

Dream Thieves

“Would you like to hear an interesting story? Very well. I have one, and I’ll tell it to you now.

It happened several years ago. Everything began with a single advertisement, which became the cause of the events that followed in my life. None of it might have happened at all, if not for my curiosity. But it is best to start from the beginning.

It was winter, and for several days I had to stay indoors, fighting a runny nose and a high fever. When I say winter, I mean winter by the calendar, because in those parts where I was then living, winter lasts almost the entire year, yielding to spring for only a couple of months. There is practically no summer, yet in some strange way I had grown used to it, even finding pleasure in contemplating snowy landscapes. In the end, those very landscapes and ice sheets are the objects of my research. Yes, I am a glaciologist, studying the behavior of ice formations, the history of their formation, and the way they respond to different temperatures. I won’t go into the details of my work; it is enough to mention my specialty to explain why I was living among ice and snow.

I had voluntarily agreed to year-round work without vacation, living in a large one-story building located at the edge of a massive ice shelf. I liked my work. Besides, I needed time to recover from the stress of breaking up with my girlfriend. My days were spent taking the necessary measurements of temperature and ice density, setting camera traps in case polar bears appeared, and compiling daily reports. Evenings I mostly spent

dreaming to the accompaniment of pleasant music. When the mood struck, I spoke with friends and family by video call. I had been supplied with everything necessary for a year. Stocks of food, clothing, and fuel were stored in a hangar beside my house, and a powerful generator provided electricity and heat. So I could devote myself entirely to my work, to observing polar animals, and to my dreams.

I will admit honestly: after half a year I began talking to myself. A month later I confessed to myself that my hermit's life was beginning to weigh on me. Of course, I told neither my friends nor my employer, presenting to them an image of boundless optimism and contentment. About three months before the end of my yearly contract, I fell ill, as I mentioned earlier. Lying in bed, I listened to the howling of the blizzard outside the window and thought gloomily about the need to shovel the snow away from the front door. These thoughts did little to lift my spirits. I only gave a bitter smile, remembering my enthusiasm in the first months of my stay in this snowbound and isolated corner of the world.

To distract myself a little, I began reading the classified ads posted on a popular website. I felt a slight tenderness at the number of notices from people wanting to give animals into kind hands. Closing my eyes, I imagined a large, gentle dog lying beside me and smiled. I decided that when my year-long contract ended, I would get a dog—precisely by answering such an advertisement.

When I opened my eyes, I noticed an ad on my laptop screen that seemed, for some reason, to be pulsing, as if trying to attract my attention. I could have sworn it had not been there just a few moments before. Somewhat surprised, I read its contents:

“Are you lying alone with a cold, far from friends and family? Are you tired of your loneliness, and do dreams of a dog warm your heart? Click the link to learn more.”

Distrustfully, I glanced around my bedroom with its insulated wooden walls, as if searching for some uninvited guest spying on me. Looking back at the laptop screen, I noticed that the line containing the link in the mysterious advertisement had grown in size, almost completely covering the rest of the text. Startled by the suddenness of it, I snapped the laptop shut.

After some thought, I concluded that I had simply stumbled upon an advertisement from some aspiring psychotherapist, or perhaps the owner of a new travel agency trying to sell expensive tours. The text had coincided with my thoughts purely by chance. And the ad had not been blinking at all—it had only seemed that way to me. My sensible reasoning calmed me. I even smiled, amazed at my own vivid imagination. And if one must speak of imagination, then it is better to use it by surrendering to pleasant dreams.

I leaned back on the pillow and closed my eyes. Wouldn't it be wonderful if my scientific supervisor were so pleased with me that he invited me to a conference and sent a helicopter to fetch me? I imagined myself speaking before a large audience, describing the development of ice shelves, presenting my theory of ice-sheet formation, while the entire hall listened, mouths slightly open in admiration. And of course the thunderous applause that followed—and a beautiful dark-haired woman who insisted on meeting me, struck completely by my intellect and charm.

I fell asleep almost happy, completely forgetting the strange advertisement that had caught my attention.

The next morning I felt much better. In good spirits I set about my work, first clearing the snow from the entrance to the house. While making my rounds of the measuring instruments and camera traps I had set up, I imagined that I was accompanied by an enormous white dog, which kept looking up at me with loyal eyes.

That evening I sat at the computer, wrapped in a blanket, entering the data I had collected during the day. My morning enthusiasm had faded somewhat, yielding to the reality in which I had no loyal dog at all. Well then—after all, I had voluntarily agreed to a year of solitude, so I had to accept circumstances as they were. In three months I would return to my city and take up office work again. Naturally, after a pleasant, extended vacation spent with a dark-haired beauty who never took her loving eyes off me.

Lacing my hands behind my head, I closed my eyes, painting in my imagination scenes of time spent with her against a backdrop of snow-white beaches and palm trees. Returning to reality, I decided to take the initiative and began searching for a life companion in the appropriate apps. I had a very clear idea of her appearance and character. In any case, I was determined to start a pleasant correspondence with some stranger who might brighten my lonely evenings.

I remembered an advertisement for a site called “A Cure for Loneliness,” and I decisively opened the page. I even leaned toward the screen in surprise when, in the very first listing, I saw a photograph of a girl who perfectly matched my vision—perfectly. Flowing, shining hair, large expressive dark eyes, full lips parting

in a smile that revealed even, snow-white teeth. Even in the photograph her eyes seemed to look at me with tenderness.

I opened her profile to learn more about her. The text beneath her picture read:

“You have defeated your cold, but not your loneliness? You are tired of it, and dreams of me and of a loyal great white dog warm your heart? Click the link to learn more.”

I stared at the screen in some astonishment, then blinked several times. The advertisement was still there, and the girl in the photograph seemed very much alive; her gaze now appeared almost questioning. My astonishment quickly passed, since I had a sober understanding of myself and knew that I possessed a very vivid imagination. But I will not hide it—my curiosity prevailed. One can understand me: for the second time an advertisement had appeared before my eyes that perfectly matched my feelings and desires.

Something inside me whispered that I should not click the link, but my hand seemed to act of its own accord, opening the link in the mysterious advertisement. I even held my breath, expecting something unusual.

But the screen went dark for a moment, and then a message appeared:

“System error. Restart your computer.”

My disappointment knew no bounds, for I had already secretly hoped at least for a virtual acquaintance with the beautiful girl of my dreams. Feeling irritated, I switched off my laptop and decided to devote the rest of the evening to reading.

I settled comfortably in bed, holding a book before my eyes and trying to focus on the story. My “sleeping compartment” was

warm, the dim light gave it a sense of coziness, and the book itself was very engaging. I forced myself to concentrate on it so as not to drift back into fantasies. That whole business with the advertisement had unsettled me somewhat.

Without noticing it, I began to fall asleep. I was awakened by a loud, trilling sound coming from my computer. I jerked upright in bed, trying to wake completely. Someone was calling me by video link. I hurried into my study, trying to guess who it might be. It was already very late, and my parents never called at such an hour. Could something have happened? Switching on the light, I rushed to my desk to answer the call. With slightly trembling hands, I lifted the lid of my laptop—and to my great relief, I saw on the screen not my parents but my immediate supervisor, a man with the unusual name Homespunat.

His parents had been convinced nudists and had named him after the first syllables of the Latin expression *homo est puer naturae*, meaning “Man is a child of nature.” To his name was also attached the rare surname Lepota, of which he was extremely proud. And rightly so—there was not another person on Earth named Homespunat Lepota.

“Viktor, sorry to call so late, but it’s urgent,” he began at once. “I didn’t wake you, did I? I see you’re already in your pajamas.”

“Has something happened?” I asked in bewilderment, not understanding the reason for such a late call.

“You’d better sit down,” he said, for some reason with great solemnity. “Tomorrow a helicopter will come for you.”

“A helicopter?” I asked, astonished. “I won’t have time to prepare the samples by tomorrow. And we never arranged anything like that,” I muttered.

Homespunat Lepota raised a protesting hand.

“I knew this would be unexpected for you. Unexpected—meaning you didn’t expect it. Tomorrow I have convened a conference of all the leading lights of glaciology. They are to familiarize themselves with your research. Until tomorrow.”

The connection was cut as abruptly as it had begun. I remained sitting at my desk, mouth open in amazement. I wondered what research he meant. And his solemn appearance puzzled me greatly: I had never seen him in a suit before, much less a striped one. Could it be that he had dressed that way specially for me? Surely this was a dream—the result of my idle fantasies. I pinched my arm hard, leaving a red mark from my fingers. Convinced that it was not a dream, I began feverishly rummaging through my papers, searching among the printed graphs showing changes in the parameters of the ice cover. I could hardly appear at a conference empty-handed! At the same time, I set aside a separate stack of photographs of a family of polar bears captured by my camera traps. Tomorrow I would have to leave a few cabbages for them early in the morning.

I bustled about, sorting papers, periodically running to the wardrobe to look for suitable clothes. I didn’t even have a suit here. No matter—in the worst case, I could rent one.

Deciding to get a little sleep, I returned to bed and pulled the blanket over myself. Dreams swept over me; I even imagined in detail the speech I would deliver before a serious audience of distinguished scientists. Of course, in my dreams the speech was smooth and expressive, the words flowing like a cornucopia. Pleased with my own eloquence, I calmed down and fell asleep.

I was awakened by a loud noise that seemed to penetrate every corner of my dwelling. Jumping out of bed, I ran to the window. About fifty meters away I saw an enormous helicopter, its spinning blades creating a whirlwind that hurled loose snow into the air. So it had not been a dream after all. Delighted, I dressed quickly. Packing the papers and photographs I had selected during the night into a large bag, I was about to run to the helicopter when I remembered the family of polar bears that often appeared nearby to feast on the vegetables I deliberately left out for them.

Going into the small room that served as my storeroom, I selected several large heads of cabbage and, satisfied with myself, went outside. Walking around the house, I scattered the cabbages along the perimeter, clutching my briefcase under my arm. Then I ran toward the helicopter, from whose open door someone had already courteously set out a ladder. Inside the helicopter I was greeted by a pleasant stewardess. Everything seemed so unreal that I simply sat first in the helicopter and then in an airplane—also sent specially for me—without a single thought in my head. It was as though events were unfolding around me, drawing me in, leaving no room for decisions or even speculation.

I do not know exactly how long I spent in transit. I remember only smiling faces bending over me again and again. There was a very strange sensation that I was at once the center of events and yet merely a helpless splinter drifting along the current of a great river.

They brought me to my home. I looked around my own apartment in surprise; it seemed to me more like a hotel room. Of

course, I had dreamed of returning to it—it had even appeared in my dreams, especially during the last couple of months at the northern station. But it lacked the coziness I remembered. It was too tidy, stripped of the scattered sofa cushions and the slightly crooked photographs. The excessive cleanliness gave it an uninhabited look.

I went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator—perhaps simply out of habit; one always goes to the refrigerator first. I don't know what I expected to find there, since I had been away for many months. With a sigh I looked at the empty, gleaming white shelves and headed back toward the living room. A thought flashed through my mind: the fulfillment of wishes does not always make a person happy.

At the entrance to the living room I stopped, unable to believe my eyes: scattered multicolored cushions lay on the sofa, and above it hung a crooked photograph of my dog, who had accompanied me through nearly all my childhood. A noticeable layer of dust lay on the television. I could have sworn it had not been there a minute earlier. With my heart pounding loudly, I stood in the doorway, persuading myself that I had not gone mad. Surely there must be an explanation. For instance: first, the late-night call from my boss, Homespunat Lepota, had affected me so strongly that I had lost my sense of reality a little. Second, I had been forced to leave the station urgently to speak at a conference convened especially for me. That fact alone would astonish anyone so much that it might shatter all habitual assumptions about life. Perhaps that sounds exaggerated, but I mean specifically my own plans and expectations: to earn well if possible, to hold on to my stable job with its steady salary, hoping

to make at least a modest career within the walls of my research institute. And, of course, to dream a great deal about a happy personal life. I do love to dream. Some people like to read in the evenings; others go to bars. But the most astonishing thing happening to me now was that my most improbable dream was coming true—and so quickly that I had not even had time to comprehend it.

My thoughts were interrupted by an insistent knock at the door. On the threshold of my apartment stood Homespunat Lepota in person, smiling broadly at me. This time he was dressed in a dark blue suit with a matching tie. Still smiling widely, he said:

“Greetings, and congratulations on your return! Forgive me for arriving without warning, but I very much wanted to be the first to welcome you!”

He spread his arms as if he were about to hug me. It felt unexpectedly pleasant; never before had my boss spoken to me with such warmth and joy.

“Thank you, Mr. Lepota,” I said, sincerely grateful. “But why are you standing in the doorway? Come in.”

I stepped aside to let him into the apartment, secretly glad it was tidy. After seating my unannounced guest on the sofa, I started toward the kitchen—to the refrigerator out of habit—then remembered it was empty. To be honest, I was very worked up, and a can of cold beer would not have hurt. I could have offered one to my boss as well, to make the atmosphere less stiff.

“Is something wrong, Viktor?” Lepota asked kindly, watching me closely.

“Well... I’ve got nothing to treat you to. Not even a can of beer in the fridge,” I replied—and immediately surprised myself. Who complains to a guest about an empty refrigerator?

Lepota suddenly slapped his forehead as if he had only just remembered something.

“Of course! How could I forget? I brought a whole pack of beer with me—to celebrate your return. It’s right outside your front door.”

I smiled at him in thanks and ran to fetch it. Strangely, it was already very cold. The cans were beaded with tiny droplets of water, pleasantly chilling my hands. I sat down on the sofa beside my boss and drained my beer in one swallow. It did exactly what I hoped: I relaxed. Only then did I truly grasp my luck—back within familiar walls, on my way to speak at a scientific conference before eminent scholars.

“Mr. Lepota, I didn’t even properly prepare my speech,” I said anxiously. “What day is the conference?”

“Call me by my first name—Homespunat. And the conference starts in about an hour. That’s why we had to bring you back so urgently.”

I sprang up and hurried toward the bedroom door, explaining as I went:

“I’ll go get dressed.”

“I’ll wait,” Homespunat said simply.

Not long after, we left my apartment and drove to the conference in an enormous, impressive black car. The windows were tinted in a strange way on both sides, so I couldn’t make out the streets or the passersby—everything outside slid past as a blurred gray ribbon. I was so preoccupied with thoughts of the

conference that I barely noticed. Everything else happened as if in a dream: the vast hotel lobby where the lecture hall was located; smiling faces that seemed oddly alike. I dimly remembered seeing that lobby once in a brochure advertising vacations somewhere on an Asian coast. I had even dreamed of going there, grumbling to myself that glaciologists, for some reason, never held interesting conferences—certainly not in exotic places, in luxurious hotels.

Apparently my face betrayed my astonishment, because Homespunat bent toward me with concern.

“What’s bothering you, Viktor? We’re not even late.”

In reply I spread my arms wide.

“All of this. I didn’t even know our city had a hotel like this— with palm trees in the lobby,” I said.

“But you dreamed of this!” Homespunat snapped, irritably—and that startled me. How did he know?

“I mean... anyone would dream of being here,” I hurried to add, seeing my own confusion. “And at a conference, too. Come on— why are you standing there?”

He practically dragged me up the wide staircase that clearly led to the conference hall. On the way he kept telling me how proud he was of me, what a valuable employee I was, never giving me a chance to ask questions. I must have been very agitated about the talk, because everything around me seemed slightly out of focus; I couldn’t concentrate enough to really take in the grand lobby as we moved through it. I only pressed my briefcase closer to my chest—the one containing my graphs and the photographs of polar bears.

My boss flung open the double doors to the hall, ushering me in.

“Just look how many people came to hear you!” he said with delighted pride. “If I were you, I’d be happy beyond words!”

I stepped into the hall and was immediately deafened by applause. The enormous, ornate room was filled with people in severe suits. Now they were all standing, greeting my arrival with clapping. A true feeling of bliss flooded me. They welcomed me like a hero returned from an important mission. Smiling broadly and nodding graciously left and right to the assembled audience, I walked toward the lectern. Homespunat accompanied me; his face, too, was shining with joy.

“This is exactly how I wanted you to be right now, Viktor,” he said, moving toward the microphone. “Don’t think. Just do what’s required of you.”

“Silence, please,” he said, raising both hands. “Our valued colleague Viktor Graal will acquaint us with his research in the field of glaciology. I have nothing more to add—everything else you will hear from the source!” He nodded toward me, inviting me to the microphone.

Inspiration came over me. Words poured out in a broad stream. I laced the dry figures and charts with jokes, and the audience received them brilliantly. That emboldened me even more, because my jokes had never met with success before. At the end of my speech I showed photographs of polar bears eating cabbage.

“This cabbage,” I concluded somewhat awkwardly, “is my small contribution to the protection of the animal world.”

Again a storm of applause crashed down on me. The elegant people in the hall rose from their seats, shouting my name with rapture:

“Vik-tor! Vik-tor!”

I was at the peak of sensation. A thought flashed through me—unfortunately, I hadn’t had time to warn my parents, to invite them to this conference. How proud they would have been. And suddenly, in the noisy crowd, I saw their familiar faces: my parents, waving at me joyfully. Homespunat, coming up beside me, whispered softly in my ear:

“I arranged everything. I even brought your parents here myself.”

I was startled by how he could have managed all of it, when he had been beside me the entire time. Or had he?

I didn’t have time to follow the thought to the end, because I suddenly noticed a beautiful dark-haired girl approaching the stage where I stood. A huge bouquet partly covered her face, but I could see large dark eyes—exactly like the girl from my dreams. I felt awkward that she meant to present me flowers. As if hearing my thoughts, she flung the bouquet to the floor and ran to me. Smiling widely, she spoke in a melodious voice:

“Viktor! What a triumph! I don’t even know what to say.”

She smiled shyly, and my heart began to beat faster. I was so enchanted that my mind froze; I couldn’t find a single word. She was exactly as I had imagined her: feminine, a little embarrassed. I should probably ask her name.

“What is your name?” I heard myself ask.

“And what name would suit me, in your opinion?” she replied, studying me intently.

I was completely thrown by the strange, unexpected answer. I kept staring at her, but she stayed silent, not taking her eyes off mine. Her pupils dilated, swallowing the entire iris in black. I

watched, spellbound, and it seemed to me that everything around me was losing its edges, turning into fog. I had the sensation that her pupils were drawing me in. Fear pricked at me, and I squeezed my eyes shut, as if trying to break the spell.

When I opened them again, I saw nothing. Darkness surrounded me.

Then, peering closer, I made out the familiar outlines of my dwelling. Outside the window the snowstorm was wailing—which meant that once again I would have to shovel the snow away from the front door.

So it had all been a dream! Never before had I had such long, coherent dreams. Everything had felt completely real. A late-night call from my boss, inviting me to a conference convened especially for me—truly, only in a dream could I have believed such a thing. Besides, my computer was switched off. With a sigh, I returned to my reality, in which I would have to pass another three months alone until the end of my contract.

Suddenly I felt extremely tired, as though I had not slept at all during those few hours. I closed my eyes and at once fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When I woke in the morning, I tried to drive away all thoughts of the previous night's dream so as not to distract myself from my work. I cleared the paths of snow and set out several heads of cabbage for the family of polar bears. To keep from feeling utterly alone, I imagined a large white dog accompanying me as I worked. I even knew his name: Stanley. I felt the name suited him perfectly.

I talked to him as I gazed over the endless snowy expanses, shimmering in many colors beneath the rays of the setting sun. He

ran ahead of me as I returned home. Beside my imaginary friend, I did not feel lonely.

That evening, sitting at the computer, I entered the day's collected data into the program. After dinner I decided to visit a few entertainment sites. And of course Stanley sat beside my chair, dozing peacefully and dreaming of something of his own—something doglike.

Speaking of dreams: I must admit, I had liked my dream about the conference very much. And the girl of my dreams, who had quite literally absorbed me with her gaze. I wondered what her name might be. By the laws of probability, somewhere in the world there must exist a girl who looked like that. What name would suit her? Surely something feminine and mysterious. Ariel, perhaps. Yes—that was exactly right.

Leaning back in my chair, hands clasped behind my head, I began to dream. There I was, returning home with my faithful dog Stanley and, quite by chance, meeting a beautiful girl named Ariel after bumping into her on the street. Or no—better to meet her after the conference. After all, she should be filled with admiration and delight at my intellect and charm. Yes, after the conference—that was perfect. And Stanley would be waiting for me at home.

As I have already mentioned, I love to dream—very methodically, as if telling myself a wonderful story about my own life. That evening I dreamed of traveling with Ariel and my dog Stanley to some warm place, where palm trees grew and the sea lapped gently—or better yet, the ocean. And far from the shore there would be a small island with a sandy beach. In detail I described to myself how Ariel and I chose a destination for our trip, without even thinking about the price, for surely I would

receive a generous bonus for my scientific achievements—perhaps they would even give me the tickets as a gift.

And who were they, so generous?

Before my inner eye there appeared the benevolent face of my boss, Homespunat. He leaned toward me, blocking the girl who stood in front of me, and said:

“Viktor, what’s wrong with you? How are you feeling?”

For some reason his face seemed to hover above me, and only then did I notice that I was lying on a wooden floor in the conference hall. I felt terribly embarrassed and tried to rise. Strong hands grasped me under the arms and lifted me to my feet.

“You suddenly lost consciousness,” Homespunat said, looking at me with concern. “You gave us quite a fright! We’ve called a doctor—he’ll be here any moment.”

My vision swam. I focused my eyes and immediately saw the frightened face of the beautiful stranger. I did not want to appear weak before her, so I shook my head and tried to smile carelessly.

“No need for a doctor. I’m all right. Probably just nerves...”

My boss, Homespunat, sighed with relief and placed his hand on my shoulder in a confidential gesture.

“This is my fault,” he said quietly. “I should have prepared you for this news instead of summoning you here so abruptly.”

I tried to shake off the remnants of the dream in which I had once again found myself at my workplace in the far north. Besides, this reality seemed far more appealing. I smiled broadly at the girl, who was still watching me with a trace of concern.

“Ah, yes,” Homespunat said suddenly. “I haven’t introduced you yet. This is Ariel, our new colleague. I would be grateful if you would bring her up to speed.”

“I have always admired the North,” Ariel joined in. “And your research concerning—”

I could not concentrate on what she was saying. I was too astonished by the fact that her name had come into my mind while I was unconscious, deliriously imagining myself back at my station.

Ariel fell silent, looking at me sympathetically.

“You fainted just after I told you my name. Perhaps you should rest.”

“Of course,” agreed my boss, who had been listening closely to our conversation. “We’ll go to my place. My parents have taken it upon themselves to prepare a festive table for us. As you see, I’ve thought of everything,” he concluded with a smile.

The prospect of meeting his parents did not particularly inspire me. I had no desire to meet convinced nudists—especially now, when I felt so unsettled. I was not sure the sight of elderly naked people would bring peace to my soul.

And speaking of parents—where were mine? I had seen them during my speech. I began looking around, trying to spot them among the people in the hall, who now all seemed to have the same face.

“What is troubling you now?” Homespunat asked, somewhat irritably.

“Where are my parents?” I asked.

My boss cast a nervous glance at Ariel, who stood beside him.

“Perhaps it would be better to meet your parents—that is, yours—another time,” I said soothingly, deciding that his irritation came from my reluctance to visit his home.

“Quite right,” Ariel added, placing her hand gently on mine. “I’m simply impatient to hear Viktor talk about his work.”

Without waiting for Homespunat’s reply, she took me by the hand and led me toward the exit of the hall. At once I forgot everything, enveloped in a cloud of warmth and trust. I followed her, smiling foolishly, noticing nothing around me. I felt very happy: after a conference where I had been the principal speaker, I was following the girl of my dreams. I did not know where she was leading me. It did not seem important. For some reason I was certain that wherever we might be, we could surrender to dreams—shared dreams. And what could be more intoxicating than that?

Ariel stopped and looked into my eyes. Smiling brightly, she said:

“I like you very much like this.”

I did not quite understand what she meant; I only noted to myself that she liked me very much. At that thought, my heart began to beat faster.

“Well, here we are. This is my favorite café. Or a little restaurant. It all depends on what you order here,” she said sweetly, pointing to the bright sign that read Haven.

Several tables stood outside the entrance, covered with cheerful red-and-white tablecloths, each with a small bouquet of wildflowers in a little vase. I had once seen a café like this in childhood, during the holidays. My parents and I had sat there together. For some reason I remembered that episode as one of the happiest moments of my childhood—as a memory that served as a kind of inner refuge whenever doubts tormented me. Probably because of the simple, carefree happiness I had felt

then. And by an incredible coincidence, this establishment, which so strongly resembled that wonderful café from my childhood, was also called Haven.

I headed toward one of the empty tables, gesturing for Ariel to join me. But she stopped, wrinkling her nose in displeasure.

“I’d rather sit inside,” she explained. “There are few people there, and no one will disturb us while we dream.”

I was slightly surprised by the way she phrased it. Usually one speaks of a place where one can talk peacefully, not dream. But Ariel truly was an unusual girl—a dreamer, like me. After all, as I have already said, dreaming is my favorite occupation.

Smiling broadly, I was about to follow her toward the entrance of the café with the curious name Haven when Ariel stopped me and, with a playful laugh, suggested:

“Close your eyes and imagine what the place looks like inside. Let’s see whether I guessed right in bringing you here.”

Obediently, I closed my eyes and imagined a saloon familiar to me from Western films: a long wooden counter lined with stools, a dusty plank floor, a gloomy, suspicious bartender, women in shabby clothes sitting at tables. I don’t even know why a saloon came to mind.

Opening my eyes, I shook my head theatrically.

“I doubt you guessed. But I like this place anyway.”

Ariel only smiled mysteriously in reply, which made her seem even more charming. I followed her inside, unable to take my eyes off her neat hairstyle.

Inside the café there was a strong smell of dust. An unpleasant feeling came over me that the place had not been cleaned in a long time. Strange—the tables outside had looked perfectly tidy. A

dim half-light filled the room, and I had to squint to make out the surroundings. Along the opposite wall stretched a long wooden counter, behind which a bartender in a stained white apron stared at us unfriendly. Women seated at wooden tables were examining us with undisguised curiosity.

I looked at Ariel in confusion. I was so struck by how closely this place resembled the saloon I had imagined that no other thought came to me. Only at the edge of my awareness did I notice that Ariel was asking me something. Her concerned face drew close to mine, and I saw her eyes with their large black pupils. It seemed as if the air around me had thickened, wrapping me in a cocoon of cotton. I felt a flicker of fear and closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, I found myself, to my regret, sitting in an uncomfortable position at my computer. I stood up and walked around the room a few times to loosen my stiff legs. The dream seemed so unusual and at the same time so real that I sat down again, trying to recall it in detail. Morning had already come, and I should have begun my routine work. But instead I sat staring into space, replaying the dream in my mind.

Or rather, there had been two dreams, the second a continuation of the first. Could my vivid imagination really be producing such extraordinary dreams, in which my wishes came true? No need to go to the cinema—very convenient. You dream up your own script, and then you see and experience it in sleep.

This realization pleased me greatly. At least I would not be so bored or lonely in the remaining three months of my stay here among the snowy plains. Though I did notice one flaw in those dreams: the absence of my imaginary white dog, Stanley. Though

how could he fit into a story with Ariel? I would think about that later.

Being, by nature, a responsible person, I set about my routine work, performing it almost automatically. Already I was looking forward to the evening, to lying down and surrendering to dreams, hoping to live them again in sleep.

Returning home, I turned on the computer to upload the day's measurements of the ice cover. I hurried, trying to finish my tasks as quickly as possible so I could return to my dreams. The computer displayed a notification of a missed video call from my parents. I decided I would call them back another time. And tomorrow I would give the family of polar bears a double portion of vegetables—I had somehow forgotten to feed them today, so absorbed had I been in my dreams. A powerful inner desire to return to them pushed all other needs into the background. I had not eaten all day, but I had no appetite, and besides, I did not want to waste time. I needed it to go on dreaming.

I lay down under the blanket, pulling it over my head. But instead of dreaming, I began recalling my dreams in detail, at the center of which was Ariel. As I remembered them, I noticed a pattern: in both cases I had awakened when I looked into her eyes. They would turn black, and I would seem to drown in them, poetically speaking. In those moments I would freeze, without a single thought in my mind. I resolved inwardly not to look into her eyes for too long again.

Without noticing it, I fell asleep.

When I woke the next morning, I realized with regret that I had dreamed nothing at all. Absolutely nothing. The only positive thing was that I had slept well. That, at least, was something.

With a sigh I got up to prepare breakfast. I was very hungry, since I had had no appetite the day before. Speaking of appetite—I mustn't forget the polar bears. They were already used to finding all sorts of treats near my cabin.

I went about my work accompanied by my imaginary friend, the dog Stanley. Sometimes I would reach out my hand into the air, as if stroking his soft white fur. And he would leap happily around me, gazing up at me with loyal eyes.

In good spirits I returned home. After making myself some hot tea, I sat down at the computer. The first thing I did was call my parents by video link. I didn't want them worrying because I had missed their calls. They complained that I looked somewhat worn out after my severe cold, and I promised to take better care of myself. After exchanging news and the usual polite phrases, we ended the call, and I began entering the new data on the parameters of ice and snow into a special table.

While doing so, I noticed anomalous changes in the density of the snow at a site about eight hundred meters from my house. I had already observed this a few days earlier and had decided to continue measuring that layer of snow at greater depth. I felt slightly ashamed that my dreams had distracted me from this problem. The anomaly might be the result of a stone slab or other rocky formations lying at some depth. No geodetic map indicated anything of the kind in that area.

I decided to inform my supervisor, Homespunat Lepota, attaching the table of measured changes in snow density. After sending him an email, I outlined a work plan for the next few days, hoping at least to estimate the size of the stone deposits beneath the centuries-compacted snow.

I spent the rest of the evening idly browsing entertainment sites. From time to time I recalled my dreams of Ariel, which had been so vividly wonderful. It was a pity they had stopped. But dreams are dreams, and interesting work awaited me. I would need to review the collected data on ice and snow parameters once more; perhaps it would give me a clue about the origin of that rocky formation. What if it were a large plateau, still unknown to science?

