear a racket, dishes breaking, the girls squealing, and Gutalin roaring louder than a grizzly:

"Repent, you good-for-nothings! Where's Red? What have you done with him, you seeds of the devil?" And the wail of the police siren.

As soon as I heard it, everything became crystal clear in my brain. I remembered everything, knew everything, and understood everything. And there was nothing left in my soul but icy hatred. So, I thought, I'll give you a party! I'll show you what a stalker is, you lousy bloodsucker! I pulled out an itcher from my watch pocket. It was brand new, never used. I squeezed it a couple of times to get it going, opened the door into the bar and tossed it quietly into the spittoon. Then I opened the window and climbed out into the street. I really wanted to

stick around and see it all happen, but I had to get out of there as fast as possible. The itchers give me nosebleeds.

I ran across the backyard. I could hear my itcher working full blast. First all the dogs in the neighborhood started howling and barking -- they sense the itcher before humans do. Then someone in the bar started yelling so loud that my ears clogged even at that distance. I could just see the crowd going wild in there -- some fall into deep depression, others freak out, and some panic with fear. The itcher is a terrifying thing. Ernest will have a long wait before he can get a full house in his place again. The bastard will guess of course that it was me, but I don't give a damn. It's over. There is no more stalker named Red. I've had enough. Enough of risking my own life and teaching other fools how to risk theirs. You were wrong, Kirill, my old buddy. I'm sorry, but you were wrong and Gutralin was right. This was no place for humans. The Zone was evil.

I climbed over the fence and headed home. I was biting my lip. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. All I saw was emptiness and sadness. Kirill, my buddy, my only friend, how could it have happened? How will I get on without you? You painted vistas for me, about a new world, a changed world. And now what? Someone in far-off Russia will cry for you, but I can't. And it was all my fault. No one else but me, a good-for-nothing. How could I take him into the garage when his eyes hadn't adjusted to the dark? I'd lived my whole life like a wolf, caring only about myself. And suddenly I decided to be a benefactor and give him a little present. Why the hell did I ever mention that empty to him? When I thought about it, I felt a pain in my throat and I wanted to howl. Maybe I did. People were avoiding me on the street. And then things got easier: I saw Guta coming.

She was coming toward me, my beauty, my darling girl, walking with her pretty little feet, her skirt swaying over her knees. Eyes followed her from every doorway. But she was walking a straight line, looking at no one, and I realized that she was looking for me.

"Hello," I said. "Guta, where are you going?" She took me in in one glance -- my bashed-in face, my wet jacket, my scraped hands -- but she didn't say a thing.

"Hello, Red. I was just coming to see you."

"I know. Let's go to my place."

She turned away and said nothing. Her head is so pretty on her long neck, like a young mare's, proud but submissive to her master.

"I don't know, Red. You may not want to see me any more."

My heart contracted. What now? But I spoke calmly.

"I don't understand what you're getting at, Guta. Forgive me, I'm a little drunk

today, so I'm not thinking straight. Why wouldn't want to see you any more?"

I took her hand and we walked slowly toward my place. Everybody who had been eyeing her before was hurrying to hide his mug now. I've lived on this street all my life and everybody knows Red very well. And anyone who doesn't will get to know me fast enough, and he can sense that.

"Mother wants me to have an abortion," she said suddenly. "I don't want to." I had walked several steps before I understood what she was saying.

"I don't want an abortion. I want to have your child. You can do what you want, go off to the four corners of the world. I won't keep you.

I listened to her and watched her get heated up. And I was feeling more and more stunned. I just couldn't make head or tail of it. There was this nonsensical thought buzzing in my head: one man less, one man more.

"She keeps telling me that a baby by a stalker will be a freak, that you're a wanderer, that we'll have no real family. Today you're free, tomorrow you're in jail. But I don't care, I'm ready for anything. I can do it alone. I'll have him alone, I'll raise him alone, and make him into a man alone. I can manage without you, too. But don't you come around to me any more. I won't let you through the door."

"Guta, my darling girl," I said. "Wait a minute..." I couldn't go on talking. A nervous, idiotic laugh was welling and breaking me up. "My honeypie, why are you chasing me away then?"

I was laughing like a village idiot, and she was bawling on my chest.

"What will happen to us now, Red?" she asked through her tears.

"What will happen to us now?"

2. REDRICK SCHUHART, AGE 28, MARRIED, NO PERMANENT OCCUPATION

Redrick Schuhart lay behind a gravestone and looked at the road through a branch of the ash tree. The searchlights of the patrol car were combing the cemetery and once in a while one caught him in the eyes. Then he would squint and hold his breath.

Two hours had passed and things were still the same on the road. The car was still parked, its motor throbbing evenly, and kept scanning with its three searchlights the rundown graves, the lopsided, rusty crosses and headstones, the overgrown bushy ash trees, and the crest of the ten-foot-thick wall that broke off on the left. The border patrol guards were afraid of the Zone. They didn't even get out of the car. Near the cemetery, they were even too scared to shoot. Redrick could hear their lowered voices once in a while, and once in a while he could see the light of a cigarette butt fly out of the car window and roll down the highway, skipping along and scattering weak red sparks. It was very damp, it had just rained, and Redrick could feel the dank cold through his waterproof jumpsuit.

He carefully released the branch, turned his head, and listened. Somewhere to the right, not too far, but not too close either, there was someone else in the cemetery. The leaves rustled there once more and soil crumbled, and then there was the soft thud of something hard and heavy falling. Redrick started crawling backward, carefully and without turning around, hugging the wet grass. The beam of light swung over his head. He froze, following its silent movement, and he thought he saw a man in black sitting motionless on a grave between the crosses. He was sitting there openly, leaning against a marble obelisk, turning his white face with its black sunken holes toward Redrick. Actually Redrick did not see him clearly, nor was it possible in the split second he had, but he filled in the details with his imagination. He crawled away a few more steps and felt for his flask inside his jacket. He pulled it out and lay with its warm metal against his cheek for a while. Then still holding onto the flask, he crawled on. He stopped listening and looking around.

There was a break in the wall and Burbridge was lying there in a lead-lined raincoat with a bullet hole in it. He was still on his back, pulling at the collar of his sweater with both hands and moaning painfully. Redrick sat next to him and unscrewed the flask's cap. He carefully held Burbridge's head, feeling the hot, sticky, sweaty bald spot with his palm, and brought the Bask to the old man's lips. It was

dark, but in the weak reflections of the searchlights Redrick could see Burbridge's wide-open, glassy eyes and the dark stubble that covered his cheeks. Burbridge greedily took several gulps and then nervously felt for his sack with the swag.

"You came back... Good fellow... Red. You won't leave an old man to die."

Redrick threw back his head and took a deep swallow.

"It's still there. Like it was nailed to tile highway."

"It's no accident," Burbridge said. He spoke in spurts, on the exhale. "Someone must have squealed. They're waiting for us"

"Maybe," said Redrick. "Want another swallow?"

"No. That's enough for now. Don't abandon me. If you don't leave me, I won't die. You won't be sorry. You won't leave me, will you? Red?"

Redrick did not answer. He was looking over at the highway and the flashes of light. He could see the marble obelisk, but he couldn't tell if he was sitting there or not.

"Listen, Red. I'm not fooling. You won't be sorry Do you know why old Burbridge is still alive? Do you know? Bob the Gorilla blew it. Pharaoh the Banker kicked the bucket. And what a stalker he was! And he was killed. Slimy, too. And Norman Four-Eyes. Culligan. Pete the Scab. All of them. I'm the only who's survived. Why? Do you know?"

"You were always a rat," said Red, never taking his eyes off the road. "A son of a bitch."

"A rat. That's true. You can't get by without being one. But all of them were. Pharaoh. Slimy. But I'm the only one left. Do you know why?"

"I know," said Red to end the conversation.

"You're lying. You don't know. Have you heard about the Golden Ball?"

"Yes."

"You think it's a fairy tale?"

"You'd better keep quiet. Save your strength."

"It's all right. You'll carry me out. We've gone to the Zone so many times. Could you abandon me? I knew you when you were so small. Your father..."

Redrick said nothing. He wanted a cigarette badly. He took one out, crumpled the tobacco in his hand, and sniffed it. It didn't help.

"You have to get me out. I got burned because of you. You're the one who wouldn't take the Maltese."

The Maltese was itching to go with them. He had treated them all evening, offering a good percentage, swore that he would get a special suit, and Burbridge, who was sitting next to him, kept winking to Red behind his leathery hand. Let's

take him, we won't go wrong. Maybe that was why Red said no."

"You got it because you were greedy," Red said coldly. "I had nothing to do with it. You'd better be quiet."

For a while, Burbridge moaned. He had his fingers in his collar again and his head was thrown back.

"You can have all the swag," he gasped. "Just don't leave me."

Redrick looked at his watch. There wasn't much time until dawn, and the patrol car was still there. Its spotlights were still searching the bushes, and their camouflaged jeep was quite close to the police car. They could find it any minute.

"The Golden Ball," said Burbridge. "I found it. There were so many tales about it. I spun a few myself. That it would grant your every wish. Any wish, hah! If that were true, I sure wouldn't be here. I'd be living high on the hog in Europe. Swimming in dough."

Redrick looked down at him. In the flickering blue light Burbridge's upturned face looked dead. But his glassy eyes were fixed on Redrick.

"Eternal youth -- like hell I got it. Money -- the hell with that, too. But I got health. And good children. And I'm alive. You can only dream about the places I've been. And I'm still alive." He licked his lips. "I only ask for one thing. Let me live. And give me health. And the children."

"Will you shut up?" Red finally said. "You sound like a dame. If I can, I'll get you out. I'm sorry for your Dina. She'll have to hit the streets."

"Dina," the old man whispered hoarsely. "My little girl. My beauty. They're spoiled, Red. I've never refused them anything. They'll be lost. Arthur. My Artie. You know him, Red. Have you ever seen anything like him?"

"I told you: if I can I'll save you."

"No," Burbridge said stubbornly. "You'll get me out no matter what. The Golden Ball. Do you want me to tell you where it is?"

"Go ahead." Burbridge moaned and stirred.

"My legs... Feel how they are."

Redrick reached out and moved his hand down his leg below the knee.

"The bones..." He moaned. "Are the bones still there?"

"They're there. Stop fussing."

"You're lying. Why lie? You think I don't know, I've never seen it happen?"

Actually all he could feel was the kneecap. Below, all the way to the ankle, the leg was like a rubber stick. You could tie knots in it.

"The knees are whole," Red said.

"You're probably lying," Burbridge said sadly. "Well, all right. just get me out."

I'll give you everything. The Golden Ball. I'll draw you a map. Show you all the traps. I'll tell you everything."

He promised other things, too, but Redrick wasn't listening. He was looking at the highway. The spotlights weren't racing across the shrubbery any more. They were frozen. They converged on that obelisk. In the bright blue fog Redrick could see the bent black figure wandering among the crosses. The figure seemed to be moving blindly, straight into the lights. Redrick saw it bump into a huge cross, stumble, bump into the cross again, walk around it, and continue on, its arms outstretched before it, fingers spread wide. Then it suddenly disappeared, as though it fell underground; it surfaced a few seconds later, to the right and farther away, stepping with a bizarre, inhuman stubbornness, like a wind-up toy.

Suddenly the lights went out. The transmission squealed, the engine roared, and the blue and red signal lights showed through the shrubs. The patrol car tore away, accelerated wildly, and raced toward town. It disappeared behind the wall. Redrick gulped and unzipped his jump suit.

"They've gone away." Burbridge muttered feverishly. "Red, let's go. Hurry!" He shifted around, felt for and found his bag, and tried to get up. "Let's go, what are you waiting for?"

Redrick was still looking toward the road. It was dark now, and nothing could be seen, but somewhere out there he was stalking, like an automaton, stumbling, falling, bumping into crosses, getting tangled in the shrubs.

"All right," Red said out loud. "Let's go."

He lifted Burbridge. The old man clamped onto his neck with his left hand. Redrick, unable to straighten up, crawled with him on all fours through the hole in the wall, grabbing the wet grass.

"Let's go, let's go," Burbridge whispered hoarsely. "Don't worry, I've got the swag, I won't let go. Come on!"

The path was familiar, but the wet grass was slippery, the ash branches whipped him in the face, the bulky old man was unbearably heavy, like a corpse, and the bag with the booty, clinking and clanging, kept getting caught, and he was afraid of running into him, who could be anywhere in the dark.

When they got out onto the highway, it was still dark, but you could tell that dawn was coming. In the little wood across the road, birds were making sleepy and uncertain noises, and the night gloom was turning blue over the black houses in the distant suburbs. There was a chilly damp breeze coming from there. Redrick put Burbridge on the shoulder of the road and like a big black spider scuttled across the road. He quickly found the jeep, swept off the branches from the hood and

fenders, and drove out onto the asphalt without turning on the headlights. Burbridge was there, holding the bag in one hand and feeling his legs with the other.

"Hurry up! Hurry. My knees, I still have my knees. If only we could save my knees!"

Redrick picked him up, and gritting his teeth from the strain, shoved him over the side. Burbridge landed on the back seat and groaned. He hadn't dropped the bag. Redrick picked up the lead-lined raincoat and covered him with it. Burbridge had even managed to get the coat out.

Redrick took out a flashlight and checked the shoulder for tracks. There weren't too many traces. The jeep had Battered some of the tall grasses as it came onto the road, but the grass would stand up in a couple of hours. There were an enormous number of butts around the spot where the patrol car had parked. That reminded Redrick that he wanted a smoke. He lit one up, even though what he wanted more was to get the hell out of there and drive as fast as he could. But he couldn't do that yet. Everything had to be done slowly and consciously.

"What's the matter?" Burbridge whined from the car. "You haven't spilled the water, and the finishing gear is dry. What are you waiting for? Come on, hide the swag!"

"Shut up! Don't bug me! We'll head for the southern suburbs."

"What suburbs? Are you crazy? You'll ruin my knees, you bastard! My knees!"

Redrick took a last drag and put the butt in his matchbox.

"Don't be a jerk, Buzzard. We can't go straight through town. There are three roadblocks. We'll get stopped once for sure."

"So what?"

"They'll take one look at your feet and it's curtains."

"What about my legs? We were fishing, I hurt my legs, and that's that."

"And what if they feel your legs?"

"Feel them. I'll yell so loud that they'll never try feeling a leg again."

But Redrick had already decided. He lifted the driver's seat, flashing his light, opened a secret compartment, and said:

"Let me have the stuff."

The gas tank under the seat was a dummy. Redrick took the bag and stuffed it inside, listening to the clinking and clanging in the bag.

"I can't take any risks," he muttered. "I don't have the right."

He put the cover back on, covered it up with rubbish and rags, and replaced the seat. Burbridge was moaning and groaning, begging him to hurry, and promising him the Golden Ball again. He twisted and shifted in his seat, staring anxiously

into the growing light. Redrick paid no attention to him. He tore open the plastic bag of water with the fish in it, poured out the water over the fishing gear, and put the flopping fish into the basket. He folded up the plastic bag and put it in his pocket. Now everything was in order. Two fishermen coming back from a not very successful trip. He got behind the wheel and started the car.

He drove all the way to the turn without putting on the lights. The vast ten-foot wall stretched to the left of them, hemming in the Zone, and on their right there were occasional abandoned cottages, with bearded windows and peeling paint. Redrick could see well in the dark, and it wasn't that dark any more anyway, and besides, he knew that it was coming. So when the bent figure, striding rhythmically, appeared before the car, he didn't even slow down. He hunched over the wheel. He was walking in the middle of the road -- like all of them, he was headed for town. Redrick passed him from the left and speeded up.

"Mother of God!" Burbridge muttered in the back seat. "Red, did you see that?"

"Yes."

"God! That's all we need!" Suddenly Burbridge broke into a loud prayer.

"Shut up!" Redrick shouted at him.

The turn should have been right around there somewhere. Redrick slowed down, staring at the row of sinking houses and fences on the right. The old transformer hut, the pole with the supports, the rotting bridge over the culvert. Redrick turned the wheel. The car tossed and turned.

"Where are you going?" Burbridge wailed. "You'll ruin my legs, you bastard!"

Redrick turned around for a second and slapped the old man's face, feeling his prickly stubbled cheek. Burbridge sputtered and fell silent. The car was bouncing and the wheels slipped in the fresh mud from last night's rain. Redrick turned on the lights. The white bouncing light illuminated overgrown old ruts, huge puddles, and rotten, leaning fences. Burbridge was crying, sobbing, and snuffling. He wasn't promising anything any more. He was complaining and threatening, but in a very quiet and indistinct voice, so that Redrick heard only isolated words. Something about legs, knees, and his darling Archie. Then he shut up.

The village stretched along the western edge of the city. There once had been summer houses, gardens, orchards, and the summer villas of the city fathers and plant directors. Green, pleasant places with small lakes and clean sandy beaches, translucent birch groves, and ponds stocked with carp. The stink and pollution from the plant never reached this verdant glade -- nor did the city plumbing system. But now everything here was abandoned and they passed only one inhabited house -- the window shone yellow through the drawn blinds, the wash on the line

was wet from the rain, and a huge dog rushed out at them furiously and chased the car through the mud thrown up by the wheels.

Redrick carefully drove over an old rickety bridge. When he could see the turn-off to Western Highway, he stopped the car and turned off the motor. Then he got out and went on the road without looking back at Burbridge, his hands stuffed into the damp pockets of his jumpsuit. It was light. Everything around them was wet, still, and sleepy. He walked over to the highway and peered from the bushes. The police checkpoint was easily visible from his vantage point: a little trailer house, with three lighted windows. The patrol car was parked next to it. It was empty. Redrick stood watching for some time. There was no action at the checkpoint; the guards must have gotten cold and worn out during the night and were warming up in the trailer. Dreaming over cigarettes stuck to their lower lips. "The toads," Redrick said softly. He found the brass knuckles in his pocket, slipped his fingers into the oval holes, pressed the cold metal into his fist, and still hunched up against the chill and with his hands still in his pockets, he went back. The jeep, listing slightly to one side, was parked among the bushes. It was a lost, quiet spot. Probably nobody had looked at it in the last ten years.

When Redrick reached the car, Burbridge sat up and looked at him, his mouth open. He looked even older than usual, wrinkled, bald, unshaven, and with rotten teeth. They stared at each other silently, and then Burbridge said distinctly:

"The map... all the traps, everything... You'll find it and you won't be sorry."

Redrick listened to him without moving; then he loosened his fingers and let the brass knuckles fall into his pocket.

"All right. All you have to do is lie there in a faint. Understand? Moan and don't let anyone touch you."

He got behind the wheel and started the car.

Everything went well. No one got out of the trailer when the jeep drove slowly past, obeying all the signs and making all the correct signals. It accelerated and sped into town through the southern end. It was six A.M. The streets were empty, the pavement wet and shiny black, and the traffic lights winked lonely and unneeded at the intersections. They drove past the bakery with its high, brightly lit windows, and Redrick was engulfed in a wave of the warm, incredibly delicious smell of baking bread.

"I'm starved," Redrick said and stretched his stiffened muscles by pushing his hands into the wheel.

"What?" Burbridge asked frightenedly.

"I'm starved, I said. Where to? Home or straight to the Butcher?"

"To the Butcher, and hurry." Burbridge was ranting, leaning forward and breathing hotly on Redrick's neck. "Straight to his house. Come on! He still owes me seven hundred. Will you drive faster? You're crawling like a louse in a puddle." He started cursing impotently and angrily, sputtering, panting. It ended in a coughing fit.

Redrick did not answer. He had neither the time nor the energy to pacify Buzzard when he was going at full speed. He wanted to finish up as soon as possible and get an hour or so of sleep before his appointment at the Metropole. He turned onto Sixteenth Street, drove two blocks, and parked in front of a gray, two-story private house.

The Butcher came to the door himself. He had just gotten up and was on his way to the bathroom. He was wearing a luxurious robe with gold tassels and was carrying a glass with his false teeth. His hair was disheveled and there were dark circles under his eyes.

"Oh, itsh Red? Sho how are you?"

"Put in your teeth and let's go."

"Uh-huh." He nodded him into the waiting room and hurried off to the bathroom, scuffing along in his Persian slippers.

"Who is it?" he asked from there.

"Burbridge."

"What?"

"His legs."

Redrick could hear running water, snorting, splashing, and something fall and roll along the tile floor in the bathroom. Redrick sank exhaustedly into an armchair and lit a cigarette. The waiting room was nice. The Butcher didn't skimp. He was a highly competent and very fashionable surgeon, influential in both city and state medical circles. He had gotten mixed up with the stalkers not for the money, of course. He collected from the Zone: he took various types of swag, which he used for research in his practice; he took knowledge, since he studied stricken stalkers and the various diseases, mutilations, and traumas of the human body that had never been known before; and he took glory, becoming famous as the first doctor on the planet to be a specialist in nonhuman diseases of man. He was also not averse to taking money, and in great amounts.

"What specifically is wrong with his legs?" he asked, appearing from the bathroom with a huge towel around his neck. He was carefully drying his sensitive fingers with the corner of the towel.

"Landed in the jelly," Redrick said. The Butcher whistled.

"Well, that's the end of Burbridge. Too bad, he was a famous stalker."

"It's all right," Redrick said, leaning back in the chair. "You'll make artificial legs for him. He'll hobble around the Zone on them."

"All right." The Butcher's face became completely businesslike.

"Wait a minute, I'll get dressed."

While he dressed and made a call -- probably to his clinic to prepare things for the operation -- Redrick lounged immobile in the armchair and smoked. He moved only once to get his flask. He drank in small sips because there was only a little on the bottom, and he tried to think about nothing. He simply waited.

They both walked out to the car. Redrick got in the driver's seat, the Butcher next to him. He immediately bent over the back seat to palpate Burbridge's legs. Burbridge, subdued and withdrawn, muttered pathetically, promising to shower him with gold, mentioning his deceased wife and his children repeatedly, and begging him to save at least his knees. When they got to the clinic, the Butcher cursed at not finding the orderlies waiting at the driveway and jumped out of the moving car to run inside. Redrick lit another cigarette. Burbridge suddenly spoke, clearly and calmly, apparently completely calm at last:

"You tried to kill me. I won't forget."

"I didn't kill you, though," Redrick said.

"No, you didn't..." He was silent. "I'll remember that, too."

"You do that. Of course, you wouldn't have tried to kill me." He turned and looked at Burbridge. The old man was nervously moving his lips. "You would have abandoned me just like that," said Redrick.

"You would have left me in the Zone and thrown me in the water. Like Four-eyes."

"Four-eyes died on his own," Burbridge said gloomily. "I had nothing to do with it. It got him."

"You bastard," Redrick said dispassionately, turning away. "You son of a bitch."

