



**VK FOURSTONE**

# **EINSTEINER**

**DON'T SELL CREATIVITY**

# **Einsteiner**

*by VK Fourstone*

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2016

*Turning from the bottom.*

One of the packs went flying into the center of the hall, another one over the reception desk. A moment later there was a loud bang of an explosion, then a second, and a third. Smoke abruptly billowed up, filling the space of the Agency.

Isaac instinctively covered his head. He didn't feel any pain, only his eyes hurt and his throat was sore from the pungent smoke. Nobody seemed to scream or whimper, frightened people coughed one after another. A face contorted in terror, belonging to a girl who worked at the reception, flashed by in front of his face. She was in shock but seemed okay. As soon as she gave a cry, a few more squealing voices joined in.

Water gushed down from above; a fire-extinguishing system went off. The sirens howled loudly and nastily. Another explosion rang out, or rather a thud. There was no fire or shrapnel, no shock wave either, just the smoke. However after the next thud Isaac felt fit of panic – irrational, hideous fear. He realized it wasn't over yet and anything could still happen, that after the thud a real explosion can strike. The fear made him crawl towards the door, seeing nothing, blinded by the acrid gas tears streaming out of his eyes. Thinking calmly was something he couldn't do at the moment, leaving it all to instincts.

“Where's the main computer? Where do you keep the devil's heart?” the terrorist screamed in a booming voice, donning a respirator.

The voice brought Isaac back down to earth a little and forced him to focus. Since the terrorist breathed the air, it was not poisonous, not a chemical attack. What he had to do was cautiously crawl towards the door, trying not to attract attention.

“Move it, or I'll kill'er!” shouted the attacker.

A woman squealed again. The old man nearby was breathing heavily and coughing. The water had dampened down

the gas a bit, and the air was gradually clearing, so he had to move faster.

“Askin’ ya for the last time! And don’t anybody move! You! The doomed one!” Through the smoke Isaac could see the gun firmly pointed at him.

At that moment Isaac couldn't think rationally, but gloomily thought that he had blown off not only his own life, but his sister Vicky’s as well. That morning he was sure that it couldn't be worse, but he was wrong and his recklessness would cost them both their future.

Well, yes, the future turned out to be not what he had thought. He had studied excellently, easily entered a prestigious university, his future seemed totally rosy. But we can’t predict what the world will look like in five years, neither the life around us, or our own. Some crappy war or epidemic, or even such a seemingly positive thing as progress, can change the world in just a few months! So here you are, studying, working your tail off, taking educational loans, passing exams, not sleeping at nights, looking forward to becoming a specialist in demand, and – poof! – suddenly the damn Agency appears, and all your knowledge gets out of date in just one second, and you are totally screwed.

As a teenager Isaac craved adventures and discoveries, envied the young professor in the film *Godzilla* and the cool nerve of Jean Reno’s character. He saw himself in the future, traveling and making appearances at scientific exhibitions and congresses. First it went smooth - a graduate of a highly prestigious university, a young engineer. But after being presented with a beautiful diploma with the name Isaac Leroy embossed in gold, the future barman hadn't come across any more gold anywhere. It’s hard enough living in glamorous Monaco, the European paradise. It’s not as big of a deal as you might think because he's got absolutely zilch money. The sun and sea are free, for the rest you have to pay. Yes, the way his dreams came true turned out

was a bit different. He had been dreaming of America, and he got it - "America" was the name of the bar where he was working. As a matter of fact, the owner looked a little like Reno and had a temperament every bit as ferocious as Godzilla. As for the real America, the most advanced place of all, meant for brilliant and talented minds, he never got to go there. Now there was no sense in traveling: if you have your creative energy, just go ahead and sell it, no need to fly anywhere. Who could have thought before, that instead of uranium or palladium the most valuable resource in the world would be human creativity?

The most ironic thing - it was all the fault of his beloved science!

A few years ago Jeremy Link, a Professor at the University of London, doctor of bioenergetics, identified human energy, responsible for an individual's originality, fantasy and imagination. He called it "orange energy", or simply OE. Skeptics made fun of him, but the professor calmly continued studying the phenomenon called "creativity". Five years later he successfully downloaded creativity for the first time, two years after that he learned how to store and use it.

Having obtained the OE of four old scientists and dozens of volunteering pensioners, the professor summoned a press conference and introduced a new type of computer, *Einsteiner*, a bio hard drive computer that worked off human creativity.

Jeremy Link picked a random person from the audience who turned out to be a third-year student, put some sort of a semi-transparent helmet on his head, connected him to his weird creation, and squinting slyly gave the guy a task from quantum physics. The audience began to make noise, somebody giggled, but however crazy, the student's answer was correct!

Having asked the student about his major in medical, the professor gave him another task: "Think about the treatment of cancer".

The hall froze. During a couple of minutes the student was doing some calculations and then passed his result to the professor. Jeremy Link displayed the sheet with figures and thickly underlined the final formula on a big screen and uttered contentedly: “Ladies and gentlemen! This is the new generation cancer treatment, the most effective one among in existence!” For a few seconds there was dead silence, and then everyone heard a gasp - the dean of the department of medicine duly appreciated the challenge.

The professor was about to continue asking, but at that moment the hall exploded with applause. After savoring the moment of triumph, Link carried on explaining: “Energy is nothing but energy. It is similar for people of different races, religions, it doesn’t have language barriers, it can’t contract viruses, has no tastes and preferences, no emotions, can’t have violent temper. What matters for *Einsteiner* is the power of a human head battery. It can unite specialists of different professions. Chemist and physicist, musician and artist, astronomer and restaurant chef. All of them together, to be precise. Having received the creativity of several ordinary students it will outclass Albert Einstein, the inspiration of this presented prototype.”

That very night the scientific world, the press, the internet – all literally went crazy. Hopes, excitement and doubts, but in the end everyone agreed that *Einsteiner* can be called the first artificial intellect in the world, very useful, and more important...safe! Disconnected from an operator it could do no harm, since it cannot create tasks and make decisions on its own.

It was not just a breakthrough, but the beginning of a new evolutionary saltation. Each new portion of OE increased the

power of the bio processor, the thoughts stored automatically. A lab-assistant linked in to *Einsteiner* temporarily acquired the pooled creativity of all the people whose individual OE had been downloaded. An idea that was previously incomplete immediately became concrete, proper and meaningful. Virtually any problem was processed by the computer like a simple jigsaw puzzle. The missing pieces became as clear as if they were traced out on paper, the gaps analyzed, and the idea itself was completed and finalized, the tasks growing more and more complex.

Human beings aren't computers; they can't concentrate intensely enough to visualize the detailed picture. We don't possess absolute memory, often missing important parts. Link's invention didn't have such a problem; activated by an operator it remembered everything up to the tiniest detail.

The world press was competing with exalted headlines: "World's first artificial mind", "Safe artificial intellect created", "Everyone can become part of Mega Brain", "*Einstein* resurrected", and even "First step to immortality". People were taking part in numerous discussions, recalling how many scientists had wrestled with a problem, solving it just partly. Some brilliant ideas seemed impossible to implement, even utopian, but the answer was really within easy reach. And how many scientists died without ever bringing their research to a conclusion? Their ideas have gone with them. What would have happened had the computer appeared earlier? How many lives would have been saved!

Three days after the news was announced, Professor Link, the most brilliant inventor in human history, disappeared without leaving a trace.

Having handed over the technology to a friend of his, Antony Blake, UN Deputy General Secretary, the professor vanished. Temporarily, as people thought at the time. Everyone was sure that the new "Person of the Year" and Nobel laureate



was about to reappear soon, but they thought wrong. And now, after seven years had passed, no one had any idea about the professor's whereabouts. Most thought he was dead.

Very likely the idea of transferring the technology to the UN saved the world from some domination, and possibly even from World War III. The United Nations International Collective Mind Agency was now set up. During one year the agency not only presented hundreds of super-useful technologies, but also made creativity the most important resource of the planet.

In three years of the *Einsteiner* operation, the agency completely vanquished cancer, AIDS and diabetes, even smoking was left in the past. Mankind finally stopped abusing natural resources, oil consumption dropped dramatically, and most cars ran on non-polluting hydrogen. Plastic became soluble, metals coated with a new compound didn't rust, the problems of freon, CO<sub>2</sub>, and other harmful emissions had been forgotten. The *Collective Mind* Agency became a very successful institution, in both the popular and commercial senses, priding itself in a host of inventions and achievements. The agency earned fantastic profits from the sale of patents, at the same time paying extremely generous fees to those who off-loaded their creativity. Four *Einsteiner* servers were installed in four countries along with a considerable net of OE downloading centers.

In the morning, reluctantly getting ready, Isaac had a cup of shitty coffee and went to the shower which he loathed. The shower was just like his life - broken, either scalding you with heat or dousing with icy cold.

He was taking a shower feeling all pissed off. He did have some good ideas, but the world had changed way too fast and just spat him out. He lived in extreme poverty, vaguely imagining what he'd be doing the day after tomorrow. Someone might call it freedom, not having a strict schedule and planned holidays. Maybe it is so, but in a couple of months such a "freedom" can make you nuts. There's much more comfort in the clarity of life. Although, not the kind of clarity he was about to obtain today. Today was his last day being poor; tomorrow the agency would make him rich.

He would think about anything, just to avoid getting dressed and setting off to the download center to submit to the damn procedure. He wanted to drag things out since thinking was also work - his typical excellent displacement mechanism.

As soon as Isaac went outside it started to pour. He didn't get wet though - the device he had invented turned on automatically. Finished just the other day, the first prototype was unique. A generator collected the energy of falling rain drops creating a magnetic field, which didn't let the water in. One could stand there in the rain and remain completely dry. The patent could have solved all Isaac's problems, but as usual, he was out of time.

Deep in thought, he didn't notice how he reached his destination. He didn't feel like entering at all, but there was no other way: the bank had given a final warning and his apartment had to be auctioned off. He had no way to pay, and more importantly, his sister Vicky, his most loved one in the world,

needed another surgery. So the only thing he really could do was to sell his creativity. He knew what was going to happen to him after. His best friend Pascal had fallen in love and sold his OE two years ago. Right there, at that very place. Isaac threw a last glance at the sea and pushed the door of the reception.

It was cozy inside, cool music played smoothly, the officers briskly filling in forms. As for donors, there were four of them: a well-groomed old man, a tired chubby woman of about fifty, a pie-faced young guy and some hippy-looking hobo, luckily not smelly. Five portions of creativity ready to replenish the power of the artificial brain.

On the wall there was a poster showing a smiling man sitting by an azure swimming-pool, with a caption: “I gave people what I was given from on high, and I have been rewarded!!” Ex-donors did look happy, indeed. The Agency made a lifelong support contract and took care of its newly titled Happies.

Isaac had already seen this one and other colorful posters when he had come in before for an interview and OE pre-measuring. The amount of creativity was different for everyone, so one could have it calculated for free and find out the possible fee. Back then he used to think that this was just a safety net, that he would for sure have time to get the money. However it turned out that selling the rights for his rain protection device, which he called *V-Rain*, was a hard task. The Patent Office and the system of selling inventions were now sort of vestigial relics, these days all corporations bought their technology only from *Collective Mind*. In the end he ran out of time – his sister got worse and her surgery was quickly scheduled. Even though he still didn't have the money.

That was when Isaac made the decision. He knew that his creativity level was high and having sold his orange energy, he'd have enough money for surgery, for buying his own house, and for many other things. He definitely would never forgive himself

if his sister died, he wouldn't want any money then. Better to be a Happy with a zero creative index than a smart guy whose wealth cost the life of the only person he really cared for.

So yes, this was the other side of professor Link's *Einsteiner* - thousands of gifted people turned into ruck. But was this a price too big, since wars and diseases that had took away millions of lives every year, were now things of the past?

Isaac felt like hypothesizing about the other donors, who they were, where they came from. The old man clearly decided to supplement the provisions of his pension or maybe was just a patriot. Very straight-backed, in spite of his age, not slouching at all. He was probably not from around there, since many people came over from other places to download and then stay. The hobo most likely was also looking for money, tired of living in a tent. Even with a climate as beautiful as in Monaco, living outside must not be that nice. The plain-looking goofily dressed guy was trifling a photo of some girl, so probably the reason was like Pascal's, and he was in love.

Isaac never had time to finish this thought. The hobo-looking guy suddenly jumped up, grabbing everyone's attention, pulled out a crucifix and started yelling: "May the Lord be with us!", as he began throwing smoke-puff explosives.

That was when Isaac made his unsuccessful attempt to flee...

"The doomed one!" These words tolled in Isaac's head like an alarm bell. Scared and adrenalized, he froze, not moving a finger. His eyes saw nothing. He hated himself for this pathetic attempt to flee. It was not him he worried about – it was Vicky. If he got killed now, she would inevitably die too. How could he have acted so stupid, not even knowing if the terrorist had accomplices or if the door was open? How could he risk Vicky's life so recklessly?

“Please, don’t kill me!” he mumbled huskily, closing his eyes tight.

No answer. He slowly opened his eyes. The smoke was clearing, no more tears, and when he cautiously looked at the terrorist, he couldn’t help smiling: the thing pointing at him was ... the cross! Not a gun, just a usual crucifix! Water, smoke and fear portrayed the big black thing in the terrorist’s hand as a pistol.

The terrorist beckoned him to get to his feet and suddenly gripped the receptionist girl by the throat. With his other hand he held something to her back and shouted:

“Where is it? Where’s the *Einsteiner*?”

The girl gasped and fainted, not falling on the floor because the terrorist was holding her. The security guard, still on his feet, looked as if he absolutely didn’t know what to do, too scared to move.

“Let her go,” the old man who was among the donors suddenly said with a firm and calm voice, “She’s just an office worker, not likely to know anything. My name is Colonel Joyce. Tell me what is it you want?”

“What I want is to destroy this devil’s machine. I want to tear its devil’s heart out!”

“Hmmm,” thought Isaac. “Yet another religious fanatic and it looks like he’s genuinely insane to boot.” He stood there obediently, gradually recovering his wits, the panic was receding. The TV sometimes reported attacks on the Agency. But only rarely, and besides, when you watch something on TV it doesn’t occur to you that the same thing could actually happen for real.

The colonel got up off his chair and asked the guard in a commanding voice:

“Where’s your central computer?”

The guard shrugged in uncertainty, and the old man addressed his question to one of the employees.

“Over th-th-there,” the woman gasped out, stammering through her tears, and waved her hand in the direction of a big futuristic-looking silver computer standing in a room, separated from the reception hall by a glass wall.

The terrorist pushed the woman aside and in two rapid strides reached the back office door and kicked it open. He lifted the computer above his head and slammed it down hard onto the floor. Ripping the wires, he furiously raised it again and again above his head and slammed it onto the stone floor until it fell to pieces. On some of those pieces he stepped in anger, as if trying to reduce them to dust.

The security man was still standing there, glued to the ground.

“Everyone down on the floor, cover your heads! Don’t do anything!” roared the colonel, getting down.

The ferocious power in his order sent everyone tumbling unquestioningly to the floor, even the security man obeyed. The only left standing was Isaac who didn’t want to piss the terrorist off again.

The hobo carried on smashing the computer in the office, frenziedly ripping out wires and various attachments. Isaac could hear something grating and plastic splintering and through this racket came the howling of a siren out in the street and brusque voices. The police! He remembered that the station was just a hundred meters away. He heard the sound of breaking glass and then a monstrous blow to the head knocked him off his feet and he lost consciousness.

It took a while before Isaac could think clearly, his head was buzzing and spinning and he felt slightly nauseous. They were dragging him somewhere, with his arms in handcuffs painfully twisted behind his back. A van, a police station, iron bars slamming loudly, and his consciousness fully recovered once he was in the cell. “Never mind, they’ll figure things out,” he thought wearily and slumped onto the metal bed. Still feeling a bit sick, he closed his eyes and instantly blanked out.

He dreamt of a war.... a big war. He didn’t know who was fighting whom or why, but he saw a nuclear explosion, the plane falling. Whole districts were set on fire. He saw a lot of different cities without names, and all he knew was that one of them was Paris. Isaac observed the immense, towering conflagration from a hill about thirty kilometers away. He couldn’t make anything out clearly, but he knew for certain that it was Paris. He was gazing, spellbound at the appalling spectacle, when suddenly some soldiers drove up, six or maybe eight of them.

There was no fear, he calmly emptied his cartridge clip into the first two, grabbed his automatic and killed the others. He did it absolutely dispassionately, quickly and without a single hitch, feeling slightly frustrated that the bullets – they were bright blue, he could see them quite clearly – flew through the air with a strange slowness. Darkness. The picture had disappeared. Isaac was somewhere between sleep and waking, and he even started trying to analyze his dream, still without waking up:

“In real life he was not capable of murdering someone, but this wasn’t the first time he killed in a dream. What can you say about the life of a man in whose dreams cities burn, wars are fought and planes crash?”

Someone was prodding Isaac insistently in the side, and he finally woke up. He just wanted to be left alone to sleep. His head

was filled with some kind of soft goo, weariness had eaten its way into his thoughts and settled there, but his annoying neighbor wouldn't stop. The drowsiness in Isaac's eyes gradually dispersed and he recognized who it was. He was in the same prison cell as the terrorist. Isaac knew there must have been some sort of mistake!

The hobo woke up Isaac, and was attentively looking into his eyes.

"Hey, how are you doing?" he inquired.

"Fine."

"That's good, good. You sure?"

"Fine," Isaac repeated angrily.

The stranger gave him another searching look.

"What's your name, lad?"

"Fine," hissed Isaac again and closed his eyes.

"My name's Mr. Elvis. I'm the Messiah, I fight the devil. I've saved you. We've got to..."

Isaac heard the stranger speaking on and on. He opened and closed his eyes repeatedly, without attempting to understand what this madman was driveling about. His head hurt badly enough already.

Suddenly he felt something on his palm, something hard and prickly. Tried to turn away, but Elvis jerked him rather sharply by the shoulder.

"Hey, you? Don't you understand? I've been speaking for half an hour and you still don't understand?"

"What? Yes, I understand, I do," Isaac gasped out. Anything to get this guy off his back.

"What does he want from me? Hell, I'm in here because of him. Someone clubbed me over the head because of this asshole. I wish those thickheads would get on with figuring this all out. Maybe I need to go to hospital," – Isaac's thoughts flowed



sluggishly through his head. He closed his eyes. He felt being shaken by the shoulder with crude determination.

Elvis continued spitting his words: “Hell spawn! Heart of the devil! Cursed machine! This devil will bring sorrow upon you. I saw the light, the determination in your eyes. They will take this away from me...”

It was some kind of a hideous dream! A waking nightmare! Isaac tried to stand up and call a policeman, but the attempt to get up gave him such a sharp pain in his head that he groaned out loud.

“God has no need for soulless bodies, and then the end will come...” Elvis went on raving, as if nothing had happened. “Are you listening to me?”

The hobo didn’t look like he was going to give up. He seemed blinded by his own insanity.

“Orange energy is people’s souls, don’t you understand? He’s taking away our souls. That is what makes us humans.”

“Screwball talk. Roaring. Roaring in my head. Everything’s weird, and I need water,” Isaac thought.

“Well then?” Mr. Elvis was certain what he’d said was convincing, even though Isaac hadn’t grasped a single thing.

A sharp pain in Isaac’s shoulder woke him up completely and he concentrated.

“And only by tearing out the devil’s heart and destroying it, can I complete my mission. What you have in your hands is absolute evil, destroy it, burn it.”

Only now did Isaac finally realize that everything happening was real and he was holding an object that looked like a piece of a microcircuit. Of course! It was from that computer, a piece of the board with some kind of circuits and chips on it.

“Henri Cavalier, get out here.”

“My name’s Mr. Elvis!” the crazy messiah growled, then he turned to Isaac and added in a whisper: “Remember what I told

you. Burn the heart of the devil. Promise me. And then the victory will come.”

Isaac nodded, and his thoughts immediately flew to Vicky. “Oh, God! The surgery, the money for the surgery. Oh, God! I’ll be too late. Where am I? Oh, God! Vicky!”

It was a nightmare: the jail cell, the policemen running around, Elvis. Isaac hammered desperately on the bars several times with his hands, but no one took any notice of him. Only once did a doctor come, examined Isaac’s head, shone a little torch into his eyes and said indifferently that it was no big deal, Isaac would live. He left, leaving behind some kind of prescription. A nightmare, only it wasn’t a dream.

“Isaac Leroy!”

Isaac opened his eyes and stared at the policeman who was shining a little torch in his face. Isaac took an instant dislike to him, first because the torch was shining in his eyes, and secondly, because shining a torch in someone’s eyes was quite abusive. Especially since he was innocent.

“Out you come!”

The attempt to stand up gave him a dull, aching pain. Isaac sat back down again. Something pricked his hand. The computer board! He stuck the hand holding the piece of board in his pocket. “What a fool I am,” he thought. “What did I take it for? If they find it, I’ll never beat the rap.” The words of Mr. Elvis came to his mind.

“Come on, move it, you little shit,” Isaac heard the same malicious voice say. “I’m not going to hang out here all night because of you.”

The policeman walked into the cell and put handcuffs on Isaac. They walked down a long corridor and turned into an office.

“Patrice, take the handcuffs off him and bring him something to drink,” the officer sitting in the office told the policeman who had woken Isaac up so crudely.

“Good evening,” Isaac heard the dry voice say, this time speaking to him.

“Evening,” Isaac mumbled, his hands had turned numb, as he kept them in his pockets.

Feeling the piece of the board in his hand and realizing how dangerous his position was, Isaac clutched it tightly and pushed it deeper into his pocket.

The pocket was strangely empty. Although, why was that strange? They’d probably taken everything he had as a safety measure. His belt was missing too, now he understood why his trousers kept slipping down during the short walk. He wondered where Mr. Elvis had been hiding the board. They must have searched him. But that was a fanatic for you; he would give his life for the cause, so hiding a microcircuit was no big deal.

The policeman was confident:

“I’ve already gotten to the bottom of everything, but we need to run through a few formalities, so let’s get started quickly and then you can go home.”

Isaac nodded again. He didn’t understand what these formalities were, he wanted to find out as soon as possible how Vicky was, and dump the dangerous object that was in his pocket.

“So, first name?”

“Isaac.”

“Surname?”

“Leroy.”

“Age and date of birth.”

“Twenty-nine, 28th of December.”

“Parents’ names?”

“Alexander Leroy and Anna Kramer.”

Isaac kept on and on answering questions. It was ok, but he wanted to sit down. He kept shifting from one foot to the other.

The officer looked up from the report.

“I’m sorry, have a seat! I don’t usually stand on ceremony during an interrogation. A habit – pardon me, sit on the chair.”

Altogether the questioning and drawing up the report took about twenty minutes. Isaac explained why he was standing; he didn’t know they were going to storm the agency.

Captain Robert (the officer turned out to be a captain) explained to Isaac that he had been stunned when the office was stormed because only two people were standing – the terrorist and Isaac. The security guard in the agency had switched on his walkie-talkie, so when they stormed the place the assault team knew that all the hostages were lying down. That was why they had taken Isaac for an accomplice.

However, the testimony of the other victims had completely convinced Robert that Isaac wasn’t involved in the terrorist attack. Robert had checked that Isaac was there to download his energy, having first drawn up a provisional contract. Robert had read it and he had discovered that Isaac’s only relative, Victoria Frank, was in the hospital, waiting for surgery, and the contract stipulated that the cost of the surgery should be paid out of the *Collective Mind* money, and thus his final doubts about Isaac had evaporated.

“You can collect your things now,” Robert added calmly. “By the way, what’s this gismo?” he asked, holding out the V-Rain. “I can tell you quite frankly that I deleted it from the inventory of your things, otherwise we would have had to hold you for another week, until we’ve figured out that this little thing wasn’t connected with the attack in any way. I’m really sorry, we dealt with Cavalier first and sent him to Marseilles, and then a

whole horde of people descended on us: our bosses, prosecutors, the deputy prefect, journalists. It took us a long time to get round to you. And then, your sister's surname isn't the same as yours. I didn't know she was your stepsister. But I checked all the information on you today, so that you could get back home, even if it is late. Off you go, it's already ten o'clock."

"It's my invention. Harmless. It's just to keep the rain off."

Isaac raked up his things, and the V-Rain squeaked plaintively. All this amiability from Robert made him feel uneasy

"Isaac, I'm very sorry," the captain suddenly added in a quiet, fatherly voice. "The news I have from the hospital isn't too cheerful. Your sister has been in a coma since this afternoon."

The ground suddenly crumbled under Isaac's feet. He started crying. His mouth still felt dry, but tears the size of large hailstones rolled down his cheeks. He couldn't say a single word, small change scattered onto the floor and his hands, full of various little bits and pieces, shook so badly that he simply couldn't find his pocket.

It wasn't fair! Bastards! Nobody specifically. Everybody. Isaac loathed them all.

"I spoke to the doctor, don't despair, of course it's bad, but her life isn't in any danger. You'll definitely find the money for the surgery. And you should also see a doctor yourself, our medic said you have a slight concussion."

No one was waiting for Isaac in the dark street. There was nothing for him in the future either. Rage against the whole world overflowed him, anger at the world, at his own helplessness. He picked up a stone and dashed it into a shop-window. The siren howled and he turned into an alleyway. He finally arrived home at dawn.

It was already lunchtime and Isaac was struggling to keep his eyes open. His body was complaining after the strain of the previous day, the despair that had made him decide to sell his creativity. The explosion, the hit to his head, the police station, Vicky being in coma; he didn't sleep well turning from side to side the whole night. When he went to bed he couldn't even undress and Elvis's present was painfully prickling his leg as a reminder of the promise.

Isaac pulled out the piece of the board from his pocket and investigated it. The piece was just a piece. Actually, some parts survived. Now Elvis gets behind the bars for a long time not even knowing that he didn't destroy anything but Isaac's plans. Actually, the other way round: he served Isaac a favor as he would have been a Happy or Vegie according to the opponents of the downloading by this time. Now he unexpectedly earned some time and gained new hope. He didn't want to feel doomed.

Isaac quickly undressed and plodded into the bathroom. Looking at himself in the mirror, he opened his eyes wide and raised his eyebrows. Squeezing his eyes open and shut he thought he looked more like a shabby hobo. Gazing out at him from the mirror was a thin young guy with dark hair and piercing grey-green eyes. The nose was a bit on the large side, so were the ears, and the cheeks were slightly hollow. You couldn't really call him classically handsome, but the girls always saw something in him and they probably knew better. Even the small scar on his chin didn't spoil his looks, instead it added a touch of the brutality that was lacking. Isaac made a slipshod attempt to tidy up his hair, but it still stuck out rebelliously. He glanced at the uneven covering of stubble on his face. "Unshaved as always, and I'm not going to shave," he thought.

"Women like stubble for some reason," was the first clear thought that came to him. "And at the same time they complain that it's prickly." He tried to imagine what it was like when you

stood at the mirror first thing in the morning and a girl walked up to you and ran her hand over your unshaven cheek like in an advertisement. But that was on television, that sort of thing didn't happen in real life. Hop into the bathroom, grab a quick wash and dash off to deal with business at hand.

The few girls Isaac had dated before had never done that.

To get your cheek stroked, you needed someone you loved. A girl who loved you, not just some casual hookup. There hadn't been any genuine loving in Isaac's life since his sister had been ill and he didn't wonder where it had gone.

No one needs a boyfriend with problems, especially one who's almost a beggar. Everyone has enough headaches of their own; they can do without anyone else's. After discovering Vicky was ill, Isaac didn't have the time or the money or, more importantly, the desire to have a genuine affair.

He had to make do with the girls – the drunk ones – who came his way at the *America*. Hints were quite often made and he was given to understand or even told straight out that he was cute, that he had handsome features, that he was tall and well built. In fact he wasn't that tall, but that didn't bother Isaac, it wasn't a problem in his life. No one needed to explain to Isaac what the female tourists had in mind when they said that sort of thing to the first young guy they met. Take everything given, as they say, though he was always short of strength after a long shift and those short term lady friends simply highlighted that nobody seriously needed him. And he oh so wanted to be genuinely loved. Isaac could really be very dedicated to his loved one. It's just that he had no chance of showing it. Even for his sister he was ready to sacrifice himself. When she fell sick, Isaac got deprived of the only love creek that the world directed towards him.

Isaac woke from his thoughts beside his computer, with a cup of coffee in his hand. "Oh, coffee! When did I manage to make that? Some things get done on autopilot, as if you have your

own barman sitting inside you,” Isaac chuckled to himself, but he wasn’t feeling cheerful. “Stop. Why go straight to the computer? That’s a habit. I have to call the hospital and find out about Vicky.”

“Grace Kelly Hospital, how can I help you?” the phone said in the familiar rapid patter.

“My name is Isaac Leroy...” Isaac cleared his throat, his voice was hoarse. “I’m calling to find out about the condition of my sister, Victoria Frank.”

“One moment.” He was put through to a different number, introduced himself again and was reconnected again. Finally he heard the duty nurse in the right department rummaging through her papers and the clatter of a keyboard and then a considerate voice chirped in his ear.

“Monsieur Leroy.” Isaac could never get used to that ceremonial form of address, and he winced every time. “Monsieur Leroy, your sister has stabilized and the worst has passed. At the moment she is listed as serious but in stable condition.”

“But I was told she’s in a coma! I want to speak to her doctor.”

The stupid, pathetic hope aroused by the medical term “stable condition” had been a mistake. The doctor confirmed that Vicky was in a coma, but only yesterday her condition had been much worse. She could have died. It was all over now, the doctors were monitoring her progress and it would be clear when the surgery could be performed.

“There’s no need to hurry with the money, Monsieur Leroy, but nonetheless we have to be ready to carry out the operation,” the doctor concluded, said goodbye and hung up.

Isaac was trembling, he instantly pictured Vicky so pale, so fragile, so seeking help and sustained by hope only. Something inside of him broke down and Isaac burst out crying. It was painful to realize that he had delayed for far too long, he felt sorry



for himself. She could have died as I didn't even consider downloading till the very end. The intrusion of the dumb-ass terrorist could have taken the lives of both of us. Why did I not come at least a day before? What a fool I was! Worse than any Veggie. The damned Agency!

“They have everything they need to cure people: the technologies, the methodologies, the high-class specialists – and all of that thanks to sucking creativity out of people like me and Pascal. But no one benefits from it all because the treatment has to be paid for. Until we go to that freaking Agency to sell our creativity, people, our nearest and dearest, just keep getting worse!”

What was going on? The media were choked solid with praise for *Collective Mind*. The whole world was rejoicing at the rosy forecasts of a happy future for mankind. Problems were being solved, scientists had been given answers to their questions, and solutions had been found for the technical puzzles. Even the people who became total Veggies after offloading their creativity were happy and looked content. What about those who fell sideways? We have no choice: it's either *Einsteiner* or the abyss, right?

No one paid any special attention any longer to terrorist attacks, like the one Isaac got involved with yesterday. Even the police ignored the feeble street protests. Solitary messiahs, protest graffiti – there were always plenty of mental cases and petty hooligans around. These troublemakers claimed we should be afraid of the power held by *Collective Mind*. Some opposition scientists claimed that pooled creativity was only useful to make progress on the kind of projects that had some prior work already done. Not even a billion donors, they said, could be helpful to start novel ventures of the future, such as conquering the deep space or curing future viruses. Thanks to *Collective Mind*, people could accelerate research and bring it to a conclusion more

quickly, but without prior developments, pooled creativity was useless. Teleportation might seem like science fiction, but in the middle of the last century, the smartphone was pure science fiction, too. Not to mention the internet, as no futurists could picture its importance in today's world.

Last week the Agency announced that it was going to double the pay for those who study quantum physics. Alright, okay, you may think that you guys gotta create and then we'll buy you out because in quantum physics we have serious gaps, a deficit of ideas!

Orange Energy sucked out of people would never be able to do what its original owners could – it wasn't capable of asking a new question, creating a dream, inventing a new fantasy. Only human beings could do that. "Nonetheless," objected the experts from the UN, "there's no guarantee that a man who holds on his creativity would make rational use of it by himself. We still have to reap the full benefits of the revolutionary leap forward that the world has made, readjust. Let's harvest the scores of new inventions that *Collective Mind* will produce, and deal with the problems later. We're studying them, but their number is miniscule in comparison with the thousands of supremely important successful new developments that we have." The success of *Collective Mind* was well protected by the armor plating of a host of useful technologies.

"Supremely important," Isaac spat out angrily. His hand reached out for a cigarette. "But I don't smoke!" In stressful moments, Isaac's old reflex of fumbling on the table with his hand for a pack of cigarettes sometimes came back.

He tried to pull himself together. "The computer could still work out, there's still time. You can earn the money you need to pay for your sister's surgery from the V-Rain. Then there'll be enough for a decent human life too. Use the chance you've got! The doctors still don't have a full picture! Just get on with the

work like a grown-up while there is still time! And don't forget: long comas may cause permanent damage.”

His rage and the pain inside his head made it hard to focus on his work.

What the heck was going on here? Isaac slammed his hand down on the mouse in annoyance. The plastic cracked, but thank God the mouse still worked.

“One thing the terrorist was right about was that the people who run the Agency and sit on all these inventions have too much power.”

“In all of the futuristic films, there always has to be an omnipotent corporation or empire. Essentially that is the model of the future world. Of course, no one ever thought the dragon would emerge from the UN. The more Veggies there are, the more docile the world is. The total elimination of crime has weeded out a whole mass of freedom-loving individuals who were beyond their control. Tomorrow they'll call anyone opposed to *Collective Mind* a criminal.”

All that was left from the rebel Elvis was the small prickly piece of board and a half sane promise to burn it.

As he tried to focus his mind on his work, Isaac played with the piece, intending to throw it out as he had promised himself to do. After his reflections about *Collective Mind*, Isaac felt a certain respect for Elvis's audacity. He had to conserve his own energy and not waste his breath on idle talk and promises, especially if it wasn't all that difficult to make them into reality. Isaac looked at the piece of board again – it had a couple of microchips and a mini-memory card on it. A mini-card, but with a big memory, and it wasn't a fragment at all, it was complete and undamaged. Happy to do anything but work, Isaac decided to take a look at what was on it.

He plugged it into his own computer and saw a mass of folders with files and tables. He opened the first one and froze,

dumbfounded. His intuition or maybe it was that special energy of his hadn't let him down. He was looking at a table of people who had been tested, but had not yet downloaded their creativity. First names, surnames, IQs, creativity ratings, and other data. Isaac leaned closer to the monitor and quickly ran his eyes over the confidential lines.

“Holy shit! Didn't that crazy hobo say: ‘Destroy this heart of the devil’? He wasn't all that far from the truth, that Elvis.”

The memory card contained a whole heap of incomprehensible information, but the most interesting things on it were the various ratings. This wasn't the devil's heart, it was his database! Isaac's fatigue instantly evaporated. His fingers flew over the keyboard as he avidly devoured the content. “Lord, what do you want me to do with his?” he thought to himself.

Isaac's hands hovered motionless above the keys. Destroying something was easy, if you knew for sure what actually was to be destroyed. Isaac had come into possession of a database, but what was the right way to deal with this knowledge from out of the blue?

“What if I search the table for names I know?” thought Isaac, in earnest excitement.

He opened the file named Human Imagination Tone. First, he decided to try his own name, typed it in and launched the search. “I'm not in the top hundred, but I made the top thousand, marked with 996 that is,” he grinned to himself. His next search was for “Jeremy Link”. There was a lot of empty chatter available on the internet about the professor, but there was no serious open information.

The search engine found Jeremy Link. Wow! The name was in a separate table with the striking title “Top 50 geniuses”. The genius top list, no less! And these were people who have not donated their energy!

Isaac ran through the list eagerly: Europeans, Australians, Americans, Asians – talents could be born anywhere. The first two were unfamiliar to him; number three was a well-known Russian mathematician, who worked at MIT. He and Pascal were taught on his books. He cracked complicated theorems like nuts and was famous for always refusing money prizes for his achievements. What had jogged him into filling in a form to sell his creativity? Isaac found the answer to that question in the “Remarks” section, where it said that the mathematician needed to raise money for medical treatment for his child who had a rare brain disease.

Isaac gritted his teeth at this coincidence. Vicky, dear little sister. Isaac's fury with *Collective Mind* overwhelmed him. It would never release him now.

