

May 10, 2017

Dubai International Airport, United Arab Emirates

Flight FZ 728 departed from Zhuliany with an hour delay, however, the panic squeezed Anna Yanhol's entrails with its frozen fingers much later in the air over Iran, when the woman suddenly realized that a terrible mistake had been made and the time difference between Ukraine and Emirates was not one but two hours. When the gear of the snow-white Boeing 737 with the orange-blue 'flydubai' inscription on the fuselage touched the bitumen covering the 12L runway of the Dubai airport, Anna's exhausting heart rattled like a drum. A woman just once before landing, glanced at the phone (08:37, that is, 10:37 local time – a little more than forty minutes until the departure to Bangkok), and then quickly drew her eyes, as though she was afraid that an overly captious glance would speed up the flow of time. Half an hour later, after announcing of descending before the landing, Anna talked to a steward – a high boy with dark eyes and shiny black hair – and found out that all Altair Air flights depart from the C wing of Terminal 3, but their plane arrives at the old Terminal 2, standing aside in the north of the airport. What is even worse, Anna did not have a boarding pass for her flight to Bangkok. In March, she turned 47, and the last time she traveled by plane was more than twenty years ago; therefore, she did not know that you could check in for the flight online. At one o'clock at night when she was checking in for her first flight in Zhulyany something went wrong, so Ann could only get the boarding pass for the flight to Dubai. When the black-haired steward heard this, he thought that he would be surprised if the passenger made it on time for her next flight. He didn't want to upset her, but instead, with a stencil voice, he explained that after the plane stopped, she had to go down to the transfer desk before going out to the arrival hall, and from there get to the Terminal 3 using the shuttle bus.

A minute after landing, while the plane was slowing down, approaching the southeastern end of the 12L runway, Anna's fear remained vague and colorless. But when at 10:38 Boeing turned on the guideway and within seconds through the left-side portholes it was possible to see the entire airfield, Anna quietly moaned: the buildings in the north and south of the airport were one and a half kilometers away from each other. Between the blurred tremulous loom and the dug ground terminals stretched two broad adapted to the giant Airbus A380 runways. At that moment, a soaked with horror suspicion that Anna had resisted since FZ 728 took off from Zhuliany, burst into consciousness, and flooded the rest of the thoughts with cold darkness. "It's over – she can't make it".

The stewards opened the door at 10:46, Anna was the first to jump out of the cabin. Then she rushed through the walkway like a bullet, and in the terminal, without stopping, sought out the inscription 'TERMINALS 1, 3' and ran along the corridor where the arrow pointed. The heart was tearing around like a bird in the box. She didn't take any luggage, only a small, leatherette bag under her armpit, where yesterday, after dinner, packing in a hurry, the woman put a few T-shirts, a pack of wet napkins, a toothbrush, and an umbrella. She also had a few tiny rolls, hidden under a bra, in panties and jeans pocket, but Anna Yanhol preferred not to think about them.

Before the escalator, the woman joined the passengers of another flight. Black-haired Arabs in snow-white dishdashas and plaid keffiyehs, a few high white-haired girls in sports jackets with the inscriptions 'SVERIGE', a young man in a business suit with a backpack at his shoulder and giant headphones on his head (ear cushions completely covered his ears), a weakly Chinese woman with three children, one of them — a three or four-year-old boy — was twisting in her hands and screaming as if the demons were breaking out of him. Helping herself with the elbows, Anna stepped onto the first floor. The Arabs were gazing at her angrily; an annoyed whisper was following her from everywhere, but the woman did not pay attention and continued her way with her head low. Anna understood that she could not draw any attention: thoughts about being late for the flight to Bangkok

were filling her body with sinister flicker, but it would be even worse if the airport security stopped her — however, the woman could not do anything: the panic was fluttering in her ears pushing her forward.

The rolls were squeezed in her underwear and hindered the run.

Under the ceiling at the exit of the escalator, she saw a new sign. Arrow pointed to the left. Anna turned there and half a hundred meters away, she saw the transfer desk and ran even faster. On the way, a woman pulled a smartphone out and glanced at the screen. 08:54.

Six to eleven local time in Dubai.

Twenty-six minutes before the departure.

Anna's journey started twenty hours ago at the old bus station in Rivne, where she took a minibus to Kyiv. At about three in the afternoon, the sun was still hanging high in the sky, so, Anna grabbed the sunglasses when she was leaving the apartment. On the way to Kyiv, the sun was going down, and before entering the terminal, Anna left the glasses lying on her head and completely forgot about them. The sunglasses remained there – drowned in her golden hair – while the woman was checking-in for the flight, waiting for the departure, and napping on the plane. Hastily, leaving the plane, that brought her to Dubai, Anna did not remember about the glasses. A few steps away from the transfer desk, they slipped off her hair. Anna shuddered only when the glasses hit the floor. She turned her head and saw that the left glass popped out of the frame and rolled back. At that moment, Anna thought that the whole terminal was staring at her, but she did not stop.

A second after the woman froze in front of the transfer desk.

“I need to the Terminal 3,” she snapped. “As quickly as possible!”

On the opposite side of the counter, there was a black-eyed young boy, looking similar to a steward from an airplane. On the wall behind him a blue sign ‘TRANSFER DESK’ was sparkling brightly.

“Your destination?”

“Excuse me?” Anna hasn't spoken English for a long time, and the boy in front had a terrible Arabic accent.

“Where are you going?” the employee of the airport pronounced slowly.

“Oh, yes... Bangkok ... to Bangkok! Here.” Anna took out a printed electronic ticket from the bag. “Flight ALR 114.”

The guy looked through the sheet.

“All right, it's in Terminal 3,” he pronounced with an Arabic accent where ‘r’ is strong and ‘i’ – short.

He gave her the printout back. Anna stared at him.

“And the boarding pass?”

“In Terminal 3, go to the transfer desk J. I can't check you in here.”

“Why?”

“I can't. You have to check in at Terminal 3.” The man pointed at the rows of plastic chairs with chrome backrests behind Anna. “Sit down. The bus will be here any minute now.

The woman shook her head.

“No-no! You do not understand, I don't have time to wait, I'm late!”

“You need to wait for the bus,” the man rapped out. Then he softened: “If ‘Emirates’ or ‘Qantas’ transport comes faster, I will ask them to pick you up. Usually, they do not refuse.” He split his arms. “There is no way you can get there faster. I'm sorry.”

Anna walked away from the counter and looked around. She was in the middle of a spacious hall with a low ceiling on the first floor of the airport. To the right and a little bit further, there was a transfer desk; to the left, she could see some plastic chairs lined up with curved backrests. The

passengers were sitting here and there. The southern wall of the hall was glass. Anna could see the planes through it, standing on the parking lots in front of the terminal. The airport service employees, wearing acid yellow raincoats with silver stripes, were bustling around them. A little bit further, the humpbacked giant Boeing 747 with Union Jack on its tail, was slowly turning around before acceleration. At the parallel runway, the plane similar to which Anna took before, with a 'Turkish Airlines' inscription was taking off. The roar of the engines burst through the windows a second before the liner left the ground.

"The bus," whispered the woman, wringing her fingers. "Where's the bus?" Nothing even remotely similar to the shuttle bus to Terminal 3, was within the eyeshot.

At first, Anna did not want to sit down, but in a minute, she felt trembling in her knees and lumped down to the chair. The woman tried to avoid looking at squeezed in her sweaty hand phone, but wherever she turned her head, her eyes seemed to be drawn to the screen. 08:58... 08:59... 09:00.

Eleven o'clock in Dubai.

Invisible waves of panic rolled one after another, breaking on something solid in the chest, forcing the woman to shudder. Since landing something rang in Anna's ears, and now whenever another wave reached the peak, the bell intensified, gradually becoming almost unbearable.

At 11:05, when until the departure of flight ALR 114 there was only a quarter of an hour left, Anna started weeping quietly. She no longer looked at the phone, holding her arms between her knees.

An elderly man in carefully ironed tweed pants and a black shirt approached the chairs and took a seat next to the woman.

"Are you okay?"

Anna raised her head. The male looked like he was sixty, probably, late sixty: thin neck, sharp chin, protruding ears. However, the look, first, clung to his eyes – light gray, burnt by the sun – with wrinkled, cracked, and similar to the old rubber skin under them. The woman shifted the gaze to the reddish with a bit of grayness, carefully combed to the side hair.

"I think it's yours." The man spoke English with a slight accent. His voice was thick and confident. He made the impression of a person who knew how to speak and got used to being listened to. Since Anna did not answer and stared at his face confusedly the man continued, "You've lost this, right?"

Anna looked down: a stranger handed her the sunglasses. The left glass was inserted into the frame.

"The glass is plastic." As if an elderly man was reading her thoughts. "I've pulled it back."

Anna did not move.

"Take it." He restrainedly smiled, deciding that the woman did not understand English.

Anna laid the hand on her chest, making sure that the rolls were safe, and then carefully – as if the glass could burn her fingers – took the glasses holding the frame.

"Thank you," she said in English.

"Why are you crying?" asked the man.

Anna flicked away the tears irritably. Why is he so concerned about her? She is late for the flight – the most important flight in her life, and nothing can help her. For a second, nervousness turned into anger, Anna Yanhol opened her mouth intending to give back-answer but could not immediately recall something acrid in English. While she was rootling in her memory, she finally noticed a clerical collar on the man's neck. The anger instantly dispersed, and Anna got embarrassed, realizing that she almost attacked a priest.

The woman turned away sheepishly. Her eyes widened, and thoughts about the priest left her head – to the transparent sliding doors of the terminal, a tune-up bus with an inscription 'Dubai Airports' on the windows was approaching, and a dark-haired worker who, a couple of minutes ago,

talked to her at the transfer desk, was taking away the band, which blocked the way to the exit. Anna jumped up. She did not move for a second, as if she was afraid that the shuttle bus would disappear in the air like a ghost, and then rushed to the door.

The phone showed 09:07, but Anna no longer dared to look at the screen.

*Grand Excelsior Sharjah Hotel, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates
7 km north of Dubai International Airport*

At the same time when the Boeing 737 with Anna Yanhol aboard was at glide capture phase nineteen kilometers to the northwest from the end of the 12L runway of Dubai airport, 43-year-old Yegor Paramonov, the First Class pilot of the Russian airline company ‘TransAsian’, opened his eyes strugglingly, and moved to the edge of the bed. For half an hour, with the expression of almost childish surprise at the sleepy face after a dream, the man was poring over a tender woman’s back, which, in the morning light that was coming through the green blinds, gained the color of pickled olives. Above the right shoulder, he noticed a pink spot from his nose, a little lower, drying quickly, shone a sparkle of saliva. Thick, black hair dispersed in various directions on a pillow.

A prostitute.

And, judging by the curvature of the back and the softness of the hair, a very expensive prostitute.

“I wonder, have I already paid her?” Yegor racked his brain but could not remember whether he paid the call girl before he had brought her to the room. Then he thought that he would never hire a hooker for the whole night. Or did he?.. And if not, then why the hell this slut is still lying in his bed? Just conked out? Now what? He won’t pay for the whole night!

Paramonov turned over on his back, wiped the saliva from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, and stuck it to the ceiling. The body was gradually flowing out of sleep: first, he felt some rasp in his throat, then something slightly stabbed in the back. Paramonov stretched and wheezed, smiling with a complacent smile, recalling the memories of the last night and what the young brunette did in bed. Then suddenly he realized that the room was boiling. Yegor unclearly remembered how five or six hours ago when entering the room, the girl turned to him, and he could feel she was shuddering. He was sure that she was unlikely cold. She was rather flirting – hinted that she wanted him to embrace her and began to caress. But Paramonov, for whom a glass of whiskey was usually enough to feel like a gentleman, did another thing: stepped back to the wall and turned the air conditioner up, almost to the highest temperature. Made what the lady asked! Yegor did not look at the temperature, – twenty-six? Twenty-eight degrees? – “Who cares...” And immediately pulled the whore to the bed. Of course, the air conditioner turned off (luckily the heater didn’t turn on), and now the room had already been stuffed with sticky air.

