

Chapter I

EPISODES: THE BEGINNING...

I

Tuesday, August 4, 17:23 (UTC¹ -4)

On the road between San Pedro and Calama

The Atacama Desert, Chile

JD became by no means the first, who was misled by *their* childish appearance...

Long shadows were stretching on the dry land. The setting sun nearly peeped opposite the windshield, filling with a golden light *Range Rover's* cabin.

A broken utterly excavated road emerged from under the hood, disappearing and then surfacing again from beneath the sand, leading northwest. On both sides of the road were lying schists and half-covered with sand limestone hills of the driest desert on the Earth — Atacama. Far behind *Range Rover* were rising bare Andean ranges where among them, like excrescence on the body of the lizard, jutted out Licancabur — a six-kilometer crater of the extinct volcano. Celestial azure flooded all around, dyeing remote mountains violet.

Silver jeep was confidently paving the way to Calama² — the only existing settlement within a radius of two hundred miles around San Pedro that has a right (doubtful, let's be honest) to be called the city³. Except for Pan-American Highway and copper mines alongside Antofagasta⁴, there are not so many places in northern Chile that bear the imprint of civilization.

JD Richardson a 45-year-old cardiac surgeon from Auckland pushed the seat deep into the cabin, threw aside the back of the seat, and straightened his tired legs. He has been staying in San Pedro for all weekends driving around neighborhoods. Ostentatious Chilean Flavio has already managed to show lots of curiosities: Moon Valley, Laguna Chaxa, Laguna Barros Negros, and

¹ Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) is the synchronized world time. Generally accepted point of reference of the local time in time zones. As the reference it is taken the local time of Greenwich longitude or London (zero time zone). UTC -4 (“minus four”) means that the standard time in Chile is 4 hours behind the standardized time in Britain. Not so long ago the synchronized time had been called Greenwich Mean Time and was marked as GMT.

² Calama is the settlement in the Atacama Desert on the north of Chile, the capital of El Loa Province — a part of the Antofagasta region.

³ San-Pedro de Atacama is the town in Chile amidst Atacama. The population density in the region is 0.1 people per km².

⁴ Antofagasta is the large industrial city in northern Chile on the Pacific coast.

Miscanti — a recreation place for pink flamingos⁵. Laying the hands behind his head, Richardson thought that he would not mind staying in San Pedro. At least for a day. If only he could, then for a week. For a moment he even regretted that Frank was waiting for him in Calama.

Frank Di'Anno, JD's college mate, arrived at this abandoned place with an ulterior motive. Unlike Richardson, who enjoyed his vacation, Di'Anno was intentionally sent to Calama. Frank has been already working for four years in an Australian company that produces medical equipment. He came here to help with customizing the MRI — magnetic resonance imaging — purchased for the local hospital. “Freaky project, — responded Frank about the purpose of a trip, — a clerk from the Chilean Ministry of Health once had a dream that Calama needs MRI. It seems like it is far to go to Antofagasta or Iquique⁶ for the Indians in the desert. And no one could stop the fact that 90% of them did not even know what MRI is and 95% did not require an MRI service at all in their whole life.” The money had been paid and Frank had to go to help locals with the new equipment.

Learning about their plans for each other, friends decided to gather in Calama to have a drink and a glass of beer. Certainly, if in this sluttish town amidst the Atacama could be found some...

“What is that?” suddenly asked JD, covering the eyes from the sun with his hand.

“Where, Señor?”

“There ahead,” the man pointed. “On the left side of the road.”

Flavio looked about the left roadside. For several seconds he could not notice anything worth attention, when suddenly at a hundred meters he saw something, which made his heart jump up, then became as heavy as a kettlebell and drifted a few inches down. The old man pounded his foot on the brakes and stopped the jeep.

“Are you nuts?” miffed the doctor. “I have almost beaten in the windshield with my head!”

The Chilean kept silent, without taking the eyes off the lonely figure.

“That is a human,” said Richardson.

“I... I am not sure, Señor...,” the squeaky voice of the old Indian oddly rattled.

“I'm telling you — that's a boy. I have better eyesight.”

Indeed, a small broad-shouldered, and sinewy boy was standing afar.

“Since what time in Atacama can be found light-skinned boys, eh?” JD tried to crack a joke.

The Chilean ignored his question again. Richardson squinted, “That's weird. The kid is completely naked.” The sunlight stretched almost across the ground, biting into the eyes, therefore

⁵ The Andean flamingo is one of the rarest flamingos in the world. It has a pale pink body and long yellow legs. The only specie with tree fingers on paws. It lives in the mountains of Peru, in the northwest of Argentina, and on salt lakes in the north of Chile.

⁶ Iquique is a city in northern Chile.

JD did not notice the gray satin trunks that covered the hips of the kid. “Em... How did he get here?”

“Señior, that’s not a human,” Flavio suddenly stated.

“And who’s then?”

“A demon.”

“What?” the doctor frowned. “Flavio, you’re...”

“Two days ago, he was seen in the desert to the North from San Pedro.”

“What the hell! A demon?” snorted JD. “What a fucking superstition?!”

The gray Chilean started the engine and pressed the gas pedal to the floor. *Range Rover* raced ahead, howling the engine.

JD pondered. Each second that approached the car the lonely figure enfolded him in confusion. A white-skinned boy was standing all alone amidst the dead immensity of Atacama but thus did not cry and did not run towards the car. He did nothing at all. Only standing and watching. Such a scene could surprise anyone even on the outskirts of a civilized village somewhere in New Zealand. In the middle of Atacama, it caused only the tingling in the belly.

The off-road car sped by the silhouette at full speed, pouring him over with dust and a small stone rolling pin. And nothing happened. Nothing at all. The jeep was moving away. The boy, barely bending his head, was following it with his eyes.

Richardson threw his hand on the seat and looked back.

“This is a mirage,” bumbled the doctor, wondering that he didn’t divine it at once. “This is a mirage. The guy is standing in the middle of the beach on the Pacific Coast and we’re observing his reflection.”

“You’re wrong, Señor...,” whispered Flavio.

Oblique rays brightly lit the figure of a child. JD has finally noticed sports trunks and the eyes... the eyes that were looking straight at him.

Suddenly something clicked in the surgeon’s head. For a second or two, he couldn’t figure out what exactly. A certain detail of what he saw didn’t fit the general picture, stubbornly finding no place in his logical brain. The doctor tensed, frowned but he was not able to seize the thing he missed.

But then he realized: the mirage *turned his head, bent down, and looked* at them! He was examining their car! The understanding came so fast that Richardson was petrified. His arms and back were covered with sweat. The boy is not a mirage. He was not a phantom, since the ghost does not react to the world around him.

JD has not yet fully comprehended what he has just realized, as Flavio said, “It’s not a mirage,” clinging his hand to the wheel, the old Indian was anxiously peeping in a rear-view mirror. “It’s impossible to see a mirage in Atacama, Señor...”

No doubt: a child was standing in the desert.

“Stop!” ordered JD.

“Señor, I’m begging, you shouldn’t...”

“I order you to stop the car immediately!”

Flavio reluctantly pressed the brakes and stopped the jeep.

“Señor, you don’t understand what you’re doing,” babbled the driver. “This is a demon. He was seen in different remote places at once...”

“Old fool, what are you babbling about?” The surgeon became angry. “There is a child. He is as real as we are. We can’t leave him here in a desert,” JD stumbled for a moment and became delighted with his theory, “How can you know? Maybe, somewhere nearby crashed an airplane and this little boy is the only one who survived? This is it! He suffered a concussion therefore he behaves so oddly.”

The New-Zealander unfastened got out of the jeep and bypassed the car.

A speck of lifted dust, dissolving with barely noticeable rustling, was descending on the ground. The boy was still standing beside the road, examining *Range Rover*. Only several hundred meters separated him from Richardson. A long geometrically correct shadow was stretching behind the figure.

JD raised his hand over the head and waved.

The boy responded instantly — he waved back also with a *right* hand.

Richardson smiled triumphantly, silently cursing Flavio for his unreasonable prejudices, and walked straight ahead, swinging his hands out of habit. After the doctor made his first step, the boy budged and marched towards, swinging his hands virtually in the same way as Richardson did.

As JD was approaching the lonely boy, he had to admit that all his altruism had vanished somewhere. He felt shivers down his spine. Something was hell-wrong. Something was wrong with that kid. He couldn’t realize what exactly — Atacama had confused his thoughts. The doctor did not suffer from agoraphobia, but the awareness that in case of any threat there was no place to escape (not because there was no space to flee; you can run anywhere but running away is pointless: for dozens of kilometers there is no place to hide) speeded up the heartbeat. He heard his heart beating in his head.

Nevertheless, JD kept pace, moving away from the car.

The boy had a good body: a broad chest and strong legs. His figure could be considered perfect except for the head. It seemed disproportionate: the upper part of the skull was too convex. In fact, there was nothing extraordinary at all. But still a slight disproportion stroke the eye.

When less than a hundred steps left to reach the boy, JD felt an anxious excitation rising. There were no bruises, wounds, or traces of ash on the kid, nothing that could have witnessed the plane crash. The lad was clean as an angel and did not look like someone who had just scrambled out of a burning plane.