Vicky was Isaac's stepsister, but she was the nearest and dearest person he had. No matter how hard Isaac tried, he couldn't clearly recall the moment when he first met her. He remembered being introduced to a frightened little girl in a blue dress. And that it was a good day, because he was given a radio-controlled car. And a bit later Vicky's dad – his mum's friend, as he was introduced at the time – bought Isaac a really great bike. Then he started coming round more and more often, together with Vicky. Playing with someone, even with a girl, was better than playing on your own. On the weekends Vicky's dad drove them to the amusement park and bought them big ice creams, and there was no reason to be afraid of someone like him. Isaac quickly got used to him and was glad when he came, always with a present, even if only a little one. Isaac was delighted when he and his mum moved into his apartment, where Isaac and Vicky had their own room.

They grew up like that together, went summer camps and the amusement parks together. Then to school, to the parties at school, and then to the discotheques. He told her about his inventions and the problems he had making progress with them, and she listened closely and encouraged her brother, and wouldn't let him give up. And Vicky used to laugh and say that he was her very best girlfriend, who wouldn't even look at the same boy as she.

Isaac drove away his memories and went back to the data base.

Isaac saw another famous name, the inventor of the unique search engine "Piquet". Johnson Pike lived in Beverly Hills and was a very successful man. He got rich after launching his search engine, with a totally new approach to the analysis of results.

The usual search engines were focused on the amount of site traffic, and a lot of traffic automatically made a site important and ranked it high in the ratings. In the first lines of the located data, users saw the most popular sites, not the reference that they needed. The information they were looking for was either hidden away somewhere in the last pages, or was never even located at all.

Piquet was better and faster at finding results for given search parameters. The algorithm for the results of analysis was complicated and, of course, wasn't made public. Specialists assumed that the search engine analyzed all the words on each site found. If there were too many words that meant it wasn't a professional site. Piquet assigned credibility to sites on the basis of the frequency of the search words relative to the total number and the presence of specific, strictly professional terms and phrases. At least, that was what the manual claimed. Paranoiacs claimed that the search engine also analyzed the files on the computer of the user who launched a search, in order to figure out what he did and rank the results more accurately.

Apart from everything else, Pike was a superb PR man. In his numerous interviews about the search engine and his company, the inventor frequently toyed with the journalists, only talking about what he wanted and cracking jokes, including dirty ones. At one press conference he put eight penguins in the front row, and he arrived to another wearing an astronaut's suit. In the first case he announced that he wanted to see a decently dressed audience at the conference, and in the second case that he had been searching for an answer to a very difficult question out in space – and found it. The journalists loved and hated him at the same time. On the one hand, he was rude, but Pike only attacked people in response to an attack, never overstepping a thin boundary line, plus he threw fantastic parties, at which he was always very hospitable and generous. In any case, he was a

newsmaker, and no one quarreled with him openly. After all, tomorrow he might block your name in his search engine, and you would instantly be consigned to journalistic oblivion.

Late last year the extravagant Pike had put on yet another show, in which he jumped off the roof of a skyscraper in Los Angeles—into the sunset—on a yellow hang-glider with “Search in Piquet” written on it. The journalists outdid each other in inventing catchy headlines. A superb banquet was laid out for them on the roof. The next day the wings of the bright-yellow hang-glider appeared on the front pages of all the major newspapers and news sites.

Everybody was really surprised when Pike announced he had decided to download his creativity. At the test session, to which he invited the press, he said that his creativity level was off the scale and declared emotionally that from now on his imagination would serve the good of society.

However, before offloading his energy, he was required to hand over the Piquet algorithm to the company’s board of directors and wind up all activities that required intellectual energy. In the table it said that the downloading of Pike’s creativity had been postponed once again. Probably it had just been another of his PR moves, so he could announce to the press how high his level was.

Isaac clicked the mouse on other tables in the data base. He went into the top 100 of those who had already downloaded their creativity. Among them he recognized the name of a celebrated artist, Andrei Sharov. He was a Veggie now, he didn’t make art any more, but the pictures he had created became world-famous.

Isaac recalled the story that had been all over the media. The artist, solitary and unsociable, never left his studio, scraping by on occasional sales of his pictures, which were not especially popular. Not a single serious art gallery wanted to take him on. After all, you see, he hadn’t invented anything conceptually new,



had he? He burned down the garage containing his unsold works and was one of the first to download. His creativity index turned out to be astronomical. Of course, they wrote about it in all the newspapers. The artist's works were suddenly noticed, and the rush started. His few remaining works were declared masterpieces, and not a single critic dared to say anything derisive about them anymore. The owner of a tiny local restaurant, who took pity on the artist and used to feed him in return for his pictures, received a lot of money for them. The six works hanging in the dark little restaurant ended up moving to the National Gallery and they even brought the artist to the opening. Only he didn't care any longer about the fame that had suddenly descended on him.

Isaac went back to the table that included Link. Where was he now, this professor? Isaac wanted to meet Link face to face and tell him what he thought about him. All about *Einsteiner*, and the Veggies, and people like Isaac, who were stuck on the sidelines of life. Link probably read the avalanche of ecstatic articles about him, so let him hear a different opinion for a change. Isaac wondered why he had disappeared and why he was hiding. He ought to be held accountable for what he had done, and for what was happening now, and for what it would all lead to in the future. What did he think now that his invention had been at work for seven years?

The ideal thing would be to make him destroy the system for integrating creativity. If he knew how then he would need to convince him, pressure him or ultimately threaten him. The world was turning into a new goddamned Matrix, only not in the movies, but for real. Isaac recalled the old film with Keanu Reeves. People seemed to be alive, but they were asleep, they lived in cocoons, in illusions, believing that their world was real. What real point was there in being born, living a quiet life, always toeing the line, and dying? In erasing your individuality?

If Link had managed to build his invention, he would surely be able to destroy it. Destroying is easier than building if one knows what to destroy. The technology was classified and hard to get at, but Link ought to know how to do it.

Isaac went back to the previous file that mentioned his name and scrolled up and down, then up again. The names of creativity-carriers who, like him, had their levels measured, but haven't yet been downloaded. And as it happened, there were quite a lot of them.

Isaac winced at the title 'Creativity Carriers', "What kind of crap was that name? They're just normal people who have not sacrificed their singularity. They had to realize what Isaac had discovered about *Einsteiner*. Maybe they have already realized that? Maybe they have known it a long time ago, and Isaac was the only one who had taken so long to see the light? Today they download creativity, tomorrow people's sense of humor, memory, emotions? The dismemberment of a person's individuality. The Agency is an obvious evil, Jack the Ripper of the human consciousness!"

"Let's take a look," Isaac said to himself, using the mouse to select a random name from the local list. He stopped at the name Eric Delangle. Just as he thought, there was a page in a social network and a blog account registered to that name.

Delangle was a biologist, in the very first lines of his resume in the business social network, he had written in large letters: "I'm not selling my identity, and I advise you not to." Eric moved to Marrakesh.

"It's a shame that Morocco's quite a long way from here," Isaac thought. "This guy would have been good enough." Catching himself thinking that, Isaac realized why he was looking at the list. He was searching for fellow thinkers and needed people like himself who were dissatisfied with the present state of affairs.

Isaac knew he wasn't a born leader. But he had no choice; he could only start with himself.

If there were other groups of discontents somewhere Isaac hadn't heard about them, but he did have quite a lot of experience in solving complex problems, and he knew where to begin. In principle he had to approach this like any complex problem. Logically.

Isaac sorted the table of locals by education and age. It would be easier with people the same age as him, he thought. Ran quickly through the names. In a three hours' time he had a list of candidates sitting in front of him. The next step was finding their whereabouts – unfortunately, there was neither a phone number nor email address shown. By night, ten of them already had either the former or the latter, though. Social networks, company or personal web sites, all this information was available on the Internet, just don't be lazy and keep searching.

The moment still not clear was the way he could actually approach those people. How to make an appointment or start a conversation? With the two first candidates, whose offices he called before the end of the working day, he didn't even get connected; for two more he was asked to call back later. He managed to get through just to one. Rulph Bongardt, a lawyer. Forty seven years old, quite well-to-do, a good clear website, nice smile, two kids. Isaac liked him at once. However the talk itself didn't come out so well – it was too late that Isaac realized that he had had to prepare in advance – the conversation was rushed, he talked disconnectedly and dimly. Finally he rattled off that they had to meet and talk about *Collective Mind*. When Rulph realized that Isaac was not interested in him as a lawyer, his interest fell away. Trying to be more specific, Isaac took risks to explain that his point was not his own protection, but that of all the mankind; that it was necessary to study all the consequences of the “*Einsteiner's*” work and that he was present during the terroristic

attack the day before. After these words the lawyer went silent, heard the speaker out and promised to think.

Isaac wasn't happy with himself. He had the luck to speak with a potential co-conspirator but he blew it, being badly prepared. It was clear that he wouldn't get any result on the telephone, he had to make personal appointments. The word 'accomplice' is a little scary. What is he doing? I have more than enough of my own problems. But something was telling Isaac that if he drops the case, then he won't forgive himself. Someone needs to start this fight, especially once he lucked out to obtain such valuable information.

Isaac concentrated and wrote emails to other candidates, trying to find a personalized approach to each one. To the owner of an IT-company he introduced himself as a research associate, to a deputy bank manager – a rich client. Speaking to another lawyer, he asked for legal advice concerning a head trauma he had received during the attack, along with his imprisonment. He sent eight letters in total. All candidates he had picked possessed both high creativity rating and a considerable fortune. “Good thing my folks had brought me to Monaco, there are plenty of rich people here. It's not for nothing that my parents moved me to Monaco, there are a lot of rich people here, and with money everything is much easier,” shot across his mind. Feeling content, he went to bed early, looking forward to the replies.

Morning started with a surprise – an unpleasant one, as it proved to be. Robert called from the police and asked him to stop by. Isaac cautiously inquired what was the matter. It turned out that Rulph Bongardt had reported on him.

Now, he certainly could have done without that! Saying he had a bad headache, Isaac promised to come over after lunch.

Knowing that his neighbor had left for a long time, he hid the board in his mailbox. Now he had to clear the computer. Dammit, not a single reply yet! Once the police see who the letters had been sent to or the replies, they might get it all. Isaac didn't know if they had the base or not. Could they extract the search history or temporary files? Who knows what on earth could give him away. The computer certainly had to be got rid of... But what if someone spots him throwing the thing away? Who could be sure he wasn't being watched? What the heck could this Bongardt-guy have told?

Isaac tried to recall every single detail of the conversation, looking for a possible way to explain it as an innocent chat.

Well, he had to erase everything suspicious, defragment and format the hard drive, download as much junk as he could and format it again. Done! Defragmentation over, now formatting. While the computer was running the task, Isaac attempted to have breakfast but it turned out that there was nothing to eat. He hadn't been planning to come back; after the downloading center he was supposed to go directly to a temporary boarding house. So the only sustenance available was a cup of coffee.

After the format process had been over, Isaac created a new mailbox, forwarded all potential replies there and started downloading some data from the Internet. Now he had at least an hour and a half of a free-time, enough to take a walk, look around and think it over.

There was no sign of surveillance, so he calmed down a little. Well, and why would there be? He hadn't said anything suspicious on the phone, they had nothing for pinning him. Feeling a surge of courage, he headed straight to the police.

Catching Robert on his way to lunch, Isaac told him he had an appointment later on and asked if they could talk at once. The Captain glanced at his watch and agreed, saying it wouldn't take long.

“We got a statement that you threatened Mr. Bongardt, Isaac.”

“Excuse me?” Isaac sounded genuinely surprised.

“Well, you called him, introducing yourself as a member of a terrorist attack, was it so?”

Isaac could remember that this was what he said.

“Well, I meant to say, I was a witness, you know. Or rather a victim! He’s a lawyer and I have trouble with my sister now. I wanted to know what I could count upon. I had a bad headache, so I might have been a little incoherent, all right, however I definitely didn’t say that I was a member of a terror group or any of the kind, no, sir.”

“Right. That’s what I thought. I calmed him down all I could, but still, you’ll have to write an explanatory note. A short one – he added, throwing another glance at his watch.”

It took Isaac three minutes to give a short version of the conversation, adding in the end that he hadn’t meant anything illegal, blaming the slight brain concussion he had.

The captain seemed satisfied. He put the paper into a file and set off to lunch, letting Isaac go.

Isaac felt quite calm, although admitted to himself that he had to be much more careful. He checked his mail on the mobile phone and saw two replies.

The first one was from the bank, quite predictably. They made him an appointment, however, not with the person he needed but some manager. This didn’t work. The other reply was predictably from the lawyer and Isaac also had to brush it aside. No more trust for lawyers. The rest were silent. Well, there was a need to change the tactics, indeed. He decided to take a closer look at those who, like him, had nothing to lose. The people of his age.

At home Isaac picked up the board from his neighbor's mailbox and copied the data to a flash-card. After that he threw the piece away, carefully paying attention to not being watched.

Having come back home, he sat at his computer to continue the analysis.

The first one he plucked out of the list was a young guy with technical education, a local programmer, Laurent-Marie Affre, working as a barman. He wasn't the only one with talent who had been dumped overboard, or behind a bar counter. Coincidentally, Isaac had technical education too. Maybe the search engine would tell him what the techie barman had on his mind.

The candidate called himself Bikie in social networks and was crazy about motorbikes. Isaac found his blog, in which Bikie was scathingly abusive about *Collective Mind*, *Einsteiner*, as well as Link, and mocked everyone who offloaded their creativity. He had posted various photographs including his own and of his Harley's. Looking out at Isaac was an awkward, longhaired clodhopper with big round eyes. Plumpish and ungainly, Bikie's build was frighteningly heavy-caliber who also possessed thoroughly good-natured air, which could not be said of his posts. "I hope he really is good-natured," Isaac chuckled. The last entry was fairly old and very short: "No one reads me here, what a Down-steiner!"

Isaac clicked on a different link and found another of Bikie's blogs, which consisted of very short messages. None of the words in them could be used in polite society except "down with", "Veggies", "people in coma" and prepositions, like "up" and "off".

A plan was finally coming together in Isaac's mind: summon a team of people like this Bikie and find Jeremy Link

since he seems to be alive. And then see what happens. What mattered was not to goof up the choice of the candidates.

Money was needed. “Damnit, money. Forgive me Vicky, I really will earn the money for your surgery, just hang on a little bit longer. Right now I have to ask the database a question. My dear ladies and gentlemen, potential accomplices, preferably, young heirs, which of you has money?” Isaac thought as he searched through the lists and through the social networks before he finally found some candidates. Half of them got cut down immediately – some turned out to be in America, some in Hong Kong or what not. What left were three.

The first was Peter Wolanski, a German who had lived in Monaco since he was a child. A member of a prestigious scientific society, the same one that Isaac had once belonged to. There weren’t any photos of Peter in the internet and Isaac decided to look for them later. Peter’s blog consisted of beautifully layed out articles with a scientific slant. A couple of them were devoted to discussing why no one should download their OE. An ideal candidate he was, better start with him.

In one of the latest articles Peter told his father’s story: his life and his achievements as a successful entrepreneur. And finally Peter Wolanski talked about his own grief and boundless sense of loss since he was alone now. “This guy is already rich,” thought Isaac and wrote Peter’s details into his notepad. “Lord, I’m like a gold-digger looking for a sponsor! It’s disgusting, but there is no choice. Money is the lubricant of any operation.”

The second candidate was a girl. What a beauty! And with a name right out of a song: Michelle Blanche. Long, shapely legs, a beautiful face, a great figure, and a mischievous twinkle in her eyes too. “A beautiful girl, and to judge from her rating, very intelligent too. I’ll never cope with a girl like that: beautiful, and



rich into the bargain. How do you come on to someone like that?" Isaac started dreaming, but he was forced to admit that it was a non-starter. He wouldn't have the nerve for it. "She'd tell me where to get off before I could even start telling her anything. Or she would think that I was a psycho. I'd love to screw a girl like that. Only high flyers like that don't come into our bar," Isaac chuckled despondently. But he wrote down the address anyway, just in case. The idea of giving up without even trying made him want to despise himself. Isaac fantasized for a little while longer and closed beautiful Michelle's blog.

The third candidate was somewhat dubious. Father, a military man, had got downloaded one of the first. The son was obviously willing to follow his father's steps, seemed like he was proud. There was a risk that the guy would turn out too righteous and give Isaac away. So he should be left only for the worst case.

"If I think like a character from a movie," Isaac thought, still fantasizing. "A strong team means people who think alike, who are also friends. It's a thousand times harder for a loner. I'll try to do things that way too. For now I have enough candidates with the techie and the guy who has money. Maybe they have friends who can fill out the team, that's less risky than chasing after strangers and inciting them to commit a crime. And it would be best to keep my mouth shut about the database."

Isaac found himself unable to resist the urge to get to know Michelle Blanche. He got the idea that he ought to start with her. That night he dreamt about the leggy brunette. Isaac almost completely forgot the dream, but he thought he remembered them getting together, and Michelle smiling at him and caressing him. Then they were in this beautiful room, and she was wearing a bathrobe, and Isaac spotted black, lacy underwear lying over at the side. He tried to kiss her, but she beckoned him towards the bed. After that, unfortunately, there was a gap, but Isaac woke up feeling aroused. He was in a really great mood, and he tried to recall if they'd had sex or not. No matter how hard he tried, though, he couldn't reconstruct the dream in his memory, but he decided it was a good sign. Intellectually Isaac realized that signs were beside the point here, that with his creativity level he could find a good sign in any corner. Living was easier with good signs; they were an additional reason for optimism.

Pinning down Michelle proved not to be easy. She had moved to Monaco a year and a half ago, and before that, from the look of things, she had lived in London. The address given in the database turned out to be valid only for correspondence, and her English mobile number had been disconnected. Michelle didn't use geolocation in social media networks, and she didn't reveal where she really lived. She often published her photographs, where she'd been, the get-togethers and the parties, but generally only on the following day. In the photos she was either posing, or always with the same young man, also not a local. Isaac kept looking at her Instagram, hoping his eyes would spot some familiar place. In some of the photographs Michelle was flaunting herself in a swimsuit on a yacht that had her name on it. After his erotic dream, Isaac feasted his eyes on her as if she were his girlfriend while imagining her naked. "If only the dream would

happen again, then I'd definitely see things through." Having gone to bed he reviewed her most explicit photos. That made him feel horny, but he couldn't summon up any more erotic dreams.

Good thing Michelle didn't just sit at home every night, but Isaac couldn't afford to do the rounds of the most expensive spots in Monaco hoping she would show up, and anyway, the effectiveness of that approach was quite doubtful, she could be anywhere at all. It might seem like he could just show up and drink coffee every evening in the Sass Café or the Cipriani Restaurant, but if you didn't order anything on the third day, they would politely ask you not to come back there again. Isaac couldn't have afforded more than two dinners in a fancy place like that. He finally managed to find out what appeared to be her real whereabouts and decided to give it a try.

In anticipation of meeting Michelle, Isaac shaved, abandoning his beautiful stubble, and put on a t-shirt with a deep neck and short sleeves. His wrist was adorned with a vintage diver's watch – not expensive, but very stylish. He even changed the ringtone on his mobile to a melody by INXS. Isaac liked himself like this. Damned if he knew whether Michelle would like him, but after his dream he believed in some kind of sexual connection. If creative energy existed, then why shouldn't there be some other kind, responsible for dreams and attraction? Isaac dismissed all his thoughts about Michelle never having seen him before. Maybe she had seen him some time, and even taken notice, but he simply hadn't spotted it.

Having arrived at the upscale condominium where he thought Michelle lived, Isaac first tried to strike up a conversation with the concierge. The man examined him suspiciously and asked if Isaac mind not pestering him with questions about the residents. If he wanted, he would be glad to pass on a note. Taking pity on Isaac after all, he did hint that Michelle rarely spent the night there. Privacy had always been highly valued in

Monaco, but the concierge saw Isaac as just a young man desperately in love and thawed out a bit. Only what could Isaac write in the note? “Please contact me in connection with...” or “I’m not an admirer, that is, you are beautiful, but I know what a high level of creativity you have”?

No, the concierge was not an option, Isaac had to come up with something else. He went back to the Sass Café and had a word with the manager there. Monaco wasn’t New York, thank God, and all the locals more or less knew each other. The manager promised to text Isaac if he saw her. Isaac visited a few more restaurants and snazzy bars and left his request at five of them.

In the evening he ran through the rich list one more time and picked another pair of candidates just in case. Since they might not live at the address given, it would be best to find out where they were really located. Whoever turned up first would be the first, then he copied out the details of another four people with various skills from among the ones who weren’t rich. Among them an artist and a photographer. Artists were often extremely independent and free-minded, regardless of how much money they had. Good allies. “If I were an artist, I’d ask Michelle to pose for me,” Isaac fantasized. Yes, artists were often outsiders, only Isaac couldn’t imagine what use their knowledge could be for his plans. “But it won’t hurt,” he decided writing out a couple of addresses.

On the third day he got lucky. A huge firework display was taking place in Monaco, and Michelle posted two beautiful photos. Isaac didn’t spot them immediately, but figured out roughly where they had been taken – the girl had been photographed on the roof of the Hotel Fairmont. It was only a ten minute walk from here to there he ought to arrive in time. And he did. Michelle and a girlfriend of hers were sitting there, surrounded by a group of respectably dressed men. “My God,

how sexy she is,” Isaac thought. Pascal would have come on to someone like that no problem, never mind about the competition. Isaac couldn’t do that. In his mind he replayed his friend’s way of acting and tried to tune in to it.

There wasn’t a single free table anywhere nearby – of course not, with a firework display like this, everything had been booked in advance. Isaac hesitated for a moment and stopped not far away from the restroom. It was a hot evening and there were several bottles of water and champagne standing on her table. Sooner or later she’d decide to visit the facility and the way out of the restaurant was right here too, so she couldn’t just disappear.

She wore an elegant beige cocktail dress, not too revealing, but short enough. Isaac’s fantasy immediately shortened it even further and he imagined what was hiding a little bit higher. No watch or bracelets adorned those lovely arms that were already beautiful and the legs... better not to describe them at all. Skyscraper legs, with little, sexy knees. This girl was the real deal, for sure. How lucky she was to be born like this, and not to a poor family too. Isaac noticed that she drank water, while the men kept competing with each other to top up her half-empty glass of champagne.

Eventually, after slightly adjusting her dress, Michelle set off arm-in-arm with her girlfriend, in the required direction. Sipping on his cocktail, Isaac tried to stand more naturally but felt too nervous and fidgety. His embarrassment made everything horribly difficult, he awkwardly tried find a better pose and in the end disaster struck. In his last and most desperate effort to make himself look as interesting as possible, he leaned against a door on his elbow, but the door turned out to be slightly open and swung away from him. Isaac managed to trip over his own foot, his glass treacherously slipped out of his hands and shattered with a loud crash. The contents of the glass flew out onto the feet of Michelle and her girlfriend covering their light-colored shoes with

numerous drops of dark, wet liquid. Isaac felt like finding a hole and crawling into it and must have looked really frightened, because Michelle gave an enchanting smile, put her hand on Isaac's shoulder and said in a gentle voice: "Don't worry about it, we're fine. Just get yourself another cocktail and they'll clear this up."

Thunderstruck, Isaac broke out in a cold sweat, but Michelle walked away imperturbably to where she was going. The admirers who had immediately darted across to the scene of the incident cast glances of contempt at Isaac.

"I've offended their queen!" Isaac thought spitefully. He responded to the final member of her royal retinue with an expression so bellicose that the group's contempt evaporated instantly and he quickly made himself scarce. There you go, you're not lounging about on your yachts now. Unlike them, Isaac had experience of being in real fights, and the final admirer had realized that if he was pushed just a tiny bit further, he was ready to attack, and to hell with the consequences.

Michelle's party left to go somewhere else, but ten minutes later Isaac got a text from the Sass: "Michelle's here!" Fortunately, it wasn't the entire posse at the Sass, only Michelle and her girlfriend with a young guy. Isaac perched where the girl would see him and she looked in his direction several times, but seemed to look straight through Isaac, without noticing him at all. He obviously didn't fall within the range of her interest. If she did recognize him as the young man who dropped his cocktail and broke the glass, she didn't give any sign of it. No matter how hard Isaac glared at her, nothing happened.

"Wrong choice," Isaac thought sadly. "But okay, there are still the other candidates." Even though he had failed to attract any interest at all, Isaac decided to try to get acquainted anyway. "After all, this is business," he thought, psyching himself up. Concentrating as hard as he could, he convinced himself that not

to approach her would be cowardice and he had nothing to lose. “I’ll finish my cocktail and walk up to her,” he thought coming up with a way to put things off for five minutes. Eventually, after gathering all his courage, he put his glass on the table and set off towards the spot where Michelle was sitting.

“Excuse me, Michelle, but could I have a couple of words with you?” Isaac said with his absolutely cutest smile. “I hope you’re not upset, are you, that it was only my cocktail that fell at your feet, and not me?” The girl failed to appreciate his humor and looked at him without any particular curiosity. It was obvious that she had absolutely no interest in getting to know strangers in public places.

“What do you want? Do you two know each other?” the girl’s male friend asked, coming to her aid.

“No, we don’t know each other. My name’s Isaac, and there’s something very important that I need to say.”

Michelle shook her head very slightly and her young man continued.

“Isaac, please have the courtesy to leave us alone. We want to relax; we don’t want to make any new acquaintances. No one’s angry with you because of the broken glass.”

“But it’s very important,” said Isaac, trying to insist.

“If it’s so important, tell us. I have no secrets from my friends,” Michelle intervened.

“Well you see, Michelle, you have a very high creativity, and so do I. And there are other people like us. People who don’t like *Collective Mind*,” Isaac rattled off. “And we can’t just sit back and do nothing. We can do a lot. And you can help to do it.”

Unfortunately, Michelle and her companions saw Isaac as nothing more than an overexcited weirdo who should be given as wide a berth as possible. Michelle’s reflex response was to lean back on her chair with her arms crossed.

“Please,” Isaac entreated her, “let me finish. You’re intelligent, rich and very beautiful. I can’t manage it on my own, I need your help. I’m not a psycho, I’m an absolutely normal young guy...an inventor, and I have a high creativity quotient.”

“And you broke that cocktail glass very inventively, didn’t you?” Michelle’s male friend persisted. This was his great chance to protect the beautiful model from an obnoxious gadfly, and he wanted to milk the opportunity dry.

He got up off his chair and stood between Isaac and Michelle.

“Please leave the easy way.”

“And what if I don’t?” asked Isaac, starting to get angry and immediately regretted it. His aggression only made Michelle more frightened. A good half of the restaurant was already watching their table, including the irate manager, the acquaintance who had sent Isaac the text.

“All right, I’m sorry. I’m leaving.” Isaac looked at Michelle one last time, she was so beautiful and so indifferent. She realized she would never make any kind of ally and was reveling in her own life of admirers and luxury. People like that would never risk disrupting their own comfortable stability. Michelle didn’t even seem so very beautiful now. Her alarm had turned her face pale and slightly drawn. Her charm had evaporated instantly and her eyes peered out spitefully from under brows. Isaac suddenly smiled. He realized that he was stronger than many brilliant or rich people. Even in his present condition he was capable of far more than many of the people around him.

“See you later, Michelle,” Isaac said with a wave of his hand and walked away with a confident stride. Maybe his mission had failed, but he felt an incredible rush of energy at having moved from theory to action.

Isaac’s legs carried him home without any thought. He wanted to run, not walk and get back to his computer as soon as



possible. He didn't really know what had happened, but his head was absolutely clear and working at maximum capacity.

It was time to search among the ones who had nothing to lose, those who attacked the Agency openly. He had to look at all their social networks again with a maximal focus on the marginal types. To hell with any society celebrities. To hell with the rich ones. First he had to create the backbone.

Isaac carried on working and analyzing until morning. It appeared that the most suitable candidate was the marginal Laurent-Marie, so called Bikie, after all with his obvious contempt for *Einsteiner*. Some posts reeked of disillusionment and rage, everything that Isaac himself felt yesterday. A conversation with him would go differently for sure. One of Bikie's strong points was his profession as a systems administrator and programmer. And the candidate worked as a barman, had no money, all the makings of an anarchist, and on top of that was as strong as an ox. If things worked out with him, physical security would come as part the deal. It wouldn't take much to find Bikie, he definitely didn't have a concierge for correspondence and so tracking him down would be easy.

Thinking about physical protection, Isaac spotted another candidate, a husky young athletically built, black guy... With such high creativity rating, what could have attracted him to sport, Isaac wondered. If you had enough natural talent both for sport and for using your brain, then why not? Abdul Djebali, age twenty-three, a member of the national track and field team. A French father and Algerian mother. A Muslim. Training, training, more training. "Aha, I know that gym," Isaac exclaimed, examining his Instagram. "That's where I'll find him."

Feeling a bit relaxed, Isaac poked his nose into another rating that he hadn't seen before. "Creativity statistics on children born to Happies". Notional zero, notional zero, zero again, zero

for almost all of them...not even *Collective Mind* could bring itself to call these figures a rating.

Isaac went to bed, but tossed and turned restlessly even though it was already past sunrise. He fell asleep around eight, maybe later, and then woke up at least twice, the clock showing 8.40 and 9.30. He had to force himself to sleep a bit longer: He had two candidates for today, and the second one worked until three in the morning. Isaac closed the curtains tightly, plunging the room in total darkness and fell sound sleep.

The administrator at the gym said that the afternoon training would finish at four o'clock. Isaac went to grab a pizza and came back a little earlier than that. When he spotted Abdul, he introduced himself and asked what he was doing after the gym. They agreed to sit and talk in a café in the port at six. The sportsman turned out to be a very amiable guy. That was the pattern – the less money people had, the more accessible they were.

With nothing else to do, Isaac went straight to the café. He took a table on the terrace and examined the yachts. Some were empty; some had jolly groups sitting on them, with music playing. Sailing into Monaco was always an event and the people were in an excellent mood.

“I live here,” thought Isaac, “but I don’t see the beauty of this place. My eyes stopped registering it ages ago; I can’t even remember the last time I looked at the sea. I don’t value what I have. But people are willing to cross the ocean to be here for just one day.”

Abdul found Isaac engrossed in these thoughts.

Isaac called over a waiter and ordered a large bottle of water. There was an awkward pause.

“Abdul, I’d like to ask you a couple of questions and make you a proposal. A week ago I almost became a Happy, but I was lucky, God spared me or maybe I was just fortunate I decided it wasn’t just a coincidence. I didn’t like the present system and the downloading craze. My gut feeling told me it was wrong. And if you dig under the surface, some points that are very unpleasant for the Agency will come creeping out.”

Isaac made sure that Abdul was listening to him and continued.

“I know you have a very high creativity level. You had it measured two years ago in the local branch. Why didn’t you download?”

“Well, apart from my creativity, I have couple of other things I can use to pull through. I can always download if I wish. Meanwhile I am in training and getting excellent results. In just a little while, I’ll make the national team.”

“I also want to ask you to join a team, a team of people who will sort all of this out independently. And maybe put an end to all of it.”

“All of what?”

“*Einsteiner*, downloading creativity. It all looks just too smooth.”

“And what do you want from me?”

“To take part. I want you to help.”

“But how?”

“Abdul, can I trust you?”

“Sure. No matter what, this conversation is just between you and me.”

“Great. I’m looking for partners, those with high intellect and tons of creativity to work together to stop this idiotic trend of turning people into stupid amoebae. You see, happies say that they’re happy. But a drugged-up junkie is happy too, as long as the drug is still in his blood. A junkie is just a sick person. What if the Happies are sick too? Like being on a high. No Happy has ever returned to a normal state.”

“That’s just paranoia. Of course they’re happy, you can see it, and you can cast doubt on any achievement that way.”

“Well, maybe it is paranoia,” Isaac retorted. “But maybe not.”

“Anything is possible, but why do you need me?”

“You’re strong.”

“Are we planning to beat someone up then?” Abdul chuckled.

“No, we’re not, and I hope we won’t have to. I read that you’re a hot-shot mathematician and that’s important for my plan.”

“But just what is your plan, I don’t get it yet.”

“Find Professor Link.”

“And more specifically?”

“There’s nothing specific as of yet. We’ll create the specifics together. We’re going to figure out where Link is.”

“You know Isaac, maybe I’ll regret this later, but I’m going to pass. I won’t tell anyone about our conversation, but as for joining up – I pass. No hard feelings?”

Isaac wanted to object, but Abdul stopped him, raising his hand.

“Until you said something you might repent later, I’ll interrupt you. I’m not interested. No details.”

There was another candidate waiting for him in the evening.

The door of the bar swung open and out spilled a colorful pair, both pretty loaded: a husky guy in a bandana and a big, bearded lanky hunk. They were talking so loud that Isaac could hear from twenty-feet away.

“Now that’s what I call a real bike!” said the hunk.

“You bet.... none of your modern garbage. This is a classic!”

“Is that a Harley Sportster?”

“Yep! And not just a Sportster... This is my bro! Even born the same year as me!”

“Okay, cheers, Bikie. See you in a week or two. Going to Trieste tomorrow and from there to Prague, but the Friday after that I’ll be back here.”

“Ciao, buddy! Smooth riding and no stones on the road.”

Isaac already knew that Bikie’s shift in the bar was due to end shortly. He had read a lot about this guy and didn’t want trouble, so he addressed him in a familiar tone.

“Bikie the Biker... that does sound funny.”

Bikie swung around and looked Isaac up and down. “What issue do you have with your face?” he said menacingly. And, after a pause, added, “We can fix that right now. Now what were you saying?”

He leaned down bringing his ear close to Isaac’s face. His stubble almost touched Isaac’s nose, the reek of alcohol was abominable. Isaac recoiled, realizing he had clearly overdone it with a sassy approach. Getting a punch in the face wasn’t quite what he was looking for.

“No, chill dude, it was just a bad joke.”

“A joke? There’s a trauma wing for jokers in the hospital.”

“Sorry. Why don’t we just forget about it, and I’ll buy you a beer?”

“Not one of those queers are you?”

“Hey-hey, don’t you forget about that trauma unit for jokers.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Bikie guffawed. “Attaboy, I like you. Just don’t forget that the last guy who joked with me went broke with his dentist’s bill. Okay, let’s have a beer, as long as you are paying.”

Isaac and Bikie walked into the bar. Everyone here knew Bikie and many of the customers came over to hug him and slap him on the shoulder.

The shaggy gaunt barman chuckled behind the counter.

“Back to work? Who’s this with you?”

“My beer. A special import, from the land of fools,” Bikie replied.

“Seriously?” Isaac grinned.

“Since you want something from me, you’ll have to put up with it,” Bikie snapped and plumped down on a chair. Compared with Bikie’s beefy frame, Isaac looked really small.

Not off to a great start, Isaac gritted his teeth, said nothing and sat down beside Bikie. No one had promised this was going to be easy, but Isaac’s enthusiasm for the idea of telling Bikie about his plan kept melting away. The biker seemed too drunk and offensive to deal with. It took all Isaac had not to just slip away.

Seeing Isaac’s sour face, Bikie slapped him on the shoulder and added good-naturedly.

“Okay, won’t do it again. You started it, so I got wound up and enjoyed it. I like taking the piss out of smart-asses and drunken superheroes. When all’s said and done, everyone’s afraid of fucking with me anyway. In real life I’m the kindest and sweetest bouncer in this hemisphere,” said Bikie, pointing to the right side of his head and cracking up again. “I’ve never given

anyone a genuine mauling, though. By the way, this is my private table,” he added, casting a proud glance at his companion.

The private table was small, but right in the very center. There was a large brass plaque embossed with “Elvis and Steve Tyler can sit here without Bikie’s permission.”

Elvis again. “Well now,” thought Isaac. “Sometimes you don’t remember a word or a name for years, and suddenly it invades your daily life like a virus.”

“I see you’re well-respected here.”

“You bet. I can do more than just make good use of my hands if need be. I once crashed the bar’s site for seating a pair of freakin’ tourist suits at this table.” Bikie checked himself for a moment and gave Isaac a cunning glance. I’ll listen carefully to what you have to say, just as soon as you bring that beer you promised, fella.”

“I brought a bottle of twenty-five-year-old whisky instead of the beer. I hope you don’t mind that? Your friend...” – Isaac nodded in the direction of the other barman – “won’t object because I brought my own liquor?”

“What the fuck’s going on here?” Bikie exclaimed. “I’ll be damned! Now you’re talking! How could I mind. Ain’t you from the Society for Encouragement of Good Old Rock’n’Rollers?”

“Almost,” Isaac replied, pouring the whiskey into glasses. “I used to work as a barman too. I quit the job last week. They gave me this in lieu of severance pay.”

Closing his eyes, Bikie breathed in the aroma of the whisky and smiled contentedly.

“I’m Isaac Leroy, but you can call me Isaac.”

