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THE SNIPE'S FLIGHT



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"The Snipe's Flight" – the first book from the cycle "Adventures of the Snipe". This beginning of story about my adventurous adventures and volume as I am the veteran of KGB after death on someone's to will it has appeared in body of the young man living in the 3158th year. The irony is that it, as well as I, too the secret agent of only already Russian Empire. My main objective is exposure of secret and very dangerous galactic community under the name: "Committee 10". But at first I have to save the planet Aurum-4 from destruction by Herpix Industries corporation, expose the traitors, spies and murderers who are in my environment. I need to survive and run away from this Godforsaken planet. It is very long story...

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The Snipe's Flight

Chapter 1

Pain. It was my one and only faithful companion the last months. Uninvited, importunate, all-consuming. Only memoirs allowed me to distract and be forgotten for some time. I am Vasily Ivanovich Kamentsev, the colonel in resignation, the former employee of the second management of KGB later the teacher in the Russian Academy FSB. Two months ago to me eighty nine years have knocked. Instead of my favourite reading the novel, now here I lie not movably and I listen attentively to monotonous hum of the medical equipment and I try not to think of the heated nail in my right side. Cancer of the fourth stage – here my final, last ruthless opponent. It the opponent could not be converted, bribed or played. It was only possible to wait and look how he defeats me and slowly kills.

I waited. Thoughts consigned to the past where there was no this pain, and there was smell of typographical paint from the shabby books about spies, burning desire of adventures in soul of the rural boy. Then there was army, military discipline, clearness. It was pleasant to me. And then this improbable, dizzy chance. «The citizen Kamentsev, the qualities shown by you are of interest to the state security agencies» – the words pronounced by the major that has come to hold at me exam in practical firing. The excellent sports discipline imitating combat or tactical conditions. Here not only the accuracy, but also speed, ability to quickly estimate situation and to work with shelters are important. The dream which is wrapped up in the folder with signature stamp «Top secret» became for me, routine work and service on for the rest of the life. Then there was law school, the diploma with honors. And then – fifty years of service. Fifty years of smart operations, invisible wars, interpretations and recruitments. Family? It for me could become vulnerability. Love? The distracting factor. I had work and service for the benefit of the huge country. Great and powerful country. To me it is unimportant what politicians and traitors have made with it. It is important that people, the people which I protected have restored its former greatness and could get up from knees. And traitors were and will be always. And the end at them, at all one.

I never thought that I will live so long, I will train three Heroes of Russia. I suspected, the last years that there is with me something is not right. But to doctors did not go. And sense? Year, well has lived and it is good. Now to me the loneliness in sterile chamber has come. I had nobody who would hold me by hand or came to visit me. No, it is not necessary to feel sorry for me. I am guilty, but what now to do. Yes you excuse my senile grumbling. Long I was silent and with anybody could not talk and tell the tall tale which has happened to me.

Being in the best Russian military hospital, I died. But I waited for it every day, and here the door has opened. My Lenchka has entered. The young nurse, with kind, but tired eyes from the next heavy change. Red hair, and ridiculously stuck fervent bow on the head. Big blue eyes, chubby sponges and pleasant aroma of flowers.

– Vasily Ivanovich, is time, – its voice was soft as summer rain.

I have silently nodded, having hardly raised the head. It has brought to my lips glass glass with water, has put two capsules on palm. Ritual action, as on me, senseless. But Lenchka asks, so it is necessary.

– Thanks, Lenchka, – having croaked I have told, swallowing of bitterish pills. Its touch was cool and fleeting. It has left, having left behind the pressing feeling of the missed opportunity. «Eh, here if ...» – I have begun thought, old as the world. But suddenly it has broken. It was not explosion or heavy blow of pain. It was similar to as though the Universe for moment has blinked. Chamber,

pain, old body – everything has disappeared. There was no pain, there was no tunnel at the end of which waited for me light.

When consciousness has returned to me with feeling of improbable, amazing ease and huge inflow of forces. I have opened eyes. I lay on something firm and cool. Not on hospital bed. On floor? I have slowly risen and have sat down, the movement I were given unusually quickly, without crunch in joints, short wind and back pain. I have carefully looked round. No, not chamber. Some technical room similar to advanced garage. Walls from metal, on the right about wall, there was column similar to tribune, and on it multi-colored bulbs flickered. In the middle of tribune the bluish screen shone. It soared in air, these are holograms with unclear schemes. Air smelled of plastic, ozone, lubricating oil and the burned-down conducting.

I have looked at the hands. Young people. I have clenched fists. Strong. Has looked at wrist on it were – not hours, and some difficult bracelet with the blinking badges. I have examined myself. On me simple, but at the same time strange clothes from gray, elastic material. Suddenly in the head the name has emerged. Others. Sergey Vasilyevich Mironov. Age thirty five years. Citizen of the Russian Empire. What?! How empires? Here has so put, here correctly say that history always revolves. And here I was overflowed by avalanche of other memoirs, scrappy, but they flew in my consciousness as falls: «technician-navigator of the third class ... starprobe vehicle „Scythian“ ... The guild of free dealers ... delivery time expires through ...»

– Mironov! Do you play the fool again? – the sharp voice from corner was distributed.

In doorway there was person in similar clothes, but with stripes on shoulder. Angry person. The instinct perfected for half a century has worked instantly. The old personality has faded into the background as the agent on appearance at the moment of danger. On surface what was known by Sergey Mironov has emerged.

– Checked stabilization contour, – I have heard the new, velvety and steady voice. – There was anomaly. All are normal.

– Anomaly? – the person has sniffed. – You have in head anomaly. The Scythian sails away in two hours. If yours gravikomp does not work, the captain will throw out you in lock without space suit. Move!

The person has left. I have slowly risen to the feet. The body obeyed ideally. Has approached the next brilliant unit housing and has seen the reflection. It not my person. Unfamiliar. Confident look, firm chin, shock of nutbrown hair on the head and on my face there was no fatigue of the old man. Thoughts have rushed whirlwind. Then memoirs. So, now the 3158th year. I in the future?! So, star ships. Free dealers. It was not similar to my world, it resembled the fantastic story from the book of my childhood more. But it was the reality. Rough, technological, smelling of lubricant and for some reason, I felt threat.

But somewhere in depth under layers of others memoirs, my old, familiar feeling has moved. That that I tested, receiving the first task. Not fear. Passion. Burning, inadmissible passion. My mission turns out, has not ended. I was given one more chance. But who? And why? Why to me? I have turned to gravikomp: I already knew how it looks and what I need to do. My fingers have stretched to the control panel. «Anomaly ...» – I have whispered about myself, and corners of my new lips have trembled in similarity of smile. Adventure of which I so dreamed in the village, reading the shabby books of the Soviet fantasy, has just begun for me. And, it seems, it is deadly as this feeling did not abandon me. But now at me was, young body, sharp mind and long experience of old wolf of the operative.

«Well, – I have thought, studying holograms of navigation routes. – Let's begin with gravikomp. And there we will look».

I felt how in my breast strange mix begins to boil: chilling horror of the event with me and wild joy. I was alive. I was in some game again. Game. For some reason this only word which turned with most has begun in my head. I, already as Sergey Mironov, walked along narrow corridor of

«Scythian». The cargo shuttle «Scythian» did not remind smooth interiors from old fantastic novels from within. Yes, cargo about it has prompted me Sergey's memory. This shuttle was the real slogger, the cargo space ship, the long-distance truck driver. Plowed space, transporting in itself various goods. The smell of such shuttles was their business card: caustic ozone ashes from the fused conducting and contacts, sweetish stench of the retsirkulirovanny air spoiled by the disinfectant and the ubiquitous, almost calming smell of lubricating oil. Walls, floor and ceiling were from gray metal. Everywhere – chaotic web of the cable routes covered with trellised panels, the blinking indicator bulbs (red, yellow, green – as traffic light signals for devoted) and hatches with inscriptions, part from which my new memory deciphered: «Reactor compartment – it is DANGEROUS!», «Emergency lock – number three».

I went, and each detail was noted, developed in my head, and then was displayed on shelves as proofs on table of the investigator. «Professional habit, Vasily Ivanovich» – I have grinned about myself. Old habits were stronger than new body. The latrine was my first purpose. Not from physiological need, and by operational need. The agent should know all details the of new appearance. Well to get used to role and not to give itself to open. I have to be natural and not cause suspicions differently failure. The latrine was very quickly as on one of doors the photograph has been pasted. Where the man dressed in black overalls celebrates the need standing. The compartment was close, shining from the chromeplated surfaces. I was locked, has rested hands against sink and for the first time have attentively looked at myself in mirror.

The man looking at me was stranger, but ... suitable. I was twenty five years old, but I looked on all thirty. Height about hundred seventy eight centimeters, as I in youth, but the body which was brought much more down, sports and strong. Not the muscleman, and it is rather runner on average distances: big shoulders, but without excess weight, muscle appeared under gray fabric of overalls accurately, without excesses. The person with correct, even a little aristocratical lines which, however, spoiled (or decorated?) couple of small scars: one thin thread over the right eyebrow, another – hardly noticeable on chin. «Working marks of Sergey Mironov» – I have assumed. Hair are thick, chestnut, randomly falling on forehead. And eyes ... Blue. Bright, cold, as winter sky. In them there was neither shadow of pain, nor fatigue. There was ... caution. And unrestrained interest. The interest of the wolf who has got to new pack. «Well, Sergey Vasilyevich, – has addressed I reflection mentally, in the old manner. – Let's get acquainted».

In ten minutes I have left latrine and have gone to the command bridge. The door with hissing has driven off aside, having opened panorama from which at me, for moment has intercepted breath. The bridge of «Scythian» was the small, filled-in muffled blue light. In the center there was big black leather chair of the captain, massive, with the cracked upholstery in which sat to me back of people. Before it there was main projection screen now showing the scheme of the ship and the counter of the return time before flying away. On each side there were three working consoles drowned in metal panels with flickering holograms and physical buttons, probably, in case of failures. Suddenly memory has prompted to me that the team consists from five people and one robot synthetics. My new memory gave names and positions, but not characters. Time to fill to me these gaps has come.

I have looked at the captain. Boris Lavrov known as the Beard. He sat in chair, having turned away from all, and muttered something in audio communication. The man under sixty, strong, as oak stub. His well-known beard, gray-haired and dense, resembled overgrown bush more. Weather-beaten face, with grid of deep wrinkles, especially around eyes which have been blinked now, studying indications. On it there was worn brown leather jacket which is put on over overalls – obviously personal mascot. From memory has emerged: the former military pilot of the Galactic Fleet of the Russian Empire, is fired for insubordination to the idiotic order. Flew on the Scythian twenty years. It is severe, but is fair, hates paper work. The in board if not to climb with councils for ship-handling.