I was just about to open my work page when an article caught my eye: "Imagination and Its Positive Influence on Our Perception of the World." The letters on the screen seemed to quiver, as if drawing my attention. Of course they were not really quivering—it only seemed so to me. And the title truly did attract me, especially the words positive influence. That always sounded good.

After reading the first few lines, I found myself drifting into daydreams. It is not hard to guess that they all concerned Ariel, the girl of my dreams. She seemed very real to me after those dreams about her. If only they would come again. How wonderful it would be to travel with her to a warm sea, to lie beside her on the sand beneath the soft murmur of the surf, to dine somewhere under palm trees in the open air.

I once saw a film in which the characters sat by candlelight at a table beneath palms, while stars glittered above them in the sky, winking mysteriously. How wonderful it would be to be there with Ariel, holding her hand, watching the stars together.

I closed my eyes, blissfully surrendering to my reverie. Apparently I dozed off, for I felt the light touch of a hand resting on my shoulder.

“Ariel,” I whispered, opening my eyes.

I was sitting at a table in the restaurant Haven. Ariel sat opposite me, looking into my eyes with concern. Behind the long wooden counter stood the owner, polishing a glass with a towel that did not look very clean.

“You suddenly fell asleep, and I decided to wake you,” Ariel explained. “You slept for almost an hour.”

I felt very awkward, and uneasy under the suspicious gaze of the bartender.

“Let’s find some other place,” I suggested, rising from my chair.

Ariel lifted her eyebrows in surprise.

“You don’t like it here? Weren’t you dreaming of visiting a real saloon?”

I was not even surprised that she seemed somewhat familiar with my dreams. Ariel was the perfect girl, able to read the thoughts of the man she loved—and I was that man. The thought pleased me greatly. Satisfied, I sat down again. Actually, it wasn’t so bad here. For the full effect, only a pianist was missing, briskly striking the keys of an upright piano.

And at that very moment, a thin dark-skinned man appeared from behind the bartender. Stepping out from behind the counter, he went to an old piano against the wall and lifted its lid with a bang. A lively tune began to play, familiar from films, the kind to which cowboys with large revolvers usually start a brawl before continuing it with gunfire somewhere in the street.

I had scarcely had time to think this when a large group of young men dressed as cowboys entered the hall, all of them mustached. Immediately a fight broke out, chairs splintering, shots fired into the ceiling. Startled, I wanted to crawl under the table,

and only the unreality of the scene stopped me. Surely I had wandered onto the set of a new Western film. Looking around, I did indeed notice a large camera moving along rails.

“It’s a surprise,” Ariel explained with a smile, noticing my confusion. “The director of this film is a good friend of mine. So this scene is just part of our romantic walk.”

I looked at her gratefully, admiring her beautiful face with its large black eyes.

The rest of the day passed as if in a dream, strolling with her through softly lit streets. I told her whatever came into my head, and she reacted exactly as I could only have imagined in dreams—catching every word, laughing sincerely at my clumsy jokes. I even confessed to her my worry about my dreams, about how whenever I suddenly fell asleep I found myself alone again, in my work cabin, and that the only thing I truly wished for was to be beside her again, with Ariel. And when I was alone at my workplace, I was certain she existed only in my dreams. She listened attentively.

“Life and reality are where your dreams and your desired events come together,” she said. “Everything else is a dream. Keep dreaming—it makes me happy. I am real—look.”

Laughing, she pinched my wrist, leaving a red mark.

I gasped at the unexpected pain. Her fingers were strong, and it truly hurt. That confirmed that I was not asleep, and I felt overjoyed. So this was reality—this was the world I lived in. How simple everything was. Why had I ever doubted?

The rest of the day was wonderful; I could not have imagined a better turn of events. Ariel eagerly followed my words, asking where and how I would like to spend my vacation after such

demanding work. I told her of my desire to visit exotic countries with long sandy beaches and tropical forests filled with huge, fragrant flowers. She clapped her hands in delight, then suddenly asked:

“And is there a place for me in this exotic country?”

In reply I embraced her and pressed her lovely head to my chest. The moment felt deeply romantic. Only the proper music was missing—something joyful, yet full of anticipation.

I remembered a certain concerto for strings that had always impressed me with its energy and beauty. Listening to it, I used to imagine snowflakes swirling in the air, thickening into little whirlwinds from which winter sleighs would suddenly take shape, gliding through the sky. I think it was Vivaldi’s Winter.

I felt awkward that, at such a moment of closeness with Ariel, I had begun recalling a piece of music. She was surely waiting for tender words from me. I was just about to apologize for my distraction when I suddenly heard that very music.

“There’s an open-air concert in the square today,” Ariel told me. “That’s where I was taking you. Come—it’s close by.”

She took my hand, and we ran toward the square, where musicians with string instruments were seated in the center. Snowflakes began to fall from the sky—huge ones, almost the size of a palm. Several squirrels came dancing up and sat before the musicians. The snow grew thicker, filling the air with white mist, from which enormous sleighs, gleaming white, began to descend from above.

I watched it all, spellbound, holding Ariel’s hand tightly. A feeling of boundless happiness overwhelmed me.

“Dream—just dream,” Ariel whispered, her warm breath brushing my ear. “This is your reality. Forget your work, forget the anomalous snow density—that is not what makes you happy.”

Her mention of my discovery about the anomalous snow density startled me. I had never told her about it.

“How do you know about that?” I asked. “That was only a dream.”

“Of course—only a dream. Don’t doubt it.” As she said this, Ariel looked into my eyes, as if making sure that I agreed.

And of course I agreed. Reality could only be like this—beautiful, fulfilling every wish and dream. Every wish?

I remembered my imaginary friend, the dog Stanley. I used to think of him when I slept and dreamed that I worked somewhere far in the north, all alone. And I used to feed a family of polar bears there...

The memory of them unsettled me for some reason. My thoughts froze—and the entire square froze with them, the sleighs hanging motionless in the air. Ariel’s eyes filled with blackness, swallowing me. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to drive away the memory and bring back that boundless happiness. When I opened them again, I saw that I was back at the station, sitting in my chair before the computer. With regret I realized I had fallen asleep again.

For several minutes I sat staring at the darkened screen. The last thing I had been reading was an engaging article about the benefits of a vivid imagination. Now the article was gone, which confirmed my suspicion that all of this had been a dream. I distinctly remembered not closing it and not turning off the computer.

On the other hand, it was good that I was asleep—tomorrow morning I would meet Ariel again. In my real world, without duties and loneliness. I only needed to review my collected data once more and think through a plan for further work.

What work? I stopped myself. This was only a dream—I needed to gather strength. What had Ariel said? “Dream! That is reality,” or something like that. I couldn’t remember the exact word order, but the meaning was clear. And sleep is the best reason to dream. I wanted desperately to return to her. I had never imagined dreams could weigh on a person so heavily—especially mine, so realistic, so full of work and loneliness.

And yet, I won’t lie: I liked the North, with its frosts and boundless snowy plains, and I took pleasure in feeding the polar bears and then watching them through the cameras I had set up. My thoughts tangled, and I completely lost my sense of what was reality and what was dream. I decided to orient myself by where I felt happier. I did not need to think long; the answer was obvious: beside Ariel. That was my reality.

Suddenly I felt an urgent desire to show her a sandy beach with palm trees. Forgetting the anomalous snow density and the family of polar bears, I sank into daydreams. I did not even notice the moment when I found myself in my reality—where all my desires were fulfilled: incredible trips and adventures, where I easily dealt with bandits who tried to offend my Ariel. I was a hero, a brilliant conversationalist with boundless humor and irresistible charm.

From time to time I would suddenly fall asleep and see myself sitting in the chair before the computer. Then I would hurriedly try to plunge back into the dazzling world where all my dreams came

true. Each time I found myself again at the northern station, I felt more and more exhausted—so much so that I no longer had the strength or desire to rise from that chair, which had become a kind of launchpad for meeting Ariel—my dream.

Somewhere at the edge of my awareness I saw messages on the computer screen about missed calls from my parents and colleagues, who were trying in vain to reach me. But it hardly bothered me; it was only a dream. I would wake up and contact them. If I remembered. For now I needed to sink into dreams—this was important, and Ariel thought so too, and that was also important.

I closed my eyes in bliss.

“Of course it’s important,” her trilling voice sounded very near. “Your dreams guide your life.”

Opening my eyes, I saw her dazzling smile. We were on a beach of gleaming white sand sparkling in the sun. Emerald waves rolled softly onto the shore, forming a light foam. Far out at sea—or was it the ocean?—a small island could be seen, crowned with a grove of palms. It reminded me strongly of an illustration from *Robinson Crusoe*, a book I had read in childhood.

Sparse white clouds, reflected in the water like in a mirror, gave the landscape an especially romantic cast.

That comparison—sea as mirror—reminded me of a mirror maze, one I suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to visit. I wasn’t thinking of a particular maze in any particular place. Just to go in, see the countless reflections, and try to find the way out—wasn’t that a fine way to spend time?

“Viktor, there’s a mirror maze right near the beach,” Ariel said, perfectly in step with my thoughts.

I was already used to her reading my mind, so I wasn't surprised. Without thinking long, we headed toward the promenade. A huge advertising poster near the embankment proclaimed:

"Today only! The famous mirror maze, created by craftsmen from Venice according to ancient drawings!"

A red arrow beneath the text pointed the direction we were to go. Soon we stood before the entrance to the maze, decorated with multicolored bulbs. With joyful anticipation I stepped inside, gently embracing my Ariel by the shoulders. And immediately, in the enormous mirror opposite the entrance, I saw a reflection. I cannot bring myself to say our reflection. In the mirror I saw myself sitting on a chair before a computer. Dark circles lay under my eyes; I looked utterly drained. Beside me, in a wheelchair, sat a dreadful-looking woman with neatly arranged gray hair. Behind her hung a dark curtain. Her hooked nose drooped over thin lips painted a bright color. Those lips parted in a smile, baring large artificial teeth. Our images in the mirror looked pasted together like a collage.

"Dream, Viktor—this is your reality!" she said, and at the same time she transformed into the beautiful sun-kissed Ariel.

Horrified, I stumbled backward from the mirror and fainted.

I came to on the bed in the sleeping room of my dwelling. I tried to sit up, but then fell weakly back onto the pillow. I felt an oxygen mask on my face, and only then noticed several people bent over me. They wore warm blue jackets.

"Lie still. It's all right," one of them said, then added more loudly, "He's awake!"

My boss, Homespunat Lepota, came up, pushing the medics aside. He bent over me anxiously. Deep wrinkles furrowed his broad face, and he did not look as well-groomed as he had in my dreams.

“What have you done...” he said reproachfully. “You could have died. The doctors say you’ve eaten almost nothing for nearly a week. And you didn’t ask for help.”

“Nearly a week,” I whispered, moving my dry lips with difficulty. Then I lost consciousness again.

From time to time I came around, only noting where I was: a helicopter, a plane, a train, my parents’ apartment.

My parents flatly refused to put me in a hospital; instead they turned their bedroom into a medical ward. My boss, Homespunat, supported them, offering to cover all additional expenses for my care. Surrounded by attention and concern, I recovered quickly. I felt terribly ashamed that I had caused my closest people so much trouble. When they asked what had led to my exhaustion, I only said that I had lost touch with reality. I could hardly tell them about my dreams. Besides, I was afraid that if I confessed too much, they would send me to a psychiatrist.

Homespunat Lepota visited often, and during one of his visits I told him about the family of polar bears I had been feeding.

“Don’t worry about them,” he replied with a smile. “We sent two staff members to the station—they found your bears. I assure you they won’t go hungry. And by the way, those employees brought special equipment to investigate the anomalous snow density in the region you indicated. Good work, Viktor!” he added, praising me.

As soon as I had recovered enough to take long walks, I went to an animal shelter. I intended to choose a large white dog for myself, the kind I had dreamed of while living at the northern station. But instead I took a small dog of unknown breed, which had been sitting sadly in the corner, covering its ears with its paws. I named him Stanley, and he became my friend, settling into my apartment as if he had always belonged there.

I began going back to work. There I processed the data obtained from studying the site of the anomalous snow density. At home my Stanley greeted me joyfully, and we would go out for walks together. In the evenings I called my parents so they would not worry too much about me. My life settled into a regular rhythm, giving me a sense of stability.

Only at first I was very afraid to fall asleep. My wish-fulfilling dreams now seemed monstrous to me, robbing me of my will and my own desires. They had almost cost me my life. I tried not to think about them anymore, pushing them to the far corners of my mind. My sleep gradually normalized, giving me proper rest before the next day. I also acquired the pleasant habit of buying fresh newspapers during my morning walks with Stanley, to read them at breakfast.

After the events that had happened to me at the northern station, I preferred to learn the news the old-fashioned way—from newspapers—avoiding any internet pages that had nothing to do with my work. I also tried to rid myself of my habit of drifting into daydreams. That was the only thing that caused me some discomfort. I had to restrain myself strongly so as not to indulge in detailed fantasies before going to sleep.

One morning, during a walk with Stanley, I accidentally collided with a young woman. She was walking with her eyes fixed on her mobile phone, noticing nothing around her, and literally ran into me. Smiling apologetically, she hurried on. I stood there, watching her in astonishment: she looked strikingly like the girl from my dreams. Only she was shorter, and above the right corner of her mouth there was a small mole. My heart began to beat faster. I stood as if spellbound, staring after her retreating figure.

At home, over breakfast, I could not concentrate on the newspaper. Memories of my dreams flooded back. I thought of how happy I had felt in them—aside from the unfortunate side effect that I had nearly died of exhaustion. But that had been my own fault, since I had simply forgotten how to distinguish waking from dreaming. And dreaming, after all, is always pleasant. I would simply have to restrain my vivid imagination a little.

All day long I could not get that fleeting encounter with the beautiful stranger out of my head. It would be nice to find her again. I wondered if she had a boyfriend.

Before falling asleep that night, lying in bed, I began to dream of meeting her—of course during a walk with my beloved dog Stanley. Then I suddenly remembered that I must take him to the veterinarian for vaccinations; summer was coming, and with it ticks and the danger of fleas. Promising myself mentally that I would take care of it the very next day, I fell asleep.

Strangely enough, in the following days I did not remember the fleeting encounter with the stranger who resembled my ideal. Probably the reason was the enormous amount of information from our northern station that I had to process and use to prepare a report with my conclusions and proposals.

About a week later I saw her again. I had taken Stanley out for a walk along our usual route. She was standing at the entrance to the bakery where I bought my newspaper, thoughtfully counting the coins in her wallet. I decided not to miss the opportunity and walked toward her, pulling my dog along on the leash, though I had no clear plan for how to approach her.

The moment she saw me, she quickly hid her wallet and hurried away. I stood there, bewildered, watching her go. Suddenly she stopped, turned, and gave me a dazzling smile. It was so unexpected that I froze in place, my mouth slightly open in surprise. Could it be that she liked me?

Almost as if on wings, I continued my walk, already imagining the details of how we might meet.

It is hardly surprising that I devoted that evening, after work and my walk with Stanley, to dreaming about her. There I was, walking down the street when I suddenly saw her. She twisted her ankle, and I ran to her just in time, catching her and saving her from falling. She smiled shyly and reluctantly freed herself from my embrace. In a melodious voice she thanked me:

“Thank you. I must have stepped awkwardly.”

Then, looking tenderly into my eyes, she continued:

“I was frightened. I thought you had forgotten your Ariel. But you haven’t forgotten me, have you, Viktor?”

I looked at her in astonishment.

“And where is the mole above your lip?” I asked.

“A mole?” she repeated. “Why do I have a mole now?”

Her voice turned creaky, like an old woman’s, and her features began to distort. The smooth face suddenly wrinkled, the pretty

nose enlarged, hanging over a narrow mouth. I pushed her away and woke at once.

I was sitting up in bed, my heart pounding. I had seen that old woman before. Then, in my dream, we had stood before some mirror, and I had seen her reflection. It was because of her that I had abandoned my dreams. And yet, on the other hand, those dreams had nearly killed me.

Why, in fact? Because they acted on me like a powerful narcotic, making me forget reality and sink into a world of sweet fantasies. An uneasy feeling told me that something was happening which I needed to understand. I was afraid of going mad, and afraid of being taken for mad if I shared my problems with anyone. I would have to clarify the situation myself. At that moment I felt as though I had fallen into a trap set by some unknown old woman who fed upon my dreams.

I decided that the very next morning I would recall everything that had happened to me—recall it without falling into a dreamy state—and then analyze the situation and draw conclusions, just as I processed data from our northern station.

Stanley sensed my agitation. With a soft bark he jumped onto the bed and settled comfortably beside me. I lay down as well, resting my hand on his warm side, and soon fell asleep without dreams.

I was fortunate: long holidays were beginning, and I would have enough time at least to begin uncovering the cause of these strange dreams. I even disappointed my parents by refusing to spend the weekend with them, but I eased my conscience by deciding that I would certainly take a trip with them sometime—and with my dog Stanley, of course.

After my morning walk and breakfast, I sat down at my desk, placing sheets of paper and a pen before me. Taking a deep breath, I began. I started by describing the day of my first dream, when I had been taken by helicopter from the station to a conference. I described everything I had experienced in detail, including my physical condition between the dreams. Then, rereading my notes several times, I came to the following conclusions: the dreams had been extremely coherent. They continued as long as I kept dreaming, and they ended the moment something in them disturbed or confused me. As for my physical state, the dreams exhausted me, giving me no rest. They intoxicated me, forcing me again and again to plunge into fantasies, completely forgetting reality.

As far as I remembered, all my wishes had narrowed to dreams about Ariel, an image born of my own imagination. Yet normally my dreams were varied; I did not fixate on a single theme. It was as if some force compelled me to forget everything else and think only of her.

And then there were those unexpected messages that had appeared on my computer screen... They had seemed to read my thoughts. No—one could become paranoid that way. If I followed that line of reasoning, it would mean that someone was reading my mind and even directing it. But why? And those sudden encounters in the street with a girl so like my ideal—exactly at the time when I had just recovered from exhaustion and returned to my routine life. And I had begun to dream again, and once more I had found myself captive in dreams with Ariel—Ariel without the

mole above her lip. And that had irritated her so much that in my dream she had again transformed into the dreadful old woman. I became frightened for my mental state. After all, I was inventing some sort of conspiracy against myself, and the goal of this conspiracy was my dreams. Was that not a sign of mental illness—these very conclusions of mine?

I forced myself inwardly to turn away from such strange thoughts and inferences, yet something would not let me rest. From experience I already knew that the best way to escape obsessive ideas was to occupy myself with something that completely absorbed my attention. So I sat down at the computer to review once more the data on the anomalous snow density. Comparing numerous parameters, I drafted a letter to my supervisor, Homespunat Lepota, outlining my recommendations for further research—specifically, the installation of drilling rigs at certain points, the coordinates of which I attached.

Satisfied with the work I had done, I spent the rest of the day reading an engaging book. It absorbed me so thoroughly that only Stanley's whining reminded me it was time for his walk.

Dusk was already falling, though the streetlamps had not yet been lit. Stanley and I followed our usual route, which passed through a small park. At that hour it was usually crowded, and today was no exception. Many people had come out of their small apartments for fresh air, occupying the benches. The playground was filled with mothers watching their children at play with tender smiles. All around were the sounds of laughter, conversation, and the barking of dogs also brought out for walks.

I liked watching people. By nature I was not very sociable. Sometimes I wondered what people could talk about for so long.

Occasionally I would stop near a group just to overhear their conversation. Stanley walked obediently at my side, wagging his tail. Near the playground he met a small, friendly dog. I exchanged a brief smile with its owner, and we stood together watching our pets.

Suddenly I noticed the mysterious girl I had already encountered in the street. She stood watching the children play, smiling faintly. The streetlamps began to glow, and in their light I could clearly see her face. I approached to speak to her. I was already within arm's reach when she looked at me in fright and stepped back. Strangely, this time she had no mole above her lip.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Do you live nearby?”

I had never before approached a strange woman in the street, but my curiosity overcame me.

“There are too many people here,” she said. Her voice was very different from Ariel's in my dreams. “Shall we walk to another street?”

Her suggestion puzzled me greatly. Did it mean she wanted to get to know me?

Stanley noticed that I was speaking to a stranger. He ran up happily, rising on his hind legs and trying to reach her face, his tongue out. The girl recoiled in fright, raising her hands. I pulled Stanley back, apologizing at the same time:

“Don't be afraid—sorry about my dog, he just wanted to...”

I broke off, noticing that her long dark hair was a wig. It had shifted slightly, revealing a pale lock beneath. Seeing my glance, she felt for the wig, quickly straightened it, and after freezing for a moment, ran. Stanley dashed after her, and I hurried after him, gripping the leash tightly.

We were faster. Catching up with her, I seized her arm and turned her to face me. Only then did I notice that the mole above her lip was concealed beneath makeup, faintly showing through.

“Who are you?” I asked again. “I won’t let you go until you answer me.”

Afterward I was astonished at my own persistence; never before had I behaved so aggressively toward strangers, especially not toward a woman.

She looked at me and at Stanley, who had sat obediently by my leg, clearly frightened. I did not take my eyes off her. At last she spoke, apparently sensing my determination:

“I won’t harm you. I was simply hired. I only had to attract your attention—nothing more. Please believe me.”

“Who hired you?”

“Through our agency. I’m a beginner actress, and the good pay for such a trivial task seemed attractive. And I’m afraid of dogs.”

“What agency, and who hired you?” I repeated.

“The agency is called ‘Art-Show.’ I don’t know the client’s name. They just called and offered me the job. Please, let me go!”

“And why did you cover the mole?” I pressed on.

“As far as I understood, it was the client’s request—and there was an additional bonus if I managed to lure you to a less crowded place. That’s all I know, honestly.”

I released her, and she immediately ran off, holding her wig in place. I stood watching her go, feeling my heart pounding.

Returning home, I sat down at the computer and opened the page of the theatrical agency Art-Show. Indeed, in the actors’ catalog I found the photograph of a dyed blonde woman with a neat mole above her lip. And of course her name was not Ariel but

Maya Bag—almost certainly a stage name. I must admit, her features strongly resembled Ariel from my dreams.

To be honest, meeting Maya Bag and speaking with her brought me some relief. It confirmed that I was right in my suspicions and perfectly sane. Now I needed to find the mysterious “client” and learn why he was interested in my dreams. I had no wish to live under the threat that my dreams might be stolen again. I was certain that this was exactly what had happened, and in my mind I even named that mysterious client—or clients—the Dream Thieves.

So, tomorrow morning I would call the agency and try to find out who had hired Maya Bag. Then I remembered that it was a holiday period, and I was unlikely to reach anyone there—and even if I did, no one would reveal the client’s name. I would have to devise another plan. Though what was there to devise? I knew perfectly well where I would meet the Dream Thieves. The entrance to their “domain” lay in my dreams, and it was in my power to leave it as well.

That night, full of determination, I sank into dreams of Ariel.

I must say, it was difficult. The face of the ideal girl I had invented kept being obscured by the face of the aspiring actress Maya. Again and again I saw the mole hidden under makeup and the crooked wig. One might say I dreamed through clenched teeth, forcing myself to imagine happy moments of meeting Ariel. But my thoughts kept slipping to those unknown people who could manipulate my dreams and fantasies.

I tried to imagine where they might be. And another thought occurred to me: if the Dream Thieves could read my thoughts, establishing some extraordinarily powerful mental connection with

me, that connection could not be without consequence. Somehow they had linked themselves to me—and the link still existed. After all, Maya Bag had been hired to push me back into dreaming.

What if I could use that invisible connection myself?

I imagined a thin thread binding me to the Dream Thieves. It would be my Ariadne's thread, helping me, like Theseus, to find my way out of the labyrinth of the subconscious and reach my tormentors. Yes—I used that word deliberately: tormentors.

Because of them I had nearly lost my life.

In my mind I seized the invisible thread, trying not to lose hold of it. It began to glow with a strange green light, filling all the space around me. My thoughts tangled, and at last, exhausted, I fell asleep.

I dreamed that I was standing before enormous iron gates, rusted in places. One of the wings stood slightly ajar. I pushed against it, but for some reason it would not yield. Beyond the gates I could see a wide sandy road, and along it trees had been planted in neat rows. All of them were trimmed, resembling sentries guarding the entrance to the grounds.

Suddenly a thin man appeared beyond the gate. His features were Asian, with high cheekbones, and he wore dark clothing. I could see him in detail, which is unusual in dreams. I even felt a faint breath of wind on my face, and my nostrils caught the delicate fragrance of some flowering plant.

The stranger did not take his piercing eyes off me. He stretched his arms forward, as if trying to keep me at a distance. His low voice sounded loudly inside my head. He spoke without moving his lips:

“Leave, and do not seek us. We know of your plans. Leave. Wake up, wake up, wake up.”

He repeated the word, hypnotizing me with his gaze. I felt very frightened and woke. I could not fall asleep again that night. I kept replaying the encounter in my mind. I had no doubt that I had come face to face with one of the thieves of my dreams.

I spent the rest of the night thinking, turning on the bedside lamp that cast a cozy yellow light. After calming down somewhat, I resolved to reason logically. What had happened? I had been directly asked to leave “them”—that is, those whom I called the Dream Thieves—in peace. That meant that my doubts and guesses posed a danger to them.

What troubled me, however, was that the actions of these thieves lately seemed poorly thought out, almost improvised. Just think of the aspiring actress Maya Bag’s crooked wig. It was as if they had not had time to prepare properly to lure me back into devoting all my time to dreaming. Why such haste? What—or who—was forcing them to act so amateurishly, undermining the very anonymity they had constructed?

I was curious to understand it, but how? I was honest with myself and knew that I would never willingly endure another encounter like the one that night. Yet the surroundings themselves had not been frightening: neat paths, well-kept trees, the scent of flowers—everything had been so real that I decided to try to find that estate. There was nothing criminal in that; many people are interested in architecture. Or gardening. Or even unusual entrance gates. I would simply take an interest as well.

Suddenly I caught myself, remembering that my thoughts and plans were not secret from my opponents. The girl they had sent,

so like my ideal, had tried to lead me away from a crowded place. Gathering all my willpower, I forced my thoughts onto other subjects. Why not spend the weekend with my parents after all? They would be very happy.

Thinking of them calmed me, and at last I fell asleep. I slept without dreams until late morning. After informing my delighted parents that I was coming, I set out to visit them with Stanley. The next two days we spent talking and taking walks.

Knowing that my father was interested in urban architecture, I casually steered the conversation toward that favorite subject of his. For the past two years, since retiring, he had devoted himself to this hobby. My mother supported him in it wholeheartedly and used his interest as a way to organize outings, so that he would spend more time in the fresh air. Sometimes she found information about abandoned estates or farmsteads, or about large houses preserved and handed down from generation to generation. Then they would go there, and my father would take numerous photographs, adding them to his collection, of which he was very proud.

They were carefully sorted into folders with specific titles and architectural styles. In a separate category he had also gathered photographs of wells, both ruined and still in use. His interest in architecture met with my full approval; in my view it was a fascinating hobby. I expressed my curiosity about his collection, and he gladly offered to show it to me.

That evening, after tea, we settled comfortably on the sofa in my parents' living room. By "we" I mean my mother, my father, myself, and Stanley, dozing contentedly after a long walk. Concentrating and trying not to let my thoughts wander, I

examined the photographs with genuine interest, reading the captions and descriptions of the buildings that had caught my parents' attention.

Judging by the notes, most of these places were located within about sixty kilometers of our city. I admired my parents' enthusiasm in making excursions over such distances merely to admire and photograph something that interested them.

In one of the photographs I saw very striking gates with an intricate metal pattern. They looked impressive, though it would have been good to repaint them: rust showed in several places. Beyond them stretched a wide sandy road lined with neatly trimmed trees. One could immediately sense the hand of an experienced gardener. I read the caption beneath the photograph: "Villa Belinda."

Then I moved on to other, equally interesting pictures. My father was clearly pleased by my sincere interest and willingly provided explanations about the places shown. For example, one half-ruined well stood in a former mining settlement. Over time the village had been abandoned after the mine closed and now resembled a ghost town. Indeed, in the background I noticed several buildings surrounded by a small grove. A few more years, and nature would reclaim them entirely.

There was also a short history about Villa Belinda: it had been built at the beginning of the last century by a wealthy physician and named after his wife. Afterward, by family tradition, all girls born in the family were named Belinda. There had even been a time when three sisters bore the name simultaneously and were distinguished only by age: Belinda the elder, Belinda the middle,

and Belinda the younger. The story struck me as somewhat strange and improbable, but many local legends are like that.

So, in conversation, we passed the rest of the day, and only late in the evening did Stanley and I return home.

The next day, toward evening, I went for a walk alone, taking my laptop with me. The weather was pleasant—no rain, and a mild temperature—so the park was crowded. I chose a bench already occupied by two women watching their children play while carrying on an animated conversation, apparently exchanging experiences of family life.

The park was noisy, and I relaxed a little, allowing myself to think freely about my situation. I still had some fear that my thoughts might be overheard. But then I remembered the efforts of Maya, the aspiring actress, who had tried to lure me away from a crowded place. Of course—from the very beginning I had been an ideal target for the Dream Thieves: a solitary dreamer far from other people, with no stray thoughts around me to interfere with their tuning in to my “wavelength.”

I edged a few centimeters closer to the loudly talking woman beside me. Now the noise of voices and the multitude of thoughts in the air would surely form a protective screen around me. Even so, out of caution, I tried to disguise my true aim in my own mind, concentrating instead on studying the route that led to an old well from my father’s collection.

Interesting—the path to it passed by an abandoned farmstead, also a worthy object of study. I would have to mention it to my father the next time we met.

I began listening attentively to the conversation of the women beside me on the bench while at the same time typing “Villa Belinda” into a search page.

“And I was so terrified when they disappeared—I ran to all the neighbors, thought I was going to have a heart attack,” one of them was saying.

“So where did your children turn up?” her friend asked.

“You won’t believe it! They went to the nearest shop to try perfumes and poured them all over themselves! I asked the shop assistants where they were looking—who leaves children unattended like that?”

“Yes, these days nobody takes responsibility,” the other agreed readily.

I found myself reflecting on the conversation I had just overheard while browsing photographs of the villa that interested me. There were many of them, since it was officially considered a cultural monument, an architectural and landscape landmark.