“I’m Bikie. Well, you know that already.”

They drank to getting to know each other. Isaac told Bikie a bit about his bar and Bikie told Isaac about his, as well as about his Harley, boasting about it and gradually getting more and more

drunk. Over the third glass of whisky Bikie began a serious monologue.

“Dude, have you seen the latest Ducati? And the Honda? And the Harley? They’re all almost identical now! Sure, they look real heavy, but they’re all the same shit. The Goddamn creeps are repressing our freedom of choice! Where is my choice? I want to make the fuckin’ choice myself! I don’t want to mount a Ducati by mistake when I’m wasted! And the music? All the lousy DJs play the same thing! I’d kill them all. How could they possibly fuck up their life so badly?”

Bikie spent about ten minutes cursing the Agency and its standardized technologies. What outraged him most of all was the almost complete loss of variety, even for the most primitive things, there was no choice at all.

“Those who have downloaded their OE have it even worse. God forbid I should ever turn into a Veggie,” said Isaac.

“Well, even when they were alive the Veggies were all but stupid fucks,” Bikie snorted.

“No, you’re wrong there. My friend sold his creativity for love.”

“That’s like cutting your dick off for love ‘cause it didn’t get hard at the right time.”

Isaac tried to explain to Bikie about Pascal, but Bikie said he didn’t watch TV serials, read political newspapers, and didn’t listen to stories about stupid fucks.

“Listen to this then, will you! I almost became one of them, I just happened to be lucky, or unlucky, I don’t know.”

Isaac began to tell Bikie his story.

Bikie tried to listen carefully, but his head was gradually drooping and he was dozing off. When Isaac finished his story, Bikie raised his eyes, looked at him and said slowly.

“I propose a toast to... Elvis! For making an effort! To his resistance!”



Isaac had been expecting a toast to Vicky's health, to his own story, to anything at all, but no way for the crazy hobo.

Spotting Isaac's expression, Bikie cleared his throat and added:

"For rebellion and to Elvis! And we'll drink to you too now, boy."

"To Elvis," said Isaac, raising his glass.

"I vowed long ago to destroy this evil, and you came in very handy. To have enough balls for fighting these days you have to be mad as a hatter or really, truly tough. As for me, I'm ready to fight and I will!"

And Bikie wacked the table so hard, his glass hopped up and broke.

The *Collective Mind* Agency reacted fairly calmly to the protest demonstrations, which in time petered out almost completely. Violations of the law were a matter for the police and the Agency tried to keep out of things and not participate in any open conflicts. People who had been cured of fatal illnesses came out voluntarily in support of *Collective Mind*: they and their relatives were the Agency's most aggressive supporters, often showing up at meetings of protesters with poster saying: "You are advocating our death".

The relatively harmless attack carried out by Mr. Elvis-Henri was stridently branded an "act of terrorism" by the press, which discussed it for a whole week. The flames of interest were fanned by the site of the crime – calm, respectable Monaco, which in former times had hardly ever figured in the crime reports.

When the Department of Orange Energy of the Paris police received the summary investigation report of the Monaco incident, basically no one took much interest in it. Only

Commissioner Pellegrini, as the head of department, was obliged to familiarize himself with the document, and he started leafing through the file. A standard case of an attack carried out by a solitary fanatic. Boring.

Pellegrini's father was Neapolitan; his mother was a Frenchwoman from Bordeaux. He was born and grew up in Paris, but he considered himself an Italian who had inherited the character traits of both nations. When necessary, his rapid, impulsive, Italian-style gestures coexisted quite comfortably with his subtle French tact.

Pellegrini's face seemed rough-hewn out of heavy granite, with powerful cheekbones and a large forehead. The broad stripes of the bags under his small, brown eyes lent his face a masculine brutality and intense astuteness. The deep folds on his slightly sunken cheeks and around his mouth created the impression that his mind was constantly engaged in strenuous thought. He was tall and stately, and his bearing made it clear that he was an ex-army man. Pellegrini had served in Africa for a long time before coming to work in the Drug Control Department of the police.

He worked very efficiently and could have become the department chief, but it didn't happen.

But despite everything, he did eventually rise to become the head of the new, prestigious Department of OE. Now everything was sure to change. Pellegrini thought he could really spread his wings and show everyone what he could do... How very wrong he was.

Six months later his friend Gautier downloaded his creativity out of patriotic considerations. He tried to persuade Pellegrini to go along with him and other officers. He pictured to him how they would have a wonderful life by the sea, somewhere in Bordeaux, while their creativity would continue working for the good of their homeland and the world. Pellegrini refused: he had realized his dream at least in a new department with such a

promising future, and he wasn't willing to abandon with his new position.

Initially, Pellegrini's work had been interesting and new technologies made catching criminals easy. But pretty soon the Agency grew so powerful that Pellegrini's job became pure routine. And not only his job, but practically all police work.

Pellegrini read the report of the attack without much interest, thinking that it would be good to feel the tenderness of the southern sun right now. He decided to take a trip to the scene of the "notorious terrorist attack" while the tracks were still fresh, while there was still something to delve into and someone to talk to. He phoned the Monaco branch of the Agency and asked them not to touch anything, explaining that he was on his way to conduct a supplementary investigation.

Isaac woke up close to midday. Despite his thirst and the hangover pounding at his temples like a sledgehammer, he got up quickly, for he was too hyped up to keep still. He downed two glasses of water and felt better. The adrenalin from yesterday's successful meeting flowed back into his bloodstream again, arousing a pleasant excitement. Isaac prowled round the apartment like a lion in a cage and couldn't really get to do anything.

Bikie didn't show up until one.

"What a dump," he grunted instead of saying hello.

"What?" asked Isaac, puzzled.

"I said, you live in a real dump." He paused for a moment and added: "Seriously, Isaac, it's like I just walked into my own place."

Isaac rewarded his irony with a wry grin.

They walked over to the computer, which was already switched on. Isaac opened a file and showed Bikie the database. Bikie whistled.

“Oh, wow! Data bases are my soft spot, my true love,” he said with a hint of smugness. I see a data base, get inside, find the weak spots and crack it.”

Bikie plumped down on the chair in front of the computer and ran rapidly through the list.

“Ah,” he said disappointedly. “Nothing needs cracking here.”

Isaac took the mouse from Bikie, moved it to find the cursor and explained that the data base was useful for finding accomplices. It was where he had found Bikie and he had seen other people in it who thought like him. Isaac explained about Wolanski and the other candidates. He felt too embarrassed to mention the girl though.

Before Bikie had even heard him out, he was hammering on the keyboard and digging through the social networks.

“Look at this dude Charles. A bit older than us, from a family with deep pockets. Moves in the highest circles, no problems with money. Yes, I remember, I remember,” he said, once again interrupting Isaac, who was trying to say something. “You’ve already set your sights on this what’s his name – Wolanski. But check it out – this guy’s got a Harley. He’s one of us, and there’s an excuse for getting to know him.”

“Just a rich showoff, I reckon,” Isaac objected. “Bet you, he only bought a Harley because he read somewhere how cool it is to have one.”

“What are you saying, bro, where do you think they write that it’s cool to have a Harley? The Ducati Sport, now, that’s never been like a Harley, and it shouldn’t look like one, and that’s why...”

“Okay, Bikie! But how are you planning to hob-nob with someone from his circle? ‘Hello, I’m a barman with a Harley, what year’s your machine? Are you against *Collective Mind*? Me too!’ I suggest that if it’s a no go with Wolanski, then we can contact this guy too.”

“Isaac, if you’ve already decided everything, then say so.” Bikie snapped, “I figure a normal guy will make normal conversation, with money or without. Although, what the heck you consider normal these days, if ridding yourself of your soul has become the norm. Eh? Especially if you don’t happen to have any better way of doing as well as this guy with the Harley.” Bikie was so sure that Link’s invention would ruin the world that it charged Isaac with confidence. Bikie regarded financial inequality and disparity of opportunities as the main reasons why it had become popular to be a donor. That way everyone got a chance, whether they were from Europe, Asia or Africa. The important thing was how well your head worked. While before, being from Fiji one could expect only the finger.

The first massive wave of creativity downloading came about in countries with negligible opportunities for fighting your way up without heavy connections, for earning enough for your own house, or for getting rich. A large flow of elderly but intelligent people followed from countries with a poorly developed social sphere, in Latin America and Asia.

In the prosperous countries, the young took up downloading. In Hong Kong, Greece, Italy and France, graduates who could not find a good job easily surrendered to it. Yesterday’s students quickly discovered how difficult it was to support themselves independently, let alone to earn enough for a decent house, start a family and live a stable life, no matter what high-level specialists they were. Most of the big-time positions

were taken, and some had disappeared altogether thanks to the *Einsteiner*-generated technologies. Sure, you could scrape by on social support payments, but the money received for OE offered a real opportunity of never having to worry about anything again. That was what they had studied and developed their brains for, you could say. In America, masses of prisoners volunteered to sell their creativity. And it went on and on. After three years it was already pointless to single out specific groups. Everybody everywhere was downloading.

*Collective Mind* successfully campaigned for the abolition of capital punishment. Rather, an alternative was offered – the downloading of one’s energy instead of electrocution or gassing: “Let every person serve the society.” It was a shame to waste the resource, if someone got executed his energy would be lost forever. *Collective Mind* was keenly interested in increasing the *Einsteiner* volume, and didn’t want a drop of Orange Energy to be wasted. It equipped prisons with download technology, and continuously increased the capacity of the network. Prisoners who downloaded their OE were offered significantly more comfortable conditions.

A lavish Hollywood movie was made. About a talented young guy, a 3D architect who through a series of failures takes the wrong path in life. His actions become more and more contemptible and mean, and he loses his job. Computer hacking and doing drugs eventually lead him to homicide. The car he is driving while high on cocaine hurtles off the road and two passengers are killed. Unintentional, but still a homicide. He sunk lower and lower and eventually became a killer. The hero became an antihero. The viewers eventually lost sympathy for him. But in the second half of the film, his profound repentance and his study of the strong and weak sides of prison life lead him to voluntarily donate his energy, in order to improve the lives of prisoners. His OE rating was huge – a valuable contribution to society.

We do not know what this man's real contribution to the innovations was. But it all looked really great, the movie won an Oscar, and the criminal was even pardoned, although he voluntarily remained in the boarding house since he didn't want to live anywhere else.

Hollywood is an ideal propaganda mechanism, it treats the public like a lover, who twists a man round her little finger and gets everything she wants out of him by putting him through incredibly profound emotions. The viewers cry and laugh, they live other people's lives, and then they are ready to accept Hollywood's ideas and messages in real life.

Isaac and Bikie's chosen land of residence also had a chance to experience this miraculous quality of Hollywood. In 1956 the wedding of the famous American film star Grace Kelly and the Prince of Monaco brought floods of tourists from all over the world to the Principality instantly making it a beneficiary of the world's "Dream Factory".

Whether a beautiful life or drama, cops who are corrupt or honest, the mafia or patriotism, Hollywood has always steered people's hearts and minds any way it liked, and the movie "Energy of Prison" helped many skeptics change their mind about *Collective Mind* and increased the flow of people wishing to download their creativity.

Of course, there were still exceptions. There were not very many donors among Russian Orthodox Christians and Israelis. Israel and Silicon Valley rapidly lost their positions on the high-tech market, surrendering leadership to *Collective Mind*.

The opposition to *Collective Mind* was gradually disappearing. The opponents of downloading and pooling creativity did not have serious arguments in any case.

It took a long time for the official Church to come up with a specific position; by and large it remained neutral. It was difficult

to go against the fact that the world was being purged of a great number of sins.

“You know what?” Bikie said eventually. “Why don’t I phone this Charles anyway? The guy with the Harley. Maybe he’ll be OK. We won’t lose anything, and I promise to be very careful. And if it’s a flop – we’ll go to Wolanski.”

For the sake of an amicable, collaborative relationship Isaac did not argue.

Bikie dialed the number and introduced himself. He said he was from a local club and would like to meet Charles to talk about the rare Harley model that Charles owned and take a few photos for the club’s site. Everything went smoothly and they agreed on seven o’clock that evening. Bikie made thorough preparations. He found a pair of old, tattered jeans, a black t-shirt with the sleeves crudely torn off and a biker jacket. He put on a bandana with a red Harley Davidson logo and a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses. He looked really menacing and Isaac liked it. For this special occasion Bikie washed his bike and pulled out a pretty good Leica camera from somewhere.

“You know what I think, why don’t you skip the meeting and go straight to Hollywood? They’ll put you in the movies without any screen-tests. Did you know that Harrison Ford worked as a carpenter up until he was spotted by George Lucas? When you end up meeting Lucas or Tarantino, at least text me to say that Bikie won’t be back.”

Bikie smiled his huge, broad smile and winked. He was happy with the way he looked too. He had taken his time, dressing, with loving care. He didn’t get to go into town dolled up like this very often.

“Admit it, Bikie, you chose this candidate especially so you could have a costume party.”



“You’re the Carnival! The time will come when I’ll always be dressed like this. On a Harley, with a busty blonde on back. You’ll see.”

“Land this guy for us first. And then I promise you two busty blondes.”

“Everything will be okay. Don’t shit yourself!”

Hours later Bikie returned to the apartment quite despondent.

“First of all, that asshole was almost an hour late,” he told Isaac disappointedly. “Then he spent a solid hour telling me how fucking cool he was. He didn’t let me get a word in, peacocking his plumage like he was trying to impress some bimbo. I soon realized he was a trashy banker after all; the speedometer on his super-rare Harley didn’t even have a thousand kilometers on it. A beautiful thing but just gathering dust. Although better to gather dust than carry a dumb fuck like that. I tried about ten times to start a conversation about OE and *Einsteiner*, but the dick kept harping on about how bored he is and what he does to avoid getting rusty: Saint Barth, the Maldives, Bora-Bora, that sort of crap. He told me about all his chicks and how crazy they all about him. Maybe there’s some kind of error in your data base? Or is all his creativity wasted on his stupid stories? I’ve never seen such a clown before.”

“Don’t let it bother you, Bikie, you looked like a million dollars, so he spread his plumage to impress you.”

Bikie brightened up a bit.

“No shit, Isaac, you’re one of the few normal guys I’ve met just recently. They’ve all gone cuckoo. Rushing about, no clue what they want in life. No goals, no ideals. Cardboard people. Let’s do some booze today, what you say? Got any more whisky?”

“No whisky, but there’s some awesome Seychelles rum.”

“Never heard of that kind, but rum’s even better.” “At this pace I will quickly become an alcoholic!”

"In vino veritas, my friend. This is my way of protesting. I'd rather drink my creativity away than get downloaded. After I fought my drug-addiction, booze for many years has been my only ally and the way to forget that I one day was supposed to be a great programmer. By the way, if you don't feel like drinking, that's fine, I'm not going to force you."

“Well, in this aspect I cannot but drink!” Isaac, who decided to befriend Bikie, found it wise to keep him company. “Tomorrow we’ll get round to this Wolanski of yours. And I promise to take it completely seriously. We can’t just go visiting anyone and drawing them into our plans. That way we could come unstuck. We don’t need anyone else. A bit of money won’t hurt, but we’ll somehow manage the rest...”

That night, drinking and reasoning, Isaac suddenly realized that it was not just the pure idea that was guiding him, but anger and revanchism for not being able to find his place in this society. His failures, hard times with Vicky, his poverty. Looking at rageful Bikie he for a second saw himself, his feeling in the day of the attack. The failure with Charles has got his companion seriously wound up – Bikie was so full of hate towards *Einsteiner* that he even started to deny its undoubtful achievements. Isaac suddenly felt scared to have this weird outcast as his only ally, whose aggression made him actually defend the Agency, his enemy. As he was getting drunk his thoughts started to scatter. Finally, having decided this all to be but a moment of weakness, he chased the unbidden doubts away.

“Our strong point is that they don't even suspect that we are fighting against them. We are the secret underground. They aren't worried, thinking that everything has always been under control. Believe me, if this ever occurred to them, even a brief analysis of our search in the net would be enough to throw both of us to jail and download!”

Isaac didn't want to get back behind bars. The first trial was more than enough, and as he remembered the tight handcuffs on his own hands, he came to the conclusion that indeed it was their chance that the enemy didn't know about their existence.

“Good morning, could I see Peter Wolanski, please?”

The young guy who had opened the door in the gate looked at Isaac closely and enquired politely:

“Who’s asking for him... and on what business?”

“My name is Isaac Leroy and I’m here on a personal matter.”

The young guy looked Isaac up and down again, cast a glance at his scooter and opened the door wider.

“We-ell, all ri-ight,” he said uncertainly, stretching out the words. “Come in,” he added.

He moved aside to let Isaac through.

The house itself was not large, and set on a wide, flat plot of ground – a rarity in the Cap d’Ail district. Six massive, dark-red columns, two of which ran down into a beautiful, sky-blue swimming pool. Windows down to the floor, lots of glass, lots of clear light and fresh air. The obligatory pampered palms trees on the grounds and lots of olive trees. A magnificent view of the sea. If someone lived in a villa like this, their life had come together very nicely. Through the glass walls Isaac saw a collection of modern art, both paintings and sculptures. He didn’t know much about artwork, but even he recognized one of the works as an Andy Warhol print.

“He’s sitting pretty,” thought Isaac. “It’s a shame my parents weren’t rich. But never mind, I’ll make it anyway.”

“Sit here,” the young guy told Isaac, pointing to a glass table surrounded by wicker furniture. “Well, I’m listening; tell what this personal matter you have for me is. I’m Peter Wolanski.”

Of course, Isaac had realized immediately that it was Peter himself who opened the gate. Although he hadn’t found a photo on the internet, the young guy was the right age, plus he had an

accent. From the dossier Isaac remembered that Peter had no brothers or sisters, and this guy had studied him too closely to be simply an acquaintance or friend of the villa's owner. Isaac had been right to pin on his scientific society badge from university. Peter was clearly familiar with the badge and it had a favorable effect.

“So what exactly brings you to see me?”

“I just wanted to meet you. And maybe make friends. We went to the same university, although at different time. And we're members of the same scientific society. I'm an inventor, by the way.”

“You are? And what have you invented? And what's the point of us becoming friends?”

“I've developed a couple of gadgets. Right now I'm planning to sell one of them.”

“Not to me, I hope?” Wolanski enquired.

“Of course not,” Isaac smiled. “Although you're capable of buying, I'm not here to sell you anything...”

“Well, that's splendid,” Peter put in.

“The reason for my coming Peter...May I call you Peter?” Peter nodded.

“Is to invite you to join a recently formed, let's say... scientific society.”

“A scientific society? Interesting especially in times like these. What society is that?”

“Obviously you're not a Happy,” said Isaac, testing the waters. “They never show so much curiosity.”

“Of course I'm not a Happy. I don't have much faith in that piece of wishful thinking. And apart from that, it was a condition of my father's will that no one in the Wolanski family should become a downloader. Not to mention that it's also the fundamental condition of my inheritance,” Peter smiled ironically.

“I’m no fan of *Einsteiner* and the Agency either, although my rating is as much as 28015.”

“How much?” Peter asked in amazement. In fact Isaac’s rating was more than twice as high, but he had named the specific figure that was Peter’s level.

“Twenty-eight thousand and fifteen,” Isaac rapped out, articulating each figure distinctly.

“Incredible... How did you find out my rating?”

“Ah, this guy’s no fool,” Isaac thought to himself. “No wonder he’s a leader. No smokescreen for long with someone like this, better to try speaking more openly, or else he would sense a lie or a trick, wouldn’t believe and might even hand you over to the police.”

“Information came my way...” Isaac paused significantly, “from a very reliable source.”

“What information? How?”

Isaac wondered whether to tell him or not. There was a pause.

“Okay, all right. You don’t have to tell me. For now. Perhaps I don’t want to know anything about it.” Peter thought for a moment and added: “But since you’re here on a personal matter, and this is the first time I’ve seen you, I don’t promise to answer questions either.”

This made Isaac feel a little uneasy, his thoughts scattering.

“I’ve read your student blog. I must say, you’re not very fond of *Einsteiner*. And I’m planning to go and download, so I decided to get some advice from people who are well up on this,” Isaac lied.

“Rubbish! For that you can log into the internet without ever leaving home. Good bye.”

“Wait! I’ve invented this,” said Isaac, changing the subject and putting the V-Rain on the table. “Turn on the lawn sprinkler and you’ll see how it works.”

“We’ll get soaked.”

“I don’t think so,” Isaac responded with a smile.

Peter took a remote control out of his pocket and turned on the sprinkler. Isaac neatly pressed the “on” button, and not a single drop fell on them or the table between them.

“Some gadget! That’s really cool.” Peter was impressed.

“The range of action without increasing the size of the device is four meters, from four to five meters away ten per cent of the drops get through.”

“Yes, any restaurant would pay a heap of money for that gismo, it would let them keep the same number of tables out during a rainy spell.”

Now it was Isaac’s turn to sit there open-mouthed. Well done, Peter. Until this moment it hadn’t even occurred to Isaac to sell the device to restaurants.

“You’re right. You and I have just demonstrated the possibility of collective intellect without any downloading of energy.”

“Isaac, do you want to hear me say that I don’t like the Agency? Well, I don’t. What else?”

“No, Peter, I want to know just how much you dislike it.”

“I dislike it very much. Why?”

“And I hate it fiercely. And that is the purpose of my visit.”

“I don’t feel fierce hatred, but I sense that this whole business will end badly.”

“Perhaps very badly indeed. It’s an epidemic. And epidemics have to be...”

“Halted?” asked Peter, again catching Isaac’s thought in mid-phrase.

“Yes, and that’s the goal of our scientific society. To find the one who will do it.”

Isaac liked Peter. What a pleasure it really was to talk to an intelligent individual. Memories of Pascal came flooding back.

“Don’t be afraid, tell me.” – Peter’s hint brought Isaac back to reality.

“You remind me of a friend of mine. He understood everything before I finished saying it too.”

“Did he die?”

“To some extent. He’s a brainless Veggie now.”

“Well, it happens. What I dislike about this business is the general degeneration. And it’s very strange that *Collective Mind* doesn’t publish statistics on the children born to Veggies. They publish all sorts of things, but they don’t disclose that information. I rummaged in the Internet recently and discovered that the Veggies’ kids are all Veggies too. They’re born straight away without any orange energy. *Collective Mind* is searching for the reason, for a cure. Now that it’s surfaced, they don’t try to conceal the fact any more. They say this is a new problem, but sooner or later they’ll fix it.”

“Yes, I read that too. Just how they intend to fix it isn’t clear. An energy transplant? They have the technology but there’s a lot they don’t know about it. I don’t think they’ll be able to develop it further in the near future without Link.”

“They’re hoping it’s a developmental thing and the energy will come. And some children, just a few, are born with some creativity. After all, the oldest child born to two Happies is still only five. Anyway, have I answered your question? Drop this circus act and tell me what you came for, or is the answer already enough for you?”

“They really do not understand all about the system, because they haven’t downloaded Professor Link. This is something I know for sure,” Isaac added emphatically.

“You suppose so?”

“I know so.”

“Wow! How could you know that?” Wolansky’s intonation told him he can stop worrying to be kicked out without finishing.



Isaac couldn't tell Peter about Link yet, that he had seen the precise statistics on newborn children. Yes, some children did have creativity, which was true. Only no one had done a DNA analysis. It wasn't certain that mum and dad were both Veggies. After all, there were enough cuckolds around and maybe *Collective Mind* had implanted embryos from normal people in Veggie women, who could tell? The important thing was that the conversation with Peter Wolanski was encouraging and he felt he could actually start talking.

“Put it this way, now I'm prepared to ask... not just to ask my question, but to explain my idea...”

Peter leaned forward, clearly eager to know.

“I want to find Professor Link. To know more about this technology. Then to demolish the system. Destroy it physically or ideologically. Or invent some kind of virus. I want to stop *Collective Mind* and the wholesale stupefaction.”

“And how do you intend to do it? Is this a plan or just a naked idea?”

“An idea Peter, as yet it's only an idea. No plan. But you have to fight fire with fire. I want to oppose collective intellect with collective intellect. But living one. I'm putting together a team and looking for fellow thinkers to set the human race back on its previous path. That's my scientific society.”

“And you came to me with this?”

Peter was clearly astounded at the scale of the concept. He could see that Isaac wasn't joking and he wasn't insane. Which meant he was absolute serious. Seeing Peter's response, Isaac regretted that the idea of the scientific society had occurred to him too late. If it had come sooner, perhaps he could have reached an arrangement with Michelle Blanche and Abdul.

“You're crazy because it's impossible. You're a genius, if you pull it off,” Wolanski declared.

“Let’s just say my rating is 57,555, and I’m by no means the biggest brain box. There are heavier people than that. Did you hear about the terrorist attack here in Monaco? I’m the fifth hostage that Elvis took, but they didn’t write anything about me. The police took me for an accomplice at first, but when they figured out what I was, they let me go. The moment had passed, the journalists had lost interest, so I was left in the shade, I learned something from that story, literally and metaphorically. First, I’ll never set foot in that place again, secondly I decided to do everything I could to find Professor Link, and thirdly, I ended up with the memory of the branch’s central computer, and there was some intriguing stuff in it. Your rating, for instance and not just yours, but hundreds of people’s: brief CVs and all sorts of information that basically make it possible to find others who think like me. The Agency is powerful, but don’t forget that the technology was invented by one man. Who, by the way, has not become a Veggie.”

“Now I get it. I must say you intrigued me when you mentioned my rating. That really got me interested.”

“And I’ve come to you for specific help.”

“What kind?”

“I need money. I have no resources to implement my plan. I’ve left my job and the bank is about to foreclose on my apartment. From the list of people that came my way, you’re not the only one with money, but you’re one of those who have criticized the system openly. Some of the rich people have already moved to somewhere else, some don’t look trustworthy, some have already gone bust. Some are religious or too law-abiding. Basically, there aren’t all that many options but there are some. You and I are the same age, that’s already a plus. Apart from the money, knowledge is important. You’re a chemist and who knows, we might have to blow something up or dissolve

something. I don't have a clue how the technology works. It's the closest kept secret in the world. But Link is the one who does."

"Mmm, this is very sudden. And you only want money?" Peter's voice sounded a bit disappointed. "And has anybody else agreed to help you?"

"Yes, but we'd better consider that I'm alone."

"Well then, all right. That's even better."

"And I'll give you back the money when I sell my invention."

Peter leaned back pensively in his chair.

"I'm no supporter of the system, but I'd never thought seriously about wrecking it. I have to think about it."

After that Isaac and Peter made some small talk about various things for just a bit longer. For the last fifteen minutes they simply drank coffee. Peter tried to be hospitable. Isaac was beginning to like the way his life had turned more and more. Only a week ago he had to make do with the tipsy customers of the America, and his flights of fantasy were limited to how to find money for Vicky. But now he had an interesting, boorishly brutal partner in Bikie, and he found talking to Peter really exciting and – most important of all – he now had a big goal.

Both Isaac and Peter regarded this conversation as important. Each of them hedged his bets so that later, if anything happened, he could tell the police that the idea of destruction had only been mentioned as a light-hearted fantasy from the same category as "let's fly to the moon" or "let's move Mont Blanc". A trifling conversation, not even the slightest intention of really doing anything.

As the sun started to set, the two young men exchanged phone numbers, wished each other good luck, and Isaac left.

As they parted, they agreed that in any case Peter would keep quiet about the visit. And if he decided to reject the offer, he

would simply call and say he wasn't going to invest in Isaac's invention.

Peter called on the third day in the afternoon and asked to come for dinner that evening. He said he had good news.

Even though the meeting with Peter left a good impression and the candidate inspired trust, Isaac was still a bit nervous. On the way there he kept glancing around all the time. Bikie, who was entrusted with countering any negative consequences of the meeting, tried everything he could to calm him down and cheer him up a bit.

Bikie approached the question of security very systematically and professionally. He tapped Peter's phone, hacked into his mail account and even undertook to watch the house in person. If Peter had contacted the police or lawyers, or if he had dialed a suspicious number, the two of them would have known about it.

Isaac assumed that Peter wasn't exactly in the team already, but he obviously wasn't refusing. So the news wasn't excellent, but it wasn't bad. Any help would be appreciated, and it could do no harm. Bikie, carefree as ever, suggested taking it easy and being cool.

Isaac and Bikie decided to go visit Peter together. Peter did not call a meeting in order to refuse to collaborate. Bikie remarked with a solemn face that Peter hadn't called anyone at all – for certain. All he'd done was call twice to order a pizza. And Peter didn't need to call anyone to take a decision. For that he had his own head on his shoulders, his own brains and his intact OE.

At seven in the evening they were at Wolanski's house. Peter opened the door in the gate himself, greeted Isaac and offered Bikie his hand.

“Peter.”

“Bikie.”

“Come in.”

Large, comfortable sofas were laid out on the lawn, a barbecue was smoking, and several bottles of cold beer were glinting in the sun.

“I’ve arranged a little picnic. I invited you and one friend of mine.”

Isaac and Bikie exchanged glances of alarm.

“Don’t worry, it’s someone reliable.”

“I hope you haven’t told him too much?”

“No, I simply invited her to dinner in a pleasant company.”

Now it was clear that Bikie’s surveillance had failed – he’d missed something. He had either tapped the wrong line, or did not have all of the numbers. Bikie was embarrassed at having screwed up, and he kept giving Isaac very guilty glances. He clearly hadn’t been expecting that Peter could actually talk to anyone without him knowing, and his self-confidence evaporated. Bikie had lost sight of something.

A car honked at the gates. Peter returned with a girl about twenty years old.

“I’m Sandrine.”

“Isaac.”

“Bikie.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

Isaac relaxed. He thought it funny to see Bikie looking like a spy caught red-handed.

“I’m not certain, but to judge from your name, you won’t refuse this.” Peter was holding a pack of dark Guinness.

“Thanks,” Bikie mumbled.

“Help yourself. Sandrine is my very close friend, my girlfriend and, I hope, my fiancée.”

Sandrine smiled and laid her head on Peter’s shoulder.

“We’re going away on a trip for a couple of months. First to Stockholm, Copenhagen and the Baltic, possibly to St. Petersburg and Moscow, and then we’ll decide where else. I haven’t done

any traveling for a long time, so I'll enjoy the ride. They say the summer in those parts is very pleasant, not as hot as here and I think I'll get by without the sea for a while. I want to take a look at Germany, my grandfather's home country. As well as Poland. They say Polish girls are quite something."

The final remark earned him a light cuff to the back of the head from Sandrine.

"Anything's possible," he said with a smile, for which Sandrine pinched him too, quite painfully.

"Sandrine! Stop it!"

"What do you think is possible? I'll show you Polish girls!" she barked.

Bikie had already recovered from his error and was about to joke on the subject of Polish girls and Russian lovelies, but after glancing at Isaac, he didn't.

Wolanski took his friends around the grounds and gave them a tour of the house.

"This is a safe place, but I'm going away for a long time, you never know if something might break down or someone might creep in. In short, would you mind living here and taking care of the house while I'm away? I could even pay you for service," he added with a smile. "A little bit."

Well, how about that! The very idea that he could live in a swanky villa like this for a while took Isaac's breath away.

Bikie instantly forgot about the affront he had suffered and started gazing around intently.

"I'm sorry, but I have no secrets from Sandrine," Wolanski went on. "The two of us have decided to support you, but we won't get involved. In a few weeks I will acquire full control over my father's legacy. Right now I live in a good house, I can afford to pay almost any expenses, but I don't have control over his fortune. I have free access to a large amount of money, which I can spend as I wish. So I don't want to put that at risk."

“And so, I’m sorry guys, the house is at your disposal, I can even write you a check for a couple of thousand a month, you have the internet here, a television, a small chemistry lab in the basement if you need it. As for financing and advice, sorry, you have to handle that yourselves.”

Peter felt awkward for steering clear of the risks, and his voice had a guilty ring to it.

“You’re here as security guards and sort of household help. I don’t need to know what you are up to while I’m away. So let’s agree that if I don’t ask, you avoid discussing your business in my presence. I ask you not to involve any one else until you have at least a provisional plan. Naturally, I have cameras here so if I see visitors, I’ll ask you to move out,” Peter added. “And you must not use the main bedroom. Better not even to go in there. And finally, good luck! And let’s drink to that!”

For the rest of the evening the group ate meat, drank wine and beer, discussed music and never mentioned business again.

Isaac and Biekie were totally excited, and each of them chose a nice room on the guest floor. If you didn’t count the small salary that Peter had set for them, he hadn’t done anything to solve their cash problems. But on the other hand, no one knew if they would need more money or this would be enough. At least now they had food and a roof over their heads. And quite a roof it was!



Isaac and Bikie decided not to waste time, and move to Peter's place as soon as possible, even before he left. In comparison with Wolanski's villa, Isaac's old apartment looked like a dismal slum.

Isaac gathered up his things, looked round his old room and thought that he would never come back here. He did not feel any regret.

"How weird," thought Isaac, "I have lived here for five years, but I don't have any particularly pleasant memories associated with this dump." Isaac had even tried not to bring girls back here, he felt ashamed, it was better to go to their hotel. "But even so I feel sad at the thought that I won't be back here anymore. It's like I'm cutting off a big slice of my past, finally slicing off my youth and my student years." Vicky wouldn't come back here again either.

Isaac walked into his sister's tiny little room. Her things had been tidied away a long time ago as if she had known. Clothes tidily folded away in boxes, a little bit of makeup, some books and textbooks, even an old doll. All he had to do was collect the bed linen. "It might come in useful. We'll stay at Wolanski's place for a while, but afterwards I'll have to rent somewhere. Damn, I almost forgot about the kitchen and the bathroom. Glasses, plates, spoons, forks, knives... God, what a drag it is gathering it all up now and making sure nothing breaks."

Isaac lived an impoverished life, so he collected up absolutely everything he could. He only left the furniture since it wouldn't have survived another move anyway, and Wolanski would have flipped at the sight of this old lumber.

He hardly had any personal things at all: jeans and t-shirts, one suit from his graduation at the university and his computer which all fit into two boxes. He also has a vintage poster of

Einstein with his famous phrase: “Only those who attempt the absurd can achieve the impossible”.

That aphorism was very apropos and highly relevant. Isaac hated *Einsteiner*, but that antipathy had nothing with the famous scientist. Isaac took the poster down carefully, rolled it into a tube and took it with him. Bikie had a similar modest collection, apart from the fact that instead of a scooter, he had a genuine Harley and a guitar.

“That Bikie-guy is a true rock’n’roller,” thought Isaac.

Wolanski met them at the gate, and he had everything ready for dinner by the pool again: drinks, hors d’oeuvres, beer. Sandrine was relaxing on a soft, white sun-lounger. She waved them hello and carried on relishing the beautiful sunset over the sea while sipping on some kind of juice. Bikie and Isaac each took a beer.

“This is some life!” exclaimed Bikie, either making a toast or just thinking out loud.

They drained their bottles in one, picked up their things and headed for the main entrance. Peter gestured them to stop and asked to go in through the side door.

“Guys, we agreed that you live in the guest section of the house, didn’t we? No hard feelings?”

“Whatever you say, buddy, no problem,” Bikie said amicably. “Don’t think we’ll have any use for your oval fireplace and swimming pool anyway. We won’t have time for long soulful evenings and swimming... But the loungers... Can we bring chicks in?”

“Bikie!” exclaimed Sandrine, already there beside him. “Do not bring chicks into the house!”

“I like you, guys. I really hope I haven’t made a mistake by inviting you to take care of the house. You settle into your rooms and I’ll wait for you here.”

The first thing Bikie did in his room was take his guitar out of its case and check that nothing had happened to it in transit. The guitar was all right.

“What is this?” Isaac asked.

“A relic.”

“Meaning?”

“I bought it on the internet. Keith Richards himself played it. He even signed the body. I forked out a grand for it. A rare item.”

Isaac looked at the half-erased scribble.

“Are you sure this really is his autograph?”

“Positive, I saw a photo of him with this guitar.”

“I see. Ever heard the word ‘Photoshop’?”

“Screw you,” Bikie growled.

“Just kidding. Surely it’s original.”

“Sure as death. In our crowd they don’t pull tricks like that.”

He then hit the strings so hard that almost made Isaac jump.

Isaac went to his room, set his things by the bed, carefully hung up the poster and switched on his laptop.

“What’s the Wi-Fi password?” he shouted out of the window.

“Alchemist28015,” Peter answered.

“Your rating, right?” Isaac asked loudly.

“U-huh.”

“Mine’s bigger,” Bikie put in.

“And mine’s longer”, retorted Peter.

“You boys are gross,” Sandrine said and everyone laughed.

