

A black and white illustration of a futuristic submarine flying over a rocky, alien landscape. The submarine is sleek and elongated, with a conical nose and a flat top. It is positioned horizontally across the middle of the frame. The background features a large, cratered moon or planet in the upper left, and a dark, starry sky. The foreground shows a dark, reflective surface, possibly water, with several jagged rock formations. The overall scene is atmospheric and futuristic.

Andrey Demidov

Natotevaal.  
War  
Chronicle

Андрей Демидов

**Natotevaal. War Chronicle**

«ЛитРес: Самиздат»

2017

## **Демидов А. Г.**

Natotevaal. War Chronicle / А. Г. Демидов — «ЛитРес: Самиздат», 2017

This novel, written over ten years ago, not only did not lose its sharpness and relevance, but, on the contrary, is intended to be a significant milestone for all intelligent readers. For all those who are still interested in secrets of space and the dual and contradictory role of scientific progress in modern society, and feelings of the characters who undergo the hardest tests of courage, devotion to duty and humanity. Moreover, the novel "Chronicle of Natotevaal" has the potential to become a cult product for fans of science fiction - it is imbued with romance of heroism, great sense of humor and it is literally impossible to break away from reading it. But, nevertheless, the novel is anything but entertaining light reading: the author raises complex issues of science, politics, philosophy and moral before his heroes and the readers. In the tradition of the best works of fiction of the 20th century, Andrey Demidov reveals the unknown in his novel, something that might either happen tomorrow or will never happen at all. The author clearly highlights the difficulty of the way to complex, unknown future - it is a long and difficult path, with mistakes and defeats on the way; and the victory will not be easy, but endured, with a promise of new ways and new challenges. To many of the questions posed by Andrey Demidov in the novel "Chronicle of Natotevaal" humanity does not yet have sufficiently complete and convincing answers. Humanity will search for these answers as long as it exists; it is obliged to, if we want to go forward, not blindly. Searching through fiction in particular, and the book you now hold in your hands will become a reliable, but demanding assistant, and possibly - your spiritual guide to a modern, distorted world. Because "imagination - is just a part, although a significant one of what usually denotes reality. Ultimately, it is unknown to which of the two genres - reality or fiction our world belongs".

© Демидов А. Г., 2017  
© ЛитРес: Самиздат, 2017

## **Natotevaal. War Chronicle**

### Foreword

'Imagination – is just a part, although a significant one, of what usually denotes reality. Ultimately, it is unknown to which of the two genres – reality or fiction our world belongs.'

H.L.Borges

Philosophy and science fiction, like any other forms of culture can interact in many different ways. Certainly not all their features are equal.

If Borges, for instance, describes philosophy as a kind of fiction with inimitable literature-centrism, Derrida principally refuses to distinguish between (fiction) literature and philosophy, and in the best case fiction critics are only able to collect images and references to philosophy in science fiction works, thus philosophical consideration of fiction is hardly a noticeable opportunity.

In pursuit of reality, and in an attempt to lay the foundation of scientific knowledge, philosophy not only ignored imagination and fantasy along with their products (relating to purely subjective orders) but systematically and consistently tried to get rid of them by all means, so as to approach objectivity and – ideally – entirely possess it.

Only, perhaps, the establishment of non-classical way of philosophizing, that allowed and even suggested alternative interpretations of reality, has gradually changed the attitude to fiction.

It is peculiar that almost at the same time – in the second half of the XIX century – formation of proper literary fiction occurs (of course: Jules Verne, G.Wells).

Only in the second half of the XX century philosophy started to conduct special studies of the imaginary, virtual, semantics of possible worlds, etc. (along with gaining fiction maturity).

However, actual fiction still remained below the horizon of perception, although only fiction provides philosophy with a special field-space for deploying extravagant concepts, as well as unique tools for modeling and experimentation.

In order to highlight these features by heuristic fiction of philosophy and outline the shapes of the appropriate project, it is useful to see philosophy as an operator, which is applied to science fiction as a phenomenon.

If philosophy assumes the reflection of ultimate bases of culture as a whole, claims to critically examine the diversity of the world in general, then by the same gesture, which provides its versatility, condemns itself and has to delve into the specifics of each particular cultural form, each area and region of the world.

For instance, a mathematician studies mathematics, and a musician – music, while figuring out how music differs from mathematics or what comprises one or the other, is not of their concern, but the task of philosophy in its applied sense, so to speak.

Of course, the point here is not about each individual object as such – this table or that tree, though everything depends on the approach.

Philosophy sprouts: in addition to the philosophy of science separately appears the philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of physics and philosophy of biology, along with philosophy of nature and philosophy of culture – and even the philosophy of history, philosophy of law, philosophy of art and so on and so forth.

Therefore, philosophy – in terms of its various fields of application, which potentially generate not only its separate directions, but whole disciplines – it is appropriate to consider it as an operative: "philosophy X" or even "philosophy Y", where anything may serve as an independent variable.

Another thing is that a simple permutation which comprises a bare slogan or manifesto, would certainly be quite insufficient – forming a research agenda requires more or less developed and reflexively drawn project.

In this case, philosophy, like phenomenological consciousness, acquires sustainable intentionality, allowing not only to identify and investigate the specificity of the corresponding sphere, but also – by revealing its ultimate bases – achieve fundamental conceptual results.

Thus one of the methods of interaction of various cultural dominions is implemented – by reflecting one on/in the other, both are modified and thereby get an opportunity to spread, fulfilling their programs with the new material.

Strictly speaking, the status of fiction in itself represents a major challenge, or rather, a whole set of problems.

Fiction, first of all as a product of imagination should seemingly confront reality or actuality: as nonexistent to existing.

However, even the critics of traditional philosophical metaphysics of presence has to acknowledge that everything we say, everything we can think of, is there in a certain way, though differently (and therefore non-metaphysical ontology should be based on a fundamentally different basis – but that is another story), thus straight oppositions do not work and cannot work.

Secondly, fantasy as a set of art depicting/representing/describing the imaginary, would have to confront realism, on the one hand, which also reproduces reality and modernism and the avant-garde on the other, which more or less avoid using references, eluding to the more or less understandable (syntactic, semantic or pragmatic) performativity.

However, a critical review of the so-called realism shows that realism, in its full and strict sense not only did not and does not exist, but is generally impossible – because any images of reality would inevitably be imagined (at least to the extent where we distinguish one and the other); after all, this is indicated by the ability of art photography, which directly and almost immediately (literally photographically) reflects the reality, regardless of our perception of it. On the other hand, a careful study of the indirect features of reference removes the inflexibility of its contrast to performativity.

Thirdly, science fiction is in no way related to one form of art, embodied – along with literature and, say, painting – also in cinematography, theater, drawing, comic books, and perhaps even in sculpture.

And even in amusement parks and – necessarily – in computer games: if they can be classified as art, then to a very special, interactive sphere.

In addition, even literary science fiction can neither be classified as a genre, strictly speaking, because it brings together works of a variety of genres (and also of different lines – a novel, a story, a narrative..., space opera, alternative history, detective fiction...) nor as a destination because it can quite easily include different styles (cyberpunk, turbo-realism...), not to mention the traditional, more or less stable division into the two main branches – the science fiction and fantasy.

Moreover, fantasy forms a whole subculture – clubs, a system of conferences, journals and symbols (souvenirs, "baubles", garments, toys, gadgets, meshes, artifacts...), a variety of amateur performances and numerous communities; a set of games (such as role-playing, and multi-user computer games – local network and online) – perhaps, no other social formation can boast of such a diversity.

Nevertheless, it is permissible to speak of science fiction as a phenomenon, the features of which science fiction philosophy is intended to clarify, to such extent in which the entire conglomerate of this diverse phenomena may be lawfully called in short, and to the extent that it can somehow be separated from the rest.

Although we can talk about a more or less pure forms of fiction in the first place – literature, painting, cinema, and supposedly computer games.

Despite the fact that problems of philosophical understanding of science fiction are extremely varied, we can try to group them into a few main lines of problematization – according to the traditional matrix of leading philosophical disciplines.

Ontology of fiction in this case will include a series of issues related to the existential status of products of imagination and fantasy, from mythological characters to heroes of art that represent the original, separate reality – different from the usual, ordinary, standard with its unprecedented novelty and uniqueness.

In fact, fantasy creates special worlds, thus the study of specific rules for creating these kinds of possible and impossible worlds will also refer here: just as postmodernism discovers connections, that are solidly unbreakable, so the rampant variety of fantasy worlds reveals some invariants.

For instance such rules as: the coherency of individual components, fragments and elements; their coordination with one another, fullness of all the emerging opportunities; introduction of the main principle of realizing the scope of all possible layers of meaning in the unity of conceivable horizon.

The situation of a seeming a priori and absolute freedom of the creator in fiction paradoxically uncovers some strange inner necessities and limits, that are defined not only by the specifics of a selected representation language or the coherence of discursive sequence, but also by some, clearly ontological terms-conventions.

Freedom and necessity turn out to be the reverse sides of each other, although not in their dialectical sense.

The development of these new virtual worlds helps to provide better arrangement and ontological characteristics of our world, and the diversification of ontologies and related concepts – the conditions and limits of the ontology itself.

Gnosseology of science fiction will include another series of questions, seizing the ultimate learning experience, modeling of exotic cognitive situations, analysis and presentation of objective consciousness realised with the help of artificial means, as well as unique means of detection and dispersal of visible illusions.

For example, an alien – is a radical instance of removal that allows to adopt a maximally external attitude and distinguish some features which would not be obvious otherwise: the conventionality of the usual, customary, traditional and non-obviousness of the evidence itself.

Unexpected turns of events, large-scale coverage of the grand space-time intervals, sophisticated scenery give the opportunity to see the limits, denoted by the acknowledged meanings and boundaries of natural intuitions and interpretations; realize the inert stereotypes of mundane consciousness.

Fiction as knowledge finally undermines the solid oppositions of the discovered/invented, the found/made, the real/imaginary.

Fiction modeling demonstrates the capabilities of the most flexible thinking and creative ways of comprehending the world: the creation of exotic worlds can tell something about our world also – regardless of whether the scientific or mythological fiction base is being used.

The Heuristic Functions of fantasy in general were among the first to be observed.

This is also backed by the discussion of problems with communication and understanding, which can be seen in colorful contrast to the highlighted situations of meeting of different civilizations, cultures and societies that belong to different worlds, planets, strata or layers of reality – in this sense, the well-known TV series «Star Track» becomes the embodiment of the universal hermeneutic project as it purposefully indicates a potentially infinite attainability of understanding.

The axiology of fiction includes another series of questions that draw the attention to the subtle aspects of working with values.

Properly speaking, there is no such notion as values of fiction, of course – not because it is impossible to estimate the products of fantasy (that is quite possible), and not even because it is impossible to come up with things or ideals, worthy of aspiring no less than ordinary and mundane (this is also feasible, although with an even greater difficulty), but simply because it is impossible to evaluate something that is make-believe: in a sense of combining the perception of some value as a value, worthy of becoming a finite basis of goal-setting, and – at the same time – as an arbitrary convention, that can easily be replaced at any time, or freely given up.

Another thing is that fiction provides a unique opportunity for revaluation of all values (almost according to Nietzsche's project), or at least for evaluating different versions of the hierarchy of values and preferences.

But in any case, there should be a certain binding to ones or the other values accepted as default, because otherwise it would be impossible to perceive new, unusual and unfamiliar ideas as essential.

The utmost escapism is inevitably related to the main flow of life – the question is always about the desire to escape from something and the destination of running.

However, there are things which one can never get away from – himself for example, – and this turns out to be the most important, the most valuable thing, and that is what one has to deal with in the long run, but in order to find this balance, everything has to be checked for strength and sustainability – as well by the means of fiction.

Of course, the diversity of aspects of fiction capabilities listed above is in no way exhaustive.

At least two relatively autonomous aspects are worth mentioning separately, as they are distinguished on other grounds.

The social aspect of science fiction – and probably the most significant behind its limits – is primarily associated with the expression and comprehension of the ideals of social order (directly and primarily in the form of various utopias and anti-utopias – respectively, the positive and the negative), and also provides the development of the future, with a reinterpretation of the past (alternative history), with recovery of the socio-cultural condition of the world and forming human relationships, not to mention overcoming xenophobia and tolerance development.

For example, Rorty highly appreciates the role of fantastic experiments carried out in the novels of George Orwell, which help to understand the nature of a man, the formation of the modern concept of a fair society and avoidance of violence.

