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Science Fiction from Soviet Ukraine

APOSTLE OF IMMORTALITY

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Published in Ukrainian

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Iakyi Sava, taka i slava

Tsar Plaksiy ta Loskoton

Ia liubliu tebe, Charlie Brown

Oles Berdnyk

APOSTLE OF IMMORTALITY

Ukrainian Science Fiction

Translated from the Ukrainian
by
Yuri Tkach



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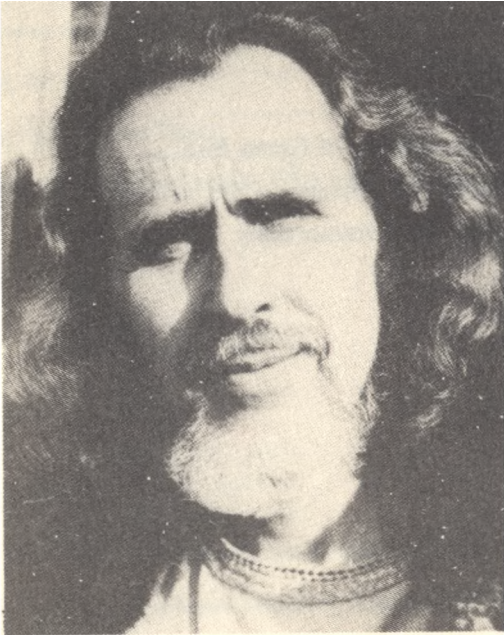
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Oles Berdnyk

OLES BERDNYK'S SCIENCE FICTION

“Is there such a thing as Ukrainian science fiction?” This question has been put to me frequently during the past few years.

“Of course,” I would reply and then amaze the listeners further by telling them that at present science fiction is by far the most widely read literature in Ukraine.

This comes as a complete surprise to both Western readers of science fiction and literary scholars, because no major Ukrainian science fiction work has been translated into English and the history of Ukrainian science fiction is virtually unknown in the West.

Since its emergence in the 1920s, Ukrainian science fiction continually grew in popularity until it became the most popular literary genre during the 1960s and 1970s. To some extent this vogue emanated from new developments in space technology and the launching of the first earth satellite in the previous decade. But, no less significant a factor was the expansion of the thematic range of Ukrainian science fiction, which began in the late 1950s. At this time many authors made their debut in Ukrainian science fiction and among them Oles Berdnyk soon became the leading figure. He had proven himself not only as a prolific author, a writer endowed with an unusual imagination, but also a bold thinker who was not afraid to dwell on new concepts and introduce them into his fiction.

Unorthodox and provocative, Berdnyk's science fiction was highly acclaimed by readers, but it aroused the ire of political authorities. As a result, Berdnyk was harassed and persecuted by KGB agents who often detained him, seizing and even destroying his manuscripts. Thereafter the Soviet regime resorted to harsher punishment and, consequently, in May 1973 Oles Berdnyk was expelled from the Ukrainian Writers Union “for his antisocial acts and deviations from the principles and tasks” prescribed for Soviet writers.

After the expulsion Berdnyk no longer devoted himself solely to science fiction, but became active in the Ukrainian dissident movement, eventually becoming a leading figure in the Helsinki Group which monitored and protested against violations of human rights in Soviet Ukraine. At present much more information is available about Berdnyk's persecution and punishment by the Soviet government than about the evolution of his literary career. Indeed, only a few details of his biography are known at this time.

Oles Berdnyk was born in 1927. From 1943 to 1945 he served in the Soviet army and fought on the German front. After the war Berdnyk studied at the Ivan Franko Drama Theatre in Kiev and was then employed as an actor, later working in the offices of several newspapers. His first works appeared in the periodical press in 1947. For unexplained reasons, Berdnyk was arrested in 1949 and sentenced to seven years in various concentration camps; in all, Berdnyk spent from 1949 to 1955 in exile in the Far North and Kazakhstan. Only in 1956 was he allowed to return to Ukraine and able to devote himself to literature. The following year Berdnyk published his first collection of science fiction stories, entitled *Poza chasom i prostorom* (Beyond Space and Time). Thereafter he managed to publish a total of 17 volumes containing science fiction works, as well as a large number of short stories. After his expulsion from the Writers Union Berdnyk was systematically discredited and destroyed as a writer. Not only was he forced to make a living by manual labor, but his books were banned and removed from all libraries and bookstores. From 1976 Berdnyk was under continual police surveillance, experienced frequent searches and confiscation of his books and papers. In March 1979 he was arrested for his involvement with the Helsinki Group, and in December of that year Berdnyk was sentenced to six years exile in concentration camps. Nothing at all is known at present about Berdnyk's life or his place of exile.*

The essays and letters by Berdnyk that were published in the West during the past decade suggest that he wrote in a solemn and didactic manner. However, not all of Berdnyk's writings are serious and profound. He composed many lighthearted stories

* In May 1984 Oles Berdnyk was pardoned by the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Ukr.SSR. A declaration was published on 17 May 1984 in *Literaturna Ukrayina* in which he repented his involvement in the Helsinki Group (Transl.).

and adventure tales which contain enough references to science and technology to be regarded as science fiction. But as Berdnyk developed and matured as a writer, he began to dwell on serious notions, particularly on the problems pertaining to the evolution of scientific knowledge and the extent to which man's own nature would change due to advancements in science and the introduction of engineering techniques in biology and psychology.

Berdnyk's first major novel, *Shliakhy tytaniv* (Paths of the Titans), 1959, contains an extensive and laudatory depiction of scientific and technological progress. Such notions as matter-antimatter propulsion systems for starships, various antigravity devices, mass production of indestructible war machines able to annihilate entire galaxies and be controlled by one scientist – these and other notions would certainly please the science fiction buffs fond of complex technology. From the developments in the novel it is evident that overall Berdnyk endorses the notion of scientific and technical progress, with some reservations, for he asserts that advancements in computer technology must not evolve to the point that all thinking is carried out by machines, inasmuch as this would ultimately make them electronic dictators over all living beings. Berdnyk also doubts that science would enable mankind to overcome such biological limitations of living creatures as their continual dependence on food sources, eventual aging and death.

In his next novel, *Strila chasu*, (Arrow of Time) 1960, Berdnyk explores further man's biological limitations in the context of societies with highly-advanced science. He tries to show that in spite of many technological and scientific advancements which will make it possible to travel through both space and time, man will not be able to control many phenomena in space and, therefore, will not become an omnipotent and omniscient being.

In his subsequent major work, *Dity bezmezhzhia*, (Children of Infinity) 1964, Berdnyk subordinates further the notion of scientific and technological progress and places all emphasis on the development of man's psychological potentials. He endeavours to outline the "enourmous" strength of man's "psychic energy" and declares that as soon as "mankind is able to gain complete control of this flow of energy, it will become almighty."

Berdnyk's last novel *Zorianyi korsar*, (Star Pirate) 1971, is certainly his most accomplished and cumulative work. Here Berdnyk expresses his utter scepticism about the contribution of

the natural sciences to man's evolutionary developments. While he de-emphasizes the significance of conventional science, Berdnyk acclaims the manifestation of "psychic energy" which enables humanoids to direct and control their own evolutionary processes to such an extent that their will-power alone enables them to alter their own nature to the point that they are able to travel through space and time by their own volition, to acquire unlimited knowledge and to become immortal. In short, by utilizing their "psychic energy" these creatures can transform themselves into god-like beings. At this point both the author and the narrator of the novel seem to proclaim the imminence of immortality and godhood as the ultimate stage in the evolution of living beings.

In the realm of science fiction the theme of man's evolution leading to immortality and godhood is by no means unique. In fact Western science-fiction writers have resorted to it frequently, and it recurs in the works of both minor writers and such eminent science fiction authors as Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert, to mention but a few. During the past few decades the very appearance of such works was received as a godsend both by publishers and assiduous readers of science fiction in the West.

But quite the contrary state of affairs prevails in Soviet science fiction. Apart from Oles Berdnyk, no other science fiction author has dared to portray man's evolution into an immortal and god-like being. This notion is indeed incompatible with the official Soviet ideology based on dialectical materialism. Consequently, the Soviet political authorities do not tolerate any deviations from it, not even in the realm of fantasy. And obviously this was the main reason for the persecution of Berdnyk, which began after the publication of *Star Pirate* in 1971.

The main themes of Berdnyk's science fiction are developed fully in his major novels. But many of them reverberate also in his short stories. Among them are such themes as man's quest for immortality, contacts with alien life forms from distant regions of space, man's extraordinary journeys through inner and outer space, dreams and accomplishments of bold individuals who dare to deviate from the prevailing patterns in life and perception of reality, and accounts of dissident scientists who challenge or reject the established scientific precepts and through their radical approaches achieve quite extraordinary results.

It is gratifying that the present volume of Berdnyk's writings – the first English translation of his works – contains a selection of

stories which illustrate many of the above-mentioned notions, and as such these stories are a representative sample of the entertaining and thought-provoking traits of Oles Berdnyk's science fiction.

Walter Smyrniw
McMaster University
1983

A Journey to the Antiworld

Prologue

The old fisherman Juan grabbed Pedro by the shoulder and shook him.

“Look, look!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Something’s falling. From the sky. See? Over Devil’s Cliff, there!”

“I see it. Looks like a person.”

“How could it be a person? What are you babbling about?”

“Maybe he fell from an aeroplane? The parachute didn’t open . . .”

“Can’t hear anything buzzing up there!”

The dark figure fell rapidly towards the water. There was a big splash. The women and children on the beach ran off in fright.

They heard shouts. An arm rose from the water, then disappeared.

“Start the motor!” yelled Juan.

Pedro yanked at the cord of the old outboard motor. The water foamed joyously behind the boat as the shore bobbed closer towards them. Old Juan steered the boat to the spot where the person had fallen. Standing up, Pedro scanned the water.

“I can’t see a thing! A little bit further, Uncle Juan. Aha, I can see an arm. There. A bit further . . .”

The arm splashed above the surface once more, a face showed and then disappeared.

“Pedro, he’ll drown!” Juan let out a muffled scream.

The student stood up on the gunwale and dived overboard. The old fisherman waited anxiously. The seconds dragged on. At last he saw the white fabric of Pedro’s shirt in the depths. The lad surfaced beside the boat and took a deep breath.

“Got him. Hold onto him, Uncle Juan.”

With one hand he raised the nearly drowned man out of the water by the collar, helped by the old fisherman. In a short while Pedro was sitting in the boat removing his wet clothes, while the stranger lay motionless in the bottom of the boat. In the crimson

light of sunset his face was still, deathly pale, his hair plastered to his forehead and cheeks, his eyes deeply sunken.

"Can he really be dead?" Pedro whispered.

Juan placed his ear to the man's chest and listened.

"He's alive."

He turned the drowned man over onto his stomach and water trickled out of the fellow's mouth. Then, massaging his feet, he said to the student:

"You'd better try to resuscitate him . . ."

In another minute the stranger's chest rose in a spasm and fell. There was a groan. Juan smiled at his nephew and winked.

They watched the man's face in silence, waiting. At last his eyes opened with a flutter of eyelids. The stranger stared at the deep-blue sky for a long time, then his gaze fell and rested on Pedro, then crossed to Juan.

"Where am I?" he asked in a barely audible whisper.

"Rest easy," Pedro leaned over him. "You're among friends. We rescued you . . ."

"Rescued," the stranger repeated.

"Yes. You fell into the sea. What happened to you? Where did you come from?"

"The antiworld," the rescued man replied softly.

"What?" Juan stammered.

"The antiworld," the stranger repeated indifferently.

Juan and Pedro glanced at one another. The old fisherman put his finger to his temple, but the student only shrugged his shoulders.

"Did anyone see me?" the stranger asked suddenly.

"Sure," said Pedro. "The women and children on the shore . . . But please explain . . . Who are you anyway?"

The rescued man made no reply. He closed his eyes again and became delirious. His fingers moved about spasmodically as if seeking something in the bottom of the boat.

"It's no use," Juan shook his head. "We'll have to take him to shore. Where do you reckon he's from?"

"The prison, perhaps. Or the mental asylum."

"That's more like it. Since he claims to have come from another world, it can't be anything but the madhouse . . ."

"A person can be driven to insanity in prison too."

"That's true. Since he's worried in case someone saw him, it probably means he's escaped. They've built some secret plants on the large island recently. Yankees came, large numbers of

scientists and soldiers . . . Maybe he's from there?"

"Maybe . . . Only who is he? Obviously not a peasant . . ."

"Looks like a scientist. His face is white. . . Probably a Yankee. . ."

The old man turned around, looked at the shore and studied the waves.

"There'll be a storm tonight. We must head for home."

"And him?"

"We'll take him with us. It's dark, no one will see. Start the motor . . ."

The boat made off towards the shore. Rocking among the crests of the large waves, it passed Devil's Cliff and entered a tiny cove.

Securing the boat, Juan and Pedro lifted the rescued man by the arms and carried him up the narrow path to the house. Spreading out a worn-out blanket on the wooden bed, they lay the stranger on it.

"Stay with him while I go out and hang the nets," said Juan.

He went outside. A breath of warm wind blew in through the open door bringing with it the fragrance of tropical trees. Clouds rolled in from the sea, darkness very quickly hid the horizon from view. Pedro sat on the edge of the bed. The stranger was muttering something, groaning, muffled curses and unclear entreaties escaped from his lungs.

"Lou," the stranger raved. "Lou, my love . . . I'll find you . . . I will . . . Clouds, clouds . . . Black tyrants . . . I'll get around them . . . I'll find you . . . Lou, my little girl . . ."

"What's the matter, friend?" Pedro asked anxiously. "Can you hear me?"

The mysterious fellow made no reply. More chaotic words left his lips:

"Fire . . . Heavenly fire . . . We shall pass through it . . . Lou . . . my little girl . . . It won't destroy you . . . Where are you . . .? Where? Lou . . . I can't see . . . I can't hear you . . ."

Old Juan came inside and lit the lantern. The weak light fell on the bed and the green face of the stranger.

"How is he?" Juan asked.

"Raving. Keeps repeating some girl's name. I can't understand a thing . . ."

"What will we do with him?"

"Let him rest here. We can talk to him when he comes to."

"All right, let it be so. Then I'm off to bed . . ."

Juan spread out the old nets in one corner of the small house and

lay down on them, groaning a few times. Making himself comfortable, he said:

“You and I went out to catch fish today, but instead we caught a fugitive from another world. Well, good night . . .”

“Good night, Uncle Juan . . .”

The old fisherman was soon wheezing through his nose. The wind was rising outside, waves crashed with a heavy thud against Devil’s Cliff. The wild weather pushed its way in through the cracks of the house, the lantern swung about, its flickering light throwing ghostly shadows onto the clay floor and the stranger’s face. He had the seal of mystery on him. It could be sensed in everything – the peculiar delirious raving, the sharp, disturbing facial features and his unusual appearance.

Pedro sat and thought, trying to comprehend from where this man might have fallen. From an aeroplane, a helicopter? He would hardly have survived. And besides, there was no plane to be seen . . .

The student lay down on a narrow trestle-bed and closed his eyes.

The stranger began to moan again. Pedro jumped to his feet and came up to him.

“Can you hear me?”

The stranger stirred, opened his eyes and, with a superhuman effort, sat up.

“You rescued . . . me?” he whispered.

“Yes, friend,” Pedro replied meekly. “But there’s no need to talk about that . . . Tell me instead who you are, where you’re from? And how we can help you.”

“I’m from the antiworld,” the stranger replied.

Pedro looked at him closely, surprised. The rescued man’s eyes looked at him intently, seriously, not at all the eyes of a madman. There was a gleam in their depths, the spark of some secret.

“You don’t believe me?” the stranger asked.

“I’d like you to be more serious with me,” Pedro said cautiously. “You see, I’m a physics student. You might have been able to tell my Uncle Juan about other worlds. But even he doesn’t believe you . . .”

“But I’m talking about the antiworld . . . a material reality, nothing mystical . . . If you’re a physicist you’ll be able to understand. I’m a physicist too – only a scientist, not a student any more. I can’t sleep anyway, so I might as well tell you everything . . .”

Pedro's eyes lit up.

"Maybe you're tired though? Perhaps you should rest?"

"No," the stranger declared resolutely. "I'm glad that I came across you. But first I should introduce myself . . . My name is Henry. Henry Wallace . . ."

"Pedro. Pedro Saira . . ."

"Perhaps you could get some water . . . I'm dying of thirst. Thank you . . . Well, listen then . . ."

Chapter One

We graduated from university in San Francisco last year. A military department offered us work overseas.

By *we* I mean myself and Lucy, my fiancée. She's a wonderful girl. Black hair, tall, slender, with smoldering Japanese eyes. But that is only what meets the eye. No one can say anything about her soul. One can only sense that. You're smiling . . . Thinking that everyone in love considers his partner to be the best? Perhaps you're right.

Anyway . . . we were offered work on an island in the Carribean. You know it, the one next to yours. We weren't told what the work would involve, they only warned us that the research would be secret and very important. The pay was very good, the place was beautiful and so we agreed after some initial hesitation.

We sailed from New York in an electroship, and then transferred to a helicopter in the middle of the night. By dawn we were already on the island.

We were met by the director of the secret laboratory, Professor Schratt. We had heard about him at university. He was considered the greatest specialist in the field of gravitation and quantum mechanics. He seemed stern and reserved. Welcoming us, the professor looked us over and said:

"You won't be going anywhere from here for three years. Did they tell you that?"

"No."

"Remember that. Not a word about the direction our work is taking. No questions. Clear?"

“Sure, professor . . . But . . .”

“No buts . . . Another thing. You must take part in some experiments. Were you told about that?”

“No,” I replied anxiously.

“Then there you are,” the professor declared firmly. “You still have time. You can refuse and go back home.”

Lou and I looked at each other, then looked at our boss. His meaty face was grim and immovable, covered in deep wrinkles. He was waiting.

“The experiments . . . are they dangerous?” I asked timidly.

“Life is always dangerous,” Schratt shrugged his shoulders. “Pedestrians are killed by cars every day, but they stubbornly continue to venture into the streets, people can drown and yet they swim bravely in the water, they die in their sleep but are still not afraid to stretch out in bed . . .”

To cut it short, we agreed to stay. The work began. It wasn't complicated. The tuning of electronic assemblies, the assembly of separate circuits of unknown construction. Apart from us, the laboratory employed dozens of engineers and scientists, but all were taciturn and unfriendly. Obviously they had all been warned. You could have expected anything for breaking the rules, especially since the laboratory was under military guard.

After work we would go down to the beach, swimming and fishing. We loved the stormy days. The storms had a freshness about them, distant smells, assuring us of changes in the future. We rejoiced at the storms, dreaming of those days when we would leave this voluntary captivity after having made enough money to enable us to live and work independently.

We had in mind buying a building, getting in touch with several other scientists, and organizing a laboratory for psychic research.

Several months passed. An unknown apparatus was built in the main hall of the laboratory. Only three engineers were allowed inside there, apart from the professor. All the subordinate workers merely assembled separate circuits. You couldn't learn anything from them.

On this particular day the professor was radiant. He greeted each of us with a broad smile – this was very unusual – and even promised to eventually tell us the nature of our work. If the experiment was successful, he added.

That evening Schratt came to us and said hello. My heart filled with an uneasy premonition. It did not deceive me.

“The time has come, Mister Wallace. You haven’t forgotten our agreement?”

“At your service, professor.”

“Not you. This time Miss Lucy, your fiancée, will take part in the experiment. Agreed?”

Lucy looked at me entreatingly, then at the professor. What could I say to her? Hadn’t we ourselves agreed to this?

In any case, there was no way out. And Lucy silently lowered her head.

We did not sleep that night.

Heavy, uneasy thoughts drifted through our minds, but we had no desire to talk. We sat side by side, holding hands, as if preparing to leave on a long journey.

Morning arrived. With trepidation I waited for Professor Schratt. He appeared. Solemn, smart, a little stern. He was very gentle with Lou, but barely even glanced at me. Lou was calm. We came to the door of the main hall. I was stopped here.

“Wait here,” Schratt said.

Pale-faced, Lou smiled at me in parting. There was a shadow of fear in her eyes.

The door closed behind her.

A few minutes passed. I stood outside the entrance to the main hall – stunned, oblivious to everything. Then the meaning of what had happened struck me. I rushed to the door to open it, to find Schratt and stop him from conducting the secret and dangerous experiment. The door did not budge, it was locked. A red light lit up above me and Schratt’s face appeared on a small television screen. He said dryly:

“Mister Wallace! Calm down. There’s no need to act like an hysterical woman.”

I retired to an armchair near the door, grabbed a few magazines lying on the table beside it, and began leafing through them in an attempt to forget. But oblivion did not come. It could not. My dear Lou was next to me, behind the wall, and she was being used for an experiment like a guinea-pig. Why, why had I agreed?

Disturbed thoughts darted through my mind as I tried to guess Schratt’s secrets. I recalled the hints of colleagues, circuit diagrams of units I had assembled, and compared them with Schratt’s work on gravitation, but could come up with nothing. Why did he need a person? Why a human being? If this involved problems of anti-gravitation, one could experiment with objects. What then? What?

I threw the magazines to one side and began pacing up and down the passage in a frenzy. I could have calmly faced death, torture, or any experiment myself. But Lou . . . No, this was it! If the experiment was a success, we would not stay another day on this damned island. We had no need for money earned at the expense of life and health!

I have no idea how long I waited there. Maybe ten minutes, perhaps an hour, maybe even three. I had lost all sense of time. But at last the door opened and Schratt appeared in the doorway. I rushed up to him. Lou was not standing behind him. I looked the professor in the face. His eyes were very strange, revealing ordinary human pity. The professor's face was red, his lips tightly pursed.

Sensing trouble, I whispered:

"Why hasn't Lucy come out? Where is she?"

Schratt coughed and lowered his eyes to the ground.

"Where's my Lou?" I repeated, already knowing that I would receive a frightening reply.

"Be brave, Mr. Wallace," Schratt said. "The fact is that science . . ."

Rage splashed into my brain, flooded my eyes. What was the old cretin saying about science! Why was he uttering useless, futile words which would change nothing?

"Where's Lucy?" I bellowed, grabbing the professor by the lapels of his jacket, ready to tear him apart.

Schratt peaceably moved my hands away and gave me a tired look. He said softly:

"Lucy is not here, Mr. Wallace. She has disappeared . . ."

Chapter Two

When I regained consciousness Schratt was standing beside me. We were in a small room next to the hall. There was a smell of medicine in the air. Seeing that I had opened my eyes, the professor sat down beside me and lit up a cigar. Sighing heavily, he said:

“It’s my fault! I should have prepared you. I didn’t realize you had such weak nerves . . .”

“Prepare me?” I whispered. “For what?”

Schratt remained silent.

“What’s happened to her?” I asked once more. “Did you kill her?”

Schratt’s face lit up with frank astonishment.

“Have you gone mad, Mr Wallace? Who do you take me for? A cut-throat from the Middle Ages?”

“Then where’s Lucy?” I groaned, understanding nothing. “Why are you speaking in riddles?”

“I told you, Lucy has disappeared.”

“What do you mean by “disappeared”? Did she jump out the window, vaporize or melt away like a block of ice? What nonsense is this?”

“It’s not nonsense. She has disappeared from our world . . . from our co-ordinates . . .”

“Can you be more precise?” I asked impatiently.

“I’ll tell you now. It’s imperative. The experiment has failed. It is undoubtedly her own fault. I’ll explain . . .”

“But she’s not dead?” I asked with a glimmer of hope.

“No,” the professor replied resolutely. “She is not dead. She should not be dead.”

“You’re leading me by the nose!”

“Not one bit. Just be patient a minute and you’ll understand everything.”