A few more steps and Richardson could see the face of the boy. And the thing JD had seen, marked in his brain forever. The boy had a frozen face, like a mask. Not the childish eyes were burning under the marble brown. Something black struggled to get free out of them. The pupils were sparkling with damply blue light, but the whites... were not just simply red. No, they were filled with crimson blood.

The doctor suddenly realized that not a simple human child was approaching him, but something unfamiliar and alien in the guise of an innocent kid.

For a moment everything changed. At that moment not the fear caused by doubt or confusion, but a real animal horror pierced JD's body with a strong electric discharge. The man clicked his jaw out of fear and suddenly stopped.

The creature stopped along with him... and clicked the jaw. Twenty meters of open space and infinite silence lay between them.

"Do you need some help?" the doctor squeezed, overcoming the growing panic and desire to scamper away. His common sense was furiously clinging to the last and desperate thought that it was a human creature in front of him. In case the kid did not understand English, JD repeated the phrase in Spanish, carefully pronouncing words, "Necesita ayuda?⁷"

The creature kept silent. However, when the cardiac surgeon was talking, the boy was twisting and stretching his lips.

JD felt the fear that squeezed his throat. Blood was pulsating in his temples. Richardson took a deep breath and tried again. He babbled hesitantly, "Are you all, right? I just thought... we could help... we could give you a lift..."

And again! The light-skinned boy soundlessly moved his lips. His bloody eyes did not come off the doctor's face. The kid tried to talk but there could be no sound flying out of his mouth. He looked so creepy, that JD receded.

Instantly the creature went backward, moving away at the same distance.

The doctor swallowed. The dry gray wind was licking their figures. From the East of the Andes cold twilight was slipping down, covering dead lands with a gray shroud. A conjuncture hit

⁷Do you need help? (*icn.*).

Richardson's head: "He repeats my actions! He moves just like me and even tries to talk when I'm talking". And there was nothing zany about it.

"Fuck everything!" He rushed to the car, raising his legs enormously. He was fleeing, putting his hand to his chest, struggling with dark circles that popped up in front of his eyes, and with a desperate desire to turn back. At that moment what he wished the most was to make sure that the one from the desert was not chasing him.

When only a couple of steps left to reach the jeep, JD got his foot in a hole, lost his balance, and fell, swallowing the dust. Trembling and cursing himself for clumsiness, Richardson pulled his knees under himself, stood up, and..., turned around. The boy was standing in the same place. He was looking at him with all the same bloody unbearable eyes.

Like a fish gulping atrophied desert air, no longer looking back, the doctor jerked forward.

"Is it you, Señor? Tell me that it is you!" yowled Flavio when JD red as a cherry with bulging eyes plopped down on the seat. "Tell me that you didn't swap your bodies."

"Start the car quickly, old goof!" growled the doctor, wiping the blood from a scratch on his cheek. "Don't babble nonsense. What a body exchange?! Move on, Flavio!"

"I told you..."

"Shut up! Start the car! Let's get out of here!"

"Yes, Señor..."

Range Rover twitched and went to the west, hauling up the tail of dust.

The solar disk touched the edge of the horizon.

II

Tuesday, August 4, 17:56 (UTC -4)

73^d kilometer of the 25th highway Carmen Alto — Calama

Holding a steering wheel with one hand, Tequito Reyes was blowing an amp joint and singing. His truck — an ancient bug-eyed *Mercedes* — was racing north.

The music cried. An obliterated audiocassette with hot-blooded songs from the Brazilian band "Banda Calypso" was reeling in a cassette player. Singling the melody out of the engine roar and cab clanking, Tequito was singing along with the soloist. He did not know Portuguese but still tried to sing, carefully repeating sounds that were coming out from the black speakers.

Tequito Reyes was an interesting fellow. His mother originated from the Mapuche tribe, and his dad was Melanesian who once immigrated to Antofagasta from remote Tongo Island. From his mother he inherited thinness and from his father — black and shiny, as if covered with drying oil,

skin. When the child was seven, because of unsolvable problems with Chilean guardians of law and orders, his father escaped to Bolivia. Since that time no one had seen him. And his mother tried somehow to raise the son alone.

During his twenty-four years, Tequito had already managed to escape from home twice, sit in jail three times (mostly for disorderly conduct and drug use), earn his first million pesos, successfully squander all his money on slot machines in Santiago de Chile, to get married twice and divorce only once. Currently, this chap deals with buying up merchandise and products in Antofagasta — the capital of the region — and reselling all these in Calama. That day the boot of his truck was stuffed with cooking utensils, agricultural tools, seedlings, fresh vegetables, and various household trifles.

Tequito had one secret weakness — marijuana. The feeling of acrid euphoria mixed with endless apathy, that filled the body after one joint, carried him away each time to another world, to a parallel universe, where there was no pain sadness, and despair, no arrogant apartment owners and brutish violent cops, but instead there were so many amusing things around.

At the same time, Tequito wasn't ashamed of his passion. For two decades of educational activity, the only thing that the old lady Reyes managed to take into her son's head was the understanding of the idea that drugs — are evil. "Junkies — are doomed people," repeated his mom, "stupid monkeys with a one-way ticket to hell, where they will suffer and eat their shit forever. No one can be worse than them. Well, of course, without taking into consideration the Adventist and Jehovah's Witnesses." Tequito did not know if a person who only smokes weed should be considered a genuine addict. And because of that, he writhed even more.

A desert path between Carmen Alto and Calama was the only place where he could blow one amp joint or even two in a row. There had been no police since the beginning of the world. Oncoming cars were rare, and they could be seen from afar. Everything you should do was hold the steering wheel and press the gas pedal.

The roll-up has burned out. Grey smoke spread out throughout the cabin. Tequito stopped singing and focused on the review mirror that was shaking queerly. He has never seen a mirror that rattled so funny. In a second the Chilean nickered like a horse and the tears poured out from his eyes.

"Oh, God! Fuck me and I will cry! Look at it! ... This mirror! Ha-ha-ha!" He screamed, slapping his hands over the steering wheel. "I. I can't... This mir-ror... Ha-ha-ha!"

Furiously continuing to chuckle, Tequito raised his eyes to the empty road and suddenly noticed a lonely figure. He peered carefully — it was a boy. He seemed young but tall and athletic. Probably a sportsman or something like that. The boy was naked except for the gray-black trunks covering his hips.

Tequito shook his head. The ghost did not disappear. Certainly, because Tequito has just zoned out after a couple of marijuana rolls. But still, he was conscious and could realize that the car was hurtling straight on the kid. And he would have slowed down or at least tried to go around the boy, if not for the oddness of the scene.

“A white-skinned boy, wearing only trunks, in the desert hundreds of kilometers away from home,” he was thinking, “that’s nonsense. A fucking heresy. It can’t be happening.” But even more confusing was the kid’s behavior. Any real creature tries to get out of the way, saving his life as fast as he can, if a large truck hurtles on him. Precisely because of this Tequito Reyes has hastily assumed that it was a hallucination in front of him - an unhealthy image in his brain caused by smoking devil’s weed. Since this happened to him for the first time in his life, he got scared, almost shitted his pants, then screamed dramatically, like a girl, “A-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!” and pressed the gas pedal...

A powerful hit sobered him. The steering wheel leaped out of his hands, and the engine hawked. The car jerked right into the virgin wilderness.

Finally, the truck stopped on the hill with its nose raised. The stones showered on the roadside. Then it became quiet. After the deafening music and the roaring engine, Tequito was paralyzed by the dead silence. If he wasn’t so scared, he would think that he was stone-dead.

For a couple of seconds, Tetito was furiously examining the spider web cracks in the lower left corner of the windshield. Then, with trembling hands, he started the car and turned on the lights. The night darkness was confidently approaching from the east, and Tequito had an irresistible desire not to stay face-to-face in complete darkness with *someone or something he had just brought down*. The roar of the car did not calm him down, but the headlights started to glow. However only the right one.

The Chilean got out of the car. His feet gave way under him, but still overcoming the heartbreaking fear, he burst forth on the highway. To the left, not far from the place of the crash, amid glass pieces, metal debris of the radiator grille, and fulvous stains of blood a tow-haired boy lay. Tequito approached him, weeping.

“The white one!” the driver knelt, “Kick the shit out of me, I’ve finished the white dude!”

Holding the boy’s head, the Chilean was timidly looking at the light skin splotched with blood, tousled light-brown hair, and motionlessly bulged eyes that were directed in the indifferent sky. Dark red blood was slowly oozing out of the numerous wounds in a brawny chest and belly.

Suddenly Tequito realized that this time he would stay in jail for a very long time.

“He’s white...” whispered the ill-fated driver, stroking light strands of hair with his trembling fingers. “God damn it, the white one! He’s so white that...” a sudden guess stung him to

the bottom of his heart, "...he's a tourist! The kid is a foreigner!" and then Tequito started maniacally panicking, "Oh, my God, I've killed a tourist!!!"

To kill the white traveler in a region where tourism as a phenomenon has only just begun to emerge... For this shit, he will not be simply sent to jail. He will be burnt alive, lynched, dismembered, and after his remnants will be fed to bat-eared foxes.