Online I found images of imposing iron gates, a long avenue lined with trees, flowerbeds, and the columned façade of the main building. There were also several pictures of the interior rooms. I especially liked a study with a fireplace and built-in bookshelves of pale wood. A large writing desk made of the same wood stood there, and the chairs and armchairs looked so comfortable they seemed to invite one to sit down with a glass of wine.

I immediately checked myself, forcing my thoughts elsewhere. I did not want my plans and ideas to become known again to people I did not even know—at least not now.

After sitting a few more minutes on the bench, I headed home at an unhurried pace, trying not to think of anything specific but

simply watching passersby. I even liked the calm I felt within myself. And yet I was preparing for a mental encounter with an adversary I did not understand.

I spent the rest of the evening comfortably settled on the sofa with Stanley, watching television. A film was playing about a war between two Asian gangs; at that moment the action was taking place in a noisy disco—or, as they now call it, a nightclub—crowded with people and loud music. Faces with high cheekbones and narrow eyes flashed across the screen. I studied them, trying to memorize them. The exercise distracted me perfectly, which was precisely my aim.

After the film I fed Stanley and went to bed—or rather, began to carry out my plan. Though “plan” was too grand a word. It had not yet taken definite shape and hovered somewhere on the edges of my consciousness. I had only to take the first step. I had no intention of leaving the thieves and abusers of my dreams unpunished.

Pulling the blanket over myself, I closed my eyes and imagined that I was on the grounds of Villa Belinda. I was certain I was on the right path—after all, it was behind those very gates that I had seen the face of the Asian man threatening me. And the long avenue lined with trees left no doubt.

There I was, walking along the avenue, a light breeze touching my face. The path was lit only by the dim glow of the moon and the shimmering stars. But I had a guide—the brightly illuminated windows on the second floor of the mansion looming at the end of the avenue.

Before my mind's eye appeared the cozy study with its pale wooden furniture. How pleasant it would be to sit there in one of the armchairs before the fireplace. I immediately imagined that I was already there. Fire crackled in the hearth, and its flames cast strange shadows upon the walls.

Beside me in an armchair sat an elderly woman resembling the one from my dreams. In those dreams she had terrified me, but now I tried to create a different image of her in my mind: a woman wise with years, possessing humor and the gift of pleasant conversation. What more could one wish beside a fireplace than an engaging companion? And there were so many books here—I was curious to look through them.

At once I felt a dry, thin hand rest upon mine. I turned, smiling in a friendly way, and saw the old woman's head inclined toward me. She was smiling broadly, her head trembling slightly. The firelight reflected from her dentures, giving them a reddish, almost bloodthirsty sheen.

"This is my study, and it is full of books. Are you fond of books?" she asked.

I was about to reply when suddenly a loud male voice sounded in my head:

"Wake up—you have come too close to us!"

The study instantly transformed into an abandoned cemetery, with leaning gravestones and black tree trunks gnawed by time.

"And I too possess the power of imagination, you lonely dreamer!" the same voice declared.

At once the trees came alive and began to surround me, stretching their long, dry branches toward me like arms.

“Leave him, Liyun! He came to me! To me!” shrieked the old woman in a piercing, creaking voice.

“He has learned to establish direct mental contact with you—good thing I noticed it!”

I began to look around, trying to dodge the branches of the threatening trees. I tried to see Liyun behind them. It felt very important to me to see him. After all, I had already encountered him in one of my recent dreams. If only I could meet his gaze—just out of curiosity. Even now it amazes me that curiosity should have prevailed at a moment when dark trees were closing around me in a tight ring.

I flung my arms about, summoning in my mind the image of the Asian man named Liyun. At once his face appeared, floating in the air like a balloon. I imagined that his face really was a balloon filled with air. As if obeying my thought, it began to swell, then burst against a sharp branch of the very trees he had created. A loud scream of pain rang in my ears, and I woke.

I sat up in bed, trying to comprehend what I had just experienced. But fatigue overtook me, and I fell asleep again, deeply and soundly.

The next day I spent idly, trying not to indulge in dreams and pushing away memories of the previous night. I confess it was not easy, for I was accustomed to reflecting on everything that happened to me. By nature rather reserved and withdrawn, I had always been used to analyzing situations on my own, without seeking advice from others.

To distract myself, I went for a long walk in the park with Stanley. I had already decided that I would no longer try to establish mental contact with the thieves of my dreams. They had

made it quite clear that I was an unwelcome guest and that they would leave me in peace. Still, just in case, I tried to keep my thoughts to myself.

A light drizzle was falling, but it did not interfere with the dogs' walks. They ran happily across the green grass and investigated the trees in the park. Their owners stood in groups, talking animatedly. I occupied myself with one of my favorite pastimes—watching other people.

That day almost everyone in the park wore hooded jackets. I did as well; I dislike carrying an umbrella, which in my opinion demands constant attention.

Trying not to lose sight of Stanley, I gathered my courage to approach one of the groups of dog owners chatting together. I probably needed to think of a topic beforehand—something light, something that could naturally lead into conversation. Usually I kept to myself and never even tried to speak to strangers. But after everything that had happened to me, I had come to the conclusion that my excessive dreaminess was the result of my isolation. I needed to overcome it.

But first I had to decide what to talk about. A greeting, of course—something casual. I tried to recall scenes from books and films in which characters effortlessly struck up conversations with strangers, without any awkwardness.

A light shove in the back distracted me from my thoughts. I turned and immediately found myself in the “embrace” of a small dog trying to leap up and lick my face. A somewhat stocky, short young woman hurried toward us.

“Alma, come here,” she called, taking the dog by the collar. “Don’t be afraid—Alma doesn’t bite,” she added, turning to me.

Stanley, who had rushed over, distracted Alma, and I instinctively took hold of my own dog's collar, though Stanley wagged his tail so amicably that I soon let him go again.

Alma's owner smiled and stood beside me, watching our pets play. I cleared my throat for no particular reason and said, "We're out walking here too," and immediately felt terribly awkward. What a way to start a conversation—of course we were walking.

"Well, we should be going," Alma's owner announced. "We come here every day with Alma. Maybe we'll see you again!"

Disappointed, I watched silently as she clipped the leash to Alma's collar and headed quickly toward the park exit. I felt a deep sadness that my attempt at a casual conversation with a stranger had failed so miserably. Though, on the other hand, she was far from my ideal anyway. In any case, I decided I would no longer try to get acquainted with anyone; obviously I held no interest for other people. I would simply have to live with that.

Lost in these gloomy thoughts, I stood motionless, absentmindedly stroking Stanley's head when he came up to me. A sudden tap on the shoulder made me start. Turning, I saw Alma's owner, slightly out of breath from running. Her dog wagged its tail happily, delighted that the walk was continuing.

"I forgot to say—we'll be here tomorrow at five, in this very spot. All right, I'm off!" she said, pulling Alma along on the leash and hurrying toward the exit, tugging her hood lower over her head.

My dark thoughts vanished as if by magic, and only then did I notice that the rain had grown heavier. Deciding that Stanley and I had walked enough, I clipped on his leash and we headed home.

There is probably no need to mention that the next day at exactly five we were back in the park—and the days after that as well. To my surprise, I discovered that I was quite talkative. I had never suspected such a trait in myself. The most interesting thing was that to be a good conversationalist, one did not need to prepare in advance; the topic would arise by itself.

Alma's owner's name was Regina. She worked online as a tutor, preparing schoolchildren for their final exams. On the day we met, she had actually been late for one of those lessons. I too had begun working remotely, so it was easy for me not to miss our five-o'clock walks.

Regina was not beautiful in the classical sense of the word: a little short and somewhat plump, yet very lively. Her dark, almost black straight hair was not always perfectly arranged. On her round face stood out dark eyes with thick lashes, and full lips always ready to break into a smile. The image of the beautiful stranger I had once named Ariel gradually faded, giving way to Regina, in whom I found everything charming.

At last, after many walks together, I gathered the courage to invite her on a date, and she readily agreed.

We became a couple, and I could hardly believe my happiness. Regina herself insisted that I introduce her to my parents. Her own parents lived far away, while mine welcomed her warmly into the family.

Gradually the story of the Dream Thieves began to fade from my memory. I immersed myself in work, analyzing the latest data from the glaciers, and enjoyed my personal life. Regina and I were not yet living together—she was cautious after previous disappointments, and I did not want to hurry her.

This went on until Regina suddenly stopped responding.

Her parents had decided to go on a long trip and had asked her to stay in their house. It stood on the edge of a forest, somewhat isolated from a settlement with the melodious name of Jangala. I was a little uneasy about her living alone in such a large house, but Regina assured me that the property was well guarded and patrolled. Besides, time spent in nature would do both her and Alma good. We agreed to speak every day. My concern she met with humor, kissing me gently on the nose.

“What’s two weeks, Viktor? You won’t even notice how fast they pass. And you have your work, so you won’t be bored,” she said reasonably.

I did not tell her how much I would miss her; I did not want to seem weak. And besides, I wanted to respect her independence and show my support.

Every evening we spoke by video call. I told her about my day, about my scientific work. She spoke about some of her students, but mostly about the nature around her and the silence.

“Viktor, only here have I realized how much I missed silence and nature! Maybe you could come here for a couple of days with Stanley? And you know, I was thinking how wonderful it would be for us to have a big country house of our own someday...”

She broke off, and I froze with happiness. Regina was planning a future with me. Gently, I steered the conversation so that she began to describe how she imagined our life together. Gradually these talks turned into shared dreaming. For several evenings we fantasized, imagining situations, even discussing possible trips. I liked that we were so in harmony in our wishes and ideas.

But gradually Regina began to withdraw. Her calls became less frequent, and she seemed eager to end our conversations as quickly as possible. I noticed dark circles under her eyes and the drawn look of her face. A vague, unpleasant foreboding stirred in me, but I pushed it aside.

“You know, I think I’ll take you up on your invitation and come visit you,” I suggested. “You look very tired.”

“Don’t worry. I just need to sleep,” she replied.

I decided not to tire her further, and we ended the call. Over the next two days Regina simply stopped responding at all.

I grew very anxious and decided to go to her. Taking Stanley with me, I set out. The three hours on the train seemed endless. Dark possibilities crowded my mind—perhaps she had caught some dangerous virus, or become lost in the forest, or fallen down the stairs. In any case, she needed help. Most likely she was ill; I needed only to remember how she had looked in the last few days. I blamed myself for not going to her sooner.

At last the train stopped at a small station, and to my relief there was a taxi stand nearby. I drove along a smooth road surrounded by picturesque green meadows and dense stands of trees, but in my state of mind the scenery left me indifferent.

I remember only vaguely how I reached my destination and paid the taxi driver. I remember only that the door of the two-story wooden building was locked, and I ran around the house several times, trying to find another entrance. Stanley, running after me, suddenly caught a scent and bolted toward a wide sandy path leading into the forest. I ran after him. Losing sight of him, I stopped and looked around, trying to spot him among the dense leaves. Hearing his bark, I ran toward the sound.

I found Regina lying at the base of a great oak. Alma lay beside her, as if guarding her, her tail moving faintly. The dog was clearly exhausted. How long had they been out here? Two full days?

I threw myself down beside Regina, curled into a little ball, and lifted her. It is impossible to describe my fear when I saw her lying motionless on the ground. But when I felt her weak breath, I exhaled in relief. Only then did I notice how much weight she had lost.

Regina opened her eyes. They seemed enormous in her gaunt face.

“Viktor... why are we here? We were riding elephants, and they were spraying us with water from their trunks. Is this a dream?” she whispered, staring at me.

My heart stopped with a terrible suspicion. Had the Dream Thieves chosen a new victim—Regina? My Regina? I decided to think about it later and called an ambulance. While waiting, I sat beside her under the oak, gripping her hand tightly.

“Don’t fall asleep,” I begged her in a whisper. “Talk to me—or just look at me.”

At the hospital they determined the cause of her condition: extreme exhaustion. That did not surprise me. These were the same symptoms I had had after my own realistic dreams—and they had nearly killed me. How good that I had managed to save Regina in time. Yes, in my thoughts I used the phrase my Regina. For the first time I had met a woman who had become part of my life. And I would not allow anyone to steal her dreams and strip her of her sense of reality.

Once I was sure she was in safe hands, I went home, taking Alma with me as well—her condition worried me too. At the station I bought her water.

All the way back I thought about how to teach the Dream Thieves a lesson. I suspected that behind it all there was, so to speak, a single brain: Liyun. There could not be many people in the world with such extraordinary telepathic abilities. I would need to find information about him before planning my next steps.

I no longer feared that my thoughts might be overheard. I had my own weapon—my imagination, which they had used shamelessly. Now I would turn it against them. But first I had to prepare.

As soon as I returned home, I called an on-call veterinarian to see Alma. The vet prescribed a special diet for a week and reassured me that apart from mild exhaustion the dog was fine. Stanley did not leave Alma's side, licking her nose now and then. His tenderness toward her moved me. I left them briefly to buy the special food the veterinarian had prescribed.

After feeding my pets, I sat down at the computer—a wonderful source of information. I simply had to find a way to reach it safely. I had no clear idea exactly what I was searching for. The only thing I knew for certain was that I had to pick up Liyun's trail first. And the last trail I knew of led to Villa Belinda. It was the owner of that villa who had named him. Liyun and the old Belinda were not merely acquainted: he, Liyun, was her unique guide into the world of dreams.

All of that might have been harmless—except that he stole other people's dreams, other people's fantasies. Anger began to

rise in me, and I had to make an effort to suppress it. I needed to think as calmly and logically as possible, keeping my composure.

I tried to find any mention of Belinda or other inhabitants of the villa, but apart from notes about the estate's historical value, I found nothing interesting. Well, what was there to be surprised about? How old was Belinda? A hundred, in my view—certainly over eighty. At that age people do not go to parties or find themselves at the center of scandals. At that age one's circle of interaction usually shrinks to a single sphere: medical. Especially when many friends are already gone, and those who remain need care themselves.

I remembered a conversation with my father, in which he mentioned that the last surviving heiress of the estate had never started a family. So her social circle was limited to household staff, gardeners, and medical workers. I dismissed the first two categories in my mind and focused on medical personnel and caregivers. I doubted Liyun was a laborer earning his living through physical work; otherwise he would hardly have had time to develop his telepathic abilities. Besides, he surely considered himself above everyone else. Such a man would not pick up a shovel.

An idea occurred to me—how to find him and learn about him. To carry it out, I needed to think it through. But it was already late, and the day had exhausted me emotionally, so I decided to postpone further investigation until morning.

Worn out, I went to bed. I dreamed I was standing on the main avenue of Villa Belinda. A huge moon shone directly above the mansion. I stopped in astonishment, staring at it. Then it tore free

from its place in the sky and began to move toward me, growing even larger. It seemed it would crush me beneath its weight.

I mastered my fear somewhat, keeping my eyes fixed on it.

“This is surely your doing, Liyun!” I said loudly.

At once the moon turned into Liyun’s face. It was a strange sight—an Asian man’s narrow face swollen into a perfectly round disc. But I did not find it funny. There was something terrifying in the enormous black eyes staring at me.

From the moon-face of Liyun two more moons split off to either side, and from those more and more, until I stood at the center of a tight circle of huge identical round faces. They all spoke at once:

“Don’t even try to find me, Viktor. You won’t be able to stop me. This is my final warning!”

The threats, multiplied by their repetition, echoed heavily in my skull. Suddenly white beams began to shoot from the surrounding moons—like sharp needles, aimed straight at me.

And then, absurdly out of place, I thought: perhaps the face on those moons was not truly Liyun’s. Perhaps he resembled one of the Asians I had seen in the film I watched recently. An image of one of the actors rose before me—and at once Liyun’s face turned into his. I quickly began recalling other characters from that film, summoning their faces. The beams aimed at me vanished, and the faces on the moons changed with kaleidoscopic speed, perfectly synchronized with the images I called up in my imagination.

I began to cycle through faces from other films, from the street, from documentaries, amazed at how quickly Liyun’s face shifted. At last his features twisted into a mad mask with double eyes, and the ring of moons around me disappeared.

“You will regret this, Viktor!” Liyun’s voice cried—more a shriek than speech—and I woke.

His threat still rang in my ears. Did he know Regina was my girlfriend? I answered my own question immediately: he did. As a guide to dreams and fantasies, he invaded what was most sacred in a person. It felt like a refined kind of revenge on his part.

But I had just discovered his weakness: Liyun could easily read other people’s dreams and thoughts, yet he showed little initiative of his own. He did not compose dreams; he exploited someone else’s imagination to the fullest. I could not explain it to myself—and honestly it mattered little—but the fact itself was valuable. Perhaps I could use it someday.

For now, however, I forced myself not to dwell on his “Achilles’ heel.” I did not want to risk letting him know that I knew.

The next day the first thing I did was call the hospital to ask about Regina. They told me her condition was stable and that she would certainly recover. I decided not to visit her yet—I wanted first to deal with the Dream Thieves. I needed to be sure her thoughts and dreams would be safe.

So after calling the hospital I walked the dogs and then began carrying out my plan to gather at least some information about Liyun. I had to find out how he made contact with his “clients.”

I tried to think like him. Suppose I were Liyun, a prodigy with telepathic abilities strong enough to read thoughts at a distance. If I happened upon a lonely dreamer, I could share that person’s dreams with my clients for a handsome fee. Better than any film. Exactly—find a solitary dreamer, someone isolated from others for one reason or another. That was what had happened to me at the

northern station, and to Regina when she was alone in her parents' country house.

So, the dreamer was found—but how did one approach the client? I put myself again in Liyun's place. What profession would I choose so that wealthy elderly people would come to me for help? After some thought I settled on hypnotherapy. Hypnotherapists often treat older patients suffering from anxiety, depression, and insomnia.

I sat down at the computer and began searching for hypnotherapists practicing in our city and the surrounding area. I had just typed the word hypnotherapist when the screen suddenly went dark. Large flashing letters appeared: STOP! They filled the screen, gradually turning dark red, as if warning of danger.

I had been prepared for Liyun to try to obstruct my search. But I had no intention of fleeing to crowded places to hide my thoughts. Liyun had angered me too deeply by turning Regina into his victim. Besides, I worked better at home.

I pictured my adversary's face in my mind as I remembered it from our nocturnal encounters. Then I imagined placing a glass dome over his head, preventing his thoughts from escaping. Strangely enough, it worked. The threatening red letters vanished, and the computer screen lit up again.

I was even a little disappointed that Liyun did not continue his attacks. That led me to several conclusions. First, I was on the right track; otherwise he would not have tried to stop me. Second, he really could read thoughts. Third, he used his mental abilities most fully when his "victim" was asleep. Then he could easily manipulate them, recreating the images of their dreams while simultaneously transmitting those images to his clients.

At that moment I was awake, and over me he possessed only the technique of light hypnosis. That no longer impressed me.

The computer produced a surprisingly long list. I narrowed the search by the name Liyun. I was even surprised at how quickly I found what I needed: the practice of Dr. Shao Liyun. Unlike his competitors, he had even given it a distinctive title: “Here Your Dream Becomes Reality.”

I felt tempted to call the number listed on his website but restrained myself. In principle I had learned nothing new about him—I had merely guessed his profession. Yet I felt there was some secret behind him that I needed to uncover. I had to defeat him—and more than that, disable him. Discovering his secret might help me do it.

Somewhere Liyun had learned hypnosis and mind-reading. More than that, he staged something like elaborate performances for his clients, all at the expense of other people’s dreams. Where did one learn such things?

I decided I would have to call his practice after all. A successful hypnotherapist like him would surely have a secretary; perhaps she would answer a question or two. I gathered my resolve and dialed the number from his website.

To my relief, a pleasant female voice answered:

“Dr. Shao Liyun’s practice. How may I help you?”

I gave a false name and tried to speak in a slightly hoarse voice, the way I imagined old men spoke.

“I was recommended by a good acquaintance of mine—Belinda,” I hesitated, since I did not know her surname.

“Mrs. Dunbar—I remember her,” the secretary said. “It’s a pity she has left us.”

“Left us?” I exclaimed in surprise, forgetting my disguise for a moment. Fortunately, the secretary did not notice.

“You didn’t know? Just a couple of days ago. But I’m glad she managed to recommend us. Would you like to make an appointment with the doctor?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I said, forcing the hoarseness back into my voice. “I wouldn’t want to deal with a fly-by-night firm that offers no guarantees. You see, I have my own life experience.”

“You won’t regret choosing us. All our clients are very satisfied. Dr. Liyun opened his practice about four years ago, and there has never been a single complaint. It would be best if you spoke with the doctor personally. When would be convenient—early morning or toward evening?”

I was about to answer that I needed time to think when the secretary’s voice was replaced by another—calm, clear, unmistakable:

“Viktor, you have questions and no answers because you are anxious and troubled. Relax—why all this fuss? Close your eyes, and the solution will come to you by itself.”

His voice sounded persuasive and soothing at once. I did not notice how my breathing slowed. My eyes closed, and I fell asleep.

At once I saw Liyun. He stood opposite me, narrowing his already narrow eyes, his lips curled in a poisonous smile.

“So—you don’t yield to hypnosis, do you, Viktor?” His tone was mocking, his eyes full of arrogance. “Look around. Do you recognize anyone here?”

Suddenly I found myself in a vast bright house with enormous panoramic windows. On a wide pale sofa sat an old man who appeared paralyzed. He held a book in his hand, and on either side of him sat two children, a boy and a girl, smiling as they looked at the pictures.

My pulse quickened when I saw Regina approach the old man with the book.

“Viktor, you promised us a boat ride. After all, we built this house by the sea for a reason.”

I ran toward her, shouting, “I’m here! That isn’t Viktor—Regina, wake up!” But the distance between us did not shrink, no matter how hard I ran, and my voice seemed to circle around me, unable to carry any farther.

“She dreams without you—though she dreams of you,” Liyun’s voice said confidently, each word seeming to imprint itself in my mind. “And I can control both you and your friend at the same time.”

I remembered my recent mental experiment with him and decided to repeat it. I imagined a round glass sphere enclosing Liyun’s head, preventing his thoughts from leaving it.

At that very instant the room vanished, and once again Liyun stood before me—this time with a glass dome over his head. His face twisted; he narrowed his eyes, and the glass shattered into tiny fragments that instantly vanished. I then imagined placing him inside the hollow of a gigantic tree, whose branches held him fast, not allowing him even to move. But the tree immediately began to wither and quickly shrank. I sent at him a writhing mass

of venomous snakes, but their heads instantly turned into flower buds.

The speed with which the dream thief reacted to all my attacks was increasing noticeably, giving him the chance to strike back at me. At last he turned me into stone and seized a hammer to smash me. In desperation I imagined him as a little boy of about six, and he dropped the hammer, unable to hold it in his small hands.

I looked at the confused little Liyun, with his thin pale arms, and at once asked, obeying an intuition:

“Do you want to show me your dream, little Liyun?”

At that very moment, high above us, an enormous nest appeared, with an eagle sitting in it.

Servants of Arnuk—the words sounded in my mind.

Enraged at having revealed a weakness, the dream thief became an adult again and, by force of thought, turned me into a lump of clay, intending to crush me in his hands. I blinked, looking straight into his eyes and driving every thought from my mind. At once I awoke.

My subconscious memory had saved me. I had escaped my first seemingly real dreams with Ariel in exactly this way—by cutting off the flow of thoughts.

Servants of Arnuk. The phrase had burst from Liyun spontaneously when he had become a small boy for those few moments. It must still be very important to him, otherwise he would not have grown so angry. So the catcher of other people’s dreams had revealed to me a fragment of his own.

Perhaps I could be called cowardly, but for my further investigation I decided to go to a library instead of working at the

computer. Another surprise in the form of remote hypnosis could easily throw me off balance. Besides, Liyun would surely not waste time preparing for our next meeting, and reading my thoughts posed no difficulty for him. Now I at least had a starting point for understanding his personality. I needed to prepare better for our inevitable next encounter.

I left the house and headed toward the university library. It seemed to me there would be more visitors there than in an ordinary public library, and a student dormitory stood nearby. Students, as everyone knows, always have to study.

As a research worker, I had free access to the library. I decided to find any information at all about the Servants of Arnuk. It must be some kind of community—probably a powerful one, at least in the place where Liyun came from. Otherwise it would not have been the object of his childhood dreams. And it must also be relatively closed, accessible only to a select few; otherwise it would not inspire such longing.

If only I could find out where Liyun had been born. Considering how emotionally shaken he had been when he accidentally revealed his childhood dream, it was clear that the Servants of Arnuk still mattered to him. And since he himself was an exceptional hypnotist and mind reader, the members of this community likely possessed similar abilities.

So my line of search became clear: traces of a mysterious, probably secret society called the Servants of Arnuk, connected with hypnosis and mind-reading.

I will not describe in detail the process of my searches and the study of countless books and records. For several days I spent nearly all my free time in the library, trying to sit near groups of

students so that my thoughts would be harder to isolate and read. Caution never hurts.

In the end I gathered the following information. The name Arnuk appears in the legends of certain islands in Oceania and belongs to a mythical eagle. It is said to guard the sleep of small children, spreading its enormous wings over them and protecting them from nightmares.

So Arnuk is an eagle. There must be some meaning in that—names are not chosen by accident. What is known about eagles? They have piercing sight and a proud nature. And they possess a remarkable ability: each eye can focus independently on different objects at the same time. An animal caught in their field of vision has almost no chance of survival—the great bird of prey, with a wingspan of two and a half meters and a flight speed approaching that of an airplane, inevitably overtakes its victim.

Like an eagle, members of this community might be able to read the thoughts of several “targets” at once, never losing sight of them. At least that was how I interpreted the connection between the name and the supposed abilities of this mysterious group.

Encouraged, I continued my search. The name Arnuk appeared only once more—in an old newspaper from the first half of the nineteenth century. In the *Fort James Chronicle*, in 1820, a certain Orson Blackwood had published a story titled *The Island of Arnuk*.

The story was overloaded with technical details and lengthy descriptions not always relevant to the plot, which made it rather tedious to read; this was evident even from the letters of dissatisfied readers published in the next issue. But setting these shortcomings aside, the following plot emerged.

A small merchant ship is caught in a violent storm and driven off course. The raging ocean throws it like a splinter onto a vast underwater coral reef, badly damaging the wooden hull and punching through the bottom. The surviving sailors abandon the ship and drift near a small island not marked on any map.

The island proves to be inhabited, and the local people receive the shipwrecked men hospitably. The naïve and good-natured natives even help repair the vessel.

Once recovered, however, the crew decides to capture the young men of the primitive tribe that had sheltered them, intending to sell them into slavery. An unequal struggle begins—unarmed islanders against sailors armed with flintlock rifles. The small tribe has almost no chance.

Then suddenly a group of men appears whom the crew has not seen before. They wear ornaments of eagle feathers on their necks and chests. The sailors are seized with fear, while the islanders bow to the newcomers, crying aloud: “Arnuk! Arnuk!”

The men speak no words and carry no weapons, yet they inspire such terror that the mutinous sailors huddle together and obediently allow themselves to be bound. Still tied, they are loaded onto the repaired ship—and there the story ends.

I found no other references to Arnuk, his servants, or any societies bearing the eagle’s name in any form.

All this gave me much to think about. Blackwood’s account impressed me greatly; he described the crew’s adventures and the ship’s technical specifications in remarkable detail, even giving the vessel’s coordinates just before the storm. His precise rendering of the captain’s dialogues with the sailors after the

marine chronometer failed convinced me that the author himself had been aboard during the events he described.

From this I drew several conclusions. The Servants of Arnuk must have a long tradition. They do not publicize themselves and live on an isolated island inhabited by a small primitive tribe. I was certain there must have been an unspoken agreement between them and the islanders: the villagers supplied them with everything necessary for life, and in return the Servants provided protection. Otherwise the complete absence of weapons among the islanders would be inexplicable—Blackwood even mentioned that they had no spears, only numerous fishing nets.

Furthermore, the community consisted exclusively of men. And they were not immortal. Mastery of hypnosis and telepathy would require long study and practice. Where, then, did the Servants of Arnuk recruit new members? From the children of the local population. I could easily imagine that apprenticeship among them was the dream of every boy in the tribe—one need only recall the special reverence the villagers showed them.

Could it be concluded from this that Liyun himself came from such an island? Quite possibly. The dream of five-year-old Liyun—the Servants of Arnuk—meant he had known of them as a small child. That is, he must have lived near them, on that very island.

The discovery excited me. If only I could learn why he had ended up here. I felt I had made an important breakthrough, yet I did not know how to use it.

Still under the impression of Blackwood's story and my own conclusions, I returned home. Putting my phone on charge—I had left it there before—I discovered a large number of missed calls

from Regina. I immediately called her back, feeling somewhat guilty for not letting her hear from me for several days.

At first her voice sounded offended, but I managed to calm her by blaming heavy workload. I was relieved to learn that she was recovering and already back at home. Right after our conversation, I gathered the dogs—Stanley and Alma—for a walk and headed on foot toward Regina’s apartment. She was overjoyed to see us. Anyone who has ever had a dog can imagine Alma’s ecstatic reunion with her owner after their forced separation.

“Ah, Viktor, sometimes reality is better than any dream,” Regina suddenly said, gently pushing Alma away as the dog kept trying to lick her face.

“Have you been dreaming?” I asked, then quickly added, “You mentioned our elephant ride in your dream—that’s why I’m asking.”

I tried to hide my inner tension and to drive away the suspicion that she might still be under the influence of the dream thief, Liyun.

“Oh yes! And they’re so wonderful that sometimes I confuse them with reality. I don’t even know how to explain it to you,” she answered.

Regina didn’t know that she didn’t need to explain anything. I could not only imagine it—I had lived through it. Realistic dreams in which every wish comes true. Dreams that destroy reality.

“Ah, Viktor, don’t worry so much about me. I’m getting better. You look exhausted from worrying.”

She came up and hugged me tightly. I held her against my chest, stroking her hair. No—no, I had to take decisive action

against the Dream Thieves. Under no circumstances could I allow my beloved Regina to fall into Liyun's trap again.

I could not tell her the truth about him or warn her about the danger of "realistic dreams." My intuition told me that such knowledge could bring her serious harm. She was not prepared for a direct encounter with the puppet master of dreamers, Liyun—he could simply destroy her. And besides, she would hardly believe me; she would think me insane.

So I simply held her and stroked her hair, filling myself with the resolve to wage a decisive battle against the dream thief.