When Isaac and Bikie sat down by the pool, the sun was already setting and the sky was scintillating with the most brilliant tones in the orange spectrum.

“Look, orange energy’s draining away...” The setting had put Bikie in a poetical mood.

“The orange energy of the sky,” Isaac commented pensively.

“The creativity of the sky, expiring at dusk, reborn the next day with not a drop lost,” Bikie commented rather neatly.

“Beautifully said! You’re a genuine poet,” commented Sandrine. She and Peter were sitting beside the pool with their arms around each other and also looking out to sea.

“I write songs and play sometimes, but mostly rock’n’roll, not lyrical stuff. I even used to play in a rock band at college.”

“Peter, why don’t you write me poems? Long ones...”

Peter started fussing about and ventured over to the table to fill the glasses, ignoring Sandrine’s remark.

“Friends, I declare the official ceremony to celebrate your moving in open!”

Peter knew how to create a distance when he wanted, and also how to break it down quickly, and then you could feel like a really old friend of his.

“Bikie, by the way, why are you Bikie?” Peter asked.

Bikie didn’t like to answer the question about the origins of his nickname, because mostly it came from drunken customers at the bar. But he was still feeling pleased with Sandrine’s compliment and decided to answer.

“The usual story, that name has been with me ever since school. I’ve liked motorbikes all my life. On my way home from school, I always looked at the mopeds, and the choppers especially... I used to ask a lot of questions and even made friends with a few grownup biker dudes. I dreamt of getting my license as soon as possible and dreamed about having my own Harley. But let me tell you: there are different kinds of bikers. Let’s say, there’ve been some gangs whose business was drugs or guns. And then there are folks who are there for the love of art. I’m one of those. There used to be a whole set of us at university. It’s fallen apart now though. One became a Veggie, one grew up and lost

interest, one was killed in a crash... yeah... Well, as for my nickname, I got it when I was still a kid. My parents bought me a scooter, a red one, so I could easily be seen on the road. And I went straight into my dad's garage, where he kept his paint. That chrome stuff, you know. And black too. I glued on a Harley emblem (I had a real one that someone gave me) and drove off to my friends. Didn't even wait for the paint to dry, got my trousers all soiled. Everyone said, now you're a true biker, kiddo, only a little one. So we'll call you Bikie and it stuck. Bikie it was. Basically I got to enjoy being Bikie and then I shot up and no one dared hang any other nicknames on me, cuz I could hang a punch on them that they wouldn't forget in a hurry."

"When I was a little girl my mum used to call me Sasha," Sandrine's added in a gentle voice. "In the Russian style from some Russian book. And I just couldn't understand, I kept asking: 'Mum what is this nickname of mine?'"

Everyone laughed except Isaac who looked morose.

"Isaac, what's up?" Wolanski asked.

"His sister, stepsister, has Russian roots," Bikie explained. "She's in the hospital now."

Sandrine put her hand on Isaac's shoulder.

"Don't feel bad, Isaac. Everything will be all right. We have to give all these new inventions their due, medicine has become excellent, a real breakthrough. I've never seen such equipment before. For instance, I recently had an x-ray or a scan, I don't remember exactly what. I was roller-skating down a steep slope and I fell, so I went to check that everything was all right.

They put this kind of special elastic suit on me, and a helmet. I stood in the middle of the doctors' office like an astronaut. And the doctor had a full 3D image of all my internal organs on his monitor. Yuck! And then he pressed a button – click! – and his screen showed my skeleton."

”My father was amazed that no one was afraid of dentists anymore,” Peter added. “I told him: not only is no one afraid of them, no one ever goes back to them anymore. When they treat something or fix something, it’s done once and for all. But that didn’t stop dad from being opposed to *Einsteiner*. He lost a lot of money when they started their operations, but he wasn’t against them because of the money. He said we knew too little about all this.”

“Now they’ve completely beat AIDS,” Sandrine went on. She obviously wanted to improve Isaac’s mood. “Now they can cure cancer, asthma and all forms of allergies. They can cure everything, Isaac!”

“Everything, but not quite,” Bikie growled. “Some illnesses have been left out in the cold. Alzheimer’s for instance – no one knew what caused the degenerative changes, and no one knows now. And your OE computer hasn’t learned how to cure Parkinson’s either. They can only cure the diseases that scientists have already done lots of research on. That metalware itself can do nothing, they just put together old crossword puzzles. Hell, why am I telling you, as if you didn’t know all that stuff?”

Strangely enough, it was Bikie who lifted Isaac’s mood, not Sandrine or Peter. What Bikie said inspired Isaac, and he cheered up, recalling that his plan to find Professor Link had already started to become a reality. Everything was going really well. He had a team of fellow thinkers. Maybe it was not very big – only him and Bikie – but Peter had given them a place to live and a bit of money. It was a good thing that Peter was on the sidelines since he turned out to be a great guy. It wasn’t clear yet if they were going to do anything illegal or it might not work out at all, but so far it was working and he was glad. “And so tonight we relax, drink and socialize!” Isaac thought with a smile, reaching out for a bottle.

“Friends! Not another single sad thought today and not a single mention of *Collective Mind!* You and Sandrine are used to this place, but I want to luxuriate in paradise!” he cast a significant glance at Bikie and at his guitar. Bikie nodded eagerly.

“*This time shall we set out to sea, or sail off on a drinking spree?*” he sang, strumming the guitar, before reaching out for his bottle.

“Is that Byron?” Wolanski asked.

Isaac laughed so hard he almost choked.

Bikie gave Wolanski a severe look.

“That’s not By-ron, it’s By-kie. It’s my song, you dorks.”

“I wasn’t joking, I actually like it.”

“That’s the most terrible compliment I’ve ever heard. Dorks like my music.”

“I don’t get you. I can’t compliment you and I can’t criticize you either.”

“Why don’t you just listen without any comments?”

“Okay, okay. Can I at least light up my cigarette lighter and stand beside you for a while, like at a rock concert?”

Sandrine and Isaac laughed until they cried.

“You can lie down on the bottom of your pool with the lighter if you like. The longer the better.”

Bikie carried on strumming, sometimes the words were sad, sometimes really jaunty. There was a lot about women and drinking. Everybody enjoyed listening.

“*She gobbled her food by the ton, and her figure was soon lost and gone. She crammed down that swill and GMO slop, in massive amounts, unable to stop,*” he sang.

For some reason the women in his songs were beautiful, but very fat, a Botero of music.

*“Her backside was just like a nut!”* he continued, *“Tra-la-la. All fatty and rough to the touch, La-la-la. Her backside was just like a nut, Tra-la-la, that goes by the name avocado.”*

Boom! A loud final chord.

The evening was so heartwarming that Isaac felt amazing. Nice company, intelligent people, light-hearted mood, even more awesome than with his university friends. “Man does not live by Pascal alone,” Isaac noted, recalling his evenings with his friend. And he had never sat around with a guitar like this before. Every cloud has a silver lining. If he hadn’t had problems, he wouldn’t have met Bikie or Peter, and he wouldn’t be sitting here at this classy villa. He even saw the terrorist Elvis through different eyes now and regretted that he hadn’t talked to him while they were in the police cell. Where was he now? Probably already in jail. But never mind, if Isaac pulled this off, they would let Elvis go too. He would definitely prefer to sit in jail for any number of years, but not volunteer for downloading.

The next day he went to see Vicky in the hospital. She was in relatively good shape. The situation was stable, and Isaac had two months to find the money for the operation. Two months ought to be long enough for him. Fortunately he only had to pay for the operation itself and for bringing the specialists from Germany. His sister’s stay in the hospital was covered by social insurance.

When he got back to the villa, Bikie met him with contrived cheerfulness.

“Well then, back already from your sweet little cutie?” Bikie really wanted to cheer his friend up, but it came out awkward.

“What are you talking about?” said Isaac, puzzled. “I’ve been with Vicky, my sister.”



“Your stepsister. That’s who I meant,” Bikie chuckled. “Your little sister’s high-class. I looked at your photos with her. A jaw-dropping figure and great smile. A real beauty! Got to get her cured quick. Why that acid look, you guys have different folks, don’t you?”

“We do,” said Isaac slowly.

He felt a sudden, sharp sting. He wasn’t offended by Bikie’s offhand manner, he had simply never thought about his Vicky as a beautiful young woman. “Vicky, a little cutie,” he repeated to himself pensively. It was true. Neither hospital surroundings nor her wan complexion could spoil her looks. She looked so fragile under hospital bed sheets and she was... beautiful.

In the morning when Isaac and Bikie woke at the villa, excellent coffee was already waiting.

“The gentle cooing of this pimped-up coffee machine is akin to the noble note that resounds when I start up my Harley,” declared Bikie, already in a poetic mood first thing in the morning. “I think I’ll listen to it one more time. Isaac, put in a cup. Ah, tell you what: genuine coffee is some mighty stuff! Not like that instant shit. You are one fluky guy, Isaac. Maybe there’s some kind of fluky energy? Just think about it. You’ve got no money, but you will have. Your sister’s sick, but only until you get your money, so it’s a temporary problem. Your brains are in good shape. You went to download your creativity, but Lady Luck saved you. You got a piece of computer plate and you didn’t throw it out, you looked at it. Out of the candidates you found me and Wolanski. Hit the bullseye again! I won’t deny that I’m glad we ended up here, not with that swanky jerk with the Harley.”

“It’s not entirely a fluke. I admit I was lucky with the downloading when Elvis showed up. But choosing you and Wolanski was shrewd calculation. A risk it was certainly, but the analysis of the candidates was correct. Lady Luck likes hard workers; she doesn’t do everything for you herself. And what’s more, I had failures with a couple of other candidates.”

“Dunno. I reckon you’re fluky. And you’ve got good intuition. Sometimes I think about how many little details came together for me to be sitting here, right at this moment, and I realize the math doesn’t explain it because it is unrepeatable from the standpoint of probability theory. I even ended up in the bar because I love motorbikes. The owner of the bar is a biker too. If I were not a biker, I wouldn’t have ended up in the bar, and you might have chosen someone else.”

“You could say that about absolutely anyone starting at least with the fact that every one of us is born from the victor in a race of spermatozoa. One out of tens of millions. It’s like one person from the whole of France, one from Poland, five from America. So mathematics hasn’t got anything to do with it, its fate or something else. Maybe it is flukiness.”

While they talked they had no less than three cups of coffee each. Heady, exquisite aroma diffused through the air and the delicious brew spread invigoratingly through Isaac’s body, clearing his thoughts. He always put in a lot of sugar. Now it was time to sit down at the computer.

“Ok, Bikie. Any ideas on how to find Link?”

“Considering how much sugar you just had, that’s really a question for you. Sugar is the brain’s main fuel. Your tank is over full right now.”

“About the ideas, I meant your professional skills in the first place.”

“Well, there are a few things we can do, and some we can’t. As always, we have to try everything. You never know where you’ll stumble across the trail. Either he’s a total hermit, which is quite likely for a scientist, or sooner or later he’ll leave tracks. Provided he is alive and hasn’t become a Happy.”

“I still hope that he is present in the data base not just by accident or mistake. He’s definitely not a Happy, and clearly not officially listed as dead. Why keep data on the intellectual capabilities of a corpse?”

“Who knows? Many people searched him. Although we are special since we have out-of-the-box thinking. I’ll try to turn the question round the other unusual way.”

Bikie considered himself a super-analyst and was sure he’d find Link if there was even the slightest chance. He downloaded all the information he could find, at the same time creating and

running a file comparison program to eliminate identical content. In the end he gathered a vast amount of relevant data.

He also compared articles that were almost identical and copied out any differences into his list of leads. In one place he found the name of a hotel Link stayed in, in another - the make of car in which he was driven there. Then he found out how Link was dressed. He collected whatever could be collected.

Leaving his partner to ruminate, Isaac went off to the next meeting about registering his anti-rain invention.

Isaac hated *Collective Mind* more and more, his resolve to strike a blow at it was growing stronger. Five years ago his invention would literally have been grabbed out of his hands, they would have lined up for it. But now he was on his way to even more talks with the agent at the patents office, still not even knowing if this was the final meeting, or the first of yet another dozen bureaucratic discussions.

The bald, plumpish patent officer, who introduced himself as Serge Morell, was also an Agency-hater. He had his reasons. He used to be the boss of a large department, almost twenty people, a big wheel and a well-respected man. Now his department consisted of just him, and it was only still considered a department because no one wanted to waste any time and energy on renaming it a section. He loved inventors and creative personalities, but nowadays they very rarely came his way. He felt awkward about Isaac's case and tried to excuse himself saying that he was overwhelmed with doing everything alone; register the applications, check them, and even type out all the data.

He assured Isaac that the next meeting would be the last, everything was almost ready, and he hinted that he would be happy to leave his job and become Isaac's personal agent, marketing his inventions. Isaac promised to think about it. The agent added that his business card as a head of department still inspired respect and simplified negotiations. And he knew all

about whom to approach and how – after all, he had thirty years of experience.

The former Isaac, so unsure of himself would have agreed immediately. But now he felt like a different hardened hearted man - a man who wouldn't fling himself at the very first offer with open arms. So he only said he'd consider it.

When Isaac got back from the patents office, he glanced into Bikie's room. Seeing his friend, tired from all his monotonous searching work, he decided to suggest an idea of his own.

"I can see you're tired. I'll run a fresh eye over your provisional results and tell you what I think and how we could approach the analysis. And you will tell me what's possible and what's not, and maybe add something else."

"Go ahead," said Bikie and turned back to the computer in his traditional style.

"Well, we need to find things that could be important to him: rare objects or an old vintage motorbike, for instance."

Seeing that Bikie was really whacked, Isaac wanted to cheer him up and offered his suggestion with absolute seriousness. Bikie picked up on the gibe, turned his head and grinned.

"But seriously, though," Isaac went on, "let's take a look at his credit card expenditures, his bank statements, habits and journal subscriptions and any other little details of his day-to-day life. What he loved and what he hated."

"Well, the journals could be a useful line, by the way, all right. There are all sorts of things on the internet, but good old paper journals, who doesn't love them? That's easy," Bikie added. "And the same goes for phone numbers, his e-mail account, favorite sites and digital subscriptions."

"If he's alive and well he might secretly be keeping in touch with a few friends, like Deputy Secretary Blake, for instance."

“I think I can find out Blake’s mobile number, and if it’s not a corporate UN phone, I’ll crack all his calls, but if it is a UN phone, then for sure it won’t be easy. Probably even hopeless. Lots of companies’ data protection programs are still not up to much, but that’s not the UN. Usually it’s the people themselves who are sloppy; they leave heaps of leads behind, without even suspecting it either because they’re negligent or because they don’t consider themselves important enough. There are still hordes of heavy hackers around...and get this...we programmers are actually underground types who have the lowest percentage of downloaders,” Bikie announced smugly.

“Yeah right, but lots of you are actually employed full-time by the Agency.”

“If need be, a couple of my friends can crack any tough nut and get the best porn movies off the computer of the Satan himself.”

“And then,” Isaac reasoned. “I think we should take a look at where Link went most often before he disappeared. I don’t think he’s in Africa or the Antarctic. If you wanted to hide, you’d probably choose some place where you’d been before, the one you liked.”

“That’s easier. I can track journeys, especially old ones. In those days the data protection programs were total shit compared with today. Anyway, I don’t think any crazy tourist company would lay out its dosh on a super-program to protect data about its clients’ destinations a hundred years ago. I reckon I’ll get in easily from about ten years back. I don’t think Link had time to handle all the tedious ins and outs of traveling. More likely he used an assistant or a secretary.”

“Then there are frequent flyer programs and maybe he used a car-rental company. I doubt they have mega-protection either.”

“You can’t be sure. But as far as I can tell three assistants worked in Link’s lab, two male and one female. He wasn’t exactly

the sociable type. There are only forty-two numbers that were called from the lab more than five times a year, and about another hundred for the female assistant. And there are obvious front runners among them.”

“Excellent, that’ll be useful.”

“Also,” Bikie continued, “we have to find his old bank card and at least pick out the most popular transactions.”

“Yes, we might see something unusual. Buying medication, for instance, and if it’s rare, he probably still uses it.”

“Get real. No more cancer, no more AIDS, remember? Or you think Link didn’t fix some allergic catarrh he had?”

“Yeah, you’re right, not much chance. It depends on when it happened. It wasn’t invented, manufactured and distributed at once. But even so, please take a look. Meanwhile I’ll slip down to the gym, somehow this place has given me the urge to work out. I used to think I wasn’t kind of a person suited for fitness training and now I just can’t wait to pump some iron. It really clears out your head and calms the nerves. See how much stronger my arms are?” Isaac proudly displayed his slightly enlarged biceps to Bikie.

Bikie nodded without speaking. Wolanski’s gym was certainly top-notch all right - put together by professionals, obviously a pricey job. But Bikie didn’t use it; he was as strong as an ox anyway.

The next meeting with agent Serge Morell at the patents office turned out not to be the last. Some kind of typo had slipped in and all the documents had to be signed all over again. The agent assured him that this was definitely the final stage and next time Isaac would receive a certificate for his patent. And so he did, two days later. Isaac couldn't believe his luck, it still wasn't money, of course, but he was in the home stretch. The agent congratulated Isaac on officially becoming an inventor and solemnly presented him with the beautiful patent and a bundle of documents.

Smiling, Isaac gathered up the heap of paper. Just in case, the agent reminded Isaac about his offer to work with him, but Isaac didn't have time for that right now, he was too excited and delighted. He promised to think about it a bit later. Everything had ended well after all, and he set off back to the villa in a good mood. Bikie took one look at his super-delighted friend and asked:

“Well, how was the meeting with the im-patent agent?”

“Super! The invention's registered. Bingo! Look!” Isaac triumphantly raised the brand-new certificate with the big gold seal above his head.

“Ooh-ooh! Well done! Cheers! Today we celebrate.” Bikie gave his friend a tight hug.

“It's my treat!”

“From Wolanski's bar? Oh no! Today we'll go to my McCarthy's. I'm on a long-term leave, but I still kinda work there. Itching to pour someone a beer and mix a drink. I haven't seen any chicks for ages. We live like monks! But I personally have never taken the vow. We're like a pair of doting parrots, we're perched in this gilded cage.

“OK! Let's go into town!”



“You can stand at the bar, and I’ll serve you! Live it up, it’s your day!”

Early that evening they set out for the bar. Isaac put on his tattered jeans and a white shirt with skull cufflinks that he kept for special occasions.

“The skulls don’t suit you, Isaac. I’ll make you some cufflinks myself, real heavy ones, will be a unique copy.”

“Why, what’s wrong with these?”

“Nothing’s wrong with them, but nothing’s right with them either.”

“The skull, by the way, is a talisman.”

“I know. It’s just that you somehow manage to look like a coxcomb. But screw that, let’s go!”

Bikie had washed and serviced his Harley for the occasion, and even wiped the dust off his biker’s jacket.

“Just don’t squeeze your tits against me too hard,” he grinned, gesturing for Isaac to sit on the back.

“You have to offer a girl a drink first before you can expect snuggling like that!” Isaac squeaked flirtatiously in reply.

With the old motor roaring powerfully, they hit the road to the center of Monaco.

At McCarthy’s Bar Isaac felt jealous at first: it was his celebration, but everyone rushed to hug Bikie. They said hello to Isaac too, and Bikie introduced him to everyone. Then he solemnly poured a mug of beer, switched off the music and made a ceremonial announcement.

“Today we’re celebrating the huge success of my friend Isaac, a great inventor who has conquered rain. He has registered his bizarre design with the patents office! Cheers!”

The entire bar roared thunderously: “Cheers!”

Hearing the sound of clinking glasses on all sides, Isaac felt a sudden rush of happiness. He’d never been the center of so much attention and absolutely everyone was shaking his hand and

wishing him success. Sincere, genuine congratulations from people he didn't even know. Everyone smiled at him and a pretty waitress even kissed him on the cheek. The bar was awash with festive cheer.

Bikie proclaimed that the next twenty mugs of beer were on the house, and people surged towards the bar. It wasn't so much that the guests were desperate for free beer, just that they all wanted to share Isaac's pride and joy. Since they were caught up in his celebration, they wanted to be involved in it completely.

*"We are the champions..."* the speakers thundered.

*"Of the world!"* the entire bar sang, joining in.

"Hoo-ray!" Isaac raised the cry, and everyone supported him with a roar of approval. He was the happiest man in the world, a triumphant conqueror.

After drinking three mugs of beer in half an hour, Isaac felt a sudden urge to go to the bathroom. At the table furthest away, right in the corner, hidden behind the columns, he spotted a solitary figure sitting in the semi-darkness, someone not participating in the general merriment. Drunk either on happiness or beer, Isaac felt he had to dust off this melancholy customer's sadness, and he set off confidently towards the mysterious stranger. Oh, so it was a girl!

"Dear God, it's Michelle!" Isaac thought in delighted surprise.

Michelle was sitting there completely withdrawn and absorbed in her own thoughts. Standing in front of her was a half-empty glass of a cocktail.

"Michelle, is that you? What are you doing here?"

"Ahh, hi, Isaac. It is Isaac, isn't it? I'm glad you're here. Do you think you could bring me some water, please?"

The realization that Michelle remembered his name sent a wave of warmth flooding through Isaac's body. He immediately forgave her spiteful look at their previous meeting. Looking

slightly sad and relaxed, she seemed a hundred times more beautiful than before.

“Of course, just a moment, I’ll be straight back.” He realized the girl wasn’t feeling well, and the drunken haze in his head dissipated instantly.

Isaac went in behind the bar, poured a glass of water, added ice and whispered to Bikie:

“Michelle Blanche is sitting in the corner. I went to her before I found Wolanski. I don’t understand what she’s doing here.”

Bikie craned his neck to see who Isaac was talking about.

“I know her. That is, I’ve seen her here before. It’s not the first time she’s come. She doesn’t come often, but she drops in. A strange girl, she always by herself, never talks to anyone. Probably just taking a break from her jet-setter crowd. Maybe she’s unhappy or maybe she’s just pissed off with them all, and comes here to hide once in a while. Other people’s thoughts are a maze, and women’s thoughts are a maze to the power three. To me they are, for sure.”

“I see. She’s so beautiful!”

“Her face is beautiful. But her figure... I don’t like them that skinny.”

Isaac brought Michelle water and she gulped down half the glass, then got up and asked him to show her to her car.

Isaac had started dreaming of getting to know her better at last, and he was terribly disappointed.

“Maybe you could stay for a while? Can I get you anything?”

“No. It’s time I went. I’m tired. Some other time.”

Taking Michelle by the arm, Isaac carefully helped her to come to the exit. The customers were still congratulating him, but Michelle didn’t seem to notice that at all. That was a real bummer.

He'd been enjoying a great triumph and she hadn't seen any of it, and now she was leaving. Isaac's mood was ruined.

Outside Michelle didn't look tired. Her driver was waiting at the entrance, holding the door of her luxury car open for her.

"Thanks, Isaac, you're really sweet! I saw you were celebrating. Congratulations. Enjoy your fling." Michelle kissed Isaac on both cheeks, like a friend, said goodbye and drove away.

Isaac realized he was in love. Definitely in love with her. What a shame she had to leave. He could still feel the touch of her lips. He was totally shattered emotionally – how easily and casually Michelle had conquered him, without even trying and surely not just him, but most of the men in her entourage. Isaac stood there in his loneliness for a while; he didn't want to draw a line under this unexpected encounter. But then he had to go back into the bar.

"Where did you go, Isaac? What's wrong with your face? What's got you so down?"

"Just pour me a drink, will you? And not beer, make it a vodka. A double with two shots.

"Oh, your problem is clear enough," Biekie said with a jolly wink. "We've drunk to the patent, enough of that, now we're boozing to love."

Isaac didn't remember how much longer they spent in the bar and how they got back home. The next thing he felt was a fierce dryness in his throat and a splitting headache. He didn't feel like getting out of bed, but the intense pain in his head was so bad that he reluctantly got up and shambled into the kitchen to look for an aspirin.

After two weeks, Isaac and Bikie, having collected an ocean of information and analyzed it forwards, backwards and sideways, were still stuck right where they had started. They still have not come up with any theory concerning Link's whereabouts.

They discussed and argued, trying to persuade each other, but in fact did not make any progress.

Isaac looked at the data they had and summed things up.

"So, our old boy didn't take many holidays and he loved islands. He was quite fond of Thailand, Corsica and Sardinia, and he had been to China. He visited America too, but mostly on business, for holidays he usually chose the Mediterranean islands. Sometimes he went just for a weekend, sometimes staying longer and, interestingly, often called a Dutch escort service before setting off. Well yes, sitting in the lab for hours on end does make it pretty hard to find a female companion. The rest is general information: date of birth, education – nothing that gives us any insight."

"Isaac, why are we trying to find him in the first place? Putting in so much effort? Maybe we ought to try studying the actual technology?"

"Intuition, Bikie. If we find him, maybe we'll find both our question and answer at the same time. In theory, the man who created it can destroy it too. Lots of people who've tried to produce the technology have got nowhere and we want to break it. What if we cause some disaster? It's dangerous. Better let Link stop it when we find him."

"If he can, and if he wants to..."

"We'll make him. I'm sure he knows a couple of secrets how to persuade people from downloading."

"What if he's a big fan of his eyecandy?"

“Stop cooking Link before catching him. We’ll work it out. By the way, what about the woman he loves? If he’s alive, she’s probably somewhere close by. Analyze her data. Maybe it’s not so secret, and anyway women don’t worry as much about security, or rather, they’re not as careful as a paranoid scientist. If she’s not from scientific environment, she could easily have left tracks.”

“Well that would be a good idea, except that I haven’t really found any personal connections for Link.”

“And what about that escort service? Why don’t you think he could have called and dated the same woman all the time?”

This secret side of Link’s life could turn up some leads. Only they had to take into account that such a service probably didn’t have permanent sites or a permanent telephone number. But they didn’t have anything else, and Bikie started on the analysis.

A few hours later Isaac looked in on his friend, and from Bikie’s excited appearance, he realized they finally had some kind of lead! “I think I know where our pal weaves his nest from time to time.” Bikie was really excited, and Isaac realized he was about to deliver some kind of bombshell. “Every time after he called the agency from this number, there was another call, to a mobile or landline number. The mobile number’s been out of use for a long time, unfortunately, but I wouldn’t have spent much time on it anyway because I came across something more interesting. The landline number is in Amsterdam, it’s listed to an apartment at an address that came up once at the immigration office. So, according to the report on this address, two girls lived there. A certain Yoshi Kato and a certain Hiro Okamoto. So our man was not only fond of his laboratory flasks, he liked a touch of Japanese flavor.”

“Right...”

“After that I came across Yoshi Kato several times.”

“But Hiro not once, apparently,” Isaac guessed with a smile.

“Bull’s-eye! Well done, kiddo, you catch on quick.”

“And I’d even venture a guess that you’ve already gathered the info on Yoshi.”

“Bull’s-eye again!”

“And you’ve found...”

“So far shit-all,” Bikie replied vulgarly. “Apart from the fact that she has a residence permit in England! But hang on; I haven’t been digging for long.”

“Well now, Amsterdam is not Tokyo, we can make an on-site inspection. Link had a cozy set-up, a one-hour flight and no prying eyes. I think I’ll take a flight over there,” Isaac summed up.

Thank God prostitution in Holland was legal, so they had a fair chance of finding the Japanese girl or her friend. Even though Bikie was working away tirelessly and the search for information needed to be continued, it was impossible to stop him from taking a trip to Amsterdam.

“You know that we haven’t got any money to spare, don’t you? I’ll manage on my own,” Isaac assured him.

“I agree to a hotel with a half of a star, I even agree to sleep with you in the same bed, I will not eat or drink, but I’m definitely going to Amsterdam, that’s non-negotiable... Oh, and I’m taking back my vow not to drink.”

Realizing that resistance was futile, Isaac called Peter and warned him they would be going to Amsterdam. Peter laughed and asked on what dates they would be away.

From Monaco to Amsterdam is fifteen hundred kilometers. After a small argument with Bikie, who, having won himself a trip, promptly suggested going on his Harley, the alternative of going by plane won out. Neither a car nor a motorbike was convenient in Amsterdam.

Isaac bought the very cheapest tickets and found a budget apartment with two beds through a mobile phone app.

Bikie was so excited he wouldn't let Isaac sleep until three in the morning. Although they didn't really need to discuss their plan further, they talked it through briefly. They would contact the escort agency – there probably weren't many good ones, and they could not believe that Link had used a cheap one. They would try to find both the Japanese women there.

Assuming that Yoshi had disappeared together with Link, finding her would be no easier than finding the professor. But the other woman, Hiro Okamoto had no reason to hide. They would find her and see where the threads led to from there. Bikie had easily figured out the old address of the two girls' apartment from the telephone number. The rest they would sort out on the spot.

Amsterdam. Dozens of canals divide the city up into a host of little islands, connected by hundreds of bridges of vastly different kinds. The main, and the most famous canal, is Amstel. Amsterdam is also the city of tulips, but by no means their native land. The flower originally came from the mountains of Asia. The Greeks and the Persians loved them. And there was a "Tulip Era" in Turkey too. It was from there that the Austrian ambassador brought back a few bulbs and presented them to a local professor of botany: they were stolen from him and brought to Amsterdam. Isaac recalled the story of the famous tulip boom that followed these events. At that time you could get a good house for the bulb of a beautiful tulip. Prices soared sky-high and everyone speculated in the bulbs – from bankers to ordinary housewives. Of course, in the end the bubble burst, dragging a whole bunch of people down to financial ruin. Also the boom of *Einsteiner* popularity will probably fail.

This was the world's capital of freedom. Hordes of people once used to come here for a weekend to have a good time. There was everything here: the red-light district, loads of clubs and bars,



coffee shops. Nowadays they still came here to smoke grass and have fun, although vast crowds were a thing of the past. Isaac had been to Amsterdam three times but his most vivid memory was the King's Day in the end of April. The streets were transformed into torrents of orange – every single last person was dressed in the national color to honor of the festival. It seemed as if all of Holland had gathered in the streets of the capital. On the canals there were so many boats, large and small, and rafts, that you couldn't even see the water. And so many people crowded onto the boats, you couldn't tell where the pavement ended and the water began. Everyone was singing, drinking and dancing. One of the best days in Isaac's past. He smiled at his pleasant memories as the plane made its approach for landing.

They decided to save on a taxi and took an express train. Half an hour later they were standing in the central station. Bikie was amazed by the size of the bicycle park. There were thousands of bicycles, if not tens of thousands, in a three story building. Bikes could be hired for peanuts, but the friends set off for the Old City on foot. Their apartment was conveniently located in the attic of an old house: there was no lift, but that was no problem. On the other hand, bustling, noisy Rembrandtplein was only a stone's throw away, and they could see a canal with a drawbridge that connected with the Amstel.

“Isaac, let's have lunch first, the escort agency probably isn't open so early. I'm sure the girls are still asleep after their working day, or rather night.”

“Okay, let's do lunch. That smell of pizza is making my stomach rumble. You don't mind a piece of Italy?”

“I'm all for it,” Bikie answered, stroking his large belly.

In an attempt to justify his presence in Amsterdam, Bikie had prepared very thoroughly. He had studied the five most visited escort agency sites. Only two of them had Asian girls and

only one had Japanese girls. He also already knew the location of the apartment where the phone number he'd found was registered.

"The phone number I dug up doesn't match any of the agencies. It's been changed since then but one of the sites said the agency has been in business for twenty-five years. I think that's the one we want."

Isaac's call was answered almost immediately by an extremely jolly voice.

"Decided to spend a pleasant evening?" the man's voice asked jauntily in English with an accent.

"Yes, thank you, but I have specific requests," said Isaac, feeling a bit awkward.

"Well, bear in mind that our prices are significantly higher than in the red light district. And specific requests will cost even more."

"No, no, I don't mean that. I'm interested in oriental girls."

"Well that can easily be arranged."

"Not just any, but Japanese girls. That's essential for me."

"We don't have Japanese girls. Only Thai and Chinese, and a Filipino girl. There's a young Russian with slanting eyes, very beautiful."

"No, only Japanese girls. And you know, a bit older. Over thirty if possible."

"Listen, this isn't a supermarket, we don't have that kind of choice, but you won't regret it if you choose a Chinese girl, we do have one a bit older, if you like. A very sexy and exotic woman."

"I want a Japanese woman," Isaac insisted.

"Are you a Japanophile or what? Or Japanese yourself?"

"No, I'm a European. It's just that I was here a few years ago. And I was with this girl. I want to see her again."

"Sorry, lad, I've never had any Japanese girls here. If you want someone else, call us..." – the dial tone sounded in Isaac's ear.

“No luck,” said Isaac, turning to Bikie. “I’ll take a breather and call the other number.”

“Hello,” Isaac heard the same familiar voice say.

“Uhhh, this is me again...” Isaac hadn’t expected that the different telephone numbers could belong to the same agency.

“You’re a persistent lad. You must have had a really wild time back then,” the agency manager laughed.

“But it says on your site that you have a Japanese girl.”

“If you were drug-fuelled and I brought you a Chinese girl, you couldn’t tell the difference. Anyway, I don’t have any Japanese, and I never did. But I’ll look for one. Do you remember the name of your Kamasutra? They often disappear, you know. I mean, they go away. Some guy like you gets stuck on a chick or gives her so much money, she doesn’t need to work anymore, sometimes they even get married.”

“It’s not a matter of Kamasutra. I don’t remember her name exactly. Maybe Yoshi Kato, maybe Hiro Okamoto or something like that.”

“OK. If I find her, I’ll call. What hotel are you in?”

“The Grand Hotel de l’Europe,” Isaac lied. He didn’t give the real address in case the deal broke down. It was better to play a rich customer.

With nothing in particular to do, Bikie suggested they should take a ride to the building where the girls have lived. They decided to go on the bus, in case everything worked out with the escort agency – since there was so little money.

The Japanese girls' apartment was located in a pleasant looking district, although not in the center. Unfortunately they couldn't find any cafes nearby that they could have used as an observation post. The building had no concierge, and the residents' names were on the buttons of the entry phone. There was no tab for Kato or Okamoto, but they found the name Akiyama.

“Look, Akiyama. Could that be our Japanese rose?”

“Let's check right now,” said Bikie, pressing the call button.

There was no response for a long time, but eventually a soft, mewling voice answered. The friends didn't know what a Japanese accent sounded like, but it could easily have been one.

“Can I speak to Yoshi Kato,” Isaac asked diffidently.

“I'm sorry, there's no one here by that name.” There was a brief pause and some bustling in the background. “Who's looking for her?”

Bikie jogged Isaac with his elbow. Isaac leaned towards him and Bikie whispered that if they didn't know that person here they wouldn't have asked who was looking for her.

“I'm an old student of Professor Link's. I'd like to talk to Yoshi. Are you her friend, Hiro Okamoto?”

There was rustling sound in the entry phone and a different voice answered:

“Wait.”

Bikie uttered a soundless “Yessss!” and slapped Isaac on the shoulder so hard that he winced in pain. When they were in the

lobby, Isaac twirled his finger beside his head and told Bikie what he thought of him.

“Ouch! You’re crazy? That hurts.”

“Sorry,” Bikie muttered guiltily. “I was so excited.”

The girl, and it was Hiro indeed, proved to be very nice and hospitable. She didn’t know where Yoshi had suddenly disappeared to. But she showed them a photo and also said she suspected an elderly Englishman. So the most valuable thing the guys learned was what Link’s girlfriend looked like. Hiro asked to let her know if they find her former friend.

They left feeling a bit disappointed though. They hadn’t got anything new apart from confirmation of their guess that Yoshi was probably with Link. And it had been pretty clear that the two were together anyway. No leads yet again.

“Let’s go have a beer at Smokey,” Bikie suggested. “Evening’s coming and I need to relax my nerves.”

Isaac agreed. This was Amsterdam after all. And Smokey was right on Rembrandtplein.

No sooner had the friends drunk a mug each, than Isaac’s phone rang. The number was not displayed, but he recognized the voice.

“I’ve found your Japanese girl, where shall I bring her?”

“Mmm, don’t bring her to the hotel, we’ve rented an apartment.”

“We?” the caller asked in surprise. “That’ll cost extra.”

“No, no, I’m the only client,” Isaac clarified.

“OK. I’ll be there in forty minutes.”

“OK,” Isaac replied uncertainly and hung up.

“What crazy shit is this?” asked Isaac, looking at Bikie.

“I don’t know. Maybe Hiro was jerking us around.”

“It didn’t seem that way. But who can tell? Let’s meet her, it can’t do any harm.”

