

## The World of Metro 2034

The entire world lies in ruins. The human race has been almost completely wiped out. Radiation renders half-ruined cities uninhabitable, and rumours say that beyond the city limits there is nothing but boundless expanses of scorched desert and dense thickets of mutated forest. But no one knows what really is out there.

As civilisation draws its final, shuddering breaths, memories of humankind's former glory are already obscured by a thick fog of fantasy and fiction. More than twenty years have passed since the day when the final plane took off. Corroded, rust-pitted railway tracks lead off into nowhere. The great construction projects of the final great age lie in ruins, destined never to be completed. The airwaves are empty, and when radio operators tune in, for the millionth time, to the frequencies on which New York, Paris, Tokyo and Buenos Aires once used to broadcast, all they hear is a vague, distant howling.

It is only twenty years since it happened. But man is no longer the master of the earth. New creatures born of the radiation are far better adapted to this new world than human beings. The human era is almost over. Those who refuse to believe it are very few, numbering mere tens of thousands. They do not know if anyone else has been saved, or if they are the last people left on the planet. They live in the Moscow Metro – the largest nuclear bomb-shelter ever built; in the final refuge of the human race.

On *that day* they were all in the Metro, and that was what saved their lives. Now hermetic seals protect them against radiation and monsters from the surface, decrepit but functional filters purify

their water and air, dynamos built by amateur engineers generate electricity, underground farms cultivate mushrooms and breed pigs. But the central control system of the Metro disintegrated long ago, and its stations have become dwarf states, each with a population united by its own ideology and religion – or merely by loyalty to the water filters.

This is a world without any tomorrow. There is no place in it for dreams, plans and hopes. Here instincts take priority over feelings, and the most powerful instinct of all is survival. Survival at any price.

What happened before the events recounted in this book is described in the novel *Metro 2033*.

CHAPTER 1

## The Defence of Sebastopol

They didn't come back on Tuesday or Wednesday, or even Thursday, which had been set as the final deadline. Armoured checkpoint number one was on twenty-four-hour alert, and if the men on watch had caught even a faint echo of appeals for help or spotted even a pale glimmer of light on the dark, damp walls of the tunnel, a search and rescue unit would have been dispatched immediately in the direction of Nakhimov Prospect.

With every hour that passed the tension grew more palpable. The finest combat troops, superbly equipped and specially trained for exactly this kind of mission, hadn't grabbed a single moment of shuteye all night long. The deck of cards that was used to while away the time from one alert to the next had been gathering dust in a drawer of the duty-room desk for almost two days. The usual joshing and banter had first given way to uneasy conversations in low voices and then to heavy silence, every man hoping to be the first to hear the echoing footsteps of the returning convoy: far too much depended on it.

Everyone at Sebastopol could handle a weapon, from a five-year-old boy to the very oldest man. The inhabitants of the station had transformed it into an impregnable bastion, bristling with machine-gun nests, coils of prickly barbed wire and even anti-tank hedgehogs, welded together out of rails. But this fortress-station, which seemed so invulnerable, could fall at any moment.

Its Achilles' heel was a chronic shortage of ammunition.

Faced with what the inhabitants of Sebastopol had to endure on a daily basis, the inhabitants of any other station wouldn't even have thought of defending it, they would have fled from the place, like

rats from a flooding tunnel. After tallying up the costs involved, probably not even mighty Hansa – the alliance of stations on the Circle Line – would have chosen to commit the forces required to defend Sebastopol Station. Despite its undeniable strategic significance, the price was far too high.

But electric power was very expensive, expensive enough for the Sebastopolites, who had constructed one of the largest hydroelectric stations in the Metro, to order ammunition by the crate with the income earned from supplying power to Hansa and still remain in profit. For many of them, however, the price paid for this was counted, not only in cartridges, but in their own crippled and shortened lives.

Ground waters were the blessing and the curse of Sebastopol Station, flowing round it on all sides, like the waters of the Styx round Charon's fragile bark. They turned the blades of dozens of water mills constructed by self-taught engineers in tunnels, caverns and underground watercourses – everywhere that the engineering exploration teams could reach – generating light and warmth for the station itself, and also for a good third of the Circle.