Pulling out his neck, Tequito turned around. The sun has already set by the sandy hillock in the west. The road was empty in both directions. Only the wind dispersed the grey sand, and the cracked earth sighed from time to time, welcoming the cool night. Disgusting and slippery, like an earthworm, thought crept into the dealer's head. "Draw from the road on three-four hundred meters. They will seek the body, that's clear, but the desert can keep secrets."

The Chilean thievishly looked around again. The horizon was empty.

Tequito stooped harshly, gripped the dead boy under his arms, and dragged him into the desert to the west from the road. The boy was extremely heavy for his size. Well-trained muscles are always heavier than viscid fat. In a minute the Chilean already got out of breath, so his eyes became darkened.

"Like a boar!" railed Tequito, wiping the sweat from his forehead, "As if the cast of lead." He took a break for a minute or two, sitting on haunches, and then he continued dragging the body, occasionally glancing around with caution.

"Oh God, let no one drive by..." Tequito's hands were shaking in a neurasthenic way, "My Lord, I beg you, make sure no one appeared on the road."

The darkness deepened. Along with it, the sounds deepened as well. The car disappeared over the hill but the idle roar of the engine and blurred light of the headlight marked its location.

After moving the body away at a suitable distance, Tequito stopped and took a long breath. His hands and shorts turned black from blood.

He calmed down (as far as he could in such a condition) and was about to go back to his battered car.

"I'm sorry, kid," he threw in the end, "I didn't mean to... It's just... happened."

Suddenly the boy moved. The Chilean gasped and almost shitted his pants (twice this day! - damn it), but right away he comprehended that the dead couldn't move. So, this chunky child is alive! A moment later the light-brown boy twitched again. A moan flew out of his mouth. Wounds on his belly began to bleed.

"Motherfucker!" yelled Tequito, "You didn't die!" He lifted his hands and shouted into the darkness, referring to the Lord, whom he has just so passionately asked to get rid of all undesirable witnesses on the road, "Look at him — he is alive, a son of a beach! Bastard!"

The boy opened his mouth and soundlessly moved his lips. His eyes came to life. For a while, they were chaotically bustling, till focused on Reyes' face. The kid was gazing at the Chilean with violence, which was absolutely inappropriate for the twelve-year-old boy, who could have just been enfolded in asphalt. Something non-natural, definitely not a human, blew out of his eyes. The sun had already set beyond the horizon; the cool darkness flooded the vicinity and through the dense dusk Tequito Reyes did not let himself gaze into the face of the hammering child.

“Damn it! What should I do with you now?” he clutched his head, “I swear, you'd better de cease now!”

The furtive inner voice treacherously whispered: ‘Disappear... leave the kid here... and he will die.’

Biting his lip, the dealer lifted his head and stared into the blackness overhead, where gradually one by one were arising in different spots of stars — the only witnesses of his crime.

Tequito was yet a haggler. He was even a thief and rowdy. Perhaps, someday he will become a drug addict — ‘a stupid monkey with a one-way ticket to hell’. However, Tequito Reyes was not a murderer and did not have an intention to become one. Although, this was the thing his mother did not teach him, still the Chilean savvied that becoming a murderer would be worse than getting hooked on heroin. This is even worse than becoming an Adventist or Jehovah's Witness.

“You'd better die!” hissed the driver, squatted down, and dragged the white foundling back. The boy growled, clenching his teeth. Tequito felt the rampant throbbing in the kid's muscles.

“A stupid shitbag... Fucking gringo... Stinky white asshole... It seems like it's the first time you saw a truck in your life,” snorted a confused reseller. “You're a boxer, right? Or a wrestler. And stop bleeding here! Immediately! Stop... I order you!”

Finally, he dragged the boy into the car; put him on the driver's seat, then pushed the lifeless body deep into the car, somehow securing it with safety belts. Then he got behind the wheel himself.

“I know, kid, my mommy will be so downhearted,” he was rolling a joint with his trembling hands, “I do understand that everything goes so shitty: all the way back you will sniff weed at the age of ten...” the Chilean grabbed a cigarette, lit it up and inhaled deeply, rolling his eyes, “But I'm sorry, kid. I can't drive one hundred fifty on this fucking ‘highway’ having a fresh head.”

Then he put down the parking brake and rushed forward, steadily repeating through his teeth like a mantra: “Please, don't die... don't pass away, kid...”

It became totally dark. The clock showed 18:23

Tuesday, August 4, 19:38 (UTC -4)

Calama, Chile

JD Richardson and Frank Di'Anno were sipping gin and tonic on the hotel terrace. Besides them, the bar was empty. Luckily, the evening was quiet and calm.

"Doctor Di'Anno!" called a barman, leaning over the rack.

Frank turned his head, "Yes, amigo?" a smile has not yet gone from his face.

"Someone's calling you."

Di'Anno frowned, "It's from the clinic."

"Why are you so sure about that?" asked JD.

"Who do you think may require an Australian engineer at half past seven in the evening? These vandals have definitely done something wrong."

The Australian reluctantly came up to the phone and uplifted a handset to his ear. He listened for a long while and answered briefly several times. A dissatisfied countenance slowly gave way to surprise.

When the conversation ended, Frank hastily returned to the table.

"You know, buddy, I have to drive to the hospital."

"Is there something wrong with the device?"

"The tomograph's okay. But... one boy was brought to the hospital a few minutes ago. A local guy has somehow knocked him down in the desert. Nobody knows how the kid appeared there. And doctors... they want me to arrive and take a look."

"The white kid?" as if casually mentioned JD, feeling the cold under his shoulders.

"What did you say?"

"I asked if the boy was white."

"Yes," answered Di'Anno and then rapidly turned his head, "Damn it, how do you know? I haven't told you."

"You know what? I'm going with you," said the New Zealander.

IV

Tuesday, August 4, 20:14 (UTC -4)

Calama central clinic

"This is him" claimed JD.

"Are you sure?"

“Yes, no doubt. I’ve seen him in the desert on the road from San Pedro. He acted strange, and inadequately. No wonder the kid got under the car.

“And he has already been in trunks, yes?”

“Yea,” nodded Richardson.

“Why didn’t you pick him up?” Di’Anno caught his friends’ sight.

“I intended. But I tell you, he is insane. You know... the kid scared the hell out of me... he made my blood run cold.”

He scared you?” stared Frank, “How, the fuck, should I believe this?”

“I don’t know!” replied JD, “I thought, I’d seen a ghost or a demon. He imitated me, my moves.”

Frank Di’Anno put his hands into the pockets of his lab coat. He had no idea what exactly this ten-year-old sucker did to terrify a forty-year-old doctor. The kid lay unconscious and Di’Anno (luckily or unfortunately) did not see his eyes.

Meanwhile, a doctor on duty - tensed, middle-aged Chilean with deep cheekbones and aquiline nose - approached the Australian. He received the victim.

“We did a slight survey,” he reported. “We made an X-ray examination.”

“And how’s he?” wondered Frank.

“A fracture of six ribs and a clavicle, spinal vertebrae are displaced, a huge crack in the pelvis, but his spine is, luckily, unharmed. Although it seems there is no internal bleeding, the kid has lost a lot of blood. Also, we have a suspicion of a strong concussion: the patient regained consciousness a couple of times, but he couldn’t talk at all — just rattled and...” at that moment the eyes of the doctor rattled, “and fleered.”

“Probably because of pain.”

A slim Chilean hesitated.

“I don’t think so. As for me... because of anger.”

“Is that all?”

“Currently, yes.”

“The kid got off easy,” noted Di’Anno

JD Richardson was standing next to his friend with his arms crossed over his chest, staring at the window, where he could see the part of reanimation.

“Yes, though the boy is young, he is strong as a horse. He has the well-trained muscles that an adult athlete dreams of having at such an age. The other one in his place would simply fall apart into pieces.”

“We need to finish the survey. Let’s see what’s with his head. Maybe there’s a jelly instead of a brain and our diligence is useless,” mumbled Frank and turned to the doctor on duty, “have you stopped the bleeding?”

“Yes, quite easy.”

“Perfect. I hope the tomograph is ready.”

“Yes, Mr. Di’Anno. Just this afternoon we’ve completed the setup.”

“Good. It’s the chance to check the equipment. Amigo, tell nurses to prepare the patient and start up the machine.”

The Chilean nodded and went to the staffroom.

After half a minute, the hospital cot with an unconscious boy was rolled out of the ward and taken to the MRI room. The Australian and the New Zealander looked over the relief body once again, while the bed was passing by. The wounds were not so deep, with a few small bruises and a couple of scratches — nothing else.

After washing, the kid did not look like a victim of an accident, where he had fallen under the wheels of a truck.

“What do you think about that?” quietly asked JD.

“Oddly enough, but after an ill-fated collision with the Mercedes, the kid looks better than the car itself,” sluggishly smiled Di’Anno.

“That’s not what I mean,” Richardson was not about to crack jokes. “*What was he doing in the desert?*”

The MRI room has lit up. The door of the room was open: blurred shadows were sliding on the wall and the floor in the corridor. The medical staff put the boy in the machine.

Frank shrugged, “I don’t know... Maybe somehow, he got separated from his tourist group.”

“What kind of tourists, dude? This is the Atacama! Do you consider San Pedro a suitable place for a family vacation? Even experienced travelers do not always get here!”

“I don’t know...” repeated the Australian.