At the agreed time a car drove up to the building. The manager introduced himself as Paul, gave the building a disgusted look and suggested they go upstairs. In the apartment he looked around, sent a text, and soon a woman of about forty came up.

“Here’s your Yoshi,” Paul said with a broad smile. “Give me the money.”

“Do you know Hiro Okamoto?” Bikie asked the woman, smelling a rat.

She looked at Paul inquiringly, but still shook her head.

“It’s not her,” said Bikie, annoyed.

“How do you know if it’s her or not? He’s the one who fell for the Japanese girl,” said Paul, pointing angrily at Isaac.

“But it really isn’t her,” said Isaac, trying to explain.

“I got you what you wanted, and she’s got the right name! Isn’t that right?” said Paul, starting to get angry. “What’s your name? Yoshi, right?” he asked, giving the woman a stern look.

This time she nodded.

“So let’s have the money, guys, and she’s yours. And no tricks. Don’t even think of scamming unless you’re looking for really big trouble.”

Bikie jumped up off his chair with his fists clenched.

“Who’s trying to scam here?”

“Look, lad,” his opponent told him in an icy voice. “I’ll leave calmly right now. And then I’ll come back up and you’ll leave here for the hospital.”

Paul looked very confident and quite menacing, it obviously wasn’t his first time doing this, and Isaac was frightened by Bikie’s quick temper.

“Wait. This is a misunderstanding. We wanted a different Yoshi. Let’s settle this peacefully.”

“Money on the table,” Paul said quietly, calling a number on his cell phone. “We’ve got a problem here,” he said to someone.

Bikie kept on crowding him.

“Don’t give me this bullshit. I’ll call the police and they’ll stick you behind bars before you can even let out a peep. And then they’ll download you dry. No one will let you rip off tourists. This town lives on them, and you’ll get such a kick in the ass, you’ll forget your name.”

Isaac was already standing shoulder to shoulder with Bikie, feeling that a fight was inevitable.

Paul backpedaled with this rush. He lowered his voice and started making excuses.

“I looked for the one you wanted. Hassled people and found you a Japanese girl. You guys are setting me up. I already owe the middleman.”

“Do I kick you out, or you just leave by yourself?” asked Bikie, a genuine bar bouncer seething up inside him.

Completely deflated, Paul took the Japanese woman and cleared out.

They waited for another ten minutes, and it became clear that no one was coming back up.

“Get out of here,” Isaac summed up.

“Agreed.”

They quickly collected up their things and went downstairs. Isaac’s phone rang again and Wolanski’s number was displayed.

“Hey, Peter! I’ll call you back; we’re a bit busy here.”

“Surprise, Isaac! I’m here in Amsterdam, in the Sofitel Hotel. Shall we meet?”

“You know, Peter, your timing is just perfect. We’ve got nowhere to go,” Isaac replied, turning in the direction of the famous hotel.

In Wolanski's room Isaac finally recovered his wits after the unpleasant incident. He told Paul about their search and the clash with Paul, making special mention of Bikie's heroism.

Wolanski listened avidly, once in a while throwing alarmed glances at the door.

"I swear I envy you, although you guys turned out to be real thugs! Things are humming for you two! I couldn't resist flying in here. This is Amsterdam and with you, my friends. Especially since I was so close, in Copenhagen," Peter confessed in embarrassment. "Sorry I didn't warn you, I was afraid you would be against, you wouldn't let me come," he added, speaking to Isaac.

"Against?" Isaac was amazed.

"Well yes, you're the boss, the ideologist, you decide what can be done and what can't," Wolanski explained.

Bikie nodded in agreement, reaching for the joint that Peter had prepared.

"I agree with Peter. I might have fired the shot, but you've got steel balls the size of melons. I am always prepared to knock the arrogance out of someone, but I couldn't have launched a global project like this, that's for sure."

"Who did you go to before me?" Wolanski asked.

"A lawyer. I sent some emails. Also a young guy, a sportsman. Named Abdul. Bikie went to Charles. And Michelle Blanche, if you know who that is."

"I don't know Abdul, but I know Michelle."

"And Isaac wrecked himself on her, like she was an iceberg," Bikie explained in his usual style.

Wolanski laughed and Isaac blushed.

"To hell with wrecked ships and dashed hopes! We deserve a little party in Amsterdam. I don't fancy going out, but I wouldn't mind getting high," said Isaac, handing the others bottles of beer.



“Here’s to Amster!” Bikie clinked bottles with Wolanski and glanced suspiciously at the joint. “No tobacco in it, is there?”

“Of course not, pure grass.”

Satisfied, Bikie leaned back in his armchair and released a cloud of smoke.

“Peter, tell me," he added slowly, "Why did you decide to help us?”

“Honestly?”

“Well, of course honestly. What do you have against the Agency?”

“Only if you promise not to laugh?” Peter felt a little embarrassed.

“2000 percent,” promised Bikie.

“Same from me," added Isaac.

“Well,” Peter hesitated a little. “Well, I told Sandrine about the arrival and request of Isaac. She hates the Agency, her parents are both veggie, previously to that the *Collective Mind* ruined their company. Well, I blurted out that I think I could help you, join the resistance. She looked at me with such admiration, I even somehow felt uneasy. She said she was very proud of me. So I just didn't have a choice. If I changed my mind, she'd think I was a coward. And she is just so stubborn, she could leave me immediately.”

“In short, you just want to impress this chick?” asked Bikie suppressing a smile.

“Something like that. But now I regret nothing, honestly," Polanski tried to justify himself.

Peter had such a guilty face that even stoned Isaac broke down with laughter immediately infecting Peter and Bikie with it. Next morning Isaac woke up in the hotel, still in his clothes. Wolanski was sleeping nearby on the sofa, also fully dressed, and Bikie was snoring in the bedroom. Isaac splashed cold water on his face, ordered breakfast for three and woke his friends up. Then

he went for a shower and felt better at once. There was an hour to go until they left for the airport.

They gave a warm hug to Wolanski one after another. Peter called and paid for a taxi.

“He’s a good German guy,” said Bikie, examining the buildings flickering past the car window.

“I agree. And he has an excellent habit of showing up at the right time,” Isaac added.

In the morning Commissioner Pellegrini booked a ticket, collected together his beach things and set off to the airport.

Four hours later he was already in Monaco. He dropped off his things in a cozy hotel, had a delicious lunch and a coffee at an Italian brasserie in the port. He breathed in the delightfully salty sea air while walking to the local police department where he was received very guardedly and with surprise since he was such a big cheese.

“Those weird people, first they write a huge report, and then they’re surprised that I’ve come,” the commissioner thought in annoyance.

He inspected the scene thoroughly and took notes, incensing his local colleague.

“It’s all in the report,” this host protested. The Monegasques didn’t like it very much when the French interfered in their internal affairs.

“I understand,” Pellegrini gave a dignified nod. “It’s a good report. But it’s always best to take another look. Who of the local officers dealt with the case?”

He was sent to Captain Robert, but the conversation did not produce anything new. The captain clearly had not found anything suspicious. The terrorist was a run-of-the-mill fanatic – you came across them, sometimes. He was probably a psycho. He had spouted some total gibberish about “the heart of the devil” and smashed a computer. Had he come across a cash register or a safe, he would have smashed that too. Robert was telling all the details, but in fact didn’t feel eager to deal with the uninvited guest.

“He’s in a looney bin,” the captain explained. “You can go there and check for yourself. A crackpot if ever there was one, there are plenty like that. Some stand in strike pickets, holding

placards, some turn to frenzied prayer, but this one was violent. There's nothing more I can say. Here are all the witness statements as a bonus. Here's a pass for the looney bin, if you want: you can talk to this mental case Elvis as much as you like."

But Pellegrini wasn't able to talk to Henri Cavalier, that so-called Elvis, who was as tight as a clam and as puffed-up as a turkey cock. In the hospital they said he was usually very talkative and kept rambling on about the devil and his heart, saying it had to be destroyed. But he wasn't actually dangerous, at least not to people. He'd damaged some equipment, but that was about it. Other than that he was harmless.

The amiable nurse was really amazed that the patient refused to speak to his visitor and she tried to help to get him to talk. But the patient frowned, crossed his arms and said nothing. The girl told the commissioner that only an hour ago Elvis had been boasting that the heart of the devil would be destroyed because he had managed to hand it on to someone he had enlightened.

"Elvis does have an attitude of a criminal after all: say as little as possible at interrogations," the commissar noted. But there was no doubt about Elvis's insanity. There was obviously nothing to be picked up here, and Pellegrini went back into the city. He strolled round the beautiful city and admired various modern sculptures and vintage cars. Tired of walking, he dined in the famous Café de Paris, drank a glass of local rosé and went back to the hotel.

He was intending to fly back the next day, late in the evening. But from early morning to midday he had some time to sunbathe and swim. He had to make the most of his visit. The sea wasn't at its warmest, of course, but some people had already opened the season and after that perhaps he would have a chat with some of the witnesses. Yes. Definitely! The commissioner ran a rapid eye over the records of the interviews. "I'll have a

word with them. I can go back to Paris any time, but after all, I have the sea here.”

All this time the strange phrase “heart of the devil” kept running round Pellegrini’s head. His intuition, or perhaps experience gave him a feeling there was something about these words, some hidden sense. What if the madman talked about some object?

If the nurse had reported what Elvis said correctly, someone else had this “heart of the devil”, not Elvis. Was this the ravings of an insane or an allegory that could be decoded to find his accomplices? But then, what accomplices could he have, except maybe another lunatic?

Accustomed to not discounting even the most absurd theories, Pellegrini went back to *Collective Mind* office to inquire about what had been missing after the terrorist attack. He thought that Henri Cavalier had stolen there something that he called “the heart of the devil”. He was told that nothing had disappeared; the computer in the manager’s office had simply been damaged. Pellegrini asked what was in the computer. Nothing special, just working data, that was all. A pity. The “heart of the devil” had turned to be just a fantasy.

It was boring. And boring was the modern criminal world, consisting of nobody, but fantasists, schizophrenics and freaks. There was no scope to spread his wings.

Time went by, and the promising “bombshell” dug up by Bikie still had not exploded. No clues and no interesting leads left by Link’s Japanese girlfriend have been found. She had been granted a resident permit and got a job in the same university where Link worked. All sorts of small stuff, but then, just like with Link, her trail went cold. It looked like they were together, but the whereabouts still remained unknown. Isaac tried feverishly

to figure out a way to hook the big fish Link and hoist him up out of the dark. What else should they look for?

Bikie was exhausted too, and he started to spend more of his time on things that had nothing to do with the project.

“Why don’t we take a trip to his University in England?” Bikie suggested out of the blue.

“To England?”

“Why not, we’ll get on a train in Paris and scoot over for a day or two. Thanks to Wolanski we can afford to spend a little bit of money.”

“Of course! An excellent idea! There’s a chance we might find something new there!” said Isaac, brightening up.

Bikie huddled over the computer and went to a website for railway tickets.

“Isaac, you don’t mind if we go by train instead of flying, do you?”

“We can, but why?”

“I want to have a coffee in Paris. I haven’t been there for a long time.”

“Then Paris it is. Actually we could stay overnight.”

They left on the earliest train and slept peacefully for the five hours to Paris. As Bikie had planned, they set off to drink coffee in Île de la Cité, at a brasserie not far from Notre Dame. They strolled round the center for a while and had lunch in Montmartre, but they simply couldn’t relax. The hope that they would find a lead at the University urged them on, straining their nerves, so they didn’t stay for the night, but went to the station, handed in their tickets for the next day and took ones for the next train. In the last few years the length of the journey had shortened a bit, from two and half hours to two. “Not a lot, but in mathematical terms that’s twenty per cent,” Bikie calculated. He obviously wanted to talk, and there was almost an hour left to London.

“Isaac, what are you thinking about?” Bikie was ready to talk about anything at all to avoid traveling in silence.

“About how soon I can get the money for Vicky’s surgery,” Isaac replied. “I’ve almost sold the patent, but I think it’ll be another month or two. I should’ve asked Wolanski for the money. I would pay him back later out of my fee. What if something goes wrong with her? Something that can’t be fixed?”

“Have you and your sister known each other a long time?”

“Yes, for ages. My mother got married for the second time when I was ten to a Russian immigrant. He brought his daughter with him, Victoria. She’s younger than me, but we became friends immediately. She’s, you know... clever and cheerful too. She was always kind and considerate.”

“Yes, and beautiful as well,” Bikie added. “With looks like that she’ll be okay, she’ll have a good life.”

Isaac got that clammy feeling again, that anxious stinging sensation somewhere in behind his lungs, like the first time when Bikie praised Vicky’s looks. A beautiful girl, Isaac had known that before. He felt glad for her, because she did not lack attention and had lots of admirers. The feeling Isaac had this time was completely new, and entirely inappropriate somehow. He tried to banish this anxiety and the thoughts that had begun distracting him more and more often. He had never thought about Vicky as a young woman, in the sense of someone who interested him as a woman. Argh, dammit! That sounded disgusting! Even if she was his stepsister, she was still his sister. But controlling feelings was a hard task, and Isaac’s thoughts kept turning back to Vicky more and more often.

He could not understand why he had not noticed it before. Vicky was nothing like any of the others Isaac had dated. She was a hundred times better! Because... because he loved her? That was not possible. It was the simple, logical conclusion, and he wanted to send it packing, and his feelings with it. But he just

could not. Trying to think about it less only made it worse – the only thing he thought about was her.

Isaac looked too preoccupied, so Bikie decided to change the subject and distract Isaac with anything that entered his madcap head. But then, seeing that Isaac wasn't responding, Bikie turned away to the window and started crooning another of his revolutionary songs.

*... Steel rails like belts,  
Constrain the world.  
People are sleeping. All is quiet.  
We rush to abyss, through the night.  
There's nothing there to stop the flight.*

*We are inside the monstrous snake  
That has devoured the best of brains.  
The two of us woke up in wrath  
To wreak the choo-choo of its path.*

*So let the convoy miss a curve,  
Cars break apart, disaster strike  
But wake and save all those who've there  
Succumbed to poison, unaware*

Isaac's thoughts carried him farther and farther away. He recalled his chance encounter with Michelle, but then his imagination was gradually taken over by Vicky. This was a difficult dilemma, whereas he couldn't figure out even simple cases. But were there ever any simple solutions for someone in love? Everything immediately got tangled up and seemed totally overwhelming, logic and desire contradicting each other and desire always won. If everything sorted itself out easily into neat pigeonholes in your head, then you were not really ensnared in



passion. But if you were flung from joy to sorrow and back again, like a rollercoaster ride, and all your thoughts led back to the same person, then you have really flipped big-time.

Isaac believed there was no such thing as mutual love at first sight. Interest, and which way it developed depended on the two people, especially if a third butted in. A girl usually sensed any interest in her, and if there was even a drop of interest in response, she started turning the screw gently on her admirer, not deliberately, but out of innate female flirtatiousness. So deftly and naturally to make someone fall head over heels in love with her, make him furious or drive him insane. For no reason, other than to feel that she was in good shape and get a buzz of confidence in her own sexuality. Or maybe Isaac had made all this up and he was seeing hidden meanings in perfectly ordinary behavior?

One thing he did know for certain was that he did not understand anything about women. “Get lost!” could also mean “go away” or “try a bit harder”. If everyone left everyone the first time they were told to, the world would probably have become a drab place long ago, the world wouldn’t have any flamboyant couples like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Mark Antony would never have conquered Cleopatra’s heart. True love was only born by overcoming obstacles.

To win a popular girl, accustomed to all the very finest compliments and tired of constant attention, you had to fight really hard. You always had to fight for love. Everything was complicated.

But then girls fell in love easily too and suffered over some absolute jerk.

“Bikie, listen,” he said, breaking the silence. “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about, I’ve got this dilemma. I

need your outsider's point of view. Only, please, without your usual gibes."

"So talk."

"From the age of ten I lived side by side with my stepfather's daughter. We basically thought of each other as brother and sister, and at the same time we were good friends. But now I'm starting to realize that she's becoming more than that to mean that bothers me. What do you think?" Isaac paused, but then went on. "How does it look to you from the outside?"

"It looks okay to me..." not a single muscle twitched in Bikie's face. "I wouldn't bother about it. What's could possibly be wrong? You're not related."

"We're not, but it's still not exactly the right situation for starting an affair."

"Isaac, you shouldn't get all hot and bothered over it. If you like her, I don't see any reason why you should not woo and date her. Only I don't know how she'd feel about that."

"I don't know how she'd feel about it either. I just wanted to get clear for myself how weird it is."

"You know, Isaac, we have enough real obstacles in this life. There's no point in inventing more. If you love her, then love her. I've never really fallen in love in my life, so my relations with women aren't clouded by prejudices and fears. And believe me, lots of girls like guys who are direct and know what they want, without clouding the issue pointlessly. Although, of course, you have to be aware of the subtle line between directness and coarseness."

Isaac looked so gloomy that Bikie decided not to press him anymore and looked out of the window at the colorful patches on the fields. But those colors didn't arouse the slightest romantic impulse in him.

Great progress in agriculture was another achievement of *Einsteiner's* work. "The energy of each person for the good of

humankind” – as *Collective Mind* put it in its promotional material.

All the existing knowledge about agriculture, from the moment the primordial man first began working the land right up to the present time, had been systematized and integrated. A bundle of ideas from biological sciences, soil science, meteorology, astronomy, chemistry and God knows what else had been pooled together. And the result was that *Collective Mind* could indicate precisely what to plant where in order to produce the largest harvest of the most delicious fruit per acre of land. Even the demand and supply on the market was taken into account.

The technologies cost megabucks, and the first year saw a wave of protests from farmers, but then everything quietened down. The correct use of the land produced such large harvests that, despite a general reduction in the price of agricultural products and the high cost of patents, farmers still made good profits.

Futuristic miracle-machines of gleaming metal worked in the fields. As a matter of fact, if something looks like it's arrived out of the future; it means the future is already here. The freakish combine harvesters with dozens of robotic arms droned as they harvested and processed. Up on the hills wind generators spun their curved blades soundlessly, with five propellers on each. Hothouses with solar-battery roofs shimmered opaquely in bright light, like iridescent patches of petrol on water.

The contents of supermarket shelves changed instantly. From then on no one used GMO technologies; they'd been outdated by the arrival of new methods for growing organic produce.

Fertilizers stopped being harmful to people and animals, their quality improved and they became more effective.

In general the environment had benefitted a lot. Chemical barriers and filters, waste disposal systems, technologies that reduced fuel consumption, high-power hydrogen and solar energy motors – these were all technologies that could not have been implemented without some powerful impulse. The world had definitely improved with the arrival of OE and taken an innovative leap forward.

Bikie was the one who hated the new order of things. This sweet, utopian world of smiling people had become too sterile to be regarded as real. It was more like a world of obedient, squeaky-clean robots. An advanced computer game.

Pleasant-looking, identical, nine-story buildings of a residential district flickered past the window. . The little town looked lovely. It was a Happy Ghetto. Actually these settlements were called Happy Cities, but Bikie's name for them was ghettoes.

At the Agency they hadn't immediately realized that by downloading energy from low level individuals they would run into the problem of homeless Happies that no one would look after. Those whose payment wasn't enough for a long, normal life in a boarding house or who lost the money they were given proved incapable of adapting to the outside world. To give the Agency its due, it didn't just cut these people adrift. A limit was quickly introduced, specifying a minimal level of creativity before downloading, and the downloaders were required to get insurance contracts for lifelong support, or at least have a guardian who had to obtain a license from the Agency. The homeless Happies were gathered together and housed in specially built residential districts. Of course, these weren't holiday resorts by any means, the apartments were small with no frills, but even so they were quite adequate for the undemanding new residents. In any event, they didn't complain. Before moving to Peter's place, Bikie had lived in far more modest conditions, even in Monaco. These little

towns were built quickly, on inexpensive land, and dubbed Happy Cities. They had a pretty good infrastructure: sports grounds, parks and cinemas, even leisure and entertainment centers. The Agency chose jobs for the Happy residents, often building some factory nearby. The problem was solved and no more homeless Happies appeared.

The settlement and its residents were left behind. “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions,” Bikie recalled.

“Listen, Isaac,” said Bikie, surfacing from his reverie. “Do you think Link will agree to stop all this? If we destroy the system, we have to offer something to replace it. If you think about it seriously, for most people we’re just ordinary terrorists, and death is too good for us. Wars and epidemics will start up again; lots of people will lose their chance in life. There’ll be an economic collapse and chaos like the world has never seen before.”

“Ah, but we won’t destroy what has already been achieved. We’ll just slow the world down a bit and reduce the speed of evolution. I’m not saying that *Einsteiner* is all harm and nothing else.”

“There are so many benefits, I sometimes have doubts myself. Criticizing is one thing, smashing is a different matter altogether.”

“The distance between *Collective Mind* and the other corporations and governments is growing so frantically fast, we’ll have a dictatorship before you know what’s hit you.”

“That’s just theory, but there’s concrete, positive, practical achievement there outside the window. How many of these people will end up in the street? Die on drugs? Wars, starvation, will start again. Sometimes I think we picked the goal out of anger for being losers, - Biekie looked upset. – What if people finally created paradise on the earth? Well, they are stupid, they really are. But so what? As if in the nineteenth century everyone was smart. Veggies have no creativity, but they can feel joy – they watch movies, fuck, see no evil, obey the scripture. What if this is just the future that has come too fast? What is the future you want? What if *Einsteiner* saved us from nuclear war, terrorist attacks that never happened, God knows what else? Lots of folks might not have been alive by now, but they are! Don’t you tell me that it’s better to be a dead smart guy than an alive Veggie. As for me, I don’t mind a fuss, I’m following you, and I’m really interested to reach the goal. But you, where the hell are you going? Well, there’s theoretical danger, indeed. This way you can accuse the creators of the Internet that the terrorists use it to exchange information or fuckers store child-porn there. Or the creators of cell-phones can be blamed that their gismo can be used as detonators. One can find potential threat in every goddamn invention! Actually speaking, this artificial intellect that Link invented is the safest possible. This machine doesn’t work without man, doesn’t make any decisions on its own.”

“We’ll find Link and then figure it out.” Isaac was still absorbed in his own thoughts.

The train arrived at St. Pancras Station in London.

They both got out of the carriage with its long, streamlined nose that reminded Isaac of his mother's flat iron, while Bikie thought it looked like a red-and-yellow Japanese dragon.

After they went up in the lift, their eyes were met by a huge, bright dome of glass and iron set on walls of red brick with archways and plastered columns. Beautiful, raw neo-Gothic architecture.

"Bikie, did you know that this place has the longest champagne bar in Europe?"

"I don't know what you're hinting at, girlie. Let's just have a coffee from the machine."

The machine poured them coffee in cups that had a new stag printed on them: "2. soluble plastic": in two years there wouldn't be a trace left of those plastic cups. They each bought a sandwich from the next vending machine and sat down under a sculpture called "Meeting Point".

Passengers walking by seemed not to see a high sculpture of an embracing young couple, frozen in cast metal.

Not far away was another sculpture, a bit smaller: a respectable-looking man gazing up so intently at the dome that he had to hold on to his hat to stop it from falling off. It was Sir John Betjeman, a poet who adored railways and had been feverishly active in the middle of the last century in the campaign against dismantling the platform of this station. "Look at him, an example of a man who grabbed tight hold of the past in good time. A good sign."

From the station they went to the University campus, which was a forty-minute drive from London. The University was now named after Jeremy Link.

The genial Hindu taxi driver asked if this was their first time in London.

“Yes, we’ve come to repair our karma,” Bikie informed him.

The Indian gave a broad smile and said that you didn’t repair karma, you restored it.

“My name’s Rashid. Would you like me to explain what karma is and how it influences a person’s life?”

Bikie nodded. Rather than travel in silence, he could listen to something interesting, and not just from a journalist, but from a real Hindu.

Isaac didn’t listen; he was again caught up in his thoughts about the ups and downs of love.

“Thanks Rashid, that was interesting.” Unlike Isaac, Bikie had spent the entire journey discussing and arguing about his karma with the driver. “When we go back, I’ll call you and you can pick us up. Did you get that, Isaac? If you spat in someone’s face in a past life, it may hit you in this one!”

“What?” Isaac had missed the conversation and he didn’t understand a thing.

“Look at you! What a blockhead with leaky karma you are! You’ve got two holes, in your left ear and your right one. It all flew in one and out the other. You missed everything!” Bikie explained disappointedly. “All that interesting stuff you were just told and you didn’t pick up a thing.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t in the mood for listening. And I do know what karma is.”

“In your case that’s as much use as a straw hat against a meteor shower,” Bikie replied acidly. “I’m not going to repeat it all. Listen to me next time, and I’ll swap your karmic sombrero for a decent anti-tank helmet!”

“It’s a deal,” Isaac said with a smile. “But can I have an anti-Bikie helmet?”



“There you go. You’ve just made another hole in it!” Bikie exclaimed indignantly. “What you’ve got isn’t karma, it’s a colander. And your head hasn’t got cerebral convolutions in it, just spaghetti.”

“I hope it’s Italian, at least.”

“Yeah, Italian, hard-shell noodle.”

Isaac and Bikie walked up to the library building. They wanted to look inside – it must be really beautiful! It was centuries old and the collection of books had to be huge. All universities unofficially competed with each other to have the best library. Another depository of the ideas and thoughts of great people, only not computerized. If the Agency could have found a way to augment its capacity not by using people, but the books they had written, what immense power that would have been! The book-learning machine! Though there was nothing good about artificial intelligence either. All the films on that subject inevitably ended with a computer declaring war against mankind.

The University was beautiful and it had a certain aroma of aristocratic dignity. Neatly trimmed lawns on all sides, with students on them, discussing something or other: some sitting there, reading textbooks, some lying on the grass and fiddling with their laptops. A scene from a fairytale. And lots of attractive girls.

“I’d come here as a lecturer,” said Bikie, impressed by two young girls who had just walked by.

“And what would you teach? Rebellion and rock-n-roll?”

“Libertarianism and freethinking. Epicureanism, as well.”

“This is a mixed University. You ought to go straight to one with just women to do your lecturing. Although you’re more interested in the practical classes aren’t you?”

“Screw you. If you envy my high-flying fantasy just say so. You’ll never reach such heights with that spaghetti of yours.”

“Do I understand right that you won’t take me as a lab assistant in your department?”

“In my department I conduct all the lab work in person,” Bikie declared solemnly, adjusting his jeans lewdly. “But we’ll find a sweet little fat girl for you.”

Isaac’s bad mood had evaporated. He absorbed the carefree student atmosphere floating in the air, and tried to listen in to portions of the student’s conversations in order to recall more clearly the time when he was in college.

The only thing making him feel worried was the task ahead – finding a lead to Professor Link.

“Look, Bikie, there’s our goal, the professor himself...”

“...with a bronze head! Enough with the jokes. We need a cover story; people could ask questions about who we are and why we’re interested in the professor.”

“That’s not a problem, Bikie! The subject of Link’s disappearance is still an event that intrigues people. We’ll introduce ourselves as student journalists from the University of Monaco. No one will bother to check if our student journal ‘The Principality and Science’ actually exists.”

“OK, I was going to suggest something like that myself!” Bikie said with a nod, and then out of the blue he started saying how envious he felt looking at the students in England. “Just look at that building, and how much land they have here, the lawns. Football pitches and handball courts – who are they training here, sportsmen or eggheads? And those golf courses we saw on the way here!”

“And those abandoned universities we saw on the way here,” Isaac retorted.

“That’s true,” Bikie agreed. “Lots of students have given up studying. They went chasing after the money that COMA promised them, like sheep which only proves yet again...”

“... that what we intend to do is right,” said Isaac, completing the thought. “What did you mean saying COMA?”

“That’s what one should call that darned *Collective Mind!*”

Isaac and Bikie spent some hours searching for everything connected with Jeremy Link. They rummaged through University publications and spoke with his colleagues and former students, even with the cleaning lady of his study which was now a museum. They also studied the publicly accessible archives; as a result, having asked about Link to everyone they came across. There was zero new information, they already knew everything that they were told. Link had disappeared suddenly, without even completing the course he was teaching.

As they walked out of the building, a gallery of portraits of great scientists caught Isaac’s attention. The great men looked down at him: Einstein, Leonardo, Galileo and right there among them was Professor Link. He had his head inclined to one side and his expression was sardonic, with the eyes narrowed, a real person. Not a hint of glamour, even in a portrait he’d been captured just as he was in real life.

“Bikie, there ought to be other photos of Link, right? Maybe we’ll find a lead in them?” Isaac exclaimed in sudden insight.

They looked through what they had collected again, this time studying the images carefully. They asked students and professors about their photos. Some had photos of unofficial events, some boasted that they had “me and Link” selfies. People were glad to show the two journalists their photos with the great celebrity, and the pair tried to pick new details.

In his office in Paris, Pellegrini one more time leafed through the materials from the scene of the incident and the interviews with witnesses. In the report drawn up by the Agency

accounting department he saw that the computer had to be replaced and could not be repaired because some parts were missing. The computer had been written off as a loss as a result of the terrorist attack.

“A smashed monitor and keyboard with missing parts.” Pellegrini was delighted: something had been lost after all! He could take another trip, an excellent pretext for a little more time by the sea at government expense. But the most important thing was that new details had surfaced and he needed to know what parts of the computer had disappeared. This nagging little point had to be clarified, didn’t it?

When Pellegrini showed up at the *Collective Mind* office again, he was greeted with open arms like an old friend. When he asked bluntly which parts were missing from the damaged computer, no one knew the answer. The only person with that information was the system manager Simon Droit, and this was the third day that he hadn’t been at work.

“The fact is he’s taking treatment for cancer,” one of his female colleagues explained.

“For cancer?” Pellegrini was surprised. “And he’s been away for three days? I happen to know that cancer is treated with by a course of pills and no sick leave is required. One of my subordinates had the treatment last year.”

“Yes, that’s if you go to the doctor immediately but Simon dragged things out too long, so now he had to take a sick leave. We told him to go to the doctor and get a prescription but he kept saying: ‘I’m not going until I kill Trot’.”

“Kill Trot?” Pellegrini repeated, alarmed. “I beg your pardon?”

“He was playing an online game World of the Worlds...or something like that and he had this sworn enemy, Trot,” Simon’s female colleague informed the commissioner only too eagerly, and from all the details she knew Pellegrini realized that she had a

yen for the person she was talking about. Or else she happened to play this game too.

Eventually they managed to get the administrator on the phone and Pellegrini explained to him that he was investigating the terrorist attack and would like to know what part was missing from the smashed computer.

“The board was smashed and a large piece was missing. I could have just ordered a new monitor and a case but I had to replace the machine completely because of that board,” the system administrator replied blandly.

“So it was a board?”

“Yes, the base board. They used to call them mother boards. That was because the daughter boards were attached to it.”

Pellegrini realized that now he would have to survive a flood of unnecessary information from a man who didn't have anyone to talk to about the things that interested him, so he preferred to say goodbye.

Pellegrini arrived back in Paris from Monaco, finally closed the case and prepared the materials to be sent to the archive. The last thing he needed now was for the trifling trips he had made to surface in an audit.

When the friends got back from London, they suddenly found themselves at a big party. True to his style, Wolanski arranged another surprise. Although he had not planned on returning home before he received his inheritance, he came back after all and organized a party for his own birthday. There were lots of people at the villa and the guests drank and made merry to good music. Isaac and Biekie were pleasantly surprised – Peter had turned out to be less cautious than they thought at first.

Their host greeted them like old friends. Isaac apologized because they didn't have a present, adding that they simply hadn't been expecting to see Peter here and they wouldn't like to cause him any trouble.

"No problem but I do have a present for you. You'll see it later," Peter said with a mysterious smile. "I thought about the security aspect and it's fine, I'm not taking any risks. Formally speaking there's a month or a month and a half left until I get my inheritance – or a couple of weeks, if I'm lucky. I decided to celebrate my birthday, even though you are living here. To be honest, after Amsterdam, I miss our little group more and more. I didn't feel like celebrating without you so I decided to come back, get a few friends over and hold a party. Go change and join in."

The guys dumped their things, took a quick shower and joined the other guests, who gathered around the pool. A zany old DJ was playing music, which sounded different from the modern stuff. It was obviously the choice of a veteran of the underground, not some disc from *Collective Mind* music label. It was like Isaac's good old student days, apart from the fact that the party was happening at a super-cool villa.

Isaac scanned the guests. An interesting crowd mostly from rich families with none of the Veggies. People who had enough money for the good life were in no hurry to sell their creativity although lots of people who used to be rich had gone bust together with their companies when they couldn't compete with *Einsteiner*.

There were a lot of beautiful girls, all dressed very elegantly, not flashily. All were sleek, well-groomed, with lovely slim figures.

Maybe they weren't big fans of all the latest innovations, but they definitely used the new generation of creams and other personal care products.

Isaac sipped champagne out of a fancy glass, enjoying himself as he strolled among these representatives of high society.

He met a well-known TV presenter, a few girls who were famous models, and Peter and Sandrine were sitting right there, surrounded by their friends. When Peter spotted Isaac, he started making gestures that were hard to understand. Isaac eventually realized that Peter was pointing out someone sitting over to one side, behind the DJ's console. Isaac set off in the direction indicated, but he couldn't make out who was there through the flashing of the light organ. When he got closer, he realized what the "present" was that Peter set up for him. He had invited Michelle Blanche.

Isaac was totally delighted. If only there were more Peters in this life! He turned back towards the birthday boy's table and gave him a big thumbs-up sign! Peter smiled and replied with the same gesture.

Michelle was very beautiful with her hair gathered into a simple ponytail, the minimum of makeup and just a touch of lipstick on her plump lips. Small earrings with no watch or bracelets. The modest, short little black dress exposed her sharp little knees. Her outfit was completed by lacquered sandals with high heels. Everything seemingly so restrained, but she looked stunning.

"Hi, Michelle! It seems that this semi-darkness adds some mystique to your beauty, mind if I join you?" Having drunk a glass of champagne after his journey, Isaac was in exactly the right condition – not yet drunk, but already feeling confident.

"Hi there! No, I don't. How are you getting on, Isaac?" Michelle moved from the center of the sofa to one side, so that Isaac could sit down.

"I'm good. Everything's going fine," Isaac said and kissed the girl on both cheeks. He pointed to Michelle's almost empty glass. "Maybe I could bring you another juice?"

"Yes please, only instead of juice, bring me a Bellini."

“How about I bring you a different cocktail? You’ll like it. It’s based on champagne too. I’m an ex-barman after all, and I have cocktails that I invented myself.”

“Alright, but only if it’s not too strong.”

“Well, they are just a little bit strong, but one or two won’t cause any problems.”

Isaac came back carrying two at once: one was of a bright golden color and the other hand a bronze shimmer to it.

Michelle tried the golden one first.

“Whoa, that tastes good! What’s in it? Wait, let me guess... Champagne, that’s clear enough. Something orangey and maybe something with coffee?” she added, and then sniffed the second glass: “And this one smells of coconut.”

“I won’t tell you the ingredients, or you won’t drink it! But you’ve guessed most of the smells,” said Isaac, smiling. He was dying to boast about the recipe he had invented, but restrained himself. “I’ll tell you, but first let’s see if you can figure it out yourself.”

“Well, the coconut flavor is clear enough. It’s Malibu. I’ll have another think about the rest. So you don’t just invent cunning little devices, but cocktails as well?” Michelle asked with a disarming smile.

“How do you know that I’m an inventor?”

“Peter told me. He said he had a pair of interesting characters living at his place, talented inventors. He said one them was an avid biker, and I’d seen the other one a couple of times. It was obviously you he meant.”

Isaac flushed with embarrassment and pleasure. It was a good thing Peter hadn’t introduced them as caretakers keeping an eye on his house.

“Yes, I’m an inventor.” That had a proud ring, and Isaac thrust out his chest. “And what do you do?”



“I wanted to be a designer. I was pretty good at it, and I developed a few fairly promising concepts. Unfortunately it didn’t grow into a business; it’s more of a hobby.”

“Why?”

“*Einsteiner*. They turn out excellent design concepts for quite low prices. It’s hard to compete with them. It’s possible, but the market has slumped badly. There’s no financial motivation. It would be more accurate just to say I do creative work.”

“That’s not so very terrible for you; after all you’re fairly...”

“Rich?”

“Well, yes. Well-fixed, you don’t need money all that badly.”

“Not strictly for financial reasons, no, but when your ideas die without ever being born, it’s painful. I want to show what I can do. Show that I’m not just...”

“Devastatingly beautiful,” Isaac put in.

“Thank you. To show that I’m not just another pretty face. Apart from a diploma in design I got top marks in many exact sciences.”