I have translated the look to the right. There was the first pilot and the specialist in communications. Wow, woman. By the ship? And how stereotypes? And chick-pea of what is I. I in

the future. Memory to me was quickly prompted, what is her name, by Alice Korshunova. High, thin, with sharp features and hairstyle under the boy of color of voronov covered about twenty eight years. Her long fingers flitted over the touch panel, adjusting something. The look concentrated, almost fanatical. I managed to get from memory scraps that she the brilliant graduate of civil academy of the Russian Empire, has run away from the prestigious passenger cruiser on this zhestyanolyot in search of the real flights and adventures. It is reticent, sarcastic, with the ship on first-name terms. Intellectual. Means, she is potentially valuable ally if to find with it common language.

Near it there was flight engineer. Gennady Sysoyev or just Gena. That that shouted at me in my compartment. Stocky, powerful, with hands of the smith and the person who, apparently, has forever stiffened in expression of slight irritation. By sight he was about forty years old. Now he dug in the open ceiling hatch from where sparks poured and the vile swearwords rich with technical terms and demotic expressions flew. There was also its file in my memory: the technical genius, can repair the hyper engine piece of chewing gum and blue insulating tape, but here its reports are continuous nightmare for accounts department. Rough, but clever fingers. The old friend of the captain, they together were at war. It is necessary to come into contact with him, but it is careful.

Shooter/attack plane. Vladislav Kozhin known as Kim. He sat on folding seat at back wall, cleaned something sorted, most likely, some weapon. By sight thirty or thirty five years. It is wide in shoulders, with shortly short-haired hair and quiet, almost dead-pan of the mercenary. The smooth movements perfected. The former soldier of the military case, has become mercenaries after its division was left without support and only he has survived. It is silent, speaks, only on business. Looks at all including on the captain, appraisingly, as on potential threat or the purpose. Professional. It is very dangerous. But its loyalty can be bought – not money, but respect for his skills and clearness of objectives.

And at last sintetik KI-7. Developed in three thousand hundred sixth. Similar synthetics were not any wonder now. They have joined human community for a long time and helped us with different spheres. Beginning from medicine, finishing with fighting. He asked to address him by the name of Ki. Stood at the distant terminal, not movably as statue. His body was humanoid, but without attempts to imitate the person: opaque gray composite, the head it is deprived of hair, with hardly planned features where two blue photoreceptors instead of eyes shone. It was thinner and higher than the person. Synthetics in this era as my memory prompted, was not either slaves, or the risen cars. They were the reasonable persons created for specific tasks with the limited, of course, but legitimate rights enshrined in the general galactic charter. In my opinion, they even had the labor union. KI-7 was responsible for navigation calculations, logistics and the analysis of data. It is logical, pedantic. Perhaps, the most objective crew member.

– Mironov! – the captain has bellowed without turning around. – Have you there in mirror admired? Your Gravikomp as?

Everything, except the concentrated Alice, for second have transferred to me look. The old instinct has not brought me and has worked ideally. I have got into Sergey's role. Not with captation, but yours faithfully, which is demanded by the senior on rank and experience.

– Captain. Has carried out full diagnostics. The anomaly was in the phase equalizer, local failure. Has corrected. System in green zone. Are ready to flying away.

I spoke with confidence, putting persuasiveness which has learned for years of interrogations and recruitments in voice. Lavrov, at last, has turned in my party. His small, prickly eyes chinks studied me.

– Heard, you in hangar rolled. Has hit?

– The captain has broken from ladder. Accident. Will not repeat any more.

He has hemmed, and in it hmykaniye there was something like approval. The person recognizing mistake was appreciated above here, than the one who hides it.

– All right. Take the place at the second console. You will help Alice to verify navigation data and with the cargo declaration.

I have nodded and have passed to the console. Alice has glanced at me, her fingers have not stopped.

– Mironov. Packages three and seven show divergence in weight for 0,003%. Check on manual of gravikomp, it is its error or mistake in the declaration.

– Well, – I have answered, and my dexterous fingers have already stretched to the interface.

It was the most reliable way not to think of event metaphysics – to bury in specific, clear objectives. My new fingers were remembered, appear, that it is better to do, than my consciousness. Holograms responded on contacts, lines of data flowed on the holographic screen as familiar lines. The divergence in 0,003% was the chronic error of gravikomp of «Scythian» included in the logbook three more raids back. I have noted it in the report. Alice, having obtained data, only has hardly considerably nodded – the highest form of praise in its execution. Meanwhile the countdown on the main screen inevitably ate minutes. By the ship the start fever familiar to me on old army times before large operation has begun, only instead of ural there was starprobe vehicle here.

– Gene, pressure in highways of tertiary contour! – the captain has bellowed, keeping the eyes glued on the report.

– Normal, boss! – the muffled voice has reached from the hatch. – But docking coupling on the last legs. I said that it needs to be changed!

– Let's replace. Do not grumble. After delivery it is surely replaceable. Kim, look and check external sensors.

Vlad, without having uttered words, has postponed clean weapon and has disappeared in corridor, moving with silent, predatory grace. I used turmoil finally to develop the area. With the permission of Alice I have received from her nod, this time angrier I have left from the bridge under the pretext of final check of gravitational traps in cargo compartment.

The cargo compartment of «Scythian» was its belly and the cause of existence. It represented huge cave with corrugated floor for fixing of containers. Height of ceiling is about ten meters. Air was colder here. On the walls as lianas, hoses of life support systems, power captures and flickering readers lasted. Five black massive containers have been in the middle fixed. In the distant end the massive lock of the ship through which «Scythian» swallowed and vomited cargoes gaped. Here the booming, metal silence broken only by case scratch on dock captures reigned. The perfect place for undesirable meetings or carefully planning of the actions, I have analytically noted. Old skills worked automatically.

On the way back I have glanced in galley – the tiny capsule with the food synthesizer which is eternally hammered to the full and couple of shabby chairs fastened to floor. Here smelled of cheap coffee and hopelessness. Then has come into inhabited compartment – narrow corridor with six sleeping capsules which are built in wall as cabins in the train. My capsule, according to bracelet, was the third at the left. I have glanced inside. Close space, folding table, the terminal for personal data and the small hatch in ceiling for emergency evacuation. Any personal belongings, except the jammed photo of some mountain landscape on sucker at headboard.

Having returned on the bridge, I have found final preparation.

– All to take places! To buckle up! – Lavrov's voice has not trembled, but in it the steel string, familiar on pilots, has appeared that. – Ki, report the status.

Sintetik has turned the head, its voice was equal, without emotions as the announcer of the answering machine, but with ideal diction:

– All systems within norms. Dock captures are disconnected. Planetary control gives the green light to exit. Coordinates of the purpose are loaded. Estimated time in way at standard hyper jump seventy two terrestrial hours. Error plus or minus six hours.

– I confirm, – Lavrov has thrown. – Alice, bring us. Smoothly. I do not want my cargo in compartment to have mixed up.

– Has understood, the captain, – has responded Alice. Her fingers have stood on joysticks of manual control.

The deep, breaking rumble proceeding, appear, from the skeleton of the ship was distributed. «Scythian» has shuddered, and has softly pressed me to chair. On the screen that was broadcast from external cameras. The steel wall of dock has floated down, having been replaced by the blackness of space covered not with flickering and motionless, bright dots of stars. Any blueness of the earth for which I instinctively waited. Only chasm. Cold, majestic and infinitely indifferent.

Heart for moment has gone to heels. The ancient, bodily fear has held down me for second. But immediately it was changed by wave of the same ancient, exulting delight. I in space. Devil take it, I in SPACE!

– Stabilization in orbit, – Alice has reported. – Are ready to jump.

– Gena? – Lavrov has turned back to the engineer who, sweaty, all smeared in oil, with dirty hands and happy. He has already got out of the hatch he held accurately put rags in hand.

– The reactor purrs as kitten, the captain. The hyper engine is normal.

– Perfectly. Ki, enter coordinates. Planet Aurum-4. System Helios-beta.

– I import, – has responded sintetik. – I remind: Aurum-4 – the planet, class the mine colony with the atmosphere, rarefied, but suitable for breath of the person. Primary activity on the planet, extraction of rare-earth metals. Board corporate – council of space corporation Herpix Industries. Safety level: average. Risks: the increased geological activity, periodic dust storms, high probability to meet pirates.

– Thanks for in the hope lodging in team and the reference, – was grumbled by Lavrov. – All to prepare. Jump on ten. Nine ...

Everything has occurred not as I expected. There was no deafening roar, there were no stars turning into the uniform line. The world behind windows as if was wrinkled, has contracted in point, and then was developed again, but already by other pattern. Stars have jumped on new places. In stomach has unpleasantly missed a bit, in temples for second has hooted. And all.

– The jump is complete, – Ki has reported. – We in system Helios-beta. To Aurum-4 sixty eight hours own course and then two hours of braking.

– There now and perfectly, – groaning, the captain has come unfastened. – Standard log schedule. Gene, go humour the cursor. Kim, is free. Alice, carry out the main diagnostics of systems with Mironov if he has not forgotten yet how it to do after the falling. And that again what be will find anomaly to the own harm.

In its voice it has sounded not as sneer, and as caution. I have caught on myself Alice's eye. In her eyes something has flown like female sympathy for me.

– Let's go, Mironov. I will show how not to be bored to death in transit and what to do if «Herpix» decides to throw us.

I have followed it, mentally grinning. Boredom? Oh, lovely Alice. I had just had so many cases that I will definitely not be bored to death. Here to me will once miss. Now I should make impossible for three days: to study the ship so that the nobility is better than it the former owner. To understand motivation of each crew member, to find their weak and strong points. To understand as this new, wild Universe with its Guilds, corporations and the empire is arranged. It was necessary to find out what now in the empire there was system? Absolute monarchy (autocracy) or dualistic monarchy. And I for some reason needed to find out the main thing surely that for cargo we carry on Aurum-4.

– Here, – Alice has pointed a finger at the scheme on the tablet, – we can monitor energy consumption of all systems in real time. If gravikomp starts over again being capricious, you will see jump on this line. I see?

We were in close compartment which Alice called technical labyrinth, both stood in the narrow aisle between two rows of the hooting server racks. Light was muffled, and air hooted from coolers. The perfect place for private conversation, if the nobility how to be risen.