Schratt clipped a fresh cigar and lit up. Staring at the gray clouds of smoke, he began in a laconic, staccato voice:

“You’re a physicist, Wallace. You are obviously acquainted with Paul Dirac’s theory of the physical vacuum. Emptiness is the material sea in which the physical Universe is immersed. However a void is not the absence of matter, but, on the contrary, its infinite potential reservoir.”

“I’ve read about it.”

“All the better. This assumption led to the birth of the hypotheses about antiparticles, antiworlds and similar enticing notions. These hypotheses began to be substantiated experimentally. High-energy particles smashed so-called “holes” in the Dirac sea, a term applied by the founder of the hypothesis. They are called antiprotons, antineutrons, positrons. Assumptions were put forward that postulated the existence of whole antisystems with antisuns, antiplanets and antilife. Both science-fiction writers and scientists have discussed this. It was expected that such systems could be discovered experimentally in the future. But further developments in science showed that such notions were primitive. In thinking of the antiworld, we imagined it along the lines of ordinary physical models. However the Cosmos is not a repetition of identical systems, not a sum of suns and planets, but an endlessly complicated, eternal process of evolution. And this process did not take place on a single level, not only in the plane of our Universe . . .”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, on various planes. Certain Russian scientists, followed by their colleagues in the West, created hypotheses in which they postulated that the Dirac sea, or the physical vacuum, is not an inert, neutral mass, not only a source of potential existences, but a real world with material processes, an evolution and, perhaps, a life of its own. These hypotheses are consistent and indispensable. The principle of equilibrium demands this . . .”

“I don’t understand . . .”

“The world’s energy tends to a stable level. Entropy – the dispersion of energy – was the scourge of all the cosmological hypotheses. If energy is dispersing, then it means there must have been a beginning to this process. It means there had to have been a creative act. Therefore a teleological motive is introduced, Divine creation. The scientists did not want this. And so they proposed the most backbreaking hypotheses, which explained nothing.

“But now everything is much clearer. Another Universe exists alongside ours. This is the Universe of negative energies. The Universe of antiparticles, antimatter. It evolves along the principle of reversed time, compared to us. This is why it is inaccessible to our world. Only on the brink of high energies – in phasotrons and cosmic processes – do antiparticles jump from that world into ours, disappearing immediately in a flash of annihilation.

“The new theory explains everything. Let there be an expanding universe. Let the galaxies be drifting apart. Let energy

disperse. In the other analogical Universe the galaxies are coming together, energy is being concentrated. A reciprocal exchange takes place. The rhythmical pulsation of a Single Universe. Do you follow?" The professor's eyes burned with enthusiasm, red patches covered his cheeks. He had probably forgotten what he had begun talking about. He had quite forgotten that we had been discussing Lucy's fate. I reminded him of the fact.

"I've understood everything, professor. But let's return to Lucy . . ."

"Ah, yes," Schratt became more sombre. "Yes, yes. I got carried away. Well then. I have been excited by the theory of an analogical world. I have been delving into it, experimenting, doing calculations. They were positive. Then I decided to prepare for a grandiose experiment – a penetration into the Antiworld, or the world of negative energies, call it what you like."

"And Lucy . . ." I began horrified, but the professor interrupted me.

"Your Lucy has entered that world. She is the first person from Earth to have found her way there."

"And what about coming back?" I exclaimed. "Why didn't she return? What use are such experiments to you when there is no corroboration! This is tantamount to killing a person!"

"Not quite. Not quite, Mr. Wallace," Schratt declared peaceably. "I explained the nature of the experiment to her. She must have confused things. We agreed that she would remember her co-ordinates and return to the spot after a prescribed period. We were to recreate her, return her to the physical world. She must have forgotten . . ."

"Or died," I said bitterly.

"No! I'm certain that's not the case. The equipment shows that the experiment was a success."

"So what happens now? How can we rescue her? Or have you left her to her own devices?"

The professor stared at me intently, said nothing for a while as if weighing up his reply, and then answered:

"Much depends on you . . . Maybe even everything. We mustn't lose time. If you agree . . . everything might be all right . . ."

"You want me to . . . go there?"

"Yes. And find her. That is the only way out. You will rescue Lucy . . . and serve science."

I was silent, thinking feverishly. What should I do? How should I react? Could it be possible – what Schratt had said? A world

alongside ours, another unknown life? And Lucy there in it – alone, forsaken, helpless.

“What does this give you?” I suddenly asked the professor.

“Mm . . . How can I put it,” Schratt was at a loss for words at first. “I’m not exactly permitted to talk about it . . . But inasmuch as you’re connected with our work, I’ll tell you. First, there’s the question of antimatter. Secondly, the question of invisible travel through space.”

I said nothing, knowing full well whom such travel would benefit. The invasion of foreign countries in broad daylight from a vacuum, an emptiness. As usual, the monopolies would utilize science’s most colossal discoveries for destruction.

Indignation was hatching in my soul, but I did not wish to contradict Schratt. I had to think of Lucy. The professor bent over me and said in a gentle voice:

“Think it over. But you must answer straight away. Otherwise it could be too late. We don’t know what is happening to her, where she will go, what she will do.”

I tried to imagine life without Lucy. Work . . . days and nights spent with other people, without hearing her voice, seeing her eyes . . . No, no! That would be unbearable!

Her distinctive face appeared from the gloom, her gentle voice said reproachfully:

“We will never part. Hear that, Henry!”

Yes, yes! She had said that before we had separated. Before that damned experiment. She sensed that we would be parted. We’ll be together, I told her then. She trusted that I would do everything in my power not to remain separated from her. I had to carry out my oath. And there was only one way to do it. Only one. To go after her. Yes. It was decided.

I sat up, got out of bed. Schratt was looking at me the way a cat looks at a mouse. I realized this, I knew what he was thinking, but I didn’t care less. I would go off to meet my sweetheart, I would find her in that strange world, if it existed . . . or I would perish on that same road as her.

“I’m ready, professor.”

Schratt shook my hand firmly, threw away his unfinished cigar and took out a new one. With trembling hands he set about clipping it, saying emotionally:

“You’re a hero, Wallace. I’ll be frank with you – there aren’t many willing to visit that world . . .”

“Little wonder,” I gave an ironical smile.

"It's simply that it is unusual. It upsets all our concepts about the world. But we need pioneers. One day travel between the worlds will be ordinary and indispensable. And future generations will not forget you . . . Or Lucy . . ."

"We won't talk about that," I said dryly. "You know that I'm not going out of a love for your experiment."

"All right, all right! Let's not argue. Come with me to the hall. We'll go over all the instructions there . . . and then God be with you . . ."

I followed him in silence. For the first time I entered the hallowed hall. In the middle stood a solid gray cylinder with a few narrow slits. Thick cables ran from it and its top was crowned with a matte mushroom-shaped cap of some organic substance. The cylinder continued below the concrete floor. A few of Schratt's assistants stood around it. They looked at us questioningly.

"Mr Wallace has agreed to the experiment," the professor explained briefly. "Please leave us alone for a minute so that we can talk in private. I'll go over the instructions with him myself."

The assistants left the hall. We settled into armchairs, and I asked Schratt point-blank:

"What is the nature of the experiment — transformation?"

"A change in the body's polarity. A change in the charge. The transformation of particles in your body into antiparticles."

"But 'that world' is a world of negative energies," I said. "Where does my body's energy go then?"

"It is stored away in our plant," the professor replied. "Your body becomes a unique 'hole' in the vacuum, in the Dirac sea. It is transferred to the antiworld. But inasmuch as the relationship between the antiparticles does not change, the organism must continue to exist . . ."

"This is all very hypothetical," I smiled and was astonished myself. I was not all afraid of the imminent experiment. There was only intense curiosity and a piercing cold between my shoulders, a premonition of the bizarre events which lay ahead.

"I believe in success," Schratt said. "Not everything is quite clear yet. There may not be a mechanical replacement of particles by antiparticles, but something more complex. This is probably the case. Perhaps we carry both worlds, or more, within us. Therefore the experiment may be the discovery of one of our own worlds . . ."

"That makes no difference," I said decisively. "It's not at all important. What do I need to do?"

"Concentrate. Find your bearings. Remember your co-

ordinates if at all possible. You already have a chronometer. That's good. Remember the time. We shall designate a time when we will carry out the recreation experiment. You must be standing in the same place. You and Lucy, if you manage to find her. Another thing. We need your observations. Everything you can manage. You're a scientist, so there's no need for me to elaborate. If the experiment is successful you won't regret it. The War Office will reward you well."

"I'm not thinking about that," I replied.

"All right then. That's your concern. Down to business now."

Schratt pressed a button. A bell rang in the distance, red signal lamps lit up on the walls. The assistants entered the hall. The professor nodded to them. They began to manipulate the devices against the wall. The screens of quantum and electronic automatic machines came to life.

A meter-thick hatch opened on the cylinder, which resembled a burial vault. Perhaps that is what it was. The vault had already consumed my sweetheart. Let it now consume me.

I entered the small space inside without hesitation, and sat down on the seat.

"What do I do now?"

"Nothing," the professor replied. He stood in the doorway and had a strange look in his eye. "Be brave . . ."

"I'll try," I shrugged my shoulders.

"I'll warn you once more – remember your co-ordinates. Only this is the guarantee of success."

"All right, professor," I said with a philosophical calm. "One more question."

What?"

"I can't see any devices here. Only elements, mosaics. What brings about the transformation of the particles to antiparticles?"

"I understand your amazement," Schratt replied, pleased. "As I told you, this is not a mechanical replacement, but a qualitative jump. These mosaics, as you say, or the elements of the device, create a minus-power reservoir. Your body and everything you are wearing will momentarily impart its positive impulse to this reservoir and become a "hole", that is a minus-body, an anti-body. . ."

"Thank you. That's all."

"Do you need anything else?"

"No. Farewell."

"Till we meet again," Schratt corrected me smoothly.

I nodded without answering. I did not care. I had no desire to see him again. The important thing was Lucy. I lived for her alone, carrying her image in my heart.

The door closed with a mute clunk. I was surrounded by total darkness. There was silence. Unbelievable, absolute silence, the type they say one can listen to.

My heart beat strongly, anxiously. My mind was a blank, my consciousness transparent except for a single radiant image – her face.

The silence was broken by Schratt's voice. It sounded mutely from somewhere above:

“Mr. Wallace. We shall begin. Get ready . . .”

I closed my eyes. In an ocean of darkness, rocking vibrantly around me, violet stars appeared, and a pulsing fiery sun-like flower. What was this? Was this it . . .? Had it already begun? No, this was still only an hallucination. Presently . . . Presently I would experience something incredible, frightening . . .

Chapter Three

There was a flash of lightning. It hit and blinded me.

A firestorm shook up my consciousness, spinning it through a kaleidoscope of unprecedented impressions and sensations. I felt a mighty wave rocking me in its embrace, then dragging me down in a rapid torrent.

I had a soft fall. There was gentle rustling, reminiscent of a dense forest.

I was surrounded by darkness pierced by fiery spirals. Gradually they faded and scattered.

I'm alive, I thought. So the experiment had been a success. Yes, absolutely. For I was no longer in the hall or the cylinder, but in an open space. What was surrounding me? Why couldn't I make anything out?

I opened my eyes. Or perhaps it only seemed to me that I had opened them. In any case nothing changed. There was a chaotic dance of colors and shapes which merged in a multitude of combinations and broke up again.

I needed to calm down. To concentrate. I was in a totally

different world, with different laws, a different environment. Somewhere beside me was a blue abyss. It resembled an Earth sky, though it was a much finer color, unbelievably fabulous, beautiful. Could this be the sky? But why was it below me? Or beside me? While the black surface of the ground was above my head. And now on my right . . . Or was it left? Which was my right side, and which my left?

I became confused. I began to “see” in every direction, no longer with my eyes, but with every part of my body. Body? Did I have a body?

Sure I had. I could feel it, I could move, see, hear.

I stirred, trying to get up. The blue abyss began to swim, moving to one side. What was the matter? What was wrong with me?”

I remembered that straight after birth babies could not coordinate their movements. They saw everything around them the other way around, upside down. They required time to adjust. The same thing must have happened to me. For I was in the “reverse” world. I had to try . . .

I moved my right hand, looked at it. But my left hand was moving. How strange! Well, this was obviously an optical illusion. I had to grow used to it. One more time.

I took a step — or wanted to — with my left foot. But my right foot rose and I fell. The black ground and azure sky danced around me, then stopped.

I rose to my feet again with closed eyes. Perhaps I didn’t have any, only the sensory feelings associated with them? In any case I expressed the desire and everything around me became dark. Then I felt my way forward, first with my left foot, then with my right. It seemed to work. I took a few more steps. It was all right. I just had to grow accustomed to this.

Ten minutes? Perhaps two hours had passed in our world? Or a day, a month? Who could tell what the relationship was between Earth time and time here, in the world of negative energies?

The colors around me began to fade and became gloomier. The sky turned from azure to violet. The surface of the earth took on a creepy black hue. Gradually I became accustomed to these unusual feelings and began to orient myself in space.

I had to call out. Perhaps Lou would hear me if she was nearby. But maybe sound did not transmit here. I had to try . . .

I yelled. Or perhaps only wanted to yell. In any case a thunderous sound rolled into the distance and echoed back. I listened.

No one replied. Only the echo of my voice vibrated through the air, gradually subsiding.

“Lou!” I called out once more.

“Ooh-ooh-ooh!” the space reverberated.

The sounds were accompanied into the distance by writhing spirals, diverse streaks. They were not chaotic, but corresponded exactly to the modulation of my words. Like some cybernetic machine, my brain took note of the strange phenomenon. It would have great scientific value. However – forget these observations. I had to find Lucy in this chimerical antiworld.

Suddenly I felt someone watching me. I turned around but there was no one in the gloom. I couldn't see any figures. But the sensation remained. The gaze was hostile, hateful. An unearthly cold passed through my consciousness. I realized that this was no hallucination, but a real meeting with some being. After all, things here were not at all like on Earth. There were different laws of existence and evolution here. Who was looking at me? What did it want?

Suddenly the feeling of being watched disappeared. I heaved a sigh of relief. Plucking up courage, I headed towards a dark wall looming nearby. These were trees. But strange-looking trees, almost unreal. They appeared like the negatives of those we know. Against the creepy violet sky the undergrowth appeared very morose. Why had the scenery changed so quickly? The sky had been very pleasant and bright at first. What had happened to the surroundings? Or perhaps to me?

A figure stirred under the trees and moved towards me.

“Who's that!” I exclaimed.

“Henry,” I heard a reply. “Henry, my love!”

The figure rushed into my arms. It was alien, but from the words, the breath, the heartbeat, I recognized Lou. It was her . . . Her soft voice, the glitter of her eyes which sparkled even in the darkness . . . But the body was quite different. Or perhaps, no . . . It seemed to be the same, only I could see it from all sides at once. From outside and inside. I was confused by such a flood of sensations. Of course this was Lucy, my beloved Lou!

I looked at Lou's face. It radiated a whole rainbow of colors.

“You found me,” she whispered. “You found me even in this world . . .”

“I couldn't have done anything else,” I said. “I couldn't do without you there . . . on Earth. Let's go, Lou . . . We must hurry. Perhaps we shall be lucky enough to return . . .”

“No,” Lucy replied sadly. “We won’t be able to . . . Didn’t you feel the fall . . .?”

“Sure. But so what?”

“The height of Schratt’s laboratory does not correspond to the surface level here in the antiworld,” Lucy said. “I realized that straight away . . .”

“So that’s why you didn’t return?”

“The only reason . . .”

A terrible despair speared my heart. So what if I had found Lucy? We would have to remain forever in an alien, unknown world.

“What will we do, Lucy?” I asked mutely.

Lou made no reply . . .

Chapter Four

She looked at me calmly, meekly. Under her gaze I settled down too. Lou caressed my hand and said:

“That’s all there is to it . . . Everything is all right . . . We are together. What more do you need? You want to return? What for? Maybe it’s better that we appeared here? After all, we’re alive and breathing . . . surrounded by earth, sky, trees . . . So what if it isn’t just like on Earth? We’ll get used to it. The main thing is that we’re together. Two hearts united by love can create a new world. Do you hear me, Henry?”

“I hear you,” I said emotionally. “And I agree with you . . .”

“Then let’s go. There seems to be some kind of road here. I checked it out before you came . . .”

We held hands and set out along a narrow road, strewn with fine sharp stones. On either side stretched a dense morose jungle and high, frightening cliffs. At times there would be a break and we could see endless fields covered with an impenetrable mist.

We walked for a long time. In silence. Where was this black road leading us?

Ahead of us, against the backdrop of the violet sky, a crimson radiance flared up. It was throbbing, rising higher and higher, throwing ominous reflections onto the black earth, the morose trees.

“What’s that?” Lou whispered.

“Maybe the sun,” I replied.

“A sun? Here in the antiworld?”

“Why not? But here it is the antison. We are seeing another aspect of it, unlike that in our world.”

“How interesting this is, Henry. It is worth the sacrifice of life even if only to discover a new, quite different world . . .”

“If it benefits mankind . . .”

“How do you know this won’t bring any benefits?” Lou gave me a strange look.

“But we won’t return there . . . to that world . . .”

“Who knows . . . But then . . . as far as I can understand . . . this world is not that alien to ours . . . On the contrary – they are fraternal, adjacent and tied together in some way . . . Isn’t that so?”

“Probably,” I said uncertainly. “It’s a pity we didn’t show more interest in this . . . I learned very little from Schratt . . .”

Lou suddenly stopped and pressed close to me in fright.

“What’s the matter, my baby?”

“Can you see?”

“See what?”

“Those eyes . . . That gaze.”

There really was someone before us. He watched us savagely and viciously. But we couldn’t see him. What kind of being was this? Why was it glaring at us with such hostility?

I plucked up my courage and set off towards it. The gaze disappeared. I grabbed Lou’s hand and we continued on our way.

“What was it?” she whispered.

“I don’t know. Perhaps a local creature.”

“It scared me . . . its gaze went straight through me. Why does it detest us?”

“You’re strange, Lou . . . Aren’t there enough savage animals on Earth who, given the chance, fiercely attack visitors and destroy them. And not only animals, there are enough people who are like that. Perhaps it’s the same here . . . Perhaps we came across some animal . . .”

“No,” Lou argued. “It wasn’t an animal. Such hate could only come from . . . an intelligent being . . .”

After that we moved along cautiously, looking around, our souls filled with a feeling of uncertainty and danger. I sensed that someone was following us. And not only one being, but many of them . . .

Someone peered at us again from the side. This gaze was more piercing, more ferocious than the first.

“I’m afraid, Henry,” Lou said.

I said nothing. The sky glowed crimson on the horizon, filling with bloody hues. The edge of a disc appeared. I expected to see a bright Earth sun, but this did not happen. The luminary had a sullen, unpleasant appearance. It emitted dim brown rays, giving neither light nor warmth. On the contrary, it seemed to make everything colder.

The black trees stirred, stretching out branches devoid of leaves towards the sun. Fantastic shadows crawled in the gorges among the cliffs.

The road became more defined. Structures or mountains loomed in the violet twilight ahead.

“Shall we go there?” I asked. “We may come across some beings there . . .”

“If you like, Henry . . .”

But no sooner had we taken two steps, when a horde of strange creatures descended upon us from every direction. They seemed to appear from the mist, forming solid lines and encircling us.

Lou pressed close to me, I embraced her.

“Stay calm, Lou . . . Stay calm . . .”

I tried to make out the creatures’ faces, but in vain. They were black and repugnant – that was all that I could perceive. No faces, no defined features.

The dark creatures moved towards us in a solid wall. They left an opening in one spot. So they wanted us to go somewhere. Where?

I moved down the road against my will. Lou held onto my hand. The grotesque sentries escorted us in silence. I could feel Lou’s whole body trembling.

“I don’t want to be held captive by such repugnant, mean animals, Henry.”

“Nor do I, Lou . . . We must do something!”

Had we penetrated into another world only to become the prey of violent creatures? On the one side there was Schratt and his gang – on the other side even worse demons! Our bodies were overcome with an intense desire to break free from the clutches of these dark monsters. I saw the black sentries move away. We heard a sound resembling a piercing, high-pitched screech.

“Lou! Let’s run!” I shouted.

We dashed forward for all we were worth. The dark creatures pursued us, but the distance between us began to grow. My heart beat joyously, victoriously. We would escape that damned circle

after all. The jungle of trees was close by now. We would hide there. Beyond that were cliffs and mountains! They wouldn't find us there!

In astonishment I noticed that the surrounding landscape was changing. The sun began to shine more brightly. It had turned from brown to yellow now. Bah, no! It was pink now! Or perhaps white? No, it was blue now . . .

"This is some kind of magic," Lou said.

The luminary flared up with such a firework of colors that it blinded us. We stopped, short of breath, and looked back. There was no trace of our black escort. It had melted in the light of the marvellous day.

Lush grasses swayed around us, among them grew delicate multicolored flowers. Dewdrops glistened on them, shimmering with the colors of the rainbow. Beyond this rose beautiful tall trees. They lowered their branches to the lakes below, as if peering into the serene mirror of their surface. It was just like on Earth. Only more profound, much richer.

Suddenly something loomed between the trees. Lou grew wary. The grass whispered softly, the flowers emitted a delicate fragrance. A tall figure in white emerged before us . . .

Chapter Five

We stood stock still, looking at the being in silence.

I understood that it did not belong to those dark creatures which had pursued us. On the contrary, it seemed to radiate rays of light and color. Glowing blue eyes, long golden hair down to the shoulders, with stern, but gentle facial features. They kept changing continually. No artist would have been able to paint the being's portrait. It was a kaleidoscope of expressions, forms and shades.

The being raised its hand as if welcoming us. And we heard a voice:

"I welcome you sincerely, people."

I replied emotionally:

"Thank you. But who are you? We were just escaping from some monsters . . . when suddenly . . ."

The aureole of a smile appeared on the strange face. The unknown being said:

"I know. Everything shall be explained to you. Let's go . . ."

It turned around and moved off. It appeared not to be walking, but floating over the earth and the grasses. A snow-white building appeared before us in a cozy spot among the trees. But its color was not terrestrial, being neither the color of marble, nor plastic, nor even of snow. It was alien to Earth people – an absolute white color.

We entered through a spacious passage to a translucent hall. In the centre I spied an oval pool surrounded by plants with azure flowers. Multicolored sparkling flashes shimmered through the water. The surrounding furniture, objects, walls and architecture were so inexplicably spacious that the world around me seemed like a melody.

An area by the pool was covered with thick, soft carpets. The host pointed to them. Lucy and I sat down. I did not know what to say, what to do. Everything seemed like a dream. Everything was so unreal, one didn't want to believe it. Smiling, the being said:

"You must believe . . ."

"You can read my mind?" I asked in surprise.

"I can see it," our host said softly. "And now listen to me, dear guests. My name is Heon, although a name means nothing here. I know everything about you – there's no need to explain. I know

that you're from the adjacent world, that you came across some menacing and vile monsters here and escaped from them. . . .”

“Who are they?” Lou asked impulsively.

“Servants of the Black Tyrants,” Heon replied. “They reign in the lower states of our world”

“But how did we manage to escape from them? It happened so unexpectedly.”

“I'll explain,” Heon said benevolently. “You are unused to states in our world. You are accustomed to more stable forms, more stable laws. But here everything is different. Our world is closely connected to yours. It is its antipode, its contradiction, but at the same time its form, its negative. It is the encasement, the receptacle of those things which appear in your world”

“The ‘holes’ of Paul Dirac,” Lou whispered. I nodded.

Heon looked at her affectionately and shook his head.

“Your scientist's concept is only a crude model. Although it has a certain sense to it. Your world and ours are developing together, they are inseparable, but whereas your world is one facet of a crystal, ours has many other facets. Therefore it is richer, more variable, fuller.”