These same waters incessantly eroded support structures and gnawed away at cement joints, murmuring drowsily just behind the walls of the main hall, trying to lull the inhabitants into a false sense of security. And they also made it impossible to blow up the superfluous, unused side tunnels, from out of which hordes of nightmare creatures advanced on Sebastopol Station like an endless millipede creeping into a meat grinder.

The inhabitants of the station, the crew of this ghostly frigate hurtling through the nether regions of the Underworld, were doomed eternally to seek out and patch over new breaches in the hull of their vessel. It had begun springing leaks long ago, but there was no safe haven where it could rest in peace from its labours.

And at the same time they had to repel attempt after attempt to board their vessel by monsters from the Chertanovo and Nakhimov Prospect stations, creeping out of ventilation shafts, percolating through drains with rapid streams of turbid water, erupting out of the southern tunnels.

The whole world seemed to have ganged up against the Sebastopolites in a bitter determination to wipe their home off the map of

the Metro. And yet they clung to their station obdurately, as if it were all that remained of the universe.

But no matter how skilful the engineers of Sebastopol Station were, no matter how experienced and pitiless the soldiers trained there might be, they could not effectively defend their home without ammunition, without bulbs for the floodlights, without antibiotics and bandages. Yes, the station generated electric power, and Hansa was willing to pay a good price for it, but the Circle had other suppliers too, and resources of its own, whereas the Sebastopolites could hardly have held out a month without a flow of supplies from the outside. And the most frightening prospect of all was to be left without ammunition. Heavily guarded convoys set out to Serpukhov Station every week to purchase everything that was needed, using the credit arranged with Hansa merchants, and then, without delaying a single hour more than necessary, they set off back home again. And as long as the World kept on turning and the underground rivers flowed and the vaults erected by the Metro's builders held up, the order of things was expected to continue unchanged. But the latest convoy had been delayed – delayed beyond any reasonable limit, long enough for the realisation to dawn that this time something terrible and unforeseen had happened, something against which not even heavily-armed, battle-hardened guards and a relationship built up over the years with the leadership of Hansa had been able to protect it.

And all this would not have been so bad, if only the lines of communication were functioning. But something had happened to the telephone line that led to the Circle. Contact had been broken off on Monday, and the team sent out to search for the break had drawn a blank.

The lamp with the broad green shade hung down low over the round table, illuminating yellowed pieces of paper with graphs and diagrams drawn in pencil. The little bulb was weak, only forty watts, not because of any need to save electric power, but because the occupant of the office was not fond of bright light. The ashtray, overflowing with stubs from the atrocious local hand-rolled cigarettes, exuded an acrid, bluish smoke that gathered in viscous clouds, stirring lazily under the ceiling.

The station commandant rubbed his forehead, then jerked his

hand away and glanced at the dial of the clock with his only eye, for the fifth time in the last half-hour. He cracked his finger joints and rose ponderously to his feet.

‘We have to decide. No point in putting it off any longer.’

The robust-looking old man sitting opposite him in a military camouflage jacket and threadbare sky-blue beret, opened his mouth to speak, but instantly started coughing. He drove away the smoke with a sharp flap of his hand, frowned in annoyance and replied:

‘Then let me tell you again, Vladimir Ivanovich: we can’t take anyone off the south side. The guard posts are already struggling to hold out under this kind of pressure. In the last week alone they’ve had three men wounded, one critically – and that’s despite the reinforcements. I won’t let you weaken the south side. And apart from that, they need two teams of three scouts to patrol the shafts and connecting tunnels. And as for the north, apart from the soldiers from the reception team, we don’t have any men to spare, I’m sorry. You’ll have to find them somewhere else.’

‘You’re the commanding officer of the perimeter, you find them,’ snapped the station commandant. ‘And I’ll handle my own business. But the team has to set out in one hour. What you need to grasp is that we’re thinking in different categories here. We have to look beyond solving the immediate problems! What if it’s something really serious out there?’