Still staring at the ceiling, Paramonov remembered that there was a pool on the roof of the hotel. Light trembling swept through his body. Oh, this was exactly what he needed: take a shower, have breakfast, and swim! Then take a book and lie on the sun bed next to the pool all day. Or just sleep. Whatever, he had the whole day ahead – his crew was departing to Moscow only the next day in the afternoon.

The pilot turned his head left and looked at the watch on the bedside table. 10:24. The next moment, the awakening came to the lower part of the body, and Paramonov felt as if someone splashed acid to the abdomen – unbearably wanted to pee. The man sat down, lowered his feet to the floor, and frowned, feeling that he had stepped on something slippery. Having lifted a foot, he saw a condom clung to the heel.

“Shoot...”

Having shaken a condom off, the pilot got up and shuffled to the temperature controller. The silvery pointer was shining in front of the mark thirty degrees. Paramonov scrolled the regulator to the left – the lowest mark – 12°C. Over the head, he heard quiet humming, and the cold air started pouring out of the vents. Yegor grunted and went to the bathroom.

Paramonov was peeing for almost half a minute when the silence of the hotel room broke the iPhone's ringtone. Yegor rolled his eyes. That always happens: as soon as you take your pants off somebody starts calling. He strained carefully, but it did not help. The iPhone had stopped vibrating a second before he finished.

When the pilot came out of the bathroom, the whore was sitting on the bed, blinking sleepily and shamelessly covering the breasts with a blanket. Paramonov looked at her up and down. Asian. A Chinese or Kazakh girl – young, with soft juicy breasts and luxury hair. Looks like his slightly arrogant neighbor, who had moved into the apartment above a month before he began flying to the Emirates; she only lacked a small tattoo – a thin horizontal line that stretches around the neck, like a choker. That neighbor (although Paramonov did not hide that he wanted her) did not even say hi to him any single time, so the man, looking at a rather crumpled sheet, remembered with special pleasure how he had thrown the Asian at the bed as soon as they came in. Damn, it was not so long ago. The girl in the meantime, hiding a smile, was biting a blanket. Yegor caught her look and realized that she was completely naked in the middle of the room. He again rolled his eyes, stepped to the bed, and wrapped himself in a towel. Picking up the phone from the bedside table, he glanced at the missed call. Arthur Kazarin, the flight director of TransAsian, had called. Russians became serious and pressed 'Call'.

Kazarin answered immediately.

"Hello!"

"This is Paramonov."

"Yegor, hello." Kazarin was almost fifteen years older than Paramonov, but despite this, he spoke to him like to a friend. "Did I wake you up?"

"No, I was in the bathroom. Something happened?"

"Well, yes," Kazarin replied. "Kosmakov's wife's died. Tonight. Something's wrong with the heart. Someone called an ambulance, but she didn't wake up and died in the hospital. It is what it is..."

Yuri Kosmakov was the oldest and most experienced pilot of TransAsian, he has been working at the airline since its foundation and has been flying the Moscow-Beijing-Moscow for the last four or five years.

"I'm sorry." Paramonov and Kosmakov were not close friends, therefore, he was not too concerned, and his voice sounded rather ordinary than upset: "Did she have any sort of disorder?" And then he remembered. "Wait, Jura is away now."

Kazarin sighed.

"You're right. Yura is in Beijing."

"Has anyone told him?"

Paramonov approached the blindfolded window but was standing half-turned to bed and could see out of the corner of his eye that the whore was watching him. The woman had a slightly confused look as if she could not believe that the client spoke Russian. Or perhaps at that very moment, she was thinking that he could be the same age as her father. "If she is already here," Paramonov looked at the elegant legs half-covered with a blanket, "would not hurt to relax a little bit with her again. Breakfast and the pool can wait."

"I've just spoken to him." Kazarin paused. "He's leaving back to Moscow in an hour with Aeroflot. That's why I'm actually calling."

Yegor coughed.

“Yeah.” He did not really understand what the director was aiming at.

“I want you to fly to Beijing,” Kazarin continued, “you will bring Yurii’s plane back to Moscow. The second pilot is Butynets. You’ve once worked together.”

Paramonov squeezed through the curved lips a silent “fuck”, and then asked. “And who will fly from Dubai instead of me?”

“Skuratov He’s on the way.”

“To Dubai?”

“No, damn, to Mars! Of course, to Dubai! He departed from Sheremetyevo ten minutes ago.”

“You could’ve sent Skuratov to Beijing!”

“No, we couldn’t. Skuratov has never flown to Beijing. He doesn’t know the airport. And he only has, I think, 200 hours of total flight time at Boeing 777.”

Paramonov wrinkled his nose. Bullshit! For a successful take-off, you do not need to know the airport perfectly. It’s not landing after all! And you won’t learn to fly the 777 if you don’t fly. Besides, Butynets is there; he’s worked with Kosmakov for 2 years, and he knows the airport! However, the man knew it was no use arguing.

“Does it make any difference to you, Yegor?” Continued the director a bit annoyingly. “It’s only for now. You had to stay in Dubai for the whole day anyways. But now you will fly to Beijing, get some sleep, and then take the 777 to Moscow. Do you have any problems with that?”

Paramonov’s mood was irretrievably spoiled. Instead of the pool and a sunbed on the roof of a 5-star hotel he has to spend half a day on a plane over Central Asia? Well, of course, there are no problems.

“No,” he muttered.

He can now forget about “playing” in bed with the Asian.

“That’s great.”

“When do I have to leave for Dubai?”

“At 11:55. ‘Altair Air’, Flight number 341. Third Terminal. You will fly first class. The plane lands in Beijing at about midnight.”

“Okay.”

“You have less than an hour and a half. Don’t relax.”

And Kazarin hung up.

Paramonov turned to the girl. She smiled, moving the leg back and forth on the sheet, but her smile faded as soon as the girl saw his facial expression.

“You have to go,” said the pilot in a gruff voice.

“Oh, okay.”

“No, it’s not your fault. I’m leaving for Beijing. It is urgent. My plane leaves in an hour. I’m sorry.”

“All right, I understand.”

“You can, if you want, go to the shower.”

“No, I’ll go.”

Paramonov walked around the bed looking for his underpants. The girl slipped out from under the blanket, picked up a tiny dress from the floor, turned back, and started putting it on through her head. The man stopped gazing with admiration at her breasts. Damn, how unfortunate is that he has to fly.

“What?” asked the whore, noticing his gaze.

“Are you Kazakh?”

“No.”

“Chinese?”

She smiled showing white perfect teeth.

“I won’t tell you.”

“Screw you”, Paramonov thought. His underpants were laying under the bed, and he had to get them out.

“But you are Russian.” The whore pointed at him. Her tone was not humiliating, but rather sarcastic. The edges of her thin lips were slightly shivering.

Kneeling next to the bed and holding a towel around his waist, Yegor only shrugged his shoulders. “And you are just a prostitute,” he thought a little offended.

The girl grabbed a purse from the bedside table and walked out to the exit. Paramonov dropped a towel, quickly put on his underpants, and followed her. The situation was weird – to see a prostitute off – but the pilot still could not remember whether he paid her, and considering how he was served, he did not want to look ungrateful. Maybe he settled everything with the pimp master in the restaurant. But why didn’t he remember that? In any case, he couldn’t hire her for the whole night. This is an insane pile of money! Just couldn’t!

The whore fastened her sandals. The sandals were high-heeled, so when the woman stood up, her eyes ended up being at the same level as Yegor’s. For a few seconds they silently looked at each other, as if waiting for something, and then Paramonov foolishly coughed and asked:

“Have I paid you already?”

The woman tensed.

“Have paid for what?”

“Well, for your services.”

A slap seemed to appear from nowhere. Paramonov missed the moment when the girl swung and realized what she intended to do only when a tiny palm was an inch away from his cheek. Fake fingernails scratched the bristles, and the left side of the face got flooded with the wave of burning heat. The pilot instinctively raised his hand, ran his hand over the unshaven skin, and quietly said:

“So you are not ...”

Paramonov stumbled. He had to bite back what he intended to say in order not to laugh in her face. Yesterday he was not drunk. Oh, no, three glasses of single-malt whiskey are not enough for him to plunge into the warm fog, which smoothed the sharp corners and forced the female faces to mysteriously shine – so he remembered the Asian well, and he remembered how he was trying to pick her up ... absolutely convinced that she was a prostitute.

Despite all the efforts not to laugh, the smile passed outward, illuminating the swollen face. Yegor was afraid that the black-haired woman would hiss like a snake, but she just threw a furious look at him and spat out.

“Old asshole!” Then she turned and resolutely stepped to the elevator.

The man closed the door and bit his lip, hiding an idiotic giggle, but the laughter was gurgling in the depths of his throat, and the lips themselves stretched out in a shameless smile. He is a forty-three (all right, almost forty-four) year-old man, yesterday he was wearing casual clothes, not a pilot uniform, however, he managed to drag a woman in her twenties to bed without any effort. Yegor rubbed his cheek with his palm and remembered how dizzily soft Asian’s hair was. When did he sleep with such a beautiful woman last time? And not even for the money!

The pilot felt better, much better. Paramonov pulled the curtains, – fading over the desert sunlight flooded the room – looked at the bay, and then started packing things.

An airport employee at the entrance to the terminal showed where to run, and Anna, climbing up the stairs to the second floor, rushed through a bright corridor.

The noise was hovering over the brain. It seemed like Anna was breaking through the invisible thicket: the sounds were scratching her strained nerves like needles. In less than a minute, she got to the spacious, fenced-off by bands room. On the right, several check-in counters interconnected with each other were placed under the glass wall. A huge sign 'TRANSFER DESK J' hung under the ceiling, but Anna did not notice it and realized that she got into the transfer hall only when, having not stopped, wedged into a string of people standing in line.

The woman inadvertently tore off the band and knocked somebody's suitcase down but did not turn around to apologize. Pulling out her neck, Anna glanced over the heads and went numb. The counter was immense. Hundreds of passengers in several long lines got stuck in the hall. The panic that was roaring during the last two hours, as if it was outside her body, broke the skull and, bursting inward, started destroying everything in her head.

This was the end. No chance. She was late.

At the check-in counter, partially hiding the glass wall, there were four vertical monitors with a list of flights departing from Terminal 3. Anne ran her eyes over the closest screen and, from the first try, without searching, stumbled upon a row 'ALR 114 Bangkok'. Right in front of the destination point she distinguished two bright red words: 'FINAL CALL'. So, the plane still hasn't taken off. The woman stretched out as a string (for a moment her heart squeezed into a tiny bubble) and rushed to the nearest counter.

"I'm sorry... excuse me... sorry... my flight..."

She pushed an older African, trampled on someone's luggage, dived under the band, and nearly knocked down a three- or four-year-old girl. A tanned man in a flax jacket and denim shorts shouted something in an unfamiliar language. Only having appeared in front of the counter, she dared to look at the clock. 09:18. Eighteen past eleven in Dubai. And what if – a weak light flashed in the chest – the flight is delayed? What if she can make it?

An Arab woman with a plump face in a pale green hijab with a birthmark the size of a coin on the chin was sitting at the counter.

"I'm late, right?" Anna screeched.

"Your flight?" asked the lady.

The heart seems to be growing stiff. Having leaned her breast against the counter, Anna heard it bouncing. When she answered, the voice seemed to be separated from the body.

"ALR 114 to Bangkok."

The Arab nodded and stared at the invisible for Anna monitor. In a moment she said,

"The flight is still in the boarding status. Can I have your passport, please?"

Cursing herself for inattention – she could pull it out on the way – Anna spent a quarter of a minute, looking for an international passport in a shoulder bag.