“But we can see things resembling those on Earth,” I said. “Trees and flowers, and . . . you . . . You resemble a human being”

“Yes,” Heon agreed. “But in reality it is not so. By inertia your consciousness is perceiving things the way it is accustomed to do. That is all. Do you understand?”

“Almost.”

“I shall explain more clearly. The world of negative energies is more plastic from the physical, positive world. It is devoid of inertia. That is why shape is very conditional here. It depends on the level of energy, its correlation, its intensity and frequency. That is why you escaped from the Black Tyrants. When you made your way here into our world you lost a lot of energy and fell to the lowest level of existence. But then you resurrected the highest forces in you and escaped from the sphere of the Black Tyrants”

“Henry,” Lou said joyously. “This is a complete replica of the atomic world. The greater the energy of an electron, the higher the orbit it enters”

“Correct,” Heon praised her. “You will now understand what I had in mind saying that our world has many facets of a crystal, while yours has only one.”

“But together,” I blurted out, “they make a single crystal?”

“Absolutely,” Heon’s face lit up. “The unity of the world is an eternal truth . . .”

“All this may be so,” I said sadly, “but that makes it no easier for us. We made our way here accidentally, but there is no way back.”

Heon bathed us in love, saying nothing. His high forehead reflected the emanation of thoughts, which moved like bolts of lightning through his consciousness. At last he said:

“I cannot help you. We live on a level that makes it very difficult to descend into your world. This is done at times, but the means are not appropriate in this instance. The Black Tyrants can penetrate your world very easily. They are a savage gang of rulers who reign over the creatures of the lower spheres of the negative world. But you wouldn’t want to make use of their services, would you?”

“No,” Lou exclaimed. “Never!”

“There you are. Especially since they will gladly use you for their loathsome ends.”

“And what are they?”

“Destruction. They are diametrically opposed to any creativity.”

“We have the same thing in our world,” whispered Lou. “How many great ideas have been turned to war and destruction . . .!”

“Yes,” Heon agreed. “It can be no other way. Inasmuch as our worlds are developing jointly, analogous phenomena must be present in both. But when they disappear from one world, they will cease to exist in the other at the same time . . .”

“Will that ever happen?” I asked bitterly.

“Sure. The march of evolution is ceaseless.”

“What do we do for the moment though? How do we live?”

“How do you live?” Heon expressed surprise. “Remain here. Isn’t the struggle the same in all worlds? Do you think that in your world alone they are paving the way towards enlightenment? This process is innate. Take part in it here, since you’re here now . . .”

“But aren’t we alien to you?”

“Why alien? Haven’t we found common ideas? Aren’t our higher ideals common? Aren’t our worlds, as we discussed earlier, the facets of a single world?”

“I don’t quite understand,” I became confused by the flood of unusual ideas. “Where do they connect?”

“They connect in their essence, in a third world, the world of synthesis.”

“There is also a third world?” Lou asked in astonishment.

“Yes,” Heon replied. “And that world is the synthesis of our two worlds . . .”

“Meaning a single crystal?”

“Correct. Only it is no longer a world of conditional shapes, but veritable essences. Time and space, motion, form – all are only manifestations, partial facets of the true reality of the world of synthesis.”

“There is being there too?”

“Absolutely. Being is everywhere where there is something. There, being is incomparably richer than in our worlds. It is manifested on a higher plane.”

“And it is inaccessible to our worlds?”

“On the contrary. We are heading there. This is the closest point of evolution. Both you and we. It is there, as I said, that the lines of development of the two worlds come together.”

“My mind cannot take all this in,” Lou whispered woefully. “But it all sounds very beautiful . . .”

“But now . . . can one penetrate the synthesis world?” I asked timidly.

Heon hesitated, looked at us intently, then announced:

“We do. But such experiments are dangerous. The synthesis world is a world of the highest, mightiest and purest energies. It is difficult to endure such an incredible strain. However if a being’s nature is filled with courage, purity and energy this can be done. But not for long. I have been there several times. It is a fascinating spectacle about which nothing can be said. It has to be experienced . . .”

Lou and I looked at each other. One and the same thought flashed through each of our minds. I looked at Heon. He raised his hand, as if placating me.

“There’s no need to talk. I have already understood your wishes.”

Lou stretched her hand out to me, I clasped it firmly and we soared in a single burst.

“But only one warning. Such a flight to the pinnacle of being does not come gratis. After expending your energy you may again fall to the lower rungs of existence and find yourselves in the clutches of the Black Tyrants.”

“We’re not afraid of that,” I said firmly. “We’ll get away from them.”

“I will be waiting for you,” Heon replied softly. “And now follow me.”

He moved towards an opening in the wall, we entered a small sphere filled with a blue mistiness. Heon left us in the center, between the rings of shimmering spirals, and stepped back.

“Fill yourselves with the highest desires!” boomed a thunderous voice.

I embraced Lou and gazed into her eyes. They fired lofty ideals within me, filled me with strength.

A silence enveloped us. An inviolable, incredible silence. The features of the room disappeared, shapes and objects melted away. There was nothing around us.

And then we were wrapped in opacity, complete darkness. It spread to infinity, having neither time, nor space, nor suns, nor planets, humans nor plants. It contained no shapes, no objects. But at the same time it contained everything. Everything I had seen, heard or learnt in the past, present and future. You would not understand. It has to be experienced.

Very high-power fiery currents of energy pierced us, uniting us with the strange essences of that world. We sensed them, associating with them, imbibing startling mysteries.

And then a terrible blow sent us plummeting. The paltry energy of our consciousness was momentarily expended in the synthesis world, unable to endure the powerful currents. Colorful shadows flickered all around us, then we became engulfed in darkness.

I fainted from a violent jolt . . .

Chapter Six

When I regained consciousness, there was a gloom all around and a violet sky above. I remembered Heon's warning. We really had expended all our energy and had fallen here, to the bottom of the antiworld. The body was devoid of strength, the mind was clouded.

"Lou," I called.

"I'm here," I heard her voice say.

I saw her face. It was haggard, emaciated. Lucy's eyes were wan and lackluster.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"In some kind of room."

The twilight around us cleared a little and we saw a crowd of black creatures nearby. They had surrounded us in a solid wall on three sides. Before us loomed a podium on which sat a creature. I tried to make out its features and shape, but without success. There were only sensations of disharmony, cruelty and inexorable strength.

"You did not escape from me, the ruler," an ironical voice said. "Now you are in my hands, people from the adjacent world."

We remained silent. The voice of the black creature on the throne strengthened and filled with rage:

"Why do you not reply? How did you get here again? Were you banished from the higher spheres?"

"Don't say anything, Henry. There's no need," Lou whispered imploringly.

"That is all you can expect from them," thundered the Black Tyrant. "They are as inconstant as the elements. The slightest fluctuation in energy deprives a being of the right to remain in that sphere. Who needs such absurd, inconstant existence?"

The ruler bent forward and his words rang with temptation:

"Only in my dominions is being stable and eternal. My subjects are certain of their position. They do not need the ridiculous principle of perfection. We acknowledge only the principle of pleasure – the only stimulus to existence. Do you understand me, people from the other world? Remain here. Of your own free will. You will be happy. Together with us you will take the path of pleasure and destruction. There is power in destruction. And what can be greater than power, being master of the world? You have visited other worlds. This will help you to be my servants in

those worlds. You will receive everything you desire. You will achieve power you haven't even dreamed of . . .”

What could I say to the Black Tyrant after my mind and heart had touched the lofty, incredibly beautiful worlds towards which the best of mankind has strived through the ages? Lucy nestled up to me and said hastily:

“Henry, there's no need . . . Don't say anything. He is powerless to do anything. We shall regain our strength, renew our energies, and his guards won't be able to hold us . . .”

The black ruler must have overheard Lou's words. He sat up on his podium and shouted menacingly:

“You won't outsmart me! Choose your fate. Either you become my assistants or you will be separated. I know that you, man, came here after this woman. You love her. I have the ability to return you to your world. And her I will leave here. Then you will be separated forever. Choose . . .!”

It is better to burn in a fiery storm, to perish in the gloom of obscurity, rather than to lower oneself to the lowest level – the enslavement of the soul. I looked defiantly at the Black Tyrant. He shuddered with anger and his eyes glistened with a dull fire.

“You have chosen your path, person from the other world. You shall return to your Earth and never see your partner again! Servants, seize him and do as I said!”

I was grabbed and torn away from Lucy. I saw her outstretched arms but there was nothing I could do. A brute force was dragging me away from her. I felt myself being thrown into a tight coffin-like cube, a heavy hatch sealed me inside. I heard her last muffled words:

“Henry . . . I will be waiting for you . . .”

And then there was complete darkness . . . silence . . . non-existence. . .

I was seized by indifference, all my desires began to fade. Deep in my consciousness a thought stirred: perhaps I should be resisting? Perhaps there is still a way out?

No, I did not have the strength. Emptiness. Hopelessness.

Small violet-colored stars twinkled in the abyss of perception, a pulsating fiery flower flared up. Another hallucination? Where had it come from?

I stretched my hand out into the gloom. Where had I been imprisoned? Everything was neither soft nor hard. More like a viscous fluid. It surrounded me with an implacable embrace,

pressing in . . . Perhaps I was delirious? Perhaps this was a strange, horrifying nightmare?

Thunder clapped. A powerful current of hidden energy whirled me about and hurled me into space. Light hit my eyes. I saw sky, sun, sea, felt I was above earth. I began to fall. And in my last moment of consciousness I realized that the Black Tyrant had carried out his threat and had thrown me back into my native world.

What followed, you yourself know, Pedro. If it hadn't been for you, I would probably have drowned. That's all . . .

Chapter Seven

Wallace stopped talking and closed his eyes in exhaustion. A storm was raging beyond the walls of the ancient house, waves crashed against the rocky cliffs with groans, as if accompanying Henry's moving account. The old fisherman Juan stirred in the corner and began coughing.

Pedro rose from his bed as if he had just woken up. He began pacing about the room, his anxious shadow following him, rising and falling with the lantern's uneven light. With an energetic movement he tousled his straight black hair and stopped opposite Henry. Excited, he said:

"I am lost for words . . . I believe you. This is fantastic. It could probably have happened no other way. But now we have to think . . . about your future. What do you propose to do?"

"I don't know," Wallace gave a feeble smile. "I haven't thought that far ahead yet."

"Aha," Juan suddenly interrupted their conversation. "Quieter. I can hear an engine . . ."

Pedro and Henry fell silent. The clear sounds of a motor were entwined with the roar of the storm. The old fisherman rushed to the window and looked outside. He looked back in alarm.

"Yeah. Probably coming after you. A cutter. There are two policemen and a civilian on board."

Henry looked through the window. A large military cutter had shot out from behind Devil's Cliff. It was making its way to shore. In the dawn twilight one could make out three figures on the deck. Two in military uniforms, one in civilian dress. Henry recognized

the civilian. It was Schratt. How had they learned of Wallace's appearance? Had somebody already managed to inform them? Or had they simply guessed, after hearing about the man falling from the sky?

Pedro looked sternly at Henry and asked decisively:

"Will you go with him?"

"No. Never. I won't serve Schratt and his vile gang."

"What will you do then?"

Henry looked sadly at his young friend and said softly:

"I'm powerless on my own . . ."

"You can count on me," Pedro declared passionately.

"You give your word?"

"Yes!"

Pedro firmly shook Henry's dry, bony hand and said fervently:

"They will take you away, of course. Me too, perhaps. But since there aren't many of them, there is nothing to fear."

He bent over old Juan and whispered something into his ear. The fellow thought for a while and nodded. Without tarrying long, he grabbed a crowbar from the corner and grunting, crawled out the window.

"Where are you off to?" Henry asked in amazement.

"Quiet," Pedro admonished him. "It has to be this way."

The old fisherman disappeared through the window. Voices were heard outside, then a loud knock on the door.

"Come inside," said Pedro.

Two policemen appeared in the doorway. They peered inside the house, then stepped aside to let in the civilian. It was Professor Schratt.

A unique mixture of joy, cunning and amazement played on his face. He quickly raced up to Henry and embraced him by the shoulders.

"Ah, colleague! This is incredible! We were told that a fantastic event took place on this island. A person fell from the sky! I thought it was you. We immediately came here. Get ready, we're leaving . . ."

Henry was sitting on the bed, listening to the professor's tirade with indifference and weariness. He smiled ironically and asked:

"You've come for me, you say? Why the police then?"

Schratt spread his arms apart.

"It's a military cutter, you understand. And then . . . we weren't sure it would be you. But why aren't you telling us what happened? Why didn't you return earlier, during the experiment? Where's

Lucy? And how did you end up here? Why are you silent, Wallace?" Schratt asked sternly. "You don't want to answer?"

"No," Henry said calmly.

There was nothing to fear. Those who chose the right path had the support of the highest and loftiest forces. Who cared what Schratt and his henchmen did to him! Henry sensed that everything would turn out well, that all the forces of darkness would be unable to overcome him. This was only temporary captivity, only one moment in time! And then there would be the boundless space of freedom, the limitless worlds of creativity and beauty! How repugnant Schratt's face was becoming. Was he a scientist? No, he was a time-server of the monopolies, a slave of the Black Tyrants! Yes, yes! These were the black tyrants! Their pale copies existed there in the antiworld too, worthless copies, negatives! Soon they would disappear, together with their disciples. Mankind would not tolerate such filth on the planet for long, it would go the way of perfection and transform its native Earth into the best of worlds.

"You are suppressing the results of the experiment!" Schratt raised his voice angrily. "You're a criminal, Wallace."

Henry said nothing. Let him talk! Let him bubble over with black rage! He was powerless all the same. He could kill a man, shackle him in chains, throw him into prison, but the free spirit was beyond his reach.

Henry looked at Pedro. The lad was standing beside the bed, pale but determined. He nodded his head approvingly. Schratt spotted the gesture.

"What does this mean?" he thundered. "Who is this boy?"

"He's my saviour," Wallace replied calmly.

"Great!" Schratt hissed through his teeth. "All the better. So you refuse to talk, Mr Wallace?"

"Yes."

"And you refuse to return to the laboratory?"

"Yes."

"In that case I cannot leave you behind. Taking into consideration the secret nature of the work carried out in our laboratory, with the state's interests at stake, I must arrest you. And this boy too, who obviously must know something . . .!"

"Now language like that suits you better!" Henry said derisively. "Simple . . . and sincere!"

"Take them," Schratt ordered curtly.

The policemen aimed their automatic weapons at Pedro and Henry. One of them said grimly:

“Leave the house. And don’t try to escape.”

Pedro made his way to the door in silence. Henry followed suit. The storm blasted them with the smell of the sea and distant lands. Pedro nudged Henry with his shoulder and whispered, with a sparkle in his eyes:

“Take it easy.”

They came out to the beach. The large cutter was rocking on the water in the relative calm at the base of Devil’s Cliff.

“Get on board!” the senior policeman ordered.

Clouds burned crimson on the horizon. The sea was leaden and menacing. The hurricane raised gigantic waves which crashed fiercely against the shore, spitting white foam at the island’s cliffs.

The prisoners were left by the deck-cabin with one of the policemen, while Schratt and the senior policeman went inside.

The engines roared to life. The cutter moved away from the beach. It quickly sped past Devil’s Cliff, sliced into a foaming wave. Cold splashes struck Henry on the face. He found Pedro’s hand and squeezed it.

“I’m sorry, my friend. You’re in trouble because of me!”

“Nonsense!” Pedro smiled. “Nothing has happened yet. The game is only beginning.”

“Quiet!” the policeman shouted at them, wrapping himself more tightly in his coat. “Prisoners are forbidden to talk!”

The cutter slowed down. The waves attacked it fiercely, throwing it about. Henry looked anxiously at Pedro.

“What does this mean?”

“Everything is all right!” Pedro winked. “Old Juan knows his business . . .”

Schratt looked out from the deck-cabin. He was pale and terrified.

The engines spluttered and stopped. The storm swung them around on the one spot and lifted them onto the crest of a wave. The senior policeman rushed out of the deck-cabin.

“We’re done for!” he screamed.

Pedro grabbed Henry by the hand and pulling him away, jumped into the water. A white-crested breaker picked them up and carried them along. The cutter disappeared behind a wave. It appeared once more nearby. This time only the mast and part of the deck-cabin were visible above water – a single black dot was clinging to the mast.

"They'll die!" shouted Henry, choking on the water.

"That's their business!" Pedro replied cheerfully. "Hold on, friend. The beach is close by. Old Juan is waiting . . ."

The storm died down towards evening. The sea threw up the cutter's wreckage and Schratt's body at the base of Devil's Cliff. Three military vessels carrying dozens of policemen converged onto the small island. An inquiry was launched. They broke into old Juan's house, but the fisherman was not there . . .

Before dusk he had ferried Henry and Pedro in his frail boat to the large neighbouring island. They waited there until darkness. Then the old man said goodbye to Henry in the thick undergrowth of the shore.

"May the Lord watch over you, my son! Pedro, I'll be waiting for you . . ."

The evening darkness swallowed the two figures.

Under cover of darkness and the fury of the storm Pedro and Henry scaled the high fence around the laboratory. They inched their way past the trees and through beds of flowers.

"Now it will be easier," Henry whispered. "There is no one on duty here. The guards are posted only at the fence."

They entered the passage and came up to the door to the hall. A small green rectangle was burning above the door. Henry pressed a button on the right. The door slid silently open. They entered the hall. Pedro turned on his flashlight. The narrow beam of light ran over the walls, the gray cylinder, and rested on the control panel.

"Do I turn it on here?" Pedro asked.

"Yes. Come here. There's little time. Listen carefully. I'll enter that cylinder. You'll close it behind me. The automatic machines will do everything else. When a red light appears over the cylinder, pull down the actuating lever on the control panel. The electronic machines will do the rest. Then get the hell out of here! But first . . . pull this lever."

"What is it?"

"It releases the quantum machine controls. The apparatus will keep accumulating energy unchecked . . ."

"Won't that cause a catastrophe?" Pedro asked.

"That's what I want," Henry replied. "The laboratory will

explode. Why, do you want to leave this frightening invention at the disposal of various Schratts and other black tyrants? So that they can enter other worlds and threaten mankind even through inaccessible realms?"

"I will do as you ask, Mr. Wallace."

"Farewell. Or no . . . Listen, Pedro . . ."

Henry's face drew close to the student in the darkness, his eyes filled with a warm glow.

"Pedro . . . Why don't we go together? You won't regret it. It's beautiful there, Pedro! Let's go, my friend . . ."

Pedro shook his head resolutely.

"No, Mr. Wallace. I won't go."

"Why? Are you afraid?"

"No. But I am a son of the Earth. You must go. Lucy is waiting for you in the antiworld. While I . . . still have so much to do on our planet! The struggle continues. And I shall be here, where it is the fiercest. I too will prepare to penetrate other worlds . . . Only not for myself, for everyone . . . I want all of mankind to be beautiful and strong, for the worlds of the future to be open to all! No, I shall stay. Farewell, my friend . . . I believe in your fate!"

"Perhaps you're right. Then listen to me. There are some rolls of film in the safe here. They contain all the basic records of the device's construction – the calculations, formulas and theoretical computations. Take them with you. I know that in your hands they won't be lost. You will know what to do with such treasure . . .!"

"Thank you, Mr. Wallace. I will do everything you've asked . . ."

Henry embraced Pedro, then moved away decisively and entered the opening in the cylinder. The heavy door closed behind him. A red light flared up above the cylinder.

Pedro's heart began to pound strongly and uneasily. He sighed, gritted his teeth and placed a firm hand on the lever to actuate the device . . .

Pedro hurried to the beach where old Juan was waiting for him. The bundle of films bulging from his bosom scratched his chest, and the student clutched them as he ran.

Meanwhile a fire was raging behind him. It was consuming the laboratory ruins, spewing myriads of dancing sparks into the clouds. A siren was wailing, there were alarmed shouts, the roar of

engines. Pedro took no notice of the commotion. He stopped one more time and glanced back. The laboratory was burning. Like the whole world of lies and deceit, the world of violence and darkness had to be consumed by flame soon.

Pedro turned away and went off into the darkness. With sorrow and tenderness he thought of Henry who was now in another world, right beside this one, where he was seeking his love, his fate, his heart. He would find Lou, there was no doubt about that. He would certainly find the bright-faced Heon, who would once more reveal the world of the Great Synthesis to the two lovers, even if only for an instant.

1963

The Alien Secret

(AN EXCERPT)

I still have not fully regained my senses. What happened really shook me, destroyed my customary notions, stirred my consciousness to its most secret depths. The laws of time were sent flying head over heels. So many events and impressions have been compressed into the last few days, that they would have sufficed for a million years. No, I am not exaggerating!

The profound law of development came into play – the accumulation of inconspicuous changes was transformed into a revolutionary explosion. In the last century no one has in principle denied the existence of life on other planets. But this was accepted and viewed as an abstract notion, outside the context of reality. In other words, most of the world did not regard the possibility seriously. Only science-fiction writers competed to paint a picture of these aliens – moving from one extreme to the other. Either they stooped to the personification of savage beings, declaring all higher manifestations of life to be almost identical, or they created frightening monsters.

However, I am digressing, becoming too verbose. I need to concentrate and to experience this fantastic series of events anew. Dear reader, don't hasten to express your condemnation or pass judgement. Do not reject my account, but do not become enthusiastic about it. Judge it frankly and honestly, try to find a resonance in what you read. You are restricted by fixed notions? Remember that these "fixed" notions once fought their way to acceptance through jungles of other "fixed" notions, now relegated to the archives of knowledge.

Therefore, I will begin . . .

On the 20th of August 197... I was preparing for the first flight to Mars. A flight which has not been realized to this day. The atomic-powered spaceship was standing on the cosmodrome, a whole cohort of specialists were checking through its assemblies and

mechanisms one final time. Its tanks were being filled with water. This “fuel” was considered to be the most efficient, especially since its discovery on Mars a long time ago.

During the days prior to liftoff I said my goodbyes to the places dear to me, and paid a visit to my mother who lived in a village near the dense forests of Briansk. Each morning before sunrise I would venture into the bush, the marshes, and all the wildest spots. I wanted to take memories of this virgin beauty with me into the desert of space – a beauty solemn, dismal and serene. My betrothed was always at my side. The girl Mariyka Malenka, nimble, thin as a baby deer, looking like a miniature statuette. Her tanned face with its cute snub nose and large gray eyes kept changing constantly. She could laugh infectiously, then become pensive, burying her face in something unseen. But she did not brood, did not grieve, did not suffer when we were separated.

We had decided long ago . . . no, not decided, but realized in our hearts that love knew no distance, did not fear separation. She whispered passionately, looking intently at the blue of the sky shining through the trees:

“Understand me . . . here we are walking together, talking, holding hands . . . kissing . . . You will leave, and all this will be no more. It remains only as a memory, in the imagination . . . But if I love you, that recollection lives forever . . . I need not touch your hand or look into your eyes . . . You will be beside me whenever I desire it . . . that is, always.”

This was just what I had been expecting before my flight – confused words inconsistent with logic, but consistent with the soul. And so I left the village, inspired by the love of those people closest to me and by expectations of something unusual.

The capital greeted me with an atmosphere of alarm. People were gathered around loudspeakers in the streets, as though waiting for some kind of announcement. I asked one of the passers-by in the square outside the railway station what was happening.

“You don’t know?” he answered in amazement.

“No, I’ve just returned from the countryside.”

“Just recently it was announced that an asteroid will collide with the Earth in a month’s time. They’ve calculated that it will fall in Lithuania. The danger zone, for a radius of several hundred kilometres, is being evacuated. So, as you can imagine . . . there is panic and alarm. What if the scientists have miscalculated? And this thing falls on us instead of Lithuania? Or on Paris, or London?”

Or any other place which is unprepared . . . ?”

