

Metro 2034 (2009)

Author: Dmitry Glukhovsky

Translated from the German version by: Metro2033Artjom

Metro2033Artjom's annotations:

This is the translation of the German version of Metro 2034 into English. English is not my first language. This translation is as close to the German Version as it gets. Some sentences had to be changed so that the grammar would make sense. They still incorporate the message of the sentence.

I didn't get paid translating this book and neither did I want to earn money with this translation.

Dmitry Glukhovsky is the author of Metro 2034 and all rights are reserved to him. No copyright abuse / infringement were intended.

Have fun reading.

(Please report any mistakes to me, by chapter-page-line, to my YouTube channel Metro2033Artjom)

Oh and before I forget, if something is written in brackets and is underlined than it is one of my notes.)

LieutenantShwa (youtube channel) has volunteered to edit the translated text.

Give him your thanks for taking time out of his day to ensure the quality of this translation.

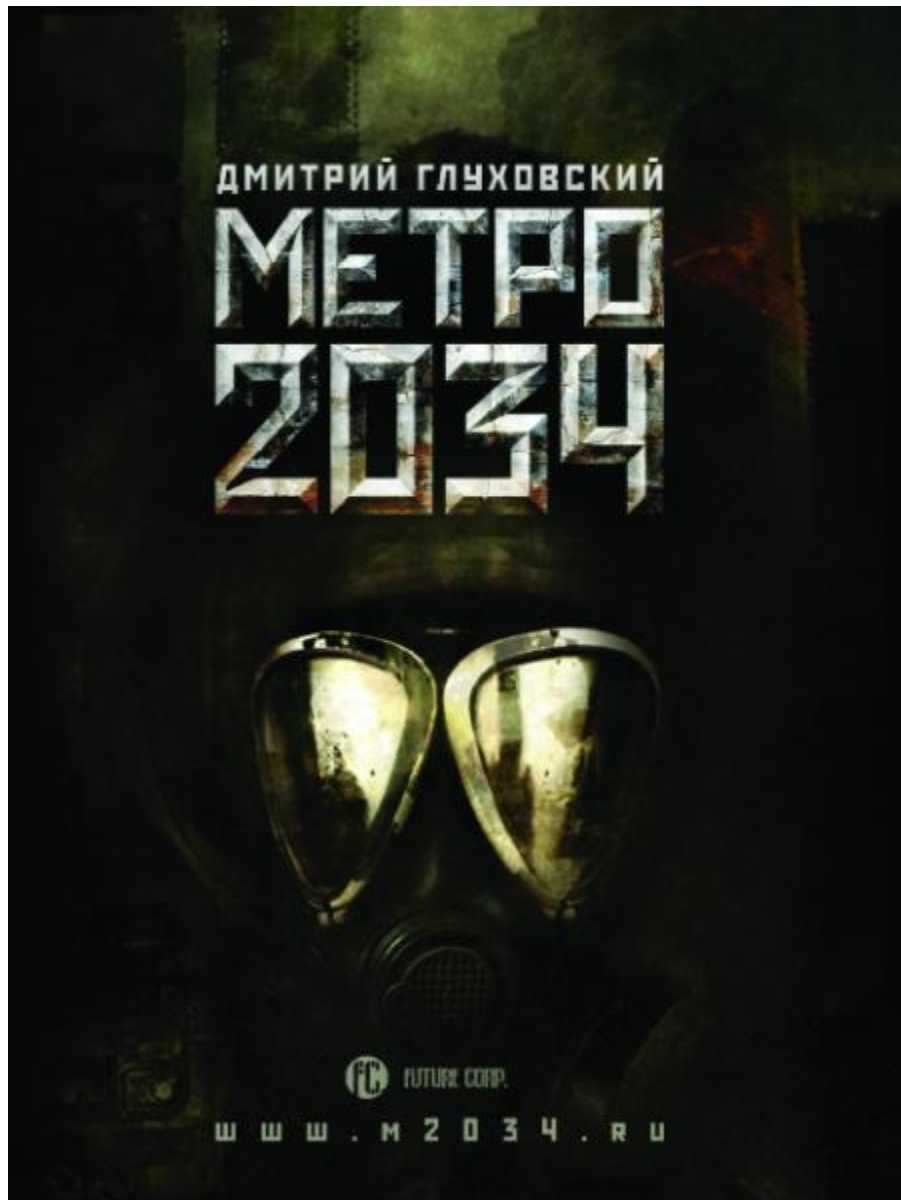
cardboardtheory's annotations:

I started this project at the beginning of this year I believe, and haven't had the time to finish it. I have attempted to refine the quality of the translation past Lieutenant Shwa and Metro2033Artjom's work. My work is evident in a little more than half of it (Chapter 10 maybe) , where I dropped off. For the past week I have also managed to revise the last few pages for reading pleasure.

For reference, the original work Metro 2033 was written by Dmitry Glukhovsky, translated in to German, translated in to English by Metro2033Artjom and LieutenantShwa, and I hope I (cardboardtheory) have better improved the quality in to a more standard English.

In short, this translation was the combined work of both Metro2033Artjom and Lieutenant Shwa, and cardboardtheory. Enjoy reading.

Metro 2034
Dmitry Glukhovsky



Prologue

It is the year 2034. The world lies in ruins. Humanity is almost destroyed. Radiation has made the destroyed cities uninhabitable. Outside their borders, some say, endless burnt wastelands and impenetrable mutated forests extend forever.

But nobody knows exactly what there is. Civilization fades away. And the memories of man's former greatness slowly retreat fairy tales and legends.

It has been over twenty years since the last airplane started. Rusted train tracks lead into emptiness. And when the radio operator listens for the millionth time to the frequencies where once New York, Paris, Tokyo and Buenos Aires broadcasted, he hears nothing but lonely howling.

It has been twenty years since then. But mankind has already left up its reign over the earth to other species. Creatures of radiation, that are far better adapted to the life in this new world.

The era of man is over.

But the survivors don't want to admit that. Some ten thousand humans are left, and they don't know, if except for them any are still alive – or if they are the last in this world.

They inhabit the Moscow metro, the biggest atomic bunker that was ever built by human hands.

The last sanctuary for humanity.

Almost all of the survivors now alive were in the metro on that day. And that saved their lives. The hermetic security gates of the stations protected them against the radiation and the terrible creatures from the surface. Old filters purify air and water. Resourceful tinkerers constructed dynamo machines to generate electricity. In underground farms humans farm champignons and breed pigs. The poor don't fear the taste of rat meat.

A central administration doesn't exist anymore. The stations have transformed themselves into small states, where humans gather around ideology, religion and water filters. Or just unite against enemy attacks.

It is a world without tomorrow. Dreams, plans, hopes – for all that there is no more place. Feelings made place for instincts, and the most important of all – to survive. At all costs.

The story before the events of this book is told in the book "Metro 2033".

The defense of the Sevastopolskaya (Chapter1)

They didn't return, neither on Tuesday, nor Wednesday, nor Thursday – the last appointed date. The outer guard post was manned around the clock, and if the guards would have just heard the faint echo of a cry for help or seen the weak reflection of a lamp on the wet, dark tunnel walls, there, where it goes to the Nachimovski prospect, they would have sent a strike team immediately. Tensions grew with every hour. The guards – excellently armed soldiers and especially trained for missions like that – didn't close their eyes for a second. The stack of playing cards, with which they usually killed time through the missions, collected dust for about two days in the drawer of the guardhouse. Their casual conversations gave away to short, nervous talks and now fatal silence reigned. Everyone hoped to be the first to hear the echoing steps of the returning caravan. Too much depended on it.

All inhabitants of the Sevastopolskaya, whether five year old boy or old man knew how to handle weapons. They had transformed their station into an impenetrable fortress.

Even though they barricaded themselves behind machinegun-nests, barbed wire, yes even tank-stoppers made out of tracks, this impenetrable fortress was threatening to fall in a blink of an eye. Their Achilles' heel was the shortage of ammunition.

Had the inhabitants of other stations experienced what the Sevastopolskaya had to endure on a daily basis, they wouldn't have wasted a thought about defending themselves, but fled like rats in flooded tunnel. Even the powerful Hanza, the federation of the stations in the ring line, wouldn't have ordered additional forces in case of an emergency – due to costs. Sure, the strategic importance of the Sevastopolskaya was enormous. But the price was too big.

So was the price for electricity. So high that the inhabitants of the Sevastopolskaya, that had created one of the biggest hydroelectric power stations in the metro, let themselves be supplied by the Hanza with ammunition and were sometimes even able to turn a profit. But many of them didn't just pay with bullets, but with a crippled, short life.

The groundwater was a blessing and a curse for the Sevastopolskaya. Like the waters of the river Styx flew around the rotten boat of Charon, so was the station surrounded by water. The groundwater gave a third of the ring line light and warmth, because it sets the shovels of dozens of water mills in motion. These had been created by skillful engineers of the station using their own plans, in tunnels, caves, underwater creeks, to put it blandly: where one could be made.

At the same time the water gnawed incessantly on the pillars, gradually loosened the cement out of the cracks, passing by very close behind the walls of the station like if it was trying to lull the inhabitants to sleep. The groundwater prevented them from blowing up unnecessary parts of the tunnels.

And exactly through these tunnels, hordes of nightmarish creatures move towards Sevastopolskaya, like an endless poisonous centipede crawling into a grinder.

The residents of the station felt like the crew of a ghost ship on its way through hell. They were damned to fill the holes constantly, because the frigate has been leaking for a long time. And a harbor, where they could find protection and silence, wasn't in sight.

At the same time they had to fend off one attack after another, because from the Tschertanovskaya in the south and from the Nachimovski prospect to the north of the station, monsters crawled through the vents, appeared from the murky sewers or stormed out of the tunnels. The whole

world seemed to be against Sevastopolskaya, trying to erase their home station from the metro's map. But they defended their station with tooth and nail, like it was the last fortress in the entire universe.

But no matter how skillful the engineers could be, how tough and relentless the training of their fighters was – without bullets, without light bulbs for the spotlights, without antibiotics and bandages they wouldn't be able to hold the station. Of course they delivered electricity, and Hanza was willing to pay a good price. But while the ring line had other and own suppliers; the Sevastopolskaya wouldn't survive a month without supplies from outside. Their supply of bullets reached a dangerously low count. Every week armed caravans were sent to Serpuchovskaya to use their earned credit to pay the merchants of Hanza for everything that was needed and return immediately. As long as the earth would turn, as long as the underground rivers flowed and as long as the metro would hold, nothing would change that.

This time the return of the caravan had been delayed.

And so much so that there was only one explanation: Something unexpected must have happened, something terrible, something that even the heavy armed caravan guards, nor the long and fair relations with the leadership of Hanza couldn't prevent.

The whole situation would have been a lot less unsettling if at least they could communicate with the Ring line.

But something was wrong with the telephone line to the Ring; they had lost the connection on Monday and the squad that was sent to find the faulty part of the line returned without any results. The lamp with the green lampshade hanged low over the round table. It illuminated yellowed papers on which graphics and diagrams were drawn on it in pencil. It was a weak bulb, maybe 40 watts, but not because you had to save electricity – that was certainly no problem in the Sevastopolskaya - but because the owner of the office didn't like glaring light. The ashtray was full of cigarette butts – all self-made and of bad quality. Biting, blue-grey smoke collected itself under the low ceiling. The head of the station, Vladimir Ivanovitsch Istomin wiped his forehead, raised his hand and looked with his one eye at the clock – for the fifth time in half an hour. He crackled with his fingers and stood up burdensomely. "A decision must be found. We can no longer delay it".

On the other side of the table sat an older, but strong built man with a lined camouflaged jacket and a worn blue beret. He opened his mouth to say something, but he had a coughing fit. Grumpily he narrowed his eyes and cleared away the smoke with his hand. Then he said: "Well, Vladimir Ivanovitsch, I repeat it again: We can't withdraw anymore forces from the southern tunnel. The pressure on the guards is enormous – even now they almost can't hold it. Last week alone they had three wounded, one of them heavy and that even with the fortifications. I won't sit here and watch how you continue to weaken the south. Especially when we need to have six scouts patrolling in the vents and the connecting tunnels at all times. And in the north we have to secure the arriving caravans, and we can't spare a single fighter there. I am sorry, but you will have to search by yourself".

"You are the commander of the outer guard post, so you search!" growled Vladimir. "I deal with my own business. In one hour a group must leave. We both think in different ways. This isn't just about our problems here and now! What if something worse happened?"

"And I think, Vladimir Ivanovitsch that you are over reacting. We have two unopened crates of 5.45 caliber ammunition in the armory which will last us over one and a half week. And then I still have something at home under my pillow." The colonel smiled, so that his big, yellow teeth could be seen. "I can surely get another crate together. Bullets aren't our problem, but people."

"And now I tell you again what our problem is. If we don't get any shipments anymore, we will have to close the gates to the south, because without ammunition we can't hold the tunnels anyway. That means that we can't maintain two thirds of our mills anymore. Just after a week the first mill break down and Hanza doesn't like a loss in current delivery at all. If they are lucky they will find a new supplier immediately, if not ... but what do I care about the electricity! For almost five days now the

tunnels are stone-dead and not a single pig in sight. What if something collapsed? Or broke through? What if we're cut off?"

"Hold your breath. The power lines are all right. The counters are running, so Hanza seems to be getting their power. We would have noticed a collapse immediately. And if it was sabotage, then the power line would have been cut and not the telephone line. As for the tunnel – what are you afraid of? Even in good times nobody strayed away from the tunnels, got lost and ended up here. Alone at the Nachimovski prospect: Without an escort you can't get through. Foreign merchants haven't risked coming to us for a long time. And the bandits already know – after all we let one of them go alive every time. So don't panic."

"Easy for you to say," growled Vladimir Ivanovitsch. He lifted the eye patch over his empty eye socket and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"I'll give you three men," said the colonel, now a little milder. "More isn't possible, all things considered. And you should stop smoking. You know it's not good for me and furthermore you are poisoning yourself! I would prefer some tea to be honest ..."

"But please, it is my pleasure." Vladimir rubbed his hands together, took the telephone receiver and barked: "Get tea here, for me and the colonel."

"Let the officer on duty come as well," said the commander of the outer guard posts as he took off his beret. "Then we will clear the matter with the search party."

At Istomin's you would always get a special tea, a fine selection from the VDNKh station. On its way shipped from the other end of the metro, Hanza taxes the famous mushroom tea (Vladimir Ivanovitsch's favorite) three times. That made it so expensive that Istomin wouldn't have indulged in his weakness for the tea, if not for his good connections in Dobryninskaya. There he had served in the war with someone, and so when the caravan leader returned back from Hanza, they always had a neat package for him. Istomin always picked it up personally. One year ago for the first time, his shipment of tea didn't come and alarming rumors spread that the entire orange line was being threatened apparently unknown mutants from the surface. They were almost invisible, practically invulnerable and could read your mind. It was said that the station had fallen, and Hanza, fearing invasion, had blown the tunnel past Prospect Mir. The price of tea went through the roof and then for some time you couldn't get any, which made Istomin seriously worried. But a few weeks later the waves calmed down and the caravans continued to bring the famous tea along with bullets and light bulbs to the Sevastopolskaya. Wasn't that the main specialty anyways?

While Istomin poured the colonel's tea into the porcelain cup with a cracked golden edge he closed his eyes and enjoyed the aromatic steam for a moment. Then he poured himself a cup, sank heavily into his chair, and started to stir a Saccharin pill into the tea with a silver spoon. The men were silent, and for a moment the melancholic sound of the spoon hitting the cup was the only sound in the dark, tobacco smoke clouded office.

Suddenly, the ambience was drowned by a shrill ringing bell, coming out of the loud speakers and the tunnel: "Alert!"

The commander of the outer guard post jumped surprisingly agilely from his place and stormed out of the room.

At first a lonely rifle shot sounded off in the distance, then a Kalashnikov joined in – one, two and then three.

Military boots hammered on the train platform and you could hear the bass voice of the colonel and how it – even from some distance away – was shouting the first orders.

Istomin reached out his hand after the shiny Militia-machine-pistol hanging on his cupboard, but then he held his back, sighed, sat back at the table and took another sip from the tea cup. On the opposite side of the table the colonel's tea steamed solitary and right next to his beret – he had forgotten it in his haste. The head of the station made a grimace and began again, this time half loud, to argue with the

absent colonel. It was still about the same topic – but this time he found new arguments, so that he didn't think of in the heat of the moment.

At Sevastopolskaya many dark jokes circulated over just why the neighboring station was called Tschertanovskaya; you could read the word "Tschort" (devil) too clearly out of its name. The mills of the hydroelectric plants extended rather far into its direction and although it was supposed to be abandoned, nobody in their right mind thought about occupying or acquiring it. The teams of technicians that had built the outer generators and regularly maintained them under supervision were always careful to not closer more than a few hundred meters to Tschertanovskaya.

Almost everyone on an expedition to the generatorse who wasn't a fanatic atheist secretly made a cross with his hands, and some even told their families goodbye.

The Tschertanovskaya was an evil station; everyone felt it from the station from even half a kilometer away. At first, in their naivety, the inhabitants of the Sevastopolskaya sent heavy armed scouting parties to extend their reach.

If they came back at all, the parties would be heavily injured and at least decimated by half. Then they sat stuttering, slobbering at the fire, so close that they clothes almost caught fire, but they never stopped trembling. They struggled to remember their experience – and one report from Tschertanovskaya is never like any other.

It is said, that beyond the main tunnel of the Tschertanovskaya, side tunnels plunged down into an enormous labyrinth of natural caves and allegedly were swarming with monsters. The people of the Sevastopolskaya called the place "the gate" – an arbitrary term, because nobody in the metro, who was still alive, had entered this part of the metro.

Although there was a story from when the line wasn't developed – supposedly a big recon unit passed through the Tschertanovskaya and discovered "the gate". Over a transmitter – a kind of cable telephone – the radio transmitter communicated that it fell down, almost vertical, at the end of a small corridor. They didn't get any further. In the coming minutes the leaders of the Sevastopolskaya heard shrill screams full of horror and pain. It was strange that the recon team didn't shoot – maybe they knew that conventional weapons wouldn't protect them. The last man of the group to be silenced was a mercenary without a conscience from the Kitai-Gorod station, who cut of the small finger of defeated enemies as a souvenir. He seemed to be some distance from the microphone that had slipped out of the hand of the radio operator, because you couldn't hear his words clearly. But after listening closely, the head of the station, understood what the man was sobbing while he was fighting for his life:

A simple prayer. One of these simple prayers that religious parents teach their small children. Then the connection broke off. After this incident all further tries to reach the Tschertanovskaya were stopped. Yes, there have been even plans to abandon the Sevastopolskaya and return to Hanza. This cursed station seemed to be one of those borders that marked the end of human rule in the metro. The creatures that pushed against these borders brought the inhabitants of the Sevastopolskaya many problems, but they weren't invulnerable and a good organized defense could fend off the attacks with light to no casualties – as long as they had enough ammunition. Some of these monsters could only be stopped with high-explosives and high voltage traps. But in most cases, the guards had deal with less terrible – but still dangerous – creatures.

"There is another one! Up there, in the third pipe!"

The upper searchlight had broken out of the frame and dangled twitching like a hanged man on the cable, scattering its hard light at the scenery of fortifications: Sometimes it illuminated cowering silhouettes of creeping mutants, other times it hid them in the darkness or blinded the guards with its glaring light. Treacherous shadows raced around, became smaller and bigger, appeared as distorted faces so that you couldn't distinguish the humans from the mutants.

The post was in a good position, because in this place two tunnels ran into one. Right before the apocalypse the Metrostroi (metro workers) began their repairs, but they were never able to finish it. The residents of the Sevastopolskaya had transformed the junction into a fortress: Two machine gun-nests, one and a half meters thick protection walls made out of sand bags, tank-stoppers out of tracks, high voltage traps and a carefully thought out alarm system. But when the mutants came in waves, like on this day, it seemed as if the fortress could fall any minute

The machine-gunner mumbled in a monotone voice to himself. Bloody bubbles came out of his nostrils, and he looked surprised at the shiny red wet palms of his hands. The air around the Petscheng (it is a heavy machine gun) flickered in because of the heat, but now the damned thing was jammed. The gunner made a short grunting sound and leaned against the shoulder of his neighbor, a colossal fighter with a closed titan-helmet and turned silent. In the next second they heard a bloodcurdling scream and the creature attacked.

The man with the helmet pushed the blood-smeared machine gunner out of the way, stood up, raised his Kalashnikov and fired a short burst. The disgusting, sinewy, grey-skinned animal had already jumped; spread its claws and flight membranes, flying at them shrieking. The hail of bullets ended the scream and the dead animal continued to fly into the same direction. Then the 150-kilo body slammed into the sand bags and created a thick cloud of dust.

"That's it."

The seemingly never ending onslaught of creatures that came out of the sawed-off pipes on the tunnel ceiling, just a minute ago, stopped. The guards left their cover carefully.

"A stretcher! A doctor! Bring him to the station, fast!"

The colossal man that killed the last animal attached a bayonet to his assault rifle and approached the dead and injured creatures that were lying around on the battlefield leisurely. He pushed down the head of the first animal and ran the bayonet right through its eye, then repeated the process until he was sure that every creature was dead. Finally he leaned himself against the sand bags, looked to the tunnel, raised the visor of his helmet and took a sip out of his canteen.

The reinforcements from the station arrived after everything was already over. Even the commander of the outer guard posts came limping, breathing heavy, cursing at his illness and with his jacket open. "Were do I get three men now? Am I supposed to cut them out my body?"

"What are you talking about Denis Michailovitsch?" asked one of the guards.

"Istomin wants to send a recon team to Serpuchovskaya. He is afraid for the caravan. So where do I get three men now? Especially now ..."

"Still nothing new?" asked the man with the canteen without turning around.

"Nothing", reassured the old man. "But not a lot of time has passed. What would be more dangerous? If we weaken the south now, there might be no one left to greet the caravan when it arrives."

The other one shook his head and went silent. He still didn't move when the colonel asked if any of guards would join the three men team.

There were enough volunteers. Most of the guards had enough of sitting around and couldn't imagine anything more dangerous than guarding the southern tunnels.

From the six volunteers, the colonel choose who he thought to be expendable. A reasonable thought: none of them would return.

It had been three days since they had sent the recon team on the railcar. The commander thought that the others were whispering behind his back and looking at him with distrust. Even the most intense conversations ceased when he entered, and the tense silence that followed seemed to be a silent request: Explain it to us, justify yourself.

But he only did his job – ensuring the security of the outer guard posts of the Sevastopolskaya. He was a tactician, a strategist. They didn't have enough soldiers anyway. What right does he have to waste them on doubtful and senseless expeditions?

Three days ago he was absolutely convinced. But now, because every afraid, disapproving, doubting look was hallowing out his certainty, he was starting to doubt as well.

A recon team with light weapons didn't even need a day on the way to Hanza and back – even accounting for possible fire fights and delays through the independent stations.

The commander ordered to let nobody enter, closed the door to his small office, pressed his hot forehead against the cold wall and started mumbling. For the hundredth time he went through all possibilities. What happened to the merchants? What happened to the recon team?

The people of the Sevastopolskaya weren't afraid of humans – except maybe of Hanza's army. The bad reputation of the station, the inflated stories told by the few eye witnesses about how dear the inhabitants had to pay for their own survival – all that was spread by the merchants throughout the metro using word of mouth.

And soon that proved results. The leaders of the station realized quickly what advantages a reputation like theirs would bring them and took the fortifications of the station in their own hands. Informants, merchants, travelers and diplomats were allowed, with an official permission, to spread the most horrible lies about the Sevastopolskaya and the neighboring stations.

Only a few were able to look behind this curtain of smoke and lies and realize the true potential of the station.

In some isolated cases during the last years, unaware bandits tried to break through the outer guard posts, but the war machine of the Sevastopolskaya, lead by former generals, destroyed them without problems.

The recon team on the railcar had gotten clear orders: If they were to encounter any threats, they were to avoid any confrontations and return immediately.

Of course there was also the Nagornaya on the route – not a place as terrible as Tschertanovskaya, but still fatal. And then the Nachimovski prospect, which doors to the surface couldn't be closed and had been overran by monsters from the surface. To blow up the entrance was not an option for the Sevastopolskaya, because the stalkers were using the surface access of the Nachimovski prospect for their expeditions. Nobody dared passing through the station on their own, but until now every railcar was able to deal with the creatures that occasionally lurked there.

A cave in? The groundwater? An act of sabotage? A sudden raid by Hanza? It was the colonel, not Istomin that had to answer to the wives of the missing recon team, while they looked into his eyes unsettled and asking, hoping to find a promise or consolation. He had to explain it to the soldiers in the garrison. At least they didn't ask any unnecessary questions and were – until now – loyal to him. And in the end he had to calm down everyone who gathered at the stations clock after work and wanted to know how long the caravan had been gone. Istomin had said, that he had been asked why the lights of the station had been dimmed. Sometimes he had even been asked to bring the lights back to full power. Even though nobody had even thought about powering down the electricity, the lighting was set to maximum. It wasn't the station, but the hearts of the people that had gotten darker and even mercury lamps couldn't change that.

The telephone line to the Serpuchovskaya was still dead. That took a feeling away from the colonel that was rare for the rest of the metro: The feeling of being close to other humans. As long as the communication was functioning, as long as caravans came and went regularly, as long as the journey to Hanza wouldn't take more than one day, all residents were free to come and go whenever they wanted. Everyone knew that just five tunnels further the real metro began, civilization – humanity.

Arctic scientists probably felt the same when they agreed – out of scientific interest or because of the high wages – to endure the fight against the cold and loneliness for months. They were thousands of miles away from the mainland, but the radio remained at their sides at all times and once a month they could hear the sound of an airplane dropping off canned meat.

The ice floe on which the Sevastopolskaya precariously balanced had broken loose from the mainland of humanity and every hour drove it further into a dark ocean, into emptiness and uncertainty.

The wait went on and the colonel's concerns turned into certainty: he would never see the three men from the recon team that he had sent to the Serpuchovskaya ever again.

To pull off another three fighters from the outer guard post and expose them to the same uncertain dangers was impossible. He couldn't afford their certain death, which wouldn't give them a way out either. He thought that it was still too early to close the southern tunnels, open the hermetic doors and form a big strike team. Why did he have to make this decision? A decision that was wrong either way. The colonel sighed, opened the door a bit, looked around hastily and called the guard to him.

"Do you have a cigarette for me? This time it's the last, next time don't give me one, no matter how hard I plead.

And don't tell anyone."

When Nadia brought the pot with meat and vegetables the guards became alive again. Potatoes, cucumbers and tomatoes were considered as delicacies and except for a few markets in the Sevastopolskaya, the Ring, and Polis, nobody offered them anymore. This wasn't just because of the lack of water, and the difficulty of cultivating the seeds. Almost nobody in the metro had enough electricity to grow crops that needed sunlight, like vegetables.

Even the leaders of the station didn't get vegetables except for the holidays, because it was mostly grown for children who needed the nutrients. Istomin had to argue heavily with the cooks and convince them to add a few potatoes and tomatoes – to improve morale.

When Nadia laid down her combat rifle and raised the pot's lid, the wrinkles on the faces of the guards started to smooth over immediately. Nobody would have wanted to talk about the missing caravan or the lost recon team now – it would have ruined their appetite.

An older man with a cotton wool jacket and small metro emblems sewed on to it, stirred around the potatoes in his bowl and said smiling: "Today I had to think about the Komsomolskaya the entire day. I would really like to see it again. Those mosaics! The most beautiful station in all of Moscow, I think."

"Oh stop it Homer," said an unshaven, fat man with a warm fur ushanka.

"You lived there and it is obvious that you still like it. But what about the stained glass at the Novoslobodskaya? And the wonderful pillars and the ceiling fresco at the Mayakowskaya?"

"I always liked the Ploschtschad Revolyuzii," admitted a shy man, just out of his teens, appointed as a sharpshooter. "I know it is stupid, but I liked those dark sailors and pilots, the border patrols with the dogs ... even when I was a child."

"I don't think it is stupid at all," agreed Nadya while she collected the scraps of the stew.

"Especially since some of the male statues were very handsome. Hey brigadier! Get on it or you won't get anything!"

The tall, broad-shouldered fighter who sat alone, approached the campfire with leisurely steps, took his ration and returned to his place – if possible close to the tunnel, and if possible as far away from the people.

The fat man pointed his head at the broad back of the man, who just returned into the darkness and whispered:

"Does he ever go to the station?"

"No, he has been sitting here for over a week" answered the sharpshooter as silent as the other man.

"He sleeps in a sleeping bag ... Maybe he needs it. Three days ago, when the creatures almost devoured Rinat, he killed every last of them. With his own hands. For fifteen minutes.

When he returned, his boots and rifle were full of blood. And he looked very satisfied doing it."

"That's not a human, but a machine," said the gaunt machine-gunner. "I wouldn't like to sleep near him. Did you see what happened to his face?"

The old man, who was called Homer, shrugged his shoulders and said: "Strange, I really only feel safe when he is around. What do you want from him? The guy is alright, he just got hit. For what do we need beauty, it is for the other stations. And by the way: Your Novoslobodskaya is the tip of a mountain of bad taste. And I can't even watch those stained windows when I am sober ... stained windows, laughable!"

"And a Kolcho-mosaic over half the ceiling is no bad taste?"

"Please tell me where you saw a Kolcho-mosaic in the Komsomolskaya?"

Now the fat man got going. "The whole damned soviet art has only one theme: The life on a Kolchese and our heroic pilots!"

"Seryosha, leave the pilots out of it," warned the sharpshooter.

Suddenly a hollow, deep voice said: "The Komsomolskaya is shit and the Novoslobodskaya as well."

The fat man was so surprised that he wasn't able to say a single word and he stared at the brigadier who was still sitting in the dark. The others stopped talking as well. The stranger did almost never participate in any conversations.

Even when someone asked him something, he answered, if at all with one word.

He still had his back turned at them, continuously looking into the mouth of the tunnel. "At the Komsomolskaya the ceiling is too high and the pillars are too thin, the whole station lies in the open. Also it is very hard to barricade all passage ways. And at the Novoslobodskaya all of the walls have cracks, it doesn't matter how often they repaired them. You can destroy the entire station with one grenade. And the stained windows are already broken. Way too brittle."

One could have countered this argument very well, but nobody dared to raise their voice. The brigadier was silent for a while, then he said casually: "I am going to the station. Come with me Homer. Shift changes in one hour. Arthur you are in command."

The sharpshooter stood up hastily and nodded his head, even though the brigadier wasn't looking at him. Even the old man stood up and gathered his possessions, even though he wasn't finished with eating. When the fighter returned to the campfire he was already in full gear and carrying his enormous rucksack.

As the contrasting figures – the colossal brigadier and the thin Homer – gradually entered into the lit part of the tunnel, the sharpshooter followed them with his eyes. Then he rubbed his cold hands together and realized he was shaking.

"I'm feeling cold. Someone put more coals on the fire."

On their way the brigadier didn't speak a single word. He only asked if Homer really once had been working in the metro and if he had ever drove a train. The old man looked at him with a distrusting look at first, but then he nodded his head.

He said he drove trains at the Sevastopolskaya, but he never mentioned that he used to maintain tracks before that. That was a embarrassing subject.

The brigadier greeted the guards with a military salute.

Those stepped out of his way and he entered the office of the head of the station without knocking.

Istomin and the colonel stood up surprised from their chairs and walked into his direction. Both looked tousled somehow, tired and lost.

While Homer remained shyly at the entrance, stepping from one leg onto the other, the brigadier took off his helmet, put it right on top of Istomin's papers and scratched his clean-shaven head. You could see once again how badly distorted his face was: The left cheek had contracted like after a heavy fire injury, the eye above it was a small crack and a big violet scar ran from his mouth to his ear. Although Homer knew this sight; chills still ran down his back, like he had seen it for the first time.

"I will go to the Ring line myself," said the brigadier.

He hadn't even greeted any of them. Deep silence followed. Homer already knew that the man was an extraordinary fighter and that had earned him a special reputation with the leaders of the station. But it took him until now to realize that compared to other inhabitants of the Sevastopolskaya the brigadier didn't follow orders. He wasn't waiting for a permission of the two old and exhausted men; it almost seemed like he was giving them orders and expected them to follow them. And again – how many times now? – Homer asked himself: Who was this man?

The colonel looked at Istomin. His face darkened as if he wanted to argue.

"Whatever you want, Hunter," he said. "Nobody can talk you out of it anyway."

Return (Chapter 2)

Homer listened. Hunter. He had never heard that name at the Sevastopolskaya. It sounded like a nickname – like his own, of course he wasn't called Homer, but Nikolai Ivanovitsch. They named him after the creator of the Greek epics, because he loved stories and rumors of all kind.

"Your new brigadier," said the colonel to the guards in the southern tunnel two months ago. They looked at the broad-shouldered man in the Kevlar armor and the heavy helmet with distrust and curiosity. He just looked at them indifferently and returned to the fortifications as if he couldn't care less. He shook the hands of those who came to introduce themselves, but didn't speak a word. He nodded his head silently, remembered their names and puffed blue smoke in their faces like he wanted to keep them at distance. His lifeless eye shimmered in the shadow of his folded up visor. Not then nor later the guards dared to ask for his name and so he remained "the brigadier". It seemed that the station had hired a mercenary that didn't need a name.

Hunter.

While Homer stood in the entrance of Istomin's office undecided he formed the strange word silently with his lips. It didn't fit for a human – more for a shepherd hound. He couldn't suppress a smile: actually there had been such dogs here. How did all this come to his head?

A militant race, with a shortened tail and ears directly on the head – nothing superfluous.

But the more often he said his name, the more he thought that he knew it. Where had he heard it? It probably got stuck in the endless stream of legends and rumors and had sunken to the ground of his mind. Meanwhile a thick layer of names, facts, rumors and numbers had appeared in his mind – all that useless data about the lives of other humans that Homer had always listened to eagerly and tried to remember faithfully.

Hunter ... a criminal with a price on his head from Hanza? Homer threw a stone into the dim lake of his mind and listened. No. A stalker? Didn't match his appearance. A field commander? More like it. And apparently a legend as well. Homer studied the face of the brigadier in secret. The name of a dog suited him surprisingly good.

"I still need two men. Homer comes with me, he knows these tunnels." The brigadier didn't ask for his approval and nor did he turn to him.

"And a runner, a currier. I will leave today." Istomin nodded his head, but then he gave the colonel an asking look.

The colonel mumbled his approval, even though he had fought like a wildcat for the same issue with the commander. Homer's opinion didn't seem to interest anyone, but he didn't think about protesting at all. Despite his age he had never refused any missions like this one. He had his reasons.

The brigadier took his helmet from the table and moved to the exit. He held the door for a moment and said in Homers direction: "Say goodbye to your family. Arm yourself for a long march. Don't take ammunition with you; you'll get it from me."

Then he disappeared.

Homer ran after Hunter to find out what would await him on this expedition. But when he stepped on the train station he saw that Hunter had already left. It was pointless to try to catch up to him. Homer looked after him and shook his head.

Against his habit the brigadier didn't put on his helmet. Maybe he was in thoughts or he needed more air. He passed a few young girls that sat on the train platform. They were pig shepherds on a break. One of them whispered: "Look, what a monster."

"Where did you dig him up?" asked Istomin. Relieved he sank into his chair and reached for a package of his beloved tobacco.

The cigarettes that were smoked in this station had been allegedly found by a stalker near the Bitzewski Place. One time the colonel had held a Geiger-counter next to the cigarettes and the counter started to tick.

After that he decided to stop smoking immediately and the coughing that had haunted his nights as he dreamed about lung cancer became less frequent. Istomin on the other hand refused to pay the story about the radiation much credit. And he wasn't so wrong – in the entire Metro there was almost nothing that didn't radiate more or less.

"He has known us forever." replied the colonel unwillingly. After a short break he added: "Back then he was different. Something must have happened to him."

"According to his face something has happened to him for sure."

Istomin coughed and looked nervous to the entrance as if he feared Hunter could hear his words. The commander of the outer guard posts didn't want to complain that the brigadier had emerged out of the mist of the past; ultimately he had transformed himself into the most important support of the southern guard post immediately. But Denis Michailovitsch still couldn't believe the return of his old friend entirely.

The news of Hunter's terrible and strange death had spread like an echo through the tunnels last year. And when he appeared in front of the colonel's door without warning, he had made a cross with his hand. How he had passed the guard posts without being noticed – as if he had walked right through the fighters – increased Hunter's supernatural aura.

The silhouette, which he saw through the peephole, was familiar to him: Broad shoulders, the shaved head, and the slightly dented nose. But the nightly guest remained where he was; his head, oddly, slightly turned to the side. He didn't try to break the tense silence. The colonel looked at the bottle of sweet wine on his table with regret, sighed deeply and unlocked the door. His codex demanded that he helped everyone of his own kind – regardless if they were alive or dead.

Hunter looked up at first when he stepped through the door. It became apparent why he had turned his face. He had probably feared that the colonel wouldn't have recognized him otherwise. Denis Michailovitsch had seen much while commanding the garrison, but Hunter's wound still struck him.

Then he laughed insecurely, like if he wanted to excuse his undisciplined behavior.

The guest didn't even show a hint of a smile. In this night he didn't smile a single time. His terrible wounds had healed in the last months, but this man had nothing in common with the Hunter that Denis Michailovitsch remembered.

He didn't lose a single word about his miraculous rescue, his long absence and he didn't seem to hear the amazed questions from the colonel as well. Rather he asked Denis Michailovitsch to tell nobody of his return. Would have the colonel followed his commonsense he would have informed the elders right away – but there was an old debt that he had to repay Hunter and so he let him in peace. Nonetheless Denis Michailovitsch started to research in secret. Truly, everybody thought that his guest was dead.

He wasn't involved in any crimes nor was he being sought-after. They had never found Hunter's body – that was for sure – otherwise he would have surely tried to contact them. The colonel agreed. But he appeared, to express it better: his vague – and in those cases normal – shadow appeared in a good dozen half true myths and stories. It seemed he liked his role and kept his companions believing that he was dead.

Denis Michailovitsch remembered his old debt and came to the only conclusion: He relaxed and played the game.

When others were with them he never used Hunter's real name. He only told Istomin the truth, but didn't go into detail. But not many cared, because the brigadier had earned his daily ration of soup many times over. He guarded the posts in the southern tunnel day and night; at the station he appeared maybe once a week – on bath day. And even if he just appeared in this hell to hide from his pursuers, Istomin didn't mind. He knew to appreciate the service of legionnaires with dark pasts – the only thing that he demanded from them was to fight and in this case that wasn't a problem at all.

The guards that had complained about the condescending nature of the new brigadier became silent after the first battle. When they saw how methodically, sunken in some kind of cold frenzy, he destroyed everything that there was to destroy, everyone came to their own conclusion.

Nobody wanted to become his friend, but everyone followed his orders without any complain, so that he never had to raise his broken voice. There was something in his voice, something like a hypnotizing sound of a snake and even the head of the station nodded his head obediently whenever he talked to him – even if he hadn't finished talking, just in case.

For the first time in ages the air in Istomin's office felt a lot lighter – as if a silent thunderstorm had passed, created by the strong tension. There was no more reason to argue, because there was no better fighter than Hunter. But if he died in the tunnels there would be no other option for the Sevastopolskaya.

“Should I order the preparations for the operation?” asked Denis Michailovitsch.

“You've got three days. That should be enough.”

Istomin closed his lighter and his eyes. “We can no longer wait for them. How many people do we need?”

“The strike team is ready. I will take care of the second one, which should be another 20 men.

When we don't hear anything from them after the day after tomorrow,” he pointed his head at the exit, “then you have to make everybody ready to leave. We will try to break through.”

Istomin raised his eyebrows but didn't answer; he just kept smoking his self-made cigarette. Denis Michailovitsch picked up some of the papers and started circling names, using a system that only he understood.

To break through? The colonel looked past Istomin's grey neck and through the tobacco smoke at the map of the Metro that was hanging on the wall. Yellow, dirty and covered with small signs this plan was a chronicle of the last century. Arrows for recon missions, circles for sieges, stars for guard posts and exclamations marks for forbidden zones.

Ten years had been documented in this plan, ten years, and not a single day had passed without blood spilling.

Under the Sevastopolskaya, right behind the station named Juschnaya the markings stopped. As far as Istomin could remember, nobody had ever returned from there. The line ran down with a lot of white areas, like one of the old maps that the first Spanish conquerors had when they arrived on the shores of India. Like a branched root. But a conquest of the entire line was too big for the people of the Sevastopolskaya – no exhaustion by the irradiated people would have been enough.

And now the white fog of uncertainty covered their godforsaken line that went on to Hanza, to humanity. If the colonel had ordered all the people to fight, no one would refuse. At the Sevastopolskaya the war for the destruction of mankind, which had lasted for two centuries, had never

stopped for a minute. If you live long enough in the face of death, fear makes place for fatalism, talismans, believes and instincts.

But who knew what waited for them between the Nachimovski prospect and the Serpuchovskaya? Who knew if they could break through this mysterious obstacle or if there was still something behind it that was worth fighting for?

Istomin thought about his last trip to the Serpuchovskaya: Markets, homeless on benches and those who still had something sleeping behind curtains. This station didn't produce anything; they didn't have any animal farms or greenhouses. The residents of the Serpuchovskaya were thieves but they were smart. They lived from speculation, sold expired goods that they had bought from late caravans for almost nothing. They also offered the inhabitants of the Ring line services that could have brought them in front of the courts at Hanza. This station was a parasite, a fungus, a growing tumor inside the powerful Hanza.

It was the last union of rich trade stations, appropriately named after the German model, a stronghold for civilization in the Metro. Everything else sank into barbarism and poverty. There was a real army in Hanza, electrical light and even in the poorest parts a piece of bread for everyone that had earned the much sought after stamp of citizenship.

Even on the black market those cost a fortune, and if the border patrol caught somebody with a fake passport it would have cost you your head.

Hanza owed its wealth and power to its extraordinary place: The Ring line united all other lines of the star shaped complex together and opened up the possibility to switch from one line to any other line. Traveling merchants that brought Tea from the VDNKh, trolleys that brought ammunition from the weapons forges of Baumskaya – they all unloaded their cargo at the nearest toll station of Hanza and returned back home. It was always easier for them to sell their goods at the safe Hanza than to embark on a hunt for higher profits throughout the whole Metro, which often proved fatal.

It sometimes happened that Hanza affiliated neighboring stations, but mostly those were left to their own fate – a tolerated grey area, in which the leaders of Hanza didn't want to get involved in. Of course those "Radial Stations" were filled with Hanza's spies, and to be exact – the stations had been bought a long time ago by the businessmen of Hanza. But they remained, formally, independent. So was it with the Serpuchovskaya.

In one of the tunnels between this station and the Tuskaya a train had broken down on that day a long time ago. Istomin had marked the place with a Catholic Cross, because the wagon that stood in the midst of the tunnel and was inhabited by members of a Christian sect. They had transformed this lifeless part of the tunnel into an oasis in a black desert.

Istomin had nothing against the sect. Their missionaries lingered in the neighboring stations, trying to save fallen souls, but these shepherds never came to the Sevastopolskaya nor did they hinder passing travelers with their missionary talk. The clean and empty tunnel between Tuskaya and Serpuchovskaya were preferred by the caravans.

Once again Istomin looked along the line. The Tuskaya? Their residents lived from what the bypassing convoys of the Sevastopolskaya and the smart merchants from Serpuchovskaya left behind. They repaired every possible technical piece of scrap metal and others searched for day jobs. For days they sat there and waited for one of the foremen offering slave labor. They were poor as well, but at least they didn't have the greasy crook look in their eyes like the people from the Serpuchovskaya. And in this station there was order, outside dangers welded people together.

The next station was the Nagatinskaya. On Istomin's plan it was marked with a short line, meaning that it was uninhabited. But that was only half the truth. Nobody remained there very long. Only shady figures resided there, living like animals. Absolute darkness reigned there and small groups hid from strangers. Only scarcely the dim shine of a campfire lit through the pillars and illuminated the dark

figures that held a secret meeting. Only unknowing and brave individuals stayed overnight because not all of the inhabitants of this station were humans. In the whispering darkness of the Nagatinskaya you could sometimes see the grotesque silhouettes of creatures scouring in the dark. And sometimes the shrill scream of a homeless person filled the remaining residents with fear until the victim got dragged into a cave and eaten.

Nobody dared to go further than Nagatinskaya, so the area between this station the strongholds from the Sevastopolskaya was an empty wasteland. It wasn't entirely empty though – and the scouts from Sevastopolskaya tried not to meet the creatures lurking there.

But now something new has emerged out of the tunnels. Something unknown. Something that swallowed everybody that tried to pass through this supposedly explored route. How should Istomin know if his station, even if every able resident picked up a weapon, would form an army big enough to deal with this unseen danger? He stood up burdened, walked to the map and marked the area between the Serpuchovskaya and the Nachimovskaya prospect with a pen. Right next to it he placed a big question mark. He wanted to place it next to the word "prospect" but somehow it landed next to the Sevastopolskaya.

At first glance you could believe that the Sevastopolskaya was uninhabited. No trace of army tents in the train station that served them as homes at most stations. But instead they had barricades of sandbags, which looked like big ant hills in the weak lights of the lamps. Those barricades were never manned and the quadratic pillars were covered with a thick layer of dust. Everything was built so that a stranger that passed through would think this station was abandoned.

But as soon as the unwanted guest just thought about staying here, he risked staying here forever. Then machine-gun teams and the snipers, which stayed at the neighboring Kavochskaya, manned their posts in seconds and instead of the dim lamps, powerful quicksilver search lights on the ceiling were activated, burning the eyes of all invaders, humans or monster. Neither were used to the strong light.

The train station was the last carefully planned line of defense of the Sevastopolskaya. Their homes were located in the belly of this deceptive station – under the station. Under the enormous granite plate, invisible from foreign eyes, there was another floor not much smaller than the station above, but divided into smaller cells. There were the lit, dry and warm apartments, the steady humming air filters and water purifier, hydroponic greenhouses ... it seemed that the residents of this station felt only safe and comfortable when they retreated further into the ground.

Homer knew that the crucial battle didn't await him in the tunnel, but at his home. While he walked through the narrow hallway, past the half open doors of the former service rooms which were now where the residents of the Sevastopolskaya lived, his steps slowed down more and more. He thought of his tactics and revisited his answers as time ran out.

"What am I supposed to do? Orders are orders. You know how the situation yourself. They didn't even ask me. Don't blow it out of proportion – that is ridiculous! No I didn't volunteer. Refuse? Out of the question. That would be desertion, understand?"

He mumbled on and on, sometimes outraged and determined, sometimes gentle and pleading.

On the doorstep of his apartment he went over everything again. It seemed a scene wouldn't be avoidable, but he wouldn't back down. He made a dark look and opened the door ready for a fight.

From the nine and a half square meters apartment – very luxurious, he had waited for one for four years while living in a dirty tent – was occupied by a two-story military bunk bed, a small neat dining table and three big stacks of newspapers that reached to the ceiling. Would he have been an old bachelor that mountain would have already buried him. But fifteen years ago he had met Yelena, who tolerated the dusty old papers in their small apartment, kept them in order and away from the stove; otherwise this mountain would have transformed itself into to a papery Pompeii long ago.

She also tolerated so many other things. The endless alarming parts from newspapers with titles like "The arms race goes on", "Americans test anti-rocket system", "Our rocket shield grows", "Farewell

to peace” and “The time for patience is over” that covered all of the walls like wallpaper; him staying all night hovering over a stack of notebooks, a gnawed on pen in his hand – using electrical light instead of candles, no option with all the newspaper around; his jesting nickname, that he carried with pride, but that evoked a joking smile by everyone else that said it.

She tolerated so much, but not everything. Not his juvenile eagerness and curiosity, that brought him into the middle of a storm every time there – and that with almost 60 years of experience! Nor the ease with what he accepts all the orders from above, without thinking about the last expedition that had almost cost his life.

If he had died ... he didn't want to think about it.

When Homer left for guard's duty once a week, she never remained in the house. She fled with her troubled thoughts to the neighbors or went to work, even if she didn't had to – it didn't matter where, everywhere was fine if it distracted her from thinking that her husband had already died, laying on the ground, dead and cold. She thought that his typical male composure regarding death was stupid, egoistic, yes, even criminal.

Fate had wanted it that she had already returned from work to change her clothes. She had put her arms through the sleeves of her patched jacket when he entered. Her dark, slightly grayed hair – she hadn't even turned 50 – was tousled and you could see fear in her brown eyes. “Kolya ... did something happen? I thought you had guard duty till late in the night?”

His courage to start his argumentation dissolved immediately. Of course this time others were responsible, he could have said that they forced him, with clean consciences. But now he hesitated. Maybe he should calm her down first and mention it later – casually – during dinner?

“I am asking just one thing from you: Don't lie to me.” she warned him as she stared at his desperate, wandering eyes.

“Lena,” he started. “I have to tell you something ...”

“Did somebody ...” she asked the most important, most feared question right away. Did somebody die, but she didn't spoke it out loud, like if she feared that her words would make it happen.

“No! No ...” Homer shook his head and added: “The freed me from guard duty. They are sending me to the Serpuchovskaya. Don't think it will be dangerous.”

“But ...” Yelena didn't know what to say. “But that is ... did they already return, the ...”

“It is all nonsense.” he interrupted her hastily. “There is nothing”. The conversation turned into an unexpected direction. Instead dealing with curses that he is trying to play a hero and wait for a good moment of reconciliation, he now had to face a far harder test.

Yelena turned away, stepped to the table, put the salt from the table somewhere else and smoothed a wrinkle in the tablecloth. “I had a dream ...” she stopped and cleared her throat.

“You always have one.”

“A bad one.” she said stubbornly. Then she started crying.

“What? What am I ... it's an order.” He stuttered and stroked over her fingers. He realized that his tirades weren't worth a cent now.

“The one-eyed should go himself! She called out angrily and moved her hand away. “Oh that devil with his beret! They can only boss around others ... What does he have to lose? He is married to his rifle! What does he know?”

When you make a women cry, the only thing left is to hold her in your arms. Homer was ashamed of himself, he was really sorry. But it was too easy to give in now, to swear that he won't follow that order, to calm her down and dry her tears – and to remember this missed chance forever. Maybe the last chance in his long life.

So he remained silent.

It was time to gather the officers and instruct them further. But the colonel was still sitting in his office. The cigarette smoke didn't even bother him anymore, but it still tempted him.

While the commander of the station moved his finger along the line of the Sevastopolskaya on his map of the Metro and was whispering to himself, sunken in thoughts, Denis Michailovitsch tried to understand what was behind Hunter's mysterious return at the Sevastopolskaya. Why did he decide to settle down here and why did he wear his helmet in public almost all the time? That all meant that Istomin was right: Hunter was hiding from something and he had chosen the southern guard post as his hiding place. There he replaced a complete brigade and had become irreplaceable. Whoever demanded his return, whatever price had been placed on his head, neither Istomin or the colonel would have given him up.

His hiding place was brilliant. There were no strangers at the Sevastopolskaya and compared to other caravans that traveled to the "big Metro", everyone passing through this station kept their tongue behind their teeth. In this small Sparta that desperately held on to their small piece of earth on the end of the world, it was the most important thing to be reliable and relentless in battle. Here secrets still meant something.

But why did Hunter give all this up again? Why did he travel to Hanza out of his free will and risked being recognized? He had volunteered for this operation; Istomin wouldn't have dared to think about appointing it to him. It probably wasn't the fate of the lost recon unit that interested the brigadier. He didn't fight for the Sevastopolskaya because he loved the station so much, but because of his own reasons that were only known to him.

Maybe he had to fulfill an assignment? That would explain a lot of things: His sudden appearance, his secrecy, the stamina with which he holds the guard post and of course his decision to leave for the Serpuchovskaya immediately.

But then why did he forbade him to inform the others? Who could have sent him expect for them?

No, that was impossible. He was one of the Order. A man that dozens, if not hundreds of people – including Denis Michailovitsch – owed their lives to, who wouldn't be able to commit treason.

But was this Hunter that had appeared out of the void the same? If he worked for somebody did he receive a signal?

Did that mean that the disappearance of the recon unit was no accident, but a well planned operation? And what part did the brigadier play in all of this?

The colonel strongly shook his head, as if he wanted to shake away his suspicions that hang on him like leeches, becoming bigger and bigger. Why would he think this about a man that saved his life? Hunter had served the station without any mistakes and he had never given him the slightest reason for doubts. Thus Denis Michailovitsch forbade himself to think about the brigadier as a deserter, spy or something else.

He had made his decision. "Another tea and then I will go to the boys," he said overly energetic and snapped his fingers.

Istomin rose from his Metro plan and smiled tiredly. He wanted to dial the number for the adjutant when the telephone rang. Both were startled and looked at each other. They hadn't heard that sound for a week. If the officer on duty wanted something he knocked on the door and there was no one else in the station that was able to call the foreman directly.

"Istomin here," he answered carefully.

"Vladimir Ivanowitsch! The Tulskeya is on the phone" he heard the hastily voice of the adjutant, "but the connection is very bad ... probably our men ... but the connection."

"Connect me already!" Istomin screamed into the receiver and hammered his fist on the table with such force that the telephone rang in pain.

The adjutant turned silent immediately. Istomin could hear a ringing sound, then static and then he heard a distant, almost unrecognizable voice.

Yelena had turned her face towards the wall, to hide her tears. What could she still do to hold him back? Why did he always reach for the first possibility to leave the station? His miserably excuses "Orders from above" and "Desertion" – she had heard them a hundred times. What wouldn't she have given, wouldn't have tried to get rid of his nonsense in these 15 years? But once again it drew him to the tunnels, as if he thought to find something other than darkness, emptiness and doom in it. What was he searching for?

Homer knew exactly what she thought, as if she had spoken it out loud. He felt miserably, but it was too late to retreat. He opened his mouth to say something excusing, something warm, but he remained silent, with every one of his words he would just added oil to the flame.

Over Yelena's head Moscow cried. A carefully framed color-picture of the Tverskaya Uliza, shining through the translucent midsummer rain, cut out of a shiny almanac, was hanging on the wall. A long time ago, when he was able to move through the Metro freely, all of his fortune was made up by his clothes and this one picture. Others carried crumpled, torn out pages from man oriented magazines in their pockets. But for Homer that wasn't a replacement. But this picture reminded him of something unspeakable beautiful ... something that has been lost forever.

Helplessly he whispered: "Forgive me", stepped out into the hallway, closed the door carefully behind him and sat himself in front of his apartment. The door of the neighboring apartment was open and two sickly pale children played on the doorstep – a boy and a girl. When they saw Homer they stopped. The patched up teddy bear, about whom the children had argued just one second ago, fell to the ground.

"Uncle Kolya, uncle Kolya! Tell us a story! You promised to tell us one when you returned!"

Homer couldn't hold back a smile. He forgot the argument with Yelena immediately. "About what?"

"Headless mutants!" screamed the boy excited.

"No! I don't want mutants!" said the girl shocked.

"They are so terrible, they scare me!"

Homer sighed: "What story do you want, Tanyuscha?"

But the boy answered before her: "Than about the fascists! Or the partisans!"

"I want the story about the Emerald city!" said Tanya and smiled.

"But I told it yesterday. Maybe about the war of Hanza against the Reds?"

"About the Emerald city, about the Emerald city!" both yelled.

"Ok", agreed Homer. "Somewhere, behind the end of the Sokolnitscheskaya line, behind the seven abandoned stations, the three destroyed bridges and a thousand times a thousand doorways, there lies a mysterious, secret city. It is magical so humans can't enter. Wizards live there and only they can leave through their portals and enter the city through them again. On top of it, on the surface there is a castle, with towers where once the wizards lived. The name of the castle was ..."

"Virsity!" Yelled the small boy and looked at his sister triumphal.

"University", Homer nodded his head. "When the war began and the atomic bombs were dropped on the earth, the wizards retreated into the castle and laid a spell on the entrance so that the bad humans, that started the war, wouldn't be able to reach them. And then they lived ..."

Homer cleared his throat and stopped.

Yelena was leaning at the doorway, she had listened. He hadn't seen her when she stepped on the hallway.

"I'll pack your things", she said huskily. Homer walked over to her and took her hand. She clumsily laid his arms around him, it was embarrassing for her in front of the children, and asked silently: "You'll come back soon? Nothing is going to happen to you, right?"

For the thousandth time in his long life he realized how much women longed for promises – it didn't matter if he could fulfill them or not. "Everything is going to be alright."

"You are so old and you still kiss like you two just married", said the girl, making a grimace. The boy yelled after them cocky: "Daddy says that nothing of the story is true. There is no emerald city!"

"Maybe," Homer shrugged his shoulders. "It is a fairy tale. What would we do without fairy tales?" The connection was truly bad. A vaguely familiar voice fought against the terrible static: It seemed it was one of the recon team that they had sent to the Serpuchovskaya on the railcar.

"At the Tuskaya ... we can ...Tuskaya", he tried to give their position.

"Understood, you are at the Tuskaya", Istomin yelled into the receiver. "What happened? Why haven't you returned?"

"Tuskaya ... here ... you can't ... everything but ..."

Again and again parts of his sentence were swallowed by the static.

"What can't we do? Repeat, what can't we do?"

"Don't storm the station! Everything but storming the station!" it sounded out of the telephone clearly for once.

"Why?" asked Istomin "What by the devil is going on?"

But the voice was no longer to be heard. The static became louder and louder, then the line went dead. Istomin didn't want to believe it at first and kept the telephone in his hand.

"What is going on there?" he whispered.

Afterlife (Chapter 3)

That look that the guard on the northern post gave him, Homer would never forget it, as long as he lived. A look filled with admiration and melancholy, like for a fallen hero.

He could hear the salute shots of the honor regiment in the background. Like a farewell forever.