The sleepy rumped attendants ran out onto the driveway, unfurling the stretcher as they came to the car. Redrick, stretching and yawning, watched them extricate Burbridge from the back seat and trundle him off on the stretcher. Burbridge lay immobile, hands folded on chest, staring resignedly at the sky. His huge feet, cruelly eaten away by the jelly, were turned out unnaturally. He was the last of the old stalkers who had started hunting for treasure right after the Visitation, when the Zone wasn't called the Zone, when there were no institutes, or walls, or UN forces, when the city was paralyzed with fear and the world was snickering over the new newspaper hoax. Redrick was ten years old then and Burbridge was still a strong and agile man -- he loved to drink when others paid, to brawl, to catch

some unwary girl in a corner. His own children didn't interest him in the least, and he was a petty bastard even then; when he was drunk he used to beat his wife with a repulsive pleasure, noisily, so that everyone could hear. He beat her until she died.

Redrick turned the jeep and, disregarding the lights, sped home, honking at the few pedestrians on the streets and cornering sharply.

He parked in front of the garage, and when he got out he saw the superintendent coming toward him from across the little park. As usual, the super was out of sorts, and his crumpled face with its swollen eyes mirrored extreme distaste, as though he were walking on liquid manure instead of the ground.

"Good morning," Redrick said politely.

The super stopped two feet in front of him and pointed with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Is that your handiwork?" he asked. You could tell that those were his first words of the day.

"What are you talking about?"

"The swings, was it you who set them up?"

"I did."

"What for?"

Redrick did not answer and went over to unlock the garage door. The super followed.

"I asked you why you set up the swings. Who asked you to?"

"My daughter," he answered very calmly. He rolled back the door.

"I'm not asking you about your daughter!" He raised his voice.

"That's another question. I'm asking you who gave you permission? I mean who let you take over the park?"

Redrick turned to him and stared at the bridge of his nose, pale and covered with spidery veins. The super stepped back and spoke more softly.

"And don't you repaint the terrace. How many times have I..."

"Don't bother. I'm not going to move out."

He got back in the car and started the engine. As he took the wheel, he saw how white his knuckles were. Then he leaned out the window and no longer controlling himself, said:

"But if I am forced to move, you creep, you'd better say your prayers."

He drove into the garage, turned on the light, and closed the door. He pulled the swag from the false gas tank, fixed up the car, put the bag in an old wicker basket, put the fishing gear, still damp and covered with grass and leaves, on top, and put

the fish that Burbridge had bought in a store in the suburbs last night on top of everything. Then he checked the car one more time. Out of habit. A flattened cigarette butt had stuck to the right rear fender. Redrick pulled it away -- it was Swedish. He thought about it and put it into the matchbox. There were three butts in it already.

He didn't meet anyone on the stairs. He stopped in front of his door and it flew open before he had time to get his keys. He walked in sideways, holding the heavy basket under his arm, and immersed himself in the warmth and familiar smells of home. Guta threw her arms around his neck and froze with her face on his chest. He could feel her heart beating wildly even through his jumpsuit and heavy shirt. He didn't rush her -- he stood patiently and waited for her to calm down, even though he fully sensed for the first time just then how tired and worn out he was.

"All right," she finally said in a low husky voice and let go of him. She turned on the light in the entry and went into the kitchen. "I'll have the coffee ready in a minute," she called.

"I've brought some fish," he said in an artificially hearty tone. "Fry it up, won't you, I'm starved."

She came back, hiding her face in her loosened hair; he set the basket on the floor, helped her take out the net with the fish, and they both carried the net to the kitchen and dumped the Fish into the sink.

"Go wash up," she said. "By the time you're ready, the fish will be done."

"How's Monkey?" Redrick asked, pulling off his boots.

"She was babbling all evening," Guta replied. "I barely got her to go to bed. She keeps asking, where's daddy, where's daddy? She wants her daddy all the time."

She moved swiftly and quietly in the kitchen, strong and graceful. The water was boiling in the pan on the stove and the scales were flying under her knife, and the butter was sizzling in the largest pan, and there was the exhilarating smell of fresh coffee in the air.

Redrick walked in his bare feet to the entry hall, took the basket and brought it to the storeroom. Then he looked into the bedroom. Monkey was sleeping peacefully, her crumpled blanket hanging on the floor. Her nightie had ridden up. She was warm and soft, a little animal breathing heavily. Redrick could not resist the temptation to stroke her back covered with warm golden fur, and was amazed for the thousandth time by the fur's silkiness and length. He wanted to pick up Monkey badly, but he was afraid it would wake her up -- besides, he was as dirty as hell and permeated with death and the Zone. He came back into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

"Pour me a cup of coffee. I'll wash up later." A bundle of evening mail was on the table: The Harmont Gazette. Sports, Playboy -- there was a whole bunch of magazines -- and the thick gray-covered Reports of the International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures, issue 56. Redrick took a mug of steaming coffee from Guta and reached for the Reports. Squiggles and markings, blueprints of some kind, and photographs of familiar objects from strange angles. Another posthumous article by Kirill: "An Unexpected Property of the Magnetic Trap Type-77b." The surname Panov was framed in black and below in tiny type it said: "Dr. Kirill A. Panov, USSR, perished tragically during an experiment in April 19.." Redrick tossed away the journal, gulped some coffee, burning his mouth, and asked: "Did anyone drop by?"

"Gutalin was here," Guta said, after a slight pause. She was standing by the stove and looking at him. "He was stinking drunk, I sobered him up."

"How about Monkey?"

"She didn't want to let him go, of course. She started bawling. But I told her that Uncle Gutalin wasn't feeling very well. And she told me, 'Gutalin's smashed again.'"

Redrick laughed and took another sip. Then he asked another question.

"What about the neighbors?"

Guta hesitated again before answering.

"Like always," she finally said.

"All right, don't tell me."

"Ah!" she said, waving her hand in disgust. "The woman from below knocked at our door last night. Her eyes were bulging and she was practically spitting with anger. Why are we sawing in the bathroom in the middle of the night?"

"The dangerous old bitch," Redrick said through his teeth. "Listen, maybe we should move? Buy a house somewhere out in the country, where there's no one else, some old abandoned cottage?"

"What about Monkey?"

"God, don't you think the two of us could make her life good?"

Guta shook her head.

"She loves children. And they love her. It's not their fault that..."

"No, it's not their fault."

"There's no use talking about it!" Guta said. "Somebody called you. Didn't leave a name. I told him you were out fishing."

Redrick put down the mug and got up.

"OK. I'll go wash up. I've got lots of things to take care of."

He locked himself in the bathroom, threw his clothes in the pail, and placed the brass knuckles, the remaining nuts and bolts, and his cigarettes on the shelf. He turned himself under the boiling hot shower for a long time, rubbing his body with a rough sponge until it was bright red. He shut off the shower and sat on the edge of the tub, smoking. The pipes were gurgling and Guta was clattering dishes out in the kitchen. Then there was the smell of frying fish and Guta knocked, bringing him fresh underwear.

"Hurry it up," she ordered. "The fish is getting cold."

She was completely back to normal -- and back to being bossy. Redrick chuckled as he dressed -- that is, put on his shorts and T-shirt -- and went to the table.

"Now I can eat," he said as he seated himself.

"Did you put your underwear in the pail?"

"Uh-huh," he said with his mouth full. "Good fish."

"Did you cover it with water?"

"No-ope. Sorry, sir, it won't happen again, sir. Will you sit still? Forget it!" He caught her hand and tried to pull her into his lap, but she pulled away and sat across from him.

"You're neglecting your husband," Redrick said, his mouth full again. "Too squeamish?"

"Some husband you are now. You're just an empty bag, not a husband. You have to be stuffed first."

"What if I could?" Redrick asked. "Miracles do happen, you know."

"I haven't seen miracles like that from you before. How about a drink?" Redrick played with his fork indecisively.

"N-no, thanks." He looked at his watch and got up. "I'm off now. Get my dress-up outfit ready. First class. A shirt and tie."

Enjoying the sensation of the cool floor under his clean bare feet, he went into the storeroom and barred the door. He put on a rubber apron and rubber gloves up to his elbows and started unloading the swag on the table. Two empties. A box of pins. Nine batteries. Three bracelets. Some kind of hoop, sort of like the bracelets, but of white metal, lighter, and bigger in diameter by an inch. Sixteen black sprays in a polyethylene case. Two marvelously preserved sponges the size of a fist. Three itchers. A jar of carbonated clay. There was still a heavy porcelain container carefully wrapped in Fiberglass in the bag, but Redrick didn't touch it. He smoked and examined the wealth spread out on the table.

Then he opened a drawer and took out a piece of paper, a pencil stump, and a calculator. He kept the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, and squinting in the

smoke, he wrote number after number, making three columns in all. He added up the first two. The numbers were impressive. He put out the butt in an ashtray and carefully opened the box and spilled out the pins on the paper. In the electric light the pins looked slightly blue and occasionally sputtered with other colors -- yellow, red, and green. He picked up a pin and carefully squeezed it between his thumb and index finger, avoiding being pricked. Then he put out the light and waited a bit, getting accustomed to the dark. But the pin was silent. He put it aside and found another one, which he also squeezed. Nothing. He squeezed harder, risking a pinprick, and the pin spoke: weak red Bashes ran along the pin and were suddenly replaced by slower green pulses. Redrick enjoyed this strange light play for a few seconds. He had learned from the Reports that the lights were supposed to mean something, maybe something very important. He put the pin in a different spot from the first and picked up another.

He ended up with seventy-three pins, twelve of which spoke. The rest were silent. Actually they too could speak, but fingers were not enough to get them started. You needed a special machine the size of the table. Redrick put on the light and added two more numbers to his list. And only then did he decide to do it.

He stuck both hands into the bag and holding his breath brought out a soft package and placed it on the table. He stared at it for a while, thoughtfully rubbing his chin with the back of his hand. Then he picked up the pencil, played with it with his clumsy rubbery fingers, and put it aside. He took another cigarette and smoked the entire thing without taking his eyes off the package.

"What the hell!" he said out loud and decisively stuffed the package back into the bag "That's it. Enough."

He quickly gathered all the pins into the box and got up. It was time to go. He probably could get a half hour's sleep to clear his head, but on the other hand, it was probably a much better idea to get there early and check out the situation. He took off the gloves, hung up the apron, and left the storeroom without turning out the light.

His suit was ready and laid out on the bed. Redrick got dressed. He was doing his tie in front of the mirror when the floor creaked behind him, and he heard heavy breathing, and he made a face to keep from laughing.

"Ha!" a tiny voice shouted next to him and someone grabbed his leg.

"Oh-oh!" Redrick exclaimed, falling back onto the bed.

Monkey, laughing and squealing, immediately clambered up on him. She trampled him, pulled his hair, and inundated him with an endless stream of news. The neighbor's boy Willy tore off dolly's leg. There was a new kitten on the third

floor -- all white and with red eyes, he probably didn't listen to his mama and went into the Zone. She had porridge and jam for dinner. Uncle Gutalin was smashed again and was sick. He even cried. Why don't fish drown if they live in water? Why didn't mama sleep at night? Why are there five fingers, and and only two hands, and only one nose? Redrick carefully hugged the warm creature that was crawling all over him and looked into the huge dark eyes that had no whites at all, and cuddled his cheek against the plump little cheek covered with silky golden fleece.

"Monkey. My little Monkey. You sweet little Monkey, you." The phone rang by his ear. He picked up the receiver.

"I'm listening."

Silence.

"Hello! Hello!"

No answer. There was a click and then short repeated tones. Redrick got up, put Monkey on the floor, and put on his trousers and jacket, no longer listening to her. Monkey chattered on nonstop, but he only smiled with his lips in a distracted way. Finally she announced that daddy had bit off his tongue and swallowed it and left him in peace.

He went back into the storeroom, put everything from the table into a briefcase, got his brass knuckles from the bathroom, came back to the storeroom, took the briefcase in one hand and the basket with the bag in the other, went out, carefully locked the door, and called out to Guta.

"I'm leaving."

"When will you be back?" Guta came out of the kitchen. She had done her hair and put on makeup. She was no longer wearing her robe, either, but a house dress, his favorite one, bright blue and low-cut.

"I'll call," he said, looking at her. He walked over and kissed her cleavage.

"You'd better go," Guta said softly.

"What about me? Kiss me?" Monkey whined, pushing between them.

He had to bend down even lower. Guta watched him steadily.

"Nonsense," he said. "Don't worry. I'll call."

On the landing below theirs, Redrick saw a fat man in striped pajamas fussing with the lock to his door. A warm sour smell was coming from the depths of his apartment. Redrick stopped.

"Good day."

The fat man looked at him cautiously over his fat shoulder and muttered something.

"Your wife dropped by last night," Redrick said. "Something about us sawing. It's some kind of misunderstanding."

"What do I care?" the man in the pajamas said.

"My wife was doing the laundry last night," Redrick continued.

"If we disturbed you, I apologize."

"I didn't say anything. Be my guest."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it."

Redrick went outside, dropped into the garage, put the basket with the bag into the corner, covered it with an old seat, looked over his work, and went out into the street.

It wasn't a long walk -- two blocks to the square, then through the park and one more block to Central Boulevard. In front of the Metropole, as usual, there was a shiny array of cars gleaming chrome and lacquer. The porters in raspberry red uniforms were lugging suitcases into the hotel, and some foreign-looking people were standing around in groups of two and three, smoking and talking on the marble steps. Redrick decided not to go in yet. He made himself comfortable under the awning of a small cafe across the street, ordered coffee, and lit up a cigarette. Not two feet from his table were three undercover men from the international police force, silently and quickly eating grilled hot dogs Harmont style and drinking beer from tall glass steins. On the other side, some ten feet away, a sergeant was gloomily devouring French fries, his fork in his fist. His blue helmet was set upside down on the floor by his chair and his shoulder holster draped on the chair back. There were no other customers. The waitress, an elderly woman he didn't know, stood behind the counter and yawned, gently covering her painted mouth with her hand. It was twenty to nine.

Redrick saw Richard Noonan leave the hotel, chewing something, and arranging his soft hat on his head. He boldly strode down the steps -- short, plump, and pink, still lucky, well-off, freshly washed, and confident that the day would bring him no unpleasantness. He waved to someone, flung his raincoat over his right shoulder, and walked over to his Peugeot. Dick's Peugeot was also plump, short, freshly washed, and seemingly confident that no unpleasantness threatened it.

Covering his face with his hand, Redrick watched Noonan bustle, get comfortable in the front seat, move something from the front seat to the back, bend down to pick something up, and adjust the rearview mirror. The Peugeot expelled a puff of blue smoke, beeped at an African in a burnoose, and jauntily drove out into the street. It looked like Noonan was headed for the institute, in which case he had to go around the fountain and drive past the cafe. It was too late to get up and leave,

so Redrick covered his face completely and hunched over his cup. It didn't help. The Peugeot beeped in his ear, the brakes squealed, and Noonan's hearty voice called:

"Hey! Schuhart! Red!"

Redrick swore under his breath and looked up. Noonan was walking toward him, hand outstretched. Noonan was beaming.

"What are you doing here at the crack of dawn?" he asked as he approached. "Thank you, ma'am," he said to the waitress. "Nothing for me. I haven't seen you in a hundred years. Where've you been? What are you up to?"

"Nothing special," Redrick said unwillingly. "just unimportant things."

He watched Noonan bustle and establish himself in the chair opposite and move the glass with the napkins in one direction with his plump hands and the plate with sandwiches in another. And he listened to Noonan gab.

"You look kind of peaked. Not sleeping enough? You know, lately, I've been very busy with this new automation stuff, but I never miss my sleep, that's for sure. The automation can go hang." He suddenly looked around. "I'm sorry, maybe you're expecting someone. Have I interrupted? Am I in the way?"

"No, no," Redrick said lamely. "I just had some time and thought I'd have a cup of coffee, that's all."

"Well, I won't keep you long," Dick said, looking at his watch.

"Listen, Red, why don't you drop your unimportant things and come back to the institute. You know they'll take you back whenever you want. You want to work with another Russian? There's a new one."

Red shook his head.

"Nope, a second Kirill hasn't been born. Anyway, there's nothing for me to do in your institute. It's all automated now, you have robots going into the Zone and that means that the robots get all the bonuses. The lab assistants are paid peanuts. It wouldn't even keep me in cigarettes."

"All that could be arranged."

"I don't like having things arranged for me," Redrick said. "I've taken care of myself all my life, and I intend to keep on doing it."

"You've become very proud," Noonan said with condemnation.

"No, I'm not. I just don't like pinching pennies."

"I guess you're right," Noonan said distractedly. He looked at Redrick's briefcase on the chair next to him and rubbed the silver plate with the engraved cyrillic letters. "You're right, a man needs money so that he doesn't have to always be counting it. A present from Kirill?" he asked, nodding at the briefcase.

"I inherited it. How come never see you at the Borscht anymore?"

"You're the one who's never there," Noonan countered. "I have lunch there almost every day. At the Metropole they charge an arm and a leg for a hamburger. Listen," he said suddenly, "how's your money situation now?"

"Want a loan?"

"Just the opposite."

"You want to lend me money?"

"I have work...."

"Oh God!" Redrick said. "Not you too!"

"Who else, then?" Noonan demanded.

"There's lots of you ... hirers."

Noonan, seeming to finally get his point, laughed.

"No, no, this isn't along the lines of your primary specialty."

"Along what lines then?" Noonan looked at his watch again.

"Here's the deal," he said, getting up. "Come to the Borscht for lunch, around two. We'll talk."

"I may not be able to make it by two."

"Then this evening around six. All right?"

"We'll see." Redrick looked at his watch. It was five to nine.

Noonan waved and rolled out to his Peugeot. Redrick followed him with his eyes, called the waitress, paid the bill, bought a pack of Lucky Strikes, and slowly headed over to the hotel with his briefcase. The sun was baking hot already and the street had quickly become muggy, and Redrick felt a burning sensation under his eyelids. He squinted hard, sorry that he hadn't time for an hour's nap before his important business. And then it hit him.

He had never experienced anything like this before outside the Zone. And it had happened in the Zone only two or three times. It was as though he were in a different world. A million odors cascaded in on him at once -- sharp, sweet, metallic, gentle, dangerous ones, as crude as cobblestones, as delicate and complex as watch mechanisms, as huge as a house and as tiny as a dust particle. The air became hard, it developed edges, surfaces, and corners, like space was filled with huge, stiff balloons, slippery pyramids, gigantic prickly crystals, and he had to push his way through it all, making his way in a dream through a junk store stuffed with ancient ugly furniture... It lasted a second. He opened his eyes, and everything was gone. It hadn't been a different world -- it was this world turning a new, unknown side to him. This side was revealed to him for a second and then disappeared, before he had time to figure it out.

An angry horn beeped, and Redrick walked faster, faster, and then ran all the way to the wall of the Metropole. His heart was beating wildly. He put the briefcase on the pavement and impatiently tore open the pack of cigarettes. He lit one, inhaled deeply, and rested, as if after a fight. A cop stopped near him and asked:

"Need help, mister?"

"N-no," Redrick squeezed the word out and coughed. "It's stuffy."

"Can I take you where you're going?"

Redrick picked up his briefcase.

"Everything, everything is fine, pal. Thanks."

He walked quickly toward the entrance, walked up the steps and went into the lobby. It was cool, dusky, and echoey. He should have sat for a while in one of those voluminous leather chairs and caught his breath, but he was late already. He allowed himself time to finish the cigarette, checking out the crowd through half-shut eyes. Bones was there, irritatedly riffling through the magazines at the newsstand. Redrick threw the butt into the ashtray and went into the elevator.

He didn't manage to close the door in time and others crowded in: a fat man breathing asthmatically, a heavily perfumed lady with a grumpy little boy eating chocolate, and a heavysset old woman with a poorly shaved chin. Redrick was pushed into the corner. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the boy with chocolate saliva dripping down his chin, whose face was fresh and pure, without a single hair. And to shut out his mother, whose scrawny bosom was embellished with a necklace made of large black sprays set in silver. And to shut out the bulging sclerotic whites of the eyes of the fat man, and the hideous warts on the swollen face of the old woman. The fat man tried to light a cigarette, but the old woman attacked him and kept after him until she got out on five. As soon as she did, the fat man lit up with a look that proclaimed that he was defending his civil rights, and broke out coughing and hacking as soon as he inhaled, sticking out his lips like a camel and jabbing Redrick in the ribs with his elbow.

Redrick got out on the eighth floor and walked down the thick carpet on the corridor, cozily illuminated by hidden lamps. It smelled of expensive tobacco, French perfumes, the soft natural leather of stuffed wallets, expensive ladies of the night, and solid gold cigarette cases. It reeked of everything, of the lousy fungus that was growing on the Zone, drinking on the Zone, eating, exploiting, and growing fat on the Zone and that didn't give a damn about any of it, especially about what would happen later, when it had eaten its full and gotten power, and when everything that was once in the Zone was outside the Zone. Redrick pushed open the door to 874 without knocking.

Throaty, sitting on a table by the window, was performing a ritual over a cigar. He was still in his pajamas and his thinning hair, though wet, was carefully parted. His unhealthy puffy face was smoothly shaved.

"Aha," he said without looking up. "Punctuality is the politeness of kings. Good day, young man!"

He finished clipping the end of the cigar, took it in both hands, brought it up to his nose, and passed it back and forth under it.

"Where is good old Burbridge?" he asked and looked up. His eyes were clear, blue, angelic.

Redrick put the briefcase on the sofa, sat down, and took out his cigarettes.

"Burbridge isn't coming."

"Good old Burbridge," Throaty repeated. He took the cigar between two fingers and carefully brought it to his mouth. "Old Burbridge's nerves are acting up."

He kept looking at Redrick with his clear blue eyes, never blinking. He never blinked. The door opened slightly and Bones slipped into the room.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked from the doorway.

"Ah, hello," Redrick said cheerily, flipping ashes on the floor. Bones shoved his hands in his pockets and came closer, taking broad steps with his huge pigeon-toed feet. He stopped in front of Redrick.

"We've told you a hundred times," he reproached him. "No contacts before a meeting. And what do you do?"

"I say hello," Redrick replied. "And you?"

Throaty laughed. Bones was irritated.

"Hello, hello, hello." He removed his reproachful gaze from Redrick and flung himself down on the couch next to him. "You cannot behave that way. Do you understand me? You cannot!"

"Then arrange meetings in places where I don't know anybody."

"The boy is right," Throaty interjected. "Our mistake. So who was that man?"

"Richard Noonan. He represents some companies that supply the institute. He lives here in the hotel."

"You see how simple it is!" Throaty said to Bones. He picked up a colossal lighter shaped like the Statue of Liberty, looked at it doubtfully, and replaced it on the table.

"Where's Burbridge," Throaty asked in a friendly tone.

"Burbridge blew it."

The two men exchanged a quick glance.

"Rest in peace," Throaty said tensely. "Or has he been arrested?" Redrick didn't

answer right away, taking slow long drags on his cigarette. He threw the butt on the floor.

"Don't worry, everything's safe. He's in the hospital."

"That's some safe!" Bones said nervously. He jumped up and went over to the window. "Which hospital?"

"Don't worry, everything is taken care of. Let's get down to business. I'm sleepy."

"What hospital specifically?" Bones asked in irritation.

"I've told you," Redrick picked up the briefcase. "Are we doing business today or not?"

"We are, we are, son," Throaty said heartily.

