RASHID MURATOV

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ONE BREATH

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One Breath. Who profits from our regrets about the past?

«Издательские решения»

Muratov R.

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One day, Mirrors appeared in our world — doors to other worlds. But they don't open for just anyone: only a handful can step through into Mirrorland — a surreal realm straight out of Salvador Dalí's dreams.That world has no air. Watch the breath in your lungs — or Mirrorland will take you. Why? That secret it reveals only to those it has chosen…A psychedelic urban fantasy that will make you see the events of the last seven years in a new light.

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One Breath
Who profits from our regrets about the past?

Rashid Muratov

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Chapter 1

A grey, unremarkable little minibus with tinted windows was parked behind an empty office building. At the gate into the yard stood two men in intelligence-service gear: masks, helmets, body armor, assault rifles at the ready. As usual, they paid me no attention whatsoever.

Three more men strolled lazily around the yard, and a fourth — masked too, but helmetless — sat on a bench with a laptop on his knees. A ginger cat sprawled next to him, asleep; the man scratched its belly without taking his eyes off the screen.

He spotted me, raised his radio and said something quietly into it. Almost at once the bus door groaned and slid open.

Inside, the bus smelled of glue and plastic, as if it had just rolled off the factory floor. My familiar four were already seated: Zigzag, Ghost, Banana and Holster.

"We were just arguing whether you'd show up or we'd dive without you." Zigzag smiled from the back seat. "I did my beads, and they said you'd come — except the bead that fell out was whitish, with a black core. Something happened to you, didn't it?"

I just shrugged. Something had. As usual, I couldn't tell. I nodded to the police officer at the wheel, shook Ghost's limp hand — he sat right behind the driver, glued to his phone — and moved on down the aisle: a high five for Banana, a nod for Holster — the kids, as usual, sat together. I went to the back and dropped down next to Zigzag. She smiled, let me put an arm around her, then got flustered and smoothed her blonde hair.

I only wish I'd met her sooner!

"Can we get started already." Holster sniffed — a plain, red-haired schoolgirl who mostly kept quiet and always spoke a little through her nose. "I've got homework."

"'Homework,' she says…" Banana snorted. "Sure, and then mommy will scold her at home…"

The officer at the wheel shushed them. The teenagers fell silent. We got to talking — skirting, as always, the very edge of forbidden territory…

We know nothing about one another. Asking questions, getting acquainted, learning real names, sharing details of our lives — all of it strictly forbidden. We go by the callsigns Cain handed out. Some of us may not even be from Kazan — maybe I'm just the lucky one. But the kids, almost certainly not. Homework and all that — how do you tear children away from school and their parents anyway?

I glanced sideways at the men in uniform. "These people" are capable of anything. I still can't figure out, for instance, why Banana goes rigid as a plucked string the moment Cain appears — while Zigzag, on the contrary, loosens up.

Holster and Banana are the same age, and together they're the spitting image of that classic pair from any sixth- or seventh-grade classroom: the cocky little troublemaker and his long-suffering victim, the girl he sticks chewing gum into. They even look the part. Holster — chubby, pimply, with a bristling nest of red hair on her head. Right now, like the rest of us, she's in a dark, skintight suit of soft porous material with a white triangle on the chest, soft ballet-style slippers with flexible soles, and gloves of the same material as the suit. I'd bet money that in real life she wears a baggy, un-ironed school uniform and scuffed shoes.

Banana is the textbook class clown straight out of a kids' comedy show: red-haired, scrawny, permanently grinning. Cheeky and brazen, even pushy — his suit makes him look like a fragile pearl diver.

Give us capes to go with these suits and we'd be superheroes.

Before a dive, a grey unremarkable foreign car used to pick me up, with the suit laid out on the back seat. Changing had to happen in the car, on the move. Imagine squeezing into a skin-tight diving suit while sitting in a sedan, where you can't stand up, can't turn, can't straighten your legs…

both feet through, haul the pants up, both arms in, stretch the shoulders over — and then, the worst of it, zipping up the zipper on your own back!

But in the Looking-Glass, the suit performs beautifully… There it only has to do one thing: be comfortable and stay out of the way.

In the car we leave absolutely everything, and take a single item of our choosing.

"Does anyone know where we're going today?"

The question is pure formality: as usual, we'll learn everything from Cain.

"Somewhere downtown." Zigzag sat with her eyes closed, fingering the maddest set of worry beads in existence: threaded on a long silk cord, maybe half a meter, were a date pit, a die, a plastic tomato, little crosses, assorted colored rings, fingernail-sized shards of glass, plastic and stone, round beads of every color and hue…

She stopped on one, lifted it, peered at it closely.

"Not far from Bauman Street."

I sighed. Her palmistry again…

"What does that bead have to do with Bauman?"

Zigzag began patiently explaining, the way you'd explain to a schoolkid that two plus two makes four.

"What do you mean, how? I look out my window: the light is only right here, and over the rest of Kazan there's nothing but clouds. So right now, over there, the sky is clear. And once — I remember — I was walking toward the Kremlin and the sky was burning with the most beautiful red sunset, as if someone had set it alight with a match. And now, see…?" She thrust the glass bead under my nose; inside it, bright blue and crimson bands spiraled in a whirl.

I pretended to understand, then got up and went over to Ghost. Why argue with the crazy ones?

"Banana, are you… eating a banana?"

"So what? All I've had since morning is tea. There was a banana lying around, so I grabbed it."

Waving the peel, the teenager turned away and flicked Holster on the ear — she merely snorted. I didn't interfere; kids have their own world, let them sort it out themselves.

I'd taken an ordinary plastic bag. Maybe I'd bring something back from the Looking-Glass as a souvenir… though kidding myself is pointless — the moment I did, they'd confiscate it on the spot and spin it under microscopes, measuring the alpha-beta-whatever radiation. Then they'd build the most powerful bomb in the world and split the planet in two.

That's what scientists do, right? I'm not getting anything mixed up?

Every time, Zigzag took along some esoteric trinket — a mandala one day, a dreamcatcher the next, a stick of incense, a little onyx Buddha. Today it was the beads. Cain's eyes would glaze over each time she showed him her choice, but he never said a word.

And he never once asked any of us to bring anything specific. I suspect there are strict instructions on that — instructions he has no power to break.

I always take something useful: a knife, a lighter, a thermometer, a compass. Once, the call-out came in the middle of my workday, and I grabbed a silver coin someone had once given me, which lived in my breast pocket. At the dive site I simply… lost it.

Ghost took a can of beer. And every time he set it down on the floor before the dive — so that the first thing he could do on coming back was take a swig…

Right on cue, he stood up, shook out his long unwashed mane, rapped on the driver's window and asked something quietly through it. The driver shook his head.

"Not allowed."

Ghost sighed, sat back down and started fidgeting — so I came and sat next to him.

"What's not allowed?"

"Won't let me take a leak, the bastard…"

I rapped on the window, and it slid open again.

"We're about to dive, and the man's under pressure — that cuts his time down by a factor of three. There may not be a single corner to duck into out there, and right now we're standing in an empty yard, nobody around. There's an alley over there with the dumpsters — plenty of cover. What exactly is going to happen? Come on, have a heart!"

I wore him down, after all. The officer clicked a button on the console at the wheel; the door unlocked. Ghost gave me a grateful look and went off to see to his business.

Zigzag sat glowering out the window: miffed that I hadn't believed her bead. I waved at her, trying to catch her attention. No point souring things before a dive, and negativity helps nobody — you want to dive on a light buzz.

The girl gave in, turned from the window and smiled back — then suddenly looked at something past my shoulder and frowned. The door thudded shut. Banana fell silent and stiffened. Cain had entered.

***

"The Mirror is on Bauman, in an attic, ten minutes from here."

Zigzag and I exchanged a glance; she smiled and shook her beads.

Cain looked each of us over carefully, then walked the length of the bus.

"Where's Ghost?"

Before I could answer, the door opened and Ghost came in. He threw Cain a fleeting glance, muttered a "hey" and scurried over to us.

Cain's face darkened. He leaned down to the driver, whispered something in his ear. The driver froze for a good five seconds, then looked back in bewilderment, snapped Cain a salute, stepped out of the bus and walked off under the archway. Another officer emerged from the same side to replace him.

"Where's he going?" Banana asked, bewildered.

"Fired," Cain said shortly.

"But I was the one who asked…" I protested.

"You asked — he allowed it. You're not under my command; everyone else is expected to follow orders."

I clenched my fists.

"Routine job," Cain went on as if nothing had happened. "We approach. We gear up. We dive. We come back out. What did everyone bring?"

I showed the plastic bag, Holster a pink pen topped with a basketball, Zigzag jangled her beads again, and Ghost produced a can of Baltika.

"I done finished mine!" said Banana through a full mouth.

"A gang of esoteric vagrants," Cain said with admiration. "One goes into the Looking-Glass with a banana peel. Another helpfully brings a bag — to put the peel in, no doubt. And the third is reading fortunes with beads! Your business. We start now. Any questions?" Cain swept his eyes over all of us and let his gaze settle on me.

I held out; I didn't drop my eyes. Cain kept staring — my nose started itching and my eyes stung — until at last I blinked and looked away. I gave a little shiver and asked:

"What's the coefficient?"

"One to five hundred, rounded."

Banana whistled. Holster just sighed. Ghost shrugged.

"That's never happened before…" Banana's head spun around in alarm; he caught my eye. "How long is that? Mister Woodpecker…?"

"Up to forty hours," Cain answered for me, calmly.

"Almost two whole days," Zigzag breathed.

"If you don't dally," Cain smiled. "It's shorter for the kids: twenty-four hours, tops. Your families, your parents, your employers, spouses, guardians — "

Whoa — guardians! So I'd guessed right about Holster… Banana, by contrast, looked like a perfectly ordinary boy from a perfectly ordinary family.

" — that's already being handled. When you get back, you'll be given proper cover stories and alibis: one of you will be packed off on an urgent business trip, another will 'take to bed sick' for a couple of days. We'll sort it out. Don't think about it now."

***

The Mirror hangs half a meter off the floor and looks most of all like fog gathered into a dense oval mass with blurred edges.

This time we're in the attic of a former knitwear factory. Around the Mirror, instruments are humming: wires, detectors, blinking lamps and God knows what else hang everywhere. Four people are tending to all this gear — three of them in full hazmat suits, straight out of a movie about a deadly laboratory: bright-yellow coveralls, oversized helmets on their heads, more like fish tanks.

The fourth — just jeans, a white T-shirt and flip-flops — turns knobs on a dark console, watching the little lights. I've seen him nearly every time; a staff member, most likely. A very lucky one.

Most people, faced with the Mirror, panic; some go mad with terror. Some drop dead on the spot — their heart simply stops. Another portion fall ill and die within a week or a month.

Perhaps fifteen percent can stay near it unharmed, but only in full hazmat and radiation suits. Around three percent can stand next to it stark naked.

A bare handful can enter the Looking-Glass. As for coming back — there are exactly five of us, and I'm one of them.

Cain told me all this when he was "recruiting" me. The Mirrors have been appearing for several years now, and not only in Russia. There were divers before us, and maybe there still are: millionths of a percent of the planet's population. We are like diamonds in a vast heap of wooden beads: they search for us, gather us, and keep us safe.