Stanley and I stayed with Regina a while longer. I drank fragrant tea and listened to her stories—about her students, about her plans to improve her teaching, about her parents who had interrupted their vacation to care for her.

"You know, I feel so awkward in front of them. I suppose I've just been exhausted after the year, without any vacation," Regina began to explain. "And where could I even go with Alma? I'd never leave her with strangers. In a few days I'll suggest that my parents continue their trip. What do you think, Viktor—is that a good idea?"

She looked at me, nodding several times as if confirming my unspoken agreement. I protested, trying to dissuade her, and at the same time an idea came to me, which I voiced aloud.

"I could look after your parents' house myself. I'd feel calmer if you stayed here, and my parents could check on you. I promise to report to you every day about how things are going there."

"And what about your work? I don't want you to have problems because of me."

"In the past few days I've done so much that I can handle the rest remotely," I lied without blinking.

I don't like lying, but I could not tell the truth either—for many reasons I had already considered.

After thinking it over, Regina agreed to my proposal, touched by my concern. We sealed our agreement with a gentle kiss, and then Stanley and I said goodbye and left.

In my mind a plan had begun to take shape—one I intended to carry out in a secluded place, namely the forest house belonging to Regina's parents. To succeed, I needed to stay out of Liyun's reach for the time being, so that he could not read my thoughts. For that reason I avoided thinking about the plan at all and instead truly devoted myself to the work I had neglected over the past few days.

The next morning I immersed myself completely in tables of new data received from our northern station. After analyzing them, I concluded that beneath the thick layer of permafrost lay a vast stone plateau still unknown to science. The next step would be to measure it.

Encouraged by the discovery, I began to analyze possible methods for further study of the plateau. First, of course, it would be necessary to organize drilling operations to obtain samples of silicate rock. I immediately wrote a report to my chief, Homespunat Lepota, setting out the new data and my conclusions in detail.

My scientific work absorbed me completely. I interrupted it only to walk Stanley and to speak by video call with my parents and Regina. Regina's appearance in my life had become very important to me—I now had another person who loved and cared about me. I would do everything in my power to protect her from danger.

The days filled with work passed unnoticed. I was even surprised when Regina messaged me that her parents were leaving again for their trip, and that in a couple of days I would need to travel to Djangala to watch over the house in their absence.

“Call me every day, Viktor, and be careful! Try not to walk in the forest after dark,” she warned me.

Promising to take every precaution, I began preparing for the journey. I bought plenty of dog food and provisions for myself, then went to Regina’s place to pick up the keys to her parents’ house. Her parents had also come to visit her before leaving.

“Are you sleeping well, Regina?” I asked. “And how do you feel in the mornings?”

I wanted to test the waters—to find out whether Liyun was still “using” her dreams.

“I’ve been having such vivid dreams lately, you know—and very pleasant ones. Sometimes I don’t even want to wake up. If it weren’t for Alma, I might sleep all day,” Regina answered sincerely.

“My sleeping princess has already been awakened by a handsome prince! And besides, the doctors say that walks with Alma will only do you good,” I said lightly, trying to keep my tone casual. “And your students need an energetic teacher. Who else will prepare them for their exams?”

“Oh, I almost forgot—I have a new topic to teach. I need to prepare some assignments.”

Relieved that Regina had turned her thoughts away from her dreams, I said goodbye to her, promising to check in every day.

A long, relentless rain began just as Stanley and I arrived in Djangala. The first thing I did was inspect the two-storey house before unpacking the things and provisions I had brought with me. I decided to settle on the ground floor, where the living room, kitchen, and bathroom were.

In the living room, in front of the fireplace, stood a very inviting sofa that seemed to beg for someone to rest on it. That—and a dog at my feet—was all we needed. After a short walk with Stanley around the house, I lit the fire and then made myself comfortable on the sofa.

A certain nervousness took hold of me: the moment for carrying out my plan was steadily approaching. After all, that was why I had come here, to this secluded place. But first I needed to gather my thoughts.

Firelight glinted in Stanley's pupils as he lay by the hearth. As if sensing my tension, he watched me, wagging his tail slightly. His presence steadied me, and I surrendered to reflection.

I knew that in this lonely house my thoughts could be read easily by Liyun. But that was precisely why I had come. I was afraid—yet I forced that fear down.

In the past few days I had learned a great deal about Liyun, but most importantly I had learned why he deliberately suppresses his own thoughts, hunting only for other people's dreams. He is afraid that the Servants of Arnuk will find him.

If one reasons correctly and draws an analogy with ordinary communication, it becomes clear: every person has a distinctive handwriting, voice, manner of expression. Thoughts are the same—they carry an individual imprint by which you can recognize the

mind behind them. Now Liyun's anger makes sense: he had slipped, revealing his childhood dream.

It would be good to know whether the Servants of Arnuk noticed that slip.

Or perhaps I had simply invented everything, and now I was sitting by a fireplace in someone else's house, wasting time on fantasies about a secret society of telepaths. But Liyun had spoken the name Arnuk, and there was Blackwood's detailed account of an encounter with them.

I couldn't understand why doubts about my sanity were tormenting me. To take dreams seriously—even dreams that mimic reality—anyone could laugh me out of the room. Yet there were other facts supporting my theory: I had found Liyun's working phone number, the photographs of Villa Belinda, and I had spoken with the young actress Maya Bag.

And I had reached one bleak conclusion: the Servants of Arnuk had not punished Liyun. He was still stealing Regina's dreams, trying to lure her out of reality again.

It would have been tempting to try to contact the Servants of Arnuk myself. But that could bring trouble as well: I knew neither their goals nor the reason Liyun feared them. And it was far from certain they would want to help me defeat him.

My best strategy was to rely only on my own strength. Having reached that decision, I called Regina to gauge her spirits. She was genuinely happy to hear from me.

"I was waiting for you to call!" Her bright voice rang in my ears. "Alma and I only just got back from our walk. And then we'll settle in for the night. And how are you there—aren't you lonely? Maybe I'll come to you?"

I was deeply touched by her care. And to be honest, I had already begun to miss her; under different circumstances I would have accepted without hesitation. But now I had to be alone.

“Regina, don’t worry about me. Just regain your strength. Stanley and I will manage. I’ll call you tomorrow. Try to sleep without dreams,” I said.

“No—no, with dreams is better! I’ll be waiting for your call, Viktor—and thank you.”

After we ended the call, I closed my eyes in despair. Regina wanted dreams. She still hadn’t grasped the link between her physical collapse and her vivid sleeping visions. And I could not reveal that secret to her. Who in their right mind would believe me?

And I had the feeling that in matters this personal—one’s own thoughts and dreams—each person has to come to their own conclusions.

The only thing I could do was protect my beloved from the dream thief Liyun. And I was ready for it—at least, I was firmly resolved.

Staring into the fire, I began to summon Liyun’s face in my mind. It filled me with contempt and anger. I stared into the dark eyes of that imagined face, trying to read his thoughts. He has thoughts, like any thinking creature. How could I reach them?

If only I could catch even a few, to understand him better. Knowing your enemy makes him easier to defeat.

What are you thinking about, Liyun? Is it really only money—do you use your gift shamelessly for profit? You even came up with the idea of feeding rich old men other people’s living fantasies—

men willing to pay handsomely for such a violent emotional jolt. Don't you have enough imagination of your own?

"Plenty," Liyun answered—floating out of the fireplace.

The room filled with darkness; only Liyun's silhouette glowed with a bluish light.

"Let Regina go, Liyun. That's all I'm asking," I said.

"After everything you did to me?"

"What—Belinda wanted the dreams to continue, but you couldn't reach me anymore?" I asked as if by instinct. "You must have plenty of other clients."

In rage, Liyun flung out his hand and threw a tight net over me, wrapping around my head. I could hardly breathe; I could no longer speak.

But what use are words when there is thought? I imagined the thick cords of the net turning into a thin cobweb—and shook it from my face.

"How much did you lose on Belinda?" I continued, pressing on the sore spot—this time silently, without moving my lips. "She had no heirs. What is it, Liyun? Were you cheated—denied an inheritance? Oh dear, how tragic."

I tried to wound him as sharply as I could, to knock him off balance. But to my surprise his lips stretched into a smile, and his narrow eyes tightened into dark slits.

"You want to get into my head, Viktor? Fine. I'm open to you."

He turned in profile. The left side of his head became a door. The door swung open—and Regina's image drifted out, hanging in the air. Her face shone with happiness.

Her image shrank, and the space between me and Liyun filled with the surface of the sea. A large white motorboat slid over it, the

name REGINA painted elegantly along its side. She stood on the deck, facing the open water, lifting her face to the wind. Beside her, in a wheelchair, sat a white-haired old man, gently holding her hand.

“She thinks it’s you,” Liyun explained, as if I didn’t already know. “Her dreams will grow longer and longer until she loses all connection with reality.”

“And how much is that old man paying you, Liyun, to play the romantic lead in a young woman’s dream? Convenient—he sits in his chair, does nothing, and the feelings are magnificent.”

“Jealous?” Liyun laughed aloud. “Believe me, I’m not losing out. The old man relives his youth and melts with happiness. I make money—and I enjoy my revenge on you. You humiliated me by learning that I even exist.”

“Let her go,” I pleaded. “And I won’t chase you anymore. I beg you, Liyun.”

“You wounded my pride by tracking me down! And what will you do now? Step out of your dream to think up another plan?”

Indignation mixed with confusion swept over me. No—no, I must not leave the dream. If only I could scatter Liyun’s thoughts, fling them apart so he could never gather them again.

At once a whirlwind burst from his head, growing larger and wider. Its walls spun with tremendous speed, forming countless vortices within themselves. Around the motorboat Regina, enormous waves rose, threatening to swallow it like a grain of sand. I saw my beloved’s face, twisted with terror—and immediately shrank the whirlwind, seized it, and crushed it in my fist.

Liyun burst out laughing.

“Ah, Viktor, you’ve quite lost yourself. Some savior you are!”

“At least I can dream—and I have imagination. You’re nothing but a petty thief, hunting the fruits of other people’s dreams and fantasies!”

“I have my reasons. But you will never grow enough to—”

I didn’t wait for him to finish. Instead, I mentally steered the boat toward a coral reef near the island of Arnuk, reconstructing in my mind the details described in Orson Blackwood’s story.

Through the clear water, green formations were visible, forming a dense semicircle along the outline of the nearby island. I halted the boat before it could strike the reef.

Not far away, I placed dolphins playing in the sea, leaping joyfully and showing clear friendliness. And above the deck of the boat circled red-tailed tropicbirds—sea birds with long red beaks and narrow crimson tails.

I needed Regina not to be frightened, not to wake. I had to carry through the plan that had suddenly formed in my mind.

I did all this quickly, hoping to catch Liyun off guard and deny him time to respond.

On the island in the distance, a small group of three men appeared. Their image grew larger, and I could clearly see the ornaments of eagle feathers on their heads and chests.

Liyun cried out in panic. The white motorboat with Regina aboard vanished. The sea and the coral reef exploded into countless droplets and instantly evaporated. The door in Liyun’s head slammed shut, and his face twisted in fear.

“Who is this? Whom have you brought to us?” a deep male voice demanded, resounding loudly in my mind.

Liyun did not answer; only his thin lips parted in a silent scream. I, too, was seized with fear—unseen hands gripped my temples. I shut my eyes, and when I opened them again, I was lying on the sofa before the extinguished fireplace in Regina's parents' country house.

I looked at Stanley, sleeping peacefully on the rug before the hearth. In the night's silence I could hear my heart pounding loudly.

"I've gone mad," I thought bitterly. And indeed—who else would dream such things? Surely I had imagined everything: a hypnotherapist who resembled the Liyun of my dreams, and by coincidence bore the same name; a century-old story leading me to the Servants of Arnuk.

Yet there were other facts: Regina, found exhausted, longing to return to her dream world; my own ordeal at the northern station, which had nearly cost me my life; the sudden appearance of the young actress Maya Bag, trying to lure me away from crowded places so the dream thieves could again use my thoughts freely.

I tried to weigh the evidence for and against my theory of Liyun and the Servants of Arnuk. My intuition insisted I had stumbled upon something real and dangerous; my reason urged me to dismiss it all as nightmares and forget them.

A ringing tone from my mobile phone interrupted my thoughts. I was glad to hear Regina's voice—she would help me return to the real world.

"I didn't wake you, Viktor? I just wanted to hear your voice," she said apologetically.

"I wasn't asleep yet, it's fine. Did something happen, Regina?" She hesitated before answering.

“I don’t know how to explain it. I had such a beautiful dream—we were sailing together on a boat, dolphins were swimming around us, and strange birds were flying overhead. And then suddenly everything vanished, and I woke up. And I realized how much I love you. So much that I want to be with you day and night—even in my sleep. It probably sounds silly.”

She fell silent, and I froze, slowly realizing what she had said. Her story confirmed that I had truly witnessed her dream—and that she had seen the dolphins and birds I had created in my imagination.

“You’re quiet. Well, never mind. I probably rushed to conclusions,” she said, hurt in her voice.

Afraid she might hang up, I hurried to answer:

“No, you misunderstood. I was just... just very happy and didn’t know how to express what I felt.”

Regina laughed.

“Viktor, that’s so typical of you. Just say what you think—is that so hard? So, what’s your answer to my confession?”

Her voice now sounded playful, waiting for what she wanted to hear. I did not disappoint her, and our conversation slipped into a romantic current. To an outsider it might have sounded banal, but to Regina and me it was filled with happiness and deep meaning.

We talked for about an hour. After the call, I fell asleep happy. A new phase of life had begun for me, one I had never known before. I had love—real love, uplifting and bright. It pushed aside all thoughts of Liyun and the Servants of Arnuk and granted me healthy sleep.

I spent the remaining week before Regina’s parents returned from vacation walking with Stanley in the forest, working on my

computer, and of course speaking with Regina every day by video call. She had fully recovered and looked cheerful and lively. Carefully asking leading questions, I learned that she was sleeping well, without long dreams, which reassured me.

A few days later my chief, Homespunat Lepota, called me—something that surprised and slightly alarmed me, since he usually preferred email. But his radiant expression on the screen calmed me.

“I’m very pleased with you, Viktor,” he said. “Beneath the permafrost they really did find bedrock. I’ll send you the data—I just wanted you to hear it first.”

The news delighted me. The discovery of a new landform beneath the snow was a significant event. My excitement must have shown on my face, because Lepota laughed.

“Don’t relax yet—you still have to compile all the data and conclusions into a paper. We’ll publish it as a separate booklet. Good luck with the work! And yes—well done!”

After praising me again, he ended the call, leaving me alone to absorb the wonderful news. Of course, I immediately shared it with Regina and my parents. After receiving a generous portion of their approval and support, I set to work.

I devoted all the remaining time before Regina’s parents returned to writing the article. The quiet and the walks in nature increased my productivity, so that by the time I went home it was almost finished—only minor corrections remained.

My relationship with Regina was also developing beautifully. Looking back, I was astonished that I had ever traded reality for dreams. But that was in the past now, and it no longer took any effort not to think about it.

After my scientific paper on the discovery of a silicate plateau in the permafrost zone was published, a local newspaper ran an article about me. I even gave an interview on the subject. After that, I received many congratulations from relatives and colleagues.

Inspired by my success, Regina suggested we have a romantic dinner for two at her place.

In high spirits I arrived at the appointed time, bringing with me a bottle of aged red wine.

I froze on the threshold when Regina opened the door. She was wearing a yellow dress that fell in beautiful waves from her bare shoulders to mid-calf. Despite my feelings for her, I had never fully realized how beautiful she was. Somehow I had been convinced that she had captivated me with her lively character and sincerity. Only now did I understand how blind I had been. She noticed my hesitation and, pleased with the effect she had made, took my hand and pulled me inside.

We spent an unforgettable evening. I could not take my enchanted eyes off Regina, and I scarcely remember what was on the table, lit by candles in an antique candelabrum. I remember only that for dessert there were fresh strawberries with cream—astonishingly delicious.

After dinner Regina began to speak about my work. It was clear she was very proud of me. At her insistence we opened the local newspaper's website on her laptop to reread my interview together.

"No, Viktor, this won't do," Regina said reproachfully, pointing at my photograph. "What kind of sweater is that? And you could at least have combed your hair properly. It's obvious there's no one

to take care of you. Never mind—before your next interview I'll personally prepare you.”

I protested weakly, claiming that naturalness also had its price. Suddenly my eyes fell on a photograph strikingly similar to Liyun. It was printed on the same page as my interview. My heartbeat quickened involuntarily. Regina noticed my interest.

“Yes, you were busy, so you don't know. Some therapist has disappeared. Vanished without a trace.”

I clicked the link. A short article described the disappearance of Shao Liyun, a well-known hypnotherapist. He had vanished about a week earlier. His secretary claimed he had left his office to meet a patient and never returned. He had taken only his phone and the clothes he was wearing.

Security cameras only deepened the mystery: one showed him leaving the building and heading toward his parked car; another, at the exit, showed no sign of him at all—as if he had evaporated. His car had not moved. Searches had yielded nothing. A police dog, picking up his trail, stopped at the car, howled loudly, and backed away. Notices and volunteer searches produced no results. Liyun lived alone, had no family, no friends, rarely went out, never traveled. Even attempts to track his phone failed; it appeared to have been switched off.

“A very mysterious story,” Regina commented. “Personally, I think he got into debt, didn't want to repay it, and simply ‘disappeared’ to start a new life somewhere else.”

“And how do you explain, Sherlock Holmes, that his accounts and credit cards were untouched—and that he took nothing with him?” I asked.

“These days, with a little skill, you can open a secret account in some exotic country. And if he’s a hypnotist, he might even make himself ‘invisible’ to others and simply climb over a fence.”

Hmm. There was some sense in that. Regina might be right—or close to it. What mattered to me was that Liyun was gone. He would no longer trouble us. An indescribable sense of relief washed over me, and I gladly took leave of the “dream thief” in my mind, surrendering myself to the joy of being with Regina.

I was not entirely honest, even with myself, in saying I had dismissed Liyun and the strange men in eagle feathers. Lately my work and my relationship with Regina had simply occupied me so completely. Yet from time to time the terrified face of Liyun would rise in my memory—the look he had worn when he saw the island of Arnuk and the men standing there. I remained curious about what had frightened him so much.

The society of the Servants of Arnuk also remained a mystery. If they still existed, they surely did not roam the countryside in eagle feathers as they had two centuries ago. Liyun, whom I believed to be one of them, had appeared entirely civilized and perfectly capable of earning money.

Thinking it over rationally, I decided to stop searching for information about them. I had achieved my goal—Liyun had left Regina and me alone. More than that, he had disappeared. There was no need to puzzle over his fate; it no longer concerned me. I was far more interested in the new turns in my own life—both personal and professional.

Regina fit so harmoniously into my life that I could hardly imagine myself without her. I loved surprising her with little gifts, which she received with genuine delight.

“Oh, Viktor, how did you know this was exactly what I needed?” she would sometimes say, hugging me tenderly. “It’s as if you can read my thoughts.”

I also grew closer to my parents, which pleased them greatly. They had once worried about my preference for solitude. They especially enjoyed our gatherings with Regina; I often noticed them exchanging glances, raising their eyebrows, no doubt waiting for the moment when I would finally propose to her. I myself saw my future only beside her—but I intended to do it properly, to make it a special event for her.

After the publication of the article about my discovery, my workload increased even more. To study the plateau, it was necessary to organize and plan geodetic surveys to determine the boundaries of the layers and examine the underlying rock. Satellite reconnaissance was even proposed. For this purpose my chief, Homespunat Lepota, assembled an entire team of specialists working under my direction.

Naturally I had to give up working remotely and began spending much of my time in my office at the Institute for Northern Regions Research. I held weekly meetings, and after some time I realized with surprise that I actually enjoyed this rhythm of work. Communication with colleagues no longer made me feel awkward.

To be honest, at first I was not sure I could handle the assignment—I had never led even a small group before. But now I found pleasure in it. I distributed tasks according to each person’s abilities, studied their files, and never forgot to congratulate them on family birthdays. Dividing them into groups of three, I took into account their personalities and ways of communicating. As a result, our scientific team had no internal conflicts.

The results came quickly: within a few months we were already processing the first data from the geophysical surveys.

Homespunat Lepota was very pleased with my work.

“I never suspected you had such organizational abilities, Viktor,” he told me once after one of our weekly meetings.

“Everyone is satisfied, everyone is working with full dedication. What did you do—hypnotize them?” he added, patting me on the shoulder. “Keep it up. Success to you!”

Despite my busy schedule, I occasionally asked about the family of polar bears living near our northern station. Colleagues kindly sent me images from camera traps, which I kept in a separate folder.

It might now seem that in the fervor of my work I completely forgot about my parents and Regina. That would not be true. We spoke often on the phone, and on weekends we spent time together. From my conversations with my father I gathered that he would very much like to share his interest in local architectural landmarks with others, perhaps even found a club devoted to it. He never said this directly, but I made a note of it.

One day, during a break at work, I approached a colleague from our IT department and asked him to create a blog for my father. My own behavior surprised me—only recently I would never have asked such a favor of a stranger. Perhaps work had hardened me, I thought, and decided not to dwell on it. I had enough to do. In any case, the computer specialist readily agreed, and before long my father had many subscribers.

“Viktor, you guessed my secret wish!” my father said when we met. “How did you know? Just think—I have my own blog!”

His joy pleased me greatly. Especially the fact that he managed to gather a group of enthusiasts who now periodically traveled under his guidance in search of interesting buildings.

My mother also noticed positive changes in my character, attributing them to Regina's influence. She and Regina developed a very trusting relationship. My mother even befriended Regina's parents and occasionally visited them at their country house, while my father traveled with his new companions through the neighboring regions.

And I still found time to prepare a surprise for Regina. My bank account was steadily growing thanks to my modest lifestyle, accumulated salary, generous bonuses, and fees from published articles. Everything was going splendidly, and for the first time in my life I felt that I was in control of it, which gave me a deep inner confidence. This did not escape the notice of my chief, Homespunat Lepota.

"Viktor, your professional success has clearly left its mark," he remarked once. "You work effectively and find an approach to people. I'm surprised—and pleased. I never suspected you had leadership potential."

Our work on the silicate plateau progressed successfully. The name of our research institute became known in scientific circles. Homespunat Lepota decided to expand our field of interest to include the study of oceanic water-mass dynamics. He asked me to draft a preliminary plan and assemble a team of specialists.

"Take care of it, Viktor—but don't overstrain yourself," he said. "Why don't you take a couple of weeks' vacation first? Clear your head. I'll be looking for sponsors in the meantime, and that will take time. We have a great future ahead of us!"

I was overjoyed at the suggestion of a vacation. It coincided perfectly with my personal plans, for my “surprise” for Regina was almost ready.

A few days later I organized a joint trip to a small port town about sixty kilometers from our city. Both my parents and Regina’s parents were invited. Everyone seemed to sense something festive in the air; they were all elegantly dressed and exchanged mysterious glances as we sat in the minibus that belonged to my father. Regina looked simply magnificent in new white shorts and a blue blouse. Needless to say, our dogs, Stanley and Alma, also found a place in the bus.

I myself burned with impatience to arrive and see the look of happiness on Regina’s face.

At last we reached a small bay that served as a mooring for private boats. I led our entire little procession to a white yacht, on whose side, in red letters, was written its name: Regina. I had tried to buy a yacht exactly like the one Regina had dreamed of.

Before she could recover from her astonishment, I knelt and proposed to her.

“You’re making my dream come true, Viktor... and yes, I agree,” she answered, to the delighted cheers and congratulations of our parents. They crowded around her, marveling at the snow-white yacht. I stood watching them, savoring the moment.

“It’s a special talent, reading other people’s dreams and desires,” I heard a pleasant male voice behind me say.

I turned and saw a sun-tanned man of about forty with a dazzling smile. He was lean, fit, and looked like a successful businessman. It was hard to determine his nationality—his

features were so neutral that he could have blended into a crowd anywhere in the world.

“Viktor, correct? Kunak Santra,” he introduced himself, extending his hand.

“On vacation too?” I asked, shaking it. I did not ask how he knew my name. He must have heard Regina addressing me.

“Yes and no,” Kunak Santra replied. “I am one of the principal sponsors of your new research project. I decided to meet one of its leaders in person—you, Viktor.”

He studied me attentively, without hiding his curiosity. I wondered how he had found me here, at a bay sixty kilometers from my home. No one except my family knew of this trip. Yet my intuition held me back from asking directly. It was a strange pretext—to seek me out during my vacation simply to make my acquaintance. Surely he had already received all the necessary information about our project from my colleagues and from Homespunat Lepota; otherwise he would not have become a sponsor.

Kunak Santra noticed my hesitation and raised an eyebrow.

“Is something wrong, Viktor?”

There was a hint of mockery in his voice. But it was not that which troubled me. Something stirred at the edge of my consciousness—a thought not yet fully formed, an image, a suspicion trying to reach me. I strained to grasp it.

“Viktor, make a happy face and come join us,” Regina’s carefree voice called, pulling me back into reality. The festive mood returned, dissolving my tension and enveloping me in pleasant ease.

And at that very moment I clearly heard Kunak Santra's velvety voice inside my head:

„Viktor, can you hear my thought?“

I froze, still smiling.

„I knew you were capable of it. We will always be near you now.“

His words sounded distinctly in my mind, leaving no doubt about the reality of what was happening. I looked him straight in the eyes and whispered, “Why do you need me?”

He answered aloud, “Why use words? They require effort to shape into long sentences.”

Then he continued, this time without moving his lips:

„We have not yet decided what to do with you.“

Aloud, however, he smiled broadly and handed me a card.

“Here is my business card. Contact me directly if you need anything.”

Strangely, I was not afraid. Only a feeling of unease took hold of me. The thought that all my actions and desires were no longer a secret to complete strangers made me uncomfortable—especially since I had no idea what their intentions were. I wondered what had drawn the Dream Thieves' interest to me in the first place. That Santra was their representative, I did not doubt for a moment.

And he had revealed something else to me—an ability I hadn't even suspected I possessed: I could hear his thoughts. With an effort of will I forced myself, for the time being, to forget my unexpected acquaintance with Kunak Santra and to concentrate on being with my loved ones.

We all gathered in the cozy cabin of our new yacht. I had made sure in advance that the table in the center of the cabin was set with a variety of appetizers, including seafood, and expensive champagne. For Regina and me this day had to remain in memory as the beginning of our new life together. And no one would prevent me from carrying out that plan. I would think about the Dream Thieves later. Ahead of me lay the most intoxicating vacation imaginable—a week-long voyage on the yacht with Regina.

The time spent aboard the Regina was unforgettable. I reveled in happiness beside the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Our parents, meanwhile, had already begun organizing our wedding, wasting no time. The future seemed bright and cloudless—only the invisible presence of the Dream Thieves darkened my thoughts.

What troubled me most was that I had no idea what their intentions toward me were. I needed to learn more about them in order to eliminate the threat. Otherwise I was endangering everyone close to me, who might become victims of the Servants of Arnuk.

After our journey I still had a few days of vacation left, and I decided to devote them to thinking about Kunak Santra. I understood perfectly well that whatever I thought would not remain secret from him. Very well, then—I would act in such a way that I truly had nothing to hide. After all, it was perfectly natural to try to find some information about a new acquaintance.

Let us begin with his name: Kunak Santra. I even smiled at his naïveté—such a simple way of encrypting his affiliation. Take the first three letters of his name and the last two of his surname:

Kunra. Read from right to left, that becomes Arnuk. A puzzle for beginners—or a recognition sign for other Servants of Arnuk. I made a mental note of this in case of future unexpected meetings.

Another thought occurred to me: the Servants of Arnuk had long since left their island, once protected by coral reefs. Take Liyun, working as a hypnotherapist, or our new sponsor Kunak Santra.

Speaking of Liyun, who had so suddenly vanished from our city—he was precisely the one who might give me information about Kunak. I had no idea where Liyun was, but that did not trouble me. I had my own special method of contacting him. One might even say, with irony, that he himself had taught me how.

After our rather “close” encounters, it would be only natural for me to inquire after his well-being. Besides, I was curious whether my theory about his disappearance was correct. I suspected that he had hidden in his car and used his mental abilities to prevent anyone from inspecting it. As I recalled, the police dog that had picked up his trail had stopped by the vehicle and whimpered in fear. The parking area near his practice was not covered by surveillance cameras.

It would have been easy for him, amid all the confusion, to slip into his secretary’s car—she was surely in on his plans—and then drive wherever he pleased. What mattered was not where he went, but that he created a sensation with his disappearance, so that everyone would stop looking for him in our city.

All these reflections gave rise to a suspicion about where he might be hiding. I would try to confirm it once I made mental contact with him.

The insistent barking of my dog Stanley, standing beside his empty bowl, pulled me from my thoughts. At the same time, a call from Regina reminded me that I had nearly forgotten our dinner at her place. I felt a little ashamed that I had become so absorbed in my thoughts that I neglected my obligations. I would have to be more attentive—or learn to manage my thoughts so that they did not interfere with everyday life.

I filled Stanley's bowl with his favorite food, talking to him affectionately out of habit, while at the edge of my mind I continued thinking about Liyun and how I might persuade him to talk. Leaving my satisfied dog at home, I put on the sweater Regina had given me and set out to see her.

Thinking of her, I suddenly pictured a red rose in a flowerpot. Slightly changing my route, I stopped at the flower shop near the park where we had first met. Fortunately, they had pots with rose bushes. I chose what seemed to me the most beautiful one and asked the saleswoman to wrap it as a gift.

"Viktor, you guessed my wish!" Regina exclaimed joyfully, unwrapping the rose. "I even know where I'll put it—right here on the windowsill."

Smiling, she set the pot on the kitchen windowsill.

"You know, I kept meaning to buy one, but somehow I always forgot. How did you know?"

I gave her the answer she wanted to hear:

"Because I love you very much, and it makes me happy to make you happy."

With a radiant smile she embraced me and rewarded me with a long kiss. I gently moved her away, admiring her face—while at the same time summoning another face in my mind: Liyun's.

I did not reproach myself for thinking of other matters while with Regina. First, these were not “other matters.” The Servants of Arnuk had forced their way into my life and made it clear they were watching me. And second, everything that concerned me also concerned Regina and my family. It was my duty to protect them—or to make the Servants harmless to us.

