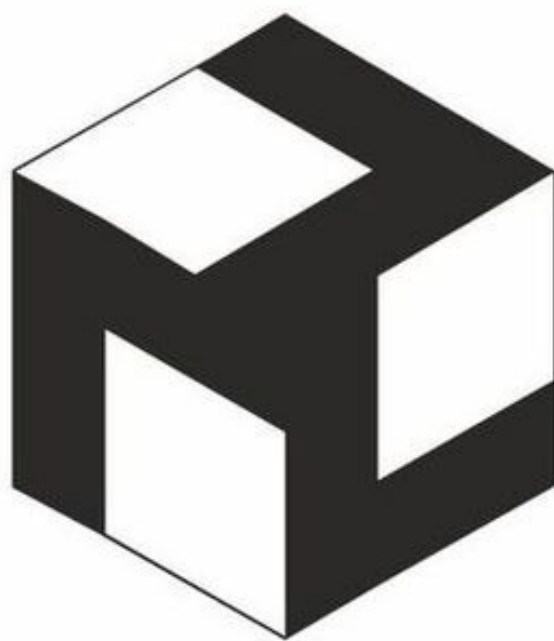


18+ Shuklina Tatyana

ANTAKARANA

Quest in Reality



Good is multifaceted
and can be extremely dangerous

Tatyana Shuklina

Antakarana. Quest in Reality

«Издательские решения»

Shuklina T.

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Eleven people head to Paradise Island to compete in the Game. They have to complete tasks at the limit of human capabilities in search of an answer to the key question: what unites the players. And only the winner will find out what the Antakarana Corporation is so diligently hiding from the world community. Will the players make it to the finish line? After all, mortal danger comes not only from poisonous snakes and moving walls, but also from the human soul, full of dangerous secrets.

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Antakarana. Quest in Reality

Tatyana Shuklina

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The Final

All I can hear now is my own uneven breathing and a deafening heartbeat in my chest. I seem to be suffocating, but it is not a lack of oxygen. Never in my life have I had to experience such deep and woeful despair. I want to hide in a corner, cover my face with hands and sob. Unleash the tears of unspoken pain, guilt and loss – everything I have experienced in the last week. But they stand like a lump in the throat, strangle and tear apart.

«Please let it be a dream! Bad, nightmarish, realistic. Let me wake up in my ordinary life, smell the Sunday pancakes that my mother has been cooking in a frying pan for twenty years...»

But I know for sure that I am not sleeping and everything that happens around is a nightmarish reality. Right now, a choice must be made. Do I really have it? I can still save those who survived, atone for my guilt for those who left. Still able to help those I love. But, God, what a monstrous cost! Do I have a choice? Will I be able to live peacefully with my hands stained with blood?

Each of us is to blame for what happened in this damned place, each made his own contribution: did not think anything over, underestimated, and did not prevent anything. I cannot live with guilt. To see their faces in nightmares, to relive repeatedly their tragedies, their losses and this destructive feeling of complete helplessness. Close my eyes and see their suffering, plug my ears and hear their cries, close my heart and feel their pain. Do I have a choice? THEY claim I do. However, I know better. For the first time in all this time, I know better. The point is I have no choice.

A countdown starts:

«Ten... nine... eight...»

I know what to do. THEY expect this from me.

«Seven... six... five...»

Suddenly the decision is there. The thoughts in my head stop getting confused. I feel confident and calm.

«Four... three... two...»

The last look at those who have become so precious to me during this time.

«Goodbye,» I whisper with my lips alone.

«One...»

I manage to catch my breath and begin to speak in a calm voice, while tears finally find their way out and run unhindered down my cheeks in streams. These are tears of relief. Rivers of deep sorrow and endless anguish.

«My name is Larina Victoria, age 25. Game name Lavina. And I'm ready to tell you the answer to this damn quest game...»

The Game begins

I wake up, but my heart is still pounding furiously in the chest. Wet sweat is on my forehead. It has been just a bad dream! At first I feel a deep relief, then a strange joy, the same that I feel every time I wake up from a nightmare. It's so good to know that it was just a dream. The adrenaline rush got into the blood, and I definitely like it.

«Tea or coffee?» A flight attendant impatiently interrupts my train of thought with a consistently professional smile. «Oh, I'm sorry, I woke you up,» she adds absolutely without regret and with the same cold smile.

«Eh, nothing. I'd like some tea, please. China is famous for its tea. I could start getting involved in its culture right now. After all, we are already flying in the Chinese sky?» I am trying to joke.

«We are on board a Russian airliner, tea is also Russian,» the stewardess calmly answers, «you like to have one?»

«Yes, thank you,» I sigh.

With a cup of hot tea in my hands, I press my forehead against the cold glass and look out the window. In my dream, I ran along the tangled paths of the labyrinth and did not see who was chasing me, but I felt the chilling fear of pursuit and the uncontrolled terror in front of an unknown enemy. The coldness and darkness of the labyrinth pressed on me. The further I ran, the sooner I got closer to this Something, to the danger that awaited me at every branch of the path. And at that moment, when I had no doubts that IT was waiting for the next turn, the flight attendant with a far from friendly smile offered me far from Chinese tea.

The blue sky, the bright sun overboard and the anticipation of the upcoming adventure are dizzy. By the way, I am afraid to fly, although I am not to blame for weakness of character. Since the age of thirteen I have been mountaineering. I have two parachute jumps behind my shoulders. The roller coasters or bungees are simply breathtaking for me. No, what really bothers me is the realization of my own helplessness. After all, nothing depends on me: one mistake of a pilot or failure of equipment – and there is an end of my precious life, filled with youth that spills like a fountain! My hands are sweating and I feel a little dizzy again. Stop! I drive away bad thoughts and switch to what is really important. My name is Larina Victoria, I am from Russia, and I got into the Game of the Century – «Antakarana. Quest in reality».

My real passion are quest games. The most diverse: computer, book and real ones. I am a frequenter of the interactive quest community. When the announcement of the upcoming game appeared on the network, this event immediately became the main topic of the forum. Like many participants, I filled out questionnaires and passed all imaginable and inconceivable tests: from logical problems and quite understandable puzzles to completely incomprehensible and even more illogical questions, such as:

«Imagine that you have little people in your ear. What color are they:

a) Yellow – the color of earwax.

b) Red – periodically you have a bleeding ear.

c) Green – the result of tests of alien creatures.

d) Little people cannot live in the human ear cavity due to the lack of atmosphere.

e) Your own option».

I thought then that this might be a test of my sense of humor, so I answered: *«f) They are actually purple. I was recently lucky to see one of them on a pillow at night.»*

However, among such stupid and harmless questions, there were also frankly frightening ones, which were, to put it mildly, creepy to answer. I doubt that in this way the organizers set out to test our erudition: the answers could be easily found on the Internet.

«How long did it take to kill people in the gas chamber in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp since the spraying of the Zyklon-B gas?»

- a) 10 minutes*
- b) 15 minutes*
- c) 30 minutes*
- d) Your own option.»*

Or another one:

«Which of the famous killer maniacs had the nickname «Killer Clown», as he lured victims under the guise of a disguised clown, tortured and brutally killed them:

- a) Dennis Rader*
- b) Gehry Regguy*
- c) John Wayne Gacy*
- d) Jeffrey Lionel Dahmer*
- e) Your own option.»*

Howbait, I was sincerely surprised when two weeks later I received the coveted invitation to the game.

In addition to my trip to China, more precisely Tibet, there is one more thing that I am incredibly happy about. A young man from Russia with the playing name Alex will take part in the quest. He is also a member of our quest community. Once we played an online game in pairs. The guy even sent me a picture, but I still don't know his real name. All our communication was limited to discussing strategies for finding objects or solving the next puzzle.

The idea that I will not be the only participant from Russia encourages me. It's not about worrying about the language barrier – after all, I've been working as an English translator for four years now. It's still nice to have someone to chat with in your native language. Tickets were booked for us for different flights. Probably, the rules of the game exclude the participants' preliminary acquaintance with each other.

And now, a month after filling out the questionnaire and completing various tasks and tests, I am sitting on the plane, feeling a little nervous about the flight, and listening to the captain of the aircraft announce the landing at the Beijing Capital Airport.

After all the formalities and customs control at the airport, I go out to the arrival hall. Immediately striking is an attractive Asian girl in an impeccable white trouser suit. Her resinous hair is pulled back neatly. She reminds me of a business woman from a glossy magazine. I do not like glossy magazines and have no idea what has been published in them lately, but this is exactly the comparison that comes to my mind.

«Glossy lady» holds a sign with my name «Larina Victoria. Russian Federation». For some reason, I immediately feel embarrassed for my appearance: for frayed jeans and a loose T-shirt, on which a stain from accidentally spilled tea appears treacherously. My long black hair is tied casually in a ponytail, and thick forelock falls over my eyes. I recall with horror that I have not combed my hair since boarding the plane about 8 hours ago. Confused, I approach the Glossy Lady and try to seem extremely friendly:

«Hello, I'm Victoria.»

«Miss Larina, welcome to Beijing city. My name is Zhang Kiang. I will accompany you to the plane, which will fly to the location.»

«Just call me Victoria. Nice to meet you, Zhang Kiang.»

«Miss Larina,» the Asian ignores my offer, «how was your flight?»

«At first everything was fine, and then tea was served: not Chinese, not Indian and not tasty. Please, call me Victoria,» I repeat my request.

«Miss Larina,» the glossy lady smiles with a cold professional smile (Today is just a holiday of some kind: «Day of a cold professional smile», I joylessly state to myself), «I hope that you will still have a chance to taste a Chinese traditional drink. But now we need to hurry. In 40 minutes, a flight will start to the private airport in the city of Lhasa, from where the plane will soon take off to the location. Follow me if you don't mind.» She brings her hands together and bows slightly. Then she turns and walks on a high stiletto heel with an impeccable gait towards the exit.

It's hard for me to hide my disappointment. I don't know what exactly I was counting on: a warm welcome in a luxurious residence, hung with slogans like «Welcome, participants of the first world-class quest game»; on a tour of Beijing; on the crowd of friendly organizers who are ready to fulfill my every wish in order to demonstrate their hospitality; on television popularity... What I certainly did not expect was a cold reception, a quick change of location and the absolute absence of a hint of any sensation.

«Zhang Kiang, where are the other participants?» I ask her on the go, hastily looking around, in an attempt to see at least something interesting. But all that catches my eye are tourists scurrying back and forth with huge luggage bags. Periodically, representatives of the opposite sex throw in our direction interested glances, no doubt intended for my companion. No wonder, since elegance, confidence and impeccable taste go along with her. With me only a compact and well-worn suitcase on wheels – the instructions clearly indicated that during the game I would not need personal items. I took only the essentials: a camera, a set of changeable clothes, a warm jacket, some cosmetics and a tablet PC. All this took half of the suitcase, and a bunch of little things filled the second part.

«Each participant will be taken to the meeting point at the Lhasa airport on a private plane with a personal escort,» Zhang Kiang replies with the same professional coolness.

I'm trying to ask a couple of questions about the rules of the game to find out at least some information. The glossy lady answers in monosyllables, and sometimes just ignores me. On the fifth question, she can't stand it any more, stops and announces in an even tone with a slight touch of irritation:

«Miss Larina, discussing information related to the game is not on my list of powers. I'm sorry.» All my hopes of hospitality are mercilessly dashed. We walk the rest of the way in silence.

Four men in white formal suits and black glasses are waiting for us near one of the airport exits. I immediately call them «ninja» to myself. They make a menacing impression: one awkward movement and the guys will fly into the air in unthinkable positions to bring down their «ki-ya» on the head of the unwanted one (in this situation, me). Without a word, they surround us in a square. And in such a slender wedge we follow the plane.

I feel very uneasy at heart. What if this whole action is planned by the slavers? If now I am kidnapped, taken away in an unknown direction, killed, demanded a ransom or sold into slavery... Such thoughts dry up my mouth and buckle my knees.

And at this moment I see it for the first time. Drawn on the wing of a small plane, it sparkles in the sun with all its facets – the ancient Tibetan symbol of Antakarana – three sevens in a three-dimensional cube. It takes my breath away how simple and beautiful it is at the same time.

Frankly, I was never interested in Tibetan culture and associated it exclusively with Buddhist monks. And even then all my modest knowledge was limited to the fact that it was about men wrapped in orange sheets, leading an ascetic lifestyle and living in cheerful multi-colored temples. They were credited with ancient healing powers and various miracles of meditation. But before the game, I read a lot about Tibet, people living there, symbols, legends and delusions.

The topic captured and carried me away so much that I was not so much happy about my participation in the game as the opportunity to visit Tibet and touch the cryptic history of this mysterious culture...

And this magical ancient symbol of healing, used in Tibet and China for thousands of years, makes my heart beat with joy and excitement. Hello, the brightest and most unforgettable adventure in my life!

On board my «personal» plane, it's incredibly clean and cold, almost sterile. White leather chairs and folding tables, dazzling white plastic. A steward in a snow-white uniform with a restrained expression on his face meets us at the entrance to the salon and obligingly takes my modest luggage. Zhang Kiang and I sit down opposite each other in incredibly comfortable chairs, and our silent, by the way, also snow-white, ninja companions are placed in the tail of the plane.

«Miss Larina, our flight will last no more than two hours. During this time, you need to familiarize yourself with the content of the contract with the Corporation and sign it. Unfortunately, we will not have time for discussion at the airport. You will be immediately transported to...»

«I know, I know,» I interrupt her impatiently, «the plane to the location. To be honest, I didn't expect such a... um... hasty start.»

The glossy lady looks at me seriously and answers without the slightest hint of her already nerve-wracking robot courtesy:

«Miss Larina, obviously you do not fully understand the seriousness of the Corporation's intentions. We have selected the best of the best for the mission. You are called to discover the most important secret and find a solution to an ancient riddle. It means a lot to us. We cannot afford even the slightest mistakes in organizing the Game. Magnificent receptions and public attention are not included in our plans. Miss Larina, I am absolutely sure that on the way back you will be able to enjoy the beauty of Lhasa and, as you call it beautifully, „join the Tibetan culture.“ Although, between us, what do you know about this? Absolutely nothing.»

She pulls her damn smile back on.

«Here's the contract. Check out its content. If you have any questions, I am at your service.»

On the one hand, I am ready to sink into the ground in shame. On the other hand, rage boils in me. Ultimately, the fact that I am lucky enough to be in the top ten does not deprive me of the right to know more about the adventure I am embarking on. And if, according to her, I am so special, then at least I deserve more tactful and helpful treatment. Having overcome the inner volcano of emotions, I take the contract from her hands:

«Actually, a little. I have read something about Tibetan monks, symbols and traditions. During the game, I learn more.

«During the game? Oh, Miss Larina, you are wrong. Our quest has nothing to do with Tibetan traditions. The glossy lady seems genuinely surprised.»

Second big disappointment to date. In order not to demonstrate it, I just delve into reading.

The contract is drawn up in Chinese and English. The parties are Antakarana Corporation (game organizers) and the participant (in this case, me). I quickly skim through the usual preamble and standard clauses of the contract. I draw my attention to the rights and obligations of the participants. Nothing new, almost all the points were listed in the initial instructions, which the organizers sent by email along with the invitation to the Game.

The plane starts to take off. As usual, my head is a little dizzy and my breathing quickens. The palms become wet. I pretend to carefully study the contract so as not to please my companion by showing inner discomfort.

She's just doing her job, I tell myself. However, my antipathy to her grows with every minute I spend together. We are gaining altitude. I'm glad this is a small private jet. The smaller the aircraft, the safer it seems to me. As if a huge airliner with hundreds of passengers on board could collapse due to its weight! I am well aware that this has no scientific basis. A couple of times the plane wobbles

a little from side to side, so it takes my breath away. But I do my best to concentrate on the contract, and in the end I succeed.

The plane has climbed up and Zhang Kiang solemnly informs me that it is finally time to enjoy Chinese green tea. I nod politely and curse in my mind, having received a small mug the size of one sip.

In the meantime, I get to the description of the paragraph on the grand prize for the winner. The Corporation promises the lucky devil one million dollars.

Of course, I don't count on the jackpot. I have never had any luck in the events like these. I chuckle at the thought of the words «like these». As if the adventures of this kind happen to me every day! Yes, I have never won lotteries, horse races, casinos, money disputes or card games. But still, I know exactly what I expect from this game: emotions, activation of mental activity, new acquaintances, well-thought-out puzzles, my own dose of adrenaline...

In a world-class quest, it simply cannot be otherwise. And yet... the thought of the likely win is dizzy. There won't be many of us. I cope well with the intricate tasks in online quests, I have good intuition and, thanks to constant training, I am in excellent physical shape. If you add a drop of luck to this cocktail...

What nonsense this cocktail! I discard the thought of winning, emphasizing to myself the intention to spend time in an interesting, effective and simply unusual way. The contract has already been marked by the head of the Corporation with two strange symbols, presumably Chinese hieroglyphs.

«Zhang Kiang, I'm ready to sign.»

«Miss Larina, I want you to be aware that after you sign the contract, you will not be able to leave the game until it is over. Under no circumstances. This is the last opportunity to refuse.»

I shall warn you that a difficult test lies ahead: strong opponents, hard conditions, difficult tasks, a constant burden of responsibility for the decisions made. The «Quest in Reality» is just a game, but this week everything will happen for real.

The organizer will not appear at the touch of a button to give a hint or help in passing an obstacle, as it happens in regular quests. Participants will have to rely only on themselves. It can be emotionally hard.

You still have the right to change your mind. But, on the other hand, you should know that the Game can show you a previously unknown world, demonstrate new facets of life and open the most secret corners of your subconscious. After completing the Quest from start to finish, you will never be the same again. You will be surprised at what your body is capable of, but even more at what your soul is capable of. It's up to you to decide, Miss Larina, and only here and now.

Her words evoke conflicting emotions in me: on the one hand, I feel the much-desired rush of adrenaline in my blood and a dizzy euphoria about the upcoming adventure. A real, live adventure! On the other hand, at some point a chill runs down my spine, as when I answered the strange questions from the questionnaire about maniacs and Cyclone-B gas suffocation.

«The decision is made.»

The glossy lady just nods and hands me a pen. I put my signature on the line intended for this.

«Welcome to the Game!»

Zhang Kiang smiles, and this time I feel like I see the emotion in her eyes for the first time: this is relief.

A few minutes later, the plane is landing. Then everything happens extremely quickly. The glossy lady takes my suitcase, assuring that she will return my things safe and sound at the end of the Game. I am allowed to take with me only identity documents and one item that will remind me of home. I choose a notebook in a luxurious leather cover and my favorite pen – the presents from

my father for the twenty-fifth birthday. I'm used to carry them with me and periodically make notes, if suddenly, in the middle of a working day, I am flashed by some kind of guess about the quest task, over which I had been puzzling until midnight. Sometimes I just like to write down my thoughts in a notebook.

One of the ninja accompanying us approaches and without a single word puts a device similar to a large medical syringe without a needle to the right side of my neck, closer to my forearm. Zhang Kiang explains:

«A coordinator will be placed in your shoulder, no reason to be alarmed.»

«A gamer with a built-in GPS, what a great idea,» I joke grimly.

«You can put it this way, too,» my companion responds indifferently.