“Oh! Heavy! I remember you have a high creativity quotient, but exact sciences – that’s even heavier.”

“But how do you know Peter? Quite an unusual person you are. Peter is no fool either, your friend is an inventor, and so are you. You came bouncing up to me that time with some kind of slogans. You surrounded yourself with creative people. Have you got a special nose for them?”

“Something like that. People like that fascinate me.”

Narrowing her lids, Michelle examined Isaac, finished her cocktail, put the glass down on the table and said in an affectedly stern voice:

“Now, tell me what you’ve dosed me with...some kind of love potion?”

“Almost. Unfortunately it’s just Brut champagne with Malibu and Cointreau in it.”

“Delicious. Champagne and liqueurs. You villain! And what is it called?”

“Lucky Blonde.”

“Ohhhh, is your girlfriend a blonde?”

“No, no,” he protested. “I haven’t got a girlfriend, it’s just a name. I thought it sounded nice!” he said, deciding not to mention that he really had named the cocktail in honor of Anna, his undivided university love. Her name on Instagram was luckyblonde, so he chose it as the title of his creation.

“You’re lying. Even in the dark I can see that you just lied. So you’re a romantic too?” Isaac’s cocktail tasted great, it had a nice color, and besides all that it went straight to your head from the very first glass. Michelle was no exception, she was joking and smiling.

“And the second one,” said Isaac, primly deciding to change the subject, “is called ‘Star Bridge’. It’s champagne too, with Amaretto and Grand Marnier. Like a bridge to the stars. Those ones up there,” he said pointing to the sky.

Michelle looked up too, at the pure black sky, spangled with bright stars.

It wasn’t cold at all, but Isaac shivered, moved closer to Michelle and took hold of her hand. She didn’t object, on the contrary, she put her head on his shoulder.

Everything was going so well, but then up walked Bikie and Peter, two moment killers.

“Damn you to hell, Bikie, can’t you guys see you’ve picked the wrong moment?” thought Isaac. But the moment had been lost. Bikie had lugged over four glasses of champagne.

“I want to propose a toast to Peter. He’s a true character! Alive and natural, not some kind of a fake. You are young, and you’re only just at the beginning of your road, so don’t turn off it!

Happy Birthday, as they say. Happy in the good sense of the word! Dammit, what a fine word they've ruined!" Bikie screwed up his face theatrically and everyone laughed.

"To Peter!" Michelle joined in, getting to her feet.

"To Peter!" Bikie roared, after switching off the sound on the DJ's console.

"To Peter!" voices echoed on all sides, alternating with the clinking of glasses.

Sandrine came over and took the birthday boy away to dance. Bikie set off to get another glass and Isaac and Michelle were left alone together again.

"Would you like me to show you my main invention?" Isaac suggested.

"Yes, do."

Isaac went to his room and came back down with the V-Rain.

"A very stylish little instrument. I tell you that as a professional designer." Her words were sweet music to Isaac's ears.

"The design's actually not the most important thing. Press this button here when it's raining, and not a drop will fall on you. It's like you're under a dome."

"Oh, wow! Great! I've never seen anything like that before. That's a really useful item for someone in an evening dress with a fancy hairstyle," said Michelle, impressed. "I could use one of those."

"That's not all," said Isaac, glad that his invention had been appreciated, and moreover, by a girl he liked so much. "You can use it in all sorts of other places, as a personal umbrella or as a public one. You can keep the rain off restaurant terraces, or even have an exhibition of watercolors out in the street. The patent has been registered."

“I see you really are an inventor. Peter wasn’t exaggerating. Good for you! You are an interesting guy. Did you drop that glass at my feet deliberately that time?”

“No, by accident, sorry.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I can believe you. Every time I see you, you pull some really offbeat stunt.”

“That’s the effect you have on me. I get dizzy and glasses start falling.”

Michelle put her arm on Isaac’s shoulders. Isaac tried to kiss her but Michelle pulled away.

“I’m a strait laced girl, not so fast. You’re too quick off the mark!” said Michelle, smiling.

Isaac couldn’t tell if she was serious or not. He could see she thought he was cute and found him interesting. But he couldn’t figure out if he should try to kiss her again or if it was better not to. Probably better not to, he could spoil everything. And today he could get to know her better. The party was in full swing, no one was getting ready to leave yet.

These sober thoughts didn’t linger in his head for long. A few minutes later he did kiss her after all, and this time she didn’t draw back.

The next morning was a hot one, with the principality scorching with sunshine. At his old place in weather like this, Isaac would literally have been gasping for breath, and he preferred to go early to the bar where strong air conditioners buzzed quietly and it was relatively cool. But that problem was behind him now. At the Wolanski villa it was great. Squeezed in between cliffs on both sides it was always slightly in the shade, and in addition there was always a breeze blowing in this little gap, even on a completely windless day.

The electric cleaners hummed away steadily outside, tidying up after the party. Isaac and Bikie, in an excellent mood, had sat themselves in the living room and were studying in more detail the photographs they had managed to get hold of at Link University.

Isaac noticed that in some of the photos Link looked rather odd by modern standards. An American would have called his appearance “old-fashioned”, and an Englishman would have called it “classic”. In some of the photos Link was holding a cigar.

“Look, Bikie, in this photo here and here too. Link smoked and he smoked cigars. Smoking has already been conquered, right?”

“That’s right, it has,” replied Bikie. “I got cured myself; I never thought it would be so easy. I don’t feel the slightest desire to smoke, in fact it disgusts me. Although there are some rich old farts that still suck on their cigars and pipes.”

“And Link smokes! Maybe he still smokes now. It doesn’t look like our stubborn Link changed his habits of many years. That could be our lead. It is cretins like that, who think cigars aren’t really all that harmful, who keep the remaining Cuban factories in business. Let’s see what we can dig up on the subject.”

Isaac remembered the jubilation at the final victory over nicotine addiction. For three hundred years smoking had been a problem for ordinary people and a source of big money for the tobacco industry. *Einsteiner* screwed the influential tobacco lobby by releasing a drug that cured nicotine addiction, both physical and psychological, with just two tablets. In a flawless marketing move, the Agency handed out the medication absolutely free, exchanging two tablets for a single cigarette of any brand. The tobacco conglomerates were crushed like pitiful worms; they went bankrupt in just a few weeks. The tablets flew off the shelves like hot cakes; people gathered in parks and burned their cigarettes together. There aren't very many ideas that can unite the entire world in a single impulse, but cigarettes were burned in parks from America to China.

The day they started handing out the free tablets was a global holiday, a celebration of independence. Independence from nicotine which used to take a million human lives a year. People lost millions on their tobacco shares, some even committed suicide but no one felt sorry for them. The hands of the tobacco company owners might not be bloodstained in the literal sense, but figuratively speaking they were dripping with gore.

Anyone that still wanted to smoke could only find a tobacco shop in the very biggest cities, or they ordered the old-fashioned poison on the internet. Cigarettes already cost almost as much as cigars, their price rocketed as sales plummeted. A month later the Agency spectacularly bolstered its influence by releasing a cheap remedy for cancer.

In those two months the popularity of donating creativity soared sky-high and more followed when *Einsteiner* struck a blow at drugs. This time the Agency didn't forget its own interests – the drug-dealers and pushers were “downloaded” compulsorily, as criminals. Drug addiction had also been defeated, this applied to every kind of illegal highs apart from weed. The arguments about

that were still going on but way things were headed, it was going to be declared a drug. The last bastions of legal marijuana, Amsterdam and Los Angeles were losing the battle.

So, smoking had been conquered. Only a few smokers were left, mostly rich people and members of the older generation. They were too old to listen to the warnings about how bad you smoking was for you and too arrogant to give up their beloved habit of puffing on a pipe or pulling at a cigar for any reason at all. For people like that, smoking a cigar was a matter of individual style, a hobby and a part of their life. There was a chance that the retrograde Link was like that too. Everything seemed to suggest it. Like many geniuses, he was not very particular about his appearance, and grayish white traces of ash could be seen on his trousers and the sleeves of his jacket. The cigars also turned in his photos a few times. The tobacco industry was at its last gasp but still working for people like Link.

Bikie came up with the idea of digging through the lists of clients on the servers of tobacco shops near the university. He asked Isaac not to bother him.

“I like to socialize and I get distracted when there’s someone else with me,” he explained. “So when I’m working, I’m a loner.”

Isaac did not object since he was sorting out the patent documents. The important thing now was not to sell too cheap. Wolanski’s idea of using the V-Rain on the open verandas of restaurants added a good two million to the price, if not more. And he went to visit Vicky in the hospital: he wanted to see her all the time now. There was so much he wanted to say to her, but he couldn’t. Neither could she hear. His relation with Michelle didn’t make him forget that feeling he had had for Vicky.

Working on his new approach Bikie collected the addresses of tobacco sellers who turned out to have been a lot more numerous in Link’s time. First of all he excluded the shops that

were too far away, and then he picked out the ones that sold expensive cigars and worked around the clock. He broke into their databases with no problem and to start with he focused on a tobacco shop that was located only a short distance from the university campus they had just come back from.

“We know when Link was in England. We know when he started giving his lectures or when he went away to conferences. I’ve highlighted the relevant dates. If he paid for cigars with his card, we’ll see its number on those days,” Bikie explained to Isaac.

Sales at the little cigar shop were pretty sparse, on some days no one bought a single one. “Good kids,” Bikie growled, “smoking is bad for you.” There was a time when he was a heavy smoker himself and he had ignored all the warnings. It was hard to imagine how many cigarettes he would already have smoked sitting there like that and working on his puzzle. Now even during an intensive search he never even thought of smoking....but coffee was a different thing.

Bikie took a swig from his cup and looked at the results of analyzing payments by dates. Every time Link came back to England, a purchase for a substantial sum was made at the tobacco shop. Bikie compared the numbers of the cards used hoping to see that it was the same customer every time, then he could assume that it was the professor’s card. But, alas, he saw that the cigars were purchased with at least two different cards. Did that mean that Link was the owner of at least one of them?

The analysis continued and Bikie decided to break into the data bases of local tourist agencies. Even though the procedure didn’t look too promising, he launched the program for comparing cards into which he had entered the numbers that came up at the English tobacco shop. While the program was working he went to take his mind off things by seeing what Isaac was up to.



Isaac had just come back from the gym and his hair was still wet after the shower. He was sitting on the sofa with the television on.

“It’s time you took a stroll down to the shop and bought a couple of new t-shirts for yourself. While we’ve been living here, you’ve pumped yourself up a lot. Good for you, of course, keep at it. But your old clothes are skintight on you now; they make you look like a dance teacher.”

Isaac snickered and reached for the remote to turn up the sound. The jingle to introduce the news played and an affable presenter announced in a brisk voice:

“And now the latest science news! In Africa new crops developed by *Collective Mind* that are tolerant to heat and consume only small amounts of water are being planted. The food that is grown is already semi-dehydrated, and its volume expands several times over when liquid is added which is extremely convenient. The compressed harvest from one acre fits into a single small truck. It goes to the warehouse, from the warehouse to the shop and onto the shelf. The customer can easily carry the compact package home and then soak it in water.”

“To deliver the amount of food that you get from one pack you would have had to hire a truck before!” an old man in a shop announced briskly from the screen, leaning down to the journalist’s microphone.

Then the television told them about the latest news in medicine. In a discussion about a large number of conveniences and innovations available to the disabled, the developers presented a new generation of artificial limbs which were practically indistinguishable from real ones.

At the end of the bulletin they showed a brief glimpse of a demonstration against downloading OE in Delhi. The protesters carried placards saying: “Veggies have dimwit children”.

“Not all of the children are born as Happies, which shows that the situation can be corrected. In any event, *Einsteiner* is certain to solve this problem, as it has previously solved other problems of mankind,” the presenter summed up.

Isaac knew that the Agency was tracking the problem; he had seen the table of Veggie children’s creativity levels. But it wasn’t true simply to say that the level was low, because most of the children were born without any creativity at all and it would be a good idea to have paternity tests for the ones who did have some. So *Collective Mind* lied. Isaac was furious, but there was nothing he could do.

After the advertisements came the sports news. In sports Happies performed no worse than ordinary people. Physical ability was still the determining factor here. The Veggies simply kept themselves in good shape under the guidance of a trainer, and basically accomplished with ease any task they were instructed to do.

Suddenly Mick Jagger’s voice started singing in the room where Bikie’s computer was at work: “I can’t get no satisfaction!”

“What the hell’s that?” Isaac started in surprise.

“The program is signaling that it’s found a match!” said Bikie with a sly wink.

The friends dashed to see what had been found. It turned out that the numbers of both cards used to buy cigars were found in the payment database of one tourist agency. They had been used several hours apart to pay for a flight to Sardinia. The same cost, a one-way flight. But the most exciting thing was the date of the payments. It coincided with the period of Link’s disappearance, the very same day when he didn’t show up to lecture to his waiting students.

“Both cards again?” Bikie exclaimed, as if he was talking to the monitor. “Why two cards?”

“Have you forgotten?” said Isaac, turning his blazing eyes towards his friend, who was so proud of his discovery but at the same time had failed to see the obvious. “Link had Yoshi with him. I’m sure she bought him cigars too. And they flew to Sardinia together. And by the way, they paid at different times to keep things secret.”

“It sounds convincing! It is convincing, dammit! But was Sardinia their final destination?”

“Let’s take a look at the tobacco situation on the island, shall we Bikie?”

“Already looking.”

Until quite recently there had been two cigar shops left on the island, both quite excessive for a dying economic sector. One shop had already closed now, but the other was working. Bikie opened up the databases of both and rummaged around in the accounts section to see if the two familiar cards showed up there. Alas, the numbers weren’t in the databases.

“But look here!” Bikie exclaimed. “Literally two days after Link’s disappearance a really big purchase was made in one of the shops. It looks very much as if someone stocked up well in advance before going into hiding. As a former smoker, I can tell you Isaac, that when your nerves are stretched you smoke a lot more.”

“Obviously Link couldn’t use the old cards for buying things. He must have had new ones ready in different names.”

“If we assume that Link hunkered down on Sardinia and he has a new card, he must have used it quite a few times.”

“Bikie, this is a lead, this is our chance to find him. Check the purchases for the last seven years on the card that came up and check that the card used for that large purchase hadn’t shown up in the shop before then and I’ll go and pack. If I’m right we’ll go to Sardinia, keep the tobacco shop under observation and lure Link out into the open.”

While Isaac was packing, Bikie shared the news with him: no one had used that card before to buy anything at the tobacco shop, or anywhere else on the island. But the number showed up again later at that shop and in several supermarkets. Deliveries have been ordered on it too, but Bikie did not manage to discover the delivery address. “Delivery companies have been flourishing, they have the money for good data protection,” said Bikie, making an excuse.

At last they had a theory about where Link was that was based on more than mere hope. It was much better than the straws they had been clutching at before. With their computers and their own two heads, they could set up a brainstorming session even in New Zealand if necessary and Sardinia was relatively close. Not Asia or North Africa luckily. The only thing keeping Isaac here was Vicky. His heart ached at the thought of having to part with her again and this time he did not know for how long.

With their plan set, Isaac and Bikie felt better. The nervousness that had dominated the last couple of weeks subsided. A decision that has been taken firms things up, setting a concrete goal, switching the thoughts over to the new challenge. Neither of them wanted to admit that the logic for the journey was rather flimsy, that Link could have moved on from Sardinia, so without agreeing they supported and encouraged each other.

That evening Isaac had yet another good sign. He got a text, short but extremely encouraging. Michelle Blanche asked him how he was getting on. He decided that today luck was definitely on his side. Forgetting about Vicky, he immediately remembered the unbelievable evening that he had spent at Wolanski’s place with Michelle, chatting and discussing things like old friends and even kissing. That was the first time she had shown any real liking for him.

Isaac answered that he was doing great and plucked up the courage to say he would be glad to see her again and the sooner

the better because he was going away and he didn't know for how long. As he waited for Michelle's reply the minutes stretched out into hours, and when she finally replied: "Yes, I've freed up my evening, we can meet!" – Isaac was engulfed by euphoria.

Everything was coming together incredibly well, at last they had a serious lead and his nascent relationship with Michelle was getting on track. It felt really good to fall in love, and memories of that evening kept coming back to him.

On days like this he thought there were quite a lot of good things in his life. As he packed his suitcase, he remembered how he used to go picnicking with his family at a campsite. They drove there, and those trips were always real adventures! His mother and stepfather took turns to drive, while Vicky and he gazed out of the windows spellbound.

Remembering Vicky again, Isaac realized with some confusion that his feelings for her were similar to what he felt for Michelle. 'Okay, there'll be time to figure things out,' he decided.

Now that they calmed down a bit, the two friends started thinking about what they needed for the journey and how they were going to get there. Isaac had a clear opinion about that but he knew Bikie would be against it, dreaming of going on his motorbike, and Isaac spent a long time choosing his words before bringing up the subject. As if he was thinking out loud, he said they would need at least some inconspicuous old van for the surveillance of the shop. It would be better to drive to Sardinia in the van because you couldn't do much talking on a motorbike. They could take their things; have a roof over their head, all hunky-dory. And if everything went well, they wouldn't be coming back on their own. In the end Bikie realized, that Isaac had already made the decision, but they only had a motorbike, so the question was where to get a van.

“Look, Bikie, what if we try borrowing some kind of van from someone in your crowd? Or maybe swap something for it, something that your crowd really values?”

“Isaac, you don’t want us to go on my Harley, and you’re dropping hints, wondering where we could get a van from, aren’t you? And since there’s nowhere a van could come from I have to sell or exchange my Harley right? Now tell me....are you totally nuts?”

Isaac nodded guiltily, as if to say, thank you, Bikie, for sparing me the need to suggest it.

There was a brief pause and then an argument followed. Bikie protested heatedly, screaming that his Harley was his life, his brother, his love and destiny. The stuff you no way sell or exchange, either temporarily or permanently.

“I’ll never, ever lend out my friends, my women or my motorbike!”

But in actual fact he was arguing with himself. He was the one who had voiced the idea of swapping the Harley. Bikie was a pretty sound analyst, and he realized that he was stuck with nowhere to turn. His logic was backing his own wishes into a corner.

“Now listen, Isaac. You talk about fantasy and creativity. Everyone who isn’t a Veggie wants to express himself, not everyone tries, but they all want to. Musicians express themselves through music, scientists through science and I express myself through my motorbike!” Bikie went hyper. “It’s more than just a piece of machinery. It’s my alter ego! I can’t sell it or swap it. It is me! I wouldn’t sell me! We bikers aren’t like that.”

“There was this guy in the bar who had a sports bike and he was summoned to court for speeding. He managed to convince the judge that at a speed of two hundred and seventy kilometers an hour it’s impossible to read a speed limit sign. The judge who used to be a biker himself once awarded him the minimum fine

and just gave him an official warning instead of confiscating his bike. That's the way we do things.”

“My Harley is my membership in a big family, my attachment to people who aspire to freedom and don't rely on rules and authority for this freaking system that we fight against... It's my comrade-in-arms. Do I have to lose my comrade for the sake of the struggle? What would you choose, Isaac? We're not them, we've got hearts!”

Bikie talked on and on, discouraging himself more and more and cursing the situation. He turned sullen and angry, realizing that he had no way out.

“All right Isaac, let this freaking system choke on my Harley. It's decided, I'm selling. It won't be a sacrifice, it will be an iron bone stuck in their throat. Only I can't do it myself. I'll send you to a friend of mine, he's been asking about my bike for a long time. He's bound to buy it. Better let him have it than some other creep, even if I'll have to give him a discount. At least he's a straight up guy. My brother will be in reliable hands.”

Isaac nodded without speaking. He knew firsthand what it was like to sell a part of oneself.

The next day Isaac called the prospective buyer for the bike and they agreed to meet in the evening. In the meantime he set his eye on a roomy American-made van. It was a hell of a machine, working on the archaic fuel combustion principle, guzzling gas like a crazed horse. But then, the only windows were in the two front doors, on the driver's and the passenger's sides so you could carry whatever you liked in the back and no one would see it from outside.

Before setting out to close the deal he dropped in to see Peter and outlined the situation.

Wolanski was upset for Bikie, he couldn't buy the bike, it would have been a violation of his father's will, and they couldn't put off the journey until he received his money.

"There's an operational Volkswagen in the garage. If you guys can find a way to destroy it – burn it or smash it up – I could receive the insurance reimbursement and buy the van to replace it. But that's a couple of weeks' hassle, or maybe ten days, and extra risk for you. You decide."

"I feel sorry for Bikie. As soon as I get my first payment, I'll buy him a new Harley."

"Don't be in a hurry to sell the rights to your V-Rain, Isaac, I'll soon be in the money and the situation will have changed: you're no longer a crazy stranger to me. Let's see, maybe we can agree on a partnership. I had time to think a bit about your invention and take a closer look at you. I am ready to do business with you. As for Bikie's Harley, let's do this...you agree with the buyer that you have the right to buy it back within two or three months to be on the safe side with a mark-up of twenty or thirty per cent. Bluff him and say you won't sell otherwise. I think he'll agree."



“All right, I’ll try it. Thanks, Peter! Bikie will be insane with happiness. He’s desperately miserable right now and gloomy as night.”

When Bikie heard about Peter’s idea and his willingness to buy back the motorbike he went gaga with joy. He went back to his room and asked Wolanski to come over. Bikie didn’t know how to express thanks, but it was a very long conversation, and Isaac could only guess what he said. When he came back to the living room, Bikie had a serious air and declared that Peter was like a brother to him now!

With that burden off the shoulders of the partners, things started moving to a different rhythm. Bikie changed his mind and went with Isaac to close the deal. At first the buyer was upset, but he agreed to the buy-back condition and promised to be very careful with the bike.

The van they bought turned out to be pretty good. Bikie bought a fuel combustion enhancer at a car dump and attached it to the engine. The gas was heated by air oxygen and entered the engine at an increased pressure that cut the fuel consumption by a third. An essential, albeit short-term gain: in this way the motor wore out sooner and various rubber gaskets and old spark plugs burned out more quickly.

Isaac provided for their everyday needs and with the rest of the money from the Harley he bought a couple of sleeping bags, some blankets, a little stove and other bits and pieces that might come in handy. They were intending to work, cook and sleep in the van and they had no idea how long the trip would last.

The two friends packed their things in silence. Bikie was still sulking about losing his Harley, even though temporarily, and he didn’t talk much. They just exchanged occasional remarks about important things... that was all.

Bikie was worried that the bike would end up in an accident or break down, he imagined someone blithely racing it too fast

with the engine roaring, so every now and then he started grumbling like an old man with gout venting his bad feelings on his friend.

“Don’t forget to take your ski boots, Isaac!”

“Don’t forget your pink bathrobe, Isaac!”

“Will you survive a week without any porn sites, Isaac?”

Isaac tried to ignore the gibes and focus on essential things. He realized that for Bikie traveling to Sardinia was a blow, especially taking the ferry, and going for a long time and not on a motorbike. It was like a senior VP of Boeing flying on business in an Airbus.

“Isaac, take the umbrellas,” Bikie gibed yet again.

It seemed he just couldn’t calm down. Finally said he was going to write a song about a proud Kenyan marathon runner — an Olympic champion — serving in the army in big, clumsy boots.

“That’s it, Bikie. Stop it right now. I tell you what you love everything American, don’t you? So look, we are traveling in a classic American van, we are going to live in it, and I agree to listen to nothing but rock’n’roll the whole way. How about that?”

“Okay, damn you, on those terms it’s a different matter!” said Bikie, suddenly breaking into a smile. “You surrendered easily after holding out for no more than an hour!”

They hooted with laughter and never mentioned the subject of vans, motorbikes or marathon runners in boots and swim fins again. Bikie packed a full box of rock’n’roll discs, enough to last them for a year on the road. There was no point in objecting, the old van didn’t have any slots for modern phones or memory cards, and there was no time to look for an adapter.

By evening they were ready; they downloaded maps and made some notes on them, set out their route and went to celebrate a job well done at McCarthy’s. Michelle was surprised

that Isaac had chosen an unromantic bar for their next date, and invited his friends but she agreed to come anyway.

Bikie persuaded Wolanski to come along. Michelle arrived a lot later than the others putting Isaac through some serious turmoil. When she finally showed up she looked absolutely devastating with her hair done in a ponytail emphasizing a long neck, minimal makeup and lips just touched slightly with a lipstick. Her look was completed with a stylish biker jacket of soft leather. Isaac clutched at his heart melodramatically, but Bikie immediately outdid him by putting his hands over his fly and starting to slip slowly under the table, groaning and gasping. Wolanski spluttered with laughter. Michelle gave him a scornful look, folded her hand into a pistol, set it against Peter's head and said "Boom!" Theatrically blowing away the smoke of the shot from the barrel, she glanced smugly at the scene and asked:

"I'm not sure, should I stay here?"

They all instantly came to life and started jabbering that of course she should.

"I'm mortally wounded, but I'm still alive." Peter exclaimed solemnly.

"And no one has ever died from an orgasm!" Bikie added.

Bewildered by this torrent of compliments for Michelle, Isaac couldn't think of anything to say. He kissed Michelle on both cheeks and moved her chair closer to him.

"I'll sit beside you, I hope you don't mind?" Michelle indicated to Peter.

"Sandrine would mind, only she's not here," Bikie responded merrily.

"Why not beside me?" asked Isaac.

"Because you're punished!"

"For what, Michelle?"

“You invited me out... to a bar! You could have chosen a restaurant, a café, a park, anywhere at all. Who asks a girl on a date to a bar with a bunch of guys?”

“Um, well,” Isaac found nothing to say.

“Please forgive him, Michelle,” said Bikie, intervening for his friend. “I agree that he is a moron, an idiot, a blockhead and a fool with a chance having been someone’s screw-up. But then that’s his personality. I won’t be able to bear his sour face tomorrow; it takes almost twenty-four hours to get to Sardinia. And what’s more, today he saved my iron buddy’s life, so now I’m simply obliged to come to his rescue.”

Isaac was not even slightly amused by all these jokes, he felt despondent and miserable at his blunder. He had imagined Michelle as his girl and then bungled their first date so badly – in the fuss and bustle of packing he hadn’t even thought that it was a real date.

“Okay. Quits! Let’s say we’re even for the way you helped me that time in the bar.”

Michelle moved over to Isaac, who, delighted at his redemption, tried to put his arm round her waist.

“Oh-oh-oh! Don’t get too excited!” said Michelle, gently removing his arm. “Quits doesn’t mean you’re completely forgiven.”

“Oh come one, Michelle. You’re a real piece of work!” said Bikie. Turning to Isaac, he added. “I don’t envy you, old buddy. But I envy you just as well.”

“OK, then it’s a bar! I’ll have a Mojito!” Michelle kissed Isaac on the cheek and said affectionately: “Bring me that, please. And you Bikie, tell me about that iron buddy who was saved and why you are going to Sardinia.”

“Long Island for me, Mister Leroy” Bikie added solemnly, getting into a role of a social advocate.

“And me,” Peter put in.

The longer they sat talking, the less Michelle was mad at Isaac. Eventually he managed to put his arm round her waist and bring her closer to him. She didn't resist. Isaac felt he was drowned in love for her. As soon as his panic was gone and the adrenalin from the fright left his blood, the alcohol took effect and Isaac suddenly got very drunk. As a matter of fact, they all, except Michelle, got totally zonked on the deceptively sweet, but very strong Long Islands, flinging out toasts about individual freedom and fine creative gals like Michelle Blanche!

Wolanski shelled out three grand in cash for the journey, for which Bikie promised to take him on as the frame drummer in his Banksy-Band, the rock group he was going to set up after the job was done in honor of the great English graffiti artist who "bombed" the streets of cities all around the world with his witty and acutely political paintings, and had never been caught.

"And if you refuse to be my frame drummer, you yourself will be drummed. If you don't play rock I will clean your clock!" he added laconically, tripping over his tongue.

They talked a bit more about Banksy, his sense of humor and how distinctive his works were, about the way he managed to remain incognito, the cunning way he inserted his graffiti into the environment and how municipal boards, signs and peeling walls turned into pop masterpieces once one of his drawings appeared on them. The police had never once caught him at work, and they wondered why. Was it because he thought out thoroughly how to avoid getting caught, or was it plain, dumb luck?

"Anything worth doing is worth doing right?" Bikie quoted, "Hunter S. Thompson said that. You know what about? If not, I'll tell you. You are not bikers, after all. In the 1960s that guy Hunter Thompson did something fucking awesome. Back then he had an old Jaguar, no bikes, and he had absolutely zilch connection with bikers. But he found them, I mean us, interesting. Normal folks

have always associated us with freedom, rebellion and real adrenalin.”

“Those were the days of motorbike clubs. One ferocious name competed with the next: ‘Gipsy Jokers’, ‘Grim Reapers’, ‘Galloping Geese’, ‘Pissed-Off Bastards’, and so on. Brutal, leather clad dudes with tattoos all over them. They swilled beer and roared along highways but one group among them really stood out – the Hell’s Angels. They drove the law-abiding society crazy with terror. There were rumors that they smear their bike suits with shit to make leather stiffer and that they would rape all the women they came across. The newspapers constantly wrote rumors about them. Well, you know how low-grade journalists can both terrorize and confuse. The girls all squealed and waited for the Angels to drive round and start raping them.”

“So Thompson wondered what this national bogeyman was really like. He had a friend, a former Angel, some kind of a news reporter, a colleague basically. And through him Thompson got access to the bikers’ get-togethers. It was useless to tell the Angels ‘Hello there, I’m a journalist; I want to write about you’. But Thompson was no goodie-goodie, he was a man who broke the rules. He got an advance from a publisher for a book, bought a bike and spent a year riding with the Angels, recording the way they lived. He stuck with the pack, cruising round the cities, tearing along the highways, interacting like crazy, smoking pot, lying on lawns, listening to cops ranting about his rights and ending up in the slammer, he was beaten up with the bikers and he buried their gang bosses with them. In short, he plunged headfirst into the subject matter. And when he resurfaced, he published his book and it became a sensation. He didn’t just say how much beer a biker drank a day, he dug deep and came up with the causes of the confrontation between bikers and American society – he figured it was all to do with the post-war period.”

“By the way, those damned Angels totally flipped out from all that fuss, they started reading the news about themselves over their morning beer, and they learned how to extort money for interviews, photos or videos. So when they found out about the book, they demanded a share of the author’s fee and beat the shit out of Thompson but that was nothing new for him. It wasn’t the first or the last scandal in his life. Scandal drives the media. That was the way he lived,” concluded Bikie what wouldn’t be his last story that evening. “A new term was even coined in his honor – ‘gonzo journalism’ – he was a real heavy guy. A legend.”

“He also wrote the book Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, I’ve read it,” Michelle added with a smile. “You’re not the only one here who knows Hunter Thompson.”

“If you get bored with that blockhead Isaac, I’m always at your disposal,” Bikie added respectfully after a brief pause. “You’re a totally fucking cool chick!”

“You could have left out the swearing, but coming from you, Bikie, it doesn’t sound crude,” Michelle laughed, winking at him flirtatiously.

“You can’t have her!” said Isaac, coming awake and drawing Michelle closer against him.

A ray of light, feebly shining through the peep in the curtains, woke Isaac up. The night was just about to surrender. The clock showed five in the morning. He looked around – a beautiful, nicely furnished bedroom.

By his side, on the large soft bed, Michelle was sleeping. Isaac gently drew her close against him. She sighed but didn’t wake up. Her warmth, her scent, she was so sexy! Isaac didn’t remember how they ended up in one bed, but now it didn’t matter.

Accidentally on purpose he moved, sliding his hand along her body – she was wearing some sort of a long thin T-shirt, tiny silky shorts and nothing more. Carefully, trying not to wake her up, Isaac began to kiss her neck, shoulders, her stomach,

squeezing her closer against him, at the same time taking her clothes off. He caressed and kissed her more and more persistently, barely able to control himself.

Not opening her eyes, Michelle smiled, hugged Isaac, letting him cover them with the blanket and take off the rest of her clothes.

For the first time in many years Isaac was making love with somebody he really wanted. Spilling all the accumulated passion, he again and again kissed and caressed Michelle by hugging her, then without hesitation, climbing under her blanket. Sleepy Michelle obediently allowed him to do what he wanted, smiled without opening her eyes, reciprocating. The night was endless and there was no time to sleep.



After the best night in his life Isaac arrived to Wolanski's villa as late as 12. Woke up Bikie and Wolanski, made a big cup of coffee for each of them and a huge helping of fried eggs.

Having woken up at night at Michelle's place, Isaac actually hadn't slept anymore. The liquor was wearing off, but the headache was getting worse. He felt like lying down but it was time to set out for Italy.

Peter suggested putting off their departure for a day. Isaac was for it of course. In the morning he read a text message on his phone sent by Michelle, with no words but three kisses and a little heart. He wanted to see her again. Just the two of them without his friends. The memories of the previous night were warm and inspiring. But iron-willed Bikie showed no sign at all that he'd been boozing heavily yesterday and insisted on going. He said they should not allow themselves to relax, that he was fine and ready to take the wheel. It wasn't his first binge, wouldn't be his last. Isaac really wanted to stay, but he had no arguments to object to Bikie, especially since he knew that the only reason he didn't want to go was Michelle. He made a feeble attempt to argue, explaining what he had with Michelle definitely was a relationship, passion and, probably, love.

"All the more reason for us to go! Michelle won't run away from you. As an expert on women's hearts, I can tell you Michelle is spoiled with men's attention so she'll find an original little character like you especially interesting. You caught her eye the way you are, stay that way. The ones who jump through hoops for her probably don't catch her."

"But all the same..."

"But all the same, we're going," Bikie interrupted. "Trust me, you can't think straight about her in any case. Get in the van and let's go!"

They set out five minutes later. Isaac only remembered about Vicky as they were driving past the hospital. He felt ashamed for forgetting to visit her and for letting Michelle drive her completely out of his mind. The second reason bothered him less. Maybe Michelle really could help him forget his sudden crush for Vicky?

It was sunny and roasting already. While Bikie drove, Isaac tried to doze away and asked him not to put on the music. Even in silence, trying to fall asleep on the winding streets of Monaco was pointless. Eventually the van climbed to the very top where the local road merged into the highway. Bikie was feeling great, and after Isaac took a pill for his headache he started recovering too. There was no point in driving in silence any longer, and it was strange not to talk at the outset of a new journey with the road stretching out ahead. Both friends were filled with contradictory emotions from the anticipation of adventure and a good hunt to a vague, indefinite fear of failure.

Ventimiglia was the first Italian town on their route. Like all the less prosperous inhabitants of the border regions of France, Isaac often visited its large local market. The low, modern buildings of the resort town were modestly mute about the ancient Roman consuls and emperors who used to frequent the area. The local Roman amphitheater, of which only ruins were left, once had been a place where humble slaves amused the rich.

Things were shaping up much the same way now, Isaac thought. Now the Veggies were the slaves, only by virtue of their intellectual abilities, not their physical ones. Their OE had been sold to those who had plenty of money and didn't need to donate their creativity. Isaac knew from history that the Roman Empire didn't fall in a single day, first it split into two parts – Western and Eastern. The Eastern part, which was also called Byzantium, was destined to flourish. Maybe that was because they stopped regarding slaves as things and started seeing them as people?

Isaac was still absorbed in his Ancient-Roman thoughts, pondering the idea of liberating the world from modern-day slavery, as they approached San Remo.

“Have you ever been to San Remo?” Bikie asked.

“Strangely enough, I haven’t, but I’ve heard it’s not as good as our resorts.”

“No resorts are as good as ours, but that’s no excuse for not going.”

“Then I’ll go see it one day.”

“I’ve been here, on my bike.”

“And where else have you been?” Isaac asked.

“No many places in a car. But on my bike I’ve been as far as Venice and Geneva, and Paris, naturally. The farthest points I went were Amsterdam and Copenhagen. In Copenhagen I lived for a whole week at the famous Freetown Christiania. And in Amsterdam I had such a wild spree in a coffee shop, I was afraid to go near my bike the day after. My head was spinning. And you probably know yourself; it’s the kind of city where you’re always looking for a reason to stay an extra day.”

“True. After our last trip, we definitely have to go back there. We could go on bike like you wanted and take a look at the windmills and tulips and all the other stuff.”

“I’ve never seen any old windmills, only the modern wind turbines. There are loads of them everywhere now, not just in Holland.”

In confirmation of these words a row of immensely high wind turbines appeared on their left, smoothly taking the air. Isaac counted eight of them, brand new ones with multiple propellers, fifty meters high, if not more. Once they all used to be white or grey, but these were painted all different colors. A pink one with black blades looked the zaniest. Where the row of turbines ended, an elevated road began with a tunnel following it. After the tunnel

there was a filling station. Biekie reduced speed and got into the line on the far right.