With unexpected agility he leaped to the floor, knocked all the magazines and newspapers from the coffee table, and sat in front of it, resting his hairy pink hands on his knees.

"Show your stuff."

Redrick opened the briefcase, took out the list with prices, and put it on the table before Throaty. Throaty glanced at it and flicked it to the side. Bones stood behind him and started reading the list over his shoulder.

"That's the bill," Redrick said.

"I see. Let's see the stuff," Throaty said.

"The money," Redrick said.

"What's this 'hoop'?" Bones asked suspiciously, pointing at the list over Throaty's shoulder.

Redrick said nothing. He was holding the open briefcase on his lap and staring into the blue angelic eyes. Throaty finally chuckled.

"And why do I love you so much, my son?" he muttered. "And they say love at first sight doesn't exist!" He sighed dramatically.

"Phil, buddy, how do they say it here? Dole out the cabbage, lay some greenbacks on him... and give me a match. You see..." He waved his cigar at him.

Phil the Bones muttered something under his breath, tossed him a book of matches, and went through a curtain into the next room. Redrick could hear him talking to someone there, irritated and indistinct, something about the cat being in the bag, and Throaty, his cigar finally lit, kept staring at Redrick with a frozen smile on his thin pale lips. Redrick, chin on briefcase, was looking at him and also trying not to blink, even though his lids were burning and his eyes were tearing. Bones came back, threw two packs of money on the table, and sat next to Redrick in a huff. Redrick lazily reached for the money, but Throaty motioned him to stop, tore the wrappers from the money, and put them in his pajama pocket.

"Now let's see it."

Redrick took the money and stuffed it into his inner jacket pocket without counting it. Then he presented his wares. He did it slowly, letting both of them examine the swag and check items off the list. It was quiet in the room, the only sound was Throaty's heavy breathing and the jingle coming from the other room -- a spoon against the side of a glass, perhaps.

When Redrick shut the briefcase and clicked the lock, Throaty looked up at him.

"What about the most important thing?"

"No way," Redrick replied. He thought and added: "So far."

"I like that 'so far,'" Throaty said gently. "How about you, Phil?"

"You're throwing dust in our eyes, Schuhart," Bones said suspiciously.

"Why the mystery, I ask you?"

"That comes with the territory: shady dealings," Redrick said.

"We're in a demanding profession."

"All right, all right," Throaty said. "Where's the camera?"

"Hell!" Redrick scratched his cheek, feeling the color rise in his face. "I'm sorry, I forgot all about it."

"There?" Throaty asked making a vague gesture with the cigar.

"I don't remember. Probably there." Redrick shut his eyes and leaned back on the couch. "Nope. I clean forgot."

"Too bad," Throaty said. "But you at least saw the thing?"

"Not even that," Redrick said sadly. "That's the whole point. We didn't get as far as the blast furnaces. Burbridge fell into the jelly and I had to head back immediately. You can be sure that if I'd seen it I wouldn't have forgotten it."

"Hey, Hugh, look at this!" Bones whispered in fright. "What's this?"

He stuck out his right index finger. The white metal hoop was twirling around his finger and Bones was staring pop-eyed at the hoop.

"It's not stopping!" he said aloud, moving his eyes from the hoop to Throaty and back again.

"What do you mean it's not stopping?" Throaty asked carefully and moved away.

"I put it on my finger and gave it a spin, just for the hell of it, and it hasn't stopped for a whole minute!" Bones lumped up and, holding his finger extended before him, ran behind the curtain. The silvery hoop twirled smoothly in front of him like a propeller.

"What the hell did you bring us?" Throaty asked.

"God knows! I had no idea -- if I had, I'd have asked more for it."

Throaty stared at him, then got up and went behind the curtain. Voices started

babbling immediately. Redrick picked up a magazine from the floor and flipped through it. It was chock-full of beauties, but somehow they nauseated him just then. Redrick's eyes roved around the room, looking for something to drink. Then he took a pack from his inside pocket and counted the bills. Everything was in order, but to keep from falling asleep, he counted the other one. Just as he was putting it back into his pocket, Throaty came back.

"You're lucky, son," he announced, sitting opposite Redrick once more. "Do you know what a perpetuum mobile is?"

"Nope, we never studied that."

"And you don't need to," Throaty said. He pulled out another pack. "That's the price for the first specimen," he said, pulling off the wrapping. "For each new one you'll get two packs like this. Got it, son? Two apiece. But only on the condition that no one except you and I ever know about it. Are we agreed?" Redrick put the money in his pocket silently and stood up.

"I'm going," he said. "When and where for the next time?"

Throaty also rose.

"You'll be called. Wait for a call every Friday between nine and nine-thirty in the morning. You'll get regards from Phil and Hugh and a meeting will be set up."

Redrick nodded and headed for the door. Throaty followed, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"I want you to understand one thing," he continued. "All this is very nice, charming, and so on, and the hoop is simply marvelous, but above all we need two things: the photos and the container filled up. Return our camera to us, but with exposed film, and our porcelain container, but not empty. Filled. And you'll never have to go into the Zone again.

Redrick shook Throaty's hand from his shoulder, unlocked the door, and went out. Without turning he walked down the thickly carpeted hallway and sensed the unwavering blue angelic gaze fixed on the back of his neck. He didn't wait for the elevator but walked down from the eighth floor.

Outside the Metropole he called a cab and went to the other side of town. The driver was a new one, someone Redrick didn't know, a beak-nosed, pimply fellow. One of the hundreds that had poured into Harmont in the last few years to look for exciting adventures, untold riches, world fame, or some special religion. They poured in and ended up as chauffeurs, construction workers, or thugs -- thirsting, wretched, tortured by vague desires, profoundly disillusioned, and certain that they had been tricked once again. Half of them, after hanging around for a month or two, returned to their homes, cursing, and spreading the word of their disillusionment

to all the countries of the world. A very few became stalkers and quickly perished before they had caught onto the tricks of the trade. Some managed to get a job at the institute, but only the best-educated and smartest of them, who could at least work as lab assistants. The rest wasted evening after evening in bars, brawled over some difference of opinion, girls, or just because they were drunk, and drove the municipal police, the army, and the guards out of their minds.

The pimply driver reeked of liquor a mile away, and his eyes were rabbit red, but he was very excited and told Redrick how that morning a stiff from the cemetery showed up on their block. "He came back to his house, and the house had been locked up for years, and everyone had moved -- his widow, an old lady now, and his daughter and her husband, and their children. He had died, the neighbors said, some thirty years ago, that is, before the Visitation, and now there he was. He walked around the house, sniffed and scratched, and then sat by the fence and waited. People came round from the whole neighborhood. They stared and stared but were afraid, of course, to come close. Finally somebody got a bright idea -- they broke open the door to his house, making an entrance for him. And what do you think? He got up, went in, and shut the door behind him. I was late for work, so I don't know how it turned out, but I do know that they were planning to call the institute and have someone come over and get him the hell out of there.

"Stop," Redrick said. "Let me off right here."

He rummaged in his pocket. He had no change and had to break a new bill. Then he stood in the doorway and waited for the cab to drive away. Buzzard's cottage wasn't too bad: two stories, a glassed-in veranda with a pool table, a well-tended garden, a greenhouse, and a white gazebo under the apple trees. A filigree iron fence painted light green surrounded it all. Redrick pushed the bell several times, the gate swung open with a creak, and Redrick slowly moved up the shady path, with rose bushes planted along the edges. Hamster was already standing on the porch. He was gnarled, black, and trembling with the desire to be of service. Impatiently he turned sideways, lowered one trembling leg in search of support, steadied himself, and dragged the other foot to meet its mate. His right arm shook convulsively in Redrick's direction, as if to say, coming, coming, any minute.

"Hey, Red!" a woman's voice called from the garden.

Redrick turned his head and saw bare tanned shoulders, a bright red mouth, and a waving hand among the greenery next to the lacy white roof of the gazebo. He nodded to Hamster, turned from the path, and breaking through the rose bushes, headed for the gazebo along the soft green grass.

A large red mat was spread on the lawn, and Dina Burbridge was sitting regally

on it with a glass in her hand and a miniscule bathing suit on her body; a book with a bright cover lay on the mat and an ice bucket with a slender bottle neck peering over the edge sat in the shade nearby.

"Hi, Red!" Dina Burbridge said, greeting him with a wave of the glass. "Where's the old man? Don't tell me he's messed up again?"

Redrick stood over her with the briefcase in his hands behind his back. Yes, Buzzard sure managed to wish himself up some marvelous children out there in the Zone. She was all silk and satin, firm and full, flawless, without a single unnecessary wrinkle -- hundred-twenty pounds of sugar-candy flesh, and emerald eyes that had an inner glow, a large wet mouth and even white teeth, and raven hair, shining in the sun and carelessly tossed over one shoulder. The sun was caressing her, pouring from her shoulders to her belly and hips, leaving deep shadows between her almost naked breasts. He stood above her and looked her over openly, and she looked up at him, laughing understandingly, and then raised the glass to her lips and took several sips.

"You want?" she asked, licking her lips. She waited just long enough for him to get the double entendre and then handed him the glass.

He turned and looked until he found a chaise longue in the shade. He sat down and stretched his legs.

"Burbridge is in the hospital," he said. "They're going to amputate his legs."

Still smiling, she looked at him with one eye. The other was covered by the heavy hair that fell over her shoulder. But her smile had frozen -- a sugary grin on a tan face. Then she swirled the glass, listening to the tinkle of the ice cubes.

"Both legs?"

"Both. Maybe below the knees, maybe above."

She put down the glass and pushed back her hair. She was no longer smiling.

"Too bad," she said. "And that means you..."

Dina Burbridge was the one person he could have told how it happened in all the details. He could have even told her how they drove back, his brass knuckles ready, and how Burbridge had begged -- not for himself even, but for the children, for her and for Archie, and promised him the Golden Ball. But he didn't tell her. He pulled out a pack of money from his breast pocket and tossed it onto the red mat right at her long naked legs. The notes fanned out in a rainbow. Dina absent-mindedly picked up several and examined them, as though she had never seen one before but wasn't that interested.

"This is the last earnings, then," she said.

Redrick leaned over from the chaise longue and pulled the bottle from the ice

bucket. He looked at the label. Water was dripping along the dark glass and Redrick held the bottle away from himself, so as not to drip on his pants. He did not like expensive whiskey, but he could force himself to have a slug at a time like this. He was just about to put the bottle to his mouth when he was stopped by indistinct sounds of protestation behind him. He looked around and saw that Hamster was painfully dragging his feet across the lawn, holding a glass of clear liquid in both hands. The exertion was making the sweat pour off his dark wooly head, and his bloodshot eyes had practically popped out of their sockets. When he saw that Redrick was looking at him he extended the glass in despair and sort of moaned and howled, opening his toothless mouth ineffectually.

"I'll wait, I'll wait," Redrick said and shoved the bottle back in the bucket.

Hamster finally limped over, gave Redrick the glass, and patted his shoulder shyly with his arthritic hand.

"Thanks, Dixon," Redrick said seriously. "That's just what I need right now. As usual, you're right on top of things."

And while Hamster shook his head in embarrassment and rapture and convulsively slapped himself on the hip with his good arm, Redrick raised the glass, nodded to him, and gulped down half. Then he looked at Dina.

"You want?" he asked meaning the glass.

She did not reply. She was folding a bill in half and in half once again, and then again.

"Cut it out," he said. "You won't be lost. Your old man..."

She interrupted him.

"And so you dragged him out," she said. She wasn't asking, she was stating a fact. "You carried him, you jerk, through the whole Zone, you redheaded cretin, you dragged that bastard on your backbone, you ass. You blew an opportunity like that."

He was watching her, his glass forgotten. She got up and stood in front of him, walking over the scattered money, and stopped, her clenched fists jammed into her smooth hip, blocking out the entire world for him with her marvelous body smelling of perfume and sweet sweat.

"He's got all of you idiots wrapped around his finger. He'll walk all over your bones. Just wait and see, he'll walk on your thick skulls on crutches. He'll show you the meaning of brotherly love and mercy!" She was screaming. "I'll bet he promised you the Golden Ball, right? The map, the traps, right? Jerk! I can see by your dumb face that he did! Just wait, he'll give you a map. Lord have mercy on the soul of the redheaded fool Redrick Schuhart."

Redrick got up slowly and slapped her face hard. She shut up, sank to the grass, and buried her face in her hands.

"You fool... Red," she muttered. "To blow an opportunity like that."

Redrick looked down at her and finished the vodka. He thrust it at Hamster without looking at him. There was nothing to talk about. Some fine kids Burbridge conjured up in the Zone. Loving and respectful.

He went into the street and hailed a cab. He told the driver to go to the Borscht. He had to finish up his affairs. He was dying for sleep, everything was swimming before his eyes, and he fell asleep in the cab, his body slumped over the briefcase, and awoke only when the driver shook him.

"We're here, mister."

"Where are we?" he looked around. "I told you the bank."

"No way, buddy. You said the Borscht. Here's the Borscht."

"OK," Redrick grumbled "I must have dreamed it."

He paid up and got out, barely able to move his heavy legs. The asphalt was steaming in the sun, and it was very hot. Redrick realized that he was soaked, that there was a bad taste in his mouth, and that his eyes were tearing. He looked around before going in. As usual at this time of day the street was deserted. Businesses weren't open yet, and the Borscht was supposed to be closed too, but Ernest was at his post already, wiping glasses and giving dirty looks to the trio sipping up beer at the corner table. The chairs had not been removed from the other tables. An unfamiliar porter in a white jacket was mopping the floor and another was struggling with a case of beer behind Ernest. Redrick went up to the bar, put the briefcase on the bar, and said hello. Ernest muttered something that was not exactly welcoming.

"Give me a beer," Redrick said and yawned convulsively.

Ernest slammed an empty mug on the table, grabbed a bottle from the refrigerator, opened it, and upended it over the mug. Redrick, covering his mouth with his hand, stared at Ernest's hand. It was trembling. The bottle hit the edge of the mug several times. Redrick looked up at Ernest's face. His heavy eyelids were lowered, his puffy mouth twisted, and his fat cheeks drooping. The porter was mopping right under Redrick's feet, the guys in the corner were arguing loudly over the races, and the other porter with the crates backed into Ernest so hard that he reeled. The man mumbled an apology. Ernest spoke in a cramped voice.

"Did you bring it?"

"Bring what?" Redrick looked over his shoulder. One of the guys stood up lazily and went to the door. He stopped in the doorway to light a cigarette.

"Let's go talk," Ernest said. The porter with the mop was now also between Redrick and the door. A big black man, along the lines of Gutalin, but twice as broad.

"Let's go," Redrick said and picked up the briefcase. He didn't feel sleepy anymore, in either eye.

He went behind the bar and squeezed past the porter with the cases of beer. The porter had apparently caught his finger. He was sucking his fingertip and watching Redrick. He was a big fellow, with a broken nose and cauliflower ears. Ernest went into the back room, and Redrick followed him, because now the three guys from the corner table were blocking the door and the porter with the mop was standing near the curtains that led to the storeroom.

In the back room Ernest stepped aside and sat on a chair by the wall. Captain Quarterblad, yellow and angry, stood up from the table. From somewhere on the left a huge UN trooper appeared, his helmet pulled down over his eyes, and quickly frisked him with his large hands. He slowed down at his right pocket and extracted the brass knuckles. He prodded Redrick in the captain's direction. Redrick approached the table and set the briefcase in front of Captain Quarterblad.

"You bloodsucker," he said to Ernest.

Ernest raised his eyebrows and shrugged one shoulder. It was all clear. The two porters in the doorway were smirking, and there were no other doors and the window was barred from the outside.

Captain Quarterblad, his face contorted by disgust, was digging around with both hands in the briefcase, and taking out the swag and putting in on the table: two small empties; nine batteries; various sizes of black sprays, sixteen pieces in a polyethylene package; two perfectly preserved sponges; and one jar of carbonated clay...

"Anything in your pockets?" Captain Quarterblad asked softly.

"Empty them."

"Snakes," Redrick said. "Skunks."

He pulled out a pack of bills and flung it on the table. They scattered.

"Aha!" the captain said. "Any more?"

"Lousy toads!" Redrick shouted and threw the second pack on the floor. "There you go. I hope you choke on it!"

"Very interesting," the captain said calmly. "Now pick it up."

"The hell I will," Redrick said, putting his hands behind his back.

"Your slaves will pick it up. You can pick it up yourself, for all I care."

"Pick up the money, stalker," Captain Quarterblad said without raising his voice,

leaning his fist on the table and straining toward Redrick.

They stared at each other for a few seconds, and then Redrick, muttering curses under his breath, crouched down, and reluctantly set about picking up the money. The porters were snickering behind his back and the UN trooper snorted gleefully.

"Don't snort at me!" Redrick said. "You'll lose your snort."

He was crawling around on his hands and knees, picking up the notes one by one, moving closer and closer to the dark brass ring lying peacefully on the dusty parquet floor. He turned to get better access. He kept shouting obscenities, all the ones he could remember and ones he was making up along the way. When the moment was right, he shut up, tensed, grabbed the ring, pulled it up with all his strength, and before the opened trapdoor landed on the floor he had jumped head first into the gray cold prison of the wine cellar.

He fell on his hands, somersaulted, jumped up, and ran hunched over, seeing nothing, counting on his memory and luck, into the narrow passageway between cases of bottles, knocking them over as he went past, hearing them fall and shatter in the passage behind him. Slipping, he ran up some invisible steps, threw his body against the door with its rusty hinges, and found himself in Ernest's garage. He was shaking and panting, there were bloody spots swimming before his eyes and his heart was beating heavily with strong jolts right in his throat, but he did not stop for a second. He ran to the far corner, and scraping his hands, tore into the mountain of garbage that hid the place where the boards had been removed from the wall. He lay down on his stomach and crawled through, hearing his jacket tear, and when he was out in the narrow courtyard he crouched down behind the garbage cans, pulled off his jacket, threw away his tie, gave himself a quick once-over, brushed off his pants, straightened up, and ran into the yard. He dove into a low smelly tunnel that led to the next courtyard. He listened for the whine of the police sirens as he ran, but there weren't any yet, and he ran faster, scaring playing children, dodging hanging laundry, crawling through holes in rotten fences -- trying to get out of the neighborhood as fast as possible, before Captain Quarterblad could cordon it off. He knew the area very well. He had played in all the yards and cellars, the abandoned laundries, and the coal cellars. He had plenty of acquaintances and even friends here, and under different circumstances he would have had no trouble in hiding out, even for a week, in the neighborhood. But he hadn't made a daring escape from arrest under Captain Quarterblad's very nose, adding an easy twelve months to his sentence, for that.

He was very lucky. On Seventh Street a parade of some brotherhood or other was making raucous progress down the street. Two hundred of them, just as

disheveled and filthy as he was. Some looked worse, as though they had spent the evening crawling through holes in fences, spilling the contents of garbage cans on themselves, maybe after having spent the night rowdily in a coal bin. He ducked out of a doorway into the crowd, cutting across it, pushing and shoving, stepping on feet, getting an occasional fist in his face, and returning the favor, until he broke out on the other side of the street and ducked into another doorway. Just then the familiar disgusting wail of the patrol cars resounded, and the parade came to a grinding halt, folding up like an accordion. But he was in a different neighborhood now, and Captain Quarterblad had no way of knowing which one.

He approached his own garage from the side of the radio and electronics store, and he had to wait while the workmen loaded a van with television sets. He made himself comfortable in the ragged lilac bushes by the windowless side of the neighboring houses, caught his breath and had a cigarette. He smoked greedily, crouching down and leaning against the rough fireproof wall, touching his cheek from time to time, trying to still the nervous tie. He thought and thought and thought. When the van with the workers pulled away honking into the driveway, he laughed and said softly after them: "Thanks, boys, you held up this fool... and let me think." He started moving quickly, but without rushing, cleverly and premeditatedly, like he worked in the Zone.

He entered his garage through the hidden passage, noiselessly lifted the old seat, carefully pulled the roll of paper from the bag in the basket, and slipped it inside his shirt. He took an old worn leather jacket from a hook, found a greasy cap in the corner, and pulled it down over his eyes. The cracks in the door let narrow rays of light with dancing dust into the gloomy garage, and kids were yelling and playing outside. As he was leaving, he heard his daughter's voice. He put his eye against the widest crack and watched Monkey wave two balloons and run around the swings. Three old women with knitting in their laps were sitting on a nearby bench, watching her with pursed lips. Exchanging their lousy opinions, the dried-up hags. The kids were fine, playing with her as though she were just like them. It was worth all the bribery -- he bought them a slide, and a doll house, and the swings -- and the bench that the old biddies were on. "All right, he said, tore himself away from the crack, looked around the garage one more time, and crawled into the hole.

In the southwest part of town, near the abandoned gas station at the end of Miner Street, there was a phone booth. God only knew who used it nowadays -- all the houses around it were bearded up and beyond it was the seemingly endless empty lot that used to be the town dump. Redrick sat down in the shade of the booth and stuck his hand into the crack below it. He felt the dusty wax paper and the handle

of the gun wrapped in it; the lead box of bullets was there, too, as well as the bag with the bracelets and the old wallet with fake documents. His hiding place was in order. Then he took off his jacket and cap and felt inside his shirt. He sat for a minute or more, hefting in his hand the porcelain container and the invincible and inevitable death it contained. And he felt the nervous tic come back.

"Schuhart," he muttered, not hearing his own voice, "what are you doing, you snake? You scum, they can kill us all with this thing." He held his twitching cheek, but it didn't help. "Bastards," he said about the workers who had been loading the TV sets. "You got in my way. I would have thrown it back into the Zone, the bitch, and it would have been all over."

He looked around sadly. The hot air was shimmering over the cracked cement, the hoarded-up windows looked at him gloomily, and tumbleweed rolled around the lot. He was alone.

"All right," he said decisively. "Every man for himself, only God takes care of everybody. I've had it."

Hurrying, so as not to change his mind, he stuffed the container into the cap, and wrapped the cap in the jacket. Then he got on his knees, and leaned against the booth. It moved. The bulky package fit in the bottom of the pit under the booth, with room to spare. He carefully replaced the booth, shook it to see how steady it was, and got up, brushing off his hands.

"That's it. It's settled."

He got into the heat of the phone booth, deposited a coin, and dialed.

"Guta," he said. "Please, don't worry. They caught me again." He could hear her shuddering sigh. He quickly added: "It's a minor offense, six to eight months, with visiting rights. We'll manage. And you'll have money, they'll send it to you." She was still silent. "Tomorrow morning they'll call you down to the command post, we'll see each other then. Bring Monkey."

"Will there be a search?" she asked.

"Let them. The house is clean. Don't worry, keep your tail up -- you know, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. You married a stalker, so don't complain. See you tomorrow. And remember, I didn't call. I kiss your little nose."

He hung up abruptly and stood for a few seconds, eyes shut and teeth clenched so tightly there was a tingling in his ears. Then he deposited another coin and dialed another number.

"Listening," said Throaty.

"It's Schuhart. Listen carefully and don't interrupt."

"Schuhart? What Schuhart?" asked Throaty in a natural manner.