Her presence gives me more and more discomfort. The woman gets on my nerves, frightens, pisses me off with her detachment and facial expressions devoid of all emotions.

Our plane lands safely. I am so lost in thoughts about this strange day and how differently I imagined it, that I forget to be scared. When we finally stop, Zhang Kiang turns to me:

«Well, all formalities have been met. In less than an hour, the plane with all participants will head to the Location. On board you will be offered a warm lunch, drinks and additional instructions.» After a short pause she adds:

«Miss Larina, you look extremely sloppy. Let me fix your hair.»

My first impulse is to jump up, push her away and, perhaps, even be rude. But Zhang Kiang is quicker: she deftly removes the elastic that secures my ponytail, straightens the long dark hair, and then pulls it back into a bun. At this moment, the Glossy Lady bends down to my ear and whispers softly, almost with her lips alone. And yet I clearly catch her words:

«Don't trust anyone. Follow the instructions carefully. This is your only chance.»

Then she walks away abruptly. The pumped up ninjas turn their turtle heads in our direction.

«Thank you.» I try to hide my surprise.

Zhang Kiang only nods indifferently in response.

I get off the plane and instead of the airport I see a primitive two-story building. Surely, the same uncomplicated equipment is inside. But I am not allowed to find it out. A few hundred meters away, a small snow-white plane with the Antakarana emblem on its wings is prepared. It sparkles brightly in the sun, dazzling with its splendor. A white limousine with a familiar three-dimensional symbol is already waiting nearby, ready to take me aboard the aircraft.

Feeling uncomfortable before, now I am seized by a real panic. What did Zhang Kiang want to say with her words: «Don't trust anyone. Follow the instructions carefully. This is your only chance.» A chance for what? Get one million dollar prize? What if this is not a game at all, but just a trap? What if now I fall into the hands of cruel pirates or slave traders?! I was naive in my belief having caught the luck of my life and that is why so easily hooked! Can I break free, scream, call the police? But can they kidnap people just like that, in daylight? What if they are all at one and it will only make it worse? While preparing for the game, I saw documents confirming the existence of the corporation. As if you can't fake them in Photoshop! Everyone knows where I am. A chill runs down my spine: no one, absolutely no one, including me, knows where we are going in a few minutes. My trail is getting lost here at an unknown private airport in Lhasa. Panicked, I turn to the Glossy Lady.

«Good luck, Lavina! I will be rooting for you.»

I catch in her eyes the second emotion of the day. And I definitely don't like her. This emotion is condolence.

My Game name. The Glossy Lady named me Lavina. Does this mean that the Game has begun? Lavina is practically my second name, identical to the name Victoria. This is the nickname my classmates gave me back in high school. Conceived as an abbreviation for the full Larina Victoria Nikolaevna, it was intended to become offensive. However, the comparison with the natural phenomenon flattered me, and soon my close friends, then fellow students, and then colleagues began to call me like that. From time to time my parents turn to me like this when they want to emphasize my restlessness and spontaneity. This is the nickname I use on forums and social networks. No wonder I chose it to participate in the Quest.

Barely breathing at the same time from fear and anticipation, I get out of the limousine. Two Chinese women meet me at the gangway. (Frankly, the ubiquitous white color begins to depress). They show the way affably. With my heart beating loudly, I enter the plane.

Against the expectations, neither pirates with machine guns in black masks nor a pack of ninjas in white suits attack me. Instead, my eyes see a cozy, bright business class salon. The path is illuminated with blue lights, as are the individual information boards over the heads of the passengers. Huge leather chairs are arranged in two rows, one chair in each.

In the first seat, I see an elderly man in his 60s who reading a newspaper through the glasses pushed to the tip of his nose. Gray strands show through his hair. The man is dressed in jeans and a green sweater with a lapel.

To his right sits a pretty neighbor. Actually not just pretty but a very awesome girl. To be honest, she's a cliché of jokes: not particularly smart, but dazzlingly beautiful blonde. Long legs in trousers and stiletto heels, smooth blonde hair falling over fragile shoulders, refined features. We meet eyes. Of course: huge soulful blue eyes, framed by long black eyelashes. The top button of the mint-colored blouse is unbuttoned so that you can see the graceful neck.

«Hello! My name is Lavina.»

I hear some greetings in return. An elderly man stands up and holds out his hand to me:

«I am Planck. Well, then, we'll play together.»

He smiles friendly, and this is the first warm smile all day. I feel calmer because Planck certainly doesn't look like an air pirate. And for ninja tricks, his bones are probably too old. In general, this elderly man immediately makes a pleasant impression on me.

I move through the cabin looking for a free seat. I walk by a middle-aged woman with a bright appearance. Judging by the sharp features and fiery gaze of her brown, almost black eyes, she could be Spanish or Italian. The southerner smiles broadly with a dazzling white-toothed smile, waves her hand and nods in my direction. Her hot temperament complements her expressive appearance, so I straight away feel sympathy for her.

To the left of the woman, just behind Planck, I notice a young man. He sits with his head bowed over a glossy magazine taken from the pocket of an airplane seat. Hearing my voice, the guy looks up and nods casually, and then immediately returns to reading. I am struck by his pumped-up arms. From under the t-shirt bursting at the seams, muscles and those notorious cubes on his stomach bulge out.

«Apparently, he is an athlete,» I say to myself.

In the third row, I immediately recognize Alex. He looks extremely like the guy on the photo and is also handsome, only slightly taller, judging by the fact that his knees bump into the front seat.

«Hello, Lavina,» he addresses me in Russian without any prefaces.

Several people turn their heads in our direction.

«As you can see, the place next to me is free. I will fly with a compatriot and a game partner! Even if it was only once and ended in a shameful loss.»

«Hi Alex, glad to meet you personally. In that game, we were both not on top.» «Have you already had the pleasure of meeting our promiscuous team?»

«Yes, and it's a big relief. At one point, I already thought to be dealing with an organized crime group for slavetrade.»

Alex throws his head back and gives out a sincere guttural laugh. Nice dimples form on his cheeks. But for some reason it makes me angry.

«What's so funny about that?» I snarl.

«What made you think so?»

«Well, yes,» I begin hesitantly, «these strange escorts and the Glossy Lady...»

«Glossy Lady?»

«I called her that for her appearance: too flawless and unreadable.»

Alex laughs again, head thrown back.

«I can imagine that you felt not at ease. By the way, a casual style of clothing and no hairstyle at all suit you. But you have to work On your face: you absolutely do not know how to hide emotions!»

I ignore his remark.

«A very sinister reception. Then there were those supercharged Chinese ninjas and secrecy... Didn't it alert you?»

«Lavina, someone here is not eager to study boring documents, huh? Have you read the constituent documents, instructions and the contract?»

«Of course I did!» I interrupt him impatiently. «Well, the main points.»

In response, Alex instructively reads a whole lecture on the paragraph about the strict confidentiality of the project. That information about the game is known to a narrow circle of people. By accepting the invitation, we automatically agree to keep secret the places of the Location, the conditions of the game, as well as information about the founders of the Corporation and the organizers of the games.

«Although,» he looks at me, as if at a hopeless person, «with your attentiveness, you can hardly tell about it even under torture.»

Alex has a lot of fun and shines with sly eyes. We've known each other for no more than ten minutes, and I'm ready to strangle him. Of course he's right. By my nature, I am always too lazy to study documents, to read the details, not to mention trying to understand the meanings of incomprehensible words. I am angry that this insolent fellow figured out my disadvantage so easily.

«Paragraph 127 of the monotonous narrative mentions that all participants will be taken to the collection point separately, with a personal escort and security. No wonder we were greeted without bread and salt. Or in this case, without tea and dried grasshoppers.»

I turn away to the window. It's supremely stupid to be offended, but for some unknown reason, I'm upset. Third major disappointment of the day. Instead of a charming young man with whom it would be nice to spend time at the Game and, possibly, flirt, I get a cocky self-confident twerp who believes to read me like an open book.

«Lavina, I am very glad that it was you who passed the competition,» suddenly he changes his intonation.

I turn to him abruptly with open surprise on my face.

«You are so... funny with your comments on forums and in dialogues with quest heroes. I thought straight away that this girl would't be boring. And then you enter the cabin with disheveled hair, a large spot on a T-shirt, and with burning eyes, you initiate me into the theory of the capture by slavers. In which you obviously sincerely believed at that moment and still got on the plane. Lavina, you're just awesome!»

Alex bursts into guttural laughter again and winks at me friendly.

Funny? Does he consider this as a compliment?! The urge to be rude to him becomes unbearable. My eyes sparkle with indignation.

«You don't know how to hide emotions, Lavina. Lightning from your eyes speaks quite expressively about the desire to kill me. We will definitely make friends.»

«I'd rather be best friend with that blonde in the first row than with you!» I think angrily to myself...»

«A casual image suits you, really. And, most importantly, it gives food for thought to the blonde in the front row: how could you have come to this? And if the blonde starts to think, then it makes her a little brunette.»

Unexpectedly, I giggle stupidly. Damn it, you can't be angry with him for long!

At this moment, a thin middle-aged man enters the plane. Round glasses slanted a little on his crooked nose. The rare hair is carefully combed back, evidently in a desperate and failed attempt to hide the bald spot. Despite his somewhat awkward appearance, in a strange way, he instantly disposes to himself. Perhaps the point is in the often blinking kind gray eyes. Stopping at the entrance to the salon, the man smiles uncertainly, slightly hunched over his thin shoulders, shifts from foot to foot, and finally speaks English with a pronounced Spanish accent:

«Um, hello. My name is Jorge... that is, Joleo. Yes, Joleo is my play name.»

Planck immediately jumps up from his seat and heartily shakes hands with the newcomer, greeting him exactly like me, as, I suppose, each participant.

Alex leans over and whispers:

This plane is just a bunch of characters. Here is our absent-minded botanist.

«What character are you?» I whisper sarcastically back.

«Isn't it obvious? Strong, smart, kind and generous Robin Hood. I'll take a million dollars from the rich people and give it to the poor ones!» he smiles so contagiously that I can hardly contain myself not to burst out laughing.

«And, in my opinion, you are an ambitious, self-confident fellow!»

«Maybe. But then the slavers will hardly be able to get a high price for me in the market.»

Joleo walks down the aisle and apologizes every two steps. At some point, he stumbles and almost falls to the floor.

«I'm so clumsy,» he repents in my direction, «I'm sorry.»

For some reason, I feel sorry for this little fragile person. I'm surprised how he got into the Game with his natural shyness. Will other gamers «eat» him? Again, my bad habit of thinking about others. There can only be one winner in this game, and I should at least try to become one.

«It's okay, let me help,» I jump up.

«No, no, do not worry, I can handle it.» He mumbles something and moves into the tail of the plane.

At this point, the pilot is addressing the passengers in English with such a terrible accent that I have to make effort to understand him:

«Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Li Cheng and I am the first pilot of our aircraft. The last passenger has just boarded, so we're ready to take off. Please make yourself comfortable in your seats. The flight attendants will help you and give you instructions. We're taking off in twenty minutes. The flight will last about 11 hours.»

The plane taxis onto the runway and accelerates.

«Are you kidding!» I hear Alex's voice and see his smile stretched from ear to ear, «just don't say you're afraid to fly!»

«I'm not afraid of anything, by the way, I have two parachute jumps behind my shoulders.» It's annoyingly, how easily Alex saw my fears.

He smiles mysteriously, generously showing dimples on his cheeks. Pawky dark eyes shine with pleasure.

«You're a unique person, Lavina. A kind who will fiercely fight in a bloody battle, and then weep over the body of a dead kitten. Don't worry, statistics...»

«I know what the statistics says,» I interrupt impatiently. «Air transport is the safest one. There is one plane crash for every one million flights.»

«Nonsense! I mean something else,» he smiles ominously, «the plane falls very quickly, and there is no chance of survival... We have a long flight ahead of us, and the worst thing that can happen on the way is that I will get bored. So relax and tell me something about yourself, the extraordinary girl named after a force of nature. I don't know anything about you except that you jump with a parachute, are afraid to fly, almost became a victim of slave traders and cry over the dead kittens. Oh yeah, and you're just awful in the „Searching for Object“ genre! I wouldn't be surprised if you have a hard time finding your socks in the morning.»

Alex hints at our online game together. But he's right again, this quest subgenre is not my strongest point. We've known each other personally for only a few minutes, and he again manages to drive me mad:

«And you declare it to me, master of negotiations! Yes, we lost only because you managed to quarrel with all the characters in almost every game dialogue!»

«Uh, and I was afraid that we would not reach an understanding,» Alex pretendedly wipes with his hand. «Where are you from? What motivated you to join this strange company?»

«You first.»

«It's not a secret. I was born and raised in Moscow. Alex is short for Alexander. I have a law degree and worked in various small offices. At the age of 30, I am fond of online quests, engaged in mountaineering, basketball and I dream of opening a private legal agency to provide my services for both Russian and foreign companies. This is what I will spend my winnings for.»

«What about „giving money to the poor“, Robin the Hood?» I ask sarcastically.

«You have no idea how many people need free legal advice,» he suddenly becomes serious, «the poor are more likely to find themselves in difficult situations, become victims of unscrupulous realtors, traders, relatives, criminals, remain without a roof over their heads and lose all their modest savings... At the same time, they cannot even afford to receive qualified assistance.»

I feel ashamed, so I change the topic and tell about myself:

«My name is Victoria, I'm from Samara. I teach English courses at a language school and occasionally work as a translator. I love adventure and look for them in every possible way. That's why I am here, aboard a plane flying in an unknown direction. I'm 25, and instead of thinking about family and kids, I sit for hours at the computer, pondering on another puzzle.»

«And what will you spend your winnings on?»

«I don't think it will come to that,» I wave it off. «For me, the Game of the Century is a way to break out of routine and become part of something great and one of a kind.»

Alex stares at me intently, as if trying to see through, and suddenly hits me on the spot with his phase:

«You clearly underestimate yourself.»

I raise my eyebrows in surprise, not knowing how to respond to such a statement.

«You have one important, I'd even say, a unique quality that will make you special in this game.»

«Yes, and which one?» I strain like a string, expecting another joke.

«A very kind heart.»

I have no time to think about his words, as the plane suddenly gets into a zone of turbulence, and it starts to shake severely. With the mind I understand that this is not dangerous at all, nevertheless, I can't help being nervous: I grip the armrests of the leather seat with my hands and even forget to breathe out of excitement. After a minute, everything calms down, and I feel ashamed of my fear.

I'm already planning a response to another stinging joke from Alex, when the plane seems to fall into an air hole. It takes my breath away for a second. But outside the window the sun is shining brightly, the sky is blinding with its blue – it can only be so blue here, at an altitude of 10,000 meters. Fluffy clouds float beneath us so peacefully that I manage to pull myself together and calm down. And the moment I completely relax, the plane shakes with renewed vigor.

I have never experienced such intense turbulence before. The plane literally jumps in the air, then drops down for a few fractions of a second, then shakes from side to side. Horror binds me, so I can't breathe or even just move. Instead, I have an iron grip on the seat and cannot formulate a single clear thought in my head. Shouts are heard in the cabin. Excited exclamations come through my own veil of fear. Someone is trying to call the flight attendant. Suddenly, everything ends as spontaneously as it began.

All I want now is to see Alex's good-natured, mocking smile and make sure everything is in order. But when I turn in his direction, instead of the expected smile, I see a worried, even pale face.

«Alex, I'm really afraid to fly,» I babble.

«Be quiet! Something is wrong! Can you hear the engine running unevenly?»

«Stop that!» I am angry and expect that now he will laugh, rejoice at how well he played me out.

«Please,» I mentally ask him, «tell me it's not true! I won't even take offense.»

But looking out the window, I shudder from what I saw. Thick black smoke is pouring from the left wing. There can be no doubt that a serious problem occurred during the violent shaking. And as if in confirmation of my thought, the plane slowly lands on the left wing, holds for some time, as it seems to me, in one place, and then begins to plummet downward.

Fuzzily, I hear screams in different languages, panic in the cabin, Alex's instructions:

«Fasten all the belts! Don't move!»

Someone is crying, another one is praying hard. The blood rushes to my head, so I no longer know where the top and bottom are. The eardrums seem to be about to burst from sudden pressure. Seat belts bite painfully into the shoulders. I want to scream, but I can't open my mouth. I register the impact of some objects flying around the cabin and the deafening roar of a falling plane.

The entire cabin is clouded with thick acrid smoke and filled with the smell of burning. The oxygen mask hung in front of my face, and somewhere deep in my subconscious, the flight attendants' briefing before the start pops up. With shaking hands, I pull the mask over the face and try to take my first breath, but the lungs sewn with the threads of fear refuse to obey. I close my eyes tightly.

The thoughts get confused in my head.

«Is that all? The end? Is all this happening to me in reality? Is the biggest fear of my life, my nightmares coming true? "I think in some daze. I used to be sure that «pictures of the whole life's journey» in the face of death is a myth. But now scenes from the past are really flickering before my closed eyes: people, events, experiences. Clearly, distinctly, in some specific moments of life and, most surprisingly, in the reverse order.

Meeting Alex. The Glossy Lady. I board a plane at Sheremetyevo airport. I open the letter with a trembling hand, stamped Antakarana Corporation. I press the «Fill» button of the questionnaire opened on the monitor to participate in the Game of the Century. I study English irregular verbs with first-graders, translate negotiations on the delivery of a new tomograph to the city hospital. Euphoria during the second parachute jump. Horror before the first one. Graduation party at the institute, generously flavored with laughter and tears. Disappointment due to the failed ascent of Elbrus. Painful parting with Andrey. I jump for joy in front of the list of applicants on the wall of the university. First kiss with Kirill at the school prom. – Pictures in my head speed up. – Tears because of the first bad score in math. Mom fries pancakes on Sunday morning, and I burned my finger. First day at the new school. Hike to the Ural Mountains. Grandma's village, where the goose nibbles me and chases me for some time. Mom leads me by the hand on my first school day. A funeral on a rainy day. Mom and Dad, embracing, cry bitterly in the kitchen. Mom, pale as a sheet, talking on the phone.

I play dolls with my older sister. I try to crawl to my sister, but she runs away from me all the time and... Nothing more.

The pictures suddenly cease to come to mind. Chaos and panic reign in the plane. I open my eyes and look out the window. The earth is approaching with unimaginable speed – the two-story airport building is already clearly visible, to which we are rapidly rushing. A couple more seconds – and only a smoking heap of wreckage will remain.

«Goodbye, Mom and Dad, I love you,» I whisper squeezed.

The wing touches the ground, I close my eyes tightly and... nothing happens.

Suddenly, the picture outside the window changes and our plane is still standing in the same place at the airport in Lhasa. I look around in fright. What's happening? Am I out of my mind? Other passengers also exchange looks in bewilderment. No, everything happened in reality, this is not my sick fantasy – this is evidenced by the things scattered around the cabin, and oxygen masks still dangling over our heads. However, the smell of burning and smoke quickly disappear, leaving no trace.

I hear somebody crying. The woman of southern descent is shouting emotionally in her language. The athlete jumps to his feet, swearing loudly and obscenely. His gaze goes to the end of the plane. Without thinking twice, he confidently walks past me in the tail, grabs by the shoulders a slender Asian woman in big round glasses, who I did not have possibility to carefully consider before, and begins to shake her.