– It is clear, – I have nodded, trying to look concentrated. Then has purposely rubbed whisky. – Everything is logical. Simply ... the head still hoots after this falling. Sometimes it seems that I remember each bolt by the ship, and I am sometimes confused in elementary. It is a shame, of course.

Alice has looked on me, and in her eyes, usually at such strict, something has flown like understanding. She has leaned back on one of racks, having crossed hands.

– Happens to everyone, Mironov. Especially after the skirmish with hard-alloy floor. What do you confuse?

The small fish has pecked. Now the main thing is not to hurry and not to change.

– Context, – I have honestly told what was the truth. – It seems I remember why we fly to Aurum-4, I remember about «Herpix». And here what we carry, but not their corporate fleet. I do not remember. And why such rigid terms? In the head scraps, and there is no overall picture. As though I read the instruction, having pulled out from it half of pages.

Alice has sniffed, but without rage. More likely, from shares of cynical approval.

– Means, it was knocked not for nothing. If has begun to ask the correct questions. All right, listen. – It has lowered voice though around, except servers, was nobody. – We carry not just containers with nuts. We carry biostabilizers for geothermal wells. Special order, piece goods very expensive. Herpix on Aurum-4 drills so deeply that without this thingummy even their heavy-duty equipment melts. And terms ... – she has made pause, choosing words. – Terms because at them there, on the planet, the small revolt is planned. Miners were tired of severe conditions, the corporation winds norms, reduces payment. One of their main pits – Vulcan Soar already stands idle the third day. If we do not deliver stabilizers in time and will break the well, there will be not revolt, but accident on half-planets. And Herpix very much does not want competitors or, God forbid, galactic Trade Inspection to have learned about it. Therefore have employed us, imperceptible free dealers. Do you understand our haste now?

I have nodded. Of course, I understood. It was classical operation under cover. To deliver crucial freight in zone of the potential conflict, keeping visibility of neutrality. My old blood has played.

– Means, we can be met not with flowers, – I noted.

– In flowers? – Alice has grinned, and in this smile there was something bitter. – We will be met, most likely, by scanners of drones, checks at customs before loss of pulse, and then also will try to beat down the price, having referred to force majeure circumstances. The captain knows it. Therefore has taken in Kim's raid. If negotiations go to case ... not according to the plan.

– And we, – I have carefully asked, – we on whose party? Formally.

– On the party of the contract, the fool, – Alice, but already without irritation has answered. – The guild of free dealers sells services, but not conscience. We deliver freight. What there Herpix does with miners – it is their internal affair. Though ... – she for moment has thought. – The captain speaks, from this invention smells of setup. So if strongly press, he can break. And then ... well, you saw Kim in business?

– It did not happen, – I honestly admitted.

– Also it is not necessary. A picture is worth a thousand words, than hundred times ... well, you have understood. The main thing is not to occur to it in the path. It is forgiving. It it is simple ... will kill, will step through corpse and will go further.

I have nodded, digesting information. The picture cleared up. «Scythian» was not just truck. He was player on thin ice of corporate games. The ideal environment for the person with my experience.

– And sintetik? Ki? – I have asked, passing to the following object interesting me. – It always such ... detached?

– Ki is Ki, – Alice has shrugged shoulders. – It follows logic and clauses. For it we, crew, – variables in the equation of successful delivery. But be not deceived. It for the ship. If it is necessary to choose between the order of the captain and rescue of «Scythian», he will choose the ship. It has the logic.

– It is clear, – I have murmured. The rational and incorruptible computer mind potentially dangerous in critical situation.

– Computer?! – she has attentively looked at me.

– I mean artificial intelligence, but the term «computer» it is pleasant to me more. It means cold and heartless. – I have tried to take away conversation aside and to cover the oversight.

– All right, there will be enough chatter, – Alice has become straight. – The head has cleared up?

– As though fog has dissipated, – I have smiled the new, charming smile. – Thanks to you, Alice. Has helped out me.

– There is nothing, – she has looked at me with interest again. – You as though have indeed changed. All right, – she has waved hand. – Just do not play the fool next time. And that Gena will set you straight not by voice, but wrench. We go, I will show how to clean sensors of external scanning. It is boring, but is vital if you do not want to fly in cloud of meteoric dust.

I have followed it, feeling as in the head my plan gradually is built, it was necessary to understand their technologies now. And for this purpose I had two and a half days. The following stop, I have solved, there will be galley in the evening. Place of informal communication. It is ideal to observe crew members in non-working situation. And after to try to start conversation with Ki. With sintetiky it is necessary to speak language of logic and the facts. What, with the facts was at me all right. I was the walking, breathing anomaly fact. «Keep, Vasily Ivanovich, – I have mentally told myself. – You in business. And it is similar, this business is worth it».

We cling to our memoirs as if they define us. We are defined what we do. My soul has survived to remind us that humanity – here our virtue. I know who I am such. And for what I have appeared in this world.

Chapter 2

Alice's words about force majeure, about Kim, about cold the logician Ki. I absorbed everything as dry sponge, sorting information in memory compartments: operational data, psychological portraits, potential threats. Work saved me from metaphysical horror. While I acted, analyzed, built hypotheses, I had no time to go crazy from understanding of own jump through time. Postponement of my mind or soul for thousands of the years ahead. In five hours of the wearisome works which are carried out in labyrinth of cables and holograms, my legs hooted, and in eyes there were ripples from the blinking indicators. Sergey Mironov's body was hardy, but not boundless. Alice, having noticed my pallor or what mute began to shake me, has sharply interrupted our excursion on shuttle life support systems.

– Everything, will be enough. Go to sleep, Mironov. You are more green, than cooling contour after jump. Now again you will fall and you will hit. And I do not want to explain you everything again. Tomorrow we will continue.

– Yes I as it should be, – I have tried to object on habit, but the voice gave my fatigue.

– It is the order, but not the sentence, – she parried without smile. – We have two more days of flight, and then landing and, perhaps, bustle. Forces will be necessary for you. Do not bring crew.

This last argument has worked on me as stimulator. «Not to bring team» – it there was language which I understood without translation. I have nodded and have gone to inhabited compartment.

The capsule has met me by the same ascetic twilight, silence and tranquility. I have thrown off overalls, having remained only in underwear from the same elastic material, and have flopped on narrow mattress. Muscles pleasantly ached – not from the exhausting cancer pain, and for healthy, healthy fatigue. I have closed eyes, trying to get rid of whirl of images: stars behind window, the tough person of Lavrov, smooth movements of Kim. I have failed in dream. I was woken by poorly vibrating bracelet on my wrist – the mute witness of my new existence.

I have opened eyes. On forearm inside where usually there would be my mechanical clock, the text rectangle shone. Message. Not ship, not from Alice or Gena. It has been encrypted to other, alien ship systems by the code. Also it was addressed not to Sergey Mironov. I have pressed icon and began to read.

«Snipe. You have missed another communication session. Urgently report the reason. Trianon. Code 7 alpha».

These words have burned my consciousness as electric shock. The safe which is deeply hid, sealed by layers of others memory suddenly has clicked and has opened, and its contents have rushed outside. I have screamed from sudden pain – not physical, but mental, shattering. Has squeezed the head hands, but it could not stop avalanche of memoirs and information. The snipe is my call sign. More true than Sergey Mironov, equipment navigator. Snipe, the agent of foreign intelligence of the Russian Empire working under cover. Pictures have started gleaming, accurate as newsreel shots: the cold hall with holographic maps of the galaxy. The man in strict, dark uniform with shoulder straps whose person I could not make out. «Remember the Snipe. Your legend, you Sergey Mironov. Guild of free dealers. Your purpose – Aurum-4». The training ground under the blue dome imitating the alien atmosphere. I in space suit, dexterously sort and I collect weapon unfamiliar to me, and is not present – it is blaster. The picture changes, I shoot from it at moving targets. The instructor gloomy nods like, acceptable. Then the starprobe vehicle simulator cabin shivering with vibration. I, all in sweat, manoeuvre between asteroids. This is «Scythian»? No, some other ship, but same principle. Voice in earphones: «Piloting at the level above the average. For the technician – it is excellent. For the agent – minimum». And the main thing is my task. Accurate, clear: to establish the nature of the cargo transported by the Scythian ship under the contract with Herpix Industries corporation. To contact the agent «Smith» on Aurum-4. To find out true plans of corporation in system Helios-

beta. Herpix is the instrument of influence of the Western European consortium. Their activity can threaten the interests of my empire in this system.

By three thousand hundred fifty eighth the global mankind was settled on galaxies and set of planets, having either terrestrial nationality of any given country or local «planetary». The countries which are on the earth owned or operated planets. Seldom planets were given in management to corporations as, for example, with Herpix Industries. Behind order in galactic systems the «Galactic inspection» created in two thousand nine-hundredth by the largest countries of the earth answered. On the earth there were four large countries. On the first place there was the Russian Empire, well here everything is clear, after it there was Asian People's republic which has united in itself all continent and headed by China which structure, had included Pakistan and India a bit later. On the third place there was the Western European block (it still called the Western European consortium) as a part of which, there were all European countries, it bordered on the Russian Empire, and headed the block and Americans who, in turn, have taken control of all American continent operated the sovereigns. On the last place there was the Arab Empire the African continent was part it and the sheikh ruled the empire. There were still countries which so far any union have not joined or were not part, but them there were no more than ten.

Mankind, carrying out the expansion, for these years could not meet or find other reasonable beings. But what in general happened on the earth for me there was same old song familiar to me from my last life. Geopolitical games have developed into galactic, only now it was not Cold War, but the war transferred to space to stars and other planets with resources, important for each party. And I became her soldier again. Or rather, her spy. The stream of memoirs has subsided also suddenly, as well as has gushed, having left behind unpleasant feeling. I sat, having leaned back against cold wall of the capsule, and shivered small shiver. Not for fear. From the enormous pressure of two lives, two persons pressed in one body.

I have looked at the message again. Trianon. Most likely, it was my curator. For certain sits in cozy office somewhere at the space station of Earth or the Moon and nervously taps with fingers on table. His agent is silent. Having collected the thoughts, I have begun to deliberate. What could I answer it? «Sorry, companion curator, I have just arisen from the dead in body of your agent. I have semicentennial career in your department, but in other millennium. I feel perfectly, I continue to perform task».