The living didn't get those looks. Homer felt like he climbed the shaky ladder of a small cabin of a plane, unable to land, that the Japanese engineers had outfitted with bombs. The emperor's flag, with the red stripes flattered in the salty wind, on the summery airfield mechanics ran around, motors roared and a thick general with wet eyes, filled with the envy of the samurai, raised his hand in a military salute ...

"Why are you so excited?" asked Achmed grimly. He on the other hand wasn't in a rush to find out what happened at the Sevastopolskaya.

His wife was standing near the train track, his oldest son on one hand, a screaming bundle in the other, holding it carefully.

"It is like a sudden banzai attack: You stand up and run directly at the machine guns", Homer tried to explain.

"Courage out of distress. In front of us lies a deadly fire ..."

"No wonder why you call it a suicide-attack" growled Achmed and looked back to the tiny bright light at the end of the tunnel. "The right thing for somebody as crazy as you. A normal human doesn't run straight into a machinegun. Those heroics don't bring anyone far."

The old one didn't answer immediately. "Well, that's the thing. When you feel that your time is over you are starting to think: What remains when I am gone? What have I accomplished?"

"Hm. I don't know about you, but I have my children. "They won't forget me." After a short pause he added: "At least not my oldest."

Homer wanted to reply upset, but Achmed's last sentence took the wind out of his sails. Of course it was easier for him to risk his old and childless hide. That boy on the other hand had his entire life in front of him and didn't need to think about achieving his immortality yet.

They had passed the last lamp; a glass can with a weak light bulb and a grit out of steel, full of burned flies and winged roaches. The chitin-mass moved almost unnoticeably: Some insects were still alive, trying to crawl out of a pit – like wounded death candidates trying to crawl out of a mass grave.

For a second Homer got stuck at the trembling, reaching, weakly-yellowish light, looking like it swelled out of graveyard's lamp. Then he took a deep breath and dove into the deep-black darkness that reached from the Sevastopolskaja to the Tulskaia – if the station still existed.

It seemed like the sad woman and her children had grown together with the granite plate. They weren't the only ones: A little bit next to them a one-eyed man with shoulders like a wrestler looked after the group that was vanishing into the darkness. Behind him a thin old man in a military jacket was silently talking with the adjutant.

"No, we can only wait." said Istomin, while he crushed the self-made cigarette.

"You can wait." answered the colonel edgily, "I will do what I have to do."

"It was Andrej. The leading officer of the railcar that we sent." Vladimir Ivanovitsch could hear the voice out of the receiver once again – he couldn't get it out of his head.

"And?" The colonel raised his brow. "Maybe he talked under torture. There are specialists that new certain methods."

"Unlikely. You didn't hear his voice. There is something different going on. Something unexplainable. A surprise attack won't matter ..."

"I can explain it to you." assured Denis Michailovitsch.

"At the Tuskaya there are bandits. They overpowered the station, killed some of our guys and took the others hostage. They didn't cut the power of course, because they need power as well and they didn't want to make Hanza nervous. They probably just turned off the telephone. How else would you explain that the telephone works some times and then it doesn't?"

"But his voice was so ..." mumbled Istomin as if he didn't even listen to the colonel.

"Well how?" exploded the colonel. The adjutant carefully took a few steps back. "When I drive a nail under your fingernail then you will scream differently! And with pliers I could turn a bass into a soprano for life!" He knew what he had to, he had made his choice. Now after he had defeated his doubts he was on a new high and his fingers twitched to his sword. Istomin can complain as much as he wants.

Istomin didn't answer immediately. He wanted to give the colonel time to blow off steam. "We are going to wait." he finally said. It sounded assuring, but relentless.

Denis Michailovitsch crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Two days."

"Two days." Istomin nodded his head.

The colonel turned around on the spot and returned to the barracks. He had no intention to lose valuable hours. The commanding officers of the strike teams already waited for about an hour at the long table. Only two chairs were empty: His and Istomin's. But this time they would have to start without their leaders.

The commander of the station hadn't realized that the colonel had already left. "It's strange how our roles have been swapped isn't it?" said Istomin sunken in thoughts.

When he got no answer he turned around and saw the helpless look of the adjutant. He made a hand gesture that he could go. He didn't recognize the colonel anymore, he thought. Normally he always refused to give up even a single fighter. He felt something, that old wolf. But could he rely on his nose this time?

Istomin's instincts said something completely different: Remain calm. Wait. The heavy infantry of the Sevastopolskaya would find some kind of mysterious and invincible enemy at the Tuskaya.

Vladimir Ivanovitsch searched his pockets, found his lighter and lit it. Smoke rings rose over him and he was looking directly into the mouth of the tunnel. Hypnotized – like a rabbit looking into the tempting mouth of a snake.

When he finished his smoke, he shook his head again and strolled back to his office. The adjutant broke free from the shadow of one of the pillars and followed him, but he kept his distance.

A damp rattling sound – a beam of light illuminated the first 50 meters of the ribbed tunnel; Hunters lamp was big and high-powered like a search light. Homer exhaled silently.

In the last few minutes he thought that the brigadier would never turn on the light.

Since they had dived into the darkness the brigadier had nothing in common with a normal human being anymore. His movement was fluently and fast like an animal. It seemed that he had only turned on the light for his followers, the Hunter trusted only his senses. He had put down his helmet and

was listening to the sounds of the tunnel. Again and again. From time to time he inhaled the rusted air as if he could smell something, which only made his suspicions stronger.

Hunter stepped through the tunnel without making any sounds and he didn't look back. It seemed that he had forgotten their existence. Achmed who only accusingly had guard duty at the southern guard post and because of that didn't know the habits of the brigadier poked the old man in his side: What was going on with him? Homer spread his arms. How was he supposed to explain it to him in two words?

Why did he even need them? Hunter seemed to feel considerably securer in these tunnels than Homer. At the same time he would have thought himself to be the guide of the group. If he would have asked the old man he could have told him much about this region. Legends, but also true stories that were mostly more terrible and bizarre than the unlikely stories that the guards told themselves at the lonely guard fire when they were bored.

Homer had a different metro plan in his head – Istomin's map was nothing compared to it. He could have filled all the white parts with his own markings and notes. Vertical shafts, open ones, even some operational service rooms and connecting lines like spider webs. As an example of his plan there was a junction between the Sevastopolskaya and the Juschnaya, so one station to the south, it ended like a gigantic hose at the gigantic train depot, the Warschavskoye that had gathered dozens of sidings like small veins.

Homer, who had a holy awe for trains, saw this depot as a dark but also mysterious place, like some kind of elephant graveyard, he could talk about it for hours, provided that there were listeners. Homer thought that the section between the Sevastopolskaya and the Nachimovski prospect was especially difficult. Preclusions and a healthy human mind demanded that they stayed together, moved forwards slowly, carefully, kept watching the walls and the floor at all times. You couldn't even keep the tunnel, where all vents and cracks had been bricked up and sealed by the construction teams of the Sevastopolskaya, behind you, out of your sight.

The darkness had only been ripped open by their light for a short time and had already grown together in to a large fog. The echo of their footsteps was thrown back from the rips of the tunnel segments and somewhere in the distance a lonely wind howled through the vents. Big, heavy drops gathered in the cracks on the ceiling and fell down. Maybe they were only made out of water, but Homer preferred to move out of their way. Just to make sure. In old times when the bloated monster city lived its life and the metro was nothing but a soulless traffic system for the restless people of the city, a young Homer that everybody just called Kolya, walked with his flashlight and iron toolbox through the tunnels.

The way there was prohibited for mortals. The only things that were meant for them were around 150 polished marble pillars and tight wagons that were covered with colorful advertising. Even though they spent between two or three hours in the rocking trains of the metro, millions of people weren't aware that they only saw a tenth of this unimaginable big underground kingdom face to face. And so that they wouldn't start to think about its real extent or about where the inconspicuous doors and iron blockades, the dark side tunnels and the over passing that had been closed for months because of reparations lead, they turned their attention away with conspicuous posters, lead them with provocative but dumb slogans into nowhere and even chased them on the escalators with wooden advertising announcements from the loudspeaker. It seemed like this to Kolya after he began to deal with secrets of this state within a state.

The colorful plan of the metro should convince curious minds that they dealt with a civilian object here. But in reality these lines in those happy colors were crossed by invisible lines of military tunnels that lead into government bunkers and military depots. Even some lanes were connected by a labyrinth of catacombs, out of the hidden times of the city.

When Kolya was very young and his country was too poor to compete with the ambitions of others, the bunkers and air raid shelters that had been build for judgment day collected dust. But with money people returned with bad intentions. Rusted, weighting tons, doors opened creaking, food and medicament supplies were renewed and air and water filters were brought back on the newest level. Just in time.

The job in the metro was like a welcome into the society of the freemasons. He felt like that because he came from a small town. Once an unemployed loner, now a member of one of the most powerful organizations that rewarded his humble service generously and brought him insight into the deepest secrets of the world order. He also liked the pay of his job; they didn't request much from future service men.

It took him some time to realize through his colleges hesitant explanations why the metro organization had to lure their employees with high wages and extra money for dangerous work. No it wasn't even for tight work shifts and the voluntary sacrifice of daylight. It was about totally different dangers.

Homer, a skeptical man, never paid much attention to the never dying rumors or even darker tells of the devils work in the tunnel. But one day one of his colleges didn't return from his site inspection of the service tunnels. Like the man all documents vanished that he had ever worked in the metro.

Only Kolya, still young and naïve didn't want to settle with the disappearance of his friends. Until one of the older employees took him to the side and whispered, looking around hastily, that they had "taken" his friend. Kolya realized just too well that something sinister was going on in the Moscow underground and that long before Armageddon broke over the huge city and destroyed all life with its flaming breath.

The loss of his friend and the initiation into this forbidden knowledge should have scared Kolya. He should have left his work and found a different one. But his arranged marriage with the metro had progressed into a passionate affair. When he was feed up with endless wandering through tunnels he let himself be trained as a substitute train driver and secured himself a firm place in the complex metro hierarchy.

The closer he got to know this ignored world wonder, the more nostalgic he turned as he looked at the antic labyrinth, this master less, cyclonic city, a upside down reflection of the surface of Moscow, and fell in love with it. This from human hand created tartarus was worthy of a real Homer, at least the feather of a swift bird and it would have impressed him more than the island Laputa ... But it was only Kolya that honored the metro in secret and sang clumsily of its greatness. Nikolai Ivanovitsch Nikolayev. Ridiculous.

It was possible to love the mistress of the cooper mountain, but the cooper mountain in particular? (Russian fable)

But this relationship was based on love on both sides and envy. It would rob Kolya of his family and save his life.

Hunter suddenly stopped and Homer wasn't able to get up from his soft bed of memories fast enough so he ran straight into the brigadiers back without slowing down. Without saying a word he pushed the old man back and stopped again, he lowered his head and held the distorted ear into the tunnel. Like blind bats made its picture from their surrounding room it seemed that he perceived invisible sound waves as well.

Homer on the other hand felt something different: The smell of the Nachimovski prospect, a smell that you couldn't mistake for anything else. How fast they had gotten through the tunnel ... Hopefully they didn't have to pay for being allowed to pass so freely ... As if he had heard Homer's thoughts, Achmed took his assault rifle from his back and switched the safety off.

"Who is there?" whispered Homer to Hunter.

Homer smiled in secret: Who knew what the devil had brought them? Through the wide open doors of the Nachimovski prospect horrible creatures feel through the ceiling like through a funnel. But there were also permanent residents in this station. Even though they were seen as not dangerous Homer felt about them in a special way: A sticky mixture of fear and disgust.

"Small ... hairless", the brigadier tried to describe them.

That was enough for Homer: There they were. "Corpse-eaters", he said silently.

Between the Sevastopolskaya and the Tuskaya, maybe in different regions of the metro, this curse had achieved a new literally meaning in the last years.

"They feed on flesh?" asked Hunter.

"More on dead flesh," answered the old one, unsure.

These disgusting creatures – spiderlike primates – didn't attack humans; they fed on dead flesh that they had dragged down from the surface. And a big clan had made their nest at the Nachimovski prospect. The reason you could smell the disgusting-sweet smell rotting flesh in the neighboring tunnels, in the station, it was so heavy that it could make your head spin, was that they gathered dead bodies as food. Some wore their gasmasks before entering so that they could tolerate the smell.

Homer who remembered the special feature of the Nachimovski very vividly, reached hastily for his gasmask and put it over his mouth and nose.

Achmed that didn't have enough time to pack looked at it with envy and covered his nose with his arm. The miasma that grew in this station covered them, surrounded them and chased them forwards.

Hunter didn't seem to experience anything like them. "Is that toxic? Spores?" asked Hunter.

"The smell," said Homer under his mask.

The brigadier looked at Homer as if he wanted to make sure that he wasn't trying to make a joke at his expense.

Then he shrugged his broad shoulders and said: "So just the usual". He held his assault rifle more comfortably and made clear that they should follow him and continued with soft steps.

After maybe fifty meters an almost unnoticeable whispering joined the horrendous smell. Homer wiped the warm sweat from his head and tried to keep his galloping heart at bay. They were close.

Finally the shine of the lamp illuminated something, the broken lights of a train that tried so hard to fight against the rust, its headlights starring blindly into the dark; a shattered windshield ... in front of them was the first wagon of a train that blocked the tunnel like a giant cork.

The train laid hopelessly dead for a long time, but every time he saw it he had the childish wish to climb into the dusty driver cabin, touch the buttons of the panel and to imagine with his eyes closed that he was rushing through the tunnel, behind him a garland of bright lit wagons, full of people, that read, slept, stared at the advertising and tried to hold a conversation over the sound of the rushing train.

"When the alarm signal is given, you are to go to the next station. There you are to man the station. The doors are to be opened. The civilian teams have to help with the evacuation of wounded and the hermetic closure of the metro stations."

For judgment day he had gotten clear and easy instructions. Everywhere possible they were followed. Most of the trains broke down on the tracks and fell into a lethargic sleep and then there where the survivors that instead of a few weeks, what had been promised to them, now had to stay there forever. Most of the trains had been completely dismantled for inventory and spare parts.

In some places they used them as homes, but Homer, who viewed the trains as living beings, thought that that was like vandalizing a corpse, as if they had stuffed his favorite cat.

In uninhabitable places like the Nachimovski prospect time and vandals had left their mark on the train but it remained intact.

Homer couldn't turn away. The rustling and hissing that approached from the station, faded into the background and once again he heard the ghostly howling alarm siren and then the deep signal of the train that spread the unheard message, once long, twice short: "Atom!"

Brakes squeaked and through the speakers came the confusing message: "Dear passengers, because of technical emergency the train can't continue its ride..."

Nor the train driver whispering into his microphone neither his assistant Homer knew the full extent of overwhelming hopelessness of this formal sentence. The exhausting creaking sound of the hermetic gates ... they separated the living from the dead, once and for all. Protocol demanded that the doors had to be closed six minutes after the alarm had been sound and they had to be closed forever, it didn't matter how many people were still on the other side.

Those who resisted the closing of the gates were to be shot immediately.

Would a tiny police officer that normally chased homeless people and drunks out of the station be capable of shooting a man into his stomach because he resisted the ton heavy machine so that his wife with her broken heel would still be able to slip through? Would the feisty woman with her uniform and her cap, who checked tickets and had only brought two things to perfection in her 30 years of service, be able to get in and cut off a gasping old man that was still trying to pass through the door? The instructions saw six minutes for a human to become a machine. Or a monster.

The screaming of the women and the screams of the men, the unrestrained crying of the children, the sounds of the pistol and machine guns salves ... Out of every speaker the request to remain calm sounded metallic and emotionless.

Somebody unaware read it because nobody that knew would be so controlled and indifferent in repeating the same sentence over and over again: "Please remain calm!" Crying, pleading ... Again shots.

And exactly six minutes after the alarm, one minute before Armageddon – with the dull sound of a graveyard's bell the doors closed. The sound of the bolts locking in place.

Silence.

Like in a grave.

To get around the wagon they had to move along the wall. The driver had braked too late, maybe he had been distracted by something on the track. They climbed upwards over an iron ladder and found themselves in a roomy hall. It had no pillars but a half-round ceiling with egg shaped holes for the lamps. The hall was big; it included the train station and both tracks with the trains. An unbelievable elegant, easy construction, simple and laconic.

Just don't look down, not under your feet nor in front of you.

Don't look what the station had become.

A grotesque meadow of corpses, where no one ever found peace, a terrible field of flesh, covered with gnawed off skeletons, rotting bodies and ripped off parts of corpses. Grotesque creatures had dragged down greedily everything they could find in their small kingdom, a lot more than they could eat, as reserves. These reserves decayed and dissolved, but they were still growing.

The mountains of rotting flesh moved, ignoring the laws of nature, as if they breathed and from everywhere a disgusting scraping sound could be heard. The shine of the flashlight caught one of the strange creatures: Long nodular arms and legs, slack, wrinkled, hanging, hairless grey skin and a bent back. The dim eyes staring half blind around the room and the big ears moved like they had a life of their own.

The creature made a hoarse scream and retreated slowly on all limbs back through the open train door. As sluggish as this one the other corpse eaters started to climb down from their mountains of bodies. Angered they bared their teeth and growled at the group.

On two feet they wouldn't have been able to reach Homer to the chest and he knew that the cowardly creatures wouldn't attack a strong, healthy human. But the irrational horror that he felt for these creatures came with his nightly nightmares: Weakened and abandoned he was laying there alone

in an empty station and the monsters came closer and. closer. Like a drop of blood in the ocean attracted countless sharks these creatures could feel the approaching death of a stranger and rushed to look at them.

The fear of getting old, said Homer condescendingly to himself. In his time he had read books about psychology. If they would just help him now.

The corpse eaters on the other hand weren't afraid of humans. To waste a single bullet for one of these harmless corpse eaters would have been considered a criminal waste at the Sevastopolskaya. The passing caravans tried to ignore them even though the creatures liked to provoke them. At this station they had reproduced strongly and the more the group progressed, while bones broke under their boots with a disgusting breaking sound, the more corpse eaters abandoned unwillingly their meal and moved slowly back to their dwellings. Their nests were in inside the trains. And for that Homer hated them even more.

The hermetic gates of the Nachimovski prospect were open. It was said that when you passed the station quickly you would only get a small dose of unhealthy radiation, but you couldn't stay there for long. So it came that some of the trains were still well preserved: The windshields and windows weren't broken, through the open doors you could see the dirty but intact seats and also the blue paint of the train was still there. In the middle of the hall was a true mountain of twisted bodies made up by unrecognizable creatures. When Hunter reached them he suddenly stopped.

Achmed and Homer looked at each other worried and tried to see where the danger came from.

But the reason for the delay was a different one. On the edge of the mountain of bodies two little corpse eaters gnawed on the skeleton of a dog— you could hear how they creaked and growled pleasurably. They weren't able to hide in time. Maybe they hadn't finished their meal or didn't understand the signals of their older creatures or their greed had overpowered them.

Blinded by the shine of the light, but still cowering, they started their slow retreat to next wagon when they both suddenly tipped over with a dull sound and hit the ground like two filled sacks.

Homer looked at Hunter surprised while he put his heavy army pistol with the long suppressor back into his shoulder holster. The face of the brigadier was as impenetrable and dead as always.

"Seemed like they had were hungry." whispered Achmed. A little bit disgusted, a little bit curious at the dark puddles where the pulpy remains of their dead skulls lay.

"I agree." answered Hunter with an unclear voice and Homer winced.

Without turning around Hunter continued walking and Homer seemed to hear silent, greedy growling. It exhausted him, trying not to be tempted to put a bullet into the head of another creature! He talked to himself reassuring until he was the same again. He had to proof himself that he was a grown man that could control his nightmares and didn't have to act crazy. Hunter didn't seem to suppress his desire.

But what did he actually desire?

The silent demise of the two corpse eaters brought movement to the rest of the pack: The smell of fresh death chased away the boldest and slowest from the train track.

Slowly, croaking and whining they retreated to the two trains, squeezed themselves against the windows or gathered at the two doors and waited. But they didn't move.

The creatures didn't seem to feel anger and you couldn't recognize any intentions to avenge their killed brethrens or to fend off this attack. As soon as the group would leave the station they would eat the two killed corpse eaters without any hesitation.

Aggression is a trait of Hunters, thought Homer. Who survives on dead bodies doesn't need it because he doesn't have to kill. Everything living must die some day and becomes food. They just have to wait.

In the shine of the lamp they could see their monstrous grimaces looking through the dirty-greenish windows, the tilted built bodies, their hands with long claws, it was like they viewed into a

satanic aquarium. In absolute silence hundreds pairs of eyes watched every move of the small group, the heads of the creatures turned fully synchronized with the passing humans movement. The small balls in their formaldehyde glasses must have probably looked at the visitors of Petersburg's art chamber the same way, if their eyes wouldn't have been sewed shut as a precaution.

Even though the hour of atonement for his godless view of the world came closer and closer for Homer, he couldn't overcome himself to believe in god or the devil. If there was a purgatory than he was looking straight at it.

Sisyphus was damned to fight against gravity, Tantalus sentenced to endure torture through eternal thirst. For Homer in his wrinkled train driver uniform there was a dead station waiting for him, with this monstrous ghost train, filled with its inhabitants, that reminded him of medieval gargoyles and the laughter and mocking of all gods that where seeking revenge. And when the train left the station the tunnel would transform itself, just like in the old metro-legends into a moebius band, a dragon eating it's on tail.

Hunter had lost all interest in the station and its inhabitants. He left the rest of the hall behind him with quick steps. Achmed and Homer had problems keeping up with the hasting brigadier.

The old man had the wish to turn around, to scream and to shoot, to do anything that would scare this bold spawn away just like his heavy thoughts. But instead he followed with his head lowered and tried not to step on any rotting body parts. Achmed did the same as he did. While they fled the Nachimovski prospect nobody thought about looking back.

The ball of light from Hunters lamp flew from one spot to the next as if it followed an invisible acrobatic through a fatal circus but even the brigadier did no longer pay attention to what the light illuminated.

In the light of the lamp you were able to see fresh bones and a definitely human head that had been gnawed on, for a second and then they disappeared into darkness.

Right next to it, like a pointless shell laid a steel helmet and a Kevlar vest.

You could still see the with white color printed word on it: SEVASTOPOLSKAYA.

Ties (Chapter 4)

“Dad ... dad! It’s me, Sasha!” She loosened the straps of her father’s helmet from his swollen chin. Then she reached for the rubber of the gasmask, pulled it from his sweaty hair and threw it away like a wrinkly, deadly-grey scalp.

His chest raised and lowered itself heavily, his fingers scrapped over the concrete and his watery eyes looked at her without blinking. He didn’t answer.

Sasha laid a bag under his head and stormed to the gate. She pushed her thin shoulder against the enormous gate, took a deep breath and crunched her teeth. The ton heavy mountain of iron retreated reluctantly, turned around and fell groaning into its lock. Sasha looked it again and sank to the ground. One minute, all he needed was just one minute for him to catch his breath ... soon he would return to her.

Every expedition cost her father more strength. It was almost hopeless in the face of their weak harvest. Every expedition shortened his life not by days, but by weeks, yes even months. But it was their need that forced him to do so. When they no longer had anything to sell, there was only one thing to do, eat Sasha’s pet rat, the only thing in this hostile station and then shoot themselves. If he would have let her, she would have taken his place and would have gone. How often had she asked him for his gasmask so that she could go up on her own, but he remained relentless. He probably knew that this holey piece of rubber with its filled up filters wasn’t any better than a talisman but he would have never admitted that. He lied that he knew how to clean the filters, even after hours of expeditions he acted like he felt fine and when he didn’t want her to see that he was throwing up blood he sent her away to be alone.

It wasn’t in Sasha’s power to change something. They had driven her father and Sasha into this abandoned part of the metro, they had left them alive, not out of mercy, but out of sadistic curiosity. They must have thought that they wouldn’t even survive a week, but the will and stamina of her father had provided them with what they needed and that they had survived for years. They hated them, despised them, but brought them food regularly. Of course not for free.

In breaks between expeditions, in these rare minutes when the two sat on the sparse lit fire, her father loved to talk about earlier times. Years ago he had realized that he didn’t have to fool himself, but when he no longer had a future, than at least nobody could take away his past.

Back then my eyes had the same color as yours, he had said to her. The color of the sky ... And Sasha believed to remember these days, these days when the tumor hadn’t bloated his head and when his eyes hadn’t faded, but when they shined like hers now.

When her father said “the color of the sky” of course he meant azure-blue and not the glowing red clouds of dust that reached over his head when he climbed to the surface. He hadn’t seen real daylight in over 20 years and Sasha didn’t know it at all. He only saw it in his dreams, but he wasn’t sure if what he saw was real. What experience people that are blind from birth: Dreaming from a world that is similar to ours? To they even see anything in a dream? When small children close their eyes, they believe that the entire world has sunken into darkness; they believe that everybody around them is as blind as they are. In the tunnels humans are as naive as these children, Homer thought. He imagined that light ruled over darkness every time when he turned on his flashlight and then turned it off again. Even the most impenetrable darkness could be full of seeing eyes. Since the encounter with the corpse eaters he couldn’t think about anything else. A distraction. He needed a distraction.

Strange that Hunter hadn't known what waited for them at the Nachimovski prospect. When the brigadier turned up at the Sevastopolskaya two months ago, none of the guards could explain how a man with such extraordinary stature was able to pass every single of the northern guard posts unnoticed.

It was their luck that the commander didn't want an explanation how Hunter got through without the noticing.

But when he didn't get to the Sevastopolskaya over the Nachimovski prospect, how did he get there? All other ways to the big metro had already been severed. The abandoned Kachovskaya line, in its tunnels they hadn't seen a single living being in the last years. Impossible. The Tschertanovskaya? Ridiculous. Not even a skilled and relentless fighter as Hunter would be able to fight himself through this cursed station. Also it was impossible to get there without showing up at the Sevastopolskaya first.

So the north, south and east were out of the question.

Now Homer had only one hypothesis left: The mysterious guest came from the surface. Of course all known entrances and exits of the station had been carefully barricaded and were guarded at all times, but ... he could have opened one of the vents. The inhabitants of the Sevastopolskaya didn't suspect that there was still somebody that had the intelligence to trick their warning system located in the burned concrete ruins. An endless chess board made out of several stories high apartment complexes that had been torn down by the shrapnel of war heads was already deserted and empty. The last players had already given up playing decades ago and left the distorted and scary figures crawling around on the surface. They now played their own game with their own rules. Looking at it from the view of humanity, a rematch wasn't possible.

Short expeditions searching for everything useful that hadn't decayed over the last twenty years, hastily; shameful raids through their own houses were the only things they were still capable of. In rubbers suits that protected the stalkers from radiation they climbed up to search the skeletons of former buildings for the hundredth time, but nobody dared to fight the current inhabitant's deterrent enough to wipe them out.

You might shoot a machine-pistol salvo at them, retreat into a nearby dirty apartment and run straight back to the rescuing entrance of the metro when the danger had passed.

The old maps of the capitol city had lost every reference to reality. Where back then cars had been stuck in traffic for miles, now there were canyons covered in impenetrable black brushwood. Where once housing areas there were now swamps or just empty burned land.

Only the boldest stalkers dared to venture further than a mile from their entrances to the metro, most were satisfied with less.

The stations past the Nachimovski prospect – the Nagornaya, Nagatinskaya and Tulskeya – had no open entrances and the humans on those two stations didn't even think about going to the surface.

So from where in this wasteland Hunter was supposed to have emerged from, was an absolute mystery for Homer.

But there was a last possibility where the brigadier could have come from. This possibility made the old atheist unable to breathe and he followed the dark silhouette of Hunter that moved through the darkness as if it didn't even touch the ground.

He came from underground.

"I have a bad feeling about this" said Achmed hesitantly and so quiet that Homer almost wasn't able to hear him.

"It isn't the right time to be here. Believe me; I have traveled with many caravans. There is something brewing at the Nagornaya ..."

The small groups of bandits that always retreated back as far as possible from the ring line right away after each raid. They took their breaks in dark stations but never dared to attack the caravans of the Sevastopolskaya.

The instant they heard the constant thunder of the studded boots, which announced the arrival of the heavy infantry of the Sevastopolskaya, they got out of their way immediately.

Not because of the bandits or the corpse eaters at the Nachimovski prospect these caravans were protected so well.

Their bone hard training, absolute fearlessness, their ability to close themselves to a iron fist in seconds and to destroy every possible threat in a hail of bullets, all that could have made the convoys of the Sevastopolskaya the undisputed rulers of the tunnels up to the Serpuchovskaya – if there wasn't the Nagornaya.

The horrors of the Nachimovski prospect were behind them, but nor Homer or Achmed felt the slightest relief. The seemingly inconspicuous, yes, even ugly Nagornaya had become the end station of many that hadn't treated her with caution. Those poor schmucks that ended up at the neighboring Nagatinskaya coincidentally tried to stay as far away from the greedy mouth of the Nagornaya. As if that would save them. As if what crawled out of the tunnel, searching for prey, was too sluggish to crawl a little bit further and choose a victim of its taste ...

As soon as you entered the Nagornaya you could rely on nothing but your luck, because this station didn't play by the rules. Sometimes it let you pass silently and the travelers looked horrified at the bloody marks on the walls and pillars where someone had tried to climb upwards hopelessly.

And just a few moments after ushering someone safely through the station could give a group a welcome, so hearty that losing half of the men was considered as a victory.

The station was always hungry. It didn't favor anybody. It didn't let anybody explore it. For the inhabitants of the neighboring stations the Nagornaya embodied pure arbitrariness of fate. She was the most difficult challenge for all that embarked on their way from Sevastopolskaya to the ring line and the other way around.

"So many missing people ... it couldn't just have been the Nagornaya alone," said Achmed with superstition. Like many residents of the Sevastopolskaya, he spoke of the Nagornaya like if it was a creature and not a metro station.

Homer knew what Achmed meant. He had thought about it a lot of times if it couldn't have been the Nagornaya that was responsible for the missing recon team. He nodded his head and added: "If so I hope it just suffocated them ..."

"What did you just say?" hissed Achmed angry. His hand twitched in Homers direction, as if he wanted to strike the old man, but he didn't. "She is not going to suffocate you to be sure!"

Homer took the insult silently. He didn't believe that the Nagornaya was able to hear them yet.

Hopefully she wouldn't get angry. At least not at this distance ...

Superstition! Nothing but superstition! It was impossible to count all the idols of the underground – you always stepped one of their foot. Homer didn't think about them anymore. Achmed on the other hand thought differently.

Achmed took a rosary made out of empty Makarov cartridges out of his jacket's pocket and started to slide the lead through his dirty fingers. At the same time his lips moved silently in his own language, he probably asked Nagornaya for forgiveness for Home's sins.

Hunter had felt something with his supernatural senses. He gave them a signal with his hands, slowed down and got to his knees.

"There is fog," mumbled Hunter As he breathed in the cold air with his nose. "What is there?"

Homer and Achmed looked at each other. Both knew what that meant: It was open season. Now they needed a lot of luck get to the northern border of the Nagornaya alive.

"How am I supposed to explain that to you?" answered Achmed unwillingly.

"It is the breath ..."

“Whose breath?” asked Hunter, unimpressed. He put his bag on the ground so that he could choose the right weapon for this job.
Achmed whispered: “The breath of the Nagornaya.”

“We’ll see.” said Homer contemptuously and made a grimace. Though it seemed like Hunters distorted face came back to life; in reality it was motionless as always – it was only a trick of the light.

They could see it now too, a few hundred meters further than Hunter: A thick, pale white fog crawled at them on the ground, danced around their feet, crawled up their legs and then filled the tunnel up to their waist ... it seemed like they were climbing into an ice-cold and hostile ocean. They stepped deeper and in to it, until the murky water-like “breath” would finally go over their heads.

You couldn’t see anything anymore. The beams of their flashlights got stuck in the fog like flies in a net of a spider. After they had finally fought themselves through the emptiness they felt exhausted and defeated. Noise, as if dimmed by a pillow, came through the fog. Every move cost them a lot of strength, as if they weren’t walking on concrete but on thick mud.

Breathing became harder, not because of the humidity, but because of the bitter stench of the air. They had to force themselves to breathe and they couldn’t shake the feeling that in reality they were breathing in the breath of a giant, strange creature that withdrew oxygen from the air and replaced it with its toxic fumes.

Homer put on his gasmask, just in case. Hunter gave him a quick look, reached into his bag and put on his generic rubber mask as well. Only Achmed was once again without a gasmask.

The brigadier stopped and listened with his shredded ear at the Nagornaya, but the thick white soup hindered him to decipher the noises from the station and create a picture of the situation. It sounded like something heavy had fallen to the ground far away, followed by a long sigh, in a pitch that was too low for a human, or any other creature. Then they heard something scraping hysterically and shrieking like if a giant hand had bent the thick iron pipes on the ceiling to a knot.

Hunter twitched his head, as if he was trying to shake off dirt from his head and instead of a short machine pistol he was now holding an army-Kalashnikov with a double magazine and a mounted grenade-launcher. “Finally,” he said.

At first they didn’t realize that they had already entered the station; the fog in the Nagornaya was as thick as milk. While Homer looked through the glass of his gasmask he felt like a diver that was on board of a sunken ocean cruiser.

You could only see the mosaic through the fog for a few seconds at a time and then it swallowed them again: they were seagulls that had been pressed with coarse soviet metal templates. Fossils, thought Homer, the fate of humanity and their creations ... but will somebody dig us up one day?

The fog around them was alive, floated in different directions, twitching. Sometimes dark images emerged from the fog, a dented wagon of a train and a rusty cabin, a scaly body or head of some mythological creature. Homer shuddered while thinking who had filled the seats all these decades ago. He had heard much about what was going on at the Nagornaya, but he had never seen anything face to face ...

“There it is, to the right!” screamed Achmed as he grabbed the old man’s sleeve. A suppressed sound erupted out of Achmed’s gun as the bullet passed through the homemade silencer.

Homer turned around with such speed that nobody would have thought he still had it in his rheumatic body. His blurred beam of light illuminated only a part of the metal covered pillars.

“Behind! Behind us!” Achmed shot another salvo. But his bullets only shredded the rest of the marble plates that once decorated the walls of the station. Whatever he had seen through the blurry dim lights had already vanished, seemingly unharmed.

He must have breathed in too much of that stuff, thought Homer. But one second later he saw something in the edge of his field of vision ... something gigantic, crouching because the four meter high

ceiling of the station was too low for its size and it was unimaginable maneuverable. For an instance it emerged out of the fog, became visible again and disappeared, a long time before the old man was able to point his assault rifle at it.

Homer looked at around desperately for the brigadier.
He couldn't see him anywhere.

"It is ok. Don't be afraid" he said again and again. He tried to catch his breath and calm her down. "You know ... there are people that are far worse off than we are ..." He tried to smile, but he only made a terrible grimace, as if his lower jaw had fallen off.

Sasha smiled back, over her pointed, dirty cheek a salty tear crawled down. At least her father was conscious again, for a few hours at least, enough for her to think about everything.

"This time I couldn't find anything," he croaked. "Forgive me. At the end I even went to the garages as well. It was further than I thought. But I found an intact one there. The lock was out of rust free steel, even oiled. Breaking it was impossible, so I used the last demolition charge. I thought, maybe there is a car in there, spare parts and all. I let it explode, went in: Empty. Why did they lock it then the bastards? All that noise, I prayed that nobody had heard me. But when I got out of the garage there were all these dogs. I thought, that's it ... That's it." He closed his eyes and went silent.

Sasha took his hand worried, but he shook his head imperceptibly without opening his eyes: Don't be afraid, everything is fine. He didn't even have the strength to talk anymore but he wanted to tell her everything, why he had returned with empty hands, why they now had to starve for a week until he could get up again.

But before he was able to do so he fell into a deep sleep.

Sasha checked the bandages on his shredded leg, wet with black blood. Laying a fresh compress on it, she stood up and went to the rat's cage and opened the small door.

The animal looked out of its cage distrustfully. It tried to hide at first, and then it jumped down on the train track and ran around. You can rely on the feelings of a rat: There was no danger in the tunnel.

Calmer, the young woman returned to the stretcher.

"Of course you will feel better again. You will be able to walk again," she whispered to her father. "And you will find a garage with a new car in it. We'll get in together and drive away from here. Ten maybe fifteen stations away. Somewhere, where they don't know us, where we are strangers. Where nobody hates us. If there is even such a place ..."

Now it was her that told the magical stories that she had heard so many times from him. She repeated it word by word and now that she spoke out the old mantra of her father she believed in it even a hundred times more. She would nurture him back to health, heal him. Somewhere in this world there had to be a place where they didn't matter to others.

A place where they could be happy.

"There it is! It is looking at me!"

Achmed shrieked as if it had already grabbed him. He had never screamed like that. Again he fired his assault-rifle until it jammed. There was nothing left of Achmed's sanity: trembling he tried to reload a new clip.

"It is after me ... after me ..."

Suddenly you could hear the rattling sound of another automatic rifle. It stayed silent for a second and went off again, this time almost inaudible with salvos of three shots. So Hunter was still alive, there was still hope.

The slamming sound distanced itself and came back again, so it was impossible to say if the bullets found their target.

Homer was expecting the angry screams of an injured monster, but the station covered itself in mysterious silence; its inhabitants seemed to have no bodies or they were inviolable.

The brigadier continued his strange fight at the other end of the station, from time to time the glowing tracer rounds cut through the fog, drunken from the fight against the ghost of Nagornaya. He had left his companions alone.

Homer took a deep breath and leaned back his head to look at the ceiling. For some time now he had the need, he had felt the cold, heavy look with his skin, his head, his hair and his back. Now he couldn't resist his premonitions anymore.

Directly under the ceiling, far above their heads, a big head floated in the fog, so big that Homer didn't realize at what he was looking at in the beginning. The rest of the giant body remained in the darkness of the station. Its huge face was hanging above the tiny humans that tried to defend themselves with their useless weapons. It wasn't in a hurry – it just gave them a bit of time before it attacked.

Silent with terror Homer sank to his knees. His rifle fell out of his hands and hit the floor with a rattling sound. Achmed screamed as if he was being tortured. Without haste the creature approached and filled the entire room in front of them with its dark body, giant as a mountain. Homer closed his eyes, prepared himself, said farewell. Only one thing went through his mind, a regretful, bitter thought drilling into his consciousness: He hadn't made it ...

Hunter's grenade launcher spit out a flame, the shockwave numbed their ears; it left a continuously thin humming sound while burning parts of shredded flesh was raining down on them.

Achmed was the first to snap out of it. He helped Homer to his feet and dragged him with him.

They ran, stumbled over the tracks and got back up again without feeling any pain. They held on to each other, because in the milky soup you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. They ran as if they were threatened not just with death, but with something even more terrible: Utter, final, unchangeable embodiment of absolute, physical and mental destruction.

Invisible and almost inaudible, but only a step behind them, the demons followed, accompanying them but not attacking. They seemed to toy with them by giving them the illusion of a possible rescue.

Then the two men saw the fragmented marble walls and after that segments of the tunnels. They had made it out of the Nagornaya! The guardians of the station fell back like they were chained to the station. But it was too early to stand still.

Achmed ran ahead, searched with his hands for the pipes on the wall and pushed Homer in front of him. They stumbled together, wishing to sit down.

"What's with the brigadier?" croaked Homer after he had ripped off the sticky gasmask from his face while he was walking.

"As soon as we pass the fog we'll stop and wait for him. It has to be soon, maybe 200 steps. Out of the fog, we need to get out of the fog." repeated Achmed, mysterious, "I'll count the steps ..."

But neither after 200 steps nor after 300 did the fog seem to disappear. What if it had spread to the Nagatinskaya? What if it had swallowed the Tulsкая and the Nachimovski as well?

"That can't be ... it has to ... only a bit ..." mumbled Achmed for the hundredth time. He suddenly stopped.

Homer bumped into him and both fell to the ground.

"The wall has ended." Achmed stepped over the tracks and the wet concrete floor as if he thought that the ground would vanish under his feet.

"It's here, what do you mean?" Homer had felt the segment of the tunnel wall and pulled himself up off the floor.

"Sorry," Achmed replied silently. "You know back at the station ... I thought I would never leave it. How it looked at me ... me, do you understand? It had decided to take me. I thought I would stay there forever. You don't even get a real burial." He spoke slowly to keep himself from crying.

He tried to justify the way he was speaking, even though he didn't have to.

Homer shook his head. "It's alright; I shitted my pants as well. It doesn't matter. Let's go, it can't be far now."

The hunt seemed to be over and they could breathe again. Even if it wasn't, they couldn't run anyways. So they kept walking slowly, feeling their way along the wall half blind with their hands. Step by step to salvation. The worst part was behind them and even though the fog hadn't disappeared soon the air from the tunnel would rip it apart and carry it away through the vents. Soon they would get to humanity and wait for their officer.

It happened earlier than they thought. Did space and time get bent in the fog as well?

An iron staircase crawled up the wall; the round tunnel became a square one and next to the tracks you could see the indent in the track that had saved a lot of lives.

"Look!" whispered Homer, "It looks like a station. A station!"

"Hey! Is there someone?" screamed Achmed as loud as he could.

"Brothers, is there somebody?" Achmed fell into a pointless, triumphant laugh.

The dim light of the lamps revealed what the darkness had hidden, walls of marble, that hadn't been left untouched by man and time. It seemed that none of the colorful mosaics, which had been the pride of the Nagatinskaya, had survived.

And what had happened to the marble around the pillars? That can't be ...

Even though Achmed didn't get an answer he kept screaming and laughing: Of course they had been afraid of the fog and had run through it like crazy, but they no longer cared about that anymore.

Homer on the other hand was worried and searched the wall with the weak beam of his flashlight. His suspicions left cold droplets running down his back.

Finally he found them: The iron letters screwed on the burst marble.

NAGORNAYA.

You never returned to the same place coincidentally.

Her father had always said that. You return to change something, to apologize for something.

Sometimes god grabs us and brings us back to the place where he forgot us last. God does that to make a decision or to give us a second chance.

Her father explained that to her; he would never be able to return to his home station. He had no more strength to get revenge, to fight or to prove something. He no longer wanted forgiveness.

It was an old story that had almost cost him his life. But he was certain that everybody had gotten what they deserved.

Now they lived in eternal exile, because Sasha's father had nothing to make up and god didn't live in this station.

The plan for their rescue, to find a new car on the surface that hadn't rotted, to repair it, get enough gas and to break out of this vicious cycle that fate had drawn, had become a good fairy tale a long time ago. For Sasha there was another way to the big metro.

When she put the half repaired machines, old jewelry, or decayed books on the tracks, the merchants offered more: food and bullets.

They illuminated her thin, young stature with the lights of their railcar, winked at each other, tried to talk to her and promised a lot of things. The girl looked wild. Silent and distrusting she looked at them, ready to strike with knife behind her back. Her jacket was big but it didn't hide her stature. Dirt and machine oil in her face made her blue eyes glow brighter. So bright that some couldn't look at them. Blond hair, cut unevenly with the knife she was holding, didn't even go over her ears. Her lips never smiled.

The men on the rail cart knew that they couldn't tame this wolf with riches, so they tried it with freedom. She never answered them. That's why they thought she couldn't talk, which made it even easier.

But Sasha knew one thing: Whatever she did she wouldn't be able to buy two seats on the rail cart.

Her father had a history with this people that she could never change.

How they were standing in front of her, faceless with their black gas masks, they looked more like enemies for her. She didn't find anything on them of which she would have dreamt, not even while she was sleeping. So she put the telephones, irons, and teapots on the tracks, stepped back and waited till the merchants had gathered the goods.

Then they threw a few packets of dried pork and a handful of bullets on the tracks, only so that they could watch her crawling around to pick all up. Then the rail cart left slowly and vanished back to the real world.

Sasha turned around and went back home where a mountain of broken machines, a screw driver, a blowtorch a dynamo machine repurposed bicycle were waiting for her. She sat herself on the saddle, closed her eyes and rode far, far away. She almost forgot that she wasn't moving. And the fact that she had refused the easy way out gave her even more strength.

What the devil? How did we end up here again? Like in a fever, Homer tried to find an explanation for what had happened here.

Suddenly Achmed turned silent; he had seen where Homer had shined his lamp. "It's not letting me go ..." he whispered silently, almost without any sound.

The fog around them became thicker and thicker, they could almost no longer see each other. Without humans the Nagornaya had been asleep, now she awoke again. To new life: The heavy air reacted to their words with almost unnoticeable fluctuations and vague shadows moved in the deep.

No trace of Hunter ... a being of flesh and blood couldn't win the fight against these phantoms; as soon as the station had played enough with them she would swallow them as a whole.

"Go," said Achmed. "It wants me. You can't know it. You haven't been here as much as I have."

"Stop it!" yelled Homer, surprised by the volume of his voice. "We got lost in the fog. Let's go back!"

"We can't go back. You can run as much as you want, you will return to this place again and again if you stay with me. You will get through on your own. Go, I beg you."

"Enough!" Homer grabbed Achmed's hand and dragged him behind him to the tunnel. "In an hour you will thank me!"

"Tell my wife ..."

An unbelievable powerful force ripped Achmed out of Homer's grip, up into the fog, into the void.

He wasn't even able to scream, he just vanished, as if from one second to the next he had been atomized and ceased to exist.

Homer screamed, turned around and fired his precious bullets, one clip after another.

Suddenly he felt a blow to his back, so strong that it had to have been one of these demons.

The universe imploded.

Memories (Chapter 5)

Sasha ran to the window and opened it. Fresh air and soft light fell into the room. The window was hanging over an abyss full of soft morning fog. With the first rays of the sun it would disappear and they would be able to see fir covered hills instead of the abyss, green meadows behind them and the matchbox tall buildings and onion-like bell towers.

The early morning was their time. She felt the approaching dawn and stood up half an hour earlier to get on top of the mountains in time. Behind the small, simple, but clean and warm hut a rocky path went up the hill, surrounded by bright yellow flowers and Sasha had slipped several times on her way up and hurt her knee.

In thoughts she wiped the windowsill that was still wet from the breath of the night with her sleeve. She had dreamt about something dark, disastrous that had crossed her happy life, but the rests of this restless vision disappeared immediately when the cold wind started to blow over her skin. Now she no longer wanted to think about what had bothered her in her dream. She had to hurry to get to the mountain top in time to greet the sun and then sliding down the path, returning to the hut, to make breakfast, wake her father and pack his provisions.

Then Sasha would be by herself for the whole day while her father was hunting. She would hunt the slow dragonflies and flying roaches between the flowers that were as yellow as the linkrusta-wallpapers in the trains.

On her toes she crept over the creaking planks, opened the door a bit and laughed silently.

It had been several years since Sasha's father had last seen a happy smile on his daughters face. He didn't want to wake her. His leg was swollen, numb and it didn't stop bleeding. It was said that the bite of a stray dog never healed ...

Should he call her? He hadn't been home for a entire day because before he had left for the garages, he had entered an apartment complex, a "termite hill", located two blocks from the station. He remembered passing out on the fifteenth floor. All that time Sasha probably hadn't closed an eye – his daughter never slept while he was away—she deserved the rest. They all lie, he thought. Nothing is going to happen to me.

He really would have liked to know what she dreamt about. He couldn't even relax in his dreams. Only rarely his consciousness let him revisit his sorrow less youth; normally in his dreams he wandered between the familiar dead houses with their empty inners and a good dream was when found an untouched apartment, full of miraculously preserved machines and books.

Every time he fell asleep he hoped to dream about the past. That time when he had just met Sasha's mother. When he was only twenty, he became the commander of the garrison of the station. Back then the inhabitants thought of the metro as a provisional home and not of a glorified barracks for forced labor he surface, where they sat out a life sentence.

Instead he always ended up in the events that happened five years ago. That day that had determined his fate and even worse the fate of his daughter ...

Once again he stood there, at the head of his fighters. He held his Kalashnikov so it was ready to fire. His officers' Makarov could have put a bullet into his head. Apart from his two dozen military police marksmen there wasn't a single human left in the station that was still loyal to him.

The mob raged, swelled in size and shook the barricade with dozens of hands. The first chaotic voices had transformed themselves into a rhythmic choir controlled by an invisible director. They still demanded that he step down but soon they would demand his head.

This was no spontaneous demonstration. This was the work of provocateurs. He could have tried to identify and liquidate every single one of them, but now it was already too late. When he wanted to stop the rebellion and remain in power there was only one thing left to do: To open fire on the group. It wasn't too late for that ...

His fingers folded around an invisible stock, under his swollen eye lids his pupils twitched restless from one side to the other, his lips moved and formed silent orders. The dark puddle of blood he lay in grew larger as more and more life left his soul.

"Where are they?"

Something ripped Homer out of the dark sea of unconsciousness. He shook himself like a fish on a hook, he gasped, cramped for air, and stared at the brigadier. The dark, cyclopic colossus still towered over him, the guardians of the Nagornaya, and reached with their long fingers; without any struggle they would rip out his legs or crush his ribs. They only disappeared slowly, even unwillingly, when he opened his eyes again.

He tried to jump up again but the stranger's hand that had held his shoulder with a light grip now held him like the iron hook that had pulled him out of his nightmares.

He started to breathe normally and concentrated himself on the scarred, machine oil covered face with bright eyes ... Hunter, he was still alive?

Homer carefully turned his head to the left, then to the right: Where they still in the cursed station?

No, this was an empty and clean tunnel. You could almost no longer see the fog of the Nagornaya that had covered the exits anywhere. Hunter must have carried him over a kilometer. Reassured Homer broke down. He asked him again, just to be sure: "Where are they?"

"Nobody is here. You are safe."

"These creatures ... did they knock me unconscious?"

He wondered as he held the back of his head.

"No that was me. I had to knock you down, otherwise I wouldn't have been able get you out of there in your panic. You could have hurt me."

Finally Hunter loosened his iron grip, stood up stiffly and moved his hand to his officer's belt where the Stetschkin hang. On the other side hang a mysterious leather box. The brigadier opened it and took out a flat mes bottle. He shook it, opened it and took a deep swig without asking Homer if wanted one to. Homer tried to close his eyes for a second.

His left eye wouldn't close.

"Where's Achmed? What happened to him?" Chills ran down Homer's back.

"He's dead." his answer almost sounded indifferent.

"Dead." Homer echoed mechanically.

The moment the giant hand ripped the hand of his comrade out of his, Homer knew: No living being could escape its grip. Homer had just been lucky that the Nagornaya hadn't chosen him. The old man turned around again. He still couldn't believe that Achmed was gone forever. He stared at his hand, it was scraped and bloody. He hadn't been able to hold on to him. He didn't have the strength.

"He knew that he would die." he said silently.

"Why did they take him out of all of us and not me?"

"There was still life in him." answered the Brigadier. "They feed on human life."

Homer shook his head. "That isn't fair. He had small children. So many things that hold him here ... well held him here ... but I have been looking for those for eternity ..."

"If you were the Nagornaya, would you eat moss?" Hunter cut off Homer and ended the conversation with him pulling Homer back on his feet. "We got to keep moving. We're late."

While Homer ran behind Hunter he tried to figure out why he and Achmed had ended up at the Nagornaya. Like a flesh eating orchid the station had clouded their mind with its miasma and lured them back in. But they hadn't turn around a single time that much was sure for Homer. So he started to believe in the distortion of space in the tunnels now, like those simple minded comrades of his on guard duty. The solution was a lot easier. He stopped and slapped himself on the forehead: The connecting track! Some hundred meters behind the Nagornaya there was a track for trains to turn around. It turned around at a sharp angle and that's why they following the wall blindly, reached the parallel track and then when the wall suddenly disappeared, ran back to the station.

So much for magic! But there was still another thing that needed an explanation. "Wait!" he yelled after Hunter.

But he just continued to march forward as if he was deaf, so the old man had to catch up to him while breathing heavily. When he had caught up to the Brigadier he tried to look him into the eyes and said: "Why did you leave us to our fate?"

"Me, leave you two?"

There was a sarcastic tone in his emotionless, metallic voice. Homer bit himself on his tongue. True, it was him and Achmed that had ran from the station and left the Brigadier alone with the demons ...

The more Homer thought about how raging and helplessly Hunter had fought at the Nagornaya the more he realized that the inhabitants of the station hadn't accepted the fight that Hunter had tried to force them into. Out of fear? Or had they seen him as a part of the family?

Homer gathered his courage – there was only one question left, the hardest one of all. "At the Nagornaya ... why did they ignore you?"

Several minutes passed; Homer didn't dare to ask again. Then Hunter gave him a short, almost inaudible and grumpy answer: "Would you eat tainted flesh?"

The beauty of the world will redeem you, her father had once said jokingly.

Sasha had put the colorful teabag back in the pocket of her jacket, blushing. The small quadratic plastic hull that still had a faint aroma of green tea was her greatest treasure. And a reminder that the universe wasn't just the body of the station and its four tunnels buried twenty meters below the graveyard that had once been Moscow. The teabag was some kind of magical portal that moved Sasha back by centuries and thousands of kilometers. It was so much more, something enormously important. In the wet climate of the metro, paper decayed quickly.

Decay and mold didn't just eat books and brochures, they destroyed the entire past. Without pictures and chronicles the already limping human mind stumbled and ran into the wrong direction like man without his crutches.

The hull of the teabag was made out of a material that mold and the time couldn't harm. Sasha's father had once said that it would take thousands of years before this material would fall apart. So even their decedents would one day inherit this teabag, she thought.

And the picture printed on the teabag was, even though it was a miniature, a real picture. A golden frame that was as bright as on the day it came from the conveyor belt. It depicted a view that robbed Sasha of her breath. Steep walls of stone, covered in dreamlike mist, a far reaching pine forest that held on the almost vertical mountains, roaring waterfalls that fell down from the highest tip of the mountain

into an abyss, a purple shine that spoke of the nearing dawn ... in her entire life she had never seen anything more beautiful.

She could sit there for a long time, with the teabag in her hand, just looking at it. The mist in the morning that covered the mountains held her view magically. And even though she had read all the books that her father had brought from his expeditions before they sold them, the words did not suffice to describe what she felt looking at these one centimeter tall mountains, taking in the smell of the pine needles. It was a world so far from their reality but it had a strong pull ...

The sweet longing and the eternal expectation of what the sun would see first ... the endless thoughts about what was behind the sign with the brand of the tea: A strange tree? A nest of an eagle? One of those houses that lay on the slope of the mountain, and in which she would soon live with her father? It was him that had brought her the teabag when she was five years old. Back then, the contents of the bag were a real rarity.

He had wanted to surprise her with real tea. She had to gather her courage to drink it, as if it was medicine.

But the plastic hull had fascinated her from the very start. Back then he had explained her that it wasn't a very artful illustration: A conventional Chinese province, just good enough for the print of a teabag. But teen years later Sasha still viewed it with the same eyes as on the day she had gotten the gift from her father.

Her father, on the other hand, thought that the teabag was just a shabby replacement for the whole world. And every time she fell into this trance and looked at this badly drawn fantasy he felt the unspoken accusation for their mutilated, bloodless life. He tried to hold her back every time, without any success. With almost anger he asked her for the hundredth time what she liked about this old packaging for a gram of tea. For the hundredth time she put it back into her pocket and answered embarrassedly: "Father ... I think it is beautiful!"

Hunter wouldn't stop for a moment, a second's rest. If Hunter had been there, Homer would have taken three times as long, slowly making his way down the tunnel. He would have never moved so securely and self-confident through the tunnel. The group had to pay a terrible transit fee down the Nagornaya, but at least two out of three had made it. And all three could have survived if they hadn't been lost in the fog. The price wasn't higher than usual: Nothing had happened there that hadn't happened before, neither at the Nachimovski prospect nor at the Nagornaya.

So it wasn't because of the tunnels that lead to the Tuskaya? Now they were completely silent, but it was a disastrous and tense silence. Sure: even at a totally unknown station Hunter could feel dangers that waited for them hundredths of meters in advance. But was it possible that his intuition would leave him exactly here, here where at least a dozen experienced fighters had suffered the same fate?

Approaching the Nagatinskaya he hoped he would have the solution for all the secrets ... Homer struggled to keep his thoughts together because they ran fleetingly through his head.

Still, he tried to think about what waited for them at the station that he had once loved so much. The myth teller imagined that the legendary satanic legation had emerged at the Nagatinskaya or that the inhabitants had been eaten by migrating rats on their way for food through the tunnels that humans couldn't pass through. Even if Homer would have been alone he wouldn't have turned around for anything in the world. In all these years at the Sevastopolskaya he had forgotten to fear death. When he had embarked on this journey he knew that it could be his last journey; and he was ready to sacrifice his remaining time for it.

A mere half an hour after the encounter with the monsters of the Nagornaya they had become the horrors of his memories.

Even more, while he listened to his thoughts, he felt faint movement in the deeps of his soul: Somewhere deep down inside him something had been awakened, the thing that he had wanted so

much. What he had searched for on his dangerous adventures, that what he had never been able to find at home ...

Now he had a real reason to delay death with all his power. He would allow it after his work was done.

The last war had been more brutal than all that had come before it and it had only taken a few days. Since the Second World War three generations had passed, the last veterans had died and the living didn't fear war anymore. The collective insanity that had robbed millions of humans of their humanity had once again become a simple political instrument.

The fatal game had become more like routine with every day that had passed and in the end there was no more time to make the right decision. The ban of using atomic weapons was dropped under the table in the heat of the fight:

In the first act of the drama they had hung their rifle on the wall and in the one before the last they had actually fired it. It didn't matter who had pulled the trigger first anymore.

All the metropolises on the earth were turned into ash and rubble at the same time. Even the few that had an anti-rocket shield were destroyed; they remained intact from the outside but radiation, chemical and biological weapons killed the majority of the population instantly. The unstable radio transmission between the few survivors ended after a few years. From that moment the world had ended for the inhabitants of the metro and neighboring lines.

While before the earth had been explored and colonized now it had sunk down to the borderless ocean of chaos and oblivion of ancient times. The small islands of civilization sank into the depths one after another, without oil or power, humanity returned to the Stone Age.

An age of terror began.