«What the hell is going on here?! Are you at one with them? Sick motherfuckers, what the fuck is that?» he keeps swearing.

The girl babbles back and sobs loudly. Alex jumps up from his seat and runs up to him.

«She's just the victim like us. She's in shock, can't you see? Get your hands off her!»

The athlete looks at Alex with bloodshot eyes and breathes heavily. At one point it seems that he will get into a fight. But instead, the athlete lets the Chinese woman go. The girl falls on Alex's chest and grabs him with a death grip, continuing to sob loudly.

Behind her, Joleo firmly presses both hands to his chest, periodically rubs his high wrinkled forehead and mutters something inaudible, apparently in his own language.

A thin woman of about fifty, whom I had not noticed before, a neighbor of a Chinese woman, bent over, hugging her knees and crying soundlessly.

Apparently, the blonde is in a life-saving swoon. From my seat, I can only see her hand hanging lifeless from the chair. Planck stands next to her and tries to bring the girl to the senses by lightly patting her cheek.

An angelic-looking boy sits in the aisle of the plane and sobs shamelessly. Of course, this is not a boy. He is at least 25 years old. But golden curls, delicate skin and perfectly shaped lips and nose make him look more like a young angel. Large tears roll down the guy's flawless face. Feeling embarrassed to look at him, I turn away, being myself not in the best condition. I also want to crawl to the floor and sob uncontrollably.

«We are glad to welcome you, participants of the Great Game!» a soft deep voice is heard. We turn around and realize that it belongs to an elderly man on the monitor screen hanging above the entrance to the aircraft cabin.

An old Asian-looking man, most likely Chinese, brings his hands together and bows slightly. His gray long hair is slicked back, and his narrow slanted eyes express friendliness and old wisdom. He smiles and bares teeth that are too white for his advanced age.

«My name is Maestro. I will accompany the players throughout the game. First of all, let me tell that you are completely safe on board. This is one of the most modern and reliable Bombardier

models, additionally equipped with security and air control systems. Any problems during the flight are completely excluded. I assure you that in 11 hours we will safely deliver you to the place where the Quest will be played.»

An absolute silence reigns in the cabin. We look at the screen in shock and bewilderment. The old man continues:

«In addition, the aircraft is equipped with a flight simulator similar to those used by pilots. The simulator is all at once: acoustic, optical and mechanical. The devices built into the windows show the various pictures, but these are only types. The mechanisms in the housing and chassis simulate the movement of the aircraft, smells and sounds.»

The aggressive guy recovers first:

«Oh, you sick bastard! I'll strangle you with my own hands!»

He continues to shout curses. As if hearing the athlete, Maestro continues:

«You may be curious, for what purpose did we use a flight simulator and stage a plane crash? The answer is simple: check your reactions, my friends. Emotional stability. Ability to think sensibly and make decisions in stressful situations. Just consider this as the last of many tests you had to pass to get here.»

At this time, the blonde, who has already come to her senses, jumps to her feet and shouts:

«You call this a „test“? Who are you to mock us like that?! Let me out now, I'm leaving this plane and this damn game.»

«I suppose,» the elder continues calmly, almost sympathetically, «that some of you will want to quit the game without even starting it. Unfortunately, this is not possible. Each of you has signed a contract and has no right to leave the game before it ends.»

«Not possible? Who will stop me then?!» She walks furiously toward the exit. Four men in suits and glasses, similar to those who accompanied me from the airport in Beijing, come out from the cockpit. The blonde girl shouts something else, but hesitates and returns to her place.

«We have selected the best people for this Game. Each of the participants is extremely important for the Corporation and for me personally. Now this is almost impossible, but you will soon comprehend how necessary this cruel test was. I promise that a lot will become clear by the end of the game week. Show patience, wisdom and restraint – these are the three pillars on which any sage rises. After all, only a true sage can become the winner of the Great Game.»

«He'll definitely learn the strength of my patience as soon as collides with me personally,» the athlete hisses in rage.

A woman of southern descent with a whiny voice and surprisingly clear English addresses the screen as if the elder can hear her:

«How unfair and cruel subject people to such tests! Your test is a crime! I do not wish to take part in this. The fact that we have become part of the quest does not make us cannon fodder in your perverted games!»

«Many of you lack motivation. Money is a powerful engine, but still often insufficient, especially when it comes to the emotional level of perception, when the game hurts the thoughts, feelings, and sometimes the dignity of people. And we can do nothing without motivation. Well, I will give you this incentive. The winner will receive one million dollars to spend it as he pleases: keep it for himself, divide it between the participants, send it to a charitable foundation, God knows how else. But that's not all. Antakarana Corporation will fulfill one of the most important and vital wishes of the winner. We are powerful, believe me, these are not empty words. Many of you may not yet even guess what exactly is your innermost desire. The time will surely come to find out. But the organizers already know it from the moment they met you and decided that you and no one else would become participants in the Great Game. Money, my friends, is dust, but the thing we are ready to do for you in case of victory is deeply personal and worth some hardship.»

Maestro pauses meaningfully.

«What is he talking about?» the young man with an angelic face asks quietly. The athlete looks at him contemptuously:

«That he can make you a real man.»

«My dream has already come true, I discovered and proved the presence of the satellite Joleo in the Saturn system,» the absent-minded scientist exclaims with unexpected joy and smiles broadly, «but if I can prove the existence of the tenth planet in our solar system... This promises the Nobel Prize, no less! I really can make history!»

«I hope you were able to appreciate the significance of my words. After 11 hours, you will be taken to the Location. This is a wonderful place of incredible beauty in the Indian Ocean. I will not hide it, it is fraught with many dangers. But together you will cope with them without much difficulty. Every day you will find yourself in situations that require the best skills, knowledge and capabilities. My advice: stick together to the last. Only one, the strongest, will win, but alone none of you will reach the final, since each participant has a specific set of knowledge. Every day, every hour, you have to make decisions that affect the course of the game. Always remember that these are solely your decisions and the Corporation does not impose them on you.»

I am so overwhelmed by the simulated catastrophe and immersed in myself, that I can hardly perceive the words of Maestro. The flaming wing of the plane still stands before my eyes, the smell of burning is felt in the nose, and the deafening growl of the engine is heard in my ears.

«So we come to the most important thing: the essence of our game. Of course, the goal of the quest is to go through all locations and reach the final. But here is the topmost task, the solution you have to find, my friends...» he again makes a long pause. Maestro has achieved the desired effect. Now all the participants' attention is riveted to the monitor.

«Each player is here not by accident. The main question is: what unites you all besides the passion for quests and riddles, be it online games, researching the secrets of mankind or the search for a new planet in the solar system? Undoubtedly, each of the participants is a master of his genre, one might say, a genius in solving puzzles. Yet there is one secret that binds you more than you can imagine. The players will have to find an answer to this question in the coming week. And we will help you with this.»

Those present in the salon exchange glances in bewilderment. We have never seen each other before and so far have not even considered it necessary to know each other's names. We were only potential rivals and did not know how closely we would have to interact. Now everyone is looking at each other as if for the first time, as if we had not experienced a joint plane crash and a common death.

«Now that you have full information, I still give you the first choice, and this will be the last opportunity to leave the game. We aren't inhuman masters of fate. The decision is always yours, remember this! You will have only a minute to get up and leave this plane for good.»

At these words, the ninjas at the exit parted in different directions. There is deathly silence in the cabin, so you can hear the ticking of someone's wristwatch. The players froze, as if paralyzed by the words of Maestro. I can feel how dense the air has become from the thoughts and inner doubts of the participants. My first impulse is to jump up, get out of the plane, return home and never, ever remember this awful day, this cruel imitation of flying and falling. I turn to Alex, who is still standing next to the Chinese woman. He meets my eyes and shakes his head slowly. I can almost hear him: «No, temerarious girl with the name of a force of nature. You are capable of more. «And the moment is missed, the guards again block the passage. None of the participants even moved.

«Well,» the old man smiles from the screen, «your reaction confirms once again the fact that the Corporation was not mistaken in choosing you. All participants are familiar with the rules of the game in detail, I will not repeat myself. I would like to just give two pieces of advice: do not try to break the rules and stick together to the last. I wish you the best of luck. And remember: this is just a game, but you are experiencing it in reality.»

The screen goes blank. Two uniformed girls appear, and the guards hide in the cockpit. The silence is interrupted only by the instructions of the flight attendants. We take our seats and fasten the belts. The plane enters the runway, quickly picks up speed and this time really takes off from the ground.

More than two hours pass, but still no one speaks a word. Everyone copes with the shock in his own way. I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep. I feel uneasy at the mere thought of looking out the window. About an hour after take-off, we were offered lunch, but I did not even touch the exotic dishes.

It always seemed to me that, having gone through such a shock and suddenly being safe, I would feel a euphoria, similar to the one I experience when waking up from a nightmare. But instead, I am filled with a terrible emptiness, unbearable sadness and incomprehensible longing.

To distract myself, I reflect on the words of Maestro. What can unite us all? Have we met somewhere before? I had a chance to visit abroad twice: in Spain for climbing the Pyrenees mountains and in India at the tourist resort of Goa. None of the players present seems to me even close to familiar.

We've definitely never seen each other until today. We are absolutely strangers, people who were not only not united by the plane crash, but also distanced from each other as much as possible.

One innermost desire, said the Maestro. What could it be in my case? For what am I ready to make such sacrifices as, for example, to experience this impromptu disaster? I have always considered myself to be quite a happy person. I have wonderful parents and a small but loyal circle of friends. I was lucky to do what I love and do not have to complain about health problems. A list of things to do before you die? Like all people on earth, I have a list with rather generalized phrases like «swim with dolphins», «conquer the Mont Blanc», «jump upside down from a bungee in Sochi Olympic Park» and other nonsense. But can I call anything from this list my innermost desire? Definitely not! Love, family and children? I never thought about it seriously. Now my heart is free, and it suits me perfectly. I love the feeling of absolute independence. Moreover, I am convinced that all this will happen in due time and without the help of some powerful Corporation. Another open question. I have no idea about a response.

The words of Maestro do not go out of my head: «Better stick together to the last,» said the elder. How will I interact with all these people? I've always had a hard time pairing quests, not to mention team games. I can find a common language with almost everyone, but it gives me discomfort to discuss and explain my decisions to someone else. Continuous questions and not a single even approximate answer!

Realizing that, despite the long tiring flight from Russia to China, I will not be able to sleep, I open my eyes.

«Alex, are you awake?» I ask in a whisper.

«No, I'm sitting and waiting for you to ask me if I'm sleeping,» he jokes. But the expression on his face is not at all like that self-confident cheerful grimace, which so angers and pleases me at the same time. «Lavina... sorry to my laughing at your fear of airplanes. It seems that from now on I am also afraid. It must be contagious. My own fault, I should have washed my hands in time,» Alex tries to cheer me up in his own peculiar manner.

«You're pale, are you all right?»

«Yes, it's from the awful look of the dinner. What is this muck? They didn't manage to smash us to the ground, and that's why they decided to poison us?»

«Alex... I always thought that the expression „life flies before your eyes“ is a myth. What did you see in the last seconds of our lives?» I ask strangled, unable to drive away the obsessive memories.

«I haven't seen anything like this, because I don't have your violent imagination. I remember only one thought constantly spinning in my head: what a fool I was that I did not know how to appreciate life. That's all. No faces, no memories, no sound thoughts. Only: what a fool I was, how blind I was. Probably, I should be grateful to the organizers for opening my eyes.»

«And are you grateful?»

Alex laughs joylessly:

«I'd hold each of them while the athlete polishes their smug faces. Tell me better about your visions.»

«It's rather strange,» I say thoughtfully, «I saw brightly and distinctly moments from life, people's faces and some places from the past. For a split second, I experienced the same emotions as during that period of time. Some events are clear-cut, and some have completely faded from memory. The last memory was my older sister. She died tragically 20 years ago in a terrible car accident.»

As soon as I say it out loud, I suddenly understand the reason for my sadness. No matter how successful and happy our life is, we will never be able to drive out ghosts from the past, survive the tragedies that have happened and heal the wounds inflicted. One way or another, they overtake us at the most unexpected moment and, when all bad things seem to be left behind forever, they fall down with a heavy and devastating load.

Suddenly a thought comes to my mind. What if each of us has experienced a terrible loss in the past and now leads his ordinary life trying not to look back, because there is only pain and emptiness? At least this is some kind of clue! I make the first note in my notebook: «Common: past tragic losses?»

«What are you writing there?» Alex cranks his neck curiously.

«Plan how to seize a million dollars.»

We talk to each other for a while. He tells a little about himself, generously seasoning the monologues with jokes and anecdotes. At the same time, the guy does not skimp on jokes about me.

I am deliberately not mentioning anything about my assumption. At the first stage, I don't want to share my thoughts and guesses with anyone else, even with Alex. The conversation encourages me a little, but I still feel miserable. The rest of the passengers are either asleep or in muffled conversations with each other.

I decide to visit the restroom and follow to the rear of the plane. Suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, in the last row I notice a girl about 10 years old. She looks out the window and holds something tight to her chest. This is so unexpected that for a moment I am speechless. Although the rules did not mention anything about the age of the participants, I was sure that only adults are allowed to play. Does that mean she also had to go through that hell? Well, this is too much! It is inhumane and cynical to do such experiments on adults. But to subject children to such tests is a heinous crime. There is no limit to my indignation. I appeal to the girl:

«Hi! What's your name?»

She turns her head to me, then looks away again without saying a word. I am amazed by her huge, serious and incredibly blue eyes. Combined with bright red hair and pale skin, they give the girl some kind of fantastic look. She reminds me of someone.

«My name is Victoria or Lavina, whichever you prefer,» I make a second attempt. This time she doesn't even turn in my direction. «You understand English? Are you scared? Maybe you need help?»

No reaction. I stand in confusion for another minute, but the girl continues to ignore me. I decide to discuss this with Alex, but when I return, he is fast asleep, snoring in his chair. I make myself comfortable, close the eyes, and finally manage to fall into a restless sleep.

I spend most of the flight sleeping. I retreat twice to the rear of the plane. The strange girl sits in her place, curled up and fast asleep. I am extremely surprised when I understand what kind of object she is holding tightly to her chest – a small chessboard. The thought of the mysterious passenger haunts me.

Once Alex wakes up and I ask if he has noticed the strange girl behind us. He cheerfully replies with a shrug:

All the boys and girls on this plane are strange. As for the absent-minded scientist behind you, he is just from another planet.

I decide not to develop the topic with Alex and figure it out on my own. Maybe it's just the daughter of one of the crew. Perhaps she doesn't understand English or is playing the role of a character in one of the quest tasks. I open my notebook and make a note: «get to know the mysterious girl better.»

We get a second lunch two hours before boarding. Despite my lack of appetite, this time I still eat the whole tray. The food seems bland, cold and totally tasteless. Alex makes a sarcastic comment «they know how to cook bad.»

After the flight attendants have removed the leftover food, the monitor turns on, and a woman like my good old friend The Glossy Lady greets us dryly. She asks to listen to the rules again, which, as it seems to me, everyone has already learned by heart:

1. *The location of the game, tasks and situations, methods of organization and equipment are the intellectual property of the Corporation and must be kept in strict confidence.*

2. *When communicating, the participants should use the following terminology: Location – the place where the quest takes part, Players – participants in the quest, Platform – the gathering place for Players to discuss current tasks, Bungalow – the place of residence of the Players, Cell – the Player's room. This rule is advisory in nature.*

3. *The players' communication language is exclusively English.*

4. *Play names should be used throughout the game. This rule is advisory in nature.*

5. *At the Location, the Organizers will provide the Players with everything necessary for the Game. Each Player has the right to take with him one piece of home, such as an amulet, photograph, personal item, accessory, stationery or small piece of clothing. All electronic devices, especially communication facilities, are strictly prohibited for use in the Location.*

6. *The player is obliged to wear wardrobe items and use only things provided by the Organizers in everyday life.*

7. *Daily schedule: wake up strictly at 9:00, going to bed strictly at 21:00. By this time, each Player must be in his cell alone, have already had dinner, taken a shower, put on the provided set of clothes and gone to his bed. Healthy and prolonged sleep is an absolute must in the Game. Each Player determines the meal time for himself.*

8. *Every morning for seven days, the Players will be asked situations with detailed instructions. When completing tasks, players are guided by their own decisions. The organizers do not interfere in the decision-making process and the development of strategies for completing tasks under no circumstances.*

9. *Only one Player can win the Game, however, joint problem solving is encouraged until the final.*

10. *Under no circumstances the Players have the right to leave the Location and independently remove the Game Coordinators from their forearms before the Game's end.*

11. *The Players will be punished for violation of the rules of the Game, and eliminated from the Game for significant violations.*

12. The organizers are not responsible for the actions of the Players in a particular situation, as well as have no right to interfere with the course of the Game.

13. The game is considered over when one of the Players completes the final task.

The woman on the screen monotonously repeats the rules in a circle over and over again, which obviously irritates the passengers. Therefore, everyone sighs with frank relief when the first pilot announces the landing of the plane. The curator on the monitor gives further instructions:

«The cars waiting at the airport are supposed to take the players to the location. Please follow our drivers.»

The screen goes blank. I look out the window and gasp for breath. A ridge of islands spreads directly below us. They create bizarre geometric shapes framed by snow-white sand strips, then pale blue areas of lagoon water and, finally, deep blue water abysses. This is roughly how I imagined paradise. Stunning views relieve the tension of the last day. Against all odds, I once again feel the excitement in the solar plexus area ahead of the upcoming adventure.

«What do you think these islands are?» I ask Alex dreamily.

«Let me think about it, given the plane's trajectory, altitude and speed, wing angle and the appearance of the islands, it becomes obvious that I have no idea. The Indian Ocean has a great many archipelagos: Chagos, Seychelles, Eparhe, Maldives, Yemen and so on. Choose what your heart desires.»

«I only know that this is a heavenly place, and we will have a great time here. Such islands are created for absolute happiness, harmony with nature and their own inner world.»

«Provided that we won't be eaten by the local aborigines.»

The plane lands at a small airport drown in greenery. Lush vegetation pleases the eye. Wild trees and flowers have surrounded the runway and seem to stretch their green paws towards the plane. An uncomplicated building, equipped with radars, looks rather like a small hangar, which, perhaps, it is. Mesmerized, I watch the lush vegetation amid a faint hint of civilization until the plane finally stops.

Three snow-white jeeps with the Antakarana symbol on the right wing are waiting at the gangway.

As soon as we leave the plane, my first thought is – how will I breathe here? The air is heavy, warm, and seems very humid. But a couple of minutes pass, and the lungs adapt to it, so the unusual humidity and heat do not bother me anymore. I look around with delight and wonder how different the green color can be: from light, almost yellow, cutting eyes of light green to dark emerald, almost black.

The local drivers in white suits are waiting near the cars. Planck, the blonde girl, the southern woman and the athlete get into the first jeep, and it drives off immediately. The driver of the second car gestures to the next four passengers who left the plane: me, Alex, the absent-minded scientist and the guy with an angelic face. We sit down in a comfortable spacious salon and the car starts to move. I turn around and see the last three participants: the Chinese woman, the thin woman with the big glasses and the little stranger girl. Obviously, the third jeep is prepared for them.