Bitter, almost hysterical smile has escaped at me outside. The passion which I felt from the moment of awakening has got new feeling. It was not just the adventure. It was the mission, work. Real, deadly mission of the intelligence agent. I have returned to the favourite work. Here only in books the agents did not fall into state of the immigrant, popadanets or appeared? I have raised hand, my fingers have stood over the holographic key projected by bracelet. What to answer? The truth it is excluded. Means, it is necessary to continue game. As always. I have typed the short, abrupt answer, trying to imitate avaricious style which as my memory prompted, the Snipe had:

«Trianon. Failure of the equipment after emergency situation at start. The personal communicator has been damaged. Restoration in process. I continue performance of task. Cargo, gyro stabilizers for geothermal wells. After contact with the agent I will contact. Snipe».

I have sent the message and have switched off projection. In silence of the capsule only my breath and the remote rumble of engines somewhere in the depth of the ship was heard. So. Means, all this not to dream me now. Then what is it? Favor of the Universe to the lonely and sick old man? Of course, at present it is not the most important question. But nevertheless I need the answer. Now I had purposes and tasks. And still there was accurate order. To play Sergey Mironov's role for crew of the shuttle of «Scythian». To perform task for the empire. And, the main thing to find out in what my main objective as my contact had instructions on the planet consists. It will report the meeting place when we land.

The first two points have met in one point: Aurum-4 and cargo. Gyrostabilizers. Too just in order that because of them to start such fuss. Means, in them something else. Or they – only cover. And still this strange crew. Not all tell the truth about themselves here. I have slowly exhaled, feeling as the shiver leaves, being replaced by cold, habitual concentration. The fear has receded. There was work. The most complex, multilevel work for which I had not only fifty years of experience of service in KGB now, but also trainings of the agent of star era, and young, strong body.

Tomorrow it will be necessary to check imperceptibly data on communicator. Perhaps, in it there is still something, except communication with Trianon. And in the evening, in galley, it is worth trying to throw inadvertently Genya conversation about unusual modules in cargo containers. The engineer likes to mutter about technical absurdities. I have extinguished light in the capsule and have settled, looking in ceiling behind which steel flesh of the ship which is carrying away me to others planet hooted. Game has become complicated. Became three times more dangerous. But also it is three times more interesting. For the first time for many years I felt not just passion, and purpose. I was spy. Snova. And this time rates were higher, than ever. On game there was not career and non-state secrets. On game there was understanding of the one who I am is. «Well, – I have thought, closing eyes. – Welcome to the future, the colonel Kamentsev». And with this strange thought, in pacifying in the terrible complexity, I have failed in dream.

The dream was uneasy and faltering. In it I was in sterile chamber where instead of Lenchka Ki with capsules in hand entered and passionlessly said: «Your time has expired. Leave from system». That limped along corridors of KGB, but the door in office of the chief conducted in the dusty, filled-in with orange light galley of the shuttle of «Scythian». Everything merged in one disturbing, nervous porridge. I have woken up from bracelet signal. The dry, mechanical voice has reported that there has come morning on ship time and it is time to go on watch. Time for thoughts was not. Having got into the role, I, having washed ice water and having washed away finally the dream remains. Has pulled overalls and has gone to the bridge. «Scythian» floated to the next point of turn, and on the main screen only the abstract hologram of route blinked. The captain Lavrov dozed in the chair, the beard was disheveled, the jacket is undone. Gena dug at the open panel, something grumbling on conducting. Vlad – Kim, he sat in the place, motionless as the idol, but his eyes cold and estimating, traced everything on the bridge. He has nodded to me when I have entered. Minimum, professional gesture. Neither it is more, nor it is less. Alice was already on the place. She has darted glance at me.

– Has got enough sleep? The complexion is better.

– As newcomer, – I have vigorously lain, taking the place at the console. – What according to the schedule?

– Routine diagnostics. And ... – it has lowered voice, – the captain wants you and Gena to have visually checked fastenings of cargo. After jump sometimes there are surprises.

– Has understood, – I have told, and inside something has missed a bit. Good opportunity! Gene, having heard the name, has got out from under the panel, again wiping hands fat rags.

– Again? Boss! Yes there everything keeps, I hundred times looked. – Lavrov has opened the right eye and has gloomy looked at it. – Well, – having waved hand and, having put accurately rag, has hung up it on handrail, has looked at me and has continued. – Let's go, the beginner. Only do not disturb and do not climb under power beams.

We have together left the bridge. In five minutes we entered cargo compartment. In the flight mode it looked even more ominous. The huge, empty space lit only with emergency lamps at the edges the system of maintenance of pressure hooted. Twelve massive containers, everyone of the size of the small house, have been fixed in the center on magnetic platforms. From them plaits of cables and fat hoses – those life support systems lasted.

– Here they, handsome, – has grumbled Gena, bypassing the first container. – The price of everyone – is more, than all our rusty shuttle. Yes if to be honest, all our crew in addition.

– Look ... solidly, – I have noticed, trying not to show interest in the voice. – And what inside, except stabilizers? Some additional stuffing? Systems of tracking, protection?

Gena has sniffed.

– Protection? Yes from whom? From us? Here besides standard transponders there are sensors of fluctuations, temperatures and pressure. And solenoidal locks which are picked only by the code from Herpix. Try poke also you either current will hit, or dye will pour which then month you will not wash. Or both at once.

– Cleverly, – I have told, pretending that I check fastening of the magnetic platform. – And on weight everything meets? There is no feeling that they ... well, are rather heavy for the volume?

The engineer has stopped and has looked at me with the blinked eyes.

– You about what, Mironov? Again you look for anomalies? Weight is entered in the declaration with their error. Yes, weight decent. But if they carried tungsten pigs inside, it would be even heavier. – It has knocked with bones of fingers on armored board of container. The sound was deaf, equal. – No, guy. Here what is stated. Very expensive fragile biotechnics. All counter is in how to deliver it intact and in time. But not that there.

His confidence has at first sight seemed to me sincere. Gena did not see dirty trick in cargo. He saw engineering task: to bring the fragile device to point. These a lot of things spoke. Or cargo and the truth is clean, or Herpix has tried wonderfully well that even such meticulous technician has suspected nothing. We have bypassed all containers. I remembered each detail: marking, arrangement of sensors, the type of locks from memory of the Snipe defined as they can be cracked what is necessary the special tool which, of course, I do not have now. At first sight I have not seen anything obviously criminal. But the pressing feeling of lie did not release me. It is too much noise because of, apparently, ordinary industrial delivery. Returning to the bridge, I have suggested to come in galley to pour to myself on glass coffee. And to sit. Gena has not refused to keep me the company. The synthesizer has given two mugs of the muddy, giving plastic liquid. It was not real coffee, synthetic and very far reminding cup of hot strong black coffee. I have taken small sip, enjoying simple feeling.

– Lavrov spoke, you were knocked by the head, – has unexpectedly told Gena, taking seat on the creaking chair. – Memory has not floated?

The question has been asked quietly, but eyes of the engineer looked directly and is tenacious.

– Has floated, to be honest. I was even frightened, but on not mnoga everything rises on the place, – I parried, shrugging shoulders. – You know how happens: for second everything takes off, then returns. It is a shame, of course.

– Happens to all, – Gena has nodded, but his look did not weaken. – Only look ... You at us the navigator. If in the head porridge, better at once tell. And that we will fly in some gravitational anomaly or we will come across pirates. The captain though the grumbler, but will not give the command in offense. And here if because of someone's forgetfulness or mistake the ship under blow gets ... – He has kept back, but the sense also was so clear to me.

– Head as it should be, – I have firmly said, meeting his look. – For the ship and crew it can be charged. For especially.

Gena has a little kept silent, then has hemmed and has delivered to coffee, never without having taken a sip.

– All right. I trust. You are always such meek creature? Or it is possible to rely on you? – I have lifted up on it the surprised eyes. He has looked me fool in the face and has continued. – The main thing that it was also farther so. Everything worked, and you conducted us right way. You do not take offense at me, I am quick-tempered and sometimes I do not control that I tell. But you will not bring us, I am confident in it.

It was the important point. I have undergone the first, secret testing. Not from the captain, and from old guard of the ship. Gena has accepted my explanation. Now the main thing is not to give reasons for new doubts.

The whole next day has passed in routine. I helped Alice to calibrate sensors of distant detection, verified data with Ki's testimonies. Sintetik was ruthlessly exact and immediately pointed to the slightest discrepancies, ran on orders of the captain. And I observed. Lavrov resembled bear in den: the most part of time slept or grumbled on official reports, but in its rare, curt commands the grip of steel was felt. Alice has been concentrated at work, but I tried to catch on myself its glances darted furtively – studying, analytical. Kim ... Kim just was. Was present. As the rock, it is and will not get to anywhere.

By the evening as I also planned, I have appeared in galley along with Ki. Sintetik did not need food, but sometimes came to check the equipment and consumables or as suspected some of crew, it is simple to listen to their talk, obviously this sintt was engaged in data collection.

I synthesized to myself plate something, reminding braised beef with potato, the taste, of course, was far from the original, but is edible. Having received the portion, I have sat down to table.

– Ki, – I have addressed him, trying to sound neutral efficiently. – Question on cargo. In the declaration the average coefficient of temperature expansion for containers is specified. But for exact setup of cooling systems of compartment I need exact data on everyone. Do you have access to specifications of Herpix?

Sintetik has turned to me the smooth head. Blue sparks eyes flickered.

– The inquiry is logical. However in the specification of cargo the provided corporation information in cut form. Full specifications are secret. My calculations of life support systems are based on the provided average values with margin of safety in fifteen percent.

– It is clear. Privacy, – I as though it has been expected have nodded. – And how you estimate risks of the delivery? In terms of logistics and the probability of external intervention.

Ki has stood for second, processing question.

– Risks are estimated as raised. Bases, following: short deadlines, the nature of cargo crucial for the customer's infrastructure, political instability on Aurum-4. Probability of attempt of interception of cargo by competitors or illegal groups is twenty two whole and fairy percent. Probability of technical failures when unloading in the conditions of geological activity is eighteen whole and seven tenth percent. Probability of failure to follow the contract because of the customer and decrease in payment is thirty three whole and one tenth percent.

Figures flew from it equal, passionless stream. It was the car estimating probabilities. And its assessment confirmed: this trip as walk around the minefield.

– Thanks, – I have told. – I will mean.

– Performance of official duties is my optimum task for minimization of risks, – Ki noted and, having finished quietly left.

I remained one with plate of synthetic food. Ki's figures were groundless. The highest percent of Ki gave on setup from Herpix. Not the consolatoriest chances. But I had not only role of the technician now. I had the purpose. And the first step was clear: to contact the agent Kuznets. He had to know more. About cargo. About realistic plans of Herpix. I have eaten up tasteless food, have put away ware in the utilizer and have looked at black window in which my new person was reflected. Blue eyes looked at me with cold determination.