“I need an Italian cappuccino,” he explained, “and bathroom.”

At the filling station the guys ordered an absolutely delicious doppio cappuccino, and then sat down on plastic chairs under a sunshade outside.

It was amazing, you only had to cross the Italian border and the cappuccino, even at a filling station, was totally different. Either the Italian milk tasted better, or the water was purer, but the brew was divinely delicious.

“Italian cappuccino and a panini. Not just a snack, it’s a party!” said Isaac, smiling with pleasure.

“I don’t like paninis,” said Biekie. “I’m more a pizza man. I once read that Italians prefer Margarita to any other kind because it’s impossible to spoil it.”

“Before that I used to take ‘four cheeses’ or seafood, I liked it with salami too, and I never took a simple Margarita. What for, when there are such delicious kinds with all sorts of toppings and fancy doodads? But after I read that article, I ordered a Margarita. And I didn’t regret it. It really was delicious, and the cheapest kind as well. Since then I only eat Margarita, although I used to laugh at people who took it, I thought they were dummies.”

After they had their snack and cleared the table, the guys moved on. Anyone driving along this autostrada for the first time must surely think it the most beautiful high speed-road in the world. On the right side the sea and endless little Italian towns; on the left mountains buried in greenery.

Isaac was feeling much better. Every kilometer the van dived into a new tunnel and shot back out into the sun again. A dark stretch and a bright stretch. After the party at Wolanski’s he had begun a bright stretch, and he wanted it to be a long one.

“Driving into a tunnel is like dying, and the heavenly light at the end is like being reborn into a new life,” he said pensively.

Isaac believed in God, but not in a specific God; he regarded himself as agnostic and didn't believe in Christ, Allah or Buddha, but he served the commandments: thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, and thou shalt not commit evil. He liked the idea of karma too, it was like a shield over your head. Good deeds strengthened it, and villains' karma was rotten, it leaked. Too bad, though, this leakage was not immediate, but sometime in the future.

It was probably karma that had rescued him when he went to download his OE. It had saved him, or the angels had, the words made no difference. He would have become a Veggie a long time ago, if not for Elvis's fortunate appearance. And then there would never have been Michelle, or Bikie, or Peter, or the long-awaited patent in his life. He felt the urge to share these thoughts with Bikie.

“You know, I've thought about God lots of times. My parents were killed, Vicky is sick. But they were very good people, and there was nothing to punish them for. I can't say I feel glad about ordeals like that. I'm grateful for what he's given me, but he's taken away plenty of things too.”

“It depends what God is for you,” Bikie responded.

“As someone who knows about technology, I think of God not just from the viewpoint of faith, but through the prism of science too. For me, God first and foremost is justice and conscience. The ultimate justice based on the actions of each man. And from the standpoint of science, God is infinity.”

“I don't get it. What's infinity got to do with it?”

“Well look, what's more potent and universal, infinity of space or time?”

“Can you really compare them?”

“Yes. As being impossible for our awareness to grasp, you can. Both of them are inconceivable to man, and above all, they’re forever. No matter how far you go, no matter how long you live, there’s always something beyond, something still to come.

“So it turns out that time and infinite space are almost identical. Is there anything bigger than infinity? Longer than time? No. But you can say the same thing about God. What could be bigger and mightier than God? Nothing. So God is both infinity and time. Those are his different manifestations. You can’t say that there are lots of gods in infinity.”

“And it turns out that God didn’t create, but he gave us time and space to exist in. They’re a part of himself that he has shared with us.”

“So God is time?”

“Yes, and he is space too. When I was a kid I went to a planetarium for the first time, and I watched an incredible show, a 3D film on the dome of the building about the earth, the solar system, outer space, the galaxy, and the universe. There was loads of interesting stuff in it. And in the end they showed an ordinary man on the screen. The camera started pulling back and the man became a spot compared with a skyscraper, the skyscraper turned into a spot compared to a city, the city - compared to the planet, the planet to the sun.”

“Soon even the sun seemed like a microscopic speck compared with other stars, and in turn they were transformed into specks compared with the other big stars we know nowadays. And so on to infinity. A galaxy is a mere speck compared to the universe. There could be hosts of universes. Because, if it is not that way, then what comes after the universe if you fly an infinite distance away from it? There’ll be other universes and something much bigger. Possibly. The universe is a little piece of one of the atoms that make up the wing of some fantastic insect, sitting on some fantastic flower. And the flower grows...”

“In your imagination,” Bikie joked.

“Let me finish. At the end the screen shrank to a tiny dot and disappeared. They turned the lights on and I was dumbfounded, I didn’t think anything could astound me any more at that moment. My stepfather added something else, ‘Isaac,’ he said, ‘I can see you’ve realized how small we are, that there’s something much bigger, and bigger. But that’s not all, you can go in the opposite direction too with things getting smaller. We’re huge compared with some things, as huge as the universe is compared to us. Just imagine, we consist of molecules, and they consist of atoms, but if we had an immense, mega-powerful magnifying glass, we could enlarge an atom and see what it’s made out of, a host of complicated pieces each consisting of particles that are made up of a huge number of universes, which consist of hosts of galaxies, stars and planets, inhabited by someone or something. And so on to infinity’.”

“Yeah, infinity’s mighty stuff,” Bikie declared. He had listened to the theory of God with genuine interest. “You know, Isaac, they should put you on a stake! I’d even lend them my Zippo lighter to light it.” Just a second ago Bikie was serious too, but now he started hooting with laughter in his usual manner.

“A gaping black hole has just appeared in your karma, and the remains of your clueless brain have started evaporating out through it, Bikie.”

“No problem, it was you who just said that my brain is infinite. And even after it has evaporated almost to a frazzle there’ll still be something left. A handful of thoughts and my last three hundred Spartan soldier thoughts will kick ass on your legion of Persian fantasies.”

“That’s right, a battle of minds. Only be more accurate your last three hundred thoughts will all be about chicks. So your regiment is Spartan women, not Spartan warriors.”

“Please stop fucking with my brain!”

They roared with laughter and cracked jokes, teasing each other although the conversation had supposedly started with a serious subject. God probably invented humor and jovial people especially so that we wouldn't go gaga trying to understand what comes after the universe or die of boredom.

"Isaac, tell me how does your idea of God and infinity fit together with karma?"

"I don't know, I haven't thought about it."

"Well, I'll tell you. Karma is your identification number, your coordinates in infinity, God can see you after all in the context of infinity, and you're totally insubstantial. You're a tiny piece of space and an empty space."

Isaac couldn't tell if Bieke was serious. It could easily be a joke.

After two hours of traveling the van eventually reached Genoa.

"The great Genoese were born in this very city," thought Isaac, remembering Christopher Columbus. "The man whose curiosity and love of adventure, combined with impudence gave the world the discovery of America and brought gold flooding into the treasury of the Spanish crown causing the deaths of thousands of Indians."

At first what they saw looked like a fairly run-of-the-mill port and an industrial city but when they reached the historical center everything changed and the city became magnificent. Leaving the van in a car park, the two friends set off to Ferrari square to have a cup of coffee and a light snack. There was plenty worth looking at here.

"Isaac, the spirit of pioneering endeavor dwells in this city," said Bieke, obviously thinking about the same thing.

"Our goal is different. To find another pioneer. To sniff out his tobacco smell."



This was the first and last large city on their route. Their mood was excellent, the jokes were as feeble-minded as in the morning and the sun was scorching, forcing them to squint or shut their eyes. Isaac and Bikie were on a high. As for the goal of the journey, it could wait after all, they were not in the army, they did not have precise schedule to go by and were not expected to be stern and serious, with no right to down a couple of beers along the way. So they did. The mug of beer invigorated their philosophical mood.

“Bikie, we have a chance of becoming clairvoyant or terrorists. The world has become cleaner and less aggressive; there are no wars, less crime, a whole heap of achievements. Even the fact that Veggies’ children are stupid doesn’t mean that it cannot be fixed. We now see the world striving towards an ideal utopia. Should we fight that? We’re certain to be regarded as villains. The funniest thing is that a couple of months ago I would have tried to stop a pair of schizos like you and me.”

Bikie was already getting used to his friend’s fits of self-doubt. Unlike Isaac, he had no second thoughts; he was calm as a boa constrictor.

“The world won’t lose the technologies it has already gained from OE and there’s nothing else good left to look forward to. And don’t quail, before we hack in, we’ll weigh everything up one more time. Our goal is to find the professor but we don’t know yet whether we’ll convince him to help us. Now, why don’t you just take a look at those lovelies?”

At that, Bikie strolled rakishly toward two female tourists and introduced himself.

The girls turned out to be Swedish from Stockholm, Stephanie and Carla. They had arrived in the morning on a cruise liner that was leaving for Rome tomorrow. In three days of sailing they had become thoroughly bored and were glad to keep Bikie’s and Isaac’s company. They had a great time as Bikie spun tales

about the dangerous journey through Africa that the guys had ahead of them, all the way down to Johannesburg, and invited them to look over the van, in which he and Isaac were going to live, sleep and cook as they cut across the dark continent, all the time bewailing the fact that they'd probably miss European women terribly on the journey.

It wasn't clear if Stephanie and Carla believed in the African trek, but they went to look at the van. Isaac preferred to leave the van and the free-and-easy socializing entirely to Bikie despite the beer he had drunk and the obvious interest he could feel from Stephanie. Michelle Blanche was firmly stuck in his head... and Vicky too. He definitely wasn't interested in other girls. Isaac tried to drive away his lustful thoughts of Vicky by recalling memories from their childhood, telling himself that they were friends and virtual brother and sister. "No, a confession of that sort will definitely shock her," he thought. And the last thing he wanted to do was to unsettle Vicky and drive her away from him. He had to admit that even when he started thinking about her, when thoughts of love came up, he caught himself switching back to Michelle. That was probably for the best.

Isaac went for a stroll through Genoa Old Port. In the meantime, Bikie, without batting an eye, raked both girlfriends up in his arms, promising to tell them about the dangerous hippopotamias well as the cannibalistic customs of some tribes. He began by saying that a male lion usually had several females at once and they made love up to seventeen times a day. The last thing that Isaac heard as he clambered out of the van was the beginning of a story about how girls in Africa often didn't wear any blouses, preferring the natural look of nakedness.

"The vanquisher of Africa" didn't bother to call or text Isaac when the girls left, he fell asleep right there in the middle of the van on top of a crumpled sleeping bag. That was how the furious Isaac found Bikie, all alone, after freezing outside until four in the

morning. He was forced to go back to the van, even though his friend hadn't answered any of his calls or texts.

The next morning they boarded a ferry to Sardinia.

"Just look at that view! I wonder how some Monet or Picasso would have painted it."

"He'd have painted it wonderfully. He'd have painted you yesterday pretty well too. With your pants down in a van littered with all sorts of garbage and beer bottles."

"No one drove you away yesterday. You went yourself. You have no damn reason to be angry. Why don't you just look how beautiful this is?"

"I think I'll postpone the nature for a while and get a couple of hours' sleep."

But Isaac couldn't go to sleep, the van was stinking of hangover and in the end he had to join Bikie on the deck.

"Nature is an infinity of masterpieces, and any work of art attempts to create a composition, colors and depth that are equal to nature," Bikie said with a wink, emphasizing the word "infinity".

"I wonder," Isaac ignored his words, "how much creativity Picasso had? Must have been a lot."

"It would be funny to find out that he was average, while the people who promoted him have a really high one. Now that would be a hoot."

"Remember the artist who became famous after he became a Veggie? After the fact it turned out that he had had a super load of OE, he was one of the highest rated downloaders. The journalists trumpeted the story about, and people started admiring his paintings. He was immediately declared one of the greatest geniuses of modern times."

"It have always been that way, people often started idolizing a genius only after he died in misery. Not just painters. It happened with Mozart, who died totally destitute. And since he

was writing a Requiem when he became fatally ill, a popular rumor spread that he was writing it for himself. Public Relations, although it wasn't called PR in those days. If people weren't so fond of spoofs, who knows, maybe all his brilliant compositions would have sunk into oblivion."

"Wouldn't it be great to find out Mozart's rating?"

"Forget about the dead. We've got to worry about the living."

The fairy danced slightly on the waves of oncoming ship and Isaac felt sick at once.

When they reached Sardinia, Isaac and Bikie went straight to Porto Cervo. The cigar shop was located somewhere in its vicinity. Their stomachs were rumbling and they decided to eat something before putting their plan into action.

They took a table at the veranda of a little restaurant that caught their eye and started discussing once again what the connection between Professor Link and his assistant might be.

The sickly aroma of gossip hung in the air, but the two friends felt that they were obliged to understand the role of the Japanese woman, not out of curiosity, but for the good of the cause, and so they could not avoid the subject.

Everything suggested that the professor was bound to her by more than just sex. She bought his cigars for him, so she could not be just a plain call girl. A lover, friend, assistant? What?"

Isaac suddenly stared, wide-eyed, and his lips stretched out into a broad smile.

"I think that's her," he said, jabbing his finger towards a woman walking past nearby, who looked Filipino or Malaysian.

"Oh, sure, the first Asian woman we see will turn out to be the very one we're looking for! Of course, you're a flukey bastard Isaac, but not that flukey."

“What does flukiness have to do with it? It’s just analysis and precise calculation. With your rating you can’t possibly understand me,” Isaac snapped.

“Right, right, definitely. If you multiply the length of the equator by the number of Japanese and divide it by the number of Chinese, take away the square root of ginseng, then you’re bound to get thirteen. If you get bullshit, it means your calculations were fuckin’ bullshit too.”

“Hey, cut the swearing!”

“I’m not swearing even though your calculations make me feel like it.”

“No Bikie, swearing is really the lowest of the low.”

“Stop bitching, you’re just jealous of me.”

“Why, I wonder, would I be jealous of you?”

“You’re jealous of my light-blond locks.”

“What blond locks, you’ve got dark hair.”

“The light-blond locks those pretty little Swedish girls left on my sleeping bag!”

“No, Bikie, I rather feel bad for you, my dear friend!! What sort of pain in the neck do you have to be to make girls’ hair come off?”

“No way, they tore it out in that surge of passion I made them feel. But don’t be upset, I promised to be your mentor in handling women. I think that after a couple of years’ intensive training, I’ll let you move on to practicing – tender kisses.”

“You can kiss my ass...tenderly. And record your advice and talk lines for me, the ones that trimmed the Swedish girls’ hair so sweetly. If they lose their hair like that, I’ll just hold the Dictaphone up to my face and use it to shave with.”

Afterwards they walked round the sunny little streets of the town with full stomachs and in an excellent mood.

The superb resort town really lifted their spirits. Every step brought into view hosts of bars, little restaurants, cafes and other pleasant establishments.

Bikie stuck the bandana on his head, slipped on a pair of mirror sunglasses and put on long black shorts. Isaac dressed even more lightly: his entire outfit consisted of a tank top, flip-flops and shorts. There was no shower in the van, but they could walk to the beach and take a dip.

Having returned to the van, Isaac and Bikie started the engine and drove to the cigar shop. It turned out to be in the outskirts of the town, although previously it had been on an upmarket shopping street. There was an upside to that – unlike in the center, here there were convenient observation sites where they could easily park. The shop window displayed hookahs, wine bottles and all sorts of bits and pieces including a cigar box and a humidior.

Driven by the thrill of the chase, Isaac suggested going in, but Bikie objected.

“How could you be so careless? We obviously don’t fit the part of rich smokers or their couriers.”

“Cool it! Half the store window is filled with cheap garbage. It’s a long time since they sold anything but cigars. Come on.”

Getting into the shop turned out to be impossible. A note stuck to inside of the glass said that the shop would open in half an hour. How long ago it had been put up was not clear, and the disappointed friends went back to the van. It was stuffy inside so Bikie parked the van under some trees to cool down.

Bikie took out his laptop and fiddled with it, trying to find a Wi-Fi connection. Isaac watched the entrance, waiting for the owner or a shop assistant to show up. Long after the lunch siesta crowds flooded down the street, there was not a soul around, just the baking sunlight and hot asphalt frazzling the air. Bikie started the engine to give it at least a small blast of coolness from the air conditioning. The two friends didn’t feel like talking; you might have thought they have been overcome by holiday-resort lethargy, but they were really trying to focus. It felt like at any moment Link would come to the shop and everything would work out just fine.

Eventually an elderly Italian came up to the store, opened the door and took the note off the glass. Five minutes later the friends were already inside, just an ordinary little shop, nothing remarkable. Bikie asked about the internet, and a secondhand mini-router was unearthed from among the masses of odds and ends on the shelves. While the shop assistant checked to see that it was still working, Isaac pointed out to Bikie a fridge with a glass door, with neat rows of cigars inside, in boxes and loose. Bikie smiled contentedly. The cigars were found, all right – the only thing left was to wait for the buyer.

After they spent several hours in the van and not a single customer entered the shop their excitement evaporated. They noticed a policeman coming in their direction. He walked up to the van, peered inside vigilantly, knocked on the window on the driver's side, and when Bikie opened it, asked an unambiguous question:

“What are you doing here, boys?”

“We're tourists,” Bikie replied brightly, keeping his grip on the laptop. “First day on the island. We still haven't figured out where to stay, so we're sitting here arguing and looking at the sites of the hotels nearby.”

“Move on, guys, will you,” said the policeman, in a genial mood. “We've had a complaint from the old woman in the house opposite. She says some strange characters got out of a van and then mysteriously went back, and now they're sitting there with the engine running and making a stink, and are obviously plotting something. I understand everything, but she's an old lady, why upset her?”

“OK, chief,” Bikie responded. “Already gone.”

The policeman walked away. They drove the van away a bit, and Isaac nodded in the direction of the shop. The shopman locked the door and was twirling the handle of the shutters, covering the display window. The guys could leave without any



qualms of conscience: the first day of surveillance was officially over.

They stopped a kilometer from the shop, at an empty lot where the van was concealed from the road by bushes. Bikie came up with an idea – let technology do the surveillance. In a blink of an eye he had linked up a web camera from his arsenal to the laptop and fine-tuned the image.

It was almost dark when the friends got out of the van to stretch their legs, grab a bite and install the web camera opposite the cigar shop.

When they reached the site, Isaac noticed an old woman on a chair in front of one of the houses. She was either dozing or enjoying the long-awaited coolness of the evening with her eyes blissfully closed. Bikie caught Isaac's glance and nodded. They would have to wait. There was a little grocery shop on the ground floor just behind the woman.

"Clear enough, life teaches proprietors to be vigilant," Bikie explained to Isaac. "Or maybe she's just feeling bored."

They took up a position on a municipal bench, pretending to be tourists resting after a hike and ate the pizza they got on the way. The old lady couldn't see them, but if they turned round and craned their necks, they could see if she was still on her chair.

It took quite some time before the woman finally got to her feet, yawned, grabbed her chair and retreated in to the house.

"I'll take the chair inside, so the damn thieves won't steal it!" said Bikie, imitating an old woman's voice so convincingly that Isaac could barely hold a laugh.

Mindful of their earlier error, the friends took their time. They waited until the light came on upstairs, which meant the old woman was in her bedroom, and went out again, indicating that she had gone to bed. Only then did Isaac and Bikie get up and stroll gently in the direction of the cigar shop.

Pretending to take an intense interest in a blossoming bougainvillea, Bikie quickly fixed the camera on the fence, hardly even slowing his already-slow stride. To look even more natural, he theatrically sniffed in the air from one of the lush purple flowers, breathed out noisily and walked on, whistling, beside Isaac. Isaac teased his friend, saying that today Bikie had indeed revealed his acting talent.

The entire next day they observed the shop remotely. There was only one customer in the morning, an elderly gentleman with a cane and another three in the early evening.

“Now that’s what I call a rush of customers!” Isaac quipped acidly. “Bikie, maybe we need to think of something else?”

“I already have,” Bikie replied. “I’ve written a little program that responds to changes in the video image. It will be activated every time someone goes into the shop. Something like a remote motion-detecting sensor. Then at least we won’t have to spend the whole day long staring into the monitor. When someone goes in, the computer will chirp to us. And tomorrow we’ll visit the shop again and I’ll put another web camera inside. We’ll be able to see who’s buying.”

The third week of surveillance was coming to an end, and the friends were gradually giving in to despair. The program that observed movement at the shop was working excellently, with no glitches, but in all this time cigars had only been bought on eight occasions. The demand for smoking material really was tending towards zero. They took turns keeping watch, making periodical visits to the port.

They even wanted to talk to a salesman from the cigar shop to ask about the buyers, or with that watchful grandma, but they were afraid to scare off the Professor. You never know if the

seller knows Link, and will warn him. So much wasted effort wasn't worth the risk. This shop was their only lead, to risk it was impossible, so they decided to be patient and wait.

Sometimes cigars actually got bought.

Isaac followed the first customer, who turned out to be a steward from the luxury yacht Carbonica, obviously not the right lead. Isaac had decided that they would follow all the customers who bought cigars. The next box was bought by some local individual with a beautiful villa in the town's center. On three occasions cigars were delivered to different yachts, and once to a hotel. On one occasion Biekie had to drive off in a hurry and follow a young guy on a scooter to the nearby town of La Maddalena, while Isaac kept watch from the bench with his computer. And on one occasion they had to drive all the way to Cagliari, three hundred kilometers round trip, almost seven hours. The damn van guzzled so much petrol that they had to fill the tank and then hurtle furiously down the road to catch up with the car carrying the buyer. Thank God, they did. It was all futile. On three occasions the owner of the cigar shop delivered cigars himself, every time to yachts.

Isaac saw the fridge with cigars so often that he started dreaming about it. And Biekie knew the exact number of cigars in it, so he could easily tell how many cigars one or another customer had bought.

Meanwhile the money Wolanski had given them was running out. The island of Sardinia had proved to be far from cheap. Eventually they decided to sell the van since living in it had become unbearable, it was so hot and constantly burning petrol by using the air conditioner was getting too expensive. They made a serious loss on the sale of the van, but they didn't really have any options. They moved into a budget hotel three hundred meters from the cigar shop and hired a cheap scooter for operational movements around the island.

Their frustration and despair would have overflowed long ago, but after the van, living in a cheap little hotel seemed almost like heaven. The relaxing atmosphere of the cozy Italian island also helped keep their dark forebodings at bay. Their evening walks immediately after the cigar shop closed would beat any psychiatrist treating an onslaught of a depression. Every morning and every evening Isaac jogged five kilometers to the sports ground where he worked out for an hour and then ran back. A little more of that and he would have to buy new clothes again.

Days were exhausting, but evenings after the shop closed was when they could walk to the port or take a swim, and that inspired them with hope for the next day. The backdrop of luxury yachts and laid-back people had a calming effect on them. Now and again Bikie picked up another female tourist, while Isaac and Michelle exchanged phone calls and messages more and more often. He lied to her, saying that Bikie and he were already in Palermo, fearing that Michelle might decide to come to Sardinia. She probably had loads of friends here. He really did not want her to know that Bikie and he were living in a two-star hotel with a communal shower and a kitchen in the corridor. After Wolanski's villa, his room seemed like the ultimate slum.

After all, the womanizer Bikie had been right. After Isaac's promising start with Michelle, the involuntary separation only enflamed their mutual feelings. This was especially true with Michelle, who was accustomed to men being willing to drop everything for her sake. The mysterious Isaac had gone zooming off on his own business for nearly a month which made him all the more interesting in her eyes. And what sort of business he had was a mystery too, but he obviously didn't look like a criminal or a scam artist. No matter how hard she tried to find out where he was and what he was doing, she got nowhere. Nothing but excuses and evasive explanations.

Isaac was not glad to be stuck on the damned island either. From what the doctors said, Vicky was improving, but there was still no question of recovery without surgical intervention. He wanted to see Michelle really badly but then he would have had to tell her everything and he couldn't. It would be bad for the cause, and there was no point in putting the girl to unnecessary risk.

Isaac phoned Vicky's hospital too having to explain every time that he was her brother, gradually returning him to that role for real, so he decided that his temporary lust for her was a result of stress and purely brotherly concern. Apart from everything else, getting to know Michelle has been very timely in that way too.

Still there was this one detail that was bothering commissioner Pellegrini, and he called back in the Monaco branch of *Collective Mind* to find out what the board that had disappeared consisted of. The system administrator, now fit and well, told him that the most valuable part lost was a memory card, something that really ought to have been backed up constantly, but the instructions were not to do that, in order to protect from copies being made of the classified data base. Pellegrini frowned with the man's ability to bore one to death with his work talk, thanked him for assisting the police and hung up without waiting for more explanations. Pellegrini hated people who talked too much and off the point, in fact he was afraid of them. That was just about all that he feared in life.

As an experienced army officer, he had been through a lot and had a reduced sense of fear. The commissioner had also conducted hostage negotiations at least three times, all of them successful. Even though the last time, the success was relative – he had to shoot the hostage-taker in front of a young teenager.

After talking the perpetrator into losing his guard with a promise to meet his conditions and go even further, Pellegrini put a bullet through his head. It was perfectly legal since the criminal was using the kid as a human shield threatening to kill him.

There was also a similar incident, when a deranged drug addict was so desperate for a fix that he demanded his wife sell their only daughter, yelling that she was no good for anything anyway. He was so badly disturbed that he couldn't even explain who to sell her to, he just yelled with foam on his lips, holding a knife to the girl's throat.

A neighbor saw the quarrel from the window opposite and called the police. The situation was critical; the junkie's hands were trembling, leaving scratches at the child's throat. He could blow his top any moment.

The commissioner decided to act without waiting for the backup team. He assessed the situation and suggested to the junkie to take painkillers while waiting for heroin to be brought.

Holding out his open left hand with the pills, the commissioner coaxed the freak to make a couple of steps towards him to take a look at them. Seizing the moment when the junkie loosened his grip to transfer the little girl to his other arm and the knifepoint lowered some distance away from the child's throat, Pellegrini flung up his right hand and put a bullet straight into the man's heart. In two swift bounds he reached the man before he fell down and grabbed hold of the little girl. The knife and the body fell almost simultaneously. The knife sprang back off the wooden floor with the blade pointing upwards and at that instant the body fell onto it. It was a ghoulisn sight. The little girl didn't even scream, she was completely stunned with fear. The commissioner liked to recall this story, but it at the same time he didn't really like it.

Later he visited the girl, made sure that she received free psychological care and even gave a part of his bonus to the

mother, so that she could at least buy something for herself. Their home resembled a garbage dump: everything that could be sold or exchanged for drugs was gone and they used all sorts of trash in the household. The atrocious father used to bring home from the dumps everything that could have any value and there were even two cassette players there, which he obviously had not yet gainfully disposed of.

Two years later when the little girl turned seven, she started calling the commissioner daddy, and he called her his goddaughter.

The most repulsive memory was the way the dropped knife ripped open the man's stomach, with guts spilling out and feces flowing out on the floor. Sometimes, when he stayed on late at work, the commissioner summoned up this picture from his memory to suppress his hunger pangs.

Right now it was time to end the working day, but Pellegrini kept on sitting there, going through his notes again while suppressing his hunger. The notepad fell out of his hands and opened at a page with the names of the witnesses to the terrorist attack. One of them was a dark horse, who had been overlooked somehow. Not even Captain Robert had said much; just that he was an ordinary young guy and the captain had checked him out and let him go. Pellegrini arranged a working trip to Monaco in order to meet him.

However the search for Isaac Leroy was futile but Pellegrini, giggling to himself that the police had taken the victim for an accomplice, got a copy of his interrogation at the police station. There also was a registered report from certain Bongardt, a lawyer, and Leroy's explanatory note. Post-traumatic syndrome as it is, Robert said, and Pellegrini agreed. As a real professional, he very soon dug up a whole heap of information about Isaac, though the guy himself was nowhere to be found. Leroy's phone has registered for roaming on Sardinia. So he was in Italy, at least.

The fourth week was coming to an end without any developments. After supper they felt drowsy, and it was time to get back to the hotel. Every time they put this moment off as long as possible since the bench on the street was way better than their room.

“Oh, it’s time to get up,” Bikie moaned. “Get up or get it up? My smartphone always used to confuse the two meanings, automatically switching to ‘get it up’. The software developers were obviously guys with a lewd sense of humor.”

As always Bikie had the urge to talk about women.

“It would be good to get it up and in right now. The last one I had was really wild, well you don’t remember, of course... but anyway, she doesn’t count. As for an all night stand there were just the two Swedish girls, and a really long time ago a girl from the beach who was really boozed up and took a mighty effort to entice me.

Bikie told the story with all the details, but Isaac wasn’t listening. Now it seemed to him that all the conclusions were far-fetched, that Link wasn’t there, the money was running out and the future was obscure.

Another two futile days passed in surveillance of the cigar shop, and their hopes for success dissipated. They started looking for an alternative lead and reviewed the reports about Link over and over again but no new findings or ideas came up. A couple of times they took off on the scooter following buyers who left the shop. It was all pointless, all futile. The first time the cigars were delivered to a yacht again, the second time to a villa drowning in greenery where a respectable looking little old man met the courier at the gates and immediately lit up a specimen from his purchase. It was the same house in La Margarita that Bikie had



already been to. This time they even saw the smoker, and it was not Link.

The fifth week of surveillance was just beginning. The laptop chirped – they had brought a new batch of goods to the shop, but the computer signaled again almost immediately. Isaac looked at the screen. He saw the door of the little shop closing behind an elegant figure in a light dress.

“Bikie! A girl, a girl has gone into the shop! She looked Oriental and quite young, as far as I can tell. She hasn’t been there before. You can’t see her now, but the salesman is rummaging in the fridge!”

They ran out of their hotel, hopped on the scooter, started the engine and stood by waiting. Within a minute, the girl came out and walked towards her car, holding a large package. The friends managed to get a good look at her as she got into the driver’s seat. It was Yoshi! Her car set off unhurriedly. Bikie and Isaac followed.

Pellegrini found out that Isaac's apartment had been repossessed by the bank for debts and where he lived now was unclear. Questioning the neighbors didn't turn up anything. Isaac hadn't been on friendly terms with any of them.

Isaac's sister was in hospital, in a coma. Pellegrini visited the hospital and asked them to call him immediately if Monsieur Leroy shows up.

The commissioner had a pleasant, warm feeling in his chest — as always when he was not idling but focused on a case. Events and facts looked strange: Isaac moved out and lives nowhere, came to the Agency, but didn't download. All other donors injured in the attack went through afterwards, and this guy never returned. Though the need for the money didn't disappear. Maybe his sister is just a cover? On top of that, he sat together with Henri Cavalier, who suspiciously refused to communicate. That statement was strange. Also, judging by the roaming, Isaac visited Amsterdam, and London, and not just in somewhere, but at the University of Link.

Pellegrini was passing down his hotel room like a tiger in the cage. This long-forgotten feeling — it will soon find and reveal the offender. That everything is a coincidence with a lot of accidents occurring around the innocent loser, Pellegrini couldn't believe. Isaac was clearly fishy. "Suspected partaking in the attack," - the Commissioner made a mark opposite to the name Leroy in his notepad. After writing that, the commissioner decided to speak with the physician of Isaac's sister. This conversation could explain something.

“Let's go through it again.” Bikie was a bit nervous.

“Again, we’re reporters from a student journal and we’ve come to interview Professor Link.” Isaac wasn’t nervous, on the contrary, he had calmed down a little. “That cover story works just fine.”

They were standing near the gates of a high wall around a mansion where Yoshi had dropped out of sight the day before. In the last few days they had thought through lots of different options. The absence of an entry phone seemed strange, they could not see any security cameras either. Bikie had wanted to launch a small drone, but Isaac was afraid its noise would alarm their game. And they did not have the money for an expensive noiseless one.

The request of an interview would astonish anybody who opens the gate.

If the staff in the villa didn’t know who they were really working for, then they must know him by a different name. They would probably repeat the name “Link” and tell the guys they had the wrong address, but if the person who opened the door knew, he would be startled thus giving himself away. He would ask who had come and say they were mistaken, or something of the kind only after a pause. Since there were no cameras, someone would open up in person and a person’s face could say a lot.

In any case they would ask to pass on a note that said the following:

“Dear Professor Link,

We kindly request you to grant us an interview. You need have no concern that your whereabouts are known to anyone but us. We are neither enemies nor friends of yours, but we need your help. We ask you to meet us in token of friendship. If you turn us down, it will be pointless for us to keep your location secret.

Yours sincerely, Isaac and Bikie.

“PS. Please call the following number, we are staying in a hotel not far from you.”

In the case that they refused to take the note, Isaac and Bikie had planned to leave. Half an hour later a pizza delivery man drove up to the house and handed over the note together with the bill while Isaac and Bikie remained at a safe distance.

Bikie thought they had to give Link three hours to consider, assuming that he wasn't likely to contact the police, and if he had any backup, it could only come from the Agency. But that was unlikely – plus it would take at least three or four hours.

The guys shelled out for a second hotel room, on the ground floor with an exit into a garden. The hotel was by no means cheap, with air conditioning and a mini-bar, which, of course, were totally useless for the operation. But one big plus was the market nearby, and several tourist cafes and souvenir shops. Basically a busy spot. Bikie bought more video cameras and a local mobile phone - a prepaid one for visitors, that didn't require registering.

They set up the notebook and a web camera in the room. The broadcast signal went directly into the Internet, and it was impossible to determine quickly who was watching it and where from. The telephone number in the note was cunningly redirected, and the phone itself was linked to the computer.

Bikie had done something smart: after a minute of the ringing tone, a program cut in that sent the call into the web. But the phone carried on ringing, and you could still answer it, or you could answer via the Internet.

“In short, it's not possible to tell exactly where we are,” said Bikie, explaining his scheme.

Bikie hung a mirror over the door so they could see the window. He blocked off the keyhole on the inside with three layers of tape and covered the crack under the door with a rug, on which he dumped a night-table. It was impossible to get into the room without being noticed.

Very soon Isaac and Bikie were standing in front of the fancy hammered gate of Link's supposed villa and then they saw

the first camera. Not on the wall, but hidden inside the garden which explained why they hadn't noticed it yesterday. Isaac hesitated for a moment and rang the bell.

"Good afternoon, who are you looking for?" a voice that obviously belonged to a woman, answered in Italian a minute later.

There's no denying it, you live and learn. Sometimes you lose sight of elementary, but important, details. The guys were so carried away with designing a plan of retreat and preventing a professional from finding them, that they had overlooked a simple contingency: that no one would come up to the gate; there was simply a voice. The call button was on the wicket door, but the entry phone was hidden on the other side of the metalwork.

Bikie shrugged in confusion. Isaac feverishly tried to think of something.

The pause started dragging out and the voice asked again, this time in broken English:

"Pardon me, who are you looking for?"

"We, we... is this house number five?" asked Isaac, playing for time.

"Yes it is. Are you looking for someone? Who are you?"

"Could you please ask the owner to come to the intercom?"

"Who? The owner? What for, on what business? Stop playing games, young people, or I'll call the police."

"We have a personal letter for him."

"There's a letterbox on the left. Drop it in there."

"It's a confidential letter, we'd like to be sure it won't get lost."

The only reply they heard was the entry phone being switched off.

They stood there for a while, bewildered, not knowing what to do, whether leave the letter, ring again, or just go.

Finally Isaac pressed the call button once more.

“Now what?” The voice was by no means as cordial as the first time.

“Signora, I’ve dropped the letter in the box as you requested. It is a letter from the owner’s home country, we have travelled thousands of kilometers to deliver it. It’s very urgent and important. Please be sure to pass on greetings from Elvis.”

“Very well.”

The line went dead again.

“What has Elvis got to do with this?” Bikié asked.

“Nothing at all. This is just to make them curious. To make them read the note sooner.”

Once they were sure the envelope had been collected from the box, the guys dashed to a café they had chosen earlier to watch the web camera.

The next three hours seemed like three days. No call came. No one came to their hotel. No one drove out of the professor's villa. Nothing.

"What if he's not home?"

"Sleeping?"

"Or they didn't give him the letter?"

Many questions, no answers. Both were nervous.

"All right, let's think. If it's not Link, then whoever it is would clearly have called the police by now. The letter can be interpreted in various ways, even as a threat."

"That means Link either hasn't read it yet, or he doesn't know how to react."

"Or maybe they took us for pranksters?"

Take a look at us, we're obviously not street riffraff. We're too old to be simply monkeying around."

"Let's see again: if it's not Link, anyone who got the note would call either the police or us. Or they would get one of the staff to call, just to be on the safe side."

"True."

"Then if there's no call, it is Link after all."