"Here."

The Arab leaned over the keyboard. Anna looked tremblingly at the phone again. 09:19. At the same moment the keystrokes stopped. An employee of the information center was focused on something on the screen.

"Something's not okay?"

"Where are you flying from?" without raising her head, the woman asked.

"From Ukraine."

"And your luggage..."

"I don't have checked-in luggage. Only hand luggage."

The Arab moved the hijab a little and glipped at Anna – her dark forehead got overspread with wrinkles, which made her facial expression seem to be dissatisfied, almost strict – but in a moment, not dropping a single word, she looked away.

Anna put her phone in front of her and clasped her fingers over it. Fear was biting her from everywhere. When the numbers on the mobile screen changed – instead of 09:20 the clock showed 09:21, the Arab woman, without lifting her head, took up a radiotelephone which was standing on a special stand next to the keyboard, quickly dialed the number and put the phone to the ear. In a second, an unclear answer was heard from the speaker, after which the girl started explaining something in Arabic. Anna started trembling as if from a cold when in the stream of unfamiliar sounds, she distinguished the word ‘Bangkok’. After listening to the answer, the woman put off the handset and looked at Anna.

“I’m sorry, I cannot give you a boarding pass.”

Her chest was pierced with scalding pain, and for a few seconds, Anna felt as if she was shot in the back. After all, dragging the air through her teeth, she clung her hands to the counter as if someone was trying to drag her away from it.

“Why?”

“You will not make it to the wing C, the plane is preparing for the take-off.”

Unexpectedly Anna bawled:

“BUT THE “FINAL CALL” IS WRITTEN ON THE SCREEN!” – She pointed at the monitor behind the woman, but the movement appeared to be clumsy unclear, and vague, the arm was lifting slowly as if she was raising it in thick water, only fingers were trembling. Frightened by the strength of her own voice, the woman whispered: “The landing hasn’t finished yet ...”

The Arab shrugged her shoulders.

“This is a big airport, madam. I cannot print you the boarding pass, because you won’t make it on time anyway.” The woman looked back, throwing her gaze on the screen, and at that very moment “FINAL CALL” to the right from flight ALR 114 changed to “GATE CLOSED”. She turned her head and measured Anna with an irresistible look. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t understand.” Anna pulled the fingers to her left temple, feeling how horror was steadily drilling her brain. “It’s essential for me to get to Bangkok ... I have to be there until tomorrow ... You don’t understand ...” Two big tears fell from her eyes, she angrily wiped them away.

(don’t cry ... don’t cry... don’t cry)

“Sorry, I can’t help you with anything.”

The woman put Anna’s passport in front of her and defiantly turned her face to the next person in the line.

“Please.” Anna continued desperately clinging to the counter. Between the hackneyed and silent words, a sob broke out.

“Step aside,” the woman ordered from behind the counter.

Unexpectedly behind the chair where the Arab was sitting, appeared a young man in a shabby blue shirt. A faded badge with the inscription ‘MANAGER’ was ticking to the right of the chest.

“What’s happened?” British accent, thin hair on the top, unhappy look. “Why are you crying?”

Anna swallowed a snort and, getting a grip, closed her eyes.

“This woman...” Shit, that makes no sense to waste time complaining about the Arab. Anna opened her eyes and said clearly, “I need to get to Bangkok,” the voice shrugged, therefore it sounded like the words were creaking between the teeth. “I took a flight from Kyiv with FlyDubai, but the departure was delayed, and now I can’t make it to Bangkok”.

“And that’s why you are crying?” The man raised his eyebrow. “I can solve it.” Anna stared at him.

“What company were you supposed to fly to Bangkok with?” The man silently ordered the Arab to give him a seat by touching her shoulder. She obeyed and went away. He took her seat.

“Altair Air, flight 114.”

The man’s fingers rushed to the keyboard.

“Oookay,” he said. “Altair Air has no more flights to Bangkok today, the next one is tomorrow at 11:20, and if it’s fine for you, I can check you in...”

Anna shook her head so that the golden strands of hair were blinking in front of her eyes.

“No, no, no! Please, you have to understand, it’s important. I have a meeting scheduled, and a lot of things depend on it...” She shivered. It did not seem that the British was listening very attentively. He was polite, but no more. It was unlikely that his attitude would change if he got more information about when and with whom the meeting had been scheduled.

“What time do you have to be in Bangkok?”

“At nine o’clock in the morning. Oh, wait, no.” Anna twitched her head again. “The meeting is at nine. I have to be there earlier. At least one and a half or two hours before the meeting.”

The man nodded.

“So, seven in the morning.” He stumbled into the screen and typed something on the keyboard. “Just a second... Here’s what I can offer you: Emirates has five flights to Bangkok today. Three have already departed, and two are scheduled for today. The first one is EK 370, departing at 12:45, reaching the destination today at 22:25. The second is EK 374 which leaves at 22:30. But this one is not the best for you, because it lands in Bangkok tomorrow at eight o’clock in the morning.” He looked at Anna and smiled a little. “There is a seat for you for flight EK 370.” He theatrically glanced at his watch. “And you still have time for lunch.”

Anna tried to smile in response and timidly asked:

“So can you give me a boarding pass for this flight?”

The man again looked at her a little bit disappointedly.

“Yes, but ...” He began to understand that a golden-haired passenger did not quite understand what was being said. “...since this is an Emirates flight, you have to pay for the ticket.”

Anna felt like a huge gulf opened in her abdomen.

“But I have already paid!”

The heart became cold like a piece of metal. Anna was trying to imagine something good – promenades at Swan lake park with her husband; her son, getting out of the taxi, arrived home for his first vacation; the last family dinner before the war at the sky-bar "Manhattan", where you could witness the frankly magical view of Rivne out of the windows – however the heart was fiercely dancing, filling the blood with fear.

“Yes,” the Briton nodded, “but you were late for the flight ALR 114.”

“You don’t understand,” Anna whispered.

“Believe me, I understand you. But I ask you to understand me too. You were late for your flight and it was not ‘Altair Air’ fault. Therefore, you won’t get reimbursed for the missed flight. ‘Altair Air’ has some free seats for tomorrow’s flight, and I can immediately check you in. But you insist that this flight is not appropriate for you, so I tried to find other flights from different companies that can take you to Bangkok on time. There is an option with ‘Emirates’. However, ‘Emirates’ has nothing to do with ‘Altair Air’ passengers and you have to buy a ticket to get on the plane.

Anna was standing with a look like she was bent over to the ground by an invisible shower.

“How much is the ticket?”

“Two thousand five hundred and eighty-five dirhams.”

“And can you...” the heart was twisted, and every blow echoed with pain in her head.

“In dollars? Euros?”

“In dollars, please.”

All sounds around seemed to be frozen in the air.

“Seven hundred four dollars.”

Anna’s lower lip shivered.

“I can’t afford it,” she whispered.

“You have no money, right?”

Her eyes were quiet, like at the funeral.

“I have money. But I can’t pay seven hundred dollars.”

The British did not take his eyes off her face.

“How much can you pay?”

Anna did not answer. Her dry lips were moving as if she was chewing the air. The man waited for five seconds, and then he answered,

“I can still help you, just tell me what amount you are willing to spend.”

“I don’t know,” she answered with bated breath.

The British leaned to the monitor. Anna was crying silently, looking at the man’s fingers running over the keyboard. Half a minute ran out when the British, disappointedly shook his head.

“I was trying to find an option with a layover in Delhi,” he explained. “‘Altair Air’ has two flights to the capital of India today. Both have free seats and I could check you in on one of them. It’s closer to Bangkok from Delhi, and the ticket would not cost you more than one hundred and fifty dollars from there.” The man rubbed his chin with his palm. “But as a matter of fact, all evening flights to Bangkok are full. No free seats.”

Anna silently took her passport and stepped back from the counter. The British felt a strange discomfort in his chest, having noticed how the woman’s face had changed. It simply got gray, and now it looked like dead as if someone had blown out the candle that filled the person’s face with colors.

“Wait.” He awkwardly waved his hand. “I’ll try another option.”

The woman stopped. The Brit frowned and stared at the monitor. Anna watched him until the tears faded away and the world around was transformed into a stirring mixture of colors and light. Then she was simply standing and shaking every time when some kind of sharp sound from behind burst into her head and punched her exhausted nerves. After half a minute, a man took his phone and connected with someone. Anna could distinguish only separate words, but she did not find the strength to put them together. After hanging up the phone, the man coughed. He was confused.

“Is there anything?” Anna stared at him in painful anxiety.

“I do not know if you like it, but I found an option ... m-m ... with a layover in Beijing.” The Brit stopped waiting for her reaction. Anna nodded asking him to continue. “There is a flight to Beijing scheduled with ‘Altair Air’ today. The plane was supposed to depart at 11:55, but the ground airport services did not have time to prepare it, and the flight is delayed. I just talked to the manager of ‘Altair Air’. The boarding starts no earlier than in the afternoon. You have time, and there are free seats. I also explained your situation, and he agreed to exchange your ticket at no extra charge. That is, for a flight to Beijing you don’t pay anything. Then – the man drew his eyes to the monitor – the flight takes seven hours, you will land in Beijing half an hour before midnight local time, and in two hours there is a flight from Beijing with ‘Shanghai Airlines’ to Bangkok. The duration of the flight is five hours and five minutes. The time difference between Thailand and Beijing is 1 hour, so you’ll arrive in Bangkok at 6:15 am local time. The ticket costs two hundred and eighty-three dollars.” Pause. Anna stopped breathing. “If you agree, I can immediately check you in for a flight to Beijing.”

Anna unconsciously put her palm on her chest. Two hundred eighty-three. Two hundred eighty-three dollars...

The British was waiting for her to decide.

“Do I have to buy a ticket to Bangkok here?” In the end, the woman asked.

“Yes. Everything is here. There is no need to go anywhere.”

“Then ...” Anna bit her lip and looked away so that the man could not look into her eyes.

“Can you wait? I have to take the money.”

“Take from an ATM?” The man did not understand. “Why? You can pay by card at the check-in counter.”

“No, I just ...” her face went red, “have to ... I’ll come back.”

The Brit’s face did not change, but Anna felt that her behavior began to annoy him.

“It’s eleven thirty now, madam. There aren’t many tickets left to Bangkok. In addition, you won’t get anywhere if you miss the flight to Beijing.”

“I have to think.”

The man shrugged his shoulders.

“As you wish.”

Anna got out of the boundaries roped off by the stripes and looked around. The toilets were located opposite the check-in counter, and she rushed there.

The women’s toilet was an elongated room with washbasins along the right wall and toilet stalls along the left one. Anna looked into each stall, making sure that there was nobody inside, and then turning round frightenedly, locked into the farthest one.

Taking a breath, Anna put the bag on the floor, moved down the toilet lid, and took her T-shirt off. The pale spotted with freckles skin shimmered from sweat. Having thrown a T-shirt on a hook, the woman moved her bra down with her left hand, and, with her right one, pulled out two twisted and wrapped with thin elastic rope rolls of 100-dollar banknotes. Carefully Anna put the rolls on the toilet lid and turned round again to make sure the door behind her back was closed. Then she unzipped the jeans and pulled out two thicker rolls from under the white cotton panties, followed by two more – very small, thick like an index finger – which she got out of socks. Finally, she got out a thick bundle of notes from the back pocket of her jeans.

Bending down in front of the toilet, Anna took off the elastic rope and started counting. Thirteen hundred... forty-seven hundred... eleven thousand two hundred. The banknotes were wet from sweat, sticking to fingers and almost didn’t rustle. Seventeen thousand... twenty-two and a half... twenty-seven thousand nine hundred. When Anna finished counting, she uttered a scream and closed her mouth with her palm. Just twenty-eight thousand eight hundred. The innards were overflowed by the deadly cold languor: she lacked more than a thousand dollars. The woman thought that she would faint. Her knees dropped on the tile, and her eyes dimmed. She could make a mistake while counting – for a hundred dollars or two – but not for a thousand dollars!