The next day of flight was similar to dense, viscous syrup. Time passed strange: outside of it did not exist, inside it lasted infinitely. «Scythian» was steel puzyryom, mislaid in space, and its crew behaved, respectively, has fallen into similarity of hibernation. My observation of crew continued. I have noticed that each crew member had the ritual of murder of time. Gena, for example, with ecstasy was picked engines though, according to him, everything worked. It was its meditation. Alice solved on the personal tablet difficult puzzles – astronavigation tasks it seems: lay route through neutron star taking into account gravitational attraction of big star. Her eyebrows met in the thin, concentrated fold, with astonishment rose. Kim, after all all addressed not on his name Vlad, and Kim, from their words it is so more pleasant to it and to me very persistently recommended so it to call. He for

hours sat not movably, but his fingers made the fast, perfected movements from time to time, it were virtual trainings with weapon as has prompted me memory. The captain Lavrov read. Is not present holograms, and surprisingly the present, shabby paper book with small print. I have somehow made out the name: «Psychology of mass riots in the conditions of limited space». He grumbled, did marks by pencil and lit smelly roll-ups, despite ventilation system protests.

Studying bracelet communicator became my ritual. During rest in the capsule I activated the hidden protocols. Memory of the Snipe gradually was restored to me, as well as skill of driving the bicycle. The bracelet was masterpiece of the espionage equipment of the Russian Empire. Besides the encrypted channel with Trianon, in it there was scanner of wide profile. Very useful function for detection of listening devices. In addition, the analyzer of materials which could be useful to me for scanning of cargo and that the most interesting, the limited module of breaking of any types of locks has been built-in there. Solenoidal Herpiksa locks were to it on teeth, but for work the physical contact and ten time for breaking was required minutes. It was very good news. Bad news has come from the bracelet in the evening. The short message from Trianon: «The confirmation code of the last transfer does not coincide with the reference sample Snipe. Repeat check of the personality. The biometric scanning beam will be directed to you within 10 seconds. Do not move».

There is devil, – has flashed at me in the head. I have forgotten or did not know about any idiotic signature of the agent which that had to put in each message. Not movably lying on bed, I have felt light heat in wrist. The bracelet let out the invisible beam which is reading out fingerprints, the drawing of veins, rhythm of heart, beating and probably dozen more of parameters about which I did not know.

In the head thoughts zaroitsya. What if I do not undergo testing? I am not the real Snipe. But the body was it! Same veins, same prints, same retina of eye. Heat has disappeared. There has passed minute of painful expectation. Then message: «The biometrics is confirmed. Deviations in neural patterns are explained by consequences of physical trauma. It is recommended to carry out self-diagnostics under the Delta protocol. Communication will be reestablished after successful exit to Aurum-4. Trianon».

I have exhaled. Has carried by. Mine allegedly falling from the platform was ideal cover for any strangenesses in behavior. Successful accident or part of the plan? Riddle on riddle. There was last day before going into orbit of Aurum-4. Tension increased as pressure before thunderstorm. Even unperturbable Ki began to carry out additional inspections of systems of the ship. Alice continually caused on the system screen card Helios-beta, studied routes of patrols of corporate safety and gray zones where pirates liked to hunt.

In the evening behind the synthesized dinner, the informal briefing has taken place. Everything, except Ki, have gathered in galley. Though I saw that it just stood behind wall and listened to us. The captain Lavrov, having postponed the book, has thrown out lot of the printed-out papers on table, but, probably, it is reliable in terms of protection against breaking.

– So, – it has begun, having gloomy inspected us. – Tomorrow at ten thirty in the morning in a ship way we approach Aurum-4. Alice, that on situation?

– The silence, the captain, – has responded it, without coming off the tablet. – Corporate patrols in standard orbits. Any abnormal movements of the fleet. Air is clean, except commercial traffic and negotiations of miner's labor unions on the planet. The last ... very expressivna.

– I do not doubt, – Lavrov has grumbled. – Gene, ship?

– It is intense as the string, but holds, – the engineer held mug which he considered with very great interest in hand. – Docking units are ready. Cargo life support systems in green zone. If only these eggheads from Herpik do not decide to warm to us brains the scanners of the fifth generation.

– Will warm, – without shadow of doubt Kim has said. He sat in corner, still motionless, but its voice was low and accurate. – Standard protocol. External inspection, scanning on the hidden

compartments, verification of documents and removal of biometrics of crew. Will take hour. Two if you want to pull time.

– About time at them it is strict, – I have noticed, carefully getting into conversation. – The well waits. I think, will not begin to tighten just like that.

All have looked at me. I have turned to the captain:

– The captain, and if they try to beat down the price, referring on ... – I have taken second break, considering the words. – Well, suppose, that because of unstable situation on the planet, they will ask to throw off cargo in other point? As though it is our risk.

Lavrov has grinned, and in this smile there was something wolf.

– Let will try. We have contract. Iron. With the registered penalties for delay from their party. And with very interesting point on force majeure which includes actions of the third parties, including the protesting groups. We are not guilty that there miners revolt. We haul freight. Want to receive it let pay. Everything, point.

– And if do not pay? – has asked Gena, tapping with fingers on table.

In reply the captain has only translated view of Kim. That slowly, has almost imperceptibly nodded. No word has been told, but the atmosphere in galley for moment became ice. I got it. «Scythian» was truck, but not toothless. Kim was their trump. Extreme, but effective.

– Mironov, – the captain has addressed me. – Your task always to be near the console of gravikomp during joining and unloading. Any failure, any anomaly in indications and at once you report to me. Do not try to repair. I see?

– It is clear, captain.

– Perfectly. All to have a rest. Tomorrow will be long.

We have dispersed. I have returned to the capsule, but there was no wish to sleep. Via the screen in ceiling showing simulation of space it was visible only flickering abstraction of hyper space. I have double-checked bracelet. In his memory there was encrypted tag for the first contact: the standard commercial terminal in port zone, public network. It will be necessary to send package of data with the Calibre code. The answer will come with the indication of the place and time of meeting. Primitively, but it is reliable. Lying in the dark, I listened to ship rumble. It was the sound of my new life. It has replaced hum of the hospital equipment. And instead of expectation of the end I waited for the beginning now. The fear was finally melted into the concentrated energy. I was ready. It is ready to play role of the technician. It is ready to perform the agent's task. «Well, Vasily Ivanovich, – I have mentally told myself. – Tomorrow we descend in investigation. Let's look what both of us are capable in this new, marvelous world of». And with this thought, at last, has fallen asleep.

Chapter 3

The planet Aurum-4 outside reminded the body covered with ulcers. They were on all planet, and heap of rusty domes of the buildings, towers and trellised docks which have stuck into the gray-brown planet. Reminded me my old body covered with tumors. Air in the shuttle, even after recirculation, kept caustic smack. But now the crew of «Scythian» did not pay attention to it.

Unloading has taken place not smoothly, but after all has taken place. Five hours of nervous bustle under sights of sterner of corporate safety, an hour and a half altercations with the clerk from Herpix smelling of cheap cologne and arrogance. Have ended for us safely. Lavrov, grabbed as the ram, pointed a finger at clauses, Gena gloomy tapped with wrench up to palm, looking very much not good at the representative of corporation, and Kim stood slightly behind, silent and motionless, but in hands it had weighty argument in the form of laser automatic rifle. As a result the credits have been transferred into the account of Guild. Everything can be exhaled. The task is performed. Cargo is handed over, money is received. Tension on saved, was splashed out outside, in a word, by the thrown captain: «In bar. All! At my expense!». All have applauded such news and have gone to gather. To send messages about the arrival coherent I did not become now. For safety reasons. I will sit in bar, and there we will look.

We have gone to the nearest bar from the spaceport. We went on the narrow, filled-in with yellow light tunnel conducting to port zone. In my ears still there was rumble of «Scythian», but it was gradually forced out by sounds of the spaceport: ventilation buzz, the remote hails, drumming of someone's boots which are lined with metal. Thoughts have feverishly twirled in my head: bracelet. Nonsense inexcusable for such professional, as I. In unloading turmoil, at the moment when the clerk has gone into hysterics concerning the unforeseen, but already expected by us circumstances of revolt, I, left it in the capsule. Also has forgotten. Without it I was blind and deaf. The agent so does not do. The agent does not leave weapon unguarded. The pressing sense of danger has appeared in my breast. Our company already approached the bar lit with neon with the blinking sign «Old Mine». The rumble of voices, sourish smell of the reek of alcohol and synthetic beer was heard.

– Mironov, you what have braked? – Alice, in expectation from holiday anticipation has turned back. Her face has blurred in smile.

– Has forgotten ... the tablet on the ship, – I have told lies, trying that the voice sounded with disappointment. – With calculations for the following flight. The captain, you asked to throw off to you on check today. Alice, I fast run, and in ten minutes I will return. Will you cover?

Lavrov who was already pushing door has waved hand and without turning around has told:

– Only be not late. And everything we will drink that without you.

Alice has darted the fast, studying glance at me, but has turned and has followed the captain. Kim has only thrown cursory glance on my person and has nodded – like, do that has to. I was immediately developed and have almost run back, to the «Scythian» docked on external ring of docks. Having reached the shuttle, I began to consider it. It stood, grown quiet, with the put-out running fires, only emergency indicators blinked red in step to my rapid pulse. The lock with hissing has let in me inside. The familiar smell – oil, ozone, dead air has struck in nostrils, but now it has seemed to me not opposite, but the acquaintance. And how we here all this breathe? The ship was empty. When I have already almost reached inhabited compartment, have out of the corner of the eye noticed that light indication on door in cargo compartment burned not with habitual green, but dim yellow. This color meant «Maintenance» or «The entrance is limited». But we have already unloaded cargo. Why there to someone to be? Instinct, that, hunting, has forced me to shorten stride. The door has not been simply blocked. It has been slightly opened on centimeter. From crack the stream of cold, not retsirkulirovanny air with smack of metal flew. At this moment everything in me has cried: «Go, take bracelet and leave!». But legs have incurred me to door. I was silently driven into the corner nearby

and have listened. Silence. The deep, ringing silence of empty cargo compartment. Too quietly. Now sounds of the working ventilation system, clicks of sensors had to be distributed. But it was silent.

I have carefully pushed door with shoulder. She has silently moved, opening part huge, empty space now. Lighting has been muffled to minimum. Corrugated floor shone in the twilight. And in the middle, at the basis of that power beam where earlier container number five fastened, the motionless dark figure lay. I have entered inside, have quietly covered door for myself. Has approached closer. It was Ki. Sintetik lay on one side, one hand is unnaturally twisted back. On smooth, opaque forehead the deep dent as if from blow by blunt heavy object gaped. Blue sparks of eye-sockets were extinct. Nearby on floor the massive adjustable spanner rolled – from personal set Genes. On its handle the spots similar to oil or on that liquid darkened that exuded from the damaged joint on Ki's shoulder.