By the way, the heated debates on the program of so-called gender studies elegantly complement the fictional models of societies, cultures and civilizations, built on a completely different (from what we are used to) principles: it is not just about the possibility of existing of other life forms (in one case – the androgynous, and in the other – proclaiming and accepting dominance of homosexual contacts over heterosexual), but also more exotic ways of existence – the robots, for instance, which also happen to be discriminated like women, blacks, gays, children and other peculiar characters.

Anyway – fiction is indispensable in demonstration of the fundamental conditionality of all forms of human interaction, even if it reproduces the steady absoluteness of the required functions.

Finally, we could also mention the ability of fiction to act as an emphasized workaround, as a form of Aesop's language, which allows to disguise ideological and political journalistic statements for works of art avoiding censure, if such products in fact, do not belong to the fiction itself in a quite indirect way.

The discursive aspect of fiction is primarily associated with the means of its realization and perception.

The main question is what conditions and assumptions are necessary for the existence of fiction as purely fantastical, not accepted as a brazen lie, that is, or an attempt to mislead or a story about reality.

After all, fiction is also expressed with initially limited means (ordinary language – minimally modified, or built up); the fact that these means are certainly excessive (realities, concepts, constructs, concepts...); on the one hand, fiction works are unlike purely formal search experiments of avant-garde and modernism, and on the other hand, from the popular science literature, support the delicate balance of subtle contrasts of the usual and unusual, explicable and wonderful, traditional and new, natural and artificial...

For example, the metaphorical transfer is often used inversely, if the standard step is to compare technical progress with natural or magical, the device of reverse provides a unique effect.

Thus fiction forms, constantly reproduces and maintains a special horizon of expectation in the space of the absence of the true/false opposition, in other words, creates new evidence with the help of the self-extracting code and its reader, who has a taste for such a recoding and other similar intellectual procedures.

The subject-indicating focus of language means is transformed by the means of fiction discourse in the functioning process into subject-projecting, the goal of which is to reveal the unprecedented.

Thus, science fiction acts as discursively embodied means of literature and/or visual arts (painting, drawing, sculpture, movie...) as something given, represented, described, but nonexistent, but real and materialized at the same time – unlike, abstract art for instance.

The peculiarity of the fictional in this sense is mostly defined by separation from the rest and self-restraint, by the act of mental balancing in testing the different types of discourse.

The most widely open and extremely pointed (though, again, not to a radical break) fiction discourse becomes the generative source for filling the gaps in lacunae, detected in the accepted discourse or the worldview.

Fiction is attractive due to its invincible variety; it opens new conceptual space and carries away to an amazing, wonderful, mysterious, unknown, unusual, supernatural and going beyond the limits.

Like a mental experiment in physics (Maxwell's demon, Schrödinger's cat, Einstein's elevator) fantasy provokes construction of unexpected concepts in other sciences, including a collection of imaginary constructs that have numerous applications – the imaginary logic of Vasilyev, the unspeakable communities and imaginary social institutions.

But this goes far beyond science, of course, – Tolkien's epic "The Lord of the Rings" for example, could easily be interpreted as a full-fledged version of a modern esoteric doctrine.

At the attempts to locate science fiction into a tight conceptual grid it often happens that all the definitions fade and moreover blur the stereotypical schemes of perception and thought.

Science fiction fans are well aware of the harm which "science-fiction mass consumption products" do to this genre.

Heroes there are substituted with schemes (even super-schemes), supermen with crystal-clear and empty soul.

With stagy ease these "heroes" use their abilities in time and space, unlimited even by common sense.

Cinematography did not go far beyond from the publishers in this sense, making new "supermen" and new "star massacres" rich with dynamics which are made at a really fantastic technical level.

Therefore, the appearance of such work as a novel by Andrey Demidov "The Natotevaal Recruits" should become a significant, and even iconic event not only in the paradigm of fiction, but of the literary process in general.

Why are we talking about literature in general in this case?

Because literature is always a non-fictional (and sometimes distorted) reflection of the present.

But can we say that works of fiction genre reflect the future?

No, we cannot.

The present is refracted and repeated in a special form in them.

The future – is just a prism through which science fiction writer considers his time, his contemporaries. However, this prism still allows the readers to see features of future in the present.

That is why we can confidently say that fiction helps a person in a world, that is changing with tremendous speed, especially nowadays, when the rate of change has dramatically increased, and all these changes can be both beneficial as well as threatening to the mankind.

Fiction, that describes possible changes, prepares a person for a real change and helps either to adjust to it or to change oneself.

But are these changes of human nature really needed and are they possible?

We live in a world, predicted by science fiction writers decades ago.

Andrey Demidov's protagonists live in a world, the suppositions of which we are making today, the premises of which we can see even now.

It is a world in which the most formidable predictions of science fiction writers and futurists have come true.

A world, in which nuclear weapons have been brought into play, killing millions of people and a world, where the survivors envy the dead.

This is a world where Christian and Muslim civilizations meet in a deadly combat, a world in which tolerance and liberalism have been completely refuted.

This is the world where the danger of physical, intellectual and moral degradation of the mankind as a whole – is an obvious fact, the everyday reality of life.

Essentially, it is a world without a future.

Andrey Demidov's heroes do not even get a chance to think about the future.

They have other problems to deal with.

Their past is war, their present is war, and their future – mysterious, enigmatic and unknown – will most likely result in war.

War – is the occupation of the novel's characters.

They are fighting for their race, their land, their families, but by chance they will have to take part in battles of a totally different level.

In childhood, joyfully shooting the space fleet of "the evil empire" on cheap game consoles, the novel's characters naively believed that monstrous plans of "Star Wars" would be carried out somewhere far away from Earth and certainly never dreamed of being at the forefront of these space wars, but soon... In a while they are going to find themselves taking part in a totally different war:

“Getting out from a pile of floppy disks and coils of a collapsed rack of the archive, Whitehouse was anxiously listening to the established silence.

The emitter of «Das Rhein» was quiet.

Mackliff was pottering about nearby, "Yes, it has been a long time I was hit in the face like that..." – he said, letting trickles of blood pour into the weightlessness down his smashed nose.

The speaker of internal communication rustled again:

– ‘Das Rhein’ calls up ‘Independence’, ‘Das Rhein’ calls up ‘Independence’.

Raumwaffe Colonel Manfred von Conrad speaking... As a result of penetration of a cumulative rocket, depressurization of all compartments has occurred. I beg permission to move to your Shuttle.

Whitehouse approached the microphone as quickly as it was possible:

– Yes, hurry up. We will open the lower gateway.

German astronauts appeared in ten painfully long minutes.

Covers of cadmium suits were torn apart; glass of pressure helmets was smoke-stained, identification badges looked faded.

Their eyes were empty, staring at one point. Their faces looked like the astronauts have just returned from the underworld. There were four of them, Colonel von Conrad, Navigator Eichberger and board gunner Hoffman, who was laid next to the fourth, Matthias Leiseheld, whose body was inside a funeral package with a small black-and-red-and-yellow flag pinned to the chest.

He was killed when one of the missiles hit the emitter tower.

– Well, what do we do now? – Eichberger asked gloomily.

– Allah Akbar. That's what. – Von Conrad looked up at his Navigator with his dull eyes, reddened from capillary bleeding, and brushed the edge of his hand across his throat.

A game of this self-confident giant with legless midgets went on for several minutes, after which the remaining Stergs were turned into rubble with a few exact salvos.

– Now, that's what I call real war! – Von Conrad broke the deathly silence and clapped his hands. – Bravo, Swertz.”

Soon the soldiers from Earth will become space soldiers, the recruits of Natotevaal, and the victory or the defeat of the space race, for which they have decided to fight, will depend only from them.

This is where the author gets a chance to study human psychology and behavior in new, seemingly improbable situations.

Heroes will act in a new reality for them, which is hard to perceive, even in terms of technology – even though the author smartly describes all the technical details, they are not presented as a contrived conglomeration of terms, although composed in the form of a document:

“Digital Coded Telegram NO5

To:

Commander of the "Independence VH-O" group,

Captain-Commander

yagd Audun Tskugol.

Regarding the raider "Krovur":

During the battle for Terhoma in the Blue Plume area, sector A55S00; sub-sector 354 the following features of the raider "Krovur" were detected;

– The raider is a plate-shaped aircraft with two modes: cruiser and combat.

-in cruiser mode its body is solid, has a radius of 4.7 Krs and an average thickness of 1.01 Kr.

-in combat mode, a remote cabin separates from the central part of the body, leaving a 2.1 Kr radius void and the raider turns into a toroidal body.

At the time of the fight its cabin, which is a standalone warship moves away at a safe distance.

About ten objects get separated from the main body simultaneously; they most likely perform the repeater functions of the cabin because a variety of interference and communication blocks are commonly used in combat.

-Repeaters, due to their small size are survivable against the enemy; they line up in a chain which connects both parts of "Krovur".

-experts believe that the 'swarming fly' maneuvers are only possible due to a radically new type of engine, different from the megrasine ones.

"Krovur" probably has gravitational driving force, which is two or more artificial groups, asynchronously rotating inside the computer by thickening the rim, which is no more than a looped-through accelerator channel.

This allows "Krovur" to change the direction of the flight instantly, along and across its body, which is almost unattainable for our "cigar-shaped" vessels."

However, the scientific and technical achievements, no matter how incredible they are, do not cancel or devalue human emotions and qualities – the duty of friendship, loyalty, personal courage and honor – these feelings are eternal and timeless. The strength of these feelings will be time-proved, and it will depend only on the hero whether these tests will end up with victory of the spirit or shame.

Therefore, when we read the list of the fallen Natotevaal recruits, we see an eternal granite plate in front of our eyes with names of the heroes of the Second World War, and this feeling is intensified with a Russian name of one of the characters:

"Here rest:

Jean Batiste Dunois,

George Fujieka,

Wolf Lauer Hoffman,

Otto Franz Eichberger,

Mathias Leiseheld.

And the soldiers of Natotevaal:

Richard Aydem,

Alexander Vladimirovich Dybal.

God bless their souls,  
And the souls of all the commandos from Earth,  
Who have fallen in Natotevaal.”

A detailed analysis of various aspects of science fiction as a phenomenon of literature and philosophy, that precedes the story about the novel of A.Demidov was not accidental.

This novel, written over ten years ago, not only did not lose its sharpness and relevance, but, on the contrary, is intended to be a significant milestone for all intelligent readers.

For all those who are still interested in secrets of space and the dual and contradictory role of scientific progress in modern society, and feelings of the characters who undergo the hardest tests of courage, devotion to duty and humanity.

Moreover, the novel "Chronicle of Natotevaal" has the potential to become a cult product for fans of science fiction – it is imbued with romance of heroism, great sense of humor and it is literally impossible to break away from reading it.

But, nevertheless, the novel is anything but entertaining light reading: the author raises complex issues of science, politics, philosophy and moral before his heroes and the readers.

In the tradition of the best works of fiction of the 20th century, Andrey Demidov reveals the unknown in his novel, something that might either happen tomorrow or will never happen at all.

The author clearly highlights the difficulty of the way to complex, unknown future – it is a long and difficult path, with mistakes and defeats on the way; and the victory will not be easy, but endured, with a promise of new ways and new challenges.

To many of the questions posed by Andrey Demidov in the novel "Chronicle of Natotevaal" humanity does not yet have sufficiently complete and convincing answers.

Humanity will search for these answers as long as it exists; it is obliged to, if we want to go forward, not blindly.

Searching through fiction in particular, and the book you now hold in your hands will become a reliable, but demanding assistant, and possibly – your spiritual guide to a modern, distorted world.

Because “imagination – is just a part, although a significant one of what usually denotes reality. Ultimately, it is unknown to which of the two genres – reality or fiction our world belongs”.

(War chronicle)

A novel

Many of them strong, fierce and cheerful

Those who killed elephants and Men

Those who died from thirst in a desert,

And froze on the edge of eternal ice

But still faithful to our planet,

Strong, cheerful and fierce...

Nikolay Gumilev

\*\*\*

Digital Coded telegram VHV

Confidential level: B.

To the commander of the 156th squadron of 1U Fleet,

Colonel Kokum Yohoud.

Yagd Colonel!

I have to inform you, that yagdishwalder-42 of the entrusted squadron, did not reach the area of concentration to participate in the landing attack operation the "Earl".

I also do not have the data concerning the dislocation of LG-42.

Natote!

16-00.

Mars 17

Year 4725

From the beginning of Natotevaal.