‘I think you’re getting ahead of yourself, Vladimir Ivanovich. We’ve got two unopened crates of 5.45 calibre in the arsenal, that’s enough for a week and a half, for certain. And I’ve got more lying around under my pillow at home.’ The old man laughed, baring his strong, yellow teeth. ‘I can scrape together a crate, for sure. The problem’s not the ammunition, it’s the men.’

‘I’ll tell you what the problem is. We’ve got two weeks to get our supplies in order before we have to close the hermetic doors in the southern tunnels, because we won’t be able to hold them without ammunition. That means we won’t be able to inspect and repair two-thirds of our mills. A week after that they’ll start breaking down. Nobody will be happy about disruptions in the power supply to Hansa. If we’re lucky, they’ll just start looking for other suppliers. And if we’re not . . . But the power’s not the worst of it! The tunnels have been totally deserted for almost five days now – nobody, not

a single man! What if there's been a cave-in? What if we've been cut off?'

'Ah, come on! The power cables are in good order. The little numbers are spinning on the meters, the current's flowing, Hansa's consuming it. If there was a cave-in, you'd know straight away. Even supposing it was sabotage, they'd have cut our cables, not the phone. And as for the tunnels – who's going to come down them now? Even in good times no one's ever strolled down here just to be sociable. Nakhimov Prospect is bad enough, without throwing all the rest in. No one can get through it on his own, the merchants from other stations don't stick their noses in here any longer. And the bandits obviously know about us. We did the right thing, letting one go alive every time. I'm telling you, don't panic.'

'It's easy for you to talk,' growled Vladimir Ivanovich, lifting the bandage off his empty eye socket and wiping away the sweat that had sprung out on his forehead.

'I'll give you a team of three men. Honestly, I simply can't give you any more yet,' the old man said, speaking more calmly now. 'And stop smoking, will you! You know I can't breathe that stuff, and you're poisoning yourself! Why don't you just get us some tea?'

'That's something we can always manage,' said the commandant, rubbing his hands together. 'Istomin here,' he growled into the telephone receiver. 'Tea for me and the colonel.'

'And summon the duty officer,' said the perimeter commander, taking the beret off his head. 'I'll give the instructions about those three men.'

Istomin's tea was always the same, from the Economic Achievements Station – a special, select variety. Not many could afford that sort of thing – delivered from the far side of the Metro and charged duty three times along the way by Hansa's customs posts, the commandant's beloved beverage was getting to be so expensive, even he would have stopped indulging his weakness, if not for his old contacts at Dobrynin Station. He once fought side by side with someone there, and ever since then, every month, without fail, the commander of the convoy returning from Hansa had brought a bright-coloured bundle, which Istomin came to collect in person.

A year ago, however, supplies of the tea had become unreliable. Alarming rumours reached Sebastopol Station of a terrible new danger menacing the Economic Achievements Station, perhaps

even the entire Orange Line: new mutants of a type never seen before had come down from the surface, and supposedly they could read people's thoughts, were almost invisible and, even worse, virtually impossible to kill. Some said the station had fallen and Hansa, fearing an incursion, had blown up the tunnel beyond Peace Prospect Station. The prices for tea soared, and then it disappeared completely, and Istomin had been seriously alarmed. But a few weeks later the frenzy subsided, and the convoys returning to Sebastopol Station with ammunition and electric light bulbs started delivering the aromatic beverage again – and what could possibly be more important than that?

As he poured the perimeter commander's tea into a china cup with a chipped gold border, Istomin squeezed his eyes shut for an instant, breathing in the fragrant steam. Then he strained some tea out for himself, sat down heavily on his chair and stirred in a tablet of saccharin, tinkling his little silver spoon.

Neither of them spoke, and for thirty seconds or so this melancholy tinkling was the only sound to be heard in the dark office, wreathed in tobacco smoke. But suddenly the tinkling was drowned out by a different sound, in almost exactly the same rhythm, that came hurtling out of the tunnel – the jangling of the alarm bell.

“The alarm!”

The perimeter commander leapt up off his chair with incredible agility for a man of his age and darted out of the room. Somewhere in the distance there was the crack of a single rifle shot, immediately overtaken by the chatter of machine-guns – one, two, three of them. Metal-tipped soldiers' boots clattered along the platform and from somewhere far away came the bass rumble of the colonel's voice barking out orders.