One day there was a knock at my apartment door — an ordinary guy from the building-maintenance office, checking gas and heating. I opened the door on the chain, just a crack, and asked for ID — and the guy showed me not only that but a long list of tenants from the other apartments, and sighed mournfully that I was the last one left.

He went into the kitchen, checked the vent, then took a strange contraption bristling with antennas and little bulbs out of his case and set it on a stool.

"And what's that?" I asked suspiciously.

"I'll check the radiation while I'm at it. Heard anything about the 5G towers?"

"Isn't that a load of baloney?" I shrugged. "Pensioners' superstitions, no?"

"That depends how you look at it… Here, hold this!"

He handed me some heavy steel ball bearing, pressed a button on a remote, and the contraption began to beep — low at first, then rising higher and higher until the sound went ultrasonic. Then the ball zapped me with current; I yelped and dropped it on the floor.

"All right, all right, it's over now!" the guy soothed. "That's normal."

Out of the device slid a long, thin strip printed with a blue sine wave, like a chart.

The guy read it. Looked at me. Read it again. Adjusted his glasses, read it once more… the strip, then me, then the strip again…

"Is something wrong?"

He muttered something under his breath, packed up his case in a hurry and left.

"I never signed your vent check!" I shouted after him as he jabbed at the elevator button.

That evening there was a knock at my door: a tall man with piercing eyes, who could with equal ease have been thirty, or forty, or sixty.

"My name is Cain."

"Maxim…" I stammered.

"I'll be calling you Woodpecker, if you don't mind. And not just me — so you'd better get used to it. You've just made tea; I'd be glad to have a cup. There's a serious matter to discuss…"

***

We called the suited guys "the Eggheads" behind their backs: all they ever did was twiddle knobs, press buttons and stare at monitors and little lights.

The first few times, Cain read us the rules, but this is our thirtieth-something dive, so he'd gone straight over to the Eggheads and now stared grimly at the lights and screens alongside them, occasionally jabbing a finger at something and muttering half-quietly to whoever it concerned.

As for us — we're getting ready, each in our own way.

Ghost lies on his back in the middle of the attic, staring at the ceiling. Zigzag sits in the lotus position, back straight, eyes closed, fingering her beads and whispering something. Banana scuffs the floor with his sneaker toe and rocks on a rickety wooden chair that has appeared on this attic from God knows where. Holster sits on a plank laid across a pile of bricks, flipping through a textbook.

I lay down next to Ghost, head to head, our feet pointing in opposite directions. Without any ulterior motive. Man is a social creature; he likes to be close to his own kind.

We lay like that for a minute, two — then he spoke, half under his breath.

"I dreamed of a plane tonight."

I raised my head and carefully glanced toward Cain. He was showing something on the console to the man with no suit; the man nodded along energetically, arms crossed over his chest.

"I'm on it, in the passenger seat, middle of the cabin. People all around, flight attendants bustling, offering chicken. Fish. Peanuts. And then the plane just plummeted."

Any conversation that touches on our lives gets cut off hard — it's forbidden, for reasons God knows. But we seize the rare chances to share feelings, thoughts, plans. We don't speak openly about life outside our "job" — we don't quite have the spirit for it. What if they're watching us without our knowing… But dreams, we hadn't talked about dreams yet.

"And you woke up?"

"No. The wreckage pinned me down; I lay there a long time and felt nothing. And one other person survived the crash — a living road ate him, the one we fell onto. Imagine that — a living asphalt road? It sprouted stone arms, grabbed him, yawned open a huge, toothy stone maw, and stuffed him inside."

We were silent for a while. I tried to think of what one is supposed to say in such moments.

"It feels eerie, Woodpecker. I'm always anxious before a dive, but today especially."

"Don't stray far from the Mirror — once the kids dive back out, wait five seconds for appearances' sake, and leave too."

"I don't want to be a burden."

"You're not a burden, Ghost!" I grinned. "you're just a mopey bastard — but there's no shame in that. I'll keep an eye on you. Relax."

"I can't."

"Can't — then don't go."

He didn't answer. Probably sulking over the "mopey ass" bit. And I went back to lying there, watching my breath. In — out. In — out. They say pearl divers spend half an hour before a dive meditating on their breathing: the heart rate slows, the body burns less oxygen… So there I lay,

watching my nostrils flare, the damp attic air sliding into my nose and throat and deeper — maybe it'll help?

And Ghost is a fool. Suffering, tormenting himself.

Something tickled my cheeks and earlobes; fingertips traveled down my neck and brushed my lips. Zigzag was looming over me, sitting close enough that her knees almost touched my head.

I wonder — does she have someone?

"This is what I drew." She held out a white shard shaped like a skull, with black eye sockets, from her mad necklace. "We stay sharp, okay?"

"Only if you promise to wake me up like this more often before dives." I smiled. "You know the skull is a good omen for Mexicans? They actually revere death and treat human remains with real love — so everything's going to be fine."

"I'd kiss that confident face of yours, but the commander's about to come over and make it all awkward…"

"And if he doesn't get here in time…?"

But she was right, as always. Quiet, confident footsteps came tapping toward us from the humming instruments.

Cain is smart: he understands that what matters now is for us to stay relaxed. As always before a dive, he stopped being the hard commander. No order — just a quiet, polite question:

"So, kids — shall we begin?"

Chapter 2

For a while the five of us stand around the Mirror, staring into the pulsing whitish fog, over which broad ripples keep racing. I breathe steadily, trying to relax as much as I can. Ghost is panting, his breath shallow and quick. Zigzag fidgets with her beads.

The kids just stand there. Holster stares at the floor, while Banana is beaming like a freshly polished copper pot — every dive delights the boy; for him it's a trip to a magic land.

Over in the far corner of the attic, a pigeon stirs and rustles, then flies out through the little attic window. I feel it: time. I take a deep breath, then empty my lungs down to the last drop, greedily draw the air back in — and step into the fog.

The first minute.

It's like diving into a calm summer sea. The air has thickened; your body is wrapped in a thin layer of neoprene, but your face and hands feel the coolness. You see nothing; you stand in the fog. It doesn't last long — a couple of seconds — then the fog scatters and the Looking-Glass comes into view.

It can look like an ordinary world: you're standing on a beach, a mountain trail, a green meadow. Except the blades of grass and the meadow flowers turn out to be brittle, snapping at the slightest touch of a fingertip, while the waves on the sea are motionless, as if frozen — or as if some mighty being snapped its fingers and stopped time. The sand, on the contrary, flows like a river, gives way under your feet — and footprints keep appearing on it, but you see no one.

Or you can find yourself inside a painting by Bosch: a chaos of human and beast-like figures hiding in the corners of a strangely shaped hall — either not noticing you, or fearing you, or simply not deeming you worth their attention.

Or you see a forgotten city on a planet at the other end of the universe, where everything is reversed: black dots of stars on the white night sky, and drops of rain tearing loose from the planet's surface and flying upward.

Once I landed in front of the face of a giant spider, with mandibles several meters long and dozens of eyes all fixed on me — I jumped straight back and shoved everyone else out behind me!

Another time I stepped out into the middle of fire: cold, alive, and very, very angry.

Thirty dives, and every single time we couldn't predict what would be waiting on the other side. So every time there was a touch of dread, and we had to prepare for anything.

Today the Looking-Glass turned out to be Salvador Dalí's dream come true.

Imagine that the earth has vanished, and the sky — a vast space filled with blue sky and white clouds — remains. And across this emptiness runs an endlessly long two-lane highway. It bends, ties itself into knots and tangles, twists into loop-the-loops a kilometer long — like a huge paper streamer shot out of a party popper into zero gravity: it twirled, coiled itself up, and froze in midair.

That is the highway I find myself on. A dense grey road with white dashed lines runs off in both directions; one end, far ahead, curls like a wheel and is lost in a grey tangle; the other, about twenty meters away, drops downward — passing right beneath our road, five meters or so below, parallel to it, before winding upward in a sharp curve off to the side.

The whole of the infinite space is filled with this grey, crumpled ribbon of road, and we are standing on the upper part of one small loop.

Zigzag steps out from behind me, gazing around in delight. "Beautiful!" she signs to me with a smile. A little bubble of air breaks loose from the corner of her lips and floats up into the blue, empty sky.

Speaking is impossible here, so we communicate in sign language: each of us has learned the simplest words and phrases under Cain's watchful eye and been handed a printed guide with more complex ones.

"There's almost nothing to study," I sign back. "You can't get far along the road, there's nothing else here. We should go back."

"Let's stay a while. It's wonderful here."

I wave a hand — why not. I turn around: the boy and the girl are already carefully walking along the other side of the road. Banana has come right up to the edge and is cautiously peering down; he leaps back in fright, lands slowly on his heels, nearly falls. I wag a finger at him.

Ghost comes over to me.

"Tasty here," he signs, mixing up "tasty" with something else in his agitation. Maybe he means "fine," or "strange." Just in case, I nod and give him a thumbs-up.

His chest is already jerking. He's wound himself up so tight that the contractions have started almost immediately — the diaphragm demanding an end to this madness: expel the acrid carbon dioxide, draw in oxygen. As far as I know Ghost, pride won't let him leave right now. He'll wait until the children race back to Kazan first, and step through right after them…

The most important thing in the Looking-Glass is air. It's thick. Not like water — you can't swim in it. It's like a nightmare where you desperately want to run but can't — your legs churn, your arms stroke with all their might, and still you crawl along at a turtle's pace while a monster closes in on your back!

You cannot breathe here. All you have is the single breath you brought with you.

By our tenth dive we had gotten used to it and stopped coming back at the first urge to inhale; by now each of us can last about three minutes. My personal record: three minutes forty-four seconds. I could probably last longer — but I don't risk finding out…

The second minute.

My chest lurches: the diaphragm contracts for the first time. An unpleasant ache sets into my shoulders and neck — the kind anyone knows who has ever been stuck in a reeking elevator or a piss-smelling alleyway and tried to hold their breath as long as possible.

By the end of the second minute your lungs will be burning like fire, your muscles will cramp, your diaphragm will tear itself apart with contractions — your body is begging for oxygen! And you cannot breathe here: give in, take a breath, and your lungs will instantly fill with the local thick air, the kind you can't breathe… and you'll drown as surely as if you were underwater. The team comes back without you.

We always dive out one at a time — there are strict instructions about that, too: no holding hands, no helping another diver, no pulling anyone out. Every diver for themselves.

Honestly, Them — that's what we called the faceless people running the study of the Looking-Glass — are first-rate scoundrels. How can anyone make fifth-graders sign up for all this? It's more dangerous than crossing a minefield blindfolded!

Zigzag and Ghost have drifted a little ahead. They walk carefully to the edge, look down, and stand lost in admiration.

To distract myself from the unpleasant sensations in my chest, I bend down and stroke the rough surface of the road: asphalt, plain asphalt. Whoever created this place took care of the details — grey and black pebbles, tiny shards of glass set into the black mass, hardened drops of bitumen; in one of them I even spot the edge of a beer-bottle cap sticking out. The asphalt is warm, like under a summer sun — but breaking off a piece, putting it in my bag and taking it along? Not going to happen…

Suddenly there's a deep rumble. I spin around, hunting for the source of the sound… Zigzag and Ghost peel away from the chasm too, straighten up, turn, eyes wide. Zigzag signs toward somewhere behind me and above. I turn around — and I think I go grey on the spot.