Commander of the tactic group 'Earl',

Lieutenant Colonel, yagd Aprehum Scisert.

\*\*\*

Digital Coded telegram AHM

Confidential level: A.

To the commander of the 156th squadron of 1U Fleet,

Colonel yagd Kokum Yohoud.

Yagd Colonel!

I have to inform you, that two hours ago the picket boat from patrol division 255, has detected pieces of the 1st class battleship's 'Marshall Tote' armor plating in sphere sector A13N45. The battleship has traces of mixed impact nuclear attack and surface melting, typical for annihilation weapons of the enemy.

With the help of convoy raider 'Haldesmemur', of 17th separate destructive crew, we were able to detect and gather a great number of combat vessels and airlifters' fragments with mark of yagdishwalder-42.

Natote!

/A copy to the Special secret service Department

of the 3rd Galactic Directory

19-45.

18 Mars

Year 4725

From the beginning of Natotevaal.

Commander of the picket boat 'Ropin-6'

255 patrol division,

Lieutenant Kannel Prehur.

\*\*\*

Digital Coded telegram AHO 69

Confidential level: A.

To all combat vessels of the squadron 156 Fleet 1U.

I hereby order:

- To abort all current tasks and block the areas adjacent to the sphere sector A16N45 according to the scheme 'Net'.
- To organize a search for survivor vessels and rescue boats of yagdishwalder-42
- To bring the lock scanners of the second and the third watch on combat duty
- Cancel leave and enter the mode of 1A degree alert
- Commander of the 'Tybentite' battleship, Captain Grafog Tertisote should launch an investigation concerning the circumstances of the YAG-42 destruction.

Natote!

/A copy to the General Headquarters

Of the 3rd Galactic directory

19-55.

Mars 18 a.c.

Commander of 156th squadron of 1U Fleet,

Colonel yagd Kokum Yohoud.

\*\*\*

The earth, covered with glittering scales of cirrus clouds, decorated with scrolls of ocean cyclones seemed to be a figment of someone's whimsical fantasy.

Slowly spinning around like a huge lazy ball, it seemed, it took dense blackness from deep space and spread it on its surface in various colors and shades of blue, from smoky, white and blue on the edge of the atmospheric film, to dark ultramarine over the ocean breaks.

Awakening continents slowly crawled out on the sunlit side, showing spots of deserts, forests, wormholes of megalopolises, negligent strokes of Islands and zigzags of coastlines.

Pilot of the shuttle "Independence" Lieutenant of the SAS air forces, Ronald Whitehouse sighed deeply and not paying attention to this magnificent picture, rubbed his neck on the collar of his spacesuit:

– When it comes to it, nothing ever turns out! – He put a krypton cutter that has not yet cooled off, in his backpack, circled around the bent bracket that jammed the docking rim of the rescue capsule, and perched on the edge of the shunting engine.

Aiming, he slung a piece of the rod from a broken solar battery from hand to hand, and brandished:

– Geronimo!

A blow.

The bracket trembled slightly, but didn't move an inch.

The astronaut himself flew off to the whole length of the tether on an impact and, after he had stopped the indiscriminate tumbling with great difficulty, began to maneuver the back pack, attempting to re-approach the odious piece of iron:

– Hey, Mackliff, Mackliff, hey! I can't do it. We should try something else. Maybe we can descend with the Germans?

Air crackled, and the nervous voice of John Mackliff, the flight engineer, came through:

– The Germans are in no better conditions than us. Depressurization of the capsule. All of their life support systems have failed. Ronald! If you don't straighten out this piece of iron shit, we are going to die, damn it!

Prickly shivers ran down Whitehouse's back; the indicator of the sleeve altimeter showed indifferent figures-«334».

Only three minutes ago the altimeter was showing 335, 5 miles at perigee. "Independence" was falling down rapidly, narrowing down the number of turns of orbital rotation. Having miscalculated the power of the back pack jet, Whitehouse hit the casing of the radio telescope, broke the sun visor of his pressure helmet and having made a ridiculous flip, found himself on the other side of the Shuttle.

At the right side of 'Independence', like a dark sprout, the streamlined hull of the German military ship 'Das Rhein. WN-4962' was sticking out.

An authentication check box of the Euro-Asian Community contrastingly stood out on its black armor.

Six hours ago, when 'Das Rhein' started a complex maneuver on the selection of the supply container in close vicinity to the research Shuttle, one of its shunting engines broke down.

At high speed the armored nose pierced the belly of 'Independence', which was covered only by sunshield.

The blow was terrible.

The right solar battery and the wall-mounted fuel storage containers have been torn off from the shuttle; the shield of the aerodynamic braking was messed up, a valuable telescope was broken to pieces, the rescue capsule was damaged, almost all of the flight control systems were deactivated, and the equipment for ozone-plasma synthesis, intended for ozone input into the atmosphere was broken as well.

Jean Dunois, the flight supervisor and George Fujieka, the second pilot were killed because of depressurization of the laboratory and the engine compartment.

Dick Aidem, the general major of the SAS air forces, received multiple fractures, concussion of the brain and now was lying unconscious in the control room under the supervision of the navigator – Alexander Dybal.

The German ship was less damaged.

However, everything that had been fixed in it without welding, was swept away from its places by inertial acceleration; the clamp bolts were cut from the storage batteries, as well as the main and local computers, propulsion systems, aiming systems, food containers, not to mention personal belongings of the crew, rubbish, rags and oil from the broken gyroscope that appeared out of nowhere...

All of these things were sadly floating inside the battle station that now looked more like a garbage truck, rather than a military ship.

The Germans were all alive, but two of the four officers had fractures and the board gunner Wolff Lawyer Hoffman was in a comatose state.

Otto Franz Eichberger, the navigator of «Das Rhein», who was performing the duties of a doctor, having examined the Lieutenant just sighed:

– Poor Hoffman, he can only be saved on Earth, in a special ‘Raumwaffe’ hospital in Dusseldorf.

Several minutes after the collision, having lost the opportunity of using their engines and in a state of shock, ‘Independence’ and ‘Das Rhein’, sharply started to de-orbit and began to fall.

A few minutes later, having lost contact with the outer world, people realized that there was no possibility to use their rescue capsules and from the thought of it they winced; this was not just a heavy accident: it was a disaster.

For the last two hours Whitehouse has been shaking the bracket, Mackliff has been trying to somehow establish the external communication, and call the repair vessel on duty.

All the while three Germans were consistently working on sealing their capsule.

Now, seated on the cracked telescope casing «Hubble-514», Whitehouse was a doleful observer of their vain efforts to hammer in the titan-stratum fiber into the microscopic cracks by melting them with krypton.

The titanium was bubbling, forming small spheres of an unpleasant brown that burst like soap-bubbles on the rough armor plating, leaving quickly evaporating blots.

At the same time, it was clear that only the astronaut in a pale blue commander’s space suit worked well, and the other two could barely move.

The one, who was meticulously melting the titanium fiber in equal intervals of time, most likely had a broken left arm; it was hanging like a whip.

The other only stirred when an instrument box slipped out of his hands and he had to catch it frantically.

– Listen, Mackliff, do you know what they are doing? Mackliff, hey! Did you fall asleep? Hey!’  
– Whitehouse knocked his hand in a dirty white glove on a box of internal communication, which has been finally disturbed; and heard a voice of the flight engineer in response, that sounded muffled like in a dungeon:

– Yes, I can hear you. Who are you talking about?

– The Germans of course, damn it!

– Oh well... They must be messing around with their capsule, like us.

– They are caulking it, like an ancient boat with titanium fiber!

– So are they making progress?

– Seriously? Have you lost your mind, John? Will titanium fiber stand the temperature of atmospheric friction? What about the buffing? I have a feeling that they are doing it only because they want to be engaged in some sort of activity. Perhaps it is easier for them to await their deaths like that.

– Well you do not even try. You are so lazy you will not even wait for your death.

– There is finally a teacher for me! This is insanity. It's madness to be engaged in this work.

– Of course this is crazy. They are total morons. It is clear as a noonday. They managed to bump into us in void space. I would understand if this happened at zero orbit, because it is crammed with satellites, transports, spotters and other junk waiting for liquidation. – Mackliff coughed and fell silent. You could hear him grinding something and breathing heavily.

Whitehouse took a deep breath.

His stomach was aching with hunger. Cocoa from the thermos has been drunk an hour ago and he did not want to crawl clinging to the rail, get through the narrow doors of the airlock system to change the thermos, check its tightness, and climb back. He had no strength for that.

– Hey, Mackliff, what about the connection?

– Maybe I will be able to fix it...or maybe not, – the flight engineer was obviously nervous.

Whitehouse glanced at the altimeter that was showing 301 mile in perigee, and crawled to his bracket, gently scouring the safety cable.

In order to distract his mind from the gloomy thoughts and a hungry rumbling in his stomach, he switched the intercom headset to a broadcasting wave.

A familiar tongue-twister struck his ears:

– You are listening to CNC, the official radio broadcasting company of the Yokohama pact countries.

Takashi Midzuki is on the microphone.

Transmitting the latest news...

Today at three o'clock (Tokyo time), in Brussels the long-awaited conference on rectification of the consequences between troops of the Islamic States Coalition and the Euro-Asian Union had begun.

The representatives of the military command of the North American community and the Pacific Union will take part in the conference because their troops were also involved in the conflict last year. The conference is held behind closed doors, but it is known from reliable sources that the main issues will be the exchange of prisoners of war and the withdrawal of the forces from the line of demarcation Bombay-Balkhash-Baku-Ankara.

According to our observers, a compromise can hardly be reached, as the main condition of the BIT leader, General Yasser Mohammad Vazir, is the immediate lift of the ban on the export of oil products from the countries of BIG, and the abolition of all trade sanctions... Listen to what is said in the...

A green lamp lit above the right eye of Whitehouse; Mackliff demanded him to switch to internal communication. After the tell-tale voice of the speaker, flight engineer's speech seemed sluggish:

– Gosh, Ronny! What were you doing? Stop dreaming. Listen, I fixed the transmitter, but I have a feeling that we are being jammed. Do you hear me? Hey!

– I can hear you, but if you do not stop shouting in the headphones my membranes are going to burst. Nonsense! Who would possibly jam someone here? The Germans may be fixing something and that must be the cause of this interference.

-No, it's not that, the background noise is too stable for ordinary interference.

-You are always imagining things; – Whitehouse slowly turned around and in three hundred yards from the Shuttle saw a matt cylinder with a thin light pen. And he braced his feet on the basis of his camera as if he was capturing an enemy on the wrestling mat of the Amateur club.

– Looks like it is giving in... I have to increase my efforts. What if I try and give a push with my space suit engine? I wish a miracle would happen, for once!

Whitehouse pushed the power lever up and started the back pack.

His shoulders cracked from the tug and a fierce vibration pierced the body, he felt his chest being pressed into metal. On the upper panel of the pressure helmet the reboot lights of all systems of the space suit glimmered violently. The engineer's voice burst through the roar of the jet:

– Ronny, this is a miracle! The fall has slowed down, and we began to level off, it seems that one of the shunting engines turned on!

– Yeah and Elvis Presley rose from the dead and helped it with a bright song... This is not a shunting engine, but my back pack has turned on – Whitehouse could not finish the sentence.

He just clenched his teeth and let out a howl, trying to take a breath with his sandwiched diaphragm. A string of orange circles flashed before his eyes, his head felt heavy. The torso control panel cracked and sank in, the temperature rose sharply.

The hum of the back pack became a roar and suddenly stopped.

The red lamp flashed; the fuel consumption is 100%.

– Mack-cliff... – Whitehouse pushed away the firm bracket, which remained in the same position, and started to move away slowly from 'Independence'.

It seemed to him that he was floating on his back, pulled by gentle surf, relaxing and exposing his face, damp from ocean spray to the sun. Fast seagulls...

– Ronny, we are descending again. Have you noticed which of the shunting engines has worked? Answer! – Rattled the voice of the flight engineer in his humming eardrums.

– Mack-cliff... – The tether uncoiled, stretched and sprang back with a sharp tug around the waist, causing Whitehouse to return from his comatose surf to the height of 291 miles.

– Mack-cliff ... – Whitehouse was hanging in thirty yards from the gleaming white hull of the Shuttle. – Goodness, Mackliff! My space suit and air conditioner broke down and the cadmium cloth layer has dispersed, and...

– What the hell, where are you, I do not see you... Ronny, Ronny! – Dybal' interfered.