Istomin also reached for the gleaming militia machine-gun that was hanging by the cupboard, but then he gasped and clutched at his waist, flapped his hand helplessly, went back to the table and took a sip of tea. The perimeter commander's abandoned cup was standing there, cooling, on the table in front of him, with the light-blue beret lying beside it, forgotten in the colonel's haste. The station commandant grinned sourly at the beret and started arguing in a low voice with the commander who had bolted, coming back again and again to the same old topics with new arguments that he hadn't thought of while they were wrangling face to face.



\*

It was a constant subject of sombre jokes at Sebastopol – the similarity of the next station’s name, Chertanovo, to the Russian word for a demon, ‘chert’. The watermill generators were scattered deep into the tunnels between the two Metro stations, but nobody even dreamed of making things more convenient by occupying and developing vacant Chertanovo, in the same way as Kakhovka Station, adjacent to Sebastopol, had been annexed. The undercover engineering teams who crept closest to it, in order to install and inspect the more distant generators, didn’t dare approach within a hundred metres of the platform. Apart from the most hard-bitten atheists, almost all the men setting out on an expedition like that crossed themselves furtively, and some even said goodbye to their families, just in case.

There was something bad about that station, and everyone who came within half a kilometre could sense it. The heavily armed detachments that the Sebastopolites, in their ignorance, dispatched to Chertanovo when they were still hoping to expand their territory, had sometimes returned battered and crushed, with their numbers reduced by half, but most often they hadn’t returned at all. Some battle-hardened soldiers had come back so badly frightened that they hiccupped and drooled and trembled uncontrollably, even sitting so close to the campfire that their clothes began to smoulder. They struggled to recall what they had been through, but one man’s recollection was never like another’s.

The generally accepted explanation was that somewhere beyond Chertanovo Station the side branches of the main tunnels dived downwards, weaving their way into a colossal labyrinth of natural caves, rumoured to be teeming with all sorts of loathsome creatures. At the station this place was referred to provisionally as the Gates – only provisionally, because none of the living inhabitants of Sebastopol Station had ever seen it. There was, of course, the well-known incident in the early days, when the line was still being explored and the Gates were apparently discovered by a large reconnaissance team that had managed to get through Chertanovo Station. They were carrying a communications device, something like a land-line telephone. On this device, the signal officer reported to Sebastopol Station that the scouts were standing at the entrance to a wide corridor that descended in an almost vertical incline. His

voice was cut off before he could add anything else, but for several minutes after that, until the cable was snapped, the commanding officers of Sebastopol Station huddled round the intercom, listening as the soldiers of the reconnaissance team screamed in diabolical horror and agony – until one by one their screams were cut short. Nobody even attempted to fire, as if every one of the dying men realised that ordinary weapons couldn't possibly protect them. The last one to fall silent was the commanding officer of the group, a cutthroat Chinese mercenary from Kitai Gorod Station who collected the little fingers of his dead enemies. He was evidently some distance away from the telephone receiver dropped by the signal officer, and it was hard to make out what he was saying. But, concentrating hard on the man's sobbing as he died, the station commandant recognised a prayer – the simple, naïve kind of prayer that parents who believe teach their little children to say.

After that incident they had abandoned all attempts to push beyond Chertanovo Station and were even planning to abandon Sebastopol and join Hansa. But the accursed Chertanovo seemed to be the frontier post marking the precise outer boundary of the human domain in the Metro. Creatures that infiltrated beyond it were a cause of serious annoyance to the Sebastopolites, but at least they could be killed, and with a properly organised defence these attacks could be repelled relatively easily and almost without human bloodshed – provided there was enough ammunition.

The monsters that crept up to the sentry posts were sometimes so large that they could only be stopped with explosive bullets and high-voltage discharge traps. But most of the time the sentries had to deal with beasts that were less frightening, although they were extremely dangerous. These beasts had been given the name of a vampire monster out of a book by Gogol, a word that sounded almost affectionate, like the name of a household pet – 'upyr'.

