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Investigator Vissarion Lom sat in a window booth in the Café Rikhel. Pulses of rain swept up Ansky Prospect, but inside the café, in the afternoon crush, the air was thick with the smell of coffee, cinnamon bread and damp overcoats.

‘Why don’t you go home?’ said Ziller. ‘No one’s going to come. I can call you if anything happens. You can be back here in half an hour.’

‘Someone will come,’ said Lom. ‘He’s not sitting out there for no reason.’

Across the street, a thin young man waited on a bench under a dripping zinc canopy. He had been there, in front of the Timberworkers’ Library and Meeting Hall, for three hours already.

‘Maybe he spotted us,’ said Ziller. ‘Maybe the contact is aborted.’

‘He could have lost us straight off the boat,’ said Lom. ‘He didn’t even look round. He’s not bothered about us. He thinks he’s clean.’

They had picked him up off the morning river-boat from Yislovsk. Briefcase – that was the cryptonym they gave him, they didn’t know his name – had hung around the wharves for a while, bought himself an apricot juice at a kiosk, walked slowly up Durnovo-Burliuk Street, and sat down on a bench. That was all he had done. He carried no luggage, apart from the small leather case they’d named him for. After an hour he’d taken some bread out of the case and eaten it. Except for that, he just sat there.

Ziller picked up his glass of tea, looked into it critically, set it down untouched.

‘He’s an arse-wipe. That’s what he is.’

‘Maybe,’ said Lom. ‘But he’s waiting for something.’

The truth was, Lom rather liked Briefcase. There was something

about him – the way he walked, the way his hair was cut. Briefcase was young. He looked ... vulnerable. Something – hatred, idealism, love – had driven him, alone and obviously frightened, all the way across the continent to Podchornok, his ears sticking out pinkly in the rain, to make this crude attempt at contact. The call from Magadlovosk had said only that he was a student, a member of some amateurish break-away faction of the Lezarye separatists. The Young Opposition. The Self-Liberation Will of All Peoples. He was coming to meet someone. To collect something. Magadlovosk had sounded excited, unusually so, but also vague: *The contact, Lom, that's what matters, that's the target. The contact, and whatever it is he's bringing with him.*

'You really should go home,' said Ziller. 'What time did you finish last night?'

'I'm fine,' said Lom.

'Fine? You're over thirty, you do twice the hours the others do, you get no promotions, you're on crappy pay, and you need a shave. When did you last eat something decent?'

Lom thought of his empty apartment. The yellow furniture. The unwashed plates and empty bottles. Home.

'Why don't you come round?' Ziller was saying. 'Come tonight. Lena's got a friend. Her husband was killed when the *Volkova* went down. She's got a kid but ... well, we could invite her—'

'Look,' said Lom. 'I had some paperwork last night, that's all.'

Ziller shrugged. He lit a cigarette and let the smokestream drift out of his nose.

'I just thought ...' he said. 'Maybe you could use a friend, Vissarion. After the Laurits business you've got few enough.'

'Yeah. Well. Thanks.'

They sat in silence, awkwardly, staring out of the window. Watching Briefcase staring at nothing.

'Shit,' said Ziller, half-rising in his seat and craning to see down the road. 'Shit.'

A line of giants, each leading a four-horse dray team and a double wagon loaded high with resin tanks, was lumbering up the hill from the direction of the river quay. They were almost in front of the Rikhel already – the rumbling of the wagons' iron wheels set the café floor vibrating faintly – and when they reached it, Briefcase would be out of

sight. The teams were in no hurry: they would take at least ten minutes to pass.

'You'll have to go outside,' said Lom. 'Keep an eye from the alley till they're gone.'

Ziller sighed and heaved himself reluctantly to his feet, trying to shove the loose end of his shirt back under his belt and button his uniform tunic. He took a long, mournful, consolatory pull on the cigarette and ground the stub into the heaped ashtray, squeezed himself out of the booth and went out into the rain with a show of heavy slowness. Theatrics.

Lom watched the giants through the misted window. They walked patiently under the rain: earth-coloured shirts, leather jerkins, heavy wooden clogs. The rain was heavier now, clattering against the window in fat fistfuls. Only one person was standing out in the street. A soldier, bare-headed and beltless, grey uniform soaked almost to black, left sleeve empty, pinned to his side. He had tipped his face back to look up into the rain and his mouth was wide open. As if he was trying to swallow it down. He had no boots. He was standing in a puddle in torn socks, shifting from foot to foot in a slow, swaying dance.

Two kinds of rain fell on Podchornok. There was steppe rain from the west, sharp and cold, blown a thousand versts across the continental plain in ragged shreds. And the other kind was forest rain. Forest rain came from the east in slow, weighty banks of nimbostratus that settled over the town for days at a time and shed their cargo in warm fat sheets. It fell and fell with dumb insistence, overbrimming the gutters and outflows and swelling the waters of the Yannis until it flowed fat and yellow and heavy with mud. In spring the forest rain was thick with yellow pollen that stuck in your hair and on your face and lips and had a strange taste. In autumn it smelled of resin and earth. This, today, this was forest rain.

Ziller was taking his time. The giants and their drays had gone, and Briefcase was still on his bench. The soldier wandered across to him and started waving his one arm. He seemed to be shouting. He had something in his hand and he was trying to show it to Briefcase. Trying to give it to him. Briefcase looked confused.

Shit. This was *it*. This was the *contact!*

Lom crashed out into the rain and across the road.

'Hey! You! Don't move! Police!'

Where the hell was Ziller?

Briefcase saw Lom coming. His eyes widened in shock and fear. He should have waited. Showed his papers. Said he had no idea who this soldier was, he'd just been sitting there eating his bread and watching the rain. Instead, he ran. He got about ten paces across the road, when Ziller came out of the alleyway by Krishkin's and took him crashing down into the mud.

The soldier hadn't moved. He was staring at Lom's face. His eyes, expressionless, didn't blink. They were completely brown: all iris, no whites at all. He opened his mouth, as if he was going to speak, and Lom smelled the sour, earthy richness of his breath, but he made no sound. His one hand worked the small cloth bag he was holding as if he was crushing the life out of it. Lom snatched it out of his grip.

'Give me that!'

The man's fingers felt cold. Hard. Brittle.

Lom undid the cord and looked inside. There was nothing but a mess of broken twigs and crushed berries and clumps of some sticky, yellowish substance that might have been wax. It had a sweet, heavy, resinous perfume.

'What the fuck – ?' said Lom. 'What the fuck is this?'

The soldier, gazing into him with fathomless brown eyes, said nothing.