– Of course you don't, I am hanging right at the opposite side – he gasped, starting to fall into oblivion, but suddenly shouted as if his nails were being pulled out.

– Idiots! Pull me, pull me faster!

The tether length was reducing with agonizing slowness; the electric motors could barely work with the discharged batteries.

When the astronaut fell into the oval of an airlock, the altimeter, which was the only undamaged device of his space suit, stated flatly: 285 miles at perigee.

\*\*\*

The 'Independence' sank into silence.

Usually buzzing local computers were out of order.

The ozone-plasma synthesis reactor was a towering dead pile of panels.

Usually noisy TV and rustling air conditioning were also silent. Mackliff saved the emergency batteries. He was sitting fastened by the battery.

– Mackliff! I can see a probe on the right!

– Does the recognition system 'beep' something?

– The system has become junk long ago and it won't 'beep' anything.

– Damn! Does it have any identification marks?

– Aha! Would you like its home address and phone number?

– Come on...

– I don't know the Sun is in the way. I can't see a thing...

– Try to approach it.

– What for? This must be the worried rescue service. We have lost contact with them about six hours ago. They are looking for us. Let's hope that this thing sees us. Or maybe... There is a lot of junk in space nowadays. Eh, I wish we could shift the bracket and two hours later we would drink coffee on our way to Canaveral, – Whitehouse nodded in the direction of the Germans, seeking for support of his words, but saw that they had already climbed inside, and now he's all alone sitting on the telescope.

A yellow strip of Equatorial desert could be seen between his feet that were hanging in the emptiness.

It was uncomfortable and cold, the air conditioning system of the suit was working properly. The chill came from the heart – 297, 6 miles at perigee. He clenched his teeth, and with one jerk reached the unfortunate bracket. He clasped the transmitter and was digging into its innards with a gleaming sting of a soldering iron.

Next to him, in a t-shirt, hovered Dybal, waving away the parts that popped up from the hands of a flight engineer:

– So what? We don't need this, do we? Why did you throw away the sixth board?

– No, we don't. Can you imagine, – Mackliff has been maliciously commenting on his massacre with the transmitter.

Lieutenant Whitehouse gradually came to himself, carefully fastened to the plane of the bed by his comrades.

A hard bitter K was stuck in his throat, and even the third package of orange tonic could not push it through; his chest responded with a dull ache to each breath, white spots were flashing before his eyes, and his folded hands involuntarily floated over his head, as if they were still clutching the bracket.

He finally managed to get away from the chaos of the brain, and tear off his tongue from the palate:

– Al, John, what's up, guys?

– It sucks, – answered Dybal in Russian and turned his tired sweaty face to him. – That probe with no identification marks, Ronny, that were the Arabs...

– Nonsense, it can't be, – Whitehouse opened the belts that were holding him, stood up from the bed and hung over the handrails of a racing simulator. – Nonsense.

– If a neighboring space object interferes with the work of one or more computers and jams several channels of communication, it may be an unfortunate coincidence, – said Mackliff tediously

and shrugged his shoulders. – But if this object paralyses the work of all computer systems and moreover does this permanently, than it is...

– An invasion! – finished off Dybal.

– An invasion? You must be out of your minds. Since last year the Arabs have been lurking in their holes like mice, thanking Allah they were able to sign a rectification on fire suspension at four levels: sea, land, air and space. Mutual nuclear attacks in Asia, nuclear canopy and burning oil fields taught them well.

They are now engaged in extinguishing fire in the wells, deactivation of mosques and military coups. No, guys, there is something confusing about it. – Whitehouse barely crept to the window and stared into space; they went round the dark side of the Earth.

Dybal sighed deeply and heavily:

You are both right and wrong, Ronald. Islamists are actually sitting quietly and they are not going to start a new campaign in the near future, although it is possible. But believe me they will not miss a chance to capture two of the newest and magnificent spaceships, which are moreover very high-tech. Well, is this clear? This is a tidbit. Apparently they found out that we failed to notify the Center about our dislocation and situation. You see? They jammed our signal and surrounded us. They are going to take us like helpless blind kittens and they will find out whatever they want. Remember, how they have tortured two British pilots who were brought down over Balkhash?

– What ring? I don't see anything, – said the pilot, still staring into the darkness; he decided this was a joke; he didn't want to; he dreaded the thought of believing them. -This is a bad joke, guys.

"Well... I burned the decoder because of you! – Something shorted and burned under the soldering iron of the flight engineer. A cloud of bluish grey and caustic smoke appeared. Mackliff angrily spat at the steaming board and by several hysterical blows of the screwdriver turned the remains of a transmitter, and block orientation of external antennas into a swarm of ugly debris:

-Why do you need a transmitter here? What can it possibly do?

Dybal smiled bitterly:

– Are you getting emotional, John?

– Well, stop boasting of your composure. If you shot twice from a machine gun in the direction of Ankara, it does not make you a hero! In a couple of hours you will be wrapped in reflex spirals and fried until you answer all their questions. Then I will see if you have any – having lost his temper Mackliff shouted suddenly. His short black beard was messed up, green eyes bulging, throbbing veins stood out on his forehead.

Dybal only waved his hand and moved to navigator cabin, where Dick Aidem was moaning feebly.

– Look! There they are three Islamist stations! – Panting flight engineer got to the window, where Whitehouse was hanging in confusion, and began to rub his ragged nail on the dark glass

furiously. “There they are: three humpback shapeless silhouettes. Only a blind man would not see them! Look...” – he had such a brutal face, as if he was going to strangle the pilot.

Whitehouse pulled himself together, took hold of the fire extinguisher bell for greater stability and thundered:

-Flight engineer John Harriman Mackliff, I order you to shut up. According to the Statute, after the failure of the captain, his duties are performed by the pilot. I order you to immediately stop the hysteria, and prepare to launch the empty cylinders of the diffusion reactor. Execute an order! – the pilot survived Mackliff’s suddenly vitreous stare and made his way to the navigation bridge being careful not to touch the bodies of Dunois and Fujiecka, that were wrapped in sheets and fastened along the casing of the main on-Board computer.

He tried not to look into black holes of windows and not to think that Mackliff can lose control and start a rampage.

A fight on a falling shuttle is a nightmare.

At the moment when he knelt down beside the humps of emergency batteries, he could hear a rustle of still running internal communication from the dynamics beside the navigation pane of the charthouse. A confident voice has started broadcasting in perfect English:

– Astronauts of «Independence» and «Das Rhein»! The Supreme command of the united armed forces of the Arab States Bloc gives you a promise to save your life and dignity, as well as to provide you with medical care and hot meals.

Give up.

Open gateway bays and disconnect the system of self-destruction.

Think about your families, kind and gentle women waiting for you, about your mothers. Surrender, and your life will be saved otherwise you will be destroyed.

Do not wait for help as our probes mimic your emergency call onto the orbits of a different azimuth. Astronauts of the “Independence” and “Das Rhein”, the Supreme...

All of a sudden the Shuttle was filled with a powerful buzzing, as if its hull had a few APS distribution transformers pinned to it.

From the depths of the living quarters you could hear Mackliff shouting:

"Jerry, it is jerry! Idiots, they turned on the military emitter! Fanatics! I had almost thought it out, and they...

Whitehouse and Dybal rushed to the side port.

From the right solar battery of «Independence», from the spot where a combat ship was sticking out of his body; short pale-blue flashes were splitting the darkness. One after the other the probes for tracking and jamming, lit up and were destroyed between them.

The Arabs could not turn off their signal lights, necessary for safety control, and the German gunner methodically shot these electronic suitcases.

Islamist stations began to move away slowly to a safe distance closing them in a cloud of reflecting suspension.

– Come on, comrades, let's burn the green devils! We are all done for anyway! Let's have some fun after all... – Dybal was striking out wildly.

At the same time Whitehouse was feverishly writing on the sheets that were torn out of the logbook:

«On the 34th day of the flight we were attacked by the BIS warships.

We have lost the connection.

Fulfilling the duties of the «Independence» NIS, Ronald Scott Whitehouse. Finder must immediately pass this to representatives of the authorities. »

Having nervously filled up six sheets with the same message, he rushed to the reactor of ozone diffusion synthesis and found that Mackliff was already here, finishing the preparation of the cylinders for the launch.

Flight engineer seemed changed.

He was busy. His fingers stopped shaking there was a metallic gleam in his eyes, and the cheekbones were tightened.

It was the former Mackliff.

Cylinders were intended for many operations: from the input of ozone into the atmosphere up to the dumping of nuclear warheads, and they were designed for multiple passing through the burning atmosphere.

Now they were being prepared to launch without calculation, not above the critical points, and could fall anywhere, but there was a chance that they will be found by their people or allies. So, having torn out the filling tubes, Whitehouse stuck the notes inside and shut the lids. He looked at the flight engineer with expectation.

The other gravely saluted with the expanded palm of his hand.

"– Everything is ready, sir.

– Start without reference. Execute an order. – Whitehouse looked up at the place where on Earth would be the sky. – Let us hope that our people will find those. God bless us!

Cylinders started simultaneously and flew to the Land like an open fan.

The Islamists have not even tried to destroy them.

-It is burning!!! It is burning!!! – Shouted Dybal. – See what a beam can do!

About five miles to the starboard side, one of the enemy ships was burning like a Bengal fire. The emitter continued hitting it.

Germans did not give a chance and just leave it damaged they were finishing it off.

The confident voice that was humming about «The life and dignity, as well as medical care and hot meals», shut up in the middle of a sentence.

– It is burning, you bastard, and it is burning very nicely, – the Navigator was happy as a child, – I hope they do not run out of energy...

At this moment the Shuttle shook as if it hit the rock.

This was followed by a series of aftershocks.

Something exploded and cracked in the engine compartment, you could feel the smell of burning and heated metal. Round bulkhead door to the battery room protruded, but did not open.

The Arabs used non brisant missiles to 'Independence', like those that are used to knock out satellites, when you don't want to damage the filling.

Getting out from under a pile of floppy disks and the coils of a collapsed rack of the archive, Whitehouse was anxiously listening to the established silence.

Emitter of «Das Rhein» was silent.

Mackliff was pottering about nearby, "Yes, it has been a long time I was hit in the face like that..." – he said, letting trickles of blood pour into the weightlessness, from his smashed nose.

The speaker of internal communication rustled again:

– 'Das Rhein' calls up 'Independence', 'Das Rhein' calls up 'Independence'.

Raumwaffe Colonel Manfred von Conrad speaking...As a result of penetration of the cumulative rocket depressurization of all compartments has occurred. I beg permission to move into your Shuttle.

Whitehouse approached the microphone as quickly as possible:

– Yes, hurry up. We will open the lower gateway.

German astronauts appeared in ten painfully long minutes.

Covers of cadmium suits were torn apart; glass of pressure helmets was smoke-stained, identification badges looked faded.

Their eyes were empty, staring at one point. Their faces looked like the astronauts have just returned from the underworld. There were four of them, Colonel von Conrad, Navigator Eichberger and board gunner Hoffman, who was laid next to the fourth, Matthias Leiseheld, whose body was inside a funeral package with a small black-and-red-and-yellow flag pinned to the chest.

He was killed when one of the missiles hit the emitter cupola.

– Well, what do we do now? – Eichberger asked gloomily.

– Allah Akbar. That's what. – Von Conrad looked up at his Navigator with his dull eyes, reddened from the capillary bleeding, and brushed the edge of his hand across his throat.

– There, there! We will show them! – Dybal said, forcing himself to smile and made a hand movement as if he closed the breech of an antique naval gun. – “Our proud ‘Varyag’ does not surrender and nobody asks for mercy...”

At this point from the utilization camera of sanitary block they heard blows of metal upon metal, buzzing of krypton cutter and already stifling air was filled with the smell of welding flux; Board engineer John Mackliff was in the process of making something:

– Hey, anybody! Come here quickly! – His excited voice pierced the silence.

Two German astronauts started moving, but Whitehouse stopped them and began to examine their wounds. Dybal went to see Mackliff, taking first-aid kit with him just in case.

But first-aid kit was not needed; Mackliff sent the navigator back with the task to rip off the heat sealing siding from the cooling compressor of the engine.

Bandaging Eichberger's hand and watching Dybal flying back and forth with thermal insulation mats, dragging a trail of debris and wiping sweat from his forehead, Whitehouse asked:

– What is going on there, Al?

– He didn't say. Probably afraid of the evil eye, but he looks determined. He is messing with the garbage bins.

Von Conrad caught a receiver with a ‘Jean Dupois’ label, which was hovering nearby and tuned in.