For centuries scientists have tried to return history from its almost destroyed papyri, parchments and foliants. With the invention of the press newspapers have continued to weave the fabric of history. And then the chronics of the last centuries almost no longer had any gaps in it: Almost every gesture, every move of those who controlled the world had been carefully documented.

Now the presses of the world had been destroyed with a single blow, abandoned. The looms of history stood still. In a world without a future they were no longer needed. The shreds of this fabric were only held together by a single, thin thread.

In the first years after the disaster Nikolai Ivanowitsch had tried to find his family in the overcrowded stations. It had been in vain. He had abandoned all hope already but alone and lost as he was he now stumbled through the darkness of the underground because in this kind of afterlife he didn't know what to do with himself. The thread of Arianne – the sense of life – that could have showed him the exit out of this never ending maze had fallen out of his hand.

In his longing for the past he had began to collect the newspapers, to remember and to dream.

He searched the articles and reports to find out if they could have prevented the apocalypse. One day he started to write down the events in his station in some kind of article.

And so it happened that Nikolai Ivanowitsch had found a new thread: He decided to become chronicler of the metro, author of the youngest history, from the end of the world to his own. His disorganized, aimless collection had now a purpose: To restore the damaged fabric of time and continue to weave it further.

The others saw Nikolai Ivanowitsch's passion as harmless nonsense. Out of his own will he sacrificed his pay for old newspapers and turned every corner of his personal space into an archive. He volunteered for guard duty, because there at the fire at meter 300 wild men told themselves the craziest stories like little boys, where he caught every granule of truth about the rest of the metro. Out of the myriad of rumors he filtered out the facts and wrote them down in his books.

Even though this work distracted him he knew how useless it was. After his death all these reports would turn to dust without any care. The day he wouldn't return home they were only good as a few more seconds for the fire.

From the yellowed paper only smoke and ash would remain, the atoms would enter new connections and forms. They would be saved in some other type of matter. But what he really tried to preserve wouldn't. All that unimaginable, ethereal information that was on those pages would be lost forever. Humans worked that way: What stood in the school books remained in their heads up to graduation. And when they forgot the material afterwards they did it with a true sense of relief. The memories of men were like the sand of the desert. Numbers, dates and names of unimportant people disappeared in it without a trace, as if one threw a stick into a sand dune.

Something only remains if it conquers the fantasy of man, makes the heart beat faster, to move them, make them feel something. A gripping story of a hero or a great love could survive an entire civilization because it remains in the brain and is told by generation to generation.

When he had realized that he transformed himself from an amateur scientist to an alchemist – and out of Nikolai Ivanowitsch, Homer emerged.

And from now on he no longer spent his nights to create some chronics but to search for the formula for immortality. For a story as long living as Gilgamesh and a hero that was tough as Odysseus. On the thread of this story he would attach all his accumulated knowledge. And in a world where paper was transformed into warmth, where you carelessly sacrificed the past for a small moment in the present, the legend of this hero would storm the hearts of the people and redeem them from their collective amnesty.

But he had to wait for the main reactant in the formula; the hero just didn't want to step onto the stage. The copying of the newspaper articles hadn't taught Homer how to create myths, to breathe life into this golem and make this made up story more interesting than reality. His worktable seemed like Frankenstein's laboratory to him: Crumpled pages with fragments of the first chapters of his saga, which characters weren't convincing, weren't able to survive. The only things that he got from these nightly works were dark rings under his eyes and a sore bitten lip.

Still, Homer still didn't give up on his new destiny that easy. He chased away every suspicion that it could be that he wasn't suited for it, that you needed a skill to create worlds that he hadn't received.

He just had to wait for an inspiration, he said to himself ... and from where should it come from? From the humid air in the station maybe? The tea ritual at his home or during his shift doing agriculture? Or while on guard duty, which became and more scarce for him because of his age? No, he needed excitement, adventure and the storm of passion. Maybe then the dams of his mind would break and he could start his creation ...

Even in the hardest times the Nagatinskaya had never been abandoned completely. Of course it wasn't an ideal place to live. Nothing grew here and the exits were closed. But many used the station to slip under the radar for a while or for some intimate time with their lover.

But now the station was empty.

Hunter moved with silent steps up the stairs, up to the tracks and then he stopped. Homer followed him, breathing heavily, looking around nervously at all sides. The station was dark, only the dust hanging in air glittered in the shine of their lamps. The sparse hills of shredded cardboard on which the inhabitants of the Nagatinskaya slept on were spread out all over the floor. Homer leaned his back against a pillar and slid down slowly to the ground. The Nagatinskaya had once been one of his favorite stations because of the elegant and colorful marble mosaics. Now the station was dark and lifeless. The Nagatinskaya was nothing like he remembered.

Like a dead man's old passport, his old picture taken at a time where he didn't know that he wasn't just looking into a camera but eternity.

"Not a single soul is here," said Homer hesitantly.

"Except one." Hunter nodded into Homers direction.

"I meant ..." started Homer, but Hunter cut him off with a gesture of his hand.

At the end of the station where the row of pillars ended and even the brigadier's search light couldn't shine, something crawled slowly onto the platform ...

Homer fell onto the ground next to him, lightened his fall with his arms and stood up clumsily. Hunters lamp was turned off and the brigadier himself had disappeared into thin air. Sweating because of his fear, Homer switched his rifle to auto-fire and pressed the stock, shivering against his shoulder.

Out of the distance he heard two suppressed shots.

Encouraged he looked past the pillar and hasted forward. In the middle of the platform Hunter was standing upright. At his feet was lying a difficult to see, skinny and pitiful figure. It seemed to be made out of boxes and rags and only had a slight remembrance to a human being. But it was one. You couldn't determine its age or sex – in its dirty face you could only see its eyes. It made almost inaudible, sighing sounds and tried to crawl away from the brigadier. He seemed to have shot through both of its legs.

"Where is everyone?" Why is nobody here?" Hunter put his foot on the stinking bundle of torn rags.

"They are all gone ... left me alone. Left me all by myself" it croaked. At the same time its hand wiped over the granite without moving forwards.

"Where did they go?"

"To the Tulskeya ..."

Homer had reached both of them and joined the conversation immediately: "What is going on there?"

"How am I supposed to know?" The homeless person made a grimace. "Everybody that went there, died there. Go and ask them. I had no more strength to move around in those tunnels. I'd rather die here."

The brigadier didn't give up: "Why did they leave?"

"They were afraid, boss. The station got more and emptier over time. So they decided to break through. Nobody returned."

"Not a single one?" Hunter raised his pistol.

"Nobody. Only one." the pile of rags corrected himself. When he realized that the barrel of the gun was still pointed at him he floundered around like an ant under a magnifying glass.

"He went to the Nagornaya. I was asleep. I could have imagined it."

"When?"

The homeless man shook his head. "I don't have a watch. Maybe yesterday, maybe last week."

No more questions came but the barrel of the pistol was still pointed at the forehead of the interrogated man.

Hunter was silent. Strange, but he was breathing heavily; it looked like the conversation with the bum had cost him a lot of strength.

"Can I ..." asked the homeless man.

"There, eat!" growled the brigadier and before Homer knew what was going on he had pulled the trigger twice. The dark blood coming from the hole in the unlucky man's forehead made its way his wide open eyes. He fell to the ground – once again nothing but rags and cardboard. Without looking up Hunter loaded four more bullets into the clip of the Stetschkin and jumped on the tracks. "We will find out for ourselves soon enough," he yelled at the old man.

Homer lowered himself unwillingly over the body, took a piece of dirty cloth and put it over the destroyed head of the homeless man. His hands hadn't stopped shaking.

"Why did you kill him?" he asked weakly.

"Ask yourself" answered Hunter in a dull voice.

Even when he gathered all his strength the only thing he could still do was open and close his eyes. Strange that he had awoken at all ... he had been laying there unconscious for about an hour and his body had felt as numb as if it was covered with a layer of ice. His tongue had dried at his palate and a ton heavy weight laid on his chest. No he couldn't even say goodbye to his daughter, it would have been the only thing worth delaying the end of his eternal fight for survival.

Sasha didn't smile anymore. It seemed she was now dreaming uneasily, rolled up on her bedroll, both arms crossed in front of her chest. Even when she was a child he had always woken her when she had been tormented by nightmares, but now he had only enough strength to slowly move his eyelids.

And then even that became harder and harder. When he wanted to do was hold on till Sasha awoke, to continue the fight. It had lasted for over twenty years now, every day, every minute and he was damned tired of it. Tired of fighting, hiding, hunting, proving, hoping and lying.

While his mind darkened he only had two wishes: To see Sasha's eyes one more time and then ... to finally find peace. But he couldn't do it. Once again the pictures of the past rose up in front of his inner eye and mixed with reality.

He had to make a decision. To break others or be broken himself. To punish or to penance ...

The guardsmen closed the rows. Every single one of them was loyal to him alone. Ready to die here and now, to let themselves be torn apart by the masses or to shoot at the innocent. He was the commander of the last unbreakable station of the metro, president of a no longer existing confederation. Under his soldiers his authority was unquestioned, unmistakable, every single of his orders was to be executed immediately, without question. He would take full responsibility for it, like he had always done.

When he retreated now this station would sink into anarchy at first and then it would be swallowed by the boiling red empire that had swelled over its usual borders and had annexed more and more territories. When he would open fire on the demonstrators, power would remain in his hands – at least for some time. And if he wouldn't shy away from mass executions and torture maybe even forever. He aimed his rifle. One moment after him the entire unit did so too.

There they raged, not just a few hundred demonstrators but a giant, faceless human mass: Bared fangs, wide open eyes, raised fists.

He turned off the safety. His unit answered with the same clicking sound.

It was time to take fate into his own hands.

He raised his rifle and pulled the trigger. Chalk fell from the ceiling. For a moment the masses turned silent. He signaled his fighters to lower their weapons and made one step towards the demonstrators. He had made his decision.

And finally the memory let him in peace.

Sasha was still sleeping. He took his last breath, tried to look at her one last time but he could no longer raise his eyelids ... but instead of eternal, impenetrable darkness he saw an unimaginable blue sky – clear and bright, like the eyes of his daughter.

“Stop!”

Homer almost jumped and raised his hands, he was that startled. But he kept it together. The voice – probably from a megaphone – out of the depths of the tunnel had surprised him. The brigadier wasn't surprised at all. Tense as a cobra before it strikes; he took the heavy automatic rifle from his back silently.

Hunter hadn't just refused to answer a single of the old man's questions but hadn't said a single word at all. The one and a half kilometer from the Nagatinskaya to the Tuskaya had felt as endless as the journey to Golgatha. He feared that death waited at the end of the tunnel and it was getting harder for him to keep Hunter's speed.

At least he had time to prepare himself and to think about old times. He thought about Yelena, cursed himself for his egoism and asked her to forgive him. He once saw the magical, soft, sad light on that slightly rainy summer day on the Tverskaya. He regretted that he hadn't said what should happen to his newspapers before he left.

He had been ready to die – to be ripped apart by monsters, eaten by giant rats, poisoned by some kind of gas ... what other explanation was there why the Tuls kaya had transformed itself into a black hole that swallowed everything outside and didn't let it go?

But when he heard the mysterious but familiar human voice he didn't know what to think anymore. Had the Tuls kaya just been captured? But who was able to destroy all the recon teams of the Sevastopolskaya, vagabonds that traveled through the tunnels systematically, not even sparing women and old people?

"Thirty steps forward!" said the voice out of the distance.

It sounded vaguely familiar and if he would have had time to think about it he would have been able to determine who's voice it was.

Wasn't that someone from the Sevastopolskaya?

Hunter put his Kalashnikov in one hand and carefully counted his steps: For the thirty steps Hunter took Homer needed fifty. In front of them was a fuzzy barricade that had been constructed out of random objects. Strangely the defenders didn't use any light ...

"Lamps out!" commanded somebody from behind the pile. "One of you, come twenty steps closer."

Hunter unsecured his rifle and moved forwards.

Homer remained behind alone again; he didn't dare to refuse the orders. In the deep darkness that reigned here now, he carefully sat down on the ground, reached for the wall and leaned on it with his shoulder.

The steps of the brigadier went silent at the wanted distance. Somebody asked him something inaudible and he gave a growling answer. Then the situation got tense: Instead of the first neutral mood now you could hear curses and insults. It seemed that Hunter demanded something that the invisible guardians denied him.

Now they almost screamed at each other and Homer could almost make out single words ... but he could make out one word: "Punishment!"

In this moment the sound of a Kalashnikov ended the conversation and a heavy salvo from a Petscheng (a heavy machine gun) answered. Homer threw himself to the ground, unsecured his rifle but didn't fire, he didn't know if he should shoot or not, or at whom.

But it was over before it started; Homer hadn't even time to aim his rifle.

In the small breaks between the machine gun salvos that almost sounded like Morse signals, the stomach of the tunnel made a long shrieking sound that Homer wouldn't have mistaken for anything else.

The hermetic doors were closing! Tons of steel slammed against each other, it muffled the screams and the machine gun salvos.

The only entrance to the metro was closed.

Now there was no more hope for the Sevastopolskaya.

From the other side (Chapter 6)

One moment after that Homer almost believed that he had imagined everything: The vague outline of the barricades at the end of the tunnel, the somehow familiar distorted voice ... when the light went out all other sounds faded as well. He felt like a convict that had been put a sack over his face just before the execution. In the absolute darkness and sudden silence the whole world seemed to have disappeared. Homer touched his face to reassure himself that he hadn't vanished into this cosmic blackness as well. Then he calmed down again, tried to find his lamp and held the trembling beam of light in front of him where a few seconds ago the invisible battle had taken place. About thirty meters from where he had taken cover during the fight, the tunnel ended. A steel door cut through the tunnel like the blade of a guillotine. So he had heard right: Somebody had really activated the hermetic door. Homer knew of its existence but he hadn't thought that it was still functional. But it turned out that you could still use it. His eyes, weakened by paperwork, didn't immediately see the human figure that leaned on the iron wall. Homer pointed his rifle forward and took a step back. At first he thought that one of the men from the other side had remained outside in the confusion, but then he recognized Hunter.

The brigadier didn't move. Homer started to sweat.

Hesitantly he approached Hunter. Probably he would see blood on the wall ... but no. Even though they had fired at Hunter in an empty tunnel with a machine gun he was completely unharmed. He pressed his mutilated ear on the metal and listened for sounds that only he could hear.

"What happened?" Homer asked carefully and got closer.

The brigadier didn't pay any attention to him. He whispered something to himself, repeating the words that were spoken on the other side of the closed door. Several minutes passed till he moved away from the door and turned to Homer: "We go back."

"What happened?"

"There are bandits. We need reinforcements."

"Bandits?" asked the old man confused. "That voice back there seemed ..."

"The entire Tulskeya is in the hand of the enemy. We will have to storm it. For that we need backup with flamethrowers."

"Why flamethrowers?"

"To be sure. We go back." Hunter turned around and moved away from Homer.

Before Homer followed Hunter he looked at the door observantly, yes he even pressed his own ear against the cold metal in the hope to hear a part of the conversation as well. But he heard only silence.

And suddenly Homer realized that he didn't believe Hunter. Whoever this enemy was that had captured the station behaved completely incomprehensible. Why did they activate the hermetic door? To protect themselves from two people? What kind of bandits negotiated with some armed men instead of mowing them down?

And then: What was the "punishment" that the mysterious guardian had mentioned?

Nothing is more valuable than a human life, Sasha's father had once said.

For him it wasn't just empty words, not just a saying. There had been a time where he thought differently, he hadn't been youngest military commander in the whole line for nothing.

When you're twenty you don't think much about murder and death. Your whole life seems like a game and in the worst case scenario you just start over again. It wasn't a coincidence that the armies of the world recruited young men that had been students before. And those boys that played war were only red and blue arrows for only one man commanded thousands. One that didn't think about ripped off legs, guts swelling out and crushed skulls when he decided to sacrifice a regiment.

There had been a time where her father had hated his enemies as much as himself. Back then he had looked at tasks that put him in danger with strange frivolity. But he had never foolishly moved forward but with strict calculations. Smart, striving and indifferent for his life he couldn't feel reality, didn't waste a thought about the consequences and felt no regrets. He had never shot at women and children but he had executed deserters with his own hands and was always the first to storm the enemies' fortifications. Pain couldn't harm him. Most of the time he didn't care.

Until he met Sasha's mother.

She defeated him, him who was used to victory, with her indifference. His only weakness, his ambition that had driven him against machineguns before was now directed at a desperate storm attack that had transformed itself into a long siege.

For a long time he didn't have to strain himself when it was about women. They had always come to him. Corrupted by their compliance he had always satisfied his longings at the first night so that the seduced had lost every interest for him before he could fall in love with her. His stormy nature and his fame clouded the girl's eyes and none tried the good old strategy of letting the man wait so that they could get to know him better.

He couldn't impress Sasha's mother with his awards, his rank and his triumphs on the real battlefield and on the battlefield of love as well. She didn't react to his looks and his jokes only made her shake her head. To storm this young woman would be a challenge. A challenge more important than any conquest of some neighboring station.

She should have been only another mark on the stock of his rifle. But soon he understood: The further the unity with her faded into the distance, the more important she became to him. Being with her about one hour per day felt like a triumph for him. But it seemed that she only agreed to it to torment him. She doubted his service, laughed about his principles, cursed his coldness and shook his conscience until he was at the end of his strength.

He endured everything. He even liked it. With her he started to think. To question. And then to feel: Helplessness, when he didn't know how to approach her, regret for all the minutes he couldn't spend near her, fear to lose what he had never won. Love. Then she rewarded him with a sign:

A silver ring.

Only when he no longer knew how to live on without her she gave in.

One year later Sasha was born.

He could never abandon these two lives and he himself couldn't just die anymore.

When you command the strongest army in your known part of the world with the age of twenty-five it is very hard to get rid of the notion that the earth would stop turning because you commanded it to do so. To take the life of a human you didn't really need much power; to bring somebody back to life, though, was in nobody's hands.

He knew that too well: tuberculosis killed his wife and he wasn't able to rescue her. In that moment something in him broke.

Sasha had just turned four but could still remember her mother very well. Sasha remembered the horrible emptiness of the tunnels after she died. The close death of her mother had opened a bottomless abyss in her small world and she had looked straight into it. The edges of the abyss only grew back slowly – two or three years passed until she no longer yelled for her mother in her sleep.

Her father did that to this day.

Maybe Homer didn't approach the whole thing right. When the hero of his epic didn't want to appear then why shouldn't he start with his lover? Maybe he could get him out of hiding with her beauty and youth?

When Homer started to draw her outline first, would his hero just step forward out of nowhere? For their love to be complete those two figures had to complement each other ideally and completely. Therefore the hero of Homers poem had to appear as a completed, finished character.

In their thoughts and facets of their character they would match each other like the shards of the glass mosaics at the Novoslobodskaya. Then when they were once whole, they would be determined to become one again ... Homer didn't find anything bad in "stealing" that plot from the old classics. It was easier said than done. To form a young woman out of ink and paper was a task that Homer didn't think he was able to accomplish. He doubted that he was able to describe feelings convincingly as well. His relationship with Yelena was one of softness; he had learnt too late how to love without holding back. In their age it was no longer about satisfying their passion but to come together and leave the shadows of their pasts behind them and ease their loneliness.

Nikolai Ivanovitsch's had left his one and only true love on the surface of Moscow. But the facets of her personality had faded over the centuries so that there was no example for his novel anymore. Also there had been nothing heroic about his relationship with his wife.

On the day the atomic thunderstorm broke over Moscow, they had offered Nikolai to take the place of the train driver Serov who had retired shortly before. That meant twice the pay. Before he would take on the new post he was to take a few days off. He had called his wife and she had said that she would bake a Scharlottka, then leave the house to go shopping and take a stroll with their kids.

But before he could go on vacation he just had to bring another shift behind him. When Nikolai Ivanovitsch entered the driver cabin of the train he knew he would be the captain of, happily married, at the beginning of a tunnel that lead to a beautiful and bright future. Half an hour later he had aged twenty years. When he came to the end of the lane, Nikolai was a broken, poor and lonely man. Maybe that was why every time he stumbled onto a miraculously preserved train he felt the strange need to take the place of the train driver, letting his hands glide over the instruments on the dashboard, to look through the front windshield into the network of tunnels. To imagine starting the vehicle again ...

And put it in reverse ...

It was like the brigadier created some kind of field that shielded them from all dangers. And he seemed to know it.

They didn't even need an hour back to the Nagornaya.

This time the line didn't resist them.

Homer had felt it again: Scout, merchant from the Sevastopolskaya or any other human, as soon as they ventured into the tunnels they became foreign matter for the blood flow of the metro. As soon as they left their station the air around them went up in flames, reality cracked and unbelievable creatures emerged seemingly out of nowhere and threw themselves against the humans of the metro.

Hunter on the other hand was no stranger to the dark tunnels and he didn't seem to bother the leviathan in which veins they moved. He even turned off his light to transform himself into the darkness that filled the tunnels. Then it seemed that he was gripped by an invisible stream and flew on twice as fast. Even though Homer followed him with all his strength he fell behind and had to yell so that Hunter would wait for the old man.

On their way back they passed the Nagornaya without being disturbed. The fog had disappeared and the station slept.

Now you could see from one end of the station to the other. Where the ghostly giants hid themselves was a riddle that Homer was unable to solve. It was a common, abandoned stop: salt had gathered itself on the wet ceiling, a soft layer of dust was on the platform; here and there somebody had written something indecent on the walls with charcoal and the walls were blackened from smoke. Only on your second look you could see the strange markings on the ground, doing some kind of strange dance through the station and the dried brown stains on the pillars and the ceiling which were cracked and broken as if something had scratched itself on them.

But even the Nagornaya just flickered shortly and then was left behind. They flew on. As long as Homer followed the brigadier his magical cocoon of invincibility seemed to surround him as well. The old man started to wonder, where did he take the strength for this enormous march?

But he didn't have enough air to talk and Hunter probably wouldn't have answered. For the hundredth time Homer asked himself why he had joined the silent and merciless brigadier that seemed to forget about him again and again.

The numbing smell of the Nachimovski prospect approached. Homer would have liked to leave this station behind him as quickly as possible but the brigadier slowed down. While the old man was only able to stand the smell through his gasmask Hunter even sniffed around as if he could smell something out of the thick and heavy rotten air.

Again the corpse eaters retreated away from them out of respect, threw away their half gnawed on bones and spit out shreds of flesh onto the ground. Hunter climbed the mountain in the middle of the station, sinking into the rotting body parts up to his ankles, scanning the area with his eyes. He didn't find what he was looking for and satisfied he made a gesture with his hand into Homers direction and continued to march on.

Homer on the other hand had found something. He had tripped and fallen to the ground; scaring away a young corpse eater that was just disemboweled a wet bulletproof vest.

Homer saw a helmet from the Sevastopolskaya that had rolled to the side. One moment after that the glass of his gasmask steamed up – he was covered in cold sweat.

He desperately tried to fight his nausea, crawled to the bones and started to fish for the dog tags.

Instead he found a small, dark-red smudged notebook. The first page he opened was the last one of the entries: "Do not storm the station, under any circumstances!"

Even when she was just a child her father had taught her not to cry but now she had nothing which she could throw against fate anymore. Tears flowed over her face automatically and out of her chest you could hear a thin, painful whining. She had realized immediately what had happened and now she had been trying for hours to deal with it.

Did he yell for her to help him? Had he wanted to tell her something important? She no longer remembered when exactly she had fallen asleep and she didn't know if she was awake now. Maybe there was a world where her father was alive. Where she hadn't killed him with her sleep, her weakness and egoism. Sasha held the cold but still soft hand of her fathers to warm it and talked to herself: "You're going to find a car. We will go up there, sit inside and drive away. You will laugh again like on the day you brought the recorder with the music CDs ..."

Her father had sat upright at first, leaning on the pillar and his chin pressed to his chest so that you could have thought that he was sleeping. But then his body had slipped down into the puddle of blood. Like if he had been tired of playing alive, no longer wanting to put on a show to her.

The wrinkles that ran through her father's face had smoothened.

She let go of his hand, helped him to sit more comfortably and covered him from head to toe in a torn blanket.

There was no way to bury him. Of course she could have left him on the surface where he could see the sky when it brightened one day. But long before that his body would have become the victim of the creatures.

In their station nobody would touch him. Out of the lost southern tunnels was no danger to be feared, the only creatures that lived there were flying roaches. In the north the tunnel ended into a rusted, half broken metro bridge. Humans lived there but they would have never thought about crossing the bridge. Everybody knew that there was nothing on the other side but burned wasteland. And on the edge of this wasteland there was a guard station where two castaways sat out their death sentence.

Her father would have never allowed her to stay here on her own and now it was completely pointless. Also Sasha knew: It didn't matter how far she ran, it didn't matter how desperately she tried to escape, she would never be able to free herself from this cursed dungeon. Not anymore.

"Papa ... Forgive me" she sobbed. There was nothing there anymore with which she could have earned his forgiveness.

She pulled the silver ring from his finger and dropped into the pocket of her overall. Then she took the cage with the rat that was still uneasy and walked slowly to the north. Her boots left bloody prints on the granite.

She had already stepped onto the rails and entered the tunnel when suddenly; in the empty station, something astonishing happened. A long flame from the fire reached at the body of her father. But it didn't reach him and retreated unwillingly back into the deep darkness, as if it respected his right for his last rest. (In this moment Sasha's part of the book is ahead of this chapter, this happens after Homer and Hunter leave again – Chapter 7)

"They are coming back! They are coming back!" it sounded out of the loudspeaker. Istomin put down the receiver from his ear and looked at him unbelievably. "Who's they?" Denis Michailovitsch jumped up from his chair and spilled his tea. A dark stain spread on his pants. He cursed the tea and repeated his question.

"Who's they?" asked Istomin again mechanically.

"The brigadier and Homer, Achmed is dead." sounded the receiver through the static.

Vladimir Ivanovitsch wiped the sweat of his forehead with a handkerchief and scratched himself under the black rubber of his pirate-like eye patch. Whenever a fighter died it was his responsibility to inform their families.

Without letting himself be connected again he put his head out of the door and yelled for the adjutant: "Both of them to me, immediately! And I want the table ready!"

He went into his office, straightened the pictures on the wall for some reason, stopped at the map of the metro, whispered something to himself and then turned to Denis Michailovitsch. He had his arms crossed in front of his chest with a broad smile plastered on his face.

"Wolodya, you act like a girl before her rendezvous." the colonel said grinning.

"And you aren't nervous at all?" answered the leader of the station. He pointed with his head at the colonel's wet trousers.

"Me? I am ready. The two strike teams are ready. Just another day and we can go."

Dennis moved his finger over the blue beret, stood up and put it on his head. He looked more official that way.

They heard hasty steps from the hallway; the adjutant looked at them, holding a dim glass bottle of some sort of alcohol through the crack in the door.

Istomin made a gesture with his hands: Later, Later!

Then they finally could hear the familiar voice, the door sprang open and a broad figure entered. Behind the brigadiers back was the old storyteller that Hunter had carried around for some reason.

"I welcome you!" Istomin sat into his seat, stood up and sat back down.

"Now, what is it?" asked the colonel. The brigadier looked from one man to the other and turned to Istomin.

"The Tuls kaya has been captured by a wandering group of bandits. They have killed everyone."

Dennis Michailovitsch raised his bushy eyebrows. "Our men too?"

"As far as I can tell. We only got to the station's door. There it came to a fight and then they closed the hermetic door."

"The hermetic door?" Istomin held on to the edge of the table and stood up.

"What are we supposed to do now?"

"Storm the station." both the brigadier and the colonel answered, completely synchronized.

"No. We can't storm the station."

It was Homer's voice that sounded out of the background.

She just had to wait for the right hour. If she hadn't confused the days the railcar would soon emerge from the wet mist of the night. Every other minute she remained in this place, this abyss, there were the tunnel emerged from the earth like an open vein would one day cost her life. But there was nothing to do but to wait. On the other side of this never ending bridge she would find a closed hermetic door that you could only open from the other side. It only did once a week, on market day.

Today Sasha had nothing to offer, but this time she had to buy more than ever before. She didn't care what the people on the railcar would want in return for her to pass into the world of the living – the grave coldness and the lifeless lack of emotion of her father had passed to her.

How often had she dreamt to one day get to into another station, to be surrounded by other people, establish friendships and to meet someone special...

She had asked her father about his youth, not just to go back to her bright lit childhood, but because instead of her mother she saw herself and instead of her father she saw the blurry picture of a beautiful young man in her own naïve imagination of love. She doubted that she would be able to get along with other people if one day she would be able to go back to the metro. About what would these people would talk about?

But now, mere hours before the arrival of the ferry, yes maybe even minutes, the other men and women didn't matter to her. Even the thought of her existence being worthy of a human being felt like she was betraying her father. Without hesitating one second she would have agreed to spend the rest of her days in this station, if that would have been able to save him.

When the candle stump in the glass started to fight its last fight she put the fire on a new wick. On one of his expeditions her father had found a whole chest full of wax candles and she always carried one of them in her overall's pocket. Sasha enjoyed imagining that their bodies were exactly like the candles and that a part of her father had passed to her when he faded.

Would the people on the railcar would recognize her signal through the mist?

Until now she had only looked outside from time to time to remain outside for the least time possible. Her father had prohibited her from doing so and his swollen head was warning enough for her. On the slope Sasha always felt uneasy, like a trapped mole, looking around restlessly, only daring to venture to the beginning of the bridge to watch the black river. But now she had too much time. Leaning forward and trembling in the wet and cold wind Sasha made a few steps forward. Through the dawn and boney trees she saw the fallen skyscrapers; in the oily, thick waters of the rivers something massive swam around and in the distance she heard an inhuman scream. Suddenly a familiar sound emerged, the familiar squeaking sound of the railcar.

Sasha jumped up, holding the glass with the candle up high and from the bridge a small ray of light answered.

The old railcar approached, struggling against the thick fog. The weak shine of the spotlight cut through the night and Sasha made one step back. It wasn't the same railcar as normal. It moved slowly, like every rotation of the wheels cost the people pushing the levers a lot of strength.

Finally it stopped ten feet in front of Sasha. A fat giant in a primitive radiation suit jumped off the railcar and landed on the gravel. The diabolically dancing fire of her candle was being reflected by the glass of his gasmask so that Sasha couldn't see his eyes. With one hand he held an army Kalashnikov with a wooden stock.

"I want to get away from here." explained Sasha and raised her head.

"A-way." echoed the scarecrow and stretched the sound surprised and sarcastic at the same time. "And what do you offer in return?"

"I have nothing anymore." She withstood his look and looked directly into the glasses of the gasmask.

"There is always something to take. Especially with women." The ferryman groaned, then he went silent. "You would leave your father alone here?"

"I have nothing anymore." she repeated and looked to the ground.

"So he did die." it sounded parts relieved parts disappointed out of the mask.

"Better this way. He wouldn't have liked this."

The barrel of the gun slowly unzipped her overall.

"Stop it!" she screamed and took a step back.

The glass with the candle fell onto the rail, shards flew around and darkness took over.

"Don't you get it? Nobody returns from here." the scarecrow looked at her indifferently out of the dark dead glasses. "Your body isn't even enough to pay for the trip, but it may just pay for your father's debt."

The assault rifle swirled in his hands so that the stock of the gun pointed forward. Sasha felt a heavy blow to her forehead. Her consciousness showed pity and left her.

Since the Nachimovski prospect Hunter hadn't left Homer out of his sight, so that he hadn't been able to take a closer look into the notebook. Suddenly the brigadier cared, he even tried to not just to not let him fall behind any further but to match Homer's speed. For that Hunter had to slow down a lot. Several times he had stopped and turned around checking if somebody was following them. But the blinding light of his lamp was always pointed at Homer face so that the old man felt like he was being interrogated.

He cursed, blinked and tried to remain calm. The penetrating look of the brigadier moved over his entire body, searching for the item he had found at the Nachimovski prospect. Nonsense! Of course Hunter couldn't have seen anything, in that moment he had been too far away. He had probably felt the change in Homers behavior. But every suspecting something. But every time their looks met he started to sweat. The few things that he had been able to read had made him question the brigadier's intentions.

It was the diary. Parts of the pages were glued together by dried blood. Homer left those alone, his tired and numb fingers would have just ripped them apart. The entries on the first pages were confusing, as if the author no longer knew which letters meant what and his thoughts ran all over the place so that you almost couldn't follow them.

"Passed the Nagornaya without casualties." revealed the notebook and jumped on immediately: "Chaos at the Tulskeya. No way to the metro. Hanza isn't letting anybody through. We can't go back as well."

Homer continued to read. Out of his field of vision he saw the brigadier stepping down from the kurgan and approaching him. He couldn't let the diary fall into the brigadiers hands. Before he let the

notebook disappear in his backpack he read: "Have the situation under control. The station is sealed and we have a new commander." and then "Who dies next?"

Written over the question was the date. The yellowed pages of the notebook made him believe that what had happened in it had happened in the last century, but the entry was only a couple of days old.

Homer's old brain put together the single pieces of this mosaic with almost forgotten speed: The mysterious wanderer, the pitiful homeless man at the Nagatinskaya, the seemingly familiar voice of the guard at the door and the sentence: "We can't go back as well". In front of his inner eye he had put it together to one picture. Maybe the pages that were stuck together had all the answers to the mysterious events?

At least one thing was sure; there had been no attack on the Tuskaya. What had happened there was far more complex and mysterious. And Hunter that had questioned the guards fifteen minutes ago knew that as well as Homer.

That was why he couldn't show the notebook to Hunter.

And that was why he had risked disagreeing with him in Istomin's office.

"No, we can't storm the station," he repeated. Hunter slowly turned his head, like a battleship that readied its main cannon. Istomin pushed back his chair and came out from behind the table after all.

The colonel made a tired grimace.

"We can't blow up the door," Homer continued, "Because there is the groundwater, we would flood the entire line. The Tuskaya is just barely holding it back, every day they hope that the ground water doesn't break through. And you know that for ten years now the parallel tunnel has been ..."

"Are we supposed to knock and wait till they open up?" the colonel interrupted.

"We can still go around," said Istomin.

The colonel was so surprised that he started to cough. Then he argued with Istomin, accused him of wanting to make his best man into cripples, and bring them into their graves. But then the brigadier interrupted them.

"The Tuskaya has to be cleaned. This situation demands the total destruction of all that are there. Not one of your people is still there. They are all dead. If you want to prevent any more casualties this is the only way. I have all the necessary information."

His last words were definitely aimed at Homer.

The old man felt like a small dog that had been shook so it would stop barking.

Istomin straightened his jacket: "If the way is blocked from the other side there is only one way to get to the Tuskaya. From the other side. From Hanza. But that also means that we can't send armed men. That is out of the question."

Hunter made a reassuring gesture with his hand: "I'll find some."

The colonel winced.

"But if you want to get to Hanza by going around you have to cross two stations over the Kaschovkaya line to the Kaschirskaya," said Istomin and went silent.

The brigadier crossed his arms in front of his chest: "And?"

"There's very high radiation in the area near the Kaschirskaya. A fragment of a warhead went down not far from there. There was no detonation but the radiation is still dangerously high. One out of two that gets a dose of radiation like that dies in about a month. Even now."

The group went silent. Homer used the break to make an unnoticed, tactical retreat out of Istomin's office.

Then Vladimir Ivanovitsch came to words again. It seemed that he feared that the uncontrollable brigadier would still try to blow up the hermetic door at the Tuskaya and said: "We have radiation suits."

Two of them. You can take one of our best fighters with you. We'll wait." He looked at the colonel. "What can we do otherwise?"

Dennis Michailovitsch sighed. "Let's go to the boys. We'll talk about it and you can choose a companion."

"Not necessary," Hunter shook his head.

"I need Homer."

Chapter 7 (Limits)

The railcar drove over the wide bright yellow stripe that ran over the ground and the ceiling. The man that controlled it could no longer act like he didn't hear the faster and faster clicking sound of the Geiger counter. He reached for the brake and mumbled excusing: "Colonel sir, without any protection we can't proceed ..."

"Just another hundredth meters" asked Denis Michailovitsch. "Because of the high exposure you'll get a week off. For us it is just a two minute drive but the two in the suits would take half an hour for it."

"This here is the limit," grumbled the helmsman but he didn't dare to slow down.

"Stop" ordered Hunter. "We continue on foot. The radiation really is too high."

The brakes squealed, the search light attached on the vehicles frame started to shake back and forth as the railcar came to a stop. The brigadier and Homer who had let their feet hang over the edge of the railcar jumped onto the rails. In their heavy suits made out of lead soaked material they looked like cosmonauts.

These suits were unimaginably expensive and rare; in the entire metro there were maybe a few dozen of them. At the Sevastopolskaya they had almost never been used – they had saved them for more important missions. They withstood the highest level radiation but even small movement was an arduous matter. At least for Homer.

Denis Michailovitsch left the railcar behind him and walked with them for another few minutes. He and Hunter exchanged a few sentences – intentionally fragmented that Homer wouldn't be able to decipher them.

"Where are you going to get them?" asked the colonel, grumpily

"They're going to give me some. They can't do anything else." answered the hollow voice of the brigadier.

"Nobody is waiting for you. For them you died. Dead, you understand?"

Hunter stood still for a moment and spoke silently, more to himself than to the officer: "If it would be that simple."

"To desert from the order is worse than death." growled Denis Michailovitsch.

The brigadier made a surly gesture with his hand, as if he was saluting the colonel but at the same time cutting an invisible rope that was attached to an anchor. Denis Michailovitsch understood the gesture and remained at the pier, while the other two distanced themselves from the shore, slowly but steadily continuing their journey over the ocean of darkness.

The colonel took his hand from his forehead and gave the helmsman of the railcar the signal to start the motor.

He felt empty: There was nobody that he could give an ultimatum anymore, nobody that he could fight anymore. As the commander of the military of his lonely island in the sea he could now only hope that the small expedition wouldn't sink, but to one day return from the other side, as proof that the earth was still round.

The last guard post in the tunnel had been directly behind the Kachovskaya, which every human soul had abandoned. As long as Homer could remember the inhabitants of the Sevastopolskaya had never been attacked from the east.

The yellow line seemed to not only separate two parts of the metro but to connect two planets with each other which were hundreds of light-years away from each other. Beyond this line the living area of the earth had changed into a lunar, dead landscape, and both were strangely similar. While Homer concentrated himself to not trip over his heavy boots he heard how his breath squeezed itself through the complex system of tubes and filters, imagining that he was an astronaut that somebody had abandoned him on the far reaches of a far away planet. He allowed his childish fantasy because it was easier to deal with the suit that way, because on this moon there was more gravity. He shivered with the thought that for many kilometers they would be the only living beings.

Neither scientist, nor science fiction writer had been able to foresee this future, thought the old man. In the year 2034 mankind would have already conquered half of the galaxy, or at least the neighboring sun systems, they had promised Homer that when he was young. But the authors of science fiction novels and the scientist had always believed that humanity would act rationally. As if it wasn't made off a few billions of slow, careless and enjoyment seeking individuals, but some kind of bee hive with collective reason and a focused will. As if they had ever had the intentions to conquer space. Instead they had been become bored with the game and had abandoned their goal halfway and turned to electronics at first then to biotechnology without getting any halfway impressing results in those areas. Maybe in nuclear physics.

And now he was here, a flightless astronaut, surviving only because of this space suit, a stranger to his own planet. Ready to conquer the tunnel between the Kachovskaya Nad and the Kaschirskaya. He could forget about all others and the survivors, he could no longer see the stars anyway.

Strange: Here past the yellow line his body moaned under gravity but his heart was weightless. Days before the march to the Tuskaya, when he had said goodbye to Yelena he had known that he had to return. But when Hunter had chosen him as his companion for the second time he knew that this time it was serious. So he had prayed for a challenge, an enlightenment and he had finally been heard. To be too afraid would have been stupid and unworthy. He knew that he wouldn't be able to do his life's work as a side job. But fate didn't let itself be stopped. A motto said that it will come, maybe later, one last time ... there would probably be no last time, and when he didn't decide now if he would still live? Should he spent the time that he still had as Nikolai Ivanovitsch, the fool of the station, an old, slobbering and stupid smiling story teller?

But to transform himself from a caricature of the real Homer to his inheritor, to transform himself from a lover of the old myths to their creator, to raise from the ashes as a new human he first had to burn his old image. He believed that when he continued to doubt to give in to his longing for home and wife, continuously looking back at the past he would overlook something very important that been laying in front of him in the end. He had to cut that all from him. From this new expedition he would if at all not return unharmed. Of course he was sorry for Yelena. At first she didn't believe that Homer had returned alive and healthy after one day. She had tried to keep him from embarking on this voyage, in vain.

When they parted ways in tears again he didn't promise anything anymore. He pressed her against him and watched the clock over her shoulder. It was time to go. He knew that. He couldn't amputate ten years of his life so easily and he would probably get phantom pains from doing so.

He had believed that he would have wanted to look back all the time. But as soon as he crossed the yellow strip it was as if he had actually died and his souls had freed himself from the both heavy and unmoving wraps and ascended. He was free.

The suit didn't seem to slow Hunter down. The clothing had transformed his muscular, wolf like figure into a formless mountain but it hadn't limited his movement. He walked alongside the panting Homer but only because he didn't want to leave him out of his sight. After all he had seen and the Nagatinskaya, the Nagornaya and the Tulaskaya it hadn't been easy for Homer to agree on another journey with Hunter. But there was something that had convinced him. The brigadier's presence had started his long awaited metamorphoses that promised his reincarnation. The old man didn't care why Hunter carried him around again, let it be as a guide or walking provision.

The main thing was to not let this moment pass, to use it as long as it lasted, to imagine something, to write down something.

And then when Hunter had called for Homer he had felt that also wanted something of him. It wasn't because he showed him the way in the tunnels or protected him from all possible dangers. Maybe the brigadier took something from the old man without asking for it while he gave him what he wanted? But what would he need?

Hunter's lack of emotions could no longer deceive Homer. Behind the crust of the paralyzed face magma cooked, and it shot over the crater of his eternally open eyes from time to time. He was uneasy. He was looking for something as well.

Hunter seemed to be perfect for the role of Homers epic hero in his book. At first the old man had hesitated but after a few tries he had acknowledged him. Even if many characteristics of the brigadier, his passion for killing, his silence and sparse gestures had made Homer careful. Hunter was like those murderers that gave the police cryptic messages so they could be caught. Homer didn't know if the brigadier saw a priest waiting for a confession, a biographer or some kind of donor of something in Homer, but he felt that this attachment mutual. And that it would soon become stronger than his fear. Homer couldn't shake the feeling that Hunter was delaying a really important conversation. From time to time the brigadier looked at him as if he wanted to ask something but he remained silent. But maybe the old man had confused a wish with reality again and he wasn't an unnecessary witness that Hunter would choke to death somewhere in the tunnel once unneeded.

More frequently the brigadiers gaze fell on the old man's backpack where the mysterious diary was. He seemed to feel that Homers thoughts circled around a certain object and he closed in it, approaching slowly but steady. Cramped Homer tried not to think about the diary, in vain.

He hadn't had much time to pack and had only spent a few minutes with the diary. Of course it hadn't been enough to wet all with blood glued together pages and separate them from each other but he had been able to read a part of the pages. They were all over the place, the writing was in fragments and events weren't in order, as if the author was in peril as he jotted down the words. So that they would make sense, Homer had to bring them in the right order.

"No contact. The telephone is silent. Probably sabotage. Someone who had been exiled? Out of revenge?"

"Still in front of us"

"The situation is without a way out. No help can be expected from anywhere. To ask the Sevastopolskaya would be the end for our men. We can only wait ... But for how long?"

"We cannot get out ... They went crazy. If not them then who? Flee!"

And then there was something else. Immediately after the last words that warned about storming the Tulskaya there was a signature, almost unreadable, stamped with the brown weal of a bloody finger. Homer had heard the name before, he had even said it.

This diary belonged to the radio operator that had left with the caravan for the Tulskaia a week ago.

They passed the tunnel to another metro depot that hadn't been emptied out. Without a doubt it would have if it hadn't been hit by so much radiation. The black tunnel that leads there had been barricaded with welded together metal of all kinds. On a metal sign which hung down from a piece of wire that was attached to one of the bars, a dull smiling skull stared at them and under it were remains of a warning in red paint, that had now fallen off or been removed intentionally. This barred-off tunnel held Homer's look magically and when he was finally able to take his gaze from it he was thinking that this line wasn't as lifeless as many thought at the Sevastopolskaia.

Then they passed the Warschavskaya, a horribly rusted and fungus covered station that looked like a body that had laid too long in stagnant water. The tile covered walls sweated some kind of murky fluid and through the half-opened hermetic door a cold wind blew from the surface as if a giant creature tried to breathe air into this rotten station. The hysterical ticking sound of the Geiger counter exhorted them to leave this place as fast as possible.

They were already approaching the Kaschirskaya when the system stopped working and the indicator stopped at the end of the scale. Homer felt a bitter smell on his tongue.

"Where did it go down?" asked Hunter.

The voice of the brigadier was hard to hear as if Homer had put his head into a full bathtub. He stopped, finally he had an excuse for a just short but welcome pause and pointed with his glove to the southeast.

"At the Kantemirovskaya. We think that the ceiling and the airshaft went down with it. Nobody knows for certain."

"That means the Kantemirovskaya is abandoned?"

"Always has been. Past the Kolomenskaya you won't find a single human soul."

"Somebody once told me ..." started Hunter but then he went silent, making a gesture for Homer to be silent as well.

He seemed to feel some kind of invisible wave. Finally he asked: "Does anybody know what happened at the Kaschirskaya?"

"How?" Homer didn't know if his sarcastic tone sounded through the filters.

"Then I am going to tell you. The radiation is so high here that we will be cooked in a matter of minutes. With the radiation suit or without. We are going back."

"Back? To the Sevastopolskaia?"

"Yes, there I will go to the surface. Maybe I get there from the surface." said Hunter sunken in thoughts. It was as if he was already planning his route.

Homer couldn't find the right words: "You want to go alone?"

"I can't always look after you. I have to watch out that I won't die too. We won't get through together anyway. It isn't even sure that I am going to make it alone."

"Don't you understand? I have to go with you, I want ..."

Homer desperately searched for a reason, an excuse.

"... to do something useful before you die?" ended the brigadier the sentence. His tone was indifferent, even though Homer knew that the filter of the gasmasks filtered any fumes so that only tasteless sterile air came in and mechanical soulless voices as well.

The old man closed his eyes and tried desperately to remember what he knew about the short stub of the Kachochskaya line, about the irradiated Samoskvorezkaya line, about the way from the Sevastopolskaia to the Serpuchovskaya ... Everything but not to turn back, to not return to this lacking life that had nothing to offer to him anymore but false hopes of great stories and legends.

"Follow me!" he croaked as he suddenly walked to the east with such speed that even he was surprised. They walked east, to the Kaschirskaya, into the middle of hell.

She dreamt that she was working with a saw on the iron ring to which she was chained to the wall, the tool shrieked and slipped again and again but every time she had gotten one millimeter into the steel the thin scratch grew together again in front of her eyes.

But Sasha didn't give up. Again she took the saw with her bloody hands and continued to work the unyielding metal.

The most important thing was to continue, to show no weakness, not to stop working and to not rest. Her chained feet were swollen and numb. Sasha knew that even if she succeeded to beat the iron she wouldn't be able to flee because she could no longer control her legs ...

She awoke and opened her eyelids.

The chains hadn't been a dream. Sasha's hands were handcuffed. She was lying on the dirty loading area of the mining railcar that shrieked monotones while it tortured itself forward. In her mouth was a dirty piece of cloth and her forehead hurt and bled.

He didn't kill me, she thought. Why?

From the loading area she could only see a part of the tunnels ceiling. In the randomly moving light the welds of the tunnel rings flickered out of the darkness. Suddenly the tunnel segments disappeared and cracked white paint was to see.

What kind of station was this?

This was a bad place: Not just silent but deathly silent, not just empty of people but empty of life and also dark. She had always thought that the station on the other side of the bridge would be full of people and noise. Should she have been mistaken?

The blanket over Sasha didn't move anymore. The kidnapper climbed on the platform cursing, his boots with iron spikes and fitted soles made a strange sound. He seemed to scan his surroundings, and seemed to have already taken off his gasmask because Sasha heard him mumble: "There you are. It has been a while." relieved he breathed out and beat after something – no kicked against something – lifeless, heavy: "A full sack?"

Sasha realized. She bit the stinking rag and started to moan, her body cramped. Now she knew where the fat man in the radiation suit had brought her and to whom his words were pointed at.

Even the thought to leave Hunter behind was absurd.

With a few predator-like jumps he had caught up to him, held on to his shoulder and shook him painfully. "What's going on with you?"

"A little further ..." croaked the old man. "I remember. There is still a tunnel that leads directly to the Samoskvorezkaya line, even before the Kaschirskaya. If we pass there we get directly into the tunnel and don't have to run through the station. We circle it and end up directly at the Kolomenskaya. It can't be far. Please ..."

Homer used Hunter's hesitation to rip himself free, but one of his legs got caught up in the suit and didn't move, he fell onto the rails. He stood up immediately after that and continued to set one foot in front of the other. Hunter grabbed the old man with ease as if he was a rat, turned him to his face so that the windows of their gasmasks were at the same height. A few seconds he locked his eyes at Homer, but then he eased his grip. "Okay," he growled.

From now on Homer dragged the brigadier behind him without stopping for a second. The sound of his blood in his ears pumped over the clicking sound of the Geiger counter, his stiff legs were almost no longer under his control and his lungs seemed to explode, struggling to get air.

He had almost overlooked the deep dark stain of the hole. They squeezed through and ran for another few minutes until they left through another new tunnel. The brigadier looked around hastily, went back into the tunnel and asked the old man angrily: "Where have you lead me? Have you even been here before?"

Around another thirty meters to left, into the direction that they had to go, the tunnel had been filled from the floor to the ceiling by something that vaguely reminded him of the web of a spider. Homer didn't have enough air to breathe so he just shook his head. It was the whole truth, he had never been here. Everything else he had heard about this place he wouldn't tell Hunter.

The brigadier held the assault rifle in his left hand, pulled a long straight knife out of his backpack; it was some kind of self-made machete and started to slice the sticky white mass. The dried shells of flying roaches that hung in the web started to shiver and made sounds like rusted bells. The edges of the wound started to grow back together immediately.

The brigadier raised the half transparent piece of spider web, put his search light through and lit the side tunnel.

They would need hours to cut their way through. The sticky web had grown in the tunnel in many layers. Hunter looked at the Geiger counter, made a strange but disappointed noise and started to rip through the web that was between the walls. The web only gave in reluctantly, it cost them more time than they had. In around ten minutes they had only gotten around thirty feet and the net became denser and denser, it seemed to block the entry like a big piece of cotton. When they finally passed a overgrown vent where an ugly two headed skeleton laid on the ground the brigadier threw his knife to the ground.

They hung in this web like the roaches and even if the creature that had made this giant web was already dead the radiation would do its job.

While Hunter was looking for an exit Homer suddenly remembered what he had heard about this place. He dropped to his knees, shook a few bullets out of his reserve clip, turned them around, opened them with his knife and shook the gunpowder in to his hand.

Hunter realized immediately. A few moments later they stood at the entrance of the side tunnel again, covered a piece of cotton with the coarse grey powder and held a lighter to it.

The powder hissed and started to smoke and suddenly the unimaginable happened, the small flame began to shoot into all direction at the same time, reached the ceiling, wandered along the walls and filled the entire tunnel.

Greedily it ate the web and rushed into the deep. Like a roaring ball of fire it moved forwards, lit the dark tunnel segments and left burned pieces on the ceiling. On its way to the Kolomenskaya the fire narrowed and dragged all the air with it. Then the tunnel turned around and the flame that dragged a purple cape behind it was no longer to see.

In the distance Homer believed to hear an inhuman, desperate shrieking over of the deafening sound of the fire.

But the old man was still hypnotized by what he had seen so he didn't entirely trust his senses.

Hunter put his knife back into his backpack and pulled out two new and sealed filter-boxes for their gasmasks. "They were meant for the way back" He changed his filter and gave the other box to Homer. Because of the fire the radiation is now as high as back then."

The old man nodded his head. The flame had whirled up radioactive particles that had deposited in the web. In the black vacuum of these tunnels there had to be millions of death bringing molecules.

Uncountable small underwater mines hung in this empty room and blocked their way. They couldn't move out of it, there was only one way out, directly through them.

"If your father could see you now" the fat man mocked her.

Sasha was sitting directly in front of her father's corpse that was laying in his blood facedown.

The kidnapper had opened his overalls, he was wearing a bleached t-shirt with some kind of happily laughing animal.

Every time she raised her eyes her kidnapper blinded her with his flashlight so that she wouldn't be able to see his face. He had pulled the cloth out of her mouth but Sahsa didn't even think about pleading for something.

"You don't look like your mother. Too bad, I was hoping ..." The elephant legs in the high, stained rubber boots wandered for the second time around the pillars. Sasha was leaning on them with her back so she didn't know what was going on. Now his voice came from behind. "Your father must have thought that in time they would forgive him. But there are crimes that don't lapse ... Like slandering and treason". His obscure silhouette emerged out of the dark from the other side. He stopped in front of her father's corpse, kicked at it with his boot and spit out thick slime. "Too bad that the old man already died without my help."

The fat man moved the ray of light through the murky, faceless station where mountains of useless scrap laid around.

At the bicycle the light stopped. "You got a nice place here. I think if not for you, your father would have already hung himself."

While he lit the station Sasha tried to crawl away but one second later the ray of light caught her.

"I can relate," with one jump her kidnapper stood next to her. "she made a nice lady. But like I said, too bad that she doesn't look like her mother. It probably bothered him too. Well whatever." He kicked her side with his boot so that she fell over. "After all I have crossed the entire metro to get here."

Sasha winced and shook her head. "You see Petya, how easy it was to predict what would go on to happen?" once again he had turned to her father.

"Back then you always brought your rivals in front of the tribunal. And much thanks for the lifelong exile instead of the execution! Well, life is really long and your situation changes. And not always in your favor. I am back even though it took me ten years longer than planned."

"You never accidentally returned to the same place," she whispered her father's words.

"Too true." answered the fat man sarcastic. "Hey, who's there?"

At the other end of the platform you could hear a scraping sound, then something heavy fell to the floor. Some kind of hissing sound emitted and another that sounded like steps of a big animal. The silence that followed was deceptive but Sasha and her kidnapper both felt that something approached them.

The fat man clicked the safety off his weapon loudly and went down on one knee next to her, he had pressed the stock against his shoulder and sent a flickering spot of light over the pillars that were standing around. That something had moved in the century-abandoned southern tunnels was scarier than all the marble statues in the central station suddenly coming to life.

In the wandering ray of light a blurred shadow appeared for a second, but its silhouette nor its speed was human. When the ray of light quickly returned to the same place, strangely there was no trace left of the strange creature. A few seconds the panicky searching light caught it again, now only twenty feet away from them.

"A bear?" whispered the fat man doubting what he had just seen. He pulled the trigger.

The bullets rushed to the pillars, hit the walls, but the animal had vanished into thin air at the same time, not one of the shots had reached its goal. Then the fat man switched to pointless auto fire, dropped the Kalashnikov and pressed his hands onto his stomach. The flashlight rolled to the side so the light fell on the heavy, cramped figure from the ground upwards.

Without any haste a human emerged out of the twilight, with astonishing, soft and almost inaudible steps even though he was wearing heavy boots. The radiation suit was even too big for his colossal stature, so that you could actually think that he was a bear.

He didn't wear a gasmask. The cleanly shaven head that was full of scars that it reminded of a dried desert. One part of his face had a brave look, if not a bit rough, you could have said that it looked beautiful if it hadn't been unmoving like he was dead. Sweat ran down Sasha's back when she saw him.

The other half was just outrageously wounded, a complex network of scars made a mask of pure ugliness out of his face. Still, his appearance would have had something repulsive and not scary if it weren't for his eyes. An always wandering, half mad stare was the only thing that kept the unmoving face alive. A life without a soul.

The fat man tried to get onto his feet but slipped on the ground and immediately screamed in pain. The colossal man crouched; slowly pointed the long barrel of the suppressed pistol against the back of the fat man's head and pulled the trigger. The screaming stopped instantly, but the echo wandered around in the tomb of the station for a bit longer, like a lost creature that had been deprived of a body. The shot had ripped his lower jaw from him, the kidnapper showed his face to her, which was now a slimy red funnel. Sasha lowered her head and started to cry.

The terrible man pointed the barrel of the gun at her, slowly and sunken in his thoughts. Then he turned around and decided differently. The pistol returned to his shoulder holster and he himself stepped back as if he wanted to distance himself from his doing. He opened a flat flask and put it to his lips.

Now another character stepped onto the small stage that was lit by the fading flashlight of the fat man: An old man. He was breathing heavily and pressed his hand against his ribs. He wore the same suit as the killer but moved a lot more clumsily as him. As soon as he had caught up to his follower he fell to the ground. He didn't even realize that everything was covered in blood. Only after he had rested and opened his eyes again he saw the two distorted corpses and the completely scared girl.

He had just calmed down his heart and now it started to beat faster again. Before Homer had found words for it he knew: He had found her. After all his inconclusive tries he had found the heroine for his novel which had started to take shape in front of his inner eye at night, her lips, hands, her clothing, her smell, her movement and thoughts of the person he had tried to create were now suddenly standing exactly in front of him. In flesh and blood. Directly out of his imagination.

But no, honestly he had imagined her differently, more elegant, with smoother edges ... And definitely older. She here had too many hard edges and her eyes weren't filled with warmth but two splinters of hard ice. But he knew that it had been him that had been mistaken, he hadn't been able to foresee how she would be. Her chased look, the scared face, and the cuffed hands – it all fascinated him. Of course he knew how to tell many extraordinary stories but to write a tragedy of the likes of what had happened to this young woman was not in his power. Her helplessness, being exposed to the cruel world, her wonderful rescue and the way fate had woven her, his and Hunter's story together, all that could only mean that he was on the right path.