'There's another one! Up on top, in the third pipe!'

The searchlight, torn off its ceiling anchors, dangled jerkily on a single wire, flooding the space in front of the guard post with harsh white light, picking out the contorted figures of the mutants who were lurking in the shadows, then plunging them back into impenetrable gloom, then glaring blindingly into the eyes of the sentries. Blurred, quivering shadows heaved and surged on all sides,

shrinking back and springing forward, slanting and twisting: men cast shadows like fiends, fiends cast shadows like men.

The guard post was very conveniently located at a point where the tunnels converged: shortly before the Final War, the Metro Construction concern had launched a renovation programme that was never completed. At this node the Sebastopolites had set up a genuine little fortress: two machine-gun positions, a barricade of sandbags that was a metre and a half thick, anti-tank hedgehogs and booms on the tracks, electrical traps on the close approaches and a carefully planned signalling system. But when the mutants advanced en masse as they did on that day, it seemed that with just a little more pressure, the defences would collapse.

A machine-gunner stared in amazement at his scarlet-soaked hands, breathing out bubbles of blood through his nose and muttering something in a vague, monotonous tone: the air round his jammed 'Pecheneg' was quivering with heat haze. He snorted briefly and fell quiet, nestling his face trustingly against the shoulder of the next man, a massive warrior wearing an enclosed titanium helmet. The next second a blood-curdling shriek rang out ahead of them as an upyr launched into the attack.

The warrior in the helmet rose up above the parapet, pushing aside the bloodied machine-gunner who had tumbled onto him, flung up his sub-machine-gun and fired a long burst. The repulsive, sinewy, matt-grey beast had already flung itself forward, stretching out its knotty front limbs and gliding downwards on taut-stretched folds of skin. The upyrs moved with incredible speed and anyone who hesitated had absolutely no chance – only men with the nimblest feet and fastest hands stood duty on this watch.

The whiplash of lead cut the shriek short, but the dead creature continued falling by inertia and its hundred-kilogramme carcass slammed into the barricade with a dull thud, throwing up a cloud of dust from the sandbags.

'Looks like that's it.'

Only two minutes ago the torrent of gruesome creatures gushing out of the immense sawn-off pipes suspended under the ceiling had seemed endless, but now it had dried up. The sentries started cautiously picking their way out from behind the defences.

'Get a stretcher! A doctor! Get him to the station quick!'

The husky fighter who had killed the final upyr attached a

bayonet to the barrel of his automatic weapon and started walking unhurriedly round the dead and wounded creatures littering the battlefield, giving each one a kick in its toothy jaw with the toe of his boot and thrusting the bayonet swiftly and deftly into its eye. Finally, when he'd finished, he leaned back wearily against the sandbags, raised the visor of his helmet and pressed a flask to his lips.

Reinforcements arrived from the station after it was all over. The commander of the perimeter also arrived, with his private's monkey jacket unbuttoned, breathing hard and cursing his old aches and pains.

'So where am I supposed to find him three men? Rip them out of my own flesh?'

'What are you talking about, Denis Mikhailovich?' asked one of the sentries, peering into his commander's face incredulously.

'Istomin insists we send a team of three scouts to Serpukhov. He's worried about the convoy. But where am I going to get three men for him? Especially right now...'

'So there's still no news about the convoy?' asked the large man who was quenching his thirst, without turning round.

'Not a word,' the old man confirmed. 'But it hasn't really been all that long yet. Which is more dangerous, when you really get down to it? If we strip the south naked today, in a week's time there'll be no one left to meet that convoy!'

The husky warrior swayed his head without speaking. And he didn't respond when the commander carried on muttering for a few minutes and asked the sentries at the post if anyone wanted to volunteer for the team he would have to assign to an expedition to Serpukhov Station, otherwise the station commandant – damn him to hell – would have the old man's bald head.

There were no problems with selecting volunteers; many of the sentries were already tired of being stuck here, and it was hard for them to imagine anything more dangerous than defending the southern tunnels.

Of the six men who put themselves forward for the expedition, the colonel selected those who, in his opinion, Sebastopol needed least. And this turned out to be a good choice, because none of the three men who were dispatched to Serpukhov ever returned to the station.