I did not hear out the garrulous stranger, rushing off to hail a taxi to the Cosmonautics Committee. There they were already waiting for me. The secretary showed me into the office of Academician Liubavin, the Committee Chief. The country's eminent scientists had assembled there – the cream of the Academy and government representatives. Liubavin, a broad-shouldered robust man, was saying something, gesticulating energetically. He flashed me a look and nodded towards a chair. I sat down.

“Therefore, there can be no mistake,” the academician was saying. “The calculations have been repeated twenty-five times. Not only by our computing centres, but by those of America and England as well. The results coincide. An asteroid with a mass of close to a billion tonnes will fall on Lithuania. Even the evacuation of the whole republic would not solve the problem. Of course, there is always the possibility of error. We cannot discount a probability of even a thousandth of a percent that the asteroid will fall in another place where the people will be unprepared.”

“What do you people propose doing?” someone asked. All present turned to the questioner. He was a government representative.

“There are two alternatives,” the Committee Chief replied. “One involves an attempt at destroying the asteroid at a safe distance from Earth with rockets fitted with hydrogen charges. The second alternative involves the dispatch of the Mars spaceship with a pilot who will set hydrogen charges on the asteroid and destroy it. The first alternative provides no guarantees. There is a possibility of error. And the slightest error will result in a deviation of several thousand kilometres . . .”

“And the second alternative?”

“The second one . . . will depend on the spaceship pilot . . .”

The academician looked at me. I understood. I even felt strange that anyone should have any doubts. If it was necessary, I would go . . .

It was decided to go ahead with the preparation of both alternatives. Just in case. Five hydrogen charges were loaded onto my ship, together with vibrators for drilling on the asteroid. The main computer centre calculated a new orbit for me. The preparations lasted eight days. Twenty-one days remained before the asteroid was to strike Earth. I lifted off on August 18, two days prior to the planned flight to Mars. It was no festive occasion,

there were no solemn speeches. The people of Earth were alarmed, waiting and hoping.

The spaceship rose confidently, entering the rarified layers of the atmosphere, and locked into orbit. Down below the engines buzzed away like angry bumblebees, accelerating the ship to its normal cruising speed of five hundred kilometres per second. The Earth's sphere grew smaller, I became engulfed by a dark-violet abyss which stared at the ship in amazement with its billions of diverse star-eyes. I lay in the pilot's seat, pressed down by G forces. I looked into the videoscope and marvelled. The surrounding Cosmos appeared familiar, near and dear. Why? Where had this feeling sprung from?

I remembered the debates conducted by scientists and nonscientists before the space age. Some asserted that human beings would be unable to survive interplanetary flight. That they would go insane in the strange conditions. That they would never become accustomed to conditions so different to those on Earth. That we were never destined to meet intelligent beings from other planets. . . What nonsense. Here I am on my first flight through the emptiness of space, sensing with all my being that I am a child of the Universe, not only the resident of a single planet. I am exultant, overjoyed at the thought, just as a child rejoices when it discovers the world beyond its cot, beyond its parents' home. I am a small spark of Intellect, but with limitless possibilities. . . And that spark will become the master of Infinity. That is the only course! The only way. . .

I opened my eyes, blinded by centuries of superstition, and saw the outlines of my new home. It was infinitely spacious and beautiful. It was my inheritance, and I was its master. The freed Intellect overcame the inertia of habit, stagnation and egoism. It kept flying further and further ahead, destroying the boundaries of mystery one after another, seeing with awe and pride that they could all be accommodated in its immense bosom. Your fate is verily beautiful, man! You are a bottomless chalice of knowledge which will forever draw on the sparkling wine of wisdom from the ocean of Infinity . . .

For several hours I flew with the engines off. Weightlessness was an indescribably blissful freedom. I savoured it, absorbed it into my soul, my consciousness, my nerves. Someone once said that weightlessness was an unnatural sensation, a state hostile to man! Rubbish! This state is a goal. It is a great freedom from gravity, the fetters of inert mass. Little wonder that in childhood we dream of

flight in space. Flight without wings, controlled only by the Mind. The profound, undiscovered essence of nature programmed into our being alarms us, lures us to the sun, into a world with no weight, where the mind senses a kinship with the Universe . . .

The chronometer hand and the instruments told me it was time to slow down. The engines hummed once more, this time slowing down the spaceship . . .

The locators found the miniature planet in space. A bright spot appeared on the screens. Passing through an electronic compensator, the image was magnified and assumed more legible outlines. The portable computer burst into operation, correlating theoretical calculations of the flight trajectory with the instrument data. There was no deviation. The spaceship drew closer to the space rock, landing gently on its craggy surface.

I lay in my seat for a few minutes, eyes closed, and listened to the blood flowing through my body, the heightened rhythm of awareness. Was I pleased and happy to be the first human being from Earth to reach so far into the Cosmos, to experience something beyond the reach of countless past generations?

No, this was pride – a pride for mankind’s great progress, the restlessness of the Intellect which had peered into the abyss of mystery. And something else – worry. Ordinary human worry for the fate of those on Earth fearfully awaiting the asteroid’s fall.

I regained my senses. Checked the output of the ship’s units. The instruments were functioning normally. I turned on the transmitter and half a minute later heard the call sign – a reply from the Cosmonautics Committee. I revelled at the words of Liubavin’s voice:

“We are receiving you clearly, Mykhailo. Awaiting your advice.”

“The ship has landed on the asteroid,” I replied. “All systems are go.”

“How is your health? Are you feeling all right?”

“I feel strange. But more about that later . . . I am preparing to venture out now and begin drilling . . .”

“We wish you success. We are waiting. Be careful . . .”

I finished my transmission and signed off. After inspecting my spacesuit, I left the cabin for the narrow circular passage which hugged the reactor. Grabbing a vibrator, I made my way towards the air-locks.

The Cosmos engulfed me with such a grand embrace of sparkling immensity, that I stood motionless beside the spaceship

for a long time – stunned and enchanted. Words cannot describe the sensation. To say anything about the beauty of stellar lights, the boundlessness of the Cosmos, is to repeat banal descriptions already bandied about for hundreds of years. My dear friend, if you are young, you will soon experience what I am describing, for the cosmic era is unfolding for everyone. But if you are an older person, try to find similar emotions in the depths of your soul.

I stepped out onto a rocky clearing, having first secured myself with a line to the spaceship. Gingerly, so as not to break away from the asteroid surface, I made my way across the clearing, marking a few places for drilling sites. A little further on I noticed some fairly deep rifts. I decided to plant two of the charges in these.

Returning to the spaceship, I plugged the vibrator cord into the ship's electrical system and prepared the charges. I then laid out the cord to the marked positions. The rock yielded easily, compressing silently under the action of the device's invisible vibrations. In half an hour I had prepared three holes.

Holding my breath, I carried out the first cylinder with the hydrogen charge. Though I knew that it would not detonate without a special radio signal, I was still unable to check the nervous tremor in my legs. My imagination painted a vivid picture of destruction, which I had recently seen in a film. A hellish fiery storm had swept the planet, sweeping away trees, buildings and people for tens of kilometres in every direction. What good fortune that mankind had rejected the devilish might of nuclear arms, settling conflicts still dividing nations through peaceful means. Only in instances such as this, to save planet Earth, could the horrendous power of the atom be employed . . .

Without resting I set all five charges, installing a special receiver beside each which would receive the signal from my ship to detonate the hydrogen charges.

After finishing my work, I let out a sigh of relief. Now I could head back. If I returned fortuitously . . . if . . . for how could one guarantee success on a new uncharted path . . . then I would immediately set off for Mars. To that strange, old, exciting planet. I would not encounter a dead world, like this lump of galactic rock, but a land of great secrets and disturbing riddles. I would be able to see at close hand the gigantic unnatural formations on Mars' moons and might perhaps bring the people of Earth the clue to their ancient civilisation . . .

I rolled up the cord and put away the vibrator, then decided to collect a few specimens of rock from the asteroid.

Taking a portable jackhammer with me, I went beyond the clearing and stopped by a cliff. The sun played brightly on the granite precipices as I studied them for something interesting.

In a few places I freed some chimerical entanglements of diverse crystals from the rock face and hid them in my bag. Examining the interesting concentrations of rock, I made my way up the cliff face and looked over to the far side of the asteroid. Nothing was visible in the thick shadows. But unexpectedly, as I turned sharply, my eyes were pierced by a blinding flash. I squinted and covered my face. Looking closer, I spied the glistening polished surface of some creation.

My heart anxiously missed a beat. Could this be a hallucination? I drew closer. No. This was no illusion, no spectre. An alien extra-terrestrial craft really was standing among the dead cliffs . . .

Apprehensively I approached the unknown ship, examining it from all sides. It was made of a shining metal or similar substance, without a single seam. It was shaped like a humming-top, standing about five metres high. Underneath I could see the black outline of an opening. Obviously the entrance. On the upper section were several protuberances – possibly equipment channels.

My mind was in a flurry, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Where would this craft have appeared from on the asteroid? From Mars? The entrance was open, so there would probably be no one inside. Perhaps the cosmonauts had died? I should venture inside . . . But I was afraid I might activate an automatic system, and then might never emerge from there . . .

I walked around the craft. On the rocky ledge on the other side I noticed something black. I drew closer and tried to make out the shapes. Rays of weak light reached this spot and I saw two mushroom-shaped objects. They had a rippled silvery surface, crowned at the top with a spherical cupola. What were they? Robots of some kind?

I carefully lifted one of the objects and moved it into the sun. Looking down at the cupola, I was horrified and dropped the object in amazement. Large *human* eyes looked at me from behind the transparent surface. In any case, these were eyes of *intelligence*.

I began to tremble. My heart beat in excitement. Intelligent beings . . . Probably dead. What should I do?

The mushroom-shaped being slowly drifted to the ground, for the gravity here was very weak. I picked it up again and peered into the translucent area.

Eyes, straight-out living eyes . . . They looked into my soul with a penetrating, authoritative gaze. But how unreal and unusual the shape of these beings was! A head, and below a kind of unique umbrella. Two limbs, one on either side . . .

I carefully placed the dead cosmonaut back on the ground. And became lost in thought. What a surprise! This was a discovery with world-wide repercussions. I had no right to forsake my discovery, to destroy it together with the asteroid. Earth had to be informed . . .

I returned to the ship and summoned Liubavin. He asked anxiously:

“What’s the matter, Mykhailo? You haven’t finished yet?”

“Everything is ready! I was about to leave. But I found a craft on the far side of the asteroid.”

“What craft?” the academician asked in amazement.

I recounted everything I had seen and heard his heavy breathing in the receiver. Then he asked uncertainly:

“You haven’t by chance . . . Mykhailo . . .? Perhaps you were hallucinating?”

“Teacher!” I howled. “I swear to you . . .”

“There’s no need! Hold on! Let me recover. You have no right to leave behind either the beings or their craft . . .”

“The beings I can take on board,” I argued. “But the craft . . . It’s wider than my spaceship . . .”

“Listen carefully,” Liubavin replied authoritatively now. “Don’t waste any time. Place the beings in the hydrogen charge containers. They will remain at a low temperature there and will be well preserved. And you can secure the alien craft to your ship. Do you have lines on board?”

“Yes!” I replied. “But I don’t understand . . .”

“What is there to understand!” the academician said angrily. “The gravity on the asteroid is negligible. The lines will hold out. You’ll just have to reduce the acceleration. Do the calculations. You’ll enter a satellite orbit around the earth and unhitch the alien craft. Follow me?”

“Yes,” I replied cheerfully.

“Good then. Later we’ll send a special rocket to retrieve it . . . Make haste. Don’t forget that you still have to destroy the asteroid!”

Having finished speaking with the academician, I set to work. I transferred both cosmonauts to my spaceship, housing them in the low-temperature niches. Turning the engines to minimum power, I

manoeuvred the ship to the other side of the asteroid where the alien craft was located.

I spent several hours fussing with the lines and at last succeeded in securing the craft to my spaceship. On the way back to my ship I noticed a small silvery object on the rocks where the bodies of the cosmonauts had previously lain. I retrieved it also. With no time to examine the find, I stowed it away in a box.

Quickly working out the calculations for the ship's return course, I turned on the engines. The asteroid began to drift away. Soon it was transformed into a brilliant speck. On course, ahead of me, shone the azure disc of Earth.

I looked at the craft in tow through the viewfinder. It was holding well. The instruments showed that the asteroid was now ten thousand kilometres away. I could activate the signal.

I checked the operation of the transmitter and turned on the locators, which fixed onto the already invisible asteroid. I pressed the signal button.

The Cosmos darkness was rended apart by a distant blinding flash. I saw a radiant cloud of gasses dissipating into infinity, misting over the neighbouring stars. Soon the nebulous cloud had completely disappeared, and there was no reminder at all of the man-made catastrophe . . .

My heart rejoiced and sang. How lucky I was! Through my efforts science had averted a frightening disaster for millions of people. And I was the man from Earth to see and find cosmic aliens. Even though they were dead, this find might serve as an impetus to the search for their civilisation . . .

The spaceship approached its Earth orbit. The misty sphere of my native planet filled the viewfinders, beckoning with its warmth, its unique radiance, like the heart of a loving mother.

I switched on the communication systems and informed Liubavin of the mission's success.

For several minutes I listened to the radio broadcasts of various stations. The earth was seething. It was engulfed in a single passion. My name, the name of my country, kept being repeated countless times in all the languages of the world.

At a height of two hundred kilometres I jettisoned the alien craft. Now it would continue orbiting Earth until our scientists could bring it down. Let the Cosmos retain the secret of an unknown civilisation a little longer. Soon it would become an acquisition of the people on Earth . . .

The spaceship moved away from the alien craft and entered the

outer layers of the atmosphere. The retro-rockets fired automatically. Somewhere far below the oceans sparkled away. The signals of the tracking stations sounded. Surrounded by a storm of burning air, the ship descended towards the cosmodrome . . .

Several days later a heavy shower of meteorites fell from the sky onto the Baltic states. Myriads of tiny meteors flashed through the atmosphere, burning up before reaching the ground. The remains of the asteroid, which until recently had been a severe threat to millions of people, had now become an attractive, enthralling sight. . .

The bodies of the aliens in their unique spacesuits were handed over to the Institute of Astrobiology. They were housed in special rooms having a temperature close to that of open space. The Institute director, Academician Hordiyenko, ventured the thought that the beings still possessed life-giving potential, and that they might be successful in bringing them back to life.

He was laughed at, but the old scientist stubbornly insisted:

“No percent of possibility should be disregarded. We shall study the aliens only under the conditions in which they were found. We cannot remove their spacesuits, for we know neither the conditions which existed on their planet, nor the structure of their body, nor the principle of their metabolism . . .

The device I found near the aliens was examined by the physicists. It was shaped like a flattened disc, composed of several rings covered in a scale-like mosaic. No one could say anything about its function. In principle, it was suggested that this was some kind of radio.

Meanwhile, the biologists moved slowly forward. They set up special X-ray machines beside the aliens and progressively X-rayed the cosmonauts' bodies and were able to form an idea of the basic outlines of the beings and their internal structure.

A detailed examination of the bodies revealed that one of them had been struck by a meteorite. Hopes of bringing it back to life disappeared. Therefore Academician Hordiyenko permitted the suit to be opened and a gauntlet of detailed examinations was performed.

The work lasted a whole week. On the eighth day the USSR Academy of Sciences convened an International Congress of biologists and astronomers . . .

Academician Hordiyenko addressed the Congress. He stood on the podium in the Palace of Science, lanky and stooping, his eyes

flashing excitedly from behind his large old-fashioned glasses. In his haste to convey the bizarre news to his colleagues, he swallowed the endings of words:

“The being we have been studying is nothing like the humans on Earth. This fact unconditionally supports the idea of an infinity of diverse lifeforms in the Cosmos. The undertaking before us is to learn where these intelligent aliens have come from! From which planet, from which solar system did they come? The answer will raise the knowledge of Earth to grandiose heights, opening up enthralling new perspectives! Look here . . .”

Hordiyenko waved his hand. The lights in the hall died away and a white rectangle of light appeared on the screen, followed by the image of the alien being. There was a buzz of electrified excitement as the scientists commented on what they saw. The appearance of the alien cosmonaut was truly peculiar. A large round head, a mushroom-like or umbrella-like body without any lower limbs, the two upper limbs resembling arms. Only the eyes were very human – not in their shape or structure – but even dead they radiated a curiosity and anxiety innate to people on Earth. However, I must say that the being’s shape, its build, did not seem ugly either to me or the other scientists. On the contrary, everything about it was very harmonious and pleasing. And there was nothing peculiar about it either . . . Weren’t they very much like us? An unusual shape is not always a sign of disharmony. I realized this very clearly while watching the motionless image of the alien. . .

Meanwhile, Hordiyenko continued:

“We have ascertained that the metabolism of these beings, and most probably that of their planet’s flora and fauna, is based on the principles of atomic energetics. Therefore it is incomparably more economical and effective than that on Earth. Here before you is a cross-section of the being’s body . . .”

A schematic diagram appeared on the screen. At the core of the body was a flexible, cartilaginous notochord around which the internal organs and muscles were grouped. The round skull housed a colossal brain resembling that of a human. Another brain could be seen a little below the short neck. The whole organism was permeated with a dense mesh of vessels and ducts which united in a strong chamber resembling a heart. The being had no lungs at all. Its gaseous metabolism with the surrounding environment probably operated through the whole body surface. But the most interesting were the organs for accumulating energy.

That was what Hordiyenko called them. In reply to countless questions, he said:

“We have reason to believe that these beings lived in an atmosphere saturated with colossal charges. They learned, or rather nature learned to accumulate these charges in the organism. I cannot say what this energy was utilized for, but some of our scientists have expressed the thought that the beings were able to create a natural field of antigravity . . .”

A murmur of amazement and audible objections filled the hall. The academician raised his hand and announced firmly:

“Yes, I affirm this statement once more . . . The beings have no lower limbs by which they could have moved across the planet surface. The whole structure of their body attests to the fact that they flew . . . more correctly, not even flew, but floated through the atmosphere. So then . . . These accumulators created by nature amassed energy which the organism utilized for antigravity. I foresee objections, but they are to no avail! What can one object to? That we humans do not have such organs here on Earth? That is immaterial. When viewed from outside, aren't any of our organs a miracle? Are not the heart, lungs, liver, brain, our whole intricate structure, a marvellous creation of the genius of nature, the utilization of electrical, molecular, chemical and countless other forces . . . Our own bodies have a small energetic potential, therefore it is impossible for us to attain a state of antigravity. However, the aliens' bodies obviously drew on much more powerful sources of energy, which were then utilized as indicated . . .”

An argument ensued. Scientists with varying views gave addresses. However none of them were calm or indifferent – all realized that Earth's science had reached a point in time which was crucial, revolutionary, it was facing a threatening force much like a hurricane which sweeps away the trash and brings a life-giving rainstorm.

There were many hypotheses relating to the origins of the aliens. Since they were found on the asteroid, some said that they were the inhabitants of the hypothetical planet Phaeton, which had at one time been destroyed by unknown causes. Many of the astronomers refuted such an idea. They could not accept the possibility that life might have remained unharmed after the cosmic catastrophe of a whole planet. An analysis of the remaining atmosphere in the spacesuits showed that the planet's atmosphere had been a

mixture of hydrogen and methane. Citing this, Liubavin declared that the cosmonauts could have come from the group of outer planets – Jupiter or Saturn – that they had suffered a catastrophe in the asteroid belt, and that an expedition had to be dispatched to these worlds.

This raised a storm. The orthodox scientists – astronomers and biologists alike – began to ridicule Liubavin. They voiced the conventional theories – that life could not have developed on the large planets with their poisonous dense atmosphere; and even if it had – it could not have evolved, but if it had evolved, it could not have reached an intelligent level; that in the stormy atmosphere of Jupiter or Saturn no stable life form could exist, that the temperature of the sun’s rays was insufficient . . . Many, many other sensible and very foolish statements were made . . .

Hordiyenko declared:

“We could argue about this forever. But that is not why we have assembled here. We have a more complex assignment before us – to discover who these aliens are and where they are from. Nothing can be achieved by analysis and logic alone. However there is some hope. The aliens’ spaceship is in orbit around the Earth and we shall retrieve it in time. Besides this, an unknown instrument was found on the asteroid. We have as yet been unable to identify its function or its principle of operation. However, we expect to learn most from the second cosmonaut, whose body is uninjured. Our institute hopes that he can be brought back to life, that his vital functions can be reactivated . . . Quieter, my friends, I understand your scepticism, however I do not wish to argue. You will say they’ve been dead for millions of years! Well, and so what? An analysis of the spacesuits and their instruments shows that the temperature inside them fell gradually until it reached that of open space. This means that if the alien’s body is unharmed – and we’re counting on this – then he can be brought back to life . . .”

It was decided to convene a second meeting of the Congress in a month’s time, during which Hordiyenko and the Institute hoped to bring the alien back to life. The visiting scientists did not want to leave Moscow, and remained to await the results of the daring experiment. The Institute of Astrobiology was surrounded by a cloud of correspondents. The world media seethed with excitement, demanding material from Hordiyenko to appease the anxious public. However, the scientist was firm. Not a single correspondent managed to penetrate the room housing the being’s body. The secret remained undisclosed . . .

And then . . . it happened!

Now, when all is behind us – the anxiety, the tense waiting, the doubts – it seems those days flew with lightning speed. But how long they dragged on then, tension mounting as the secret stubbornly refused to reveal itself.

A whole eternity seemed to pass, though only ten sheets had been torn off the calendar. The Cosmonautics Committee resolved to postpone the Mars mission until the experiment had been completed. I was free to go home once more. But during those days I did not even think of resting. I received permission from Hordiyenko to be present in the experimental theatre.

The cosmonaut's body was removed from the spacesuit and placed inside a large transparent dome inside which the atmosphere was made to resemble the remaining air found in the spacesuit. The temperature was raised very gradually, then stabilized every two or three degrees. Dozens of scientists did not leave their instruments, tirelessly monitoring the thawing process. Hordiyenko was in the Institute day and night and even had his meals brought to the theatre. For several hours each night he would doze in a soft comfortable armchair and then resume his vigil beside the dome, issuing forever new directions.

The soft light of the fluorescent lamps clearly outlined the alien being. I spent hours standing beside the dome, observing and studying the cosmonaut's body. His whole structure – the round head with its powerful forehead and the strong front limbs ending in fanshaped fingers, and the well-proportioned umbrella-shaped torso – were so finely finished and appropriate that it all seemed beautiful.

Ten days passed. The temperature inside the dome reached thirty degrees Centigrade. The instruments showed that all the fluids inside the body had achieved a vital potential and that the cellular structure of the organs was undamaged. The bioscreens began to show barely discernible flashes, indicating that the peripheral areas of the alien's body were beginning to function.

Hordiyenko's voice broke the anxious silence:

“The heart . . .”

One of the operators switched on a stimulator from which microelectrodes ran to the heart of the alien being. They were supposed to start it beating.

The minutes passed. It was so quiet that one could hear the tense breathing of the scientists.

“There it is,” whispered the operator.

The instruments signalled the first beat of the heart. Then another. The rhythm grew stronger, faster. The cosmonaut’s blood began to flow through his vessels, bringing to life myriads of cells which had been in suspended animation, secreting life-giving forces in their depths.

“Will he really come back to life?” the operator said almost childishly.

No one made a reply.

An intelligent being from an alien world was returning to life! What did he have in store for us on Earth, what thoughts, aspirations, what pain and joy?

The cosmonaut’s eyelids fluttered. Slowly they moved down to cover his eyes. The deep-violet face no longer appeared dead. It was trembling barely noticeably, it was alive.

A warm luster covered the forehead, the eyelids opened once more. The cosmonaut’s eyes looked at the scientists. But now they were no longer lifeless, glassy eyes . . . They were shrouded in a living mist through which intelligence was already peering, the soul of a live being.