The driver turns to us, smiles and mutters something in the local language, sounds like a greeting.

«How long will the trip take?» Alex asks in English.

The driver explains with gestures that he does not understand him. As for me, I plan to take advantage of the travel time: to get to know the participants better and adore the great views. However, either from a long journey, or from the experienced shocks, my eyes suddenly begin to stick together. I struggle for another couple of minutes, then finally fall into a deep sleep without any dreams.

When I open my eyes, the darkness has descended – so thick that nothing is visible outside the car. My whole body is numb, I can feel pain in the muscles of the neck and a metallic taste on the tongue. The head buzzes unpleasantly. I yawn wide and hear the driver muttering something in his own language.

«Obviously I fell asleep. How long were we on the way?» I ask Alex in Russian, still half asleep. He often blinks with sleepy eyes.

«I have no idea, because I slept like a child. The flight can be so exhausting when it starts with a small plane crash.»

«Does anyone know how long we were on the way?» I am addressing other participants in English. It turns out that we all slept all along. At this moment, the monitor, placed directly above the driver's head, lights up. The same woman as on the screen in the plane appears, and announces in the same even voice:

«Welcome to the Location, dear Players! Local time is 8:00 p.m. This means you have an hour to occupy your cells, take a shower, put on your prepared clothes and go to bed. The light will go out exactly at 9:00 p.m. After that, no one is allowed to be outside the cells. Tomorrow morning, at exactly 9:00 a.m., the Game will begin. Try to get some rest and prepare yourself for the challenges of the first day.»

We leave our jeep, wave goodbye to the driver, and head towards the Bungalow. In the dense twilight, little is visible, but this also sharpens the sense of smell and hearing. I listen to unusual sounds with a sinking heart. The cries of unfamiliar nocturnal birds and the hysterical chirping of insects with the rhythmical, enchanting sound of the ocean in the background create the impression that I have entered another world. The aroma of night freshness, mixed with a specific smell of algae, hits the nostrils. What an unearthly pleasure to inhale this air, to feel the moist warmth of the ocean on your skin, to feel the gentle touch of a light breeze on your face!

The path to the Bungalow is lined with stones with built-in lanterns, the dim light of which makes it possible to distinguish the silhouettes of tall trees.

We four enter our new home. In the dark, it is difficult to tell what material it is made of. The corridor is painted white and has no furniture or interior elements. The bungalow is constructed in the shape of a circle, the doors are situated every two meters from each other. They are numbered and signed with the game names of the participants.

1. «BeBe». What a strange nickname, I have no idea who it could belong to. 2. «Planck». A courteous elderly man in the front row. 3. «Yu». Briefly and clear, that nothing is clear. 4. «Angel». A guy with a cute face stops in front of this cell, smiles charmingly and wishes good night. Of course, «Angel» means angel in English. I find it a little sugary, and out of the corner of my eye, I can see Alex struggling to keep from laughing. 5. «Lavina». My cell. I say goodbye to Alex and the thin man – Joleo, as he introduced himself on board the plane – and open the door.

The interior furnishings and decoration of the room are as simple as possible. The cell is a square about three by three meters, without windows and any adornment. The walls and ceiling are painted white, traditional for the Corporation. There is a small bed against the right wall, next to it is a bedside table and a chair. Looking closer, I notice a small niche in the wall. Nearby I see a button, when pressed, the metal screen moves. Behind it there are a toilet and a tiny shower.

All scarce furniture, bed linen and a towel in the shower are snow white. There is an electronic clock on the nightstand, which shows 20:07. On the back of a chair, a crisp white nightwear is neatly

folded. It smells sterile clean. The temperature in the room is quite comfortable, obviously supported by the central climate system. And yet I am extremely disappointed that there is no window inside. The smell and sound of the ocean would be dearer to me than the most comfortable temperature created by the modern technology.

I wonder what to do next. According to the schedule, at 21:00 you need to be in your bed, but for me there is no chance of falling asleep. All the shocks experienced today and a long sleep in the car will not allow me to relax. This means that a restless, sleepless night is ahead, and in the morning I, very tired, will start my first game day. With these thoughts I head to the tiny bathroom, but the water flows only in a cool, thin stream, so that the hope of soaking up under a warm shower after more than a day of flights is crushed to smithereens.

«The conditions created by the organizers are far from ideal,» – I note with regret to myself.

After the shower, I put on my pajamas, sit on the bed and take out my notebook. Time to make the first notes about this strange day. But not a single worthwhile thought wants to go into the head. My gaze falls on the last record about the young stranger. What a mysterious girl! Certainly, I must learn more about her. Why am I so attracted by her secret – is the reason her age or something else?

Suddenly I hear steps outside the door. Without thinking twice, I jump to my feet, look out into the corridor and immediately see the bright red head, whom I was thinking about a second ago.

«Wait, don't go, please,» I whisper.

The girl, without turning around, stops in place. At least she's not deaf and dumb, I think with relief. Where to start so as not to scare her away?

«I saw a chessboard in your hands. My father loves this game very much. From my childhood he made me keep him company. If you get bored or need a second player, maybe then you will let me join?»

The girl turns around and looks at me seriously with big blue eyes. Suddenly, a wide, sincere smile lights up her face. I feel confused from surprise and don't know how to react.

«Thank you, dad,» I think to myself, «finally your queens are good for something.»

Her smile shakes to the core and fills with incredible warmth. Perhaps this is exactly what I need to overcome the shock I experienced today.

«You're right. It's better with a partner. Playing chess alone is not very interesting. I win at myself all the time,» she nods, a little thoughtfully, as if doubting her decision.

«It seemed to me that only adults are allowed to participate in the quest. The fact that it can be children...» I abruptly shut up, scolding myself: «Damn it! These are definitely not the words to gain her trust.»

«I'm not an ordinary child, but a master of sports in chess in the junior category. And I take part in this Game because they need me,» she calmly answers.

«I'm sorry, of course! I did not mean to offend you. It's just that the things happened today are capable of breaking the psyche of an adult, let alone children...»

«I'm not an ordinary child,» she stubbornly repeats, «and I'm capable of much more than many of those people.»

«I don't even doubt it. But how did you cope with the flight? I mean...»

«The plane crash? You may not look for the right words. I am older than you think, and endured it better than all of you. Because I can disconnect from the outside world when something bad happens. This may seem strange to some, others call it „autism.“ As for me, I consider it as a protective reaction against external irritants.»

I can't believe I'm hearing these words from a little girl.

«How old are you?»

«I just turned 10. By the way, my name is Leeloo.»

Before she can say anything, I know who she reminds me of! Leeloo is the character of Mila Jovovich from the famous film «The Fifth Element».

«I really like this movie! The main character is brave and innocent, and yet so longs for love,» my little friend adds quietly.

«That name really suits you. What's your real name?»

«It doesn't matter. Just like our real life hasn't the slightest relation to this place.» She utters the phrase «to this place» so hostile that I get goosebumps.

«Listen, we still have 20 minutes. Would you like to come in?» I suggest carefully.

«Why not.» Leeloo looks around the room and notices:

«My cell looks exactly the same.»

I try to ask her a couple more questions, but she answers everything extremely evasively. I am amazed at her wisdom and calmness. Leeloo is indeed much older in her head than her age. The clock shows 20:45. My new friend gets up and says:

«I don't trust anyone and prefer to stay aloof. A modest invisibility, a dull shadow. But I like you and we could be friends. Please do not discuss our conversation with anyone! You know, I have plans to win.» she gives me her charming smile again.

My heart is melting. Suddenly I feel happy because this girl is here on the island. She stands and waits for an answer.

«You agree?»

«Sure. But what about Alex? It seems that this guy can be trusted, although sometimes I want to kill him.»

Leeloo thinks it over for a minute and answers:

«Maybe. But not right now.»

With these words, she goes to her cell. I go to bed and start taking notes. Leeloo never leaves my head. She is strange, but I feel comfortable and calm in her presence. I will definitely find out more about her secret when the time comes. The clock shows 20:59 and the lights go out.

«Great,» I sigh, «now I have to lie all night in the dark, alone with my thoughts.»

But, obviously, all recent events, experiences, fears and worries have tired me so much that I almost instantly plunge into a deep restful sleep.

The Game

Day one

When I wake up, first of all I look at the digital clock on the bedside table. It shows 9:00 a.m. I have been sleeping for exactly 12 hours, which surprises me a lot: never in my life have I slept for so long and been so punctual.

Despite the long rest, the head is still buzzing, and the same unpleasant metallic taste is felt on the tongue. I was probably lying in the same position through the whole night, because my neck and shoulder muscles are terribly numb. As I begin to stretch the shoulders, a chair catches my attention. In surprise I jump out of bed: it no longer has my yesterday's clothes on! Instead, there is a white suit made of soft dense material: tight long pants with elastic bands in the calf muscles, a tight jacket with a zipper and long sleeves ending at the wrists with the same elastic bands. Under the chair there is a pair of white high boots with thick soles and lacing. This costume wasn't here yesterday! I feel uncomfortable with the idea that someone was in the room while I slept in the dark.

Tormented by thirst and hunger, I dress quickly. No wonder, I haven't had a crumb in my mouth since yesterday. It is unknown if the tap water can be drunk, so I decide not to risk it. Instead, I head to the gathering place – the Platform – hoping to get breakfast and find out how the first Game Day will be.

Outside, the sun is already shining in the blue cloudless sky, flooding this paradise with its dazzling light. Our Bungalow is made of snow-white textured bricks, drown in lush tropical greenery. It is surrounded by tall, wild-growing palms. The playful vines hang along the perimeter of the clearing, as if inviting you to swing. The ocean is visible a few meters from the Bungalow.

Cheerful waves rush onto the shiny sandy shore, crash noisily against it and roll back like white lambs to return again. Every now and then a motley bird breaks down from one of the branches and, waving light fans of its wings, hovers to the next one to hide again in the dense crown of a tree. Despite the fact that the tropical air is humid and stuffy, I enjoy breathing it in with my lungs tainted by the urban environment.

Directly in front of the Bungalow, a round area has been cleared, in the middle of which there is a massive wooden table, oddly enough, only on three legs. The same solid benches stand around it. Most of the players have already gathered at the table. On the wall of the Bungalow, facing the Platform, there is a wide monitor – apparently, a means of communication between the organizers and the players.

I come to the table and greet everyone present. The players salute me in return. They are all dressed the same as me. The design of the table itself is also impressive: the symbol of Antakarana, striking in its beauty, is engraved on its entire surface – three volumetric sevens, which, as if form the edges of the cube, diverge from the center and shape three legs of the table.

Gradually other players join us. I think of Leeloo as she walks out of the Bungalow. Instead of going to the negotiating table, she heads in the opposite direction, sits down under a branchy tree at a distance and begins to take apart her chess pieces. The large leaves provide a perfect hiding place, so you need to look closely to see her there. The girl, in turn, does not even look in our direction. In my mind, I decide to talk to her later.

«I think it's time to get to know each other better and eat something,» Alex interrupts the awkward silence.

«We'd have eaten something long ago if there was something edible here,» the athlete answers tartly, «there is not a damn thing here. It looks like the organizers are planning to starve us.»

I don't like the tone he has chosen. The guy's appearance scares me: he personifies strength and aggression, as if a silent threat comes from him.

«What about the tap water?» the blonde girl complains, «I'm just dying of thirst.»

«You can safely drink tap water,» Planck replies, «judging by the temperature and low pressure, water does not come directly from a natural source, but through a desalination system. Heating occurs naturally from the sun's energy. By the evening the water cools down, and in the afternoon, judging by the morning heat, boiling water will run from the tap. This water can be drunk without any harm to health.»

«They aren't very hospitable here,» the southern woman sighs.

At this moment, the screen lights up, and we see already familiar Maestro. His expression and tone are still calm and friendly. Like the rest of the players, I'm just dying of curiosity. Almost the same as of hunger and thirst.

«I welcome you to the Location and congratulate you on the first game day in the Great Game «Antakarana. Quest in reality»! I hope you are well rested after a tiring journey and ready to start the challenge. Some of you are professionals in the hidden object genre, others are good at logic puzzles. Today you will join forces to find provisions for the upcoming game week. I will give you the hints every day. It is extremely important to listen carefully and memorize them. Indeed, they contain not only the key to the correct decision, but also, often, to life itself. So today's tip goes like this:

The mysterious number seven:

Life starts with seven grounds:

Earth, Fire, Water, Air

Are filled with Light and Sounds,

And a bright Thought is there.

By finding germs of life

And merging them together,

You'll get a little clever

Feed hunger through awareness.

So, seek for nature's voices:

Where the harmony reigns

Unnatural darkness appears

To misinterpret the view —

There you'll find the clue.

Happy Game start, Players! The Corporation trusts in you!»

Maestro disappears. Instead, four red arrows show up, guiding towards the interior of the island – the projections of light from the same screen. Silence reigns for a while. We can barely hide our disappointment. Angel breaks the hush first with a common thought out loud:

«And this should be the promise: we'll be provided with everything we need? How will I complete tasks if I'm just starving?»

«What are you whining like a girl?» The athlete growls contemptuously at him. «As soon as this damn plane flew upside down, it became clear that they wouldn't pat us on the head.»

«Your disputes and differences are useless,» Planck interrupts them, «there is not a minute to waste. In the tropics it gets dark quickly, and we don't even have the slightest idea in which direction to move.»

He's right of course. We all understand this, so we immediately start discussing the action plan.

First, we write down the Maestro's hint. Then we spend 20 minutes to briefly introduce ourselves. Everyone knows Planck, thanks to his courtesy on the plane. Nevertheless, he repeats his name, then makes a short pause and adds: «My real name is also Max Karl» and laughs good-naturedly. We look at each other in confusion, not having the slightest idea what he is hinting at. From the expressions on our faces, Planck understands that his joke doesn't fit this audience, and briefly introduces us the outstanding German physicist Max Karl Planck, known for his works in the field of thermodynamics, quantum physics and thermal radiation. The blonde calls herself Blonda, which makes many players smile.

The woman with a southern appearance turns out to be that mysterious BeBe – short for the full name of Beatrice Bianchi. The name of the athlete sounds like Runner, that is, «runner» in translation from English. A thin woman in glasses in her 50s introduces herself as Martha. Then follows Angel with an angelic face, Joleo, who named himself after the satellite of Saturn that he discovered, and Alex and I. The last one appears to be the Chinese woman – a miniature girl with thick black hair that reaches down to fragile shoulders and with too bulky frames of glasses for her neat little face. The Asian woman's name is simply Yu, an abbreviated form for Yuming. Nobody asks for the name of the little red-haired girl, and I don't bring it up.

We decide not to waste time on further discussions and to start searching immediately. Judging by the direction of the sun, our Platform is located in the west part of the land. The arrows on the screen clearly show directions: north, south, southeast and northeast. We make a general decision to split into four teams: Alex and I choose the northeast direction. Runner volunteers to accompany Blonda and looks frowning when Angel joins them. However, he doesn't mind out loud, and this team gets the southeast. Joleo and BeBe take a southerly direction along the coastline. Planck and Martha remain to explore the area around the Platform, because of the age they are inferior to the others in physical parameters. Yu insists on heading north alone, also along the ocean line.

«I grew up by the sea,» she firmly denies all objections, «this is my element, nothing can happen to me.»

Now we have a vague idea of what exactly we are looking for. It's only clear that you need to pay attention to some unnatural objects or phenomena in nature. Or, as Alex quoted the Russian fairy tale: «Look for that – I don't know what.»

Before leaving, I ask Alex to wait a couple of minutes. We have absolutely nothing to fill water in and take it with us. It remains to hope for a fresh source on the way. I drink a lot and greedily and then immediately head to Leeloo.

She is still sitting under the tree. I have never had any particular knowledge of botany, so I have no idea what kind of plant it is. Nevertheless, I definitely like it – the branches covered with large leaves hang down almost to the very ground, giving a healing coolness in the midday heat and shielding from the outside world.

«Leeloo, do you want to come with us?» I ask, sitting down next to her. The tree immediately envelops me with its hospitable aura. We seem to be cut off from everything that happens outside in this secluded leafy hut. I even feel a slight euphoria from our «hide».

«No, I'd better stay here and try to find something,» the girl replies. After a pause, she adds: «Be careful and come back before dark. It gets dark terribly quickly in such places. I don't want you to get lost and spend the night in the jungle.»

Her voice is full of alarm.

«Don't be afraid, Leeloo, we'll be back in time. The sooner the better. My stomach is already cramping with hunger. We'll have a feast tonight, I promise.»

We exchange smiles and a sudden urge to hug Leeloo seizes me, but I hesitate. Instead, I get to my feet and run to Alex. He is already waiting for me to leave the Platform and go towards adventure.

For 10 minutes we've been moving forward in silence.

Just a few meters from the Platform, the thickets become unexpectedly dense. Our legs get tangled in intricate grassy plexuses, every now and then some impudent liana grabs the face or sleeve. From this angle, we no longer see the soothing blue of the ocean or hints of civilization, so the heart gets filled with anxiety. There is something mesmerizing about the sounds of the jungle. Multi-toned

cries of birds. The buzz of insects. The rustle of trees. Whistling tops in the wind. They seem alive and pierce through – they frighten, surprise, delight, but do not leave you indifferent.

If in the morning a white tight-fitting suit seemed to me unsuitable for such a hot tropical place, now it would be difficult to imagine the best clothes. Tall fern with unknown inhabitants, tropical and often unfamiliar shrubs and the ubiquitous dense clumps of lianas are definitely not suitable for close contact with my northern skin. In addition, the sun beats down so mercilessly from the blue sky that I could be burned to the crust in a matter of minutes.

Alex walks in front, wearing his suit more loosely, which gives him a bit of the look of a factory worker. Finally, I break the silence and address Alex in Russian:

«Looking for objects in this jungle is the same as looking for a needle in a haystack...»

As soon as I utter the phrase to the end, suddenly a piercing ringing begins in my ears. The sound is so intense it feels like my head is about to explode. It causes such unbearable pain that I fall to the ground and hold my ears tightly with the hands. Through the veil in front of my eyes, I see Alex, with a frightened expression on his face, run up to me and say something. At this moment, he also grabs his head, and his face distorts a grimace of pain.

«... is happening here?!» the end of the phrase reaches me, after which he screams loudly and falls to the ground.

«How damn painful it is!» Alex rolls on the ground, and blood runs out in a thin stream from his right ear. A guess comes to my dull consciousness, and I scream with all my might in English, hoping that Alex will hear:

«Shut up! Not a word in Russian! Shut up! Quiet, quiet, quiet!!!»

I crawl up to him, look into his eyes and take my hands from my head.

«Can you hear me? Shut up!»

He nods, still wearing the same haggard expression. We sit side by side under a palm tree and try to come to our senses. The ringing in my ears gradually dies down and I can think more clearly. It takes about twenty minutes before I can move my tongue again:

«Alex, we violated rule number three: «The language of communication of the Players is exclusively English» and the rule number eleven was applied to us: «Players will be punished for violating the rules of the Game, and eliminated from the Game for significant violations». First, this deafening ringing in the ears. I don't know what happened after your second sentence. But your eardrum seems to be hurt.