I remembered well my only conversation with Kunak Santra. I had managed to hear his thoughts only after Regina called out to me, relieving my inner tension. From this I concluded that to establish mental contact one must remain calm, even relaxed—and never strain.

We sat at the table in Regina’s cozy kitchen, enjoying the fruits of her culinary skill. For dessert she served a delicious vanilla-cream cake.

“You need to put some weight on, Viktor,” she said in a businesslike tone, breaking off a piece of cake with her fork. “And I’m going to take care of your wardrobe. If they’re writing about you in newspapers, you have to look the part.”

I melted with happiness, just as the sweet cream melted on my tongue. Meanwhile, from time to time, I called to Liyun in my mind without interrupting my conversation with Regina.

„Liyun, answer me. I know you’re still here. We need to meet.“

But my calls went unanswered.

I was already walking home through dark streets dimly lit by streetlamps when, at last, Liyun’s voice sounded in my head:

„Oh, Viktor, how tiresome you are. But I’ve been asked to meet with you.“

„Where and when?“ I asked quickly, also in thought.

“If you’re so clever and capable, then figure it out yourself. If you don’t catch me or can’t find me—that’s your problem.”

I stopped abruptly in the middle of the street. Although I myself had called Liyun into mental contact, the fact that the dialogue had actually taken place unsettled me. My heart began to race, blood rushed to my head, and a wave of panic—of unknown origin—swept over me. I could not understand its cause; after all, I knew perfectly well who I was dealing with. And yet I was afraid, and I hurried home.

I took Stanley out for a short walk, then returned, took a shower, and lay down in bed, pulling the blanket completely over myself. I listened to Stanley’s loud snoring as he slept on the fur mat beside my bed. Even these familiar sounds could not calm me entirely. A strong sense of anxiety and vulnerability gripped me. There was nothing surprising in this. I had been deprived of the ability to have private thoughts and dreams—everything that makes a person distinct, an individual. Without them I would become nothing more than a talking shell.

And then it struck me: I would become a talking shell—one whose thoughts would always be spoken aloud or transmitted by telepathy. I would have nothing to hide. I had a beloved woman, parents with whom I shared a close bond, work I loved, my dog Stanley, and a career ahead of me. None of this was a secret to anyone. So I would act accordingly, doing what was expected of me. At the moment, what interested me was learning something—anything—about the mysterious Kunak Santra. After all, Liyun himself had said: „I’ve been asked to meet with you.“
Let that meeting be my focus. Having reached this decision, I calmed somewhat and fell asleep.

The next morning, after breakfast and a walk with Stanley, I called Regina and my parents. Then I changed clothes and set out. I did not have to think long about where and when to look for Liyun. An image of the planned meeting place had flashed through his mind like a picture. As for the time, I chose noon, taking into account Liyun's rather limited imagination.

After two bus transfers and a short walk, I arrived shortly before noon at the bay where the yacht Regina lay at anchor. As I approached, I noticed a thin figure standing on deck. A large straw hat was pulled low over his face, hiding half of it. The whole scene looked like something from a cheap spy novel.

Smiling to myself, I jumped onto the deck and, without saying a word to Liyun, headed for the cabin door to open it.

"A cheap spy novel, yes, Viktor?" Liyun said behind me. He tried to sound sarcastic, but there was more hurt than venom in his voice.

Inside the cabin we sat on a semicircular sofa surrounding a white enameled table. Liyun removed his hat and placed it carefully beside him. For a while we sat in silence, studying one another.

It was the first time we had met face to face, yet I felt nothing in particular. Perhaps because, from this day forward, I had resolved to act as a walking, talking shell, carefully concealing my true thoughts and intentions. That did not mean I had no emotions—only that they were now subordinate to the immediate situation, reactions to what was happening at that moment.

As now, when I noticed uncertainty—even confusion—flicker in Liyun's eyes, and felt a sudden pang of pity for him.

“We have a new sponsor—Kunak Santra,” I began without preamble.

“And you recognized him quickly as one of the Servants of Arnuk,” Liyun replied, emotionless, merely stating a fact. “And demonstrated your mental abilities.”

I liked that. It meant we could move straight to questions, without hints or persuasion. Though in any case he would reveal only what he was permitted to say. I was certain we were being “overheard” telepathically.

“Since you mentioned the Servants of Arnuk,” I said, “your own name doesn’t conceal that title, does it?”

I looked at him expectantly, but he only raised his eyebrows and spread his hands.

“The hierarchy?” I asked.

He merely sighed.

“Were you punished for your work as a hypnotherapist?” I continued.

“I was punished because of you,” Liyun answered after a moment’s pause—perhaps waiting for permission to reply honestly. “I failed to recognize your abilities and let you get too close... to me... to us.”

Now it was my turn to raise an eyebrow.

“Am I really a danger to such a powerful group?”

He did not answer.

“Were you earning money for the needs of the Servants of Arnuk?”

“That’s enough,” Liyun said irritably, jumping to his feet. “Why don’t you ask your sponsor? He already knows everything that

happens, everything that is said and thought—at least where I am concerned.”

He left the cabin so quickly, snatching up his straw hat, that I had no chance to reply. I did not follow him, but remained sitting on the sofa, thinking over our conversation. Anyone would have done the same; it felt entirely natural.

I concluded that Liyun was highly emotional. I had suspected as much before—after all, he had tried to take revenge on me through Regina, treating my discovery of his identity as a personal insult. He could not keep his feelings in check. That was why he had betrayed his resentment toward the Servants of Arnuk, who had evidently punished him in some way. And he himself stood on the lowest rung of their hierarchy.

I had learned nothing about the goals of the Servants of Arnuk—but even these few conclusions were enough for a beginning.

During the remaining days of my vacation I did not think about Liyun or the Servants of Arnuk, devoting my time to pleasant company with my family and Regina. That, after all, is what a holiday is for—to rest and relax among those close to you.

Only sometimes, as I fell asleep, I felt a faint fear of entering the world of dreams, where it would be impossible to conceal my true intentions.

My first working day after the vacation began with a summons to the office of my chief, Homespunat Lepota. In the doorway I was met by his secretary, who was wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. She merely gestured toward the door of his office. I sensed confusion and deep hurt radiating from her.

Homespunat Lepota sat at his massive desk, resting his head on his hand, lost in thought. He smiled faintly as he greeted me. I

sat opposite him, wondering what had caused his gloomy mood and his secretary's tears.

"That's how life goes," he said with a sigh. "The old step aside to make room for the young. Congratulations, Viktor—you are to become scientific director of our new project. That is what the sponsors have decided. The vote will be soon."

I sat there, stunned, feeling like a traitor. Then, catching myself, I forced those feelings down and tried to think logically.

"What reason did the sponsors give?" I asked. "And does this mean your possible dismissal?"

"I am honestly glad for you, Viktor. You deserve the promotion. As for the reason—they need energetic young scientists. And I suppose I am considered outdated." He sighed again and shook his head.

"And they also need leaders with experience," I said. "When will the vote take place?"

"The day after tomorrow, at ten," he replied, glancing at his watch for some reason. "And yes, I was informed only today, and I called you in immediately. I thought it would be better if I told you about it personally."

Homespunat Lepota seemed to have aged ten years at once, and I felt a strong sympathy for him. I also considered the sponsors' decision unfair—who, if not Lepota, had successfully led our research institute, reliably managing its many departments? At that moment, with a new scientific project just being organized, I could see no one who could replace him.

I had many arguments in his favor. I would need to organize them and present my reasoning to the sponsors. I was not guided by personal attachment to my chief but by logic. No one would

want to ruin a new scientific project by dismantling a management system that had been functioning effectively for years.

I left Lepota's office deep in thought. It was a perfectly natural reaction. I was not afraid to show feelings—love and affection for my family, concern for those close to me—everything that is natural to any human being. None of the Servants of Arnuk would find anything suspicious in that.

But I was careful that my feelings and emotions should not betray my true intentions.

I still had time to persuade the sponsors to leave Homespunat Lepota in his leadership post. I was certain that the idea of replacing him with me had come from Kunak Santra. That meant I should address him directly. If I was right, and he truly stood behind the decision, then the other sponsors were merely playing by his rules, and there was no sense in appealing to each of them individually. I did not even know who the other investors were, or how many there might be.

Having made this decision, I returned to my desk and occupied myself with routine tasks. During a short break, I sent an email to our colleagues at the northern station, asking them to send fresh photographs of the polar bear family living nearby. The thought of the bears brought a smile to my face.

That evening at home, I considered how best to contact Kunak Santra. I had two options: reach out to him telepathically, or arrange a meeting. I preferred the second. I still believed that reading and transmitting thoughts violated a certain inner ethic. And besides, I had his business card, printed on expensive paper threaded with gold—an object that seemed to radiate wealth and power.

I dialed the number printed on the card and immediately heard Santra's voice.

"Tomorrow at one in the afternoon, the pizzeria on the corner of Theatre Street. And yes, Viktor, use your mental abilities—it's simpler that way."

He hung up at once, leaving me somewhat bewildered. His complete lack of politeness offended me slightly. After all, there are common rules of conduct for a reason; they place everyone on equal footing.

"See you tomorrow, Viktor. All the best!" Santra's voice sounded in my head. "And one more rule: time is money."

His voice vanished, and I understood fully—he was always near. It cost him no effort to transmit his thoughts to me at a distance, and everything I thought was known to him as well. I immediately suppressed the rising feelings of fear and uncertainty. Fortunately, I still had Stanley, with whom I could disappear into crowds on busy central streets or near playgrounds in the park.

The next day I went to meet Kunak Santra, as arranged. A line of hungry office workers and tourists stretched outside the popular pizzeria. I joined the end of the queue, nervously glancing at my watch.

"Go ahead," Santra instructed me mentally. "One of the waiters will meet you and bring you to me."

A polite waiter, smiling constantly, escorted me to a small booth at the far end of the hall. Kunak Santra sat at a table covered with a red-and-white cloth. Seeing me, he rose slightly and extended his hand.

"Glad to see you, Viktor! Since ceremonies matter to you, we can begin by talking about the weather."

There was mockery in his voice, but I pretended not to notice.

“Order the house pizza—you won’t regret it,” he advised.

I was somewhat nervous and did not notice that I had begun, in my mind, to formulate arguments in favor of Homespunat Lepota as head of the new scientific project.

“I already know all that,” Kunak Santra said, answering my thoughts. “But I need you nearby. We will cooperate.”

“Why?” I asked reasonably. “You already read every thought I have, wherever I may be.”

I looked at him closely, trying in turn to read his thoughts. But his eyes seemed to be covered by an impenetrable film, stripped of any expression.

“You’re straining too much, Viktor,” Santra said, smiling indulgently. “Still, my compliment—you perceive my thoughts without difficulty. Not bad at all for an initiate.”

The last sentence sounded too serious to be mere praise. It seemed my ability worried him.

“Careful, Viktor,” his voice sounded in my head. “Don’t think yourself clever enough to read my emotions.”

He closed his eyes, trying to hide his irritation. I stopped analyzing the situation or his reactions, now fully aware of whom I was dealing with. Fortunately, our pizza arrived, and I concentrated on eating. It was indeed very good.

At the edge of my awareness I realized that it was possible to conceal one’s thoughts by focusing completely on a single action or idea. From a practical point of view, I might even be proud of my acquaintance with such an influential man as Kunak Santra. I looked at him sitting opposite me. His face expressed confidence, and his lips were always ready to form a courteous smile. From

the outside he appeared benevolent and attentive—qualities that naturally inspire trust. I made a mental note of that.

“You’ve strayed from the subject, Viktor,” Santra said, watching me closely. “Let’s talk about your chief, Homespunat Lepota. I see no need for him. Under my supervision, you will manage the leadership of your scientific project perfectly well.”

“I am not opposed to cooperating with you,” I explained, “but not in the role of a laboratory rabbit developing mental abilities under ‘your supervision,’ as you put it.”

He fell silent for several seconds, trying to read my thoughts. I felt his presence in my subconscious. But I thought of nothing—I had already stated my intentions and was simply waiting for his answer or for further questions.

“Not bad—you can be opaque,” he said approvingly. “To be frank, that is another reason not to let you out of my sight.”

“Now you are the one straying from the subject. Please listen to my arguments.”

“Let’s order coffee,” he suggested, then added mentally, “Formulate your ideas and let me read them. It will be simpler.”

I nodded and gave free rein to my imagination, describing the possibilities of our cooperation: I would serve as a scientific consultant, he as sponsor and manager, while Homespunat Lepota would remain director, guiding our new oceanographic project to a new level—a task he would undoubtedly handle better than I could.

“Interesting. This is worth discussing. I only hope that you are sincere with me and that you have no hidden intentions,” he said, still communicating with me mentally.

At once I imagined myself in the role of a very wealthy and confident entrepreneur, successful and connected all over the world, able to use my mental abilities to advantage—both in business and for my family.

Two cups of steaming, fragrant coffee were already standing before us. I took a sip with pleasure, enjoying the taste.

“Well now, Viktor. Dreaming of a career as an entrepreneur. Not bad. I might even believe it,” his thought sounded clearly in my head. “After we discuss your proposal, I will contact you. We are now on the same wavelength.”

“I understand,” I replied mentally. “You are part of a large community, and you probably cannot make decisions on your own.”

My answer irritated him somewhat, and for a brief moment he lost control of his thoughts. I had expected this and immediately slipped into his subconscious, which quickly closed itself to me. But I managed to read a new name there—Martin Nuken.

“And your future wife is quite a dreamer too, isn’t she, Viktor? And yes, she does not have your abilities. An interesting arrangement—how different people can be. I’ll be in touch. Until next time.”

He rose at once and left the pizzeria.

His last remark sounded like a threat, but I tried to ignore it. Kunak Santra did not make decisions independently. Independence was clearly not encouraged among the Servants of Arnuk. Liyun had been punished for wanting to settle accounts with me, despite the fact that he was the first to discover my mental abilities. That had been very short-sighted of him, and he had paid for it.

It was unlikely that Kunak Santra would risk his position—one clearly higher than Liyun's. Surely all his actions were also being controlled.

I finished my coffee thoughtfully, trying to analyze the conversation with Santra. No matter how I tried, his mention of Regina disturbed me. The dream-thief Liyun had nearly destroyed her once already. I was afraid even to imagine what a more refined mind like Kunak Santra's might be capable of. And all because of my remark that he made decisions only after consulting someone—Martin Nuken, whose name had flashed through his mind when he momentarily lost his vigilance.

I had not realized he was so sensitive. Touchiness is a quality of people striving for achievements still beyond their reach, yet convinced they have been deprived of what they deserve.

Well then, that meant Kunak Santra still had something to strive for. In that case, we would strive together. I would also orient myself toward building a career—with his assistance. Such an arrangement would surely benefit him as well.

I was fully aware that my thoughts were being listened to. I might just as well have spoken aloud—there was no longer any difference for me between thinking something and saying it. For example, the thought that the unknown Martin Nuken must also be one of the Servants of Arnuk, judging by his name.

If I was an open book to them, then let them read it calmly. I hoped I had conveyed my main idea—that I was ready to work with them, the Servants of Arnuk, in order to build a career for myself, and of course to their benefit as well.

I paid for our lunch and returned to my workplace at the Northern Research Institute. After dealing with correspondence

and reviewing new data from our colleagues at the Arctic station, I printed the latest photographs of the polar bears taken by camera traps. They looked well-fed and content, and the cubs had noticeably grown. They had no idea what a wave of warmth they stirred in me.

I pinned the best photograph to my computer screen and looked at it for a long time, the way one looks at old friends not seen for years. It calmed me, washing away the unpleasant feelings after meeting Kunak Santra. Now I was ready to think logically, assembling convincing arguments in favor of my plans to cooperate with the Servants of Arnuk. Then there would be no need for them to search for me or watch me—I would already be nearby.

I did what I had always enjoyed doing: I fantasized. I sketched new prospects in my mind, new possibilities, the expansion and strengthening of the Servants of Arnuk—and my indispensable role in it. My ideas captivated me so much that I immersed myself in them, concentrating on details, often returning to thoughts I had already expressed.

Kunak Santra had been right: “Viktor, use your mental abilities—it’s simpler that way.” I did not need to write anything down, did not need to revise sentences or add corrections. It was easier for my “interlocutors” simply to read my thoughts and retain them in memory. Mentalists must have excellent memories.

I was already projecting developments twenty years into the future when Kunak Santra’s voice sounded in my head:

“Enough, enough. We understand. We will answer this evening.”

This evening I would wait for their answer, and tomorrow there would be a vote deciding the fate of my chief, Homespunat Lepota—and mine as well. I forced myself not to think about it. Better to look once more at the photographs of the polar bears. Then, remembering myself, I sent a thank-you email to the colleagues who had sent them.

For the rest of the working day I stayed in my small office, so as not to meet Lepota by accident. I could not allow myself to display feelings or emotions connected with work.

That evening I devoted myself to my usual routine: I walked Stanley, spoke with Regina and my parents by video call, and then spent a long time choosing a film to watch before sleep. I was slightly uneasy about the absence of any message from Kunak Santra. He had promised to contact me after a decision was made about my cooperation with the Servants of Arnuk.

Midnight was approaching, and I still remained in ignorance. I checked my email once more, then, somewhat annoyed, went to bed.

But the moment I began to pull the blanket over myself, my room turned into a raging sea—dark and menacing. My bed was tossed about like a splinter of wood. In panic I clutched its edges, afraid of being carried away by the black waves crashing over me. Salty drops struck my face like needles, forcing me to squeeze my eyes shut.

Something struck my forehead and forced its way into my head. I opened my eyes and saw a huge black tentacle stretching toward me from the storming waters. I felt it split inside me into thin threads, enveloping my brain and squeezing images and

thoughts out of it. I was so afraid of drowning that I had no strength to resist the monster.

With my inner sight I watched scenes from my life being pressed out of my mind, flowing along the threads like channels into the greedy tentacle that devoured them. I mentally clung to the image of the polar bears emerging from me. I wanted to be beside them, to turn into a small cub hiding behind the solid back of its mother.

The terrible tentacle clamped down harder, causing a violent headache.

“Liyun, I know this is your doing!” I tried to shout, but only a hoarse whisper escaped my lips.

This sudden attack had shaken me so badly that it took time to understand who stood behind the nightmare. Realizing it gave me strength. Whatever else I lacked, imagination was not among my weaknesses.

I turned myself into a polar bear, very hungry. The raging sea and the bed vanished, replaced by an endless snowy plain. I sat by a hole in the ice on a frozen river. The black tentacle with its threads was still lodged in my head, but I ignored it—I was very hungry. I created a black, impenetrable shell around my brain, cutting the threads off from it. At the same time, I caught a sturgeon from the ice hole—a fish with Liyun’s head. My bear’s jaws turned into a great furnace lined with sharp teeth. I did all this very quickly, in a single instant, giving my opponent no time to respond. Liyun’s eyes, set in the fish’s body, widened in terror.

With malicious delight I thrust him into my mouth and was about to close my jaws when a powerful, enormous paw struck him from my grip.

Before me stood a gigantic snow leopard, baring its teeth threateningly. I understood that there were two of them—Liyun and someone else who had access to my thoughts. His name surfaced easily: Kunak Santra.

The snow leopard leapt at me, claws extended like knives. I barely managed to dodge. He slashed my shoulder and prepared to leap again. From the other side Liyun approached, now transformed into a white wolf. I had no way to escape them. The accursed tentacle still protruded from my head, hampering my movements.

The wolf and the leopard were already in mid-leap toward me when, by an effort of will, I turned myself into a stone cliff.

Screeching in pain, they rebounded from me, and the tentacle finally vanished, withdrawing its threads from my head.

“I didn’t expect this from you, Kunak,” I said, still remaining a cliff, just in case. “Is there really no other way to read my thoughts and determine my intentions?”

Instead of an answer, lightning struck from the sky, shattering my rocky body and turning it into a heap of stones. I slipped into the form of a tiny pebble and shot at high speed straight into the snow leopard’s eye. I was sure Kunak Santra was hiding behind it. I barely paid attention to Liyun, considering him the weaker opponent.

I simply encased him in a thick layer of ice—and in the brief moment it took him to break free of that icy prison, I slipped through the eye into Kunak Santra’s brain. I acted fast, turning myself into a small pump in order to draw as much information as possible from his consciousness. At that moment, irritation and uncertainty dominated him.

Kunak filled his head with water and washed me out of it, spitting me onto the snow. He turned into a massive hammer, ready to crush me into dust—when, above our heads, laughter rang out, and then an unfamiliar voice commanded:

“Enough. I’ve understood everything. The decision has been made.”

I came to in my own home, on my bed. After what I had just lived through, all I wanted was quiet. I did not think about whose voice had sounded at the end of the nocturnal skirmish—I already knew, because I had been inside Santra’s head.

It was Martin Nuken, occupying a higher rank in the hierarchy of the Servants of Arnuk. I had seen him through Kunak Santra’s eyes: a tall, lean man of about sixty, with a sun-darkened face and piercing eyes beneath thick black brows.

Not even the fact that I had learned to enter other people’s thoughts and read them inspired me. On the contrary, it frightened me a little. I had the sensation that I was turning into a mental monster, and I did not like that at all. But I was too exhausted to think seriously about it. Later—someday—I would certainly sort out my feelings.

I patted the blanket, inviting Stanley—who was sleeping on his mat beside the bed—to climb up next to me. He was my anchor of reliability, returning me to a quiet, peaceful evening. I hugged him, felt him lick my nose, and fell asleep.

The next day was very important: the fates of my chief, Homespunat Lepota, and my own were to be decided. I treated it as an inevitable fact, showing no emotion. It was simply important, and I needed to dress carefully, as is customary for meeting sponsors.

With Regina's help I had refreshed my wardrobe, adding several elegant suits, so I had no trouble choosing what to wear.

I decided not to appear in the institute building until the meeting began, so as not to run into Lepota. He needed words of encouragement, and I did not want to feed him hope when I still did not know the outcome of the vote.

I arrived in the conference hall about five minutes before the start, when all participants were already assembled. The long table was set with small microphones so speakers would not have to raise their voices to be heard. At equal intervals there were trays with biscuits and mineral water—a typical meeting setup.

On one side of the table, in comfortable office chairs, sat people I did not know, radiating confidence and condescension—the sponsors. I had had no idea there were so many of them. Among them there was only one familiar face: Kunak Santra. He sat in the middle, staring straight ahead and avoiding my gaze.

On the other side sat the heads of departments of our research institute, led by Homespunat Lepota and our accountant. I sat down beside my chief; he had thoughtfully left a seat free for me.

I did not listen to the explanations of graphs, project presentations, or debates. It made no sense—because the decision had already been made, and I was impatient to hear it announced.

I tried to catch Kunak's eye across from me, but he stubbornly looked away. I felt the temptation to read his thoughts, but restrained myself. It must not become a habit. If I had developed the ability, I would use it only in extreme necessity.

I looked at him as he listened attentively to one of the speakers. A faint, quickly vanishing smirk appeared on his lips, as if he had read my thoughts. After all the speeches, the sponsors withdrew to confer before making the final decision.

At last it was time for the vote. Homespunat Lepota was visibly nervous, repeatedly wiping sweat from his forehead with a napkin. The closing statement was taken by Kunak Santra—executive director of the sponsor group “Nuken’s Arch.”

“Our group gathers under our ‘Arch’ promising projects,” he began after a brief introduction, “projects that bring not only profit, but also open new horizons in science and technology. I am pleased to report that the results of your institute’s work have convinced us that its leadership, headed by Director Homespunat Lepota, has achieved truly excellent results and holds great potential for further development...”

While he spoke in well-worn phrases before the sponsors’ decision—and Homespunat Lepota drank water by the glassful from excitement—I studied the nameplates of the investors sitting opposite me. In none of the other names, besides Kunak Santra, did I find a hidden “Arnuk.” Apparently, they really were wealthy entrepreneurs investing in promising projects.

Then a list was read of the employees who would be entrusted in the future with maintaining contact with the sponsor group. Homespunat Lepota, by virtue of his high professionalism and experience, remained director, while I was given the title of “scientific consultant.”

I smiled at my relieved chief beside me and once again turned my attention to Kunak Santra. I was still angry at him for last night’s nightmare, and I did not even try to hide it. Could such a

high-ranking “Servant of Arnuk” really not read my thoughts unnoticed—me, an inexperienced amateur?

If he had needed to put me through a psychological trial that did not yield the result he wanted, then that meant I was better than he was. After all, I had managed to break into his consciousness, even though I had not planned it. I was “thinking aloud,” not hesitating to express my opinion.

Kunak Santra gripped the glass of water in front of him so tightly he seemed about to crush it.

“And yes, Kunak—there were two of you, you and Liyun, against me alone,” I continued, now addressing him mentally, directly. I needed to release all my indignation without holding back. I had suppressed my thoughts and feelings for too long; now I had found an outlet. After that I would hide again behind an emotionless mask, turning once more into an efficiently functioning shell.

Loud applause and the scraping of chairs signaled the end of the session. After a long handshake and backslaps with Homespunat Lepota, Santra approached me and held out his hand. His face expressed confidence; his lips spread into a polite smile.

“Glad about our upcoming cooperation, Viktor,” he said aloud. And mentally he added: “We’ll see how glad you’ll be.”

A wave of hatred rolled off him toward me. And one more feeling—something I interpreted as jealousy. Or rivalry?

Kunak Santra realized he had yielded too much to his emotions and let me “see” them. After a quick farewell, he left the conference room.

In the days that followed, my chief Homespunat Lepota and I were busy with organizational work: outlining concrete plans to begin the research, assembling working groups, holding negotiations with oceanologists from other countries. We needed to develop a new concept that would give us an advantage over our scientific competitors.

This work absorbed me so completely that I even forgot to think about the Servants of Arnuk. But after a couple of days, I began to be seized by sudden, inexplicable waves of anxiety and fear. They lasted for several minutes, yet they threw me badly off balance. I attributed it to accumulated fatigue and the inner tension that had accompanied me for a long time. With difficulty I shook it off, forcing myself to focus again on work.

Yet the episodes of fear and despair grew more frequent—so much so that my chief Homespunat Lepota noticed my depressed state.

“Viktor, I’m sending you home on a week’s leave. Don’t worry—we’ve already outlined the main directions of our work, we’ll manage without you for now, and you need to rest,” he said, looking at me with concern.

I was glad of his suggestion, although out of politeness I tried to protest against being sent on leave. In the end, I went home, deeply grateful to my chief in my thoughts for his care.

My dog Stanley, delighted by my early return, “persuaded” me to take him for a walk, cheerfully bouncing around me with his leash already in his teeth. The walk did me good. I thought about nothing, simply enjoying the fresh air. And yet only recently I had felt terribly tired. Though “tired” was not quite the right word. It was

more like I felt my strength draining out of me, leaving behind an unpleasant emptiness.

Now, refreshed after the walk, I began to reflect on the causes of my malaise. Surely the strain of the past months, connected with the forced contact with the “dream thieves,” had taken its toll. I admitted honestly to myself that they had shaken me deeply. And now I would even have to cooperate with them. That prospect did not please me at all.

Gradually my thoughts grew darker and darker. It felt as though my heart were caught in an iron band. I felt completely alone. An inexplicable, overpowering anxiety engulfed me. I tried to convince myself that I had loving parents, Regina, and finally my beloved dog Stanley—but it did not help. Everything appeared in the bleakest colors. I clutched my head as a single thought began pounding there, repeating like a mantra:

“I am weak. I am just a dreamer, just like my future wife, and I only imagined that I was capable of anything more.”

The thought repeated itself again and again, regardless of my will, as if it had suddenly taken root in my mind. Slowly, surprise replaced despair. I had never used the expression “my future wife” about Regina, though I had indeed made plans for our future together.

Then I remembered my conversation with Kunak Santra in the pizzeria, when he had said word for word: “Your future wife is quite a dreamer too,” hinting at possible pressure on me through Regina. I also recalled Orson Blackwood’s story *The Island of Arnuk*, where it was said that the Servants of Arnuk had frightened seasoned sailors into panic merely by their presence.

At once the headache vanished, along with the unpleasant sensations.

So, Kunak Santra wanted to destroy me morally. I was certain it was him. “We’ll see how glad you’ll be about our cooperation,” he had said to me after the vote at the institute. I addressed him mentally:

“Why are you afraid of me, Kunak? You chose an unworthy way to eliminate a rival. In what am I better than you?”

“You’re paranoid, Viktor,” he replied at once in my mind. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about. Next time, contact me only on business.”

I did not argue with him, nor did I try to penetrate his thoughts—I already understood that he had tried to corner me emotionally. I mentally enclosed my consciousness under an impenetrable dome and, exhausted, went to sleep.

I don’t know whether the dome affected my sleep or not, but I slept well, without dreams.

During my morning walk with my faithful dog Stanley, I went to the park where I had met Regina several months earlier. It was a well-known place in our district for walking dogs, crowded almost all day long. Stanley and I already had a few acquaintances there, so I let him run onto a small meadow where dogs were chasing each other happily.

I joined a group of owners chatting casually while keeping an eye on their pets. Having a dog had affected my character positively: I had become more sociable and rid myself of many complexes—or so it seemed to me.

While discussing with them the possible reconstruction of the park planned by the local authorities, I simultaneously tried to

establish contact with Liyun, but without success. Then I switched to Kunak Santra.

“Viktor? What do you want?” he asked.

“We need to meet,” I replied mentally, without interrupting my conversation with the others.

“I can barely hear you—too much interference, too many people around you.”

I broke off the connection, blocking my thoughts from him. I had learned what I wanted to learn. Liyun, at the beginning of our acquaintance, had been able to influence me mentally—for example through hypnosis—only when I was alone. Kunak Santra could catch my mental call even when I was surrounded by people, but he had difficulty maintaining a dialogue. Strangely enough, I heard him perfectly well. And that was in my favor.

Perhaps he had recognized my innate mental abilities, which had provoked his hostility. Did he perceive me as a threat? Yet the only thing I truly wanted was for the Servants of Arnuk to leave me alone. I still did not understand why they were so interested in me. It seemed I would have to play by their rules, whether I liked it or not.

That evening, when I was alone at home, Kunak Santra contacted me.

“What was that, Viktor?” his voice sounded in my head. “If you want to tell me something, be so kind as to get rid of the interference first.”

I did not admit that I had had no trouble receiving his thoughts, even among people.