Unexpectedly, the cold fire in my abdomen gave way to an intolerable burning twinkle. What if she counted the money in Rivne wrongly? What if being in a hurry, she took less than thirty thousand? Anna moaned, and in a moment she punched herself in the forehead. What an idiot! She remembered putting some money – sixteen or seventeen hundred, deciding that such a sum of money would not cause any suspicions if suddenly customs officers decided to seek through her bag – into her purse.

Spasms continued to pass rapidly in her stomach while Anna was looking for a purse in a bag. Everything was mixed up inside – there was a moment when the woman was distorted by a thought that the purse fell out when she was running – but then Anna found it between the T-shirts at the bottom of the bag. The money was there. Unlike in the rolls, there were different banknotes – hundreds, the twenties, fives, and even several one-dollar notes – embedded in a folded notebook piece of paper. First Anna took the money out and then unfolded the paper. Before leaving Rivne, she

wrote the address of the Embassy of Ukraine and the names of the two subway stations close to the embassy:

*87 All Seasons Place, CRC Tower, 33rd Floor,
Wireless Road, Lumpini, Patumwan, Bangkok
Ratchaprarop, Makkasan*

Anna hid the paper back into the purse and counted the banknotes. One thousand five hundred and thirty-four dollars. So, altogether – thirty thousand three hundred thirty-four dollars. Everything she managed to find before the departure. She had to give away thirty thousand at the embassy. The rest was enough to stay in Bangkok and get to Cambodia. Anna did not imagine how to return from Cambodia to Ukraine. There was no money for the flight, but from the beginning, she did not hesitate. She thought that first she had to get to the embassy and give away money, and after that, she would figure something out. Now things have changed: two hundred and eighty-three out of three hundred and thirty-four dollars she has to spend on the ticket from Beijing to Bangkok. She will stay in Thailand with fifty dollars in her pocket. Well, she can get to the city from the airport by subway, it will cost forty-five baht (about one and a half dollars – Anna checked this yesterday before departure). It is possible to survive a day without food, even without water. But what's next? Are forty-nine bucks enough for two people to leave Thailand? What if a bus ticket will cost more than twenty-five dollars?

There were no answers, and the more she was thinking about it, the more exhausting it was, so Anna took three hundred and thirty-four dollars from the money she had and pushed them to the back pocket of her jeans, and the rest she divided into six smaller piles and rolled back again. After everything was done, she looked at the bag, deciding if it was possible to put all the money there, but chose not to do it. There is a security check on the way to the gate, her bag will undergo the inspection through the scanner, and she doesn't know how the security officers will react, finding thirty thousand dollars in cash there. Anna knew that it was allowed to take no more than ten thousand dollars without declaring from Ukraine (in fact, that is why she hid money in her underwear) but did not know anything about the laws of the UAE, and therefore decided that it was better not to risk, and put the rolls out of sight in the same the place where had been before. Having put on a T-shirt and zipped the jeans, the woman meticulously looked at herself. She didn't notice anything suspicious, brushed her hair quickly, and got out of the stall.

The transfer desk was crowded as before. Ignoring angry shouts, Anna swept through the line. Just a second before her, a bald man in a snazzy T-shirt came up to the counter. He was so obese that the fat rolls between the head and shoulders resembled watering hoses around the neck. Anna rushed forward, pushing the fatty out of the way, and faced the British.

"It's you." With the same expression of frozen dissatisfaction, he raised his eyebrows.

"Yes."

The fat man sniffed angrily and touched Anna's shoulder.

"Excuse me..."

The woman removed his fluffy hand.

"I'm having a flight in fifteen minutes."

The bald sniffed louder.

"But I ... I ..."

His English was not good, or the man was just bad at speaking in general: while he was looking for words to say, Anna pushed him even further.

“I won’t leave this place without a boarding pass.”

The fat man turned his head to the British looking for support, but he did not say anything, and Anna finally jumped in between him and the counter.

“I agree,” she told. “Check me in for a flight to Beijing, and then to the end destination. I’m buying a ticket to Bangkok.”

“Just a second.”

The British bent down his head and started typing something. Unexpectedly the keystroke stopped. The man did not utter any sound, but his lips were moving, and Anna was able to clearly read the short “shit”.

“What’s wrong again?!” because of the anxiety she became almost weightless.

The British stroke down the hair and looked at the Ukrainian woman apologetically.

“I’m sorry, I was wrong. The price I told you ... two eighty-three ... it is in Euros...”

Anna has never been a religious person, she certainly has not believed in God and praying in churches, but she has not considered herself an atheist. Her faith – if faith could be called the subconscious admiration of the delicate complexity of the universe and the uncertain feeling that even inanimate objects may have an invisible component that could be described as the word "soul" – was close to animism. However, at that moment, Anna Yanhol for the first time thought of the endowed with consciousness an omnipotent afterlife essence that has set itself the goal at any price not to let Anna go to Bangkok. Or this essence is leading her somewhere? This thought had a surprising effect and instead of humble desolation, it flashed in Anna’s chest a feeling of malicious persistence. The anger nurtured her and made her determined and ready to do anything to break the chains of fate.

“And there is nothing cheaper, yes?”

“No I’m sorry, madam, that’s my ...”

The woman waved her hand, forcing him to shut up.

“How much is it in dollars?”

“Three hundred and thirty-one.”

“This is crazy," Anna thought. “A stupid dream.” On the way out of the toilet, she got her passport, and all the time, while walking to the counter, she was holding it with the phone in her hand. Pressing the side button, the woman lit the screen. 09:39. Twenty to twelve in Dubai – less than a day until the meeting at the embassy. She can buy a ticket and still save thirty thousand, which means she will stay in Bangkok with three dollars in her pocket. Or even less than two if include forty-five bahts for the subway to the city center. Anna suddenly realized that tomorrow after 9 am she would not have money even for returning to the airport. If everything goes well, she will not be alone, and two dollars is not enough for two people to get to the terminals by subway. On the other hand, there is just enough money to get to the embassy, and this is the only thing that really matters.

The British coughed.

“I’m sorry, but there is a line behind.”

He looked into her face, but the eyes remained indifferent.

“I’ll take the ticket.”

“Flight 889, ‘Shanghai Airlines’, from Beijing to Bangkok, departure time – 2:05 am, May 11, arriving at the destination on the same day at 6:15 am Thai time. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Three hundred and thirty-one dollars.”

Anna got the money from the back pocket of her jeans. A second or two she was holding the banknotes with her fingers as if trying to remember what they looked like, and then pulled out three

one-dollar notes from the bundle, and gave the rest, not counting, to the man at the counter. He nodded.

“And your passport, please.”

Anna held out the document. The British opened it and with fake earnestness verified the picture in the passport, then leaned over the monitor and typed: "ANNA YANHOL."

[...]

PART III. THE MOUNTAIN

Paramonov slowly and very reluctantly regained consciousness. He was lying in an awkward position — on the left side with his arm straight forward — and was striving to delay the moment of awakening. Through the slit of the dry eyelids, the pilot could barely see his bizarrely twisted palm. Hot needles pierced his eyelids as he tried to open his eyes. Yehor squealed and blinked, and then one by one, as if someone had run his fingers over the toggle switches, physical sensations started retrieving. It rumbled at the top of his head, and his throat was burning as if someone had sprinkled finely ground pepper there. Hell, he has never had such a hangover. And why all of a sudden? He had swallowed only a few portions while picking up that Kazakh girl. Or a Chinese one. Or... Stop! Everything is wrong. He met an Asian woman the day before yesterday and yesterday... He was stabbed in the side, and Paramonov tried to take a deep breath, but he couldn't — a lump of dust from a vacuum cleaner seemed to be stuck in his mouth. He was so weak that he couldn't even cough and just sniffed. So, yesterday... The outlines of the first-class cabin appeared before his inner vision. He was drinking on the plane, yes, he was flying somewhere, although he did not remember where and why. For some reason, he could not breathe deeply. The pain in his head intensified, and Paramonov groaned. Enough. You need to get out of bed and go to the kitchen — there is aspirin. And then the Russian realized that he was not at home. And not in bed. And the palm still visible through half-closed eyelids is not his. He would break his wrist if he tried to bend it like that!

All feelings sharpened. Yehor opened his eyes and trembled. Crossed on his chest, seat belts held him at the edge of the broken chair; his left leg twisted so that his heel almost touched his buttocks. For a while the picture before his eyes remained blurred, as if someone had poured oil on the top, so Yehor focused on the palm that loomed half a meter from his face. Then something seemed to crack in his head, and memories started penetrating his mind: Amir... Eliash... terrified voice of the dispatcher... *airspeed low*... rocky steep ahead. He is in the cockpit of the airliner that crashed in the mountains somewhere between Pakistan and China.

Shit!

Releasing the leg, Paramonov lifted his hand to his eyes and stared at his watch. Four minutes to three in Moscow. There was no visible damage to the clock face or glass, but when he looked closely, Yehor noticed that the second hand froze between six and seven. Apparently, the mechanism stopped due to the hit at the moment of the crash.

But how long ago?

"Amir," Paramonov reached for the unnaturally twisted palm, touched it with his fingers, and immediately, as if from an electric shock, withdrew his hand. The skin was cold. Not icy, but not warm enough for the alive flesh. Adrenaline rushed into his blood, and his eyes brightened. The right part of the cockpit looked as if it had been flattened under a hydraulic press. The co-pilot was buried under a pile of aluminum and plastic, in fact, except for a hand that seemed to stick out of the metal, Yehor could not discern any other part of his body. "Damn!"

Despite the cold, the dead flesh had not yet hardened: the palm swayed slightly from the touch; at the same time the pilot could not hear the sound of fire, that is, everything that inflamed after the crash had already burned. So, the disaster happened half an hour ago. At most an hour.

Yehor unbuckled, slid down on the floor, and groaned. Every movement streaked with a painful echo in the muscles. Gritting his teeth, the man turned on his back, leaned on his elbows, and looked to his left at the captain's seat. The left side of the cockpit was a little less mutilated, but Paramonov needed only one look to understand that Eliash had not survived the crash either. A fragment of the steering wheel pierced him through; several pieces of the dashboard distorted the face beyond recognition.

Paramonov rolled onto his belly and glanced aside at the back wall of the cabin. The door was at arm's length, and Yehor, suddenly realizing how much the plane's nose had flattened, panicked. He's like in a coffin. Panting, he tried to stand up, but his arms bent. Hitting his head on the floor of the cabin (was it actually the floor?), sparks started flickering before his eyes. Then he noticed an oxygen tank. He grabbed it, put the mask on his mouth, and opened the valve. A few greedy sips of oxygen were enough to make the panic recede.

However, he did not feel better. His mouth felt like a shithole, nausea was rolling up his throat; the lungs were burning as if Paramonov was trying to breathe over a half-waned heart. He glanced at his watch again and counted down the time in the opposite direction: maybe forty minutes unconscious, no more than a quarter of an hour after the crash, and another half an hour asleep before depressurization. So, the last time he consumed alcohol was an hour and a half ago. Some of it may still be undigested. Yehor squatted down without hesitation, put two fingers deep into his throat, and vomited. Then again. And again.