«I'll tell you what. It was as if thousand needles had pierced eyes, ears and brains at the same time. But, of course, it seemed to me not enough,» he jokes sadly, «for the third time I felt a small explosion in my head. I guess I should throw away my right ear as it is hopelessly damaged.»

«At least you don't lose courage,» I grin, «but just in case, from now on, not a word in Russian on this damned island.»

«After this I'm afraid, not a word for the rest of my life.»

«But how do they do such cruel things to us?»

We look at each other and understand at the same time. The answer is so elementary and terrible that we begin to laugh nervously:

«Coordinators! We are not just figures with the built-in navigators, we are puppets in the hands of the organizers. They can punish players, control every step, every word...»

«And turn off our consciousness any time convenient for them,» Alex finishes calmly.

«What?!»

«Look. Yesterday everyone fell asleep, barely got into their cars. None of us knows how long we were on the way, or which road we were driving. At exactly 21:00 p.m., I fell asleep, although I usually don't fall asleep before midnight. And getting up at 9 a.m. in the morning is absolutely fantastic! I don't even ask how it was with you, because now there is not the slightest doubt that everything happened in the same way.»

«That's where this disgusting metallic taste in the morning and back pain comes from!» I whisper. «But it's illegal! This is an infringement on a person's privacy. They just don't have the right to do it.»

«Lavina, something tells me that nobody in this ominous place thinks about our rights. Perhaps this is just the beginning. How did we end up here?»

«But... but how?! It's just a game! And we almost went deaf by breaking a little insignificant rule. What will happen if...»

I feel depressed. There is no trace of hope that this adventure will turn out as I expected. This is a serious organization and it plays for real. High bets – high demands. How deep is my regret that I responded to the request, passed all the tests and did not leave that fatal plane while there was still an opportunity!

The words of Zhang Kiang come to my mind again: «Don't trust anyone. Follow the instructions carefully. This is your only chance. "Maybe she really wished me well and wanted to warn me of the impending danger? I can't wait to discuss this with Alex, but now that I know that every word of ours is being tapped, I hesitate, fearing to get Zhang Kiang into trouble. Of course, the Glossy Lady is not the best example of hospitality, and she has a brilliant talent for getting on your nerves. And yet, what if she is as hostage to the situation as we are? Alex interrupts my train of thought:

«One thing I can say for sure. You have good English if you know the word „eardrum“. And I seem to be able to hear with both ears again.»

We walk through the jungle in silence, still impressed by what happened. Our goal is to go as far as possible in order to explore the place in which we find ourselves as best as we can. I roll my head around in search of something unusual. In these thickets, it is simply not possible to see this something. My pessimism picks up steam when I suddenly hear Alex say:

«Look at that tall tree, something is clearly wrong with it.»

«What exactly?»

«It's extremely high.»

As I get closer to our subject, I admit that Alex is right – this palm is different from other trees. Probably, it can be seen from any hill in the area. We examine it from all angles and find a tiny red Antakarana symbol at the base of the tree.

«We found it! Symbol!» I exclaim.

«Do you think this is our subject – a palm tree?»

«Maybe a piece of bark with a symbol? Let's take a closer look.»

Examining the base of the palm tree thoroughly, we notice a square of earth directly below the mark. It differs from the rest of the tree's surroundings: grass also grows on it, but the ground under it is red. Without thinking twice, we break the square with our hands. At a depth of about five centimeters, our fingers press against a plastic box.

Alex takes out a white box with the familiar black symbol – three sevens, placed in a volumetric cube. It contains a small glass bottle with a red liquid.

«Doesn't look edible,» Alex says, disappointed.

«Not at all,» I confirm grimly.

A note is glued to the bottle with the words:

«Where one begins,

The other finds its end.

Great God created this

Best thing He ever made»

Alex reads the legend aloud and says thoughtfully:

«You don't need to be a genius to guess the answer „Earth“. In addition, this element was mentioned by Maestro in the initial formulation of the task. Most likely, the phrase hides something more significant.»

«What strikes me is the contrast. Suppose all vegetation starts and sprouts in the ground. A person ends his life there,» I add.

«Smart girl! Even at the beginning, Maestro opposed the natural and harmonious to all the unnatural and called it „darkness“. What can disturb the harmony of nature? Only a human. That is, we have a conflict between nature and man.»

«In any case, we'll find out more when and if we find all seven objects or, as Maestro put it, «mystirious seven elements',» I sigh.

«Chin up! It hasn't been long, and we already have something. Quite not bad. It would be nice to eat. There is nothing edible in this jungle except you and me. Let's hurry up, I wouldn't want to be someone's late night meal.»

For a long time we follow forward, carefully making our way through the dense jungle, talking on various topics from our past lives. Our real lives seem to be something distant, having nothing to do with the current reality, only two days after we left our homes to plunge headlong into an adventure. Too much has happened in the past 48 hours. And first of all, the fact we had to die and rise again.

I try my best to be vigilant, looking at my feet before every step in fear of seeing a snake or some unknown animal. We move extremely slowly, no more than two kilometers per hour.

With each step, the road becomes more and more difficult. The sun is now directly overhead, and there is not a cloud in the sky to somehow alleviate the midday heat. The shadow of trees is the only defense against the scorching rays. Sweat rolls down my face. Gradually, our conversations fall silent. Based on the position of the sun in the sky, we have been on the way for more than three hours. Given how quickly it gets dark in the tropics, there are maximum five hours left to reach the camp.

Hunger, thirst and oppressive heat are merciless. The water that I drank before leaving the Platform came out long ago with sweat. My tongue is swollen, the mouth is dry and I find it difficult to say something. My stomach is cramping, and I remember with longing about yesterday's tasteless food on the plane, as well as the banana trees growing around the Platform. In addition, the humid stuffy air and the scorching sun depress consciousness. More than anything, I want to sit on the ground and fall into a deep, painful sleep.

But Alex is certainly right. In such dense vegetation live... who actually? I'm even afraid to think about it. I know one thing for sure: at night they go hunting. After getting dark, there will be little chance of reaching the Platform. And so we go on, and each step gets harder and harder. Every thought delivers almost physical pain. Alex, who at first after the discovery was still making some jokes, gloomily keeps silent and goes forward.

«I'm dying of thirst. Let's go back? Maybe other groups have found something?» I did not expect to hear such a plaintive squeak from myself.

«And you quickly give up,» Alex hoarsely replies, who himself can barely keep on his feet, «let's sit down and rest, and then turn back. How could they have sent us into the jungle, in which there is not a single coconut tree?! You know, once in some survival guide I read a phrase that somehow stuck in my memory: «In tropical jungles and rainforests, the soil is always wet and teeming with insects, leeches and reptiles. Therefore, during sleep, you should isolate yourself from the soil, otherwise the heat of your body will attract the snakes, and in the morning you may find one or more of them curled up around your intimate places.»

«I used to think that my worst nightmare is a plane crash. But THIS attracts me even less. Thanks, no.» I feel horror and disgust at the mere thought of a snake curled up in a ball in my lap.

We sit down on the trunk of some tree lying on the ground. Never in my life have I felt so tired, but falling asleep here is putting myself in mortal danger. To somehow cheer up, I ask my partner:

«How did you manage to be here? Without a drop of water and crumbs of food? Well at least you are lucky with the company».

However, Alex does not react in any way to my attempt to joke and answers seriously:

«You know, there was a moment when my life seemed meaningless and uninteresting – a terrible depressive state. It was probably then that I got carried away with online quests. It was a way to escape reality and plunge into a fictional world, where I was something. Subconsciously, I was always looking for an adventure that would shake me up and get me out of depression.»

«Found?»

«Found. You're quite an adventure,» he laughs, «although a million dollars won't hurt. What are you doing here?»

«I suffer from my pernicious love for adventure. Frankly, I didn't expect to win the prize. It was more important to participate in the Game of the Century, solve complex riddles and receive the most vivid impressions.»

«Received?» Alex mimics me.

«Not! Instead, I sit here and ready to die for a sip of water!»

There is a painful silence, so at one point I doubt if my fellow traveler has fallen asleep. Suddenly a strange sound comes to my weary hearing. Subtle, distant, but unmistakably sweet sound of water.

«Alex, can you hear that?»

«Hear what?»

He is listening for a moment, then, without saying a word, we jump to our feet and rush in the direction of the noise. The hope of finding water gives a new burst of strength. From time to time we stop and listen, choosing the path. After a few minutes, there isn't the slightest doubt: we are moving in the right direction. I almost run forward, unable to contain myself and forgetting about the constantly threatening danger under the feet.

Thirty minutes later, the most beautiful thing that I have ever seen and heard in my life opens up to our eyes: a small waterfall with clear, cool water, which falls into a crystal blue lake. We fall to the knees and greedily drink, wash, splash and laugh like children. How little you need to feel happy! I've never drank anything tastier in my life!

After some time, having quenched our thirst, washed off a little dirt and sweat from our faces and fooled a lot, we sit on a large stone and drooped swollen and rubbed feet in the water, enjoying its delightful coolness.

Alex looks at me seriously and speaks in a voice full of thoughtfulness:

«There is something you need to know. You have very beautiful legs.»

I get embarrassed and turn away to hide my awkwardness. Unperturbed, he continues:

«Especially the right one. We'll eat it first if we don't find food.»

He throws his head back, falls back on the stone and gives a contagious laugh. His crafty brown eyes sparkle in my direction. I jump to my feet in indignation.

«I'm joking, calm down. We'll start with the left one, of course.»

It's really incredibly difficult to be angry with him. Alex's humor helps me cope with difficulties and turns everything that happens into a game. Rather, it reminds me that this IS a game, and I am here of my own free will... Suddenly something catches my eye.

«Alex, take a closer look at the waterfall. On the right side, closer to the boulder. See? The water falls there differently than in all other places. As if it meets a flat, unnatural obstacle... as if a stream of water from a tap were breaking against a metal sheet. Do you see this spray?»

Before he can answer, I am already rolling up my trousers.

We are not aware of the depth of the lake, so we jump on the stones sticking out of it, and without much difficulty reach the waterfall. To the right, behind a stream of water, there is a small metal platform built into the rock, on which a small red Antakarana symbol is barely visible. I was right! Looking closely, we find a niche, and in it the coveted white box. Getting very wet and not

without effort, we take it out and hurry to the shore in order to quickly familiarize ourselves with the contents. It turns out to be a rounded vial, similar to the first, with an orange liquid and a note:

«Your best friend and the base of life
That world can't live without;
But still, in its destructive might
It can destroy you to the ground».

Alex turns the note thoughtfully in his hands:

«In this riddle, the opposition is somewhat different.»

«Yes,» I agree with him, «this lake gave us new strength, healing, maybe even life. But a tsunami could ruin thousands of lives. Just recall its consequences in South-East Asia in 2004 or in Japan in 2011. Tsunamis are caused by earthquakes that destroy entire cities. These are natural forces that a person cannot influence on.»

«It seems that we are still dealing with the theme of the conflict between man and nature... Lavina, all is not lost with you when it comes to finding objects. I'm impressed!» Alex praises me.

«You noticed that all the finds were located in iconic places: a tall tree that can be seen from any hill in the area, a waterfall with a lake of fresh water... Hopefully the others also paid attention to this and found something,» I hastily mutter, to hide how flattered I am by his compliment.

«Maestro said that we are professionals. Let's see. We won't die of hunger and thirst in any case. I've seen banana and coconut palms around our camp, and there are probably edible plants and animals in the forests. It's a shame we don't have any tools. However, the lack of food will greatly complicate our five star stay.»

«I propose to move on. And stop staring at my feet. Trust me, they're tasteless and very skinny.»

Having cheered up from the find and having drunk plenty of water, we decide to turn back to the Platform.

The sun is rapidly approaching the horizon, the heat subsides and is replaced first by the saving, and then by the uncomfortable coolness.

«How much time do we have?» I ask Alex anxiously. The fear of getting lost and staying overnight in the jungle spurs me on and gives me a new burst of strength in the legs.

«Probably no more than two hours. We should be on the Platform by six. Otherwise, there is every chance to spend the night in the company of cute animals.» He tries to hide his worry, but does not really succeed. To distract myself somehow, I ask:

«What do you think we might have in common with each other and these people?»

«Passion for adventure? Love for nature? Common acquaintances? One thing I know for sure: now it is fear, hunger and a desire to strangle Maestro and his entire team.» Alex does not turn around and picks up the pace a little more. Now we don't even have time to look at our feet.

After a little thought, I decide to share my idea with him:

«Have you had any deep mental trauma in your life, for example, the loss of a loved one, divorce of parents, financial fiasco...?»

«You mean besides our joint shameful loss in an online game?»

«Alex, I'm serious! Maybe a similar tragedy in the past unites us all? At the age of five, I lost my older sister. She died in a terrible accident. The school bus was returning from a tour of the places of military glory in Volgograd, when the driver of the truck fell asleep, lost control and went into a ditch. The bus driver did not have time to react and crashed at full speed into the tail of the truck. Then five children died. One of them was Julia. I don't remember much about that terrible tragedy, and I dimly imagine the outline of her face. Twenty years have passed and I have almost forgotten everything. But my parents have to live with it every day.»

«This is terrible. I sympathize with you and your parents. True. But I don't think I fit into this scheme myself. My parents have lived together for many years and still love each other. The brother and sister are doing well too. A terribly decent and boring family. Let's be honest, 95% of people on

earth had to go through the loss of a loved one or a difficult parting, witness death or suffer childhood trauma. I don't think this can be our answer, too many inhabitants of the planet fit such a description.»

Alex is right. But something is still gnawing at me from the inside. Something, what I am not yet able to find a name and give shape for.

I watch anxiously as the sun touches the edge of the horizon, turning bright orange. There is not even a hint of our camp around. The jungle sounds are suddenly louder and more intense. It's getting really creepy. Pleasing to the eye, rich green tones of lush vegetation transform into ominous dark outlines. The lianas turned out to be long paws with tenacious claws that grab and try to drag me into the depths of the dangerous and unpredictable jungle.

«Alex, are you sure we haven't lost our way? We still haven't passed that tall tree, although we should have already been there...»

«Right, tree! Lavina, you are a genius! Now I will climb higher and see where it is. Our tree should be different from the rest. If I'm lucky, I might even be able to see the Platform.»

Alex picks the highest tree in sight and climbs it. And I watch in dismay as the sun disappears quickly. A few more minutes, and everything around will plunge into the absolute darkness. Maybe there is no point in looking for a way back, but spend the remaining time to organize a night shelter? And the moment the twilight gets really thick, I see a glow. Of course! Our camp is the only illuminated place in the area!

«Alex!» I shout. «The light!»

He immediately understands what I mean and jumps from a rather dangerous height. We are rushing towards a barely discernible glow, now and then bumping into some kind of plant barriers. I pray to myself that the next vine does not turn out to be a rattlesnake. Another twenty minutes pass, and in the pitch darkness, terrified to death, we finally jump out of the thickets into a poorly lit clearing.

All players have already gathered at a massive table. They turn around at our steps. BeBe is the first who takes off, runs up and throws herself on my neck:

«Thank God, you are all right! We were going crazy with worry!»

She lets go of me and hugs Alex, continuing to mutter something and sob periodically. My eyes meet Alex's confused gaze.

«And when did we become such close friends, why are they worried about us?» you can read a mute question on his face.

I am both moved and alarmed by this reaction of BeBe. After all, we are rivals in this game. After her, Planck comes up to us and shakes Alex's hand for a long time:

«We thought you were lost in the jungle. Even discussed whether to send a rescue team. But it's simply impossible to find someone in these forests at nightfall.»

Having exchanged pleasantries, we approach the table. Other people expresses their relief and rejoice at our return. Blonda chirps happily with Alex, which surprisingly annoys me. Only the athlete Runner sits silently. After a while, he breaks down and interrupts the general noise:

«It is, of course, good that everyone is there. But the task hasn't yet been completed, and my stomach is humming. Maybe these two have something to add to our findings?»

Suddenly, a deep sense of shame pierces me: for the whole day with Alex, with all our misadventures, I never remembered Leeloo. My unmerciful consciousness paints her in all colors among the dangerous dark jungle. In panic, I look for a tree in the twilight and breathe a sigh of relief. Leeloo is still sitting beneath it, her head bowed over the tiny figures, and does not even turn her head in our direction. I give myself my word to talk to her after the general meeting.

We sit down at the table and start discussing the day. Alex and I are the first to present our findings and detail the circumstances under which they were discovered. As if by tacit agreement, we don't mention personal acquaintance with the coordinator's force, and also in every possible way avoid the details of tomfoolery at the waterfall. We share a secret, and it makes me feel both shame and joy at the same time.

Joleo and BeBe found a green bottle of liquid. On the way, Joleo was constantly talking about the stars, celestial bodies and the mysteries of the Universe. At the same time, he was dreamily looking up at the sky and showing something to his companion, who nodded her head with excitement, although, of course, she did not see anything there and understood almost nothing from the clever terms of the astronomer. So they found the bird, which in a strange way hovered above the ground and did not move either to the right or to the left. The players were standing with their heads raised for about 5 minutes. The bird still did not move, which seemed extremely unnatural. BeBe was the first to see the thin wire connecting the stuffed bird to the upper branches. Taking a closer look at the tree, the researchers noticed a red Antakarana symbol and a white box hidden in the grass right under the stuffed bird. It was about the element «Air», which became clear from an accompanying note, similar to those we discovered in our findings:

«You don't notice it at all,
A synonym for «nothing»
But life cannot exist without it.
You only then appreciate it,
When it's completely fading out.»

Blonda then happily tweets about how Angel first discovered the bottle. Runner is looking at the guy with the angelic face sullenly, but doesn't interrupt the girl. From the expression on the athlete's face, it becomes clear that Blonda's story is extremely unpleasant for him, and Angel's presence on the team enrages him even more.

«We were walking along the sand coast, and Angel was the first to notice that the huge boulder had an unnaturally rounded groove. Of course, sea water could have carved it, but still we decided to check it out. And so, when the next wave came and covered the stone, the water stood for some time in a round recess, and then began to slowly go somewhere deep into the stone, making an unusual hissing sound. So we discovered that the boulder, or rather its skillfully created and believable model, consisted of two parts. Inside was a bottle of light blue liquid and a note with a riddle:

«It's quick and sharp, it's meek and brash,
It can be full and hollow...
It's human and alien at the same time
What makes it uneasy to follow.
It filled the world with voices and essence,
But at the same time
It's guarding cherished peace
With its mysterious many-voiced silence.»

Angel smiles modestly and blushes slightly at the girl's delighted story:

«We are talking about the element «Sound». Besides something caught our eyes in all these little notes...»

«Wait,» Blonda interrupts him impatiently, «I haven't told about the last find yet!» she makes a meaningful pause and looks around everyone present, «I found the second bottle of water, or something blue. Could you imagine, we met Magnolia tripetala along the way?!»

She looks at the players so triumphantly and conspiratorially, as if this Magnolia should cause us wild delight. Instead, Blonda sees only puzzled looks. Realizing that this doesn't mean anything to those present, she sighs and explains further:

«Well, or in simple terms, Magnolia three-petal. It is simply impossible that such a tree can grow in the tropics. Its natural habitat is the southeastern part of North America, from Pennsylvania to Alabama, Arkansas and Mississippi. In addition, this plant can be grown artificially in the Botanical Gardens. The humid hot climate of the tropics is definitely not suitable for it. Why are you all looking at me like that? I graduated from the Faculty of Biology before starting to work in the fitness studio.»