Out of the heavens, from the direction of the Mirror, a passenger jet is falling on us, rolling over onto its side. The engine on the right wing is on fire, spitting flame, smoke and sparks.

Banana and Holster step straight into the Mirror. But the three of us — I see it at once — won't make it. We have seconds left, and then we'll be crushed.

I wheel around and run for the edge of the road, and jump down onto the ribbon below us. Zigzag and Ghost jump after me.

The explosion. A muffled roar, the screech of metal, the ring of shattering glass. The road shudders — but the thin grey strip above us neither crumples nor collapses: the plane has been torn apart, and now burning debris is falling on both sides of us. A huge tail section sweeps past — stumbles against a coil of road below and bursts across it into fire and metal.

The urge to breathe becomes unbearable.

The third minute.

You can only leave through the Mirror, and it's above us — to reach it we'll have to walk about thirty meters along the road and climb the steep asphalt curve. We make sure no more debris is falling, and set off, fighting with all our might not to hurry.

I'm the first to scramble up, clinging to the edge of the grey rough strip. I lurch toward the oval mass of fog, around which panels of the plane's skin lie scattered — then remember I have to help the others. I clamber back down to the steepest stretch of the climb, give Ghost my hand, haul him up, reach for Zigzag.

She reaches out — and suddenly goes limp. Her eyes close, her arms drop helplessly, and the girl slides back down the slope, rolls to the very edge of the road, and lies there where she's stopped. The beads fall from her hand and drop into the blue chasm.

Ghost is already running slowly toward the Mirror — it's some twenty meters away. According to the instructions, everyone gets out of the Looking-Glass on their own; you are not to save the others.

I jump off the road and glide down through the taut air, soft as in a dream, landing beside the girl. I gather her up in my arms.

All skin and bone — maybe fifty kilos. In real life I've carried her in my arms as a joke, and here she weighs no more than a well-stuffed backpack.

Cramp seizes my neck; my fingers and the soles of my feet are going numb — my body is demanding oxygen. I try to relax, take a short run, scrape my free hand along the asphalt, and somehow, by a miracle, make it back up top — nearly dropping the girl back into the void on the way. I lose half the air in my lungs. There's no oxygen left in it, but a full chest makes the suffering easier to bear.

The fourth minute.

The Mirror is right there — but my legs are buckling and my vision is swimming. My lungs are clawing and tearing at me, demanding air so insistently that I want to rip open my suit and tear open my own chest. There's roaring in my ears, pulsing in my temples. My arms and legs are cramping.

So I don't drop her, I press Zigzag tighter to my chest and carry her toward the Mirror, weaving around the mangled chunks of metal. Smoke rises off some of them; heat drifts from them. The thought arrives too late: what if pieces of the plane hit the Mirror — and then, on the other side, people? Or the attic catches fire, then the building, and we surface in the middle of an inferno?

Ghost is two steps from the Mirror — he staggers and collapses onto the asphalt.

A fraction of a second is enough to understand: I cannot carry two.

You bastard, Ghost! Two meters short. A couple of steps — that's all it would have taken, if only you'd calmed yourself before the dive instead of poisoning yourself with grim thoughts!

Ringing fills my ears; a pleasant haze wraps my thoughts. My chest is wrenching itself inside out, my legs folding, my arms numb to the elbows — and suddenly I don't care anymore. I try to feel afraid, and can't; I simply take another step. Then another. And another. Passing Ghost's body, I think that I might black out just like him — one step short of the way out…

Cramp clamps down on my chest; darkness closes over my eyes. I retch — spit out the last of the air in my lungs, seal off the Looking-Glass's deadly atmosphere at the final instant, and step into the Mirror with Zigzag in my arms, feeling my arms, my lips going utterly numb, darkness flooding my eyes…

The greedy first breath — the first, the most delicious, the sweetest. I can taste notes of resin and wood in the attic air, the smell of dry shavings the floor is packed with, the acrid tang of ozone — and I breathe, and breathe… How good. How fresh. That's what life smells like to me today: freshness, ozone and resin.

The Looking-Glass lets go.

A blackout — losing consciousness from lack of oxygen.

First the oxygen runs out in the lungs. Carbon dioxide builds up there: a little at first, then more and more, until an acrid acid fills your chest to the brim.

At some point the oxygen in the blood runs out. In ordinary life this never happens — that's exactly why we carry five or six liters of air in our lungs.

The body's tissues suffer from the excess of carbon dioxide. Malaise in the arms, legs, chest, abdomen… But the body can still go on living without oxygen, briefly. The brain cannot. To save the command center, the body begins shutting down everything that can wait — your fingers go numb, then your lips, your face, your legs, your arms…

At some point the oxygen is almost gone, and the body, to save itself, switches off consciousness — and you fall into the dark. Hence the name: blackout, when the lights go out.

After that you have about five minutes to start breathing again. After that, the brain dies.

Zigzag fretted herself unconscious. Ghost blacked out one step short of salvation and stayed in the Looking-Glass. I made it out at the very limit — one second later, and the three of us would have stayed on that strip of asphalt.

I caught my breath, made sure my body was answering me again, and turned around — the Mirror was dissolving like a bank of fog in the morning sun.

The attic was intact; not a trace of the plane's wreckage.

Zigzag lay beside me on the shavings; Cain was giving her mouth-to-mouth, and an Egghead was already running up with an oxygen tank and mask.

My head was spinning. Staggering, I got up to offer help — but Cain, without a word of explanation, shoved me aside.

"Get away. I've got this."

Right, what could I possibly do here? Just get in the way. I sat down on the shavings. After another round of mouth-to-mouth and chest compressions, Zigzag drew a sharp breath — Cain, without looking, reached out, grabbed the oxygen mask, sealed it over her mouth and nose, and the Egghead turned the valve on the tank.

Another minute, and the girl opened her eyes.

"Easy, easy. You're all right. Stay down."

Zigzag stirred restlessly, then found Cain with her eyes and calmed down.

Cain stood, and without a glance at me walked over to the Eggheads, who were still fussing around the instruments, murmuring to one another. The man without the suit stayed with Zigzag. I followed.

"Ghost is gone."

Cain didn't answer. The Eggheads fell silent and now just stood there, looking more than ever like robots in their suits.

"Ghost is gone," I repeated, deciding he hadn't heard.

"Why did you pull her out?" Cain snapped, wheeling around and staring me dead in the eye. "Are you an idiot?"

"What do you mean?" I was dumbstruck.

"You know the rules. We still don't understand how the Mirror works." He jerked his head toward the spot where it had hung a minute ago. "It might have torn your arms off. Or fused the two of you into one. Or ripped you apart. Or welded you together into a single Siamese monster with

four arms, four legs and two heads. Or simply killed you too, just for the hell of it. The Looking-Glass is capable of anything…"

"But I saved her…"

"Yes, you saved her. Well done." Cain nodded unexpectedly and smiled grimly. "You're the first in the entire history of this program to take the risk. By sheer luck, nothing bad came of it. A hero."

Some hero I am. I barely made it out myself; nearly stayed there for good…

"What happened to Ghost?" Cain looked at me, waiting.

"A plane fell on us…" I muttered, as if making excuses.

"So. A plane…" He raised an eyebrow. One of the Eggheads leaned in and whispered something in his ear — suit and all, Cain heard him.

"Did he say anything to you before the dive?"

"He told me about a dream…"

"Was there a plane in it?"

I said nothing.

"Answer me!"

"Well… yes," I admitted.

"Idiots." Cain said it without malice, but every word hit me like a jolt of current. "The rules are not my whim. They — even the most idiotic ones — are written in the blood and lives of the divers who came before you. Especially the most idiotic ones…"

"If I hadn't heard about the plane, it wouldn't have appeared…?" It dawned on me.

Cain opened his mouth to answer — and the Egghead leaned in again. Cain's face darkened.

"Come on, I'll give you a ride. Zigzag needs to rest; the men will look after her."

***

We drove through night-time Kazan in silence. My clothes were on the back seat, and while Cain ran into a Turkish fast-food joint, I changed back into my jeans and T-shirt without leaving the car. Awkward beyond belief — and still better than wrestling wet neoprene onto a bare body in the same conditions.

Cain got himself a coffee and handed me a cup of sweet tea and a wafer roll. I took a sip, but in front of my eyes, over and over, was the plane falling out of the heavens onto the ribbon of asphalt — and Ghost, falling one step short of the Mirror. Again and again.

We passed the Ring, then Basket Hall, and were heading for Sukonnaya Sloboda. Cain parked a little way past the stop. I discovered I still hadn't bitten into the tasty wafer roll; I took off my backpack, put the treat inside, left the tea — I'd finish it on the way to the metro.

I held out my hand to Cain to say goodbye — and suddenly he spoke.

"One working theory is that the Mirrors kill every diver at the moment of the dive."

"What do you mean?" I nearly spilled my tea. "I'm, uh, pretty much alive."

"And that what comes out of the Mirror is not the person, but a copy of them that behaves like the original." Cain went on. "While in fact being an agent of the Looking-Glass, gathering data, then returning home, reporting, and receiving new instructions…"

I barked a laugh.

"So by that logic we should all have been killed ages ago? Just to be on the safe side…?"

Instead of an answer, Cain said nothing — and I very much disliked the shade of that silence. Graveyard silence. Marble, cold, dead.

At last he cleared his throat.

"That's only one of the theories, and far from the leading one. But I can't — I'm not allowed to — dismiss it, any more than the other thousand or so. Here's the thing, Woodpecker: we don't even know which direction we ought to be looking in. The Mirrors appear. They terrify most people,

and some die simply from looking at them… They appear, as if to order, in attics and abandoned construction sites — places where people almost never go. But then why not in the tundra, or the Arctic? At the bottom of the ocean? What if tomorrow a Mirror like that opens on the Arbat, in the middle of Bauman Street? Or in the Kremlin, in the sky over Moscow, over Saint Petersburg? London, New York…?"

I drained the tea — brewed from one of those worthless tea bags stuffed with straw and dust, cut with three spoonfuls of sugar — and tried to work out why Cain was telling me all this.

"…Only a handful of people can enter. Where exactly — we have no idea; what happens in there — no idea either. All we know is that time is compressed there. A minute there is ten here, half an hour, an hour, several hours, or a day… For some reason you can't breathe there, and you can't take a supply of air with you either. And there's all manner of madness going on… You understand that better than I do. Take today's dive, for one…"

Take Ghost, for instance. A kid with long unwashed hair and a permanent depression, who dreamed of a plane, told me about it — and the plane appeared in the Looking-Glass. Which means everything there depends on what we know? Or rather, on what at least two of us know — and if only one knows, it doesn't count?

My hair literally stood on end. I felt a small puzzle piece click into place. For now it doesn't mean much, and it doesn't reveal the whole picture — but… one piece is already something.