\*

For three days now, ever since the scouts had set out in search of the convoy, the colonel had imagined whispering behind his back and sidelong glances from all directions. Even the most animated conversations broke off when he walked by. And in the tense silence that fell wherever he appeared, he seemed to hear an unspoken demand to explain and justify himself.

He was simply doing his job: maintaining the security of the defensive perimeter of Sebastopol Station. He was a tactician, not a strategist. When every soldier counted, the colonel had no right to squander men by sending them out on missions that were dubious, or even entirely pointless.

Three days ago the colonel had been absolutely convinced of that. But now, when he could feel on his own back the lash of every frightened, disapproving, doubting look, his certainty had been shaken. Travelling light, the team should have taken less than twenty-four hours to cover the distance to Hansa and back – even allowing for any possible skirmishes and waits at the borders of independent way stations. And that meant . . .

Giving orders for no one to be allowed in, the colonel locked himself in his little room and started muttering, going over for the hundredth time all the possible versions of what could have happened to the traders and the scouts.

At Sebastopol they weren't afraid of people – apart from the Hansa army, that is. The station's bad reputation, the stories of the price its inhabitants paid for survival, first told by a few eyewitnesses, then taken up and exaggerated over and over in the telling by shuttle traders and people who liked to listen to their tall tales, had spread right through the Metro and done their work. Quick to realise the usefulness of this kind of reputation, the station's commanders had done their best to reinforce it. Agents, travellers, members of convoys and diplomats were given an official blessing to lie in the most terrible terms possible about Sebastopol Station – and in general about everything that came after the Serpukhov stretch of the line.

Only a few individuals were capable of seeing through this smoke-screen to perceive the station's appeal and genuine significance. In recent years there had only been one or two attacks by ignorant bandits attempting to force their way in past the guard posts, and

the superbly well-tuned Sebastopol war machine had decimated the isolated bands without the slightest difficulty.

Nevertheless, before setting off on its reconnaissance mission, the three-man team had been clearly instructed that if any threat of danger arose, they should not engage the enemy, but come back as quickly as possible. Of course, there was Nagornaya Station, a less malign place than Chertanovo, but still very dangerous and sinister. And Nakhimov Prospect Station, with its upper hermetic doors stuck open, which meant it couldn't be completely closed off against infiltration from the surface. The Sebastopolites didn't want to detonate the exits there – Nakhimov Prospect's 'ascent' was used by the local stalkers. No one would ever venture to make his way alone through 'the Prospect', as it was known at the station, but there had never been a case when a team of three men had been unable to repel the beasts they encountered there

A cave-in? A groundwater breach? Sabotage? Undeclared war with Hansa? Now it was the colonel, and not Istomin, who had to give answers to the wives of the scouts who had disappeared, when they came to him, gazing into his eyes with weary yearning, like abandoned dogs, seeking for some kind of promise or consolation in those eyes. He had to explain everything to the garrison soldiers, who never asked unnecessary questions, while they still believed in him. He had to reassure all the alarmed people who gathered in the evening, after work, by the station clock that had noted the precise time of the convoy's departure.

Istomin said that in the last few days people kept asking him again and again why the lights had been dimmed at the station and demanding that the lamps be turned back up as bright as before. But in fact no one had even thought of reducing the voltage, and the lamps were burning at full power. The gathering darkness was not in the station, but in people's hearts, and not even the very brightest mercury lamps could dispel it.

Telephone communications with Serpukhov still hadn't been restored, and during the week that had passed since the convoy left, the colonel, like many other Sebastopolites, had lost a very important feeling, one that was rare for inhabitants of the Metro – the sense of close companionship with other people.

As long as the lines of communication functioned, as long as convoys travelled to and fro regularly and the journey to Hansa

took less than a day, everyone living at Sebastopol Station had been free to leave or to stay, everyone knew that only five stops away from their station lay the beginning of the genuine Metro, civilisation . . . The human race.

