

He went out onto the street, flagged a cab, and ordered the driver to take him to the Borscht. He needed to finish with all this business, he was unbearably sleepy, the world was swimming before his eyes—and he did in fact fall asleep, slumping heavily on his briefcase, and only woke up when the driver shook his shoulder.

“We’re here, mister.”

“Where are we?” he asked, sleepily looking around. “I told you to drive to the bank.”

“No way, mister.” The driver scowled. “You said the Borscht. This is the Borscht.”

“All right,” grumbled Redrick. “Must have dreamed it.” He paid the fare and climbed out, painfully moving his stiff legs. It was very hot, and the pavement was already baking. Redrick noticed he was soaked through, that his mouth tasted vile, and that his eyes were tearing up. Before coming in, he took a look around. As was usual at this hour, the street in front of the Borscht was deserted. The businesses across the street weren’t open yet, even the Borscht was technically closed, but Ernest was already on duty—wiping glasses, sullenly glancing from behind the bar at the three goons lapping up beer at a corner table. The remaining tables still had chairs on top of them, an unfamiliar black man in a white jacket was industriously scrubbing the floor, and another black man was struggling with a case of beer behind Ernest’s back. Redrick came up to the bar, put his briefcase on top, and said hello. Ernest grumbled something unfriendly.

“Pour me some beer,” said Redrick, yawning uncontrollably. Ernest slammed an empty stein down on the bar, grabbed a bottle from the fridge, opened it, and tilted it over the stein. Redrick, covering his mouth, gaped at Ernest’s hand. The hand was shaking. The neck of the bottle kept clattering against the

stein. Redrick looked Ernest in the face. Ernest's heavy lids were lowered, his small mouth was twisted, his fat cheeks drooped. One of the men was swinging a mop right under Redrick's feet, the goons in the corner were viciously arguing about the races, and the man handling the beer bumped into Ernest so hard he wobbled. He began mumbling apologies. In a strained voice, Ernest asked, "You got it?"

"Got what?" Redrick looked over his shoulder.

One of the goons lazily got up from the table, walked to the entrance, and stood in the doorway, lighting a cigarette.

"Let's go have a talk," said Ernest.

The man with the mop was now also standing between Redrick and the door. An enormous black man, like Gutralin, only twice as broad. "Let's go," said Redrick, grabbing his briefcase. He was now wide awake.

He walked behind the bar and squeezed past the black man with the beer. The guy must have crushed his finger—he was licking his nail, scowling at Redrick from beneath his brows: another powerfully built black man, with a broken nose and cauliflower ears. Ernest went into the back room, and Redrick followed, because by now, all three goons were standing by the entrance, and the man with the mop blocked the way to the storeroom.

In the back room Ernest stepped aside and, hunching over, sat on a chair next to the wall while Captain Quarterblad, mournful and yellow, got up from behind the desk; a huge UN soldier, with his helmet pulled over his eyes, materialized from the left and quickly patted Redrick down, going over his pockets with enormous hands. He paused at the right side pocket, removed the brass knuckles, and softly nudged Redrick toward the captain. Redrick approached the desk and placed his briefcase in front of Captain Quarterblad.

“Good job, bastard,” he told Ernest.

Ernest gave him a dejected look and shrugged one shoulder. Everything was clear. The two black men were already standing, smirking, in the door, and there were no other exits, and the window was shut and grated with thick iron bars.

Captain Quarterblad, grimacing in disgust, was digging with both hands through the briefcase, laying the contents out on the table: two extra-small empties; sixteen sparks of various sizes in a plastic bag; two beautifully preserved sponges; and a single jar of carbonated clay.

“Is there anything in your pockets?” Captain Quarterblad asked softly. “Take it all out . . .”

“Assholes,” said Redrick. “Idiots.” He stuck his hand in his pocket and hurled a bundle of cash down on the table. The bills flew in all directions.

“Wow!” said Captain Quarterblad. “Anything else?”

“You stinking toads!” shrieked Redrick, grabbed the second bundle from his pocket, and hurled it forcefully at his feet. “Take it! Choke on it!”

“Very interesting,” Captain Quarterblad said calmly. “And now pick it up.”

“Screw you!” said Redrick, putting his hands behind his back. “Your lackeys will pick it up. You’ll pick it up yourself!”

“Pick up the money, stalker,” said Captain Quarterblad without raising his voice, digging his fists into the table and leaning forward with his whole body. For a few seconds they silently looked each other in the eye, then Redrick, muttering curses, squatted down on the floor and started reluctantly collecting the money. The guys behind his back snickered, and the UN soldier snorted spitefully. “Don’t snort!” said Redrick. “What are you, a horse?”

He was already crawling on his knees, collecting bills one by

one, getting closer and closer to the dark copper ring, lying peacefully in a dirt-filled groove in the floor; he turned to position himself, continuing to shout dirty words, all the ones that he knew, and a few he made up along the way, and when the moment came, he shut up, strained, grabbed the ring, and pulled on it with all his might: the thrown-open trapdoor hadn't even clattered onto the floor when he was diving headfirst, arms outstretched, into the cool dank darkness of the wine cellar.