"Don't interrupt, I said! They caught me, I ran, and I'm going to turn myself in now. I'm going to get two and a half or three years. My wife will be penniless. You take care of her. So that she needs nothing, understand? Understand, I said?"

"Go on," said Throaty.

"Not far from the place where we first met, there's a phone booth. It's the only one, you won't mistake it. The porcelain is under it. If you want it, take it, if you don't, don't. But my wife must be taken care of. We still have many years of playing together. If I come back and find out you double-crossed me... I don't suggest that you do. Understand?"

"I understand everything," said Throaty. "Thanks." After a pause, he asked: "Maybe you want a lawyer?"

"No," said Redrick. "Every last cent goes to my wife. My regards."

He hung up, looked around, dug his hands into his pants pockets, and slowly went up Miner Street between the empty, boarded-up houses.

3. RICHARD H. NOONAN, AGE 51, SUPERVISOR OF ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT SUPPLIES FOR THE HARMONT BRANCH OF THE IIEC

Richard H. Noonan was sitting at the desk in his study doodling on the legal size pad. He was also smiling sympathetically, nodding his bald head, and not listening to his visitor. He was simply waiting for a telephone call, and his visitor, Dr. Pilman, was lazily lecturing him. Or imagining that he was lecturing him. Or trying to convince himself that he was lecturing him.

"We'll keep all that in mind," Noonan finally said, crossing out another group of five lines and flipping down the pad's cover. "It really is shocking."

Valentine's slender hand neatly flicked the ashes from his cigarette into the ashtray.

"And what precisely will you keep in mind?" he inquired politely.

"Why, everything that you said," Noonan answered cheerfully, leaning back in his armchair. "To the very last word."

"And what did I say?"

"That doesn't matter," Noonan said. "We'll keep whatever you say in mind."

Valentine (Dr. Valentine Pilman, Nobel Prize winner) was sitting in front of him in a deep armchair. He was small, delicate, and neat. There wasn't a stain on his suede jacket or a wrinkle in his trousers. A blindingly white shirt, a severe solid-colored tie, shining shoes. A malicious smile on his thin pale lips and enormous dark glasses over his eyes. His low broad forehead was topped with a bristly crewcut.

"In my opinion, you're being paid a fantastic salary for nothing," he said. "And on top of that, in my opinion, you're a saboteur as well, Dick."

"Shhhhhh!" Noonan whispered. "For God's sake, not so loud."

"Actually," Valentine continued, "I've been watching you for a long time. In my opinion, you don't work at all."

"Just a minute here!" Noonan interrupted and waved his pink finger at him. "What do you mean I don't work? Is there even one replacement order that hasn't been handled?"

"I don't know," Valentine said and flicked his ash again. "We get good equipment and we get bad equipment. We get the good stuff more often, but what you have to do with it I'm sure I don't know."

"Well, if it weren't for me," Noonan countered, "the good stuff would be much rarer. And besides, you scientists are always breaking the good equipment, and

then calling for a replacement, and who covers for you then? For example..."

The phone rang and Noonan broke off and grabbed the receiver.

"Mr. Noonan?" the secretary asked "Mr. Lemchen again."

"Put him on."

Valentine got up, brought two fingers to his forehead as a sign of farewell, and went out. Small, straight, and well-proportioned.

"Mr. Noonan?" the familiar drawling voice spoke in the phone.

"I'm listening."

"You're not easy to reach at work, Mr. Noonan."

"A new shipment has arrived."

"Yes, know about it already. Mr. Noonan, I'm here only for a short time. There are a few questions that must be discussed in person. I'm referring to the latest contracts with Mitsubishi Denshi. The legal side."

"At your service."

"Then, if you have no objection, be at our offices in a half hour. Is that convenient?"

"Perfect. In a half hour."

Richard Noonan hung up, stood, and rubbing his plump hands, walked around the office. He even began singing some pop ditty, but broke off on a particularly sour note and jovially laughed at himself. He picked up his hat, tossed his raincoat over his arm, and went out into the reception area.

"Honey," he said to the secretary, "I'm off to see some clients. You stay here, hold the fort, as they say, and I'll bring you 3 present when I get back."

She blossomed. Noonan blew her a kiss and rolled out into the corridors of the institute. Attempts were made to stop him a few times -- he wangled out of conversations, joking, asking people to hold the fort without him, to keep their cool, and finally emerged unscathed and uncaught, waving his unopened pass under the nose of the sergeant on duty.

Heavy clouds hung low over the city. It was muggy and the first hesitant drops of rain were scattering on the sidewalk like little black stars. Spreading his coat over his head and shoulders, Noonan trotted past the long row of cars to his Peugeot, dove in, and tossed the coat in the back seat. He took out the round black stick of the so-so from his suit pocket, put it in the jack in the dashboard, and pushed it in to the hilt with his thumb. He wriggled around, getting more comfortable behind the wheel, and pressed the accelerator pedal. The Peugeot silently drove out into the middle of the street and raced toward the exit from the Pre-Zone Area.

The rain came pouring down suddenly, as though a bucket had been overturned

in the sky. The road got slippery and the car swerved at corners. Noonan turned on the wipers and slowed down. So, he thought, they got the report. Now they'll be praising me. Well, I'm all for that. I like being praised. Especially by Mr. Lemchen himself. In spite of himself. Strange isn't it? Why do we like being praised? It doesn't get you any more money. Glory? What kind of glory can we have? "He's famous: three people know about him now." Well, let's say four, counting Bayliss. What a funny creature man is! It seems we enjoy praise just for itself. The way children like ice cream. And it's so stupid. How can I be better in my own eyes? As if I didn't know myself? Good old fat Richard H. Noonan? By the way, what does that "H" stand for? What do you know about that? And there's nobody to ask, either. I can't ask Mr. Lemchen about it. Oh, remember! Herbert! Richard Herbert Noonan. Boy, it's pouring.

He turned onto Central and suddenly thought how the city had grown over the past few years. Huge skyscrapers. They're building another one over there. What will it be? Oh, the Luna Complex -- the world's best jazz, and a variety show, and so on. Everything for our glorious troops and our brave tourists, especially the elderly ones, and for the noble knights of science. And the suburbs are being emptied.

Yes, I'd like to know how this will all end. Well, ten years ago, I was sure I knew. Impenetrable police lines. DMZ twenty miles wide. Scientists and soldiers, and no one else. The horrible sore on the face of an odor that he had long ago given up trying to identify, and he threw open the door at the end of the corridor and went in. Instead of the secretary there was a very tan, unfamiliar young man at the desk. He was in shirtsleeves. He was digging around in the guts of some electronic device that was set up on the desk instead of the typewriter. Richard Noonan hung up his coat and hat, smoothed what was left of his hair with both hands, and looked inquiringly at the young man. He nodded. Noonan opened the door to the office.

Mr. Lemchen rose heavily from the big leather armchair in front of the draped window. His angular general's face was wrinkled either in a welcoming smile or in displeasure with the weather or, perhaps, in a struggle with a sneeze.

"Here you are. Come in, make yourself comfortable."

Noonan looked around for a place to make himself comfortable and could find nothing except for a hard, straight-backed chair tucked away behind the desk. He sat on the edge of the desk. His jovial mood was dissipating for some reason -- he himself did not understand why. Suddenly he understood that he was not going to be praised today. On the contrary. The day of wrath, he thought philosophically and steeled himself for the worst.

"Please smoke," Mr. Lemchen offered, lowering himself back into the armchair.

"No thank you, I don't smoke."

Mr. Lemchen nodded as though his worst suspicions had been confirmed, pressed his fingertips together in a steeple in front of his face, and carefully examined them for a while.

"I suppose that we won't be discussing the legal affairs of the Mitsubishi Denshi Company," he finally said.

That was a joke. Richard Noonan smiled readily.

"As you like!"

It was devilishly uncomfortable on the desk, and his feet did not reach the floor.

"I'm sorry to tell you, Richard, that your report created an extremely favorable impression upstairs."

"Hmm," Noonan mumbled. Here it comes, he thought.

"They were even going to recommend you for a decoration," Mr. Lemchen continued. "However, I talked them into waiting on it. And I was right." He tore himself away from contemplating the pattern of the ten fingers and looked up at Noonan. "You ask why I behaved in such a cautious manner?"

"You probably had some justification," Noonan said in a dull tone.

"Yes, I had. What are the results of your report, Richard? The Metropole gang is liquidated. Through your efforts. The Green Flower gang was apprehended red-handed. Brilliant work. Also yours. Quasimodo, the Wandering Musicians, and all the other gangs, I don't remember the names, disbanded because they knew the jig was up and they would be taken any day. All this really did happen, it's all been verified by other sources. The battlefield was cleared. Your victory, Richard. The enemy retreated in disarray, suffering heavy losses. Have I given an accurate account?"

"In any case," Noonan said carefully, "during the last three months the Bow of materials from the Zone through Harmont has stopped. At least according to my information."

"The enemy has retreated, is that not so?"

"Well, if you insist on the metaphor, yes."

"No! The point is that this enemy never retreats. I know that for sure. In rushing a victory report, Richard, you have demonstrated your lack of maturity. That is why I suggested they hold off rewarding you immediately."

Go blow, you and your awards, thought Noonan, swinging his foot and glumly watching his shiny toe. Stick your awards in the cobwebs in the attic! And all I need is a little didacticism from you. I know who I'm dealing with without your lectures. Don't tell me about the enemy. Just tell me straight out -- when, where,

and how I messed up, what those bastards managed to steal, where and how they found cracks and without the bullshit, I'm no raw recruit, I'm over half a century old and I'm not sitting here for the sake of your stupid decorations and orders.

"What have you heard about the Golden Ball?" Mr. Lemchen suddenly asked.

God, what does the Golden Ball have to do with all this, Noonan thought in irritation. I wish you and your indirect manner would go to hell.

"The Golden Ball is a legend," he reported in a dull voice. "A mythical artifact located in the Zone in the shape and form of a gold ball that grants human wishes."

"Any wishes?"

"According to the canonic version of the legend, any wish. There are, however, variant versions."

"All right. What have you heard about death lamps?"

"Eight years ago a stalker by the name of Stefan Norman, nick-named Four-Eyes, brought out an apparatus from the Zone that, as far as can be judged, was some kind of ray-emitting system fatal to earth organisms. This Four-eyes offered the apparatus to the institute. They did not agree on price. Four-eyes reentered the Zone and never came back. The present whereabouts of the apparatus is unknown. People at the institute are still tearing their hair out over it. Hugh from the Metro-pole, whom you know, offered any sum that could be written on a check."

"Is that all?" Mr. Lemchen asked.

"That's all." Noonan was blatantly looking around the room. The room was boring, there was nothing to look at.

"All right. And what have you heard about lobster eyes?"

"What kind of eyes?"

"Lobster eyes. Lobsters. You know? With claws." Lemchen made clawlike movements with his fingers.

"I've never heard of them," Noonan said frowning.

"And what about rattling napkins?"

Noonan climbed down from the desk and stood before Lemchen, hands in pockets.

"I don't know a thing about them. How about you?"

"Unfortunately, neither do I. Nor about the lobster eyes or the rattling napkins. Nevertheless, they exist."

"In my Zone?" Noonan asked.

"Sit down, sit down," Mr. Lemchen said waving his hand. "Our little talk is just starting. Sit down."

Noonan walked around the desk and sat on the hard chair with the straight back.

What's he aiming at? he thought feverishly. What is all this new stuff? They probably found it in the other Zones and he's trying to make a fool out of me, the ass. He never liked me, the old devil, he can't forget the limerick.

"Let's continue our little examination," Lemchen announced as he drew aside an edge of the drape and peered out the window. "It's pouring. I like it." He released the curtain, sat back in his chair, and looking at the ceiling, asked: "How's old Burbridge getting along?"

"Burbridge? Buzzard Burbridge is under surveillance. He's a cripple, well-to-do. No connection with the Zone. He owns four bars and a dance school, and he organizes picnics for officers from the garrison and for tourists. His daughter Dina leads a dissolute life. His son Arthur just graduated from law school."

Mr. Lemchen nodded in satisfaction. "And what is Creon the Maltese doing?"

"He is one of the few active stalkers. He was mixed up with the Quasimodo gang, and now he peddles his swag to the institute through me. I'm giving him a free rein: somebody will pick him off sooner or later. He's been drinking a lot lately, and I'm afraid he won't last too long."

"Contact with Burbridge?"

"He's courting Dina. No success."

"Very good," Mr. Lemchen said. "What do you hear about Red Schuhart?"

"He got out of prison last month. No financial difficulties. He tried to emigrate, but he has..." Noonan was silent. "Well, he has family problems. He has no time for the Zone."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Not much," Mr. Lemchen said. "How are things with Lucky Carter?"

"He hasn't been a stalker for many years. He sells used cars and he has a shop that converts cars to run on so-so's. Four kids, his wife died last year. Has a mother-in-law."

Lemchen nodded.

"Well, who have I forgotten of the oldsters?" he asked in a kindly tone.

"You forgot Jonathan Miles, known as Cactus. He's in the hospital, dying of cancer. And you forgot Gotalin."

"Yes, yes, what about Gotalin?"

"He's still the same. He has a gang of three men. They go into the Zone for days at a time, destroying everything they come across. His old organization, the Fighting Angels, broke up."

"Why?"

"Well, as you recall, they used to buy up swag and Gotalin would take it back into the Zone. The devil's things to the devil. Now there's nothing to buy, and besides, the new director of the institute got the cops on them."

"I understand," Mr. Lemchen said. "What about the young ones?"

"Well, the young ones, they come and go. There are five or six with some experience, but lately there's been no one to fence the swag and they're lost. I'm training them little by little. I think that stalking has almost disappeared in my Zone, chief. The old ones are retired, the young ones don't know how, and the prestige of the trade is slipping. Technology is taking over. Now there are robot stalkers."

"Yes, yes, I've heard about that. But the machines use up too much energy. Or am I mistaken?"

"It's just a question of time. They'll be worth it soon."

"How soon?"

"Five or six years."

Mr. Lemchen nodded again.

"By the way you probably don't know that the enemy has started employing the automated stalkers?"

"In my Zone?" Noonan asked, on guard.

"In yours, too. They base themselves in Rexopolis, transfer the equipment by helicopter over the mountains to Snake Canyon, to Black Lake, and the foothills of Mount Boulder."

"But that's the periphery of the Zone," Noonan said suspiciously.

"It's empty there. What could they find?"

"Little, very little. But they find it. Anyway, I was just informing you, it doesn't concern you. Let's recapitulate. There are almost no professional stalkers left in Harmont. The ones who have stayed have no relationship to the Zone any more. The young ones are lost and undergoing a process of being tamed. The enemy is shattered, scattered, and lying low somewhere licking his wounds. There is no swag, and when it does appear, there's nobody to sell it to. The illegal removal of material from the Harmont Zone ceased three months ago. Correct?"

Noonan was silent. Now, he thought. Now he's going to give it to me. But where was the gap? It must have been a really big one, too. Well, do it, you old fart! Don't drag it out.

"I don't hear your reply," Mr. Lemchen said cupping his hand to his wrinkled hairy ear.

"All right, chief," Noonan said somberly. "Enough. You've boiled and fried

me, now serve me at the table."

Mr. Lemchen harrumphed vaguely.

"You have absolutely nothing to say for yourself," he said with unexpected bitterness. "You stand there flapping your ears before authority, how do you think I felt day before yesterday?" He interrupted himself, got up, and started for the safe. "In short, during the last two months, according to the information we have, the enemy has received more than six thousand items from the various Zones." He stopped before the safe, patted its painted side, and turned sharply toward Noonan. "Don't comfort yourself with illusions!" he shouted. "The fingerprints of Burbridge! The fingerprints of the Maltese! The fingerprints of Ben Halevy the Nose, whom you did not even bother to mention! The fingerprints of Hindus Heresh and Pygmy Zmyg! So that's how you're training your youths! Bracelets! Needles! White whirligigs! And on top of that -- these lobsters' eyes, and bitches' rattles, and rattling napkins, whatever they are! The hell with them all!" He interrupted himself again, returned to his armchair, made a steeple with his fingers, and asked politely: "What do you think about all this, Richard?"

Noonan mopped his neck with his handkerchief.

"I don't think anything about it," he honestly answered. "Forgive me, chief, I'm a little... let me catch my breath... Burbridge! Burbridge has nothing to do with the Zone any more! I know his every step! He arranges picnics and drinking parties at lakesides. He's hauling it in, he just doesn't need the money. Excuse me, I know I'm blabbing nonsense, but I can assure you that I haven't lost sight of Burbridge since he got out of the hospital."

"I won't keep you any longer," Mr. Lemchen said. "I'm giving you a week. Come up with some ideas as to how the material from the Zone gets into the hands of Burbridge -- and all the others. Good-bye."

Noonan rose, nodded to Lemchen's profile, and still wiping his sweating neck, went out into the reception area. The tan young man was smoking, thoughtfully gazing into the bowels of the mangled electronic device. He glanced over at Noonan -- his eyes were empty and seemed to gaze inward.

Richard Noonan shoved his hat on his head, grabbed his raincoat, and went outside. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. His thoughts were confused and rambling. I must -- Ben Halevy the Nose! He's even gotten himself a nickname! When? He's just a little punk, a snotty-nosed little punk. No, there's something else going on! You legless shmuck. Buzzard, you really got me this time. Caught me with my pants down. How could it have happened? just like that time in Singapore -- face flat on the table, then slammed against the wall...

He got in the car and for some time looked around the dashboard for the ignition key, forgetting everything. Rain was dripping from his hat onto his lap. He took it off and tossed it into the back without looking. Rain was streaming across the windshield, and Richard Noonan thought that it was keeping him from understanding what his next step should be. He punched himself in the head. He felt better. He immediately remembered that there was no key and couldn't be any because the so-so was in his pocket. The permanent battery. And you have to take it out of your pocket, dummy, and stick it into the jack, and then at least you'll be able to drive somewhere-somewhere far away from this building where the old bastard was probably watching from a window.

Noonan's hand froze as it was reaching for the so-so. Now I know who to begin with. I'll begin with him, oh how I'll begin with him. Nobody's ever begun with anybody the way I'll begin with him. And it'll be a pleasure. He turned on the wipers and drove down the avenue, seeing almost nothing in front of him, but slowly calming down. All right. Let it be like it was in Singapore. After all, it ended well in Singapore. So what, I got my face slammed down on the table one lousy time! It could have been worse. It could have been some other part of me and it could have been something with nails in it instead of a table. All right, let's stay on the track. Where's my little establishment? Can't see a damn thing. Ah, here it is. It wasn't business hours, but the Five Minutes was as lit up as the Metropole. Shaking himself like a dog coming out of the water, Richard Noonan entered the brightly lit room that reeked of tobacco, perfume, and stale champagne. Old Penny, not in uniform yet, was sitting at the counter eating something, his fork in his fist. Spreading out her huge breasts on the counter among the empty glasses, Madame watched him eat. The room had not yet been cleaned up from last night. When Noonan walked in, Madame turned her broad, heavily made-up face toward him. It was angry at first, but immediately dissolved into a professional smile.

"Hi!" she said in her deep voice. "Mr. Noonan himself! Missed the girls?"

Benny went on eating; he was as deaf as a doornail.

"Greetings, old lady! What do I need with the girls when I have a real woman in front of me?"

Benny finally noticed him. His horrible face, covered with blue and purple scars, contorted into a welcoming smile.

"Hello, boss! Came in out of the rain?"

Noonan smiled in return and waved. He did not like talking with Benny: he had to shout all the time.

"Where's my manager, folks?" he asked.

"In his room," Madame answered. "He has to pay the taxes tomorrow."

"Oh, those taxes! All right. Madame, please fix my favorite. I'll be right back."

Stepping soundlessly on the thick synthetic carpeting, he went down the hallway past the draped doorways of the cubicles -- a picture of some flower painted on the wall next to each one -- turned into a quiet dead end, and opened the leather-covered door without knocking.

Mosul Kitty sat behind the desk, examining a painful sore on his nose in the mirror. He did not give a damn that he had to pay the taxes tomorrow. The completely bare desk top held only a jar with mercury salve and a glass with a clear liquid. Mosul Kitty raised his bloodshot eyes at Noonan and lumped up, dropping the mirror. Wordlessly, Noonan settled into the armchair opposite him and silently watched, while he muttered something about the damn rain and his rheumatism. Then he said:

"Why don't you lock the door, pal."

Mosul, his flat feet slapping the floor, ran up to the door, turned the key, and returned to the desk. His hairy head towered over Noonan, and he stared loyally into his mouth. Noonan kept watching him through half-shut eyes. For some reason he remembered that Mosul Kitty's real name was Raphael. Mosul was famous for his huge bony fists, purplish and bare, that stuck out from the thick hair that covered his arms like sleeves. He had called himself Kitty because he was convinced that that was the traditional name of the great Mongol kings. Raphael. Well, Raphael baby, let's get started.

"How are things?" he asked gently.

"In perfect order, boss," Raphael-Mosul replied rapidly.

"You smoothed over the problem at headquarters?"

"It cost 150. Everybody is happy."

"It comes out of your pocket. It was your fault, pal. It should have been taken care of."

Mosul made a pathetic face and spread his hands in a sign of submission.

"The parquet in the hall should be replaced," Noonan said.

"It will be done."

Noonan said nothing, puckered his lips.

"Swag?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"There's a little," Mosul replied in a low voice, too.

"Let's see it."

Mosul rushed over to the safe, took out a package, and opened it on the desk in front of Noonan. Noonan felt around with one finger in the pile of black sprays,

picked up a bracelet, examined it from all sides and put it back.

"This is all?"

"They don't bring any," Mosul said guiltily.

"They don't bring any," Noonan repeated.

He aimed carefully and jabbed his toe with all his strength into Mosul's shin. Mosul grunted and bent over to grab the injured spot, but immediately straightened out and stood at attention. Then Noonan jumped up, grabbed Mosul by his collar and came at him, kicking, rolling his eyes, and whispering obscenities. Mosul, moaning and groaning, rearing his head like a frightened horse, backed away from him until he fell onto the couch.

"Working both sides, eh? You son of a bitch." Noonan was hissing right into his terrified eyes. "Buzzard Burbridge is swimming in swag and you give me beads wrapped in paper?" He smacked him in the face, trying to hit the scab on his nose. "I'll ship you off to jail. You'll be living in manure, eating dry bread. You'll curse the day you were born!" He punched the sore nose one more time. "Where does Burbridge get the swag? Why do they bring it to him, and not to you? Who brings it? Why don't I know anything? Who are you working for, you filthy pig? Talk!"

Mosul soundlessly opened and shut his mouth. Noonan let go of him, returned to the chair, and put his feet up on the desk.

"Well?" he said. Mosul sniffled back the blood from his nose and said: "Honest, boss, what's the matter? What swag can Buzzard have? He doesn't have any. Nobody's got swag."

"What, are you going to argue with me?" Noonan asked gently, taking his feet off the desk.

"No, no, boss, honest," Mosul hurried to say. "Me argue with you? I wouldn't dream of it."