It was probably the way polar explorers used to feel, abandoned in the Arctic after voluntarily condemning themselves to long months of battling the cold and loneliness for the sake of scientific research or high pay. The mainland was thousands of kilometres away, but somehow it was still close, as long as the radio worked and every month the rumbling of a plane's engines could be heard overhead and crates of canned meat came floating down on parachutes.

But now the ice floe on which their station stood had broken away, and with every hour that passed it was being swept further and further out into an icy blizzard in a black ocean, into the void of the unknown.

The waiting dragged on, and the colonel's vague concern for the fate of the scouts sent to Serpukhov was gradually transformed into the sombre certainty that he would never see those men again. He simply couldn't afford to take three more soldiers off the defensive perimeter and fling them after the others to face the same unknown danger and, most likely, certain death. But the idea of closing the hermetic doors, cutting off the southern tunnels and assembling a large strike force still seemed premature to him. If only someone else would make the decision now . . . Any decision was foredoomed to prove wrong.

The perimeter commander sighed, opened the door slightly, looked around furtively and called over a sentry.

'How about letting me have a cigarette? But this is the last one, don't give me any more, not even if I beg you. And don't tell anyone, all right?'

Nadya, a thickset, talkative woman in a fluffy dress with holes in it and a dirty apron, brought a hot casserole of meat and vegetables, and the sentries livened up a bit. Potatoes, cucumbers and tomatoes were regarded as very great delicacies here: apart from Sebastopol Station, the only places where you could feast on vegetables were one or two of the finest restaurants of the Circle or the Polis. It wasn't just a matter of the complicated hydroponic equipment required to grow the seeds that had been saved, there was also



the fact that not many stations in the Metro could afford to spend kilowatts of energy on varying their soldiers' diet.

Even the top command's tables were only graced with vegetables on holidays, usually the children were the only ones who were pampered like that. It had cost Istomin a serious quarrel with the chefs to get them to add boiled potatoes and a tomato to each of the portions of pork that were due on uneven dates – in order to keep up the soldiers' morale.

The trick worked: the moment that Nadya, with typical female awkwardness, dropped the sub-machine-gun off her shoulder in order to lift the lid of the casserole, the sentries' wrinkled faces started relaxing and smoothing out. No one wanted to spoil a supper like this with sour, tedious talk about the convoy that had disappeared and the overdue reconnaissance team.

'I don't know why, but I've been thinking about Komsomol Station all day today,' said a grey-haired old man wearing a quilted jacket with Moscow Metro shoulder badges, as he squished potatoes in his aluminium bowl. 'If I could just get there and take a look . . . The mosaics they have there! To my mind, it's the most beautiful station in Moscow.'

'Ah, drop it, Homer, you probably used to live there, and you still love it to this day,' retorted a fat, unshaven man in a cap with earflaps. 'What about the stained glass at Novoslobodskaya? And those light, airy columns at Mayakovsky Station, with the frescoes on the ceiling?'

'I like Revolution Square best,' a sniper confessed shyly – he was a quiet, serious man, getting on in years. 'I know it's all stupid nonsense, but those stern-looking sailors and airmen, those border guards with their dogs. I've adored that station ever since I was a kid.'

'What's so stupid about it? There are some very nice-looking men depicted in bronze there,' Nadya said, backing him up in as she scraped the remains off the bottom of the casserole. 'Hey, Brigadier, look sharp, or you'll be left with no supper!'

The tall, broad-shouldered warrior, who had been sitting apart from the others, strolled over unhurriedly to the campfire, took his serving and went back to his spot – closer to the tunnel, as far away as possible from the men.

'Does he ever show up at the station?' the fat man asked in a



whisper, nodding in the direction of the massively broad back, half-hidden in the semi-darkness.

'He hasn't moved from this place for more than a week now,' the sniper replied in an equally quiet voice. 'Spends the night in a sleeping bag. I don't know how his nerves can stand it. Or maybe he just enjoys the whole thing. Three days ago, when the upyrs almost did for Rinat, he went round afterwards and finished them off. By hand. Took about fifteen minutes doing it. Came back with his boots covered in blood . . . Delighted with himself.'

'He's a machine, not a man,' a lanky machine-gunner put in.