Quiet calm voices were heard from the MRI room. Then a slight click — the MRI machine started working. Richardson and Di’Anno moved toward the half-open door.

“Did you inform the police?” continued JD. “Someone’s, probably, looking for him.”

“It’s not my problem. Chileans have to sort this out.”

“But the boy seems very weird.”

“I don’t understand, why do you consider him so wei...”

At this moment, when only a few steps left to reach the door, a strained sound slipped out of the room. This odd sound JD Richardson will, probably, remember for all his life. It seemed like someone had dropped down a watermelon from a considerable high. A striped melon fell on tiles

with a typical sound, then cracked and smashed into pieces. But Richardson and Di'Anno instantly realized that there were no watermelons behind the door.

However, they were terrified not by the sound itself, but by the conditions that accompanied it. Initially, the light blinked on the whole floor. Then the MRI sharply squeaked, whistled several times, and began to subside, until completely stopped. The dead silence established.

The doctors rushed to the room.

“What happened?” cried Di'Anno, breaking in. “Qué pasó?!⁸”

“No lo sé... No lo sé, señor...⁹” mumbled the Chilean doctor.

Most of the room was occupied by barreled tomograph. The device reminded Richardson of a big barrel for gathering rainwater that he had seen in Meteora¹⁰ monasteries during his last trip to Greece. The outer surface of the flipped ‘barrel’ was opaque, the color of cocoa with milk. A rectangular ventilating channel was tacked on the top, stretching upwards, and disappeared into the ceiling. In the middle was a round hole with smooth edges that seemed too small for the human body. The inner surface of the hole was glossy, orange on the edges, and inside it was sterilely white. In front of the hole, there was a narrow bed from whence the patient was “served” in the machine. From the main control panel inside the device were stretching lots of pipes and wires. Everything looked very modern.

The foreign doctors leaped into the room when the boy was moving out of the MRI. Currently, only his legs were visible. Nothing unusual, although... With the corner of his eyes, Richardson noticed a pale-pink thick liquid that dribbled down the floor from the left side “barrel”. In a second the boy entirely got out of the hole. One of the nurses fainted at once without any sound: she plopped on the floor; her head was thrown back, and her arms outstretched unnaturally. The other one screamed and, sneaking past the doctors, ran out of the room. Her hysterical shrieking, like a siren, was coming out of the corridor for a long time. Frank Di'Anno became gray, like sun-dried desert land. There was a reason: the boy's head disappeared. Vanished without a trace. The dark-red blood was continuously oozing out of the bloody stump.

“Where's his head?” bellowed Di'Anno, as if one of the nurses hid it under the white coat. The Australian looked childishly confused, as the hero of Disney cartoons, whom the insidious villain winded round his little finger with the use of black magic. “Where is it?”

Frank bent over the body and looked inside the tomograph. There was no sign of the head.

“Fuck!” he yelled. “Where is his head?!?!?”

⁸What happened? (Sp.).

⁹ I don't know... I don't know, señor (Sp.).

¹⁰ The Meteora — (Gr. ‘suspended in the air’) - is one of the largest monastery complexes in Greece; all monasteries are located on high cliffs (average 600 meters) that like columns rise above the Thessalian valley.

The Chilean doctor on duty, with his face yellow, made an uncertain step forward, “I don’t know, señor. We’ve just simply put the kid inside and started the machine... Everything’s due to the instructions. And then the clap...”

“What the fuck are you talking about?!” screeched Australian. “Idiots! This is an MRI machine, not a guillotine!!! What have you done with the patient?”

“We did nothing!” the yellowed Chilean started to scream. “I’ve just started the machine...”

Frank grabbed his head and, moaning hard, leaned on the device.

“What do you think about this, buddy?”

The New-Zealander wanted to support his colleague, but the only one stupid phrase was spinning in his head: “Dude, I have never seen such trashy results of the MRI examination in my whole life”. JD decided that it was probably better to say nothing.

Richardson looked inside the MRI machine. The walls were clean, only the part of the white plastic tunnel, where previously the head laid, was splattered with brains, mixed with hair and blood. A strange horseshoe thing was lying at the bottom.

“I think there’s his jaw. The lower one,” the cardiac surgeon got out, “And... em... his cervical vertebrae... if I’m not mistaken.”

Frank Di’Anno jumped up.

“Cretins! Fucking rattle-brained Latinos!” he bawled. “It can happen, dude... if there is a metal in the chamber... any metal object inside... Probably, a hearing aid or... I don’t know, anything...”

Pushing Richardson away, Di’Anno climbed into the machine. He writhed and puffed, pushing a decapitated body, and finally disappeared into the tomograph’s tunnel. For one and a half minutes nothing was heard from the inside. The Australian got back much quieter but confused. And like a vampire after a banquet, he was stained with blood from head to toe.

“So?” asked the New Zealander.

“Nothing,” rasped Frank. “There is everything that should be. Crushed skull bones, teeth, pieces of face, brains, hair, and blood. But there is no metal. No mechanical scratches on the panels... Devilry, JD. I don’t understand anything...”

The duty doctor moved to the door to block the exit from the room.

“Mr. Di’Anno, you must stay in the room until the police come,” he answered coldly. “And you, Mr. Richardson, I strongly ask not to interfere.”

JD did not argue. He backed away, shifting the sight from the headless kid to his colleague and back.

“Hold on, buddy,” he dropped as a goodbye and went into the corridor.

V

Rushing out of the room, JD was lost in thoughts. Richardson was also a doctor, so he knew no matter what happened in those few seconds after starting MRI, it did not happen because of the system fault. A magnetic field with the strength of three Teslas is powerful but completely safe. Metallic objects that get into this field behave like cannon shells. But the thing is that he examined the machine himself and there were no metal objects.

The New Zealander was determined to get the truth. At least he should try. Taking advantage of anxiety, Richardson went to the third floor. He quickly found the right door in the corridor and entered the fluoroscopy room. He hoped no one would be in the hardware but he got it wrong: a young nurse with long tanned legs was sitting at the table. "Like from the cover of the magazine," flashed through his mind.

The girl raised her dark eyes on the man. "How can I help you?" she asked in Spanish.

JD was taken aback.

"Um... senorita... you.... M-m-m... do you speak English?"

"Yes, quite a little."

The New Zealander was discouraged.

"Do you need anything?" the nurse flashed a smile.

"I'm sorry for breaking in..." Richardson sighed. Words did not come together. "I'm a doctor. I was sent here to help with... m-m-m... with the recently delivered boy. The white one. Probably a tourist or... The car knocked him off..."

JD stumbled again. The girl nodded.

"And?"

"We made him an X-ray examination. I want to take a look at snapshots," bringing together all his strength, blurted out JD.

The girl pondered, playfully wrinkling her nose. In essence, she should refuse. This man does not belong to the hospital staff. Besides, a fatso from the reception has already called her and told that one of the white 'medicasters' has torn the blond boy's head off - the one, who was brought from the desert by a junkie. Luckily, the nurse *has not yet grasped* that the 'medicaster' tore the boy's head literally; she even got pleased with JD, taking the doctor's embarrassment as the result of her breathtaking appearance. She smiled flirtatiously and palmed off a few large X-ray images on the edge of the table.

"But only to take a look," she whispered conspiratorially.

"Deal," JD pounced on pictures.

The boy was totally enlightened — from head to toe, - his head, chest, pelvis, hands, and feet bones were caught separately. Richardson took gray-black sheets of paper one by one, raised above his head, and examined carefully through the yellow light of old lamps. Particularly attentive — a snapshot of the head. Large sheets were shivering in his hands.

After the third checking of the skull's X-ray image, Richardson verified: the boy was 'clear'. He had no metal implants in his body and — what was the most important — in his head. He is not a demon, not an alien, not a robot or cyborg covered with human skin. He is real. Ordinary kid. Despite numerous fractures caused by a traffic accident, the boy looked like a completely normal child. JD rushed out of the room, without thanking. He ran to the first floor. The police have not arrived yet. On the way to the exit, the cardiac surgeon noticed a black, as Nubian, driver and guessed that it was he, who brought the boy from the desert. Already sober Tequito Reyes was sitting on the folding chair in the corner of the reception under a huge map of northern Chile. Catching approaching footsteps, the driver raised his eyes.

“Señior...” wheezed Tequito, grasping the sleeve of the doctor's lab coat, “Señior... how's the kid? Is he okay? Is he gonna die?”

Dirty streaks from tears were crawling off his dark cheeks.

JD Richardson did not know what to answer. He should tell him that through the fault of a fucking miracle the boy was somehow decapitated, but he understood — that's nonsense. It can happen in a cheap horror movie, in a fiction novel, or any other reality, but never on Earth, here everything obeys the inviolable laws of physics. JD shamelessly lied, “He's... mm... he's okay. He will be fine...”

“Thank God!” sniffled Tequito, showing dirty yellow teeth.

The New-Zealander drew back his hand and went to the light indicator 'Salida'(exit). Outside he stopped for a while until his eyes got used to the darkness. Peering into the darkness, he noticed blurred outlines of Mercedes that emerged nearby the entrance to the hospital and strode off to the truck. Illuminating the way with the cell phone flashlight, JD surveyed covered with a tarpaulin van. At first, he examined the point of impact: the bottom of the windshield, smashed headlight, and bent bumper; looked under the car, checked the wheels, and inspected the front axle as much as he could... Nothing. Richardson had no idea what to look for. He was just simply studying the car that knocked off a strange creature in the desert.