A familiar voice of the CNV commentator could hardly be heard due to constant noise:

– ... that has forced the Countries of the Big Three to allocate additional seven billion dollars SGSA to the ‘TRANS-Selva’ state company, formed at a Congress of the South American Union in order to carry out the works on restoring forest belts along the left bank of the Amazon and its tributaries: Rio Negro, Mara; and Juru;.

According to the statement of the UN Commission on controlling the spread of Equatorial deserts – CSED, the sands come with the speed of up to three miles per year. The Amazon, which has lost the Northern part of its water basin, is rapidly drying up. For the last six weeks the water level has reduced to two feet... Amazonia, the lungs of our planet, may die within a few years. The world community... – Von Conrad tuned in to another frequency.

– You are listening to the World sports radio... Hugo Stern is at the microphone. Listen to a brief news summary... The Norwegian football team, having defeated the footballers of French Canada, reached the final of the world championship ahead of time... Who will be their rivals in the finals? Is it going to be the National team of Wales or the Italians? Ring bike race in Tampa-Set is still going on.

The unsurpassed Marc van Gal from Belgium has gathered seventy-six points in the standings and is leading... – von Conrad scratched his index finger on his grey temple:

– It is strange how they keep talking about this rubbish, but they do not say a word about the war...

– True – agreed Eichberger– If the Islamists had started another commotion, then all the channels would have been already broadcasting it; caution, nuclear alarm, and so on, without a break.

The Colonel nodded, feeling the bandage on his arm and at the same time squeezing raspberry jam from a tube in his mouth.

His eyes shone with the reflection of emergency lights, over the bridge of the nose deep wrinkles were ingrained, while he was eating, his lower jaw protruded like an excavator bucket.

– Hey, commander! Ronald! – Mackliff emerged from a sanitary unit. Everything is ready.

– What is ready? – Whitehouse had to step aside, and press his wet, sweaty back into a dead power distribution cabinet in order to let Dybal in. – What a crush!

– Well yeah, it is not a stadium, – confirmed Dybal, who was dragging a couple of reserve oxygen regenerators.

Flight engineer gleefully shook the working cutter, from which yellow flames were bursting out:

– I melted thermal insulation from refrigerators on the internal surface of the garbage containers, fit a control panel in the automatic shields of aerodynamic braking and parachutes. I made the locks on the inside. Of course, I understand that sanitary rubbish container is not the most convenient means of transport in the world, but this is still a chance. So, you can put your suits on and occupy the best seats.

– You have gone nuts! What do the trashcans have to do with it? What is the remote control on the braking shields meant for? – Whitehouse could barely restrain himself, not to thrust a bunch of repair keys tucked under his arm at Mackliff. All this sounded too gibberish.

Flight engineer grinned, pulled out a crumpled paper from a pocket of his overalls, and gently tapped the pilot on his broad shoulder:

– Here is the calculation. If we release the braking shields five minutes forty-five seconds earlier, and at the same time open up the first couple of parachutes, the internal temperature in the containers can be held at the level of forty to fifty degrees Celsius. Plus our air conditioned suits which we will be wearing. The temperature will be quite permissible. The first couple of parachutes will burn up of course, but the main domes will still be there...

– All of us will not fit in there, – glumly said Whitehouse, reckoning something in his head.

– Why? Two containers are ready. One will carry the badly wounded, the doctor and supplies. All the others will fit in a second container. We will have to leave the deceased, though.

The Shuttle twitched and there was a grinding sound, all port windows were closed by the body of Islamist station; the Arabs docked to the ‘Independence’ side-by-side.

Eichberger grabbed Whitehouse by the sleeve of his overalls:

-We can wait no more, Herr Commander. They will be inside the Shuttle in half an hour. We have to make a decision. We either give up, discrediting ourselves, or turn on the system of self-destruction and attempt to escape in the containers.

At this time, Von Conrad, looking like a samurai, who was sentenced to death, took out a screwdriver from Eichberger’s pocket, and clasping it in his hand, turned to the airlock.

From the outside you could hear the sound of scuffling, soft footsteps on the shell plating, the hum of the cutters; Islamists began to open the airlock hatch, and ‘Independence’ was rapidly falling under the escort of enemy ships.

Whitehouse was trifling a piece of paper with Mackliff’s calculations in his hands, unseeing eyes looked at the lines of differential equations of eighth order while he listened to his inner voice, that always helped him out. When he was a kid, on his way back from Grandma Theresa he had turned to a totally strange yard and in a minute a war between clans of Stone and Ho Chi broke out in the Great Park. Afterwards the police up nine corpses of random passersby that had been pierced with holes from quick squirts from the pavement.

And later, in Foot Strasse, at the training base of 51st wing of the U.S. air forces, where he did not make to after dismissal, because he got drunk in a pub just opposite the CPT base, at the same time, when his perfect all-weather interceptor with a pilot substituting for him was broken to pieces. And then, on the frontline in the center of besieged Ankara, when he and two rangers entered the rear of the command post of the 115th shock division of the Islamists, found themselves in the lair of the enemy, under the mass of concrete just a few minutes before a local nuclear attack...

Now, floating in zero gravity among the rubbish and garbage, under a luminous board showing 251 miles at perigee, he did not hear that inner voice, and therefore lingered.

– Hurry up, Ronny, don’t fall asleep, – Dybal startled him out of his apathy.

He and Eichberger were already fully clothed in suits and gently shoved Aydem into the suit.

The light blue emergency lights were slowly fading, giving deathly shade to faces of feverishly working people, the altimeter was signaling monotonously, changing the decreasing numbers, heat sealing that was cooling off in the containers had a disgusting smell.

It was getting unbearably stuffy with every minute; without getting enough voltage, the respiratory mixture regenerators had stopped functioning.

The Arabs had already passed through the outer hatch of the airlock, and there was a sound of grinding diamond drills, that were exposing the first inner membrane.

Someone was rummaging in the engine compartment, having got in through the hole in the empty fuel tanks.

– Why the hell did you take «Coke», throw it out immediately. And what's this? Goose liver? Will do. Dried rice? All right. Strawberry jam? Leave it to the Arabs. Chocolate? Suitable... – Whitehouse and Dybal loaded the second container with product packs and most valuable instruments.

Unconscious Hoffman was already inside with Eichberger, who was taking the load and arranging it in a form of small pyramids.

Mackliff and von Conrad dragged Aydem:

– Step aside we are going to ship the commander.

– The most interesting fact is that he will not fit in there. He will have to fly in our container. See how many things we have got? And we cannot put Hoffman in a different position. You do not want to tie his knees to the chest while he is unconscious. – Whitehouse froze with a box of rice in his hands and a blank face.

– Meanwhile Dybal leaned over the hatch to Eichberger's container, turning his shoulder timer to him:

– Hey, man, if you do not want us to be blown apart by a couple hundred miles, then listen carefully and memorize. Let's check the time first. It is fifteen forty – forty one– forty two– forty three on my timer ...

– Have you managed to set the time? Good for you.

So, you must reset the timer at start, and when it comes up to twenty-seven minutes fifteen seconds, you press that button there below the elbow. Shield braking will open and the parachutes will shoot off.

It will shake, but not much. Then you can relax.

All the rest will be done automatically. If we do it synchronously, we will land within half a mile from each other. If not, then much further. Yes, there is one more thing. If at landing a '010' symbol appears this will mean you have landed on water. Do not unlock the hatch in any case, and turn on the beacon immediately. Got it?

– All right. God bless us! We are 99% dead already. Therefore farewell. – Eichberger crossed himself and closed the glass of his pressure helmet.

Von Conrad helped him lower the heavy round hatch:

– Goodbye. But still you should sit back. Just in case we get lucky.

When there was a click of internal bolt, still warm from Mackliff's design tweaks, flight engineer sighed with relief:

– Seems that it worked. Let us hope that design of our capsule will not fail us either, – he was looking for something wooden to knock three times against the evil eye by the Russian tradition, which he remembered all of a sudden.

He did not find anything wooden, of course, so he spit three times over his left shoulder, and climbed in the container.

– Yo, damn mechanic, what is that hissing sound? – Whitehouse asked warily; he could hardly settle between Dybal and the colonel.

-Oh... I opened a goodbye helium tank, – said Dybal and listened to the whistling sound, as if overheated steam burst out from a kettle. He added with a wry grin:

-That will be a nice big blow when self-destruction is triggered. The "Green ones" will definitely enjoy it.

The Arabs were creaking with their diamond drills in the airlock, exposing the inner flap; liquid helium was hissing, flowing like a mist; self-destruct timer was buzzing; an alarm sound was roaring at regular intervals and dispassionate voice in the headsets repeated:

-The station is ready to explode. Three minutes left...

– The station is ready to explode. Two minutes forty-five seconds left.

– Batten down the window, Al. Automatic start will set off in a minute, – snapped Whitehouse and rolled down the glass of his pressure helmet.

Dybal quickly pulled the cover and spun the bolt wheel:

– Farewell, father "Independence" and mother life!

Pressurized helmet lights illuminated the inner parts of the container; astronauts were cramped like canned sprats.

They could not even stir; there was no question about it.

All they could was to move their hands a little that have been prudently placed in front of the dashboards of their spacesuits.

Von Conrad was either whispering something quickly, or praying, or piling up one of his creepy complex abuse.

Dybal was trying to blow away a chewing gum wrapper from his nose; which had somehow gotten under the glass of his pressure helmet.

Nervously biting his lip, Mackliff was holding his index finger on the timer reset button, looking steadily at his shoulder altimeter which was showing 213 miles at perigee:

- Oh, come on, respond, you damn automatics!
- Station is ready to explode in two minutes fifteen seconds...
- Well, there it goes!
- One minute forty-five seconds.
- What is it, Mackliff! Have you forgotten to turn on the sluice valve?
- Station is ready to explode in forty-five seconds.

– It is not possible! We have already passed the estimated 205-mile mark. It just can't be true! I'm sorry, guys ... – Mackliff suddenly felt like his flesh was being separated from the bone, and the brain was being smeared over his cranial vault.

He was so pressed into the titanium boarding that his guts seemed glued to the spine. Before he sank into the blackness, through his headset he could hear Whitehouse gnashing his teeth and roaring throatily:

- It has worked, damn it, that fucking piece of iron!

Thirty seconds after the ejection of containers, "Das Rein" and "Independence" along with two docked Islamist ships became a swollen fiery yellow ball and then turned into a firework of molten metal.

\*\*\*

Exchange 2.

Digital Coded telegram VHN 11

confidential level: A.

To the commander of the 156th squadron of 1U Fleet,

Yagd Colonel Kokum Yohoud.

Yagd Colonel!

I have to inform you, that by the end of 4725, Marr 24th from the beginning of Natotevaal, parts of the entrusted squadron have completely blocked the ball-sector A16N45 according to the scheme "The Net."

Patrols were placed at a distance of 5 Tohs.

All available lock scanners are thoroughly searching the sector and the adjacent space to detect the remains of yagdishvalder-42 and possible raiders of the Swertz empire.

The operation excludes:

- Yaggishvalder-15; convoy to Fort KK22 "Ihteneld-56-R" fortified zone of Stigmarkont.
- The repair ships brigade 446 of the separate remount battalion.
- 4 minesweepers: type "Ohayra" from units YAG-17 and YAG-32 that are undergoing preventive maintenance.
- Strategic reserve fuel tanker of squadron 156 SMI 443: propulsion engines overheating due to excess boost of mergasine.

Total engagement of forces of the 156th squadron is 89%

Natote!

00-30. 25 Marr A.C.

Executive Captain of the "Capture" operation,

Yagd Audun Eydlah.

\*\*\*

Digital coded telegram OOE

Confidential level: A.

Fleet base Stygmarkont

Marr 25

Year 4725

From the beginning of Natotevaal.

Special Department Coordinator

Of the Foreign Intelligence Board

And Security Service of the 3rd Galactic directory.

An Inquiry regarding the destruction of YAG-42

To: The Security Service Coordinator,

Marshal and Commander of Natotevaal,

Yagd TOTE YASCHEMGART

By the time of losing contact with yaggdishvalder-42 of the 156th squadron 1U Fleet of the 3rd Galactic Directory on Marr 15 a.c., it consisted of the following vessels:

- 1st class battleship “Marshal Tote” /flagship/
- 2nd class battleships “Kekvut”, “Maykopar”, “Rys”.
- Heavy cruisers “Jezerá”, “Kahn Sorre”, “Krodis”, “Moztok”
- Minesweepers type "Ogayra" / total number of 13 /
- Patrols type “Zhevur” and “Yunus-5”/ total number of 15 /.