"That's why we move not even at a snail's pace, but at the brisk pace of a one-legged, half-blind snail in a wheelchair. Feeling our way, a millimeter at a time, afraid to breathe the wrong way. Mankind hasn't died off yet — that's already a win. If we can keep that pleasant trend going until they put us out to pasture, consider the mission accomplished. Figuring something out and turning it to our benefit — that would be a dream. And as for where exactly you end up — inside your own fantasies, some spirit realm, a parallel universe, Cthulhu's dream, or a black hole at the center of the galaxy — frankly, it makes no difference. What matters is: what does it threaten us with, and what do we do about it? What are the risks, and what's the plan?"

"Then maybe they'll simply stop touching us? Close on their own?"

Cain was silent for half a minute, as if weighing whether he was allowed to speak.

"The oldest Mirror is currently four years, two months, three days, eight hours and…" — he glanced at his watch — "...twenty-nine minutes old. We deliberately left it in place, to find out how long it can stand and whether its properties change. It's still there."

We were silent for a while.

"Zigzag is definitely going to be all right?"

"Of course. Losing consciousness in the Looking-Glass is the same as losing it underwater. Pull someone out right away, and it's not dangerous."

"So there have been others who went as far as blacking out and came back?"

"Some misjudge their limits and go unconscious right at the moment of the transition, dropping out of the Mirror already out cold. Roughly like you today… Don't worry, nothing will happen to her. The men will debrief her in my place; she'll tell them about the plane — or whatever she saw there in its place…"

Goosebumps raced over me again.

"So we all see different things? And after surfacing, everyone tells their own version? Is that why you debrief us separately?"

It seemed Cain realized he'd said too much and cut himself off.

"So my account doesn't match Banana's, or Zigzag's…? And she didn't see the plane — maybe not even the asphalt road? It's only for me and Ghost?!"

Cain ground his teeth and looked me straight in the eyes.

"You trying to get me killed? I already said more than I should have, back in that attic, if I want to stay alive and keep my post. Now get going."

I opened the door and stepped out, goosebumps running over my skin. Another puzzle piece clicked into place. Also a small one — but right next to the previous one. In a single dive I had learned more than in the previous thirty combined.

“Woodpecker!” Cain called after me from the car. I turned around.

“I hope you now understand how important it is not to discuss anything unnecessary with the people you dive with.”

Chapter 3

You know how much I get for every journey into the unknown, on a single breath, at mortal risk to my life?

12,792 rubles[1]. The Russian minimum wage.

But money is the least of it. Every time after a dive it's as if I were coming off a bender — or madness, or sleep. That dream had been pure fantasy — but I wanted to believe in it far more than in ordinary life.

The fantasy began the moment Cain called, with his short, businesslike: "Get ready. They'll pick you up within the hour."

Everything instantly becomes real: I think faster, act bolder. During a dive I'm a different person — or perhaps not a person at all. It's as if my eyes open and a membrane peels away from my chest, the film that separates me from who I want to be.

Every time before a dive I feel an unhealthy curiosity: what's out there next?

Right now I'm riding the metro, surrounded by people heading home from work; tomorrow morning they'll wake up and go back to work — as they've been doing for the past ten, or maybe twenty, years. There are no other worlds for them. If I told any of them where I'd spent the last two days, they'd decide I was a junkie who'd been "getting high."

Meanwhile I need to invent some lie to tell my wife about where I've been for these two days: Cain promised each of us an alibi, but there was a commotion and somehow it got forgotten…

"This is Gorki station."

Right by the doors I saw, standing in front of me with his back to me, Ghost.

I froze for a couple of seconds, then carefully put my hand on his shoulder — he spun around and turned out to be a completely different guy. It's just that his hair was the same — long, unwashed, greasy, hanging in lanky strands to his shoulders — and the guy himself just as pudgy; even the jeans were similar, with a worn dark hooded jacket over them. Only the eyes were different: tired, but alive — one look into Ghost's eyes and you'd sink straight into depression.

"Sorry…" I mumbled, embarrassed. Luckily the train doors swung open and I squeezed out, nudging the guy aside with my shoulder.

I wonder how long I'll keep seeing him everywhere?

My smartphone chirped. "Credit: 19,188 r. Sberbank. Balance…" On the move I ran the figures through the calculator: exactly one and a half times my usual fee. A reward for rescuing a drowning man, maybe?

"Did I get promoted, or is this for pulling Zigzag out?" I texted Cain. In another hundred years the whole world will be communicating through neural interfaces and VR — and the secret services will still be talking over radios and by SMS.

Probably so foreign counterintelligence can kick themselves, failing to find the FSB's or SVR's chat channels on Telegram.

The phone pinged.

"Per regulations. Emotional-distress compensation — loss of a dive partner."

***

I spent the bonus for abandoning a person in the Looking-Glass not far from my home, in the Auchan across the Gorkinsko-Ametyevsky Park. It covered a big plombir ice-cream cake, some

[1] approximately $130

salmon, a hefty wedge of blue cheese, outrageously expensive spaghetti (five hundred rubles a pack — but black, with squid ink). I also grabbed a French baguette and a big disc of pu-erh tea. And the main thing: two liters of orange juice, and a kilogram of oranges. Plus an assortment of basic groceries — buckwheat, kefir, milk, cottage cheese. And a bunch of flowers.

At the checkout I realized I'd gone off the deep end: the shopping had eaten not just the bonus but part of my regular pay, which I'd already earmarked for the rent. I walked to the exit grinding my teeth: the oranges alone would have been enough — we're strictly ordered to eat them after coming out of the Looking-Glass, since the vitamin C level in the body drops sharply.

On my way out of the Auchan I froze: Holster walked right past me, hungrily devouring a yellow bell pepper.

At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me — like with Ghost in the metro — but then I looked closer… it was her! Even without the black skintight suit she was impossible to mistake: tousled hair, baggy school uniform, scuffed leather shoes and a worn-out backpack — exactly as I'd imagined.

Just walking along, gnawing on her pepper…

I started after her, not daring to call out and with no idea what I'd do next.

We went like this for fifty paces, and then she turned and looked me dead in the eye, still chewing her pepper. I instantly felt like some pervert who'd been stalking a child and had just been caught in the act, with a camera aimed at him, streaming live on Channel One.

"Hello, Uncle Woodpecker!"

"Hi, Holster," I answered, at a loss.

She came up, looked at my Auchan bag and poked a finger at the oranges.

"There's more vitamin C in a yellow bell pepper than in oranges. Didn't you know?"

I shook my head.

"A grown man, and you don't know that…" the girl sighed. "Here."

She pulled a pepper out of her pocket and held it out; I gave her a couple of oranges in exchange. I stuffed the pepper into my bag. Looked around, feeling like a criminal again — or somebody even worse.

"Do you live somewhere around here?"

"Yes, in those buildings over there." She waved at the new development across the road. "Except we're not supposed to talk about this, are we?"

People all around were carrying out Auchan bags as taut as mine. Crunching chips and smacking on pastries. We were right next to a big parking lot — Friday evening, and it was more than half full; cars kept arriving and leaving, and there was no way to tell whether anyone was watching us. A little round camera stares down from above the entrance — and then there are those damned dashcams in every car…

I couldn't help myself.

"Tell me — what did you see today, when… when we dove in?"

The girl seemed surprised by the question.

"A big forest. Trees tall as the sky. We went to look at a lake, and then the trees started falling down… Seryozha and I — "

"Seryozha?" I repeated.

"Banana. We told each other our names ages ago, whispered in the ear — it's only you adults who are so obedient… Anyway, we ran, and surfaced before you did. Uncle Cain questioned us, told us not to worry and to go home. What happened after?"

I was silent for half a minute, weighing what was worth telling and what wasn't. My discoveries were nothing a girl needed to know. If it had been Zigzag standing here, that would have been different. I weighed it all once more…

"Ghost didn't make it out. We're without him now."

The girl went still for a second.

"What do you mean, 'didn't make it out'?"

Just what I needed — to introduce a child to the subject of death! "You see, sweetheart… people come and go, but the memory of them stays…"

"He didn't make it in time. They both passed out; I pulled Zigzag out, but I couldn't get him — I nearly blacked out myself…"

"So he's dead, then…" Holster sighed easily. "Good thing you got Zigzag out! Ghost is sad and boring. Zigzag is fun."

That creeped me out. Not the cynicism itself — I had plenty of my own — but hearing it from a twelve-year-old girl…

"My mom died a year ago, but she died of cancer," she went on.

"And now?"

"I live with Dad. He's a good one." The girl smiled and glanced at the little blue watch on her wrist. "I have to go, or he'll worry."

The most serious schoolgirl in the world held out her hand to me; I shook it — it felt like a sparrow had landed on my palm.

"By the way, my name's Ksyusha." And she walked off around the corner behind the store, without saying goodbye and without waiting for an answer.

"And mine's Maxim…" I said after her. She waved without turning around, and I couldn't even tell whether she'd heard.

So that's how it is, then? A forest, trees tall as the sky — and then they just started falling?…

***

From the Auchan you have to cross the road, walk past the McDonald's and follow a wooden walkway through a birch-and-pine forest, then take the walking paths toward the metro, where my building stands.

Halfway through the forest I was already out of breath, swapping the bags from hand to hand for the fourth time, and feeling like an idiot. I could afford squid ink in my spaghetti, but not two hundred rubles[2] for a taxi home — I suppose that's what "the psychology of poverty" looks like.

"Where have you been, Max? I've been on edge for two days!"

And this is what "dead on my feet" looks like: first you hear a voice coming out of your phone, and only then realize you've already set down the bags, dug out your phone, answered the call — and now you're supposed to say something…

Well hello there, Masha.

I silently cursed Cain — he promised to give us alibis! Now I'd have to wriggle out on my own…

"Hi. I kept meaning to call you…"

"So you can lie to me again?"

"Come on, no need to start like that. I'll be home soon and we'll talk. Can we not do this over the phone?"

"Max, do we even have anything left to talk about? You walk around all clammed up, off thinking your own thoughts… You haven't been with me for a long time. Didn't you notice? I did."

Masha, Masha… When I flunked out of the philology department five years ago, she didn't leave me. On the contrary — we got married, rented an apartment. I spent half a year stuck in the sweltering hell of a McDonald's kitchen, while she went off to an internship at the Interior Ministry.

Imagine that! Students who distinguished themselves at phonetic analysis were given positions at the agency and took part in transcribing phone-call recordings: building psychological profiles,

[2] approximately 2$

guessing the speaker's nationality, and combing the recordings for anything that might lead to a target — sounds of planes, cars, advertisements… Sherlock Holmes's work, without ever leaving the laptop and headphones!

We lived. I worked; she studied and interned, coming home late and exhausted but with shining eyes, telling me all kinds of stories. She kept trying to drag me out somewhere, introduce me to somebody.

Meanwhile, after half a year slaving away at the McDonald's, I snapped, bought a laptop on credit and started writing articles to order. Masha graduated with honors and now worked as editor-in-chief of a news portal, sometimes getting called in "on call" to the directorate. She'd distinguished herself during her internship; they valued her and kept her on as an outside specialist.

When Cain recruited me, at first I kept wondering whether she knew something… after all, she worked for the services too, in her way. Granted, I was there as hired labor and she as an independent consultant. But over time I convinced myself that only those directly involved knew about our unit.