“Pulse – three hundred a minute,” the operator said in alarm.

Hordiyenko waved his hand wordlessly, without taking his eyes off the cosmonaut. Then he whispered barely audibly:

“Perhaps it’s normal for them . . .”

The mist began to disappear from the being’s eyes, its gaze was filling with reason, moving across the rows of scientists and stopping. The cosmonaut was looking. He was *alive* and *looking* at the people of a world alien to him . . .

His limbs stirred. One of them touched the surface of the transparent dome and fell again. The body trembled, a surge seemed to pass through it.

Suddenly the room filled with exclamations of awe. Without any noticeable effort the cosmonaut’s body rose into the air and began to float along the dome wall.

The Earth scientists’ attention was riveted to the transparent dome – they were astonished and overjoyed. The being from an unknown world slowly drifted past them. His eyes peered anxiously and deeply into the eyes of the Earth people, as if asking about some secret . . .

The cosmonaut floated once around, then stopped in the middle. He closed his eyes in exhaustion.

“Let him rest,” Hordiyenko said. “Friends, we need to take a break . . .”

“But what do you propose doing next?” Liubavin asked. “What do we feed him, how do we deal with him?”

“That worries me too,” replied the astrobiologist. “We must set up a rapport with him . . . Give the order for the disc found on the asteroid to be brought here. Perhaps it will help us.”

Messengers from the Physics Institute arrived half an hour later with the mysterious disc. It was placed on a high table in front of the dome. They waited.

Meanwhile news of the cosmonaut’s resurrection had leaked out beyond the confines of the Institute of Astrobiology. There was a great uproar among the crowd of correspondents and radio commentators. They shouted and appealed to the scientists’ goodwill.

However, the Institute’s doors remained closed. There was silence in the experimental theatre. The scientists sat around the dome, staring wordlessly at the vibrating figure of the resurrected cosmonaut.

And what was there to say? What could be discussed in the face of such an incredulous event? They needed to wait . . . to wait as long as necessary . . . until the veil of mystery moved aside even for a moment. Science was accustomed to this, for it waited years, centuries, to wrench at least a crumb of knowledge from nature, so needed by mankind . . .

Several hours passed. The cosmonaut stirred once more and opened his eyes. This time his gaze was brighter and more energetic, as though reaching deep into the scientists’ souls. When the alien’s eyes met mine it seemed as if a sharp knife was driven into my brain.

What had happened? Why had I experienced this strange sensation?

The cosmonaut rose into the air, drifted to the dome wall. He was *looking at his disc*. His arm rose smoothly and touched the transparent cover. The place the cosmonaut had touched became shrouded in mist.

Someone screamed in astonishment. In place of the alien there appeared spiralling eddies of multicolored wisps. The transparent dome seemed to stretch out towards the table containing the disc. Before the scientists present could regain their senses or realize what was happening, the mist had disappeared, the cosmonaut

was in his place and the dome wall was transparent, just as before.

“The disc,” Liubavin let out a muffled exclamation.

Everyone focused on the table. The mysterious disc was no longer there. The resurrected cosmonaut was now holding it in his peculiar arms . . .

“What can this be?” asked a pale Hordiyenko.

“The deformation of space,” Liubavin said, as if doubting his own words. “They employ different dimensions . . .”

“Mysticism,” one of the young scientists whispered. Liubavin threw a stern look in his direction.

“Not mysticism . . . but a phenomenon unknown to us . . .”

The cosmonaut raised his “arm” holding the disc, then lowered it, leaving the disc suspended in the air. I rubbed my eyes, pinched myself on the arm, trying to dispel the hallucination. Nothing helped. Held up by nothing, the disc remained suspended in the centre of the dome.

Suddenly something happened. Just exactly what – I could not explain to either myself or others. Everything was as before . . . the Institute theatre, the scientists, the dome, the cosmonaut behind its walls . . . but a change was taking place . . .

The disc began to pulsate and emanate an azure radiance which spread all around in waves and shrouded the entire room. The outlines of objects became misty, unclear, they began to dissolve. I saw that everything remained in its place, but something else began to filter through the customary objects . . .

Finally everything disappeared – the room, the dome, the resurrected cosmonaut. I was left alone. Even the figures of the scientists had melted away. I was surrounded by an endless Cosmos. A blue sun shone from its depths, a constellation of unknown patterns.

I heard Hordiyenko’s voice:

“Comrades . . . am I dreaming? You here?”

“Here,” hooted Liubavin, as if from another world.

I heard the muffled voices of the other scientists. Then everything became silent. I was alone amid the infinity of this starry space.

The blue sun became smaller, suddenly transforming into a blinding schematic disc. Around it appeared the spheres of planets. The first planet sailed by, then a second and a third . . . They resembled the planets of the solar system. Mercury, Venus, Earth . . . The fourth had to be Mars . . . But in its place was a large

planet some five to six times the size of the Earth. It was circled by a large satellite, larger even than Mercury. The gigantic fifth planet sailed past, then the sixth, the seventh . . .

"The solar system, without a doubt," boomed Liubavin's bass.

"Similar," another scientist responded. "Mercury, Venus and Earth are similar . . . Jupiter, Saturn, even without its rings, Uranus, Neptune too . . . But where is Mars? And why that giant planet in the orbit of the fourth planet?"

"Phaeton," Liubavin announced solemnly. "I swear, it's Phaeton. And Mars is its satellite . . ."

"This is an illusion," came Hordiyenko's sigh. "A bright blue Sun . . . Mars circling an unknown planet . . . What happened to them?"

"Wait . . . Let us see what happens next . . ."

The voices quieted down. There was a dead silence. The system model disappeared. I found myself in boundless space once more, surrounded by the twinkling lights of billions of stars.

A chunk of rock appeared from the darkness, drew closer, illuminated by the bright rays of the Sun. I saw the outlines of familiar objects on it. Why?

And suddenly I understood . . .

This was the asteroid I had destroyed, the one on which I had found the craft and the two aliens. I could see the cliffs, the flying ship beside them, two silvery figures. They were not yet dead . . . They were moving . . .

One of the figures rapidly increased in size. I saw the head of the cosmonaut inside his spacesuit, his large, penetrating eyes behind a transparent visor. They looked straight into my soul. They *spoke* . . .

Yes, yes. I am not exaggerating. The gaze of the alien was a look of *intellect*. It awoke unknown depths within me, rocked them with an unknown force, creating a storm of images and ideas.

These were not unfamiliar images, the mysterious combinations of an alien intellect.

These were fathomable creations of my own psyche.

I heard, I thought, I saw.

Later I learned that all the participants in this strange illusion had experienced the same sensations. But at the time it seemed that nothing and no one existed around me. Only the asteroid in starry infinity and the mournful face of the alien cosmonaut.

I heard, or perhaps imagined, a strange voice. It spoke, addressing the whole world:

"I, a spark of Intellect amid infinity, am addressing everyone.

"The planets. The distant stars shining out in space.

"The life-giving circle of the Mother Star – the Sun.

"The Infinity, which breathes silently, holding in its bosom billions of new sparks of Life.

"I am addressing those who will come after us to perceive the world and leave behind the flame of their Intellect, the rays of their ideas.

"There are two of us on this rock flying through space. My companion is dead. Soon I will follow in his footsteps.

"We were born and grew up on the planet Ta Ina, the fourth from the Mother Star. In the ancient language Ta Ina means "Great Goddess". Now only countless fragments hurtle through space. These are all that is left of it.

"I am sitting on one of them. And beside me is my dead companion.

"I am doomed too. But I am at peace.

"Ta Ina's satellite circles the Mother Star. It has become the fourth planet. It carries on it the remains of Ta Ina's life – our hope. What will happen to my brothers – I know not. Will they find a glorious path, will a mighty new civilization sprout from the last seed?

"I cannot see into the future.

"But I see the future history of the Cosmos. It is incessant.

"I am sitting on a cold rock. Thinking.

"I am addressing the Intellect which has not yet sprung forth. The Intellect which unites Eternity.

"I do not know who will accept my thoughts into their soul. But I and you, who are listening, are brothers. We are streams from the one source. We flow into the one Ocean of Truth.

"Therefore, you will understand me, distant brother.

"Therefore, listen . . .

"Listen to an account of the last days of the history of the planet Ta Ina. My planet. You will probably be living in this same system, in the system of the Mother Star. You will be its child, born of its bountiful rays, its fiery bosom.

"This is why I know that you will be close to us and will comprehend . . ."

The voice became silent.

For a while the silence reigned supreme. The cosmonaut's gaze reached out to infinity, as if trying to see the being with whom he desired to share his thoughts. Then the alien once more hurled

us into a flood of images and ideas. An impressive kaleidoscopic account began – the history of the planet Ta Ina. Everything the alien said passed through the prism of my earthly perception.

Almost everything had set them apart from *us*. They lived on a planet several times the size of Earth, in a hydrogen-methane atmosphere. They bathed in hydrocarbon seas, reproduced according to a different principle, possessed the gift of antigravity, and communicated not only by acoustic means, but through telepathy.

However, like us, they loved, fought, hated, made mistakes, threw their brothers into slavery and struggled for freedom. They sought the path to truth and perished on that endless road.

1962

Two Abysses

The heart creates worlds.
An Eastern aphorism

The young scientist Robert Smith was fervently trying to convince his wife Margaret:

"It's the only way out. The only way, dear Ma. The world has gone mad. It will devour itself. The East versus the West. The West versus the East. The arsenals are bursting with nuclear monsters. Another day, perhaps two . . . Maybe even a year . . . and a cataclysm will destroy this planet. Nothing will remain alive. But I want to live. Simply to live and to love you . . ."

"What about our children, Rob?" Margaret sighed quietly, looking wretchedly at her husband with clear blue eyes.

"They will be even better off. They will not know this damned world. They will grow used to a new kingdom. It will have its own romance, other delights of existence . . ."

"But, Rob . . . What about the sky, the stars . . . My God! How can we forget them? People strive to reach into the heavens. Perhaps the cosmos will change them . . . Let's wait, Rob!"

"No!" the scientist exclaimed feverishly and clenched his small dry fist. His pale face scowled menacingly. "No, Ma! They'll never change. They'll take their hostility with them to other planets, throwing distant worlds into chaos. But it will not come to that! Within the next few years people will suffocate to death in a radioactive cloud. And the stars? What about them? I can bring along some color films of the heavenly constellations. You can watch them. But our children will not see the sky. After all, we cannot see the spheres of other dimensions. We even deny their existence. It will be the same for our children. The sky will not exist for them. Ma! That's enough arguing. Tomorrow we shall be in a new world. What joy! Silence. Tranquility. Nirvana. Real Nirvana. Total forgetfulness of the earthly world . . ."

"All right, I'll submit to your wishes," Margaret whispered feebly, lowering her head. "I love you Rob . . ."

He embraced her, kissed her head, deeply inhaling the fragrance of her soft golden plaits.

“Oh, what joy! There’s none greater in the world. A loving wife . . . Silence . . . We’ll create a golden age for ourselves and our descendants. We’ll limit the number of new births. Robots will take care of all the necessities. We shall be left to enjoy only the bliss of lovemaking and amusement. Billions of years lie before us. Billions . . .”

Margaret remained impassive, her eyes closed. Only her lashes fluttered when her husband’s hot lips touched her cheek and neck.

They left the city at dawn. A stone, ferro-concrete, plastic and glass colossus was awakening, roaring and shuddering. The pale neon signs still flashed away, seeming to have lost some of their energy after their fiery nocturnal orgies. Boys on street corners were calling out in hoarse voices:

“Project for a military base on the moon! All Earth under control! An interview with Professor von Braun!”

Robert snorted with disdain and looked at his wife, who was wrapped in a nylon fur.

“Here’s their Cosmos for you. Here are the stars for you, Ma! In farewell the Earth is showing you a good example of the accuracy of my predictions!”

Margaret made no reply. She looked at the bustling newsboys, at the solitary figures of policemen, at sleepy couples in love returning from the parks and woods outside the city. Sadness and tenderness played in the woman’s clear gaze, as if she wanted to carry off with her a host of memories about this fantastic, very chaotic, inconsistent, frightful but wonderful world. With her . . . into the kingdom of silence and nonexistence . . .

The car sped out onto a freeway outside the city and headed west along its gray concrete ribbon. A blue strip of ocean soon appeared on the horizon. Feathery crimson clouds lit up by the early morning sun, stretched above the water.

Robert drove the car right onto the beach. The wheels began to spin in the sand. He turned off the engine and said:

“Time to get out. We’re here.”

A few other cars were standing on the beach. Close to shore a cutter was rocking on the waves. On it stood a jolly corpulent fellow, who waved to them and yelled:

“Everybody’s here. We’re only waiting for you, Rob!”

Robert and Margaret greeted him and made their way to the

cutter. The group headed out to sea. Damp spray settled on Margaret's face, the cold air created a pleasant ache in her chest.

She looked at the sun. The hot vibrating sphere rose slowly above the horizon, growing brighter, becoming transfused with sparks. Margaret felt a pain in her heart, an inexplicable grief. Robert clasped her hand and said:

"Here, look! The submarine . . ."

A periscope rose above the waves. Before long people peered out from an open hatch, yelling joyously. Margaret heard nothing, she could not comprehend where she was, what was happening to her. As if in a dream she was transferred from the cutter to the submarine and was greeted by other people. It seemed the nightmare would pass, she would wake in her bed and once more see the blue sky of morning, the twinkling stars of night, breathe in the fresh forest air while collecting aromatic meaty mushrooms in clearings . . .

But the nightmare did not pass. The hatch crashed shut above them with a splintering thud. A deathly light flickered on in the passage along which she and Robert were moving. Her husband brought her up to a wide porthole. Beyond the clear glass she saw the disturbed green depths in which a large sphere burned like a jewel.

"What's that?" Margaret whispered.

"The Sun," Robert replied indifferently, making himself comfortable in an armchair.

"The Sun," his wife echoed his words.

Bubbles of air rushed upwards, the magical gemstone sphere grew paler, melted and disappeared. The engines hummed quietly. The people in the salon were silent. The water beyond the porthole grew darker, became permeated with a black hue.

"Rob . . . So this is forever?"

"Forever, Ma . . ."

"My God . . . I'll die of grief."

"You'll get used to it, Ma . . . I'll be with you."

"The sun . . . It's disappeared, it's died for me . . ."

"You will have a hundred suns, Ma. We've created everything a person might want . . ."

"Oh Rob, why did I agree to this. Why? I'd rather have died under the stars . . ."

On 21 August 19... a group of scientists and several wealthy Americans and their families left the continent. They went down in a submarine into the depths of the Pacific Ocean. In a secret location on the ocean floor an underwater city had long since been built. It contained everything required to sustain human life: biosynthesis plants, living quarters, power units, workshops for the construction of new robots and the repair of old ones. The inhabitants did not have to interfere in the mechanical servicing of the city – everything was done automatically. The founders of the city had one goal in mind – to ensure that they and their descendants could lead a carefree, happy life. And first and foremost they wanted to escape the threat of death which stalked the planet.

Before long children were born in the new city. Margaret and Robert had a beautiful daughter born to them. Margaret called her Star. The children knew nothing about Earth conditions, heard nothing about the existence of boundless space. They grew up under a thick layer of water, frolicking among the seaweed in light costumes, playing with the fish, fighting the dragons of the ocean depths.

Time passed. No one knew what was happening on the planet's surface. Gradually the older inhabitants began to die off. The robots deftly prepared meals for the new people, supplied them with clothes and diving costumes. Star grew up into a beautiful girl with mysterious clear greenish eyes. One day she asked her gray-haired mother:

“What does my name mean, mother?”

“I can't explain it, my daughter,” whispered Margaret, who was lying on her bed awaiting death. “You will never understand. One must see a star to know what it means . . .”

“Where can I see one, mother?”

“In the sky, my daughter . . .”

“The sky . . . What's that, mummy dearest? I've never heard that word at school . . .”

Her mother sighed, looked sadly at her daughter, and tears welled in her eyes.

“You must feel bad, mummy dearest,” Star became frightened. “All right, I won't ask . . .”

Old Margaret was buried in an underwater grotto. Gray-haired and sallow, Robert sat for hours beside the transparent glass of the

salon porthole, staring at the fantastic shape of the cliffs which rose above her final resting place.

Star came up to him quietly, leaned on his shoulder, and softly asked:

“We won’t see mother any more?”

“No, darling . . .”

“But why, daddy? Why? I feel so sad without her . . .”

“That’s the law of Nature . . .”

“I don’t understand you, daddy. But tell me, what is the sky? And what is a star?”

Robert looked suspiciously at his daughter and asked:

“Who taught you such strange words? Star is simply a collection of sounds . . . it doesn’t mean anything . . . Mother simply liked it . . . And the sky is an abstract notion. An imaginary sphere. Understand? One can imagine anything, even if in reality it does not exist . . .”

“That’s strange,” whispered Star. “Tell me how we found our way here to this strange city? Where did it appear from? Who created the silent metal robots?”

“Nature created them,” her father said sprangly. “Don’t worry about it, love. Enjoy life. Find yourself a boyfriend, spend time with him.”

“I don’t like boys,” the girl said, grimacing with disgust. “They look at me strangely. Why – I don’t know. I run away from them and hide in the thickets of seaweed. I prefer it there on my own. Daddy, what is up there above us?”

“Up where?” her father asked anxiously.

“Up where the air bubbles fly from the aqualung. I’ve been up there and once I spotted something colorful, gay and bright. It was round and radiant. I wanted to rise even further, but just then a shark appeared and I dived back down. Daddy, what was it?”

“An hallucination,” her father said sullenly. “From being too exhausted. You rose into the forbidden zone, darling. I forbid you to venture there. Otherwise you will die. Do you hear?”

“I hear, daddy,” Star sighed. “But how blissful it was, that enchanting hallucination . . .”

Robert Smith was also buried in the grotto. All the original inhabitants of the underwater city, including its founder, were dead. Their descendants vegetated sleepily in luxurious salons, copulated coarsely after satisfying meals, bred children.

Eventually the schools were closed. The new children had no wish to study the language nor the primitive knowledge deemed necessary by the city's founders.

But Star was not satisfied by such a thoughtless existence. Again and again she remembered her enchanting vision. She wanted to experience it once more. However, her father's prohibition checked her desires.

The young lads stubbornly pursued her. Star ran away from them, escaping through the air lock into the watery depths, hiding in seaweed. However her pursuers gave her no peace. Their eyes filled with rage and animal desires. One day they ambushed her in the seaweed jungle and grabbed her.

Strong, stiff hands kneaded her body, dragged her towards the air lock. Star desperately struck her attacker in the chest with her feet, broke free and dashed steeply up.

The city melted away in the green depths. Shadows of fish skimmed past her.

"I'd rather die," Star thought, "and see my enchanting dream. I won't return there any more. I'd sooner die."

Her father had told her that there was nothing up above. Emptiness, nonentity. The sphere of death. She wanted to see that sphere. Head back down? To be taunted, to suffer? To live a life of useless vegetation . . . Never!

Everything was growing lighter around her. Bright specks appeared. A large disc danced with golden orange hues.

"A mirage," Star thought.

Only this time it was not as bright as before. But it was enchanting all the same. The layer of water ended and the girl found herself at the surface. She let out an amazed scream.

Before her stretched Infinity, sown with myriads of bright fires. A golden disc was sailing among them, seeding the ocean surface with twinkling droplets of fire.

Star hit the water with her hand, sending a shower of droplets into the air. The space sparkled with a fiery fountain.

"Can this be the sphere of death? So enchanting? So fantastic? Why didn't father speak of its beauty? This is no hallucination. No. I can sense it - my mind can perceive an enormous new reality!"

A warm breeze fanned her neck. She felt its breath, was surprised. So this was not a void. There was air here. Perhaps she could breathe it?

Star tore off her face mask. The smells of the sea rushed into her

lungs, the fine scent of flowers and trees which drifted across from the dark mass on the horizon intoxicated the girl.

He had deceived her . . . her father had lied to her! But why? Her mother had known. She had known and remained silent . . . This was why she wept. And why she had named her Star. Perhaps that enchanting disc above was called a star? It floated through the sky. It had to be. Her mother had said that one needed to see the sky and the stars to comprehend what they were . . .

Something was germinating in the girl's being, lulled feelings were awakening, bewildering her. It seemed as if she had already seen the stars and the sky before. She admired the boundless space and anxiously longed for something bright and desired . . .

Where had this been? When?

What would she do in this newly-discovered world. How would she live? Would she be forced to die under this mantle of beauty? Should she return? Into the green depths? To those sleepy covetous lechers who wanted only to savor her body? Never!

She would lie on her back and let the ocean rock her. And the stars would sing inaudible songs. She would fall asleep. And die in bliss.

The girl fell asleep in the embrace of the sea.

When she awoke, the stars were disappearing from the sky. The sky was growing bluer, brighter, and above small fluffy clouds burned with changing hues. Star let out a shriek of amazement. Where were the stars disappearing? Would they return again?

A red disc was rising above the horizon. The girl watched it in astonished joy. The disc rose quickly into the sky, growing hotter as it filled with golden fires. Soon she could no longer look at it. It had flooded the whole space with a joyous life-giving radiance.

Star looked about. Quite close by was a blue strip of coastline. Tall swaying trees hemmed in the shore and graceful structures stood starkly white.

"Can there be people here?" the girl thought.

But then anything was possible. Her father had deceived her. He had said there was a void here, but instead she found fragrant air. He had told her she had experienced an hallucination – this boundless space and these strange fairy-tale lights were very real. He had said it was a sphere of death, but there was vegetation here, and buildings.

She swam towards the shore. Foamy white breakers crashed against the cliffs. Star stepped cautiously along the bottom, staring vigilantly ahead.

A figure appeared among the rocks. The girl stopped in fright. A tall lad was looking at her. The wind played with his blond bush of hair, his powerful body glistened bronze, his black eyes were aflame.

He called out in surprise:

“Where are you from? I haven’t seen you on the island before!”

The girl was unable to utter a single word.

“What’s the matter – are you dumb? Perhaps you’re from some ship? Do you need help?”

Star moved forward, smiled shyly and said hoarsely:

“I’m from down there . . .” And she pointed into the water.

The boy burst out laughing.

“That’s witty. A modern mermaid. But I’m not afraid of you. I could even kiss you. Because you really are very beautiful. Enchanting . . .”

The girl listened to his words as if they were the sweetest music. What was he saying? So many unknown words. He was admiring her. And his eyes radiated tenderness. “So there is life here?” Star asked timidly.

Where?” the boy uttered in surprise.

“Above the ocean . . .”

“There is life everywhere. Are you ill or something? Tell me seriously, where are you from?”

“I told you,” the girl said. “From under the water. There is a city down there. My parents died and I came to detest that life and decided to die in the sphere of death. That’s what father told me. But there is life here. Boundless space. And stars. But they’ve disappeared for some reason . . .”

“Wait, wait,” the boy exclaimed, and his face became serious. “So that’s it! I’ve heard about an underwater city. The scientists searched for it, but they still haven’t been able to find it. So you were born there?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve read about it,” the boy said. “A group of people were said to have gone underwater to live. They feared a war. But there hasn’t been a hint of war for a long time now. There is peace on the planet, and space travel is commonplace, we have met with other intelligent beings . . .”

The girl slowly made her way to shore, stretching her arms out towards the lad. She whispered in amazement:

“You’re not a spectre? An hallucination? Am I really seeing you?”

You are like a sun. Like the sky . . . Let me touch you . . .”

The youth moved timidly towards her, looked into her greenish emerald eyes which were like the unmeasured ocean depths. His caressing fingers touched her pale cheek, ran down her swan-like neck.

“You’re warm,” she said. “I feel joy at your touch. Only mother caressed me like that. Love me. I have no one . . .”