The doctor started to circumambulate the car's body, illuminating the boards. Without any results. Then he got to the back part of the car, threw aside the edge of a dense tarpaulin, and desperately tried to find anything to look inside. There he found large cardboard boxes, a couple of

smaller wooden boxes, and at the top - white plastic bags with the lettering ‘D&S’¹¹ on them. The packs were clean and new, just from the supermarket.

A vague feeling came over JD. There, in the desert, when he had noticed a boy for the first time and subconsciously grasped that it was not a mirage. Something did not fit the overall picture. An inconspicuous detail — the last piece of the puzzle — did not match the entire story. The story was taking shape in his head.

Hiding the phone in the back pocket of his jeans, Richardson hustled under a tarpaulin and climbed into the van. He pulled out the phone again, directing a bright ray on packs. Inside plastic bags, he found repairing instruments: hammers, screwdrivers, pliers, scissors for metal. All instruments were new — inside plastic packaging with carefully rented price tags. Checking the boxes, the New Zealander discovered that the truck was filled with stuff, bought in the supermarket...

Thoughts swirled in his head. “What supermarket? was thinking JD, “To the east from Calama there isn’t any large store up to the border with Bolivia... Where did he get these packs? They can’t be here, unless... unless...” The thought resisted, wriggling like a snake trying to dive and hide in the depths of consciousness.

“Wherefrom did the truck come?”

The question arose at once. It seemed like someone had whispered it in the ear. The doctor began to twitch one of the bags. Soon he discovered something he was looking for. At the bottom, under the name of the supermarket but using smaller letters was written the exact address: the house number, street name, and... the city.

“Antofagasta,” read JD. His jaw dropped... Richardson wasn’t a great expert in the geography of northern Chile. But at the same time, he knew this region quite enough to confess the truck did not come from the east. And it was bad.

JD jumped out of the car and ran back to the hospital. His heart was thumping like a typewriter under the fingers of the stenographer. The slim driver was sitting at the same place.

“Hey, buddy, listen... What’s your name again?” the doctor gaspingly asked.

“Tequito... My name is Tequito Reyes, Señor,” the dealer tried somehow to cope with the English.

“I want to ask you something.”

Tequito stood up immediately. His lips were shivering. The dark eyes swelled with tears. “They won’t send me to prison, Señor, will they?” he muttered, “If the kid survives, everything will be fine with me, right? I brought him here...”

¹¹ ‘D&S’ — the network of food and non-food supermarkets in Chile

JD interrupted the Chilean with an impatient gesture, “Nobody accuses you of anything. It was an accident, it’s not your fault,” the New Zealander lied again, restraining the impatience. “I’m interested in another thing. Please, show me the place, where you’ve been when... em... when you noticed the boy?”

The New Zealander pointed at the map. The Chilean scratched his head concentrating.

“Well... I don’t know.”

“At least approximately! JD raised his voice.

They both moved up very close to the map.

“It was here, señor...” Tequito touched the road on the map.

JD could feel the hair standing up on his head, like the fur on the wolf’s scruff, and the wave of cold covered the body. He did not ask again if Tequito was sure about the accuracy of the indicated place. It was not important.

“You were driving from Antofagasta?” asked Richardson, swallowing words from agitation.

“Yes, Señor. Where else could I drive my rattletrap?”

The cardiac surgeon paled, feeling his heart shrink from fathomless fear. This is not a puzzle that does not fit the picture. This is a picture that breaks into pieces because of a single wrong puzzle.

“W-when... when did it happen?”

“What exactly?” sheepishly asked the driver.

“When did you come across the creature?” snapped JD, “Tell me the time!”

“You mean the boy?”

“Yes!”

Tequito rolled his eyes, recalling the sequence of events that evening.

“Just after sunset, a few minutes before six. Thirty minutes after I passed Carmen-Alto.”

The New Zealander opened his mouth. He had seen the boy half an hour before.

“It’s impossible...”

“What is impossible, Señor? “

Richardson did not hear the driver. Richardson could find the explanation for everything: a freakish boy’s behavior, a strange fact of his presence in the desert, and even a head that turned into mince. For anything above he could pick up a cool-headed more or less possible answer. But the thing that has just become clear was impossible neither to explain nor to realize. Tequito pointed to *another road*: Flavio and Richardson were traveling to Calama from the east of San Pedro, while Tequito Reyes was driving his truck from southwest of Antofagasta through Carmen Alto.

Though, it was not the main thing.

The New Zealander lowered his eyes and stared at the scale in the bottom right corner of the map. He raised his hand and using his thumb touched a point on the highway ‘Carmen-Alto — Calama’ on the south from the city — where Tequito knocked off the boy; then he drew his forefinger on the east and put it on the same place, where the old Indian and he noticed the white-skinned creature. Afterward, he removed his hand and, without changing the position of the detached fingers, estimated the distance by comparing it with the scale. The distance between spots was 100... 120 kilometers. Directly. Through wildered spaces, covered with barchans and strewn with rocks and clefts.

JD helplessly stared at the map. What do we get? At first, he accidentally finds a creature and in half an hour Tequito Reyes knocks it off in another part of Atacama. This kid could not divide, so he had to slip through the pristine desert at a speed of at least 250 km/h... None of the known live creatures move Earth moves with such speed.

Like a drunk, JD tumbled out of the hospital and shuffled to the hotel. The head was buzzing even worse than the whole beehive. His shoulders started shuddering and his heart stopped each time he heard a rustle, which slipped from the dark bystreets. Everywhere he imagined evil and mysterious, white-skinned boys. Richardson did not believe in spirits, teleportation, holes in space, distortion of time, and other devilry and therefore he resisted the fear, trying to solve the paradox by seeking an appropriate answer.

Near the hotel the doctor stumbled over a low curb and almost fell on the asphalt, cutting his palms. At this moment something flashed before his eyes. He straightened and froze. He was afraid that the thought would vanish, and never crystallize.

Luckily, that did not happen.

“Boys...” muttered JD, “not a single boy, but boys...”

And so, JD Richardson, the forty-five-years-old cardiac surgeon, who had an indirect relation to further events, was going to go back to Auckland in a couple of hours, so he would happily avoid all that brutality that was beginning in the depth of the Atacama Desert, he is the first who has yet made the correct conclusion in this story.

‘So, there were two of them’, — thought JD.

[...]

Chapter III

ARRIVAL

XV

Saturday, August 15, 10:31 (UTC -4)

Comodoro Arturo Merino Benítez International Airport

The professor was picking pants out of his ass. After fourteen hours on the plane (the airliner arrived on time — at 9:35 Chilean time) he looked as if before leaving the house, he had forgotten to iron clothes. His hair resembled a haystack, tousled by a hurricane. Emelyanov felt himself accordingly.

“You didn’t tell him anything, right? — he asked Shtaerman, selecting a moment when Tymur went to the toilet.

“You will find more details on arrival.”

“At least I know where I’m going and what’s waiting for me there. This guy doesn’t even imagine what he was drawn into.

“I don’t have any right. Currently he has only a third level of access”.

“Fool! The guy created a problem without visiting the complex. In a couple of hours, he will have the fifth level. They would have given him the sixth level if they had had one since he is the only person who now can solve a problem... who can save billions of your shitty investments until they crossed the Andes or descended to the East from Santiago.”

“What do you want from me, professor? I just follow Keitaro’s instructions.”

“He has a right to know, Shtaerman. These damn conspiratorial things are now leading to a huge problem - on the arrival to the laboratory boy will definitely panic and refuse to cooperate,” judging by the manner of speaking, it was difficult to believe that Emelyanov had a doctorate. Igor was one of those arrogant oddballs always present in the surroundings of genuine scientists.

“He won’t refuse.”

Tymur appeared among rows of seats in the waiting room and the conversation between Oscar and Igor was interrupted.

At 12:15 they boarded the plane of the Chilean company ‘LAN’, flight LA 362, and after an hour and a half they landed in Antofagasta.

XVI

Saturday, August 15, 14:00 (UTC -4)

Parking at the Cerro Moreno airport

Antofagasta, Chile

“Where’s the convoy?” snarled Oscar Shtaerman from afar.

The air was chilly — slightly flavored with ocean scent — and very dry. At the parking lot, a crashed and gray from dust jeep *Toyota Tundra* was waiting for them. The car was new, but after a few months of grueling work in the desert was transformed into a broken trough.

Oscar, Igor, and Tymur came out of the airport, pushing trolleys with their belongings. A driver slipped out of the pickup to meet them: it was a low, short-haired American, wearing juicy red shorts, a yellow shirt, sneakers, and a fashionable but faded baseball cap with the inscription ‘Bon Jovi’. Outwardly — Tymur’s coeval. One by one he shook newcomers’ hands then helped to put suitcases in the car and placed guests on the back seats.

“Jeffrey, where is the damn convoy?!” snarled Shtaerman straight into the driver’s ear.

“I am your convoy,” he said quietly, lifting his green eyes on the Chilean.

“What does it mean?”