Recovering his breath, Paramonov picked up the oxygen tank and tried to open the cabin door. Subconsciously, the Russian expected the door to jam and was very surprised when it moved after the first push. He waded from the cockpit to the wind porch in front of the first-class on-board kitchen. It was dark. The disgusting, copper-flavored smell of burnt flesh tickled his nostrils, though the corridor itself was not affected by the fire. To the right, held by seat belts on a sloping chair, a flight attendant, whom Paramonov had had a small talk with before taking his seat in the tail of the plane. Yehor ran his fingers over her face. Cold. Then he crawled around the body, made sure that the selector on the door on the left side was in the “ARMED” position (i.e. “inflatable ladder is ready for release”), and tried to open the door. Only the third time, he managed to turn the knob counterclockwise. Leaning hard, Yehor pushed the door aside. The skin was instantly tightened by the cold; the eyes got burned by a greasy, thick light. The inflation system worked — in a few seconds the ladder unfolded and descended smoothly. Covering his eyes with his forearms, Paramonov straightened up and got ready to jump, but then he suddenly froze. The inflated ladder was hanging almost vertically. Grabbing the edge of the doorway with his left hand, Yehor leaned out of the plane, glanced down, and was petrified. An abyss at least four hundred meters deep opened wide under the fuselage. Screwing up his eyes from the bright sunlight, Paramonov stared at the strip of virgin snow-framed, black-toothed rocks, which almost vertically ran down to the glacier. The edge of the rubber ladder swayed, not reaching about one and a half meters to its beginning.

“Shit!” He almost jumped into the bottomless abyss.

The pilot backed away, tripped over the flight attendant, and fell on his back. Putting the oxygen tank into the other hand, he scrambled to his feet and rushed to the door on the right side but did not touch the handle. His heart was pounding. The illuminator was covered with snow. If there is a precipice on the left, then on the right, behind the snow, there may be a rocky wall. Therefore, it is better not to touch the door: the inflatable ladder will easily push the remains of the plane into the abyss.

Breathing in the oxygen, Paramonov squeezed through the kitchen to the first-class cabin. It was a little lighter there. The rays shone through the ash-covered illuminator on the left side, flooding the mutilated chairs with cold light. The ceiling and most of the once snow-white panels were covered with soot, and the bulkhead between the business class and first-class cabin melted from the fire, although the flames had already gone out. The right side along the entire length of the cabin resembled crumpled foil. For a few seconds, Yehor was staring at the shattered 1K seat and thought he would be dead if he stayed in it, then ran his eyes over the motionless bodies in the other seats, and finally stopped to look at the bright spot where before depressurization there was the 4K seat occupied by a woman with golden hair. A hole. A huge cavity in the fuselage. Paramonov hurried there.

The luggage compartment flattened during the crash, so a little more than two meters separated the edge of the hole and the rocky surface under the fuselage. Yehor tucked the oxygen tank under his armpit and jumped. Clumsily landing on his outstretched arms, he scratched his palms and tore the jeans on his right knee. The tank slipped out and, tapping dully, rolled away. The Russian sprang up, blood slithered from his head, and the picture before his eyes blurred. For ten seconds, leaning his hands to his sides, he was catching his breath.

The light was falling from behind — despite the blur, Paramonov could clearly see his own shadow — but the sun shone as fiercely as if it was trying to burn him. Frenzied prickly rays bounced off the rocks, rushing in from all sides, forcing the Russian to snap his eyes shut helplessly. Waiting for the pupils to narrow, he looked around. The nose of the liner he had just left was stuck over an abyss on the western slope of a narrow saddle that connected two fang-shaped peaks.

The lowest of the peaks — in the southwest — rose above the saddle no more than half a kilometer. The higher one, almost in the north, looked like a relatively smooth rocky hill, at the foot

of which a mutilated Boeing cabin huddled, but then it crashed into the sky almost steeply. There was very little snow on its windswept and sunburned slope. The saddle, which did not exceed a few tens of meters in width, ended off in the east of an abyss, probably as deep and steep as the one that underpinned it in the west, although it was impossible to see the bottom from where Paramonov was standing.

Yehor held his breath for a second and realized that the wheezing reaching his ears was not an echo of his gasps. Rubbing his eyes, he looked in the direction from where the sound came — twenty steps away from the breach in the fuselage, clasp his torso with his hands stood a man. Tousled black hair, a rumpled jacket — surprisingly almost undamaged — but left trouser leg, below the knee, looked as if it was pulled through a paper shredder. A calf smeared with ach or maybe dried blood was discernible through the tattered strips of cloth.

Paramonov limped forward and, approaching, recognized the man — 1E seat, a silent, Turkish-like companion of the bald German. Behind him, leaning his back against the stone, sat a thin old man in a black shirt with a white clerical collar. His crooked, wrinkled face looked familiar, but the Russian didn't remember if the old man was flying first-class.

Three survivors so far.

The 1E passenger was swallowing the air with his mouth wide open, which sounded as if he was choking on water, and looked at Paramonov without blinking like a snake. While the Russian was staring at the man with a white clerical collar — arthritic fingers were feeling his face like a blind man trying to find something between his wrinkles — the gray jacket squeezed out a short remark.

“I'm Oliver,” like it was important.

Paramonov looked at him and asked in a fragile voice. “Heart issues?”

Oliver Morgenstern was still cuddling his torso, looking as if he was afraid that the chest would fall into pieces, as soon as he lowered the hands. He blinked in confusion, and then Paramonov remembered the raspy sneezing that was giving the German a hard time during the flight.

“Wait.” The Russian, limping, returned to the breach in the fuselage, found an oxygen tank amidst the stones, turned, and handed it to Oliver.

He barely frowned.

“What is it?”

“Oxygen.”

The German greedily stuck to the pipe and took several deep breaths. Yehor turned away and stared nervously at the place where he had just come from — on a mutilated plane. Precisely on its nose, because, apart from the first twenty meters of the fuselage, on the slope of the hemmed-in between the peaks hollow there was nothing more, no wings, no turbines, no trace of the tail. Only the cockpit, the first-class cabin, a third of the business class cabin. That's it. As if everything else was just simply cut off like with a knife.

A whirlwind seemed to swirl in his chest.

“Where is the rest of the plane?” A dry tongue numb like a piece of bark scratched the palate.

There was a blank moan behind him. Paramonov looked around and saw that the old man in the black shirt was pointing to the shaded, eastern slope of the smaller peak. The pilot followed his hand, put his palm over his eyes, and then, as if enchanted, plodded along the saddle. He stopped half a dozen steps from a slope covered with sharp plane fragments; his eyes got hooked on the narrow ledge, barely sloping to the south, under which, like tyrannosaurus' fangs, hung a row of giant icicles. The ledge was about two hundred meters horizontally and almost a hundred meters above the place where Paramonov froze. Immediately above him, miraculously holding on to the dizzyingly steep slope, rested the central part of the Boeing 777 fuselage.

The top of the hull burned through; there were no wings, and from under the scorched edges of the fuselage skin protruded stumps of spars, stringers, and frames. This fragment was mutilated even more than the nose of the liner — the place of the fracture resembled an elongated ellipse, through the hole in which Yehor saw a pile of uprooted, compressed seats, reminding of a storm-torn forest.

Having collected himself, Paramonov began to run his eyes over the slope, looking for the remains of wings and tail. He looked down to the foot of the ridge and finally noticed something resembling a nozzle of a turbine gas generator. Squinting, the Russian discerned dozens of smaller

fragments in the snow around it — from such a height they were similar to the pieces of charred foil — and tried to understand what exactly happened during the crash. The plane touched the slope of the mountain with its wings, and then...

His thoughts were interrupted by the rustle of unconfident steps and a weak voice coming from behind. “What’s happened to us?”

Paramonov recognized the crackling German accent and did not turn around.

“The plane crashed.” Yehor was scanning the glacier crawling out of the ridge in the south, turning smoothly under the saddle, and then stretched almost straight to the east. On this side of the ridge, its width reached more than a kilometer, in some places, maybe even two kilometers — the distances in the mountains are deceptive. “We survived a plane crash.”

Oliver Morgenstern was standing next to Paramonov and, with a guilty expression, handed him an almost empty oxygen tank and then wrapped his arms around his chest again. “I understand that it crashed.” The German resembled a melted candle left by the stove — shapeless and waxy-pale. “Why did it crash?”

Paramonov did not answer. In some places, there was snow between the stones, and the air temperature did not exceed 8... 9 ° C, but the sun was beating down ruthlessly, and so far, the cold was almost imperceptible, and the impossibility to breathe easily was much more annoying. Yehor felt pain in his side (maybe a broken rib), but he suspected that he was breathing hard not because of that. The air itself was like a cocktail diluted with water. And it scared the most.

“Is it because of the explosion in the tail?” Oliver suggested.

Behind the glacier, in the east, a high cracked ridge was rising to the sky. Paramonov ran his eyes over it and then turned his gaze to the central part of the fuselage as if glued to the mountain. He remembered the giant hole at the forty-first row stretching almost to the tail. So, they hit the mountain with the wing, but which one? The peak over the saddle or one of the monsters sticking out of the ridge behind the glacier? Yehor estimated the length of the slope from the saddle to the peak above it in the southwest. Too small. Hardly enough to dissipate energy during a fall. Most likely, they touched one of the higher mountains in the south or southeast, flew over the glacier, and then... Paramonov glanced over his shoulder at the broken nose of the plane... and it seemed like someone stroke his heart with icy fingers. He suddenly realized how miserably unlikely it was that the liner would hit the mountain at such an angle and at such a speed that the nose, detached from the fuselage, slid down the slope and dissipated just enough kinetic energy to get stuck in the saddle. If the speed had been at least a little lower, the nose would have fallen into the abyss with the wings and tail, if a little bigger, the nose of the plane would have crashed against a rock in the north of the saddle.

Oliver Morgenstern carried on. “But we are alive, right?” He said in a tone as if he doubted. “Are we saved?”

His words only scratched the surface of the brain, not penetrating inside. Yehor closed his eyes (*damn, how hard it is to breathe*), rubbed his forehead with his fingers, and tried to remember the number. The last thing he had seen before the collision. He was wrong when answering Oliver — the plane crashed but did not fall. They are not where the plane usually appears after the crash, and so the number was very important. Paramonov had realized this already when the 777 touched the mountain with its wing. It depended on the number and whether they had a chance to get saved. However, the first attempt to extract it from a depleted brain failed. The thoughts were somewhat jagged and painful.

“My head’s splitting,” Oliver muttered, waiting for no reply from the Russian. “There is oxygen left in the tank... can I have some more?”

Paramonov silently returned him the tank.

May 10, 2017

Gasherbrum VI, southwest saddle

At least 5900 meters above sea level

17:40, GMT +5

For the first few seconds after waking up, Anna felt like she had her head stuck in a barrel of cement. Some sounds came from the right side; straining, the woman recognized the voices — the

two men exchanged short, cracked phrases, and then the silence fell. The knees bumped into something solid, and the shin bone and the right foot hurt terribly. Anna tried to change her position, and her body was suddenly pierced by pain. Yelping, the woman opened her eyelids, and then her heart skipped a beat. Above her head, she discerned sooty plastic panels (charred wires hung from a crack in one of them), and on the right, where her chair stood, was a large hole in the fuselage, through which a distant view of the jagged mountain range opened. The ice-covered peaks, merging with the sky, shone with a cold blue — the sky seemed to run down to the ground. Anna shuddered — the seat belt cut into her stomach — and trembled realizing the nightmarish irreversibility of what had happened — the plane crashed, and she will not reach Bangkok on time. Inside, everything flopped over and throbbed: heart, lungs, stomach, guts. It seemed like the organs were displaced and could not fit back.

Pulling the buckle, Anna slipped out of her chair and, squeezing a moan-like howl through her teeth, fell on the floor. Despite the pain in the leg, she first checked to see if the money was still there. With trembling hands, she felt the rolls in her bra, jeans pockets, and panties. Everything was there, and it eased a heavy lead bullet in her chest; she was alive, she had the money, and she needed to get out.

Then she heard rustling behind her. Anna turned and saw the girl whom the Russian had brought to the first-class cabin a few minutes before the crash. She was half-lying, dangling her legs from the chair; the seat belt squeezed her chest under the armpits. There was still an oxygen mask on her face, and her temple, cheek, and right neck were covered with a crimson crust of dried blood.