Masha is a people person. A beautiful, slim, blonde woman with intelligent, deep eyes. She loves dressing well and knows how to talk to people. She has her own noisy, cheerful crowd: together they hit quiz nights, escape rooms, apartment gigs, parties. She kept trying to drag me out, introduce me to people — but my idea of relaxation is being alone: a good book, a game on the laptop with good music in my headphones, or the roof with a thermos of tea.

That's me: quiet and strange.

So the question is: why would she want a guy with no degree, no decent job and no knack for getting ahead in life? A bullet fallen out of the magazine and already going rusty, at not-quite twenty-eight. I suppose the thought had crossed her mind too.

I wonder which of us thought it first?

We started spending our free time apart. A year ago the dives began, and I started disappearing — for an evening, half a day, a day, a couple of days. Everything on our end happens fast; I don't have time to tell Masha anything. Most of the time I have an alibi, but there are slip-ups like today's, and I wriggle out as best I can — the trouble is, I'm a bad liar.

First Masha got angry, then she started fights, and lately she'd gone quiet, pretending nothing was happening.

And what was there to talk about? She's building a career, while my head is full of the Looking-Glass: every time I come back from a dive with a storm of emotions I have nowhere to put — right up until the next time, when I return to Zigzag, Banana, Holster and Ghost and we can finally, at least a little, discuss the things that truly matter to us!

And now we were sleeping apart, too: she in the bedroom, I on the sofa in the living room — the one I can't even be bothered to unfold.

"Max, I'm moving to Moscow. I was offered a job, and I've accepted."

"And discuss it with me?"

"That was the idea. Yesterday," she said flatly. "But you weren't here yesterday. Where you disappeared to this time — naturally, you won't tell me…"

Last evening, Masha? If you could have seen me, I was falling, very slowly, almost imperceptibly to you, onto an endless strip of asphalt running from void into void. Falling and praying that the shards of the falling plane would miss me.

This morning, while you ate your muesli, I was saving a person. A bit later, around your lunch break, I decided to leave another person to die. But that's fine — he was sad and boring. They even paid me six thousand rubles[3] for it.

"...so I've decided: goodbye. Enough of this masquerade. I'm gone. We'll sort out the divorce later."

[3] approximately $60

"Wait — let me explain everything!" I yelled into the phone, but the line went dead. I swore, jammed the phone into my pocket and strode off faster toward home.

And what could I have said, anyway?

The bouquet went sailing into the nearest bin.

I got home twenty minutes too late — the kettle was still hot on the stove, cups on the table. The dishes washed in the dishwasher, the trash can empty, lined with a fresh bag. Masha the neat freak. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd tidied the apartment first and only then called me and left.

In the bathroom, a bottle of cheap men's shampoo sat alone on the sink. Dozens of colorful tubes and jars, along with the files and the rest of her paraphernalia, had vanished, along with all her other things: clothes from the drawers and closets, photographs, the box of rings and chains that stood by her bed. Even the salt shaker shaped like a goofy little blue angel, which she'd once bought on Bauman Street for who knows what reason, was gone. The big canvas bag that always sat on top of the hallway closet was missing, too.

Masha had forgotten bits and pieces — the shampoos, for instance, were still in the cabinet under the sink — but outwardly my apartment was now one hundred percent bachelor territory.

I ate a quarter of the cake by myself, chasing it with oranges and washing it down with juice. I couldn't fill up no matter what; then I cooked the black spaghetti and ate half a plate of it — soggy, plain and flavorless — before I remembered the fish and the cheese.

A dozen times I picked up my phone, thinking of calling Masha, then put it back down on the table. I transferred part of the rent to my landlord and promised to send the rest by the end of the week. I put on a TV series, but didn't feel like watching. Cut myself another slice of plombir.

The first advantage of being alone: no one to share the cake with…

I downloaded some dumb old shooter from the early two-thousands and, until my eyes started drooping, sat there killing Nazis in World War II — running through crossfire, mending telegraph cables, blowing up tanks, jumping into trenches.

A second before falling asleep, it occurred to me: our secret services' methods are pretty effective. Get six thousand rubles more than you expected — and half a day later you've all but forgotten Ghost's death.

Or maybe it was meeting Holster that knocked it out of my head.

Or Masha leaving…

Or maybe it's just my nature?

Chapter 4

Before I got together with Masha, I lived with my mom in Derbyshki — a little town of its own next to Kazan: green, quiet, ringed by birch and pine woods.

"Woods" is just a word: you can cross either one in half an hour. A Siberian or a Far Easterner would only snort at this "forest" — how could anyone get lost here, set off on a week-long trek, stumble on a bear or a deer? Over there the squirrels practically jump on your head, while for us, meeting a hedgehog is an event you recount to your friends with pride.

But for me it was all forest. Ever since school I loved slipping away there to wander, watch the sky, breathe in the grass and listen to the silence — and the real magic began at night, when some ten meters in you could no longer make out the path under your feet and you sank into darkness where you could roam for an hour, even two.

There was nothing to fear. No bears, no wolves; the whole forest contained exactly one maniac — that was you; there were no other fools out walking alone at night. Just walk, listen to the rustling in the bushes, and think with all your might that you're not scared at all. A couple of hours like that, and your head comes out clean, and any stone that's grown onto your soul since Monday slides right off.

How to relax and have fun in the city — that I still don't know.

Now, Sanya — Masha's younger brother — knows all about that. And fine, let him; I have nothing against it. Except here he is hammering on my door, and I go to open it as slowly as I can, putting off the inevitable.

Sanya looks and acts very much like Alexander Petrov's cop in Politsy s Rublyovki (A Cop from Rublyovka), that Russian comedy series: brash, bold, an open-hearted joker — the complete opposite of strict, calm Masha. I've heard that's common among siblings.

Sanya shook my hand, grunted, and, without taking off his shoes, went out onto the balcony and lit a cigarette. I was used to him by now, so I calmly went to put the kettle on and crumbled pu-erh into it.

But today he crossed every line. First I caught a whiff of acrid smoke — and then turned around and saw him puffing away right there in the kitchen.

He stubbed the cigarette out in the sink, tossed it in the trash, sat down, drank some pu-erh, winced. Put a chunk of the blue cheese in his mouth, smiled with satisfaction and nodded like the master of the house.

"Well — out with it."

"Out with what?"

"You can't be serious?! Nothing to wonder about here. How the two of you lasted five years — that's what's amazing! So tell me the main thing: did she leave on her own, or did you dump her?"

"She left."

He nodded with the air of a man who'd just heard good news, picked up his phone and started typing to someone.

"I've grown a little richer." He crossed his legs. "Me and Gena had a bet on which of you would end up dumping the other. So, my grieving friend…" — the phone vanished into an inner pocket of his biker jacket, and his fingers drummed on the table. — "I know you don't want to go anywhere; you want to spend the rest of your life inside these four walls. Here's the deal: if I surprise you, you come with me?"

Up to something again…

"Fine, go ahead…"

"Look!" He raised a sneakered foot. "Eight grand a pair!"

I looked closely and couldn't see what was worth eight thousand: sneakers were sneakers. Sole, a black-and-white stripe, white laces.

I shrugged.

"Hold on…" Sanya flicked the light switch and, judging by the sound, clicked his heels together. The sneakers instantly lit up in red, green and blue; neon strips of color raced from heels to toes. The colored lights spilled onto the floor and reflected in the fridge. Sanya seemed to be standing on a platform of light.

I stared in admiration. Had to admit it.

"Yeah," I say. "Cool."

"Whoo-hoo! What did I tell you? Get dressed — the car's already waiting downstairs."

***

About a year ago I'd spent the night at his place after a loud but warm house gig. Masha had left early, I stayed till late, and then we shared a taxi home — we lived in the same neighborhood. On the way he offered me his couch. He showed me into a spotless two-bedroom on the ninth floor and waved a hand: "Eat, shower, sleep — whatever you find is yours."

That's what people usually say when there's nothing to eat and you'll be sleeping on a rumpled sofa or a mattress. But Sanya's fridge was packed with all kinds of food, with a whole shelf set aside for jars of Nutella. I introduced him to pu-erh later — but there was a simple, good, tasty black Indian tea.

I ate half a jar of that Nutella with bread, cut myself some cheese, washed it down with tea. For the first time in my life, I brushed my teeth at someone else's place. In the bathroom there was a cabinet above the sink labeled "GUESTS" — inside: brand-new unopened toothbrushes, toothpaste, fresh towels, soap, disposable razors, and four packs of Durex, all sizes: S, M, L and XL. And, for some reason, a pack of Korean sanitary pads. Apparently Sanya had decided to plan for absolutely everything.

On the balcony there was a soft folding couch, with a blanket, a duvet and an orthopedic pillow.

Falling asleep, I thought that Sanya was a big-hearted man who simply drew no line between himself and other people, and treated everyone who came into his apartment with genuine care. If it's allowed for him, it's allowed for everyone! People like that are what hold the world together!

In the morning he woke me, fed me breakfast, called a taxi — though we lived close, thirty minutes' walk apart. I was starting to think I'd found a best friend. As we said goodbye at the door, he handed me some kind of envelope. Once in the car, I took out a neatly folded sheet of A4 and stared at it the whole way home:

— Use of toothbrush — 175 rubles.
— Use of toothpaste — 50 rubles.
— Use of shared shower — 240 rubles.
— Clean towel — 70 rubles.
— Soap and shampoo — 60 rubles.
— Room cleaning — 90 rubles.
— 1 sleeping place, VIP (balcony) — 1,400 rubles.
— Breakfast — 300 rubles.
— Additional food supplies (Nutella 312g, white bread 120g, cheese 72g) — 480 rubles.
— Taxi home — 400 rubles.
Total: 3,265 rubles.[4]

And below, payment details.

[4] approximately $30

I paid him — after he called that evening, asked how I was doing and reminded me about the bill. That's when I knew for sure it wasn't a joke, and transferred the figure next to "Total" straight to his card.

If I'd lived alone, we'd never have seen each other again. But when I told Masha about it, she just shrugged — you ought to understand, she said, nobody does anything for free. So a week later Sanya invited us to some get-together or other, and we went.

The strange thing was, every time we met I could see that he found me interesting. He sought out the contact himself: would come sit next to me, strike up conversations, try to pull me into discussions I was avoiding.

By thirty he had already folded the world into a simple, clear picture, where everything had its allotted place: people, money, time, hobbies, sport. He gave each one its precisely measured time and got pleasant, desired emotions back in return.

But with me it was as if he were touching an unexplored patch of reality he'd never suspected existed. Every time he talked to me it was as if he were trying to grope his way deeper into that world — and every time he left displeased, as if cunning old me had refused to share it with him.

Probably, talking to me, he felt what I feel standing before the Mirror: "now it's going to get interesting."

I confess I envied him — bold, even brash, living free and doing what he wants (in the good sense). Knows how to make money and sees nothing wrong in it. Talks a lot and loudly; knows an incredible number of people. To strike up an acquaintance, cut a deal, apply pressure, get into a fight — for him it's a snap of the fingers; for me it all comes at the cost of monstrous pain and superhuman effort.

He understands this world well and has found his place in it — that's where he and Masha are alike.

***

We drove across the center of town to the apartment of Sanya's acquaintances: twenty-something students. People were drinking and having fun; the crowd had already split into groups of three to five: some played guitar and drank port, others played a board game and knocked back cognac, and a third group discussed literature out on the balcony. On the windowsill facing the street, a bottle of champagne gleamed in the light of the streetlamps.