"I'm going to get rid of you," Noonan threatened. "You don't know how to work. What the hell do I need you for, you so-and-so? Guys like you are a dime a dozen. I need a real man for real work."

"Hold on, boss," Mosul said reasonably, smearing blood all over his face. "Why do you attack me all of a sudden? Let's work this out." He touched his nose gingerly. "You say Burbridge has a lot of swag? I don't know, somebody's been lying to you. Nobody's got any swag now. After all, only punks go into the Zone now, and they're the only ones coming out. Nope, boss, someone's lied to you."

Noonan was watching him covertly. It looked as if Mosul really didn't know a thing. It wouldn't have paid him to lie, anyway -- Buzzard Burbridge didn't pay

very well.

"These picnics, are they profitable?"

"The picnics? I don't think so. You won't shovel in the money. But there aren't any profitable things left in town."

"Where are these picnics held?"

"Where? You know, in different places. By White Mountain, at the Hot Springs, at Rainbow Lake."

"Who are the customers?"

"The customers?" Mosul sniffed, blinked, and spoke confidentially.

"If you're planning to get into the business yourself, boss, I wouldn't recommend it. You won't make much up against Buzzard."

"Why not?"

"Buzzard's customers are the blue helmets, one." Mosul was ticking the points off on his fingers. "Officers from the command post, two. Tourists from the Metropole, the White Lily, and the Plaza, three. Then he's got good advertising. Even the locals go to him. Honest, boss, it's not worth getting mixed up in this business. He doesn't pay us that much for the girls, you know."

"The locals go to him, too?"

"The young people, mostly."

"Well, what happens on these picnics?"

"What happens? We go there on buses, see? And when we get there everything is set up -- tables, tents, music. And everyone lives it up. The officers usually go with the girls. The tourists go look at the Zone -- if it's at the Hot Springs, the Zone is just a stone's throw away, on the other side of the Sulphur Gorge. Buzzard has thrown a lot of horse bones around there and they look at them through binoculars."

"And the locals?"

"The locals? Well, that doesn't interest the locals, of course. They amuse themselves in other ways."

"And Burbridge?"

"Burbridge? Burbridge... is like everybody else."

"And you?"

"Me? I'm like everybody else. I watch to see that the girls aren't hurt... and, well, like everybody else, basically."

"And how long does all this go on?"

"Depends. Three days, sometimes, sometimes a whole week."

"And how much does this pleasure trip cost?" Noonan asked, thinking about something else entirely. Mosul answered something, but Noonan didn't hear him.

That's the ticket, Noonan thought. Several days, several nights. Under those conditions, it's simply impossible to keep an eye on Burbridge, even if you tried. But still he didn't understand. Burbridge was legless, and there was the gorge. No, there was something else there.

"Which locals are steady customers?"

"Locals? I told you, mostly the young ones. You know, Halevy, Rajba, Chicken Tsapfa, that Zmyg guy -- and the Maltese often goes. A cute little group. They call it Sunday school. Shall we go to Sunday school, they say. They concentrate on the old ladies, make pretty good money. Some old broad from Europe..."

"Sunday school," Noonan repeated.

A strange thought came to him. School. He rose.

"All right," he said. "The hell with the picnics. That's not for us. But get it straight: Buzzard has swag, and that's our business, pal. Look for it, Mosul, look for it, or I'll throw you to the dogs. Where does he get it, who gives it to him? Find out and we'll give twenty percent more than he does. Got it?"

"Got it, boss." Mosul was standing, too, at attention, loyalty on his blood-smeared face.

"Move it! Use your brains, you animal!" Noonan shouted and left.

Back at the bar he quickly drank his aperitif, had a chat with Madame about the decline in morality, hinted that he was planning to expand the operation, and lowering his voice for emphasis, asked for her advice on what to do about Benny -- the old guy was getting old, he was deaf, his reaction time was off, and he didn't get along like he used to. It was six already and he was hungry. A thought was drilling through his brain, out of nowhere but at the same time explaining a lot. Actually, a lot had become clear by now anyway and the mystical aura that irritated and frightened him about this business was gone. All that was left was disappointment in himself because he had not thought of the possibility earlier. But the most important thing was the thought that kept floating in his head and giving him no peace.

He said good-bye to Madame and shook Penny's hand, and headed straight for the Borscht. The whole trouble is that we don't notice the years slipping by, Noonan thought. The hell with the years, we don't notice everything changing. We know that everything changes, we're taught from childhood that everything changes, and we've seen everything change with our own eyes many a time, and yet we're totally incapable of recognizing the moment when the change comes or else we look for the change in the wrong place. There are new stalkers now, created by cybernetics. The old stalker was a dirty, sullen man who crawled inch by inch

through the Zone on his belly with mulish stubbornness, gathering his nest egg. The new stalker was a dandy in a silk tie, an engineer sitting a mile or so away from the Zone, a cigarette in his mouth, a glass with a pleasant brew at his elbow, and all he does is sit and monitor some screens. A salaried gentleman. A very logical picture. So logical that any alternative just did not come to mind. But there were other possibilities -- the Sunday school, for one.

And suddenly, from nowhere, a wave of despair engulfed him. It was all useless. Pointless. My God, he thought, we won't be able to do a thing! We won't have the power to contain this blight, he thought in horror. Not because we don't work well. And not because they're smarter and more clever either. It's just that that's the way the world is. And that's the way man is in this world. If there had never been the Visitation, there would have been something else. Pigs always find mud.

The Borscht was lit up and gave off a delicious smell. The Borscht had changed, too. No more dancing, no more fun. Gutalin didn't go there any more, he was turned off by it, and Redrick Schuhart probably had stuck his nose in, made a face, and left. Ernest was still in stir and his old lady finally got to run the place. She built up a solid steady clientele; the entire institute lunched there, including the senior officers. The booths were cozy, the food good, the prices reasonable, and the beer bubbly. A good old-fashioned pub.

Noonan saw Valentine Pilman in one of the booths. The laureate was drinking coffee and reading a magazine he had folded in half. Noonan approached him.

"May I join you?"

Valentine turned his dark glasses on him.

"Ah," he said. "Please do."

"Just a second, I'll wash up first." He had remembered Mosul's nose.

He was well known there. When he got back to Valentine's booth, there was a plate of steaming sausages and a mug of beer -- not cold and not warm, just the way he liked it -- on the table. Valentine put down the magazine and took a sip of coffee.

"Listen, Valentine," Noonan said, cutting the meat. "What do you think, how will all this end?"

"What?"

"The Visitation. The Zones, the stalkers, the military-industrial complexes -- the whole lot. How can it all end?" Valentine looked at him for a long time with his blind black lenses.

"For whom? Be specific."

"Well, say for our part of the planet."

"That depends on whether we have luck or not. We now know that in our part of the planet the Visitation left no aftereffects, for the most part. That does not rule out, of course, the possibility that in pulling all these chestnuts out of the fire, we may pull out some thing that will make life impossible not only for us, but for the entire planet. That would be bad luck. But, you must admit, such a threat always hovers over mankind." He chuckled. "You see, I've long lost the habit of talking about mankind in general. Humanity as a whole is too fixed a system, there's no changing it."

"You think so? Maybe, you're right, who knows?"

"Be honest, Richard," Valentine said, obviously enjoying himself.

"What has the Visitation changed in your life? You're a businessman. Now you know there is at least one other rational creature in the Universe besides man. So what?"

"What can I say?" Noonan was mumbling. He was sorry that he had ever started the conversation. There was nothing to talk about.

"What has changed for me? Well, for several years now I've been feeling uneasy, insecure. All right. So they came and left right away. And what if they come again and decide to stay? As a businessman, I have to take these questions seriously: who are they, how do they live, what do they need? On the most basic level I have to think how to change my product. I have to be ready. And what if I turn out to be completely superfluous in their system?" He livened up. "What if we are superfluous? Listen, Valentine, since we're talking about it, are there any answers to these questions? Who are they, what did they want, will they return?"

"There are answers," Valentine said, smiling. "Lots of them, take your pick."

"And what do you think yourself?"

"To tell the truth, I never permitted myself the luxury of thinking about it seriously. For me the Visitation is primarily a unique event that allows us to skip several steps in the process of cognition. Like a trip into the future of technology. Like a quantum generator ending up in Isaac Newton's laboratory."

"Newton wouldn't have understood a thing."

"You're wrong. Newton was a very perspicacious man."

"Really? Well, who cares about him anyway. What do you think about the Visitation? You can answer unseriously."

"All right, I'll tell you. But I must warn you that your question, Richard, comes under the heading of xenology. Xenology: an unnatural mixture of science fiction and formal logic. It's based on the false premise that human psychology is applicable to extraterrestrial intelligent beings."

"Why is that false?" Noonan asked.

"Because biologists have already been burned trying to use human psychology on animals. Earth animals, at that."

"Forgive me, but that's an entirely different matter. We're talking about the psychology of rational beings."

"Yes. And everything would be fine if we only knew what reason was."

"Don't we know?" Noonan was surprised.

"Believe it or not, we don't. Usually a trivial definition is used: reason is that part of man's activity that distinguishes him from the animals. You know, an attempt to distinguish the owner from the dog who understands everything but just can't speak. Actually, this trivial definition gives rise to rather more ingenious ones. Based on bitter observation of the above-mentioned human activities. For example: reason is the ability of a living creature to perform unreasonable or unnatural acts."

"Yes, that's about us, about me, and those like me," Noonan agreed bitterly.

"Unfortunately. Or how about this hypothetical definition. Reason is a complex type of instinct that has not yet formed completely. This implies that instinctual behavior is always purposeful and natural. A million years from now our instinct will have matured and we will stop making the mistakes that are probably integral to reason. And then, if something should change in the universe, we will all become extinct -- precisely because we will have forgotten how to make mistakes, that is, to try various approaches not stipulated by an inflexible program of permitted alternatives."

"Somehow you make it all sound demeaning."

"All right, how about another definition -- a very lofty and noble one. Reason is the ability to use the forces of the environment without destroying that environment." Noonan grimaced and shook his head.

"No, that's not about us. How about this: 'man, as opposed to animals, is a creature with an undefinable need for knowledge'? I read that somewhere."

"So have I," said Valentine. "But the whole problem with that is that the average man -- the one you have in mind when you talk about 'us' and 'not us' -- very easily manages to overcome this need for knowledge. I don't believe that need even exists. There is a need to understand, and you don't need knowledge for that. The hypothesis of God, for instance, gives an incomparably absolute opportunity to understand everything and know absolutely nothing. Give man an extremely simplified system of the world and explain every phenomenon away on the basis of that system. An approach like that doesn't require any knowledge. Just a few

memorized formulas pins so-called intuition and so-called common sense."

"Hold on," Noonan said. He finished his beer and set the mug noisily on the table. "Don't get off the track. Let's get back to the subject on hand. Man meets an extraterrestrial creature. How do they find out that they are both rational creatures?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Valentine said with great pleasure.

"Everything I've read on the subject comes down to a vicious circle. If they are capable of making contact, then they are rational. And vice versa; if they are rational, they are capable of contact. And in general: if an extraterrestrial creature has the honor of possessing human psychology, then it is rational. Like that."

"There you go. And I thought you boys had it all laid out in neat cubbyholes."

"A monkey can put things into cubbyholes," Valentine replied.

"No, wait a minute." For some reason, Noonan felt cheated. "If you don't know simple things like that... All right, the hell with reason. Obviously, it's a real quagmire. OK. But what about the Visitation? What do you think about the Visitation?"

"My pleasure. Imagine a picnic."

Noonan shuddered.

"What did you say?"

"A picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. A car drives off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out of the car carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios, and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see? Gas and oil spilled on the grass. Old spark plugs and old filters strewn around. Rags, burnt-out bulbs, and a monkey wrench left behind. Oil slicks on the pond. And of course, the usual mess -- apple cores, candy wrappers, charred remains of the campfire, cans, bottles, somebody's handkerchief, somebody's penknife, torn newspapers, coins, faded flowers picked in another meadow."

"I see. A roadside picnic."

"Precisely. A roadside picnic, on some road in the cosmos. And you ask if they will come back."

"Let me have a smoke. Goddamn this pseudoscience! Somehow I imagined it all differently."

"That's your right."

"So does that mean they never even noticed us?"

"Why?"

"Well, anyway, didn't pay any attention to us?"

"You know, I wouldn't be upset if I were you."

Noonan inhaled, coughed, and threw away the cigarette.

"I don't care," he said stubbornly. "It can't be. Damn you scientists! Where do you get your contempt for man? Why are you always trying to put mankind down?"

"Wait a minute," Valentine said. "Listen: 'You ask me what makes man great?'" he quoted. "'That he re-created nature? That he has harnessed cosmic forces? That in a brief time he conquered the planet and opened a window on the universe? No! That, despite all this, he has survived and intends to survive in the future.'"

There was a silence. Noonan was thinking.

"Don't get depressed," Valentine said kindly. "The picnic is my own theory. And not even a theory -- just a picture. The serious xenologists are working on much more solid and flattering versions for human vanity. For example, that there has been no Visitation yet, that it is to come. A highly rational culture threw containers with artifacts of its civilization onto Earth. They expect us to study the artifacts, make a giant technological leap, and send a signal in response that will show we are ready for contact. How do you like that one?"

"That's much better," Noonan said. "I see that there are decent people among scientists after all."

"Here's another one. The Visitation has taken place, but it is not over by a long shot. We are in contact even as we speak, but we are not aware of it. The visitors are living in the Zones and carefully observing us and simultaneously preparing us for the 'cruel wonders of the future.' "

"Now that I can understand! At least that explains the mysterious activity in the ruins of the factory. By the way, your picnic doesn't explain it."

"Why doesn't it? One of the girls could have forgotten her favorite wind-up teddy bear on the meadow."

"Just skip it. That's some teddy bear. The earth around it is shaking! On the other hand, maybe it is somebody's teddy. How about a beer? Rosalie! Two beers for the xenologists! You know, it really is nice chatting with you," he said to Valentine. "Cleaning out the old brains, like pouring Epsom salts under my skull. You know, you work and work, and lose sight of why, and what will happen, and how you'll soothe your savage breast."

The beer came. Noonan took a sip, watching over the head of foam as Valentine examined his mug with a look of distaste.

"You don't like it?"

"I usually don't drink," Valentine said hesitantly.

"Really?"

"The hell with it!" Valentine moved the mug of beer away from him. "Why

don't you order me a cognac in that case."

"Rosalie!" Noonan called out, finally cheering up.

The cognac arrived. Noonan spoke.

"But you really shouldn't go on like that. I'm not talking about your picnic -- that's too much -- but even if we accept the version that this is a prelude to contact, I still don't like it. I can understand the bracelets and the empties. But why the witches' jelly? The mosquito mange spots and that disgusting fluff?"

"Excuse me," Valentine said, taking a slice of lemon. "I don't quite understand your terminology. What mange?"

Noonan laughed.

"That's folklore. Stalkers' slang. Shop talk. The mosquito mange spots are areas of heightened gravitation."

"Ah. Graviconcentrates. Directed gravity. That's something would enjoy talking about for a couple of hours, but you wouldn't understand a thing."

"Why wouldn't I? I'm an engineer, you know."

"Because I don't understand it myself. I have systems of equations, but no way to interpret them. Witches' jelly, is that colloidal gas?"

"The very same. Did you hear about the catastrophe at the Currigan labs?"

"I heard something about it."

"Those idiots put a porcelain container with the jelly into a special room, highly insulated and isolated. That is, they thought it was isolated. And when they opened the container with manipulators the jelly went through metal and plastic, like water through a sieve, and outside. And everything it touched also turned into jelly. Thirty-five people were killed, more than a hundred were crippled, and the entire building was destroyed. Did you ever go there? Marvelously equipped place! And now the jelly has seeped down into the basement and the lower floors. Some prelude to contact."

Valentine made a face.

"Yes, I know all that. But you must agree, Richard, that the visitors had nothing to do with it. How could they have known about the existence of our military-industrial complexes?"

"They should have known," Noonan insisted.

"Their answer to that would be that the military-industrial complexes should have been done away with a long time ago."

"That's for sure. That's what they should have taken care of, if they're so powerful."

"You mean you're suggesting interference in the internal affairs of the human

race?"

"Hmmm," Noonan said. "I guess we're going too far. Let's drop it. Instead, let's go back to the beginning of our discussion. How will it all end? Well, look at you, for instance, you're a scientist. Are you hoping for something fundamental to come out of the Zone, something that will alter science, technology, our way of life?"

Valentine shrugged.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Richard. I don't like to indulge in empty fantasizing. When the subject is something serious, I prefer to revert to healthy careful skepticism. Based on what we've already received, a whole range of possibilities is raised, and I can say nothing specific about it."

"All right, let's try another approach. What do you think you've already received?"

"You'll find this amusing -- very little. We've unearthed many miracles. In a few cases, we've even learned how to use these miracles for our own needs. A monkey pushes a red button and gets a banana, pushes a white button and gets an orange, but it doesn't know how to get bananas and oranges without the buttons. And it doesn't understand what relationship the buttons have to the fruit. Take the so-so's, for example. We've learned how to use them. We've even learned the circumstances under which they multiply through a process similar to cell division. But we still haven't been able to make a single so-so. We don't know how they work, and judging by present evidence, it will be a long time before we will."

"I would put it this way. There are objects for which we have found uses. We use them, but almost certainly not the way the Visitors use them. I am positive that in the vast majority of cases we are hammering nails with microscopes. But at least we're using some things -- the so-so's, and the bracelets to stimulate life processes. And the various types of quasibiological masses, which have created a revolution in medicine. We have received new tranquilizers, new types of mineral fertilizers, a revolution in agriculture. But why am I giving you a list! You know this at least as well as I -- I notice you wear a bracelet. Let's call this group of objects beneficial. It can be said that mankind has benefited from them in some degree, even though it should never be forgotten that in our Euclidean world every stick has two ends."

"Undesirable applications?"

"Precisely. Say the use of so-so's in the defense industry. But that's not what I'm talking about. The action of every beneficial object has been more or less studied and more or less explained. Our technology is holding us up. In fifty years or so

we'll know how to make them ourselves and then we can crack nuts to our hearts' content. It's more complicated with the other group of objects -- more complicated because we have found no application for them, and their qualities within the framework of our present concepts are definitely not understandable. For instance, the magnetic traps. We know that they're magnetic traps, Panov has proven it very wittily. But we don't know the source of such a powerful magnetic Field and what causes their superstability. We don't understand a thing about them. We can only weave fantastic theories about properties of space that we never suspected before. Or the K-23. What do you call it? The pretty black beads that are used for jewelry?"

"Black sprays."

"That's it, the black sprays. That's a good name. Well, you know their properties. If you shine a ray of light into one of those beads, the transmission of the light is delayed and the delay depends on the bead's weight, size, and several other parameters. And the unit of light coming out is always smaller than the one entering. What is this? Why? There is a wild theory that the black sprays are gigantic expanses of space with properties different from those of our space and that they became curled up under the influence of our space." Valentine sighed deeply. "In short, the objects in this group have absolutely no applications to human life today. Even though from a purely scientific point of view they are of fundamental importance. They are answers that have fallen from heaven to questions that we still can't pose. Perhaps Sir Isaac wouldn't have figured out lasers, but he would at least have understood that such a thing is possible, and that would have influenced his scientific outlook greatly. I won't go into detail, but the existence of such objects as the magnetic traps, the K-23, and the white ring has invalidated most of our recently developed theories and has brought forth completely new ideas. And there is still a third group."

"Yes," Noonan said. "The witches' jelly and other goodies."

"No, no. Those fall either into the first or second category. I'm talking about objects that we know nothing about or have only hearsay information. The things that the stalkers stole from under our noses and sold to God knows who, or have hidden. The things that they don't talk about. The things that have become legends or semi-legends. The wish machine, Dick the Tramp, and the jolly ghosts."

"Wait a minute! What are those things? I can figure out the wish machine, but..."

Valentine laughed.

"You see, we have our own shop talk, too. Dick the Tramp -- that's the hypothetical wind-up teddy bear wreaking havoc in the old plant. And the jolly ghost is a type of dangerous turbulence that occurs in some parts of the Zone."

"First I've heard of it."

"You understand, Richard, that we've been digging around in the Zone for twenty years but we don't even know a thousandth of what it contains. And if you want to talk of the Zone's effect on man... By the way, it looks as though we'll have to add another category, the fourth group. Not of objects, but of effects. This group has been shamefully neglected, even though as far as I'm concerned, there are more than enough facts for research. And you know, sometimes my skin crawls, Richard, when I think about those facts."

"Zombies," Noonan said.

"What? Oh, no, that's merely puzzling. How can I put it -- at least, that's imaginable. I mean when suddenly for no reason at all things start happening, nonphysical, nonbiological phenomena."

"Oh, you mean the emigrants."

"Exactly. Statistics is a very precise science, you know, even though it deals with random occurrences. And besides, it's an eloquent and beautiful science."

Valentine seemed to be tipsy. His voice was louder, his cheeks were red, and his eyebrows had crept up high over his dark glasses, wrinkling his forehead into a washboard.

"I really like nondrinkers," Noonan said.

"Don't get off the subject!" Valentine said. "Listen, what can I tell you? It's very strange." He raised his glass, drank half in one gulp, and went on. "We don't know what happened to the poor Harmonites at the very moment of the Visitation. But now one of them decides to emigrate. Your most typical man in the street. A barber. The son of a barber and the grandson of a barber. He moves, say, to Detroit. He opens up a barbershop and all hell breaks loose. Over ninety percent of his clients die during a year: they die in car crashes, fall out of windows, are cut down by gangsters or muggers, drown in shallow waters, and so on and so forth. A number of natural disasters hit Detroit and its suburbs. Typhoons and tornadoes, not seen since eighteen-oh-something, suddenly appear in the area. And all that kind of stuff. And such cataclysmic events take place in any city, any area where an emigrant from a Zone area settles. The number of catastrophes is directly proportional to the number of emigrants who have moved to the city. And note that this reaction is caused only by emigrants who actually lived through the Visitation. Those born after the Visitation have no effect on the disaster and accident statistics. You've lived here for ten years, but you moved in after the Visitation and it would be safe to relocate you even in the Vatican. How can this be explained? What should we reject? The statistics? Or common sense?" Valentine grabbed the glass and finished

his drink in a gulp.

Richard Noonan scratched his head.

"Hmmm, yes. Of course, I'd heard all that before, but I, uh, assumed that it was all, to put it mildly, exaggerated. Really, from the point of view of our highly developed science..."

"Or, for instance, the mutagen effect of the Zone," Valentine interrupted. He removed his glasses and stared at Noonan with his dark, myopic eyes. "Everyone who spends enough time with the Zone undergoes changes, both of phenotype and genotype. You know what kind of children stalkers can have and you know what happens to the stalkers themselves. Why? Where is the mutation factor? There is no radiation in the Zone. While the air and soil in the Zone have their own specific chemical structure, they pose no mutation dangers at all. What should I do under the circumstances -- believe in sorcery? In the evil eye?"

"I sympathize. But, frankly, I am much more upset by corpses come to life than by your statistics. Especially since I've never seen the statistics, but I have seen the zombies -- and smelled them."