He believed her before she had said a single word.

Because next to everything this girl possessed a kind of beauty in her confused, blond, sloppily cut hair, pointy ears, dirt covered cheeks, fragile, exposed, astonishing white shoulders, her childish lips, so that a spontaneous attachment joined his curiosity and pity.

Homer approached her and crouched. She lowered her head and closed her eyes. She probably didn't have a lot of contact with other people he thought. Because he didn't know what to say so he just softly held on to her shoulder.

"We need to go," growled Hunter.

"And what's with ..." Homer pointed at the girl with an asking look.

"Nothing, she's none of our business."

"We can't leave her here alone!"

"Then we give her a bullet." answered the brigadier harsh.

"I don't want to go with you," said the girl surprisingly clearly. "Just get these handcuffs off of me. He probably has the keys." She pointed at the faceless body on the ground.

With a few moves of his hand Hunter fished the iron keys out of the fat man's pocket and threw them to the girl: "Satisfied?"

The old man played for time. "What did that pig do to you?" he asked the little one.

"Nothing" she replied while she fumbled at the lock.

"He didn't get far. He is no monster. Just a normal human being. Horrible, stupid and unforgiving. Like all people."

"Not all," answered the old man but it didn't sound very convincing.

"All," repeated the girl. She made a grimace but she accomplished to stand up with her swollen feet.

"Well it isn't always easy to remain human."

How fast she had laid down her fear! Now her eyes were no longer looking at the ground but she was looking at the two men as if she was up for a challenge. She fell to her knees next to one of the bodies, carefully turned it on his back, straightened his arms and kissed the forehead of the dead man. Then she turned to Hunter, closed her eyes and said "Thank you."

She took nothing with her. She climbed down to the rails and walked, slightly limping, towards the tunnel.

The brigadier followed her with a dark look. His hand wandered undecided from his flask to his knife. Finally he made a decision. He stood up and yelled: "Wait!"

Masks (Chapter 8)

The cage was still where the fat man had beaten down Sasha. The door was open and the rat was gone ... Well, thought the girl, even a rat has a right for freedom.

It didn't matter; Sasha had to wear the gasmask of her kidnapper. She believed to smell the rest of his foul breath, but she could be happy that the fat man hadn't worn the mask when he had been shot.

At the middle of the bridge the radiation suddenly spiked again.

It was like a miracle that she could even move in the giant radiation suit. She bounced around in it like the larva of a roach in its cocoon. The gasmask had been widened by the broad visage of the fat man, but it still stuck to her face. Sasha tried to breathe in as powerful as possible to suck the air through the tubes and filters, but while she looked outside the round glass of the gasmask she couldn't shake the feeling that she had slipped into a stranger's body. Just one hour ago this grey demon that had haunted her had been in this suit, and now to get over this bridge she had to enter his world, see the world with his eyes.

With his, and with the eyes of the humans that had banished her father to the Kolomenskaya, who had let them live for all these years because their greed was stronger than their hate. Would Sasha, if she wanted to disappear in the human mass, continue to wear this black rubber mask? Would she have to act like she was somebody else, somebody without a face and feelings? If at least it would help her to change her inner thoughts: all that what she had suffered through, to forget and to strongly believe that she could start over again!

Sasha had wished that these two hadn't just found her out of chance, she wished that it had been a rescue mission sent just for her, but she knew that that wasn't true. She didn't get why they took her with them: Be it for pleasure, out of pity or to prove something to each other. In the few words that the old man had thrown before her, a certain note of sympathy had swung with it, but now he looked after his companion, didn't speak many words and seemed too concerned to not appear too human.

The other one hadn't turned to the girl since he had allowed her to come with them to the next inhabited station. Sasha had stayed behind intentionally, so that she could at least observe them from behind, but it seemed that he had felt her look, because immediately he twitched his head but didn't turn it, maybe so she could keep her curiosity, maybe so she would think that he didn't notice her.

The powerful built physique of the bold man, with his animal like behavior, which the fat man had mistaken for a bear, marked him as a warrior. But this picture wasn't just off his physical power. He emitted a certain strength that you could have felt if he had been thin and built small. A man of the likes of him could get anybody to follow his orders and if anybody would dare to refuse his order he would eliminate them without hesitation.

And far before Sasha was able to bring her fear of other humans under control, before she was clear about him or herself, an unknown voice told her, the voice of her inner soul, that she would follow him.

The railcar proceeded astonishingly fast. Homer felt no resistance from the lever, because the brigadier took all the strain. The old man raised and lowered his arms as well, out of decency, but it didn't cost him any strength.

The compact metro bridge waded with many pillars through the dark, thick water. The concrete had fallen off the iron skeleton at some parts, its legs stood so awry that one of the two lanes had kinked and fallen down.

It had been a totally functional bridge, a standard model, short lived like the new building in the outer areas of the capitol which had been designed on a drawing board.

There was nothing, nothing that was beautiful of it.

Still, as he looked around his surroundings, Homer had to think about the magically retractable bridges of Petersburg or the elegant bridge constructions of the Krymski Most with its cast iron chains.

In the twenty years that he had lived in the metro, Homer had only been on the surface three times. Every time he had tried to see as much as he could in the small time away from his cell. To refresh his memories, to point his weakened eyes at the objects of the city, to push the rusty triggers of his visual memory and to gather as many impressions for the future. Maybe he would never have the chance to get to the beautiful places on the surface, like the Kolomenskaya, the Retschnoi Woksäl or the Tjoply Stan, all three were stations that laid far away from other stations. Back then, like many other inhabitants of Moscow he had treated them in with a condescending attitude.

With the years Moscow aged continuously, fell apart, withered away. Homer had the need to touch the disappearing bridge like that girl from the Kolomenskaya had touched the dead man again. The bridge, the grey edges of the factories, the abandoned beehives of the apartments. To dwell in their sights. To touch them, to feel that they really existed, that everything here wasn't a dream. And to say goodbye, just in case.

The line of sight was bad, the silver moonlight obtruded through the clouds so that the old man sensed his surroundings more than he perceived them. But that wasn't too bad: He was used to replacing reality with his imagination.

If it mattered, Homer just thought about what he saw right now. Forgotten legends that he had appointed himself to create and the mysterious disappearance of daylight that had busied his imagination for the last hours. He felt like a child on a field trip: he sucked in the sights, the obscure silhouettes of the skyscrapers into himself; he continuously turned his head from one side to the other and loudly talked to himself.

The others didn't enjoy the journey as much. The brigadier who silently stared into the direction they were driving only looked from time to time when he had heard a sound from underneath the bridge. His attention was directed at the point where the rails dug themselves back into the ground.

The girl behind them held the scavenged gasmask with both of her hands. He could see that she didn't feel well on the surface. In the tunnel Homer had thought that she had been tall, but the moment that they had stepped outside she was small as if she had retreated into an invisible house of a snail and even the wide radiation suit that she had taken from the body didn't make her taller. The fascinating things you could see from the bridge didn't seem to interest her and most of the time she looked at the ground.

They passed the ruins of the station Technopark. It had been built hastily right before the war. The poor state it was in was not the doings of the bomb attacks, but the teeth of time. Then they finally approached the tunnel.

Compared to the bleak darkness of the night the tunnel entrance emitted absolute darkness. Homer's suit seemed to him like a real armor and he himself felt like a medieval knight that entered the cave of a legendary dragon.

The sounds of the nightly city remained at the doorstep, exactly here Hunter ordered them to step from the railcar. Now you could only hear the careful steps of the three companions and the few

words that echoed from the tunnel segments. The tunnel sounded strange. Homer heard the closeness of the room, as if he had climbed into the inside of a glass bottle.

"It's closed here." Hunter seemed to want to enforce their fears. The shine of the lamp exposed the resistance: a hermetic door towered in front of them like an impenetrable wall. Where the door met the rails it shined and the massive corners of the door raised themselves out of brown shreds of oil. Old planks were laying on a hill. Dried firewood and to coal turned pieces of wood were there as if there had been a campfire not long ago. The door was being used, without a doubt, but seemingly only as an exit. No bell or other signal was to see on this side.

The brigadier turned to the girl: "Is it always like that?"

"Sometimes they come out and drive to us on the other shore. To trade. I thought today ..." She seemed to want to distance herself in time. Had she known that there was no more entrance, or had she kept something from them?

Hunter hammered the grip of his machete against the door as if he wanted to operate a giant metal gong. But the steel was too thick and instead of the dull echoing sound he had hoped for it created only an empty clanking sound. Probably nobody would have been able to hear it on the other side even if somebody was still alive there.

No answer. No miracle had happened.

Past all reason Sasha had hoped that the two would be able to open the door. She hadn't warned them that the entrance to the big metro had been closed out of fear; they could have chosen another way and left her where they had found her.

But nobody waited for them at the big metro and to break through the barricade was impossible. The bold one searched the door for a weak point or bent key holes, but Sasha already knew that you could only open it from the other side.

"You stay here," he commended them grimly. "I'll look at the barricade at the second tunnel and search for any vents."

He was silent for a moment and added: "I'll come back." Then he vanished.

The old man gathered a few twigs and planks and made a sparse fire. He sat down at the doorstep and started to fumble in his backpack. Sasha sat down next to him and watched him out of the corner of her eyes. He made a strange spectacle, maybe for her and maybe for himself.

After he had brought a torn, dirty notebook out of his backpack he threw a distrustful look at Sasha, distanced himself from her a bit and lowered his head into the pages. Immediately he jumped up with astonishing speed and looked if the bold one was really gone. Slowly he sneaked ten steps to the exit of the tunnel and only after he didn't see anybody there he leaned at the door, put the backpack between him and Sasha and sunk into the book. He read restlessly, mumbling something she couldn't understand, removed his gloves, reached for his water bottle and put a few drops onto the book. Then he continued to read.

After a short time he suddenly started to clean his hands on his legs, angrily put his hand on his forehead, touched his gasmask for some reason and hastily continued to read on. Infected by his excitement Sasha let herself be distracted from her thoughts and moved closer, the old man was too busy to notice her.

Through the glass of his gasmask she could see the sparkling of his bleak green eyes which mirrored the light of the fire. From time to time he emerged from the book like he wanted to catch his breath. He abandoned his book, stared fearful at the round part of the nightly sky at the end of the tunnel, but nothing had changed. The bold head had vanished indefinitely. And as soon as he realized that he powered through the book.

Now she knew why he put water on it. He was trying to open the pages that were stuck together.

Seemingly he only succeeded with peril, once he even screamed as if he had cut himself. One page had been torn.

He cursed himself and then he realized how carefully she had watched him. Embarrassed he straightened his gasmask but he didn't say a word until he hadn't finished reading.

Then he ran to the fire and threw the notebook into it.

He didn't look at Sasha and she understood: There was no use in asking. He would just lie to her or say nothing.

There were other things that caught her attention. She guessed that the bold one had been gone for a whole hour.

Had he left them like unnecessary ballast? Sasha sat down next to the old man and said silently: "The second tunnel is closed as well. All the vents in the area are walled off. There is only this entrance."

The man looked at her but his thoughts were somewhere else. It seemed that it cost him a lot of strength to concentrate himself to hear what she just had said. "He is going to find a way. He feels it." He was silent for a minute and asked more out of politeness: "What's your name?"

"Alexandra," she answered seriously, "And you?"

"Nikolai ..." he started and gave her his hand, but before she could shake it he pulled it back again cramped. It seemed that he had decided differently. "Homer. I'm Homer."

"Homer. Strange nickname," answered Sasha, sunken in thoughts.

"It's my name," alleged Homer stiff and firmly.

Should she explain him that as long as she was with them these closed doors would remain closed? If the two men would have gone on their own the door could have been open.

The Kolomenskaya didn't let Sasha go. She punished herself for how she had treated her father. She had tried to flee, but now the chain was strained and she couldn't break it. The cursed station had brought her back once and it would do it again.

She had tried to chase away her thoughts and visions like bloodsucking insects. They always returned, circled her and crawled into her ears and eyes.

The old man had asked Sasha something but she didn't answer. Tears came out of her eyes and once again she heard the voice of her father: Nothing is more valuable than a human life.

Now she knew what he had meant.

That what had happened at the Tuskaya was no longer a riddle for him. The explanation was much simpler and terrible than what he had thought. And now after he had deciphered the entries of the notebook a worse story began:

The diary led him on a journey of no return. Now that he had held it in his hands he wouldn't be able to get rid of it, no matter how long it burned on the fire.

Also his distrust for Hunter had been given more fuel by the irrefutable evidence even though Homer had no idea what he should do with it. What he had read in the diary contradicted what the brigadier had said. He had lied and he was aware of it. Now Homer had to find out what his lies accomplished and if they even made sense. It all depended on it if he would continue to follow Hunter and end his journey with his heroic epos or with a massacre without any live witnesses.

The first entries of the diary dated back to the first day when the caravan had passed the Nagornaya without any problems and closed in on the Tuskaya without encountering any resistance.

"We're now at the Tuskaya. The tunnel is silent and empty," reported the radio operator. "We are making good progress which is a good sign. The commander expects that we will be back tomorrow." A few hours after that he wrote worried: "The Tuskaya isn't guarded. We sent a scout. He disappeared. The commander has decided that we are going to enter the station as a team. We are readying ourselves to storm the station." Again a bit later he wrote: "It's difficult to understand what is going on ... We talked to one of the inhabitants. It's bad. Some kind of disease". Then with he wrote with

more clarity: "Some inhabitants of the station are infected with something ... Some kind of unknown sickness..."

It seemed that the members of the caravan had tried to help the infected at first: "The medic doesn't know how to treat it. He says it is something like rabies ... Unimaginable pain, people lose their minds and attack others". And right after that: "Once weakened by the disease they are more or less harmless. The worst thing is ..." Exactly at that point the pages were stuck together and Homer tried to wet them with water so that he could separate them again. "The light hurts. Nausea. Blood in their mouth. Coughing. Then they bloat and turn to ..." The word had been painted over carefully. "We don't know how it is transmitted. Through the air? Through contact?" The entry was now already from the next day. The return of the group had been delayed.

Why hadn't they reported what they had found? thought Homer. Instantly he remembered that he had already read the answer. He turned back some pages ... "No connection. The telephone is dead. Maybe sabotage. One of the exiled, out of revenge? They had realized it before we had arrived. At first they had chased the sick into the tunnel. Maybe one of them has cut the cable?"

At that point Homer ripped himself away from the letters and stared into the dark room without seeing anything.

If they cable had been cut, why hadn't they returned to the Sevastopolskaya?

"Even worse. Until it breaks out a week passes. What if more ...? Until death another week or two. Nobody knows who is sick, nobody knows who is healthy. There is no cure. The disease is absolutely deadly." On the same page the radio operator had made another entry which Homer already knew: "Chaos at the Tuskaya. No way to the metro. Hanza isn't letting anybody through. We can't go back as well."

Two pages ahead he continued: "The healthy shoot at the sick, especially at the aggressive ones. They have herded the infected into a cage ... They resist, want out." Then the most horrible sentence: "They are tearing each other to pieces ..."

The radio operator had been afraid too, but the iron discipline of the group had prevented it from turning into panic. Even in the midst of a deadly fever epidemic the brigade of the Sevastopolskaya held their ground.

"Have the situation under control. The station is sealed and we have a new commander." And then. "Who dies next?" read Homer. "They are all alright but not enough time has passed."

The search troop of the Sevastopolskaya had reached the Tuskaya, but had been stuck there as well. "Our orders are to stay here until the incubation period has passed so that we don't endanger anyone...we might be staying here forever." The radio operator noted darkly: "The situation is without hope. We can't expect help from anywhere. If we demand more men from the Sevastopolskaya we lead them to their doom. There is nothing but to endure it here ... How long?"

So the mysterious guard at the hermetic door of the Tuskaya had been put there by the troop of the Sevastopolskaya. That was why the voices had been familiar to Homer: It had been people with whom he had freed the Tschertanovskaya from some monsters just a few days back! By passing voluntarily on returning they hoped to spare their own station the epidemic ...

"Mostly from human to human but apparently also through the air. Some seem immune to it. It has started a few week ago and some are still not sick ... But there are becoming more and more. We are living in a morgue. Who dies next?"

The chased writing looked like a hysterical scream at that sentence. But then the radio operator had calmed down again and continued normally. "We have to do something. To warn the others. I am going to volunteer. Not to the Sevastopolskaya but to repair the broken part of the cable. We have to reach them."

Another day passed when the author had probably argued with the commander of the caravan and other soldiers.

A day where his despair had grown stronger. What the radio operator had tried to explain them, after he had calmed down again he had written down in this diary: "They don't understand! The blockade has lasted for a whole week. The Sevastopolskaya is going to send a new troop and this one won't come back as well. Then they are going to go mobile and storm the station. But whoever gets to the Tuskaya enters the risk zone. Someone is going to infect himself and run back home. That is the end. We have to keep them from storming the station! Why don't they understand ...?"

Another try to convince the leader turned out to be a failure, like the others: "They won't let me go. They have gone mad. If not me then who? I have to flee!"

"I now act like I agree with them to wait here longer."

Then one day later he wrote: "I let myself be assigned for guard duty at the gate. At sometime I said that I would find the place where the cable had been cut and just started running. They shot me in the back. The bullet is still inside".

Homer turned the page: "Not for me. For Natasha and Seryoschka ..." Here the feather had fallen out of the weakened fingers of the author. Maybe he had added this later because there was no more room or because it made no difference where he wrote it. Then the chronologic order was there again: "At the Nagornaya they let me pass, many thanks! I have no more strength. I walk and walk. Passed out."

How long did I sleep? Don't know. Blood in the lung? From the bullet, or am I sick? I..." The curve of the last letters stretched itself to a straight line like the encephalogram of a dying. But then he seemed to have come to his senses again and continued the sentence to an end: "Can't find the defective part."

What now flow in red streams over the paper had no more connection to each other: "The Nachimovski. I am here. I know where the telephone is. I am going to warn them ... Everything but rescue ... miss you ... got through. If they heard me? The end is near. Strange, I am tired. No more bullets. I want to sleep, before those ... standing there and waiting. Go away! ... I am still alive."

He probably had written the end of the diary before that. With formal, straight writing he had repeated the warning not to storm the Tuskaya, added his name, the name of the man who had given his life to stop that from happening.

But Homer knew: The last thing the radio operator had written, before his signal had been silenced was the sentence: "Go away! ... I am still alive"

A heavy silence surrounded the two humans that cowered at the fire. Homer didn't bother to get the girl to talk anymore. Silent he scratched in the ashes of the fire with a stick, there where the wet notebook burned reluctantly like a heretic and waited for the storm to blow it out.

Fate made fun of him. How he had longed to decipher the riddle of the Tuskaya. How proud had he been that he had discovered the notebook. How he had hoped to weave the threads of history by himself. Now? Now that he had found the answerer to all questions he cursed his curiosity.

Of course when he took the notebook at the Nachimovski he had worn a mask and even now he was wearing a suit. But nobody knew how this disease was transmitted!

He had been an idiot to tell himself that he hadn't much time anymore. Of course overreacting had helped him to get over sloth and fear. But death had his own will and didn't like it very much to be ordered around. And now the diary had given him a concrete ultimatum: From infection to death it was only a few weeks. It could even be a whole month: How much he still had to do in those puny thirty days!

What should he do? To confess to his companions that he was sick and to remain at the Kolomenskaya so he could die there, if not from the epidemic but hunger and radiation?

On the other hand: When he carried the terrible disease in him so were Hunter and the girl who had shared the same air with him. Before all, the brigadier who had talked with the guardsmen at the Tuskaya, he had been especially close to them.

Or should he hope that the disease would spare him, to keep it to himself and wait? Not just like that but to continue the journey with Hunter. So that the storm of events that had carried him away wouldn't stop and he could continue to get his inspiration from it.

Because Nikolai Ivanovitsch, this commoner, this useless inhabitant of the Sevastopolskaya, this former helper of the train operator, this former gravity bound caterpillar, had to die through the discovery of this cursed diary so Homer the chronic and myth creator would come to light as a beautiful butterfly. If even just for a short time. Maybe he had been appointed a tragedy that was worthy of the feathers of the great masters, but everything depended on what he would be able to put on a piece of paper in the next thirty days.

Had he the right to let this chance pass? Had he the right to turn into an eremite, to forget his legend, to voluntarily pass on true immortality and rob all other around him from it as well? What was the bigger crime, the bigger stupidity: To carry the pest through half of the metro or to burn his manuscript with himself?

He was without courage, but he was still seeking fame. Homer had already decided and just searched for arguments for it. What did it bring him that he put himself next the two corpses at the Kolomenskaya, to let himself be turned into a mummy while he was still alive? He hadn't been made for heroics. When the fighters of the Sevastopolskaya had been ready to go to their certain death at the Tulsкая it was their own decision. At least they didn't die alone.

But what was the point that Homer sacrificed himself? He couldn't stop Hunter anyways. The old man had carried the epidemic around with him unknowingly – but Hunter knew exactly what was going on at the Tulsкая. No wonder that he had ordered the complete destruction of all the inhabitants of the station, including the caravan from the Sevastopolskaya. And no wonder he had wanted to use flamethrowers so badly.

But if both of them had already been infected they wouldn't be able to avoid that the epidemic would hit the Sevastopolskaya. And the first humans to be hit would be all the people that had been next to him. Yelena. The head of the station. The commander of the outer guard posts. The adjutants. So in three weeks the station would have no more leadership. Chaos would emerge and finally the epidemic would kill everyone.

But why had Hunter returned when he had known that they had been infected? Gradually Homer realized that the brigadier hadn't acted out of intuition but he had followed a certain plan step by step. But then the old man had mixed the cards anew and thought.

So was the Sevastopolskaya doomed to go under and did his expedition have no more reason? Even if Homer would have wanted to return home to be reunited with Yelena in death it was impossible. Alone the way from the Kachovskaya to the Kaschirskaya had been enough to render their gasmask useless and the suits that had got dozen if not hundredths of Röntgen and they had to dispose of them very soon. What to do now?

The girl had rolled together and slept. The campfire had finally eaten the infected diary, the last twigs and had gone out. To save the batteries in his lamp Homer decided to wait in the dark as long as possible.

No, he would continue to follow the brigadier! To reduce the risk of infecting others he would avoid contact with them, leave the backpack with his things here, destroy his clothes, hope for a merciful fate and keep an eye on the thirty day countdown. Every day he would work on his book. Somehow everything would be solved, he said to himself. The main thing was that he followed Hunter.

If he came back.

It had been over an hour since he had vanished through the obscure exit of the tunnel. Homer had talked to the girl to calm her down but he wasn't entirely convinced that the brigadier would return.

The more he found out about him the less he understood him. It was possible to doubt the brigadier and to believe him at the same time. He didn't follow any pattern, didn't show common human ways. When he trusted himself to himself he exposed himself to Mother Nature. But for Homer it was too late: he had already done it. Regret was pointless.

In the darkness the silence now seemed impenetrable to him. Like through a thin bowl he could hear a strange whispering sound, a distant howling and a rustling sound ... Homer thought it sounded like the staggering walk of one of the corpse eaters then again it was like the giant ghost at the Nagornaya and finally like the screams of the dying. He gave up before it had been ten minutes.

He switched his lamp back on and winced.

Two steps away from him Hunter was standing, his arms crossed in front of his chest and looking at the sleeping girl. He protected his eyes from the blinding ray of light and said calmly: "They are going to open the door very soon."

Sasha dreamt ... of when she was alone at the Kolomenskaya and had to wait for the return of her father's expedition. He was late and she definitely had to wait and help him out of the radiation suit, pull off the gasmask and help him eat. The table was already laid and she didn't know what else she could do to keep herself occupied. She already wanted to go away from the door that lead the surface but what would he think when he came back and she wasn't around? Who would open the door for him? So she sat on the cold ground at the exit, hours passed, days went by and he didn't come. But she wouldn't leave her place until the door ...

The dull beating of opening bars awoke her; it was the same sound like at the Kolomenskaya. She awoke smiling, her father had returned. The she looked around and remembered everything.

The only thing that had been real about her dream was the groaning of the heavy bars on the iron gate. Only a few moments later the giant door started to vibrate and opened slowly. A ray of light fell through the widening space and it smelled of burnt diesel. The entrance to the big metro ...

The doors itself had opened without a sound and gave allowed the look into the inners of the tunnel that lead to the Avtosavodskaya Nad and later to the ring. On the rails was a big railcar with a smoking motor, a searchlight at the front and a lot of men as its crew. Through the sights of their machine guns the men saw to blinking wanderers that held their hands in front to their eyes.

"I want to see your hands!" sounded the order.

She followed the example of the old man and both complied and raised their arms. It was the same railcar that had come to them over the bridge on market day. These people knew about Sasha – probably now the old man with his strange name had to regret taking the cuffed girl with them without asking how she had ended up at this godforsaken station.

"Gasmask down, IDs." Commanded one of the men on the railcar. While Sasha exposed her face she cursed her stupidity. Nobody could free them. The sentence over her father and over her had still all of its power. How could she have been so naive that those two men could have brought her into the metro? That nobody would recognize them at the border?

The men recognized her instantly. "Hey, you can't go in here! You have ten seconds to leave. And who is that? Is that your ..."

"What's going on?" Said the old man confused.

"Let him in peace! It's not him!" screamed Sasha.

"Leave!" The voice from the men with the assault rifle was cold as ice. "Or we ..."

"At the girl?" Asked a second voice unsure.

"Hey, didn't you hear us?"

She definitely heard the clicking of their safeties.

Sasha stepped back and closed her eyes. For the third time in a few hours she stood before the face of death.

Then she heard a small whistling noise. In the now reigning silence she waited in for the last order. It never came. Finally she couldn't stand it anymore and opened one eye.

The motor was still smoking. Blue-grey clouds swam around the white ray of the search light that had fallen over for some reason. Now that the light didn't blind her anymore Sasha could recognize the people on the railcar.

They were lying around like folded puppets on the railcar, flopped out on the tracks. Mindlessly hanging arms, unnatural twisted necks and bent in torsos.

Sasha turned around. Behind her was the bold one. He had lowered his pistol and watched the railcar carefully, which now looked like a butcher's counter. Then he raised the barrel and pulled the trigger again.

"That was it." He said, satisfied. "Take their uniforms and gasmasks from them."

"Why?" The face of the old man was distorted by his fear.

"We have to change clothes. We are taking their railcar to get to the Avtosvodskaya!"

Sasha stared at the killer. Inside of her, fear and admire fought with each other. Disgust mixed with gratefulness. He had just eliminated three with one blow and violated her father's most important rule. But he had done it to save her – well and the old man's life of course. Was it a coincidence that he had done it for the second time? Could it have been that she had mistaken his cruelty with strictness?

One thing was clear: The fearlessness of this man let her forget his ugliness ...

The bold one was the first to walk over to the railcar and start to rip off the enemies' rubber scalps from their heads. Suddenly he tumbled back and made a shrill scream as if he had seen the devil himself, put both of his hands in front of him and repeated several times: "A dark one!"

Air (Chapter 9)

Fear and terror aren't in the slightest way the same. Fear pushes, forces you to act, forces you to be intuitive. Terror paralyzes body and mind and robs humans of their humanity.

Homer had seen enough in his life to know the difference between the two.

The brigadier didn't know fear, but terror could apparently overthrow him. But that wasn't what Homer was wondering right now but even more what had triggered the reaction.

The body was unordinary. Under the black rubber mask, dark shimmering skin, full lips and a broad, slightly compressed nose were exposed.

Homer had never seen any people with dark skin in the ten years without music channels. But he realized immediately that the dead man was an African-American. A rarity in the metro for sure. But was so terrifying about him?

The brigadier had already calmed down; the strange seizure hadn't lasted for a minute. He lit the flat face, groaned something incomprehensible, and started to undress the resisting body. Homer could have sworn that some finger bones broke.

"They want to mock me ... With friendly greetings, what? ... And this here is supposed to be humane? ... such a punishment..." mumbled Hunter silently.

Had he mistaken the body for somebody else? Did he maim the dead man out of revenge for the humiliation that he had just suffered, or was there an older and more serious score to settle? While Homer suppressed his disgust as he helped to remove the clothes of the body, he looked covertly again and again to the brigadier.

The girl didn't participate in the scavenging and Hunter left her in peace. She sat a distance on the rail, her face in her hands. Homer believed that she was crying.

Finally Hunter threw the body outside the door on a pile. In less than 24 hours there would be nothing left. By day the city was ruled by such terrible creatures that even the most dangerous tunnel monsters retreated into their caves without complaint.

The strange, but still fresh blood on the dark uniform was not to see but it stuck, like a cold plaster, to his chest as if it wanted to return to a living organism again. It disgusted them.

Homer asked himself if this masquerade was even necessary. He reassured himself that at least they would be able to prevent more victims at the Avtosavodskaya. When Hunter's plan would work they would pass through freely, thinking they were one of them but what if it didn't work? Did he even have the intention to leave unnecessary victims behind?

The bloodlust of the brigadier disgusted Homer but also fascinated him at the same time. Not even a third of his murders could be justified by self defense, but still there was even more sadism behind them than usual. More importantly a question tormented the old man: had Hunter volunteered to just go to the Tuskaya to satisfy his bloodlust in the end?

The unfortunates that had laid a trap for them hadn't found a cure for the mysterious fever but that didn't mean that there was none. Here in the underground there existed places where more

scientific thinking was present, where people researched, developed new medicaments and mixed serums together. Take for example, Polis, the heart of the metro, where all four arteries merged. The Polis was the last allusion of a city, which stretched over the labyrinth of stations from the Arabatskaya, Borovizkaya, Alexandrovski sad and Biblioteka Imeni Linian.

All the doctors and scientists had settled there or the giant bunker next to the Taganskaya, the secret city of science for Hanza.

The Tuskaya may not have been the only station where the epidemic had stricken. Probably they had fought it successfully? How could you abandon hope for rescue that easily? Of course now that Homer carried the time bomb inside him he only cared about his own egoistic interests. His mind had already made his peace with the death that was in front of him, but his instincts resisted and ordered him to find a way out. Maybe if he found a way to rescue the Tuskaya he could save his own station from oblivion and maybe even himself...

Hunter on the other hand seemed to apparently believe that there was a cure for the disease...

The few words that he had exchanged with the guard at the Tuskaya had been enough to condemn them to death and make himself the judge of the sentence. First he had led the commander of the Sevastopolskaya on a false path then he had fastened the decision and now he readied the uncompromised implementation: the Tuskaya would go under in fire.

But maybe he knew something about the events at the station that turned everything on its head again? Something that nobody knew, whether Homer nor the man that had left his diary at the Nachimovski Prospect ...

After he was finished with the bodies the brigadier ripped the flask from its holder and sucked the rest of the contents. What had been in it? Alcohol? Was this a potion or an ingredient, or did he try to dispel the sour aftertaste in his mouth? Did he enjoy the moment, or hope to kill something with the alcohol?

The old smoking railcar was something like a time machine for Sasha, like in those fables her father had told her.

It didn't just transport her from the Kolomenskaya to the Avtosavodskaya, but transported her from the present into the past. Even though she didn't know if she could call her life in this prison made of stone, these worm tunnels, the past and. And she didn't know if she could call where she was now the "present".

She remembered the whole journey there: Her father had been bound and was sitting next to her, a sack over his eyes and a gag in his mouth. She had just been a small girl and had cried all the way. One of the soldiers of the execution squad had made animals with his fingers; their shadows had danced over a small yellow stage which was on the ceiling. The shadows had tried to outrun the railcar.

When they had reached the other side they had told her father his sentence: the tribunal of the revolution had pardoned him. The death sentence had been replaced by lifelong exile. They had pushed them onto the rails, with a knife, an assault rifle with a spare clip and an old gasmask, and sat Sasha next to him. The soldier that had showed her the horse and the dog waved his hand as they left. Had he been one of those that Hunter had shot?

When she put on the black gasmask of one of the dead, her feelings became stronger that she was breathing the air of a dead man. Every small part of her journey somebody paid with his life. The bold one would have probably shot them no matter what, but now Sasha thought herself to be his accomplice by just being there.

Her father didn't want to return back home not because he had been tired of fighting. He had once said that his humiliation and deprivation no longer weighed on another strangers life, so he preferred to suffer himself then to cause anybody else harm again. Sasha hadn't known that the scale of

life had been weighed down by all the things on his conscience, and he had tried to bring it back into balance.

The bold one could have acted sooner, could have scared the people on the railcar just by his presence so that they could have laid down their weapons without firing a shot. None of the dead had been an equal enemy.

Why did he do all this?

The station of her childhood approached sooner than she thought. Not even ten minutes passed until the lights started to flicker. The tunnel to the Avtosavodskaya wasn't guarded; it seemed that the inhabitants relied on the hermetic gates. Around fifty meters before the train platform, the bold one slowed down the motor, commanded the old man to take over the steering wheel and stood next to the machine gun.

The railcar rolled almost silently and very slowly into the station. Or was it time itself that was bending for Sasha, because she recalled the days of her youth...

It was on that day that her father had ordered the adjutant to hide until everything was over. The man had lead them deep into the work offices in the belly of the station, but even there you could still hear the screams of hundredths of throats shouting at the same time and her companion had immediately rushed back to his commander. Sasha had followed him, out into the main hall of the station ...

While they ran over the train platform Sasha saw the roomy family tents and the train wagon offices, children played catch, old men put their heads together, cranky women were cleaning guns And she saw her father behind a small troop of grim, maybe even scary looking men, how they tried to keep the never ending and angry group of people at bay. She ran to him and pressed herself against his back. Surprised he shook her away, turned around and accidentally hit his surprised adjutant's face. But something had happened. The formation that had already readied their rifles for the fire order was given an all-clear. There was only one shot, into the air, as her father explained that he was ready to hand over the station to the revolutionaries peacefully and negotiate.

Her father had always firmly believed that man always received signs.

You had to recognize them and interpret them correctly.

But time hadn't just slowed down so that Sasha could relieve the last days of her childhood. She saw the armed man that had risen to stop the railcar. She saw how the bold one appeared behind the heavy machine gun with in a fluent motion and how he pointed the heavy barrel at the surprised guards.

The order to stop the railcar was like the crack of a whip . She knew in just a few seconds so many people would die that the feeling that she was breathing the air of a stranger would last to the end of her days.

She could still prevent a bloodbath, she could still rescue these people, she could prevent herself and another human being from doing something terrible...

The guardsmen were already clicking off the safety on their assault rifles, but they took too long, the bold one was a few seconds ahead of them...

She did the only thing that came to her mind.

She jumped up and hugged the iron hard back, crossed her hands in front his not moving chest that didn't seem to breathe. The bold one winced as if somebody had hit him, but he hesitated. The soldiers on the other side that were ready to shoot froze as well.

The old man realized immediately.

The railcar spat out bitter black clouds and rushed on and the Avtosavodskaya remained behind them.

In the past.

During the drive to the Pavelezkaya nobody said a word. Hunter had freed himself out of the surprising hug of the girl. He had bent her arms away from him like a ring of iron that had been too tight.

They rushed past a single guard post with full speed.

The salvos that the guards shot flew right over their heads into the ceiling. The brigadier was just quick enough to pull out his pistol and fire three silent bullets as an answer. He apparently managed to kill one of the guards; the others ducked behind the flat tunnel segments and got away with their lives.

I don't believe this, thought Homer as he looked at the girl that was cowering on the ground. He had hoped that the entry of the female protagonist would have created some kind of love story but the whole thing was developing way too fast. He didn't even have time to realize what it meant, far less write it down.

Only when they had reached the Pavelezkaya did they decrease in speed.

The old man already knew the station: It seemed to be from a horror novel. While the tombs of the newer station in Moscow's outer regions rested on normal pillars, the Pavelezkaya rested on an array of tall and round arches that were bigger than any humans. And just like in a horror novel there was a curse on the Pavelezkaya: at exactly eight o'clock at night, before deals could be finished, the station was emptied. From all the busy and sly inhabitants only a few daredevils remained on the platform. All others disappeared with children, furniture, bags full of wares, not even benches and stretchers remained.

They crawled into their bunker, the tunnel to the Ring line which stretched for almost a kilometer, and shivered there for the entire night because where the Pavelezkaya station was; terrible creatures awoke on the surface. It was said that the entire region was under their unchallenged rule and even when those creatures slept, others didn't dare to go near them. The inhabitants of the Pavelezkaya were at their mercy because the hermetic doors that protected other stations and the escalators were entirely missing, so that the entrance to the surface was always open.

In Homer's opinion there was no worse place to camp overnight, but Hunter seemed to think differently: he brought the railcar to a stop at the end of the station, took off his gasmask and pointed at the train platform. "We'll remain here until morning. Search for a place to sleep."

Then he left. The girl looked after him then rolled together on the hard ground of the railcar. Even though Homer tried to make himself as comfortable as possible, it was in vain. Once again his thoughts drifted to the epidemic and how he would carry it through all the healthy stations. The girl was silent as well, but awake.

"Thanks," she said suddenly. "At first I thought you were just like him."

"I don't think there is anybody just like him," said Homer.

"Are you friends?"

"Like a shark and its pilot fish." He smiled sadly because he thought how fitting this picture was: of course it was Hunter that eliminated all these humans, but a few bloody shreds were Homer's to clean up.

She stood up a bit. "What do you mean?"

"Where he goes I go. I think I can't go alone anywhere without him and he ... Well maybe he thinks that I clean him up like one of the pilot fish. But I don't really know what he is thinking myself."

The girl sat down closer next to the old man: "And what do you want from him?"

"I have a feeling that as long as I am near him ... I keep my inspiration."

"What does inspiration mean?"

"Actually it means to breathe in something."

"What do you want to breathe in? What does it get you?"

Homer shrugged his shoulders. "It is nothing that we breathe in. It is what something breathes into us."

The girl drew something into the dirty floor of the railcar. "As long as you breathe in death nobody is going to want to touch your lips. Everybody is going to back away from the smell of corpses."

"When you see death you think about many things."

"That doesn't give you the right to cause death anytime you want to think about something," she said.

"I'm not doing that" justified the old man. "I am just standing next to him. But for me it is not about death, not just about it. It is so that I will be shook awake, to get my head clear."

"Have you had a bad life?" asked the girl.

"A boring one. When one day is like the other, they fly by so fast that the last seems to approach with great speed," Homer tried to explain. "You fear that can't take care of things anymore. And every day is filled with thousands of small things. After you are finished with one you shortly catch a breath and do the next thing. At the end you don't have the strength or the time to do something really important. You think to yourself: Ok, I'll just start tomorrow. But that tomorrow never comes and it is always today."

"Have you seen many stations?" It seemed that she hadn't really listened to him.

"I don't know," answered Homer surprised. "Probably all."

"I only two," sighed the girl. "At first my father and I lived at the Avtosavodskaya, and then they chased us away, to the Kolomenskaya. I have always wished to see at least one other. But this one here is so strange". Her view wandered along the array of round arcs. "Like thousands of entrances without any walls in between them. Now they are all open, but I no longer want to go there. I am afraid."

"The second one ... was that your father?" Homer hesitated. "Is he dead?"

The girl retreated into her shell and was silent for a while before she answered: "Yes".

Homer took a deep breath. "Stay with us. I am going to talk to Hunter that I need you, to ..." He spread his arms but he didn't know how he could explain to the girl that she would be his muse.

"Tell him that he needs me," she jumped onto the rails and distanced herself from the railcar. While doing so she looked at every single pillar she passed.

She wasn't a bit flirtiest nor did she play with him. She wasn't interested in guns and she felt indifferently about using her female arsenal, like gripping looks and lovely gestures. She didn't know anything, that a blink in a man's direction could rise up a storm, and that some people were ready to kill others over a fleeting glance. Or was she just not able to use them in the right way?

Whatever, she didn't need this arsenal. With her hard, direct look she had forced Hunter to change his decision, with a single move she had thrown her net over him and stopped him from committing another murder.

Had she broken his armor? Had she found his soft core? Or did he need her for something? Probably the last one: the thought about the brigadier having a weakness was too much for Homer.

He just could not sleep. Even though he had changed the heavy and sticky gasmask with a lighter one he still had trouble breathing and it was like somebody had put his head into a vise.

Homer had left all his possessions at the tunnel. He had cleaned his hands with a piece of grey soap, washed away the dirt with the foul water out of his canister and decided to wear a gasmask at all times. What else could he do protect the people in his immediate area?

Nothing. Truly nothing anymore. Not even to go away, fight through the tunnels and become a rotten pile of shreds would have helped. But now that he was so close to death it immediately put him

back more than twenty years, into his time, when he had just lost the people that he had loved. And this gave his plans new and true purpose.

If it would have been in Homers power he would have given them a memorial. But they hadn't earned even a common tombstone. They had been born generations apart and had all died on the same day: His wife, his children and his parents.

And his classmates and friends at school. The actors and musicians that he had worshipped. All who still had been at work, already at home or stuck in traffic.

Those who didn't die, those that remained for many days in the irradiated, half destroyed capitol, had tried to survive and weakly scraped at the closed security gates of the metro. Those that had been instantly pulverized into their smallest atoms and those that had bloated and fallen into pieces, were eaten alive by radiation sickness.

The scouts that were the first to go to the surface had trouble finding sleep for many days. Homer had met some of them at the campfire near the transfer station. In their eyes there was still the inextinguishable impression that the city had left on them, their eyes were like frozen rivers that spilled over with dead fish. Thousands of not moving cars with their lifeless passengers that blocked the prospects and exits of Moscow. Bodies everywhere. Nobody there to get rid of them until finally new creatures took over the reign of the city.

To keep their sanity they avoided schools and kindergartens. But it was enough to lose your mind if you coincidentally saw the staring look through the dusty window from the backseat of a car.

Millions of lives had stopped. Millions of words left unspoken, millions of dreams left unfulfilled and millions of arguments unsolved. Nikolai's youngest son had asked him for a big package of colored felt tip pens, his daughter had been afraid of figure skating training, and his wife had described to him that they should do a short vacation, just the two of them at the ocean, before going to bed ...

When he had realized that their small wishes and passions had been their last, they appeared far more important to him.

He would have liked to engrave a memorial plate for every one of them, but an engraving on a giant mass grave of humanity was also a worthy cause. And now that his time was running out he thought that he now knew how to find the right words.

He didn't know in which order he should put them together yet, with what he could fix them to a place, with what he would decorate them, but he felt: In the story that played in front of his eyes he would find a place for all the restless souls, all the feelings and all the small grains of knowledge that he had gathered so meticulously. In the end also for himself. The plot was best for this, better for this than for anything.

As soon as he would be up there again and it would be bright and the merchants would venture to their station again he would try to find a clean notebook and a pen. He had to hurry: If he didn't bring this mirage of his novel that was floating in the distance to paper soon it could disappear into thin air again and he didn't know how long he would have to sit on the dune and stare at the horizon in the hope that out of tiny grains of sands and flickering air again an ivory tower would emerge.

He probably didn't have enough time for even that.

An ironic smile on his lips, Homer thought: whatever the girl said, it was the look in her empty eyes that forced him to act. Then he had to think about the curved eyebrows, the two bright rays in her dark, dirty face, the chewed on lips, the shaggy blond hair and he smiled again.

Tomorrow at the market he would have to search for something for her as well, he thought, as he drifted to sleep.

At the Pavelezkaya the night was always restless. The shadow of the odorous torches twitched over the marble walls, the tunnel breathed restlessly, only at the foot of the escalator a few silhouettes

talked to each other almost inaudibly. The station acted like it was dead. Everyone hoped that the wild creatures on the surface didn't lust after corpses.

But sometimes the curious animals discovered the deep entrance and smelled the fresh sweat, heard the regular beating of human hearts and felt the warm blood running through their veins.

And sometimes they even came down.

Homer had finally sunken into a half sleep-like state and the excited voice on the other side of the train platform only got through to his conscience with a struggle, distorted. But then the sound of the machine gun ripped him out of his slumber. The old man jumped up and searched the floor of the railcar for his weapon.

The ear numbing heavy machine gun salvo was joined by shots out of assault rifles. The screams of the guards weren't just nervous but scared. Whatever it was that they were shooting at with their calibers they seemed to not do any damage. From an organized defense against the moving target was not to speak, here people fired around wildly and only thought about saving their own skin.

Finally Homer had found his Kalashnikov but he didn't dare to step onto the train platform. He resisted the temptation to start the motor and flee and it didn't matter to him where. He remained on the railcar and put his head through the pillars to watch the place where the fighting was happening.

Suddenly the penetrating scream came from a close distance, where the guards yelled and cursed. The heavy machine gun fire ebbed, somebody screamed terrible and then turned silent. Sudden like something had ripped his head off.

Again the assault rifles sounded off, but only scarce and only for a short time. Again screaming, it seemed further away ... and suddenly the creature that had made the sound and which echo he had heard came from the close proximity of the railcar.

Homer counted to ten and started the motor with his shivering hands. In a moment his companions would return and or he would leave, he did this for them not for himself ...

The railcar vibrated, started to smoke, the motor overheated and something jumped through the pillars unimaginably fast. Fast like lightning it disappeared out of his point of view, so that no picture of it could emerge in his head.

The old man held on to the rails, put his foot on the accelerator and took a deep breath. If they wouldn't return in ten seconds he would leave them and ...

Without realizing he had stepped onto the train platform and held the useless assault rifle in front of him. He just wanted to make sure that he couldn't help his people.

He pressed himself against the pillar and threw a look at the middle floor ...

He wanted to scream but his lungs were missing the air.

Sasha had always known that the world wasn't just the two stations where she had lived up till now. But she had never known that the world was so beautiful. Even the boring, even dreary Kolomenskaya had been a comfortable home and she had known every inch of it. The Avtosavodskaya, roomy and cold had arrogantly turned away from her father, exiled him and she couldn't forget about it.

Her relationship to the Pavezhskaya on the other hand wasn't unstressed and with every minute Sasha felt that she was falling in love with the station. The soft, wide reaching pillars, the big, inviting arches, the noble marble, the fine veins on the walls let it look like the soft skin of a human ...

Had the Kolomenskaya dreary poor and the Avtosavodskaya been dark, this station was like a woman: In her unworried and playful nature the Pavezhskaya had even after centuries retained her former beauty.

The humans here couldn't be merciless or evil, thought Sasha. She and her father would have only had to get over two hostile stations to get to this magical place ... He would have just had to live one

more day to escape from exile and get his freedom ... She would have forced the bold one to take both of them with them ...

In the distance a campfire flickered where moments before the guardsman had sat around. The ray of light of the search light climbed up to the high ceiling but Sasha didn't get pulled to there. How many years had she believed that she had just to escape the Kolomenskaya and to meet other peoples to be happy! But now she only wanted one human to share her company, her awe that the earth was a whole third bigger and her hope that she could repair it. But who would need her, Sasha? No other human would need her, no matter what she and the old man had said.

And so the girl walked into the other direction, where there was a fallen train with smashed windows and an open door stood in the half of the right tunnel. She stepped into the wagon, from one to the next, inspected the first, the second and then the third. In the last one she discovered a miraculously unharmed couch and laid on it. She looked up and imagined that the train would start to drive to the next station at any second where bright and loud human voices were. But now she didn't have enough strength to imagine that all these tons of steel scraps would move from its place.

With her bicycle it would have been a lot easier.

The game of hide and seek came to an end: the sound of a fight jumped from wagon to wagon until it reached Sasha.

Again?

She jumped up and ran onto the train platform, the only place where she could still do something.

The shredded corpses of the guards were lying next to the glass cabin with the static search light, over the smoldering fire in the middle of the hall. Other fighters had apparently given up earlier and had started running to find cover in the passage way, but death had caught up to them halfway.

Over one of the bodies a terrible and unnatural figure was covering down. Even though you could only see it badly from this distance, Homer recognized a smooth white skin, a powerful, twitching comb and the impatiently twitching legs with many strongly bent joints.

The battle was lost.

Where was Hunter? Homer leaned forwards again and froze maybe ten steps from him, leaning as far behind the pillar as Homer, as if it wanted to lure him or play with him. A terrible visage started down from its height of two meters. From its lower jaw it dripped red and the heavy jaw gnawed on a terrible chunk of flesh. Under the flat forehead there was nothing, but the fact that creature had no eyes didn't seem to keep it from sensing other beings or from moving or attacking.

Homer turned around and pulled the trigger but the rifle remained silent. The chimera made a long ear numbing scream and jumped into the middle of the hall. Panicking Homer fumbled with the locking handle, even though he knew that there was no use in it ...

But suddenly the creature lost all interest in him, and turned its attention to the train platform. With a strong movement Homer followed the look of the blind creature and his heart skipped a beat.

There stood, scared and looking around, the girl.

"Run!" yelled Homer and his voice suffocated a painful croaking sound.

The white chimera jumped forward many meters and now stood directly in front of the young women. She pulled out a cooking knife, and made a threatening move to the side.

As an answerer the creature swooshed with its front paws at the girl and she fell to the ground. The blade flew to the side.

Homer already stood next to the railcar but he didn't think about fleeing. Rasping he waved his assault rifle and tried to get the white dancing silhouette into his sights.

Without success: The creature had reached the girl.

The guards that could have been a threat to this creature had been shredded after a few minutes and now there were only these two helpless beings left, backed into a corner.

It seemed to want to play with them for a while before it killed them.

It was hovering over Sasha so that the old man couldn't see anything. Was it turning her insides out?

But then it winced and moved back, scratched at an expanding dark blotch on its back with its claws, turned around screaming, ready to eat its attacker.

Hunter stumbled to the creature.

In one hand an automatic assault rifle, the other hanging down limp. You could see that every move hurt.

The brigadier shot another salvo at the creature, but it turned out to be surprisingly tough. The monster stumbled for a second, found its center of gravity again and stormed forwards.

Hunter's bullets were spent but he was able to bury his machete into the enormous chest of the creature. The chimera fell on it, the blade submerged in his chest, and suffocated Hunter with his weight

Like if it wanted to destroy all hope, a second creature jumped next to it. It stared over the twitching body of its own kind, put a claw on the white skin as if it wanted to wake it and turned its eyeless grimace to Homer ...

He couldn't pass that chance. The big caliber shredded the chest of the chimera, split its head and when the animal had finally fallen to the ground split the marble plates to shreds and dust. Homer needed time until his heart had calmed down and his finger had loosened from the trigger.

Then he closed his eyes, ripped the mask from his head and breathed in the cold air that was filled with the smell of fresh blood.

All heroes had fallen and he had been left on the battlefield.

His book was over before it had begun.

After Death (Chapter 10)

What remains of the dead? What remains of every one of us? Tombstones sink in, moss covers them, and after a few centuries the name can no longer be read.

Every forgotten grave is designated a new corpse. As the generations passed, remembrance of the dead diminished until it was forgotten.

What was called everlasting peace only lasted half a century. The bones were disturbed as the graveyards were mulched in to suburbs. The earth had become too small, for the living and the dead.

In half a century a funeral had become a luxury that only few could afford who had died before judgment day. But who cares about a single body when the whole planet is dying.

None of the inhabitants of the metro had had the honor of a funeral; nobody could hope that the rats would spare their body.

Earlier the remains of humanity had only had the right to be there as long as the living remembered them. A human being remembers their relatives, their friends and colleagues. But his conscience only reached back three generations before it faded away. Just more than fifty years.

With the same ease, you let the picture of our grandfather or your friend from school out of our conscience into absolute nothingness. The memories of a human can last longer than the bones, but as soon as the last one who remembered us has passed we dissolve with time.

Photographs, who makes them anymore? And how many of them were kept when everybody still made them?

Back then there was almost no more space in the thick family album for old and brown turned pictures, but almost nobody that looked through it could say for sure who was on the photos. The photographs of the passed can be interpreted as some kind of mask, but not as a print of their soul when they were living.

And the photographs only decay as slow as the people that live inside them

What remains?

Our children?

Homer touched the flame of the candle with his fingers. The answer wasn't easy to find for him, Achmed's words still hurt him. He himself had been damned to be without children, unable for this kind of immortality, so he couldn't do anything but choose another path to immortality.

Again he reached for his pen.

They can look like us. In their reflection we mirror ourselves in a mysterious way. United with those we had loved. In their gestures, in their mimics we happily find ourselves or with sorrow.

Friends confirm that our sons and daughters are just like us. Maybe that gives us a certain extension of ourselves when we are no more.

We ourselves weren't the first. We have been made from countless copies that have been before us, just another chimera, always half from our fathers and mothers who are again the half of their parents. So is there nothing unique in us but are we just an endless mixture of small mosaic parts

that never endingly exist in us? Have we been formed out of millions of small parts to a complete picture that has no own worth and has to fall into its parts again?

Does it even matter to be happy if we found ourselves in our children, a certain line that has been traveling through our bodies for millions of years?

What remains of me?

Homer had it harder than the rest. He had always envied those who had put faith in life after death. Whenever he had come to this conversation about the end of life his thoughts had always turned to the Nachimovski prospect immediately, with its disgusting and corpse eating creatures.

But maybe he was made of something more than flesh and blood, which sooner or later would be eaten by corpse eaters and digested.

Only if there existed something in him that didn't exist as a part of his body.

What had remained of the Egyptian pharaohs? What of Greece's heroes? From the artist of the renaissance? Did something remain of them and did it exist inside of their bodies or in what they had left behind?

What kind of immortality was left for mankind?

Homer again read what he had written, thought about it for a short time, ripped the pages out of the notebook carefully, crumpled them up and put them on an iron plate and lit them. After a minute, the work that he had done in the last three hours was only a handful of ashes

She had died.

Sasha had always imagined death like that: The last ray of light had been extinguished, all sounds silenced, her body without any feelings and nothing but darkness.

Humanity had emerged out of darkness and silence.

It was inevitable that they would return to it. Sasha knew all the fables of paradise and hell, but underworld had sounded harmless to her. Eternity in absolute blindness, deafness and absolute not being able to do nothing at all was a hundredth times more terrible than some cauldrons with vegetable oil.

But then a small shivering ray of light appeared.

Sasha reached for it but couldn't touch it: The dancing ray of light ran away from her, came back, lured her, and ran away from her again immediately. Playing and luring her. She knew immediately: a tunnel light.

When a human died in the metro, her father had said, his or her soul was lost and had to wander the dark labyrinth of tunnels that lead nowhere. It didn't realize that it wasn't bound to a body anymore, its earthly life had ended and so it had to wander around long before someday in the distant future it would see the shine of the ghostly fire. So it would guide her there, because this little fire had been sent to lead the soul to find its cold rest. But it can also happen that the fire had pity of on the soul and brought it back to his or her lost body. For these people you could say that they had returned from the beyond. It was more truthful to say that darkness had let them go again.

The tunnel light lured Sasha, again and again; in the end she didn't resist and accepted her fate. She didn't feel her legs anymore, but she wouldn't need them: To follow the spot of light she just had to keep it in her eyes. She had to fix her eyes on it as if it wanted to talk it over and tame it.

Sasha had caught the light with her gaze and it pulled her through the darkness, through the labyrinth of the tunnels which she wouldn't have been able to leave if she had been on her own. Until they reached the last station of the lifeline. And then she saw it in front of her: Her guide seemed to sketch the contours of a far room where they waited for her.

"Sasha!" yelled a voice after her. Surprised she registered that she knew the voice, but she didn't know to whom she belonged anymore. In it a full, know, caring tone swung with it.

"Father?" she said unbelieving.

They had come. The ghostly tunnel fire stood still, turned into a common fire, jumped onto a wick of a molten candle and made its home comfortable like a cat that had returned from an expedition ...

A cold, wrinkled hand was on her hand. Slowly Sasha loosened her look from the flame because she feared that she could sink into the ground at any time. As soon as she awoke she felt the stinging pain in her lower arm and in her forehead. Out of the darkness simple furniture appeared tumbling: a few chairs, a dresser ... Sasha herself was lying on a stretcher that was so soft that she couldn't feel her back.

She felt as if her body only came back to her gradually.

"Sasha?" repeated the voice.

She looked on the person that was speaking and hastily retracted her hand. At the bed the old man who had driven with her on the railcar was sitting. His touch had been without any claim, neither harsh nor indecent. Shame and disappointment had made her retract her hand: How could she have mistaken the voice of a stranger with the one of her father's? Why had the tunnel light led her back here from all places?

The old man smiled softly. He seemed to be pleased that she had awoken again. Only now she recognized the same warm shine in his eyes which she had only seen in with one other human. No she knew that she had been mistaken ... She was ashamed of herself.

"Forgive me," she said. In the next moment she remembered the last minutes of the Pavelezkaya. With a strong move she rose up. "How's your friend?"

She didn't know if she should cry or laugh. Maybe she just didn't have the strength for it.

Luckily the razor sharp claws of the chimera had missed the girl; only the paws had hit her. But she had been unconscious for the whole day. The doctor had reassured Homer that her life was in no longer in danger. He hadn't told his own problems to the doctor.

While Sasha had been unconscious Homer had gotten used to calling her that way and sank back into his chair and she leaned against her pillow. The old man returned to the table, where an opened notebook with ninety-six pages waited for him. He turned around the pen in his hand and continued at the place where had had been interrupted by the fevering girl.

"... But this time the return of the caravan had been delayed and that long that there was only one reason for it: Something unknown must have happened, something terrible, that not even the heavy armed and experienced soldiers that accompanied them nor their long and good relationship with hanza could have prevented.

The whole thing would have been a lot less unsettling if they could at least communicate with each other. But there was something wrong with the telephone to the ring line, the connection had been gone since Monday and the troop that had been sent to the breaking point had returned without any success."

Homer raised his eyes and winced, the girl was standing directly behind him and looking over his shoulder at what he had scribbled down. Her curiosity seemed to be the only thing that kept her on her feet.

Embarrassed the old man turned the notebook on the other side.

"Are you waiting for inspiration?" she asked him.

"I am only at the very beginning," mumbled Homer.

"And what happened to the caravan?"

"I don't know". He carefully framed the title with his pen. "The story isn't over for a long time yet. Lay down, you need to rest."