The boy’s eyes misted over with inexplicable feelings. The girl’s strange appearance, her unearthly beauty and fantastic fate rocked the foundations of his heart and made his blood rush. He embraced her thin moist waist, pressing her close. She was refreshing and enchanting.

Star looked up into the boundless azure sky and burst into tears. Joyous rainbows of sunshine played in the transparent drops of her tears . . .

1967

The Constellation of Green Fish

A TALE OF THE UNPRECEDENTED

I will go to her and say: "Darling, perhaps it's not necessary?"

She'll look at me with those moist doe-like eyes of hers and ask in a frightened voice: "What's not necessary? What are you talking about?"

Then I will tell her just what this bewitching evening has done to me. I have become a different person and can no longer live as before. I want her to understand, so that she can travel with me into the unprecedented . . .

I am going to her, hurrying along. The light of the swaying neon lamps urges me on. The carved shapes of maple leaves fall through the evening twilight, resting at my feet, to sleep forever on the cold alien asphalt. I am avoiding them, afraid to step on them, and so my walk is erratic and confused.

Here is her building. From the luminous mansions of the Dnieper slopes I plunge into the twilight cavern of the entrance and climb the stairs. Shrieking happily, children come sliding down the bannisters. Another small group of youngsters is huddled together around a stamp album, swapping stamps.

Outside the night is aflame with stars.

I ring the bell. How convenient everything is. I press a button and she will hear me in a distant room. An electrified cave.

The door opens, I am engulfed by the scent of French perfume and the smell of fish stewed in tomatoes. Her eyes twinkle with surprise.

"Has anything happened? I'm expecting you tomorrow morning. Have we forgotten something?"

"Forgotten?" I laugh. "We've forgotten everything! But I have just remembered . . ."

"Come in," my fiancée says in alarm. "That's strange, everything seems to be in order. Ten cars have been ordered." She lists them on her painted violet fingernails. "One Chaika for us. Three ZIMs

for our parents and the more important guests. And there are six Volgas for the rest¹. All very chic, what more do we need? We've invited all the necessary people, even a dozen unimportant ones for good measure. There are enough drinks, and mother has taken care of the rest. I don't understand why you're so agitated, darling. Mother, mother!"

"Wait!" my hand covers her full lips. "Don't call your mother. I came here to talk to you. This is much too serious a matter . . ."

"Then let's go into my room," she says, a little confused. "There's something disturbing about you today. Your eyes are gleaming, your face has an unhealthy flush. You've had a bit to drink, perhaps?"

"Yes, I'm drunk," I laugh. "On a potion of stars and cosmic wine."

"This is rather an untimely joke. Well, tell me quickly, what's the matter? I have to go back to the kitchen to finish the cooking – I'll be busy till midnight. Have you any idea how many guests will be coming tomorrow? Mother says there'll be about three hundred mouths to feed . . ."

"Mouths?" I repeat in surprise. "Is that how she thinks of our guests?"

"Oh, don't latch onto words. It's just a figure of speech . . ."

"Oh, yes! Sorry, I forgot it was merely a figure of speech."

Now we are in her room. The air is heavy with the familiar scent of her delicate perfume, which until not so long ago teased and attracted me. Why is it irritating me so much today? Perhaps it is because outside the stars shine sadly through the autumn trees and solitary maple leaves fall onto the cold indifferent asphalt.

"Well, I'm listening . . ."

"Darling, perhaps it's not necessary?"

"Not necessary? What are you on about?"

She is reacting just as I imagined she would. And with that expression on her face – naive, a little perplexed and capricious. Oh well, I'll give it to her straight, without any soft talk.

"Maybe there's no need for the Palace of Marriage tomorrow, or for the reception, or the guests . . . Maybe we don't need all this ennui? What do you think?"

Her eyes become as round as saucers. She moves sharply

1. Chaika – an 8-cylinder passenger car. ZIM – a plush car manufactured by the Molotov Motor Works (Zavod imeni molotova). Volga – a five-seater medium-sized passenger car.

towards me and sniffs my breath.

“Go on, breathe. Just as I thought, you’ve been drinking . . .”

“No, no!” I try to move away. “You must take me seriously. An incredible thing happened to me today and I want you to experience it too. Darling, listen! The stars embraced me, intoxicated me with a sweet poison and I can no longer be the same person I was before . . .”

“Listen, my love,” my fiancée answers resolutely, “all this is very nice, but can we discuss your lyrical mood after the wedding. I myself will gladly partake of your stellar poison, but now isn’t the time. Show at least some sense!”

“This is not a mood,” I assure her in desperation. “I can feel that the magic moment has come. If we do not embrace it now, if we don’t capture it presently, right this instant – tomorrow will be too late . . .”

“What moment? What rainbow mist is this?”

“The unprecedented. Everything is possible today. I have perceived the hidden depths of creation. It makes our wedding preparations seem so funny and unnecessary . . .”

“You simply want out?” she asks in an icy tone and, stepping back, bores into me with a piercing cold stare. “Is there someone else?”

“Wait!” I place my hand on my heart. “There’s no need for melodrama. I’ve come for you, to beckon you into the unprecedented. I had hoped you would understand everything from my very first words . . .”

“Stop torturing me, tell me straight . . .”

“Then don’t interrupt, hear me out. Let’s sit down and look into each other’s eyes. Don’t keep looking at the door, your fish in its tomato sauce won’t run away. Come on now, relax . . . Imagine that you are not my fiancée, that I’m not your future husband. We are children playing in the sun on a river bank . . . That’s how I perceived myself today, under the stars. Suddenly all that was about to take place tomorrow seemed so savage and absurd. And not only that, but other things too — things happening yesterday, today, every day. I have fallen in love with you, I want you to be by my side, so that we can seek out a common path into the future. What does the Palace of Marriage have to do with it, where the officials will enter our names into various documents, where indifferent people will officially congratulate us? What’s the point of a reception for a hundred people? What has our love to do with fish in tomato sauce? Our happiness, with Moscow sausage?”

Our feelings, with pepper vodka?"

"Oh, my God!" she cries, horrified. "You've mixed everything up into a stew. Our love is something separate, people have nothing to do with it. This is just ordinary tradition, respect for relatives and friends. Why complicate matters, why such deep psychological analysis?"

"You don't understand, you can't capture my mood," I sigh with pain. "And so I want you to understand. Then the incredible will unfold before us . . ."

"The incredible?"

"Magic! We've directed everything into the rut of habitude. That is terrible. We pick flowers and present them at random. We meet official guests with flowers, give our sweetheart flowers, cover graves with flowers. What sacrilege! We unmercifully toss this solar gift beneath the feet of routine habit. I would forbid the picking of flowers altogether. They should be protected by law. Let the people come to them, as the faithful enter a temple, let them bow before beauty as they bow to God. Wait, do not interrupt, I am saying what has to be said. Love is the same: we must not make a routine of it – registry offices, weddings, festivities. Feeling is plucked, trampled into the dirt of habitude. 'Bitter! Bitter!' our guests shout customarily, and we must kiss before their drunken stares. What utter disgrace! Love is not for an outsider's eyes – it is the intimate embrace of a flower and the sun. Do you hear? I don't want our flower to be spat upon by mouths which will be greedily devouring fish in tomato sauce and smoked Moscow sausage, after having downed rummings of pepper vodka! I don't want that! I have grasped something testamental. And so I came here to persuade you to elope!"

"Where to?" my fiancée clasps her hands.

"To unknown places. Into a fairy tale!"

"My friend," she says fearfully. "You must be running a fever. Normal people don't act this way. I'll call a psychiatrist, a neuropathologist. My God, who could have thought . . .?"

"Wait!" I cry in an obstinately cheerful tone. "I even like the idea that you think I'm insane. Then everything is fine. Because I don't want to be normal. Only an insane fish would have left the ocean for dry land. Only a deranged ape could have become a human. Do you hear? And we want to be normal people before the eye of the infinite Cosmos! What a miserable desire! Just look what is happening! The boundaries of the universe have disappeared,

stars are scattered into infinity, breaking the clutches of gravitational bondage, galaxies are unwinding in spirals, striving to escape the fiery bosom for the caprice of unfettered flight. Planets spawn rational life on their surfaces in order to overcome the tyranny of gravity, and so attain Freedom. Do you hear? The Universe strives for freedom and the era of Perception is an era of the mind's emancipation from the program of Nature. Even unconscious matter rebels in its atomic depths in order to venture onto the mysterious path of improvisation, while people voluntarily lock themselves into thousands of everyday algorithms and other programs – habits, fashions, systems, ideas, tastes, feelings and convictions.”

“So – you are against all the achievements of history?” my fiancée asks sarcastically. “Well, what do you propose?”

“Improvisation! The unprecedented!” I declare fervently. “So that today you will not know what will come across your path tomorrow, so that at this instant you are unaware what surprise the next instant will have in store for you . . .”

“That’s terrible!”

“It is wonderful. Like a folk tale. Have you read folk tales? The heroes there don’t know what awaits them! Oh, our people are very wise, they knew that joy lies only in the unusual. And when did the tale end? When, I ask you? When the last words were uttered: ‘And they married, and had children, and achieved the limits of their desires. And I was there too, drinking mead and beer.’ Ha-ha-ha! Our people ended their tales splendidly, ironically . . .”

“What do you want?”

“To enter the unprecedented.”

“How?”

“I still do not know. We will decide together. Just look – all notions of the world are being destroyed. All the conventional outlines. Mankind is separated from Omnipotence only by routine habits, tradition, and a fear of loss of individuality. Oh, the ignoramuses! They are losing their individuality every moment, they don’t even have it. Birth – death! An ephemeral instant! From darkness to darkness through the reflex of conditional existence. And this at a time when mankind is immortal, since it is all-encompassing. In order to discover that potential, man need only awaken. To wake from the world of programs into a world of improvisation, fairy tales. Nature herself prompts us towards

such an unprecedented decision, before us are thousands of signs, hieroglyphics, but we choose not to read them. Intellect has given us the terrible weapon of perceiving Mystery, but we use that fire to mass produce refrigerators, automobiles, toilet bowls, perfumes, rifles, ballistic missiles and millions of other trifles which clutter the earth and the psyche, molding the consciousness of new generations in their image and likeness. Do you understand?"

"What signs?" she asks wearily. "What are you raving about?"

"An avalanche of signs. From the distant past to this day. The caterpillar – that ordinary trivial caterpillar, which devours the leaves of trees, after pupating becomes a magical, heavenly creature, a soaring butterfly. Have you understood? From a crawling pest, an ugly little dragon whose sole aim is to gorge itself on greenery — to a fairy-tale, flamboyant creature. This is a miracle. A sign for people. But we do not understand. All nature is destined for such a path, from primitive life on a planet's surface – to Cosmic Omnipresence. But for this to occur we must not fear rebirth, darling! Do you hear? Just as the caterpillar consumes itself in the pupa to become a butterfly, so we humans too must not fear the unprecedented. To lose oneself, so that one can be reborn in another form in another world, with different, unheard-of possibilities!"

"Are you suggesting suicide, then?"

"Good God! How primitive your understanding is! Not suicide, but an extension of the mind into boundlessness, of the senses into immeasurability! Do not analyze with the intellect, sense what I am telling you with your heart. The possibilities are countless, but the main one we already possess – our will and our fearlessness. One can lie on firewood and freeze to death. One can go begging from village to village clad only in filthy rags and yet have a king's raiment and a priceless treasure in one's sack. We are such beggars. The human heart holds the greatest power in the Universe. Fantasy Power. Nature acts according to a program, it is the child of necessity, while man is the spirit of perpetual change and rebellion, the child of improvisation. We could already transform our bodies, discover new feelings and deepen the co-ordinates of the Universe. We could become new Demiurges, Creators. We could enter the New World, the Unprecedented Chamber of Beauty and Love, but are afraid to disturb the web of our man-made "laws". These laws are merely reflections of the limits to

which we have dared perceive Matter. We surmise that Matter, the Mother of the World, is inert and indifferent, limited and unwise. What superstition! We have blasphemously humiliated our own mother, spat upon her with our dimensions, doctrines and piteous notions. But she is the World-Bearing Bride forever awaiting her Pure Beloved, who can give her new inspired life through immeasurable Freedom. Matter gives birth to our desires. We rape her, and from the illegitimate union she bears beasts and dragons, bedbugs and crocodiles, Hitlers and Neros, gendarmes and spies, vipers and murderers. She writhes in the agonies of earthquakes and volcanic groans, in the destruction of Phaetons – unfortunate planets – and the deaths of supernovae, in the bloody birth of new creatures – animal or human – and in the agony of their death, which still fails to answer the eternal question: Why? Why? Why?”

“My head is spinning,” groans my fiancée. “Tell me finally, what is it that you want?”

“Darling, let’s run away! Dare to take the plunge, and you and I shall leave behind habitual life. We shall begin the passion-play of new being . . .”

“Where do you want to run away?”

“Forget these archaisms: where? why? how? Improvisation rejects habitude. We will decide that in flight. We will cast ourselves into an abyss of possibilities . . .”

“Madness!”

“Maybe!” I cry out in joy, overcome by a wave of inspiration. “We will be insane and happy. Each moment will reveal such wonders to our aroused hearts as have never been dreamed of by anyone. Look — even orthodox science discovers the unprecedented. The Moon — that moon which for thousands of years we regarded as a natural body, now turns out to be a creation of the intellect. Comprehend that! So, there exists a civilization, an intellect which plays with planets as if they were little balls. It hurls them into whimsical flight among the stars, traversing galactic abysses, scattering the seeds of new life, mutating evolutions to awaken minds and human feelings. Perhaps we too are one such bizarre experiment? Perhaps our mysterious forefathers who once arrived out of the galactic wastes on the Moon, are waiting for their descendants to gush bravely into the abyss of the Metagalaxy? To destroy the despotism of Time and Space. To reject any mechanistic notion of the Universe and become its rulers, instead of remaining the obedient marionettes of a natural

or artificial program. A gamut of fairy-tale ideas is flooding the earth, Earth's psychosphere is crackling with a torrent of new notions and something unprecedented, catastrophic, but beautiful is about to happen! Just as Copernicus and Giordano Bruno once flung the Earth into lightning-swift flight, casting it off the turtle's back, so now we too are opening the door to the abyss of Immeasurability. This fresh view will show that the sun is not a ball of scorching plasma, but a magnetic funnel into Hyperspace, to a new Universe in which our Time, Space, and everything else is merely a small part, only a separate manifestation. Just as a tree sends energy up its tiny roots in order to bear fruit, so the Hyperworld, through the solar channel, bestows its life-giving energy to us, nurturing new beings in the bosom of Three-Dimensionality – the future residents of Freedom. Do you hear? Our Universe may turn out to be merely the Womb of Universal Existence. And when a yearning for Freedom is born in people's hearts, when they feel the necessity for new horizons – this heralds a rebirth of rational beings who will sense a new level of being . . .”

“So be it,” my fiancée says wearily. “I have understood your projects, your sickly ideas. Even if they have a grain, even a drop of rational . . .”

“Rational — no!” I exclaim in horror.

“All right. Listen to me – I've listened to you long enough. As I said, even if there is sense in your ideas, they are still not for me. I am not prepared for such decisions yet. To me they are merely pathological reactions . . .”

“Time to phone the psychiatric hospital,” I seize on her words.

“Yes,” she agrees coldly. “I will not plead with you to forget this conversation and to go to bed. I don't want to see you tomorrow. I am breaking off our engagement. The reception will still take place, because it's awkward to send the guests away now, with nothing . . .”

“What will the reason for the banquet be now,” I ask ironically.

“To celebrate my enlightenment,” she answers haughtily, rising from her chair. “I'm sorry this had to happen so late. However, it was just in time. And now listen. I will say this without eloquence or pretence. I will make it plain and simple. Everything you've said has merely been a mountain of information which your poor brain has not had time to assimilate yet. You have been engulfed with information and you've . . . flipped, to use a popular expression. In an attempt to save itself from that flood, your brain has hastened

to build a new model of the Universe, so that the ocean of paradoxical ideas can be crammed into it. Otherwise there would have been a catastrophe. Information cannot remain unsystematic, so you've created a phantasmagoric form to accommodate it. Your New World is only a chimera, a mirage on the horizon. I don't want to live in castles in the air. I don't want to go mad. It will be quite enough for me to sit back comfortably in this armchair and enjoy the pleasant touch of my loving husband's hand – which will no longer be your hand – and to savor the delicious taste of fish in tomato sauce and indulge in caresses under blankets at dawn. I am a person. A child of the Earth. I don't want to be engulfed by an indefinite, uncontrollable tide of improvisation and freedom. Unlimited freedom, improvisation uncontrolled by rhythm – that's terrible. Wait, there's no need for that shocked expression, I'm almost finished! To wait for the unexpected at every step, to be eternally tense – no thanks, I'm not capable of such endless torment . . .”

“Inspiration!”

“Depends for whom! For me it is constant turmoil. I want to know that my love is waiting for me each evening, that we will go out on the town or spend hours kissing, that I will give birth to a child, that it will grow up and attend school. That's how I imagine it, and I'm happily waiting for this to become reality . . .”

“And you will never be tempted to break the current of habitude, to achieve the unprecedented?”

“Never! For me, ordinary life is a fairy tale. Farewell, my lost fiance! One day you will be cured of your fantasy, but it will be too late!”

“I won't be cured!” I laugh, heading for the door. “I am eternally ill – forever and ever! Should I say farewell to your mother?”

“No need – I'll tell her myself!” she answers dryly.

The door slams shut. One last time I breathe in the smell of French perfume and fish in tomato sauce.

A mountain shifts from my back. What relief. Sorrow melts the remoteness of the past. There are no regrets. Regrets are merely the unsevered threads of old relationships. Freedom! Freedom!

Again I see the Dnieper slopes. I want to be drunk with freedom, a sense of the unprecedented. With whom can I share my joy and vague lassitude?

The night dew hugs the autumn trees. Dark leaves whirl around in the twilight and shake tiny droplets to the ground. These glitter like diamonds in the moonlight, and the trees seem to be shedding

star-bearing seeds.

Oh night! Unprecedented night! Captivate me, captivate me with insanity, from which there will be no return!

The heavens open up their fiery book. How many generations have read it, and yet it is always new, untouched. Mysterious tentacles silently penetrate the heart, arousing ineffable thoughts. How good that I broke the age-old web. I feel so relieved, so relieved, that my consciousness is splitting under the burden of freedom!

I gaze at the stellar field, seeking something there. What? My being is excited, because it is about to embark upon a new, undefined path — in a void where every step is improvisation and unexpectedness.

Someone comes up to me and stops in curiosity.

“A lovely night . . .”

I remain silent.

“The bright stars probably mean we’ll have nice weather, eh?”

My God, what unnecessary remarks! Nice weather? In what way is it nice? For whom? For the farmer waiting for rain to drench his fields, or for the fisherman who hopes for a sunny day, or for the sick person who yearns for a cloudy day without blinding sunlight? I look at him and sigh: he’s a person like any other — a full, good-natured face, an empty look which must constantly be fed new impressions, lips glistening from a replete supper.

“I’m no weather forecaster,” I answer him. “And the weather doesn’t interest me. The important storms and gales are born in the soul.”

“Then you must be an astronomer,” the man smiles. “All stargazers are a little mad. Right? You were studying the sky so intently that I couldn’t help noticing. Could you tell me the name of that constellation there? That swirly-looking one, with all those bright stars . . .!”

Oh, funny man! Its name? Why do you need empty words? Who needs signs with names on the boundless pages of the grandiose book of the heavens?

“You are silent. Why? I’m dying to know the name of that constellation.”

“That is the Constellation of Green Fish,” I smile.

“I’ve never heard of that one,” the stranger says, baffled. “You must be joking?”

I cast him a cheerful glance. His genial face is frowning. Oh, my

friend! I'm not joking today. I have sensed the breath of mystery, so now I can answer any of your questions. The fairy tale is opening its age-old gates for me, gates closed to sleepy souls.

"It really is the Constellation of Green Fish. See the third star from the left, it twinkles with a blue light. There is a magical planet near it. It has calm rivers, peaceful lakes, fantasy forests filled with melodious birds, and the waters teem with green fish. They come trustfully up to human hands. The unfortunate sweet thing is that people rarely appear there, perhaps only in the dreams which these fish occasionally have. The green fish wait and wait for people to come to their planet. Because these dwellers of the transparent aquamarine waters have a warm heart in their cold bodies. Their hearts are brimming with sorrow and song, but there is no one to sing those rare songs to. Do you hear, friend? The green fish are waiting for a miracle, for someone to visit their undiscovered planet. Come with me to that distant world and we'll listen to the green fish singing! Hey, where are you off to?"

"You're mad!" the man exclaims fearfully and disappears into the gloom of an avenue of chestnuts. He vanishes just as suddenly as he appeared.

I feel a joyous longing. Was I really only joking? Did I really leave my fiancée for nothing? Will I forever keep wandering among enchanted trees, waiting for a miracle? No! I will create it myself! Now, right now, I will go and find a living soul who will understand me and follow me into the whirlwind of the unprecedented.

Tonight or never!

Will the stars ever shine like this again — trustful, bright, unfathomable?

I will go. Looking silently into people's eyes, hoping. Will no one want to destroy the web of reality, to fly off to the fairy-tale, friendly planet of the Green Fish, who have been waiting an eternity in the translucent liquor for their gentle master?!

1975

A Chorus of Elements

The Cosmos is reflected in the pupil of every eye.

An Eastern aphorism

I'm still not sure whether this really happened or not . . .

For a long time I did not want to mention this fantastic incident. I was afraid people would laugh. But the truth demands its own I must speak . . .

It happened last summer. I decided to holiday with my grandmother, who lives on the banks of the Sula River in Sumy Province. The village was lost in luxurious orchards, nearby a high cliff revealed a hazy blue mirage of forests and fields. Deep gullies were green with lush vegetation. After greeting my grandmother and exchanging kisses, I talked with her awhile and drank my fill of fruit compote and cherry liqueur. Then I ran off to the Sula.

The sluggish little river left me spellbound. The water barely flowed and the translucent depths abounded with small darting fish and tadpoles. The slender rushes whispered gently of ancient legends.

I undressed and dived into the cool stream, swam over to a resplendent cluster of water lilies and sniffed the yellow honey-scented flowers, then floated on my back for a while and gazed up at the sky.

Returning to shore I dressed and, feeling refreshed and cheerful set off for the woods. I yearned to stroll in solitude amid the greenery.

The narrow path wove in and out of the oak saplings, then turned sharply uphill towards the village. I swung off the path into the undergrowth, weaving my way through sloe, hawthorn and dense pines. The mingled scents of resin and mushrooms made me feel giddy and stirred something in my heart.

Resting on a stump, I closed my eyes. And immediately I heard the sounds of a violin.

Someone was playing nearby. It was the familiar melody of a Ukrainian song *I Gaze at the Sky*. The melody was solemn, though very dynamic. Resolute, resonant and strong. Later, it

seemed to me this melody conveyed not so much a desire for wings with which to soar into the sky, as a realization of that age-old dream. But maybe this was just subsequent conjecture. Who knows . . . ?

I was very surprised. What crank had wandered into the bush to practice his music? Perhaps an unhappy village amateur whose wife had thrown him out of the house? But no, he was playing beautifully, exceptionally well. In fact, he would have had a willing audience at home or in the village club. Could he be a visiting student from the conservatory who had found himself a solitary refuge and was communing with nature? That had to be it . . .

I decided to meet this eccentric. Rising, I made for the sounds of the violin. The music stopped. I heard some low metallic noises, as if someone was striking a large hollow tank with a hammer. I became even more surprised. It seemed that apart from the musician there was also a locksmith's workshop nearby. This was altogether too much!