I catch myself really looking at this girl with open mouth. Indeed, in this place we simply have to forget about prejudices. It is somehow strange to hear such scientific facts from a beautiful long-legged blonde.

«We checked all around, but couldn't find anything resembling the desired object. Runner was angry that we were losing time, – by these words, she throws a devastating look at the athlete, – then again it was Angel who drew attention to the strange glare on the tree trunk, where, according to all logic, there should be a shadow from the branchy crown. But the intricate play of light and shadow was the key to the solution! So we discovered a cavity in the trunk of the tree and took out a bottle of blue liquid. And guess what? We have the element Light!»

With these words, she lays the crumpled piece of paper on the table and gives Angel a triumphant look. The guy just smiles modestly and looks away.

«How ridiculous is human in belief

To know everything about this Phenom!

He received his sight thanks to it, no doubt

But, as before, he's blind to its secrets, so multi-colored.»

«So, a fitness trainer? Do you prefer to deal with oak trees in gym instead of oak trees in nature?» Alex asks. In response, she laughs coquettishly, which makes me angry and I scold myself for it.

Yu chops in:

«I also have something. I took this yellow bottle out of a burnt tree, which, most likely, was hit by lightning. From the text of the note it becomes clear that it's about the element «Fire»:

«In the hearth, so calm and humble,

It gives you light, comfort, and food, and warmth,

But there is no enemy more dangerous and destructive:

It knows no mercy, if you piss him off.»

All players are really excited, this becomes clear by the gambling gleam in their eyes and the heated discussion of the theses of one or the other participant. We plunged headlong into the puzzle, like children, forgetting about food, rest and the dangers of the past day.

«Yes, we are all crazy about adventures of this kind,» I think to myself with surprise, «what can bind us closer than this almost unhealthy passion?!»

Meanwhile, Planck sums it up:

«Despite our relative success, there are still only six elements on the table, and the seventh is missing for the task completion and a hearty dinner.»

«Oh really?» Runner remarks caustically, «What did you or Martha find? You didn't have to go that far and strain for the stupid colored bottles.»

«We were analyzing» Planck replies calmly.

«And how is this supposed to help us fill our empty stomachs?» the athlete is not appeased.

«Well, we really didn't find anything, but we have some thoughts on using these, as you put it, „stupid colored bottles“. Martha, tell them about your guess!»

Surprisingly, in Planck's speech, I do not hear any aggression or sarcasm. I am amazed at the dignity with which the elderly man reacts to the attacks of the insolent young Runner.

The small, bony woman shyly adjusts her spectacles on the bridge of the nose, tucks a lock of silvery hair behind her ear and clears her throat.

«Just now, Angel was trying to explain what was strange to him in the texts of the notes.»

«I wanted to pay attention to how natural phenomena are constantly opposed to a person,» Angel is embarrassed, «it's just not clear which side the organizers are on.»

«Well, certainly not on the side of good,» BeBe sighs theatrically.

«We all noticed it,» Alex intervenes, «in riddles the elements prevail over man and demonstrate his insignificance and dependence on nature. It's clear, however, that Water and Fire give life until they get out of control and destroy entire cities. Without Air, a person will die in a matter of seconds. Life is born from the Earth, which feeds a person and supplies oxygen, but he goes there after his death.»

«The same is with Sound and Light, although they fall out of the general picture a little,» Angel continues, «Light allows a person to see and yet it keeps many secrets and mysteries, for example, in the dark or under water. And this is also a kind of opposition to natural forces – after all, many animals see perfectly under such conditions...»

«And then what do you think is wrong with the Sound?» Runner asks defiantly, looking down at poor Angel.

«The guy is right,» Planck comes to his rescue, «the human ear is able to perceive only sound waves in the negligible range from 16 to 20 kilohertz. Everything below is called infrasound, everything above – ultrasound. Not audible to us, their help many animals communicate with each other.»

«For example, whales and elephants – with infrasound, and bats and some birds – with ultrasound,» Blonda looks at Runner with hostility, as if saying: «Get off Angel.» And I again catch myself thinking how unnatural to receive such explanatory comments from the mouth of such a beauty.

«And yet I still don't understand how something that we know very well without organizers can help us. Namely, that man in the face of nature is nothing,» BeBe exclaims emotionally.

Martha is shining all over her face, no longer able to contain her triumph:

«And here is our guess. What if all this is not about opposition or exaltation of man over nature, but, on the contrary, identification? Not the struggle is demonstrated, but that man is a part of nature itself? In other words, we are talking about chakras – a teaching widely practiced in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism...»

«And also in Tibetan Buddhism! It's not for nothing that Antakarana symbols are found at the site of each find,» BeBe exclaims in amazement.

«According to the belief of Buddhists, a person has a physical and spiritual origin, and the etheric double is an exact duplicate of the physical body. In this double there are psychic centers – „chakras“. And those multi-colored liquids with which we are dealing, personify mantras, because each chakra has its own color and element!»

«Of course, it's obvious! Martha, you're a genius!» I am surprised that this simple thought did not occur to me earlier, because I also did my homework and studied everything related to Tibet. Probably, I was confused by Zhang Kiang's phrase that the game has nothing to do with Tibetan culture. How then to explain what we are dealing with now?

«Then why these stupid little notes with no less stupid riddles?» Yu sounds surprised.

«To designate which element corresponds to each of the colors and to demonstrate the close connection of the human principle with the forces of nature in order to lead us to the idea of chakras,» Martha concludes.

Inspired by Martha's hunch, the players vigorously discuss their next steps. We have an idea of the chakras more-less. The elements Earth, Water, Fire and Air don't raise any questions. It's more difficult since we are talking about such a complex concept as «ether» – a special medium that fills the world space. But what would our world be without Sound, Light and Thought?

«The last one we miss,» Angel finishes the common thought.

«Even knowing all this, we are still doomed to starve?» Runner grumbles.

There is a silence in response. He spoke out loud what each of us fears. Even if the riddle is solved and we figure out how to put it into practice, we still miss the seventh element Thought.

Suddenly Joleo, overshadowed by a guess, jumps to his feet and chatters excitedly:

«Wait! All other items were found in specific places: „Earth“ in the earth, „Water“ in water, „Air“ in...»

«We get it, go on,» Yu interrupts impatiently.

«Even Sound and Light are relatively material concepts. Is that so, Planck?» Joleo is addressing the elderly man.

«Absolutely. The first is mechanical vibrations in any environment, and the second is electromagnetic radiation,» he confirms.

«That's it! The stone hiding the Sound element made hissing unnatural sounds, and the glare of light on the dark tree trunk pointed to the Light. But Thought is immaterial. It cannot be hidden in a specific place, because it is born in a human's head!»

«In simple terms,» BeBe learned to understand her new friend quite well during today's short trip, «we ourselves will create the Thought element by mixing colors!»

Frankly, I am amazed at this unexpected solution. There is undeniable logic in the words of Joleo. But what if it's still a mistake? Time is rapidly coming to an end, and we have no other idea.

«If we are talking about the seventh chakra, then it should be purple,» Martha notes and nervously adjusts a lock of her hair.

«Well, this is known even from school: to get a purple color, you need to mix red and blue, that is, Earth and Light,» Alex reflects.

«W-w-which makes a certain sense if we consider the Earth and Light as the first creations of God,» Joleo suggests, suddenly stuttering.

All this sounds confusing enough and makes you strain your brain to assemble the pieces of the puzzle. We have four elements that make up the basis of life, as Maestro intended: Earth, Air, Water and Fire, and three etheric elements: Sound, Light and Thought. But the final one is a mixture of Earth and Light... Anyone's brain will boil from this.

«At least worth a try. What are we losing? Here's what I want to show you: take a look at this table, what do you see?» Planck is full of impatient anticipation.

«Antakarana, the most powerful symbol of the healing of Tibetan monks, we all did our homework,» Runner grins.

It suddenly dawns on me what Planck wants to say.

«Grooves! Seven grooves form sevens, which meet in the center, and then diverge along the three legs of the table,» I exclaim, «we just need to pour liquids into them in the correct sequence from the first chakra to the seventh!»

Planck has already neatly opened one of the bottles and is carefully sniffing its contents.

«Judging by the specific smell, it could be some kind of chemical compounds. I assume that when they are reunited, they will react. Unfortunately, there is no way to determine what exactly these substances are, which means that a chemical reaction can be unpredictable. Therefore, it will be better to move away from the table quickly as soon as the fluids are in the grooves,» he warns.

«And merging them together, You'll become a little clever,» Yu quotes.

«You'll still your hunger through awareness», I like even more,» BeBe exclaims happily.

We surround the table and carefully open the bottles in the certain sequence. At the same time, Martha loudly comments on Alex's actions, who, by a common decision, pours liquids from the bottles into the corresponding grooves:

Red – 1st chakra – element «Earth» – the lower part of the human body

Orange – 2nd chakra – Element «Water» – gastrointestinal tract

Yellow – 3rd chakra – Element «Fire» – abdominal cavity

Green – 4th chakra – Element «Air» – chest

Blue – 5th chakra – Element «Sound» – hearing, blood

Blue (indigo) – 6th chakra – Element «Light» – sight

Once in the grooves, the liquids begin to slowly flow towards the table legs. This is a mesmerizing sight. The Antakarana sign is being painted with all colors of the rainbow and seems to become filled with life. Alex pours the rest of the red substance into the seventh groove and neatly adds to it what is left of the blue bottle. While doing this the perspiration from exertion appears on his forehead.

For several seconds, the blue liquid spreads over the red one and penetrates into it, forming a bright purple color.

Purple – 7th chakra – Element Thought – feelings, higher consciousness, planetary mind.

After that, we quickly run away from the table and wait, holding our breath, what will happen next. Finally, all seven grooves are completely filled and bright liquids flow down the legs into the ground or a reservoir under the table – we can only guess about this. At first, nothing happens, then a faint hiss appears – a proof that the elements have entered into a reaction. A few seconds pass, and a loud clink of metal is heard. Then everything subsides. Runner is the first to dare to budge:

There is a hatch under the table, and it seems to have opened.

We are mindfully examining the mechanism. The hatch is accurately camouflaged with grass, or rather, the grass grows unhindered on it and, judging by the height and density, for a long time. Outside, it was fixed on a heavy bolt, which melted as a result of a chemical reaction caused by the elements.

Alex and Runner open the cover to reveal steps leading into the ground. From there it blows terribly cold. At first, the players stand in indecision: no one wants to go down into a gloomy ice dungeon. Alex volunteers to go first. However, as soon as he touches the top step, a small underground room is illuminated by halogen light.

It immediately becomes clear where the cold is coming from: this is a huge refrigerator with walls, floor and ceiling laid out with modern materials, and furnished with separate refrigeration chambers. On one of them the title «Meat» can be seen, on the second – «Vegetables», on the third – «Groats», on the fourth – «Seafood» and so on. All dishes are packed in tubes and jars, similar to those that astronauts or military men receive in their diet. At the entrance you can see a wardrobe with shelves. There are trays, napkins, cutlery, plates, various spices and other necessary little things.

«The organizers continue to surprise with their unprecedented generosity,» Alex notes sarcastically.

«There is even a chamber with the title «Dessert',» Blonda sighs, «probably some kind of liquid tasteless substance with added sugar. I prefer to refuse such a dessert.»

«I bet the same substance is listed as Soups when salt is added. I don't know about you, but I am terribly hungry after an exciting expedition through the friendly jungle,» Alex collects a few tubes and jars on a tray. We follow his example.

Suddenly my attention is drawn to the back of the hatch. A small rounded stone is inserted into it, on the surface of which there is an inscription, more precisely, the fraction «1/4».

«What is it?» I point in the direction of my find.

We have been looking at the stone for some time, but cannot find any use for it.

«I have a thought,» Planck announces, «when formulating the task, Maestro said: “You will become a little clever». Perhaps this is the first step to the final puzzle. Anyway, it's a good idea to save the pebble for later play.»

With these words, he deftly picks out the trophy from the hatch.

Once on the surface with trays full of food (I took food for myself and for Leeloo, deciding to visit her before bed and discuss the events of the day), I check the time: 20:00. There is only one hour left to dine, shower and go to bed if I don't want to re-experience the coordinator.

All evening we were so carried away with deciphering the keys to the riddle that no one raised the topic of the coordinators built into the shoulders. I wonder if the other players have found out anything or is this just our discovery with Alex? Now I am experiencing only a wild feeling of hunger and cannot wait to swallow these unappetizing tubes in one gulp. Therefore, we wish each other good night and go to our cells.

In my cell, I pounce on food. Expectations are confirmed – it is absolutely bland, nevertheless, never before had lasagna in the form of cold tube paste and tomato soup yellow for some reason seemed so appetizing to me.

Finally, I can calmly reflect on all the oddities happening to us in this place. But I don't come to it, as there is a soft knock at the door. To my great joy, Leeloo's curious face appears at the invitation to enter the doorway. We sit down on the floor opposite each other, and I briefly talk about our adventures in the jungle, while simultaneously devouring a humble supper. During all story, Leeloo has been looking at me with serious eyes, which I think are full of reproach:

«I was worried about you and afraid that you would not return. Then I would be left all alone.»

«Leeloo, I think you should get to know other players better. They make a good impression on me. Today we worked as one team. Alone, it's unlikely that we would have been able to solve the riddle and enjoy these delicious dishes,» I assure her and am amazed at the enthusiasm in my own voice.

I make a grimace at the word «delicious,» but Leeloo remains serious. She leans closer to me and whispers:

«I don't trust anyone here but you. They can be good people in life. But when the stakes are so high, you never know who to expect a knife in the back from.»

«For example, Alex, BeBe and Planck seem to be quite sincere. I'm sure we could...»

«No!» Leeloo abruptly cuts me off. «We don't know anything about them yet. It wasn't for nothing that we were gathered at this place. I feel danger from each of them. We aren't friends here, Lavina, and this game is not fun at all. There is something sinister behind it all.»

I feel uncomfortable with her words. Leeloo is not joking, as evidenced by her worried look and anxious forehead crease. What did the baby go through in this life that made her so incredulous and even hostile to people?

«Leeloo, hasn't anyone tried to talk to you and get to know you better?» I wonder.

«Everyone tried on the plane. I ignored them, and even now I prefer to stay away. I don't care what they think of me and if they think at all. As long as no one pays attention to me, I feel safe.»

Suddenly she moves closer to me and gently rests her head on my shoulder.

«I always wanted to have a sister like you.»

This innocent childish gesture after such frightening words touches me to the core.

«I'll take care of you, Leeloo, don't worry. Both now and after the game.»

«I have no doubt,» she gives me a warm smile, «and now I have to go before the coordinator knocks me out somewhere in the corridor.»

«Do you know about the coordinator?» I exclaim in amazement. Did she really have to go through the same unbearable pain that I myself experienced in the jungle today?! But how could this happen if she doesn't communicate with anyone? What rule did Leeloo break?

She winks slyly at me:

«I hinted to you that I am much smarter than many here.»

«Where are you from? What is your native language?»

«It doesn't matter if I can't speak it.»

«But how did you know about the coordinator?» I still wonder.

«Look what happens to us: how quickly we fall asleep and wake up, how terribly the head hurts in the morning and the fact that no one dares to speak their native language. Even you and Alex speak exclusively English to each other.»

I cannot believe. It sounds that simple...

«Do you think others already know about this?» I ask.

«Maybe the athlete still has no idea. But between us, he's not very smart.»

We laugh softly, she blows me a kiss and leaves the cell.

I quickly kick off my dirt and sweat-soiled clothes, take a cold shower, and check my watch.

A white overall hangs from the back of the chair. It looks like a wetsuit. It is solid and ends with lightweight boots with a thick rubber sole. Hmm. A strange choice for pajamas. However, I pull on tight clothing – not without difficulties, which turns out to be very light and quite comfortable. Even the rubber outsole weighs almost nothing.

I still have twelve minutes before the coordinator turns off consciousness. Okay.

I will spend precious time analyzing this day. But instead, all my thoughts are spinning around a strange girl. I need to find out her secret. What is hidden behind those sad eyes that causes in her such fear and distrust of people?

At exactly 9:00 pm, I fall into a deep, empty sleep.

Day Two

The first thing I feel when I wake up in the morning is a terrible pain in all the muscles in my back and neck. So intense that an unpleasant metallic taste on the tongue fades against its background. Opening my eyes, I understand the reason for this ailment: we are lying on a stone floor, surrounded by bare rocky walls that go high up. There they end in a wide opening through which you can observe the blue cloudless sky and the scorching sun. Despite its generous warmth, it's pretty chilly here, and I'm genuinely happy about my warm-keeping wetsuit.

All participants gradually come to their senses, sit down and examine their surroundings.

«Where are we?» Yu looks around and her already pale face becomes even whiter. The girl is struggling to hide a growing excitement. She constantly bites her lower lip, squints the eyes and nervously rubs alternately between her elbows and knees.

«This is a grotto or cave of natural origin. I'm more worried about how we got here and what to do next,» Joleo walks thoughtfully along the grotto and feels the walls.

«Those bastards touched me in my sleep! How dare they touch me?!» Blonda is shaking all over with indignation. She doesn't speak but hisses through her teeth. I would not like to be in the place of the organizers at this moment.

«Maybe you came here on your one? We don't remember anything at all about what happens at night. How we behave, whether we sleep or do something...» Angel's intonation is rather interrogative. He looks timidly at Blonda. Probably, in this way the guy is trying to calm her down, which immediately enrages Runner:

«Perhaps you know more than we?! If you know something about this damn place, it is better to tell here and now!»

«Runner, shut up,» Blonda hisses warningly at the athlete.

Surprised by her reaction, Runner falls silent. We look dejectedly around our new place of imprisonment. Apart from the wet rocks around the perimeter and uneven stone floors, there is absolutely nothing in our grotto that resembles a hint. Except for the wall-mounted monitor, of course. This means that we have no choice but wait for the Maestro's instructions. The air is cool and damp and smells like rotten seaweed. The silence is interrupted by BeBe:

«It seems to me that these people have some kind of influence on our actions. Yesterday I decided to ignore the cloth prepared by the organizers and go to bed... mmm... naked...»

«Oh, spare us these details!»

«Runner, shut up!» This time Blonda's tone sounds more tired than threat. If Runner tries to touch the delicate strings of the soul of this beauty, then extremely inefficiently.

Ignoring their swearing, BeBe continues in a plaintive voice:

«Five minutes before bedtime, I suddenly felt this... As if thousands of ants climbed under my skin and began to run over the bones and muscles. I wanted to fall and wallow, to tear my skin to somehow relieve this maddening itch. An unbearable test! I thought I was going to lose my mind in pain. Probably, it would have happened, but somewhere through a blurred consciousness I remembered about a wetsuit and pulled it on with all my strength. After that, my torture stopped instantly,» tears appear in BeBe's eyes. She adds in a whisper, «perhaps it has something to do with the coordinators implanted in us».

I'm really sorry for BeBe. The woman is about to burst into tears.