'I'm afraid even to sleep beside him. Have you seen what a mess his face is? I don't even want to look in his eyes.'

'But I only feel calm when I'm with him,' the old man called Homer said with shrug. 'What are you running him down for? He's a good man, just got maimed, that's all. It's only the stations that need to be beautiful. And that Novoslobodskaya of yours, by the way, is just plain tawdry, bad taste. There's no way you can look at all that coloured glass unless you're drunk. Stained-glass rubbish!'

'And collective farm mosaics, covering half the ceiling, aren't in bad taste then?'

'Where did you find any pictures like that at Komsomol Station?'

'Why, all that damn Soviet art is about collective farm life or heroic airmen!' said the fat man, starting to get heated.

'Seryozha, you lay off the airmen!' the sniper warned him.

'Komsomol Station's garbage, and Novoslobodskaya's shit,' they heard a dull, low voice say.

The fat man was so surprised, he choked on the words that were already on the tip of his tongue and gaped at the brigadier. The others immediately fell silent too, waiting to see what would come next: the brigadier almost never joined in their conversations, he even answered direct questions curtly or didn't bother to answer at all.

He was still sitting with his back to them, with his eyes fixed on the gaping mouth of the tunnel.

'The vaults at Komsomol are too high, and the columns are too thin, the entire platform can be raked with fire from the tracks, it's wide open, and closing off the pedestrian passages is too tricky. And at Novoslobodskaya the walls are a mass of cracks, no matter how hard they try to plaster over them. One grenade would be

enough to bring the whole station down. And there haven't been any stained-glass panels there for ages. They're all broken. That stuff's too fragile.'

No one dared to object. The brigadier paused for a moment and blurted out:

'I'm going to the station. And I'm taking Homer with me. The watch will change in an hour. Arthur's in charge here.'

The sniper jumped to his feet and nodded, even though the brigadier couldn't see it. The old man also got up and started bustling about, collecting his scattered bits and pieces into his knapsack, without even finishing his potatoes. The warrior walked up to the campfire, fully kitted out for an expedition, with his eternal helmet and a bulky knapsack behind his shoulders.

'Good luck.'

Watching the two figures as they receded – the brigadier's mighty frame and Homer's skinny one – the sniper rubbed his hands together, as if he felt cold, and cringed.

'It's getting a bit chilly. Throw on a bit of coal, will you?'

The brigadier didn't utter a single word all the way, apart from asking if it was true that Homer used to be an engine driver's mate, and before that a simple track-walker. The old man gave him a suspicious glance, but he didn't try to deny it, even though he had always told everyone at Sebastopol that he had risen to the rank of engine driver, and preferred not to dwell on the fact that he used to be a track-walker, believing it wasn't really worth mentioning.

The brigadier walked into the station commandant's office without knocking, saluting the sentries stiffly as they moved aside. Istomin and the colonel – both looking tired, dishevelled, and bewildered – got up from the desk in surprise when he entered. Homer halted timidly in the door, shifting from one foot to the other.

The brigadier pulled off his helmet and set it down on Istomin's papers, then ran one hand over the clean-shaven back of his head. The light of the lamp revealed how terribly his face was mutilated: the left cheek was furrowed and twisted into a huge scar, as if it had been burned, the eye had been reduced to a narrow slit and a thick, purple weal squirmed its way down from his ear to the corner of his mouth. Homer thought he had grown used to this

face, but looking at it now he felt the same chilly, repulsive prickling sensation as the first time.

'I'll go to the Circle,' the brigadier blurted out, dispensing with any kind of greeting.

A heavy silence descended on the room. Homer had heard the brigadier was on special terms with the command of the station because he was so irreplaceable in combat. But only now did the realisation dawn that, unlike all the other Sebastopolites, this man didn't seem to defer to the commanders at all.

And at this moment he didn't seem to be waiting for the approval of these two elderly, jaded men, but simply giving them an order that they were obliged to carry out, which made Homer wonder yet again just who this man was.

The perimeter commander exchanged glances with his superior and frowned, about to object, but instead merely gestured helplessly.

'You decide for yourself, Hunter, it's pointless trying to argue with you.'