The girl groaned, and Anna rushed to her. She leaned between the chairs, tore off the mask, unbuckled the girl, and embraced her. The knee exploded with pain, the right calf was burning as if the woman had stepped in a tub of molten metal, but at least she could stand, so there was no fracture. Anna threw back the hair from the girl's face and stared at her muddy clear bottle-class eyes.

“Maman... maman...”

“Hey, it's fine. Quiet, baby, everything is fine.”

Anna turned to the light pouring through the hole and examined the wound on the girl's head. The cut above the temple was short and deep, but no longer bled.

“God, what should I do with you?”

Male voices reached Anna's ears through the hole in the fuselage again. Anna thought they were moving away, and the woman panicked.

“Help!” She called in English. “We're here, please!”

Something rumbled behind Anna, though her senses made her look over her shoulder the moment before the sound hit her ears. Lawrence Grace leaned over one of the second-row chairs with an innocently confused grimace on his crooked face. The woman immediately remembered him — a slim guy in a tight T-shirt and sweatpants, who was in front of her while boarding.

Lawrence pushed the door of the hand luggage compartment away, and then, muttering something unintelligible, stared at Anna.

“Here's a girl,” she said. “She needs help.”

Not a single scratch covered him, only a tumbled beard that looked as if cockroaches had been living there for quite a while.

“Where are we?” bleated the guy.

“I can't take her down myself. Help me.”

Lawrence didn't hear her. Staggering, he approached the chair on the left side and leaned against the illuminator. He felt dizzy as if he was standing on the roof of a skyscraper. Far below, tearing layers of gray ice, glacier-polished stones showed through; beyond the abyss, terrible mountain ranges scattered in all directions — the setting sun carved a handful of sparks on the sky-bluish summits.

The guy shrugged. Confused, with a drooping jaw, the face under the beam of light that penetrated the illuminator resembled a sculpture made of raw clay.

“Where are we?”

“Listen,” Anna glanced at his muscular arms, “the plane crashed, but you have to...”

She was interrupted by shouts that one after another leaked in through the hole in the fuselage. “Hey! Are you here? Is everything okay?”

Yehor Paramonov and Duke Upshaw were standing under the breach, throwing back their heads. Oliver Morgenstern was stumbling in the distance. Twenty meters from the fuselage, the German was completely exhausted; first, he bent down, put his hands on his knees, and then fell sideways.

Yehor was scrunching his face again and again, as if from a toothache — the remorse was continually haunting him. It's not his flight, but he's a professional pilot, therefore before getting out of the plane, he had to make sure there were no survivors inside. He ran his eyes along the breach, picking a way to climb back into the cabin when Anna approached the edge of the hole.

"Here's a girl." The woman had to lean back to hold the Persian in her arms. The little girl snorted, sticking her nose in Anna's shoulder, and gripping the T-shirt on her chest.

"Is she alive?" Paramonov squealed out.

"Yes." Because of the tension in Anna's temples, the veins there swell with blood. "You have to take her. I can't take her down myself."

"It's all right," said the Russian. "We'll get you out. But before that..."

Suddenly Lawrence's disheveled head emerged next to Anna's. The first shock passed, but bizarre penumbra was still wandering along his face, and in the bulging eyes the lights of embarrassment flashed. He glared at Paramonov, and turned his gaze to Upshaw as if asking them, "Is this all real? Is this really happening to me?"

Duke Upshaw pointed to Anna and addressed Lawrence.

"Help her."

"Wait!" The Russian shook his head. "We will take the girl, and you make sure that there are no survivors inside. The American did not move. "Do you understand me?"

Lawrence turned his head, stared at the dim cabin as if only then noticed motionless bodies in the seats, and then nodded.

"Check the pulse, here," Paramonov touched with his index and middle fingers the neck under the jaw, "right or left at the level of the Adam's apple. If there is no pulse, but the skin is at least a little warm, still drag the body here, I'll try..."

"I know how to tell the difference between an alive and a dead person," Lawrence spoke in a hollow and at the same time loud voice, as deaf from birth usually speak.

Annoyed that he had been interrupted, Paramonov frowned, but before he could say anything, Lawrence disappeared, and Upshaw pushed him with his elbow.

"Let's go."

Anna sat down at the edge of the breach and put the girl on her knees. The sixty-three-year-old cardinal turned out to be a nimbler and approached the woman faster than the hangover-exhausted Russian.

"Don't go any further," Upshaw said in a dry, raspy voice, "I'll take her and pass her to you."

Paramonov froze. Duke Upshaw swayed several times on his half-bent legs, making sure that the charred stringer would not bend under his weight, and then nodded to Anna. The woman tried to tear the girl's hands away from the T-shirt, but the child, crying, clenched her fists so tightly that her fingers turned white. Anna looked helplessly at Upshaw. He, helping himself with his elbows, climbed a little higher and leaned over the girl.

"Leila," the cardinal whispered over her ear; the girl, without turning her head, looked askance at him with a frightened look. "It's Duke. Remember me?" She still wouldn't let go of the T-shirt, but Anna felt the pressure of her tiny fingers ease. "It's all right. Do you hear me? Everything's fine. Let me help you."

He gently pulled the girl from Anna's lap. Hugging her to his chest, the cardinal carefully descended to the stringer sticking out of the breach, and then, wincing due to the backache, bent down and handed the girl to Paramonov. The Russian carried Leila to a relatively flat rocky area, near the place where Oliver was sitting, frantically rubbing his temples.

Upshaw helped Anna. As soon as her feet touched the stones, Lawrence appeared in the hole.

"Well? Anything?" The cardinal asked, looking up.

The American shook his head.

“They’re all cold.”

Upshaw knew it was pointless to ask, but he couldn’t hold back.

“Everyone?”

“Yes, every single person.”

The receiver squatted on the edge of the breach, jumped down on the stringer, and from there to the ground. Together they moved to the place where Paramonov knelt over Leila.

Oliver took off his jacket and tucked it under the girl’s head. Paramonov held the back of her head with his palm. Ignoring the pain that repeatedly gnawed into her knee, Anna knelt, crawled over to Leila, and rested her head on her thigh. Big and bottomless, like a seal’s, her eyes seemed to be covered with a smoky crust. This gave the impression that the girl was about to faint.

“Give me the tank,” Yehor ordered.

Oliver obediently handed over the oxygen tank. Paramonov weighed it on his palm and inflated his nostrils — the steel container seemed almost weightless.

Anna read his mind.

“Is there anything left?”

“Let’s check.”

The woman threw the hair back from the girl’s face. The Russian put a mask on her lips and turned the valve. No specific hiss was heard, but some gas still seemed to remain, as the dreadful cloudiness in her eyes diminished, Leila blinked and chattered weakly.

“Maman...”

Then she jerked as if trying to stand up. Anna held her, but the girl screamed, and the woman, as if burned, withdrew her hand. Sitting abruptly, Leila turned her head.

“Maman, where are you?” A thin voice sounded desperate; the girl got to her feet. “MAMAN!”

Anna tried to hug her. Leila, wriggling out of her arms, rested her hands on the woman’s collarbone and continued turning her head desperately.

Duke Upshaw squatted next to Anna and stroked the girl’s back.

“Leila, don’t be afraid...”

She hurled back the cardinal’s hand from her back, then, glancing at him, covered her face with her palms and whined. Anna finally managed to hug her.

“How do you know her name?”

“We exchanged a few words in the terminal. With her and her mother.”

“Does she know English?”

“Not really. Just quite a bit. She mumbled something in Farsi and was able only to tell only her name in English.” Upshaw frowned suddenly. “How come she appeared in the first-class cabin?”

“I moved her.” Paramonov put the oxygen mask on his mouth and took a few breaths. Making sure that the oxygen ran out, he threw away the tank. “The oxygen generator did not turn on above her seat in the economy class.”

“So, her mother...” Upshaw did not finish. He looked first at the Russian, then turned and stared wistfully at the central part of the fuselage, which was stuck on the slope of the southwestern peak, the snow-capped summit of which resembled a fairy-tale castle.”

“Her mother stayed in economy class.” It was impossible to save her, Paramonov understood this, but instead of saying “I left her in economy class” he built a phrase as if Leila’s mother decided not to go to the first-class cabin herself, so now the guilt flooded her chest. Because of a foolish attempt to cover up with this half-truth, the next phrase that came out of his mouth seemed almost cynical. “I couldn’t take both of them together.” Following the cardinal’s gaze, Yehor shook his head gloomily and added, “She died. Their seats were almost in the tail.”

“Lord, let her rest in peace,” Upshaw whispered, barely moving his lips.

And then everything got quiet. The sun was slowly moving down the horizon, and the heavy granite sky in the east was pouring a menacing blue. Lawrence was staring at the nose of the fuselage, Anna, swaying, was hugging the quiet girl in her arms, Oliver was half-lying, fixing his gaze on the ground, Upshaw was peering blankly at the central part of the airplane stuck on the slope. The viscous

silence seemed to gain weight every second, seeping and pressing against the eardrums like water. Yehor grinned, feeling the buzzing of invisible bells grew in his ears.

The cardinal was the first to break the silence. Turning his face to Oliver, he asked, “Are you a little better?”

“I’m fine, it’s just the flu...” Oliver tried to sit up and immediately started shivering. His teeth clicked treacherously. “...and a little bit cold in here.”

The sun still flooded the saddle with bright light, but the temperature was dropping sharply, and the still air slowly seeped into the uncovered areas of the skin with invisible stings.

“Yes,” Upshaw agreed, “it was warmer when we got out.”

They sank into silence again. Paramonov, either squinting at the sun or grimacing of ache in his head, was examining the mountains in the southwest. To the east, behind him, lay the sparsely populated Tibetan Plateau, and to the north, the uninhabited Takla-Makan Desert; if the rescue team comes, then only from the south or west, from Pakistan. His thoughts were interrupted by Lawrence’s faint, damp voice.

“What now? Does anyone know where we are?”

Paramonov kept silent, realizing that they would not like what he might say.

“You’re a pilot, right?” Anna raised her head and held it half-turned to keep the sun from blinding her. “You should know what to do in such situations.”

Yehor thought that pilots were taught to avoid disasters, not to survive in the mountains after the plane crashed, but he understood that it was true: among those who survived, he was the only one who realized what was really threatening them. He quickly scanned the back of the nose of the fuselage — the luggage compartment under the second emergency exit had flattened almost completely, so the business-class floor was half a meter off the ground — and then glanced at Lawrence.

“You and I have to go back inside the plane and search everything. Not only in the first but in business class as well.”

“Why?”

“Well,” the Russian was evaluating what could be announced aloud and what was better to conceal, but the thoughts were chaotic, and the words slipped away as soon as he tried to make sentences out of them, “We won’t spend the night inside the plane.” He turned his head away from the plane’s nose and frowned. The next phrase was like a lump to be pushed out of the mouth. “It is dangerous: the remains of the plane are holding together with spit and a prayer; moreover, they are hanging on the edge of the saddle and at any moment can slip into the abyss; therefore, we have to spend the night in the open air, and this means...”

Yehor suddenly went quiet. He was wearing only a short-sleeved shirt, and the cold was penetrating deeper and deeper under his skin every second. The pilot suddenly remembered his father — everything he said about the mountains — and shuddered nervously. Is he doomed to go through the same thing? This is some stupid farce. Paramonov raised his head and stared at the bright blue sky above his head as if expecting to see someone mischievously smiling there...

“This means what?” interrupted Lawrence.

The Russian shook his head, banishing memories.

“This means, we need a lot...” the phrase cracked in the middle, “... of different things. First of all, clothes. Blankets. The cold will kill us if we don’t figure out how to keep warm.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Duke Upshaw.