The players react differently to her story. Most of them have already guessed about the manipulation of our sleep. But Angel, Joleo and Martha seem genuinely surprised by this turn of events. I, in turn, look at Alex with a silent question in my eyes. Our gazes meet, and he shakes his head slightly. I understand. Telling others about our own experience of the coordinator's disastrous function in the jungle for violating the rules of the Game will make us look bad and emphasize that

we are allies. This can be interpreted as a kind of opposition in relation to the rest of the participants. Moreover, we initially concealed this important information, and could have prevented the suffering of BeBe.

«We didn't tell them right away, we are silent until the end,» I read in the eyes of Alex. I am a little uncomfortable with such deception, but in this situation, I cannot but agree with him.

At this moment, the screen built into the wall lights up. Maestro appears on the monitor. He is still neutral friendly. Deathly silence reigns in the grotto. The sound of waves is heard in the distance. It means that we are not so far from the ocean coast, – I notice to myself.

«Greetings, Players, and congratulations on the second day in the Game of the Century! Let me express the organizers' admiration for the excellent work yesterday! It was like a balm to our souls to observe how harmoniously and accurately you completed the first task and rightfully received your reward. – Maestro pauses and nods his head respectfully. – The bets are growing, and our trust in the Players is also increasing. The organizers have no doubt that you are ready for today's challenge, which will require not only ingenuity, but also physical endurance. For only the strongest can become the winner and fulfill the great mission of the Corporation. The task for today is to get out of the branched system of caves in which you are now.

«Let the light guide you
To your cherished goal,
Leave doubts in the shadows
Bury them into oblivion.
Only courageous decisions
Of coherent minds and bodies
Make it possible to leave this captivity
And find a way out of the dungeon.»

Think carefully about each step, as your time is extremely limited: in six hours all the caves will be completely flooded by the beginning tide. Don't waste a minute, Players. Good luck to you!

The screen goes out, and a woman's metallic voice echoes through the caves:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: six hours zero minutes.»

In a daze, as if not believing their ears, the players exchange questioning glances. We heard right, this is about saving our own lives? In the light of the screen, two lanterns appeared, which all this time were in the niches of the rock on either side of the monitor.

«They are b-b-bluffing!» Joleo exclaims. Obviously, he starts to stutter when unable to cope with inner excitement. «If we had not completed yesterday's task, we would still not have died of s-s-starvation: there are a lot of bananas, coconuts and living creatures on the island. The organizers cannot kill everyone, it will no longer be a game, but a c-c-crime! If we don't get out of the grottoes and die here, how will they explain our disappearance to the public? Couldn't all the players just disappear into thin air?»

«Yes, they don't give a damn about the public, haven't you figured out yet?» Yu is close to a nervous breakdown.

I feel very uncomfortable. Until this moment, I almost did not pay attention to Leeloo. She sits against the wall of the grotto and sways slightly from side to side, looking into the distance, as if piercing with her eyes a wet stone wall – where the exit to freedom is. At least her expression is calm. I will help her. Later. When I understand how...

Planck intervenes in the conversation. It happens so unexpectedly that I jump a little in my place.

«This doesn't sound like a bluff,» he objects thoughtfully. «Look here. We are in an erosional grotto. The walls are smooth, polished with water, which seems to regularly affect them. It is impossible to say exactly at what latitude we are, therefore, it is difficult to predict the time and strength of the ebb and flow. But I assure you that there was water here. And it was quite recently.»

«Anyway, I want to get out of here as soon as possible.» Alex rises to his feet. «Where do we start, «coherent minds and bodies»? Any thoughts?»

He never gives up. It is a shame to sit next to such a person with folded arms and whine about your unhappy fate. Therefore, I stand on wadded feet, outwardly full of determination and trembling with fear inside.

«This system of caves and grottoes is a communicating vessel. Accordingly, the water will go up under the pressure of the tide. Thus, we are either at the beginning of the entire system, or most likely somewhere in the middle. In this case, the caves below the coastline are already fully or half flooded. We need to go up,» Planck says firmly.

I catch myself looking at this elderly man with admiration. I am amazed at his imperturbable calmness and ability to formulate thoughts so competently and clearly. Years of teaching at the university take their toll. And his outstanding extraordinary mindset, of course. If anyone here deserves the victory... What am I thinking about? The only thing that still matters now is to get out of this dark and foul-smelling tomb as soon as possible!

«And how do we know where this «up» is?!» Joleo asks busily. He seems to have calmed down. Even his voice sounds different now:

«I examined the walls, there are three exits: one dark tunnel and two light grottoes like ours.»

«I have an idea,» Planck takes the flashlight and puts it in the middle of the mainsail. At first nothing happens, then the lantern rolls a few centimeters to the right side in the direction of two light exits.

«To our left, into a dark tunnel,» Planck says.

«Sounds good,» Angel sounds worried, «but what if you're wrong and this road leads to the rocks? Are we going to get lost and just waste our time? What if the road down takes us faster to the sea?»

«Indeed, how can you be so sure that you are right, Planck?» I ask warily.

«Intuition plus common sense. And they rarely let me down,» the elderly man replies calmly.

«And we must rely on your intuition when it comes to our lives?!» there is such genuine fear in Yu's tone that I begin to suspect that something is wrong with the girl.

«I agree with Planck. Look in the lower exits, the floors are wet. Although the grottoes are also open, and the sun's rays enter them. But unlike „our“ grotto, they don't have time to dry after ebbs. There will be even more water below, so we definitely need to go up,» Martha suddenly intervenes in the conversation. For me personally, her argument sounds more than convincing.

«I propose to vote, after all, almost all of us represent democratic countries,» Alex offers, «who is in favor of going up?»

Everyone raises his or her hands. Joleo, after a little hesitation, also votes in favor. I sit down with Leeloo and whisper to her ear, not sure if she can hear my words in her delirium:

«How are you? Can you walk on your own?»

Surprisingly, she immediately turns to me and answers smiling:

«Don't worry about me, Lavina. I'm a great swimmer.»

Alex and Runner each take a flashlight and we head into a dark passageway leading into the unknown.

We've been walking for several minutes, carefully examining the walls, in fear of missing a vital exit. A couple of times there are forks on the way, but they all turn out to be only dead-end grottoes.

Suddenly, a light appears at the end of the tunnel. We are significantly accelerating our pace in the hope of getting out of this place as quickly as possible. Despite the fact that the height and width of the cave allows you to move around quite freely, the absolute darkness is depressing. Every

now and then someone stumbles over the ledges of an uneven surface. Sounds of drops from all sides seem to press on consciousness. It's no wonder the players were filled with excitement when they saw the long-awaited release!

Our disappointment is endless when the exit turns out to be a grotto similar to the one in which we came to our senses in the morning: the same high walls, light falling through a wide opening at the top, and two exits at the end of the hall: a light and a dark one. A metal echo meets us in the grotto:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: five hours and thirty minutes.»

«It's pointless to walk with the whole team and examine every pass,» Alex rightly notes,» too little time. Runner and I are the most physically tough of all those present. Each of us will explore one passage and return to this location. Everyone else stay here waiting, stay strong and calm. Heaven knows what else we will have to face. There is not a minute to lose!»

Nobody objects, and Alex disappears into the light tunnel. Runner runs into a dark cave. Less than ten minutes later, both messengers return with impressive results. Alex ran into a dead end, Runner, on the contrary, found out that his tunnel leads to the next dark cave with two branches. None of us like the idea of being back in dark corridors, but there is no other choice.

The tunnel we are running through is longer and narrower than the previous one. Once in the next cave hall, Planck quickly checks the angle of inclination with a flashlight, which no longer lingers in place, but immediately slowly rolls in the direction from which we came.

«I hope we're on the right track,» Planck wipes the forehead with his sleeve, obviously feeling the full weight of responsibility for his decision.

Our plan works according to the old scheme. Runner and Alex disappear into the tunnels with two flashlights. Both are gone for a while this time. The minutes drag on for an agonizingly long time. We are sitting in pitch darkness with our backs close to each other. The players try to talk about something in order to drive away the fear of the unknown in the impenetrable darkness of the cave. I squeeze Leeloo's hand tightly. Yu is sobbing nearby.

«Yu,» I whisper to her quietly, «everything will be fine, we'll get out of here. But you have to be strong!»

«I... I'm scared to death of closed spaces. I'm afraid that breathing may stop at any moment,» she whispers plaintively in response trembling all over.

«Yu, this isn't a closed space, there is definitely a way out from here, otherwise the organizers wouldn't have put us here!» I assure her.

«Don't leave me, please, Lavina! Don't leave me here alone! Promise me!»

«I promise!»

At this moment, an eerie voice is heard again. In the dark, it sounds even more merciless and makes the blood freeze in the veins:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: five hours zero-zero minutes.»

Finally, a panting Runner shows up. His appearance from the pitch darkness is so unexpected and long-awaited that Blonda and BeBe scream out at the same time with both fear and joy. Angel's timid tone follows behind them:

«Runner, Runner, is that you? Oh God, how scared I am!»

«Yes, it's me, came for your cowardly ass,» Runner throws contemptuously in response. «There the tunnel diverges, but both passages are dead-end. I can no longer run alone, someone has to accompany me to explore the passages in the caves faster – where is Alex?»

«He's still gone! We need to leave! After all, now we know that his tunnel is correct!» BeBe's voice is full of despair.

«No, we'll stay here waiting,» Runner orders. Everyone is too scared to argue with him. At least we now have a meager light source. We spend a few more agonizing minutes, and Alex still doesn't show up. My imagination paints a terrible picture of him wandering in the corridors, unable to find his way back.

«He'll be all right,» I hear Leeloo's quiet, reassuring voice. She seemed to read my mind.
«Oh, Leeloo! I've never been so scared in my life,» I whisper in response, barely audible.
«It's okay, considering the situation. Everything will be fine, he'll find a way. Trust in it.»
Leeloo's words give me strength.

«We are waiting for a few more minutes and set off. Can't sit here and waste time while Alex wanders the hallways. Maybe he got lost a long time ago. It's foolish to risk everyone by betting on one!» No one expected such determination from the humble Joleo. The fewer arguments to object to him.

«Oh no, no, no,» I am horrified and squeeze Leeloo's fingers even tighter.

To everyone's relief, Alex still emerges from the depths of the cave. He takes a breath for two minutes, then, still panting, announces:

«Well, the lost herd, are you ready to follow me?»

I feel incredible relief – as if several tons of cargo were lifted from my shoulders.

There are two exits waiting for us in the next room. Runner heads into the light tunnel. Joleo volunteered as his travel companion, whose unexpected courage cannot but arouse admiration. Having appeared at first as an insecure «absent-minded scientist», now he looks almost like a hero. At least, I am imbued with more and more respect for his ability to make responsible decisions in extreme situations, and, most importantly, not to panic. After all, many of us are on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

I volunteer to accompany Alex in the dark corridor. Partly because I just can't sit in total darkness, surrounded by panic and fears, but more because I want to stop being inactive and, thus, come to my senses.

After a little time, we run out into a cave with two corridors: light and dark. At this point, we need to split up. Alex takes over the dark tunnel, and I must examine the light one. Before that, Alex puts his hands on my shoulders and intently looks into my eyes:

«I just wanted to tell you...»

Despite the serious situation, I experience a slight tingling sensation in my chest and some strange feeling in my stomach, comparable to a spasm during free flight...

«... the last time I played with you (it feels like it was in a past life), you disappointed me a lot. Don't let me down this time, we have a whole bunch of blind kittens there. We won't let them drown in this damn bucket!»

With these words, he turns me around and gives me a slight push towards the tunnel. That's what Alex is! I am seething with indignation, but at the same time, this rage gives me strength, pushes me forward. What did I actually expect to hear?! Dying slobbering declaration of love or «leave me and live if you have to»? I'm angry with him, but even more angry with myself when I reach the next fork. The hated echo is heard:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: four hours and thirty minutes.»

Both passages are light, luckily for me. However, I am desperate. We're wasting time again! What if I get lost in these caves? Will someone come looking for me? Alex will run to save his blind kittens. Again I feel a fit of anger and without further thought I head to the first grotto. Dead end. Relief. Disappointment. Second grotto. Long, tapering at the end. I have to get on all fours and crawl, so I remind myself of Alice in Wonderland. Now I will look out of the rabbit hole and see the magical alluring freedom... But instead of it – another dark hall. What to do next? I don't have a flashlight. Reason insists on going back to Alex and exploring the grotto together.

«Losing time, losing time» ... this thought knocks in my head. Ignoring the voice of reason, I enter the grotto, find a wall by touch and move along it, carefully examining the surface with my

hands. Nothing, just a smooth, damp wall. I walk in a circle, constantly keeping in sight the bright passage from where I just came, in fear that if I look away for a minute, it will disappear. And then I will forever remain in pitch darkness! Once again I approach the light without finding a single tunnel. It was a dead-end grotto.

Alex is already waiting for me at the same place.

«Where do you roam? Your walk is clearly too long! My tunnel ends with a large light grotto with three dark tunnels. Please tell me that you have found a way out!»

a metallic voice replies instead of me. «*Until the flooding of the cave system remains: four hours zero-zero minutes.*»

I can hardly breathe when we return to the rest of the players. Thirsty tongue sticks to the palate. The wetsuit wicks moisture away from the body, but sweat flows from the forehead in three streams and is poured into the eyes and behind the collar.

Runner and Joleo are already in place. Runner makes a caustic comment to us, but I ignore it. We describe our discovery – an impressive size open grotto with three dark tunnels and only two lanterns to explore. This means that we will not be able to check all three cave passages at the same time.

Joleo reports that at the end of the path he explored, the corridor narrows, leaving a narrow dark hole. Where it leads is hard to say. Firstly, you can get into it only by moving on all fours, and secondly, you need to crawl, apparently, for a long time. Therefore, Runner and Joleo returned to make a joint decision.

«The hole may be a way out, but in case it's just a dead end – we are lost», Planck is thinking aloud.

«No no no!» Yu suddenly shouts, «This cannot be a way out! I will never go there for anything in the world! Three tunnels are three chances. Do you hear? We have more opportunities to get out of these damn caves if we follow Alex's path», the girl squats and starts sobbing uncontrollably. BeBe hugs her shoulders:

«Yu is right», she supports her friend, «according to the theory of probability, we have more chances with three outputs than with one».

Alex is doing a small vote. Everyone raises their hands in favor. The prospect of being in a dark narrow corridor in a cave gradually filled with water can drive even the most persistent crazy.

«Wait!» everyone turns to Martha, «it seems to me that we are missing something extremely important».

«What exactly?» Runner snaps, «Now is not the time for philosophical reflection. Are there specific proposals – go ahead!»

«Let her tell,» Blonda interrupts impatiently.

«I don't know for sure»...

«And you'd better know», Runner gets up and walks in the direction from where Alex and I just came running.

«It's just illogical. We advance at random, which is not the case in a good quest».

«We aren't in a „good“ quest. This is an incomprehensible game of some sick perverts who lured us into a wormhole», Alex objects.

«And yet, my intuition suggests that we don't notice something, something obvious»...

I stare at Martha in amazement. Now that she has voiced this thought out loud, I understand that all this time I have been thinking about the same thing. She's right, something is wrong here. Until that moment, despite the danger and cruelty of the assignments, there was an iron logic behind everything. Now it is slipping away from us somewhere further and further...

«We have no time for speculation. Stop banging around irrelevant», Runner demands. And to confirm his words the voice is heard again:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: three hours and thirty minutes.»

«I just... No, nothing. Let's start,» Martha brushes aside, and without further discussion, we head towards the three dark tunnels Alex found.

All players literally tumble down from fatigue when they finally reach their goal – a spacious, light grotto. The height of the walls is significantly lower than the first hall, where we woke up a little over three hours ago. However, there is still not the slightest chance to climb up due to the smooth surface, treated for years by the salty ocean waters.

Apart from the dark tunnel we just came from, the cave has three more exits, which Alex spoke about. («Or entrances,» I note to myself sadly).

We are catching our breath for ten minutes, then dive in twos – me with Alex and Runner with Joleo – into two of the available passages. I shudder when the familiar metallic voice announces the inevitable:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: three hours zero-zero minutes.»

It takes about ten minutes before we reach the next bright room.

«Oh no,» I whisper and cover my mouth with the hand in horror. Alex just shakes his head silently. A new fork opens in front of us: three more dark corridors.

We return to the others almost at the same time as Runner and Joleo do. I don't even need to hear their story to understand from their expressions: there is also a fork in the other tunnel. There remains one uncharted dark corridor. If at the end of it there is no way out, this means the end, inevitable death: we simply will not have time to explore all the newly discovered grottoes. And we can only hope that the whole task was a complete farce. The countdown will end, the lights will turn on, and Maestro will announce some next test for our emotional endurance, as then, during the «plane crash». Another announcement interrupts my thoughts:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: two hours and thirty minutes.»

The lights will turn on and Maestro... Wait a minute! A hunch dawns on me and makes me shudder with annoyance. How could we be so blind?!

«Martha was right!»

Everyone turns their heads to me, interrupting the heated discussions. I continue, trembling with excitement:

«All this time, the clue was under our nose, and we ignored it, instead of sitting down and thinking. And we made an unfortunate mistake!»

«What's clue?!»

«It's in your hand, Alex! Yours and Runner's! These are two lanterns. Do you hear? Two, not three or four!

«So what? I don't see any connection,» Blonda asks nervously, but not without hope in her voice.

«It's obvious! Remember, Maestro gave a hint:

«Let the light guide you

To your cherished goal,
Leave doubts in the shadows
Bury them into oblivion.»

We can simultaneously explore two dark grottoes and as many light ones as we like, in this case we are moving towards the light...

«But as soon as the third dark tunnel appears at the same time – this is the wrong path, which must be buried in oblivion. We only have two flashlights! You are a genius, Lavina!» Alex jumps to his feet despite his tiredness.

Everyone livens up noticeably, unexpectedly receiving a clue, at least something resembling a hope to get out of our common grave.

«So far we've been going relatively well and, judging by the narrowing of the walls and the lowering of the ceiling height, in the right direction. We've never met three dark passages at the same time. Until then,» Planck says excitedly.

«We shouldn't have come here. The right path is the very narrow hole that we so carefully tried to avoid,» Joleo sums up.

«No! No! No! This isn't true! What if this grotto is the final destination?!» Yu looks around pleading. «Why can't we wait for the tide and just float up like the corks? Planck, how will the water behave when it arrives at the grotto?»

For a while, Planck ponders her proposal:

«I'm afraid it's impossible to predict. I don't have enough information about our location for that. It all depends on the geographic latitude. The water can come slowly enough that we just get tired of staying on its surface and drown before we can reach the top of the cave. But if the tide passes quickly, then, on the contrary, under the pressure of water we can be knocked down, taken into a whirlpool, hit against the rocks... But the main danger is that this grotto can not completely flood, but only to a certain level. Then the chances of getting out are zero. It remains to wait for low tide and stay on the water until that time... And we still don't take into account the relief on the surface...»

«If this is really a way out,» Martha interrupts him calmly, «then the organizers plan to kill at least one person today,» after a pause, she adds, «I can't swim at all».

Martha is right. The organizers of the game must know about this. The question about the ability to swim was clearly present in the questionnaire.

«Be that as it may, we must return. I don't want to become fish food. Whoever wishes can stay here and hope for a miracle. And I went to hope for a miracle where I can still do something».