Thoughts have rushed whirlwind, cold and accurate. It is not accident. This intended removal from system. After delivery of cargo. Means, it was necessary for someone that Ki has not seen, has not written down something. Or on the contrary – that could not tell something later.

I have sat down on hunkers, have run hand over the cold case. Total absence of energy. But sintetik of such class as has prompted me memory of the Snipe, had emergency accumulator with independent food. I have darted off and have run to the capsule. In the head knocked: «Bracelet, bracelet, bracelet». Having flown inside, I with scope have pulled off blanket. Where I left it, dark, not remarkable bracelet lay. I have seized him, having felt simplification wave, and have immediately stood. Time. It catastrophically was not enough. The crew waits for me in bar. My long absence will raise questions. But to leave Ki here, with possible proof in memory. I have returned on the ship, and except me nobody came here. Suspicions first of all will fall on me. It is necessary to do something urgently. The decision has ripened instantly, as well as half a century back on dangerous task. I have run back in cargo compartment. On the run activating bracelet, I have caused the hidden diagnostic interface. Having sat down near Ki's body, I have groped on his neck, under composite plate, the hidden diagnostic port. From bracelet has moved forward thin as needle, the probe. I have inserted it into the port. On the mini-screen of bracelet lines of the code have started gleaming. About ... and our Ki is not so ordinary as he can seem at first sight. All right, we will deal with it later. «The damaged synthetic mind of class KI-7 is found. Level of damages: critical. The dump of emergency memory is found. To restore memory?»

«To restore. And to restart kernel in the diagnostic mode», – I have given the command chosen on bracelet. The bracelet has begun to squeak. Ki's body has moved, from the injured shoulder sparks have scattered. There have passed ten seconds, each of which lasted as hour. At last, in eye-sockets synthetics weak, uneven blue light has blinked. The mechanical voice interrupted by hissing and clicks has sounded from the built-in loudspeaker:

«The system ... is started in emergency operation me. Level of damages critical. Report: attempt of unauthorized access to onboard the log din ... after unloading of cargo. Found and stopped. The forward ... is not identified. Physical impact the Viy ... is applied»

The voice has broken. Access to logbooks. Someone tried to erase or copy data how cargo has left. And Ki, faithful to the program of protection of the ship, has prevented. And for it has been switched off. In the head has clicked: container number five. That, with anomaly of weight.

– Ki, – it is silent, but I have accurately told. – Can you support the main functions? Navigation? Monitoring?

«Negatively. Computing power is reduced by 94%. Only passive collecting data is possible. Recommendation: to tell the captain ...»

– Let's report, – I have promised. – But later. Now pass into the mode of restoration of dump of memory. Write down everything: any attempts of access to systems, all external signals, all movements on the ship. Keep data in the protected buffer. Got that?

Brain synthetics, even damaged, weighed logicity of the order. I, the technician instead of running for help, give him teams.

«You ... do not tell the captain. Your actions contradict the protocol of safety», – the voice creaked.

I needed strong argument. Logical. The one that will understand the car.

– The attacker – someone from crew. Or someone who has access. If I give the alarm now, it will disappear or will destroy proofs. I need your data to calculate it. It is optimum way for preservation of the ship. Trust me.

Pause. The silence was broken by only weak hissing from the damaged case synthetics.

«Logically. Purpose: maintaining functionality of „Scythian“. Data will be written down. The mode of passive observation is activated. The mode of restoration is started».

– It is accepted, – I have disconnected the probe. – Remain, here, you will not restore the main functions and chains of system yet. As you will be ready, let me know on my communicator. I will give you the following instructions. Do not give signs of activity yet.

I have got up, have taken view of dark bulk of compartment. Who it could be? Gena? In principle it is logical, the key belonged to him and was on the crime scene. But why to it it? Alice? Vlad? The captain? Or ... someone the stranger who has made the way aboard after mooring? Thoughts ran, were confused among themselves, but one was crystal clearly: game only began, and in this game I am definitely not one.

I left cargo compartment, have made sure that the door of lock was closed and the bulb was lit green, almost run has moved to exit. The bracelet was on the place, its cold metal soothingly pressed on wrist. Now I was fully equipped again. But now I had also ally – the Dumb, dying Witness hidden in empty belly of the ship. In several minutes I have reached bar and, having opened heavy metal door, have entered.

The Old Mine bar has met me by noise wall, clouds of tobacco smoke and roar of the hard rock flowing from cheap columns. Air was dense as soup. My workmates have already strongly located at the table in corner. Before Gena empty and thin circles flaunted. The captain Lavrov, having thrown off jacket, argued about something with Alice with fervency, swinging hands. Kim sat, having leaned back on the back of chair, his eye cold and estimating, slowly slid on the hall. He the first has noticed my emergence and has hardly considerably nodded.

– And, Mironov! – Gena has bellowed, having noticed me. – Nearly has overslept all fun! Drag chair and the back to us here!

I have squeezed through crowd dancing to table, representing the confused smile.

– Forgive, was late. This tablet ... well, you understand.

– I understand nothing, – Lavrov, but without rage has grumbled. – Work is finished. Now have a rest. Hey, bartender! One more portion for my friend!

Have driven mug with muddy, foamy liquid to me. I have pretended that I take a sip, actually having only moistened lips. Inside everything has been compressed in hard, intense knot. I sat among these people, laughed at their jokes, Genya who already began to tell the bike about repair of the engine in orbit of Jupiter assented. And itself scanned their faces, looking for crack, hint, on fault shadow.

Gena was sincerely happy with our company. Alice, though smiled, but in eyes the habitual care was read. She continually darted the interested glance at me, and then is somehow confused it took away. The captain ... the captain was oneself – rough, direct, looked at all as on the, a little eccentric, but native team. Kim ... and here he has not been readable. His face remained stone mask. Though I also saw that he has drunk three big mugs, what here was called beer. Only eyes were bright, and in them as it seemed to me, for instant something has flashed it seems ... interest. Or it was play of light from the neon sign?

«He suspects, – cold stated in me part of the Snipe. – He is professional. He sees that you have not just forgotten the tablet. You have returned another. Alerted. He could feel it».

I with force have forced itself to relax, lean back on chair back, to take one more sip of opposite beer. It was necessary to merge with background, to become part of this noisy holiday. But somewhere in the depth of my consciousness, clear understanding ripened. By the ship, in dark cargo compartment, something has occurred. And here, in bar, among laughter and binge, the one who has struck it with wrench sat. Sat and, perhaps, looked directly at me.

Game took already deadly turn. I needed to wash to gather thoughts.

The bathroom in Old Mine bar was predictably dirty and become permeated with the smell of the chemicals masking absolutely other smells. I have splashed ice water in the face, looking at the reflection in the cracked mirror. Blue eyes of Sergey Mironov looked at me with cold confidence. In them there was no hint on intoxication also only concentration. I was as the ball of nerves wrapped in the weakened cover. I left the bathroom, intending to slip out imperceptibly on the street, to take couple of detours in circle of the building and to return to the ship while the crew was in separation. But plans – thing fragile, especially where women, alcohol and stress removed after long flight are involved.

– Mironov! Where has gathered?

The hand, tenacious and strong, has clasped my wrist. It was Alice. Her cheeks have turned pink, eyes shone not only intelligence, but also that fire that wakes up after the third mug of cheap, but strong ale. In them the call was read.

– So we go to dance with me. Do not shirk, Mirovnov. Someone has to entertain the girl.

It would be unnatural to refuse. Sergey Mironov with what I remembered him from memory scraps would be flattered with Alice's attention. And the refusal could raise excess questions. I have allowed it to involve myself in thick of the dancing bodies.

Music was primitive, but Alice moved to its step with surprising, almost predatory grace. She not just danced – she studied me. Its movements were call, question which I had to answer with the same movements. I tried to correspond, accompanying role of slightly drunk, confused navigator, but inside everything has been compressed in spring. When it has nestled on me, in me the storm of emotions has blown up. Its soft and gentle embraces, has begun to smell her skin, the aroma of its gentle flower perfume confused me, reminding that I not only the agent, but also the man in young, strong body. For many years loneliness have created in me emptiness which this body desperately tried to fill. After dance it, without releasing my hand, has pulled me to rack.

– Two shot «Auruma Dust». For courage, – she has thrown to the bartender. Also has looked at me. I wanted to refuse, but her look did not leave space for maneuver. We have clinked glasses. Liquid has burned throat, leaving aftertaste of rancid cranberry and pure alcohol. The second shot has followed the first almost instantly, on its initiative. In the head has hooted, but the consciousness tempered in strict sober years kept as the rock. The body reacted differently: heat spread on veins, relaxing me.

And then there was what had to happen. We did not arrange. Just at some point when Gena has begun to shout the obscene song, and the captain, frowning, tried to stop up him with elbow, our views have met. In her eyes there was only understanding, fatigue and that call of flesh which is heavier than any arguments of mind. She has silently taken me by hand and has led from bar, without looking back at the others. Nobody has called to us. Here, on the outskirts of civilization, it was in the nature of things. We have silently gone to hotel to enjoy ours in the friend arisen desire which appears between the man and the woman.

The hotel into which Alice has brought me was called «Well». The poor, six-storied building from combined concrete panels stuck to the building of port as parasite. The elevator did not work. We have walked upstairs, the smelling mold and deodorant, on the third floor. The chip key Alice has opened door in number. The room was tiny as our sleeping capsule on «Scythian», but here was though some visibility of cosiness: shabby rug on floor, on wall the plasma screen with the flickering prompt showing infinite sunset over false mountains and that is surprising, wide bed.

The door was closed, cutting us from noise of the kosmoport. The silence has hung, between us, dense, ringing. Then Alice has turned to me, and everything has occurred by itself. There was no tenderness, there were no preludes – only hunger, greed, desperate attempt of two lonely people locked in iron box among stars to feel though for moment that they are alive. I kissed it, and lips remembered movements. My hands slid on her back, and fingers knew how to undo intricate fastener on her overalls. Alice hot kissed me, and I was given her, having allowed to muffle voice of the mind for a while.