Sanya melted into the crowd at once, while I spent half an hour poking around the space without finding myself in it. Why had I even come?

I went out to the hallway, put on my sneakers, and was buttoning up my jacket when Sanya materialized behind me like a genie out of a bottle — and, fittingly, the bottle was there too: he was holding a well-started Jack Daniel's, taking small sips from it.

"Leaving already? Where to?"

"Just thinking…" I found an excuse. "Check if the building's roof is unlocked. The boulevard and the park are right there — the view must be great… Then we can bring people up."

Sanya took another swig of Jack and squinted. I could see the gears turning in his head, generously oiled with whiskey. Another puzzle piece clicking into place: "Tall buildings have roofs; roofs have great views. You can get up onto roofs."

He nodded.

"I'm coming too! One second."

He set the bottle right on the shoe rack, walked into the room, put an arm around a girl by the wall, sang along with the guitarist, took the guitar from him, strummed three chords, handed the guitar back. Exchanged a few words with someone, answered a joke and set off a roar of laughter…

grabbed his leather jacket off a chair and finally came out into the hallway, nodding impatiently, as if it were he who'd called me.

"Come on, let's move!"

We were too lazy to walk, so we rode the elevator three floors up. We crossed the open balcony linking the two stairwells, went into the pedestrian corridor between the entrances — and ran into the grille that separates the apartments from the service floor with its elevator shafts, its access to heating, gas, power, and the comms for TV, radio and internet. Somewhere there, too, the door to the roof.

Luckily for us, the grille door stood slightly ajar — someone had already jimmied the lock on the service floor. We climbed one more storey quietly (some of us quietly; others humming under their breath — a tune from a Soviet film, then some American country), I opened the metal-clad door — it creaked, and warm air hit us in the face, smelling of dampness, mold and pigeon droppings.

The service floor turned out to be light and spacious, with three-meter walls of white brick, coarse concrete grit on the tiled floor. Why on earth is there tile here? First time I've ever seen that.

The attics of high-rise buildings smell different from those of five-story blocks. No boards or shavings on the floor here — brick and stone everywhere. Sometimes there's a smell of machine oil — it gets stronger near the elevators. Pigeons nest in the ventilation shafts and elevator shafts.

My nostrils were tickled by fresh paint — right by the door stood a row of big tins of paint. Probably one of the tenants hadn't wanted to keep the stinking cans at home…

A breath of freshness wafted past — one of the windows to the street must be open. Or was that not it? I sniffed again: no, the air was the same as ever, musty and damp — but something was off, and I couldn't put my finger on what.

Sanya began breathing loudly, hiccupping drunkenly.

"Smells like my mom's hospital ward, when they ozonize the rooms. But where's the ozone coming from?"

So that's what I'd taken for freshness. Ozone, of course. But there couldn't be a Mirror here — and when would anyone have had time to haul in the equipment?

"Let's see where it's coming from…" Sanya sniffed the air and set off after the smell, prancing along like Jack Sparrow.

"Wait!" I hissed, but Sanya didn't listen — I had to follow, guessing: is it, or isn't it? Maybe the internet equipment broke down, a wire shorted out, something else?

We walked along planks laid over soft sheets that looked like foam rubber. We crossed a long hall, stepped off the planks onto dry, clean floor that someone had bothered to sweep. The smell grew stronger.

"Careful — that's glass wool." Sanya pointed at the yellow-green sheets lying on the floor. "Nasty stuff. I once fell into it at fourteen, on a construction site. My back itched for two days!"

The wrong thing to be scared of, Sanya.

We walked carefully across the wool, trying not to raise dust. Ahead, another white brick wall, fencing off another section of the attic. The smell of ozone was sharper now.

I overtook Sanya, rounded the wall — and froze. The Mirror hung over the bare concrete right to my right, an arm's length away. The smell of ozone turned sharp, almost unbearable.

I wanted to grab Sanya and drag him out of there by force, but I didn't make it — by the time I turned around, his eyes already reflected a slightly stretched, shimmering cloud of dense fog.

And then Sanya screamed.

Loud, piercing — like a man whose arm is being sawed off without anesthesia. He went down like a felled tree onto the glass wool and began to convulse — eyes glued to the Mirror, never stopping his screaming. His face was contorted with terror. His legs kicked; his hands clawed and tore at the soft glass wool — acrid, prickly dust rose into the air.

I squeezed my eyes shut, drew a deep breath, and hauled him toward the exit. Sanya thrashed in my arms — and then, once we were past the turn, he seized my wrists and started frantically clawing

his way up them: hands, forearms, elbows, shoulders… I was already afraid he'd grab me by the throat and strangle me — but instead he pressed himself against me and began breathing fast, so fast, and half a minute later burst out sobbing like a child — without once stopping the screaming.

He calmed down only when we came out of the attic into the stairwell — stopped screaming as abruptly as he'd started. But he didn't come back to himself: he went down onto the floor, taking me with him; I barely worked free of his grip and sat down beside him, breathing hard — Sanya weighed more than I did.

Only from Cain had I ever heard what happens to people who see the Mirror…

Once I'd caught my breath, I tried to reach Sanya, to take him downstairs — but he just sat on the floor, blinking, staring through me, gulping at the air and muttering something quietly under his breath. Drool dripped from his mouth the way it does from a dog's.

Going back to the gig was out of the question: we were both covered in dust and glass wool.

Please, let him come to himself…

First I decided to get him outside for some air and led him toward the elevator. But the moment the elevator doors opened, Sanya suddenly began twitching and shaking his head, staring into the shaft in horror. I had to find the stairwell and walk him down eight floors, watching constantly that he didn't trip or bang into a wall.

Outside, we went into the inner courtyard, circled around a bush and sat down on a bench, back to the sandbox, facing the entrance — a streetlight shone from there, and I wanted to be able to see Sanya's face. I was afraid he'd close his eyes and pass out.

I'd heard the expression "scared into oblivion," but I'd never seen what it looks like in real life.

"Water…"

I turned my head around. Familiar neighborhood — there was a store in the next building, I thought.

"Sanya, I'll be quick — just wait for me, OK? There's a store right nearby, I'll run for some mineral water…"

He nodded, and I hurried off toward the store. Halfway there I looked back — he was sitting on the bench in the same pose, clearly not about to wander off. He was sitting exactly like that when I came running back with two liters of Aqua Minerale.

"You all right?"

My friend sat and stared silently at a wall. Not killed. Not driven mad — he does react to me. Just terrified. But does it affect the ones it terrifies in some other way?

I unscrewed the cap and offered him the water again. Sanya took a swallow without looking — and immediately choked: the carbonated water bubbled up and came fountaining out of his nose, and the bottle erupted too, drenching his face.

Without wiping himself, he turned his head and looked at me with suddenly very clear eyes. Still without a word, he stood up, dropped the bottle in the sand, and walked toward the bushes in front of us, unzipping his fly as he went.

Right in front of the building? The bushes barely came up to our waists. I picked up the bottle, rinsed the sand off its neck with the soda. I was about to call out to Sanya — and stopped: a black tinted van was rolling into the courtyard; it slowly and neatly went around the fence, stopped directly in front of Sanya, screening us from the entrance.

The van's side door slid open; footsteps clattered. The door slid shut again with a bang — and the van rolled slowly forward. Behind it stood seven men in black suits and masks, carrying black boxes and cases. Two of them were lugging a huge black cabinet.

It was the first time I'd ever seen the equipment delivered to a Mirror.

They paid Sanya no attention. They walked up to the entrance; the one in front pulled an intercom key from his pocket, opened the door — and the whole squad filed inside, hauling their boxes.

The van drove to the end of the courtyard, turned around, backed up onto the lawn and parked a little off to the side, closer to the garages that separated the courtyard from the street. It parked under a broad pine branch growing between the garages, and went still.

Careful not to turn toward it, I walked over to Sanya — luckily, he'd already zipped up. Now he was looking at me and breathing hard. For him this story was already over; I kept watching the van out of the corner of my eye.

"Want some more water?" I held out the bottle. "Sanya — you all right?"

"Screw you!" he snapped in my face, shoved me, and set off slowly toward the street.

I let out a breath. Not much of a thank-you for a rescue — but he was alive, and that was what mattered. I had never seen terror in anyone's eyes like on that attic — as if the love child of Freddy Krueger and the clown from It, crossed with the giant spider from Harry Potter, were charging straight at him.

And I thought: I've known Sanya for six years, but I saw the man only now — when he was scared half to death, then told me to get lost and hobbled off on shaking legs, plastered in glass wool.

Maybe I was seeing his real face for the first time? Not the forever-shining mask of a dandy entrepreneur, but a man frightened out of his wits — plain, simple, vulnerable?

Or maybe he was simply the only one of my acquaintances with whom I now had something in common — even if that "something" had lasted a couple of seconds and nearly driven him out of his mind…

Paradoxically, my mood improved. On that bench, in sweat, dust and crumbs of glass wool, after hauling dead-weight Sanya, I could breathe easier than back at the party. Before heading home, I had to fight down the urge to walk up to the van, knock on the window, give a friendly smile and say: "Open up — it's your own people!"

Somehow I doubt our "movers" appreciate jokes.

Chapter 5

The glass wool had been old — it crumbled into dust right against my skin, didn't itch much and washed off fast. But I still stood under the shower for a good forty minutes, then collapsed and slept without dreams.

In the morning I woke and lay there for about half an hour, trying to work out what was wrong. Then I heard it: the apartment was quiet! No one chattering on the phone, no clatter of plates as someone got ready for work, no two or three noisy, half-familiar people behind the wall who knew Masha well and looked at me as if I were the odd one out in my own apartment.

Quiet, empty — and so very, very good.

I tried to recall something good from our life together. Only one memory came: from the very dawn of our relationship, our first night — after two weeks of my clumsy courting we became intimate, in the apartment of a mutual acquaintance who'd asked us to keep an eye on the place while he hitchhiked off to Vladivostok.

First came quiet, clumsy sex, in which I was trying to figure out what she liked while she kept being embarrassed and refused, of all things, to take off her bra. In the end I lost patience and finished in a hurry, and afterward we lay in silence — viscous, sticky, heavy silence. I could feel that anything I said now would be out of place and absurd.

At last she got up, walked to the mirror on the wardrobe door. Took off her top (finally!) and tossed it on a chair.

For some reason she'd stopped being embarrassed. She began studying herself in the mirror, smoothing her hair, stretching, searching for something — on her face, or maybe on her chest: small but round and well-shaped, with pretty little pale-pink sharp nipples. I drank her in, wondering why on earth she'd been hiding such beauty.

She caught my gaze in the mirror.

"Tell me — could you love my collarbones?"

"Why them, of all things?"

"I hate them… they stick out, they ruin everything!" She stood before the mirror, clasped her hands behind her back, stretched up tall. "See for yourself: neck, shoulders, chest — and in between, these ridiculous bumps..!"

Her words — those I remember. My own answer, I've forgotten. Then I put my arms around her and we had sex again — far more successfully. But everything after that, all five years, was cut off as if by a knife. Probably I just need to rest and digest it all…

I got up, brewed tea, cooked buckwheat and two eggs. I sat there eating and realized I no longer had to pretend to listen to anyone, nod understandingly and ask follow-up questions while pretending to be interested.