"But you decide how your book ends."

"In this book nothing is decided by me. I just write down everything that happened."

"Then it is even more decided by you," said the girl sunken in thoughts. "Am I in it as well?"

Homer smiled. "I just wanted to ask for your permission."

"I'll think about it," she answered seriously.

"Why are you writing this book?"

Homer stood up to talk to her from eye to eye.

Already after his last conversation with Sasha he had realized that her youth and missing experience created a wrong picture in her mind. At the strange station where they had taken her with them a year must have seemed as two. So she didn't answer the questions which he spoke out loud, but the ones that he left unspoken. And she only asked questions on which he himself had no answer.

He was counting on her honestly and how else could she ever be the heroine of his book if not? He had to be honest as well, to not treat her like a child and to not cover her in silence. But he mustn't say any less than what he had already admitted to himself.

He said: "I want people to remember me. ME and those that were close to me. They don't know how the world was. The one that I have loved. That they hear the most important stuff that I have witnessed and realized. That my life wasn't in vain. That something remains of me."

"You are putting your soul into it?" she put her head oblique. "But it's just a notebook. It can be burned or lost. An uncertain place to store your soul, is it not?"

Homer sighed. "No, I only need this notebook to bring everything into the right order. And so that I don't forget anything important as long as the story isn't finished. When it is finished, you would just have to tell it to some people. How I imagine it hopefully you don't need paper or a body to spread it."

"You have seen many things that shouldn't have been forgotten." The girl shrugged her shoulder. "I don't have anything that would be worth writing down. Leave me out of the book. Don't waste paper on me."

"But you have everything in front of you..." started Homer and had to think that he wouldn't live to see it.

The girl didn't react and Homer already feared that she would close off to him. He searched for the right words trying to take everything back, but he tripped over and over again over his sorrows.

"What is the most beautiful thing that you can remember?" she suddenly asked. "The most beautiful?"

Homer hesitated. It was a strange idea to tell another person who he only had only known for two days his deepest secrets. He hadn't even told Yelena everything and she had always thought that on the wall of their chamber, only a usual landscape of the city hung. Would a girl that had been underground for her whole live even be able to understand what he would tell her?

He decided that he would let it come to it. "Summer rain," he said.

Sasha's forehead got wrinkles, which looked strange.

"What is so beautiful about it?"

"Have you ever seen rain?"

"No" the girl shook her head. "Father didn't want me to go outside. I climbed up two or three times anyways, but I didn't like it up there at all. It is terrible when all around you there are no walls." Then she explained it to make sure that they were talking about the same thing. "Rain is when water comes from above, right?"

Homer didn't listen anymore. Again that day emerged from the distant past. Like a medium his body let the summoned ghost use it, gazed at into void and didn't stop speaking ...

"The whole month had been dry and hot. My wife was pregnant, she had always had breathing problems and then there was the heat ... in the entire clinic there was only one fan and she complained how hot it was. I couldn't breathe well myself and I was very sorry. It was bad: for years we had tried to get children but without success and now the doctors scared us that we could receive a stillbirth. Now she was under constant watch, but it would have been better for her to remain at home. The date for the birth had already passed but the pains didn't happen. I couldn't take off every day of course. Somebody had once said that if you carry a child too long the risk of a stillbirth would increase. I didn't know what to do. As soon as I was finished with work I ran to the clinic and kept watch under her window. In the tunnels there was no cell phone network so at every station I checked if I had missed any calls. And then, suddenly there was the message from the doctor: Please call back right away. Until I had found a quiet place to think I had already buried my wife and child in my thoughts, the old, fearful idiot I was."

Homer went silent as if he was listening to the sound of the signal from the phone, waited if somebody picked up. The girl didn't interrupt him. She spared her answers for later.

"Then a stranger's voice said: Congratulations, it's a boy. It sounds so easy: It's a boy. From the dead they had brought my wife back and then this miracle ... I ran up and it was raining. A cold rain. The air had become so light, so clear. As if the city had lain under a dusty plastic foil and suddenly somebody had taken it away. The leaves shined, finally the sky was moving again and the houses looked so fresh. I ran along the Tverskaya, to the flower booth and cried because I was so happy. I had an umbrella but I didn't open it, I wanted to get wet, wanted to feel the rain. I can't recount ... It was like I had been born and saw the world for the first time. And also the world was fresh and new, as if they had just cut its umbilical cord and bathed it for the first time. As if everything had become new and as if it tried to make up for all the bad things that had happened. I would now have a second life: What I couldn't accomplish, my son would accomplish. Everything was just for us. In front of us ..."

Again Homer was silent. He saw the ten story high Stalin houses, the sinking, gradually pink turning nightly fog, heard the busy noise of the Tverskaya, breathed in the sweet, polluted air, closed his eyes and put his face into the summery monsoon. When he came back to himself, small raindrops shimmered on his cheeks and eyes.

Hastily he wiped them off with his sleeve.

"You know," said the girl, not less embarrassed, "Maybe rain is something beautiful. I don't have memories like that. Can you spare some of them? If you want" she smiled at him "You can include me in your book. Somebody has to be in charge how everything ends"

"It is still too early" said the doctor serious.

Sasha didn't know how she could explain this autocrat the importance of what she was asking him. She took a deep breath and readied another attack, but left it to a surly gesture of her hand and turned around.

"You are going to have to be patient. But because you are already on your feet and apparently feeling well you can go for a walk." The doctor packed his instruments into an old plastic bag and shook Homer's hand. "I'll be back in an hour. The leadership of the station has ordered an especially thorough treatment in your case. After all we are in your debt."

Homer threw a dirty military jacket over to Sasha. She stepped out, followed the doctor past the other areas of the hospital, past a row of rooms and chambers full of desks and stretchers, then two staircases upwards, through an inconspicuous low door and then into a giant long hall. Sasha froze at the doorstep, unable to go on. She had never seen something like that. It was past her imagination how many living people could live in one place.

Thousands of faces without masks! And so distinct from each another! There were humans of all ages, from the old man to the baby. Uncountable amounts men: With beards, shaven, tall, small, tired, awake, emaciated and muscular. Those who had been mutilated in battle, those with birth errors, bright beauties, and those that were unattractive on the outside, but emitted a mysterious pull. And not any less amount of women: those with big butts, red faced broads, but also thin, pale girls with unbelievable colorful dressers and interlacing necklaces.

Would they recognize that Sasha was different? Would so she could vanish into this crowd act like she was one of them or would they gang up on her and tear her to pieces like a horde of rats would do to a strange albino? At first it seemed to her that all eyes were resting on her and with every new look she felt warmer and warmer. But after fifteen minutes she was used to it: some looked at her hostile, some curious, some others too intrusive, but most weren't interested in her. They only passed Sasha indifferently with their eyes and pushed onwards immediately without taking notice.

It seemed to her that the scattered and blurry looks were the machine oil that lubricated the gears of this hectic mechanism. If those humans took the slightest interest in another the friction would be too big and the whole spectacle would stand still in the shortest amount of time.

To go under this group you didn't need a new disguise or a new haircut. It was enough if you didn't look too deeply into the eyes of others, but left their eyes after a short look. Every time she did that she still shivered. This indifference would make it easy to continuously pass the interlocking inhabitants of the station without getting stuck at one place.

In the first minutes the smell of cooking had numbed her nose, but shortly after that her senses had learnt to filter out the important ones and ignore everything else. Through the sour smell of unclean bodies she smelled a luring, young, yes even pleasant aroma that went over the group like a wave. It was the perfume of a woman. The smell of grilled meat and the miasma of the trash pit mixed together. With one word: for Sasha this smell of the Pavelezkayas was the smell of life and the longer she took it in, the sweeter it became for her.

To explore this long corridor she probably would have needed a month. Everything here was so overwhelming ...

There were places where you could buy jewelry that was made out of dozens of yellow and minted metal discs which she could stare at for hours. There was a giant selection of books that had more secret knowledge in them than she would ever be able to accumulate.

A shopkeeper lured passing people with a stand with the words FLOWER. He had a giant selection of feel better soon cards on which different bouquets of flowers were printed on. As a child she had once received a card like that, but how many of them were here!

She saw infants on the breasts of their mothers and older children that played with real cats. Couples that touched each other with eyes and other that did that same with hands.

Men tried to touch her. They could have mistaken her interest for some kind of invitation or as a wish to sell something to her, but a certain tone in their words was unpleasant to her, yes even disgusted her. What did they want from her? Weren't there enough women here? Many beauties were under them, covered in colorful dresses they looked like the open heads of the flowers on the cards. Sasha guessed that these men made fun of her.

Was she even able to get a man curious about her? Suddenly doubts started to bite deeper that she didn't even know she had. Maybe she understood everything wrong ... But why should it be different? Something awoke painfully in her chest, under her ribs, at that certain place that she only had discovered for herself a short while ago.

To get rid of her unrest she wandered along the shops again, where all kinds of wares were, bulletproof vests, normal clothing, machines, but she was almost no longer interested in them. Her inner voice had pushed out the noisy crowd into the background and the picture that her memories painted were more plastic looking than the living humans around her.

Had she been worth his life? Would they still be able to judge him for what he had done? And before all: what sense were those stupid thoughts now? Now that she couldn't do anything for him anymore ...

Suddenly even before Sasha realized why, all doubts faded and her heart calmed down. She listened into herself and heard It was the faint echo of distant melody that came from where a large group of people had gathered. Music that Sasha remembered, like the first goodnight songs her mother had sung for her. But she had to be content with only her mother's songs for years: her father hadn't had any place for music and only sparsely ever sung, even wandering musicians and jesters hadn't been welcome at the Avtosvodskaya.

And when the guardsmen on their campfires croaked their heavy hearted and fiery military song neither the wrongly tuned wooden guitars nor Sasha's inner cords had swung with the melody.

But what she heard now was no boring jingling. It sounded like the soft voice of a young woman, yes of a girl but unreachable high for the human throat. It sounded uncompromised and powerful at the same time. But with what could she even compare this miracle?

The song of the unknown instrument cast a spell over the people who stood around, raised them high and carried them into to never ending place, into worlds which all who had been born in the metro had never seen and with possibilities they couldn't have guessed. This music let the people dream and make them believe that all dreams could become reality. It awoke an incomprehensible longing and promised to fulfill it at the same time. And it gave Sasha the feeling as if she had wandered through an abandoned station for a long time when she had suddenly found a lamp and in the shine of the lamp, immediately the exit.

She was standing in front of the arms-smith. Directly in front of her was a plank of wood where different knives were screwed on, from a small pocked knife to murderous hand long daggers. Sasha watched them frozen, like the blades had cast a spell on her.

Inside of her a wild fight took place. A small tempting feeling emerged. The old man had given her a handful of bullets, just enough for the giant black knife with the jagged edge, a wide, sharp exemplar, that was better suited for her plan than anything else.

After one minute Sasha had made a decision. She hid her treasure in the chest-pocked of her overall, if possible at the place where she wanted to fight the pain. When she stepped back into the hospital, she didn't feel the weight of her military jacket nor the pounding in her forehead.

The crowd towered over the girl and the musician that created these wonderful sounds in the distance remained invisible for her. The melody on the other hand seemed to catch up to her, to make her go back, as if it wanted to talk her down.

In vain.

Again it knocked on the door.

Homer rose groaning from his knees, wiped his lips with his sleeve and pulled the chain to flush. On the dirty green fabric of his jacket a brown stain had remained.

It had been the fifth time that he had thrown up in one day, even though he actually hadn't eaten anything.

The symptoms could have a different cause, he told himself. Why had the speed of the sickness been accelerated at all? Maybe it was because ...

"Are you going to be finished soon?" yelled the impatient voice. It was the voice of a woman.

Oh! Had he misread the letters on the door in his haste? Homer wiped the dirty sleeve over his sweat covered face, put on an hard look and pushed the bar to the side.

"Typical drunk!" A woman dressed barely up to her chest pushed him to the side and shut the door behind her.

Ok, thought Homer. They could believe that he was a drunk, which was a lot better than the truth. He stepped in front of the mirror that was over the sink and put his hot forehead against it. With time he could breathe again, he watched how the glass steamed up and winched: His mouth cover had slid down and was hanging under his chin. Hastily he pushed it back in front of his face and closed his eyes. No, he couldn't consciously think about that he brought death to all humans that he met. To turn back was impossible: When he was infected, as far as he hadn't mistaken the symptoms, the whole station was going to die anyways. Starting with the woman whose only fault was that she had to go at the wrong time. What would she do if he would tell her that she now only had a month to live at best?

How foolish, thought Homer. Foolish and stupid. He had wanted to make all immortal that crossed his path. Now fate had transformed him into an angel of death and one of the foolish, bold, powerless kind. He felt like somebody had shortened his wings and told him that an ultimatum of thirty days had been engraved on him. That was as much time as he had to act.

Was that the punishment for him overestimating himself and for his pride?

No, he could no longer be silent. And there was only one human which he could open up to. He wouldn't be able to deceive him for long and it was easier for both when they played with open cards.

With unsure steps he made his way to the hospital.

The room was at the end of the hallway and usually a nurse sat in front of it, but now the place was empty. Through the door slit he could hear a broken moaning. He could only make out single words and as long as Homer listened he could put them together to sentences that made sense.

"Stronger ... Fighting ... Must ... Still sense ... Resistance ... Remember ... Still able ... Mistake ... Punishment ..."

His words were now a barking of orders, as if the pain had become unbearable and hindered the speaker on catching his rushing thoughts. Homer entered the room.

Hunter was lying unconscious, spreading his limbs and turning from one side to the other on a wet blanket. The bandage that pressed the head of the brigadier together had slipped over his eyes, the bony cheeks were covered in sweat and the unshaven lower jaw hung down limp.

His broad chest raised and lowered itself, struggling like the bellows of a blacksmith that only kept the fire burning within through struggle.

At the head end stood the girl with her back turned to him, her small hands behind her back. Not at first, but after a closer look he saw the silhouette of a black knife that she was holding cramped through the fabric of her overalls.

The ringing.

Again and again.

Thousandtwohundredthandthirtyfive. Thousandtwohundredthandthirtysix.
Thousandtwohundredthandthirtyseven.

Artyom counted the sound not because he wanted to justify himself in front of the commander but because he wanted to feel some kind of movement. When he distanced himself from the point where he had started counting so that meant that with every ringing sound the point where this madness was over came closer.

Deceiving oneself? Yeah, probably. But listening to this ringing knowing that it will never stop was unbearable. Even though at first, it had been the same thing after his very first deployment: Like a metronome it had brought order in the cacophony of his thoughts with its monotone sound, had emptied his head and calmed down his racing pulse.

The ringing cut down minutes of his shift and Artyom felt like he was in a trap made out of time out of which he couldn't escape. In medieval times there had been such torture: They had undressed a criminal and sat him under a barrel out of which never endingly water dropped onto his head. The cause was that the poor guy slowly lost his mind. Where the stretch-table was without success, normal water brought extraordinary results ...

Bound to the line of the telephone, Artyom didn't dare to distance himself just for one second. His whole shift he had tried not to drink so that no important need would lure him from the apparatus. Days before he hadn't been able to stand staying in the room, slipped out, hastily run to the exit and had returned immediately. Even on the doorstep he had listened and it had run down cold down his back: The frequency hadn't been right, the signal was now faster and not as slow as before. That could only mean one thing: The moment that he had waited for was finally here when he had been gone. Fearful he looked to the door if somebody had watched him and had quickly dialed the number again and pressed his ear against the telephone.

Out of the apparatus the same clicking sound emerged, the ringing started from anew - in the know rhythm. From that moment the busy sound hadn't returned and nobody had picked up. Put Artyom didn't dare to put down the telephone ever again. Only from time to time he put it from his one already hot ear to his other, cramped trying not to miscount.

He hadn't said anything to the leadership and he wasn't even sure if he had heard anything but the eternal rhythm back then. His orders were: Call. For a week there had been only this task. Any violation would bring him in front of the tribunal and there they made no difference between mistakes and sabotage.

The telephone helped him to orientate how long he still had to sit here. Artyom didn't have his own watch, but the commander had told him, looking at his watch, that the signal repeated itself every five seconds. Twelve sounds were one minute, 720 an hour, 13 680 a whole shift. Like small grains of sand they dropped down from one part of a giant hourglass into another bottomless container. And between the two glasses, directly in the neck Artyom was stuck and listened to time.

Also he didn't put down the receiver because the commander could return every second to check on him. Otherwise ... What he did was absolutely pointless. At the other end of the line apparently nobody seemed to be still alive.

He saw the from inside barricaded office of the head of the station and him pressing his face against the plate of the table, the makarov still in his hand. With his shot through ears he could no longer hear the ringing sound. The ones that were on the other side of the door hadn't been able to break through, but through the keyhole and the door slit the desperate ringing crawled over the train platform where all the bloated bodies were lying ... For a time you hadn't been able to here the ringing, the noise of the crowd, of the steps, the crying of the children had been to loud, but now it only disturbed the silence of the dead. The gradually dying emergency aggregates still spread their red blinking light.

The ringing.

Again.

Thousandfivehundredthandsixtythree. Thousandfivehundredthandsixtyfour.

No reaction.

Artyom (yes, our Artyom) counted the sound not because he wanted to justify himself in front of the commander but because he wanted to feel some kind of movement. When he distanced himself from the point where he had started counting so that meant that with every ringing sound the point where this madness was over came closer.

Deceiving oneself? Yeah, probably. But listening to this ringing knowing that it will never stop was unbearable.

Even though at first, it had been the same thing after his very first deployment: Like a metronome it had brought order in the cacophony of his thoughts with its monotone sound, had emptied his head and calmed down his racing pulse.

The ringing cut down minutes of his shift and Artyom felt like he was in a trap made out of time out of which he couldn't escape. In medieval times there had been such torture: They had undressed a criminal and sat him under a barrel out of which never endingly water dropped onto his head. The cause was that the poor guy slowly lost his mind.

Where the stretch-table was without success, normal water brought extraordinary results ...

Bound to the line of the telephone, Artyom didn't dare to distance himself just for one second. His whole shift he had tried not to drink so that no important need would lure him from the apparatus. Days before he hadn't been able to stand staying in the room, slipped out, hastily run to the exit and had returned immediately. Even on the doorstep he had listened and it had run down cold down his back: The frequency hadn't been right; the signal was now faster than before. That could only mean one thing: The moment that he had waited for was finally here when he had been gone.

Fearful he looked to the door if somebody had watched him and had quickly dialed the number again and pressed his ear against the telephone.

Out of the apparatus the same clicking sound emerged, the ringing started from anew - in the know rhythm.

From that moment the busy sound hadn't returned and nobody had picked up. Put Artyom didn't dare to put down the telephone ever again. Only from time to time he put it from his one already hot ear to his other, cramped trying not to miscount.

He hadn't said anything to the leadership and he wasn't even sure if he had heard anything but the eternal rhythm back then. His orders were: Call. For a week there had been only this task. Any violation would bring him in front of the tribunal and there they made no difference between mistakes and sabotage.

The telephone helped him to orientate how long he still had to sit here. Artyom didn't have his own watch, but the commander had told him, looking at his watch, that the signal repeated itself every five seconds. Twelve sounds were one minute, 720 an hour, 13 680 a whole shift. Like small grains of sand they dropped down from one part of a giant hourglass into another bottomless container. And between the two glasses, directly in the neck Artyom was stuck and listened to time.

Also he didn't put down the receiver because the commander could return every second to check on him.

Otherwise ... What he did was absolutely pointless.

At the other end of the line apparently nobody seemed to be still alive.

He saw the from the inside barricaded office of the head of the station and him pressing his face against the plate of the table, the makarov still in his hand. With his shot through ears he could no longer hear the ringing sound. The ones that were on the other side of the door hadn't been able to break through, but through the keyhole and the door slit the desperate ringing crawled over the train platform where all the bloated bodies were lying ... For a time you hadn't been able to here the ringing, the noise of the crowd, of the steps, the crying of the children had been too loud, but now it only disturbed the rest of the dead. The gradually dying emergency aggregates still spread their red blinking light.

The ringing.

Again.

2563

2564.

No reaction.

Gifts (Chapter11)

Your report! You could say what you wanted; the commander was always good for a surprise. In the entire garrison they told legends about him. Once a mercenary he was skillful with knives and was known that nothing could turn his attention away from his tasks. Back then before he had settled down at the *Sevastopolskaya* he had massacred the outer guard post of an enemy station alone, using the slightest mistakes of the guards.

Artyom jumped up, pressed the receiver against his ear with shoulder, saluted and stopped, not without some regret, counting. The commander approached the schedule of duty, looked at his clock and put next to his thumb, 3rd November and the numbers 9:22, signed and turned to Artyom.

"My report: Nothing. I mean, nobody picked up"

"Silence?" The commander crackled with his jaws and loosened his neck muscles. "I just can't believe it"

"What?" Asked Artyom worried.

"That it has already hit the *Dobryninskaya*. Could the epidemic have already hit Hanza? Do you understand what is going if it has hit the ring line?"

"But we don't know anything for sure." Answered Artyom. "Maybe it has already started. We have no contact to them."

"What if the line is damaged?" The commander lowered his head and started to knock on the table.

"But then there was still a line to the base." Artyom nodded his head into the direction of the tunnel that lead to the *Sevastopolskaya*. "That one is completely dead. Here we get at least ringing. That means the line is still working"

"Only that the base seems to no longer need us." Said the commander calm. "You can't see anybody from there at the door. Maybe the base is no more. And no more *Dobryninskaya*. Listen to me, Popov, when nobody is alive there anymore, we die very soon and all of us as well.

Nobody is going to come to our help. Why still keep the quarantine up? Maybe we should forget about all this shit, what do you think?" Again his jaws moved.

Artyom was shocked. What heresy! He didn't want to but he had to think about the commander's habit to shot deserters into the stomach before reading them their sentence.

"No commander, the quarantine is necessary"

"What you don't say ... Today alone three have become sick. Two from here and one of us. And Akopov is dead"

"Akopov?" Artyom swallowed and closed his eyes. His mouth felt dry.

"Beat his head in on the track." Continued the commander with the same calm voice." He had said that he couldn't take the pain anymore. Not the first case. It got to hurt like hell when you try for half an hour to beat in your skull or what?

"Yes, sir." Artyom turned his head.

"And what's with you? Nausea? Weakness?" asked the commander worried and shined his small flashlight into Artyom's face. "Open your mouth and say >Ahhh<. Good.

Listen up, Popov. You see that finally somebody picks up. Somebody has to pick up, Popov, at the *Dobryninskaya* and they shall say that Hanza has a vaccine and are reading sanitary brigades who are

going to be here soon. And that they are going to get the healthy out. And heal the sick. And that we don't have to stay in this hell forever. That we will get back to our wives. And you to your Galya and I to Alyona and Vera, understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Artyom nodded his head cramped.

"At ease"

His long knife hadn't been able to resist the weight of the falling down beast and had broken exactly over the handle. The blade had penetrated deep into the chest of the creature so that they hadn't even tried to get it back out of it.

The bold one who had been scared by the claws of the beast had been unconscious for almost three days.

Sasha couldn't help him but she still had to see him.

At least to think about him, even though he couldn't hear her.

But the doctors didn't let her to him. They said the injured man needed rest before all.

She didn't know exactly why the bold one had killed the people on the railcar. But if he had shot to save her then that was enough of a reason to her. She tried to believe in it but she couldn't. Probably there was a different explanation:

Instead of asking, he rather killed.

At the *Pavelezkaya* it had been different: He had followed Sasha and had been ready to die for her. Was there actually a connection between them?

Like back then, at the *Kolomenskaya* when he had yelled after her, she had waited for a bullet not the question to come with them. But when she had turned around she had recognized a change in him, even though his scary face hadn't moved a bit. It had been his eyes: Suddenly she had seen somebody else through the black pupils and looked at her.

Somebody who was interested in her.

Somebody who she had to be thankful for her live.

Should she give him a silver ring, the same gesture like back then from her mother? What if the bold one didn't understand a gesture like that? But how should she thank him instead?

To give him a knife, as a replacement for the one which he had lost because of her, at that was least something.

When she had been totally illuminated by this simple thought, standing in front of the weapons-smith and imagining how she would give him the blade, how he would look at her, what he would say, she totally forgot that she would buy a murderer another tool with it he would slit throats and stomachs.

No, in this moment he wasn't a bandit for her but a hero, no killer but a warrior and before all – a man. And there was another, obscure thought in her head: Since his blade had broken, he hadn't awoken. Maybe he would be a whole blade again ... Like an amulet ... So she had bought it for him.

And now that she was standing in front of his bed and hid the present behind her back Sasha hoped that he reacted to it or at least feel the presence of the blade. the bold one twitched from one sided to the other, made croaking sounds, started single words, moaned but didn't awake.

Darkness had him strongly in its grasp.

Up until now Sasha hadn't said his name one single time, neither loud or to herself. No she whispered it to him.

"Hunter!"

The bold one went silent, he seemed to listen as if he was unimaginably far away and her voice was only an almost inaudible echo to his ear, but he didn't answer. Sasha repeated it again, louder. She wouldn't stop until he would open his eyes. She would be his tunnel light.

From the hallway she heard she a surprised scream, boots started to hammer on the ground. She kneeled down fast and put the knife on the small table at the head end of his stretcher. "That's for you." She said.

Suddenly the iron hard fingers held on to her hand, so strong that they could have broken all of her bones in her hand. The eyes of the injured man were open, his look wandered around without any goal. "Thanks." He mumbled.

The girl had no intentions to free herself.

"What are you doing here?" A thin boy with a dirty white coat put a needle in the bold mans arm which brought him to sleep immediately again. Then the nurse grabbed Sasha by her shoulders and he said with closed teeth: "Don't you understand? In his condition ... The doctor has forbidden ..."

"You're the one who doesn't understand! He needs something that he can hold on to. From your needles he is just getting weaker ..." The nurse tried to push Sasha into the direction of the exit, but she had already taken the steps and looked at him with angry eyes.

"I don't want to see you in here again! And what is this here?" He had found the knife.

"That's ... His." Mumbled Sasha. "I brought it with me. If he hadn't been there ... Those things would have torn me to pieces."

"And the doctor is going to tear me to pieces when he is going to find out." Growled the nurse. "Now go!"

Sasha hesitated for a moment and then she turned to Hunter again who was still sleeping heavily sedated and ended what she had wanted to say: "Thank you, you saved me"

When she was leaving the room she suddenly heard his croaky voce: "I just wanted to kill it ... That beast ..."

The door was shut right in front of her face and the key fell into the lock.

The knife had been for something else. That had Homer realized immediately when he had heard how she called the name of the fevering brigadier, asking soft and sorrowful at the same time. At first he hadn't wanted to get involved but then he thought about it differently and turned way, here was nobody that needed to be protected from something. All he could do was to retreat as fast as possible so he wouldn't scare Sasha off.

Maybe she was right. At the *Nagatinskya* Hunter had totally forgotten about his companions. He had thrown them in front of the ghostly zyklops as a meal. But in this fight ...

Maybe the girl meant something to him?

Sunken in thoughts homer strolled along the hallway and went to his room at the hospital. A nurse bumped into him, but the old man didn't even realize it.

It was time to give Sasha what he had bought for her.

It seemed she would need it very soon.

Out of the desks drawer he brought a package to the light and turned it in his hands. After a few minutes the girl stormed into the room, nervous, confused and angry. She sat onto the bed, pulled her legs up and stared into the corner.

Homer waited until the storm would start or pass him. Sasha was silent and started to gnaw on her fingernails.

It was time to intervene.

"I got a gift for you." The old man came forth from behind the table and put the package next to the girl on the blanket.

"For what?" She said, without coming out of her snail house.

"Why do people give gifts to each other?"

"To repay good things." She said convinced. "For what you have gotten or for what you hope to get"

"Then let's say that I am repaying for all the good things that you have already given me. For I don't need anything else"

"I didn't give you anything." Answered Sasha

"And what about my book?" He made a jokingly, offended face. "You're already in it. I don't like owing something to somebody. Now come on, open it"

"I don't like to owing something as well." Said Sasha and ripped open the wrappings of the package. "What's this? Oh!"

In her hand was a red disk of plastic, a small box that could be opened from both sides. Back then it had been a cheap makeup box for when you were traveling, but both compartments for powder and rouge were already empty. But the mirror on the inside had survived.

"Here you can see yourself better than in a puddle of water." Sasha looked with her big eyes at her reflection. It looked strange. "Why did you give this to me?"

"Sometimes it is better to see yourself from the side"

Homer was grinning. "You'll understand more about yourself"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sasha's voice had become more careful.

"There are people who have never seen their own reflection in their entire life and because of that they think that they are someone entirely different. And if they stand in front of their reflection they often can't believe who is standing in front of them"

"And how am I seeing?"

"You tell me." He crossed his arm in front of his chest. "Myself. Well ... A girl" To be sure she turned the mirror from one cheek to the other.

"A young woman." Corrected Homer. "And a very unkempt one"

She turned from one side to the other a few times, blinked at Homer as if she wanted to ask something, thought about it again, went silent for a moment and gathered all her courage and said: "Am I ugly?"

The old man cleared his throat. He had to keep himself from laughing. "Hard to say. Under all that dirt you can't really tell"

Sasha raised her eyebrows. "What's the problem?"

"Don't men have a feeling for if a woman is beautiful or not? Do you always have to show and explain?"

"Seems like it. And women often use that to deceive us." Homer had to laugh. "Makeup can work wonders on a female face. But in your case it is not about repairing a portrait but to free it. When you can only see the foot of an antique statue you can't really tell how it looks like."

Then he added: "Even though there is a great chance that it is beautiful."

"What does antique mean?" Asked Sasha unsure.

"Old." Homer was having his fun.

"I am only seventeen!"

"We are going to know. After the excavation"

The old man leaned back to his table, opened the notebook at the last page he had written on and started to read through his notes again. Suddenly his face darkened.

If anybody digs us up one day ... The girl, himself and all others. What if in thousands of years archaeologists would explore the ruins of Moscow from which not even the name was known and suddenly found the entrance to this underground labyrinth? Probably they would think it was a gigantic mass grave. Nobody would believe that in these dark catacombs humans could have lived. They would come to the decision that this highly advanced culture had become only a few in its last days and that they had buried their leaders with all of their possessions, weapons, servants and concubines.

His book had a mere eighty free pages. If that would be enough to house both worlds in it: The one on the surface and the one in the metro?

"Can't you hear me?" The girl shook his arm.

"What? Sorry, I was sunken in thoughts." He wiped his forehead.

"Are antic statues really beautiful? I mean what the people found beautiful back then can it still be today?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "Yes"

"And tomorrow as well?"

"Possible. When somebody is still left to judge them"

Sasha went silent and thought about something.

Homer didn't try to carry the conversation forward but he sunk back into his own thoughts.

After some time she asked surprised: "So that means without humans there is no beauty?"

"Probably not." He answered a bit confused. "When nobody can see it ... Animals aren't able ..."

"But if animals distinct themselves from humans because they don't know the difference between beauty and ugliness can humans even exist without beauty?"

The old man shook his head. "Of course, certainly.

There are many that don't need it"

Now the girl took a strange thing out of her pocket:

A small quadratic piece of plastic with a drawing on it.

Shy and at the same time proud, like she was showing her a biggest treasure and held it into Homers direction.

"What's that?"

"You tell me." A smart smile hushed over her face.

"Well." He took the small quadratic piece of plastic carefully out of her hand, read the print and gave it back to the girl. "That's the packaging of a teabag. With a picture on it"

"A beautiful picture." She corrected him. "If not for this, I would've become an animal ..."

Homer looked at her. He felt how his eyes filled with tears and breathing got harder for him. Sentimental idiot!

He cursed himself. He cleared his throat and sighed.

"Have you never been on the surface, in the city? I mean except this one time?"

"No, and?" Sasha put the packaging back into her pocket. "Do you want to tell me that out there it isn't like on this picture? That there is nothing like this anymore? I know that already. I know how the city looks like, the houses, the bridge and the river. Destroyed and empty"

"Not at all." Answered Homer. "I have never seen anything more beautiful. You act like you wanted to judge the entire metro by the one platform you've seen. How am I supposed to describe it? Building higher than the mountains, big streets flowing like the river on the mountain. A sky that never got dark and shining fog ... A very, ambitious, short-lived city, just like every one of its millions of former inhabitants.

Crazy and chaotic. Influenced by trying to combine what can't be combined. Build without any plan. But so alive!"

His hands became fists, like he was angry at the world.

"You can't understand that. You should've seen it with your own eyes ..." At that moment he was convinced that she just had to go to the surface so that she could see everything like himself. He never realized that she had never seen the city in its living condition.

Homer hadn't talked to anybody and they had lead them through the barricade to Hanza and the whole neighboring stations, to the offices where the bath was. Under guard, like if they were lead to the henchman's block.

The only thing that the two *Pavelezkaya's* had in common was the name. They were like two sisters that had been separated from birth and the one had grown up with a rich family and the other at a poor station, or even in a tunnel.

The rooms were dirty and run-down, but bright and roomy. The ring station made a more crouched, edgy impression, but it was always lit and polished. They must have caravans and merchants coming through. At this time nothing was going on, who didn't work seemed to favor the masses of the neighboring station and not the strictness of the ring.

In the dressing room Sasha was alone. The walls were covered with yellow tiles and on the ground were hexagonal and broken tiles. There were also painted iron cabinets for shoes and clothes, a light bulb on a cable, two benches covered in scratched, artificial leather ... She couldn't stop looking around.

She took an unbelievable white towel and a heavy, quadratic piece of grey soap. Then she locked the shower from the inside.

The small quadratic towel, the a little bit disgusting smell of the soap, all that was part of a distant past for Sasha when she had been the loved and protected daughter of the commander. She had already forgotten that all those things still existed.

Hastily she took off her clothes which were covered in dirt and jumped under the rusty pipe of the self made shower.

With a bit of effort she turned the valve and almost burned her hand, the water was hot! She pressed herself against the wall so that she could move out of the way of the water and turned the other one. Finally when she had found the right mixture she stopped dancing around ... And stepped into the water.

The water washed away the dust, ash, machine oil and blood, her own and the blood of other people, tiredness, sorrow, guilt and doubts down the drain. It took some time until the water which was running down the drain got clear again.

Was that enough so that the old man wouldn't make fun of her anymore?

Sasha looked at her clean feet as if they weren't her own, and then she looked at the unusual white hands. Was that enough so that men would recognize her beauty?

Maybe Homer had been right and it had been foolish to visit the injured man before she had cleaned herself up. She probably still had to learn those things.

Would he recognize that she had changed? She stopped the water, went back to the dressing room and opened her new mirror ... No it was impossible to not recognize it!

She had relaxed in the hot water and all her doubts had been silenced. What the bold one had said about the beast hadn't been destined for her, but had been part of a heavy struggle in his dream. He hadn't said no to her. She just had to wait until he woke up again. If she was with him at that point he would understand. And then? Why should she think about it now? She knew enough that she could trust herself with him.

Again she thought how the bold one had turned from side to the other in his fever. Without knowing why she knew that he had been searching for her. She could bring him rest, peace and bring him into balance again. She felt warm when she thought about him.

They had taken the dirty overall from her and had promised to wash it. Instead she got bright blue jeans and a sweater with a few holes in it. The new clothes were too small for her and when she went back to the guard post she could feel the looks of all men on her, so that Sasha felt like she had to take another shower before she got back to her bed.

The old man wasn't in his room but she wasn't alone for long. After a few minutes the door was opened and the doctor stepped in.

"You can now visit him." He said "He's awake"

"What's the date?"

The brigadier put his weight on his elbow, put his head back and forth and stared at Homer. He reached at for wrist immediately, even though he hadn't had a watch in years. Then he spread his arms and shrugged his shoulders.

The nurse intervened. "The second. November"

"Three days". Hunter fell back down onto his pillar.

"I've been laying here for three days. We got to go or we'll be too late"

"You won't get far." Said the nurse. "You almost had no more blood in you"

"We got to go." Repeated the brigadier. "Time is running out ... The bandits ..." Suddenly he stopped. "Why do you need a respirator?"

Homer knew the question had to come sooner or later. He had had three days to build his defenses and organize to fight back. Hunter being unconscious had kept him from realizing; now he had a well thought-out lie ready.

He lowered his head over the bed of the injured man and whispered: "There are no bandits. While you were fevering ... You have been talking the entire time. I know everything"

"What do you know?" Hunter grabbed him by his collar and dragged him to him.

"From the epidemic at the *Tulskaya* ... It's alright"

Homer waved at the nurse who had wanted to come to his aid. "I can do this. I have to talk to him. Would you be so kind ..."

Only reluctantly the nurse gave up, put the cover back on the needle and left them alone.

"About the *Tulskaya* ..." Hunter had still fixed his red eyes on him but his iron hard grip loosened gradually.

"Nothing else?"

"Only that some kind unknown infection has broken out at the station. That it is transferred over the air. And that our guys have put up quarantine and wait for help"

"If you say so. Ok ..." The brigadier let go of him

"Yes it is an epidemic. And you're afraid to infect yourself?"

"Be on your guard then god helps you." Answered Homer carefully.

"Yes, Yes. It's alright ... I wasn't close and the air was moving in the other direction ... Nothing should have happened"

Homer found his courage again. "Why that story with the bandits? What's your plan?"

"First to the *Dobryninskaya*, to make a deal. Then to clean the *Tulskaya*. We need flamethrowers. We can't do it otherwise ..."

"Burn down the entire station? What's with our guys?"

Homer hoped that his words were just another try to get him away from the truth like he had lead the commanding officers of the *Sevastopolskaya* astray.

"They are already walking corpses. There's no way out. All who have contact with the infected infect themselves.

The entire air is infected. I've heard of this disease ..." Hunter closed his eyes and licked over his bloody lips with his tongue. "There is no cure. A few years ago we had a similar outbreak. Two thousand deaths"

"But then it stopped?"

"There was a siege. Flamethrower." The brigadier turned his scared face to him. "There is no other way. If there's an outbreak and only one human gets through ...

That's it for us. Yes that with the bandits was a lie.

Otherwise Istomin would've never agreed to kill all of them. He is too soft. I am going to get people that don't ask any questions."

"But what if there are still people that are immune against it? What if there are still healthy people there? I ... You've said ... Maybe there is still somebody with who we can talk ..."

"There is no immunity." cut the brigadier him off.

"All that got in contact get infected. There are no more healthy ones there, only those that last longer. And it is going to be worse for them. They will have to suffer longer.

Believe me it's better for them if I ... If they are killed"

"What is going to bring you that?" Homer stepped back from Hunter's stretcher and again he realized that the eye on his scarred side of the face didn't fully close. Hunter waited so long with his answer that the old man already wanted to call the doctor again.

But then the brigadier spoke slowly, stretched, with closed teeth, as if he was under hypnosis and was looking for lost memories in his past: "I have. To defend humanity.

Eliminate all threats. I am only there for that"

Had he found the knife? Had he understood that it was from her?" What if he wouldn't guess it and see no promise in it? She flew along the hallway and chased away those angry thoughts. She had no idea what she would say to him ... Too bad that she hadn't been able to stand at his bed when he had awoken ...

Sasha had almost heard the entire conversation.

Silently she had listened on the doorstep and had winched when he had talked about the killing. Of course she hadn't understood everything but she didn't have to. She had heard the most important parts, there was no more use in waiting. So she knocked on the door.

When the old man turned around she could see the despair in his face. He almost didn't move as if this time they had given him the injection to calm him down and had extinguished the flame in his eyes. He nodded at Sasha weak willed, it looked like a death candidate's rope had been raised up.

The girl sat onto the edge of the chair, bit on her lip and held her breath before she entered this new and unexplored tunnel. "Do you like my knife?"

"What knife?" The bold one looked around and saw the black blade. His face didn't move but looked at Sasha distrusting. "What is that supposed to mean?"

It was like somebody had punched her right in the face. "That is for you. Yours broke. As you ... Thank ..."

A few moments uncomfortable silence hung in the room. Then the bold one said: "Strange gift. Wouldn't accept it from anybody." She believed to hear something like a clue in his words, something with a second meaning and left unspoken. She accepted the game without knowing its rules and started to reach for fitting words. What emerged was clumsy, not making any sense, but Sasha's tongue wasn't used to describing what was going on inside of her"

"Don't you feel that you carry a part of me inside of you? That piece that they have ripped out of you ... That you were searching for ... That I have given back to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

It was like somebody had emptied a bucket of cold water over her head. Sasha was shivering but she stood her ground. "You feel it. That you are complete with me. That I can be near you and that I have to. Why else would you have taking me with you?"

"I did my partner a favor" his look was empty.

"Why did you defend me against the people on the railcar?"

"I would have killed them anyways"

"Why did you save me from that beast?"

"I have to kill them all"

"It should have eaten me!"

"You're not happy to be alive?" He asked surprised.

"Then you just have to go up the escalator. There're more of them."

"I ... You want, that I ..."

"I want nothing from you"

"I am going to help you to stop!"

"You're clinging on to me"

"Don't you feel anything, that ..."

"I don't feel anything" His words tasted like rusty water.

Even the grotesque claw of the pale monster couldn't have hit that deep. Surprised Sasha jumped up and ran out of the room.

She looked into the room and it was empty. She fell down at the corner, rolled up, was looking in her pocket for her mirror, to throw it away but she didn't find it. It must have fallen out of her pocket in the room of the bold one.

When her tears had dried, she knew what she would do. There was no time to pack. The old man would forgive her for taking his Kalashnikov, he would forgive her everything. In the room next to her she found her radiation suit hanging on a hook, cleaned and decontaminated. As if a magician had emptied the dead body of the fat man into which Sasha had to step into again and again. Following her for eternity.

She slipped into it, walked out the room into the corridor with heavy steps and through the door onto the train platform. Somewhere she heard the faint echo of the magical music; she hadn't had time to find its origin. Only for a moment she stopped ... But then she resisted the temptation and approached her goal.

When it was day there was only one guard at the escalator. As long as it was bright outside the creatures left the inhabitants of the station alone.

Sasha didn't even need five minutes to explain her situation: The way to the surface was always open. It was impossible though to take the escalator back down. She gave half of her magazine to the willing guard and put her foot onto the first step that would lead her to the sky.

Then she raised her leg and began to climb up.

Signs (Chapter 12)

At home at the *Kolomenskaya*, it hadn't been far to the surface: Exactly 56 flat steps. The *Pavelezkaya* was a lot deeper in the earth though. While Sasha stepped up the escalator that had been holed by machine guns, she couldn't see the end of her climb. Her lamp was just powerful enough to rip out the broken glass of the lamps and the rusted, oblique hanging signs with their darkened faces out of the darkness.

Why did she want to go up here? Why die?

But who needed her down there? Who needed her really, as a human and not as an acting person in a book?

Why should she try to keep deceiving herself ...?

When Sasha had left the body of her father in the lonely *Kolomenskaya*, she had believed to for fill the escape they had made. Through carrying a small part of him in herself, she thought it would help him to be free.

But since that he had never appeared in her dreams and when she had tried to summon his picture in her fantasies and share with him what she had lived through, he had only appeared obscure and silent.

Her father couldn't forgive her that she saved him in that way.

Under the books he had brought from time to time, she had always read them if possible before they exchanged them for food and ammunition, an old botanic book was her favorite. The illustration weren't very colorful, only bleached black and white pictures and pencil drawings, but in the other books that she had gotten her fingers on there weren't any pictures in them at all. Of all plants she liked the climbing plants the most:

She felt like they were part of her soul. Like those flowers she needed something on that she could lean on. To grow up on. To the light.

No before all she had needed a powerful log, to lean on it and to hug it. Not to rob it from light and warmth, no.

Without it she was just too soft, she had not enough spine to stand up straight. Standing on her own she would have to crawl on the ground.

Her father had said that she shouldn't rely on anybody else. Except for him there had been nobody in this god forsaken station and he had known that he wouldn't live forever. He would have rather seen her grow up like a tree and not like ivy. But he had forgotten that wasn't in her female nature. Sasha had survived without him. Without Hunter. But to be united with another human being had been the only reason for her to think about the future. When she had hugged the brigadier on the rushing railcar her life had gained new hold. She reminded herself that it was dangerous to rely on others and unworthy to be depended on somebody.

The harder it was to overcome and explain it to hunter.

Sasha just had wanted to lean, but he had thought that she wanted to hold on to his boot. Now that there was nobody to lean on and also having been kicked in the dirt, it seemed under her honor to keep searching. He had chased her away, said she should go to the surface, well good, then it should be like that. When something happened to her up there it was his fault, it was only in his power to change that.

Finally her steps were at the end. Sasha stood at the edge of a giant marble room, the holed metal ceiling was being kept standing by a few pillars. Through the holes in the distance you could see bright

rays of light. They were of surprising grey white color and some of the even shined to the part where Sasha stood. She switched off her lamp, held her breath and continued silently.

Traces of shots and splinters on the walls at the exit of the escalator pointed to humans having been there. But just a few more steps later other creatures ruled. Out of the dried hills of crap that were everywhere bones and pieces of skin stuck out, Sasha knew that she was inside a cave that was inhabited by wild animals. She covered her eyes from the burning light and approached the exit. The closer she got to the origin of the light the deeper became the darkness in the farthest edges of this giant hall she stepped through. She gradually got used to the light, but also lost her feeling for the darkness.

Fallen down kiosks, hills of unimaginable trash and old, stripped technical machines filled the neighboring halls.

It seemed that the humans who had used this room at the *Pavelezkaya* had stored things which you could still use here, until one day stronger creatures had chased them away from here.

From time to time Sasha thought she could see an almost unnoticeable movement in the dark corners, but she thought it was of her stronger getting blindness. The darkness that was here was already too thick so she didn't see the silhouettes of the sleeping monster next to the hills of trash.

The air moved gradually over her head, sounded over the heavy breathing and Sasha realized that just a few meters next there she had passed a slightly moving hill. She stood still, listened and stared at the contours of the fallen down kiosks. There between the rubble she saw a strange hump and froze.

The hill that had dug itself into the little house was breathing. Even almost all of the other hills moved in the same rhythm. To be sure Sasha switched on her lamp and put it onto one of the hills. The weak ray of light exposed the wrinkled white skin that ran over a gigantic chest. It was one of the chimaeras that had almost killed her, just a lot bigger.

The creatures were in some kind of stasis and didn't seem to notice her. Suddenly the animal's groaned, breathed out through the oblique slits of its snout and started to move ... Hastily Sasha put the lamp away and rushed on. The few steps through the scary camp cost her lot of strength: The further she got from the entrance to the metro the denser the chimaeras lay next to each other and the harder it got to find a way past their bodies.

But it was too late to turn around now. Right now Sasha didn't care about how she would get back to the metro, it only counted for her to get past these creature without any of them noticing. To remain unseen, to feel ... If they just didn't wake up, if they would let her go She didn't need a way back.

She almost didn't dare to breathe and didn't even try to think and slowly enclosed on the exit. A split tile on the ground made a deceiving sound under her boot. Another wrong step or another coincidental noise and they would awake and rip her to pieces immediately.

Sasha couldn't shake the thought that just short time ago, maybe yesterday or even today she had wandered between sleeping monsters too, so at least the feeling she had right now was somewhat familiar to her. Suddenly she stopped.

Sasha knew: Sometimes you can feel strangers look on your neck. And even though these creatures had no eyes with them they were searching the room, she clearly felt an intrusive staring on her.

She didn't have to turn around to realize that one of the animals behind her had awoken and had put its heavy head into her direction.

But she did and turned around.

The girl was gone and Homer didn't care to search for her right now.

To be honest he didn't care about anything anymore.

The diary of the radio operator had left one small spark that the disease would spare the old man and Hunter had extinguished that spark with his merciless boot. Homer had started a well prepared conversation, a kind of death sentence. But he hadn't wanted to pardon him and he wouldn't have been able to. Homer was the only one responsible for his inevitable fate.

Just a few more weeks, maybe even less. Only ten pages left in his small book with the plastic cover.

He still had so much to say. For Homer it wasn't just a wish but his duty, even though the unwilling rest was coming to an end very soon.

He straightened the paper so he could continue from his last point, when the doctor cut him off. But again his hand wrote: "What remains of me?"

And what of the unlucky prisoners at of the *Tulskaya*? Maybe they had already lost hope, maybe they were still waiting for help and in that case they had a cruel end in front of them. Their memories? There weren't enough people that he still remembered.

Memories weren't really strong mausoleum. If Homer wouldn't die in the far future all those who he once knew would die with him. Even his own, his personal Moscow would dissolve into nothing.

Where was he? At the *Pavelezkaya*? The garden ring was now empty and without any life, for the last few hours they had been relocating heavy military gear so that the paramedics and police escorts could pass freely. Out of the side streets stood destroyed city villas and stared like decayed, half fallen out teeth Homer could imagine the landscape above him even though he had never himself.

Before the war he had been up there. Had had an appointment with his fiancé in a café, a rendezvous next to the metro and then later had gone into the matinee showing of a movie at the cinema. He also remembered how he had gone under a pricy and clumsy medical examination for his driver's license test. Also that he had used to leave from this station with his colleagues to go have a barbecue in the forest ...

On the squared paper of his notebook suddenly the railway station in the autumn fog and the two in dust sinking towers appeared, a new office building at the ring where one of his friends had worked and the winding top of a new hotel with another just as expensive concert hall next to it. He had once asked for the price of a ticket and it had cost more than what he had made in two weeks.

He saw and heard the clinging, edgy white blue streetcars, filled with unsatisfied passengers, the anger of this harmless crowd made him smile, the garden ring, magnificently lit from thousands of search lights and blinking like one giant garland, timid snowflakes that didn't fit to the scenery, melting when they touched the dark asphalt and the crowds, myriads of particles, loaded, bumping into each other, at the same time chaotic and racing but everyone moving in a well thought-out lane.

He saw the lane between the Stalin monoliths, where slowly the big river of the garden ring flew onto the plaza.

Hundredths of windows shined like small aquariums to both sides of the broad street. The neon fire of the signs and gigantic billboards which were soon many floors tall buildings would stand ... But nobody would ever be able to finish them

He saw everything and realized that he couldn't describe this beautiful picture anyways. So at the end there was nothing left but the graves of the business center and the luxurious hotel?

She didn't come back, whether after one nor after three hours. Worried Homer searched the entire station asking the merchants and musicians and even asking the guards on the entrance to Hanza. Nothing. It was like the ground had swallowed her whole. The old man didn't know what to do.

Again he leaned himself against the door of the room where the brigadier was laying. He was the last person with who he wanted to talk about the disappearance of the girl, but what else could he do?

Hunter was laying there breathing heavily and staring at the ceiling. His right arm rested on the blanket, his fist showed fresh wounds. From small scratches blood dropped onto the blanket but the brigadier didn't seem to notice it.

"When are you ready to go?" He asked Homer without turning around.

"If it was only about me, immediately." The old man hesitated. "It's just ... I can't find the girl. And how do you want to walk in your condition? You're still totally ..."

"I'm going to survive it." Answered the brigadier

"Also death isn't the worst thing. Pack your things.

In not even one and a half hour I'm back on my feet. We are going to the *Dobryninskaya*"

"One hour is enough for me." Said Homer hastily.

"But before that I have to find her. I want her to come with us ... I really need her, you know ..."

"I'll leave in one hour." Said hunter. "With you or without you. And also without her"

"I just don't understand, where could she have gone?" Homer sighed disappointed. "If I just knew ..."

"I know where she went." Said the brigadier indifferent. "But from there you can't bring her back. Go pack your things"

Homer retreated and blinked with his eyes. He was used to relying on the brigadier's inhuman abilities but now he refused to believe him. What if Hunter was lying again, this time to get rid of unnecessary ballast?

"She said that you would need her ..."

"I need you." Hunter moved his head in Homers direction. "And you need me"

"For what?" Whispered homer.

"Much depends on you." The brigadier had heard him.

He slowly closed his eyes and opened them again.

The bed squealed when Hunter rose up with his teeth fletched. "Go now. Pack your things so you're ready in time"

Before he left the room Homer stopped for a moment and took the red makeup box from the ground. The cover was broken and the hinges were bent and loose.

The mirror was fragmented.

Homer turned around and said to Hunter. "I can't leave without her"

The chimera was almost twice as big as Sasha. Its head bumped against the ceiling. The claws were almost hanging down to the ground.

Sasha knew how lighting fast these animals moved and with what unbelievable speed they attacked. To reach her it just had to make one big step forward. That would bee enough.

But somehow the animal hesitated. It was no use to shot and Sasha wasn't even able to raise her rifle. She took one step back, to the exit. The chimera made a groaning sound and walked into the direction of the girl ... But nothing else happened. The monster remained there and continued to stare with its blind face.

Sasha dared to make another step, and another.

Without taking her eyes of the animal, without showing fear she approached the exit. The creature kept following her only a few meters in front of her. As if it wanted to keep her company to the door.

Only as Sasha was just ten meters away from the bright opening she couldn't take it anymore and started to run. The creature screamed and rushed forward.

Sasha almost flew outside and ran with her eyes closed. Until she stumbled and slid on the rough and hard ground. The chimera had to reach her every moment now and rip her to pieces, but her follower hadn't pursued her. A long minute passed and then another ... Around her was nothing but silence.

Sasha kept her eyes closed while she searched in her pockets for the self-made glasses that she had bought from the guard. It was made out of two dark green bottoms from two glass bottles. It was held together by a frame of iron rings and a bit of rubber. You could put the glasses over the round windows of your gasmask.

No she could open her eyes without being blinded by the light. Slowly she opened them. At first hesitantly and with her head lowered but then with more courage she looked around the strange place she had ended up.

Over her head was the sky. Real sky, bright and far reaching. Here was more light than any artificial light source could ever create.

Everything was covered in an even tone of green. At a few places there were low hanging clouds but between them was a true abyss.

The sun! Through the thin layer of clouds she could see it: A circle as big as a match box, white and so bright that it could burn a hole through Sasha's glasses at any moment now. Fearful she looked away, waited for a moment and took another stealthy look. It was a bit disappointing: It was nothing but a bright hole in the sky, why all that idolatry?

But no, a certain yes even something that moved her.

When Sasha had left the darkness of the cave in which those creatures had been living the exit had almost shined as bright. What if the sun was just such an exit where you could flee to a place where it was never dark? So she could escape the ground out of which she had just climbed out? She felt weak, almost unnoticeable warmth from the sun, like from a living being.

Sasha was standing in a desert of stone; all around her were half destroyed old houses. The black windows openings towered teen stories high. There were so many of them, they covered each other and pressed into field of vision so she could see them better.

Behind them were even higher buildings and behind them *even* higher buildings which were towering giants.

Unbelievable but Sasha could see all of them! They were covered in the stupid green color but the earth under her feet, the air under this crazy bright and bottomless sky was real. And then they opened up to unimaginable wideness.

Even though her eyes had always been used to the darkness, they had never been made for it. In the evening hours at the abyss of the metro bridge she had only seen the ugly buildings in the area around one hundredth meters up to the hermetic door. Behind that there had been darkness, so thick that even Sasha who had been born underground couldn't see through.

She had never really asked herself how big the world was in which she lived. For her there had always been just this small, dark cocoon, a few hundredth meters into every direction. Behind the buildings there had only been an abyss, it had been the edge of the universe for her, absolute darkness. And even though she knew that in reality the earth was much bigger she had never been able to imagine it. Now she realized that it would have been impossible.

Strangely she wasn't afraid in midst of this never ending no-man's-land. When she had climbed back into the metro, she had always felt like she had crawled back into her armor, now it felt like she had left her shell.

At day you could see all dangers from a distance and Sasha had more than enough time to hide and defend herself.

And suddenly she felt the unknown feeling of being at home.

The wind chased round balls of thorny twigs over the plaza, howling monotone through the destroyed lines of houses, blew over her back, brought her new courage and drove her to explore this new world.

She had no choice: To get back into the metro she had set foot into this building where the cruel monsters were and they were no longer sleeping. From time to time their white bodies appeared at the exits and disappeared as fast as they had appeared. It seemed that they didn't like daylight.

But what would happen if it would become night? If Sasha wanted to see something before her death, all that the old man had described to her, then she had to get as much distance between her and this place as possible.

So she started running.

She had never felt so small. It seemed unbelievable that these giant buildings had been created by humans of her size. For what had they needed them? Had people been prepared by nature for the hard life in the narrowness of the tunnels and the stations?

These buildings on the other hand must have been built by the proud ancestors of the small humans they were now. They must have been powerful, tall and imposing like their buildings in which they had lived.

Now the buildings stepped aside and the earth was covered in a stony, grey and at some parts splintered crust.

In just one small moment the world had become even bigger: From here it opened the view into the distance so that Sasha's heart stopped and her head began to spin.

She leaned against the with fungus and moss covered wall of a building, which simple clock tower seemed to support the clouds and tried to imagine how the city had looked when it was still alive...

Over the street, this was a street without a doubt, tall, beautiful humans stepped in their colorful clothes which even made the most colorful dresses at the *Pavelezkaya* look poor and laughable.

Through the glittering masses automobiles moved like the wagons of the trains in the metro, but they were smaller so that only four passengers could fit into them.

The houses had looked less dark. In the windows had been clean glass and no darkness. Sasha saw small bridges that had been attached to the houses at different heights. (*balconies*).

The sky hadn't been empty as well: Planes of indescribable size swum through the clouds and their bellies almost touched the roofs of the houses. Her father had once explained that while they were flying they didn't waggle their wings but that they remained still, but in Sasha's imagination they had been like giant dragonflies, their wings almost invisible, flapping around and weakly reflecting the green rays of the sun.

And it rained.

It was just water that fell from the sky, but the feeling was overwhelming. This heavenly water didn't just wash down dirt and tiredness, that had done the hot rays of the self made shower, no this water cleaned from the inside but gave you forgiveness for all your mistakes. It was a magical bath, which burned away all bitterness out of their hearts, renewed them and made them young again. Giving her the wish to live and the power to do so at the same time. Just like the old man had said ...