"I hope so. Yes, it's definitely Link! We saw Yoshi."

"And how long can we wait for him to react?"

"Let's wait until morning. We were there around lunchtime, let's suppose he got all the morning papers and the next viewing, including our letter, and won't be until tomorrow morning."

"What if he doesn't read his mail at all, just emails?"

"Well, we said quite clearly that the letter was for the villa's owner."

"All right, we'll wait until morning, but what do we do then if he doesn't call?"

"Look, I don't have a clue!"

“As you wish,” Bikie shrugged.

“All right, we’ll wait until morning, but what do we do then if he doesn’t call?”

“Well, tomorrow is a new day, you know.”

“If you say so.”

Suddenly the phone rang which made Isaac and Bikie almost jump out of their skin. Isaac waited a few seconds to pull himself together and answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Good evening. I’ve been handed a very strange letter from you and, to be honest, I don’t understand a thing.” The voice had a slight nasal twang, as if the nose was squeezed shut by something.

“A-ah, yes, I sent you a letter.”

“Perhaps you’ll explain what it means?”

“It means that we want to meet you.”

“Me? What for? I think it must be some kind of mistake.”

“No, Mr. Link, it isn’t a mistake.” Isaac was confident again now. “We put in a lot of work to find you, and we did. There’s no point in playing games with us. You’re dealing with a couple of pretty smart guys here. Believe me, it would be best for us to meet and discuss everything. I recognized your voice, I’ve listened to your lecture on YouTube, so there’s no doubt. Either you meet with us or I post my conclusions about your whereabouts on popular forums, you decide. If I’m wrong, then sorry. The police will come and you can try to prove that you’re not Professor Link after all.”

“According to my calculations, you should have done that a couple of hours ago. But you haven’t.”

“But...”

“Of course, if the meeting really is so important to you, I don’t think you’re ready to flush the results of your work down the pan because of an hour or two’s delay.”



“True, but it doesn’t mean I’m not prepared to flush them down the pan at all. I quite definitely am. If the result is negative, it can be discarded.”

“All right,” said the voice, losing its nasal twang. “Let’s not waste time on words. What do you want?”

“I told you, I want to meet.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Why not, I wonder?”

“You’re probably in Sardinia now?”

“And aren’t you?”

“Not any longer. I’m in Capri. Or maybe in Corsica.”

“Won’t you get tired of running? We found you, so we can find you again. But not just for ourselves any longer, for everyone. How did you sneak out of the villa, by the way?”

“Now that, young man, is none of your business. So let’s manage this by phone somehow. By the way, it’s your fault I had to leave Sardinia.”

“Professor, the questions I want to discuss are not for telephone.”

“You mean you want to discuss something illegal with me?”

“That depends how you look at it. I’d prefer to describe the situation as fighting an epidemic.”

“You’ve probably got the wrong man. I’m not a specialist in that area.”

“Well, I think there is one epidemic where it’s impossible to find another specialist of your level.”

“Ah, I think I’m beginning to understand what you’re driving at, young man.”

“Professor, think about it. There are plenty of clues to your presence left at the villa. Fingerprints, hair and all sorts of things. You’re a very visible individual. And so is your Japanese girlfriend. How far away will you sail? Where to, Japan?”

“That’s enough,” said Professor. “We can meet. My driver will pick you up at the hotel tomorrow morning and bring you to me.”

“Straight to Capri?”

“Straight to me.”

After the conversation Isaac did not feel exactly overjoyed. Finding Link should have been a cause for celebration, but the conversation did not go well.

Bikie nervously ran through every idea that might enter the professor’s head.

“What if he decides to get rid of us? Poison us? Or hand us over to the police?”

He hastily threw together a program that would send a pile of information to all his friends at a certain moment. Or not send it, if it received the command to cancel. He thought that would keep Link under control.

In the morning Isaac purchased an absorbent gel used in cases of food poisoning in a chemist’s shop. He ate half a tube of the jellyfish-like goo himself and stuffed Bikie with it too.

“It ought to neutralize a dose of poison or a sleeping draught,” he explained. “I’m more concerned about soporifics.”

Bikie laughed and said that in any case he wouldn’t accept any cups of tea or coffee from the professor’s hands and Isaac shouldn’t either. In addition, after inspecting the contents of his bag, he took a knife out of it and stuck it in his belt. Now armed, he calmed down a bit.

“He won’t try to kill us. What’s the point? He realizes we can put out information about him. He doesn’t know how many of us there are. I didn’t need to swallow that gel of yours. If we found him, it means we’re not idiots, so we would take precautions. And you pressed him hard on the phone. I liked that.”

“You know, to be quite honest, I really feel like a drink.”

“With that gel in your stomach?”

“Yeah, what a bummer. Seems like we do things right, but something always gets overlooked.”

“Drop it. The important thing is, we found him.”

Isaac nodded and started dashing off a text for Michelle on his mobile phone. Sensing danger ahead, he wanted to write to someone really close to him. The morning was already almost over, the clock showed past eleven, and Link’s driver still wasn’t there. They decided go to the lobby and have a cup of coffee – they needed to kill time somehow.

The car arrived at the hotel at midday. It was an ordinary taxi. The driver spoke neither English nor French. He said they were going to Porto Cervo, smiled at all their questions and answered in Italian. The language is very similar to French, so they were able to understand that he had been called in a usual way, asked to pick up two men at the hotel and take them to the sea port. It was mostly grand yachts that moored at Porto Cervo, the driver explained. But in every luxury port, you could also find ordinary fishing boats and smaller yachts too.

Isaac and Biekie were met by a morose character who introduced himself as the professor's assistant. His dour look sat strangely with the jolly red color of his beard and a gleaming bald patch. And his sudden appearance confused them even more: how would Link deal with them? What should they expect?

Meanwhile, the assistant handed each of them a package containing shorts, a tank top, and flip-flops. There were also two baseball caps with the inscription "Sardinia".

They went to the nearby beach to get changed and were given a key to a locker where they could leave their things. They looked funny. In fact, the clothes fit Biekie, but hung baggily on Isaac. Biekie tried to conceal the knife in his shorts but he couldn't so he left it in the locker.

Redbeard waited for them to get changed and led them along the quayside. Isaac examined with curiosity the little boats and the large yachts and ships standing a bit further off shore. They came to a rather large sixty-foot sailing yacht, old but well-kept. The sail was furled, the engine running.

"Board the yacht, please," Redbeard said.

They walked across a springy gangway to where an Italian captain was waiting for them. As soon as they were all on board, he cast off the mooring rope and the yacht put out to sea.

There was a slight swell and Isaac started feeling sick. The captain noticed and handed him a pill.

“For seasickness,” he explained.

Isaac thanked him, pretended that he was feeling much worse, leaned over the side and flung the pill away.

“Boss, I could do with a pill too!” asked Bikie. He took it and tucked the pill in his pocket inconspicuously.

“What for?” Isaac said quietly.

“Maybe we can check to see if it’s a poison,” Bikie whispered with his lips barely moving. “Maybe even test it on our professor. Or on Redbeard there.”

Bikie was upset at being left without his knife, and he felt calmer knowing that at least he had a pill of “poison”.

The yacht kept sailing away from the shore. The guys sat at the bow and gazed at the sea’s blue, rippling undulations. They weren’t sailing to Capri like this. Perhaps the professor was coming to meet them on another yacht?

Suddenly a sharp voice behind them said:

“Well then, congratulations! You managed to do what no one else could. You found me.”

Isaac swung around. A short man of about sixty was emerging from a small cabin that Isaac had thought was empty. He straightened up to his full height and the guys immediately recognized that cunning glint in his narrowed eyes: the professor had gazed out at them so many times from various photographs.

His thick, back-combed hair with very marked receding temples glinted in the sun, dividing the upper part of his head in two, which gave him a somewhat diabolical air. Fine lines radiated out from his eyes, making his expression cunning and good-natured by turns, and several deep furrows in his forehead testified to exceptional intellectual capacity. He was attractive and scary at the same time, which was exactly what Isaac had imagined the professor to be.

Isaac eventually replied to the professor in the same tone.

“I think we really wanted to.”

“I can see you did. Well done, well done.”

“And I see you weren’t really in Capri?”

“Of course, I wasn’t. I never left the villa. You’re still kids, you have a lot of weapons in your arsenal: passion and unflinching determination. But in mine, I also have experience and bluff.”

“That all comes with time, but we have youth in our arsenal too.”

“Now you’re offending me, that’s in poor taste.”

“I’m sorry, it just slipped out. I don’t like to back down.”

“That’s a good quality, but there is also Aikido. Why go head on, sometimes it’s better to make use of your opponent’s energy... Would you like some wine? Local, home-grown.”

“Professor, why did you choose such a strange place for the meeting, on a yacht? Do you think you’re safer here?” Isaac parried.

“No, not because of that. I have nothing to be afraid of, and my experience tells me that wasting nerve cells on stress causes far more harm than the actual danger that so often fails to materialize. I enjoy fishing. Sitting there, catching fish, thinking.”

“I booked this yacht last week. And I decided not to cancel it, I thought we could talk perfectly well out here.”

“And what if we’d been seasick?”

“There are pills for that,” the professor said with a smile, holding out his hand, into which the captain placed exactly the same kind of pill he had given to Isaac and Bikie. The professor screwed up his eyes and tossed it into his mouth with an abrupt movement.

Isaac and Bikie exchanged glances and the professor continued.

“And then, even if you were seasick, we wouldn’t be far from shore, the engine would get us to port in five minutes, and we could easily talk in the evening, eating what we catch today for supper.”

“Great! You live the good life alright!” said Isaac, beginning to feel less tense. He finally realized that he had achieved this incredible goal. He has found the man he had been searching for so methodically for so long. Found him alive and well. Out of all the people who had searched for the professor, only he and Bikie did it!”

“The grass is always greener... That rule always applies without exception. This life has its minuses too. I do not go to big cities, and I miss their bustle and energy. I miss students. Intelligent listeners. I’m actually glad to see you. I’m sick of hiding. I pass the time splendidly, but it flows along too smoothly.”

“And so, young people, I shall listen with pleasure to what you have brought for me,” the professor summed up. “And then you’ll tell me how you found me and why,” he added, puffing on a cigar.

“The little magic key is right there in your mouth,” Isaac thought, then he spoke out loud:

“We need your help.”

“You wrote that already and I understand everything the first time around. I don’t like it when someone tries to explain something to me for five times as if I’m some slow-witted schoolboy.”

“All right, I’ll try not to repeat myself. Professor, what you have created is both wonderful and appalling. But in the future, the appalling side could become a whole lot worse. You have created an epidemic, a ticking time bomb. The technology you have created means that the time remaining to totalitarianism

amounts to no more than a couple of decades. We want to stop that.”

“Appalling and wonderful. Interesting words,” said the professor, smiling wistfully. It was a long time since he had been involved in a serious debate.

“And you will help us do it. Help us to stop your own creation,” Isaac continued. “Whether you want it to or not. And even if you couldn’t give a damn for your own life, something that is really important to you can be found. Only two of us have come, but we have allies. If necessary, they’ll find you again. So it’s not just a matter of us. By eliminating us or handing us over to the authorities, you’ll only gain a little time.”

“There’s no need to threaten me, Isaac. I don’t intend to do you any harm, God forbid. I created the technology for honorable purposes and it has brought no less benefit to humankind than electricity or penicillin.”

“But it will inevitably lead to catastrophe.”

“An interesting theory...continue. You’re intelligent young guys. I could have done more with students like that. And you actually bluff quite well. Concerning the ‘group of friends’...” the professor smiled good-naturedly, “... you’re a bit short of practice. Tonight I will give you a book on poker, written by a friend of mine. It was published in a small edition and is very popular with the pros. It’s not as boring as textbooks on the theory of lying, much more popular in style and it better describes gestures people use when they lie or tell the truth.”

“That’s theory, professor, but you are going to run up against the reality. Then we’ll see how true your conclusions are.”

“Shush, calm down please, our conversation has got off on the wrong foot. So far there are no reasons for an argument. I can see that you’re rather hi-minded individuals, and so am I. Let’s relax and start over again. How about some rum and coke?” Link



poured a dark, foaming liquid into a glass and added alcohol from a dark, heavy, thick-walled bottle.

“Professor, I’m not really in the mood for drinking cocktails,” said Isaac, pushing aside the glass held out by Link.

Link apparently guessed they were worried about poison and took a relaxed swallow from the glass he had just offered to Isaac.

“For a start, I’ve realized that you’re Isaac, right? You work out a lot, I see?”

Isaac nodded. The worldly professor was trying to lull their suspicions with his apparent kindheartedness, slipping compliments into the conversation.

“And, judging from the hardline tattoos and the stubble, you are Bikie?”

Even in the beach gear, who was Bikie and who Isaac, was as obvious as the moon on a clear night.

“And I, as you know, am Professor Jeremy Link. But please, young people, just call me Link. Using the first name is a little too hobnob for me, and Mr. Link is way too official. So, simply Link.”

“All right, Link. So now what do you have to say? Seven years is a long time, you’re a clever man, and you watch TV and read the news. What’s your opinion?”

“You want to destroy the system for gathering Orange Energy – you do understand that we’re talking precisely about the system? It’s impossible to destroy an operating system if it’s installed on too many computers. Either physically or with some cunning virus. It’s a program. It is sold in thousands of shops. And Orange Energy is a program too, a technology. I’d even call it a form of knowledge. Knowledge is impossible to destroy if it has spread right round the world. It’s like trying to convince people all over again that the sun is nailed to the sky.”

“If you want to destroy it, you have to make everyone stop using it. Make it unpopular. That is possible. I’m sure that you, being the most respected man in the world and a celebrated inventor, will be paid attention to.” Suddenly, Isaac realized why he actually had been looking for the professor so persistently. The man was the top authority, the one to make people follow him. “But to find the weakest point, the key minus, we have to understand how the technology works, and you are the one who does know. You can present this final “key minus” as a fact, correctly. You’ll be able to stop this!”

“And this is why you searched for me...”

“Yes. In order to understand it, we decided to find you. As Gogol says in Taras Bulba: ‘I gave you life, and I will kill you’. We want to know everything about the technology that you know. Its strong and weak aspects, the principles it works on, basically everything. The plan is to destroy it, to switch it off. We’ll figure out how as we go along. The world hasn’t been destroyed yet. Even if you refuse to do it, you’ll give the chance to the opposition, which is, to us. And we, by the way, may turn out just right in our conclusions.”

“The world cannot be destroyed. Sooner or later a tyrant dies. If a new tyrant takes his place, he will die some time too. Sooner or later there is a revolution. Even if the world goes completely to the dogs, humankind will survive in some places, invent everything all over again, and a new surge of evolution will begin. We don’t know what heights were scaled by the inhabitants of Atlantis if they existed. But the fact remains that mankind survived and was resurrected, and invented everything all over again. We fly into space, we talk to other continents on miniature wireless devices. We’ve surpassed Atlantis, that’s for sure. In the same way, the hypothetical crisis that I’ve created will pass off sooner or later. Even a nuclear war, capable of reducing cities and civilizations to dust, sooner or later will be forgotten. Life will

start over again and completely restore itself. Where will the new cradle of civilization be? Maybe somewhere on the outskirts of New Zealand, maybe in Africa, or on Mauritius.”

“That’s empty rhetoric, professor. We’re talking about here and now, not ten thousand years in the future. We want to win today, not through the whim of time’s endless flow. Our task is to halt evolution in the wrong direction. My sister is sick today!” Isaac started shouting.

“What’s wrong with her?” the professor sounded considerate.

“Something your *Einsteiner* couldn’t deal with or didn’t want to. Neither it nor the Agency are interested. She’s nothing for them, a blob! But she’s a person! And she doesn’t have anybody but me!”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“That’s what brought me to the downloading office. It was a miracle that I remained myself. Now I have a first-hand experience of your super-computer. I want to know if it is possible to bring it all back? Return people their creative energy? All those who came to the downloading office along with me are normal people, deprived of the choice in life. By you!”

Professor grew pensive. He closed his eyes and it looked like he was weighing up hundreds of pros and cons. His face was tense.

“I’ve had enough time to assess the consequences of my invention. I disagree with your conclusions, although there is a grain of sense in them. In fact, it is hard not to agree with some of them. If everything were in my hands right now, I would use the technology differently. I agree that there are no guarantees. No matter how a system is constructed, sooner or later a villainous scoundrel will control it, this is quite possible, so what then? People in fact are not that deprived of choice as you think. You and Bikie are the proof.”

“The proof? In seven years there have been just two people who managed to find you. That's not the proof, that's an exception.”

“The world has always been created by exceptional people and not due to, but against things. There is always some kind of system. Masters and servants, inquisition. Army service. Even taxes: once you are born, you already are a financial slave, obliged to give part of your income and belongings to someone ahead of the game. Doesn't really make a big difference whether it's a president, parliament or dictator. History has no fear of tyranny. Every system is run by people, people get old and die, and new people take their place, it's an endless process. And in infinite time, the probability of any event occurring is a hundred per cent. Sooner or later. If God exists, then probably he alone never changes and can offer guarantees, because he is eternal.”

“I agree about eternity. I think so too. But God helps those who help themselves.”

“Scientists are often faced with a choice: to give a technology to people or to destroy what they have created. Everything has an upside and a downside. Electricity is a good thing, but lots of people have been killed by it. Not to mention atomic power. There are power stations and there are atomic bombs. You can say the same about radio and antibiotics, GMOs and many other things. ”

“We are in the present. Seven years have gone by. And everything is still in your hands. And ours. You can correct or adjust the world that has been steered off course by your invention. Time to stop. You got the world addicted to this morphine, which started to do harm after being helpful for a while.”

“You can't hold down science! Might as well try to hold water in your palms! Don't be so primitive, for God's sake!” Professor was clearly about to boil.

It was clear that he was about to seethe, getting ready to protect his invention. But, having studied Isaac and Bikie closer, he changed his mind. His face was stiff with disapproval but then a little smile touched his lips and he continued with a soft voice, a bit sadly but amicably.

“Well, yes. Everything that has happened is a catastrophe for me as the inventor. I created a universally accessible drug that is instantly addictive. The technology itself is unique and mega-useful, only there aren’t any instructions for use and my idea is not used as I wished.”

“Professor, I understand that you’re disappointed, I understand about electricity, and about the drug, I just don’t understand how determined you are to put right the mess you have created.”

“I didn’t create it, young man, I invented. God and humankind create. We always have what we deserve.” Professor’s voice instantly changed from soft and feeble to icy cold, he looked at Bikie with ill-concealed contempt.

“Professor, let me repeat more courteously, as you requested. Sorry, Bikie, he got really tired looking for you and took things a little bit too far. Are you willing to try, let’s put it this way... to reboot the program? To correct its malfunctioning, especially since the program has already done a lot of good, and all the achievements will be retained?”

The professor sighed and started pondering, shifting between a smile and a sadness. In the end, he glanced at his watch and replied:

“I have devoted the last five years of my life to this and I’m willing to devote all the time I have left. Of course, it’s annoying for me to hear about the negative aspects of my invention from a pair of young pups, no matter how intelligent they are, but I’m a scientist and I studied the consequences intensely myself a long time ago. And I’m prepared to try to correct them.”

The professor was writhing out uneasily. There was clearly a struggle going on inside of him. Agreeing, he would cross out all his achievements, acknowledging their extreme danger.

Those words took a huge weight, a massive burden, off Isaac's mind. The immense rock that had been hanging over his head crumbled to dust. He struggled to contain the emotions welling up inside him. Until today he had been obsessed with the idea, and now he saw a hope ahead. He was successful in generating an opposition. Not a radical opposition of fanatics, but a powerful, conceptual opposition by intellectuals. And from the part of this genius even "intelligent pups" sounded flattering. He felt terribly sorry for the professor, understanding him very well as an inventor. He was aware that at that moment Link was renouncing the apple of his eye.

Isaac suddenly felt ferociously tired, he couldn't even move an arm or a leg the right way. As if the burden has been lifted, and his body demanded a rest, a well merited time not to be disturbed for a while. He was tired. Very tired. The constant adrenalin has left his bloodstream.

Link's spirit was as hard as granite. Having taken hold of himself and fixed the final data, he quite soon gathered his wits and continued the conversation with Bikie, who had apologized. Bikie and Link continued arguing and agreeing about things; Professor commended his conversant several times. Isaac saw Bikie take out his mobile phone and press something on it. He was sending the text message to cancel the publication of information about Link on the Internet.

As for Isaac, he simply looked at the glitter of the waves, incapable of either listening or thinking. At that moment, he was not even thinking of Vicky or Michelle. There was only peace, peace and the splashing of the transparent blue water.

He could not see the land or the yachts beyond the horizon. Only occasional silhouettes of fishing boats, and a distant expanse

of light-blue. The tabula rasa of the sea, he thought. Genoa was somewhere over there, not far away.

“I will definitely reach my shore, I’ll reach it and discover my own America, completely new and not fucked-up, and I’m going to build a new life there,” Isaac decided firmly.

His mobile phone rang. The number did not display, but Isaac answered it reluctantly. Something might be wrong with Vicky.

“Good afternoon, my name is Pellegrini, I’m a commissioner of police and the head of Orange Energy Department. I need to talk to you about the incident that happened in Monaco.”

“I think I already told everything,” began Isaac, but the Commissioner interrupted him sharply.

“I inform you that you must appear for the interrogation in your local police station.”

“I’m not there,” said Isaac. “I’m in Spain... at a friend's place,” he lied.

“When are you coming back?”

“I don't know yet.”

“Young man!” pressed forward aggressive Pellegrini. “If you do not come voluntarily, I will declare you wanted, and I promise you will be delivered to me nicely strained by small iron bracelets. I do not advise to mess with me!”

“I... I'll be back to Monaco in a week, and I will go to the police station,” promised Isaac.

“Okay. I'll wait.” The Commissioner disconnected. He was pleased with himself. He heard fear in the voice of Isaac and did not doubt, that he will break him instantly. Isaac’s comfort and fatigue vanished as if by magic. Who was this damn Pellegrini and what did he want? It was more than two months since the attack at the Monaco branch of the Agency. Why in the world can’t they all just relax at Cote D’Azur?

Although did he really need to worry about it when professor Link himself promised to work it all out and put an end to downloading? He had Michelle and Bikie and soon, when he got the patent money, he would be able to pay for the surgery and dear little Vicky will be fine.

Isaac shivered – what if Link cheated and disappeared again? He still had to be on the defensive to make sure everything was all right.

Link looked quite relaxed, talking to Bikie, who, in his turn, seemed rather nervous, asking his questions in a cocky manner, as if trying to offend the professor. Link didn't seem offended at all, though, spoke calmly, his every word logic, facts brought in just in time. He was behaving in a very friendly manner, clearly happy to welcome his guests. He also was quite lavish with praise, comparing Isaac and Bikie with his students and lab-assistants. When he found out that they were staying in an ugly cheap hotel, he invited them to move to his villa.

After returning to the port in the evening, professor's assistant took them to fetch their things. While packing, Bikie looked sullen, as if he wasn't anymore happy to find Link. Isaac asked his friend what happened and if he was ok, but Bikie just grumbled he was fine.

Professor served some gorgeous dinner, made from the fish they had caught during the day. It was totally delicious, especially after their usual daily pizza they felt so much tired of. After eating all he could, Isaac went to sleep in a cool air-conditioned room professor had offered him and immediately passed out on a decent soft bed – finally.



Hardly had the morning smile faded from the commissioner's face, when his mobile rang. The number was that of Monaco – must be from the hospital, Pellegrini thought and picked up.

"Commissioner Pellegrini? Good afternoon! We didn't have the chance to speak a few days ago, sorry about that. This is the attending doctor of Victoria Frank, you asked me to get in touch with you."

"Yes, thank you for calling back. The thing is that her brother, Isaac Leroy, is our suspect," Pellegrini had already made his decision.

Probably because of different kinds of medical equipment, the doctor's phone wasn't working very well, issuing background noises, which made him miss the last word, so he continued:

"Yes, Isaac... why, her only relative, I know him well. A kind-hearted man. Selfless. He sold all, to pay for the treatment of his sister. I really empathize with him in this difficult situation. He has signed a contract for the operation, left a check, had to pay thus wanted money, the orange energy was supposed to help. But this terrible terrorist attack! He did succeed, and now his sister is in a coma. And now he's got another couple of months. He said he has found the means, so I hope they will be fine!"

"How did he find it? Where?" Pellegrini stiffened.

"It seems, sold his invention. Said, the money will be there soon."

"Are you sure? How long is his sister being treated?"

"Nearly a year. And a sharp deterioration happened just then, before the attack. What would you like to ask?"

"Nothing. Thank you. I'll still call you."

The Commissioner could not breathe. So the truth was that selling creativity for the sake of treatment of his sister. Isaac is not

a felon, but a normal decent person. Pellegrini was terribly embarrassed that he so easily judged the good guy. The commissioner opened the Cabinet, poured some whiskey and drank. Such mistakes he had never allowed. Damn the Agency, brought up the fact that he, an experienced police officer, invented a criminal! Also scared the poor lad!

Calling back with apologies wasn't in the commissioner's manner, his job didn't really suggest things like that.

Something was dragging Isaac down, he tried to turn and failed thus waking up. With surprise, he found himself sitting on a chair, with bound hands behind his back. Next to him was also captivated Bikie sleeping right on the chair.

"Bikie, wake up!" Isaac realized that they are in serious trouble.

"What? Where are we? Isaac, is that you?" woken up Bikie couldn't fully understand.

"We are restrained! Professor! Jerk!" Isaac tried to free his arms – nothing worked.

"Damn it!" echoed Bikie.

From behind their backs silently the red haired guy emerged and quietly left the room. Isaac tried to understand where they were, apparently on the same Villa, only now in the basement. The walls were dimly lit, along them were various boxes, some wine racks, and a large cigar humidor. There were no windows, it smelt of damp.

The Professor entered the room and turned on the light.

"Good morning, boys! I trust you slept well?" he asked as if nothing had happened.

"What is it, Professor?" angrily asked Bikie.

"Nothing. A small check. Precautions. Now I can't say anything. Let's wait it out," replied Link.

The red-bearded assistant brought some equipment, both related to connecting several sensors.

“What are you going to do with us?” Isaac cursed himself for his gullibility. “What is it?”

“We'll have a chat. This is a polygraph. More precisely, the lie detector of my own invention.”

“And what are we going to have to tell you?”

“All. All that I decide to ask you.”

“And if not?”

“Then I will connect another equipment. I have been doing neural research for many years. A nudge here and there. At a small level, and I'll let you go.”

“Just let us go like that?”

“Of course! Minimal artificial amnesia will not hurt you. Unfortunately, it won't follow a chronological order. Memory fade will be random, and while I don't see what you really forget about this place, or what I was looking for, I have to proceed further.”

“So, we can forget not only you but also something else?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I'm really sorry. I didn't invite you here. You came.”

Isaac was terrified. The Professor could do what he said, he had no doubt about that. He could erase their memory! Childhood, youth, parents, Michelle, even Vicky! God, Isaac can choose to forget that Vicky needs an urgent operation!

“What are you, fucking Professor!” muttered Bikie. “We come to you with a pure heart, and you!”

“Let's check that pure heart,” replied Link. “Isaac, you can start your story. How did you find me and why. Everything, everything, in fine detail. It's in your best interest.”

Isaac told the professor his story since the attack. He didn't conceal either Yoshi nor their trip to England nor a cigar shop. Wanting to protect Peter, he explained that Wolanski did not

know where they are exactly and that he doesn't know they found the Professor. Michelle wasn't aware of their business at all. After the story, Isaac answered some additional questions. He didn't know how to work around the polygraph, so he couldn't lie to the machine, but he didn't have bad thoughts either.

"I think you have something to add," said the Professor and eyed Bikie.

Bikie moved uneasily, and looking askance replied firmly:

"No!"

"There is a simple choice. You either say or stay silent, if you are silent or lie, I erase the memory of you both."

"No," repeated Bikie. "Nothing."

"Think," Professor sighed. "It's not just about you. Also, about Isaac, about his sister. Or are you satisfied with the role of Pascal-2? This time, it's in your hands, not his."

Isaac did not understand what was happening, but judging by Bikie's grim face, his friend was stubbornly silent about something.

"Isaac's motivation is clear to me. But yours... How far were you going to go?"

"I was going to kill you," suddenly calmly replied Bikie.

Isaac caught an eloquent look from the Professor: "You see, Isaac, what's your buddy like. You didn't expect and it is the truth."

There was a pause.

"But beyond that, Bikie, are you serious? You lied to me all this time?" Isaac felt betrayed.

"For his father," calmly replied Link instead of Bikie.

"Yes. I was going to kill you. My dad was on heroin. And he was downloaded. Not cured, but downloaded. Then he died and I vowed to take down whoever is responsible," Bikie's voice was hoarse.

“But it is now in the past. And I won't do, as much as I would love to do that. You are the key to ensuring that this all will stop.”

“Why do you blame me?”

“And whom? *Einsteiner* is actually your brainchild.”

“Come on, then all those who have lost their loved ones from electric shock will damn, I do not know, for example, Volt. Or Columbus for tobacco. I discovered the orange energy and learned to use it, have saved millions of lives!”

“Don't compare yourself to Volt. You will not find a whole a 1 percent of families who haven't lost their beloved ones because of you.”

“But it is a fact,” thought Isaac. “Pascal, himself, Sandrine, as it turned out, and also Bikie who lost his father.” Isaac was not pleased to realize that the Bikie isn't quite the straightforward man, as he thought; he is secretive, not sincere man who used him to his own advantage.

As if reading his thought, Bikie gave a guilt filled look to Isaac.

“Forgive me. You never asked me why I hate them so much. You were too focused on your own problems. And I don't really like to talk about my drug addict father. That's why I drank. Because then there was nothing I could do. It was my only secret from you. I swear! I hope not, I'm confident that this will not end our friendship. I wouldn't say this now if at stake was only my life and not yours with your sister's.”

Isaac was upset, but he immediately nodded in approval, allowing Bikie to understand that he doesn't hate him. Perhaps this is a real friendship. One doesn't have to turn each the other inside out, getting into the innermost corners of the soul to be considered a close and trusted friend. Isaac also felt guilty that he didn't know and wasn't particularly interested in what motivated Bikie.

Bikie was gloom, he didn't raise his head. Judging by the fact that the Professor did not ask clarifying questions, everything was clear. The original purpose of Bikie was to kill the Professor. However the fact that he changed his mind, too, was true.

“Link, and why you disappeared?” asked Isaac trying to be casual. “Is your secret location important enough to kill us? My sister is being killed now, you should know for sure now.”

“It's all very simple. I ran away because I was frightened. Secret Service agents came to see me ‘to have a talk.’ The government wanted to find out everything and then go public with it. I couldn't get the agents to understand that the technology had nothing to do with artificial intelligence. I set up a conference in a hurry to present the technology and hand it over to Blake at the UN. And immediately after that memorable event, I got a call asking me not to leave the country. When I realized that Secret Service would stop at nothing to get hold of the technology, even though I had already signed it over to the UN, or at least to get a copy, so that they could have a system of their own, I decided to run anyway, just to be on the safe side. Yes, I got frightened and I bolted.”

“Think about it. How much time would pass before they sucked out my own Orange Energy? I possessed knowledge that they deemed top secret. Or some bright corporate spark would have decided that I must build another computer like that. A private one, so to speak. Then they would start kidnapping and downloading scientists all around the world to create a ‘creativity race’.”

“I was far too tempting a morsel for everyone, from the military and the big corporations to ordinary terrorists. But if I were to vanish, there would be only one computer in the hands of people who had spent their lives at least trying, if not always successfully, to maintain peace on earth.

“I thought about it a lot and realized it was an absolute certainty that someone would get the idea of downloading me. It was only a matter of time until they arrived at that brilliant idea.”

“But had they laid their hands on the idea, I’m afraid there would have been a few surprises in store for them...” at this point the professor, with a restrained smile, raised his index finger and narrowed his eyes. “If energy can be pumped out, then a way can be found to...”

“Pump it back in,” Isaac murmured.

“So again, it was just a matter of time until, sooner or later, someone unearthed this idea of mine, which was almost ready. And that was something I definitely couldn’t tolerate. But now we have everything developing according to a fairly positive scenario. The technology belongs to the UN, where there are decent people in charge. Things could have gone differently. If not for my reputation, I wouldn’t have been able to get to the Secretary General so quickly.”

“Thank God, the old friend understood me and the implications of my invention instantly...” Sweat beaded on the professor’s brow. “That was luck. The last thing I wanted was to become a man who had invented a super-powerful weapon,” he added confidently. “If the military had got their hands on the technology first, then... I’m afraid the word democracy would have disappeared, except from the textbooks, and it wouldn’t have stayed there for long.”

There was a minute of silence as each of them imagined a future with the military in control.

“But couldn’t you have thought about that beforehand?” Biekie pulled himself together.

“I did. Worked on university’s funding. My laboratory assistants wrote reports on the work and the expenditures. Someone obviously overdid it, and the authorities took an interest in my invention. I only had a week to organize the conference and

my escape before Secret Service paid me another visit. So everything started slipping out of my control. But all's well that ends well. It probably never even occurred to them that a highly respected fifty-five-year-old scientist could simply do a runner."

Then the professor moved away to light up a cigar.

"You know, Isaac, when the professor starts talking, I listen to him and realize that compared to him you're a dumbo," Bikie said very seriously and immediately got a friendly punch from Isaac.

"Friends," the professor intervened, coming back with the cigar in his hand, "you shouldn't overestimate an old blockhead like me. In fact, everyone warned me the technology was extremely dangerous and it could be dangerous for me. But who were they to tell to me what I should do? It's interesting that you found me. Anyway, I'm still glad my refuge was cracked by genuinely laudable individuals."

"My refuge!" the professor continued. "How sick I am of this settled life in this lousy dump, pardon the expression, the cloying syrup of identical days. There was a time when a journalist came to see me every month to publish an interview about my invention. Frequent scientific conferences, learned debates. I used to feel the way explorers and pioneers felt, the way the greatest minds of humanity felt at the summit of their achievements. The world seemed to revolve around me! All the life of the planet."

The professor's eyes were glowing demonically. He felt a wild pleasure at remembering it all.

"Professor, that's exactly the way things were," Isaac remarked. "And I'd say they still are. A great deal depends on you. In the life of mankind."

Still smiling, the professor frowned.

"It's boring," he said, continuing his skeptical complaint. "I'm so bored to live this way. All my memories, pangs of



conscience, fears – they don't count. That's all trivial compared with the boredom. It's all trivial after having reached my peak."

"Who said you've reached your peak, Link?" Biekie asked, trying to make the question sound as intriguing as possible. "You have taught the world how to download OE, but you haven't taught it how to give it back to people. But you said yourself that it is possible! Now that would be the highest peak, Professor, returning creativity to those who have lost it. Is it feasible?"

"Theoretically," said the professor, brightening up. "I've had enough time and I can picture how to do it. Only, as you know, theory is theory, but implementation requires experiments and trials. We need a genuine Veggie. Practical tests, you know..."

"Professor!" Isaac had a glimmer of hope. "We have to make it a reality. And I even have a candidate for the experiment. I have... I had a friend, Pascal, I told you before, he downloaded and became a Veggie. You could use him for your experiment. If you return his creativity, we can all be sure the theory works. We in Monaco have a great base! There's enough room for everyone. We can conduct any experiments there. And Pascal lives very close."

"And if not?"

"If not... we'll keep on searching."

Link was obviously very interested in this proposal and went straight to the specifics: when and where did Pascal download his OE? What was his rating? What kind of life does he lead now? Isaac replied briskly. For a while he forgot about danger, the uncertainty and the possibility of failure. It all paled beside the idea of pulling his friend out of his vegetable condition, bringing the first person back out of the Veggie!

By the end of the evening the plan of action took shape. It was simple and precise. Give Pascal back his creativity and thereby justify their struggle against the system.

Link tested something similar as he was looking forward to a new grand experiment, it almost smelled of an unconquered frontier. He got so excited that Isaac's last doubts evaporated because the Professor is not going to disappear and will not erase their memory because he needs them. The obsession of the scientist is comparable to the dependency of an addict! This chance he will not miss.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner, except an outstanding painter, Andrei Sharov. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This book is a film adaptation of *Collective Mind* by Vasily Klyukin

Original version edited by Maya Azbukina

English language translation by Andrew Bromfield 2015, Sofia  
Bakhurina, Dina Kunets

Edited by James Gregory

Production by Maya Azbukina

Cover design by Vasily Klyukin

Cover Illustration by Michael Tsaturyan



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