No more talk about other people's jobs, about strangers. Better still — no more strangers to see! When was the last time I allowed myself that luxury: seeing only the people I wanted to see? Five years ago…

As if by the wave of a magic wand, I suddenly had a wealth of free time. I finished my work three hours ahead of schedule. After dark I went into the city and climbed onto the roof of a Stalin-era building across from the Moscow market — the corner building has a hefty two-storey annex, and on it stands a three-meter stone boat, on the tip of which a star hung back in Soviet times. The star came down long ago; only a thin spire remains, and from it a lightning rod ran all the way down to the asphalt: a thick, rust-eaten piece of steel rebar. I gripped it and climbed to the very top, right up to the spire. By day I'd have been in everyone's view up here, but after sunset the city itself protected me: streetlamps, headlights, the light of windows.

City lights are the veil that hides the Milky Way from us. Because of it the urban sky is pale and meager, and you can count the stars on your fingers. But climb above the lights, slip into the darkness — and you wrap yourself in that veil, hide inside it, and no one in the world knows where you are… while the stars blaze brighter.

How cozy it is up here, one step closer to the sky, knowing no one can see you.

It's the same thing I loved about hitchhiking, about night walks in the forest: I am not there for the world, and the world is not there for me.

The same is true of the Looking-Glass…

I looked toward the building where Sanya and I had found the Mirror — it's impossible to pick out in the night panorama, but I knew: up in that attic it smells of ozone, instruments stand around the Mirror, and smart Eggheads swarm like cockroaches. Maybe Cain is hovering over them right now.

Why can we step into the Mirrors, while it scared Sanya out of his mind? Why can't Cain? Why do the scientists go only in hazmat suits? And why does it kill some people? What does it depend on..?

I thought of Ksyusha, of Banana, of Zigzag. Thought of Ghost… What did we have in common? A girl whose mother had died, a sociophobe freelancer… Ghost — a walking depression, about whom I would learn nothing more. Banana — just a kid.

Zigzag… If only I could learn who she is, what she does! Where she lives, where she works or studies, what she thinks about? Maybe she's in that very building, and I'm sitting right on top of her head?!

The night was still and windless, not a cloud in the sky — I sat there, lulled, and so it startled me when a window slammed open on the top floor of the building below. I climbed down off the annex carefully, tiptoed to the edge of the roof, swung over the railing, lay flat on my stomach and peered down. What if it was her?! Miracles do happen?

A thick hairy arm holding a cigarette, resting on a balcony beam. A breeze came up, acrid tobacco smoke hit my nostrils — I winced and coughed…

"What the hell are you doing up there?" The man leaned out over the sill and now glared up at me with blank fish eyes. "Get the hell out of here!"

For three seconds I froze. What was I supposed to do? Argue? About what? Leave? Keep shouting? Shout back? He'd come up to the roof — and that was dangerous, for him and for me.

"I think you'd die on the spot," I said, surprising even myself. "But odds are you'd never even have found it. You'd invent a thousand important errands, sit down in front of the TV or doze off over a beer…"

The man dropped his cigarette. It fell for a couple of seconds, then the wind flung it against the wall; it burst into bright sparks and merged with the evening dusk.

"Have you completely lost it?" His eyes were bulging; he seemed ready to climb straight through the window at me. "Why, you — "

He went on saying something else, very menacing and dangerous, as he himself believed — but I was already walking toward the attic door, and the feeling would not leave me that I had touched on something important. What exactly, I couldn't yet explain to myself.

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I waited, but Cain didn't call the next day, or the day after, or for a week.

The divorce was still hanging over me, but I wasn't hurrying. I have no intention of marrying anyone again; the stamp in the passport means nothing to me — so I'll let it all drift! When Masha gets in touch, we'll sort it out then…

All the same, I was sitting on pins and needles. Before, I simply lived; now I knew: a Mirror had opened, and all that was left was to wait for the call.

After three days I couldn't stand it and went back to that building. First I peeked around the corner — the tinted-window car was still parked in the courtyard. I walked up to the entrance, patted my pockets for the universal intercom keys… I'd left them at home.

But there was still the old delivery-guy trick: ring a random apartment and ask to be let in. It buzzed a good twenty times, and not a soul picked up. Bad luck… The second apartment, and the third — same thing. No luck at all… Stubbornness got the better of me and I rang ten apartments in a row — nobody!

I stepped back a couple of paces, looked at the entrance window above the awning — and saw the little vent pane stood open. Time for some acrobatics… I glanced around quickly, made sure no one was watching and the car was hidden behind dense bushes, then climbed the yellow gas pipe onto the awning and — head first — squeezed through the wide vent into the stairwell.

I stood and listened, ready at any moment to bolt, or else to start climbing the stairs with a perfectly unperturbed face — tenants come in all kinds. But the entrance was utterly silent.

In Soviet residential blocks, silence is a rarity. A dog barks, a child cries, someone gets into a heated argument or just raises their voice. And there's renovation, too: roaring drills and rotary hammers.

I turned and looked out the window I'd climbed through — and only now, from the other side, noticed that the courtyard was completely empty: no pensioners on the benches, no children in the sandbox. Nobody walking in the yard — and still no one had come out of the entrance or tried to go in, and I'd been here ten minutes, right in the middle of the day, by all appearances.

By the elevator, two piles of clothes lay on the floor — an adult's: a strict woman's jacket and trousers — and a child's: trousers with suspenders, a green T-shirt with dinosaurs, a little sun hat. I gingerly nudged the clothes with my sneaker toe: under the child's pile, little sandals; under the adult's, worn, scuffed women's shoes on a low heel. Maybe there's a laundry on the ground floor and someone carried these down to wash? Strange, all of it.

I rode the elevator to the top floor, opened the attic door carefully, and for five minutes just listened to the gloom and the soft rustle of a cool draft. Then I went in, winced at the smell of paint, sniffed… no ozone. I walked carefully along the dry planks — they still ran the whole length of the attic, over the glass wool, except the wool now started much earlier, and several bales of it stood against the far wall — it looked like the insulation job was in full swing.

The Mirror was gone. By themselves, Mirrors don't close, if Cain is to be believed. Had it all already happened without me?

The crates the movers had carried lay right there, unpacked, or packed up again. Only one instrument still stood where the Mirror had been, a red light blinking at its center like an alarm signal.

All around lay heaps of black clothes and protective coveralls — as if that squad had stripped them off, dropped them on the floor and gone for a swim.

I whipped out my phone, found Cain's contact, and texted: "Am I out?"

"Why would you think that?"

I cursed. One small omission at the start, and now I had to wriggle out of it.

"It's been a while since we dove. Figured maybe I was out of the loop."

"Steady on, Woodpecker! The moment one opens, I'll call. I don't open the Mirrors, you know."

Holding out on me?

***

Cain called two days later. Something sweet and sharp fluttered in my chest at once — he only ever called first to summon us to a dive.

Only this time, everything went differently.

"Woodpecker, a new Mirror has appeared. I'll drop you a map pin; we meet there in an hour. You'll get suits and the briefing on site. Any questions?"

"So I'm getting there on my own..?"

"Yes."

"And what's the coefficient?"

"Everything's on site." And he hung up.

***

The pin came for a completely different building and district — a huge new development, half an hour's walk from the Compressor plant, twenty minutes from the Kazanka river as the crow flies.

And what about the old building?

There was a bus stop near the meeting point, but even on the way there the bus suddenly jammed in traffic and crawled along at a meter a minute for half an hour. Then a man in uniform walked up to the cab, said something to the driver, and the driver swore loudly and lit a cigarette.

"Detour, folks! Around the jam!" he bellowed into the cabin. "Anyone getting off?"

I stepped straight out onto the roadway — luckily, the cars weren't moving. The bus stood at the intersection and now, it seemed, was preparing to turn around, making the jam even worse. Drivers traded lazy abuse from their windows.

I looked ahead and understood: this would take a while.

The road to the Compressor plant was blocked by three massive trucks with red-and-white stripes on their sides and bodies. Sitting on the beds were uniformed men in red berets, calmly watching the traffic jam. National Guard troops.

Two ridiculous black-and-white plastic barriers stood a few meters in front of the trucks — they didn't even block the road fully, only its center. Behind them stood police, turning cars around.

A driver in a battered Honda kept swearing, demanding to be "let through." A police officer calmly explained something to him.

Everything looked as if the road had been blocked in a hurry, half an hour to an hour ago.

"What happened?" someone asked from a car.

"They say there's a bomb in the high-rise!"

Our dives had always felt like partisan raids: we arrived quietly and left quietly, drawing no attention. But this time I felt as if I were walking into the epicenter of a military operation.

To the right of the road lay a small park: a fountain in the middle, trees, bushes, flowerbeds of tulips — packed right now with the most absurd-looking crowd. Someone in a bathrobe and slippers, barefoot; someone with children and a suitcase clamped under an arm. A plain, pimply woman was sobbing at the top of her voice; a glum, heavyset man in shorts and a T-shirt half-embraced her.

"They evacuated them from that building," someone nearby said. "They say the foundation's sagging and it's supposed to come down any minute."

I nodded automatically. After the week I'd just spent alone with myself, talking only to clients and only in writing, my head was buzzing with chaos and bustle. I drew a deep breath and pictured a transparent cocoon around me, like a sci-fi force field.

It got easier. I circled around the cars, stepped onto the sidewalk and walked up the road toward the very building — obviously everything was cordoned off because of it; no two ways about that.

Only fifty meters in, I suddenly realized I was walking down the street absolutely alone — no one was being let through here, and yet no one had challenged me.

A squad of police stood ahead — sturdy, stocky guys with holsters and batons on their belts, one of them carrying a radio. They ambled unhurriedly along the roadway — evidently to catch and turn back the occasional passerby.

One of the officers stood right in my path, looking as if at me but slightly off to the side. The closer I came, the more out of place I felt. It was clear I was meant to go "in there." It was clear the roads had been closed and the cars and people turned away for exactly one purpose — so that we could do our work in peace. But did this broad-shouldered man with a rifle understand that? And if he stopped me — what would I say?

I stopped, took out my phone, called Cain — busy line. Second and third try — the same. I'd have to just walk…

Not knowing how to behave, I tried to walk as if this were perfectly normal — all the while trying to catch his eye, to get at least a formal nod of permission. But the officer stubbornly ignored me. Not daring to address him directly, I simply walked past, figuring: if need be, he'd stop me. Instead, he ostentatiously turned and strolled off in the other direction, studiously examining a newsstand by the road. The two men behind him, as if on cue, turned as well, and now they were scanning the opposite side of the street.

Beyond, I met neither people nor patrols. From the windows of a five-story block I was passing, residents peered after me with curiosity — apparently only the target building had been evacuated, and these people had simply been asked not to come outside.

"Do you know what happened?" a woman suddenly called from a second-floor window. "A gas leak, they say…"

I silently shrugged and walked on faster, so I wouldn't have to lie.

From the direction of the cordoned-off avenue came shouting and honking horns — but then I turned the corner, and now I walked in silence.