– Amphibious assault ships of the 1U Fleet tactical reserve which had a fully equipped "Blue Lightning" commando division with heavy weapons on board.

/ A total number of D-Sh bots – 7 /.

– The total number of support vessels: 34.

77 combat and transport vessels altogether.

Natote!

Coordinator of 00 FIB SS-3

Captain Commander

Yagd Don Aykorr.

\*\*\*

Digital coded telegram VHN 13

Confidential level: A

To the commander of the 156th squadron,

Yagd Kokum Yohoud.

Yagd Colonel!

I bring to your notice that on May 26 a.c., having performed a thorough scan and trawling in sphere-sector A16N45; 69 flagship parts of YAG-42 and a large amount of debris and parts of sheathing, frames and engine-power plants have been detected.

The obtained black box of the 2nd class battleship "Kekvut" had been demagnetized, apparently as a result of the strong influence of residual annihilation radiation. BB's of other vessels as well as log books, nautical books and computer terminals were not found.

Natote!

23-45. 26 Marr 4725

From the beginning of Natotevaal.

Information Department

Under Special Section of FIB SS-3

\*\*\*

To: Coordinator of 00 FIB SS-3

Captain Commander

Yagd Don Aykorr.

Reference

The commander of Yagdishvalder-42, Captain GRAFOR Tertisote,

Born on Janu 14th year 4694 from the beginnings of Natotevaal.

From the Three Greyhounds System, Planet Gammun, Klenvule.

/ Code 556749 /.

Mother: Daza Tantane, occupation 5564.

Home address: Klenvule, Captain Dema Highway, Building 99, compartment 588.

Father: Shtarp Tertisote, profession 69870.

He resides at the same address.

In 4707 Tertisote graduated from comprehensive school / Code 48769 / and entered the Yagd Kokum Yohoud Metropili Biological Technical College of 1U Fleet, specialty 487659. In 4712 he was called to active duty into the 44th military transport flotilla of the U Fleet, 1st Galactic directory.

Card record of Corporal G. is attached.

Having accomplished the VGF course in 4715, he was directed to the existing Fleet as assistant of the minesweeper Commander DTO-91. Qualification card of Corporal G. Tertisote is in the attachment.

Cadet student's book of the Galactic Fleet Military Academy and a record card of Lieutenant G. Tertisote are attached.

In 4720 he was promoted for military service and appointed commander of the heavy cruiser "Jezero" YAG-42 of the 156th Squadron of the 3rd Galactic directory.

He took part in the operation on lifting the siege of Stigmarkont, by storming forts "Ihteneld-21-M" and "Ihteneld-40-R."

For valor shown in the battle on the 11th Feran year 3722 in sphere-sector V44N01 / Blue Flex System / he had been honored with governmental awards – the platinum star of the 6th rate and the title of VGF captain.

On the 1st of Junna year 4724 he became commander of the YAG-42.

Being in command of a unit he proved to be a demanding leader, cautious and prudent navigator, good organizer and executed the combat missions accurately.

He is single and without children.

Interests: 67859, 17678, 58698 etc.

Trustworthiness: 7986

He was verified by the Office of SS Counterintelligence and has never been noticed in any suspicious activity.

Efficiency report is attached.

The central archive operator

Sergeant Mara Shtatlidt.

\*\*\*

Mackliff was laying face skyward and observing a bug that resembled a scarab; it was crawling onto the bridge of his nose and busily exploring dust adhering to the skin:

“Am I dead or alive?”

He deeply inhaled the dry, hot air.

The beetle in a panic fell to his shoulder, ran to a parched leafless branch of long withered bush and hid.

Only now the flight engineer felt like he was floating in a bathtub filled with something sticky and viscous:

– Good Lord, I am floating in my own sweat!

Feelings returned to him gradually.

The facial skin suddenly wailed with all its nerve endings: “Hide me! Cover me!”

Right overhead like a white globe hung the sun, and it looked like it was gathering all its vigour to wither the astronaut.

He raised his disobeying hand to the face and cried out in pain: the skin was stinging and covered with scabs.

Overcoming the pain in his spine, Mackliff rolled onto the stomach, squelching salty moisture in the fabric of his tight suit, and realized that he was not wearing a heavy spacesuit, it was lying a few feet to the left, charred and pitiful, as if it was cut up with a knife.

– Well, I got really sunburned here, – he covered his head, with a scrap of some synthetic fabric, the first thing that came to hand.

He felt much better.

The astronaut slowly raised his head and froze in shock: in front of him, right behind the withered thorns of a lone bush stretched out the lifeless desert.

Flat as a table, without a hillock, without the slightest hint of dunes or ripples –and dazzling, as if it was glowing from within. Light drifting sand sometimes violated its complete stillness, and at the horizon, a lonely whitish cloud got lost in the sky, and was slowly washed away by a hot breath of scorching sand.

– Oh God! Where am I? I-aaah... – a yearning cry involuntarily escaped from his dry throat...

– Hey, why are you yelling? Do you think you are the only one who feels shitty? Ha ... Man, Dammit. Strike me dead... I still see you alive ... Stap my vitals... – a hoarse voice came from behind the pilot and a huge shadow loomed over Mackliff. Mackliff turned slowly, and behind Whitehouse, who also had no suit on; at a little distance, he saw the tilted container, halfway gone into the sand.

Dybal has been crawling around it on his knees, searching for something with his outspread fingers.

Two motionless bodies lay in a meager shade of the container: the former commander of the space shuttle "Independence" Aydem and the former commander of the "armored car" "Das Rein" – Colonel Von Conrad.

– Well, I'm glad. I'm very happy ... You know, John, you have had a very restless sleep, actually. I covered you with a piece of the parachute, and you started jerking your little hands and feet and threw it off. That's no good. So, old man, can you get up? – Whitehouse added seriously.

Mackliff struggled to his feet and tried to hobble towards the container.

His feet would not move.

If the dune did not have a slope, he would not even budge.

While he was moving towards the container, dismissing the help of Whitehouse, Dybal finally found what he was looking for – a binocular; and rapidly, for a man who has just darted down to the ground, got on top of the container nastily grinding the metal shield of his shoes on the black wall, which was still warm from the atmospheric heat. Scales of titanium ceramics burnt in the atmosphere flew from the hull of the container:

– It is curious to know where we have ended up ... Ooh, my arms and legs do not bend at all ... It hurts like hell...

– Yes, Al, it is curious indeed... – Mackliff made it to the container and carefully folded his body in the shade.

– Ronnie says we are not far from the former eastern coast of Venezuela, in Caracas area, which had been covered with sands. Though his eyes tell that he hardly believes in what he says. And so to speak, where is the sea breeze? At the border of the sand and the ocean air currents are mixed constantly, and it must be blowing like in the wind tunnel. But here? Ah, what to say ... – Dybal put the binoculars to his eyes and stared at the horizon. Standing on the capsule, he resembled a monument to some Ancient Mariner, who looked through binoculars at the squadron of enemy fleet...

-Well, the main thing is that we are on Earth. It is strange but we're still alive...

– Everything is relative, John. It seems to me that before the accident at "Independence", when there was light, a cold "Pepsi" and different kinds of sausage, we were a little more alive than here, where at best we can catch a weedy lizard and nothing at worst.

– Where is the second container? Where is Eichberger, Hoffman and all the supplies?

– Makliff leaned against the hull of the container, and suddenly pulled back, it was still hot from aerodynamic heating, and moreover warmed up by the sun. It was hot like hell.

– It's not clear yet. Either they landed too far from us, or did not land at all – said Whitehouse. He handed a flat jar of reactive water to Mackliff.

Flight engineer turned the release cover and gray powder filled the cap. In contact with air the powder turned into what looked like icy water in contrast to the red hot air.

Mackliff gently sipped this iron flavored liquid:

– What do we do next?

– We should at least find out our location to answer this question.

– Ronald, you said that we were in the Caracas area.

Whitehouse shrugged his shoulders.

Having had a good look at the surroundings, Dybal spent some time inside the capsule, and then climbed out red as a tomato, as if he has spent an hour in a Finnish sauna. But at the same time happy. He gently cradled a small box of a shortwave transmitter in his hands:

– Here you go. It seems to work. Now we can connect with the satellite-based positioning. We will send an emergency call and-and-and-and.....

– Well-well... And who is going to show up for your call sign? – Sand cracked on the teeth of Whitehouse. He spat aside.

– What do you mean?

– Well then, no outgoing signals. First let's try to listen to the incoming signal. – Forestalling the hesitant navigator, Whitehouse clicked the tumbler and pressed the 100.00 Hertz button.

The transmitter responded with a bang and a howl of automatic tuning. An alarmed voice could be heard through the ethereal sound; it was mumbling so fast that you could hardly parse a word.

After a while, a few more voices joined in. Sometimes the signal was muffled by the trills of triggered aircraft "friend or foe" identification systems.

– I think they speak Spanish – Said Dybal lifting the transmitter right to his ear:

-Please give permission for military approach...

Go ahead...

Iglesias, cover me...

-Yeah right. They attack our second container with Eichberger and Hoffman... Coal-colored cylinder, about three feet in diameter, open aero braking shield, two parachutes...

They do not respond to inquiries; do not shoot off the signal flares.

– In Spanish? So we are still in the SAU.

These are their patrol fighters. The SAU is neutral.

-Perhaps we could try to enable the emergency calls. – Perked up Mackliff.

Whitehouse shook his head:

– No need to hurry up, John. Yes, the SAU's are neutral, but now we only have the information that we had before the collision with "Das Rein." But then we were attacked by the Arabs. And who knows, maybe another war broke out.

And when the war starts, you can never vouch for the neutrals' position.

– Oh, shit! They brought it down them bastards, they brought down the container! – Dybal suddenly shouted, clutching his head.

– Damn it... What could a helpless container, an iron box hanging on the parachutes possibly do to them? Nasty freaks... Ah... – Whitehouse clenched his fists.

At this point, a little moan escaped from Von Conrad's mouth. Dybal bent over him:

– What is it, Manfred? Do you need something? Water, a painkiller...

Von Conrad was in a very bad state. Despite the fact that his body had no serious injuries, the general condition worsened with each hour.

When the capsule with him Whitehouse, Mackliff and Dybal, released the aero braking shield at the estimated height it started buffing and the heat reached its maximum.

After thirty seconds of falling in the atmosphere at a speed of 1750 miles per hour the titanium seal around the hatch had depressurized, and the temperature inside the container went off scale.

The fireproof fabric of the suits got wrinkled and softened, like cellophane by the fire, and air conditioning systems continued to work by a miracle.

That was the end.

Mackliff gritted his teeth and said that his life was not lived in vain, that he has developed quite a few first-class control systems of various levels, invented a probe accumulation of solar energy reflected from the moon's surface and had it affirmed by the NASA commission; made a spectrum estimation analyzer of orbital dust; said that he always liked the guys like Whitehouse and Dybal, and if he sometimes was grumbling and angry, it was only for the good cause.

He has also said that he had always loved only two women – his mother, Ann Stone Mackliff and his wife Dorothy, and all the rest were an accident, a passing moment though he could not say anything bad about them, they all believed him.

He shook his head in the misted pressure helmet, slapped Whitehouse on the shoulder, clinging to the cadmium fabric overalls with his glove, and said that he always wanted to have such children like he had: naughty boys Arnie and George; and sympathized with the pilot that it would be hard for them to stay out of bad company, drugs and juvenile prisons without a father.

Whitehouse did not get the rest of the flight engineer's shouts, but he just subtly abused the designers of emergency suits for the fabric's lack of heat resistance.

When the silicone zipper clasps began to smolder and tear at the seams, von Conrad pulled the tube of service module cooling, and liquid helium poured onto his chest.

Everything was shrouded in icy fog, the temperature dropped to normal, but through the vibration rumble and burning boarding you could hear the cracking sound of the colonel's suit.

Forty seconds later the braking shield opened and the first pair of parachutes opened up.

Then the second pair unfolded.

They have been saved, but the colonel received a severe thermal burn; up on one elbow, he made hoarse sounds, either trying to address his companions or God.

Mackliff could hardly suppress the urge to hide from this terrible, swollen, bluish face.

Whitehouse was standing nearby waving a piece of parachute fabric over the colonel. Meanwhile Dybal continued listening to conversations of the SAU pilots with their base:

– Damn it, they know that there was another container.