“There will be no cover, dude,” Jeffrey Tucker thrust his hands into the pockets of his low shorts. “Do you know what happened yesterday?” he lowered his voice. “They’ve torn the fence.”

“What?”

“Exactly what you’ve just heard. Bots have ripped it into the German Cross. In two different places... Everybody’s working now.”

Oscar froze. Another portion of aggressive phrases is stuck in the throat. His face was gradually becoming gray, and his eyes were flouncing like a madman’s.

“Oh, fuck. How’s that possible? The outside fence? What about sensors?”

“This is it! The sensors didn’t work. Yesterday a couple of bastards stayed under one of the hills. They were digging all day long. Can you imagine? In the evening they had already been under the fence, therefore sensors didn’t work. Damn, geeks!” Jeffrey calmed down, “If they don’t recover the fence and the voltage by the evening, it is likely that we will have no place to go.”

“But how we...” the Chilean was stammering, “how we are going to get there alone?”

“The same way as I did. We will try to drive as fast through the desert as I can to arrive till the darkness,” Jeffrey spat under his feet. He was afraid too, not less than an Oscar did, perhaps even more, he just tried not to show it, “I hope, we will make it till the twilight.”

“What if we pierce a tire? What if the sudden chassis breakdown? What’s then?”

The green-eyed American put on sunglasses. He did not want to think about what would happen if darkness overtook them in the desert. He bluntly ignored the question.

“Which one is the programmer?”

“The younger one,” answered Oscar without looking at Tymur, “his name is Tymur.”

“I knew it. Their names are so strange: Tymur... Vadym...” Jeff spat on the asphalt again and patted the Chilean, “Get into the car, buddy. I don’t know how, but we should break through.”

XVII

They left the city and went to the Pan-American Highway - the modern roadway that like a long grey thread cuts through the continent. Jeff directed *Toyota* (its seedy appearance turned up deceptive: the machine growled like a beast and was confidently leaving behind clouds of dust) to the northeast.

Soon after the ocean disappeared. Monotonous landscapes were stretching outside the window. It was still far to the shale cliffs of central Atacama and blue-black spurs of the Andes did not reach here. It was a dead land without plants, terrain, and even without sand — a dry unremarkable wasteland.

Forty minutes later *Toyota* drove by the sleepy town of Baquedano, and Tymur fell asleep.

At 14:35, when a couple of kilometers left to reach Carmen-Alto, Jeffrey suddenly slowed down, drove up to the right roadside, and started to look for something out on the right side of the highway. Then he quickly turned the steering wheel and swerved off the road. The barely visible imprints of wheels were stretching from under the hood. Traces were leading to the east, into the desert, and disappeared in a quivering haze, that like a thick line delimited the flat drabness of the Atacama and the incredibly outlying slopes of the Andes ridges.

Less than a minute later Oskar started to pound the front panel with his hands, “Stop, Jeffrey! Stop!”

The jeep was still moving, but the Chilean jumped out of the car run around *Toyota*, and blocked the way, leaning on the hood. His face was pale and frightened; the white shirt on his chest and under his armpits became gray from sticky sweat.

“Jeff, I’m scared!” hoarsely confessed Oscar, “I have kids! And I want to live.”

Jeffrey opened the door and put his feet on the sand. Before leaving the car, the American looked around the desert. The place seemed safe enough.

“I understand you, dude. But stop reminding this because I’m on the verge too and I feel that I’m about to pee my pants! And, you know, it’s not very convenient to drive in wet jeans.”

“I won’t go further,” claimed the Chilean flatly, “Let’s call Will. Have you taken a satellite phone? Will isn’t under Jap’s subordination, maybe he will understand and...”

“The phone’s here, dude, but... William is unavailable now...”

The doors of the car shut and the latest words did not reach the cabin. However, everything that they managed to hear was enough to make Igor scowl and anxiously fidget in his seat.

“Did he escape? That’s impossible,” Shtaerman continued talking, “Where’s he? That son of a bitch couldn’t just simply leave everything!”

“Keitaro asked me not to tell you,” The American gave up.

“What exactly not to tell me?”

“Yesterday bots somehow seized Will and one of Rhino’s guys.”

Oscar could not catch his thought. “What do you mean ‘seized’?”

“They took them away.”

“Holy shit! WHAT?!”

“We noticed that they had dug through the fence, but we couldn’t think that they had done it in two different places at once. While we rushed to cover the hole in front of the main door of the residential bloc, those bastards broke into the garage in the first engineering unit. Keitaro ordered us to recede... we’ve blocked ourselves in the ‘DW’ building... Will and one of the mercenaries, well, they did not have time, you know... Those motherfuckers caught them and dragged them into the desert.”

Shtaerman swallowed, “And you did nothing?”

“Dammit! What do you think we had to do?!” Jeffry finally exploded. It was the first time during the trip that he had lost his temper. “We were shit-scared, buddy! Even Rhino was sitting quietly as a mouse. We have shot none of them during these three days. None! Do you know what I mean? I’d better put a bullet in my head than go outside.”

“Did bots kill them?” Oscar winced.

“No.”

“No?”

“At least not at once. They were still alive, while those motherfuckers were dragging them in the desert. And after... I don’t know.”

“But why did Will surrender to those whelps? What do you think they are going to do with him?”

“I suppose the Ukrainian should tell us about this,” the American cast a glance towards the back seats of the *Toyota Tundra*, “I’ve blabbed you too much information, although that’s not everything.” Shtaerman bit his lip getting ready to continue listening, “Since there was no voltage all-round and we barricaded inside the ‘DW’ building like monkeys in the zoo, those fucking midgets got in the warehouse and...” the driver gestured meaningfully as he intended to show that everything’s lost, “... and destroyed it out totally.”

“Bagger me dead!” yelled Oscar.

“Be careful with wishes. Today you have all chances to meet your Maker, trust me,” hissed Jeff, “From now on our kids own gobs of ammunition and a dozen of Mossbergs 500.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, that’s true. Now our fugitives have a firearm.”

“What about a hormone?!”

“Relax. Everything’s not so bad. After your departure, Keitaro ordered to move all containers with aldosterone in the residential building. We still have them.”

Both men became silent. Far behind their backs on the Pan-American Highway, weary cars were occasionally driving by. They could not hear the roar of engines. It was effaced by the hiss of the wind over the desert plateau.

“You know,” the driver turned to Oscar, “I don’t want you to think that I’m eager to carry my necked ass through the Atacama without knowing where their gang can hide. But we have eight demolished pillars there...” Jeff sighed, “Man, I don’t want to reach the base and realize that we stay with them alone face to face. In that case, we will definitely have a fucking nasty night. We have to sneak.”

“No... no... no...” the Chilean shook his head emphatically. A desperate obstinacy appeared in his eyes. “I’m not going anywhere now.”

The American snorted sarcastically and spat. “Jap was right. I shouldn’t have told you all this.”

“Fuck you! I’m calling him. Bring me the phone.”

Jeffrey shrugged, “As you wish. Old Keitaro is not in the mood these days.”

“Do you think I don’t know? Give me the phone.”

The driver opened the door, pulled out satellite phone «Thuraya Hughes» from under a pile of rags, and threw it to the Chilean. Shtaerman caught the receiver and dialed without any hesitation.

“Keitaro, this is Oscar” started the Chilean, straining. “No, we are doing well. So far. I just want to talk... We’re in the desert not far from Pan-American. I have no intention to bother you without a reason... Please, Keitaro, don’t get rattled!” Oscar started to yell, “I know everything, Jeffrey told me... You should understand that if something happens with the Ukrainian on our way... Yes, we, probably, can get through, but I won’t go. I refuse... Yes, just like that: I won’t even shift. You’ve promised an escort... Stop yelling at me... Fuck my ass but are you ready to risk the programmer’s life.”

The conversation in such a manner lasted almost five minutes. The closer it was to the end, the less Shtaerman spoke. Mostly nodded. Finally, Oscar pulled the phone away from his ear.

“So?” Jeffrey raised his head.

“He’s gonna send two cars.” the Chilean blurted sharply. “They will be here in two hours.”

“What about the fence?”

Oscar shrugged, “They don’t have time to finish it till twilight anyway...”

Far from the mountains to the ocean, across the plateau, streams of dry creaky air were easily scurrying — their intense moan reminded them of the remote roar of aircraft engines.

XVIII

Saturday, August 15, 16:26 (UTC -4)

23°21'30"S 69°48'06"W

Atacama Desert

Finally, two sloping pillars of dust emerged on the horizon. Like crumbly comet tails, they were rising in the cloudless sky. A gentle wind was tearing them and dragging them north. With each minute, clouds of dust were getting clearer.

Later on, with an unbearable engine roar two huge SUVs impatiently broke out of the vague haze, grinding up stones into small pieces. From afar black cars resembled German *Volkswagen Touareg*.

“They’re driving!” announced Jeff.

Tymur stretched and yawned. A quick nap did not bring him any relief. It was already half past ten pm in Kyiv; his body demanded a deep rest.

Oscar Shtaerman stepped out into the open space folding his arms. No sign remained from his foppish look. His one trouser leg was torn, the shirt was stiff from sweat and it was inflating in the wind like a dirty sail of the Spanish galleon.

At a certain moment, he turned around and shouted, “Do you see?”

“What’s there?”