Valentine waved away the statement.

"Bah, your zombies. Richard, you should be ashamed of yourself. You are an educated man, after all. First of all, they are not corpses. They are moulages -- reconstructions on the skeletons, dummies. And I assure you, from the point of view of fundamental principles, your moulages are no more amazing than the eternal batteries. It's just that the so-so's violate the first law of thermodynamics, and the moulages violate the second. We're all cave men in one sense or another. We can't imagine anything scarier than a ghost. But the violation of the law of causality is much more terrifying than a stampede of ghosts. And all the monsters of Rubenstein, or is it Wallenstein?"

"Frankenstein."

"Of course. Frankenstein. Mrs. Shelley. The poet's wife. Or daughter." He suddenly laughed. "Our moulages have a curious property -- autonomic life capability. For example, if you cut off some part of their bodies, the part will live on. Separately. Without any physiological solutions to nourish it. They brought one like that to the institute recently. A lab assistant from Boyd told me about it."

Valentine laughed uproariously.

"Isn't it time we headed for home, Valentine?" Noonan asked, glancing at his watch. "I still have some important business."

"Let's go." Valentine tried hard to insert his face into the glasses and finally had to take the frame with both hands to put them on his nose. "Do you have a car?"

"Yes. I'll drive you." They paid the check and headed for the door. Valentine kept making mock salutes, greeting lab workers who were curiously watching one of the great men of world physics. At the door, greeting the broadly smiling doorman, he knocked off his glasses, and all three of them scrambled to catch them.

"Tomorrow I'm running an experiment. You know, it's an interesting thing..." Valentine was muttering as he climbed into the Peugeot.

He went on to describe the experiment. Noonan drove him to the science complex.

They're afraid, too, he thought, getting back into the car. The highbrows are also scared. And that's the way it should be. They should be more afraid than all us regular folk put together. We don't understand a thing, and they understand how much they don't. They look into the bottomless pit and know that it's inevitable, they must go down into it. Their hearts catch, but they must go down, and descend they do, but how, and what will they find at the bottom, and most important, will they be able to climb out? Meanwhile, we mere mortals look the other way, so to speak. Listen, maybe that's how it should be. Let it all run its course, and we'll just get by on our own. He was right: humanity's most heroic deed was surviving and intending to survive. But he'd still tell the Visitors to go to hell, if he could. Why couldn't they have had their picnic somewhere else. Like the Moon. Or Mars. You heartless trash, he thought, just like all the rest, even if you do know how to curl up space. So they had themselves a picnic. A picnic.

What's the best way to deal with my picnickers? he thought, driving slowly down the brightly lit wet streets. What would be the cleverest way to handle it? Following the law of least action, like in mechanics. What the hell use is my blankety-blank engineering degree if I can't even figure out the best way to trap that legless son of a bitch?

He parked in front of the house in which Redrick Schuhart lived and sat in the car, planning his opening gambit. Then he removed the so-so, got out of the car, and only then noticed that the house looked uninhabited. Almost all the windows were dark, there was nobody in the park, and even the lights in the park were out. It reminded him of what he was about to see, and he shivered. He even considered the possibility of phoning Schuhart and talking with him in the car or in some quiet bar, but he rejected the idea. For a whole lot of reasons. And besides, he said to himself, let's not behave like all those characters who ran out like rats deserting a sinking ship.

He went into the main entrance and slowly up the unswept stairs. It was quiet

and many of the doors leading from the landings were ajar or wide open. It smelled damp and dusty in the apartments. He stopped before Redrick's door, smoothed his hair, sighed deeply, and rang the bell. It was still behind the door for a while, then the floor creaked, the lock turned, and the door opened quietly. He hadn't heard the footsteps.

Monkey, Schuhart's daughter, stood in the doorway. A bright light fell from the foyer onto the landing, and at first Noonan could only see the girl's dark silhouette. He thought how much she had grown in the last few months. Then she stepped back into the foyer and he saw her face. His throat went dry for a second.

"Hello, Maria," he said, trying to be as gentle as possible. "How are you, Monkey?"

She did not reply. Silently and soundlessly she backed away from the door into the living room, looking at him from under her eyebrows. It looked as though she did not recognize him. To tell the truth, he couldn't recognize her either. It's the Zone, he thought. Damn.

"Who's there?" Guta asked, looking out of the kitchen. "God, it's Dick! Where did you disappear to? You know, Redrick is back!"

She hurried over to him drying her hands with the towel slung over her shoulder. Still as beautiful, energetic, strong, but she looked strained somehow: her face was thinner, and her eyes looked... feverish, perhaps?

He kissed her cheek, gave her his raincoat and hat.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I just couldn't get away to come over. Is he in?"

"He's in," Guta said. "There's somebody with him. We should be leaving soon, they've been talking a long time. Go on, Dick."

He took several steps down the hall and stopped in the door to the living room. An old man was sitting at the table. A moulage. Motionless and listing slightly. The pink light from the lampshade fell on his broad dark face, his sunken, toothless mouth, and his still, lusterless eyes. And Noonan smelled it immediately. He knew that it was just his imagination, that the odor lasted only the first few days and then disappeared completely, but Richard Noonan smelled it with his memory -- the fetid heavy smell of turned-up earth.

"We could go to the kitchen," Guta said quickly. "I'm cooking there and we could chat."

"Yes, of course!" he said cheerily. "It's been such a long time! You haven't forgotten that I like a drink before dinner, I hope?"

They went to the kitchen. Guta opened the refrigerator and Noonan sat at the table and looked around. As usual, it was clean and shiny and steam was rising

from the pots and pans on the stove. The oven was new, semiautomatic. That meant they had money.

"Well, how is he?" Noonan asked.

"The same. He lost weight in prison, but I'm fattening him up."

"His hair still red?"

"You bet!"

"Hot-tempered?"

"What else! He'll be that way to the grave."

Guta gave him a Bloody Mary. The clear layer of Russian vodka seemed to float on the layer of tomato juice.

"Too much?"

"Just right." Noonan poured the drink down. He realized that that was his first real drink all day. "Now that's better."

"Is everything all right with you?" Guta asked. "Why haven't you dropped by for such a long time?"

"Damn business. Every week I intended to come over or at least call, but first I had to go to Rexopolis, then there was a big to-do, and then I heard that Redrick was back and I thought I'd let you two have some time to yourselves. I'm really hassled, Guta. Sometimes I ask myself, what the hell are we all running around for, anyway? To make money? But what the hell do we need money if all we do is run around making it?"

Guta clattered the pot covers, took a pack of cigarettes from the shelf, and sat at the table across from Noonan. Her eyes were lowered. Noonan pulled out his lighter and lit her cigarette. And again, for the second time in his life, he saw her hands trembling, like the time when Redrick had just been sentenced and Noonan came over to give her some money -- she was in a lot of trouble at first with no money at all, and no one in the building would lend her any. Then there was suddenly money in the house, and quite a bit of it, judging by everything, and Noonan had a good guess as to its source, but he continued coming over, bringing Monkey candy and toys, spending whole evenings over coffee with Guta, planning a new, happy life for Redrick. And then, having heard her stories, he would go to the neighbors and try to reason with them, explaining, coaxing, and finally, at the end of his patience, threatening them: "You know Red will be coming back, and he'll break you all in half." But nothing helped.

"How's your girlfriend?" Guta asked.

"What girlfriend?"

"The one you came over with that time, the blonde."

"That's no girlfriend! That was my secretary. She got married and quit."

"You ought to get married, Dick. You want me to find a girl for you?"

Noonan was about to give the standard reply: "Well, I'm just waiting for Monkey to grow up." But he stopped himself. It just wouldn't have come off any more.

"I need a secretary, not a wife," he bumbled. "Why don't you leave your red devil and come be my secretary. You used to be an excellent one. Old Harris still reminisces about you."

"I'll bet. My hand was always black and blue from beating him off."

"Oh, so it was like that?" Noonan tried to look surprised. "That Harris!"

"God!" Guta said. "I could never get past him. My only worry was that Red would find out."

Monkey walked in silently, hovering near the door. She looked at the pots, at Richard, then came up to her mother and leaned against her, averting her face.

"Well, Monkey," Richard Noonan said heartily. "Like some chocolate?"

He took a chocolate bar out of his vest pocket and extended the plastic-wrapped package to the girl. She did not stir. Guta took the chocolate from him and put it on the table. Her lips were white.

"Well, Guta, you know I've decided to move." He spoke on in a hearty tone. "I'm tired of hotel living. And it's too far from the institute."

"She understands less and less -- almost nothing any more," Guta said softly. He stopped talking, picked up the glass with both hands, and absently twirled it.

"You're not asking how we're doing," she continued. "And you're right. Except that you're an old friend, Dick, and we have no secrets from you. And there's no way to keep it a secret anyway."

"Have you seen a doctor?" he asked without looking up.

"Yes. They can't do a thing. And one of them said..." She stopped talking.

He was silent too. There was nothing to say about it and he didn't want to think about it either. Suddenly he had a horrible thought: it was an invasion. Not a roadside picnic, not a prelude to contact. It was an invasion. They can't change us, so they get into the bodies of our children and change them in their own image. He felt a chill, but then he remembered that he had read something like that in a paperback with a lurid cover, and he felt better. You can imagine anything at all. And real life is never what you imagine.

"And one of them said that she's no longer human."

"Nonsense," Noonan said hollowly. "You should go to a real specialist. Go see James Cutterfield. Do you want me to talk to him? I'll arrange an appointment."

"You mean the Butcher?" She laughed nervously. "Don't bother. Thanks, Dick,

but he's the one who said so. I guess it's fate."

When Noonan dared to look up again, Monkey was gone and Guta was sitting motionless, her mouth half-open, her eyes empty, and a long gray ash on her cigarette. He pushed his glass over to her.

"Make me another, please, and one for yourself. We'll have a drink."

The ash fell and she looked around for a place for the butt. She threw it into the garbage can.

"Why? That's what I can't understand! We're not the worst people in the city."

Noonan thought that she was going to cry, but she didn't. She opened the refrigerator, got the vodka and juice, and took another glass down from the cabinet.

"Don't give up hope. There's nothing in the world that can't be fixed. And believe me, Guta, I have very important connections. I'll do everything that I can."

He believed what he was saying and he was mentally going over the list of his connections in various cities, and it seemed to him that he had heard about similar cases, and that they had seemed to have ended happily. He just had to remember where it was and who the physician was. But then he remembered Mr. Lemchen, and he remembered why he had befriended Guta, and then he didn't want to think about anything at all. He scattered all his thoughts of connections, got comfortable in his chair, relaxed, and waited for his drink.

There were shuffling steps and a thumping in the hall and he could hear the more-than-ever repulsive voice of Buzzard Burbridge.

"Hey, Red! Looks like your Guta is entertaining someone. I see a hat. If I were you, I wouldn't leave them alone." Red's voice: "Watch your false leg, Buzzard. Shut your mouth. There's the door, don't forget to leave. It's time for my dinner."

"Damn it, can't even make a little joke."

"We've had all the jokes we'll ever have. Period. Now get going!"

The lock clicked and the voices were quieter. Obviously they had gone out on the landing. Burbridge said something in an undertone, and Redrick replied: "That's all, we've had our talk!" More grumbling from Burbridge and Redrick's harsh: "I said that's it!" The door slammed, there were loud fast steps in the hall, and Redrick Schuhart appeared in the kitchen doorway. Noonan rose to greet him, and they warmly shook hands.

"I was sure it was you," Redrick said, looking Noonan over with his quick greenish eyes. "Putting on weight, fatso! Keep putting it away, eh? I see you're passing the time of day pleasantly enough. Guta, old love, make one for me, too. I've got to catch up."

"We haven't even started yet. How can anyone get ahead of you?" Redrick

laughed harshly and punched Noonan in the shoulder.

"Now we'll see who catches up and who gets ahead! Come on, let's go, what are we doing out here in the kitchen? Guta, bring on the dinner."

He reached into the refrigerator and came out with a bottle with a bright label.

"We'll have ourselves a feast!" he announced. "We have to treat our best friend Richard Noonan royally, for he does not desert his pals in their moment of need! Even though he is of no help whatever. Too bad Gutalin's not here."

"Why don't you call him?" Noonan suggested.

Redrick shook his bright red head.

"They haven't laid the phone lines to where he is tonight. Let's go.

He went into the living room and slammed the bottle on the table.

"We're going to celebrate, pops!" he said to the motionless old man. "This here is Richard Noonan, our friend! Dick, this is my pop, Schuhart Senior."

Richard Noonan, his mind rolled up into an impenetrable ball, grinned from ear to ear, waved, and said in the direction of the moulage:

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Schuhart. How are you? You know, we've met before, Red," he said to Schuhart, Jr., who was puttering at the bar. "We saw each other once, but very briefly, of course."

"Sit down," Redrick said to him, indicating the chair opposite the old man. "If you're going to talk to him, speak up. He can't hear a thing."

He set up the glasses, quickly opened the bottle, and turned to Noonan.

"You pour. Just a little for pops, just cover the bottom."

Noonan took his time pouring. The old man sat in the same position, staring at the wall. And he did not react when Noonan moved his glass closer to him. Noonan had already adjusted to the new situation. It was a game, terrible and pathetic. Red was playing the game, and he joined in, as he had always joined other peoples' games all his life-terrifying ones, pathetic ones, shameful ones, and ones much more dangerous than this. Redrick raised his glass and said: "Well, I guess we're off?" Noonan looked over at the old man in a completely natural manner. Redrick impatiently clinked his glass against Noonan's and said: "We're off, we're off." Then Noonan nodded, completely naturally, and they drank.

Redrick, eyes shining, began to talk in his excited and slightly artificial tone.

"That's it, brother! Jail will never see me again. If you only knew how good it is to be home; I have the dough and I've picked out a new little cottage for myself, with a garden -- as good as Buzzard's place. You know, I had wanted to emigrate, I had decided when was still in jail. I mean, what was I sitting in this lousy two-bit town for? I thought, let the whole place drop dead. So I get back, and there's a

surprise for me -- emigration has been forbidden! Have we suddenly become plague-ridden during the last two years?"

He talked and talked, and Noonan nodded, sipped his whiskey, and interjected sympathetic noises and rhetorical questions. Then he started asking about the cottage -- what kind was it, where was it, what did it cost? -- and then they argued. Noonan insisted that the cottage was expensive and inconveniently located. He took out his address book, flipped through it, and named the locations of abandoned cottages that were being sold for a song. And the repairs would be almost free, because he could apply for emigration, be turned down, and sue for compensation, which would pay for the repairs.

"I see that you're involved in nonemigration, too."

"I'm involved in everything a little," Noonan replied with a wink.

"I know, I know, I've heard all about your affairs."

Noonan put on a wide-eyed look of surprise, raised his finger to his pursed lips, and nodded in the direction of the kitchen.

"All right, don't worry, everybody knows about it," Redrick said.

"Money never stinks. I know that for sure now. But getting Mosul to be your manager. I almost fell on the floor laughing when I heard! Letting a bull into the china shop. He's a psyche, you know. I've known him since we were kids."

He fell silent and looked at the old man. A shudder crossed his face, and Noonan was amazed to see the look of real, sincere love and tenderness on that tough freckled mug of his.

Watching him, Noonan remembered what had happened when Boyd's lab workers showed up here for the moulage. There were two lab assistants, both strong young men, athletes and all that, and a doctor from the city hospital with two orderlies, tough and rough burly guys used to lugging heavy stretchers and overpowering hysterical patients. One of the lab assistants later told him that "that redhead" at first didn't seem to understand what was going on, because he let them into the apartment to examine his father. They probably would have gotten the old man away, because it looked as if Redrick thought that they were putting his old man in the hospital for observation. But the stupid orderlies, who had spent their time during the preliminary negotiations gawking at Guta washing the kitchen windows, grabbed the old man like a log when they were called in -- and dropped him on the floor. Redrick went crazy. Then the jerk of a doctor volunteered an explanation of what was going on. Redrick listened for a minute or two and suddenly exploded without any warning like a hydrogen bomb. The assistant who told the story did not remember how he ended up on the street. The red devil got them all down the

stairs, all five of them, and not one left under his own power. They all shot out of the foyer like cannonballs. Two ended up unconscious on the sidewalk and Redrick chased the other three for four blocks. Then he returned and bashed in all the windows on the institute car -- the driver had made a run for it when he saw what was happening.

"I learned how to make a new cocktail at this bar," Redrick was saying as he poured more whiskey. "It's called Witches' Jelly, I'll make you one later, after we've eaten. Brother, it's not something you should have on an empty stomach -- it's dangerous to the health: one drink makes your arms and legs numb. I don't care what you say, Dick, I'm going to treat you royally today. We'll remember the good old days and the Borscht. Poor old Ernie is still in the cooler, you know that?" He drank, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and casually asked: "What's new at the institute? Have they tackled witches' jelly yet? You know, I sort of fell behind science a bit."

Noonan understood why Redrick was bringing up the topic. He threw up his hands in dismay.

"Are you kidding? Did you know what happened with that jelly? Have you heard of the Currigan Labs? There's this little private supplier... So they got themselves some jelly..."

He told him about the catastrophe. And about the shocking fact that they never tied up the loose ends, never found out where the lab had gotten it. Redrick listened, feigning distraction, clucking his tongue, and shaking his head. He decisively splashed more whiskey into their glasses.

"That's what they deserve, the bloodsuckers. I hope they all choke."

They drank. Redrick looked over at his father and a shudder crossed his face once more.

"Guta!" he shouted. "Are you going to starve us much longer? She's knocking herself out for you, you know," he told Noonan. "She wants to make your favorite salad, with crabmeat. She bought a supply a while ago just in case you turned up. Well, how are things at the institute in general? Found anything new? I hear you have robots working full force but not getting too much out of it."

Noonan started in on institute business, and while he was talking, Monkey appeared noiselessly at the table by the old man. She stood there with her hairy paws on the table and then in a perfectly childlike way, she leaned against the moulage and put her head on his shoulder. Noonan went on chatting but thought, as he looked at those two horrors born of the Zone: My God, what else? What else has to be done to us before we understand? Isn't this enough? But he knew that it

wasn't. He knew that millions upon millions of people knew nothing and wanted to know nothing, and even if they found out would ooh and aah for five minutes and then go back to their own routines. It was time to go, he thought wildly. The hell with Burbridge, the hell with Lemchen, and the hell with this goddamned family!

"What are you staring at them for?" Redrick asked softly. "Don't worry, it won't harm her. They even say that they generate good health."

"Yes, I know," Noonan said and drained his glass.

Guta came in, ordered Redrick to set the table, and set a large silver bowl with Noonan's favorite salad on the table.

"Well, friends," Redrick announced. "Now we're going to have ourselves a feast!"

4. REDRICK SCHUHART, AGE 31

The valley had cooled overnight, and by dawn it was actually cold. They were walking along the embankment, stepping over the rotten ties between the rusty rails, and Redrick watched the drops of condensed fog glisten on Arthur Burbridge's leather jacket. The boy was striding along lightly and merrily, as though the exhausting night, the nervous tension that still made every vein in his body ache, and the two horrible hours they spent huddled back to back for warmth in a tortured half-sleep on top of the hill, waiting for the flood of the green stuff to drip past them and disappear into the ravine -- as though all that had not happened.

A thick fog lay along the sides of the embankment. Once in a while it crawled up on the rails with its heavy gray feet and in those places they walked knee-deep in the swirling mists. The air smelled of rust, and the swamp to the right of the embankment reeked of decay. The fog made it impossible to see anything, but Redrick knew that a hilly plain with rubble heaps surrounded them, and that mountains hid in the gloom beyond. And he knew also that when the sun came up and the fog settled into dew, he would see the downed helicopter some where on his left and the ore flatcars up ahead. And then the real work would begin.

Redrick slipped his hand up under the backpack to lift it so that the edge of the helium tank would not dig into his spine. It's a heavy bugger, he thought. How am I going to crawl with it? A mile on all fours. All right, stalker, no grumbling now, you knew what you were getting into. Five hundred thousand at the end of the road. I can work up a sweat for that. Five hundred thousand sure is a sweet bundle. I'll be damned if I give it to them for less. Or if I give Buzzard more than thirty. And the punk? The punk gets nothing. If the old bugger had told even half the truth, the punk gets nothing.

He looked at Arthur's back again and watched through squinted eyes as the boy stepped over two ties at a time, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped. His dark raven hair, like his sister's, bounced rhythmically. He asked for it, Redrick thought grimly. Himself. Why did he beg to come along so persistently! So desperately! He trembled and had tears in his eyes. "Take me, Mr. Schuhart! Lots of people have offered to take me along, but they're all no good! My father... but he can't take me now!" Redrick forced himself to drop the memory. He was repelled by the thought and maybe that's why he started thinking about Arthur's sister. He just could not fathom it: how such a fantastic-looking woman could actually be a plastic fake, a dummy. It was like the buttons on his mother's blouse -- they were

amber, he remembered, semitransparent, and golden. He just wanted to shove them in his mouth and suck on them, and every time he was disappointed terribly, and every time he forgot about the disappointment -- not forgot, just refused to accept what his memory told him.

Maybe it was his pop who sent him over to me, he thought about Arthur. Look at the piece he's carrying in his back pocket. Nah, I doubt it. Buzzard knows me. Buzzard knows that I don't go for jokes. And he knows what I'm like in the Zone. No, that's all nonsense. He's not the first to have begged me, and not the first to have shed tears; others even got down on their knees. And as for the piece, they all bring guns on their first time in the Zone. The first and last time. Is it really the last? It's your last, bud. Here's how it works out, Buzzard: his last. Yes, if you knew what your sonny boy was planning -- you would have beaten him to a pulp with your crutches. He suddenly felt that there was something ahead of them -- not far, some thirty or forty yards away.

"Stop," he told Arthur.

The boy obediently froze in his tracks. His reflexes were good -- he had stopped with one foot in the air, and he lowered it slowly and carefully. Redrick stopped next to him. The track dipped noticeably here and disappeared completely in the fog. And there was something in the fog. Something big and motionless. Harmless. Redrick carefully sniffed the air. Yes. Harmless.

"Forward," he said quietly. He waited for Arthur to take a step and he followed. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Arthur's face, his chiseled profile, the clear skin of his cheek, and the determined set of his lips under the thin mustache.

They were up to their waists in fog, and then up to their necks. A few seconds later the great hulk of the ore cars loomed ahead of them.

"That's it," Redrick said and took off his backpack. "Sit down right where you are. Smoke break."

Arthur helped him with the backpack, and they sat down next to each other on the rusty rails. Redrick unbuttoned a flap and took out a package with sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. While Arthur set up the sandwiches on top of the backpack, Redrick took out his flask, opened it, closed his eyes, and took several slow sips.

"Want some?" he offered, wiping the neck of the flask. "For courage?"

Arthur shook his head, hurt.

"I don't need that for courage, Mr. Schuhart. I'd rather have coffee, if I may. It's awfully damp here, isn't it?"