They're looking for us.

They have just passed the information on the search sector and probable coordinates 15-2 and 15-3 to the pilot...

– Too bad. Sooner or later they will find us here. And I'm afraid they are not going to offer us coffee. We have to leave. According to the numeration of squares, used in the SAU Air Forces we are near the foothills of the Andes, somewhere in Medellin, unless memory deceives me... Maybe we are standing on one of its former avenues...

Our plan is to put the wounded on the sledges and head to the mountains. There we can hide, find food and water. Even the Great Desert is still powerless compared to the mountains, – having stopped talking, Whitehouse began to chop off the straps of a flattened parachute and tore a white cloth, which Mackliff had notched previously.

Dybal started selecting things needed for the trip from time to time looking at the horizon and the sky through binoculars.

\*\*\*

Infernal heat slowly subsided.

The merciless sun rolled down further to the west, gradually turning from dazzling white to crimson. The sky like an endless ceiling, painted in smooth, pale blue paint was faintly covered with smoky clouds.

A faint breeze appeared.

It was still hot like the sand, but it was the Ocean breeze that had rolled over the mountain ranges, and dissolved in the desert. The Dunes that were hardly noticeable at first became higher, wider.

Like sickles they bent towards the mountains, whose rocky tops were covered with snow caps, clearly outlined by the horizon.

The astronauts were on the fringe. They have already thrown out most of their equipment; individual first aid kits, a box of dried bacon, transmitter battery, signal lights and rockets, blades, bags of dry fuel, with regret they buried the cadmium absorber in the sand, a unique device they have saved from "Independence", Dybal even threw out his watch that became as heavy as chains.

They were carrying their wounded on sleds, sinking ankle-deep in the fine sand, no longer having the strength to speak, to think, to raise their heads in ridiculous turbans made of scraps of snow-white parachute fabric; watery eyes just looked down to the surface of glittering sand, at the dusty toes of their boots, watching their step – the fallen could have no strength to rise.

An hour ago, before they had thrown away the transmitter Dybal intercepted a message of one of the SAU pilots that two of his supporting aircrafts did not come out of a curve in the 15-2 square and hit the ground, and he saw strange air vibrations near his aircraft.

The base has ordered to stop the search of the second capsule until morning and return to the base.

A distant rumble which daydreaming astronauts assumed was the sound of thunder, turned out to be a roar of the patrol engine "Phantom-11-E-34A", which was returning to the base in Cerro de Pasco. Blades of the assault helicopters feathered the airfield, ready to deliver observer snipers to the foothills of the search sector.

The saving rocks were close, just a dozen miles away.

An average healthy person without luggage would cross this distance in two and a half hours, but this way was an insurmountable obstacle for exhausted people whose souls have almost left their bodies. On top of that their progress was slowed down by the mountain-like dunes and terrains of basalt boulders, beaten by sands and wind.

When the sun touched the mountain tops, Dybal who along with Mackliff has been hauling an unbearably heavy von Conrad, stumbled and fell on his face.

Having lost his balance from the jerk, Mackliff also fell down. They tried to get up by scooping the flowing sand, wishing to move forward for an inch.

All in vain.

From the top of a dune, slowly, like in a dream, a landslide came down on their heads and a helpless colonel has almost been buried underneath.

But they fought, spending all strength they had; they were climbing up, further. Not seeing that his friends have stopped, Whitehouse has been going on for a while, head on his chest, stubbornly dragging Aydem, wrapped in a parachute as if it were a shroud.

Having climbed onto the next dune, he suddenly realized he did not hear the hoarse breathing of Dybal and Mackliff behind him.

He turned his stiff neck with great effort:

– Hey, guys... – a soundless whisper came out of his cracked lips.

He lost his balance and tumbled down.

Aydem was left on the other side of the ridge in a white bundle.

It took Whitehouse forty minutes to be back on the three-meter height of a continuously crumbling slope.

The sun had set.

The outskirts of the Great Desert slowly came to life; writhing lizards minced on the still-hot sand, large beetles scurried about their business, arrogant fat flies busily began exploring the wet sweaty faces of the astronauts which were covered with dust.

A desert jerboa galloped somewhere, wagging a fluffy brush tail and twisting its eared head. Right after it a viper flowed next to the face of Whitehouse. It was uninterested in people it wanted something that could be swallowed.

The wind became stronger and assertive.

Now it was blowing from the depths of the desert.

It was getting cold.

Myriads of grains moved along the crests of dunes, getting into the nostrils, eyes and ears; streamed into the collars, penetrated the tightly laced hiking boots, pockets, seams, hatchet sheath.

But Whitehouse was not paying any attention to it, he was falling asleep.

The desert drank all the strength of his powerful inexhaustible body, coupled by a handful of tonic pills.

The effect of anabolic steroids and acclimatization drugs taken after landing; was also over, and the invisible pressure of the Earth's gravity came over every cell of his body, which after three months of flight has become unaccustomed to gravity.

All at once the body was in agony, bruises and abrasions received in orbital collisions burned like fire, the sun burnt skin was stinging, and his head was aching.

Woozy from nonhuman overloads his brain filled with blurred colored pictures of the past: he is going to see "Star Boy" with his first girlfriend at 24th Avenue, then he is taking a test at the Academy and does not know how to calculate the RC characteristics, then he is playing tennis with Mackliff, ten dollars a game...

The wind force increased.

Heavy flies crawling on the face of a man as if he was already dead have been carried away by its blow; large grains of sand rattled like rain on the cloth of the overalls and the dunes started their invisible movement.

Whitehouse did not feel any heat or pain, or sandy rain on his skin, only the whistling and howling of a storm still penetrated his consciousness.

But something has subtly changed in a voice of the Great Desert, a faint vibrating sound, approaching and then moving away, mingled with the roar of the wind.

No, the desert could not make such sounds.

There, in a snowstorm, something was moving, and this something was mechanical.

Could that be people?

The SAU commandos might have finally tracked them down.

Whitehouse slowly pulled up a worn "Viking Combat" Colt to his chest, the only thing he had not thrown out on the road.

The sound was nearing.

An engine.

It was a sound of a car engine, strenuously wailing on the rise.

So be it – two clips of exploding 38 caliber bullets – it is all that was left for a dying crew of "Independence."

So be it, let them come...

An antique "Jeep" with faded canvas top came out of the dusty mist. It was gnashing, jarring and dangling.

Battered hood jumped at every road-bump. A broken wiper was hanging at the windshield, clearing the view for a driver, the right wing was aloof, the left wing was missing; the shabby sides were painted with intricate ornament.

Whitehouse thought that this monster was a plot of his imagination; and that it was actually a patrol vehicle of the SAU commandos.

He pulled the gun from the sand installed the handle by the cheek and then realized that he could not even push the fuse.

His fingers did not move.

Meanwhile the jeep stopped not turning off the engine, but it did not hold on the crest of the dunes and slid down.

Two stocky men fell out of it: both wore wide-brimmed straw hats, shapeless shirts and pants of indefinite color and sandals without socks.

– There are just the two of them – the astronaut tried to get the fuse with his teeth.

His turban fell from his head and rolled, unfolding in the wind.

The teeth clenched the icy metal of barrel housing.

It was useless.

The strange people stopped holding their hats, which immediately flew over and hung on the back straps, and began loading the still astronauts in the car.

When it came to Whitehouse, they effortlessly tried to take the gun from his hand, but they did not succeed.

The astronaut was holding it tightly.

Muttering some curses they took out the clip, and dragged Whitehouse to the car...

He tried to oppose them, but it was a pathetic attempt. Astronaut found himself on a pile of smelly, oily rags, lying near von Conrad and Dybal.

A minute later Mackliff and Aydem were laid over them.

They covered the astronauts with pieces of parachute fabric, slammed the flimsy doors and the "Jeep" disappeared in the dark.

Digital coded telegram VHN 43

Confidential level: A

Yagd colonel!

I bring to your notice that on 28th Marr a.c., in the sector A17N44 a patrol boat discovered an enemy raider type "Tsvohgum" at high speed leaving the place of a crash of YAG-42.

Cruisers "Kang" and "Medel" caught up with it in the sector 033N09 and, after a brief fire contact, disabled it. The crew of the raider, however, managed to evacuate on the rescue bots, went through mine fields and hid in the Sixth belt of asteroids.

Before the raider collapsed in the process of self-destruction, an external examination has been done by the automated intelligence.

Here is an excerpt from the experts' conclusion:

- This battle ship was made in 4700, at the Dyulta dockyards;
- The quantity and quality of weapons: corresponds with the "Tsvohgum" class;
- The number and power of propulsion: matches
- Quality of armor plating and the structure of the protective field: matches;
- The amount of external communication energy, sustainability of a central computer: matches;
- The configuration of the body: does not match; 4 powerful claws located along the aft, which were open at the time of inspection.

Presumably, the raider was used as a scanner cover for a ship of unknown functions and configuration. Based on the claws location, an unknown ship can be the size of 4.5 – 5 Ker, and have a shape of a flat, saucer-like aircraft.

- Residual megazine fields: match;
- Other fields: anomalous perturbation of the gravitational field, laminar nature of disturbances.

Type of perturbations is linear in the direction of the "Terhoma" Swerts base.

The track of disturbances lies in two Tohs -back course of the captured raider.

All things mentioned above suggest that "Tsvohgum" came from the place of the YAG-42 crash, in which he was involved in some way, covering a new ship of the Swerts.

Being discovered by our ships, the raider tried to escape but failed. However, the craft it had been covering effortlessly teleported to the area of its bases.

We continue scanning the areas adjacent to A16N44.

Natote!

22-00. 28 Marr 4725.

From the beginnings of Natotevaal.

Executive Captain of the "Capture" operation,

Yagd Audun Eydlah.

\*\*\*

Digital coded telegram AHO 101

Confidential level: A

To all military vessels of the 156 squadron of 1U Fleet.

I order:

– stop carrying out the "Capture" operation.

-set the minefields in the area limited by the navigational buoys VA333 and VA105.

-all ships must immediately return to the Stigmarkont Base.

-set analyzers of gravitational perturbations GA-22 at the escape route with compilers tuned to CP fleet.

– degree of alertness: 1A.

23-15. 28 Marr 4725.

From the beginnings of Natotevaal.

Commander of the 156th squadron,

Colonel Yagd Kokum Yohoud.

\*\*\*

Digital coded telegram 00A

Confidential level: A

The Metropolis.

29 Marr 4725 f.b.N

The SS Coordinator of Natotevaal.

To: the Special Department Coordinator

Foreign Intelligence Board

Of Natotevaal Security Service.

An order:

– cancel the arrest of Colonel yagd Kahum Yohoud.

– stop the internal investigation regarding the third scan watch of Stigmarkont FB, return personal weapons and military awards to the personnel and restore their posts.

-create a special group for the collection and analysis of all the information regarding the YAG-42, endow the commander of the crew with the authorities of the second Commander of the 1U Fleet.

The Natotevaal SS Coordinator

Marshall commander

Yagd Tote Yashemgart

\*\*\*

Digital Coded telegram VHV50

Confidential level: 3

To: Commander of the 156th squadron, 1U Fleet

Colonel Yagd Kokum Yohoud.

Yagd Colonel!

I bring to your notice that at 16-13 A-time the 211 patrol boat of patrol division, in sphere-sector V13N40, has detected a rescue boat from the transport ship "Loerda-44", with part of the crew on board.

Those who were alive have been sent to the "Tetvut Noor" raider hospital, the dead were buried according to the Fleet Charter.

The place of destruction of "Loerda-44" vehicle has significant gravitational perturbations of laminar character.

Natote!

33 Marr 4725.

From the beginnings of Natotevaal.

Commander of the patrol boat 'Ropin-33'

211 PSD,

Lieutenant Okt Arber.

8.

Whitehouse did not know how much time he spent lying on a hard straw mat, he could not remember.

He lay there, staring at the intersection of crooked roof rafters: cracked, of dark wood, with constantly steaming smoke near the fire.

But he remembered well those horrible moments when his mouth was filled with mixtures of some bitter herbs, powdered muck, with a smell of rotten eggs, pieces of bark, plant stems, and even objects in a form of buttons. And he could not even move his arm.

He just lay there and cursed that ceiling of guava leaves, the acrid smoke, thin dry hands that smelled of the sun and treated him with nauseous drugs, took out pots of his plentiful shit, where the potions went right after he took them...

But one day he got up.

At once.

One morning he just jumped to his feet, like in ancient times, in the Boy Scout camp at the sound of a wake-up.