But the agent cannot be switched off completely. Even during the hottest moments the part me remained the cold observer fixing details: scar on her shoulder, similar to trace from splinter, birthmark under the left clavicle as she blinked at culmination point, her face became unfamiliar, others. And then, when the passion has subsided, having left behind only sticky fatigue and slight sense of shame, I pretended that I fall asleep. Lying on back, I listened attentively to its equal breath, to far rumble of cars outside the window. After a while she has carefully risen on elbow, has looked at me. I have represented deep, quiet sleep. It has softly touched my cheek, has illegibly whispered something, and then has quietly got out of bed. I observed through the half-closed eyes as its naked figure, sports and fine as I blade, have slipped to the twilight of the room and have disappeared behind the bathroom door. The switch has clicked. The sound of the flowing water was heard. I have moved silently as shadow. Not to spy. I had other purpose. Her overalls lay on chair. Near it small zone cover in which it carried personal belongings: multitool, the spare battery for the tablet, room key. And its personal communicator, the thin, elegant gadget in the form of bracelet is simpler than mine.

Water in the bathroom rustled, hiding any sounds. I have taken its lump. The screen is blocked by biometrics. My bracelet activated by light touch has let out almost invisible blue beam, having slipped on the case of the device. Scanner fast and deep breaking up of electronic devices. I needed contents, metadata: active background processes, the last encrypted communication channels, all information which was on it. All that can tell me whether she dealt doubly in the last hours or not.

The beam has run on surface. On the mini-screen of my bracelet lines of the downloaded data have started gleaming. Having finished, I have examined the room. I have not found any other personal belongings, except small blaster. But nothing yet absolutely meant. Professionals do not leave proofs in the hotel room, but I have slightly opened door in number. Having returned to the room, did not begin to put on clothes, having remained so much in underwear. Has taken seat in chair which stood in dark corner of the room. Also began to wait. In twenty minutes I have heard as water has stopped flowing, and in minute Alice has fluttered out from there. It, without having paid to me attention, has quietly approached my clothes and has taken out my communicator from pocket. Having poked in it and having realized that it cannot open it, she began to look for the communicator.

– Darling you look for it? – quiet tone I have asked. She has sharply turned back, and I have seen genuine surprise in her eyes. – My girl. Very slowly give my lump to me and also slowly sit down. We have something to you to talk about. – Having guided at it blaster, I have offered. It, slowly, has transferred me my lump. Also has sat down on edge of bed, without taking away from me the look.

– Who are you? – she has asked me, and its voice shivered a little.

– Same, as well as you, the girl, – the same quiet voice have answered I. – Here only at us is and become serious problem, than this.

– And what?

– About it later. And now I suggest to agree. I personally have nothing against you. Your task is your task. But in these circumstances it would be expedient to us to combine our efforts to survive. – She looked at me, but has not uttered words, I have continued. – Not only our life, but also life of other crew of the ship in the next forty eight hours depends on our further actions.

– I do not understand what you speak Mironov about, you have again hit?

– You understand everything, the girl, – with smile I have answered. – We will arrive as follows, I will send to crew from your lump the message that they have come all here, and we honestly and openly will talk? It suits you?

– And I have other options? – having raised eyebrow, she has asked and has lowered view of blaster in my hands.

– Yes, to die here and now, – I have sustained pause, but she has not answered again. Then I have quickly typed the text of the message on its coma and have sent to all crew. It was necessary only to wait. We sat silently and looked at each other. That, time went quicker, I have turned on the TV. On all channels broadcast urgent news. Miners on mines of corporation have rebelled, heavy fighting is going. There are dead on both sides. It is necessary to wait for the statement of administration of the planet for introduction of martial law and curfew.

In fifteen minutes the tramping was heard, the door in number was sharply opened and to the room other crew has become hollow. All have looked at me.

– Mistery, I ask all of you will calm down. We with Alice have to you very important conversation. Kim, – I have looked at him, having noticed as it has slowly stretched to the hidden holster. – I ask you not to do it. Let's me express, and then you, Kim, will make the decision to kill me or not. Good? – I have taken of them quiet view.

– What here occurs? – Lavrov has growled.

– The captain, friends, sit down, we will have long and detailed conversation. – I have pointed by blaster to the chairs standing under the TV. They have turned and began to take seats. The captain and Gena have taken seat on chairs, and Kim has got up about the captain, having leaned shoulder against wall.

– Kim, – taking weapon aside and putting it on bedstand, but, without letting go it, I have asked. – I can trust you? I will put weapon, but if in this room someone gets the you will shoot at it? – he has looked at me and has slowly nodded. – Well, – I have continued, letting go weapon. – Let's those begin. And so developed circumstances force me to pass to extreme measures. But it is demanded by the developed situation. Who I am, I will answer you at the very end of our conversation. For now I suggest each of you to listen to me and what I will tell. It will not be pleasant to much of you, but I ask you to behave. Each of attendees has the and even not one skeleton in the cupboard. We will get some now and we will begin with you, Alice. – I have translated view of it. – Means, you do not want to tell us the history, well, then I will tell it. Alice is the agent of the Western European consortium working under cover. Its task was to find out that for cargo «Scythian» on this planet transports. – I have looked at it again, and she has hung the head, having looked down the look in floor. – It is clear. Then I will continue. Having made several unsuccessful attempts to scan contents of containers during flight. Our girl has made the next attempt to learn that she in them and has been found by Ki. It is better than nothing, than to eliminate the witness, she has not thought up, having struck it professional blow to the area of the head with wrench, taking away from itself any suspicions. Then has hidden it in lock hangar. But you, the girl, have miscalculated. Ki! – I have called synthetics.

In it moment from under bed was chosen by Ki, showing to all attendees deep dent on the head.

– I managed to restore its work of memory and to throw data on the lump. Where I have also seen all this. Ki, show us video. – Ki's eyes were lit, and at small distance there was hologram of Alice ransacking near the last container, then it beats Ki, and the picture vanishes. All were silent and looked at Alice.

– I ... – it have swallowed and have continued. – Mironov has told the truth, I am agent, – she has answered, without raising the head.

– To me it is unclear only one Alice why you wanted to kill me? – it has raised the head and has looked at me with the surprised look. – But how?

– Alice, daughter. «Why you are so?» – the captain has asked.

– Ki, our dear friend sintetik, he watched all of you and me. But we will talk about him later when its time comes. And so, checking data, I have found video where you Alice suddenly pull out from under me step-ladder, and I fall and I hit the head against floor. Also I lie unconscious. For what you so with me the girl? – I have looked in her eyes.

– I ... I did not want, – having rolled up the head, she has told. – I have begun to panic. Even before take-off I tried to scan container, you have found me behind attempt to open it. When I have told that I check fastenings to me it seemed that you have not believed me. And I ... have decided to get rid of you while we still were on the earth, having arranged everything as accident. – She has again hung the head.

– Well, I trust you, Alice. I believe that emotions and panic have got of you the best, and you have made up the mind to this desperate step. Only under risk of failure of operation and disclosure of your personality you have gone to it. I understand it and I am not angry with you, the girl, – she has raised the head, her eyes were full of tears and despair. I have put it the hand on shoulder and have smiled to it.

– What the hell! – the captain has exclaimed. – Do you understand that for it it is necessary to it?

– Wait a minute, the captain, the heads sech we will be then, and now I will continue. And so. The special forces soldier Kim following at us, he is Vladislav Kozhin. The commander of special group of special purpose, the Russian Empire captain Mikhail Nikolaevich Sergeyev will be more correct to tell so. Three times awarded with Imperial Two-headed Oryol, and still very large number of awards and medals for faultless service of the empire and performance of the missions. But here with the last mission it was not set two months ago. The captain and his group has appeared in such meat grinder on one of planets, very important for the empire, from which hardly in general live could return. But at everything at the same time his commander has left its group without support and without evacuation. Only you have survived, the captain, – all have turned in its party, even Alice, having opened mouth has raised the head and looked at motionless Kim. – Having returned to the empire, Kim has found this coward and the traitor and has killed him. Having realized that he has made, has run away from the empire, has replaced name and documents and became the mercenary. Under different names. – I have looked at it he continued to stand and look quietly to me in the face. I have continued. – I do not make not feasible promises, I am the same officer, as well as you. I, as well as you swore oath and swore on fidelity of the empire and to the emperor. Upon termination of this mission if I survive. I will try to help you if you help to survive to us. – He has nodded, without having uttered words. The captain has stretched hand in pocket and in it the moment all in the room have strained. It, having inspected all, has told:

– Quietly, I behind cigarettes, – getting black pack of some cigarettes. I have asked one, and it has taken out one cigarette and has thrown to me pack. – Smoke on health to you now more necessary. – I have got cigarette and have lit from the matches lying on table. The puff has dragged on and has exhaled.

– Thanks, the captain, – I have nodded to it. – Then with your permission, I will continue. Also I will pass to our following hero. Gennady. – All have with astonishment looked at me, probably, expecting that I will begin with the captain. – Yes. Gena. When you killed the real Gennady Sysoyev, I hope, you not for long tormented him? – He sat without moving. Its usual expression of eternal irritation has slipped from face as mask, having left behind emptiness. He did not begin to deny. Has not tried to contract or snatch. It it is simple ... Gena has stopped being. It was similar not to explosion, and to thawing of skin on body. Skin on face and hands, has begun to darken, turning into something glossy, casting ferrous and dark gray metal. His clothes – the old, shabby overalls – have not torn. It was absorbed in this new metal flesh, became its part, through it muscle fibers which the person could not have have appeared. Fingers were extended, joints have acted, framed sharp as if the ground bone plates. Nails became similar to the short, bent blades from black obsidian. But the most terrible – it was his face. Or rather, what from it remained. Sysoyev's lines were erased as the drawing

on damp sand. There was smooth, shapeless oval on which only two deepening on the place of nose and rigid crack of mouth have appeared. And then in this darkness eyes have flashed. Not two points. And set. As at spider. Difficult, facet, flickering cold, lifeless scarlet light. Light proceeded from within, from skull depth, and in its crimson reflection skin cast in color of the baked blood. It became higher. Each line of his new body shouted of terrible efficiency. It was the car. It was the metamorph. One of the most expensive and terrible products of the black market of genetic engineering. The live weapon capable to imitate the person for years. Until activation of task of murder.

Kim, was instinctively displaced to the left, having taken position between monster and window. The professional saw before himself weapon with which, perhaps, already dealt. And this weapon was the top class. Alice has started back to wall, having pressed palm to mouth. In her eyes there was not only horror, but also bitter enlightenment. She lived with it ... it something in close metal box for months. Slept, ate, trusted it the life and life of the ship. The captain Lavrov has not moved a little. He sat, having straightened back, and his old, weather-beaten bear look studied metamorph without fear, but with the deepest, ice contempt. He looked at thing which has dared to pretend to be his friend. Which dared to concern its ship. At this moment something has brightly sparkled, and in second in the head of metamorph the huge black hole gaped. It slowly began to precipitate on floor, and then was just filled up on one side, spilling black slush on all floor. All have looked in that party from where the shot has been made by clot of the concentrated plasma. Ki was motionless, only his right hand extended forward came to an end not with brush, but trunk of the built-in fighting laser. In the room the silence which in five minutes was interrupted by the captain's voice has hung.