"It's damp." He put away the flask, chose a sandwich, and set to chewing. "When the fog lifts, you'll see that we're surrounded by nothing but swamps. In

the old days the mosquitoes were something fierce."

He shut up and poured himself some coffee. It was hot, thick, and sweet, and it was even nicer to drink now than alcohol. It smelled of home. Of Guta. And not just of Guta, but of Guta in her robe, fresh from sleep, with pillow marks still on her cheek. Why did I get mixed up in this, he thought? Five hundred thousand. And what do I need it for? Planning to buy a bar with it or something? You need money so you don't have to think about money. That's the truth. Dick was right about that. You have a house, you have a yard, you won't be without a job in Harmont. Buzzard trapped me, lured me like a tenderfoot.

"Mr. Schuhart," Arthur suddenly said, looking away "Do you really believe this thing grants wishes?"

"Nonsense!" Redrick muttered distractedly and froze over the cup near his lips. "How do you know what we're after here?"

Arthur smiled in embarrassment, ran his fingers through his hair, tugged at it, and spoke.

"Well, I guessed! I don't remember exactly what gave me the clue. Well, first of all, Father was always going on and on about the Golden Ball, and lately he's stopped. And he has been talking about you. And I know better than to believe Father about you being friends. And secondly, he's been kind of strange lately." Arthur laughed and shook his head, remembering something. "And finally, I figured it out, when you and he tried out the little dirigible over in the lot." He smacked the backpack that contained the tightly rolled balloon. "I followed you and when I saw you lift the bag with rocks and guide it over the ground, it was all clear to me. As far as I know, the Golden Ball is the only heavy thing left in the Zone." He took a bite out of his sandwich and spoke dreamily with his mouth full. "I just don't understand how you plan to hook onto it, it's probably smooth."

Redrick watched him over the rim of the cup and thought how unlike each other they were, father and son. They had absolutely nothing in common. Not face, or voice, or soul. Buzzard had a hoarse, whiny, sneaky kind of voice. But when he talked about this, his voice was hearty. You couldn't ignore him. "Red," he had said then, leaning over the table. "There are only two of us left, and only two legs for both, and they're yours. Who else but you? It's probably the most valuable thing in the Zone! And who should have it? Should those wise guys with their machinery get it? Hah? I found it. Me! How many of our boys fell there? But I found it! I was saving it for myself. And I wouldn't be giving it to anyone now, but as you see, my arms have gotten too short. There's nobody left but you. I dragged lots of young ones in there, a school full. I opened a school for them,

you see... they can't. They don't have the guts for it, or something. All right, you don't believe me, I don't care. You want the money. You get it. You give me as much as you want. I know you won't gyp me. And maybe I'll be able to get my legs back. My legs, do you understand? The Zone took them away, and maybe it'll give them back?"

"What?" Redrick asked, coming out of his reverie.

"I asked, do you mind if I smoke, Mr. Schuhart?"

"Sure. Go ahead and smoke. I'll have one too."

He gulped the rest of the coffee, pulled out a cigarette, and as he squeezed it, he gazed into the thinning fog. A psyche, he thought. He's nuts. He wants his legs back, the bastard.

All this talk had left a residue, he was not sure of what. And it was not dissolving with time, but on the contrary, it was accumulating. And he could not understand what it was, but it was bothering him. It was as though he had caught something from Buzzard, not some disgusting disease, but on the contrary... his strength, perhaps? No, not strength. But what then? All right, he told himself. Let's look at it this way: let's assume that I didn't get this far. I was all ready to go, packed, and then something happened, they arrested me, say. Would that be bad? Definitely. Why bad? Because I would lose money? No, it has nothing to do with the money. That this treasure will fall into the hands of Throaty and Bones? There's something in that. It would hurt. But what do I care? In the end, they'll get it all anyway.

"Brrrrrr." Arthur shivered. "It gets into your bones. Mr. Schuhart, maybe now you'll give me a sip?"

Redrick got the flask silently. I didn't agree right away, he thought. Twenty times I told Buzzard to get lost, and on the twenty-first I agreed, after all. I couldn't take it any more. Our last conversation turned out to be brief and businesslike. "Hi, Red. I brought the map. Maybe you'll take a look at it, after all?" And I looked into his eyes, and they were like sores -- yellow with black dots -- and I said "Let me have it." And that was it. I remember that I was drunk then, I had been drinking all week, I felt really low. Ah, the hell with it. Does it matter? I went. So here I am. Why am I worrying about it? What am I, afraid?

He shuddered. He could hear a long sad sound through the fog. He jumped up and Arthur jumped up too. But it was quiet again, and the only sound was the gravel tumbling down the incline under their feet.

"Must be the ore settling," Arthur whispered unsurely, barely able to get the words out. "The ore cars have a history -- they've been here a long time."

Redrick looked straight ahead and saw nothing. He remembered. It was at night.

He woke up from the same sound, sad and long, his heart stopping, like in a dream. Only it hadn't been a dream. It was Monkey screaming in her bed by the window. Guta woke up, too, and took Redrick's hand. He could feel the sweat break out on her shoulder against his. They lay there and listened, and when Monkey stopped crying and went back to sleep, he waited a little longer, then got up, went down to the kitchen, and greedily drank a half-bottle of cognac. That was the night he started drinking.

"It's the ore," Arthur said. "You know, it settled with time. The dampness, erosion, all kinds of things like that."

Redrick looked at his pale face and sat down again. His cigarette had disappeared somewhere from his fingers, and he lit another one. Arthur stood a little longer, looking around anxiously, then he also sat down.

"I've heard that there's life in the Zone. People. Not visitors, but people. It seems the Visitation caught them here, and they mutated... they've acclimated to the new conditions. Have you heard that, too, Mr. Schuhart?"

"Yes," Redrick said. "But not here. In the mountains in the northwest. Some shepherds."

That's what he's infected me with, he thought. His madness. That's why I've come here. That's what I want here. A strange and very new feeling overwhelmed him. He was aware that the feeling was really not new at all, that it had been hidden in him for a long time, but that he was acknowledging it only now, and everything was falling into place. And everything that had seemed like nonsense and the delirious ravings of a crazy old man turned out to be his only hope, the only meaning of his life. Because he finally understood: the only thing he had left in the world, the only thing he lived for in the last few months was the hope of a miracle. Fool that he was, he kept pushing hope away, trampling on it, mocking it, trying to drink it away, because that was the way he was used to living. Since childhood he had relied on nothing but himself. And since childhood this self-reliance had been measured in the amount of money he could snatch, grab, or bite away from the indifferent chaos that surrounded him. It had always been that way, and it would have continued, if he had not ended up in a hole that no amount of money could get him out of and in which it was absolutely useless to rely on himself. And now this hope -- no longer a hope, but confidence in a miracle -- filled him to the brim, and he was amazed at how he could have lived for so long in the impenetrable, exitless gloom. He laughed and gave Arthur a poke in the shoulder.

"Well, stalker, think we'll live through this, eh?"

Arthur looked at him in surprise and smiled uncertainly. Redrick crumpled up

the waxed paper from the sandwiches, tossed it under the ore car, and lay down, his elbow on the backpack.

"All right," he said. "Let's say that the Golden Ball really -- what would you wish?"

"You mean, you do believe?" Arthur asked quickly.

"That's not important whether or not I believe. You answer my question."

He really was interested in what such a young boy, a schoolboy just yesterday, could ask of the Golden Ball. He enjoyed watching Arthur frown, tug at his mustache, and look up at him and look away.

"Well, dad's legs, of course. And for everything to be all right at home."

"You're lying," Redrick said pleasantly. "Keep this in mind, brother. The Golden Ball only grants your deepest, innermost wishes, the kind that if they're not granted, it's all over for you!"

Arthur Burbridge blushed, looked up at Redrick once more, and became even redder. His eyes filled with tears. Redrick grinned.

"I understand," he said almost gently. "All right, it's none of my business. Keep your secrets to yourself." He suddenly remembered the gun and thought that while he had the time he should take care of whatever could be taken care of. "What's that in your back pocket?" he asked casually.

"A gun."

"What do you need it for?"

"To shoot!" Arthur said challengingly.

"Forget it," Redrick said firmly and sat up. "Give it here. There's nobody to shoot at in the Zone. Give it to me."

Arthur wanted to say something, but kept silent, took the Army Colt from his pocket and handed it to Redrick by the barrel. Redrick took the gun by its warm textured handle, tossed it up in the air, and caught it.

"Do you have a handkerchief or something? I want to wrap it up."

He took Arthur's handkerchief, clean and smelling of cologne, wrapped the gun in it, and put it on the railroad tie.

"We'll leave it here for now. God willing, we'll come back and pick it up. Maybe we'll have to shoot it out with the patrol guards. However, shooting it out with them..." Arthur decisively shook his head.

"That's not what I wanted it for," he said sadly. "There's only one bullet. In case of an accident like Father's."

"So, that's it." Redrick stared at him. "Well, you don't have to worry about that. If that should happen, I'll drag you back here. I promise. Look, it's getting light!"

The fog was disappearing before their eyes. It was completely gone from the embankment and in the distance it was thinning, melting away and showing the rounded bristly peaks of the hills. Here and there between the hills could be seen the mottled surface of the stagnant swamps, covered with sparse thickets of willows, and the horizon, beyond the hills, was filled with bright yellow explosions of mountain peaks, and the sky above them was clear and blue. Arthur looked back and gasped with awe. Redrick looked too. In the east the mountains looked black, and over them the familiar green wash of color billowed and shone iridescently -- the Zone's green dawn.

Redrick got up, went behind the ore car, sat on the embankment, and watched as the green wash dimmed and quickly turned to pink. The sun's orange rim came up over the ridge, and purple shadows stretched from the hills. Everything became harsh and in high relief, he could see things as clearly as if they were in the palm of his hand. Right in front, two hundred yards away, Redrick saw the helicopter. It had fallen, apparently, into the middle of a mosquito mange spot, and its fuselage had been squashed into a metal pancake. Its tail had remained intact, only slightly bent, and it stuck out over the glade like a black hook. The stabilizer was also whole, and it squeaked distinctly, turning in the light breeze. The mange must have been very powerful, for there hadn't even been a real fire, and the Royal Air Force insignia was very clear on the flattened metal. Redrick had not seen one in many years and had almost forgotten what the insignia looked like.

Redrick went back to his pack for the map, which he spread out on the hot mound of ore in the car. You couldn't see the quarry from here -- it was blocked by the hill with the burned-out tree on its rise. He had to go around the hill from the right, along the depression between it and the next hill, which he could also see, completely bare, its slope covered with brown rocks.

All the reference points corresponded, but Redrick felt no satisfaction. His instinct of many years as a stalker protested against the very thought, which was irrational and unnatural, of laying a path between two nearby elevations. All right, Redrick thought, we'll see about that later. It will be clearer when we get there. The path before the depression led through the swamp, along open flat ground, which seemed safe enough from here. But looking closer, Redrick noted a dark gray spot between the two dry hills. He looked at the map. There was an X there, and it said "Whip" next to it in clumsy letters. The red dotted line of the path went to the right of the X. The name was sort of familiar, but who Whip was exactly, and what he looked like, and what he did, Redrick could not remember. For some reason, Redrick could only remember the smoky room of the Borscht, huge red

paws holding glasses, thundering laughter, and open jaws filled with yellow teeth -- a fantastic herd of titans and giants gathered at the watering hole, one of his most striking childhood memories -- his first visit to the Borscht. What had I brought that time? An empty, I think. Straight from the Zone, wet, hungry, crazy, with a sack over my shoulder, I burst into the bar and clattered the sack on the counter in front of Ernest, looking around angrily, listening to the wisecracks, waiting for Ernest -- young then and in a bow tie, as usual -- to count the right amount of greenbacks. No, wait, it wasn't green back then, we still had the square royal bills with some half-naked dame wearing a cape and a wreath. I waited, put away the money, and unexpectedly, even for myself, took a heavy mug from the counter and slammed it into the closest laughing face. Redrick smirked and thought: maybe that was Whip himself?

"Is it all right to go between the two hills, Mr. Schuhart?" Arthur asked in a low voice near his ear. He was next to him looking at the map, too.

"We'll see when we get there." Redrick kept looking at the map. There were two other X's, one on the slope of the hill with the tree, the other on the rocks. Poodle and Four-eyes. The path was marked below them. "We'll see," he repeated, folding up the map and putting it in his pocket.

He looked Arthur over.

"Put the backpack on my back. We'll go like before," he said, shifting under the weight of the pack and arranging the straps more comfortably. "You go ahead, so that I can see you every second. Don't look back and keep your ears open. My order is law. Keep in mind that we'll have a lot of crawling to do, don't suddenly be afraid of the dirt. If I tell you to, drop your face into the mud without any back-talk. And button your jacket. Ready?"

"Ready." Arthur was very nervous; the rosiness of his cheeks had disappeared.

"First we go this way." Redrick waved sharply in the direction of the nearest hill a hundred steps from the rocks. "Got it? Let's go."

Arthur heaved a sigh, stepped over the rails, and started down sideways from the embankment. The pebbles rained after him noisily.

"Easy, easy," Redrick said. "There's no hurry."

He started down slowly after him, automatically adjusting his leg muscles to the weight of the heavy backpack. He watched Arthur out of the corner of his eye. He's scared, he thought. He must sense it. If his sense is like his father's, he does. If you only knew how things were turning out, Buzzard. If you only knew, Buzzard, that I took your advice this time. "This is one place, Red, that you can't go to alone. Like it or not, you'll have to take somebody with you. I can give you one

of my people who's expendable." You talked me into it. It's the first time in my life that I agreed to something like this. Well, maybe it will turn out all right, he thought. Maybe, somehow, it will work out. After all, I'm not Buzzard Burbridge, maybe I'll figure something out.

"Stop!" he told Arthur.

The boy stopped ankle-deep in rusty water. By the time Redrick got down to him, the quagmire had sucked him in up to his knees.

"Do you see that rock?" Redrick asked. "There, under the hill? Head for it."

Arthur moved on. Redrick let him get ten paces ahead and then followed. The mud slurped underfoot. It was a dead swamp -- no bugs, no frogs, even the willows were dry and rotten. Redrick looked around, but for now everything seemed to be in order. The hill slowly got closer, covering the sun, which was still low in the sky, and finally blocking the entire eastern sky. At the rock, Redrick looked back at the embankment. It was brightly lit by the sun. A train of ten ore cars stood on it. Some of the cars had fallen off the tracks and were lying on their sides, and the embankment above them was covered with the rusty red piles of the ore. Further on, in the direction of the quarry, north of the train, the air over the track shimmered and undulated, and tiny rainbows exploded and died in the air. Redrick looked at the shimmer, spat, and turned away.

"Let's go," he said. Arthur turned his tense face to him. "See those rags over there? You're looking the wrong way! Over there, to the right."

"Yes," said Arthur.

"Well, that was a guy called Whip. A long time ago. He didn't listen to his elders and now he lies there in order to show smart people the right way. Look just to the right of Whip. Got it? See the spot? Right where the willows are a little thicker. That's the way. You're off!"

Now they were moving parallel to the embankment. Every step brought them to shallower water, and soon they were walking on dry, springy hillocks. The map still showed this as solid swamp. The map's old, thought Redrick, Burbridge hasn't been here in a long time, and it's gotten out of date. That's bad. Of course, it's easier to walk on dry land, but it would have been better for that swamp to be here. Look at Arthur go, he thought. He's walking like he's strolling down Central Avenue.

Arthur seemed to have perked up and was walking full speed. He had one hand in his pocket and he was swinging the other as if out on a stroll. Redrick rummaged in his pocket, took out a bolt weighing an ounce or so, and threw it at his head. The bolt hit Arthur in the back of the head. The boy gasped, grabbed his head,

crouched, and fell into the dry grass. Redrick stood over him.

"That's how it comes out here, Artie," he pontificated. "This isn't an avenue, we're not on a promenade here, you know." Arthur got up slowly. His face was drained white.

"Everything clear?" Redrick asked. Arthur gulped and nodded.

"Fine. And next time I'll let you have it in the teeth. If you're still alive. Go ahead!"

The boy could have made a stalker, after all, thought Redrick. They probably would have called him Pretty Boy Artie. We used to have another Pretty Boy, his name was Dixon, but now they called him Hamster. The only stalker to fall into the meatgrinder and live. He was lucky. The fool still thinks that it was Burbridge who pulled him out of it. The hell he did! You don't get pulled out of the meatgrinder. He did pull him out of the Zone, that's true enough Burbridge performed a heroic deed like that. If he hadn't...! Everybody was getting fed up with his tricks, and the guys had told him: you better not come back if you come back alone. That was when they began calling him Buzzard, before they used to call him Winner.

Redrick felt a barely perceptible current of air on his left cheek and immediately, without thinking, he shouted: "Halt!" He extended his hand to the left. The current was stronger. Some where between them and the embankment there was a mosquito mange, or maybe it extended along the embankment itself: there was a reason why the cars had tilted over. Arthur stood as though he had been planted, he did not even turn around.

"To the right. Let's go."

Yes, he would have made a good stalker. What the hell, do I feel sorry for him or something? That's all I need. Did anyone ever feel sorry for me? I guess they did. Kirill felt sorry for me. Dick Noonan feels sorry for me. Of course, he might be more interested in Guta than in feeling sorry for me, but one doesn't necessarily rule out the other. Only I don't get to feel pity. My choice is always either/or. He finally understood the choice: either this boy, or my Monkey. There was no real choice, it was clear. If only miracles did happen, some voice said inside, and he repressed the voice with horror.

They went around the mound of gray rags. There was nothing left of Whip. Some distance away in the dry grass lay a long, completely rusted stick -- a mine-sweeper. In those days many stalkers used mine sweepers, buying them up on the quiet from army suppliers, and depended on them like on the Lord God himself, and then two stalkers were killed within a few days, killed by underground explosions. And that put an end to it. Who had this Whip been? Did Buzzard bring him here

or had he come on his own? Why were they all drawn to this quarry? Why hadn't I heard anything about it? Damn it, it's hot! And this is so early in the morning, I can imagine what it will be like later.

Arthur, walking five paces ahead, wiped the sweat from his brow. Redrick squinted up at the sun; it was still low. And suddenly he realized that the dry grass was not rustling underfoot but squeaking like cornstarch, and it was no longer stiff and bristly, but soft and crumbly -- it was falling apart under their shoes, like flakes of soot. And he saw Arthur's clear footprints, and he threw himself down on the ground, shouting: "Hit the dirt!"

He fell face down into the grass, and it turned into dust under his cheek. He gnashed his teeth in anger over their bad luck. He lay there trying not to move, still hoping that it would blow over, even though he realized that they were trapped. The heat was increasing, overwhelming him, enveloping his body like a sheet soaked in boiling water. Sweat poured into his eyes, and Redrick shouted belatedly to Arthur: "Don't move! Bear it!" And he started bearing it himself.

He would have withstood it, and everything would have passed quietly and well, they would have gotten by with a lot of sweat, but Arthur couldn't take it. Either he had not heard Redrick's shout, or he became scared out of his wits, or maybe, he had been baked more strongly than Redrick -- anyway he lost control and ran off blindly, with a scream deep in his throat, following his instinct -- backward, The very direction they couldn't take. Redrick barely managed to rise and grab his ankle with both hands. Arthur fell down with the full weight of his body, raising a cloud of ashes, squealed in an unnatural voice, kicked Redrick in the face with his other foot, and struggled wildly. Redrick, not thinking clearly any more through the pain, crawled on top of him, touching the leather jacket with his burned face, trying to press the boy into the ground, holding his long hair with both hands and desperately kicking his feet and knees at Arthur's legs and his rear end and at the dirt. He could barely hear the muffled moans coming from beneath him and his own hoarse shouts:

"Lie there, you toad, lie still, or I'll kill you." Tons and tons of hot coals were pouring over him, and his clothing was in flames and the leather of his shoes and jacket was blistering and cracking, and Redrick, his head mashed into the gray ash, his chest trying to keep the damn boy's head down, could not stand it. He yelled his lungs out.

He did not remember when it all ended. He understood only that he could breathe again, that the air was air again, and not steam that burned his throat, and he realized that they had to hurry and get out from under the devilish heat before

it came crashing down on them again. He got off Arthur, who was lying perfectly still, tucked both his legs under one arm, and using his free arm, crawled forward, never taking his eyes off the line where the grass started again. It was dead, prickly, dry, but it was real and it seemed like the greatest source of life in the world. The ashes felt gritty in his teeth, his burnt face gave off heat, and the sweat poured right into his eyes, probably because he no longer had eyebrows or eyelashes. Arthur was stretched out behind, his jacket seeming to catch on to every possible place. Redrick's parboiled hands ached, and the backpack kept bumping into his burned neck. The pain and lack of air made Redrick think that he was completely burned and that he would not make it. The fear made him work harder with his elbow and his knees. just get there, just a little more, come on, Red, come on, you can make it, like that, just a little more...

Then he lay for a long time, his face and hands in the cold, rusty water, luxuriating in the smelly, rotten coolness. He could have lain like that forever, but he forced himself to get up on his knees, throw off the backpack, crawl over to Arthur, who was still lying motionless some thirty feet from the swamp, and turn him over on his back. Well, he used to be a pretty boy. And now that handsome face was a dark gray mask of baked-on blood and ash. For a few seconds Redrick examined with dull interest the ruts and furrows made in the mask -- the tracks of stones and sticks. Then he got up on his feet, picked up Arthur by the armpits, and dragged him to the water. Arthur was breathing hoarsely, moaning once in a while. Redrick threw him face down into the deepest puddle and fell down next to him, reliving the pleasure of the wet, icy caress. Arthur gurgled, moved about, braced himself on his hands, and raised his head. He was bug-eyed, he understood nothing and was greedily gulping air, coughing and spitting. Then he came to his senses. His gaze settled on Redrick.

"Phoo-oo-ey." He shook his head, scattering dirty drops of water.

"What was that, Mr. Schuhart?"

"That was death," Redrick murmured and coughed. He felt his face. It hurt. His nose was swollen, but his brows and lashes, strangely enough, were in place. And the skin on his hands remained intact, but red.

Arthur was also gingerly touching his face. Now that the horrible mask had been washed away, his face -- also contrary to expectation -- turned out to be all right. There were a few scratches, a bump on his forehead, and his lower lip was split. But all in all, okay.

"I've never heard of anything like that," Arthur said looking back.

Redrick looked back too. There were many tracks on the gray ashy grass, and

Redrick was amazed to see how short his terrible, endless path had been, when he crawled to save them from doom. It was only twenty or thirty yards from one edge of the burnt-out grass to the other, but in his blindness and fear he had crawled in some wild zigzag, like a roach on a hot skillet, and thank God he had at least crawled in the right direction. He could have gotten into the mosquito mange on the left, or he could have gotten turned around completely. No, that would not have happened to him, he was no greenhorn. And if it had not been for that fool, then nothing at all would have happened, he would have gotten blisters on his feet -- and that would have been it as far as injuries.