“Sorry, Kunak, my mistake,” I replied conciliatorily. “I need to meet with you and Liyun. It concerns our new scientific project.”

“State your thoughts now. Why waste time on meetings?”

“Liyun, join us,” I said mentally, calling up his image.

“Viktor, you’re becoming a nuisance. What is this—some kind of three-way conference?” Liyun expressed his irritation as he “appeared.”

I concentrated on conveying the importance of the meeting, sending both Liyun and Kunak impulses of its necessity.

“If my plan works, first, it will bring great success to all the Servants of Arnuk, and second, it will move you upward in the hierarchy.”

I believed what I was saying, and I meant exactly what I communicated mentally. At that moment I was completely sincere; there were no hidden intentions in my subconscious. Liyun and Kunak felt this and probed my thoughts.

I turned to Liyun, as the more emotional one:

“What do you think, Liyun? You have nothing to lose, do you? If it fails, everything remains as it is—and the laurels of success I will gladly leave to you.”

“And what do you gain from this?” Kunak asked, still somewhat distrustful.

“I am a scientist to the marrow of my bones, and the success of our new project is my priority.”

After several more probing questions from my “interlocutors,” we agreed to meet the very next day on my yacht, Regina. Liyun was impatient to know in advance what plan I had prepared. Again and again he tried to “slip” into my mind, but he did it clumsily—I immediately sensed his presence in my consciousness. At last he had to curb his curiosity and wait for the coming meeting.

Glancing at the wall clock hanging in my room, I noticed with surprise that our mental conversation had taken less than a minute. And it had hardly cost me any effort. Indeed, it was a very convenient and fast way of communicating.

I had learned to draw conclusions without formulating them consciously. They simply settled in my mind, becoming facts. And the fact was that both of them—Liyun and Kunak Santra—had been tempted by the prospect of career advancement within the community of the Servants of Arnuk. I understand that this was obvious, that anyone in my place would have reached the same conclusion without lengthy reasoning. But every fragment of information about them was useful.

I was glad that I had almost an entire free week at my disposal and did not need to ask for leave from work to go anywhere. I informed my parents and Regina that I would spend several days at home recovering my strength after the strain of recent work. They immediately grew concerned and offered to visit me. But I managed quite easily to convince them that solitude and rest would do me good. It was becoming almost effortless for me to persuade people of my point of view. It happened almost automatically and, I admit, made life easier, sparing me long explanations and sometimes invented excuses.

At the appointed time I arrived at my yacht Regina, near which Liyun and Kunak Santra were already walking. They were silent, conversing mentally. I sensed Kunak's irritation toward Liyun, but I did not try to discover the reason by "eavesdropping" on their exchange. I still regarded mind-reading as an intrusion into a private sphere, reserving my new mental abilities only for

necessity—though deep down I already understood that I would hardly be able to avoid using them.

I had brought a bottle of good red wine and several kinds of cheese from a delicatessen. Almost casually I noted to myself that meeting the “dream thieves,” or the Servants of Arnuk, in person no longer caused me anxiety. That pleased me, for now we were working together, and we would have to communicate often.

We sat down at the oval table in the salon, where I placed the glasses and plates of sliced cheese.

“We are listening, Viktor,” Kunak began mentally, taking a sip of wine.

I was already accustomed to conversations without preliminaries, so I went straight to explaining my idea:

“We need to unite—the three of us. Create a working cell, so to speak.”

“And for this empty idea you summoned us? You could have asked me mentally from a distance, without making me waste my time,” Kunak Santra said irritably, setting down his glass.

“I actually think Viktor’s idea is quite good,” Liyun unexpectedly supported me. “The three of us are connected by the same mental wave; we could easily exchange ideas.”

“The three of us?” Kunak repeated with a trace of mockery. “Your abilities are limited by distance, have you forgotten, Liyun?”

Liyun flushed with offense but quickly regained his composure.

“I don’t know what you have against me, Kunak. Those above are very flexible in making decisions, and I have brought much benefit to our organization, studying the dreams and desires of ordinary people.”

Then something happened that I had not expected at all: Kunak Santra replied mentally to Liyun, but I could not catch anything—absolutely nothing. It felt as though my head had been wrapped in a thick layer of cotton that blocked all signals from outside.

I had deliberately arranged this meeting with both of them, already knowing Liyun's impulsive and somewhat unrestrained nature. I had hoped to divert Kunak's attention to him in order to try to penetrate his subconscious. The question of why the Servants of Arnuk had decided to keep such close watch on me—why they seemed to fear me—still would not leave me in peace. The answer was important for understanding them better. Personal fears reveal much about people.

But now I sat on my yacht, having completely lost control of the situation. Everything was happening very quickly, and my thoughts flared for a moment and then went out, settling silently in my mind. Just as quickly I decided to try to free myself from this "cotton prison." Keeping an expression of confusion and disappointment on my face—since that was a perfectly natural reaction—I slowly began to release thin steel tubes from my head, letting them seep through the cotton. At the same time I watched Liyun's face, which was clearly twisted with a sense of injustice and resentment.

My tubes pierced the cotton, and I "heard," though somewhat muffled, part of Liyun's mental reply:

"...the island, to return there. I developed my abilities and earned a great deal of money for the community. If I return, it will be as a mentor. After all, it was I—no one else—who recognized Viktor."

“And now this upstart has been imposed on me to monitor his mental development, all because of you! Look at him—he sits there deaf to our conversation, incapable of opposing my skill.”

Liyun changed tactics, softening his tone:

“We have both been demoted. We must stick together in order to—”

“Stick together? With you? You haven’t even earned a new name officially admitting you among the Servants of Arnuk! All you’re fit for is preparing hot towels for me when I come to the island to rest!”

Carried away by his insults, Kunak Santra did not notice how, through the thin tube that had opened a passage for me, I mentally slipped into his consciousness, trying to locate his contacts—or, as Liyun had called them, mental waves. At least the connection with Martin Nuken, whose clear presence in his mind I had already noticed during our previous encounter.

I had very little time. Kunak must not notice my presence. I attached a thin thread, like a spider’s web, to the image of Martin Nuken stored in his memory. Making the thread completely transparent, I secured its other end in my own consciousness. I was not sure my plan would succeed, but it was worth trying. All these manipulations took less than a second.

After that, I withdrew the tubes from the cotton tightly enveloping my brain. Looking at Kunak and Liyun, still absorbed in their “conversation,” I suddenly spoke aloud, breaking the silence:

“Kunak, this isn’t fair! I can’t follow your thoughts!”

The “cotton cloud” wrapped around my head vanished, and Kunak’s voice sounded in my mind:

“I’m leaving. There will be no more personal meetings.”

Casting a contemptuous glance at both of us, he quickly left the cabin.

Liyun remained seated opposite me, torn by anger and resentment, unable to suppress his emotions. For me it was easy enough now to slip into his thoughts and the images forming in his mind. He made no attempt to protect them. I felt his intense self-pity and his unwillingness to return to his island. I saw memories of him standing at the entrance of a white building, obsequiously opening doors for guests filled with self-importance. I decided not to hide my discovery from him.

“You worked in a hotel? Somewhere on the island? I’m sorry, Liyun, but out of curiosity I read your thoughts,” I said to him.

That remark completely enraged him.

“Ever since you appeared on my horizon, I’ve had nothing but trouble! Now they will definitely send me back, and it’s all because of you!”

His thoughts, now charged with hatred toward me, hammered in my head like blows. I felt uneasy, yet I still asked what interested me most:

“Back to the island of Arnuk?”

In a surge of agitation he sprang to his feet, knocking a plate of sliced cheese off the table. At once a mental command sounded from Kunak Santra, who had already left my yacht:

“Liyun, leave at once! Close your thoughts and go!”

Liyun ran for the cabin exit, leaving me alone.

I was satisfied with the outcome of the meeting. By chance I had learned more than I had expected. Of course, I did not allow myself to dwell on it in any detail. I had already learned to hide my thoughts and intentions quite successfully. Otherwise I would

never have been able to eavesdrop on Kunak and Liyun's dialogue—protected from me—and attach a transparent “web-thread” to Kunak Santra's mind.

Finishing my glass of wine and putting the plate of cheese away in the refrigerator, I began to prepare to head home. I did not feel sorry for the unscrupulous Liyun, who was being sent into exile on the island of Arnuk. The only thing he might still have hinted to me was the location of that mysterious island, absent from any map. I did not yet understand why I would need that—my goal had only been to rid myself of the “guardianship” of the so-called Servants of Arnuk, in order to protect not only myself but also the people close to me.

Suddenly a thought in Kunak Santra's voice sounded in my head. It was indistinct, like a faint incoherent mumble—if a thought can even be compared to spoken words. Could it be that my “web-thread,” stretched to Santra, had worked? I imagined it strengthening and clearing, turning into a channel that duplicated and directed the flow of information from him to me. Closing my eyes, I began to listen in on the conversation.

“...meet with Liyun. He must disappear immediately,” said a commanding “voice,” trembling with agitation.

“It's good I was nearby—who knows what else he might have blurted out to Viktor,” Kunak continued.

“Did he try to penetrate your mind?”

“I threw him off balance by covering him with an ‘alienation cap.’ And at the same time I was able to put Liyun in his place without letting us be overheard.”

“Yes, I know. I was present at your meeting too, plugged into your subconscious. And for a brief moment I sensed Viktor there during your conversation with Liyun.”

“That’s impossible. Most likely Liyun’s emotions toward that Viktor spilled over—no one has ever managed to cast off my ‘alienation cap.’ And especially not some amateur...”

“I think you’re right, but his innate abilities can’t be discounted,” Martin Nuken cut him off. “And we still don’t know the limit of their development, so don’t let him out of your sight. By the way, the working groups for the new research project have already been formed. Find out from your ward, Viktor, what material gain can be extracted from them.”

“None!” Kunak began to bristle. “He has already reached the limit of his mental development, and we are only wasting resources on him! I would be of more use if I continued working on attracting investors to our companies.”

“So you believe he poses no threat at all? He is very angry with us—the Servants of Arnuk—even though he hides it carefully.”

“And then why all this fuss around Viktor, if he is a potential threat to us? Wouldn’t it have been better to begin the process of ‘mental blinding’ right away? I suggested that option long ago.”

“Those at the very top have taken an interest in him. This is the first case of such talent being discovered in an uninitiated person. But I will speak with them and then pass on their decision. Until then, do nothing on your own. You were already demoted because you were too eager.”

“I also want to participate in this meeting with the High Council—I am the one who dealt with Viktor directly.”

“You have no access there. Open all information about him mentally, so I can read it. Then I will deliver it firsthand—yours, Kunak’s.”

The voices fell silent, leaving a ringing emptiness in my head. With difficulty I managed to hide what I had overheard inside a tiny point in my consciousness, wrapping it in everyday thoughts and concerns.

All the way home I thought about Regina—remembering our first meeting in the park, our future wedding, our parents. By the way, I should call them and ask how the wedding preparations were going. They had taken all the worries off my shoulders so that I could cope better with my work.

The thin web-thread stretched from my consciousness to Kunak’s vibrated, letting me know that Kunak Santra was listening in on my thoughts. I immediately summoned his image in my mind, imagining him arrogant and irritable, too absorbed in his own success. And I thought that he had been forced on me as a partner, even though without him I could have organized and carried out our new research better. I felt a pulse of Kunak’s dissatisfaction—then he vanished from my thoughts.

That day I did not think of him again. I dealt with routine household matters, spoke with Regina and then with my parents, and walked my dog Stanley. And all the while, the secret point hidden beneath ordinary thoughts in my subconscious continued its own independent work.

So that was what it was! The High Council of the Servants of Arnuk had taken an interest in me the way botanists take an interest in a new species of plant. They probably wanted to learn how far a “non-initiated” person’s mental abilities could develop—

while also suspecting that I did not feel friendly toward them. My discovery of their community had not prompted them to eliminate me. Which meant that the very fact of their existence posed no danger to them. And indeed—whom could I tell? And who would believe me? Even Orson Blackwood’s story *The Island of Arnuk* had stirred no interest in readers, who took it for a clumsy invention. And now I was threatened with “mental blinding.”

Probably because the Servants of Arnuk believed I had already reached the limit of my development, and they would no longer be interested in observing me. The High Council might well decide to leave me alone for now—but I did not want to risk it. The very phrase “mental blinding” made me shudder. I decided to act.

But first I tried to remove even the faintest hint of hostility toward the Servants of Arnuk. And indeed, one could only admire their abilities and their business acumen. I, too, was oriented toward success—so cooperating with them could only benefit me. Having given myself that internal setting and reinforced it through all layers of my subconscious (except for my secret “point” containing my true thoughts), I got to work.

I needed to prove that I had not yet reached the limit of my mental abilities—and that I was still worth watching.

I addressed Kunak Santra in my mind. He immediately shut himself off from me, while I observed his thoughts through the thin web-thread, careful not to reveal my secret channel to him. He felt a deep dislike and contempt for me, as for someone not worth taking seriously. I continued to call to him insistently, and at last he responded:

“Yes, Viktor, I hear you. What has come into your head this time?”

“I want to understand what I did to anger you. We didn’t even speak seriously during our last meeting, and Liyun left so unexpectedly,” I explained.

“Don’t play naïve. You were trying to pry him open and get answers to questions that shouldn’t concern you.”

He kept trying to end our mental conversation, while I tried to hold him in it. Knowing that talk of Liyun irritated him, I deliberately steered the conversation there, provoking his displeasure. Distracting him this way, I moved mentally along the web-thread from his consciousness toward Martin Nuken’s.

I did not know him personally and had no idea where he was. But intuitively I “approached” him via the communication channel between Kunak and him. As I understood it, the Servants of Arnuk used such channels of mental connection—highly individualized, accessible only to the chosen. I was certain that Liyun, who stood on the lowest rung of their hierarchy, had no access to it. I’m explaining all this in such detail so that my further actions will be clear.

I was trying to move from one of the Servants of Arnuk to another, in order to learn as much as possible about their organization.

Already very close to Martin Nuken’s consciousness, I caught an echo of Kunak’s thoughts resonating within it. That meant he was listening to our conversation.

“I think I could work well with Liyun—then it would be easy for you to keep an eye on me through him,” I continued mentally in my dialogue with Kunak Santra, fully aware of how stupid it sounded. But that didn’t bother me; I was simply trying to provoke a strong reaction. And I was right. Kunak Santra laughed loudly,

with genuine relish, and replied, deliberately choosing words meant to sting. The essence of what he “said” was simple: I was easy enough to keep under surveillance as it was, and it was still unclear whether I was even worth the effort. Martin Nuken, taking part in our exchange as an observer, seemed genuinely amused by the conversation—almost enjoying it. Both of them regarded me as an amateur and didn’t even bother to shield themselves from me. Meanwhile, I fixed my web-thread into Nuken’s consciousness and withdrew at once. The whole maneuver took less than a fraction of a second and went unnoticed.

“I’m sure your superiors are watching our mental exchange right now,” I declared, to Kunak’s obvious displeasure. “We need to set up controlled probes ourselves—able to scan the depths of the ocean and also to sound out the earth’s strata. That would open enormous possibilities.”

I clearly felt a flicker of interest from Martin Nuken, transmitted to me through the spider-silk filament I had just anchored in his mind. But the interest died just as quickly—and Kunak Santra felt it too. Without ceremony he cut off our dialogue, blocking his thoughts from me. I wasn’t disappointed; on the contrary, I was pleased with the “session,” which had allowed me to take root in Martin Nuken’s mind—whose existence I had learned about only by “reading” Kunak Santra’s consciousness.

Deciding to lie low and stop trying to infiltrate the minds of my opponents among the Servants of Arnuk—so as not to risk exposing my web-threads—I went about my ordinary business.

I assumed that if they decided to perform the procedure of “mental blinding” on me, they would do it at night, when I was

asleep. In that state I would be easy prey for psychic manipulation.

Of course, I reasoned about all this in secret, using my hidden point—well concealed in my mind. Lately it had become a habit, so much so that I could think about other things at the same time, or hold conversations, carefully keeping track of the topic.

Needless to say, that night I was afraid to fall asleep. I lay in bed, expecting at any minute the onset of the “mental blinding” that terrified me. Only toward morning did I drift into an anxious sleep. It felt as if someone were drilling into my skull while pouring hot sand into my eyes.

The next day I felt so exhausted that I could barely get out of bed. Only after forcing myself to remember that I also had to look after my dog Stanley—feed him and take him out—did I manage to move at all. I decided to keep our walk short; I desperately wanted to sleep again. Besides, I assumed another sleepless night awaited me.

Stanley and I were approaching a large intersection with heavy traffic. Our destination was a small square nearby. Stanley bounced impatiently at my side, waiting for the signal to cross. At last the light turned green. We stepped forward.

Suddenly everything went dark before my eyes, and it felt as if my brain had exploded. Fragments of thoughts tore through my consciousness, mixed with flashing images that appeared and vanished at once. I couldn't make out the world around me, and my legs simply obeyed the taut leash as Stanley hurried toward the square. The chaos in my head continued—thoughts streaked past, breaking apart as they went. The pieces blended together,

losing meaning. I lost the ability to understand anything at all—so completely that I no longer even knew whether I was still moving.

I couldn't think. I couldn't concentrate. It was as if my head had been covered by an impenetrable dark cap, and every attempt to pull myself together shattered against it. But I had Stanley—I couldn't, under any circumstances, leave him unattended. That was the only thought that still made sense.

With my last effort of will, I managed to hold onto the drifting image of my dog and hide it in the secret point deep inside my mind. All my memories from the past year smashed against the invisible cap around my head, turning into small multicolored marbles. They mixed with scraps of tangled, meaningless thoughts and burst like soap bubbles. Then emptiness came.

I came to on a bed in an unfamiliar room, something like a hotel room. For some reason it smelled strongly of medicine.

My mother's face immediately bent over me. Tears were running down her cheeks.

"Viktor, you gave us such a fright," she whispered, stroking my hand.

My father came up to me, along with a plump young woman with a pleasant face whom I did not know. They were very distressed as well. The young woman stroked my face with warm, gentle fingers, moving her lips silently. Her face seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't remember her. Why was she worrying about me so sincerely?

"Don't worry about Stanley—I took him home with me for now," she said, barely holding back tears.

The name Stanley stunned me. Somewhere in the depths of my consciousness a small flame of a dim thought flickered. I felt it was important and closed my eyes, trying to catch it.

“If you need to sleep—sleep,” I heard my mother’s caring voice.

I opened my eyes again and asked:

“Where am I? Why am I not at the northern station? Did they fire me?”

My mother and the dark-haired young woman standing beside me exchanged glances and, for some reason, burst into tears at the same time. My father stepped between them and me and, bending over, began to explain:

“Viktor, you’re in the hospital. You haven’t worked at the station for a year now—you’re involved in a new scientific project. Your boss, Homespunat Lepota, paid for this private room out of some sponsors’ money.”

“Why am I in the hospital? What happened?”

“You lost consciousness during a walk with Stanley—your dog. And you hit your head badly. That’s probably why you’ve lost your memory. But it will come back. Don’t worry.”

“Yes, the doctor warned us you have symptoms of a severe concussion and need rest,” the young woman added.

I absorbed their words like a sponge, trying to remember something—anything—but failing. A nurse entered the room and began changing the IV, while my parents and the young woman watched her closely. I felt guilty for causing them such distress. I needed to recover as soon as possible; I couldn’t bear their worry. And that sweet young woman whose name I didn’t know... she had mentioned Stanley. I had long dreamed of a dog named

Stanley. And apparently now I had one. How many events had been erased from my memory?

I asked my visitors to leave me alone for a while.

“You need to rest. And I’ve come around, so it’s all for the best,” I said, giving them an encouraging smile. “I won’t be able to get better if I’m now risking your health as well.”

“I assure you, he’s in good hands,” the nurse confirmed as she headed toward the door. “And I don’t think we’d be happy to get new patients. We’re full,” she joked awkwardly.

Left alone, I decided to try to recall at least something about the events that had brought me to a hospital bed.

Stanley. His image immediately appeared in my mind: a kind dog of unknown breed, greeting me joyfully at home. He exists—really exists. I got him after returning from the northern station. And according to my family, I’m currently developing a new scientific project. And that project has sponsors. I would need to check my work computer; all my research and notes must be there.

I won’t describe in detail how, mentally following the image of Stanley, I reached my “secret point” hidden deep in my consciousness. It contained preserved memories of everything that had happened to me over the past year.

I remembered everything.

My first impulse was to break into Kunak Santra’s consciousness and unleash the same chaos on him that he had unleashed on me. But common sense forced me to restrain myself. First, the Servants of Arnuk are a hierarchical organization, and Kunak clearly isn’t the top figure in it. Second, I shouldn’t comfort myself with the hope that after carrying out

“mental blinding” they would leave me alone. They were still watching me—because they were now convinced that I had innate mental abilities. And the Servants of Arnuk would never allow those abilities to manifest again.

Which meant I would have to act even more carefully—hiding the restoration of my memory and my abilities with the utmost precision.

As a result of the “mental blinding,” the thin threads I had mentally stretched to the minds of Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken were destroyed. But that no longer mattered to me—eavesdropping on thoughts had become taboo. The slightest hint of my presence in someone else’s mind would be my death sentence. It frightened me even to think what else they might be capable of.

I was eager to leave the hospital as soon as possible to begin carrying out my new plan. But the attending physician categorically refused to discharge me.

“You have a concussion, and you’ve only just regained consciousness. You need to remain under observation for a few more days,” he explained.

I called my parents and asked them to bring me my laptop. I intended to fill my mind with new data, gathering it piece by piece—just as any person would who had lost his memory but retained his intellect. And that was exactly the behavior the Servants of Arnuk expected from me. Of course, I would know nothing about ever having been able to read minds or communicate at a distance. After all, all of that had been erased from my memory.

In the following days I devoted myself to studying the scientific material I had collected about the discovery of a stone slab beneath the permafrost. I read all my correspondence with

colleagues. Homespunat Lepota personally came to visit me, partly to tell me about the new scientific project and its sponsors. Regina filled me in on the details of how we had met and our relationship. My parents showed me photographs we had taken together over the past year.

“And here we are on the yacht Regina—and don’t worry, I moved it to a sheltered mooring. It’s under supervision there,” my father said.

I memorized everything I learned, gradually filling my mind with newly acquired information. I was impatient to return home; it seemed to me that within familiar walls I would feel more confident. But after my discharge, once I was home, waves of fear and intense anxiety would sometimes sweep over me. My salvation was spending time with my dog Stanley, who served as an anchor of stability for me. I spoiled him with various treats and spent long hours walking with him.

After a couple more days that my boss had granted me for full physical and psychological recovery, I returned to work at our research institute. There, in conversation with colleagues, I quickly caught up on matters. Homespunat Lepota warned me that our sponsors had begun expressing doubts about the advisability of financing our new project.

“You’re acquainted with the sponsors’ representative, Kunak Santra,” he said to me. “Perhaps you’ll remember him when you see him again,” he added, hesitating slightly.

“My memory is recovering,” I assured him. “Did they explain the reason for their doubts?”

“That Santra has scheduled another meeting with us. And you must attend. It seems they want to review the project development plan once more. After that they’ll make their decision.”

“We’ll explain everything again. That’s not a problem.”

“I don’t like this Kunak Santra,” Homespunat Lepota said, wrinkling his nose in displeasure at the thought of him. “It’s as if he says one thing but means another. I’m thinking of looking for other sources of funding.”

I was pleasantly surprised by my boss’s perceptiveness regarding Kunak Santra. He had hit the mark exactly.

“Let’s wait for the scheduled meeting. By the way, do we know the date yet?” I asked.

“It’s set for the day after tomorrow. That Santra wastes no time. He contacted me the very day you were discharged from the hospital. Very persistent. Started talking business without even asking about your condition.”

“Perhaps that’s for the best,” I said, trying to sound confident, at the same time filling myself with optimism. “The sooner we clarify the situation with the sponsors, the better.”

“At least we’ll know where we stand,” my boss agreed.

For me, the news of the upcoming meeting with Kunak Santra was deeply troubling—the Servants of Arnuk were openly observing me. Surely this meeting would be a kind of test. Very well, I was ready to meet him, demonstrating memory loss and attempts to fill the gaps in my recollections with information gathered from outside. Even before the procedure of “mental blinding,” I had learned to conceal my thoughts and intentions in an infinitely small point of my consciousness—so small and so

well hidden that even Kunak Santra himself had not discovered it. Until we meet again, Kunak.

The time until the scheduled meeting with the sponsors passed unnoticed, filled with preparatory work. Together with my staff I had to draw up a new work schedule with adjustments. Our accountants did an excellent job preparing a working budget, including calculations of potential profits from selling the information we obtained to competitors.

About half an hour before the meeting, an agitated Homespunat Lepota came to fetch me.

“Come, Viktor,” he said, nervously rubbing his hands. “The participants are already gathering. I’ll show you some of them. Let them think your memory has fully returned. That will be better for business.”

I obediently followed my boss out of my office. I understood him very well. He had already become infected with enthusiasm for the new project, which required funding. And finding new sponsors was a difficult and exhausting business. We had to try to keep the ones we already had—or rather, almost had.

Several small groups of two or three people had gathered near the entrance to the conference hall. A wave of expensive cologne drifted toward me. Homespunat Lepota lightly nudged me, pointing to a tanned, self-assured man.

“That’s Kunak Santra. A very slippery type. But our success depends on him,” he explained.

I nodded slightly, studying Santra carefully. Then I awkwardly looked away when our eyes met. I had already grown accustomed to using the information stored in my, so to speak, open consciousness without touching my hidden point. Therefore I did

not recognize him. He was a stranger to me—but I would pretend I did recognize him.

He extended his hand in our direction and began approaching us, smiling broadly.

“Viktor, how glad I am to see you! I heard you were in the hospital.”

He paused, arranging his face into an expression of sympathy. I shook his hand like an old acquaintance.

“Mr. Santra, I’m glad to meet you again and to answer all your questions regarding our project,” I said briskly, smiling just as broadly. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Homespunat Lepota, standing beside me, nodding approvingly. Kunak Santra immediately turned to my boss and began discussing ways of spending weekends. Meanwhile, I mentally rehearsed the opening words of my presentation.

To be honest, I did not disgrace myself: my report was brief but substantial. I presented logical arguments in favor of our project and its potential to expand our field of activity. I impressed everyone present—except Kunak Santra. He made caustic remarks and tried to throw me off with questions unrelated to the topic. At last I managed to finish my speech and sat down at the long table directly opposite him. He studied me, his head tilted slightly to one side in irony.

Everyone seated at the table remained silent, waiting for him to pronounce his “verdict.” My boss Lepota sat beside me with his head lowered. He, and everyone else present, already understood the verdict of the sponsors’ representative, Kunak Santra. All that remained was to hear him speak.

The air in the conference hall was filled with tension and the subtle fragrance of expensive perfume. I, too, waited for Santra to finally speak, bringing us at last to the end of this drawn-out meeting. At last his voice sounded in the complete silence:

“As everyone present here has already understood,” he said, spreading both hands as if to embrace all those seated at the long table, “I am not inspired by the project presented. Despite Viktor’s efforts...”

He continued speaking, portraying our attempts to advance the project as almost laughable. He was enjoying his speech and was completely absorbed in it. I took advantage of the moment and released a portion of my thoughts, wrapping them in the drifting vapors of perfume that lingered in the air. With an invisible thread I tied the resulting invisible “cloud of thoughts” to my consciousness and, exhaling toward it, directed it toward Kunak Santra, who sat opposite me.

He paused in his speech and inhaled several times, drawing my little cloud in through his nose. Then he continued:

“I will not weary your attention further. I will only conclude by saying that, despite all the efforts of Viktor and the institute’s administration, the report did not convince me. Though I must note that the explanations and presentation of the proposed development plan were carried out very competently. It is immediately clear that it was prepared by scientific staff who know their work well.”

At his last words almost everyone present stirred, turning their eyes toward Kunak Santra.

“And if we are to mention the scientific staff who developed this working plan, I will need their personal consultation. I have

decided not to make hasty decisions. Let us postpone the continuation of the meeting to a later date. Mr. Lepota, I will contact you soon. Thank you all, and until we meet again.”

He rose and left the hall with a spring in his step, leaving the rest of the participants in complete bewilderment.

“What was that, Viktor? He turned in the opposite direction right in the middle of a sentence,” my boss said quietly.

“I don’t understand it myself. Perhaps that’s how sponsors behave,” I replied just as quietly.

I was satisfied. My tactic had succeeded. I had sent Kunak Santra a fragment of my consciousness together with a package of thoughts in which my unquestioning personal sympathy for him and my sense of the necessity of cooperating with our institute were firmly embedded. He would be able to interpret all this as subtle intuition. But most importantly, a part of my consciousness, connected to me by an invisible thread, had firmly settled inside his mind. I no longer needed to use the technique of reading thoughts, risking exposure. From that moment on I knew everything that happened in Kunak Santra’s head—I had, figuratively speaking, taken up residence there.

I will not go into the details of how Kunak became my best friend, developing a growing sympathy for me. Our project advanced at a rapid pace thanks to the sponsors’ financial support. A new special design department, created on the basis of our research institute, managed within a relatively short time to develop and implement its own locating instruments. They proved more effective than existing ones and quickly pushed them out of the market. Money flowed like a river, to the great delight of the Servants of Arnuk, pleased that they had not miscalculated in

trusting me. At the same time their influence expanded and strengthened in the scientific, technological, and digital spheres. Some of their representatives were already feeling their way toward positions within the power structures of the world's leading countries. This development did not surprise me in the least: I had long understood that the true aim of the Servants of Arnuk was, quite simply, money and power.

Meanwhile Regina and I were married, and the witness on my side was my best friend, Kunak Santra.

"I don't understand how I failed to see at once that you were a kindred spirit," Kunak told me, holding a glass of champagne. "I have the feeling that you and I are, as they say, on the same wavelength."

I smiled knowingly. He was sincere in his friendly feelings toward me. Now was the time to make my next move—to meet personally with his immediate superior, Martin Nuken, whose existence I had long known of through Kunak's thoughts. I did not rush events; everything had to look natural and arouse no suspicion among the Servants of Arnuk. The fact was that they communicated mentally through established contacts, obeying a strict hierarchy, almost like in the army. Communication stretched from top to bottom, enveloping, like a web, ultimately all members of this mental community. I had understood all this after firmly settling in Kunak Santra's mind.