“Rhino Headhunter, as large as life.”

“It cannot be!” the American was delighted.

Cars slowed down - not simple SUVs designed for fashion shows in the city but genuine *Touaregs*, all-terrain vehicles with especially instilled off-road packages ‘Terrain Tech’. In addition, uniquely attached bumpers protruded above the radiator grill; the front window was also covered with special safety nets. At the back of each car large doors and their both sides shiny metal sheets were carefully welded. These sheets of steel covered completely all windows in the back doors. Windows in the front doors were also covered by two-thirds with solid metal, the rest — with the grid. With these changes, an elegant jeep *Volkswagen* looked like an awkward cross between the German ‘A7V’, the World War I clumsy tank, and a military off-road jeep *Humvee*, the prototype of the insatiable civil ‘fuel absorber’ *HUMMER*.

As soon as the ‘tanks’ stopped, eight heavily armed men jumped out on the ground. Six of them were strong, although now very tall niggers — so black like anthracite coal. Another one was the typical Japanese: short, thin, with a flat face, slanting eyes, and smooth reddish-brown hair tied in a ponytail.

A sturdy guy with an angular weather-beaten face, black hair that stuck out in different directions, and small, like wild boar’s enormous eyes stood out ahead. On the left cheek starting from the middle and across his whole face to the chin stretched a deep scar. He was something about two meters tall His body was profusely covered with bulging muscles.

“Hi-fi, chickens!” waved a bruiser without pulling a cigarette from his mouth. “You’re waiting for mommy to take you from the kindergarten, yea? How sweet!” he burst out laughing, “And how far have you driven away from the Pan-American Highway? For eight hundred meters? For the whole thousand? Oh-oh-oh! Holy shit, you’re super-cool guys! You can be proud of yourself! Ha-ha-ha!”

“Hey!” Jeff moved his hand.

Oscar approached a tanned idol and shook his hand. Then he outstretched his hand to the young Japanese. Tymur and Igor were curiously studying the armed convoy.

“Who’s that?” quietly wondered Emelyanov. Among newcomers, he knew only the Japanese. His name was Katsuro Takeda — the right hand of the old Jep.

“That sturdy man is Rhino Headhunter,” eagerly explained the American, “the head of the Safety Department.”

“The head of what?” The Russian was surprised.

“Of the Safety Department.”

“Correct me, if I’m mistaken: he’s a headhunter?”

“Yea.”

“Is this his real name?”

“That’s how he calls himself. What’s in his passport — only the devil probably knows.”

In Africa, they called him Rhino Headhunter, less often — Rhino Godzilla. His surname was unknown. Godzilla was an adust adventurer. He supplied weapons to UNITA during the civil war in Angola and was engaged in selling elephant tusks, drugs, and people. In 2002 after the end of the war in Angola, Rhino became unemployed. He had a try to start a petroleum business, but he was quickly thrown out of the market. So, he formed a reliable team and officially registered it as a security service. He had a South African passport although his guttural German accent (which Rhino hated to the bottom of his heart) bore witness to the German colonists’ roots in Namibia. Headhunter made the impression of the nervous bull, which was able instantly to pass from jokes and giggling to brutal wrath.

“Where did they get so many blacks?”

“This is Headhunter’s boys, African mercenaries. Four of them out of the Herero tribe — Frankie, Jerry, Tee-Jay, and... em, I forgot the name of the fourth - and another two - out of the Ovambo — Nahas and Ndonga. There are also two Hereros, Sam, and Ghotto, but they’ve stayed in the laboratory. And we had Tom as well, but... he is no longer with us.

“Hmm...” Igor understood that Ovambo and Herero are the names of tribes or nations, so he decided not to ask again. “And how long ago did Jep hire this gorilla and his pack of blacks?”

“Around two weeks ago. Soon after we’ve fucked up everything. Before Keitaro had sent home most of the staff,” Jeff hesitated whether he could tell him more. “... everyone who did not know that the “kids” had escaped.”

“So, they had escaped?”

“You did not know?”

“Oscar didn’t tell me. Although, I suspected. And why didn’t you hire the locals?”

“Will Noland allow? The locals have relatives; they have a place to flee and to hide or friends to chatter with. Well, you know... The American is afraid of... mm... was afraid of divulging.”

“I’m not surprised. If I were him, I’d also live in constant fear.”

Looking closely at the cars and mercenaries, Tymur noticed two peculiarities. First of all, Africans were armed exceptionally with shotguns. Tymur knew this model — a semi-automatic American *Remington 1100*. In one of the earliest games released by *TTP Technologies*, his bots used the same weapons. Judging by its short barrel it was designed for battles, not for hunting. This rifle is famous for tremendous areas of destruction and rupture force but is effective only over short distances. It is not appropriate for the desert where far more logical will be using ranged weapons with a perfect targeting system.

Secondly, Tymur did not like those SUVs. On both sides, from under the sheets of armor a color logo was peeking outside: a safety helmet on the cyborg’s head. The right side of the head looked like a human face, the left one was formed from microcircuits, where in the midst a red neon eye burned. At the bottom, there was a bold inscription: NGF LAB. The picture was unrealistic and extremely childish; however, something else had confused the programmer. The logo was located under the additional armor. The obvious conclusion came to his mind: initially, both *Touaregs* were in an exploit without a metal shell, but then something peculiar happened that made their users hastily remake the cars into armored fighting vehicles.

It was the first time since departure from Ukraine that Tymur felt the chill of anxiety that creeps under his skin.

“Can someone explain to me, what the hell is going on here?” he asked with notes of anxiety. “Some kind of tribes rebelled in the desert or the Andes, right? For whom have you made this masquerade?”

While Jeffrey was thinking about the answer, Headhunter went back from Shtaerman and yawped, “In the cars, ladies! Get in carriages, my puppies!” His voice was like a blast wave flying over the desert. “The Ukrainian goes with me. The Russian — with Katsuro. My crew gets under the way first, then Jeff follows and Katsuro’s convoy in the end. The distance is fifty meters, not more and not less!” Rhino paused to breathe in and then added some metal to his voice, “And don’t forget after nightfall, each one is for himself. If someone lagged, got in the ditch, broke the car’s suspension, burned the engine, the rest should continue the way to the base without stopping.”

Tymur was ordered to sit between two blacks in the back seat. When everyone took their places, Rhino turned the face to the Ukrainian and winked friendly. It seemed to be not very sincere.

“How do you feel, fella?”

“Good, thanks...” he lied, “But I’m sleepy.”

The bruiser grinned and rasped, “I’m Rhino Headhunter. Welcome to Atacama, the kid! We’ve got tired of waiting for you.”

The engine suddenly barked and roared; the instrument panel came alive. The humming of other cars echoed in the desert. A moment later the cars were racing toward the mountains, leaving the ocean, the sun, and civilization far in the west.

A little more than an hour left till twilight.

XIX

Saturday, August 15, 17:07 (UTC -4)

Atacama Desert

Crouching down, several boys were slinking through the hollow. They were moving silently. They used only glances for exchanging information. They looked dirty and shabby and at the same time incredibly similar to each other. It seemed they had the same face. They resembled comic book characters drawn with carbon paper.

They were moving weirdly — always avoiding the light. Boys tried to hold in the shade at any price. It seemed that even the languid winter sun, which was almost on the horizon, irritated them. After necessary dashes through lighted areas, kids stayed in the shade for a while to have a rest.

They were silent.

Reaching the narrow crevice, the boys examined its bottom carefully. Like dogs, they sniffed everything and then climbed on the slope. They did not understand what they were doing. To be more precise, they did not understand that they were doing everything right.

Twice this day, two cars were driving through this crevice. The same way they used to return to the East. Also, twice. An hour ago, new crews rushed to the west. The kids saw them — filled with people from laboratories. Armed people. Boys could not make sense of it. They were unable to understand. But instead, they were taught to analyze. Therefore, it was quite natural for kids to assume that the third convoy would go back to the same valley.

White-headed figures easily climbed to the top of the low range that propped the valley in the south. They scattered and couched, sprawling in the smallest unevennesses of the terrain. Like water after the rain, sinewy bodies filled with the slightest dents. The sun was scorching unprotected heads, but the boys endured this, knowing that the sunset was around the corner.

They lay down and began to wait.

The desert immersed into darkness.

XX

Saturday, August 15, 17:52 (UTC -4)

23°16'28"S, 69°03'49"W

Atacama Desert

Sheathed with metal *Touareg* with Tymur on the board was rushing ahead, choosing the way. *Toyota Tundra* with Oscar Shtaerman and Jeffrey Tucker rattled behind. The second *Volkswagen*, where protected by three Africans and the Japanese Katsuro Takeda the Russian professor Igor Emelyanov was transported, locked the cavalcade. A huge solar disk was quickly setting behind the horizon. The sun was shining in the back of the caravan, lighting all potholes on their way. However not for long. Just in ten minutes the darkness would attack and force them to restrain the race.

Suddenly the air was torn by the continuous whining of the automobile horn.

Tymur turned around. Through the window, partly closed with the metal sheet, he saw *Toyota*. Jeffrey Tucker was reducing the distance, honking excitedly.

“Here it goes...” Rhino flatly hissed.

“Should I slow down?” the African driver Jero slightly turned his head.