Sasha believed so hard in this world, she wished so hard for it so that she could finally see it. She already heard the slight sound of the transparent wings in the sky, the happy twittering of the masses,

the gradual beating of the iron wheels and the rushing sound of the warm rain. And suddenly she remembered the distant melody that she had heard yesterday ...

She felt a painful sting in her chest. She jumped up and ran onto the street, to the stream of people, ran around the small wagons that were stuck in the crowd and held her face into the heavy drops. The old man had been right: It was wonderful here, almost like out of a fairy tale. You just had to scratch away the mold of time and the past started to glitter and see the colorful mosaics and the bronze reliefs of the stations.

At the other shore of the green river she stopped. The bridge which had once stretched over it had broken down right at the beginning of the bridge, the other shore was out of her reach.

The magic disappeared.

The picture which just a few moments ago had been so real and colorful faded and went away. The dried up, empty houses, the cracked open skin of the streets, the two meter high grass at the edges, the wild impenetrable grove, the rest of the street next to the river bank, as far as her eye reached, it was all that was left of her beautiful phantom world.

Sasha felt hurt from the inside that she would never see this world with her own eyes. She now only had the choice between death and the return to the metro. Nowhere in the world was still one of those tall humans in their colorful clothes.

She was the only human soul on this broad street, which ended at a far away point, there were the sky and the deserted road met each other.

The weather was good. No rain.

Sasha couldn't even cry. Now she just wanted to die.

As if it had heard her wish, far over her a black shadow opened its wings.

What should he do? To let the brigadier go, to give up on his book and stay at the station until he had found the girl? Or should he take her out of his novel forever, follow hunter and wait like the spider in its nest until a new heroine got caught in his net?

Reason forbade Homer to separate himself from the brigadier. For what else had he made the journey, for what else had he been exposing the entire metro to a deadly danger? He had no right to wager his work, the only thing that justified all those sacrifices, the once already made and the coming ones.

But when he picked up the broken mirror from the ground he realized: When he left the *Pavezhskaya* without knowing the fate of the girl he was betraying her. A betrayal that would sooner or later seek revenge in his book. He would never be able to get Sasha out of his memories.

Whatever Hunter said, Homer had to do everything to find the girl, or at least convince himself that she was still alive.

So the old man doubled his effort. The ring line?

Can't be, without documents they would never let her through to Hanza. Through the gate? Homer searched from the beginning of the station to its end, asking everybody who passed him if they hadn't seen a girl pass them. She must have worn a radiation suit. Homer didn't believe his ears.

Finally he had followed Sasha's footsteps to the guard at the end of the escalator.

"That's not my problem." Answered the guard in his cabin tired. "She can go wherever she wants. I even gave her some good glasses ... You can't go through there now though, I already got in trouble for letting her through. Up there our nightly visitors have their nest. Nobody goes there.

When she asked me I almost started laughing." His pupils were as big as the end of a pistol and stared into the distance without noticing Homer (the guard is high as hell).

“Go back grandfather, it is going to be dark soon”

Hunter had known! But what had he meant when he had said that Homer wouldn't have been able to get her back from there? Was she still alive?

In his haste he stumbled back to the hospital. He dove under the low hallway, climbed down the narrow staircase and opened the door without knocking ...

The room was empty: Neither Hunter nor his weapons were anywhere to be seen. Only the bloody bandages which were brown from his blood were lying on the ground. Next to it the empty flask.

The cleaned radiation suit in the next room was gone. The brigadier had left Homer like an annoying dog.

Humanity got signs. Her father had always believed that. You just had to see them and encrypt them.

Sasha looked up and froze. If somebody had wanted to give her a sign it couldn't have been clearer.

Not far from the broken bridge, out of the thicket, an old round tower with a strangely decorated dome on it stood and was the highest building in the entire area. She could see it clearly: The walls were covered in deep cracks and the tower slowly tended to one side dangerously. It would have already fallen to its pieces if not a miracle had kept it standing straight ... How could she have overlooked it?

Around the building was a giant climbing plant. Its stem was of course a bit thinner than the tower itself. But it seemed that its strength was enough to support the gradually decaying building. This strange plant ran around the tower and from its stem thick branches with thinner twigs built some kind of web that held the building in place.

Surely this plant had once been weak and had bent like the soft and young plants. But now it had climbed onto the edges and the balconies of the tower. If the tower wouldn't have been that high it would have never grown to that size.

Amazed, yes even under a spell Sasha looked at the plant and the building it was saving. Everything made sense again and her will to fight returned. It was strange but for her nothing had changed. Still, against all odds this small plant had broken through the grey crust of her despair.

Of course there were things that she could never repair. Things that had happened and words which she could never take back. And still, there was so much in this story that she could change even though she didn't know how. The most important part was that again she had new strength.

Now Sasha believed to guess the reason why the hungry chimera had let her go unharmed. Somebody had dragged its invisible chain back so that she could still have a chance.

Full of thankfulness she was ready to forgive, ready to discuss and ready to fight. From Hunter she just needed a small sign. Only a sign.

Suddenly the lowering sun disappeared and flamed up again. Sasha raised her head and out of her line of sight she could see the black, lighting fast shadow that had dove down over her head. For a second the sun had been darkened.

A howling sound cut through the air, a deafening screaming, like a rock the creature fell from the sky at Sasha.

Acting only out of instinct she threw herself onto the ground at the same time and only that saved her. The shadow missed her by about the length of a hair. A giant creature glided with spread

wings over the ground. Returned with a powerful beat of its wings into the air, started to fly in a circle and attack again.

Sasha reached for her rifle, but lowered her arms at the same time. Even a frontal salvo wouldn't stop this monster.

Nor kill it. And she also had to hit it first! She stumbled back to the free plaza from where she had started her short expedition. She didn't waste a single thought how she would be able to return to the metro.

The flying creature screamed and attacked again.

Sasha's legs got stuck in the suit and she fell stomach first on the ground but she managed to turn on her back and shot a short salvo at the creature. The bullets scared the monster off for a few moments without leaving a fatal injury.

The few seconds she had won she used to get back up on her feet and run to the next houses. Finally she knew how she could defend herself against the attacker.

Now another shadows circled the sky. They kept themselves in the air with their heavy, leathery. Sasha plan was simple: When she kept close to the walls of the houses, these big and immobile monster couldn't get to her. How she got away from here ... Well she didn't have any other choice anyways.

Done! She pressed herself against the wall and hoped that the cruel creatures would stop their attack.

But no: It seemed they had hunted more skillful prey before. The first one landed on the ground, and then the second one, around twenty meters from her and approached slowly, dragging their wings behind them.

Another salvo of her rifle didn't scare them off but only made them angrier, the bullets seemed to get stuck in the thick skin. The animal that had gotten closest to Sasha opened its mouth: Under its big snout and the raised black lips came oblique, needle-like looking sharp teeth to the light.

"Down!"

Sasha threw herself onto the ground without thinking where the voice had come from. Suddenly something exploded closely next to her and a burning hot shockwave gripped her. Another one followed immediately, sounded over the wild animalistic screaming and the distant sound of wings.

Hesitantly she raised her head, coughed up dust from her lungs and looked around. Not far from her, into the street a fresh crater with filled in dark, oily blood, had been drilled. Next to it was a ripped out, burnt wing and a few burnt pieces of flesh which had no real shape.

Over the stony crater a strong built man in a heavy radiation suit approached her with steady, straight steps.

Hunter!

A story (Chapter 13)

He took her hand, helped her up and dragged her behind him. Then as if he had thought about it differently he let go of her again. The visor of his helmet was out of tinted glass so that Sasha couldn't see his eyes.

"Stay close behind me!" It sounded dull out of the filters of his mask. "It is going to be dark soon; we need to get away from here"

Without giving her another look he started running.

"Hunter!" Yelled the girl after him. Through the glasses of her gasmask she tried to recognize her savior.

He acted like he hadn't heard her and Sasha couldn't do anything else but run after him with all her strength. Of course he was angry at her: For the third time he now had to help that stupid girl out of a tight spot. But he still had come only because she had gone to the surface, how could she have doubted him ...

The brigadier left the nest out of which Sasha had come out to his left. He knew other paths. He turned away from the main street to the right, dove under an arc, ran past a few flat and rusted iron boxes, fired at a blurry shadow in a corner, and finally stopped in front of a shed in front of a brick wall with windows closed off with iron bars. It didn't look like much. With a key he opened the massive lock. A hideout? No the shed was a hidden entrance: Behind the door a concrete staircase fell from one side to the other into the depths.

Hunter put the lock back from the inside and locked it, switched on his flashlight and started climbing down. The white and green colored walls, from which the color peeled off heavily, were written on over and over again: Entrance – Exit, Entrance – Exit ... Sasha's savior added a few unreadable writing at one part. It seemed that everybody that used this secret entrance had to note when he had gone out and when he had come back. At a few names the numbers for the return were missing.

The way down was over quicker then she thought:

Even though the steps lead down further, Hunter stopped at an almost unnoticeable iron gate, beat his fist against it and after a few seconds you could hear how somebody pushed the bolt out of the way. A tousled man with a sparse beard opened them. He was wearing a blue pants.

"Who's that?" He asked surprised.

"Found him at the ring." Said hunter. "The birds almost got him, if I hadn't been there with the grenade launcher ... Hey man how did you even end up there?" He put back his hood and took off his gasmask ...

In front of Sasha was standing an unknown man with a dark blond, short, military haircut, pale grey eyes and a bent in nose that looked like he had broken it once before. She had suspected that he was moving way too fast for an injured man, his movement had been animal like, even his radiation suit hadn't been the same but she hadn't wanted to believe it till the last moment. She had told herself lies to make her believe.

She was feeling unbearable hot and she ripped the gasmask from her face.

Fifteen minutes later Sasha was already on the other side of Hanza's border.

"Sorry but without any documents you can't stay here." In her savior's voice was honest regret. "Maybe tonight, well yes ... So at the gate?"

She nodded silent and smiled.

Where should she go now?

To him? There was enough time. Sasha couldn't keep her disappointment in that it hadn't been hunter who had saved her. Even now she still had to do another thing that no longer needed another delay.

Soft and luring were the sounds of the wonderful music that cut through the noise of the crowd. Over the sound of boots and the screams of the merchants. It was the same melody that had put its spell on her yesterday. While she followed it Sasha had a feeling as if once again she was finding a door full of unearthly shine. Where did it lead her this time?

Dozens of listeners were standing around the musician in a tight circle. To see him Sasha had to make her way through the crowd. Finally she was standing directly in front of him. His melody pulled the humans to him like magic put kept them at a distance at the same time. It was like light, all flew to it put nobody wanted to get burned by it.

Sasha wasn't afraid.

He was young, tall and was surprisingly good looking.

Even though he looked weak, his well kept face wasn't soft and in his green eyes was no naivety. The dark, long hair fell down to his shoulders. His clothes were different from the crowd of people at the *Pavelezkaya*, they were simple but extraordinary clean.

His instrument was like one of the whistles of children, which had been built out of plastic pipes, but bigger, black and had folds of copper. The flute was something fine and it was probably very expensive. The sounds that he lured out of the flute seemed to be out of another world and another time.

Like the instrument and its owner.

He had caught Sasha look immediately, let it go for a moment and caught it again. It made her blush. His attention was not unpleasant but actually she was here for the music.

"There you are! Thank god!"

It was Homer who made his way to her breathing heavy and sweating.

"How's he?" Asked Sasha immediately.

"Is he ..." Started the old man but then he said: "He left"

"What? Where?" Sasha felt as if a fist was pressing her heart together.

"He ran away. Packed all his things. I think he went to the *Dobryninskaya*"

"Did he leave anything?" She asked carefully, anxious for the answer Homer would give her.

The old man shook his head. "No, nothing"

Somebody in the crowd made an angry hissing sound.

Homer went silent and listened to the music and stared distrusting at the musician and the girl. But Sasha was sunken in thoughts.

Hunter had chased her away and ran away, but now she seemed to understand his strange rules.

When the bold one had taken everything he owned, truly everything ... Then he wanted that she didn't give up, that she didn't stray from her path and search for him. And she would do that, even after everything that had happened. If just ... "The knife?" She whispered.

"Did he take it with him? The black one?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "It's not in his room"

"So he did take it with him!"

That simple sign was all she needed.

The musician with the flute had talent without a doubt and knew how to use his instrument perfectly, as if he had been playing at a concert just yesterday. There were many bullets in the flute box in front of him, so many that he could have fed a small station or erased it from the face of the earth.

There it was. Acknowledgement, thought Homer and smiled sadly.

The old man thought about from where he knew the melody, but even after a long time he had no idea. From an old movie in the cinema, a concert or on the radio? He couldn't remember where he had heard it. The extraordinary thing was: Did the melody have you once, it didn't let you go, you had to listen to it till the end and then applaud the musician until he started to play again.

Prokofjev? Schotakovitsch? Homers knowledge about music was too small that he could've guessed the composer.

But whoever had written those notes: The musician played them not just like that but gave them their own sound and a new meaning; yes he made them come to life. A skill for that made even Homer forgive the young man the tempting looks he was throwing at Sasha like a paper ribbon to a kitten.

But now it was time to take the girl away. Homer waited till the music had died and the musician took in the applause of the audience. Then he grabbed Sasha by the wrist, like chloride smelling dress and dragged her out of the circle.

"My things are packed. I am going after him." He said while he distanced himself from the musician.

"Me too." Answered the girl fast.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Asked Homer.

"I know everything. I listened to you two." She looked at him like she wanted to challenge him. "An epidemic? Am I right? He is going to burn all. The living and the dead. The entire station."

He looked at her and said: "What do you want from him?"

Sasha didn't answer and for some time they just walked next to each other through the empty part of the station. Finally she said slowly, searching for words: "My father died. Because of me, it's my fault. I can't do anything to bring him back to life. But there are people that are still alive. I can still save them. So I got to try. I owe him that"

"Save? For whom? For what?" The old man answered bitter. "You can't cure the epidemic like you've heard"

"For your friend. He is more terrible than the disease.

More deadly." The girl sighed. "With a disease at least hope remains. Somebody is always going to get better.

One in a thousand.

"Why do you believe that you can stop him out of all?

"I've done it before." She answered sure of herself.

Did the girl overestimate her abilities? Did she deceive herself when she believed that the hard and merciless brigadier felt anything for her? Homer didn't want to discourage Sasha but he thought it was better to warn her.

"Did you know what I've found in his room?"

The old man gave the broken makeup box to the girl asked Sasha. "Did you ..."

Sasha shook her head.

"Then it was Hunter"

The girl opened the cover and looked at her reflection through the splinters of the glass. She thought about her last conversation with the bold one and the words that he had spoken when he was half asleep and when she had wanted to give him the knife. She thought about Hunter's face, how he charged with heavy legs, covered in blood at the chimera so that it went away from Sasha and killed himself ...

"He didn't do it because of me." She said. "It was because of the mirror"

Homer raised his eyebrows. "What does that have to do with everything?"

"You said it yourself" Sasha closed the cover of the box and tried to mimic the mentor like voice of the old man

"Sometimes it's useful to see yourself from the side.

Then you understand more about yourself"

"You think that Hunter doesn't know who he is? Or that he is still suffering from his appearance? That that is the reason why he broke the mirror?"

The girl leaned against a pillar. "It's not about what's on the outside"

"Hunter knows exactly who he is. Obviously he just doesn't like it when somebody reminds him of it"

"Maybe he forgot. I sometimes have the feeling that he is trying to remember something. Or that he has been chained to a mine cart that is rolling down into the darkness and that there is nobody there to stop it. I can't explain that. I just feel it when I see him." Sasha's forehead got wrinkles.

"Nobody sees it but me. That's why I said that he needed me"

"Sure and that's why he left you"

"I left him. And now I have to catch up to him, as long as it's not too late. They are still alive. We can still save them. And him too"

Homer raised his head: "For whom do you want to save him?"

She looked at him searching. Had the old man not understood anything even though she had tried so hard? Then she answered with unimaginable seriousness: "From the man in the mirror"

"Is that seat taken?"

Sasha who was poking the grilled meat and mushrooms with her fork, winched. Next to her stood with a tray in his hands the green-eyed musician. The old man had gone somewhere, his place was empty.

"Yes"

"There is no problem that can't be solved!" He put his tray down, took a free chair from the neighboring table and sat himself next to Sasha's left before she could complain.

"If something happens, I didn't invite you." She warned him.

"Is your grandfather going to be angry?" He was winking with his eyes. "Allow me to introduce myself: Leonid"

Sasha realized she was blushing again.

"He's not my grandfather"

"If that's so." Leonid put another portion of his meal into his mouth and raised an eyebrow.

"You're very bold." She said.

He raised his fork. "Persistent"

Sasha had to smile "A little bit too full of yourself for my taste"

"I put my trust in mankind." He mumbled while chewing. "But I trust myself the most"

The old man returned, stood behind the braggart and made an unsatisfied grimace. But then he sat himself on his chair. "Sasha isn't it a bit too crowded here?" He was looking past her at the musician, ready for a fight.

"Sasha!" He repeated triumphal and looked up from his bowl. "My pleasure. Like I said my name is Leonid"

"Nikolai Ivanovitsch." Answered Homer grumpy and looked at him. "What kind of melody was that you were playing back there? It seemed familiar"

"No wonder, I've been playing it for the last three days straight." He emphasized the last word. "I composed it myself"

"It's from you?" Sasha put her fork down. "What's its name?"
Leonid shrugged his shoulders. "It has no name. I've never thought about one. And also how could I express it with words? And why?"
"It's beautiful." Said the girl. "Extraordinary beautiful"
"I could name it after you." Said the musician without any hesitation. "You would deserve it"
"No thank you." She shook her head. "This melody should remain without a name. That's more fitting"
"To name it after you would be fitting." Leonid started to laugh, food got into his trachea and he started to cough.
"You ready?" Homer took Sasha's tray and stood up. "We got to go. Please excuse us young man"
"No problem!" I am already finished. Could I keep the young madam's company for a while?"
"We are about to leave." Answered Homer sharp.
"Wonderful! Me too. I need to get to the *Dobryninskaya*." The musician made an innocent face.
"Could that possibly be the same direction you're heading in?"
"It is." Answered Sasha surprised. While she tried to not look at Homer, her look went over to Leonid again and again.
He had a certain easiness, something sarcastic that wasn't meant to be taken in a bad way. Like a small boy who fought with a twig he made small, harmless strikes on which you couldn't really be mad at, not even the old man. He made his innuendos by the way and with fun so that Sasha didn't even think about taking him serious. And what was that bad about him liking her?
Also she had fallen in love with his music long before she had met him. And the temptation to take that magic with them was just too big.

Of course it was the music. That young devil lured innocent souls like the rat catcher from Hameln with his flute so that he could corrupt every girl that he could. Now he was even trying to get Alexandra into his fangs and Homer didn't even know how he should act!

At the beginning the old man swallowed the cocky jokes but soon he felt how the anger grew in him. He was also angry about how easily Leonid accomplished that the guards of Hanza, who were known for their strictness, just let the tree pass from onto the ring line and to the *Dobryninskaya*! And that without any papers! The rooms of the commander of the station, of a bold and old man with a moustache, the musician entered with his box full of bullets and came back smiling and the lighter box.

Homer had to be honest; the diplomatic skills of this young man were very helpful: The motorized railcar which had brought them to the *Pavelezkaya* had left with Hunter from the depot. A detour would've cost them a whole week.

But the carelessness with what this trickster left this station and how easy he parted with all his savings only to follow Sasha into the tunnel made him feel uneasy. Normally you would think that of somebody that was in love but Homer knew: That boy didn't mean it. He was just used to easy victories.

Homer felt like a grumpy nanny. But there was a good reason for his vigilance and envy: That his muse would run away with this traveling musician would be the last thing he needed right now! A, to be fair, totally unnecessary figure.

Homer hadn't planned any place for him in his novel and he had just taken a chair and brought himself into this game outrageously.

"Is there nobody else in the entire world anymore?"

The three travelers were already wandering into the direction of the *Dobryninskaya*, joined by three guards'.

When you shared your bullets with the right people your wildest dreams could come true.

Sasha had told a short story about her adventure on the surface, then she had stopped and her face had darkened.

Homer and the musician looked at each other: Who should be the first to raise her spirits?

The old man cleared his throat. "Is there life past the MKAD? Even the younger generations are asking that?"

"Of course." Explained Leonid convinced. "That nobody survived isn't true. There is just no connection to those people"

"For an example I have heard." Said Homer. "That somewhere behind the *Taganskaya* there is a secret passage which leads to an interesting tunnel. It looks like a common tunnel, six meter wide, but it has no tracks in it. It is deep, maybe forty or maybe even fifty meters underground. And it leads to the east ..."

"You mean the tunnel that leads to the bunkers in the Ural Mountains?" Leonid cut him off. "And the story of the man, who coincidentally found it, then got a backpack full of provisions and started walking through the tunnel ..."

"... Walking for a whole week with only a few breaks, until his provisions were almost gone and he had to return. An end to the tunnel was nowhere to be seen. Yes, if you believe the rumors it is the way to the bunkers in the Ural Mountains. Maybe somebody is still alive there"

"Probably not." Yawned the musician.

Homer ignored him and turned to Sasha. "From a friend at the Polis I know that one of their radio operators had once contact with men in a tank. They must have been able to close all hatches in time and drive into no-man's-land where nobody thought about dropping bombs ..."

Leonid nodded his head. "It's a well known story.

When they ran out of fuel they dug the tank into a small hill and made a really small settlement. And for a few weeks they called polis every the evening until ..."

"Until the receiver broke down" Said Homer, slightly angered.

"And what about the submarine?" His rival was moving. "One of our submarines was away and when the bombs hit both sides it hadn't reached its position yet. And when it finally emerged everything was already over. Back then the crew docked it at Wladivostok ..."

"And its reactor powers the place till today." Homer remembered. "Half a year ago I met a man that claimed that he had been the first officer of the boat. He said that he had crossed the entire country on a bicycle and finally got to Moscow. He must have been traveling for three years"

"And you have talked to him in person?" Asked Leonid polite but surprised.

"Of course!" Said Homer. Legends have always been his hobby and he couldn't resist triumphing over this boy. He still had one story in his reserve that meant a lot to him. Actually he would've liked to tell it on a different occasion instead of wasting it on this contest. But when he realized that Sasha was laughing at every single joke of this bandit he told them the story. "And what's with the Polyarnyye Sori, do you know that?"

"Polyarnyye-what?" Asked the musician and turned to him.

"But please." Homer was smiling. "In the north, on the Kola half island there is a city that is called Polyarnyye Sori. A godforsaken nest. To Moscow it's one and a half thousand kilometers, to

Petersburg at least one thousand. The closest thing is Murmansk with its marine base and even to there it is a long way”

“With one word: A dull.” Commented Leonid smiling oblique.

“It lies far away from any big cities, secret factories or military bases. All the important targets. All cities which our missile shield couldn’t protect went down in dust and ashes.

And the others with a shield and working missiles were ...” Homer looked up. “Well we all know what happened to them. But there were places at those nobody was aiming. Those that didn’t pose a threat. Like the Polyarnyye Sori”

“They don’t interest us anymore.” Said the musician.

“They should.” Said homer. “Because not far away from Polyarnyye Sori there is the nuclear reactor Kola. One of the most powerful in the entire country. Back then it probably supplied the entire north of Russia with electricity.

Millions of people. Hundredths of factories. I myself am from Archangelsk, so I know what I’m talking about. As a student I went there on an excursion once. It is a real fortress, a state inside a state. They’ve a small army there, their own farmers and factories. They were totally self-sufficient. Why should life have changed after the atomic war? He smiled sadly.

“You’re saying ...”

“Petersburg is gone, Murmansk and Archangelsk as well. Millions of people destroyed, factories and cities burnt to dust and ashes. Polyarnyye Sori survived. And the reactor has been left untouched as well. For kilometers around it there is nothing but snow. Snow and fields of ice, wolves and polar bears. There was no connection to the central administration. And they have enough fuel to keep such a big city alive for some time. That means that they and the surrounding area are taking care of for about one hundred years. They get over the winter easily”

“An ark.” Whispered Leonid. “And when the flood was over and the water had retreated, came from mountain Ararat ...”

“Exactly.” The old man nodded his head.

“How do you know all that?” The voice of the musician didn’t sound sarcastic or bored anymore.

“I once have worked as a radio operator.” Homer danced around the question. “I had wanted to find survivors in the region where I was born”

“Are they going to last, so high up in the north?”

“I am sure of it. But the last contact I had with them is two years ago. But just think about it: Electricity and warmth for 100 years. With medical machines, computers and electronic libraries on CD-ROM’s. Why would you know it?

In the entire metro there are only two computers and they are just toys. And this is the capitol.” He smiled bitter.

“If some people survived somewhere, not just some a few but entire communities then they are in the 17th century, if not in the stone age. Wood for fire, cattle and shamans.

Every third child dies at birth. Abacus and writing on the bark of a trees. There is nothing but a farm or two. A no-man’s-land without people. Wolves, bears and mutants.

Our entire civilization is built on electricity.” He cleared his throat and looked around. “If we have none the station here die and that’s it. Billiards of humans have built our civilization over hundredths of years and suddenly everything is gone. Homo sapiens can start again. But who knows if we can do it again? And now just imagine:

A handful of people get a hundredth year ultimatum!

You’re right, it’s an ark Noah. An almost unlimited supply of energy. Oil has to be refined and for gas you have to dig and pump it for kilometers. So back to steam powered machines? Or even further?”

He took Sasha’s hand. “I tell you the people there aren’t in any danger. They are as tough as roaches. But civilization ... You have to defend it”.

"Is there still civilization there?"

"You don't have to have any doubts. Atomic power is our greatest technical intelligence. The conditions are better there than here. In two centuries Polyarnyye Sori has grown a lot. They had continues radio contact: "To all survivors ..." and their coordinates. It's said that there are still some people that make it to there"

"Why have I never heard of it?" Mumbled the musician.

"Only a few know of it. From here it is hard to get their wave length. But you could try it sometime when you have some days off." Homer was smiling. "Codeword: >last harbor<"

"I should've known that. I collect those cases. Has everything really passed by them peacefully there?"

"How should I say that ... Around it there nothing but snow and ice and if there were some villages and cities they turned wild very soon. It has happened that they have been attacked by some barbarians. And of course there are the wild animals, if you can even call them that. But they have enough weapons. A defense all around the clock and guard post everywhere. Electrical barb wire and watchtowers. Like I said, it's a fortress. In the last thirty years they have built a palisade fence (tree logs in the ground and sharpened on the upper end). Also they have explored their surroundings. They got till Murmansk, at least two hundredth kilometers far.

Now the city is a giant smoking crater. They wanted to make an expedition to the south, into the direction of Moscow but I talked them out of it. Why risk it? As soon as the radiation goes back they can conquer other pieces of land. But at the moment there is nothing to gained by coming here. It's a graveyard and nothing else." Homer sighed

"It is really strange." Said Leonid. "When humanity after it had been destroyed by the atom now also has been saved by it"

"It's like with Prometheus who stole fire. The gods had forbidden to bring fire to mankind. But he wanted to bring humanity out of the dirt, out of darkness and coldness ..."

"I've read it." Homer cut him off angrily. ">The myths and legends of old Greece<"

"A prophetic myth. The gods were against it because of nothing. They knew how it would end"

"But it was fire that made mankind, mankind"

"Do you want to say that without electricity humans turn back into animals?"

"I want to say that without power we are thrown back two hundredth years. And if you think about it that only one for every thousand has survived and everything has to be built again, connected and explored, probably it will take more then five hundredth years. Maybe we'll never get back to how things were. Or do you think something else?"

"No, No." Answered Leonid. "But is it really just about electricity?"

"About what else?" Homer raised his arms over his head. The musician gave him a long and strange look and then he shrugged his shoulders.

The silence got longer. Homer had felt that the end of the conversation had been his victory: Finally the girl had stopped eating that boy with her eyes and was sunken in thoughts. It wasn't far to the station when Leonid said: "Well, then I think then it's my time for a story now"

Homer made a tired face but nodded merciful.

"At the other side of the *Sportivnaya*, there where the destroyed *Sokolnitscheski* Bridge is, there a line that departs from the main line and ends in a dead end. There is a grid and a security door. Many times people have tried to open it but they've succeeded. Practically every adventurer who had gone there never returned. Their bodies were later found at other parts of the metro"

Homer made a grimace. "The emerald city?"

"It's well known." Continued Leonid unflustered.

"That the *Sokolnitscheski* metro bridge went down on the first day. That means that all stations behind it were separated from the metro. Most people think that nobody survived there even though there is no evidence for that"

Homer made gesture with his hand. "The emerald city"

"Also it is known that the Moscow University was built on soft ground. That giant building was only stable because giant cold machines cooled the cellar and kept the swampy ground in its frozen condition. If not it would've slid down into the river long ago"

"That's a farfetched argument." Said the old man.

He knew what Leonid wanted to say.

"It has been over twenty years but the abandoned building is still standing at the same place"

"Because it's a fable, that's why!"

"Rumors say that under the university there isn't just a normal cellar but a big gigantic bunker that is ten stories deep.

There are the cold machines and even more important, a nuclear reactor, living quarters and connections to the nearest metro stations and even to the metro 2." Leonid was looking at Sasha with big, scary looking eyes so that she had to laugh."

"That's old coffee." Commented Homer.

"It's said that there is an entire city underground"

Continued the musician in his dreamy voice. "The inhabitants of this city didn't die but have made it to their job to gather all knowledge and bring it back to the same level as before when all was beautiful. They don't give up going on expeditions to still standing galleries, museums and libraries on the surface. They raise their children with a sense for beauty. There is peace and harmony there, their ideology is knowledge and their religion is art. There the walls aren't just covered in ugly oil colors but with colorful frescos. From the loudspeakers no orders and alarm signals could be heard but Berlioz, Haydn and Tschaikovsky on *that* day. Just imagine every inhabitant can quote Dante out of their heads.

That's the reason why the people have remained like back then. Well not like in the 21st century but more like in antique times. Well, you've read >Myths and legends<"

Leonid smiled at the old man as if he thought that he was a bit slow. "Free, courage's, beautiful and wise.

Righteous and noble"

"I've never heard of it!" Now he just hoped that that smart devil hadn't caught the girl with his net already.

"In the metro the place is called >The emerald city<. Its inhabitants like to use another name"

"And that would be?" Said Homer angrily.

"The ark"

"Nonsense! Complete nonsense!" Yelled the old man and turned away.

"Of course." Said the musician. "After all it is just a story"

At the *Dobryninskaya* chaos reigned. Homer looked from one side to the other, surprised and fearful at the same time: Was this an illusion? Could something like that happen at the ring line? It looked like somebody had declared war on Hanza. Out of the tunnel towered the transport railcar, a few bodies on it that were laying on top of.

Paramedics carried them down and put them on a piece of cloth, one was missing the head, another one had a mutilated face, intestines were quelling out of some ...

Homer held his hand in front of Sasha's eyes.

Leonid was breathing heavily and turned away.

"What happened?" He asked one of the men who were guarding the paramedics.

"Something hit our guards at the big distributor. All dead, to the last man. No survivors. And nobody knows who did it." The paramedic cleaned his hands on his coat. "You got a smoke? My hands are shaking"

The big distributor, so Hanza's shuttle, it was the spider web like system of tracks, that departed from the radial station at the *Pavelezkaya* and connected four lines with each other: The ring, the grey, the orange and the green line.

Homer had guessed that Hunter would take that way. It was the shortest. But it was always guarded by Hanza.

Why all this bloodshed? Had they opened fire first?

Or hadn't they seen him coming out of the darkness? Where was he now? Oh god, there was another head ... Why had he done this?

Homer thought about the broken mirror and Sasha's words. Should she have been right? Maybe the brigadier was fighting against himself, maybe he had wanted to avoid unnecessary deaths, maybe he wasn't in control of himself ... And that was the reason he had broken the mirror, to destroy the ugly man into which he had transformed?

No. Hunter hadn't seen a man in his reflection but a monster. He had tried to eliminate it but only broken the glass and one reflection had become a dozen.

But what if ... Homer looked after the paramedics who had just loaded the last of the eight bodies from the railcar onto the platform ... What if he had seen a desperate man staring back out of the mirror? The old hunter?

What if the other one, the monstrous one had already arrived and taken the lead?

What else? (Chapter 14)

What made a human to a human? More than a million years he journeys through the world. The magical transformation, which let this intelligent animal become something totally new, had only happened in the last ten thousand years. You just had to think: 99 percent of his history he spent cowering in caves and chewing on raw meat, unable to warm himself, develop tools or even weapons and he couldn't even really talk. Even his feelings weren't that far from apes or wolves: Hunger, fear, companionship, pleasure ...

How had humanity learned to build in just a few centuries? To change its surrounding matter and to create new?

Why had they started to paint all of a sudden and how had they discovered music all of a sudden? How could they bend the earth to their will and change it according to their needs? What was it that had made this animal to something special in the last ten thousand years? Fire? It gave humans the ability to tame light and warmth and carry it into uninhabitable cold regions. But what changed that? Good, it made it possible for humans to extend their reach. But rats had colonized the entire planet without fire. No it wasn't fire, well not just fire, there the musician had been right. There had to be something else ... But what?

Language? That was a difference to any other animals without a doubt. When rough thoughts were polished to brilliants of words they had finally turned into the common, currency. At the same time it wasn't just so much about expressing yourself, not really about what was happening in your head but more about the ability to order the instable, like molten iron flowing pictures into a solid form. To retain a clear and sober mind and to pass on orders and knowledge accurately. So also about the ability to organize, to conquer, to raise armies and form states.

But ants didn't need any words. On a for a human unnoticeable level they lived in complex hierarchies, shared information and orders with high accuracy, agitated thousands of fearless legions with iron discipline to merciless wars.

Or was it letters? Without them would we have been able to save our knowledge? Those bricks that made up the to the sky rushing tower of Babylon of human civilization?

Without them all wisdom that Humanity had gathered, would flow apart like unbaked clay and the tower would fall down under its own weight. Turning into dust.

Without letters every generation had to build the tower again, would work all their life in the ruins of their clay huts and finally die, without even having constructed a single floor. First letters and then writing made it possible for humanity to transport the gathered knowledge out of their small heads and store it just like it was for their decedents. So it was no longer their fate to discover the discovered over and over again and they were able to built something of their own on the stable fundament that had been built by their ancestors.

Was that all?

If wolves could write, would their civilization be similar to the one of humanity? Would they even have a civilization? A full wolf that was no longer hungry got tired, snuggled with its kind until it's growling stomach drove it further. A full human gets a strange feeling on the other hand:

He gets melancholic. The unbelievable, unexplained tend that gets him to look at the stars for hours, paint on the wall of his cave with ochre, to decorate the front of his warship with a carved statue, building stone colossuses over centuries of hard labor instead of strengthening the wall of his fortress and work his whole life on the perfection of his poetic masterpiece instead of learning how to wield a sword.

It was the tendency which brought a former train operator helper to devote the few years he still had to lecture and search and to try and write something down ...

Something special To free him of the longing the common and poor people listen to the skilled violinist, kings had kept own troubadours and painters and an underground born girl looked at the package of a painted teabag. It is an obscure and powerful calling, that is even able to overshadow the voice of hunger. And only humans can hear.

It is not just the calling that goes past the spectrum of animals and gives a human the ability to dream and hope for courage. Love and mercy, two emotion which humans think to be such a special ability. They weren't the first to find it. Even a dog is able to love and feel mercy: Is its master sick, it doesn't stray from his side and whimpers. Even it can long for the day and is able to see the reason of life of another creature: Some dogs have been ready to die as well after the death of their master. Only so that they could stay with them.

But a dog can't dream.

Then isn't there the longing for something beautiful and the ability to value it? This surprising ability to enjoy a composition of colors, arrays of sound, broken lines and elegant constructed sentences? To get the sweet and at the same time hurting sound of their soul, which grips your heart, even if it is sick and scarred and make it pure again?

Maybe. But not just that.

To sound over shots and the desperate screams of imprisoned naked humans, some humans have played wonderful operas from Wagner on full volume. And that wasn't a contradiction: One underlined the other.

What else?

Even when humanity survives this hell as a biological kind, is it going to keep that fragile and almost unnoticeable but without a doubt real part of its nature? Is it going to protect that special spark that had brought the hungry animal over ten thousands of years to a creature of order? To a creature who was tortured more by the hunger of the soul then the hunger of the body?. A stumbling creature, always torn from one side to the other, between spiritual greatness and lowness. Between for a predator forbidden mercy and unforgivable cruelty which seemed to have come out of the soulless world of insects?.

A creature that built wonderful castles and made unimaginable paintings. Whose ability to create beautiful things could measure up with the creator itself and at the same time create gas chambers and nuclear weapons to destroy and annihilate the created and exterminate his own kind. A creature that built sand castles with much passion so that it could destroy them one day when it felt like it. A creature that knew no limits, that was fearful and cooking of hate, unable to satisfy its hunger but not trying to do anything but that in its entire life. A human ...

Is that spark going to stay in it?

Or is it going to disappear in the past, like a short beat on the diagram of history? Is humanity going to be thrown back after this strange event? It had become timeless routine for countless of generation to have their eyes fixed onto the ground. Will the ten, hundredth, five hundredth years going to pass on them without extinguishing the spark?

What else?

"Is it true?"

"What?" Leonid was smiling at her.

"That with the emerald city? The ark? That there is such a place in the metro?" Sasha's voice sounded like she was sunken in thoughts while she was looking at her feet.

"There're rumors"

"I would like to see it ... You know, when I was walking around up there it had pity on humanity. Only because of one mistake it won't ever be like back then. But it is so beautiful ... I think at least it is"

"Because of one mistake? No that wasn't just one. To destroy the entire world, to kill six milliards of people, can you even call that a mistake?"

"Still. Don't you and I have earned their forgiveness?"

Everybody deserves a second chance, to change and try again and again and even if it's the last time." Sasha turned silent for a while and then she said: "I would like to see how it looks like in reality. Back then I didn't care. Back then I was just afraid and everything was so ugly up there.

But it seems that I had just gone up at the wrong place. How stupid ... The city up there is like from another life before mine. It has no future. Only memories and even those are strange to me. Just ghosts.

I've realized something important when I was up there you know ..." She was searching for the right words.

"Hope is like blood in your veins. As long as it flows you're alive. I want to keep hoping"

"What do you want in the emerald city?" Asked Leonid.

"I want to see how life was back then. You've said it yourself. There the people are probably totally different. They haven't forgotten yesterday and they will surely have a tomorrow. So they have to be totally different, totally ..."

They hastily walked along the *Dobryninskaya*. The guards still didn't leave them out of their eyes. Homer had gathered all his courage and went to speak with the commander of the station. He had been gone for a while now and there was no trace of Hunter.

Then at the marble passageway of the *Dobryninskaya* Sasha realized something strange: The big arcs through which you could get to the tracks changed into smaller ones.

Always a big arc and a small arc, a bigger one and a smaller one. Like a man and a woman who were holding hands. A man and a woman, a man and a woman ... Suddenly she felt the need for the broad and strong hand of a man. To put her hand into his.

"Even here you can start a new life." Said Leonid and winked with his eyes into her direction.

"Sometimes you just have to go somewhere else and search ... Sometimes it is enough to look around"

"And what am I seeing?"

"Me"

"I've already seen you. Already heard you play too." Finally Sasha smiled as well "I like your music very much. Like all. Don't you need the bullets? You've given so many away to get us through ..."

"I only need enough for food. I always have enough.

To play for money is stupid"

"Then why are you playing?"

"Because of the music." He laughed. "Because of the people. But not to just for them. Because of what music does to the people."

"What are you doing to the people?"

"Whatever I want." Now he was serious again.

"I got one for love and another for tears"

Sasha gave him a distrusting look. "And the one that you've played the last time? The one that doesn't have a name? What does it create?"

"That one?" He whistled the song. "Nothing. That one just takes away the pain"

“Hey old man!”

Homer closed his book and slid from one side of the uncomfortable bench to the other. The officer on duty towered over a small desk that was almost completely covered with three old black telephones that were missing the dials. On one of the apparatuses a small red lamp was flashing.

“Andrey Andreyevitsch is ready. You got two minutes, so don’t doddle but get straight to the point”

Homer sighed. “Two minutes aren’t enough”

The officer on duty shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve warned you”

Even five minutes wouldn’t be enough, Homer didn’t know where to start and where to end. Nor did he know for what he should ask or plead. Except for the boss of the *Dobryninskaya* there was nobody to who he could turn anymore.

Andrey Andreyevitsch was an of malice dripping fat man with an open uniform and didn’t listen to the old man for long.

“Are you crazy? This station is on alert, eight of my men are dead and you come here with your epidemic! There’s none! Stop, you’ve stolen enough of my time! You leave now or ...”

Like a whale that jumped out of the water the commander of the station raised up his body and the desk almost fell to the ground. The officer on duty looked into the room through the door.

Homer rose as confused from the hard visitor’s chair.

“I’m going. But why did you order men to the *Serpuchovskaya*?”

“What’s it to you?”

“They say at the station ...”

“What, what? That’s enough. Spreading panic ...

Pavel, into the ape cage with him!”

Another moment later Homer was being dragged out of the room. The officer dragged the struggling old man into a narrow corridor while telling him to calm him down and hit him right in the face.

Homer’s respirator flew away. He tried to hold his breath but he got another punch into the stomach so that he started to cough cramped.

The whale appeared on the doorstep of his office.

He filled the entire door. “And there he shall sit for a while. We’ll see you later ...” Then he barked at the new visitor. “And who are you? You got an appointment?”

Homer looked back at the stranger. Not even three steps from him Hunter was standing, not moving and his arms crossed in front of his chest. He was wearing a new uniform and you couldn’t see his face under the shadow of his opened visor. It seemed to he didn’t recognize the old man or he that he didn’t want to get involved. Homer had expected that he was dripping with blood from head to toe like a butcher but the only dark red stain on his clothes was the blood of his own wound.

Hunter looked at the commander with his stone hard look and suddenly he was moving straight to him as if he wanted to go through him into the office.

At first Andrey was angry, mumbled something but retreated and made space for Hunter. The officer who was still holding on to Homer’s collar stopped unsure.

Hunter followed the fat man into the office and \him silenced him with a predator-like hissing sound.

Then he whispered something into his ear which sounded like an order.

The officer who had let go of the old man had stepped onto the doorstep. One moment later he flew through the door, followed by dirty curses and the voice of the commander almost screamed. "And let the provocateur in peace!" It sounded as if he had been hypnotized.

With a red head the officer retreated through the door behind him, dragged himself to his place at the entrance and put his head onto a newspaper. When Homer was approaching the door of the commander, the man lowered his head even deeper into his newspaper as if this was no longer his concern.

Only after he gave the guard-dog another triumphal look, he looked at the telephones a bit closer. On one of them, the one that was flashing all the time was a small piece of paper where somebody had written with a blue pen the word:

TULSKAYA

"We're in contact with the order." The sweating commander at the *Dobryninskaya* crackled his knuckles and didn't leave the brigadier out of his eyes for even one moment.

"Nobody has informed me of this operation. I can't make this decision alone"

"Then call them." Answered the other. "There's still time for them to vote on it. But not for long"

"They won't approve. Such an operation endangers the stability of Hanza. You know that that is more important than everything. Also we have the situation under control"

"What stability by the devil? If you don't do anything ..."

Andrey Andreyewitsch remained stubborn and shook his heavy head. "The situation is under control. I don't understand what you want. All exits are guarded. Not even a mouse can slip through. We can wait it out until it takes care of itself"

"Nothing is going to take care of itself!" Yelled Hunter. "You'll only get them to go to the surface and get to other station from there. The station has to be cleaned. I don't understand why you haven't done that already"

"But there could still be healthy people there. How do you imagine it? That I'll order my boys to burn the *Tulskaya* to the ground? And also the people from the sect just to be sure? Maybe the *Serpuchovskaya* too? Half of them have their whores and bastards there! No, you know what?

We are not fascists. War is war, but this here ... massacring sick people ... Even as at the *Belorusskaya* a similar epidemic happened, they brought the pigs into different corners of the station, so that the sick could be killed and the healthy could live on. They didn't just kill all of them"

"That were pigs. Here it's about Humans." Said the brigadier in his indifferent voice.

"No, no and again no." The commander shook his head so that sweat was flying through the room. "I can't. It's not humane. How could I have that on my conscience? So that I get nightmares later?"

"You don't have to do anything. For that there are people that don't get nightmares. Nothing more"

"I've sent messengers to polis. They're looking around for a vaccine." Andrey Andreyewitsch wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "We are hoping that ..."

"There is no vaccine. And no hope. Stop putting your head into the sand. Why aren't there any paramedics here?"

Why are you refusing to answer the telephone and give the green light for the legions of the order?"

The commander of the station was silent. He tried to close the buttons of his coat, fumbled around with his wet fingers and finally gave up. Then he stepped to the scratched cupboard and put a strong smelling liquor in a small glass and drank it with one sip ...

Hunter realized. "You haven't said anything ..."

They have no idea! At your neighboring station there has been an outbreak and the order knows nothing of it ..."

"It is about my head." Answered the other with a husky voice. "An epidemic at the neighboring station, that's the end of me. Cause I let it happen ... Because I didn't do anything to prevent it ... Because it has endangered the stability of Hanza"

"Neighboring station? You mean the *Serpuchovskaya*?"

"Up until now everything has been quiet, but I reacted too late. How should I've known ..."

"And what have you said to your people? That you're sending military units to the neighboring station? And close the tunnel?"

"Bandits ... A riot ... That happens everywhere.

It's common"

The brigadier nodded his head. "And now it is too late to tell them everything"

"No it's not just about me stepping down." Andrey Andreyewitsch filled another glass and drank it as fast as before. "That means the death sentence"

"And now?"

"I wait." Said the commander and leaned on his table.

"Maybe something happens ..."

"And why aren't you answering the call." Said Homer suddenly. "The telephone is ringing all the time, that's the people at the *Tulskaya*. Who knows what's going on there"

"No it doesn't. Not anymore." answered the commander. "I switched off the sound. Only the small lamp is still flashing. As long as it does that there are still people alive there"

"Why aren't you picking up?" Repeated Homer angry.

"What am I supposed to tell them?! That they should be patient? Tell them to get well soon? That help is on its way? That they should put a bullet in their heads? Talking with the refugees was enough for me"

"Shut up already." Ordered Hunter silent. "Listen up. In 24 hours I am back with a unit. I want you to let us pass freely at all guard posts. You keep the *Serpuchovskaya* closed. We go to the *Tulskaya* and do our job. If necessary we'll do the same thing at the *Serpuchovskaya*. We wage a little war. You don't have to contact Hanza. You don't have to do anything. I'll see to it myself that ... The stability is brought back"

The commander nodded his head weakly. Exhausted he sank into his chair like bicycle tire with too many holes.

He filled another glass with the snaps, smelled it and before he emptied the glass he asked silent: "You are going to wade in blood up to your elbow. That doesn't scare you off?"

"You can wash off blood with water." Answered the brigadier.

When they had left the office of the commander of the station, he took a deep breath and yelled for the officer on duty with his thundering voice. The officer flew through the door and it closed behind him with a creaking sound.

Homer had waited for Hunter. He let him make a few steps and then he lowered himself over the desk of the officer, took the receiver of the blinking apparatus and put it onto his ear. "Hello! Hello! I hear you." He whispered into it.

Silence ... but the silence wasn't like if the cable had been cut but more like somebody had picked up the receiver on the other end but wasn't there to answer Homer anymore. As if the person on the

other end had waited for a reaction for a long time and run out of patience. As if the old man with his broken voice was talking into the ear of a dead man.

Hunter had turned around at the doorstep and gave Homer a disapproving look. He carefully put the receiver back and followed the brigadier.

“Popov! Popov! Get up! Fast!”

The powerful lamp of the commander shined through his closed eyelids and burnt his brain. A strong hand shook him on his shoulder and slapped Artyom in his unshaven face.

He struggled to open his eyes and rubbed his burning cheek. But he jumped up from the stretcher, straightened up and saluted.

“Where’s your weapon? Get it quickly and then follow me!”

He had been sleeping in his uniform for days.

Artyom took out his Kalashnikov which he had wrapped into a piece of cloth that had served as his pillow and tiredly walked behind the commander. How long had he been sleeping? An hour? Two? His head hurt and his throat felt dry.

“It has started.” Yelled the commander over his shoulder. Artyom could smell his breath.

“What has started?” He asked fearful

“You’re going to see that soon enough. There you have a spare clip. You’re going to need it”

The roomy and pillar-less (< in German it’s one word) *Tulskaya* that looked like the upper part of a big tunnel was plunged into almost complete darkness. Only at a few places a few weak rays of light hit the ground. They moved senseless from one side to the other as if children or apes were playing with the lamps. But where should those apes have come from?

Suddenly Artyom was awake. He realized immediately what was going on and started to gain full control of his assault rifle. They hadn’t been able to hold stand! Or was it still not too late?

Two husky and sleepy fighters emerged out of the guard’s house and joined them. The commander gathered all reserves, everybody who was still standing and could hold a weapon. Some of them were already coughing.

Through the heavy, used up air a strange and terrible sound came to their ears. No scream, no howling, no order, just the moaning of hundredths of throats, tortured, full of hopelessness and horror. A moaning framed by a metallic sound that came from two, three, no ten different directions.

On the train platform was a giant barricade of ripped and fallen down tents, fallen down cabins, parts of wagons, wood and all kinds of furniture. The commander cleared the way through this junkyard like an icebreaker.

Artyom and the others followed him. On the right, out of the darkness they could see the not totally complete train. The light in both wagons was gone; the open doors had been hastily nailed shut with metal grids. Inside, behind the dark windows was a cooking and terrible crowd of people.

Dozens of hands held on to the bars and ripped on them and made the noise. At every door snipers with gasmask had been posted, where from time to time black mouths opened and raised their rifles, without beating or shooting at them. At a few places the guards tried to calm down the masses. Did the people in the wagon even realize what the soldiers were saying? They had imprisoned them in the train because some had tried to flee from the isolation into the tunnel. They had been too many, more than the healthy. The commander ran past the first wagon and Artyom finally understood why he was in such a hurry: At the last door a pus bubble had exploded and strange creatures flew out of the wagon. They almost couldn’t stand on their feet and their faces were covered in tumors so that you couldn’t recognize anybody. Their arms and legs were bloated and sickly.

All remaining marksman had been gathered at the door. The commander broke through the ring and stepped in front of them. "To all patients! Turn back immediately to your seats! That's and order!" With a strong move of his hand he brought the Stetschkin from his belt.

The sick people who were standing closest to him needed many tries to raise their heavy heads. Then one of them went with his tongue over his bloody lips and asked:

"Why do you treat us like that?"

"Like you know you've been infected by an unknown epidemic. We are currently searching for a cure ...

You have to be patient"

"You're searching for a cure." Repeated the sick man.

"I think I am going to laugh"

"Return to your wagon immediately." The commander unsecured weapon. "I am counting to ten, and then we open fire. One..."

"You give us hope so that you don't lose control.

Until we die on our own"

"Two ..."

"It has been 24 hours since we have gotten any water. Why should you give water to death candidates ..."

"The guards are afraid to go near the bars. Two have already been infected ... Three"

"The wagon is full of bodies. We are stepping on human faces. Do you know how it sounds when a nose breaks? If it's a child's then ..."

"We have no room for them, we can't burn them ... Four"

"At one part there is so few room that the dead are standing next to the living. Shoulder to shoulder"

"Five"

"Damn it, just shot! I know that there is no cure.

At least I'll die fast. It is like somebody is rasping my insides with a tool and then covers it with alcohol ..."

"Six"

"... In the end burn me. As if my head was full of worms that slowly chewed through my brain and soul ...

Nom, nom, crack, crack, crack, ..."

"Seven..."

"Idiot! Let us go already! Let us die like humans!

You don't have the right to torture us! You know as good as I do that probably we're all ..."

"Eight ... All of this is for our own security. So that other can live. I am ready to die but none of you pest bubbles is getting out of here. Take aim!"

Artyom raised his assault rifle and aimed for one of the sick that was closest to him. God in heaven, was that a woman?

He looked into her eyes and put the barrel of his gun on an old and tumbling man. The group of creatures retreated moaning at first, trying to press itself back into the wagon but more and more sick came out of it, like fresh pus from a wound. Moaning and crying.

"You sadist, do you know what you're doing to us?

We aren't zombies!"

"Nine." The voice of the commander had broken. It sounded like a whisper.

"Let us go!" Screamed the sick man while he reached with his arms after the commander. As if he was the director the crowd followed his movement and raised their arms.

"Fire!"

As soon as Leonid had put his instrument against his lips the people started to gather around him. Even after the first sparse and unclear sounds the first people started to smile, clap and were happy. And when the voice of the flute got stronger their faces transformed. It was like all dirt had fallen off them.

This time Sasha had a special place: Directly next to the musician. Dozens of eyes were only on Leonid but even a few looks were on her. At first she had felt uncomfortable because she didn't even deserve their attention. The melody, like a good book that didn't let people go and let them forget anything around them, had carried her away from the granite floor as well.

It was the same melody, Leonid's own, nameless one that flew through the white room. He started and ended his performances with it. With it he straightened wrinkles in the faces of his listeners, wiped away dust from their eyes and lit small lights.

Even though Sasha already knew it, Leonid was able to open small and secret doors on his flute so that the music still sounded differently. She felt like she had been staring at the sky for a long time and suddenly between the clouds she had seen an endless green distant land for a second. Suddenly she felt a sting. She winced and was under the earth again and turned around fearfully. There it was: A head bigger than all others in the publicum, a little bit further away, his chin raised. Hunter.

He had put his hard look on her and it only went to the musician from time to time. Leonid didn't even look at him. Even if something was bothering him while he was playing he didn't say anything.

Strangely Hunter didn't leave immediately and made no effort to take her with him or stop the concert. Only after the last sounds had stopped he retreated and disappeared.

Immediately Sasha left Leonid standing where he was and made her way through the crowd. To catch up to the bold one.

He hadn't stopped far away, he was sitting with Homer on a bench. He had also lowered his head.

"You've heard everything." Said the brigadier with a husky voice. "I am continuing. Are you coming with me?"

"Where to?" The old man smiled at the girl tired.

"And she knows"

"Hunter looked at Sasha again with his hard look, then he nodded his head silently and turned back to the old man

"It's not far from here." But he made a movement with his head. "I don't want to go on my own"

"Take me with you." Yelled Sasha sure.

The bold one sighed, his fingers made a fist and opened up again. "Thanks for the knife." He finally said.

"I made good use of it"

The girl moved back. Surprised. In the next moment she was already in control of herself again and said: "You decide what you do with the knife"

"I had no choice"

She was chewing on her lower lip. "Now you have always have it"

"No, not even now. If you knew you would understand. If you would truly ..."

"Understand what?"

"How important it is that I get through to the *Tulskaya*. Important for me. As fast as possible ..."

Sasha saw that his fingers were shaking slightly and the dark stain on his shoulder had gotten bigger. She was afraid of this man but she was more afraid for *him*. "You've got to take me with you." She asked him softly.

"No way." He answered. "It doesn't matter who is doing it. Why not me?"

"You're killing yourself." She moved closer and carefully took his hand.

He moved back as if she had just bitten him. "I have to do it. The people who are in command here are all cowards. If I hesitated longer, I kill the entire metro"

"But what if there was another way? A cure? If you ... Wouldn't have to do it anymore?"

"How often do I have to repeat myself: There is no cure against the fever! If so If would ... I would ..."

"What would you choose?" Sasha was still holding his hand.

"I have no choice." The brigadier took away his hand.

"Let's go." He said to homer.

"Why won't you take me with you?" Yelled Sasha.

Silent, almost whispering, so that nobody could hear it except for her he said: "I am afraid"

He turned around and left. While he was passing Homer he told him that he had ten minutes until they were leaving.

"Is it because of the fever?" It suddenly sounded from behind her.

"What?" Sasha turned around and bumped into Leonid.

The musician was smiling innocently. "If I am not mistaken somebody was talking about the fever"

"You're mistaken." She didn't want to discuss this right now.

"And I already thought that the rumors were true"

Said Leonid in thoughts and to himself.

Sasha's fore head got wrinkles:"What rumors?"

"Of the quarantine at the *Serpuchovskaya*. Talks of this apparently incurable disease. An epidemic ..." Leonid was looking at her, watching every movement of her lips and her eye brows.

She blushed. "How long have been listening to us?"

He spread his arms. "I never do it because I want to.

I just have the ears of a musician"

"That's my friend" she explained and pointed with her head into Hunters direction.

"Great" Answered Leonid.

"Why did you say apparently?"

"Sasha!" Homer had risen from his bench and gave a distrusting Leonid. "Can I talk to you for a second? We have to decide how we ..."

"Can I talk for a second?" The young man let the old man stand where he was and with a polite smile he made a few steps to the side and waved the girl to him.

Sasha followed him unsure. He felt that she hadn't lost the fight with the bold one yet and if she just kept on at it Hunter wouldn't dare to chase her away again. Then she could finally help him, even though she had no idea how.

Leonid lowered his head and whispered: "It could be that I've heard about his epidemic before, or not? Maybe it hasn't been the first time that this epidemic has broken out.

And maybe there are some magical pills for it"

He was looking into her eyes.

"But he's saying that there is no cure." Said Sasha.

"That he has ..."

"... To destroy all of them? *He*, your great friend?

That's no surprise. He probably studied medicine"

"Are you saying ..."

"I am saying." The musician put his hand on Sasha's shoulder, lowered his head to her and whispered in her ear.

"That there is a cure"

Only the two (Chapter 15)

The old man cleared his throat angrily and made one step into the direction of the girl. "Sasha! I got to talk to you!"