I reached the high-rise and immediately craned my head back to its very top. I remember it as if it were yesterday: in that building's stairwell, one floor above the last residential level, the entrance is blocked by a wide mesh grille that I slip through with ease. From the top balcony you climb over the railing — and you're on the first roof level. Walk a little way to the ladder and go up another three storeys — and from twenty-four floors up opens a panoramic view of the Kazanka river, the Millennium Bridge, the mirrored monument of the Azure Skies residential complex, and the Universiade stadium, which reminds me of an enormous turtle.

I wonder where we're climbing now — and, more importantly, why on earth they evacuated the residents?

The courtyard was guarded; an intercom gate led inside — open now, with several ordinary police officers at the entrance who, like everyone else, stubbornly refused to notice me. As I passed, one officer's radio hissed and muttered something.

I stepped into the courtyard and at once heard a thin, melodious ringing, like a crystal bell — except the sound didn't fade; it sang, strong and steady.

In the inner courtyard, just around the corner past the building's edge, Zigzag sat on a bench beside the sandbox. A little way off, three uniformed men were talking. The children, it seemed, hadn't arrived yet.

Coming closer, I saw that Zigzag was holding a singing bowl and running a striker around it — the bowl was singing. She saw me and smiled, but didn't put the instrument down.

"The moon is in the third house today!" she announced, delivering the news. "Just like when I was born. It's all for new connections and old ties — and it's also a good time for starting new hobbies and cooking chickpea dishes. Do you like hummus?"

I sat down beside her and studied her carefully. Zigzag was Zigzag as always — joy, beauty and a drop of madness — but she seemed tired, or sleep-deprived: there were bags under her eyes.

"Zigzag, what's going on?"

"I don't know, and nobody knows," she answered quietly. "Cain promised to explain everything when he comes. All I've heard so far is that things are not going the way we're used to. They've evacuated all the people, for some reason… Are you scared, Woodpecker?"

The bowl was singing, and its hollow interior seemed to me the center of the galaxy. Everything around was in motion: stars igniting and dying, life being born and dying on planets, comets streaking across billions of kilometers to find their target and burn up… people panicking and fussing, the wooden striker obediently circling… and the bowl motionless… holding its resilient note, quiet and stubborn.

I smiled and said it as confidently as I could.

"Not really. We don't even know what to be afraid of. Once we find out — that's when we'll tremble with all our might!"

She smiled and nodded, but I could see something was troubling her.

"Here's the suit." She nodded at the next bench, where a neatly folded black suit lay.

"What, right here?" The courtyard was empty, but roughly a hundred windows looked down at me.

"There's no one in the windows — and 'these people', " she nodded at the police, "aren't looking at us. No children around… By the way, I came really early, and you're usually the last to arrive. Maybe they decided not to take Holster and Banana today? Only Ghost left?"

Somewhere around my heart, a small balloon burst.

"Ghost… isn't coming."

The bowl stopped singing.

"Why? And how do you know?"

I'd already forgotten that of all of us, only I knew about his death. Plus Holster. The kids had surfaced earlier, and Zigzag had blacked out altogether.

"He blacked out a couple of steps short of the Mirror, and I only managed to pull you out…"

The girl didn't answer. Then, suddenly, she pressed her forehead.

The girl didn't answer. Then, suddenly, she pressed her forehead against my shoulder and sniffled.

"Hey — what's this?" I put my arm around her.

"You fool. You save the ones it's useful to save. You saved me — and what good did it do?"

"Well, I got a bonus out of it," I snapped back, stood up and began taking off my trousers to change — which, incidentally, left Zigzag no time to answer.

What is it with her? When she's not around, I'm ready for anything just to see her. But five minutes of talking to her and I want to strangle her.

The police had forgotten us completely — the trio had moved closer to the entrance, sat down on a bench and lit up. A bird whistled shrilly and cheekily as it flew past. The suit, as always, looked brand-new; the dense fabric strained over my arms and legs as it stretched. I was pulling up the zipper at my back when Zigzag asked quietly:

"Tell me — since the last dive, have you been having those dreams too?"

"Dreams?" I was surprised. "Sure, I dream. Sometimes I don't. Or do you mean some particular dreams?"

She suddenly went still — and then, without a word, took up the bowl again and began carefully circling the striker along its inner side. The bowl obediently began to play, and the galaxy resumed its quiet waltz.

I threaded the zipper cord into the little loop at my neck, stretched, smoothed the soft elastic fabric. Walked around Zigzag — and found her staring glassily at a single point in front of her. The striker moved slowly around the bowl; the bowl sang — but now it sounded like an alarm siren…

"I'm sorry," the girl said suddenly, in a colorless voice. "I didn't mean to…"

"Sorry for what?" I didn't understand.

The entrance door slammed with a bang. The police officers jumped, scrambling to hide their cigarettes from Cain. I expected him to bellow — but he walked right up to them and said something so quietly that I couldn't even hear his voice.

The one in the middle shuddered; another recoiled. The third's eyes went wide, and his jaw hung open.

"Wipe your noses, gentlemen," Cain told them with a predatory smile. "Believe in the best, and the job market will offer you plenty of surprising openings."

Having, apparently, just ended their careers with a single sentence, he came over to us and sat down on Zigzag's left. For a while he looked straight ahead and said nothing; we didn't dare break the silence either.

At last he turned his head and nodded at the singing bowl.

"Zigzag, that's two items: the bowl and the striker. One of them has to be left behind."

I took the striker.

"This one's mine."

He shrugged and nodded. The formality, whose meaning none of us understood, had been observed.

"Today it's just the two of you."

"Why aren't the children coming?" I asked.

In answer — a hard, fierce glare from under his brows. A minute ago Cain had been smiling; now he looked ready to kill me.

You know, that glare said.

So it had come out — about our talk with Holster. So they'd been listening in, and had learned that she and Banana had exchanged their real names.

"So now it's Zigzag and me?"

"Why ask obvious questions, Woodpecker?"

"Then here's a more serious one." The nagging vagueness was starting to anger me. "What's with all the panic on the streets?"

Cain settled himself more comfortably, took out a cigarette, lit up.

"Is there?" he asked thoughtfully, as if to himself.

"Everything's cordoned off from the Compressor plant to Fuchik Street. And I saw them evacuating this building's residents. National Guard trucks are parked across the roadway, and beyond them a second cordon… What is happening?"

Cain nodded all through my speech, as if reluctant to argue.

"But for you two, everything remains as before. The Mirror is on the sealed attic floor, right after you surface. The coefficient this time is pocket change — ten. You'll be back in under an hour. Well? What are we sitting for?" He took out another cigarette and lit it, looking at us with a raised eyebrow. "Think you can manage without your nanny this time?"

Cain had always escorted us to the Mirror — fussed over the instruments with the Eggheads, tracked the readings alongside them. Then gave a short briefing, wished us luck, and met us at the exit. Now he wasn't even going up to the Mirror — and somehow I was certain there was no one upstairs either, any more than in the rest of the building.

"What happened to the Mirror on Chekhov Street? Last week."

"How do you know about that?" he asked quickly.

"It just happened. I stumbled on it by accident, before your people showed up. I was visiting, then climbed up to the roof…"

"Alone?" Cain asked, as if in passing.

From our first meeting I've never stopped marveling at the speed with which he switches between emotions. Joy, anger, calm, indifference — for him they're tools, ways to get what he wants from you more quickly and efficiently. I can see it — and still, every time, I take the bait like a child.

"With a friend," I admitted. "We wanted to cut through the attic, and suddenly there it was, the Mirror. I was fine — he nearly lost his mind…"

Cain sat quietly studying his smoldering cigarette, outwardly showing not the slightest interest.

"I see… Then here's the situation: you two go on the dive now, and when you're back, I'll tell you everything. Otherwise, it's none of your business."

The sensible thing would be to change back into my ordinary clothes, turn around and leave. What could they do to me? They couldn't throw me into the Mirror by force; I'd given no commitments, signed no contracts.

Hardly anything would happen to me. Perhaps they'd tail me for a while, to make sure I wasn't looking for journalists and wasn't planning to publish articles. Cain simply wouldn't call again, and the whole story of the Looking-Glass would fade into my past.

And Zigzag.

"I'm going," the girl said suddenly.

"Well, I never!" Cain winked at me cheerfully. "The fair sex is showing you up! Surely you won't leave a beautiful lady alone? What if a live dragon is waiting for her in the Looking-Glass?!"

My cheeks went hot. I stood up in silence and walked toward the entrance.

Chapter 6

"Coming because I am?" she asked, smiling.

I pressed the elevator call button.

"You simply beat me to it, Zi."

"Oh! You've never called me Zi before!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "I like it — call me that from now on, always!"

The freight elevator chimed and smoothly slid its silver doors open. You could have fit a whole crowd in there, along with a pair of pianos — but as if by unspoken agreement, we stood very close together.

Now I could smell her light hair, with a faint tart perfume — as if she'd just risen from a forest meadow thick with grass, chamomiles and dandelions. I could barely restrain myself from burying my nose in the top of her head. I pressed 24 on the panel. The doors slid shut just as smoothly; the car jolted and began its slow climb.

"And what about the Mirror on Chekhov Street?"

"I thought that was where we were going today…"

The elevator turned out to be so slow it was as if someone was being paid by the second to keep it running. In the time it took us to reach the twenty-fourth floor, I managed to tell Zi, briefly, how Sanya and I had been at a house gig, gone up onto the roof, found the Mirror…

A second before the doors opened, I had just finished describing how I'd later gone back to that building — the unnatural silence, and how on my way there I hadn't met, hadn't even heard, a single person.

"Back then it just surprised me. Now I think it's all somehow connected."

Zi wasn't surprised, didn't ask questions. She only nodded, as if in agreement. I even had the feeling that she had known all this for a long time and was simply checking it against what I had just learned.

Then the elevator stopped, the elevator gnome struck its little bell, and the doors opened. Zi took the striker from my hand, and in her grip the bowl began to sing again, cutting through the dead silence of the empty residential building. In the enclosed space the sound changed — as if instead of one bowl, a dozen had started up. With this singing we walked through the residential floor toward the door to the open balcony, shuffling slightly over the clean, washed concrete, sidestepping the little grey doormats, identical, as if stamped from the same mold.

Nearing the door to the open balcony, we stumbled onto a small flood: in the corner lay a bucket and a mop — apparently abandoned in a hurry. Dirty water was running from the bucket in a thin stream, along the wall, down the corridor.

Zi stopped, as if we'd come upon not a puddle but a raging river. I didn't hurry her. I could feel it: she knew something the whole world didn't, and it was connected with the Mirrors, with the piles of clothes throughout the building on Chekhov Street, and with the bags under her eyes — as if she'd been unloading coal at the station for the last several nights.

"Zi, I have this feeling you know something you're not telling."

She just stood there, silently watching the reflection of a dim bulb in the puddle, still turning the striker in the bowl.

"There are things I can't tell — not to you, not even to Cain…"

That "not even to Cain" stung. So she trusts me less, and can tell me less? Though why am I taking offense? The rules of the game were agreed long ago: we don't tell each other anything unnecessary, we don't talk about our lives, we don't reveal our real names. Cain is our handler — of course she'd be more open with him. Maybe he already knows everything, and the two of them are stringing me along!

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