I approached a large clearing. It was flooded with brilliant sunlight which illuminated the most uncanny, unexpected structure. A tarpaulin of white canvas was pitched over a large sphere some three metres in diameter, constructed of large violet hexahedrons. Even in the shade this peculiar structure shone with a magical subdued light which made my eyes smart. An old man with a long white beard dressed in an embroidered shirt was seated near the sphere. He hummed a tune under his breath whilst striking the hexahedron with a small hammer.

I halted in bewilderment. What could all this mean? Was he a travelling magician? Maybe he was part of an expedition? What did this chimera of a sphere resemble? A probe? No. An astronomical device? Not likely.

The old man put aside his hammer and picked up the violin. He rubbed the bow with the rosin, coughed as though to clear his throat, and began to croon:

*"Long have you awaited us, distant planets,
Oh, distant planets, wonderful worlds . . ."*

Then his hand touched some unknown device. It was a spherical retort containing a network of tubes and cables. Small fountains of multicolored liquids danced inside the vessel. Or maybe they were not liquids. In any case, that's what they resembled . . .

The old man immediately picked up the violin and began to play the song he had just been humming. Once again I was astonished.

This ordinary, trivial tune took on a new significance and a profound meaning. The currents in the retort merged at its center into a lilac cloud, spun around in a spiral and settled.

What a strange sight! Almost a fairytale vision. Who would have thought that in a small grove by the Sula some eccentric would be performing secret experiments. I had to ask grandma, she would surely know something about this expedition . . .

Quietly, so as not to disturb the researcher, I headed back. When I was on the path again, I heard a soft melody:

*“Oh, eagle gray, oh falcon swift,
Forever free, through the sky you drift . . .”*

I found grandmother in the orchard. Affectedly shaking her black-kerchiefed head, she was cutting back those branches of the apple tree covered in worm-infested web.

“Why did the Lord create such pests?” she mumbled to herself. “Such wondrous beauty is blossoming around us, warming the hearts of man and nature, but there you go! Some fiendish spirit has sent along these worms to chomp on the leaves, ruining everything . . .!”

“Grandma,” I interrupted her philosophizing, “who are those scientists who’ve come here? Are they part of some expedition?”

“What scientists?” grandma was surprised.

“Here in the woods. They’ve pitched a large tent and some old man is playing the violin.”

“Haven’t heard, darling! Haven’t heard. Perhaps you just dreamed it?”

I was about to argue that my eyes hadn’t failed me yet, but I bit my tongue. What if I really had just imagined it? Heady forest scents, the strong sun, the bewitching spell of the woods in springtime . . .

I made a snap decision. After all, what was there to be afraid of? I would approach the old man and ask him.

I raced back down the steep path. Excitedly I forced my way through the dense undergrowth in the direction where I had first heard the song. Hammering noises continued to come from the clearing. There, how could that be an hallucination? One can never dream the same thing twice!

I reached the clearing. The old man was sitting on a stool as before, tapping the sphere with a small hammer. I coughed softly. Without turning around, the old man said:

“Come closer, don’t be afraid. You should have come up the

first time . . .”

So, he had seen me even then? Another riddle . . .

“Hello,” I said awkwardly. “Sorry for bothering you. I heard a clanging noise and singing. Thought I’d take a look.”

“No need to be apologetic,” the old man replied kindly. “You haven’t done anything wrong. It’s in a researcher’s blood. You are studying mathematics, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” I said, marvelling. “But how do you know?”

“I know everything, brother,” answered the old man, looking at me for the first time.

His eyes were a clear blue. They reflected the sky, the downy clouds and the delicate green canopy of the young oaks. His hair and beard were pure white, like swan’s plumage, his face was gaunt and sallow like parchment. It seemed, but for a breath of wind the old man would drift into the air like gossamer spider-webs of Indian summer. Neither the old man’s stature nor his clothing — a simple embroidered shirt — pointed to his being a scientist or researcher. He gave the impression of being a gardener or bee-keeper. But then he knew what I was studying, so he had to be a university lecturer . . .

“Where are the others?” I asked timidly.

“What others?” he smiled.

“The other members of the expedition.”

“I am alone, there is no expedition.”

“But what are you investigating? I’ve never seen such a peculiar apparatus . . .”

“I’m not investigating anything, brother. I’m getting ready for a flight to other worlds . . .”

Shivers ran down my spine. He was obviously a lunatic.

The old man shook his browned finger at me angrily.

“You’ve no control over your thoughts, brother. It’s not very sound to think ill of people, not knowing their game . . .”

“But I . . . I didn’t . . .” I blurted out in confusion.

“That’s even worse, you’re deceitful,” he retorted, frowning.

“You thought I was a lunatic, didn’t you?”

I must have grown as red as a beet. The old man laughed.

“Ha, ha. Young and green. All right, I’ll forgive you this once. I’ll repeat myself then — I’m preparing to fly to other worlds . . .”

“In this?”

“Aha, in this apparatus . . .”

I touched the violet sphere with my finger. It swayed a little.

“Excuse me,” I said apologetically. “But it seems somehow unbelievable . . . Only young cosmonauts go up in rockets . . .”

“That’s just it,” the old man answered sadly. “I wrote and wrote to the Cosmocenter: take me, you can’t imagine just how much I yearn to travel among the stars before my death. But no! They refused. They were very civil about it, said my jokes were misplaced. Only one kind soul answered that my dream might be realized, but in a different way . . . Video transmitters would be installed on other planets and I would be able to visit those far-away worlds with the aid of a television screen . . . Thanks very much, but the fact is I’m not interested in a picture on a screen. I want to explore the Cosmos myself. I want to be surrounded by stellar infinity, to witness other dawns, see other creatures or perhaps alien people . . . Surely you cannot compare such a dream with a televised picture?”

“But I don’t understand . . .”

“You soon will,” said the old man. “It’s all very simple. I was convinced that I would never be able to fly as part of an official team and decided to go it alone . . . What’s the matter? You still don’t believe me?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know your name . . .”

“Grandpa Hryts is my name. Call me that . . .”

“Hm . . . Sorry, Grandpa Hryts . . . But it’s strange all the same to hear such words in this atomic age: they refused to take me along on a space flight, so I decided to go it alone . . .”

“Why is it strange? It is precisely because this is the space age that there is nothing strange about it. There are technological possibilities, there is knowledge . . .”

“These days no one makes discoveries single-handed,” I answered authoritatively.

“Lies,” laughed Grandpa Hryts, arching his bushy eyebrows. “Individuals have always made the discoveries. Collectives merely realized them. I also profited from the services of the collective. Everything I used came from state department stores and laboratories. Friends helped. Ah, but I have no time to argue with you. If you want to listen — listen, if not — stop being a pest. Sit down here on this stool. I’m a little tired, I want to rest, so we can talk a while. Just don’t interrupt. Well, then. I decided to fly into space all by myself! But how? I couldn’t build a spaceship, they wouldn’t accept me into the school for cosmonauts, and I couldn’t project my astral body like the Hindus, enabling me to fly to other

spheres . . . I thought and thought about it . . . For a long time . . . And finally I had it. I developed a completely different principle of space flight — simple and convenient. It would be accessible to all. Inexpensive, simple, quick and portable. Unimaginable possibilities. I decided to produce a weightless metal . . .”

“Wells’ favorite,” I interrupted, “that’s a bit unreal.”

“Hm, how quick you are,” he grumbled ironically. “You read the work of some crank and repeat his ideas like a parrot! You’re all the same, you shallow people! ‘Favorite is impossible! A perpetual-motion machine is impossible’ . . .”

“But there’s even a resolution not to investigate designs for perpetual motion machines any more,” I interjected in an insulted tone.

“An idiotic resolution,” he answered mildly. “Such lawmakers block out the sun with their hands. The perpetual-motion machine is not only feasible, it exists. The Cosmos itself is a perpetual-motion system. Quiet, don’t interrupt. I want to talk about weightlessness now. A few words about how I proceeded with my research.”

The old man bent over and picked the pale-blue flower of a bluebell, then found a decayed leaf from the previous season. He placed both in his palm and showed them to me.

“How does one differ from the other?” he asked curtly.

“What do you mean, how?” I was confused. “One is living, the other — dead . . .”

“The difference lies not in the substance,” he declared sternly. “You cannot reason deeply. Both are alive. In one there is macrolife, in the other — microlife. Inorganic matter also contains life, only at a lower level. But that’s not the point. In the flower life is highly organized, we have a more or less long-lasting symphony of elements which comprise it, while in the decomposed leaf we have disharmony, a disturbance of the melody, a destruction of the symphony. Everything in life is built on this principle, my boy. Where there is a symphony and a harmony of elements there is joy, peace, beauty and happiness. Disharmony is a sign of decadence, distress and arbitrary rule.”

“All the same . . .”

“All the same, you still haven’t understood. I’m explaining to you, brother, explaining. I thought: why not experiment with the melodics of metals? Why not create a chorus of metals, a symphony of chemical elements? Eh? You’re surprised? Yet

everything in the world has a septenary musical nature. Sounds have a septenary octave, light too. Mendeleev's periodic table of elements is septenary by periodization. It is the law of our universe. Existence is a grandiose melody! Wonderful! Having made this definition, I already knew that I had taken the correct path. Ah, what possibilities for the future! Symphonies of nations, choirs of planets, melodious nature. There will be no decadence on Earth, no corruption, no decay. But how difficult it is to build from terrestrial elements. Our cars, buildings, railways and ships are all so awkward! Thunder, stench, gases, noise, catastrophies! What harmony is that? And why? Because the melody has not been found, the law of combining elements has not been discovered. I started to experiment, my boy. The results were striking. Having been a chemist all my life helped. Yes, don't look so surprised, I'm no village melon-farmer, as you thought, but a chemistry professor. My surname? What use would it be to you? You'll find out when I return. Anyway, I invented a device. Here it is, look. Streams of metallic microdust combine here in this retort, entering the sphere of certain melodics chosen by me. The violin is connected to this device through a psychomagnetic collector. But the question is not so much one of string vibration, as of psychic tuning. This is how it works. Several elements combine harmoniously to form a totally new substance. Ha-ha! You still don't believe me? Oh, I can hear your thoughts. 'The old schizophrenic', eh? Oho! Don't deny it, because I know everything! But I'll forgive you this time too. So I chose a whole range of melodies created at various times, whose winged souls strove for the heavens, space. Understand? The psychic energy of flight is contained within these songs and melodies. This may seem a lot of nonsense to you, but to me it is a great reality. Here before you is the flying apparatus. I completed it today. And now I am going to test it . . ."

I didn't know whether to laugh or to believe him. Everything the old man had said was so fantastic and unreal that I was left flabbergasted.

"Ah, you young grandpa," said the professor, shaking his head reproachfully. "Twenty years old — and such a sceptic. Afraid of fairy tales, of the miraculous, the legendary. But everything around you is a legend. Every flower, every butterfly, all of us, the sun and the stars, the birth of children and the soul's yearning for fresh mysteries — all this is the accomplishment of the sublime

legend of Being. Just look at everything that surrounds you, don't close the eyes of your mind with dogmas and preconceptions."

"Grandpa Hryts," I sighed. "All right, say I believe you. But this is contrary to the laws of . . ."

"What?" his white eyebrows rose. "Which laws?"

"The laws of nature . . ."

"The laws of Nature . . ."

"Have you spoken with Her?" the professor asked derisively, gathering up the equipment on the stool. "Do you know about *Her* laws?"

"Hm. As far as science can prove, matter cannot be weightless."

"Science, science. Rubbish! Is not radiation — matter? And the energy of our thoughts — isn't that matter? Mass is only a temporary state of matter, belonging to only certain of its aggregates. It's up to us to smash these aggregates and create more harmonious ones. I have achieved this. Look — these violet hexahedrons are a synthesis of terrestrial elements, a chorus of metals. I have imbued them with the property of weightlessness. Inside there is an ordinary light framework, hermetically sealed; and some provisions. My device becomes completely isolated from the influence of the gravitational-magnetic spheres of physical worlds. Thus I become an independent cosmos. I head wherever I want to go."

"But the motor? Where is the motive force?"

"Me, my thoughts. What? You still don't believe me? What an ignoramus! My system is weightless and even an insignificant stream of thought energy becomes the motive force. Understand? No? Well, some day you may. My dear fellow, I can reach the speed of light and cross the quantum threshold. Ha-ha! A hard nut! I can visit the nebula of Andromeda and return within an hour. And there's no paradox of time here. I rule over time and space! I will test it presently, and then hand my apparatus over to the Academy when I return. I want to admire the Cosmos until I've had my fill . . . Then I can die. Ha-ha . . . Although I can now become immortal too . . ."

"Come on," I said, "that's a bit much . . ."

"A bit much?" the old man grew angry, rising from his stool. "Want me to prove it to you? Let's fly together . . ."

I looked at him, stupefied. Fly? So he wasn't joking? Yes, why not crawl into this contraption of his just for fun. Then everything would fall into place. I would know that I was dealing with a

demented paranoiac!

The old man opened a large trapdoor on the sphere and quickly threw in his laboratory equipment, the table, the stools and the tent. He pointed authoritatively at the opening:

“Get in.”

Diffidently I climbed inside. The trapdoor closed with a hollow clang. Surrounded by a violet twilight, I could see the dim outlines of trees and the lilac clouds overhead. Then something happened. A blinding light irradiated us. The walls disappeared and we seemed to be suspended in space. I shrieked and sat down in astonishment.

“Careful,” laughed the old man, “you’ll squash the tinned food.”

I rose to my feet and sat on a stool. We rose into space. The green torrent of woods was now below us, the clouds neared at a lightning-fast pace.

Something snapped inside me, my calves began to shake, a cold sweat covered my palms.

“I don’t want to!” I yelled. “I’m afraid!”

We stopped, then rushed downwards. I very nearly lost consciousness from our sharp movements in space. Once again oaks swayed tranquilly around the translucent sphere. The old man looked at me critically and shook his head

“Hey, hey, brother! I thought I’d have a fellow-traveller to share this interesting journey with. But you are just a chicken. An ordinary chicken in human guise!”

“I . . . I thought you were joking,” I whispered.

“Ha, ha!” he cheered up. “Jokes! Well, get out then. Off you go! Eh, you mathematician! I’ll fly by myself! First to the moon, then to Mars, Jupiter, Uranus. Maybe I’ll even get to Centaurus or Sirius. Who knows. We’ll see! Farewell! Here, keep this as a memento! A hexahedron. So you won’t think it was all a dream! Ha, ha! Give it to the scientists, let them analyze it . . .”

I seized the mysterious metal, it burned my hand. I found myself on the ground again. The door to the violet sphere closed. The apparatus soared into the heavens like a meteor, fading into the blueness, and disappeared.

I opened my hand to look at the gift. The hexahedron shot up and floated off through the air. I tried to catch it, but it kept floating out of reach. Like a living thing, it rose above the trees and, with a dull flash of its matte faces, vanished. I almost wept with disappointment. Butterfingers! I couldn’t even hold on to a

minute part of the legend! I had lost the great and the small! What a shame!

I was ashamed, painfully ashamed! I'm still disgusted with myself!

Somewhere in distant worlds courageous Grandpa Hryts is travelling mysterious paths. I could have helped him, supported him on that difficult path of knowledge. But I was unable to. I missed my only chance and was left in a spiritual desert, a defeated pup. . .

Well, tell me – did this happen or not? Did it or not. . . ?

1967

The Apostle of Immortality

A TALE OF THE UNPRECEDENTED

. . . the time is near for all boundaries to be effaced and for the whole Earth to become our fatherland, and then not only the Earth, but the infinite universe too; wings of canvas and steel do not suffice, some day the wings of the spirit will carry us into the embrace of Eternity.

A. Blok

I met him in the Klukhori Pass, at an altitude of two thousand eight hundred metres. It was all very unexpected and incredible.

That summer I took my holidays in July. The weather was beautiful, so I decided to venture through the Caucasus on my own, following the ancient Sukhum Road. At first I wanted to take along a companion, and even began to ask among my friends, describing the lure of the wild mountains. However, all my efforts were in vain, as everyone preferred package holidays on the shores of the Black Sea, the Dnieper River, or in the resorts of the Carpathian Mountains. So I gave up trying, and was even glad that I had: after all, why did I need anyone to come with me? It would invariably mean having to make polite conversation, to socialize and, heaven forbid, suffer all sorts of whims. I get enough of that at work, so I decided it would be better to spend the whole month on my own with only the endless sky and the mountains for company.

That is what I decided, and that is what I did.

I reached Teberda and spent a few days there getting used to the mountain air while at the same time acquiring something of a tan. Then, after having bought some provisions, I hoisted my enormous knapsack onto my back, and set off for Klukhori.

Towards evening I was already close to the pass. Translucent diamond crests gleamed in the sky and the air was crisp and dry. A blue-green lake slumbered in the crater of an ancient volcano, sending forth a mighty torrent which frothed angrily as it tumbled down to the valleys carpeted in flowers. I decided to stop for the night in a spot overlooking the valley, but did not pitch my tent, for I wanted to sleep under the stars. I lay in my sleeping bag, while above a cosmic Bach played the inaudible chords of a pure and triumphal melody on a stellar organ. The exultant echo of the mountains imbued these mysterious chorales of eternity with the refreshing souls of the glaciers.

Whether I slept or not, I do not know. I rose at the crack of dawn — feeling happy, rested and enthusiastic. After a drink from the clear torrent, I washed in its icy water and continued on my way to the pass.

Clouds slumbered in the valleys below. Above them ice-capped peaks were awakening, greeting the sun. Light suddenly pierced the gray veil of mist and showered its generous colors on the rocky agglomeration of the Caucasus. I took off my knapsack and stood awestruck. No sounds from the lowlands reached here, this was the domain of Eternity. Peace and quiet. Something impossible to describe in words. The living human spirit had to commune with nature, become an inseparable unity with it. For a few moments I experienced such a state.

And then I saw him. At first I didn't even understand who he was and why he was there. A person was sitting on a boulder to my right. He was a man of about thirty. His big gray eyes regarded me benevolently, smiling. He was wearing only blue shorts and his lean body shimmered like a rainbow in the sunlight. He appeared to be covered with morning dew. "Could he be a lunatic?" I thought initially. "But why is he here, at this altitude?"

The stranger's lips winced, an ironic expression played on his face. However his words were serene and amicable.

"Good morning, comrade. Isn't the view exquisite? You won't see its like down below . . ."

"Good morning," I replied. "I've already admired the view . . . But, excuse me . . ."

"My appearance worries you?"

"No," I said in bewilderment. "But I thought perhaps you needed help . . ."

"Not yet," the stranger answered cheerfully, shaking his long black locks. "I'm not mad or in dire need of anything. Just a traveller, like yourself. A "savage". I like solitude, beautiful places where I can think . . ."

"You spent the night here?"

"Sure."

"But where's your tent? Your sleeping bag . . .?"

"I haven't any," the stranger shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "I don't need such things . . ."

"Hm. You're a stoic. But such hardship can lead to illness or lifelong disability . . ."

"That's no longer a threat to me. I see you're surprised. You

don't believe me. Oh well, I'll have to explain a thing or two then. If we were somewhere below, in the valley, I wouldn't have dared. But here I'll tell you. You are impressed by the magic of the mountains, your soul is receptive to the unusual, perhaps you will understand . . ."

"But who are you?"

"A person. Your contemporary. My surname? For me it no longer has any meaning. I used to be called Hryhoriy. Hryts. Call me Hryts, if you like. Well, shall we go? It's time. The sun is out, we can make tracks. Here, let me help you on with your knapsack. Oho, how many useless things you've stuffed into it! Look at me — just a simple shirt and pants. And I only wear them when people are around, so they won't get offended."

"But what do you eat?" I asked in astonishment.

"The same thing as you," he smiled mirthfully. "The sun's rays. Only you obtain them from coarse foods — meat or fruits, while I get them directly . . ."

"Come on, really . . ."

"What?"

"You're bluffing. This is some archfantasy. True, Tsiolkovsky¹ once dreamt of such a being, but it is impossible. To assimilate sunlight directly? No, no, that's unnatural . . .!"

"But why?" Hryts asked in genuine surprise.

"Well, because we humans have specialized. Flora went the way of photosynthesis, while we animals and humans became the parasites of flora . . ."

"That's true!" exclaimed Hryts. "I agree with that. We really are parasites of the plant kingdom. But as for the impossibility of radiation energetics, I dispute that. Especially since the proof of it stands before you. I myself . . ."

"Hm. Either I'm dreaming . . . or you're . . . pulling my leg . . ."

Hryts laughed and fiery sparks played in his penetrating, slightly insane eyes.

"I know, I know. You think differently. You think that before you stands an imbecile, a psycho, a schizo, as the young smart alecks say. All the same, look at me. Even a cursory inspection confirms some anomaly . . ."

Indeed, his body was unusual, covered by a barely noticeable misty membrane which shimmered like a rainbow in the sun. He

1. Konstantin E. Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935). A Russian scientist and SF writer.

had a broad chest and a sunken belly. A very strange figure! And besides, he was barefoot! Surely he didn't tread barefoot over these rocks?

"Aha! You're looking at my feet. No shoes. Well, that can be achieved through training. However my soles are just as tender as yours. Please take a look. Not a scratch, though I've been in the mountains for a long time. Well — are you convinced!?"

"Stop keeping me in suspense, tell me your secret . . ."

"There is no secret. Let's go. I'll tell you everything, I won't hide a thing. It may prove useful to you. And if not to you, then perhaps to your friends . . ."

We began our descent, passing gigantic boulders, aggregations of grotesque rocks covered in greenish-gray moss. Yellowing human bones were strewn among them, here and there lay rusty pieces of German rifles and spent cartridges. An intense battle had been fought here once. The Germans had wanted to break through to the sea along the Sukhum Road; every rock had resounded with shots, every rock had been awash with blood. Everything had passed. A wise silence reigned over the mountains once more, bones lay yellow among the rocks and here was this peculiar stranger with me beside him . . .

I trod carefully, loose stones shot out from under my shoes, but Hryts moved along this dangerous track with ease. At times he seemed to be floating above the ground like a misty summer cloud. We came out onto an ancient road trodden in by millions of travellers. On our right an emerald stream thundered into a rocky gorge and to its enchanting accompaniment my companion continued his incredible tale. I haven't altered a word of it . . .

"Several years ago I worked in the Kiev Institute of Cybernetics. I was a mathematician by profession. My father, a pedagogue, passed onto me his love for this science. Ever since I was a small boy I have been in love, as it were, with that wonderful world of numbers, precise measurements and faultlessly accurate experiments. I loved to attend lectures on physics, chemistry and geometry. I listened in rapture as my father led his students along the fairy-tale path of measurements, numbers and weights to the dizzying heights of scientific abstraction. The familiarization with the history of science finally convinced me of the omnipotence of knowledge, the invincibility of the exact sciences.

"That childhood impression determined my life. I entered university, choosing the faculty of cybernetics. This science has

masterfully “intruded” into the consciousness of humanity, into technology, into our way of life, promising miracles in our perception of the world and its most profound workings, modelling the processes of creativity and intuition, overshadowing the aureole of poets and chess masters. I also became fascinated by the magical powers of science, the possibility of comprehending everything, of opening up an area of infinite possibilities for mankind by utilizing rational aids such as cybers and even cyborgs – synthetic beings with a biological base.

“But you know all about that, so I won’t go into details.

“During my final year at university fate dealt me its first blow. My father died.

“I found him still conscious. He was in agony. Cancer was devouring his lungs, none of the treatments were helping, the two operations merely hastened the inexorable.

“Father’s bed stood by an open window. He liked to watch the sun rise, its pink rays penetrating the lush garden greenery, sending sunbeams to dart about playfully on his emaciated face. A mysterious yearning glowed in his sunken eyes. I looked at this dear man, the closest person to me, and sensed that he was leaving me forever, that he was melting before my eyes like a summer cloud, and there was no power on Earth which could prevent this terrible inevitability. Tears, commiseration, scientific knowledge, the efforts of the doctors – all were futile, utterly futile!