– I do not understand anything else. How you have understood that it is metamorph? – The captain has asked and having become silent has stared at me.

– Well, I will explain, – it is a little, having calmed themselves, I have told. – The captain, you when be noticed for the friend that he, wiping hands after repair rags, put how usual rag? But did not throw it on floor.

– No. He usually threw it anywhere, I and crew always swore at it as there were cases of injuries from the fact that it on floor underfoot rolled. – I have nodded, agreeing with this argument.

– Did you notice or saw that the crew member during flight has poured to himself coffee and left it, never without having drunk from cup?

– No. Coffee is very important for crew. As renders the invigorating effect for the person. – I have again nodded, agreeing also with this opinion.

– Well and at last the last. I have finally made sure of bar that it is not person when around it behind table there were empty circles, and he affectedly tried to seem drunk. To tell the truth changed. – I have made helpless gesture.

– It is very interesting, the detective, – I have even shuddered as its brutal voice did not match in any way the person who told it.

– Kim, I want to notice, you have fine baritone, – I have told, smiling broadly. – But you are mistaken, I am not detective. I am agent of the Russian secret service of its imperial majesty. I ask all of you to address further me Sergey Mironov or the Snipe. – I have looked at Kim, he has a little smiled corners of lips. – Now about situation in which all of us with you have appeared.

– Stand, stand. And how captain? And Ki? Will you about them tell nothing? – Alice has protested.

– And what you want to hear? The captain it and in space the captain. That there is the most true captain of the Scythian freighter. And here Ki. Here, I think, we will take break so far. So, remains to time for our actions very little. All of us are threatened by either death, or penal servitude on it to the planet. – I have looked at the TV on which there were continuously urgent news, and what I have read, has changed my decision about continuation of the story who there is who. I have included loudness and from the screen not young, the blonde, but the nice leader of news said: «I repeat, urgent news. Due to the attempt of military takeover. When using in it the forbidden fighting metamorphs. The

planetary administration of the planet Aurum-4 imposes ban on arrivals and departures of any vessels from the planet. Without martial law is urgently imposed, police and security planetary structures are abolished. All population of the planet has to carry out and submit to requirements of military strictly. Otherwise they have the right to open fire on defeat. Also to be introduced restrictions on priob ...». I have switched off sound. I have looked at all sitting in the room and have even taken view of Ki who has already removed weapon, and now on its place there was its usual brush.

– Now you understand in what situation we are?

– More than, – there has begun the captain. – Freight was delivered by us and all cones to us. I so understand there in containers there were these creatures. – He has spat lying metamorph.

– We are come to be liquidated as witnesses, we live are not necessary to them, – Kim noted.

– If to consider the fact that we with Sergey the spies, will interrogate us at first with addiction and when we are not able already to give anything to them useful will get rid of us. Snipe, how many at us time, your way? – I have looked at Alice and have understood now the status of indisputable leadership has been transferred to me.

– Ki, that with galactic communication?

– It was disconnected two hours ago, – he has answered. I have looked how on the screen the line ran that there is no signal. I see. If it was possible to look four hours ago though some galactic channels, have switched-off them then and only planetary channels were available. That now full information muffling and any channel did not work any more.

– Two, there can be three hours. If already we are not looked for. Kym, to us needs weapon. You have captain, probably, here communications with local pirates. We need their help.

– What plan, Snipe? – the captain has asked.

– Just like that the planet not to leave. But the planetary administration somehow all the same moves. Besides it needs to hold communication and to send products to orbital base. We need to get on the planetary spaceport of administration. I will hijack the ship, and we will be able to leave.

Chapter 4

– That, friends, – I have told, looking at this speckled group, – it seems, we have appeared in the thick of interstellar adventure from which at any agent respecting himself eyes would begin to sparkle. Only it smells not of glory, but the prison cell, and even direct execution. Time now – our main enemy. To you the captain, Alice and Ki it is necessary to go to bar. Find local underground network there, we urgently need the conductor knowing all cracks on this planet. We need urgently to bring down from this planet. The most important we need the card of the corporate kosmoport. Placement of posts of protection, number of hangars and so on. Learn how many we should jump on this Godforsaken hole and on what. Will you cope?

Lavrov silently has nodded, its bear figure, appear, already strained to be in action. He devoured with look the body lying on floor his once former friend Gena, and in his eyes the rage stormed. He has understood the main thing: its ship, its crew became change in someone's to dirty game, and he could not reconcile to it.

– Ki, to you it is clear? – I have asked synthetics.

– Current situation demands from me the maximum assistance to people and survival of crew for the subsequent rescue of «Scythian». My computing power are restored for only forty percent at present. It is enough for the analysis of routes and breaking of primitive security systems. I am ready the Snipe.

– Perfectly. Alice? – it has raised on me eyes. The fear and confusion in them were replaced by cold determination. The agent in it has got the best.

– I know couple of tiptoes in local bar. They will bring me to people necessary to us. There smugglers who carry cargoes bypassing corporate and galactic posts hang out. They too not really love Herpex. Therefore have to help us ... for the corresponding payment, of course.

– Let's pay from ship cash desk, – Lavrov has muttered. – If we reach it. Of course.

– Kim and I, – have continued I, – we go on «Scythian». We need weapon, ammunition, space suits just in case and everything that can be carried away from edibles. We meet here exactly in hour. If someone is not – we improvise, but we do not wait. Time is more expensive than the imperial credits.

We have dispersed. With Kim we have slipped out hotel as shadows, having merged with gray crowd of workers, loaders and other port crowd. Morning air on Aurum-4 was dense and caustic, but now seemed to me is more sweet than any terrestrial breeze – it was freedom air, let and with dust impurity. There was a wish to live something very much. Approaching external dock ring where there was our faithful rusty slogger, we with Kim have at the same time stood, having nestled on heap of abandoned containers. The instinct perfected on hundreds of operations shouted of danger.

At lock of the ship people crowded. But it were not dockers and not technicians. Six. In gray, functional form of planetary guards Herpex, with stripes «Special Department». On hips – heavy blasters, in hands at two – portable scanners. They on something argued with the officer who, judging by its impatient gestures, demanded immediate opening of lock.

– Power pincers do not take, this can, the sir! – one of policemen has reported. – Ship AI has blocked all external protocols. Physical breaking is necessary.

– Then crack! – the officer has cried out. – We have order! The ship and all crew to detain for interrogation. Especially Mironov's equipment navigator and pilot Korshunova. Dead or alive – it is indifferent.

At me in breast has grown cold. «Dead or alive» is the most unloved me point in any situations. Especially when it is applied to me personally.

Kim, keeping the eyes glued on group, has whispered to me:

– The plan «And», probably, is cancelled. They are six, plus, perhaps, in the district to steam of people. Chances to break are insignificant. If we break will give the alarm on all port. – It was rational opinion. It is not necessary to make noise to us.

– He agrees, – I have whispered in reply, feeling as on back the acquaintance runs, almost forgotten chill. – Means, the plan of «B». Quickly we recede.

We have crawled away back, for garbage heap, and, without getting up in all growth, have hurried back on labyrinth of office tunnels. My new body worked faultlessly: lungs swallowed caustic air, muscles carried me easily and quickly, and the head, worked at reckless speed.

– Somehow quickly they have begun our search, – Kim when we have curtailed into rather deserted corridor has told and have stopped to take breath. – Means, or Alice was already found and contacted all of us. Or ... Herpix from the very beginning watched «Scythian». Also waited for occasion that all of us to tie.

– Or waited until freight is delivered, there will come time of «X», and witnesses will become unnecessary, – I have gloomy added. – Good old tactics: to use blindly, and then to liquidate and none will be the wiser. Only we, were prompter and cleverer. We it too hard, Kim. Believe.

He for the first time for all this mad day has slightly smiled. It was the bad, wolf smile.

– So it is even more interesting, the Snipe. – He has answered me, and we have returned to the hotel room the first. In twenty minutes Lavrov, Alice and Ki were. On their persons it was visible – they had news not from pleasant too.

– The Old Mine bar is surrounded by guards, – without prefaces the captain has blurted out. – Fortunately, we have approached from outside and have seen cordon in advance. Have caught one smuggler who has poked into bar. For bottle of good moonshine he has told us that on all port look for crew of «Scythian». Accuse of arms trafficking for insurgents and of communications with ... by extragalactic forces. – Lavrov has spat. – The complete nonsense, but for arrest will descend. What at you?

– Waited for us, – I have looked at the captain. – We were waited by six or more people about the shuttle. They tried to get in the shuttle, but so far nothing is impossible to them. We managed to hear their negotiations. The order to take from them me and Alice at any cost. Dead or alive. So we have decided to come back.

– Here means how, – he has gloomy looked at me. – And me and Kim means in expense, so it turns out? – I have nodded. – Well has also put ...

– Have you the conductor found? – I have asked.

– There is one option, – having taken seat on chair, Alice has told. – The same type has told that there is old route – on air shafts of geothermal power plants. They last on hundreds of kilometers, some leave almost to the most corporate kosmoport. But there heat, toxic evaporations and ... are possible meetings with local fauna which was got in those tunnels.

– What for local fauna? – I have asked again.

– The mutating insektoida, – has passionately explained to Ki. – Result of leakages of biological waste of the extracting production. Generally average sizes, predators, hunt packs. I estimate chances of survival of the small group armed only with small arms at thirty two percent.

– Thirty two?! Well, it is already quite good, – upset with such figures I have noticed, remembering the experience of survival in much more hopeless situations. – What about weapon? At us only mine and that at Kim.

– I have contact, on this planet, – Alice has unexpectedly told. – Armorer in the black market. It owes me. To be in the region of old drainage collectors. It on the way to air shafts.

– I have the person here too. But the problem is that I never worked with him, know by sight. I cannot trust too. If I with it come for contact, there is no guarantee that instead of it there will be no someone another and all of us will tie. Therefore I suggest to come to yours, Alice, the checked contact.

I have looked at the captain, at Kim. Both have nodded. Risk? Of course, enormous. Alternative? And it is not just in this situation. We were left no choice. We can trust so far only each other as us one purpose on all unites now, this survival.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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