He looked at Arthur. Arthur was washing up, moaning as he touched the sore spots. Redrick stood up, and wincing from the pain of his clothes on his burnt skin, walked to a dry spot and examined the backpack. The pack had really taken a beating. The top buckles had melted and the vials in the first-aid kit had burst to hell, and a damp spot reeked of antiseptic. Redrick opened the pack and started picking out the slivers of glass and plastic, when he heard Arthur's voice.

"Thank you, Mr. Schuhart! You saved my life!"

Redrick said nothing. Thanks! You fell apart, and I had to rescue you.

"It was my own fault. I heard your order to lie there, but I was really scared, and when it got so hot -- I lost my head. I'm very much afraid of pain, Mr. Schuhart."

"Why don't you get up?" Redrick said without turning around toward him. "That was just a sample. Get up, what are you loafing around for?"

Wincing from the pain of the pack on his burned shoulders, he put his arms through the straps. It felt as though the skin on the burned places had wrinkled up. He was afraid of pain, was he? Shove you and your pain! He looked around. It was all right, they hadn't left the path. Now for the hills with the corpses. The damn hills, just stood there, the lousy mothers, sticking out like the devil's horns, and that damn depression between them. He sniffed the air. You damn depression, that's the really lousy part. The toad.

"See that depression between the hills?" he asked.

"I see it.

"Head straight for it. March!"

Arthur wiped his face with the back of his hand and moved on, splashing through the puddles. He was limping and did not look as straight and well-proportioned as he had before. He was bent over and was walking very carefully. There's another one I pulled out, thought Redrick. What does that make? Five? Six? And now I wonder why? He's no relation. I'm not responsible for him. Listen, Red, why did you save him? You almost got it yourself because of him. Now that my head is

clear, I know why. It was right to save him, I can't manage without him, he's my hostage for Monkey. I didn't save a human being, I saved my minesweeper. My master key. Back there in the heat, I never gave it a second thought. I Pulled him out like he was my flesh and blood, and didn't even think about abandoning him even though I had forgotten everything -- the master key and Monkey. What does that mean? It means that I really am a good guy, after all. That's what Guta insists, and Kirill used to say, and what Richard is always babbling about. Some good guy they found! Drop it, he told himself. You have to think first, and then use your arms and legs. Got that straight? Mr. Nice Guy. I have to save him for the meatgrinder, he thought coldly and clearly. We can get past everything except the grinder.

"Stop!"

The depression lay before them, and Arthur was already standing there, looking at Redrick for orders. The floor of the depression was covered with a rotten green slime that glinted oilily in the sun. A light steam rose above it, getting thicker between the hills, and nothing was visible beyond thirty feet. And it stank. "It'll really stink in there, but don't you chicken out." Arthur made a noise in the back of his throat and backed away. Redrick shook himself back to action, pulled from his pocket a wad of cotton soaked in deodorant, stuffed up his nostrils, and offered some to Arthur.

"Thanks, Mr. Schuhart. Isn't there a land route we could take?" Arthur asked in a weak voice.

Redrick silently took him by the hair and turned his head in the direction of the bundle of rags on the stony hillside.

"That was Four-eyes," he said. "And on the left hill, you can't see from here, lies Poodle. In the same condition. Do you understand? Forward."

The slime was warm and sticky. At first they walked erect, waist-deep in the slime. Luckily the bottom was rocky and rather even. But soon Redrick heard the familiar rumble from both sides. There was nothing on the left hill except the intense sunlight, but on the right slope, in the shade, pale purple lights were fluttering.

"Bend low!" he whispered and bent over himself. "Lower, stupid!" Arthur bent over in fright, and a clap of thunder shattered the air. Right over their heads an intricate lightning bolt danced furiously, barely visible against the bright sky. Arthur sat down, shoulder deep in the slime. Redrick, ears clogged by the noise, turned and saw a bright red spot quickly melting in the shade among the pebbles and rocks, and there was another thunderclap.

"Forward! Forward!" he shouted, unable to hear himself.

Now they were moving in a crouch, Indian file, only their heads exposed. At

every peal Redrick watched Arthur's long hair stand on end and could feel a thousand needles puncturing his face. "Forward!" he kept repeating. "Forward!" He could not hear a thing any more. Once he saw Arthur's profile, and he saw his terror-stricken eyes bulging out and his white bouncing lips and his green-smearred sweaty cheek. Then the lightning began striking so low that they had to duck their heads. The green slime gummed his mouth, making it hard to breathe. Gulping for air, Redrick tore the cotton out of his nose and discovered that the reek was gone, that the air was filled with the fresh, piercing odor of ozone, and that the steam was getting thicker, or maybe he was blacking out, and he could no longer see either of the two hills. All he could see was Arthur's head sticky with green slime and the billowing clouds of yellow steam.

I'll get through, I'll get through, Redrick thought; this is nothing new. My whole life is like this. I'm stuck in filth and there's lightning over my head. It's never been any other way. Where is all this gunk coming from? You could go crazy from this much gunk in one place! Buzzard Burbridge did this: he walked through and left this behind. Four-eyes lay on the right, Poodle on the left, and all so that Buzzard could walk between them and leave all his filth behind. That's what you deserve, he told himself. Whoever walks behind Buzzard walks up to his neck in filth. You didn't know that? There are too many buzzards, that's why there isn't a single clean place left.

Noonan's a fool: Redrick, Red, you violate the balance, you destroy the order, you're unhappy, Red, under any order, any system. You're not happy under a bad one, you're not happy under a good one. It's people like you who keep us from having the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. What do you know, fatso? Where have you seen a good system? When have you ever seen me under a good system? He slipped on a stone that turned under his foot, and fell in. He surfaced and saw Arthur's terrified face right next to his. For a second he felt a chill: he thought that he had lost his way. But he had not gotten lost. He realized immediately that they had to go that way, where the black top of the rock stuck out of the slime; he realized that even though there was nothing else visible in the yellow fog.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Keep right! To the right of the rock!"

He could not hear his own voice. He caught up with Arthur, grabbed his shoulder, and pointed: keep right of the rock and keep your head down. You'll pay for this, he thought. Arthur dove under at the rock, just as a lightning bolt hit it, smashing it to smithereens. You'll pay for this, he repeated, as he ducked under and worked furiously with his arms and legs. He could hear another peal of thunder. I'll shake your souls out of you for this! He had a fleeting thought: who do I mean? I don't

know. But somebody has to pay for this, and somebody will! Just wait, just let me get to the ball, when I get to the ball, I'm no Buzzard, I'll get what I want from you.

When they finally scrambled out onto dry land that was covered by sun-heated pebbles, they were half-deaf, turned inside out, and staggering and holding on to each other. Redrick saw the peeling pick-up truck, sagging on its axles, and he remembered that they could rest in the shade of the truck. They crawled into the shade. Arthur lay on his back and began unbuttoning his jacket with limp fingers, and Redrick leaned his backpack against the side of the truck, wiped his hands against the small rocks, and reached inside his jacket.

"And me, too." Arthur said. "Me too."

Redrick was surprised by the loudness of the boy's voice. He took a sip, shut his eyes, and handed the flask to Arthur. That's it, he thought weakly. We got through. We got through even this. And now, accounts payable upon demand. Do you think that I forgot? No way, I remember it all. Do you think I'll thank you for letting me live and not drowning me? You get zilch from me. This is the end for all of you, get it? I'm not leaving any of this. From now on, I make all the decisions. I, Redrick Schuhart, being of sound mind and body, will make all the decisions for everybody. And as for all of you, buzzards, toads, Visitors, Boneses, Quarterblads, bloodsuckers, green-backers, Throaties, in your suits and ties, clean and fresh, with your briefcases and speeches and good deeds and employment opportunities, and your eternal batteries and eternal engines and mosquito manges and false promises -- I've had enough, you've led me by the nose long enough. All my life you've led me by the nose, and I thought and bragged that I was living the way I wanted to, fool, and all the time you were egging me on and winking among yourselves, and leading me by the nose, dragging me, hauling me through jails and bars. I've had it! He unsnapped the straps of the pack and took the flask from Arthur.

"I never thought..." Arthur was saying with meek disbelief in his voice. "I couldn't even imagine. I knew about death and fire and all, of course, but something like that! How are we going to get back?"

Redrick was not listening. What that thing was saying no longer had any meaning. It had no meaning before, either, but before it was a person at least. And now, it was like a talking key, a key to open the way to the Golden Ball. Let it talk.

"If we get some water," Arthur said. "At least wash our faces."

Redrick looked at him distractedly, saw the disheveled and glued-together hair, the face smeared with drying slime with finger marks in it, and all of him covered with a crust of oozing slime, and he felt no pity, no irritation, nothing. A talking

key. He turned away. A dreary expanse, like an abandoned construction site, yawned before them. It was covered with broken brick, sprinkled with white dust, and highlighted by the blinding sun, which was unbearably white, hot, angry, and dead. The far end of the quarry was visible from there -- also blindingly white and at that distance seemingly perfectly smooth and perpendicular. The near end was marked by large breaks and boulders, and there was the path down into the quarry, where the excavator's cabin stood out like a red splotch against the white rock. That was the only landmark. They had to head for it, depending on dumb luck to guide them.

Arthur propped himself up, stuck his arm under the truck, and pulled out a rusty tin can.

"Look at that, Mr. Schuhart," he said, livening up. "Father must have left this. There's more under there."

Redrick didn't reply. That's a mistake, he thought, dispassionately. Better not think about your father now, you'd be better off not saying anything. On the other hand, it doesn't matter. Getting up, he winced: his clothes had stuck to his body, to his burned skin, and now something was tearing inside, like a dried bandage pulling from a wound. Arthur also groaned as he got up; he gave Redrick a martyred look. It was clear that he wanted to complain but that he didn't dare. He only said in a strangled voice:

"Do you think I might have another sip, Mr. Schuhart?"

Redrick put the flask that he had been holding back under his shirt.

"Do you see that red between the rocks?"

"I see it," Arthur said and shuddered.

"Straight for it. Let's go."

Arthur stretched his arms, straightened his shoulders, grimaced, and said looking around:

"I wish I could wash up. Everything's sticking."

Redrick waited silently. Arthur looked at him hopelessly, nodded, and was about to start when he stopped suddenly.

"The backpack. You forgot the backpack, Mr. Schuhart."

"March!" Redrick ordered.

He did not want to explain or to lie, and there was no need. He would go anyway. He had nowhere else to go. He'd go. And Arthur went. He wandered on, hunched over, dragging his feet, trying to pick off the baked slime from his face, looking small, scrawny, and forlorn, like a wet stray kitten. Redrick walked behind him, and as soon as he stepped out of the shade, the sun seared and blinded him, and he

shaded his eyes with his hand and was sorry that he had not taken his sunglasses.

Every step raised a cloud of white dust, and the dust settled on his shoes and gave off an unbearable stench. Or rather, it came from Arthur, it was impossible to walk behind him. It took him a while to understand that the stench was coming from himself. The odor was disgusting, but somehow familiar -- that was the smell that filled the city on the days that the north wind carried the smoke from the plant. And his father smelled that way, too, when he came home, hungry, gloomy, with red wild eyes. And Redrick would hurry to hide in some faraway corner and watch in fear as his father tore off his work clothes and tossed them to his mother, pulled off his huge, worn shoes and shoved them on the floor of the closet, and stalked off to the shower in his stocking feet, leaving sticky footprints. He would stay in the shower, grunting and slapping his body, for a long time, splashing water and muttering under his breath, until he shouted so that the house shook: "Maria! Are you asleep?" He had to wait until his father had washed and seated himself at the table, where a pint bottle, a bowl with thick soup, and bottle of catsup were ready for him. Wait until he had slurped up all the soup and started on the pork and beans, and then he could creep out into the light, climb up on his lap, and ask which shop steward and which engineer he had drowned in vitriol that day.

Everything around him was white hot, and he was dizzy from the cruel dry heat, the exhaustion, and the unbearable pain of his skin blistering at the joints; it seemed to him, through the hot haze that was enveloping his consciousness, that his skin was crying out to him, begging him for peace, for water, for coolness. The memories, worn to the point of unrecognizability, were crowding each other in his swollen brain, knocking each other over, blending, tumbling, mingling with the white hot world that was flaming before his half-closed eyes, and they were all bitter, and they all evoked self-pity or hatred. He tried to fight the chaos, to summon from the past some sweet mirage, a feeling of tenderness or cheerfulness. He squeezed out the fresh laughing face of Guta from the depths of his memory, when she was still a girl, desired and untouched, and her face appeared, but was immediately blanketed by rust and then twisted and deformed into the sullen face of Monkey, covered with coarse brown fur. He struggled to remember Kirill, that sainted man, his swift, sure movements, his laugh, his voice, which promised unheard-of marvelous places and times, and Kirill appeared; but then a silver cobweb exploded on the sun and Kirill was no more, and Throaty's unblinking angelic eyes stared at Redrick, a porcelain container in his big white hand... The dark thoughts festering in his subconscious knocked down the barrier his will tried to create and extinguished the little good that his memory contained, and it

seemed that there had never been anything good at all, only ugly, vicious faces.

And during all this time, he never stopped being a stalker. Without realizing it, he recorded somewhere in his nervous system the essential information: that on the left, at a safe distance, there was a jolly ghost over a pile of old planks -- it was quiet, exhausted, and so the hell with it; on the right there was a slight breeze, and a few steps later he saw a mirror-smooth mosquito mange, with many arms, like a starfish-far away, no danger -- and right in its center, a flattened bird, a rare sight, since birds did not often fly over the Zone; and right by the path there were two abandoned empties -- apparently Buzzard had dropped them on the way back, fear is stronger than greed. He saw all of this and took it into account, and Arthur had only to stray a single foot from their path for Redrick's mouth to open and the hoarse warning to fly automatically from his throat. A machine, he thought. You made a machine out of me. The broken rocks at the edge of the quarry were getting closer, and he could see the fanciful designs made by rust on the cabin's red roof.

You fool, you, Burbridge, Redrick thought. You're clever, but you're a fool. How could you have trusted me? You've known me for so long, you should know me better than I know myself. You're getting old, that must be it. Getting dumber. But what am I saying, I've been dealing with fools all my life. And then he pictured Buzzard's face when he discovered that Arthur, his sweet Artie, his one and only son, that his pride and joy had gone into the Zone with Red after Buzzard's legs, not some expendable punk. He pictured his face and laughed. When Arthur turned his frightened face to look at him, Redrick went on laughing and motioned him on. And then the faces crawled across his consciousness again like pictures on a screen. Everything had to be changed. Not one life or two lives, not one fate or two -- every link in this rotten, stinking world had to be changed.

Arthur stopped at the steep descent into the quarry, froze in his steps, straining to look down and into the distance, extending his long neck. Redrick joined him. But he did not look where Arthur was looking.

Right at their feet the road into the quarry began, torn up many years ago by the treads and wheels of heavy vehicles. To the right was a white steep slope, cracked by the heat; the next slope was half excavated, and among the rocks and rubble stood a bulldozer, its lowered bucket jammed impotently against the side of the road. And, as was to be expected, there was nothing else to be seen on the road, except for the black twisted stalactites that looked like fat candles hanging from the jagged edges of the slope, and a multitude of black splotches in the dust, as though someone had spilled bitumen. That was all that was left of them, it was even impossible to tell how many there had been. Maybe each splotch represented

a person, or one of Buzzard's wishes. That one there was Buzzard coming back alive and unharmed from the basement of Complex #7. That bigger one over there was Buzzard getting the wriggling magnet out of the Zone unscathed. And that icicle was the luxurious Dina Burbridge, who resembled neither her mother nor her father. And that spot there was Arthur Burbridge, unlike his father and mother, Artie, the handsome son, their pride and joy.

"We made it!" Arthur rasped deliriously. "Mr. Schuhart, we did make it, after all, right?"

He laughed a happy laugh, crouched down, and beat both fists as hard as he could on the ground. His matted hair bounced ridiculously, and dried clumps of dirt flew in all directions. And only then did Redrick look up at the ball. Carefully. With caution. With a hidden fear that it would turn out wrong -- that it would disappoint him, evoke doubts, throw him from the cloud that he had managed to scramble up on, and leave him to wallow in filth.

It was not golden, it was more a copper color, reddish, and completely smooth, and it shone dully in the sun. It lay at the foot of the quarry's far wall, cozily ensconced amid the piles of accumulated rocks, and even from that distance, he could see how heavy and massive it was, and how solidly it lay in its place.

There was nothing disappointing or doubt-inspiring about it, but there was nothing to inspire hope either. For some reason, his first thought was that it was probably hollow and that it should be hot to the touch from being in the sun. It obviously did not glow with its own light and it obviously was incapable of floating up and dancing in the air, the way so many of the tales had it. It lay where it had fallen. Maybe it had fallen out of some monstrously huge pocket or had gotten lost, rolled away during some game between some giants. It had not been carefully placed here, it had been left behind, littering up the Zone like all the empties, bracelets, batteries, and other rubbish remaining after the Visitation.

But at the same time, there was something about it, and the longer Redrick looked at it, the clearer it became that it was pleasant to look at it, that he wanted to go up to it, to touch it, pat it, and suddenly the thought came to him that it would be good, probably, to sit down next to it, or even better, to lean back against it, close his eyes, and think, reminisce, and maybe just dream and drowse and rest... Arthur jumped up, tore open all the zippers on his jacket, took it off, and threw it down smack at his feet, raising a cloud of white dust. He was shouting something, making faces and waving his arms, and then he put his hands behind his back, and dancing a jig, headed down the slope. He was not looking at Redrick any more, he had forgotten Redrick, he had forgotten everything. He was going down to make

his wishes come true, the little secret wishes of a blushing college student, of a boy who had never seen any money beyond his allowance, who had been beaten mercilessly if he had a whiff of alcohol on his breath when he came home, and who was being groomed to be a famous lawyer, and in the future, a cabinet minister, and in the distant future, and as his greatest prospect -- president. Redrick, squinting his swollen eyes against the blinding light, silently watched him go. He was cool and calm, he knew what was about to happen, and he knew that he would not watch, but it was still all right to watch, and he did, feeling nothing in particular, except that deep inside a little worm started wriggling around and twisting its sharp head in his gut.

And the boy kept walking down, dancing a jig, shuffling to his own beat, and the white dust rose from his heels, and he was shouting at the top of his lungs, clearly, joyously, and festively -- either a song or an incantation -- and Redrick thought that this was the first time in the history of the quarry that a man went down there as though he were going to a party. And at first he did not listen to what his talking key was yelling, and then something clicked inside him and he heard:

"Happiness for everybody! ... Free! ... As much as you want! ... Everybody come here! ... There's enough for everybody! Nobody will leave unsatisfied! ... Free! ... Happiness! ... Free!"

And then he was suddenly silent, as though a huge fist had punched him in the mouth. And Redrick saw the transparent emptiness that was lurking in the shadow of the excavator's bucket grab him, throw him up in the air, and slowly slowly twist him, like a housewife wringing her wash. Redrick had time to see one of his dusty shoes fall off his jerking leg and fly high above the quarry. Then he turned away and sat down. There wasn't a single thought in his head, and he had somehow stopped sensing himself. Silence hung heavy in the air, particularly behind him, there on the road. Then he remembered the flask, without particular joy, but just as medicine that it was time to take. He unscrewed the cap and drank with tiny stingy sips, and for the first time in his life he wished that instead of liquor, the flask contained cold water.

Time passed, and more or less coherent thoughts came to him. Well, that's it, he thought unwillingly. The road is open. He could go down right now, but it was better, of course, to wait a while. The meatgrinders can be tricky. Anyway, he had some thinking to do. An unaccustomed exercise, thinking, that was the trouble. What was "thinking" anyway? Thinking meant finding a loophole, pulling a bluff, pulling the wool over someone's eyes -- but all that was out of place here.

All right. Monkey, his father... Make them pay for that, steal the bastards' souls, let the sons of bitches eat what I've been eating... No, that's not it, Red... I mean, that is it, but what does it mean? What do I need? That's cursing, not thinking. A terrible presentiment chilled him, and quickly skipping over the many arguments that were still ahead of him, he told himself angrily: this is how it is, Red, you won't leave here until you figure it out, you'll drop dead here next to the ball, burn to death and rot, but you won't leave.

God, where are the words, where are my thoughts? He slapped his head. I have never had a thought in my entire life! Wait, wait, Kirill used to say something like that. Kirill! He feverishly dug through his memories, and words floated to the surface, familiar ones and unfamiliar, but it was all wrong, because Kirill had not left words behind. He had left pictures, vague, and very kind, but thoroughly improbable.

Meanness and treachery. They let me down in this too, they left me speechless, the bastards. A bum -- I was always a bum, and now I'm an old bum. It's not right, do you hear me? In the future, for once and for all, it should be outlawed! Man is born in order to think (there he is, old Kirill at last!). Only I don't believe it. I didn't believe it before and I don't believe it now. And I don't know what man is born for. I was born. So here I am. People eat whatever they can. Let all of us be healthy and let all of them drop dead. Who is us and who are they? I don't understand a thing. If I'm happy, Burbridge isn't, if Burbridge's happy, Four-eyes isn't, if Throaty is happy, no one else is, and if things are bad for Throaty, he's the only one fool enough to think he'll manage somehow. God, it's just one long brawl! I fight all my life with Captain Quarterblad, and he fights all his life with Throaty, and all he wants from me is that I give up stalking. But how can I give up stalking when I have a family to feed? Get a job? I don't want to work for you, your work makes me puke, do you understand? This is the way I figure it: if a man works with you, he is always working for one of you, he is a slave and nothing else. And I always wanted to be myself, on my own, so that I could spit at you all, at your boredom and despair.

He finished the dregs of the brandy and threw the empty flask to the ground with all his might. The flask bounced, flashing in the sun, and rolled away. He forgot about it immediately. He sat there, covering his eyes with his hands, and he was trying -- not to understand, not to think, but merely to see something of how things should be, but all he saw were the faces, faces, faces, and more faces... and greenbacks, bottles, bundles of rags that were once people, and columns of figures. He knew that it all had to be destroyed, and he wanted to destroy it, but he guessed

that if it all disappeared there would be nothing left but the flat, bare earth. His frustration and despair made him want to lean back against the ball. He got up, automatically brushed off his pants, and started down into the quarry.

The sun was broiling hot, red spots floated before his eyes, the air was quivering on the floor of the quarry, and in the shimmer it seemed that the ball was dancing in place like a buoy on the waves. He went past the bucket, superstitiously picking up his feet higher and making sure not to step on the splotches. And then, sinking into the rubble, he dragged himself across the quarry to the dancing, winking ball. He was covered with sweat and panting from the heat, and at the same time, a chill was running through him, he was shuddering, as if he had a bad hangover, and the sweet chalk dust gritted between his teeth. He had stopped trying to think. He just repeated his litany over and over: "I am an animal, you see that. I don't have the words, they didn't teach me the words. I don't know how to think, the bastards didn't let me learn how to think. But if you really are...all-powerful...all-knowing... then you figure it out! Look into my heart. I know that everything you need is in there. It has to be. I never sold my soul to anyone! It's mine, it's human! You take from me what it is I want... it just can't be that I would want something bad! Damn it all, I can't think of anything, except those words of his... 'HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND NO ONE WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED!' "