“It was then that I began to doubt the omnipotence of science. My thoughts were harsh and uncompromising. So what, I thought, if some day the all-powerful science of the future discovers the elixir of life? What good would it do my father? What use would it be to the untold millions who spent each day in agony, raising their hands to a mute god, to the desert of nonexistence on the other side of the grave?

“My father was no more. Only memories remained, and a small green mound over his remains. And a little elder bush which some old lady had planted. There was also the cheerful necrology recited at the cemetery by Oksana, a pupil from the ninth grade. ‘The memory of our wonderful teacher will remain in our hearts forever.’ Oh, naive little girl! You will be laughing your head off tomorrow, listening to the jokes of your classmates. And the day after you will be melting in the arms of some dark-eyed boy, without a second thought for the sorrowful face of the deceased mathematician who so loved to lead you through the labyrinths of knowledge . . . !

“Oh, well! That’s how it should be. That’s how it will be. However the illusion was shattered. I became introspective, my spirit began the mournful task of analyzing and dissecting the riddles of life.

“I entered the Institute of Cybernetics, completed my post-graduate research and easily defended my dissertation. Everyone foretold a brilliant future for me. I worked under a well-known scientist in a section where the latest logic machines were being constructed. The prospects, the projects! Immortal cyborgs, self-programming mechanotropes, invulnerable cosmonauts who could head for distant worlds, synthetic child prodigies who would open up the most secret inner depths of matter for humankind, composers and automaton poets who would dethrone the mystique of creative inspiration and reveal its rational base. There was much talking, shouting, numerous articles were written and academic declarations made. There were countless threats to model the intuitive process. And yet I was already indifferent to these words. Something within me had changed, a qualitative transformation.

“One day I was walking along a Kiev street through a crowd of noisy humanity. Nothing had changed. But suddenly I understood what it was that I lacked.

“My rage rested on a department-store window with mannequins on display. Modern papier-mache boys and girls. Perpetual smiles, learned gestures. Frightening stasis, the inability to change anything. Everything would forever remain as the fashion designer had specified.

“And I realized that science faced such a danger too. The stasis of programs, of the primordial impulse. We had to exhaust the given impulse ad infinitum even though it might be leading us nowhere. We were forced to make use of experimental results obtained with the aid of this or that apparatus, which could be emitting signals modelled on archaic levels of knowledge. The most important thing to remember was that amid the avalanche of machines and cybers man remained inimitable, only sharpening his intellect unilaterally, while the intuitive, ethical and sensual spheres were being systematically downgraded because of his complete reliance on the rational analysis of the cybernetic outlook.”

Hryts became silent. A group of tourists was approaching. We caught the sounds of a transistor mingled with merry laughter. A

wiry Svan guide walked in front, leading a horse by the reins. A few knapsacks were strapped onto the saddle. Seeing us, the tourists began calling out, chatting among themselves. They greeted us, giving Hryts disconcerted looks. The girls branded him with their lusty glances, but he paid no attention to anyone and continued along the path unperturbed, solemnly, as if there was no one nearby.

“Hey, boy! Have you been robbed? Need a pair of sneakers? We’ve got two spare pairs.”

“He doesn’t need them,” I shrugged. “He’s used to going about barefoot.”

“What about food? Perhaps you need some, eh? ‘Cause your friend there looks like a hermit. You sure he isn’t a yogi you’ve dragged out of some cave, eh?”

“Ha, ha, ha!” the tourists laughed and the surrounding mountain valleys played with the echoes of their guffaws.

The group disappeared around a bend and a rational silence descended on us again. I caught up to Hryts. Giving me a kind smile, he sighed deeply and continued his account.

“And then I fell in love. She was a student of philology and wrote nice poetry, even had a book published. I sensed in her that poetry which I lacked – a yearning for the transcendental, the extrasensual, a oneness with the imperceptible, the intangible, the unprecedented, the destruction of barriers of personality, individual limitations, the confines of the intellect. Beautiful days, enchanting evenings. I seemed to have finally found the desired synthesis. It was in the union of lovers, who imbued the communion of their feelings with the unique nectar of separate experiences. It was bliss, I was in seventh heaven . . .

“Then came another blow!

“We went skating in winter. I fell through the ice. Valya screamed in horror, there were no people about and I couldn’t climb out onto the ice. My body grew numb, I felt myself losing consciousness. My lashes began to freeze together, a blinding mirage appeared before my eyes, and there too was the monstrous face of my beloved girl. That was just it: somehow it seemed so monstrous to me then.

“I don’t know what happened after that. Someone ran up, threw in some boards, pulled me out. Then came the ambulance, the hospital. But it was too late. I had lost the use of both legs. Paralysis. Two years of treatment did not help. I became an invalid

and received a pension. I had regular visits from various boys and girls who tried to amuse and comfort me. They consulted me. Why not! My mental faculties were unimpaired, I could help many of those preparing their dissertations and proved useful to many former colleagues. Then the visits became less and less frequent. Social duties had been fulfilled, no one really felt like seeing a paralyzed friend. Oh, I understood that, so I wasn't very disappointed when I was left alone once more.

"*She* came a few more times. Valya would look at me sadly and sigh. At times she didn't know what to say and flipped through my books or played the tapes she had heard a hundred times over. Finally she plucked up enough courage and, looking away with innocent suffering eyes, said to me:

" 'Hryts, I have something important to tell you . . . '

"I feigned a cheerful laugh and replied:

" 'There's no need, Valya. No need, little girl. Why torture yourself, struggling with an ethic-moral complex which our parents instilled in us, though they never heeded it themselves. You want to leave me? But you've already done that, a long time ago . . . '

" 'Me?' She clapped her hands theatrically, regarding me with offended, angelic eyes. 'When? I'm always with you . . . '

" 'Yes, yes, physically you're here. But your soul has been elsewhere for a long time. I've noticed. And I've been expecting these words. It won't be painful for me. Farewell . . . '

" 'Hryts, please understand . . . '

" 'It's all right, Valya. I understand. What would you do with a paralyzed, immobile husband? And what sort of husband would I make? Just a log! In a movie, exceptional loyalty might be bearable, but in real life . . . No, no, don't eat your heart out, go your own way and find yourself a partner . . . '

"She left. For good.

"But all the same, I had been lying. I was hurt. Incredibly hurt. The world crumbled about me and rained splinters on my heart, my nerves, my brain, shocking and maiming an already mutilated soul.

"I don't wish to discuss sensations any more. What followed was a nightmare, hopelessness, the pits. Days, months, years. I tried to find some meaning to my new existence, at least a fragment of sense. I had read and known all about heroes, all about endurance, unshakeable faith. But all that made sense only if a person took for

granted the worth of life itself, of biological functioning. I had never before thought about the worth of life itself. For me it was a vehicle to perception, inquiry and endeavor. But now what endeavor could there be with immobility. What inquiry? Why burden the world with my presence, forcing those close and not so close to me to sacrifice years of their precious time for a useless cripple? Especially since my illness began to progress and I was losing the use of my arms and had difficulty in speaking. A nurse was hired to look after me, clean up my room. It was hard on me and I felt very ashamed. Sometimes I wanted to crawl out of bed, reach the window and throw myself onto the asphalt below. My room was on the sixth floor and my skull would have been smashed to a pulp. But I couldn't even manage that – I didn't have the strength.”

I found Hryts' account enthralling, although I couldn't grasp what his personal tragedy had to do with the unusual capabilities he had hinted at initially. The knapsack was eating into my shoulders, I wanted to rest and have a drink of water. I stopped him and gestured that we sit down. He glanced at my perspiring face and agreed, helping to unburden me. While I washed in the stream and greedily gulped down the refreshing water, Hryts sat under an ancient poplar and listened to the rustling of its leaves. I returned to the path, sat down on a rock, and asked him to continue.

“What happened next,” Hryts went on, “confirms an ancient piece of wisdom: a person is the smith of his own life. The hammer and anvil are possessed by all. They are our will. We are accustomed to swimming in the current of harmonious social life. We acquire a profession, a dwelling, opportunities. But when one of these disappears – we are at a loss, we lose faith in ourselves. But the measure of everything is man himself. The ancients knew this. If there is any sense to life, then it should not be present in external opportunities, though no one will deny the importance of our environment. However, the main thing is the inner determination of attaining goals and the will to act. You will no doubt say what I thought at first – what can an invalid do, an immobile log chained to his bed? The point was that I was used to seeing action as being beyond me and had forgotten that concealed within each of us is the root and nucleus of any act – our spirit and our mind. Therefore, if one opportunity for action is lost, the spirit can discover ten, a hundred others . . .

“Listen to what happened next. One day, as part of her duties, the nurse brought me my mail. I leafed through the newspapers and began to read the magazines. In one of the popular science journals I came upon a very interesting article on hunger therapy. The mechanism of self-limitation and the benefits of hunger therapy were argued convincingly, the theory and practice of the treatment were covered.

“I figured I had nothing to lose. I dismissed my doubts. In any case, it was an escape even in the event of a negative result. I would simply expire, and that would be that. I would extinguish the already wavering flame of life with my own will . . .

“I won’t bore you with a description of the details. Suffice to say that on the third day I already knew that I was doing the right thing. During those first two days my body had demanded food, but on the fourth I experienced relief. In a week I was sitting up in bed and my speech had improved. On the tenth day I lowered my feet to the floor. Moved to tears, the astonished nurse brought me a pair of crutches and helped me to hobble about the room.

“After two weeks I was able to walk around the room on my own. Slowly I began to develop my biceps. I drank only water and herbal teas with honey. I exercised daily and rubbed myself down with water. After three weeks I ventured outside and strolled about the Botanical Gardens, hugging the tree trunks and weeping from sheer happiness that once more I could gaze into a clear sky, breathe in the perfume of the trees, stroke the rough bark of the oak and feast my eyes on the beauty of the flowers.

“Eight weeks passed. I recovered fully. Fully, you understand?

“I resumed my normal eating habits, put on some weight. Then I went to see my doctors. They were impressed, bewildered. However, they understood everything when I explained how I had cured myself.

“At the institute I was received with an enthusiastic roar. Some lowered their eyes. There was no need. My happiness had swamped all the insults and disappointments.

“I was reinstated and granted three months leave so that I could fully recover, get my strength back and attain the ‘necessary condition’, as my boss put it with a pleasant smile.

“I decided to spend more time in the Carpathians. Before leaving, I met Valya. She was engaged and preparations for the wedding were under way. However my former love looked sad and tears glistened in her eyes.

“ ‘Why did you call me?’ she whispered, biting on the edge of her handkerchief. ‘To hurt me? To get back at me?’

“ ‘Get back at you, Valya?’ I was surprised. ‘But haven’t you chosen your path in life? Aren’t you happy?’

“ ‘Don’t laugh! I was happy with you. Fate has mocked me . . .’

“ ‘Valya,’ I dared. ‘I want to reveal my secret to you. And if you’ll understand . . .’

“ ‘What kind of secret?’

“ ‘The greatest one of all. That is the only reason I contacted you. Otherwise I wouldn’t have dared . . . If you understand – then fate and its whims will mean nothing to us! We will weave our own fate. I have perceived this and I believe in the unprecedented. . .’

“ ‘This sounds phantasmagorical, irrational,’ she smiled through her tears. ‘But go on . . .’

“So I opened my soul to her, revealed what I had decided upon during those memorable days when I was returning from immobility to life . . .

“ ‘You’re mad!’ Valya cried in horror after hearing my ardent confession. ‘You’re demented. Immobility at first, then hunger, the joy of returning to life . . . Listen, Hryts, don’t tempt fate, begin thinking normally again . . . ! Before it’s too late! Let it be a lapse, a temporary illusion, I’ll understand everything . . .!’

“ ‘I believed that you were a poet in everyday life too!’ I said, disappointed. ‘I believed you were abnormal! But a poet who advocates normality? Sorry I bothered you . . .’ We never met again. I found myself near Chornohora¹, rented a room from an old woman, a spinster who lived high up on a ridge, just below a stand of firs, and embarked on my plan . . .”

“What did you decide to do?” I asked impatiently. “What plan did you contemplate? What changes in outlook?”

“A minute’s patience, please,” Hryts replied. “Let me help you with your knapsack. There. Now, let’s go. Listen carefully. I am coming to the crux . . . Have you ever thought what man is? Why he lives? Such a question is not whimsical. Countless philosophers and sages, scientists and politicians, sociologists and theologians have considered the question for thousands of years. There are various answers, various approaches. But there is no universal conclusion. Isn’t that strange? After all, one eagle won’t argue with another about their purpose in life. There are wings, there is air,

1. Chornohora – a mountain in the Ukrainian section of the Carpathian Mountains.

the boundless sky. Fly, take pleasure in flight. In the same way it is not necessary to define the nature of a flower, a bee, a snake or a hedgehog. But man seeks his purpose in life. He searches, ponders his goal, but then chooses to master a profession and molds himself into a specialist. Man – engineer, man – teacher, man – tailor, man – politician, man – soldier. Bizarre specialization, subordination of oneself to a nonhuman goal, an industrial, scientific or social necessity. But what is man beyond his profession, beyond his social function? I asked myself that, but could find no satisfactory answer. I couldn't then, but now I know. I shouldn't race ahead, though . . .

“While I was undergoing the hunger therapy, my mind was enlightened by a single lofty revelation. Willpower. We had forgotten about it. This force had led the animal kingdom from the amoeba to the human being. It seethed in every tree leaf, it charged the rays of sunshine, it was present in the cranes' spring cries and in the uprisings for freedom, in a child's yearning for adventure and in the beauty of flowers, in the anguish of great love and in the despair of a scientist who shatters his heart against the wall of the universe's countless mysteries. Perhaps my words sound trivial, however we rarely make use of willpower, although we repeat the word at every step. We have replaced the true will to act with an imitation – an innumerable avalanche of programs. Herein lies the danger in cybernating thought, feeling and creativity. Instead of a living penetration into the infinite, we have a model of the universe. Instead of expanding our feelings – we create analogs for them, mechanical prosthetic devices. Instead of mastering new possibilities in evolution – we accumulate old values; instead of mastering new, economical energetics, we exploit the precious organic resources of our planet! But what am I telling you? Every thinking inhabitant of Earth should understand this. And there are many who do! However almost no one wants to stop and think – where is the alternative, the new path?

“I told myself: ‘An experiment! It will answer all your questions. Have you realized that it was willpower which put you on your feet, resurrected you, performed a miracle where all the powers of medicine were impotent?! Well then, continue along the same path. Discover your million-year-old mystery, look into the treasury of your own being, answer the question: who are you beyond what your parents, your specialization, your education made you into? Who are you as a person, rather than a cyberneticist?’

“I know what you will say. Man is a social creature. That’s true. Without social information a child cannot master the knowledge of the past. But all the same – information can build up such a barrier in the eternal genetic code that a person becomes incapable of molding himself, becoming completely subject to an artificial program of race, government, religion, education or some such thing.

“Now, about will. Why do we apply it? There is only one answer – to forge ourselves. That which took millions of years to occur in nature – things such as the appearance of new genera, new families and species – can be achieved by a person in the space of a lifetime. Not consumerism, not the pleasure of surfeit, but self-discovery! That is the ideal for mankind!

“I realized life was not a spontaneous phenomenon, not mere chance. It is all-encompassing. It is the essence of the sole substance, matter. And its highest aspect is light, radiation.

“The world-bearing fabric of life unifies infinity as the perpetually dynamic blood of the universe. Absolute life is manifested. Through immeasurable combinations of systems, planets, evolutions, it ascends ever higher through countless experiments, and creates a bewitching Symphony of Being.

“At the same time co-ordinates of existence and consciousness are created. Each has his own, although the universe is absolute for all. For us the most important co-ordinates are Time, Space, Mass and Motion. But they are not universal. On the contrary, our world is only a venous system of the Absolute Organism, where the world-bearing blood slows down the rhythm of being and weaves a shadowy existence – substance. In time, breaking the fetters of gravitational lethargy, light gives birth to biological life and spurs it on to self-perception, to cognizance, to human evolution. Through thought and spiritual ecstasy, through the beauty of creation and heroic deeds, light returns to the Dwelling of Infinity, enriched with ideas of exploit and self-denial, love and co-suffering, fortitude and faith.

“And so the grandiose interchange takes place in the vast being of Mother Nature.

“Evolution is the gradual transition from a shadowy to a worldbearing existence, from the world of Relativity to the world of Absoluteness, from the world of Necessity to the world of Freedom.”

I listened to Hryts’ impassioned speech as though it was a legend. Where had he come from? Why did his words burn with

such ardent faith in what he said? Still, there was no particularization! Only generalizations, exaltation, inspiration!

I told him that. I told him that each experiment required a result. But what result had his romantic thoughts yielded? What would humanity become, changing from a “shadowy” existence, as he put it, to a world-bearing one? Would bodies and individuals remain, or would everything be transformed into facelessness, a Lemovian¹ “Solaris”, where the whole planet comprised a single organism? Even if it was possible in principle, who could prove that such life would be more pleasant than our present existence?

“Oh, no!” laughed Hryts, looking dreamily beyond the mountains, where soft white clouds wove beautiful fairy-tale forms against the blue sky. “Not for anything! Mother Nature bore us through the thickets of primitive genera, families and species to the thinking, independent beings that we are now. Having that consciousness, can we possibly stoop to become a mindless crowd, a degraded mass? Quite the opposite – complete individualization! That is the next step in evolution. A union of titanic minds and feelings. Not herds of average good-for-nothing people, consumers of material comforts, but a fellowship of cosmic creators.

“Through its activity humanity has given birth to a psychosphere. It already exists and will be present in the future. It is immortal. It is mankind’s memory. All who direct their psyche into this current can utilize it. But to be born into the psychosphere, the noosphere, to be able to act freely there, to form a new body, a new manifestation, it is imperative to overcome the mentality and action of the natural program. We must become our own foundries. Create an inviolable center of consciousness – independent of time, space or death. Let man choose his own base. Nature has given him one body. Born of body, man will master myriads of bodies and phenomena.

“This is freedom, my friend! Freedom!

“I know, I know! You want to contradict me again. You want to query the method, the aim of the experiment. I have been talking a lot about the theoretical basis of my outlook so that you could grasp the most elementary principle: the power of Infinity lies in

1. Stanislaw Lem (b. 1921). A Polish SF author, born in Lviv and the author of *Solaris*. Considered by many to be the leading representative of SF in the Communist world.

the human will. For milleniums people have given away their will, their power, their glory to their heavenly shadows – despotic gods. They went – barefoot, hungry and wretched – carrying a pauper’s bag on their backs, entreating the heavens for alms. The heavens were silent. While in that bag – do you hear, my friend – in that beggar’s sack lay the magic warder of omnipotence. The warder of willpower!

“Now I talk about it freely, confidently. Because I know. But then, then I admit I had mixed feelings. There were doubts, wavering. Deep meditation, searching – but where should I begin? I decided to start with the energetics of the organism, since it comprised the basis of biological life. I realized that no new, higher level could be attained without renouncing the law of engulfment. As long as we depend on food, weather, dwellings and other creatures – how can we have will? All our actions are bound by myriads of threads to countless creatures, phenomena and objects. What freedom can we dream of?

“The beauty of the Carpathians helped me. Long days of meditation and concentration. Everything around me seemed to urge me not to be afraid. The grandiose folds of the mountains, the tall sentinel firs and the all-knowing silence which drifted over Chornohora on starry nights – all seemed to command: begin!

“And I said: why not begin? Why not try? Anyone can theorize, but only a bird can soar into the sky! If the capacity for a new manifestation exists within me, success will follow. If it is not present, then that capability should appear. Otherwise willpower is useless! A mere fiction. And then a human being is only a slave of nature, its marionette. That’s uncompromising – right? However truth comes above all else!

“I repeated my hunger therapy experiment. Sixty days abstinence. Previously my goal had been to cure myself, to become mobile and lead a normal human life. Now the aim was entirely different.

“At dawn I joined the sun and became one with it. Yes, yes! This is no abstraction! I felt a part of it, one of its atoms. More than that, I felt I was the sun itself, a consolidation of radiation isolated for travels to other worlds. So what, if I was opaque, if I was no ball of fire? So what, if I had to walk, sleep and wear clothes? My inner being had been dozing all this time, clothed in three dimensions! And now that I wanted to return to the Infinite Dwelling, I was awakening. I had no need of food or foreign sources of energy. I was energy itself, the external dynamo of universal Motion.

“Oh, my friend! You cannot comprehend what the will can create! It is like a snowman. A whole colossus can grow from one small snowball. Or a nuclear chain reaction. The same law applies to degradation and ascension. Steadfastness of will is the key to all locks. In science, in exploit, in love.

“Transformations began to occur in my body. I drove myself to the edge of death. And thus I achieved harmony with the million-year-old evolutionary reflex. It had not been active because there was no need for it, man lived in a hothouse. But when I summoned it into action, when I perceived it – it awoke. I don’t know whether it was a first on Earth or not. Maybe someone has done this before me. Maybe . . . I hope to meet such people if they exist. We ought to open a whole new era for mankind, new possibilities. Do you understand what I’m leading up to?”

“But the setup of your experiment?” I uttered in confusion. “It doesn’t sound very serious. More like wizardry . . .”

“There-there!” nodded Hryts, smiling benevolently. “Your lips are voicing the ancient program. It is impossible because it cannot be. We are the finest energetic machines, not even machines, but the very basis of the world’s energetics. Every atom of our being contains immeasurable power. But while we possess such a fine system, we still resort to the archaic steam-engine, we burn precious wood. I’ll tell you, the means of our nutrition is an animal legacy. It has to be transformed, transmuted. Then everything will proceed more easily, more confidently. Having an immeasurable source of energy, one can achieve phenomenal results. Transmigration, that is journeying through space, union at a distance with intelligent beings, telekinesis, antigravitation and countless other possibilities. But the principal thing is that you master your own being, overcome death, because you can stop the degeneration of the organism, rise above time. Oh, how I wish mankind would step onto the path of immortality. It would solve countless problems. It would really open up the Cosmos to those on Earth . . . However, I must go. I am being called . . .”

“By whom? Where?” I looked around in surprise. “It’s quiet, there’s no one around . . .”

“My female friend is calling me,” he answered tenderly, fixing his clear gaze on me. “She is in the Carpathians. She believes me and together we want to destroy the net of time . . .”

“You can hear her so far away?” I asked incredulously.

“Distance does not exist for those who feel their presence everywhere. Recall the folk tales. A hero helps out a fish and it

gives him one of its scales. In time of need he sets it alight and the fish comes to his assistance. The same goes for the bear and the fox. Our ancestors were wise indeed. They knew, and passed on the legacy to us: unity with nature offers fantastic possibilities. But we must unite with nature without devouring it. On the contrary, we must become its essence, its heart, its child . . . Farewell, my friend!”

His figure began to fade. Or was it my imagination? What was happening to me? To my eyes?

“Wait, I’d like to meet you again . . . To talk some more . . .”

“You know the main thing,” came Hryts’ faint voice. “The rest is all will. By the way, have you understood the meaning of the words freedom and will?”

“I don’t follow you . . .”

“All the philosophers fretted over the definition of the concept of will and freedom. But it’s all very simple. In the word itself is revealed the essence of the concept. Manifest willpower and you are free!”

A cold breeze blew down from the mountains. A raw fog billowed from the gorge. The sun hid behind dark menacing clouds.

“Hryts, where are you? Don’t play tricks on me . . . Where are you hiding?”

The mountains remained mute. Exhausted, I sank onto a rock, the knapsack fell heavily to my feet. I felt as if I had lost something dear, something very precious. As if I had missed something by failing to listen attentively. What had happened to me? Perhaps I was hallucinating? That was all I needed . . .

Colorful circles floated before my eyes. Nervous spasms shook my body.

I touched my forehead. My head was burning . . .

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