Leonid was winking into Sasha's direction and stepped back, giving Sasha free with over exaggerated humility and distanced himself. But Sasha couldn't think about anything else. While the old man was trying to convince her that they could still break hunter, was trying to tell her something and to talk sense some into her the girl was looking over his shoulder at the musician. He didn't look back but the slight smile on his face told her that he had felt it. She nodded her head and told Homer that she was ready for anything if he would just let her alone with Leonid for one more minute. She had to find out what he knew and had to start believing that there was a cure.

"I'll be back soon." She cut of the old man when he was in the middle of saying something. She passed him and ran to the musician.

"You've got to tell me!" She was sick of playing games. "How?"

"That is the complicated part of the question. I know that you can cure the disease. I know people that have won against it. I can get you to them"

"But you've said that you could fight it ..."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You understood me wrong. How could I? I am just a flutist, a wandering musician"

"Who are those people?"

"If you want to meet them you can. But we have to take a small stroll first"

"At which station are they?"

"Not far from here. You're going to see them, if you want"

"I don't believe you"

"But you would like too. And because I don't believe you fully as well I can't tell you everything"

Sasha's look darkened. "Why do you want me to come with you?"

"Me?" Leonid shook his head. "I don't care. You want to. I don't have to save anyone, I couldn't even. At least not like that"

She hesitated and then she asked: "Can you give me your word that you can bring me to those people? You're word that they can help?"

"I'll get you to them." Said Leonid in a serious tone.

Again the angry Homer joined the conversation:

"What are you planning Sasha?"

"I am not going with you." She said and turned to the musician. "He says that there is a cure"

"He's lying." Said Homer unsure.

"You seem to know about viruses more than me"

Leonid tried to keep hi tone respectful. "Have you explored them? Or gathered you're on experience with them?"

So you think that mass murder is the best way to get rid of the epidemic?"

"Where do you know all this from?" Asked the old man surprised and looked at Sasha: "Did you ..."

"And there is our new doctor." Said the musician when he realized that hunter was approaching and made a step back, just to be sure. "Then the complete first aid team is ready and I can go"

"Wait." Plead the girl.

"He's lying!" Whispered Homer. "He just wants to ..."

With you ... Even if he's telling the truth you won't make it. Hunter will be back with the men in 24 hours. When you stay with me you may still be able to change his mind. And that one ..."

"I can't do anything." Said Sasha with a helpless voice. "I can't change anything anymore, I feel it. I have only one choice: I have to make him choose. I've got to separate ..."

"Separate?" Homer raised his eye brows.

"I won't need twenty four hours." She said and disappeared.

Why had he let her go? Why had he shown weakness and let it happen that that crazy wanderer stole his heroine, his muse, his daughter? The more the old man thought about Leonid, the less he liked him. Out of the big green eyes of the musician he could see his lusting looks and when he thought that no one was looking at him dark shadows came over his face of an angel ...

What did he want from her? Best case scenario was that he just played the fan of her beauty so that she could be another mark on his list. The disappearing charm of her youth, something that you couldn't photograph, it would fall off like flower dust.

The girl herself, lied to and used would shake it away and would take long time to get pure again but she would forget the betrayal of this Satan.

But why had he let her go? Out of cowardice.

Because Homer hadn't just not argued with hunter but not even asked him the questions that kept him from finding sleep. Sasha was in love so her courage and her not thinking about anything could be forgiven. Would he have had as much patience with the brigadier if he would've asked him?

Homer kept calling him "brigadier" because he was used to it and it calmed him down: That name took the man his cruelty because he was just the commander of the northern guard post at the *Sevastopolskaya* ... But no! The person who cut through the darkness of the tunnel next to him was no longer the same knight. The old man started to realize that his companion was starting to transform himself.

Something terrible was going on inside of him, it was foolish to not want to see it and without hope to tell himself otherwise.

Did Hunter move faster because he wanted to show him the bloody end of this drama earlier? Now he wouldn't just destroy the *Tulskaya* but also the sect that was in the other tunnel and the *Serpuchovskaya* with all its inhabitants and the stationed guards of Hanza. Only because some of them could have gotten sick. And the *Sevastopolskaya* could maybe have the same fate in front of them. The brigadier didn't need any cause to kill anymore. He just needed a reason.

Homer wasn't able to run behind hunter anymore and like a nightmare watch all his crimes and document them. He had a clean conscience that everything which had happened was in the name of rescue of the *Tulskaya*, had told himself that it had been a necessary evil. The merciless brigadier was like a Moloch and Homer was too much of a coward to fight against fate.

The girl did seem to want to fight it. While Homer had made peace with the *Tulskaya* and the *Serpuchovskaya* transforming into Sodom and Gomorrah, Sasha was reaching for straws. Homer could no longer tell himself that some pills or vaccine existed so that Hunter didn't have to end the epidemic with fire and sword while Sasha seemed to look for a cure till the bitter end.

Homer was no warrior and no doctor and also too old to believe in miracles. A part of his heart dreamt passionately about a possible rescue and exactly that part he had ripped out of body and let go, with Sasha.

Everything he hadn't dared to do, he had pushed onto the girl. And found peace in his helplessness. In 24 hours it would all be over. After that Homer would desert and get himself a lonely cell to finish his book. Now he knew about what it would be.

How a smart animal would find a magical star which had fallen from the sky, how it had eaten it and transformed into a human.

How humanity stole fire but couldn't tame it and how they did not just burn themselves but how they turned the entire world into ashes. How one hundredth years later the star would be taken away again and how that transformed it back into something terrible that had no name.

The guard let the handful of bullets slip into his pocket and shook the musicians hand strongly as the fulfillment of their bargain. "For a symbolic payment you can even come with us on the railcar"

"I prefer romantic strolls in the tunnel." Answered Leonid.

The guard didn't give up and whispered to the musician: "Now look, just the two of you can't go through this tunnel without an escort the tunnel. You get one, no argument. And your lady has no papers. But I could get you to where you want a lot faster, where you too could be alone"

"We don't need that." Said Sasha.

The musician bowed before her. "We should act like they are our guards. The prince and princess of Monaco are going for a walk"

"Which princess?" Said Sasha.

"From Monaco. At the Cote d' Azur ..."

"Listen up." Cut him off the guard. "If you really want to go on foot, then go now. Your magazine in all good faith but the boys got to go back to base. Hey crutch!" He yelled at one of the guards. "Accompany those two to the *Kievskaya*. Tell the patrol it is a deportation. Get them to the radial line and then back home." He turned to Leonid.

"Right?"

"Of course." He answered and saluted jokingly.

The leader of the guard blinked with his eyes and said. "Any time"

How different Hanza was from the rest of the metro!

On the entire line from the *Pavelezkaya* to the *Oktyabrskaya* there wasn't a single spot where it had been completely dark. Every fifty steps there was a cable that crawled along the wall, an electrical lamp which light reached to the next one. Yes even the secret and escape tunnels that separated themselves from the main tunnel from time to time were lit very well so that they lost their horrors.

If it would have been after Sasha they would have ran to save important minutes, but Leonid convinced her that there was no reason for haste. He refused to explain where he was leading her from the *Kievskaya*. He marched without any haste and was bored. It seemed that he was a common visitor to the tunnels through which normal mortals could pass to the ring line.

"I am glad that your friend always does what he thinks is right." He said after a while.

Sasha's forehead got wrinkles: "What are you talking about?"

"If civilians were as important to him as to you we would've had to take him with us. Now we've separated into groups of two and everybody does what he wants. He kills, you heal ..."

"He doesn't want to kill anybody!" She said sharp and a bit too loud.

"Of course. It just is his job after all." He sighed.

"Who am I to judge?"

"So what do you want to do when you're and adult?" Asked Sasha sarcastically. "Play?"

"I am just going to be near you. What else do I need to be happy?"

She shook her head. "You're just saying that. You don't even know me. How could I make you happy?"

"I know how. But it is already enough for me to look at a beautiful girl and I am happy. And what ..."

"So you're saying that you know beauty when you see it?" She looked at him.

He nodded his head. "The only thing that I'm good at". Suddenly the wrinkles on her forehead smoothened.

"What's so extraordinary about me?"

"You are shining"

This time his voice had almost sounded serious. But at the next moment the musician took a step back and put his look on her. "Just to bad that you're wearing those rough clothes"

"What's wrong with my clothes?" She moved slower.

It was irritating her that he was looking at her back.

"Your clothes don't let any light through. And I am like a moth." He moved his hands as if they were wings and made a stupid face. "Always flying to the fire"

A slight smile was on her face for a moment. She took part in the game. "So you're afraid of the dark?"

"Loneliness". Leonid made a sad face and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

He shouldn't have said that. While he had tuned his instrument, he had thought that the resistance had been weak, and the weakest and softest string had broken with an ugly noise.

The slight movement of the air in the tunnel had blown away all serious thoughts and had Sasha made play with the the musician. But now she had stopped. With one beat the happy feeling that Leonid's words had created was gone. Now she was sober again and asked herself why she had given in. Had she gone with him because of that and left the old man and hunter?

"Loneliness. You don't even know about what you're talking about"

The *Serpuchovskaya* had sunken into darkness and fear. Soldiers with army issue gasmask blocked the entrance to the tunnel and the passageway to the ring line. The station was humming, with premonition of a catastrophe, like a stirred up bee hive. Hunter and Homer were brought through the hall under guard. Here the inhabitants of the *Serpuchovskaya* tried to find if they know their fate by looking at their eyes. Homer looked at the ground; he didn't want to remember their faces.

The brigadier hadn't told him where they were going but the old man was beginning to suspect. To polis.

Connecting four metro lines it was a real city with thousands of inhabitants. The rest of this underground realm had split into warring stations long ago. Polis was a heaven for science and culture.

The holiest place in the metro that no one dared to attack.

Nobody but the old Homer, that half crazy rider of the apocalypse ...

But in the last 24 hours he had felt better. His nausea had gone and the coughing that had forced him to clean his bloody gasmask had stopped as well. Maybe his organism was winning against the epidemic? Or maybe he hadn't been infected in the first place? Maybe he had just imagined it. He had known that from the beginning but he had still been afraid ...

The tunnel behind the *Serpuchovskaya* was dark and silent and had a bad reputation. Homer knew: Until polis they wouldn't meet a single human soul, the station between the *Serpuchovskaya* and the *Borovizkaya* had always a surprise ready for its visitors. Over the *Polyanka* the only station on their journey, he knew a lot of legends.

Everybody who passed it generally didn't have to fear for his life but his mind could be damaged.

Homer had been there a few times but never noticed anything out of the ordinary. He knew all legends and had an explanation for every single one of them. So he was hoping that the station would remain dead once more and lay abandoned like in better times. But around one hundredth meters in

front of the *Polyanka* he noticed the electrical light and the first sounds echoed to him and he had a premonition.

He could clearly hear human voices but was that actually possible? Even worse: Hunter who could normally feel the presence of all living beings even a few hundred steps before they met them didn't seem to hear anything.

He didn't even take notice of Homers worried face.

He was totally beside himself and it seemed that he didn't know what was happening here. The station was inhabited! Since when? Homer had asked a lot of times why the inhabitants of polis had never tried to get to the *Polyanka*.

They were already running out of space so why not just annex it? It was just legends that had stopped them! But had been enough for them to let this station in peace.

But someone seemed to have gotten over their fear and built a city of tents. They had even installed new lights.

How they were wasting electricity! Still, in the tunnel Homer put his hand in front of his eyes, to keep them from looking into bright light that was coming out of the mercury lamps which were hanging from the ceiling.

Incredible! Even polis had never looked so clean and for. The walls weren't covered in ashes and dirt of the last years. The marble tiles were shimmering and it looked like the ceiling had been renewed with white paint just yesterday.

Homer looked through the arc of the entrance into the station and he couldn't see a single tent. Hadn't they gotten to that part, putting them up? Or did they want to turn it into a museum?

He could believe that, after all some strange people where in charge of polis. Gradually the train platform was filling with people. They didn't care for the to the teeth armed mercenary with his titan helmet and the stumbling, dirty old man.

And still: Homer knew while he looked at them he couldn't move even one bit, his legs were numb.

Every human who had gathered at the platform was dressed like if they were making a movie about the first year of 2000 at the *Polyanka*. Fine coats, colorful warm jackets; dark blue jeans ... People had worn those clothes before the catastrophe. Where were the coats made from rough pig leather, where was the eternal brown of the metro, the graveyard of all color? Where had it gone?

Where did they get all this richness? And their faces!

That weren't faces of people who had lost their families in one moment. Those people seemed to have seen the soon not a while ago, they looked like they had started their day, like always with a hot shower. Homer could have sworn ... And then ... He had the feeling that he knew those people from somewhere. More and more of these wonderful people gathered at the edge of the platform without stepping onto the tracks though. Soon the colorful crowd filled the entire station, from the beginning of the station to its end. It seemed that they had all stepped out of an old photos that had been made 30 years ago.

Still none of them were looking at homer directly, they looked everywhere, the walls, the newspapers, looked at each other in secret, out of envy or curiosity. But they didn't look at the old man, as if he was a ghost.

Why had they gathered here? For what were they wafting? It took him some time until he had himself under control again. Where was the brigadier? Why hadn't he said anything? Hunter had stopped a few steps behind him. He seemed to not be interested in the station full of people. With a heavy look he stared into the room, as if was standing in front of something that was blocking his way. A few steps in front of him something must have been hanging above his head. Homer stepped closer and looked carefully under his visor ... And suddenly hunter started to punch. The fist went through the air, made a strange circle to the left and then to the right, as if the brigadier was trying to stab an invisible

creature with an imaginary blade. He almost hit Homer but he jumped to the side. Hunter continued his fight. He punched, stepped back, defended himself and seemed to hold on to something with his iron hard fingers, groaned in the next moment as if something was squeezing his neck and choking him with its grip. The old man felt like he had seen something similar before, just a while ago. Where and when? And what the devil was going on with the brigadier? Homer yelled his name but he seemed to be possessed by something and didn't react to his loud screams.

The people on the platform didn't react to hunter; he didn't exist for them and they didn't exist for him. They reacted to something else, they looked at their watches, talked to their neighbors and exchanged the time with the red numbers on the electrical clock at the tunnel entrance.

Homer closed his eyes a bit and followed the looks of the people ... The station's clock showed the time where the train had departed. But the display got bigger, it now had place for ten numbers: Eight before the blinking double point and another two for the seconds. Also small red dots surrounded the seconds and only the last number of this incredible long number; it was more than twelve million, changed ...

A scream and crying.

Homer turned away from the strange clock. Hunter was laying face down on the tracks and wasn't moving.

Homer ran to him and turned the heavy and lifeless body on its back. No, the brigadier was still breathing. He couldn't see any injuries but his eyes were the ones of a dead man. His right hand was still a fist and now Homer realized that hunter hadn't been unarmed in this strange duel. In his hand was the black knife.

Homer slapped the brigadier a few times and he started to moan like if he was drunk. He blinked with his eyes, leaned on his elbow and looked at the old man with an unclear look.

The picture of his dream had disappeared: The people in their colorful coats had disappeared without a trace, the bright light was gone and the dust of centuries was on the walls. The station was black and lifeless as always, like Homer had been used to on his earlier expeditions.

Till the *Oktyabrskaya* the two didn't exchange a single word. She could only hear how their guards exchanged a few whispers and breathed in sharp when they stumbled over a threshold. Sasha was angry, not so much at the musician but at herself. This ... Well what? He had acted like she had thought of him. Now everything he was doing was embarrassing her a bit, but hadn't she been too strict with him?

At the *Oktyabrskaya* the wind changed and when Sasha saw the station she forgot everything else. In the last days she had been at many places which she hadn't thought could even exist. But the glory of the *Oktyabrskaya* overshadowed everything. On the granite floor were rugs and you could still see their original pattern even though they were very old. The burning heads for torches, polished chandeliers plunged the room into a steady and milky light.

Here and there were tables where people with bright faces were sitting, talking to each other tiered and exchanging papers. Sasha stretched her neck to see more of it.

Then she said shy: "Everything here is so ... luxurious"

"The ring stations are like pork on stick over a fire"

Whispered Leonid. "They are just dripping because of the fat ... Oh and before I forget, how about a snack?"

"No time." She shook her head and hoped that he couldn't hear her growling stomach.

"Come on." The musician pulled her hand. "There's a place here, everything you've eaten before doesn't even come close to it ... Boys, you don't have anything against a good meal, or do you?" He asked their guards. "Don't worry Sasha, in two hours we're there. And I didn't just mention that with the pork on the stick out of fun. Because here they are making ..."

He talked about the meat until Sasha agreed. If it was just two hours to their goal, then there was enough time for an half hour meal. They still had the entire day and who knew when she would get something to eat again?

The stew had earned all its praise. But it hadn't been enough, Leonid had ordered a whole bottle of sweet wine.

Sasha was curious and drank a small glass, the guards and the musicians shared the rest.

Suddenly she rose of her chair and ordered Leonid to do the same thing. The hardness of her voice came from her being angry at herself. Angry that she, exhausted from the food and the hot alcohol, had pushed away his hand from her knee a little bit too late. His fingers had been soft and sinful.

Outrageous!

Leonid raised his hands immediately as if he wanted to say: "I give up!" But she could still feel his touch on her skin. Why did I push it away so fast, she asked herself confused? She wanted to get this sticky sweet scene out of her memory as fast as possible, to cover it up with a conversation.

"The people here are strange." She said to Leonid.

"Why?" He emptied the glass with one sip and came slowly forth from behind the table

"There is something missing in their eyes ..."

"Hunger?"

"No, not just ... They don't seem to need anything"

"That's because they *do not* need anything." Leonid smiled. "They are full. Queen Hanza feeds them. And the eyes? Normal, dull eyes ..."

Sasha was serious again. "What we left over today could have fed me and my father for three days. Shouldn't we have taken it with us, to give it to someone else?"

"No." Answered the musician. "They give it to their dogs. There are no poor people here"

"But they could give it to the neighboring stations!

There were people are hungry ..."

"Hanza is no charity." Said one of the guards they called crutch. "They can see how they get their own food.

That's the last thing ... feeding all those no goods"

"Are you from Hanza?" Asked Leonid

"I've always lived here. As long as I can think"

"You won't believe it put past the ring line people need to eat too"

"They can eat themselves for all I care!" Answered the guard angrily. "Or should we let it happen that in the end they divide everything like the reds?"

"Well if all happens like it has happened before ..."

Started Leonid.

"Then what? Shut up boy! What you're talking here is enough for a deportation!"

"I've already earned my deportation." Said the musician. "But I'm willing to work on it a bit more"

"I can deport you to somewhere else." Thundered the guard. "Because you're spy of the reds!"

"And I you because you're drinking while on duty ..."

"Well you ... You did too ... Come here you ..."

"No! Sorry, please excuse him. It's all just a misunderstanding." Said Sasha, pulled the musician away from crutch on his sleeve. Crutch was breathing heavily.

Almost violent she dragged Leonid to the tracks, looked at the clock and sighed. Because of the meal and them arguing two hours had passed, Hunter on the other hand had probably not stood still for one second.

The musician was laughing behind her drunkenly.

The whole way to the *Park Kultury* both guards were complaining heavily. Leonid had wanted to answer them but Sasha had talked him out of it every time. He was still drunk, with his arrogance his insolence grew and the girl turned away to escape his intrusive hands.

"Don't you think I look good at all?" He said hurt. "

"I am not your type, yes? You don't like the likes of me, I would need muscles and sc-a-a-rs ... Why did you even come with me?"

"Because you promised!" She pushed him away.

"Not because ..."

"That old song: >I am not like *that*.<" He sighed.

"If I would've know that you're such a mimosa ..."

"How dare you? There are still people alive there"

"They are all going to die if we don't make it!"

"And what can I do to prevent that? I almost can't lift my feet. Do you know how heavy they are? Here see ..."

Leonid tried to raise his foot and knee while he was walking. It looked very absurd. "And the people are going to die anyways. Tomorrow or in ten years. Just like you and I.

So what's the hurry?"

"So you lied to me? Yes, you lied to me! Homer knew immediately ... He had warned me Where are we going?"

"No I didn't lie to you! Should I swear again? You'll see! You're going to tell me that you're sorry! Embarrassed you're going to say: >Leonid! I was wr-o-ng ..."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going, till we no longer can ... To the emerald city ... La-la, taram-tam-tam ... It isn't an easy way"

Sang Leonid and was giving instructions to an invisible orchestra with his fingers. Suddenly his flute box fell down, he cursed and almost fell down himself.

"Hey you drunk! Can you even make it to the *Kievskaya*?" Yelled one of the guards behind him.

"If you pray for us!" The musician bowed before them. "Elli is coming back." He continued the song. "And Elli is coming back ... With totoschka ... Back home ..."

Homer had never believed the legends about the *Polyanka*, but he had learnt that they were true the hard way.

There were people who called it "the station of fate" and some looked at it as some kind of oracle. Some believed that if you made a pilgrimage to it your life would change and the curtain that had been in front of your future would be lifted, giving them insight on what was waiting for them at the end their journey.

Some ... But everybody who still had common sense knew that from the station from time to time toxic gas came out of the ground. It created fantasies and brought forth hallucinations. But to the devil with the skeptics! What could that vision have meant? Homer seemed that he was just one step away from solving it and every time his thoughts turned around. In front of his eyes hunter appeared again, stabbing the air with his blade. Homer would have given much to find out which vision the brigadier had seen, had tried to fight and which duel had brought his defeat and yes, his death"

"What are you thinking about?"

Homer's innards got cramped. Hunter had never said anything to him without good reason. A barked order, an unwillingly growled answer ... How should you talk about a soul with somebody who had none?

"Just ... Nothing special." Stuttered Homer.

"No I can hear it." Said Hunter calm. "You were thinking about me. Are you afraid?"

"Not at the moment." Lied the old man.

"You don't need to be afraid. I am going to leave you in peace. You remind me of ..."

Half a minute later Homer asked carefully: "Of whom?"

"A part of me. I've forgotten that something like that is still in me. You remind me of that" While he struggled to say those heavy words Hunter continued to stare to what was in front of him. Darkness.

"That's why you took me with you?"

The brigadier answered: "It's important for me to keep that in my head. Very important. And for others it is important, that I ... Perhaps it could be like ... It was before"

"It's about your memory?" Homer felt like he was crawling over a minefield. "Has something happened to you?"

"I remember everything!" Answered hunter sharp.

"I only forget myself sometimes. And I'm afraid to forget myself forever. You're going to remind me of it, yes?"

"Ok." Homer nodded his head even though Hunter wasn't looking at him.

"Back then it all made sense." Said the brigadier tired. "Everything I did. To protect the metro. The people. My orders were clear: Eliminate all dangers. Destroy. It made sense, yes it did!"

"But now it makes sense too ..."

"Now? I don't know what now is. I want that everything is like back then. I don't do this just because I feel like it. I'm no bandit and no murderer! I do it for the people.

I've tried to live without the people, to keep them safe. But it was too horrible. I couldn't forget. I had to get back to the people. To protect. To help. To remember. And there was the *Sevastopolskaya*. They took me in. The station had to be saved, needed help. At all costs. It seems like when I do ... When I eliminated a threat ... That there is something important, a big thing. Maybe then I can remember. I just have to remember. That's why I have to get as fast as possible ... It's turning faster and faster. I have to make it in 24 hours at all costs. I have to make it: Reach polis, form a unit and go back ... Keep reminding me until then, alright?"

Homer nodded his head cramped. Even the thought about what would happen if the brigadier would forget who he was completely scared him. Who would remain in the body when the real Hunter fell asleep? But not the one ... against he had lost the illusionary fight?

The *Polyanka* was now far behind them. Hunter stormed to polis like a guard dog that had been let loose from its chain and had smelled the trace of its prey. Or a wolf fleeing from its hunters?

It got bright at the end of the tunnel.

Finally they reached *Park Kultury*. Leonid tried to get on the good side of the guards again through inviting them to a "very wonderful restaurant." But the two men were suspicious. Even when he went to the restroom they only let him go after a long discussion.

While the guards waited at the door, he asked the musician: "You still got money left?"

"Not much." Leonid left the restroom and gave him five bullets.

"Give them to me! Crutch wants money for you two.

He thinks you're a provocateur from the reds. When he is right, here is the passage to your line. You already know. If not you can wait here until the police is coming to get you. You're going to have to barter with them on your own though"

Leonid tried to keep his hiccup under control.

"So you've found out, yes? Of course ... We will see us again. Many thanks!" He raised his hand for a strange greeting. "Listen ... To the devil with the passage way! Get us to the tunnel, mhm?" The musician took Sasha's hand and stumbled on a bit faster. "That one was good." He mumbled.

"There is the passage to your line ... maybe you want to get up there too? Forty meters deep. As if he didn't know that it was already full of mines ..."

Sasha realized. "Where are we going?"

"Where?" Groaned Leonid. "To the red line! You've heard it yourself: I'm a provocateur and they got me, uncovered my true intentions ..."

"You're a red?"

"My dear girl! Don't ask anything now! I can't think and walk at the same time at the moment. And running is more important. It won't be long until our friend go on full alert. And they're even going to arrest us. Money alone isn't enough for him, he wants a medal!"

They dove into the tunnel and let the guards behind them. Pressed themselves against the wall and ran into the direction of the *Kievskaya*. Sasha realized that they wouldn't make it to the station. When the musician was right and the second guard would show up they would pursue them ...

Suddenly Leonid went to his left into a bright side tunnel, like out of routine, as if he was going home. A few minutes later she could see flags, grids and sandbags in the distance, machine gun nests and she heard barking of dogs. A border post? Did they already know of their escape? How could they have come from? And what territory was behind those barracks?

"I work for Albert Michailovitsch." Leonid put a strange document under the guard's nose. "I had to get to the other shore"

The guard looked at the documents and said: "The usual tariff. And where are the papers of the lady?"

"I pay double." He was searching his pockets and scrapped his last bullets together. "And you didn't see her, ok?"

"Nothing is *ok*." Said the border guard strict. "This is a state with laws and not some kind of bazaar!"

"Oh no!" Acted the musician startled. "I thought because we now have a market economy we could barter a bit. I didn't know that there was a difference in ..."

A few minutes later Sasha and Leonid were thrown into a small room with tiled walls. The musician's clothes were tousled, he had a scratch on his cheek and was bleeding from his noose.

The iron door closed.

It got dark.

In the cell (Chapter 16)

When you can no longer see anything but darkness your other senses sharpen. Smell gets more intensive and sounds louder. In the cell next to them you could hear that something was scraping on the ground and it stank unbearable of piss.

Leonid seemed to still be drunk and didn't seem to feel any pain. For a small amount of time he was mumbling something and then he turned silent and started to breath heavily. He didn't care that their pursuers would now definitely catch up to them and he didn't care what would happen to Sasha. She had tried to cross the border of Hanza without any explanation and papers. Not to mention the fate of the *Tulskaya*, he didn't seem to care about that as well.

"I hate you." Said Sasha silently.

No reaction.

Little bit later she saw a small hole in the door: A peephole out of glass. Everything else remained invisible but that small point was enough for Sasha who was feeling her way and slowly crawled to the door. Then she started to hammer her small fists against it. The door answered with loud thunder and as soon as she stopped it was a absolutely silent again. The guards didn't react to the noise nor to the screams. Time passed slowly. How long would they keep them imprisoned? Maybe Leonid had led her here. To separate her from the old man and Hunter. To get her out of the book and into a trap. And all just because ..."

Sasha started to cry. The sleeve of her coat sucked in the tears and the sobbing.

"Have you ever seen the stars?" She suddenly heard his still drunken voice.

She didn't answer

"I only on pictures." He continued. "Not even the sun can penetrate all that dust and clouds, how should the stars do it? But when you started crying, I think I saw a real star"

She swallowed her tears before she answered.

"That's a peephole"

"I know. But I am interest in ..." Leonid cleared his throat. "Who was that who had stared at the sky with his eyes? And why did he turn away?"

Sasha shook her head. "There was nobody"

"I always wanted to believe that." Said the musician sunken in thoughts.

"Nobody cares what will happen to us in this cell!"

She started to cry again. "You had planned this all along, or not? So that there would be no chance that I could do it?" Again she hammered against the door.

"If you believe that there is no one the other side why are you hammering at the door?" Asked Leonid.

"You don't give a shit if the sick die!"

He sighed. "So that's your opinion of me, yes? That isn't fair. You don't care about the sick either. You're just afraid that your lover is going to massacre all gets sick to and then you would have a cure ..."

"It's not true!" Sasha was almost ready to start hammering her fist at Leonid.

"It is true!" Said Leonid. "What do think is so great about him?"

She didn't want to explain it to him. She would have liked to not say a single word to him. But she said it anyways: "He needs me! He really needs me. Without me he's falling down further into darkness. You don't need me ... You just don't have anybody who is playing with you!"

"Ok, let's say he needs you. >To need< seems to be farfetched, but let's leave it at that ... Why do you need him?"

That pest control? You like dark guys? Or do you like rescuing fallen souls?"

Sasha was silent. It got to her how easy it was for Leonid to guess her feelings. Maybe there weren't that special to begin with? Or was it because she couldn't hide them? All the soft and escaping thoughts that she couldn't turn into words. Out of his mouth they sounded so routinely, yes even banal.

"I hate you." She said after some time.

"Doesn't matter. I don't like me that much as well"

Sasha sat on the ground. Again she was crying, at first because of anger and then because she felt like she would pass out. As long as she could change something she wouldn't give up. But while she was sitting here in this dark dungeon with this emotionless human she couldn't convince anybody to stop. Everything had been in vain.

And then she had the picture in front of her, the high houses, the green sky, the flying clouds, laughing humans. The hot drops on her cheeks were the ones of the summer rain of which the old man had told her. After one second the illusion had passed, only a slight, wonderful mood was in the air.

Sasha bit on her lip and said to herself: "I want a miracle"

In the next moment somebody switched on the light in the hallway in front of the door and unbearable bright light flooded into the cell.

They weren't far from the entrance to the holy capitol of the metro; the marble fortress of civilization with its white shine of the mercury lamps that were spreading an holy aura of rest and prosperity.

At polis they didn't have save light because they thought it had a magical influence on people. The overflow of light reminded the people that in distant time's humanity hadn't been a creature of the night. No nocturnal predator.

Even the barbarians that got from the *Peripherie* to the realm of police acted accordingly.

The border patrols weren't as large as at other stations and the border station reminded Homer of the waiting room of the soviet minister: One desk, one chair, two next to the door officers in clean uniforms.

Controlling papers and searching bags. Homer took his passport out of his pocket. There were no more visas so he didn't have to worry. He put the green book into the hand of the officer and looked at the brigadier.

He was standing next to him and didn't seem to hear the orders of the officer. The officer's hand was slowly moving to the clean grip of his pistol, "Show me your papers or leave the territory of polis immediately!"

Homer was sure: the brigadier hadn't realized what they wanted of him. He only reacted to where the fingers of the officer were going. After a short moment he reacted and lightning fast his open hand punched the guard in his throat.

He turned blue, croaked and fell with his chair to the ground. The other one ran away and Homer knew that he wouldn't make it. Like a trickster who had an ace up his sleeve, hunter brought the henchmen's pistol to light and ...

"Wait!"

The brigadier hesitated one second. The fleeing soldier used it and climbed the platform, rolled around the corner and disappear.

"Let them in peace! We need to get to the *Tulskaya*! You ... Wanted that I remind you." Homer was running out of air. He didn't know what to say.

"To the *Tulskaya* ..." Repeated Hunter hollow.

"Yes, better wait till the *Tulskaya*. You're right"

He put the heavy pistol next to him and lowered his head.

Homer used that moment, raised his arms and ran ahead to the guards who were jumping forth from behind the pillars.

"Don't shoot! He gives up! Don't shoot! By the heavens ..."

They bound their hands and ripped his gasmask from his head. Only then they let him talk. All that time the brigadier was standing next to him completely silent. He had sunken back into his strange stiffness and let them take away his weapons without resisting them and they brought him into the cell for their investigation.

Even though they had let Homer go he accompanied him to the cell. Hunter entered, sat next to him on the bed, raised his head and whispered: "You have to find someone for me. His name is Melnik. Bring him to me. I am going to wait ..."

The old man nodded his head and quickly turned around. He wanted to make his way through the guards when he suddenly heard hunter yelling: "Homer!"

The old man had a surprised look on his face; Hunter had never called him by his name before. He returned, stepped to the weak iron door and looked at the brigadier asking.

He had put his giant arms around his body as if he was shivering and mumbled with a weak, toneless voice.

"Hurry!"

The door opened and a soldier took a hesitant look into it, it was the same one how had beaten the musician before. A kick brought him into the cell so that he almost landed on the ground. When he was standing again he looked around unsure.

In the door a tall and thin officer was standing who was wearing glasses. On his shoulders were a few stars. The grey getting dark blond hair was combed back. "Go on you idiot." He groaned.

"I ... Me." Sobbed the guard.

"Go on!"

"I wanted to excuse what I've done. And you ... I can't"

"Ten more days"

"Beat me." Said the soldier and retread from his look.

"Ah, Albert Michailovitsch!" Yelled the musician and blinked into the direction of the officer. "I was beginning to think that would never come"

The man who he was speaking to had a slight smile on his face. "Good evening. I am here to see that justice is done. Go on, do whatever you want"

Leonid rose from the ground and stretched his back.

"I have to protect my hands. I think you can take care of the punishment"

"With all hardness." Nodded, Albert Michailovitsch.

"Arrest for one month. And of course I have to join the excuse of this idiot"

"He didn't mean it in a bad way." Leonid rubbed his hurting cheek.

"I hope this can remain under us?" The metallic voice of the officer was creaking mysteriously.

"As you can see I was just smuggling somebody through." The musician nodded into Sasha's direction.

"Could you help me with that?"

"Done." Said Albert Michailovitsch.

They let the guilty guardsmen stand in the cell. The officer locked the door and led them along the corridor.

"I am not going anywhere with you." Said Sasha loud.

Leonid hesitated and said almost inaudible: "And if I am telling you that we're really going to the emerald city?"

What if I just happened to know more than your grandfather? That I've seen it with my own eyes? Even been there myself and that only ..."

"You're lying"

"What if he." Leaning his head into the direction of the officer. "Only let us go because he knew where I'm from?"

And that we can surely find a cure in the emerald city? And that it's just three stations away?"

"You're lying!"

"How do you know?" Said Leonid angry. "When you really want to believe in miracles then you should be ready to *believe* in them. Or in the end you're going to miss it. I always knew that they would let us go. I just wanted to ...

Not act before it happened"

"You've been playing for time!"

"But I didn't lie to you! There is a cure!"

They had reached the border. The officer who had turn to them again, gave the musician back his things and even gave him a few bullets and documents. Then he saluted Leonid. "Now, what are you going to do Leonid Nikolayewitsch? Are you taking your smuggle-ware with you or are you leaving it at customs?"

It ran down cold Sasha's back. "We're taking it with us"

"Well then I wish you a life of love and happiness"

Said Albert Michailovitsch like if he was her father and lead them through the three defense lines. Their occupants saluted them while they passed the out of grids welded tank stoppers. "I hope that you won't have any problems with your import?"

Leonid was smiling. "We'll manage. I don't have to tell you that there're no honest officials. The stricter the regime the lower the price. You just have to know where to look"

The officer cleared his throat. "The magical words should be enough"

"Not for all." Leonid was feeling his cheek again. "But what was the saying again? I'm no wizard, I am still learning"

"It would be an honor to deal with you again when your training is complete." Albert Michailovitsch bowed his head and stepped back.

The last soldier opened the thick iron gate which went from the ground to the ceiling. Then an empty and completely lit part of the tunnel came to their views which walls were covered with ashes at some points and it had been marked by firefights. At the end they could see a new defense line, hanging from the ceiling like giant banners.

Even their look made Sasha's heart beat faster. She stopped and asked Leonid. "Which border is that?"

"What now?" He looked at her surprised.

"Of course the border to the red line"

How long had Homer dreamt to get back here!

How long has it been since he had last been here! At the *Borovizkaya*, with its small and roomy apartments that were directly under the arcs, the reading hall with the Brahman monks in the middle of the room, the long with books covered desks out of planks and the low hanging, with cloth covered lamps. It was interesting how Homer almost could hear conversations from a time before the crisis and the war.

Then the dignified *Arbatskaya*, totally made out of white and bronze colors, just like the palace of the Kremlin.

With their strict order and the busy military officials who still acted like they had nothing to do with the apocalypse.

Then the old and worthy *Biblioteka imeni Lenina*, which towered on the surface. They had forgotten to rename it, as if that even made sense because it had been as old as the world even when the young Kolya had stepped foot into the metro the first time. It had its own passage, which was over the romantic commando bridge in the middle of the train platform. Even the surrounding stucco had been renewed, if not a bit sloppy.

Then the *Alexandrovski*, remaining in the half dark for all eternity, somehow a thin and edgy stop, looking like a blind retired man, who was thinking about his Komsomol-youth.

Homer had always been fascinated by the question, how far did the stations resemble the likeness of its builder?

Were they self portraits of the architects who had designed them?

Had they received small parts of their creators? One thing was sure for the old man: It shaped the inhabitants of the stations; their character was transmitted to the people and they were infected by its special mood.

With all his being Homer didn't belong to the strict *Sevastopolskaya*, with all his thoughts and eternal incurable nostalgia. He belonged to polis which emitted the light of the past.

Fate had decided differently though.

Even now that he had reached it he didn't want to go through the echoing halls and look at the stucco, cast sculptures and to fantasize. But he had to haste on as if was being chased. Hunter had accomplished to bind that horrible creature inside of him with enormous effort. He had to feed human flesh to it from time to time. But this monster inside of him just had to bent the bars of the old cell behind the brigadier was sitting to free itself. Homer had to hurry.

Hunter had asked him to find a man called Melnik.

Was it his cover name? A parole? When the guards had heard that name they transformed immediately: No talk about the tribunal which had threatened the brigadier and also the handcuffs around Homers wrists had disappeared into the cupboard again. And it was the fat leader of the guard that was escorting Homer personally.

They climbed the stairs, walked along the corridor and arrived at the *Arbatskaya*. There they stopped at a door that was guarded by to man in civilian clothes, killing was their job and you could see it in their faces.

Behind their broad backs a narrow hallway with many small offices on both sides stretched into the distance.

The fat man told Homer to wait and walked along the hallway. After three minutes he was back and studied the old man surprised and told him to come in.

At the end of the hallway was a surprisingly roomy chamber which walls were covered with maps, plans, between them were notes of cryptic radio messages, pictures and newspapers. Behind a broad oak desk sat a thin man in the middle of his life with uncommonly broad shoulders.

Homer saw that he was having his uniform hand over his shoulder and only his left arm came out his sleeves.

After one second Homer saw that his right arm had been almost amputated completely. The man was a giant, his eyes were almost at the same height of Homers and he was standing right in front of him.

"Thanks." Said the man and let the fat man go who closed the door with noticeable regret behind him. Then he turned to Homer. "Who are you?"

"Nikolayev, Nikolai Ivanovitsch." Answered the old man confused.

"No more games! When you're coming to me and claiming that you're accompanying my most valued comrade who we've buried a year ago you have to have a good reason for it. Who are you?"

"Nobody. It's not about me. He's alive, believe me.

You have to come with me, as fast as possible"

"Now I am getting the feeling that it's a trap. Or an idiotic game. Or just a mistake" Melnik (Miller from 2033) lit a self-made cigarette and blew smoke into Homer's face.

"Good you know his name. But let's say he was here with you so you should know his story. You should know that we have searched for him for a year, every day of it. That I've lost a few good men on the search. And god damned you should know how much he means to me. Maybe even that he was my right hand man." A bitter smile hushed over his face.

"No, none of it. He never said anything." Homer had lowered his head. "Please, just come to the *Borovizkaya*. We have no time ..."

"I am not going anywhere. Not without a good reason." Melnik's hand reached under the table, moved around without getting up and after a few seconds Homer realized that he was sitting in wheelchair. "Let's talk about it in peace first. I want to know why you appeared here"

"My god!" Homer didn't know what else he should tell that stubborn man anymore. "Believe me. He's alive. He is sitting in the ape cage at the *Borovizkaya*. At least I hope that he's still ..."

"I would like to believe you." Melnik stopped, took a deep breath of the cigarette so that Homer could hear how the filter paper burnt crackling. "But there are no miracles.

You're just opening new wounds. Well ok. There is my own theory who's behind this game. But to find that out we have people that are trained to find out just that." He reached for the receiver of the telephone.

"Why is he afraid of people with dark skin?"

Said homer suddenly and more to himself. Not exactly knowing why.

Melnik froze. Then he carefully put the receiver back where it belonged. He inhaled the rest of his self-made cigarette, spat out the rest into the ashtray and said: "To the devil with it, then I'll roll to the *Borovizkaya*"

"I am not going there! Leave me! I rather stay ..."

Sasha wasn't joking nor playing. Nobody had hated her father more than the reds. They had taken his power, broke him and instead of taking his life they had out of mercy or because they thought he wasn't worth it, damned him to years of pain and suffering. Her father had never forgiven the people who had betrayed him. Not those who had provoked the people to betray him, who had armed them with weapons and flyers. Even the red color could bring him to rage. And even though he had said that he was no longer after revenge at the end of his life, Sasha had felt that he had just wanted to find a reason for giving up.

"It's the only way." Said Leonid confused.

"But we wanted to the *Kievskaya*! You've lead me to a no-man's-land!"

"Hanza has been at war with the red line for centuries; there I couldn't tell the first person I saw that we're going to the communists. I had to think of something"

"Without lies you can't do anything or what?"

"The gate is behind the *Sportivnaya*, I've always said that. The *Sportivnaya* is the last station of the red line, in front of the broken down metro bridge. I can't change that fact"

"And how are we supposed to get there? I have no papers!" She didn't let Leonid out of her sight for a second

Leonid smiled. "Trust me. You just have to talk to people. Long live corruption!" Without listening to any other complains he took Sasha's hand and dragged her behind him.

Even from a distance you could see the shining search lights of the second defensive line and the giant banners out of red fabric which were hanging from the ceiling. The air moved them so that Sasha almost believed to see two red waterfalls in front of her. Was that a sign ...?

If it was right what she had heard about the line they would fill them with holes immediately when they got in range.

But Leonid stepped forward calmly and his self-confident smile on his lips. Like always. Around thirty meters in front of the border station the bright ray of the search light hit his chest. The musician put his instrument box on the ground and raised his arms. Sasha did the same thing.

Two guards enclosed who were sleepy and surprised. It didn't seem like somebody had ever approached this part of the border.

This time Leonid went with the higher ranking guard to the side before he could even ask for Sasha's documents.

He was whispering into his ear, strummed with the brass in his hand and the man returned in a better mood. The leader of the guard accompanied them past all posts in person, even put them on a waiting railcar and ordered the soldiers to drive them to the *Frunenskaya*.

They activated the lever and gasping for air the railcar started to move. Sasha looked at the faces of the people. Her father had told her they that they were their enemies but they didn't look special: Coats out of cotton, bleached caps with stars on it, fallen in bony cheeks ... They didn't have bright faces like the guards of Hanza, but instead in their eyes was a curiosity of young men. The inhabitants of the ring line didn't know about anything that. Also: Those two had no idea what had happened at the *Avtosavadsкая* almost ten years ago. Were these Sasha's enemies then? Could you even hate unknown people from your deepest regions of your heart?

The guards didn't dare to talk to the passengers.

Only the steady groaning was to be heard while they operated the lever.

"How did you do that?" Asked Sasha Leonid

"Hypnosis." He was winking with his eyes.

"And what are those documents of yours?" She looked at him distrusting. "How is it that they're letting you through everywhere?"

"There are different passports for different situations." He answered vague.

So that no one could hear them she had to move closer to Leonid. "Who are you?"

"An invisible watcher." He whispered.

If Sasha hadn't put her hand in front of her mouth the questions would have just rushed out of it. But now the soldiers were listening and even the sound of the lever had become more silent.

So she had to wait till the *Frunenskaya*, a dried up and bleached station which faded face had been covered in the red makeup of the flags. The mosaic on the ground was missing at some parts, the broad pillars had been gnawed on by the tooth of time and the rooms above her were like dark ponds.

Closely over the heads of the inhabitants black lamps on cables moved from one side to the other. They had been put between the pillars and not even one ray of the valuable light was being

wasted. It was surprisingly clean here: Even more cleaning ladies than usual hushed over the platform, scrubbing the ground from one side to the other.

The station was full of people, but when they look at Sasha they winced and acted if they were going about their business. Only when she had passed them they relaxed again and talked to each other silently. When she turned around the whispering disappeared and the people got back to their business. Nobody seemed to want to look into their eyes.

As if it had been something indecent.

Sasha looked at Leonid. "Strangers don't often go here?"

The musician shrugged his shoulders. "I am a stranger to them as well"

"Where do you live?"

"There were the people aren't so dead serious." He smiled. "Where they know that a human doesn't just survive on food alone. Where they haven't forgotten about yesterday even when it hurts"

"Tell me of the emerald city." Pleaded Sasha silently.

"Why are they ... Why are you hiding?"

"The rulers of the city don't trust the metro ..."

Leonid had to stop and barter with the guards at the tunnel entrance. Then he and Sasha dove into deep darkness.

With an iron lighter he lit the wick of an oil lamp and continued: "They mistrust them because the humans in the metro are gradually losing their humane appearance. Also there are still people here who started that terrible war. They don't even want to admit that to their best friends. The people of the metro won't change. You can only fear them and keep them away from the city. You can only watch them. If they would know of the emerald city they would consume it and spit it out again like they do it with everything they get their hands on. The paintings of the old masters would burn. Paper would burn and all that's on it. The starved building of the university would break down. The only society that has reached peace and harmony would be destroyed. The big ark would sink. And nothing would remain"

Sasha felt hurt. "Why do you all think that we can't change?"

"Not all believe that." Leonid gave looked at her with his head sideways.

"Some try to do something"

"They don't seem to try very hard." Sasha sighed.

"Not even the old man knew of them"

"Many have heard it." He said mysterious.

"You mean ... The music?" Guessed Sasha.

"You're one of those who want to change us? But how?"

"To force something beautiful on you." Joked the musician.

The adjutant pushed the wheelchair while Homer hastened after them. He almost couldn't keep up and turned around to his giant guard from time to time.

"If you don't know the story." Said Melnik, "I'll tell you. If at the *Borovizkaya* it won't be him at least talk to your cellmate about something ... Hunter was one of the best warriors of the order, a hunter like out of a book.

His scent was like the one of an animal and he was behind our cause all the way. He was the one that tracked down the dark ones about one and a half years ago. At the *VDNCh*. Ever heard of it?"

"At the *VDNCh*?" Repeated Homer sunken in thoughts. "Yes invulnerable mutants that were able read minds and turn invisible, right? I thought they had been called >Darks'<?"

"Whatever ... He was the first one to go after the rumors and raise alarm, but back then we didn't have enough men and time. So I refused support. I had other things to do."

Melnik moved the rest of his right arm. "Hunter went alone. When we last had contact he told me that they could control the wills of others and make everybody feel true terror. He was an unbelievable, yes a born warrior. He alone was worth as much as a whole unit"

"I know." Mumbled Homer.

"He had no fear. He had sent that young boy to us with a message that he had gone up to settle his score with the dark ones. When he wouldn't be back we should come to the decision that the danger had been greater then we had thought. He disappeared. We thought he was dead. We've a system of messages: Who is alive, is obliged to notice us every week. Obligated! He had been silent for over one year"

"What happened to the dark ones?"

Melnik smiled oblique. "We straightened the entire area with Semertsch-missiles. We haven't heard anything from the dark ones from that moment. No letter. No call. The exits at the *VDNCh* were closed and life returned to normal.

The boy didn't make it mentally but as far as I know they brought him back to how he was before. He's living a normal life and he even married. Hunter on the other hand ...I have him on my conscience". He rolled over a steel ramp down the stairs, scared a few of the librarians and waited for the air gasping old man and added: "You shouldn't tell that last part to your cellmate"

One minute later the entire group had reached the cell. Melnik ordered the cell door to stay closed. He leaned on the adjutant, fletched his teeth, rose up and looked through the peephole. He just needed a fracture of a second.

Then as if he had made the whole way from the *Arbatskaya* on foot, Melnik fell down into his chair and put his fainting look over Homer and told him his verdict:

"That's not him"

"I don't think that the music belongs to me." Said Leonid serious all of a sudden. "I don't even know how it comes to my head. I just feel like sometimes I'm like the riverbed. I am just the instrument. If I want to play I put the flute to my lips. But it's like somebody else is putting *me* to its lips and the melody is created ..."

"That's inspiration." Whispered Sasha.

He spread his arms. "Whatever it is, it doesn't belong to me but comes from the outside. I've no right to keep it inside. It wanders through the people. I begin to play and see how they gather around me: Rich and poor, those covered in wounds and those shining of fat, crazy ones, cripples, significant people, just all. My music moves something in them and all can tune in on the sound. I am like the tuning fork. I can bring them to harmony, even if it's just for a short time. They sound is so pure. They sing ... How am I supposed to describe that?"

"You're explaining it very good." Said Sasha sunken in thoughts. "I've noticed it as well"

"I have to try and plant it in them. In one it decays but in another the seed blossoms. I am not rescuing anyone, I can't do that."

"But why won't the inhabitants of the emerald city help us? And you, why don't you want to admit that you are doing exactly that?"

Leonid was silent until they had reached the *Sportivnaya*. The station was just as empty and bleak, overly ceremonial and cheerless as the others. And this one had even lower hanging ceiling, narrower and more burdensome halls.

It smelled of smoke, poorness and pride. A shadow attached himself to their steps immediately. Wherever they went he followed them up to exactly ten steps.

The girl pushed on but the musician held her back.

"Not now. We have to wait." He found room on a stone bench and opened the locks of his flute box.

"Why?"

"You can only open the door at a specific time"

"When?" Sasha's view turned to the station's clock.

If it was on time they had only twelve hours.

"I'll tell you soon enough"

"You're delaying everything!" She stared at him and distanced herself. "Sometimes you promise to help me and sometimes you try to delay me!"

"Yes." He breathed in and looked into her eyes. "I want to delay you"

"Why? For what?"

"I am not playing with you. Believe me, I would've found somebody to play by now, I don't get a no that fast. I think I am in love. By god, how banal that sounds ..."

"You don't believe that in your life! You just say that, that's all"

His voice was still dead serious. "There is a method to tell the difference between love and a game"

"When you lie to get someone is that love?"

"You can always change the rules of a game. Love just destroys your entire former life. True love doesn't care for circumstances"

"I don't have a problem with that. I have never had a life. Now lead me to the gate"

Leonid looked at the girl with his heavy eyes, leaned against the pillar and crossed his arms in front of his chest. A few times he breathed in as if he wanted to tell Sasha no, but then he breathed out again without saying one word.

Finally he got smaller and admitted: "I can't go with you. They won't let me go back"

"What does that mean?"

"I can't go back to the ark. The banished me from it"

"Banished? Because of what?"

"Because of a certain thing." He turned away and spoke very silently even though Sasha was just standing just one step next to him. She still couldn't understand everything.

"It ... was a personal story. With one of the head librarians.

He made me look like a fool in front of others ...

In the same night I got drunk and burned down the library. The librarian burnt with the rest of his entire family. It was a pity that they had gotten rid of the death sentence, I would have deserved it. Instead they banished me. For life.

For me there is no way back"

Sasha's hands became fists. "Why did you lead me here then? Who did you have to burn my time too?"

"You could try to ring." Mumbled Leonid.

"Second side tunnel, twenty meters from the gate there is a marking of white paint. Exactly under it, at the same height as the ground there is the button of a bell. You have to ring three times short, three times long and three times short, that is the signal for returning watchers ..."

Leonid helped Sasha to pass the three guard posts and then he went back to the station. As a goodbye he wanted to put an old assault rifle into her hand, which he had gotten somewhere, but Sasha didn't want it. Three times short, three times long, three times short was all she needed. And a lamp.

The tunnel behind the *Sportivnaya* made a dark, silent impression at first and so every guard post that passed reminded her more and more of a small fortress.

Sasha wasn't afraid. She just thought about one thing: Soon she would see the doorstep to the emerald city.

And if the city wasn't real she didn't have to be afraid any longer.

The side tunnel was there where Leonid had said it would be. A damaged grid was in front of the entrance but it was big enough for Sasha to slip through. After a few hundredth feet she saw the steel wall of a security door which made an eternal and unshaken impression.

Sasha counted forty feet and indeed: She saw the white markings on the wet and at the same parts sweating wall out of the darkness. She found the bell immediately. She searched with her hands for the button and put another look at the watch that Leonid had given her. She had made it!

She had gotten there in time! She just had to wait another few moments and she closed her eyes ...

Three times short.

Three times long.

Three times short.

Who's talking? (Chapter 17)

Artyom lowered his glowing barrel. Sweat and tears burnt in his eyes. But the back of his hand only hit his gasmask. Should he just rip it off? What difference did it make now?

What difference did it make now...

The screams of the infected had apparently been louder than the salves of the rifles. How else was could he explain it to himself that more and more had streamed out of the wagon and stormed into the hail of led? Hadn't they heard the thunder, hadn't they not understood that they were executed in their close area? For what had they hoped? Or hadn't they cared at all?

In front of the entrance to the train platform was covered for meters with bloated corpses. Some were still twitching; yes even some of them were moaning on this terrible graveyard like hill. The pest had spilled out. Those who were still in the wagon had cowered down in fear and hid from the bullets.

Artyom looked at the other marksmen. Was he the only one whose hands and knees were shivering? Nobody said a word and even the commander was silent. You could only here the sighing of the humans who were still in the overcrowded train, like they were cramped trying to suppress bloody coughing. Out of the morgue the last dying man cursed them: "You monsters ... Pigs ... I'm still alive ...

Can't stand it"

The commander looked for the unlucky until he found him, went to his knees and fired the rest of his clip of his magazine into the man until you could only hear an empty clicking sound and even then he pulled the trigger a few more times.

Then he rose up again, looked at his pistol and strangely cleaned it on his pants. "The rest of you: Stay calm!"

He screamed huskily. "Everybody who tries to leave the hospital without permission will get the same treatment"

"What are we supposed to do with the bodies."

Asked someone.

"Back into the train. Ivanenko, Aksyonov you do it!"

The stability had been renewed. Artyom could return to his seat again and try to find some sleep: Until the wake-up call there were still a few hours so he could make it till tomorrow ...

But it came differently.

Ivanenko made a step back, shook his head and said he refused to touch the in pus covered, half fallen apart bodies. Without hesitation the commander put his pistol at him, but he seemed to have forgotten that he was out of bullets, hissed hatefully and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened but a clicking sound. Ivanenko screamed and ran away.

Suddenly one of the soldiers raised his assault rifle coughing and rammed the bayonet with an oblique movement into the commander's back. The commander didn't drop down but turned his head slowly over his shoulder and looked at the attacker behind him.

"What are you doing you damn son of a whore?"

He asked him silently and surprised.

The other one screamed at him: "Soon you'll get rid of us like as well! There are no more healthy here! Today we kill them and tomorrow you throw us to them into the wagon!" The man moved the gun from one side to the other and tried to pull it out of the commander put didn't pull the trigger.

Nobody dared to intervene. Even Artyom who had made one step into the other direction had stopped. Finally the bayonet got out of his back. The commander tried to touch the wound, in vain. He fell to his knees, leaned on his hand and shook his head. It looked like he was fighting against sleep.

Nobody dared to shoot at the commander. Even the provocateur who had stabbed him stepped back afraid. Then he ripped his gasmask from his face and screamed over the entire station pass: "Brothers! Stop this torture! Let them go!"

They are going to die anyways! And we too! Aren't we humans?"

"Don't you dare ..." Hissed the commander still on his knees.

The marksmen started to discuss loudly. Suddenly one of the soldier fired the provocateur straight in his face so that he fell onto his back. He was laying right next to the other bodies. But it was too late: With a triumphal howling the infected streamed out of the train, ran stumbling on their thick legs, ripped the rifles out of the hands of the undecided guards and disappeared into all directions. Even the guards started to move: Some of them shot at the sick; others had already joined them and ran into the tunnels leading to the north. To the *Serpuchovskaya* and to the *Nagatinskaya*.

Artyom was still standing as if he was made out of stone and stared at the commander confused. He just refused to die. At first he was crawling on his hands and feet, then he stood up and started to stumble. It seemed that he had a certain goal.

"You'll be surprised." He mumbled. "It's not that easy to ... Me ..."

His glassy look stopped at Artyom. He looked at him as if he didn't recognize who he was and then he barked with the same tone as always: "Popov! Get me to the room of the radio operator!"

The guards at northern post have to close the door at all costs ..."

The commander leaned on Artyom's shoulder and both stumbled past the empty train, past the fighting humans and the mountains of trash until they finally reached the of the radio operator. The wound of the commander seemed to not have been fatal but he had lost a lot of blood. So his strength left him and he passed out.

Artyom put the chair in front of the door, took the microphone and dialed the number of the northern guard. The apparatus clicked, there was a rasping sound as if somebody was breathing exhausted and finally silence. It was too late.

He could no longer cut them off. But the *Dobryinskaya*, he had to warn them at least! He rushed to the telephone, pressed both buttons and waited a few seconds ...

Thank god, the apparatus was still working! At first he could only hear the whispering echo and then the ringing.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ... Six

Please god, let them answer! If they are still alive, if they aren't infected yet, let them answer, so that they could have a chance. Let somebody pick up the receiver before the infected reach the station ... Artyom would've sold his soul for it, if somebody would just pick up the receiver at the other end ...

Then the unimaginable happened. The seventh calling broke the silence; a croaking sound was to be heard, in the background a few shreds of words and then a breathless, broken voice cut through the static.

"*Dobryninskaya* here!"

The cell was plunged into half darkness but even the bit of light was enough to notice: The silhouette of this prisoner was too small and lifeless to be the brigadier. It looked like there was a puppet made out of hay behind the bars. The person had collapsed. Probably it was one of the guards, dead. But where was Hunter ...

"I almost thought you wouldn't come." It sounded the hollow from behind them. "In there it was too ... Narrow"

Melnik turned around so fast that Homer couldn't keep up. In the middle of the passage way to the station was the brigadier. His arms were crossed in front of his chest, as if he mistrusted them and feared to let them go.