“No. Forget it, Jero. But... drive around and do not approach.”

Jero, who had the most militant look among other blacks, nodded.

“Okay, boss,” and turned *Touareg* to the left.

Noticing that the flagship car made a smooth turn, Jeff stopped the pickup and got out of the cab. The American waved his hands calling them. Bright red shorts and a yellow jersey swelled and flapped in the wind.

“Boss,” Jero quietly called. He directed the car to the American but was looking aside.

“Yes, fella.”

“I don’t see the third car.”

Everyone instantly turned their heads to the place where the third jeep should have been. They did not see the car.

Half a minute ago the convoy swept through the narrow arcuate gorge, where in the south a ridge pierced out and, in the north, it was surrounded by macabre dark-gray dunes. Several limestone formations, that resembled church towers from afar, barely held the line against the sand. Out of the crevice, between the rock and smooth ledge of the five-meter barchan parallel tire tracks snaked. Therefrom Headhunter’s crew has just moved out, and the *Toyota Tundra* followed. Second *Touareg* has not appeared yet.

Rhino raised his hand and ordered Jero to hold the car without saying a word. He waited a few seconds, hoping that Katsuro Takeda had lagged. Useless. And then hurriedly ordered, “Drive up to the pickup. Stop. Do not turn off the engine.”

In a few seconds, *Volkswagen* stopped one and a half meters from *Toyota*. Jeffrey approached the barred window. “The tire in Katsuro’s car deflated,” anxiously said the black-haired American, “I’ve seen this,” his words sounded pleadingly and plaintively. Tymur grimaced.

Without opening the door, Rhino was carefully examining the surrounding terrain. Steadily and patiently casting his eyes back and forth.

“They are over there, behind this ridge,” the American continued to explain, poking the arm behind his back, “we’ve drawn away from them a little bit because it had happened so unexpectedly. And then I’ve started honking and... well, you did not want to stop...” the guy stammered, noticing the glare of small round eyes.

“The jeep has overturned, yes?” Rhino put a cigarette in his mouth but did not light it up.

“No.”

“Did it get bogged down?”

“No... I mean, I think it didn’t.”

“Then who’d the hell allowed you to stop?”

“Rhino, don’t get mad.” Shtaerman intervened, leaning out of *Toyota*. However, there was no great confidence in his voice.

“You’ve violated the order!”

“We still have a few minutes till the sunset,” Jeffrey denied.

Suddenly, a walkie-talkie in *Touareg*’s cabin cracked and woke up.

“Rhino... Rhino... this is Ndonga,” snorted the driver’s voice mixed with the creaking noise inside the receiver, “Over.”

Jero gave the receiver to Headhunter.

“Dongie, I’m on the line” answered Rhino, gazing at the top of the stone ridge. “What’s going on there?”

“The tire was ripped off. I see a lot of stones here. Looks like a landslip. Damn it! We’re changing the wheel. Go on without us.”

“Jeff and I, we’ve stopped not far from the crevice,” said Rhino, rumpling the lighted cigarette with his lips.

“Really?” the Ovambo on the other side could not hide his surprise, “It’s not necessary, boss. The situation is under control, the Jeep is on solid ground. In a couple of minutes, we will follow you.”

Headhunter bent, almost nuzzling the windshield. That fucking ridge could be the ideal place for an ambush. Up there it was possible to hide the whole battalion, and no one would guess about it in the desert. Certainly, he thought that bots were not so smart to arrange the ambush. At least he hoped for it.

Rhino lifted the receiver to his lips:

“You have three minutes, fella. We’re waiting,” afterward he poked the black Jero and pointed to the crevice between the dunes and the ridge. The Herero nodded.

Volkswagen swerved to the right and went to the place where tire tracks separated from the ridge. Jeffrey’s *Toyota* was trudging nearby.

SUVs stopped on the way out of the gorge. The sands ended up here but the rocky ledge stretched further. A rocky strand was hanging over cars, wriggling like a crocodile’s tail to the south, and was slowly dipping on the horizon, immersing into the ground.

“Here they are!” as soon as *Touareg* reached the gorge, Tymur saw the second crew. Katsuro’s automobile was stuck just in hundred meters from the way out of the gorge and merely three meters from the stone wall. Just behind the jeep was the narrowest point of the canyon, where close to the cliff several bizarre limestone pillars were approaching the way. At the bottom, there was barely enough space to propel one car.

Katsuro’s car was standing on the jack. Two Africans — Frankie and Nahas — were bustling around the right front wheel. Ndonga was treading on the left side of the car, holding near at hand a matte black *Remington* and keeping his eyes on the ridge. Katsuro (also with a shotgun in his hands) was covering the rear. Tymur could see Igor, who stayed in the back seat of the car.

The work lasted in complete silence. The low-lying sun made an atmosphere similar to amber, dyeing rocks in the color of wax. Africans cast long skeleton shadows. Twilight with a devilish pleasure ate greedily stunted the remnants of daylight.

But soon the installation of the spare wheel came to an end. The new wheel began to turn. Frankie — the young energetic fellow, a single Herero in Japanese's car — was carefully twisting bolts. Then he lowered the jack... Soon, very soon they will hit the road...

And right this moment...

"Boss," coughed the black mercenary, who was sitting to the right of Tymur.

"What the fuck do you want?" muttered Rhino, throwing the unlighted cigarette out of his mouth.

"I want to pee."

Jero chortled. Headhunter frowned, tying wrinkles on the forehead in a sheaf.

"You took the best time, motherfucker..."

"I really need to, Rhino. I can't hold it anymore."

Rhino was irritated. Because of the light-winged twilight that raced from the mountains faster than the wind, because of the unpredictable delay, and now also because of his homegrown fighter. He desperately desired to turn back and send the guy in the knockout with few precise strokes. But what Headhunter did not intend to tolerate was to smell urine aromas the rest of the road, "Don't get out of the car. Open the door, put your sausage outside, and piss."

"Thanks, boss."

"Quickly, dickhead."

The mercenary quickly opened the door and jumped down on the sand. He turned his back on the car and, holding the door with his elbow, began to relieve himself. A stream commenced crunching on the sand.

During this time, the hustle around *Touareg* diminished. Frankie and Nahas were throwing instruments in the trunk; Ndonga took the driver's place and Katsuro — the front passenger seat. No one was watching the edge of the rocky ridge that like a clear zigzag stood out against the evening sky. No one guarded the rears... And only Tymur, who had nothing to do, kept an eye on the second crew. It was he who first saw when something had darted between the rocks. Behind *Touareg*, in the narrowest isthmus, the unclear silhouette flashed from the gray dunes under the shelter of thick darkness that curled at the root of the ridge.

"Did you see that?" blurted Timur.

"What?!" said everyone in chorus.

"Someone's there!"

The cordial clicking of bolts sounded in the car.

“Are you sure?” Rhino asked again. The Herero, sandwiched between the door and the jeep’s side, has stopped to piss. The sandy crunch ceased.

“I swear, something appeared and vanished quickly behind the car with Emilyanov on the board,” whispered the Ukrainian.

Nobody moved. It could be heard only the wind whining over the plateau.

And then, a new suspicious sound joined the phlegmatic howling of the wind. Quiet, distant whistle initially, which was instantly increasing, — the whistle of an object that cut the air at breakneck speed.

No sooner had Tymur thought about it that a sizeable piece of rock hit the Herero who was standing at the door with his fly opened. The hit threw his head back. The wild screeching broke the silence. A terrible wound was formed on the African’s face. The left side was pressed in the face showing broken teeth through the tear in the cheek and the eye was completely smashed.

“Jesus fucking Christ! What the fuck?!” shocked Tymur cried in Ukrainian. Then, acting instinctively he seized the young African and pulled him in the car.

Behind them, on the left, something rattled, someone shouted, and *Remingtons* started barking. Suddenly, huge stones commenced hitting windows and armor. And then everything was absorbed by the roar of the engine: Jerry started the car and jerked forward.

Tymur could barely hold the vast Herero. Having caught the African, he pressed him to the seat, but he could not pull him into the car. The Ukrainian was desperately clinging to his clothes. The shirt crumpled under the arms and slipped from his hands. Tymur could not close the door.

“Throw out this bag of shit!” roared Rhino, looking back, “Push the fucking nigga out!”

The legs of the wounded Herero were like sacks.

“No way!” Tymur snorted.

Despite all efforts, Negro was slipping from his hand. The jeep was hurtling too quickly. The shirt has cracked and torn. A few more seconds and the blacky would fall outside.

Tymur had almost given up when Jero slowed down a bit: the road was blocked by potholes that were impossible to overpass at a high speed. Using this, the Ukrainian jerked the Herero into the cabin and closed the door. He turned around. *Toyota Tundra* was racing at some distance. The second *Touareg* remained in the gorge.

“Who has just assaulted us?!” Tymur attacked the giant, “Rhino, what the hell is going on?!”

“These were your kids, fella. Damned towheaded motherfuckers...”

“Who?” the guy stared.

Headhunter raised his eyebrows and did not answer.

Max Kidruk *Bot*

Snuggling the chest to his knees, as in an airplane during an emergency landing and snapping his teeth when the jeep was overflying potholes, Timur was thinking that someone from the two of them — he or the bruiser — had got crazy.