“Okay.” Paramonov now addressed them both, “Look for the blankets handed out by the flight attendants.” They are made of polyester, synthetic, which is why they will be very electrified, but it is unlikely that any of the passengers had anything warmer than jackets or light sweaters. The more blankets, the better. You can cut a hole in them and put it over your head like a poncho.” A shiver ran through his body as if the pilot had been struck by an electric shock. “Then, the water.” He glanced again at the remnants of the plane’s nose. “If you find bottles, jars, or containers with water, in fact, anything non-alcoholic, take it with you. Finally, we must collect everything that has not burned and can help us start the fire. Magazines, books, money, instruction cards...” The Russian pretended to have something in his eye to hide the look; rubbing it with his finger, he was pondering how to explain to the men standing in front of him that the clothes of the dead would be good fuel to start the fire.

Without inventing anything, he just muttered, “You can also take bags, any leather or fabric; if we manage to start a fire, it will burn well.”

Lawrence frowned.

“Wow! Slow down.” He was facing west, and his eyes were so deep green under the mountain sun that they seemed firm. “We are not going to spend the winter here. Rescuers will arrive soon”.

It would have been better to remain silent, but Paramonov suddenly got extremely annoyed by the carefree, overconfident tone of the American.

“Nobody will come to save us soon.”

Lawrence snorted.

“Oh, come on! This is an international flight and we...”

“Do you see the runway somewhere?”

Lawrence’s face changed and he looked around as if the Russian had informed him about a maniac with a knife behind.

“What about the helicopters?” polished arrogance slowly evaporated from his voice.

Yehor shook his head.

“Helicopters do not rise over four and a half thousand meters.”

“Are you saying we are?” Lawrence paused for a moment and gave a lookover at the surrounding rocks as if he just now understood where they ended up being. “Are we higher than that?”

Paramonov preferred not to mention the altitude.

“If anyone shows up here,” he said slowly, as if chewing on every word, “then only on foot. Rescuers will be able only to come here, but not fly, you know?”

Lawrence froze with his mouth open. Anna sobbed behind him.

“Calm down.” Paramonov realized that he told them too much. “Two dispatchers followed us on radars, they know where we are, and I am sure: rescue services are already equipping the team to save us. It’s just that we’re really, uh, high. It will take some time before they get here. And don’t let this warmth fool you. We are on the southwest slope, we are lucky now there is no wind now, and the sun is shining just on us. As soon as it sets, the temperature will drop below zero.” He glanced at Duke Upshaw, then turned to Grace, and repeated, “We need blankets, water, and anything that can burn.” Anna continued choking with sobs. Yehor leaned down so that she could see him, and spoke in Russian, “Calm down. Everything will be fine.”

The woman bit her lip.

“I’m fine.” However, tears continued to roll down her face.

Upshaw approached and stopped so close that Yehor felt the warmth of his breath.

“How high are we?” The cardinal asked faintly. “You were in the cabin.”

Paramonov wanted to say that the events that preceded the crash had been erased from his memory, but he suddenly realized that he remembered everything. He remembered. The number flashed before his eyes as if it had been laser-burned on his retina. 199. They were in the one hundred and ninety-ninth echelon when the 777th touched the mountain with its wing. That’s why they all felt this suffocating emptiness in their chests, that’s why after a few sharp movements, hammers thump in the ears, and the sky seems to float before your eyes.

“Let’s go,” the pilot muttered.

And, turning around, headed to the fuselage.

First, Paramonov went around the plane’s nose from the south to find out how tightly it was holding on to the saddle. The flattened business-class cabin was tucked into a shallow gutter plowed by the nose when it was falling into the rocks and ice, but the first-class cabin and almost the entire cockpit were hanging over a four-hundred-meter abyss.

“There’s an inflatable ladder.” Upshaw pointed to a giant rubber boat-like structure that hung motionless under the first entrance on the left side.

“Yes,” Yehor nodded, “I unfolded it.”

“Look,” came from behind.

Upshaw and Paramonov turned their heads to Lawrence.

“What is it?”

“The moon.” The receiver was looking in the direction of his shadow. The ridge closest to the saddle, rising behind the glacier in the east, was generously illuminated by the setting sun, but further

away the mountains were sinking in the purple twilight, and far beyond them, on the horizon, from behind the thin curtain of dark haze, a huge moon emerged. Due to the sharp difference in brightness and excessively dense colors, the landscape seemed a bit surreal: both the mountains in the east and the moon above them resembled theatrical scenery. "It's huge."

Paramonov was silent, Upshaw nodded slightly and immediately turned away, staring into the torn belly of the airliner.

"Do you think we can find something here?"

Paramonov ran a dried-up tongue over his lips, "We have to," and climbed inside.

Lawrence and Upshaw followed him.

What the business class cabin turned into after the crash looked like a garbage dump after a devastating fire. There was no floor or ceiling left — everything mixed with the ground — and the men had to wade through a mishmash of shattered chairs, charred luggage, and cargo containers. It smelled like a fire site and burnt steel. Flakes of ash swirled in the air, mixed with dust and frozen particles of moisture. Moving a few meters from the edge of the fuselage, the Russian saw the first charred bodies. Lawrence inadvertently stepped on something crunchy, leaned over to identify the object, and croaked loudly, covering his mouth with his palm. Just beneath him, a blackened baby was lying. The skin was oil-black, like obsidian, which crumbled underfoot with a disgusting rustle.

"Fuck!" Lawrence recoiled, and tried to walk away, but lost his balance. He would have fallen if Upshaw hadn't held him back. "The child!" The receiver squeezed. "Damn, there are so many children in here!"

"Calm down," Paramonov replied deadpan. "We can't help them anymore."

"Why the fuck did you drag us here?" Lawrence was still covering his mouth with the back of his hand. "Everything's burned down in here."

Yehor silently pointed forward. The receiver stretched his neck, "What's?"

"The bulkhead web between first and business class cabins. Three lavatories and two on-board kitchens. There might be some water left."

"We had to climb through a hole in the right side. Why the hell did we..."

Lawrence paused as Paramonov leaned over the body of the teenage girl, who was lying on a pile of pulled-up chairs. She looked like a thirteen-year-old Arab. Yehor touched her neck with his finger, waited for a few seconds, and then, grabbing the girl, started pulling her out from under the pile of remnants.

"Is she alive?" Upshaw asked.

"No."

She was wearing a red windbreaker with a hood. Paramonov managed to release only half of her body, and then her thighs got stuck between the bars that served as a support for the floor. Paramonov stopped pulling and, holding the girl's body with one hand, pulled off her jacket with the other.

"Fuck, man, you're sick," Lawrence snorted. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"She's dead," the Russian said, folding the windbreaker carefully without raising his head, "but the jacket will help Leila get warm."

Lawrence shook his head and followed Yehor.

Reaching the door portal between the first and business-class cabins, Paramonov kicked in a lavatory door. The cabin was greatly squeezed, it was reduced to the size of a small coffin, and the steel toilet, bent but not charred, hung at chest level. Yehor pressed inside, broke a few plastic panels with his hands, and, inspecting the pipelines, cursed. The pipe through which the drinking water went to the sink was dry.

The cabinets on the right side of the bulkhead were completely destroyed, but the kitchen on the left side survived, so while Paramonov was rummaging the toilet, hoping that there was at least some water left in the pipes, Duke Upshaw inspected the side kitchen. He came across a steel tray on wheels, that the stewardesses use to carry around drinks and food, but inside there were only garbage and duty-free goods. However, behind the kitchen, on the floor of the lopsided passage to the first-class cabin, the cardinal saw two plastic bottles of water. Next to them was lying a partially burnt polyester blanket.

“I found water,” said the old man. “And a blanket.” He lifted it over his head. “Although it’s slightly burnt.”

“Great.” Paramonov stuck the head out of the lavatory. “Take everything with you.”

The Russian moved to the second lavatory, but the door did not give in, they had to lean on it together. Lawrence watched them for a while, then turned away and began to look at the fire-ravaged remains through which they had just made their way into the cabin. Through the hole, he could see the daylight fading quickly. Darkness, like smoke, rose from under the pile of charred chairs and metal beams and spread beyond the fuselage, and the cold was penetrating from the outside of the cabin. Lawrence clapped his hands, crossed his arms over his chest, and began rubbing his biceps with his palms. The old man with the clerical collar and the other one, with a Slavic accent, did not say anything, and he was not eager to help them. Despite the cold, he felt decently fine and was thinking that not everything was so bad — being a loser but alive is still better than being a dead champion. Suddenly he noticed a movement with an angular vision. Two meters from him, a coal-black armrest slid sideways. Beneath it, between cracked but unburned panels, he distinguished a body.

One more dead. And before Lawrence even started thinking of how the hell a piece of chair could be moving as if someone was pushing it, the corpse, creaking deafly, lifter. A pair of eyes stared at Lawrence’s sooty face. The guy jumped out of the blue but was able to suppress a terrified scream and only then let out a more decent muffled howl.

“Oh, hell, someone is alive there!”

Upshaw and Paramonov rushed to Lawrence, and then three of them together hastened to pull the passenger out from under the wreckage of the floor and seats. Having released her, they carried the passenger closer to the door portal and placed her next to the kitchen. The woman was wearing a dark green dress with a cherry pattern and a black jacket, which had obviously been much lighter before the accident.

— קר... — she was shivering. — פה קר כך כל למה?.. אני איפה?..¹

Upshaw crouched, wincing when his knee cracked, and asked,

“I don’t understand you. Do you speak English?”

“It’s cold,” she repeated. “Why is it so cold here?”

“The plane crashed,” said the cardinal. “We’re high in the mountains.”

Paramonov quickly examined the woman but saw no wounds bleeding.

“Where are we?” She blinked.

None of the men answered.

“What is your name?” Upshaw asked, throwing a blanket over her shoulders.

“Helen. I...” the rescued spoke English with a light, almost imperceptible accent. “What’s happened here?”

“It’s all right, Helen.” He opened one of the bottles and put it to her lips. “How do you feel? Does anything hurt?”

The woman took a few sips, withdrew his hand, and looked around.

“Did the plane crash?”

“Yes.” The cardinal soaked the edge of the blanket and wiped her face. “It’s a miracle that you survived.”

Now it was her turn to examine the men.

“What are you doing here?”

Upshaw didn’t seem to understand the question.

“We’re looking for water and blankets,” the Russian replied.

“Why?”

“Because we are in the mountains, and...”

“And...” She frowned, like a man who can’t remember the name of a distant relative.

Oxygen, which reached the lungs through the nostrils, was not enough, and Yehor breathed noisily through his mouth.

¹ Cold... Where am I?.. Why is it so cold?.. (Hebrew).

“And so far, no one has come for us.” He looked at the aisle leading to the first-class cabin, touched Lawrence’s arm, and said quickly, “We have to move her there. Then we’ll search everything and take her down through a hole in the right side. It will be easier than dragging her back through the business class cabin.

The Russian took Helen by the legs, Lawrence grabbed her by the armpits, and they carried the woman to the 4E seat, where Leila had been sitting before the crash.

“Stay with her,” Yehor asked the cardinal. Then he turned to the guy, “Collect blankets, bags, backpacks, and drag everything here. Blankets can still be in the corridor, there.” Paramonov didn’t have to repeat twice: while Lawrence was shifting around between the seats, chattering his teeth with cold, Paramonov went to the cockpit and halfway there uttered over his shoulder, “Find her some shoes.”

The American glared at Helen in the unfolded chair, saw that she was barefoot, and frowned.

“That is, I must...”

“Yes, you must take them off someone dead.” Otherwise, she will get her feet frost-bitten fast.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the cockpit.”

In the cockpit, from a special shelf behind the door, Yehor took out a small emergency hatchet with a handle covered with insulating material. This model of the 777 was older than the one he was flying, but the pilot knew that, in addition to the hatchet, the mandatory set of rescue equipment included rescue flares, flashlights, ropes, and a first aid kit. However, having prowled for a minute between the flattened walls of the cabin, he did not find them.

When Paramonov returned to the first-class cabin, a pile of gray blankets with Altair Air logos (six or seven unfolded and at least two dozen unopened, still wrapped) and several bags stood in front of the hole on the right side, and on Helen’s feet hanged loose and therefore too tightly laced sneakers “Under Armor”.