Melnik's cheek twitched. "Is that you?"

"Still." Hunter cleared his throat strangely. If Homer wouldn't have known better he could've interpreted the sound as some kind of laugh.

"What's with you? With your face?" Probably Melnik wanted to ask something else entirely. With one gesture of his hand the guards distanced themselves.

Homer was allowed to stay.

"You're not in the best condition either." The brigadier cleared his throat again.

"Nothing special." Melnik made a grimace. "Just too bad that I can't hug you. The devil take ... How long we've searched for you!"

"I know. I had to ... Be alone for some time." Said Hunter in his typical way. "I ...didn't want to go back to the people. Wanted to disappear forever. But then I was afraid ..."

"What happened back then, with the dark ones? Is that from them?" Melnik pointed with his head at the violet scars on Hunter's face.

"Nothing happened. I wasn't able to destroy them."

He touched his scar. "I couldn't. They ... Broke me"

"Then you had been right back then." Said Melnik with unexpected intensity. "Forgive me! At the beginning I didn't think it was important and didn't believe you. Back then we ... You know it yourself. We found them and burnt them down. We thought you were no longer alive. And that they ... That's why I ... Them ... For you ... To the last!"

"I know." Said Hunter huskily. It must be hard for him to talk about it "They knew it would come to it. Because of me. They knew everything. The fate of every single one of us. If you knew against whom we had raised our hand back then! Back then he had smiled on us one more time. And we ... And I've judged them and you carried out the sentence.

That's how we are. The true monsters ..."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I got to them ... They showed my myself.

Back then it was like I was looking into a mirror and I saw everything for what it was. I understood everything about me. About humanity. Why everything had happened to us ..."

"What are you talking about?" Melnik stared at his comrade worried and looked hastily to the door. Did he regret that he had sent the guards away?

"I tell you, I have seen myself with my own eyes, like in a mirror. Not from the outside, but from the inside, what was behind the armor ... They brought it to the light.

The monster. I didn't see a man back then. And I had been afraid of myself. I had lied to myself ... Told myself that I am here to protect the people, to save them ... All lies!

Like a hungry animal I went for their throat. Even worse ... The mirror disappeared but this here ... This ... Remained. It awoke and didn't let me in peace. They thought I would kill myself after that. And yes: For what should I still live? But I didn't do it. I had to fight. At first alone so that no one could see it. Far away from the people. I thought I could punish myself so they didn't have to. I thought I could chase it away through pain ..." The brigadier touched his scars.

"But then I realized that I couldn't defeat it on my own. Again and again I forgot myself ... So I returned"

"Brainwashing." Said Melnik. "That's what they did to you"

"It doesn't matter! It is already over." Hunter took his hand from his face and his voice changed: Now it was again dull and lifeless.

"At least almost. The story is old. What happened, happened. No we're alone. We have to fight through ... But I'm not here because of that. At the *Tulskaya* there has been an outbreak of an epidemic. It could spread to the *Sevastopolskaya* and the ring. The air fever. The same as back then. Deadly"

Melnik gave him a distrusting look. "Nobody has told me anything about that"

"Nobody told anybody anything. They're cowards.

That's why they lie. And keep it to themselves.

They don't understand what they doing.

Melnik rolled closer to the brigadier. "What do you want from me?"

"You know that as good as I do. The threat has to be eliminated. Give me my tags. Give me men. Flamethrowers. We have to lock down the *Tulskaya* and clean it. If needed, the *Serpuchovskaya* and the *Sevastopolskaya* as well. I hope that it didn't get any further.

"To just cut out three stations, just in case?"

"To save the rest"

"After a massacre like that they will hate the order"

"Nobody is going to know about it. Because there won't be anybody left that could infect others ... Or have seen something"

"For such a heavy price?"

"Don't you understand? If we hesitate longer we won't be able to save anybody anymore. We heard of the epidemic too late. There is no other possibility to stop it. In two weeks the entire metro is a pest barrack and after one month a graveyard"

"I have to see for myself ..."

"You don't believe me, don't you? You think I've gone mad? Well believe what you want, I don't care. I go alone. Like always. But at least I go with a clear conscience"

Hunter turned away, without taking a single look at the frozen Homer and moved to the exit. His last words had hit *Melnik* like a harpoon and it was dragging him behind the brigadier.

"Wait! Take your tags!" Hastily Melnik took them out of the pocket of his uniform and gave hunter the simple disks. "I ... Approve"

The brigadier took the tags out of his bony hand, put them into his pocket, nodded his head silent and took a long look without closing his eyes.

He mumbled. "Come back. I am tired"

Hunter cleared his throat again in that strange way and said: "I on the other hand have never felt better"

Then he disappeared.

A long time Sasha didn't dare to ring again so that she wouldn't make the watchers of the emerald city angry.

They had probably heard her but needed more time to study here thoroughly. They hadn't opened the door which seemed to be rooted in the ground, but that must have meant that they were still discussing if they should let this stranger in who apparently had guessed the secret code on her first try.

What should she say when they opened the door?

Should she tell them of the epidemic at the *Tulskaya*? Would they risk influencing the story? What if they guessed her intentions right away like Leonid had done?

Should she admit to them what she hadn't even admitted to herself? Would Sasha even be able to melt their cold hearts? When they had already cured that terrible disease before why hadn't they sent a courier with the medicine to the *Tulskaya*?

Just because they were afraid of ordinary people?

Or did they hope that the disease would kill all the people in the metro?

Or in the end they were the ones who had created the disease ...

No! How could she even think about that? Leonid had said that the people of the emerald city were righteous and humane. That they didn't use the death sentence and didn't even imprison you. That in the midst of all their beauty there wasn't even one criminal.

Then why didn't they save these death candidates?

And why didn't they open the door?

She rang again. And again.

Behind the steel door it was as silent as if it was fake and a thousand tons of rock were behind it.

"They won't open"

Sasha turned around. About ten steps behind her was Leonid, crouched down, with tousled hair and a depressed face.

Sasha looked at him unbelieving. "Then you try it!

Maybe they have forgiven you? That's why you came with me or not?"

"There is nothing to forgive. There is nothing"

"But you've said ..."

"I lied. That isn't the entrance to the emerald city."

"Then where is it?"

"I don't know." He raised his arms. "Nobody knows"

"And why did they let you through all the posts?"

So you're no watcher? You did ... At the ring and the reds ... You're playing games again, yes? You told me about the city and you didn't want to!" She tried to get a look at his face, to get confirmation of her assumption.

Leonid was looking at the ground. "Back then I've dreamed about it myself. Have gathered rumors, read old books. I've been a hundredth times at this place. And there was the bell ... And I rang it for days. In vain"

"Why did you lie to me?" She approached him, her right hand reaching for her knife. "What have I done to you?"

Why have you done this?"

"I wanted to take you away from them." The knife confused the musician but instead of running away he sat onto the tracks. "I thought when you were alone with me ..."

"And why are you here now?"

"Hard to say." He looked up at her. "Probably I've realized that I've gone too far. After I sent you here ... I started thinking. The soul isn't born black. In the beginning it's clear and light shines through. It only gets darker over time. Spot after spot, every time when you forgave evil, tried to justify it and tell yourself that it's just a game. Then one day darkness has the upper hand. You only notice it rarely, it's hard to notice from the inside. But I knew that right here I am crossing a line from which on I'm going to be a different person. Forever. And that's why I'm here, telling you everything. Because you've earned it"

"Why are they all afraid of you? Why are they bowing down to you?"

"Not to me." Sighed Leonid. "To my father"

"What?"

"Does the name Moskwin tell you anything?"

Sasha shook her head. "No"

The musician made a sad smile. "You're probably the only one in the entire metro. Well my father is the big boss. The big boss of the red line. He gave me a diplomat passport so they would let me through everywhere. The name isn't that common and nobody wants to get into trouble. Only when somebody doesn't know it ..."

Sasha had stepped back and looked at him.

"And what are you watching? Did they send you because of that?"

"They threw me out. When daddy realized that no real man is going to become of me he no longer cared about me.

And now I'm bringing shame to his name." Leonid made a grimace.

"Did you two argue?"

"How can you argue with the great comrade Moskwin?

He is a monument! They banished and cursed me.

You know I've been a fool in Christi since I was a child. I only liked beautiful paintings, playing the piano and reading books. That was my mother's fault because she had wanted a girl. When my father had realized that he had tried to get me interested in firearms and the party but it was already too late. Mother taught me how to play the flute and father drove it out of me again with his belt. He banished the professor who had taught me and put a Politruk at my side.

Everything in vain. I had already been corrupted to the core. I hate the red line, it was to ... Grey to me. I wanted a colorful life, wanted to play music and paint. So my father once let a mosaic be destroyed for educational purposes. With that I learnt that everything beautiful could perish. And he made me destroy it. And so I did. But while I did that I remembered every detail, even now I could still put it together ... And since that moment I hated my father"

"You can't say that!" Yelled Sasha horrified.

"I can." Leonid smiled. "Others are shot for it. That with the emerald city ... My professor had told me about it.

He had whispered it to me when I was still small.

And so I decided to find the entrance when I would be older. There had to be a place where for what I was for living made sense. Where all live was like back then. Where I wasn't a small, ugly no good, no white handed prince and no inheritor to the red line but an equal under equals"

"And you've never found that place." Sasha put away her knife. She had found the core of all his words.

"Because it doesn't exist"

Leonid shrugged with his shoulders. He stood up, went to the bell and rang it. "Probably it doesn't matter if somebody hears me on the other side. Probably it doesn't even matter if this place even exists. The main thing is that I *believe* that it exists somewhere. That someone hears me. And that I haven't earned the right yet so that they would open up.

"And that's enough for you?"

Again the musicians shrugged with his shoulders.

"It's always have been enough for the world, so it's enough for me"

Homer ran onto the train platform and looked around confused. Hunter was nowhere to be seen. Behind him Melnik rolled out of the prison, grey and beat down as if the brigadier had received not just his tags but also his from him soul.

Why had he ran away again and to where? Why had he left Homer? He wouldn't ask Melnik. Homer was trying to get out of his way before he remembered him. So Homer acted like he wanted to catch up to the brigadier and stepped away hastily. Waiting for a yell from behind. But Melnik didn't seem to be interested in him anymore.

Hunter had said that he needed Homer so that he wouldn't forget his former self. Had he lied? Maybe he had just tried to avoid a fighting polis in his rage which he could easily have lost and what would've blocked his way to the *Tulskaya*. His abilities and his killer instinct were paranormal but nobody could dare to storm an entire station. If that was true then Homer had served his purpose by accompanying Hunter to polis and now he had been pushed from the stage.

And not very soft.

So he had taken part in the end of the story, he had taken part in the final act that the brigadier, or whoever played the main role.

What were these tags? A passport? An insignia of power? A black mark? Forgiveness for all the sins that Hunter wanted to load onto his soul? Whatever it was: The brigadier had ripped the tags and his approval out of Melnik's hand.

The brigadier's hands were free to act. And he hadn't planned to confess to anyone, that what had won inside of him, that monster that had appeared from time to time had won.

What would happen at the *Tulskaya* when Hunter would get through to it? Would he be able to quench his thirst when he drowned the entire station in blood, yes even two or three? Or would that what he was carrying inside of him grow till it knew no more bounds?

Who of the two Hunters had Homer accompanied?

The one that consumed the people or the one who fought against the monster? Which one had fallen to the ground at the fight of phantoms at the *Poliskaya*? And who had asked for Homers help after that?

Yes, maybe Homer had another destiny: To kill him.

Was it maybe the small remnants of the old brigadier who had asked the old man for it out of despair?

Did he see it all with his own eyes full of horror while the other hunter killed?

He couldn't take his own life so the brigadier had chosen his henchman. A henchmen who you didn't have to ask for anything, who had enough intuition to realize it on his own and smart enough to deceive the other Hunter. The second one who was getting more monstrous day after day and didn't want to die.

But even though if Homer had the courage and waited for the right moment to kill Hunter when he wasn't looking, what would that accomplish? He wouldn't be able to stop the epidemic. So was there nothing he could do but keep watching and writing down?

Homer had guessed where the brigadier had gone. That almost mystical order, which apparently Melnik and Hunter were members of. Rumors said that they had their base at the *Smolenskaya*, the underground of polis. Its legionaries protected the metro and its inhabitants from all dangers that whole armies of common stations couldn't deal with.

Nobody knew more about this mystical organization. The old man couldn't even think about entering the *Smolenskaya*, it was without an entrance like the fortress Alamut. But for what: To meet with the brigadier he just had to go back to the *Dobryninskaya*. And wait till fate brought Hunter there without stopping, at the place of his coming crimes, the end station of this strange story.

Should he allow him to settle his score with the infected and disinfect the *Tulskaya* and then act accordingly to his will? Homer had always thought that he had a different role: Not to shoot, but to give immortality, not to judge and to not get involved and give the heroes of his book the possibility to act on their own. But when you're standing in blood up to your knees it seemed impossible to not get dirty yourself. Now it was lucky that the girl had left with this smart guy. At least he had spared Sasha from

seeing the horrible massacre with her own eyes; even she couldn't have stopped it. He looked at the clock of the station: When the brigadier stuck to his schedule then Homer had only a few hours. Enough time to be alone. And ask polis for to dance with him one more time.

"And how do you want to earn the right to get in?"

Asked Sasha.

"Well ..." Leonid hesitated. "It's stupid, I know, but ... With my flute. I thought I could redeem myself with it.

You know, music is the first art to disappear. It only exists as long the instruments sounds and in the next moment it is gone without a trace. But nothing grips people as strong as music, nothing hurts so deep and heals so slowly. When somebody touches you with a melody it stays with you for your whole life. It is the extract of beauty. I thought I could heal the wounds of the soul with it.

"You're strange"

"But now I've realized that someone who is sick can't heal sick people. If I don't tell you everything I can never stop them"

She gave him a sharp look. "Do you think that I'm going to forgive you? Your lies, your cruelty?"

"Will you give me one last chance?" Leonid smiled at her. "You've said that we all deserve one"

Sasha was silent. She had gotten more careful.

This time she wouldn't get swept away by one of his strange games.

She had just thought that he was truly sorry and his words to be true and now ... Again?

"Out of everything that I've told you one thing is true.

There is a cure." He said.

"Medication?" Sasha turned around; again ready to be lied to again.

"No medication. No pills, no vaccine. A few years ago at our line, the *Preobraschenskaya*, we had a similar disease"

"Why doesn't hunter know of it?"

"There was no epidemic. The disease went away by itself. The virus can't stand radiation. Something happens to it, I think it stops dividing ... Well you can stop the disease even with small doses. We found it out. You don't need anything else. The solution of the problem, so to speak is on the surface"

Shivering she took his hand. "Really?"

"Really." he put his hand in hers. "We don't need to do anything else but get in contact with them and tell them"

She let go of his hand. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? That's just! How many people die up till now!"

"After just one day? None ... I didn't want you to stay with this killer. I wanted to tell you from the beginning, but I wanted to trade this secret for you"

"You've traded me against the life's of others!"

Hissed Sasha. "I am not worth ... One of them!"

The musician raised one eyebrow. "I would trade mine"

"You don't get to decide that! Stand up! We need to go back. And that fast. As long as he didn't already make it to the *Tulskaya* ..." Sasha put her finger on her watch, whispered something and sighed. "Just three more hours!"

"Why? We can use the telephone. I'll let them call Hanza and explain everything. Then we don't have to run to there ourselves. We wouldn't make it anyway ..."

"No!" Sasha shook her head. "No! They won't believe it. They wouldn't believe us. I have to go to him myself and tell him. To explain to him ..."

"And what then?" Said Leonid envious. "Then you give in to him just out of fun?"

"That's none of your business." She answered. But she immediately knew who she could control this man who had fallen in love the easiest: "I don't want anything from him. But without him I don't have any chance to get through"

"It seems my lies have been a good teacher"

Answered Leonid with a slight smile. Then he sighed. "Ok, let's go"

They reached the *Sportivnaya* in half an hour: The guards had changed and Leonid had to explain again how a girl without a passport could've crossed the border to the red line.

Sasha looked nervous at her watch and Leonid at her, you could see that he was torn from one side to the other.

He was fighting with himself.

On the train platform, thin recruits put a few bundles of wares on an old, stinking railcar, drunk workers acted like they were stopping a leak and a few children in uniforms sang a children's song. In five minutes they had stopped Leonid and her to see their passports a few times and the control at the tunnel to the *Frunzenskaya* took especially long.

Time was running out. Sasha didn't even know if they could make it in the two hours that were left of their ultimatum anymore. Nobody could stop Hunter and it could be possible that he had already started with his operation.

The soldiers had finished loading the railcar, the railcar spit out smoke, started moving and came closer.

Leonid made a decision.

"I don't want to let you go." He said. "But I can't stop you. I thought if I made sure that you came too late you wouldn't need anything there anymore. But I've understood that I can't get you that way. Being honest is the worst way to get a woman, but I don't want to lie anymore. Choose yourself with whom you want to be"

The musician ripped the border guard the wonder passport out of his hand and punched him surprisingly fast at the chin. Then he took Sasha's hand and dragged her with him onto the railcar which was leaving at that moment. When he driver looked around he looked surprised into the barrel of a revolver.

Leonid was laughing loudly. "Dad would be proud of me now! How often did I have to hear that I'm just wasting my time and that I'll never be something with my stupid flute! And finally when I act like a real man he isn't here!

What a tragedy!" Then he ordered the driver "Jump!" He even though they were going fast dropped to the ground and rolled behind in the darkness screaming. Leonid started to throw their cargo overboard, with every bundle that fell onto the tracks the motor roared louder. The old search light in front the railcar threw a secure and flickering light forward that maybe reached a few meters. Screaming like somebody was scraping on glass, rats were chased away by the wheels and a surprised tunnel guard jumped to the side at the last moment and in the distance they could hear the hysterical howling of the alert siren. The tunnel segments went by them faster and faster, Leonid brought the last bit of speed out of the machine.

They flew past the *Frunzenskaya*. The unknowing guards stormed away like the rats and only as the railcar had left the station far behind angrily the siren of the *Sportivnaya* howled alarm.

"Now it has started!" Screamed Leonid. "We got to make it to the ring line at the next side tunnel! There is a huge defense line where they're going to try and stop us. We drive on along the line to the center!"

He knew about what they had to be afraid off: Out of the side tunnel that had lead her to the red line, the search light of a diesel powered railcar hit them. The tunnel was only a few feet away from them and it was too late to stop. Leonid pressed the rough pedal to the metal and Sasha closed her eyes ... It was only left to hope that they hadn't changed the tracks to theirs yet, if they would have a frontal collision with the other vehicle. A machine gun thundered and bullets flew only a few centimeters over their heads. The smell of something burning and the hot air surrounded them, the other motor roared and went silent again. The two vehicles had missed each other like out of a miracle.

As soon as the railcar had passed the tunnel the other railcar followed their trail. While they drove to the *Park kultury*, swinging from one side to the other, the diesel powered railcar drove into the other direction.

They still had a head start. To the next station it would be enough, but what then? The railcar got slower, the tunnel was going uphill. Leonid turned to Sasha. "The next station is *Park kultury*, it's almost directly under the surface.

The *Frunzenskaya* on the other hand is fifty meters below it. We got to get over that hill and then we're going to pick up speed again!"

And it happened that way: When they had reached *Park kultury* they had gotten faster again. The station was old and prideful, with a high ceiling but somehow lifeless, dark and only sparsely inhabited. Croaking a siren raised its husky voice. Behind defense lines made out of bricks you could see many heads. Assault rifles barked angry. But too late, they couldn't do anything.

"Maybe we'll even stay alive!" Leonid laughed.

"With a bit of luck ..."

They saw how something that looked like a spark in the darkness at first, then it got brighter and closer. It was the search light of diesel powered railcar! The ray out light was like a spear it had raised in front of it, as if it wanted to ram it into the old railcar t. It ate the distance between them. Again machine guns were fired and bullets went past them howling.

"Not long now! There is the *Kropotkinskaya*!"

The *Kropotkinskaya*, divided into squares, full of tents, run down and unclean. Certain portraits on the wall which had been painted a long time ago and were already smeared. Flags and nothing but flags, so many that they formed a continuous red band like frozen blood in vein out of stone.

This time it was a grenade launcher that threw its cargo after them. A hail of marble splinters rained down onto the railcar and one of them hit Sasha's leg without leaving a deep wound. They had dropped a barricade from the ceiling but the railcar just broke through it while it almost went off the rails.

The diesel powered railcar got closer and closer:

Its motor was a lot more powerful and moved the colossus that had been reinforced with steel without any problems. Sasha and Leonid laid down flat so that they could find cover behind the low metal railing and get out of the way of the never ending hail of bullets.

In a few moments the bumpers of both vehicles would hit each other and they would board their railcar ...

Sasha looked at Leonid frantic, who had seemed to have lost his mind because he was suddenly undressing himself.

In front of them was the defense line, sandbags and tank stoppers made out of steel: The goal of their escape.

Now two search lights would be pointed on them and two heavy machine guns. They would hit them like a hammer an anvil.

Just one more minute and it would all be over.

Salvation (Chapter 18)

The group was a few dozen meters long. They were the best fighters of the *Sevastopolskaya*, Denis Michailovitsch had chosen every single one of them carefully. Their small helmet lamps flickered in the darkness of the tunnel and suddenly the commander thought that the whole formation looked like giant swarm of glowworms that was flying through the night.

A warm and good smelling summer night at the *Krim*, over the cypress and near the soft sounding ocean. This place to where the colonel hoped he would go after his death ...

A pleasant shiver went over him but at the same time he shook himself, put on his dark look and yelled at himself. Yes, even he had started to get weak. It was his age!

He let the last soldier pass him, opened his steel cigarette box and took one of his last self made cigarette out of it, smelled at it and lit his lighter.

It was a good day. He still had luck, everything happened as planned. They had passed the *Nagornaya* without any casualties. One single soldier had disappeared for a moment but he had returned to the column. All were happy:

To go to war was easier then to wait for eternity and not knowing what was going on.

Also Denis Michailovitsch had allowed them to get a good night sleep before the fight. Just he himself hadn't been able to close one eye.

Fate had always just been a chain of coincidental events for him so the old fighter couldn't understand why someone could trust himself to it. Since he had gone to the small expedition to the *Kachovskaya* there had been no message from them. It was possible that even Hunter wasn't immortal.

What had he been thinking when he had sent the half crazy brigadier and the old story telling old man? He couldn't wait anymore.

The plan was that the main part of their fighters would go through the *Nachimovski prospect*, *Nagornaya* and the *Nagatinskaya* to the southern gate of the *Tulskaya* and take the station by surprise. He had men on the surface as well. Their orders were to get into the tunnels through the vents and eliminate the guards if there were still some. Finally they would open the gate for the main force. It was all about a question of military strategy, it didn't matter who was occupying the station.

They had needed three days to locate the vents and excavate them. Now some stalkers were with them to go down and let them in. They would only need a few more hours.

A few more hours, then it would all be decided and Denis Michailovitsch's thoughts were his own again. He would be able to sleep and eat again. The plan was easy, carefully planned and without any gaps. Still, the colonel had a strange feeling in his stomach and his heart was racing like eighteen years ago when he had went to his first fight at the village in the mountains ...

The hot air of his self made cigarette calmed him down a bit. Finally he threw away the rest, put his mask on and ran behind the brigade with hastily steps.

A short while after that they were standing in front of the steel door. Now they could catch their breath. Denis Michailovitsch would use the time before the storm to go through different strategies with his commanders. With one thing the old man had been right thought the colonel and smiled:

Why run at a fortress head on when you could open it from the inside? That was the story with the Trojan horse, from whom was that story again?

Denis Michailovitsch took a look at the geiger counter, radiation was low and he put off his gasmask. The officers followed his example and then the rest of the fighters.

They had earned a last breather!

There had always been gaffers at polis. Most were poor people that fought themselves through the dark stations and struggled for their daily meal. Now wandered with wide open eyes and open mouths through the galleries and halls.

And so almost no one paid attention to Homer while he made his rounds at the *Borovizkaya*, went with his hands over the narrow pillars of the *Alexandrovski sad*, torn from one side to the other and had even fallen in love with the chandeliers of the *Arbatskaya*.

Premonition had gripped his heart and didn't let him go: This was his stay at Polis. What happened in a few hours at the *Tulskaya* would shake his entire life. Yes, it may even mark his end. But he had decided: He would do what he had to do. He would allow Hunter to massacre the station and burn it down ... But then he would try and kill him. He knew that if the brigadier would suspect anything he would just break his neck immediately. But maybe he already died at the storm of the *Tulskaya* and that would mean that everything would already be over at that point. But everything would go after his plan; Homer would return to his lonely nest and fill the last white papers of his book, from the intrigue to the finally. The last would be that he shot Hunter in the back ...

Was he able to do it? Would he have the courage?

Even thinking about it made Homer's hands shiver.

Calm down, calm down. Everything would be solved by itself, now wasn't the right time for those thoughts ...

But that didn't make him any less nervous.

It had been his luck that the girl had disappeared!

Homer didn't know where her adventure had led her. How had he been able to drive her into this lion's cage?

His over exaggerated ambition of an author had been the cause of that and apparently he had forgotten that she wasn't a creature of his fantasy. Homer's novel had turned out differently from what he had thought. He had loaded too much on himself. How would he even be able to get it to the people? He didn't even have space for the crowd of people who was passing the old man. Also his novel shouldn't have become a big mass grave with meter long lists of names in front of his eyes. Writing made off bronze letters which didn't tell you anything about the faces of the dead.

No it was impossible! His already with holes riddled memory wouldn't be able to take all this people on board. The sweaty face of the merchant who was selling candy nor the pointy face of the girl who was giving him a bullet. The smile of her mother, bright as a Madonna or the sticky smile of the soldier who had just passed her. The deep wrinkles in the faces of the beggars or the wrinkles of the smile of the thirty year old woman ...

Who of them was violent, who was a scrooge, a thief, a traitor, a lively one, a prophet, a righteous one, who didn't care and who hadn't decided about it yet?

All of that Homer would never know. He didn't know what the merchant was really thinking while he looked at the girl, how to interpret the smile of the mother that had been lit by the look of the soldiers. Nor what job the old man had had before his legs had stopped working. It wasn't in Homer's power to decide how had the right to be in his story and who didn't deserve it. Six milliards of people annihilated, six milliards of people!

Was it a coincidence that only a few thousands had been able to rescue themselves?

Train operator Serov which place Nikolai had taken over had looked at life like at a soccer game. Humanity had lost, he used to tell Nikolai but both of us are still running around.

Why do you think is that? Because it is still nil-nil in our life, that's why! The referee had given us more time.

Till the final whistle we have to find out why we are here and finish our last things, get everything out of ourselves, then we make the last pass and flew towards the shining goal ... He had been a mystery, old Serov. Homer had never asked the soccer fan if he had already shot his goal. But he had been

reassured that he, Nikolay Ivanovitsch Nikolayev was still able to settle his score. And from Serov he had been convinced that nobody was in the metro out of pure coincidence.

But it was completely impossible to write about all of them! Was it even worth a try? In this moment Homer saw one face in the thousands of unknown ones. Exactly the one he had expected the least.

Leonid threw away his coat, pulled his pullover over his head and finally his white t-shirt. He moved the shirt like a flag from one side to the other; not caring for the bullets that rushed through the air all around them. Something strange had happened: The diesel powered railcar started to fall behind and the fortress in front of them didn't open fire like they had thought.

"My father would kill me now!" Said Leonid after he had stopped the railcar in front of the tank stoppers. The brakes were howling.

"What are you doing? What are we doing.?" Asked Sasha, still out of breath. She didn't know how they had been able to stay out of harm's way at this race.

"We surrender!" He laughed. "That is the tunnel to the *Bibliotek imeni Lenina*, it's the border to polis. We are now deserters."

Guards ran to them and ordered them to get down from the railcar. Then when they opened Leonid's passport they exchanged a few looks, put the handcuffs back and lead them to the station. There they brought them to the hall of the guards. The soldiers were whispering to each other and looked at them respectful, they left the room to inform the leaders of the station.

Leonid got comfortable in one of the scratched armchairs. Soon after he jumped up, looked through the open door and waved at Sasha. "They are even sloppier then at the red line." He said. "Nobody is guarding us"

They slipped out of the guard room, walked slowly along the corridor but got faster and faster until they finally started running. Hand in hand, so they wouldn't get lost in the crowd of people. A little bit later they heard the first whistles in behind their backs but to disappear in this giant station was easy, here even more people were around them than at the *Pavelezkaya*. Not even in her visions off the surface she could have imagines such a crowd! And it was so bright here. Just like on the surface. Sasha put her hand in front of her eyes and looked only through a small gap between her fingers.

Wherever she looked, she saw wonderful things, faces of stone, pillars and if not for Leonid she would have let go of his fingers, stumbled and got lost. Some day she would return to here she promised herself. Some day ...

"Sasha?"

She turned around and looked at Homer, he was looking at her afraid, angry and surprised. She smiled: Yes, she had missed the old man!

"What are you doing here?" He didn't have to ask the two young people that stupidest question out of all.

"We want to the *Dobryninskaya*!" She answered out of breath. They now ran slower so the old man could keep up with them.

"That's madness! You can't go there ... I won't allow it!"

But none of Homer's arguments he told them while he was gasping for air could convince them.

When they had reached the entrance of the defense line at the *Borovizkaya* it seemed that nobody had informed the border guards of their escape.

"I am here on orders of Melnik. Let me through immediately." Said Homer to the officer on duty. He wanted to open his mouth but found no words, saluted the old man and moved out of the way.

When the post had sunken into darkness, Leonid asked politely: "You did lie, or not?"

"And?" growled Homer.

"The important part is that you do it convincingly" said Leonid. "Then only pros realize it"

"Stay away with your teachings!" Homer's forehead got wrinkles and he switched his lamp on and off a few times because its rays had gotten weaker.

"We're going to the *Serpuchovskaya*, but I won't let you go any further!"

"That's not the important thing." Said Sasha.

"There is a cure!"

"What?" Homer stopped, had to cough and looked at Sasha almost afraid. "Really?"

"Yes! Radiation!"

"The virus can be neutralized through radiation." Said Leonid.

"But a virus is like a hundredth, no a thousand times more resistant to radiation than a human! And your immune system is weakened by radiation too." Homer lost his control and turned to Leonid: "What did you tell her? Why did you drag her here? Don't you know what is going to happen there! Nobody, not I or you can stop it! Take her with you and hide at a secure place! And you ..." He turned to Sasha. "How could you believe him ... That pro!" He spat out his last words full of contempt.

"Don't fear for me." Answered the girl silently. "I know how I can stop Hunter. He has two sides ... And I've witnessed both of them. The one wants to see blood and the other wants to save lives"

Homer put his hands over his head. "What are you talking about? There are no more sides, just one single monster in human form. Maybe a year ago ..."

Hastily the old man told him off the conversation between Melnik and Hunter but Sasha couldn't be convinced.

The longer she listened to Homer the surer she got that she had been right. She searched for words to explain it to the others: "It's like that. The killer inside of him betrays the other. He tells the other one that he doesn't have a choice.

The other one is thirsty for blood and the other one by his longing to save people ... That's why Hunter wants to get to the *Tulskaya* so badly, because both of his halves drag him there! And I have to separate them from each other. As soon as he has the choice to save without killing ..."

"My god! He won't even listen to you! What is it that still drives you?"

"Your book" Sasha smiled at him. "I know that it's not over yet. The end isn't written yet"

"Have you lost your mind? What foolish talk"

Mumbled Homer desperately. "Just why did I tell you of it?"

He grabbed Leonid's arm. "Young man, at least you ... I beg of you, I know that you're not a bad man and you didn't lie with bad intentions. Take her with you. That's what you want isn't it? You're both young and beautiful. You should live! She can't go there, you understand? And you too.

There ... Is going to be a terrible massacre. And none of your lies are going to stop anyone from ..."

"It wasn't a lie." Answered the musician polite.

"Should I give you my word?"

Homer stopped. "Well I would like to believe you.

But Hunter ... You've only seen him for a short time.

Leonid cleared his throat. "But heard more than enough about him."

"But with what do you want to stop him? With your flute? Or do you think that he's going to listen to the girl?"

Something controls him ... Something that no longer listens to anything else”

Leonid turned to Hunter and said: “Actually I fully agree with you. But she asked me for it. And as a gentleman ...” He winked to Sasha.

“Don’t you understand? this isn’t a game!” Homer looked at the girl pleading, and then at Leonid.

“I know.” said Sasha, seriously.

And the musician added calmly: “Everything is a game”

If Leonid was really Moskwin’s offspring it was possible that he knew something about the epidemic that Hunter didn’t know, or didn’t want to tell them. Homer thought Leonid was a liar, but what if the fever could be fought with radiation? Against his strong will and common sense the old man tried to find proof for this theory. Hadn’t he wished exactly for this a few days ago? Was at the end of the day the blood in his mouth and nausea just the symptoms of radiation sickness? The dose which he had gotten from the march over the *Kachovskaya* line must have been high enough to get rid of any infection.

How easily he had let himself be lead astray!

If it was right, what did that mean for the *Tulskaya*?

What did that mean for Hunter? Sasha hoped that she could make him stop. And she really seemed to have a strange power of the brigadier. But inside of him were two antagonists: The one may have thought about the chain the girl had tried to put him on that it felt like soft silk and for the other it had burnt like glowing iron. Who of the two would be in command of Hunter’s body in the all deciding moment?

This time the *Polyanka* had no pictures ready for them, whether for him nor for Sasha or Leonid. The station seemed empty and dead. Was that a good or a bad sign?

Maybe it was just the movement of the air that blew through the tunnel. Blowing away all hallucinogenic gasses.

Maybe Homer had made a grave mistake and there was no more future the *Polyanka* could show him.

“What does emerald mean?” asked Sasha suddenly.

“An emerald is a green shimmering diamond.” Said Homer confused. “Emerald just means green”

“Strange.” said the girl sunken in thoughts. “That means that the emerald city really exists ...”

“What are you talking about?” said Leonid.

“Oh just ... You know.” She looked at the musician again. “I am going to search for it now, your city. And some day I am going to find it”

Homer shook his head; he didn’t believe Leonid when he had said that he was sorry.

Sasha had been sunken in thoughts the whole time and again and again she had whispered to herself and a few times she had sighed. Then she looked at Homer searching:

“Have you written down what happened with me?”

“I ... Am working on that”

She nodded her head. “Good.”

At the *Dobryninskaya* something was cooking.

Hanza had doubled their guards and the silent and dark soldiers at the entrance held their ground and refused to let Homer and the others through. The notes of the musician nor simple reasoning could impress them. Finally he had an epiphany: he ordered them to connect him to Andrey Andreyevitsch.

After a long half hour finally the radio operator stumbled to them rolling a thick cable behind him. Homer talked into the apparatus threatening; he said they were the first of the troop of the order. This halfway true statement was enough that they were lead through the station right away.

In the middle hallway it was hot as if somebody had pumped all the air out of the station. Even that it was late didn't seem to bother anyone because everybody was on their legs.

Finally they stood in the greeting room of the commander of the *Dobryninskaya*.

He welcomed them, sweating and run down, with dark eyes and an unpleasant smell. The adjutant was nowhere to be seen. Andrey Andreyevitsch looked around nervous when he didn't see Hunter and he grunted: "When are they going to arrive?"

"Soon." promised Homer.

"At the *Serpuchovskaya* a riot is in progress." The commander wiped over his face and walked from one end of the greeting room to the other. "Somebody told them about the epidemic. Nobody knows for what they should be afraid of and now they are saying that gasmask don't help"

"That's true." Said Leonid.

"At one of the southern tunnels that lead to the *Tulskaya* a complete set of guards have left their posts.

Cowardly pigs! In the second tunnel that leads to the train with the people from the sect, they are still standing even though these fanatics have started a siege and are screaming something of a judgment day. And at my own stations hell can rise up at any moment. Where are they?

They are our last hope!"

Suddenly you didn't hear the loud cursing in the station anymore. Somebody yelled and the barking sounds of the guards joined in. After nobody answered Andrey Andreyevitsch he pressed himself back into his office, a little bit later they heard how the bottle neck clanged against the drinking glass. As if he had just waited till the commander would leave the station the red lamp of the telephone on top of the desk of the adjutant started to blink. It was the apparatus with the name of the *Tulskaya* on it.

Homer hesitated one, two seconds then he stepped to the desk, licked his dry lips and took a deep breath.

"*Dobryninskaya* here!"

"What am I supposed to say?" Artyom looked confusedly at the commander.

But he was still unconscious. The fainting eyes were like behind a curtain and rolled upwards again and again without a goal. From time to time he had to cough cramped.

The bayonet had penetrated his lung.

"Are you still alive?" He yelled into the receiver.

"The infected broke free!"

Then in this moment he realized that there nobody knew what was going on at the *Tulskaya*. He had to tell them from the start and explain.

From the train platform he heard the scream of a woman and then machine gun fire. The sounds slipped through the door slit, you couldn't escape it. Somebody on the other end of the line asked him something but he couldn't really understand him.

"You have to barricade the exit!" said Artyom hastily. "Shoot them down. And keep your distance!"

But they didn't even know how the sick looked like. How should he describe them: As swollen, exploded and stinking creatures? Those who had just been infected looked totally normal.

"Shoot them all down!" he said mechanically.

But what when he tried to leave the station himself? Would they fire at him too? Had he spoken his own death sentence? No he wouldn't get away anymore.

There were no more healthy here. Artyom suddenly felt terribly alone.

"Don't hang up." He pleaded.

Artyom didn't know about what he should talk with the unknown man at the end of the other line. He started with his in desperate tries to contact them and told him that he had feared that no station in the metro was still alive. He had thought it could have been that he had spoken with a future where nobody had survived. Even that he told the stranger.

He wasn't afraid to embarrass himself anymore. He didn't have to be afraid of anything anymore.

The main thing was that he could talk to somebody.

"Popov!" Suddenly he could hear the husky voice of the commander behind him. "Did you reach the northern post? Is ... The gate closed?"

Artyom turned around and shook his head..

"Idiot!" The commander spat blood. "Not useful for anything ... Listen up. Above us is an underground river.

I've placed something there ... When we blow it up this whole fucking station is going to be filled. The button is here, in the room of the radio operator. But you have to close the northern gate and look if the southern is still standing. The station has to be without a single leak, you understand? I am not drowning the entire metro. And when everything is done you tell me ... The connection to the guard post is still working?"

"Yes." Artyom nodded his head.

"And see to it that you get out in time." The commander tried to make a tortured smile and then he had to cough again. "It wouldn't be fair otherwise ..."

"And what's with you? You'll stay here?"

The commander's forehead got wrinkles. "Pull yourself together, popov! (I think it means something like boy). Everybody is born to do something. Mine is to drown those pigs. Yours to close the hatch and die from old age.

Understood!?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then be quick about it"

The telephone was silent now.

The gods of the telephone had to be thanked that Homer had understood most of the words of the soldier at the *Tulskaya*. He didn't hear his last sentences but most he had understood before the connection had stopped working.

The old man looked up. Above him was Andrey Andreyevitsch's heavy stomach. Under the arm pits of his blue uniform he could see dark spots and his fat hands were shivering. "What is going on there?" He said toneless.

"The situation is out of control." Homer swallowed. "Sent every available men to the *Serpuchovskaya*"

"I can't do that." Andrey Andreyevitsch pulled his Makarov out of his pocket. "They're in panic here. The few people I can rely on have gathered around the post of the ring line so that nobody of them runs away"

"You can calm them down. We have ... You can cure the fever. Through radiation. Tell them that ..."

"Radiation?" The commander made a grimace.

"And you believe that? Of course. You have my permission!" He saluted jokingly and closed the door loudly behind him and locked his office.

What now? Now Homer, Leonid and Sasha couldn't even run away from here anymore. By the way, where were they? Apparently they ran away!

Homer ran out to the corridor with one hand pressed on his racing heart. He ran onto the train platform and yelled their names. They had disappeared.

At the *Dobryninskaya* chaos reigned. Women, children and men with big sacks blocked the exits. Behind thrown down tents some kind of riffraff ran around, but nobody paid attention to them. Homer had seen something like that before: It would start with the soldier kicking all who stepped on their feet and in the end they would shoot at the unarmed people.

Suddenly a moaning went through the tunnel.

The noise and screaming got silent; instead you could hear surprised yells. Again this powerful sound sounded, like hundreds of horns of the roman legion that had wandered around for centuries and finally marched to the *Dobryninskaya* ...

Hastily the soldier pushed away the barricades out of the tunnel because something massive approached. An armored battalion. In front of the heavy skulls were mounted steel plates with only a small slit in them. On their backs where heavy machine guns.

Not even Homer had ever seen such a monster.

Faceless idols were on their armor which black as ravens.

They were wearing full-body suits out of Kevlar, gasmasks of an unknown kind and special military backpacks.

They didn't seem to belong to this time or to this world. The battalion stopped. The heavy armed arrivers from the train platform, not caring for the crowd of people and formed three rows next to each other. Then they turned like one man, like one machine with thundering steps to the tunnel of the *Serpuchovskaya*. Their powerful steps sounded over the conversations of the adults and the screaming of the children.

Homer ran behind them and tried to identify Hunter under the dozens of fighters. But all were built strong and the overalls sat on their shoulders as if they had only been made for them.

Everybody had the same, terrible weapons:

Flamethrowers and Wintores-rifles with suppressors. No insignias, no badges.

Maybe he was one of the first three in the line?

Homer passed the group, waved his hands and looked into the windows of the gasmasks. But he only got the same stiff look that didn't care for him. None of the arrivers reacted, nobody knew Homer. Was Hunter even under them?

He had to be. He just had to appear!

Homer couldn't see Sasha or Leonid on his way to the tunnel. Should their common sense have won and had the musician had taken the girl at a safe place?

Yes, hopefully they were waiting for this bloodbath to pass. Later Homer would try to barter with Andrey Andreyvitsch to get a solution, if he hadn't put a bullet between his eyes by then.

Like a thrown hammer the formation made its way through the crowd and marched with surprising speed.

Nobody dared to get into their way and even the border of Hanza stepped away silent. Homer decided to follow the battalion; he had to make sure that Sasha wasn't going to try something.

Nobody of the soldiers chased him away. For them he was a dog that ran after a railcar. When they entered the tunnel the three rows in front of them switched on their search lights and burned away the darkness in front of them. Their lights were as bright as a thousand candles. Homer couldn't stop thinking that the bodies of those humans were like iron but that their souls had died long ago. He had a perfect killing machine in front of him; its single parts were without a will of their own. Only one of them who you couldn't separate from the rest knew what would happen: When he gave the command: "Fire" the rest would burn down all on their way to the *Tulskaya* and the other stations.

At least they didn't go through the tunnel with the train and the sect. Those unlucky people could still wait until the eternal flame got to them. First the *Tulskaya* and then they ...

Suddenly, like they reacted to an invisible signal the group slowed down. One minute later Homer understood why: They were at the station where you could hear screams in the distance.

Then something surprising came to the ears of the old man which made him question his own sanity: A wonderful melody.

Homer listened like under a spell. He didn't hear anything but the voice that sounded out of the receiver and suddenly Sasha knew that now was the best time to leave.

She slipped out of the greeting room waited for Leonid and dragged him with her. At first to the tunnel to the *Serpuchovskaya*, then the tunnel that lead where they needed their help. Where they could save lives.

Also the tunnel lead to him, Hunter.

"Aren't you afraid?" Sasha asked Leonid.

He smiled. "Yes. But I have the slight feeling that I am finally doing something important"

"You don't have to come with me. It could be that death is waiting for us. We could also just stay here and go somewhere"

"Nobody knows what the future brings."

Answered Leonid with his finger raised.

"And I was thinking that you decided it yourself?"

"Ah, stop it already" Leonid smiled ironic. "We are all just rats in a labyrinth. There are small doors which are opened and closed by those who research us. When the door to the *Sportivnaya* is closed you can scratch at it as much as you want, it is not going to be opened for nothing in the world. And if behind the next door is a trap you still fall into it, even though you were already expecting it. Because there is no other way. You only have one choice: You keep running or die out of protest"

Sasha's forehead got wrinkles. "Aren't you angry at all that you have to live?"

"No I am angry at my spine. I can't put my head that far back to look into the face of who is doing the experiment"

"There is no experiment. If necessary rats can bite through concrete"

Leonid started laughing. "You're a rebel. I am an opportunist"

Sasha shook her head. "That's not true. You think that you can change people as well"

"I would like to believe in it"

Sasha passed the post that apparently had been abandoned in all haste: Some pieces of wood were still smoking, next to them old, almost fallen apart magazine with pictures of naked women were

laying around. On the wall was an abandoned and half shredded standard. Around ten minutes later they found the first body.

It was hard to recognize it as a human being. Arms and legs were spread and swollen so much so that its clothes had fallen off. Its face was more monstrous than everything Sasha had ever seen at any monster.

"Be careful!" Leonid pulled away the corpse.

"That one is contagious"

"And? There is a cure. There were we're going everyone is contagious"

Suddenly they heard shots and distant screams.

"We made it just in time." Said Leonid. "It seems that they no longer want to wait for your friend ..."

Sasha looked at him scared, but then she said:

"Doesn't matter! We just have to tell him. They think that all are sentenced to death. We just have to give them hope!"

The security gate of the station was completely open. Another corpse was laying there, face down but at least it still looked human. Next to him was a metal box that hissed in, as if the radio was trying to wake up the dead guard.

At the end of the tunnel a few men had bunkered down hastily behind a few sandbags. One heavy machine gunner and a few soldiers with assault rifles. That was the entire barricade.

In front of them were the narrow tunnel walls ended and the platform of the *Tulskaya* started a terrible crowd was cooking and enclosed the besieged. It were infected and healthy, hideous monsters and human silhouettes, some had flashlights in front of them and others didn't need light anymore.

The soldiers who were in front of them defended the tunnel. Their bullets were going to an end and the shots sounded sparsely and even more sparsely. The crowd got closer and closer.

One of the Soldiers turned to Sasha. "Are you the reserves? Boys, they've reached the *Dobryninskaya*! The reserves are here!"

The monster with its many heads reacted as well and moved forward worried.

"People!" Yelled Sasha. "There is a cure! We found it! You won't die! Patience! Just have a little patience!"

But the crowd swallowed up her words, yelled unsatisfied and moved on. The machine gunner shot angry another salvo at them so that some fell to the ground moaning, while others answered with a few gunshots. Not stopping the mass moved forward, ready to trample anything in their path, defenders and Sasha and Leonid alike.

Then something happened.

At first hesitating, but then more and more self-confident the sound of the flute sounded through the tunnel.

Nothing seemed more unfitting, yes even stupider, but the crowd growled surprised at first and then moved forward laughing.

But Leonid didn't mind. Probably he didn't play for them but for himself. It was the same melody that had put a spell over Sasha and attracted dozens of listeners.

It was an unfitting method to stop the riot when you thought about it. Maybe it was just the touching naivety of this desperate step and not the magic of the flute that slowed down the march of the crowd. Or had the musician been able to remind those who were around them and already ready to tear them to shreds of something. Something that ...

The shots stopped and Leonid stepped forward without taking the flute from his lips. It acted like this was his usual audience who would applaud every second now and threw bullets at him.

For a fraction of a second Sasha thought that under the listeners was her father who was smiling softly. He had waited for her ... She thought about what Leonid had said:

This melody was able to take away the pain.

Behind the hermetic door it started to rumble all of a sudden. Actually too soon. Had the search party gotten through faster than expected? So the situation at the *Tulskaya* wasn't as complicated? Yes, maybe the occupants had left the station already without opening the doors?

The troop spread out and the soldiers took cover behind the tunnel segments. Only four men remained next to Denis Michailovitsch directly next to the gate. All readied their rifles. It was time. Soon the door would open and after a few minutes the forty heavy armed men from the *Sevastopolskaya* would get into the *Tulskaya*, break down any resistance and occupy the station in a few moments. It had been easier than the colonel had thought.

Denis Michailovitsch took a deep breath to order his man to put on his gasmask.
He didn't get any further.

The group formed again, spread out so that six men created one row and filled the entire width of the tunnel. The front line held the flamethrowers in front of them and the second row their automatic rifles. Like black lava it crawled forward, gradually and unstoppable.

Homer looked past the broad backs of the men. In the white rays of their search lights they could see the entire scenario: The handful of soldiers who were still manning their station and two small silhouettes, Sasha and Leonid and the horde of terrible creatures that enclosed on them. He stared at them horrified.

Leonid was still playing. Wonderful.

Unbelievable. Encouraged as never before. The terrible horde swallowed up the music and the defenders of the tunnel had risen to get a better look at him. His melody divided the two enemy factions as if an invisible wall was erected between them. It was the only thing, the melody, that stopped them from running at each other in a final and deadly fight.

"Ready!"

The order had come from one in the black group.

But from whom? The first row went to their knees immediately and the second row aimed over them.

"Sasha!" screamed Homer.

The girl turned around, closed her eyes a bit and put her hand in front of them because she was fighting against an ocean of light.

The crowd growled and moaned under the burning rays. They walked closer and closer.

The fighters remained still.

Sasha was standing almost in front of the black formation. "Where are you?" She yelled. "I need to talk to you. Please!"

Nobody answered.

"We found a cure! You can cure the disease!"

You don't have to kill anybody!"

The dark phalanx remained silent.

"I beg you! I know that you don't want to do this. You're just trying to save them ...and yourself— "

Suddenly out of one of the rows of fighters you could hear the husky voice: "Go away. I don't want to kill you."

"You don't have to kill anyone! There is a cure!"

Repeated Sasha desperate and walked from one side of the masked humans to the other. Searching for the one who would listen.

"There is no cure."

"Radiation! Radiation helps against it!"

"I don't believe you!"

"Please!"

"The station has to be cleaned."

"Don't you want that something to change? Why are you repeating what you've done already? Back then with the dark ones! Why aren't you searching for salvation?"

The fighters remained silent. The masses moved closer and closer.

"Sasha!" yelled Homer pleading, but she didn't hear him.

Finally the words dropped: "Nothing will ever change. There is nobody left to forgive me. I've raised my hand against...against...I've been punished."

"It's all inside of you! You can free yourself! You can prove it! Don't you see? It's a mirror! A reflection of what you've done, one year ago! But now you can do it differently...you can listen...give them a chance and earn your own!"

"I have to eliminate the monster," said the formation.

"You can't do that! It is in me, it sleeps in all of us! It's a part of the body, a part of the soul. And when it awakes you can't kill it, can't cut it out! You can only bring it to rest and sing it back to sleep..."

In that moment a dirty and young soldier (this is Metro 2033's Artyom) stepped through the crowd, pressed himself past the still black rows, grabbed the radio on an iron construction and started speaking.

Immediately a suppressor made a clicking sound and he fell to the ground. The crowd smelled blood and howled angrily.

Again the musician started to play his instrument but in the next moment the magic disappeared. A shot erupted, and the flute fell out of his hands as he was shot.

The ends of the flamethrowers spat flames.

Sasha stormed to Leonid and didn't care for the crowd. The phalanx was now only made out of the barrels of an uncountable amount of guns. They made a step forward.

"No!" she screamed. She stood alone against hundreds of terrible creatures...against a legion of killers: against the whole world. "I want a miracle!"

Suddenly distant thunder sounded. The tomb shook itself; the crowd shivered and even the formation of fighters made one step back. Thin streams started to flow over the ground, from the ceiling the first drops fell, louder and louder the river rushed towards the people...

"A leak!" screamed a voice.

The fighters retreated hastily out of the station and to the hermetic gate. Homer ran with them but again and again he turned to see Sasha who stood still.

She put her hands and face under the water which fell onto her and laughed. "That's rain," she yelled. "It's going to wash everything clean! We can start again!"

The black battalion was already standing behind the gate. Homer had barely made it in time as some of the fighters pressed themselves against the gate to close the *Tulskaya* and hold back the water—

The door started to give in slowly. Realization broke as Homer started running to get Sasha who was still standing in the middle of the station, but somebody held him back and threw him to the ground.

Then one of the fighters jumped to the door, put his hand through the slit as it grew narrower and narrower as he yelled at the girl: "Here! I need you!"

The water was already at their knees. Sasha's blond hair disappeared under the water.

The fighter retracted his hand and the door closed.

The door didn't open. The tunnel was shaking and on the other side the echo of an explosion barraged against the steel plate. Then it distanced itself again.

Denis Michailovitsch put his ear against the door, listened for a while and looked warily at the wet ceiling.

"We turn back!" he ordered. "Everything is done here."

Epilogue

Homer sighed and turned the page. There was only a little bit of space left in his book, only a few pages. What should he write on them, what was he willing to sacrifice? He put his hand to the fire, to warm his cold fingers and to calm them down.

The old man had asked to be transferred to the southern guard post. Here, viewing the tunnel he could work better than at home at the *Sevastopolskaya* between all the dead newspapers. Even Yelena was letting him rest.

Homer looked up. The brigadier sat apart from the other guards, at the furthest border of light and darkness. Why had he chosen the *Sevastopolskaya* out of all stations?

Something had to be special about this station ...

Hunter had never told him what had happened at the *Polyanka* back then. But Homer knew now: It hadn't been a prophecy but a warning.

After a week the water at the *Tulskaya* had gradually retreated. The remnants had been pumped away by the giant pumps of the ring line and Homer had volunteered immediately to enter the station with the recon team of the station.

This catastrophe had claimed almost three hundred victims. While Homer turned over corpses he didn't feel disgust. He didn't feel anything. He was just searching for her, searched for her again and again...

After that he had sat at the same place for a long time where he had last seen the girl. When he had hesitated, instead of fought, to run to her. To rescue her or to go down with her.

A never ending stream of the sick and healthy wandered past him, into the direction of the *Sevastopolskaya* and to the healing tunnel of the *Kachovskaya* line. The musician hadn't lied: radiation had really stopped the sickness.

And who knows: maybe he hadn't lied at all.

Maybe the emerald city existed somewhere and you just had to find the gate. Maybe he had stood often enough in front of it and just not deserved to be let in.

Now he wouldn't see it anymore till "the water retreated".

But the emerald city wasn't an ark; the true ark was the metro itself. The last refuge that had kept Noah and Sem and Ham from the dark towering water, the righteous and the villains at the same time. Of every kind a pair. Everybody who still had a score to settle. Believer or sinner.

They were too many. That was apparent, not all could be in this novel. The notebook of the old man had almost no empty pages left. It wasn't an ark but a small boat made out of paper; it wouldn't be able to take all the humans on board. But still, Homer felt that he had done it, with careful lines he had brought something important onto those pages.

Not about the humans. About *the* humans.

The memories of all who had died before us didn't disappear, he thought. When our world is woven out of deeds and thoughts of other people: we're made out of countless mosaic stones which we inherited from thousands of our ancestors, they must have left a trail in us. We must have received a small part of their souls when we were born. You just had to look closely enough.

Even Homer's little boat, folded out of paper, out of thoughts and memories would swim along for eternity along the ocean of time, until somebody picked it up again, looked at it and realized that humanity had never changed, yes that it had even stayed true to itself after the end of the world. The heavenly fire that we had once received fought against the wind and hadn't been extinguished yet.

Homer's score had been settled.

He closed his eyes and found himself in the flickering, bright light-flooded station again. On the platform were thousands of people. They were wearing elegant dresses like those of that time where

nobody had thought to call him Homer. But this time these weren't just people who had lived in the metro. Nobody knew why the others were there. Something connected all of them ...

They waited and looked worriedly at the dark tunnel.

And suddenly Homer recognized their faces. It was his wife and his children, his colleagues, classmates, his neighbors, his best friends, even Achmed, his favorite actors...

All who he remembered were there.

And suddenly the tunnel was lit by a silent metro train that drove into the station, with bright shining windows, polished walls and oiled wheels. The operator cabin was empty save for a fresh uniform and a white t-shirt hanging there.

That is my uniform, thought Homer. And my place.

He entered the cabin, opened the doors of the wagon and gave the signal. The crowd pushed themselves into the train and separated themselves in to their seats. They smiled calmly. And Homer was smiling as well.

He knew: when he wrote the last dot of his book onto the paper this shimmering train full of happy people would leave the *Sevastopolsaya*, into eternity.

Suddenly something ripped him from his magical dream. Not far from him he heard a dull, almost unnatural croaking. He winced and reached for his rifle...

It was the brigadier who had made the sound. Homer stood up and hesitated to go to the brigadier, but he croaked again, this time a bit higher...and again...a bit lower.

Homer listened and suddenly he started to shiver. He didn't believe his ears.

Huskily, stumbling, the brigadier tried to search for the melody. He stopped, returned to the beginning and repeated it patiently until it was finally right. He sang it almost silently, like some kind of song to fall asleep to, a lullaby.

It was Leonid's nameless song.

Homer hadn't found Sasha's body at the *Tulskaya*.

What else?

Final Translator Notes

Metro2033Artjom:

I did like this book, not as much as 2033 but it was alright.

It has been translated into a few languages, that was in 2010. Even now there are no plans for an English translation. It there may never be an official one. I think Artyom's death could be responsible for it. That was the only part that I hated and I am happy that Metro Last Light won't follow the story of Metro 2034. Artyom isn't just the protagonist of the book and the games; he is us – the reader or the player – venturing into the darkness and uncertainty of the Moscow metro. I hope that you still enjoyed this fan translation, please let me know if you did. Because I enjoyed translating it for you (well most of the time ☺)

See you around on Youtube and the internet.

METRO2033Artjom

July 14 2012

Cardboardtheory:

Yes, that is the real ending.

The young soldier who died is Artyom. I'm not so sure about the Artyom referred to earlier.

It was a labor of love. For everyone who helped translate this.

“And the future, our future stretches before us like an endless Metro tunnel. And maybe, once, we will deserve the light at the end of this tunnel...”

Cardboardtheory

October 28 2012