He was healthy.

He was ready to run a marathon, climb without hooks and anchors on the steep cliff, bent nails, dive without a scuba in underground lakes.

He stood there, smiling from ear to ear, looking around.

In a mud hut with narrow unglazed windows and low entrance, curtained with a motley cloth, he noticed the presence of another person – an old woman: gray-haired, wrinkled, but agile and quick in her movements with a weathered bony face.

For a while she studied the smiling giant, whose head reached the roof beams, with quiet, intelligent eyes, and then took from the shabby shelves, the only furniture in the room – a light gray suit with traces of coarse darning, hiking boots of the twenty-ninth size and threw it at the feet of Whitehouse.

– Who are you? Where am I? – The astronaut hesitantly stepped forward, but the old woman shook her head and pointed to the exit. Whitehouse picked up his things and climbed out, covering up the loins with his hand.

The first thing he saw was the navigator Alexander Dybal all covered with exotic trinkets, in short shorts made of overalls and a stunning straw hat. A thick cigar in his mouth, he was squinting from the smoke and lively chatting in Spanish with a boy of seven years, who like Whitehouse had totally no clothes on.

A cliff with several shades of rock caves hang over to their right; dense swaying jungle tangled with vines stretched ahead to the left, and behind a dozen huts, was a steep slope, that turned into a rocky plateau, which abruptly ended behind the stone pillars.

These basalt stelae resembled petrified giants, deformed by time.

The desert stretched behind them.

Dybal turned and the cigar nearly fell out from his mouth:

-Ronald damn it are you crawling about on your own?

They clapped their hands, and having walked around a rusty skeleton of a Ford truck, sat on a crumpled barrel of gasoline.

Dybal joyfully patted Whitehouse on the strong shoulder:

– Ronny, I'm so glad to see you safe and sound.

-So am I, Al.

-Can you imagine how lucky we are! So damn lucky! May all of us be that fortunate in the future – The navigator hit three times with his knuckle on the crown of his sombrero, spat over his left shoulder and grinned at the Indian boy, who was puzzled by these gestures:

-This is Magdalena, a village of Kichai Indians. There are two clans. Seven miles away is the Thierry village. Three small tribes live there. This is all that is left of the Kichai tribe: harsh climate

change, the war with the Matilonos tribe because of living space; the jungle that spreads from the Sintar Pass to the Canyon of Aborning Rocks.

There is one old man – Aguilar, a sort of an elder. We had a long conversation with him while you were resting. You know, many strange things are happening here. Some ghosts are flying in the sky, transparent and silent. Alien tracks in the jungle. They do not belong to Indians or Buenaventura soldiers. On the whole, they have their ears pricked up. Hunter Saurno had noticed our capsule before the disclosure of parachutes. What good eyesight, can you imagine? Hawk eyesight doubled by an eightfold magnification of Zeiss binoculars.

This shaggy boy, by the way, is one of the sons of Saurno. He also has three daughters. And what beauties! Oh, I almost forgot. Ponce! Ponce, bring me that thing, which you were boasting about yesterday.

The boy hesitated for a while, first glancing at his calloused fingers, then at the huge Whitehouse, and getting up, ran to the last hut.

Looking at the construction on the roof of the hut, Whitehouse was surprised to see a saucer of a home satellite dish.

Melodious female voices competing in a kindly squabble could be heard nearby. Two young girls carrying water in toxic-orange buckets came from behind the granite block plastered with moss. Having suddenly remembered that he was completely naked, Whitehouse started to dress frantically. Subtle gurgling of a spring somewhere behind the block, coolness of stones, twitter and trills of hooting birds in the jungle, short slender girls, merrily grinning AI – all this in addition to burning sighs of the Great Desert seemed surreal, almost fairy-tale. Girls, continuing to descend quickly, crossing over the scattered stones sonorously laughed, seeing Whitehouse get entangled in his pants and blush in embarrassment. The echo responded to them. Dybal waved to them, and making a conspiratorial face, whispered:

-Field notes: the higher girl is Saurno's second daughter, that hunter that drove us in the storm, and whose mother nursed us. Unfortunately, I do not know the Guajiro dialect, but they somehow connect you to her in their conversations. So...

Tying the shoelaces, Whitehouse with interest stared at the elastic hips of the girl, covered by embroidered with bright beads blue jeans:

-She is cute...

-Jesus, Ronald! Did you forget how you whined in the capsule: the wife, the children are the dearest for me, will I ever see them and all that stuff. What a Casanova. – Acidly said someone right above his ear. Only Mackliff could speak like that!

John Makliff, hands on his hips, stood there as if nothing had happened, dressed in overalls with metallic shimmer as if he had just got them from the McClellan indent depot. A rapid M16A1 fire rifle and a grenade launcher, stuffed with forest litter hung on his neck; two colored jays and a small animal, looking like a rabbit were fastened to his belt. He wore a uniform NASA cap, and scratched sunglasses on his nose.

Whitehouse tightly hugged the flight engineer. He showed displeasure but then laughed happily:

– Well, well, be careful, old chap, or you will break my bones again. I should have told Unsule not to finish your treatment totally, because you're too dangerous for other people – he nodded to the two Indians that followed him out of the jungle, and they silently marched to the huts, carrying away a shot mountain goat on the pole.

We will have meat for dinner, with cassava juice and pepper topping; Dybal licked his lips. Everything is good. I am sorry for the guys though. Nice fellows they were. Dick, Colonel Eichberger... Salvation was so close and real: – sighed Whitehouse, suddenly stern.

All were silent for a while. The navigator was intently smoking a cigar, puffing sweet tobacco and scattering a few mosquitoes in the sun; Makliff was rummaging with a sprig in the rifle sight slot, which was plugged with brown clay. Somewhere the fire was kindled and a blue-gray wisp of smoke drifted above them. A dog barked. The other one responded. On the roof of the hut decorated with satellite, climbed an old Indian and began tying fresh guava leaves to the rafters instead of those that were torn by the wind.

Finally Makliff cleared the sight slot and said quietly:

– Yeah, I feel sorry for the guys, Ronni. But as for Aydem and Colonel, you were mistaken.

– Strike me dead! Are they alive? Where are they, I want to hug them!

– They are not here at the moment. The irony is, they got better before us and rushed into action.

A week ago the colonel left with the hunters to the Santar Pass to banish matilones soldiers who seized the pass. By their mercy the Kichak have been sitting in isolation for three months already. No mail, no whiskey, no fuel, no batteries for radios. And the generator, which powers their TV's does not work without fuel. We still have no idea whether a new war with the Islamists broke out or not.

As for Aydem, he has been rushing about in the sands with Saurno Santo for three days now. He wants to collect those belongings that we have thrown away on our way to the mountains: first of all, the logbook, the transmitter and cadmium absorber. But there has been a snowstorm twice since then.

It is unlikely that they will find anything. All has been long covered with sand. – Sighed Mackliff. Whitehouse just shook his head in shock:

– Gee.

Dybal, throwing away his cigar and making a gulp of orange juice from a pumpkin jar continued Mackliff's story:

– Now it is very important for us to find out whether the war had started. And whose side took the SAU and if we could go to Buenaventura. Kichak know nothing. There is no contact with the outer world. We cannot find out anything from indirect observations as this area is completely cut off, isolated.

It lies at the center of a vast area that remains uncontrolled after the approach of the Desert and the destruction of Ecuador and Colombia. They have no government here. Those who did not want to evacuate, are now on their own: hunting, fishing in Braziliera that flows over this ridge, some kind of craft – figurines of black wood, woven tapestries, beads of rock crystal – all of this is changed for cartridges, alcohol and gasoline in Buenaventura, the SAU Naval Base which lies in two hundred miles from here.

The matilones warriors boss the show here along with something that kills the Kichak hunters who come too close to the Canyon of Aborning Rocks. And it is killing them in a weird way, as if pouring napalm over them. As for the SAU fighters who shot down Eichberger's container, they mainly patrol the coastline from Barranquilla to Cayenne, without delving into this wilderness for more than twenty miles.

Ponce returned, holding something heavy under his arm.

He nodded to Mackliff with the importance of an adult and handed to Dybal his burden, wrapped in a piece of advertising poster "Panasonic" – the real world in your home".

– Rodriguez brought this thing and gave it to Santo for adjusting the sound head. Rodriguez says that he took that stone from the Canyon of Aborning Rocks. But no one believes him. – Navigator held in his palm a strange oblong stone: smooth, shiny, as if polished, studded with many thin streaks, forming a dense network:

– So, what do you think about this?

Whitehouse cautiously took the stone, turned it over in his hands, scratched it with his fingernail and even smelled it:

-It's confusing...

-Okay, let's go to Aguilar, drink a sip of maize and have a bite, I have had nothing more than Malaga in my mouth since morning. There we will talk. We won't be able to make it out without booze – said Mackliff, rising.

They went past the corral, where in piles of half-baked eggplants pigs were languid with the heat; past wicker baskets with fading in the sun tobacco leaves, which two children were hanging out to dry; passed the canopy under which three very old men knocked the dominoes, bypassed the adobe building that resembled a miniature fort with loopholes facing the jungle, where sat a thin bored young man in a mangy sombrero, with an aged Brazilian IMBEL rifle in his hands.

Astronauts walked round a pile of empty boxes from sardines, instant coffee, cigarettes, and stew, and plunged into the narrow entrance of one of the huts, screened by a mosquito net.

The host was not home.

Without much ado Mackliff opened the doors of a coarse buffet and pulled out a bowl of guava, a bottle with a worn label "Amoretti" and sat down on the floor:

– I think old Aguilar will not mind if I leave him a fat rabbit instead of this sour stuff.

Dybal and Whitehouse also sat on the mud floor, legs folded, and Ponce settled near a small window and started snapping the rifle trigger, out of which Mackliff has prudently taken the magazine.

Having made a sip from a bottle of corn vodka, Dybal perched on a hammock, causing it to sag almost to the floor and said dreamily:

-It's nice here. Maybe I should stay... Marry some fawn with brown eyes and a passionate spirit. I would shoot parrots in the forest and write memoirs.

-Look at him. Do not relax. You will come with us.

-Where to, John?

-We'll find a way. – Mackliff, wincing had half a cup of vodka with sweet guava and took the stone from Whitehouse:

Let us return to our muttons. I would say it's a piece of basalt, exposed to extremely high temperatures, combined with some chemical catalyst. Look, it is porous like a sponge, as if it boiled.

– Maybe it is a result of volcano activity. – The navigator asked uncertainly.

– Well, if we consider that the nearest Rouse volcano is a hundred miles to the south. No. It is too far. And the magma does not have such texture. Hey, Al, do you have more of these stones?

-As much as you like. The canyon is full of them.

– I think that this is the work of a man. I'm sure of it. It is some kind of experiment. This must be a proving ground for testing new weapons. It's either that or the SAU's or Islamists, or all of them together. The place is suitable. Whitehouse moved the jaw muscles and shook his fist at blank space:

– So, it is the base. Now I understand why they kill hunters at the canyon. Once I had to deal with an Islamist base in the Turkish Eskshihone. We must do away with them. I'm going. What about you? John, Al?

Mackliff frowned:

– If the war is on, then it is logical. And what if there's no war? Imagine what hell the BIG's will raise: a terrorist group of Americans, a German and a Russian attacked their military object. What if they're producing a fertilizer instead of guns? So do not get excited. We should wait for Aydem and the Colonel to talk things over. I think we should gather more information about the Canyon, try to communicate with Central Office get the instructions and find out the situation in the world.

Whitehouse angrily waved:

– When did you become such a formalist? -

Flight engineer scowled and with one gulp drank a second helping of maize.

Swaying in a hammock and driving away the flies from perspiring face, Dybal quietly talked to Ponce about something.

When Whitehouse finished squabbling with Mackliff, Dybal said: – All we know about the Canyon at this point is what the hunters who managed to get back out of there alive told us. The Canyon is fifteen miles from the village, in the south-west it winds from the Buendia Mountain to Braziliera River. It is deep. In some places, stone flies to the bottom in fifteen seconds, but there are shallow areas with gentle slopes. At the bottom there is a stream – El Coyote.

Almost nothing grows there. But on the slopes there is a lot of Malaga and yams, that wild pigs like so much.

The name: Canyon of Aborning Rocks emerged long before the Kichak came here from the coast of Lake Maracaibo. This is the name they have adopted from Chiapas, now extinct. They say that at night an underground buzz can be heard in the valley, someone is tinkering there and rattling with stones.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.