"Since we're on the same wavelength, I want to confide something to you," I said to Kunak, conspiratorially leaning toward his ear. "Recently I spoke with our chief engineer, and he told me that with a small amount of financial support their bureau would be

quite capable of developing new satellite systems. Imagine what opportunities this would open for us.”

I watched his train of thought. Carefully, through the fragment of my consciousness that had become part of his brain, I released the response I needed. A few seconds later Kunak reacted:

“I don’t think it’s worth wasting time on long discussions. My partners in the sponsor group and I have already studied you quite well. We’ll resolve this matter quickly.”

I already knew that he had decided to introduce me personally to Martin Nuken, whom he mentally connected to our conversation.

“We’ll need to expand the design bureau with new, fresh minds. I’m thinking of the best graduates from technical universities,” I said.

“You’re right. They’re full of youthful energy and focused on success. On our success, Viktor!”

We raised our champagne glasses in greeting. I was pleased—Martin Nuken, who was “listening in” on our conversation, had not noticed my presence in Kunak Santra’s mind. I still had a long road ahead, and this was my first major success.

Regina and I had to postpone our honeymoon for a few days, because literally a couple of days later Santra invited me to one of the most expensive restaurants in the city. Regina treated this with understanding, considering it her duty to support me in all my undertakings.

I put on a generous amount of the expensive cologne my parents had given me.

“Viktor, you’re a successful businessman now, and you should smell accordingly,” my mother had joked, handing me the beautifully wrapped bottle.

Now was the time to use it. I could not simply send Martin Nuken a “package” of thoughts with a fragment of my consciousness. He was a more experienced mentalist than Kunak Santra, and without proper camouflage I risked being exposed—with very sad consequences for me. And yet, deep within my consciousness, in my hidden point concealed from everyone, I was anxious.

At the precisely appointed time I entered the hall of the restaurant, which specialized in seafood. Kunak Santra was already seated at the table reserved for us. He greeted me warmly, encouragingly patting me on the shoulder.

“My boss will be here in a moment. He’s already heard a great deal about you and is impressed by your achievements. So don’t worry,” he assured me.

Our drinks had already been served when Martin Nuken appeared. I concentrated entirely on the part of my mind filled with newly acquired information after my memory loss, so I observed the newcomer with genuine curiosity. He was a man of medium build with a springy step. It was difficult to guess his age—he might have been forty, or sixty. Probably because of the smooth skin of his round face. Kunak jumped up to greet him.

“Martin, this is Victor—I’ve told you a lot about him. Victor, this is Martin Nuken, my immediate superior,” he introduced us.

Nuken extended his hand, smiling broadly.

“I’ve heard so much about you that I’d rather switch to ‘you’ right away. You don’t mind, Victor?” he said, sitting down. “I have the impression now that I know you better than you think.”

He spoke only glancing at me, immediately burying himself in the menu the waiter had courteously presented.

“You should listen to him, Martin,” Kunak said, somewhat disappointed by the lack of attention.

“I’m hungry. I wanted to look at Victor, and I’ve looked at him and seen nothing extraordinary. I give my approval.” He beckoned to the waiter, casting me a strange glance beforehand. I thought I detected in it a mixture of contempt and disappointment.

Taking advantage of the fact that he was busy discussing the menu with the waiter, I sent toward him, wrapped in the vapors of my cologne, a packet of positive emotions along with a fragment of my consciousness. He frowned, sniffing a few times. My “packet” passed through his nostrils straight into his brain.

“What a tasteless excess, Victor. I didn’t expect that. Next time, don’t drown yourself in perfume,” he remarked rather bluntly.

Sitting beside me, Kunak Santra flushed deeply and nudged me with his elbow.

“Come on, Victor,” he muttered. “Still, he did give his approval.”

Having finished choosing his dishes, Martin Nuken leaned back in his chair. He looked at me attentively, and his gaze warmed. Suddenly smiling, he said:

“I can be sharp at times, but take my remark with humor. By the way, what is that cologne you’re wearing? It’s actually not bad.”

The atmosphere at the table relaxed at once. Kunak and I placed our orders as well, adding a bottle of excellent white wine.

Conversation during lunch flowed easily. Martin Nuken asked me about our project, interspersing his questions with jokes.

“Let’s see how things go with those satellites. When new interesting ideas arise, let me know,” he said in farewell, handing me his business card. He was the first to leave the table.

“Victor, this is a great success, believe me,” Kunak said, finishing his wine. “He rarely gives anyone his personal contact details. Now you’re in the club of influential people.”

“All thanks to you, Kunak. Thank you,” I replied sincerely.

“You know, Victor, when we first met, I never thought you’d become my friend. I didn’t like you at all, and it felt as if I knew you from another side,” Santra confessed, apparently under the influence of alcohol.

I poured him more wine, steering the conversation onto neutral ground.

“Regina and I are going on a trip on our boat. I’ll let you know when we return,” I said.

We discussed possible routes for our voyage for a while longer before leaving the restaurant, pleased with the time spent together and with each other.

After returning from my honeymoon, I learned of the decision to create a Board of Directors for our enterprise. There was logic in this—the interests of our institute had long gone beyond research of the North and oceanology. In essence, we had become a large corporation with many fields of activity.

Besides me, the new Board included my boss Homespunat Lepota and Kunak Santra. Homespunat Lepota became chairman of the Board, and I believed he had earned that position. Our shares rose steadily on the market, bringing additional income.

Despite the responsible position, I had more free time—our corporation's partnerships were well established, our researchers worked according to plan, and the design bureau was actively engaged in new developments.

Through Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken, I knew that those at the very top of the organization known as the Servants of Arnuk were very pleased with me. It cost me no effort to know everything that passed through Santra's and Nuken's minds, since, as I have already mentioned, I had become a part of their consciousness—without their knowledge.

Thanks to this, I learned that one of the leaders of the Servants of Arnuk had begun to distrust me. In a conversation with Martin Nuken, he expressed the thought that I might have restored my mental abilities without their knowledge.

"I can't imagine that a simple, indecisive research worker could turn into a successful entrepreneur with such abilities. Something troubles me," he said to Martin. "Send me again, mentally, all the details of your first meeting with him in the restaurant."

Through Martin Nuken's mental communication channel, I learned only the name of this high-ranking Servant of Arnuk. His name was Nathan. Simply Nathan, without a surname. That seemed strange to me, since their names usually concealed the veiled form of "Arnuk."

But that was not my main concern, which required urgent resolution. I feared a new test from their side. The "mental blinding" performed by Kunak Santra had nearly cost me my sanity. And who knew what more powerful members of that strange and frightening organization were capable of?

I had to take countermeasures to protect myself—and my plan concerning them.

One weekend I invited Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken for a trip on my yacht, Regina. The weather promised to be fine, perfect for a sea outing. I knew they would agree for two reasons. First, we had indeed become friends, and they felt strong sympathy toward me. Second, they had received instructions from Nathan to test me—not through any dangerous procedure, but simply to probe, so to speak.

We headed toward a small bay sheltered by high cliffs. The water was calm, its turquoise surface sparkling in the sun. We had brought bathing things in advance, anticipating a refreshing swim. Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken communicated with each other mentally from time to time.

“Honestly, I can’t believe Victor even remembers his mental abilities,” Kunak remarked mentally.

“Nor do I. I’ve scanned his consciousness many times. There isn’t even a trace of memories about us. All his knowledge was acquired after his memory loss. But we’ll conduct a standard test.”

I felt no particular anxiety about the coming test. After all, Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken, having received a fragment of my consciousness, had begun to feel toward me a strong sympathy and compassion they themselves could not explain. And that was only natural—for I had become an inseparable part of them. And no one willingly harms himself... or a part of himself.

I carefree made my way to the edge of the yacht and jumped into the cool sea water. Then I turned back, smiling and waving toward Kunak and Martin, inviting them to join me.

Suddenly, the sky—clear only a moment before—darkened, and a strong wind began driving high waves toward me. They crashed over my head, dragging me downward in an undercurrent. Caught off guard, I panicked, struggling to stay afloat. I tried desperately to swim toward the rocky shore, hoping to find shelter beneath it. But the waves tossed me about like a splinter, and each oncoming swell hurled me back.

I was in danger of drowning, yet I did not use my mental abilities to calm the sea. When I was already being pulled under, an invisible force pushed me back to the surface, and another wave struck my back, carrying me toward the rocks. They loomed closer, and I feared being dashed against the sharp stone.

Then the rocky shore suddenly turned into a wide sandy beach, and the wave pushing me forward began to lose its strength. I swam quickly toward the sand. As soon as I reached it, I felt a powerful blow to my head and lost consciousness.

I came to on a sofa in the cabin of my yacht. A towel filled with ice lay on my head. Kunak and Martin were leaning over me, speaking to each other mentally.

“He didn’t even realize what happened and didn’t try to do anything against our hypnosis,” Kunak stated.

“He simply drifted along the current of events imposed on him, both literally and figuratively. He’s clean,” Martin Nuken concluded.

I groaned softly and said in a weak voice,

“A storm came up suddenly, and I almost drowned. Thank you for saving me.”

Martin exchanged a glance with Kunak and replied, avoiding my eyes,

“Don’t worry, Victor. Just forget about it. I think we should head back.”

He went to the helm to steer the boat back toward the harbor.

I was satisfied and hoped that the testing of my mental abilities was now over. I still had to think through my next steps toward achieving my goal—to rid myself once and for all of the control of the Servants of Arnuk. The situation weighed heavily on me: I constantly had to conceal my memories and true thoughts, hiding them in an infinitely small point within my subconscious. If I lost vigilance for even a moment, Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken would become my sworn enemies, eager to avenge themselves for my control over their minds.

You ask what my plan was? I will explain—but in order.

By effectively occupying part of the consciousness of Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken, I learned that telepathic communication among the Servants of Arnuk flowed through carefully established channels, from higher-ranking members of the organization to lower-ranking ones, forming a strict hierarchy.

Kunak Santra supervised, besides Liyun, nine other people on the lowest level. He himself was under the control of Martin Nuken, who in turn had five other subordinates besides Kunak. From the contacts of Nuken that I overheard, I concluded that he stood on the second level of the hierarchy, and the entire pyramid was directed by the Council of the High Table. I did not know how many people belonged to that Council. One of them, Nathan, was Martin Nuken’s direct superior.

Naturally, all Servants of Arnuk were permitted to use their mental abilities on ordinary people for their own purposes. I had experienced that myself, having fallen under Liyun’s hypnosis.

And he had stood on the very lowest rung of the hierarchy and did not even have the right to take a name containing the coded word "Arnuk."

I could not even imagine how many victims their psychological experiments had claimed.

If I could reach the members of the Council of the High Table, I would gain the chance to take control of the entire carefully constructed pyramid of the Servants of Arnuk.

I needed to find a pretext to persuade Martin Nuken to introduce me to Nathan, without arousing Nathan's suspicion. Meanwhile I worked actively at our research institute, which had gradually turned into a large conglomerate with a Board of Directors that included me and my boss, Homespunat Lepota. We were no longer limited to purely scientific questions; we had established production of our own locating instruments and even satellites that ensured rapid and reliable data exchange.

Our shares were rising, as was my bank account. I provided credit cards to my parents and to Regina, and still had enough funds left to secretly begin building a house in a place I had long chosen for myself.

Because of my responsibilities, I had to visit various countries to attract investors. This came to me rather easily. I enveloped them in the radiation of my thoughts, while simultaneously reading their consciousness without penetrating it. I was able to inspire complete trust in a short time, adapting myself to their expectations. Gradually I built an excellent reputation in the business world, opening doors to powerful lobbying groups. I introduced Kunak and Martin into these circles. This allowed the

Servants of Arnuk to infiltrate the upper echelons of power in leading countries.

Yet I still could not meet Nathan personally, the curator of Martin Nuken. I felt that any direct interest in him might provoke strong distrust—even suspicion—on his part. And I had no desire to subject my mind to yet another test.

But the opportunity presented itself on its own, without my intervention.

I was in my new large apartment, where Regina and I lived comfortably with our two dogs, Alma and Stanley. I was preparing for bed, hoping to get a good night's sleep after another business trip. At that very moment, a mental conversation began between Nathan and Martin Nuken.

“Your and Kunak’s protégé, Victor, has achieved astonishing success. Don’t you ever ask yourself how a modest, dreamy loner turned into a business shark?” Nathan asked, not without irony.

“Nathan, Kunak and I periodically scan his consciousness. I assure you, he’s clean. He doesn’t even remember having mental abilities.”

“You’re defending him. That worries me as well. He has the ability to inspire very strong sympathy. His psychological skills match those of the most experienced Servants of Arnuk.”

“His successes have benefited our entire organization. And I assure you, my relationship with him is purely professional.”

“I doubt that. I don’t like your overly friendly attitude toward him. You know our code of conduct: no personal sympathies—act only for the benefit of the organization. You must test him again. Join forces with Kunak. I will observe your actions.”

“We nearly killed him with our last test. Believe me, he’s clean,” Martin Nuken repeated.

“Bring him to me. That is an order. I will deal with him myself.”

From this conversation I understood that the time of my meeting with Nathan—one of the members of the Council of the High Table—was finally approaching. I also understood that he would subject me to a test—the strongest, the most merciless one.

But I could not retreat. Nor would retreat have made any sense. From the moment Nathan showed open interest in me, I had become a target of his constant observation. Until we met in person, he would no longer trust the reports of Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken. Any deviation in my behavior, even the slightest, would arouse still greater suspicion. I feared that in such a case he would devise an even more sophisticated method to probe and analyze my mind.

I was not sure whether I was ready for a confrontation at such a high level. But I repeat: I had no other choice but to meet him face to face.

Two days later Martin Nuken intercepted me as I was leaving the main building of our conglomerate at the end of the working day.

“Victor—what luck to run into you,” he said. “I stopped by here on business, and just like that I run into you face to face,” he added cheerfully, spreading his arms in greeting.

My face immediately took on an expression of surprised delight. I let him persuade me without difficulty to sit for a while in a cozy café nearby.

“It’s a pity Kunak isn’t with us right now,” I said after our coffee and pastries were served. “You know what a sweet tooth he has.”

“We won’t tell him, so he won’t be upset afterward.”

Martin Nuken looked calm and self-assured, but behind that façade lay strong anxiety. Anxiety—for me. He narrowed his eyes as if listening to something. I knew what he meant—or rather, whom. Nathan was invisibly present at our meeting through a direct mental connection.

“Speaking of meetings,” Martin said, “one of the leaders of our sponsoring organization is very impressed with your success. And he would like to meet you, Victor.”

“Really? I’m very flattered,” I answered sincerely. “If necessary, I can give him a tour of our new departments and—”

“You don’t understand,” Martin interrupted me. “He wants to meet you in an informal setting. Just to talk.”

“I don’t mind, of course,” I replied, somewhat uncertainly. “The question is how informal you mean. You know I don’t do well at meetings where strict dress codes are required.”

“Don’t worry about that. My boss suggests meeting at a golf club—in a relaxed atmosphere, and you’ll even get a bit of exercise.”

I did not mention that I did not know how to play golf. In the end, no one was likely to care.

“And yes, Victor,” he added, biting his lip for some reason, “when you speak with him, just be yourself. Open, so to speak.”

I understood perfectly what he meant. If I opened my mind to Nathan, I might be able to convince him that I had no mental abilities and thus avoid yet another test. The fragment of my consciousness lodged in Martin Nuken’s mind faithfully did its work, turning him into my friend and supporter, revealing to me his most private thoughts.

We agreed to meet on the coming weekend, and at the appointed time Martin Nuken picked me up in his car. He was so absorbed in his own thoughts that he did not even notice the golf clothes I had specially bought for the occasion. I could easily have read his thoughts unnoticed, but I refrained out of caution. It was entirely possible that Nathan noticed things Martin himself did not suspect.

I completely camouflaged the hidden point in my consciousness, hoping that even a very powerful mentalist would be unable to detect it. My mind was clean, filled only with current events and entirely stripped of any memory of my telepathic past. As for the fragment of my consciousness inside Martin, it had fully blended with his own; only I could detect it—or remove it, when the time came.

We drove through ornate metal gates onto the grounds of the club where we were to meet Nathan. I looked around with curiosity at the carefully maintained area in front of the administrative building, with its flowerbeds and neatly trimmed trees. The weather was summery, sunny, and windless—perfect for golf. Although I knew little about the sport, I was not opposed to learning. I was also somewhat nervous about meeting one of the leaders of the influential organization to which Martin Nuken belonged.

He noticed my tension and said reassuringly, placing a hand on my shoulder:

“Your nervousness is natural, Victor. You cannot imagine how nervous I was during my interview with him when I first joined, so to speak. You will get through it.”

He laughed a little nervously, and we went inside. The attendant at the desk informed us that Mr. Nathan was waiting for us on the course and that a golf cart would take us to him.

We were driven to a small ravine, beside which stood a very tall man. He was lining up a shot, apparently intending to send the ball across the ravine toward a flag marking the target. Setting his club aside, he straightened when he saw us.

I was astonished. Before me stood a strikingly handsome man of about forty, with a kind expression. He resembled an ancient Greek god as depicted in old paintings: classical features and a proud bearing. He was nothing like the image I had formed of him in my imagination.

“Nathan, allow me to introduce Victor, of whom I have told you much. Victor, this is Nathan,” Martin Nuken said, trying to conceal his inner tension.

Nathan smiled broadly, revealing even white teeth.

“Well then, I am glad to meet you, Victor,” he said. “I chose this place deliberately. Nowhere does a person reveal himself so well as during a game.”

“I don’t know how to play golf,” I admitted, feeling slightly embarrassed.

“I will try to teach you. And do not worry if it does not work out—I have rented the entire course. There is no one here but us.”

Handing me one of the clubs, he began showing me how to hold it correctly. His voice was a pleasant baritone, perfectly suited to his appearance. I followed his instructions, repeating his movements.

“Again, Victor. Watch me. Repeat after me. Spread your feet a little. Hold the club as I do.”

I copied his movements, and I found that I liked it. The sound of his voice was pleasant in my ears. Spread my feet, bend forward, swing the club to the right. Again. And again. I appreciated how patiently and willingly he tried to teach me the basics of the game. It felt good to stand beside him. His charm seemed to surround me like a warm cloud.

I was surprised by Martin Nuken’s nervousness as he watched us from some distance. Perhaps he had personal problems and could not fully relax on such a beautiful day, in such pleasant company. I would thank him later for introducing me to Nathan.

I felt so good that I no longer wanted to think about anything. It did not concern me why Martin was nervous. Everyone has their own problems.

Just repeat the movements. Try to do them correctly. To please Nathan. Concentrate. Bend, swing. Keep the right hand straight. Bend again.

The pleasant baritone of his instructions filled my head, pushing everything else aside. It became my main point of reference. Without it I would not know what to do. I had to follow him. Without proper guidance I was blind.

A haze came over my eyes, but that was not frightening. Nathan was beside me, and he knew what needed to be done. That was good; I would no longer have to strain myself deciding what to do. Was this not bliss? Let his voice fill my mind, let it correct my intentions. He knew everything better than I did. I had nothing to hide from him. Nothing at all.

Suddenly a feeling of anxiety arose in me, together with the sensation that an invisible net was sifting through my brain. A tiny flash in the point hidden deep in my consciousness made me awaken for a brief instant from the hypnosis. Following an inner impulse, clinging with my last strength to a spark of true reality, I detached a fragment of the part of my consciousness that I had long ago lodged in Martin Nuken's mind and, swinging the club once more, sent it toward Nathan, who stood to my left. Then, exhausted, I allowed the haze to envelop me again. The net sifted through one layer of my consciousness after another, penetrating deeper and deeper. My thoughts became tangled. Or did I no longer have any thoughts at all? Only emptiness. And that, too, was good. The pleasant voice that had been sounding in my head disappeared as well. And if there were no instructions to act, then that must mean... It must mean something.

"What does that mean?" I repeated aloud.

The fog before my eyes cleared, and I found myself lying on the grass. Martin Nuken was crouching beside me, shaking me by the shoulders. When he heard my voice, he released me.

"You can speak, Victor," he said with relief, looking back at Nathan, who was standing nearby, in joyful astonishment.

"My guest must not tolerate the sun very well," Nathan suggested, examining me as I still lay on the grass. "They will come for us shortly. We will sit in the café in the club building where it is cooler. I have already arranged it. No one will disturb us."

I noticed a mobile phone in his hand and thought with admiration that Nathan always knew what to do.

I remembered nothing after the moment Martin Nuken had introduced me to Nathan. I felt ashamed that I had lost consciousness immediately afterward. "Very ashamed," I whispered involuntarily. It was good that this had not happened somewhere else, where no one would have known what to do. "And Nathan always knows," I whispered again. For some reason I had begun to think aloud.

With Martin's help I got to my feet and allowed myself to be guided into a small vehicle that carried us toward the administrative building. I only remember smiling meaninglessly and nodding my head the whole time. And I had no idea how I eventually found myself at home, in my bed.

From the kitchen came the faint clatter of dishes, and after a while the bedroom door opened and Regina entered, carrying on a tray my favorite scrambled eggs with tomatoes and a slice of fried bread.

"You're awake," she exclaimed happily. "How do you feel?" Setting the tray on the bedside table, she sat down beside me and placed her cool palm on my forehead.

"You don't have a fever anymore, and that's already good. The doctor said it was all from exhaustion, and also a bit of sunstroke."

"I'll sleep a little more," I replied and closed my eyes. Regina kissed me on the cheek and quietly left the room, carefully closing the door behind her.

I began to drift off, but loud noises outside the door woke me. I heard sharp barking and the sound of paws scratching at the door. Stanley! The thought flashed instantly through my mind.

I got out of bed and walked to the door, swaying slightly from dizziness and weakness. My faithful dog burst in as soon as I

opened it, nearly knocking me over. Wagging his tail furiously, he followed me back to the bed. I patted the blanket, inviting him to settle beside me. His presence revived me. Resting my hand on Stanley's soft back, I closed my eyes with satisfaction.

How good it is to have a loyal friend who loves you always and under any circumstances. And I have other friends as well, besides my devoted family and my dog. I began to list them in my mind: my boss, Homespunat Lepota—he must surely be very worried about me now. I would not be surprised if he came to visit. And also Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken, representatives of our sponsors and members of the board of directors of our corporation.

As I recalled my friends and acquaintances, I tried to orient myself inwardly, because I could not shake the feeling that I had forgotten something very important, something I needed to remember. It seemed to me that I had once been in exactly the same situation. What had happened then? Another partial loss of memory? And Stanley had helped me then as well. My Stanley, ready to follow me anywhere. And I am ready to follow him.

What luck that I chose him at the animal shelter. Thanks to him I met Regina. And afterward something happened to her. Memories seemed to crowd behind a dense veil, knocking against it, trying to open it for me. What was that mysterious veil? Or place? Or point?

My hidden point in consciousness.

I immediately sank into it and remembered everything. A torrent of memories overwhelmed me, leaving no blank spaces. I now knew what had happened to Regina, when I had to save her. She

had become a victim of the dream-thief Liyun, who had been sent back to an island not marked on any map.

With effort I restrained myself from filling my entire mind with the contents of my hidden point. No—I would fill it gradually, as was expected of me, without knowledge dangerous to me. I would preserve in it the feeling of admiration for my new acquaintance Nathan.

Fortunately for me, he had “worked on” me only after I had already gained considerable experience in mental self-preservation. He had sifted my brain, passing it through a fine sieve, mercilessly destroying established chains of thought. It was astonishing that he had not discovered my infinitely small hidden refuge for my true thoughts and intentions. For a master of psychological manipulation, that was frankly strange. In any case, I retained enough mental capacity to recover. And in addition, my growing mental experience.

Thank you, Nathan. You showed me a terrible psychological weapon in action. I learned the lesson you taught me.

Exhausted from the intense strain of thought, I fell asleep with Stanley beside me. I had earned this rest.

I slept until evening, and would have slept longer if Homespunat Lepota had not come to visit.

“I won’t stay long, Victor. I just wanted to make sure you are all right,” he explained as he entered my room. I was very glad to see him; I valued his sincere attitude toward me.

“Since the start of our new project you’ve been having these bouts of weakness. To be honest, I miss our old days, before these sponsors and this race for results,” he said with a light sigh.

“My weakness will pass, don’t worry. Perhaps you should rest as well,” I replied, studying his drawn face.

“We will talk about that when you have fully recovered, Victor.”

“You want to retire?” I guessed.

Homespunat Lepota pressed a finger to his lips and smiled slightly.

“Let that remain our little secret for now. I have earned very well lately; it will be enough for a decent life in retirement. But enough about me. I have arranged for you to have a week’s leave. If that is not enough for a full recovery, extend it without hesitation.”

“I truly appreciate your care for me. I want you to know that.”

He smiled, nodded several times, and then left, wishing me a speedy recovery.

I felt a little sad after his departure. For me, our institute—now proudly called a conglomerate—was inseparably linked with his image. His retirement would leave an irreplaceable emptiness. And I also felt a little ashamed that I knew nothing about his life outside of work. Did he have a family, children? Why had I never been interested?

I decided that I would preserve this valuable and sincere friendship with Homespunat Lepota, and the thought inspired me.

You ask why I never read his thoughts or entered his mind to learn everything about his private life. I will explain. It is simple—I am repelled by invading another person’s mind. I consider it sacrilegious. I developed my mental abilities only because of special circumstances, when I attracted the attention of the Servants of Arnuk—unscrupulous people ready to destroy the psyche of anyone who learned of their existence. I had to defend

myself against them and at the same time devise a plan to neutralize them.

The moment I am about to tell you about was a turning point; the success of my plan depended on it. I was impatient to learn whether I had managed to “plant” in Nathan’s mind the fragment of my consciousness that I had sent to him with the stroke of the golf club. I assumed that he had been so absorbed in me that he had not noticed the “departure” of that fragment from Martin Nuken’s mind to his own. I would never have risked checking this myself—Nathan was an extremely powerful mentalist and would have sensed my presence immediately. I waited for a mental conversation between him and Martin. In that case I would become a direct witness to their dialogue, at least from Martin’s side.

After several days without any contact between them, I began to worry. Hiding in the secret corner of my mind, I tried to find an explanation. The only conclusion I could reach was that Nathan had discovered my presence in his consciousness and was preparing a terrible punishment for me. I was already preparing inwardly for a new confrontation when he unexpectedly contacted Martin Nuken. And yes—I was present in the minds of both of them. My trick with the golf club had worked.

I watched their mental processes and noted with satisfaction that Nathan’s strong suspicion toward me was changing into growing sympathy, even something like compassion.

“How is our friend Victor? Have you visited him?” Nathan asked.

“I do not dare meet him. You deprived him of his reason,” Martin replied.

“I spared him. I did not send him into a dying coma as I have done with others.”

“But your ‘fisherman’s net’ destroyed all the logical and causal connections in his brain.”

“Not all. I did not complete the procedure. I preserved his deep subconscious. Help him recover. Use the Ariadne Thread. We still need him.”

After this conversation I realized how lucky I had been that my deep subconscious remained untouched by the net Nathan had cast. That was exactly where I had hidden my secret point with all my memories and reflections. I was certain that it was the fragment of my consciousness I had sent to him that had made him spare me. Otherwise, cold and ruthless as he was, he would have finished the process and destroyed me to preserve the secrecy of the Servants of Arnuk.

That conversation also explained why my closest friends, Kunak Santra and Martin, had not yet visited me. They were afraid to see me deprived of reason. In reality, things were not so bad. Nathan had withdrawn his net in time, leaving the essential parts of my subconscious intact. Of course, chaos reigned in my head; scattered images drifted there that I could not join into a logical chain. But now I had one important advantage—two powerful mentalists, Kunak and Martin, would help restore my memory. Not completely, of course. They would make sure that any mention of the Servants of Arnuk remained erased from my memory.

I began to wait for their visit, keeping only my damaged consciousness open. I was curious to see how the Ariadne Thread worked. Inwardly I was calm, ready to follow their instructions as they restored my memory.

I sat in bed, propped up by pillows lovingly fluffed by Regina. Beside me on the soft blanket lay my faithful dog Stanley. Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken hesitated a moment in the doorway before entering. When I saw them, I smiled. Their faces remained in my mind as friendly images. I remembered nothing else about them—at least not in the part of my mind open to them.

Stanley ran up to them, wagging his tail, clearly recognizing them. Kunak and Martin patted him affectionately.

“Our four-legged friend demands attention. I think walks with him will do you good, Victor,” Kunak said, approaching my bed. Sitting on the edge, he placed his palm on my forehead and closed his eyes. Then he turned to Martin and shook his head slightly, pressing his lips together.

Martin sat on the other side of the bed. Taking my hand, he asked me to close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“You never told us how Stanley came into your life. He is important to you, isn’t he, Victor?”

“I always dreamed of having a dog,” I answered, my eyes already closed. “I had imagined a different breed, but my Stanley won me over at first sight. He was sitting in a corner, apart from the other animals in the shelter.”

“You had to adapt to him—take him for walks, buy special food. Tell me about your walks with him,” Martin asked.

His voice sounded penetrating, turning into a sticky ribbon that guided my thoughts, gathering images and events and binding them together.

Gradually I remembered meeting Regina and her dog Alma in the park. I remembered my parents, happy that I had found a girlfriend. I followed the ribbon as it drew scattered events

together. Without noticing, I fell deeply asleep, and when I woke, Kunak and Martin were no longer beside me.

You may ask why I did not restore my memory myself using all the information stored in my hidden place in the subconscious. The answer is obvious: by doing so I would have exposed myself. I had to act and behave exactly as the Servants of Arnuk expected, so as not to endanger not only my life but also the lives of those close to me.

Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken came to see me several more times. Putting me into a trance, they gradually helped me recover my lost memory. Not all of it, of course. My memories ended at the point where I met Nathan on the golf course. After that I had lost consciousness, apparently from exhaustion and the heat of the sun. That was how I was supposed to remember that meeting.

Kunak and Martin were clearly satisfied with the result. In the end they even accompanied Stanley and me to the park, reminiscing along the way about the time we had spent together. I, meanwhile, was thinking about the failed game of golf.

“I feel so embarrassed before Nathan. Losing consciousness like that at such a moment... I don't even know how to make up for it,” I said aloud.