“I found another bottle of water,” Lawrence said, throwing a blanket over his shoulder, but he kept shivering, “...and some wrapped buns. There were salads or something as well,” the guy pointed at the first-class on-board kitchen, “but everything was gutted — the food got mixed with glass and plastic, and I didn’t even try to take anything.”

“I see.” Yehor turned to Helen, “Can you walk?”

“Yes, I’m better.” The woman rejected Duke Upshaw’s help and was standing up on her own.

“Then let’s get out of here.”

Upshaw, holding a windbreaker for Leila under his armpit, was the first to leave the plane. Lawrence dropped him a bottle of water, blankets, and a bag of bread, then jumped himself. Before helping Helen, Paramonov walked through the cabin and with the hatchet cut off all the seat belts he could reach. Folding them into one of the bags, he threw them to Lawrence. He looked in his bag and shook his head but did not ask anything.

Yehor and Helen stopped at the breach.

“I’ll help,” the pilot suggested.

“No, I can do it myself.” She shook her head.

Standing on the very edge, the woman froze. Without collusion, Helen and the Russian simultaneously turned their heads in the direction of the melted, broken aisle of the business class cabin. They were thinking about the same thing, but the pictures in their heads seemed to have different coloring. Yehor saw the ruins and death and wondered how at first sight a trivial fuselage problem had killed so many people and turned one of the most advanced airplanes in the world into a charred piece of junk, and Helen was thinking of millions of dollars. She could do nothing about it. She stared at the pile of crushed chairs, the deformed plastic that looked like frozen lava, and the metal frame exposed by the fire, but she saw only organs — human organs stuffed in human bodies.

18:46

A quarter to seven the sun disappeared behind the mountains in the west, and the sky above the saddle turned black.

While Paramonov, Upshaw, and Lawrence were seeking through the plane nose, Oliver Morgenstern literally turned blue from cold, and yet he did not want to take the jacket back – Leila needed it more. When the men returned, Anna and Helen put on the red windbreaker Duke had brought over, and the girl finally stopped chattering her teeth.

In total, Yehor counted twenty-nine blankets — four for each adult and five for Leila. At first, he handed out two blankets to each of them, advising them to wrap them around their legs and fasten their seat belts to their ankles and under their buttocks. He showed how to remove a belt from a metal clasp and fit another one with a tongue at the end so that an improvised clamp is formed, the tension of which is easy to adjust, and which can be aptly removed from the leg if necessary.

While the men and women were wrapping their legs in polyester blankets, the Russian took turns laying out the rest of the blankets on a more or less flat stone surface and making a small incision in the center of each, just to get the head through. Then each of the survivors equipped themselves with the remaining two blankets, putting them over their heads like a poncho. Anna and Helen helped Leila to “warm up.”

Finally, Paramonov began to look through the contents of the bags brought from the plane. He was in a hurry — the strip of light behind the peaks in the west was getting thinner, and the twilight seemed to be getting heavier — and he wasn't too careful. Yehor hoped to come across a notebook, a folder of papers, or something like David Mitchell's novel “Dream Number 9” in paperback, but, unfortunately, there was nothing. After searching almost all the bags, he was able to find only a paper napkin, a small box of pills, and a wallet, which, unluckily, contained only credit cards. Not hiding his disappointment, the man opened the last bag, and then Anna grabbed his hand.

“It's mine.”

Despite the twilight, he could distinguish the freckles on her face but did not notice the nervous gleam in her coffee eyes.

“I will take only the money and a passport.”

“No!” Anna tried to pull the bag out of his hands, but Yehor did not release the grip.

“What do you mean “no”?” Paramonov finally noticed that she cringed. He wasn't sure if she was breathing. “Is there anything personal?” The woman did not answer. The Russian handed her the bag, but inside, between the T-shirts, he noticed a thick woman's wallet. “If you want, do it yourself. I just need your passport, money, and anything made of paper. I don't need anything else.”

“I can't.” Anna looked as if the guts were slowly being pulled out of her.

“Why? Are you afraid of losing your passport? They will make you a new one.”

“It's not because of the passport,” she said as if her tongue was swollen. “My money... I need it.”

“Don't you understand?” Paramonov got angry. “I need paper to light a fire! Without it, we will die! Once we get out, the airline will pay you so much that...”

Suddenly he was interrupted by Lawrence, “How are you going to you light the fire?” Anna and Yehor spoke Russian, but the American seems to have guessed what the conversation was about.

Paramonov turned his head and calmly asked, “Do you have a lighter?”

“No.”

The Russian raised his voice, “Does anyone have a lighter?”

There was a depressing silence for a few seconds.

“Are lighters allowed to be carried to the cabin?” asked Helen.

“Petrol lighters – no, even put in your luggage. But ordinary gas ones are allowed.” Yehor rolled his eyes. “Well? Anyone?”

Helen grinned annoyingly. “For the first time in my life, I regret giving up smoking.”

“How about the matches?” The man asked.

Nothing in response again. Some shook their heads, and some pretended to look away, although, in reality, everyone was secretly watching Paramonov. Only Anna (whose face, as soon as it became clear that none of them had a lighter, seemed to be closed) stepped away from the Russian and sat down next to Leila.

“You're an idiot.” His beard was frosted around Lawrence's grimaced lips. “We were crawling for half an hour inside the plane, collecting rags, and you hadn't even had an idea to ask before whether anyone had a lighter?”

“If you stared less at the moon and helped us a little more, we would have managed to finish everything before sunset, and I would have had time to light a fire.” roared Yehor.

“How?”

“We have water.”

“So what?!” A deep unsatisfied wrinkle appeared between Lawrence’s eyebrows. “Can you set the paper on fire with water?”

Paramonov measured him with a tired look but did not explain anything, “I guess no fire for tonight. But tomorrow I will take care of everything.”

In a silence full of hostile premonition, they moved to a deepening on the slope of a rocky hill to the north of the saddle. For some reason, Helen Horowitz avoided Leila, so the girl was placed between Anna and Oliver. Upshaw, Lawrence, and Helen set down in a semicircle. The Russian, having dragged all the bags to the hollow, settled down next to Anna. He muttered that they should get closer in order not to lose heat, even though everyone instinctively clung to each other. After settling down, Paramonov handed them a bottle of water, the cardinal had opened on the plane. Everyone took a few sips; the rest was given to Leila to drink.

At a quarter to seven, the impenetrable blackness overcame the last purple glints over the horizon, and the night fell over the saddle. The darkness erased the outlines of distant ridges, but the grayish-white moonlight sprinkled the southwestern peak with a silvery mist as if releasing it from the darkness.

Frost clenched its jaws. Anna first wrapped Leila’s head and then tied up her own with the blanket. Despite that, every five minutes waves of light tremors (which made the cheekbones convulse) rolled up and down the body, and then Anna pulled her knees to her chest, bent her head, and began to breathe noisily, blowing the warm air between her palms. Helen, who couldn’t stop moving, did the same, but in a minute, not feeling relieved, poked Yehor.

“Why can’t I spend the night inside the plane? It’s a little warmer there.”

“Because we don’t know if it’s holding up well on the slope,” Paramonov replied. “We will not have time to get out if the fuselage starts rolling down.”

Upshaw took a wheat bun from the bag and handed it to Leila. The girl quickly snatched the bun from his hands and immediately, as if afraid that the old man would change his mind, hid it under a blanket. However, she did not start eating it straight away – had no appetite. Thirst was much more annoying than hunger.

“*Man ab mikham,*” she whispered. “*Man teshne hastam*².”

The little girl whispered so softly that at first, only Anna heard her.

“She’s saying something.”

Upshaw leaned forward.

“Leila... Is anything wrong?”

“*Man teshne hastam.*”

“I don’t understand you. Can you repeat it in English You can, I know.”

The girl whimpered, hiding her face almost completely under the blanket, but the feeling of thirst was too strong and muffled her shyness. She did not understand a word of what the cardinal was saying but guessed to repeat the request in English.

“Water...”

“She wants more water,” said Anna.

Paramonov took an unopened bottle from his bag, Anna unscrewed the lid and pressed it to the girl’s lips. Leila was holding the bottle until she drank half.

At a significant altitude, the partial pressure of water vapor in the air is extremely low. Even at an altitude of two thousand meters, the humidity is twice lower than at the sea level, and in the highlands, especially at low temperatures, the air becomes completely dry, and as a result, the body quickly loses liquid through the skin and lungs. Physical work with a lack of oxygen and almost zero humidity further enhances lung activity and thus accelerates dehydration. In such conditions, a person sometimes loses up to ten liters of liquid a day. Lawrence was silent when everyone just soaked their lips, but he couldn’t help watching Leila swallow greedily.

² I want more water. I’m thirsty (Farsi).

“Me too...” his glance latched onto a plastic bottle, “...I want more water!”

Anna looked askance at Yehor, and the Russian, hesitating, nodded indecisively. The woman handed the bottle to Lawrence. Grace sucked on and took three big sips. Paramonov suddenly interrupted him.

“Don’t drink much.”

Lawrence pulled away from the bottle. There was only a sip of water left.

“Why?” aggressive notes vibrated in his voice.

“Because there are seven of us, we’re also responsible for the child, and this is all the water we have.”

“There are tons of snow all around.” The guy pointed to the north. “Up there on the slope.”

“We can’t eat the snow,” the phrase sounded childishly naive. Yehor understood this and immediately tensed up, desperately trying to remember everything his father had said about the snow in the mountains. Memories of one particularly lousy evening came to mind: the apartment was cold, the clouds outside the window were swollen with black, and swarms of small drops crashed against the windows with a loose, monotonous rustle. Father laid his crippled hands on the armrests, looked sadly at him, huddled on the sofa in the opposite corner, and slowly, as if savoring, explained why snow and ice cannot save from thirst in the mountains. The explanation was a permanent prelude to further narration. Yehor needed to believe that all the horrors of the Victory Peak had actually happened, that his father had not invented them just to swagger him in dread. The story was engraved in his mind down to the smallest detail — his father returned to it almost every week for four years until Yehor escaped from home to study in Krasnodar — but the explanation, unfortunately, didn’t fade from memory.

Lawrence rolled his eyes.

“Dude, stop it. I’m sick of your preachments!

“As you wish.” Paramonov felt the irritation rising up his throat. “Eat as much as you want. I highly recommend trying yellow snow. It is said that yellow snow is extremely delicious and worth the extra effort spent searching.”

There was silence for a few seconds, then Lawrence exploded.

“This asshole’s just joked about the piss?!” He glanced at Upshaw, turned his gaze to Anna, then to Helen. “We got smashed in the mountains in the middle of some fucking caliphate, and he’s joking about the snow pees?!”

“Calm down,” said Helen. “He is right. You do not quench your thirst with snow!”

“Why?”

“Because it should be melted first, well, before drinking. Just chewing snow will lead to even faster dehydration.

Paramonov was silent.

“But why?” Lawrence waved his hands. “It’s just frozen water!”

“In short, because the amount of energy the body uses to turn snow into water is way bigger than the amount of energy the body gets from the melted snow...” Lawrence was sitting silently with a slightly puzzled look, so Helen continued, “...We need water for metabolism. That is, to produce energy and maintain a stable body temperature. Do you understand? But melting the ice will take a lot more energy, so I doubt it won’t feel thirsty after, but it will definitely cause hypothermia, dehydration, and, as a result, death.”

“How do you know it?”

“I’m a doctor.”

Lawrence paused. He was staring at the almost empty bottle for a long time. Three sips only irritated him. Then he finally handed it to Anna. She put the lid on. For a while, all that could be heard was Oliver breathing quickly and shallowly, like a dead-beat dog. Eventually, stomping into emptiness, Paramonov said, “Tomorrow... if there are no clouds... we will light a fire.”