“Don't worry, Victor. Nathan understands. We will play golf together again,” Martin said, placing his hand on my shoulder. He was right. At the initiative of the ever-smiling Nathan, we began meeting about once every two weeks on the golf course, now also joined by Kunak Santra. I learned to handle the club fairly quickly, sending balls flying impressive distances. And Nathan's artificial cordiality toward me gradually turned into genuine sympathy. Yes,

we became friends. The fragment of my consciousness lodged firmly in his mind had turned this ruthless, cynical man into my ally.

Once I felt I had completely won him over, I moved to the final phase of my plan. Now that Nathan's last doubts about me had vanished, I allowed myself to observe him from a distance, using the invisible mental link between us. Through him I learned the entire structure of the community known as the Servants of Arnuk.

At the top of their hierarchy stood the High Table Council. It consisted of five people. Their names were noteworthy: Arman, Randy, Nathan, Uriy, and Kolin. The initials of their names formed the word "Arnuk." Only then did I understand why that word was absent from Nathan's own name. I found the idea rather tasteless, like a childish game. It might have been amusing, if not for the people playing it. Meeting them unprepared could have very serious consequences.

Each member of this council supervised three mentalists, so besides Martin Nuken, Nathan had two other subordinates. The second tier of the "pyramid," people like Martin, each had six people under them, and each of those six had ten subordinates of their own. Orders flowed from top to bottom through special mental channels. Complaints and suspicions moved upward, and depending on their importance, they reached the attention of the High Table Council. I am explaining all this in detail so that my later actions will be clear.

Taking all this into account, I concluded that the entire community of the Servants of Arnuk consisted of 1,010 people. That number, incidentally, carries symbolic meaning—often associated with transformation, self-knowledge, and the importance of intuition. There was also a small group of initiates

still in training, developing their mental abilities, but they did not interest me. My attention was fixed on the High Table Council. I wanted to win them over, just as I had won Nathan.

But with Nathan I had been lucky. He had been completely absorbed in the “fisherman’s net” he had cast into my mind, and I had used Martin Nuken as a conduit. So although I had a plan, I did not yet know how to carry it out, and I relied on chance. For the time being I immersed myself in my work, alternating it with golf and weekends on the yacht with my family.

Time passed, and with it the ambitions of the Servants of Arnuk grew. They had tasted power. They created their own lobbying groups to advance their interests. Through Nathan, who attended the meetings of the High Table Council, I knew all their plans. These meetings were held on the island to which the unfortunate Liyun had been exiled. More and more often my name was mentioned there as someone who had made a substantial contribution to their success. I decided the time had come to meet the other members of the council.

Subtly, I began steering Nathan’s thoughts, nudging him toward the idea of introducing me to the other leaders of the community. I was already anticipating success when, during one of our golf games, Nathan suggested that I accompany him to an exotic island reserved exclusively for the relaxation of very influential people.

“You’ve earned it, Victor,” he told me. “You have a special instinct for business, and at the same time you keep a cool head. It’s time you joined the circle of people like yourself.”

I knew perfectly well which island he meant—the island of Arnuk. On the one hand I was curious; on the other, a decisive

moment was approaching: meeting the entire upper tier of the Servants of Arnuk. A dangerous iceberg, capable of destroying me completely at the slightest mistake—or perhaps allowing me to ride it.

I will not go into detail about the commotion that followed when I told my parents and my wife Regina about Nathan's invitation. I arranged my leave with Gomespunat Lepota and, with his blessing, set out.

Nathan and I arrived on the island after more than ten hours in his private jet. As we approached, I pressed my face to the window, studying the island below. A semicircular coral reef bordered it, shimmering in bright colors beneath the water's surface. Tall green palms lined the sandy beach, turning the place into a picture-perfect island like those on travel brochures and postcards.

"You'll like it here, Victor," Nathan said, noticing my interest. "Clean air, perfect weather—and most importantly, only members of our sponsor community vacation here."

When we stepped out of the plane, warm, humid air enveloped me, hot after the artificial coolness of the cabin. A well-trained driver in a bright uniform loaded our suitcases into a large black limousine, and we drove inland. We headed toward a tall hill rising in the center of the island, covered in lush exotic greenery.

"You know, Victor, only there, in our residential quarters, do I truly feel at home," Nathan said, gesturing toward the hill. He had said "our residential quarters." To me it sounded like "the nest of the Servants of Arnuk." Apparently they never truly left it, departing the island only for business.

We reached our destination quickly; the island was small, just as I had imagined. The smooth asphalt road from the airport to the hill was completely deserted. I saw no other cars, no people, no houses—only the strange sensation of driving through an immense botanical garden, with carefully tended trees on either side of the road and bright patches of flowerbeds between them.

I noticed the residential complex only when we drove right up to it. Until then it had remained hidden behind a wall of tall trees. It consisted of numerous one-story cottages painted white. They were nearly identical, with no signs or markings—no dining hall, no reception, nothing.

Nathan stretched contentedly, surveying the panorama.

“And this entire island belongs to your company?” I asked with genuine admiration. “I must say—an excellent choice.”

“I would put it this way: the island and we chose each other,” Nathan replied, then added, reading the silent question in my eyes, “I’m joking, Victor. I only meant to say how well I feel here.”

A thin, smiling man approached us, simply dressed in dark trousers and a white shirt, sandals on his bare feet.

“Victor, meet our loyal Liyun. He will show you to your cottage. If you need anything, ask him. Liyun, this is our honored guest, Victor,” Nathan said, introducing us.

By now I was accustomed to using only the main layer of my consciousness, the one that held no memories of Liyun or the events connected with him. It caused me no inconvenience. I already knew all of Nathan’s thoughts and intentions ever since the fragment of my consciousness had taken root in his mind. I could observe and overhear him, as well as Kunak Santra and Martin Nuken. In a sense, I had become part of them, even

learning to steer their thoughts in directions useful to me. As for Liyun—emotional, unable to control himself—he had always been an open book to me.

Liyun recognized me. The strong surprise in his eyes quickly turned into equally strong indignation. The obsequious smile twisted into a hostile grin. I was so taken aback by the change in his behavior that I stepped back.

“Did I do something wrong?” I whispered to Nathan. “He looks... angry.”

I knew Nathan had already probed my mind and was fully satisfied that I had no idea who Liyun was.

“It’s all right, don’t worry,” Nathan replied in the same low voice.

Then he turned to Liyun.

“Victor is our welcome guest. Make sure he feels it.”

Liyun bowed slightly and, walking stiffly, escorted me to one of the white cottages. At the door he stopped, turned back, and wagged a finger at me.

“You won’t fool me, Victor. No, you won’t,” he said through clenched teeth. Then, wagging his long finger a few more times, he left me alone.

Of course, it would not have been difficult for me to turn him from a sworn enemy into a devoted friend, as I had done with Martin Nuken, Kunak Santra, and Nathan. But that would have raised serious suspicion. Liyun’s hatred of me was well known; that was precisely why he had been assigned to attend to me—to observe my reaction to him. I passed that test easily, showing no sign of recognizing him.

After taking a shower and changing clothes, I decided to walk around the grounds. Slowly circling the pleasant white cottages

arranged in narrowing rings toward the center of the clearing, I approached the central building. It looked no different from the others. Whoever had designed the place must have followed a principle of equality and minimalism.

Despite the exotic scenery and the breathtaking view from the hilltop over the coastline, I began to feel uneasy. An inexplicable тревога crept over me. It seemed to be connected with the absolute silence pressing on my ears—no birdsong, no rustling leaves, no muffled voices. I could clearly see a flock of birds flying overhead, yet I heard nothing. It felt as though I stood in a place suddenly abandoned by all living things.

I was therefore relieved to notice Nathan approaching. He said something, but I heard nothing. His lips moved like those in an old silent film. Yet I clearly caught his thoughts. He was asking me to relax and not be afraid, even though he knew I could not hear him. Arman, Randy, Uriy, and Kolin were coming toward me. They formed a ring around me. I knew who they were—the High Table Council in full assembly—because I had seen them before through Nathan's mind.

“Nathan, you tried to warn him. We do not like this. If we find even the faintest trace of mental power in him, we will have to neutralize you as well,” came a harsh telepathic warning.

“I checked him this morning when he met Liyun. Victor had no idea who he was,” Nathan began to justify himself.

“You are defending him. Victor has caused changes in you. We will conduct the closed-circle rite without you.”

“Liyun is the only one who has not fallen under his influence. He will replace you,” said another member of the council.

“Victor is ready for the procedure. He is frightened and disoriented,” added a third voice. “Where is Liyun?”

All the heads turned at once toward Liyun, who was running toward us, almost skipping with excitement. I realized I had to do something immediately if I wanted to leave this island alive and sane.

“It is a mistake to replace me with Liyun!” Nathan suddenly protested, drawing all attention to himself. “And you opened a direct channel with him without warning me!”

“We considered it wise to keep you uninformed. Our duty is to eliminate any threat to our community. And Victor has already begun to reach us—through you, Nathan!”

I listened to their exchange in growing panic. Only a miracle could save me. My limbs went numb, my thoughts froze, my will was paralyzed. As if in slow motion, I saw Liyun staring at Nathan with malicious triumph; the other four council members stood with folded arms, concentrating on Nathan. Apparently they were subjecting him to some psychological procedure. For a brief moment, no one paid attention to me.

Gathering what strength I had left, I forced out a fragment of my consciousness and, closing my eyes, sent it toward Liyun. I chose him instinctively as my target. Only later did I realize how wise that choice had been. The council members already suspected me; they would have sensed even the slightest manipulation. I had deceived Nathan before because he had been wholly absorbed in casting his “fisherman’s net” into my mind. Now the situation was different: though the others were occupied with Nathan, they still kept their own minds under strict control. Liyun was their only weak link—and I used it.

But I had no strength left to anchor my mental fragment inside him. Helplessly I watched as Liyun leapt about in agitation, scattering its contents into the air, filling the small clearing where we stood.

Nathan vanished soundlessly, and Liyun took his place in the circle.

The Servants of Arnuk around me stretched out their hands. It felt as though they enclosed me in an invisible capsule that froze every movement. My knees buckled, yet I remained standing, held upright by an unseen force. The light in my eyes suddenly went out, plunging me into impenetrable darkness. I felt my thoughts begin to move—literally move. They were severed from one another, sliced apart by rapidly spinning rings. Gradually my head filled with a growing hum, until that was the only sensation left to me.

I awoke in my room in the white cottage assigned to me on the island. My head ached slightly, perhaps from the long flight. I took a cool shower and felt better. It would be good to have breakfast, but I did not know how to arrange it. Most likely I should ask Liyun, the lean, athletic man Nathan had assigned to me. He was probably nearby.

I stepped from the bedroom into the sunlit living room. A table stood by the window, already set with plates of food. Liyun, still dressed in light dark trousers and a white shirt, was pouring orange juice into a crystal glass. He smiled pleasantly when he saw me.

“You certainly slept a long time, Victor. Do you still remember my name?”

He looked at me intently, waiting.

“Of course I remember. Your name is Liyun. Nathan introduced us when we arrived,” I replied, slightly surprised by the question.

He laughed with relief and nodded several times.

“Yes, that’s right,” he said cheerfully. “You slept all of yesterday and the whole night as well. A good breakfast will do you good.”

I needed no persuasion. I sat down and began to eat with appetite, washing the food down with the excellent juice.

Liyun was still standing by the table, watching me.

“Is there anything else I should know, Liyun?” I asked, my mouth slightly full.

“After breakfast, a car will take us to the beach. You’ll like it there. And then you’ll take part in a celebration this evening—arranged especially for you,” he replied. “I’ll stay by your side the whole time so you won’t get bored.”

“And where is Nathan?” I asked. “Is he coming with us to the beach?”

“He’s busy with preparations. But he made sure you’d get a proper rest.”

I was flattered by all this attention—especially by the fact that an evening celebration was being organized in my honor. They had clearly appreciated my contribution to the prosperity of their sponsoring firm.

It was strange: yesterday, during our first meeting, Liyun had struck me as rather hostile toward me. I blamed that on my fatigue, which can distort reality. Because now, standing in front of me, was an extremely friendly man doing his best, wholeheartedly, to please me. And his emotions were so easy for me to read—he was so open. Too easy, almost, as if even his thoughts were

reaching me. It was a strange sensation, and at the time I chalked it up to my extensive experience dealing with all sorts of people.

A driver dressed entirely in white took Liyun and me in a large car toward the sandy beach.

“I already packed a bag with everything we’ll need,” Liyun said, pulling it from the trunk.

I thanked him sincerely—I hadn’t even thought of it myself.

The clean sea air and the boundless ocean filled my heart with delight, waking a wave of gratitude toward Nathan for bringing me here.

“Don’t swim past the coral reef,” Liyun warned me. “Beyond it, there’s a dangerous current.”

He stayed on the beach, letting the sun warm his sinewy body.

I splashed and swam in the clear water, enjoying myself enormously. I thought it was a pity my family wasn’t there—and my beloved dog Stanley. He would have loved this too. My thoughts drifted to him without my noticing. I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes, rocking on the small waves. I remembered bringing him home from the shelter, our walks, how I met Regina.

I opened my eyes, suddenly realizing I had already remembered all of this more than once—pulling a chain of events up from the depths of my mind, restoring my memory. Exactly: from the depths. From the place inside me where I remember everything. Where I know everything.

I lay there on the waves and closed my eyes again. My intuition warned me: under no circumstances could I show my alarm.

I won’t linger on the details of how I found my hidden point in my mind—the one holding the memory of everything connected to the Servants of Arnuk. Unfortunately, it broke off at the moment

when, surrounded by them, I lost all sense of time and space and could hear only the unbroken hum filling my head. Then I woke in a cozy white cottage. I needed to know what had really happened.

Liyun swam up to me and splashed me with a broad sweep of his arms.

“You’ve been in the water too long—you’ll get sunburned,” he said. “You can tell you haven’t been to the sea in ages.”

“That isn’t quite true,” I objected. “I have my own yacht, and I spend weekends on it with my family.”

“Invite me to your yacht someday,” Liyun said. “By the way, I can guess its name.”

“Try. I’ll give you three attempts.”

Liyun lifted his arms, closed his eyes, and dove underwater. A few seconds later he surfaced again. He placed his wet palm on my forehead and, staring straight into my eyes, said clearly:

“Your yacht is called Regina—after your wife.”

When he saw the surprise on my face, he laughed delightedly and declared:

“Yes, Victor, I’m something of a wizard. I can read minds sometimes. And you—how are you with that?”

“How do you know my wife’s name is Regina?” I asked, thrown off.

“We know everything about our honored guests,” he said, stressing the word “everything.”

Deep inside—inside my hidden point—I knew exactly what he meant. If I didn’t still have to hide my memory and my mental abilities, I would have laughed out loud. Naive, emotional Liyun, always eager to throw dust in people’s eyes. And I already knew how I would fill the gap between yesterday’s events and today’s.

After swimming, we lay beneath a beach umbrella. Carefully, I scanned his thoughts and confirmed that a fragment of my consciousness had anchored itself securely inside his mind. The rest was easy: like an open book, his memories of yesterday unfurled before me—of course, from his perspective. But it was enough.

So: completely unexpectedly for Liyun himself, the most powerful people in his organization—the members of the High Table Council—opened a direct mental channel with him. Everyone except Nathan. Liyun was stunned with joy and ready to do anything to please them. They let him in on the secret preparations for a psychological operation against me called “the closed ring.” They praised him for not falling under my influence and ordered him to keep it secret from everyone—Nathan included.

Under skillful hypnosis, I was guided to the small plaza in front of the central white building. Liyun tracked my movements too, rubbing his hands with glee, anticipating my total defeat. He eagerly took Nathan’s place in the circle with the remaining four council members. He could barely focus, so strong was his excitement; Arman, standing beside him, even had to restrain him telepathically.

Taking a deep breath, Liyun—like the others around me—extended his hands forward. With their combined energy, the Servants of Arnuk paralyzed me while weaving their minds together. With their collective psychic force they entered my exhausted brain, probing every fragment of it, narrowing like a pulsing ring, reaching into the most concealed corners—until at

last they surrounded my hidden point, containing all my memories and abilities.

Then, at the most critical moment—when I was already on the verge of being exposed—the pulsing circle stopped tightening.

“We can end the procedure. All that remains is to check the deepest subconscious—memories from the womb. That doesn’t interest us,” sounded in the shared mind of the five. “Put him to sleep. Restore his memory. He won’t remember any of this. No need to kill his brain.”

Their shared mind split back into separate selves, and the closed ring vanished from my head. They carried me to the cottage assigned to me and left me in Liyun’s care. That was it.

I glanced sideways at Liyun, tanning beside me. He had no idea he had saved me. Jumping with joy yesterday, right before the closed-ring procedure, he had “sprayed” the contents of my mental package—my fragment of consciousness—across the entire plaza where the High Table Council stood. In such a way that he became part of the Servants of Arnuk’s collective mind.

That was the reason for their sudden mercy toward me.

Now I was “present” inside all five leaders of this secret society.

For the moment, I decided not to use that fact. I would simply wait, let them grow accustomed to the change in their minds—without noticing it.

After the beach, Liyun and I returned to the hill, to the residential complex of identical white cottages. After lunch and some rest, we walked toward the central building—the same one in front of which the “closed-ring ritual” had been performed on me the evening before. Nathan stood by the entrance and greeted us warmly.

“I hope you had a good rest in Liyun’s company,” he said, shaking my hand and patting my shoulder. “I’ve been rather busy—sacrificed a few hours of my vacation to work. Come with me.”

We entered the house, its walls decorated with colorful garlands. Four men were sitting at a set table in the living room; they rose as soon as they saw me. Nathan introduced me to them. They were Arman, Randy, Uriy, and Kolin. I truly was in the company of all five members of the High Table Council—in the company of Arnuk itself. They all looked different, but they shared one trait: an unmistakable sense of superiority and a sharp, piercing gaze.

“Now I understand you, Nathan,” Uriy, a stocky dark-skinned man, said telepathically. “He has a natural charm. It feels as if we’ve known him for years.”

“He fills the whole room with his presence,” added Arman, a tall dark-haired man with a mustache.

Their telepathic remarks confirmed my success: each of them now possessed a fragment of my consciousness without realizing it. I had completed the most difficult stage—I had taken hold of their minds.

After lunch, we drove to the beach, taking Liyun with us. Admiring the panoramic view of the sun sinking into the sea far on the horizon, we also watched skillful fireworks that formed shapes of brightly colored animals. With conversation and jokes, the evening passed unnoticed, leaving pleasant memories behind. For the first time in a long while, I felt truly relaxed—no longer trying to penetrate other people’s thoughts, no longer fearing another psychological test. At the same time, without effort, I was aware of all the thoughts of Arnuk—that was what I called the five members

of the High Table Council, since the initials of their names formed the word. I had tamed it.

I spent several more days on the island. Liyun was almost constantly at my side, his sympathy toward me growing stronger. By unanimous agreement, Arnuk granted me full authority to develop our joint business. The trip to the island proved even more successful than I had hoped.

In a short time, through their own established mental channels, I managed to extend my consciousness to all 1,010 members of the Servants of Arnuk. In essence, I became Arnuk, holding all the threads of control over this secret society of telepaths. They did not suspect it, convinced that they were making their own decisions. In reality, it was my mind guiding them, shaping all their thinking. It was not difficult: I enveloped all their minds in a “cap of estrangement,” like the one Kunak Santra had once placed over me on my yacht. Instantly blocking their telepathic channels, I replaced them with my own—thin threads connected to my consciousness. I guided them toward the decisions I wanted; it was my logic and my intuition, which they took for their own. A side effect—though a very important one—was that I eliminated any risk of becoming a subject of their psychological experiments again.

I did not have to strain to control the Servants of Arnuk, who had in effect become my servants. They were now part of my mind and my consciousness—at least the part necessary for my purposes. It might have seemed that I could stop there and simply enjoy my position and power. But that would have been a mistake. If an accident happened to me—or if I lost consciousness even for a moment—the entire pyramid I had built with such effort would

collapse instantly. And at the same time I would gain 1,010 sworn enemies, eager to take revenge—not only on me but on my entire family, whom I cherished deeply. I could not risk that, and so I hurried to complete my plan.

A central part of it was expanding our enterprise. We had become an influential conglomerate; banks under our control issued loans to governments around the world. Under my influence, the Servants of Arnuk created subsidiary companies across many countries. Each was headed by one of the five council members. They, in turn, sent their subordinates of the second rank—such as Martin Nuken—to establish operations in less important cities. In this way, I dispersed the leadership of the Servants of Arnuk across different countries, depriving them of personal contact. All their communication passed through telepathic channels that I created and controlled. It was easier to manage them one by one.

It took me about a year, through these channels, to learn the detailed biographies of each of the 1,010 members of the telepathic community. I stored all of it in my memory, hidden deep in my subconscious.

It was becoming harder and harder to maintain control over such a vast pyramid. I began to grow tired of the constant psychological strain. And my family was growing; I wanted to devote my emotional strength to them. So, as soon as I had studied the biographies of every member of the organization, I began the final stage of my plan.

I was somewhat anxious as I began—but I set my doubts aside. It was the only way to free myself from the bonds of the Servants of Arnuk.

I did not need to invent anything new. I decided to use the same methods of psychological influence that they had used on me.

I began with “mental blinding,” starting with the five members of the High Table Council: Arman, Randy, Nathan, Uriy, and Kolin. I created an impenetrable shell around their minds, completely enveloping them. With a mental effort, I formed a vortex in their heads that tore apart all logical connections. The fragments turned into small, chaotic spheres, colliding and bursting against the impenetrable shell surrounding their consciousness.

Through the telepathic channels I had stretched to all 1,010 members of the Servants of Arnuk, I spread this mental vortex to all of them, destroying each one’s memory. To make sure no trace of telepathic ability remained, I cast the Fisherman’s Net into their minds. It filtered their brains, finally destroying the remnants of memory and the chains of temporal and logical connections.

From my own experience, I knew that a powerful mentalist could create, in the depths of the subconscious, a hidden storehouse of memories and life experience—almost unreachable to others, except through the closed-ring ritual. That was exactly what I performed in the final stage. Once I was certain that the consciousness of every one of the 1,010 Servants of Arnuk had been completely cleansed of all memories, as well as their mental and psychological abilities, I began restoring their memory—but only partially, only the part accessible to ordinary public life.

There was no place in it even for the faintest hint of Arnuk Island. The memory of the island where that monstrous community had arisen had to vanish from their minds forever.

Instead, I restored only the name they officially used in the business world: the Financial Forum.

The ruling five of the Servants of Arnuk became a Board of Directors serving as General Sponsors. The second level of the pyramid, to which Martin Nuken belonged, was called the Official Sponsors, accountable to the generals. The third level, represented by Kunak Santra, was classified—depending on each member's contribution—as Gold, Silver, or Bronze Sponsors. In memory of my friendship with Kunak, I designated him a Gold Sponsor.

The final, lowest level, where my old acquaintance Liyun stood, consisted of Partners responsible for advertising and publicizing the activities of the entire sponsor group in the media. I also made sure to “settle” a strong sympathy for me firmly in their minds. This feeling would no longer be artificially maintained by me; it would become, for them, a sincere and natural emotion.

Having gathered my resolve, I destroyed all the telepathic channels linking the former Servants of Arnuk to one another and to my consciousness. Somewhat exhausted by the inner strain, I closed my eyes, trying to sense any attempt to enter my thoughts. But I sensed nothing. I could not personally verify the results of my “operation” for two reasons. First, I was far away from all representatives of that sponsor group, now scattered across the world. And the second reason was deeper: I had given myself my word never again to intrude into another mind—except when necessary for self-defense, as it had been with the Servants of Arnuk. All that remained was to be patient and wait for confirmation of my plan's success.

In the following weeks and months, our conglomerate operated as usual. Our company's shares rose, increasing our personal capital. Only some representatives of the Financial Forum occasionally complained of severe headaches. The doctors they consulted attributed these ailments to the aftereffects of a viral influenza that had spread across many countries.

With the large capital they had accumulated, the Financial Forum, by decision of its board of directors, purchased a small island in the Atlantic Ocean. It had previously belonged to a Hollywood star who had recklessly squandered all his savings. The island became a popular retreat for representatives of our corporation.

I was satisfied with the work I had done, though it had cost me great effort. At last I was certain that I had freed myself from the danger posed by the Servants of Arnuk. No one would watch me or my family anymore, reading our most private thoughts. And I no longer needed to hide my true self in a secret corner of my mind. I felt free, as if a crushing weight had been lifted from me.

With a clear conscience, I moved with my family into the large house I had built—a house with verandas, a private heated pool, and even an enormous golf course enclosed in a glass structure that protected it from the weather and maintained a constant pleasant temperature of twenty-five degrees Celsius. The staff I had hired took care of the grass specially designed for golf courses. Yes, I had come to enjoy the game whose basics Nathan had once taught me.

I decided to step back from business, devoting myself to my family and my personal interests. In truth, I had turned myself into a successful businessman only to mislead and win the trust of the

Servants of Arnuk. Now that I was rid of them, nothing prevented me from returning to the study of the ice sheets of the far north. After all, I am a glaciologist, and I always will be.

I invited Homespunat Lepota to live with us; he truly had no family of his own. In the evenings we often sat together on the glass-enclosed terrace, watching the stars shimmer in the sky. I could not have wished for a better life.

This idyll lasted about a year when, suddenly, I heard Liyun's voice in my mind:

"At last I've found you, Viktor! Though I didn't have to search long. Shall we start all over again?"

I was so stunned that I did not know how to answer. Questions whirled through my head: How? Had my plan failed? How could this be?

"No, Viktor—not with me!" Liyun's mental voice continued. "You erased everyone's memory—but not mine. Don't think I'll let that go unpunished!"

I sighed with some relief, at the same time—out of old habit—shielding my mind and hiding my intentions deep within my subconscious. Unwittingly, Liyun had told me that I had erased everyone's memory except his. How had he escaped that fate?

"I'm stronger than you thought, Viktor! Stronger than anyone in the world! After all, no one but me even remembers Arnuk Island," Liyun boasted.

His lack of restraint revealed my mistake to me. Arnuk Island, for Liyun, was not merely the birthplace of the organization of telepaths—it was his own birthplace. Over the years, the Servants of Arnuk had begun recruiting pupils from all over the world, identifying the first signs of mental abilities in children. Gradually

they had even driven the island's native inhabitants away, effectively taking possession of it. Only one family remained on their land, known for their hard work and their love of gardening. I remembered the carefully tended groves of tropical trees on Arnuk Island and the neatly cleared glades between them, filled with bright flowers. It was in that family that Liyun had been born.

You ask why I did not attach any importance to this? After all, I had studied in detail the biographies of all 1,010 members of the Servants of Arnuk. The answer is simple and naïve: yes, I knew this fact from Liyun's biography, but I considered him too weak a mentalist, incapable of restoring his memory. Now it was obvious that I had miscalculated.

"Accept my apologies, Liyun, but I acted solely in self-defense. I am even glad that you remembered everything, using your birthplace on Arnuk Island as an anchor of salvation," I sent him my thoughts.

"I don't know how you pulled it off, but no one even suspected your abilities. Will you share the secret?"

"I hope I buried that secret along with the disappearance of the Servants of Arnuk."

"Speaking of disappearance—I contacted you to demand compensation for my moral damages. And don't start telling me how badly you had it with the Servants of Arnuk. You outwitted everyone and made more money than any dictator."

"You are trying to blackmail me, even though you know perfectly well what I am capable of."

"I know," Liyun answered calmly. "But in that case you would have to completely destroy my mind, turn me into a vegetable. And you won't do that. Besides, we were friends."

“In your place I would take advantage of the situation. Now you are a unique man with unique telepathic abilities. You have no competition in the whole world.”

“Except you, Viktor. And still—you owe me. After all, it was thanks to me that you discovered your mental abilities. You could say I’m your teacher.”

I felt a strong sense of self-satisfaction coming from Liyun, transmitted to me with every fragment of his thought. I decided to support his self-esteem.

“You could become famous throughout the world by opening a new kind of practice—like Freud, perhaps. Free people from their phobias simply by searching through their memories. It would be easy for you. Just don’t break into their dreams, or you might accidentally run into another natural-born telepath.”

“Ha-ha! You’ll pay for me to buy a building for my practice. I’m a walking time bomb for you. I know everything about you, Viktor! I still consider you a friend—but I also have a sense of self-preservation and dignity.”

“I will not be your competitor. And I will pay for the building,” I assured him sincerely.

“I’ll contact you when I find a suitable place.”

Liyun broke the connection, leaving me alone with my thoughts. To be honest, I was glad for him. Now his dream of becoming an unrivaled master of telepathy would begin to come true. Of course, from time to time I would discreetly check whether he was abusing other people’s minds. If so, I would have to intervene—something I very much wished to avoid.

Fortunately, to this day I have not caught him attempting again to become a “dream thief.” I do not think he needs that anymore,

now that his name has become widely known in such a short time. Besides the practice I helped finance, he began giving public demonstrations, performing feats of telepathy. Videos of his performances spread across the global network, attracting enormous numbers of followers. I know—you enjoy watching his tricks as well. And why not? He can read a long letter sealed inside an envelope, down to every comma and period.

Yes, I am speaking of Yun Shao Li—that is the name he now uses. Surprised? The most astonishing stories happen in life, not on computer screens.

And now—sleep. Very well, I will invite him to visit us, I promise. Dream of something pleasant. Until morning.“

I told this story to my son. We understand each other without words. It took me only about half an hour to transmit this long tale to him mentally. But that is our secret, one we share with no one. Yes, he is our son—Regina’s and mine. And as his father, I am bound to protect and guard him.

I built a house for him not far from the northern station, where my adventures began. From the tropical greenhouse I created, there was a magnificent view over the endless snowfields. Sometimes we could watch the northern lights, gathered there as a family—including Homespunat Lepota, my former chief. He had become my father’s closest friend and had also taken an interest in unusual buildings.

From time to time the tracks of a family of polar bears appeared in the snow. Then my son and I, accompanied by the somewhat aged dog Stanley, would go to check the camera traps and later print the photographs of the bears caught on film.

And now sleep well, my son. Like Arnuk, I will spread my wings over you so that no one may disturb you. Your dreams will remain yours alone, and no one will dare to take them away. Your Arnuk watches over this.

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