With that, Runner turns and walks without hesitation into the tunnel we just came from. Planck, Martha and Alex follow him.

BeBe stands near the wall, hiding her face in her palms. Joleo approaches the woman and whispers something softly in her ear. I can't make out the words, but gradually BeBe lifts her face and despair is replaced by some new expression, similar to hope. Finally, she breaks into a faint smile. Joleo carefully takes the woman by the hand and gently leads her behind him, like a frightened child. This is how they join the rest. This gesture touches me deeply. Joleo, so absent-minded and plain at first glance, became a real savior for BeBe in her moments of deep despair. He found the strength for two. I am imbued with indescribable respect for this player. Some people in stressful situations tend to panic, while others, like Joleo, are able to reveal themselves from a new side – full of nobility and human dignity.

My attention turns to Angel and Blonda. The guy sits detached on the floor of the cave, Blonda kneels in front of him and holds his hand.

«Angel, baby, you have to move. (Baby?!) Please come with us», she begs him, “‘cause staying here means death. Please don't leave me alone!»

She either shakes him by the shoulders: «get up, I said, do you hear?», then tearfully asks: «please, follow me.» Angel seems to be in a daze and only occasionally shakes his head.

I really don't understand anything about human relationships. Blonda, self-confident, sharp tongue beauty, in love with, albeit outwardly attractive, but weak man? It looks like Runner is tormented by the same thoughts. He returns from the tunnel and sharply addresses Blonda:

«Leave the baby here, it's his choice».

«I'm not going anywhere without him,» she snaps.

«If you don't go by yourself, I'll carry you by force,» Runner seethes with indignation and jealousy overwhelming him.

«I'm not going anywhere without him, you understand, you son of a bitch?» she repeats with undisguised contempt.

Runner takes a deep breath and, grabbing Angel by the hand, drags him along, thereby pulling the guy out of a deep trance. It seems that Angel is moving forward by inertia...

Me, Leeloo and Yu close this strange procession of people who are fighting not only for their own lives, but also for the lives of those who have become close to them.

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: two hours zero-zero minutes.»

That's who all human feelings are definitely alien to.

Despite all efforts, our team is progressing unacceptably slowly. Fatigue, thirst and despair do their job. When we finally stand in front of a cramped manhole, which looks like copied from a real horror movie, a voice announces:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: one hour and thirty minutes.»

This grotto is not much different from the previous ones – convex rocky walls, sounds of drops and inhospitable piercing cold. And yet there is a difference: it ends with the release to freedom. Or a way to nowhere.

It seems to me, that the sound of water is heard in the distance. Fear runs cold in my veins.

«I'll go ahead,» Runner commands. He is sweating a lot and can hardly keep on his feet. His hands are trembling. «As soon as I get to whatever it is, I'll immediately give a signal. You are all waiting here, got it?»

«No time for that,» Joleo objects sharply. «We follow you right after».

«What if the hole gets too narrow? I won't be able to go back and we'll all be stuck in this damn tomb!»

«Nooo!» Yu falls into uncontrollable sobs again. I try to put my arms around her shoulders, but she struggles.

«In this case», Alex intervenes, «we are still drowned. So what's the difference where?»

Runner just waves it off and climbs into the tunnel without further protest. Alex, BeBe, Joleo, Planck and Martha follow him at two minutes intervals.

Surprisingly, Angel, without any persuasion, climbs after Blonda. The emotional shake-up obviously did him good.

Only me, Leeloo and Yu remain in the grotto. Yu is sitting on the floor, huddled into a ball and muttering, without ceasing, under her breath «no... no... no.»

«Yu», I try to sound soft, but convincing, «you can't give up now, one step away from being released. After having come all this nightmarish journey!»

«You don't understand,» she raises her face, wet with tears, «This isn't just fear, but a disease that I cannot overcome. Breathing is out of rhythm, and the brain refuses to work. Terror paralyzes the entire body. I am like a fly in a sticky web – any movement only tightens the threads of fear, blocking the access of oxygen and common sense».

«It's poetic, Yu, but let me tell you that staying here means certain death».

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: one hour, zero-zero minutes.»

Now not any doubt remains: we hear the sound of water, which gradually fills the grottoes, and is getting closer and closer to us.

«Don't leave me,» Yu grabs my hand in panic, «You promised. You remember?»

«I won't. But don't leave me either», I frantically try to imagine what Alex would say in this situation, «don't let me down! I don't want to drown here... because of you, Yu!»

For some reason, from my lips it sounds like an awkward accusation, and not at all as a stimulus to active action. The art of persuasion, apparently, is not my strong point.

Leeloo softly touches my hand and whispers:

«Tell her that she is not alone, that you are also afraid. Tell her the truth».

The girl nods to me encouragingly and finally disappears into the tunnel.

«Yu, listen,» I say carefully, «I've never been so scared in my life. If it weren't for all of you, I wouldn't budge, I swear! Instead, I would sit and obediently await my fate. Only thanks to your strength of mind, I find the courage to move on. I just want you to know that».

Yu looks at me in surprise:

«I thought you were one of the few who managed to maintain composure. I admired your courage. Today you are a hero, just like Runner, Alex and Joleo.»

«No! I'm weak. Help me survive this final stretch of the road».

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: fifty minutes.»

Now the metallic echo counts down every ten minutes.

I hold out my hand to her. Yu takes it, gets up, squeezes her eyes shut and dives into a narrow hole. I have no choice but to follow her. At the same time, only one thought is spinning in my head about what a big mistake I am making. She has only to start panic, and we will be forever stuck in this hole. I had to go first!

The tunnel seems incredibly long, it becomes more and more difficult to crawl: the walls narrow and, judging by the sensations, we are moving upward. Behind, the sound of approaching water is heard more and more clearly. Almost all the time I cheer Yu up, try to find the right words, and this is no less exhaustingly than the movement through the tunnel.

At some point, the walls become so narrow that you have to lie on your stomach. It is no longer possible to crawl on all fours. And then what I most feared happens: Yu begins to choke. To all my attempts, from soft persuasion and reasonable arguments to rude curses and threats, she doesn't react at all. Instead, the girl repeats all the time like a mantra: «I can no longer, I can no longer, I can no longer.»

I myself am close to a panic attack. Judging by the splash and roar of the water, it is no further than three or four grottoes from here. Voices can be heard up ahead screaming our names. The echo is quite booming, which means that we haven't yet approached the final goal and have to crawl at least a few tens of meters. We urgently need to come up with something, otherwise we will drown. Oh, if only I didn't give Yu a promise not to leave her alone, if only I climbed first, if only I didn't fill out this form on the website...

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: forty minutes.»

«Quiet, quiet, shh» I soothe myself in my thoughts. And then an idea comes to my mind, completely absurd and inappropriate, but there is no choice left. I remember my dear mother and how she used to help me in moments of fear, anxiety or just sadness. Just one fairy tale.

«Yu, listen! I'll tell you a story. You close your eyes and crawl forward. Don't think about anything, just listen to me!» Without waiting for an answer, I begin:

«Once upon a time there was a brave Bunny. He wasn't afraid of anyone, not at all. He even kicked a Bear once. The Bear rubbed the bruised place, twisted at his temple and said «some kind of nutcase», then turned around and left. Maybe he didn't want to mess with an crazy Bunny, or he turned out to be an overly kind and non-conflict bear. The Bunny was very brave. And extremely ill-

mannered. Once he ran up to the Wolf and said indifferently: «Do you know what I like most for dinner? Wolf Steak! Medium rare».

«Go to the doctor, psycho!» the Wolf snapped, but just in case he went into the forest.

«Nonsense,» Yu grumbles, but moves from her place and slowly creeps forward on belly.

«I absolutely agree with you! The Wolf should punish the Bunny for such bad manners! But you see, the Wolf decided that since the impudent behaves like this, he may have connections in an authoritative circle of predators! Well, a simple Bunny cannot say something like this to a wolf without having someone behind him. What if it's Hippopotamus himself?! (I remember the tactics of my mother: for all my attempts to stop the fairy tale, continue to be offended, sad or angry, she invented new stories about the brave, ill-mannered, stupid, smart, etc. Bunny, depending on the situation. The main secret is to tell like nothing happened).

«The Bunny, elated with success, once met a wild Boar, who wanted to eat the Bunny»...

«Boars don't eat Bunnies,» Yu interrupts angrily, but this anger is feigned. Well, if only she did not concentrate on the narrow tunnel!

«You're right, they don't eat. But they really want to try»...

I continue to talk some nonsense about the brave Bunny and his exploits, when at the end of the tunnel such a long-awaited light appears. Now the screams of other players are clearly audible, the clearest of all is the alarmed voice of Alex:

«Lavina! Lavina, damn you, where are you?!»

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: thirty minutes»

The main thing is not to think about anything! Continue to crawl and in no case be silent...

«Once the Bunny met the Fox. «I'll eat you,» she said. «No, you won't,» the Bunny replied insolently. You see, he was also very cocky. «The Bear, the Wolf and the wild Bear are my close friends and told me in all details about your intimate relations with them (in my mother's version, these were always more harmless options like «stealing food», but in this place I already, as a rule, laugh and am fooling around with her). The Fox blushed all over with shame. And yet she ate the Bunny. But the redness has not completely disappeared, since then Fox has been walking red».

At this moment, someone's hands grab Yu by the shoulders and pull first her, and then me, out of the hated manhole.

«What a stupid fairy tale», says Yu, smiling weakly.

«You are welcome», I smile in response, «by the way, it's called «Why the Fox is red.»

Barely catching my breath, I look around and see the worried faces of the participants. The cause for alarm is obvious: we are in a dead-end light grotto. Its walls are significantly lower than the previous ones, but still smooth, without a single ledge. Angel and Blonda are palpating them, while the others are sitting in the center and discussing something violently. We join this company at a merciless voice:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: twenty minutes.»

«We have no choice... will try to rise to the surface as the grotto is flooded, like corks... If we made a mistake... we will pay dearly for it», Planck offers, breathing heavily. One can see how difficult our expedition was for him. From time to time, the elderly man pauses to clear his throat and catch his breath, «be prepared for the fact that the water level may be insufficient to get out of here... The walls in the grotto are no more than 10 meters high. But even if there is only one meter left to the brim, we are lost. Besides, no one knows the landscape on the surface»...

«We are in the right place!» Angel rejoices, «Look what I found!» he holds out his open palm, on which lies a stone, exactly the same as we found in the dugout with food yesterday. Only with a 1/2 fraction carved on it.

«Great job Angel!» Alex grabs a stone and shoves it in his bosom, «Now there is no doubt that these things will be useful to us in the finale».

«And you decided that this stone will be more comfortable with you?» Runner asks hostilely.

«Guys, no time to quarrel», BeBe interrupts him angrily «look!»

We watch in horror as water pours out in a thin stream from the manhole from which we have just come.

«The narrow tunnel will create a pressure as soon as the water accumulates in sufficient volume in the grotto, where this very tunnel begins», Planck announces, «We'd better move to the opposite wall and get ready».

«And what about Martha?» BeBe exclaims with horror.

Our eyes turn to her. Martha sits calmly on the floor, and only her pale face betrays her inner state. There is a painful silence.

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: ten minutes.»

«We all go to the back wall and hold on until the water reaches the neck. After that, we sail calmly, slowly, waiting for the water level to rise. Save your energy! Martha, listen carefully! Me, Joleo and Runner will take turns keeping you afloat. Most importantly, you must relax and in no case resist, no matter how scary and uncomfortable it may be. Clear?» Alex commands an orderly tone.

«If you start to panic, I'll have to let you go,» Runner threatens. Alex gives him a warning look.

«Martha, this could mean death for both the drowning man and the rescuer. We are already too exhausted, running along the grottoes».

Martha just nods, unable to utter a word.

«I'll take care about Martha myself,» Angel's gentle voice sounds.

The players all, as one, turn their heads in surprise in his direction. Confused, the guy continues:

«I'm a professional swimmer and as a swimming instructor I had to take a course on rescuing drowning people. Besides, unlike you, I still feel a little bit of energy in me».

«Because you sat on your ass in safety while we were trying to find our way out!»

«Runner, shut up!» Alex turns to Angel. «Okay, so we'll do it.»

«Well, finally „Baby“ will be good for something», Runner throws angrily, but no one argues. It won't be easy to get out on your own, let alone help someone who can't swim.

I catch a glimpse of Blonda's proud, admiring gaze directed at Angel. Her eyes literally glow with happiness. Well, it's already clear to me that I know absolutely nothing about human relations. Now Angel, so handsome and cowardly, became a hero for Blonda and Martha. I don't have time to finish thinking this thought, as a female metallic voice announces for the last time:

«Until the flooding of the cave system remains: zero-zero minutes.»

At this moment the water from the tunnel bursts into our grotto with a terrible roar.

Despite all the fatigue, adrenaline is pouring through my veins. Like all other players, I hold myself firmly against the wall.

Leeloo is standing next to me:

«Don't worry, remember, I'm a great swimmer. Save energy, we'll need it,» I hear through the deafening roar of a powerful jet of water.

The water hits my heels, ankles and knees, but I try my best to keep the balance. Gradually, its level rises and when it reaches the neck, I break away from the wall and start paddling. Under normal conditions, this would not be that difficult. But now, exhausted, scared to death, I can hardly move my legs and arms. Even a wetsuit doesn't help. Out of the corner of my eye I see Angel, who is confidently floating on the water, holding Martha by the armpits. She hardly moves, but horror is imprinted on her thin face. There are still a few meters to the surface. Two meters. One meter. The water arrives now much more slowly. I don't know how long we have been paddling on the surface, but for me these minutes drag on endlessly. The hands refuse to obey when the water finally reaches the surface. Someone's faces, hands, bodies flicker before my eyes. I can only hope that the rest of the players will win in their own struggle for life.

I grab the edge of the grotto, try to pull myself up, but my fingers slip, so I go under the water. I frantically float to the surface, try to make a second attempt, but again I break down and plunge

into the water. How I want to surrender, just relax, let go... The third time I appear on the surface, I stretch out my hand on fumes, when suddenly someone's fingers grip my wrist and pull me out of the grotto. The last thing I see before passing out is Alex's worried face.

When I come to life, all the players are lying safe and sound on the rocks of the cliff, which seems to be the largest part of the cave system. A significant part falls on the ocean floor, judging by the appearance of the relief that opens from the hill. Aggressive waves are splashing around, now and then covering stones that serve as a refuge for players soaked to the skin. An uneven path of rocky boulders of various shapes and sizes leads to the coast. I can't wait to get out of here as soon as possible!

I don't know how long I spent unconscious. The sun is leaning towards the horizon. Some of the participants are still lying down, but most have already got to their feet and are actively discussing something. I find Leeloo with my eyes and exhale with relief. As usual, she keeps aloof and does not take part in the general discussion.

«Thank you,» Yu sits on a stone next to me and looks at me, «I'll never forget that».

«You're welcome,» I smile in response. «The tale is really stupid».

«It's not about your fairy tale. It's about you. I don't remember most of how I wandered in caves, much less crawled through the narrow tunnel. But one thing I know for sure: never again will I be able to overpower myself and voluntarily enter an elevator or a room without windows. All the progress that I have so painfully achieved so far has been destroyed without a trace. And no win is worth this failure.»

With that, she stands up and joins the rest of the players.

Her words make me think. Yes, I helped Yu, but first of all, I helped myself. While distracting the girl from gloomy thoughts, I did not have the time and energy to dwell on my own. What a strange experience! All these people showed themselves from unexpected sides. Usually absent-minded, Joleo makes sober decisions for himself and BeBe. Quiet and, as Runner often likes to say, worthless Angel saves Martha. Alex and the unpleasant Runner run to the limit, but come back every time for the rest. Yu overcomes his worst ailment and crawls forward through the nightmare that has come true. Martha trusts her life to an almost stranger. Planck with an invaluable baggage of knowledge and ability to analyze the situation saves everyone. What a surprise! I myself couldn't have imagined before that I would become a hero for someone. Even for myself. What I instilled in Yu about my own fear and powerlessness there, in the cave, was absolutely true. Maybe the ability for heroic deeds and self-sacrifice in critical situations is what unites us all? A thought worth discussing.

I feel relieved, even mildly euphoric, in the fresh air. But it does not last long: just remember the experienced moments of the nightmare or think about the future fate – all euphoria disappears without a trace. I quickly join the rest of the group in order to drive away gloomy thoughts from myself as far as possible.

«I know this place!» Yu exclaims. «Yesterday, during exploring, I saw these rocks. This means that we are in the north of the island and can easily find our way to the Bungalow».

As soon as the players finally come to their senses, we move forward. Jumping from one slippery stone to another, we get to the rocky coast. As it turns out, we are indeed on a hill. The mountain offers an excellent view of the jungle.

«Look there!» BeBe points with a finger to the place we were a few minutes ago, being washed by the waves, which every now and then tried to drag us back into their abyss. Not a trace remained of this place. The tide swallowed the rocks completely. Only from time to time, among the dancing waves, the sharp tops of this or that stone appear – either they mock us, or rage because of the victims who narrowly escaped death.

We reach the Platform within an hour. Everyone walks in silence, unable to conduct a conversation or discuss what happened in the caves. For the last half hour we have been moving in the dark, as the lanterns are inoperative after swimming.

Arriving on the Platform, the first thing the players do is stilling hunger and quenching thirst. Thereafter we sit around the massive table. We decide to learn more about each other in order to get closer to solving the main question – what can unite all of us. All attempts to find a common ground: places where we could meet, people who could connect us, and so on, lead to a dead end.

After what we had to go through today, I look at everyone with different eyes. Here are not just players or allies and, moreover, not opponents – from now on they are my friends. A common misfortune has brought us together. Someone is especially strong – out of the corner of my eye I glance at Joleo and BeBe, who are sitting next to each other and holding their hands under the table, as if afraid to let go of each other even for a second. The woman periodically glances at him secretly, and her eyes are filled with a special, incomparable shine.

The tragic love triangle also doesn't escape my close attention as well. Runner looks in the direction of Blonda, who, in turn, does not take her eyes off Angel.

The atmosphere of the evening seems calm and, at first glance, even cozy. But all those present are oppressed by the same thought: what will happen tomorrow? What crazy task would the organizers prepare for us this time?

As soon as we leave for our cells, I have a quick shower and put on the prepared clothes – a light cotton suit. The only thing that gives me inconvenience is the high leather boots. I have already ceased to be surprised at anything, so with a sigh I put them on and lace them up.

Finally, I grab my diary and think before I write it down. It is most convenient and clear to arrange the data about the players in the form of a table.

Name / Play name / Age / Country / Profession / Family / Comments

*Larina Victoria / Lavina / 25 / Russia / Freelance translator, teacher / Not married / That's me
Alexander Mironov / Alex / 28 / Russia / Lawyer / Single / Damn attractive (I wonder if he has a girlfriend?)*

Mariska Novak / Martha / 46 / Hungary / Head of laboratory of a research institute / Divorced, two children / Smart as Planck, only in a skirt

Max Karl Hofenberg / Planck / 56 / England, German descent / University teacher / Married, three children / Smarter than all of us put together

Helena Jönsson / Blonda / 28 / Sweden / Fitness club trainer, dreams of becoming an explorer of flora and fauna / Divorced, no children / Pretty woman seems to have a crush on Angel

Angel Sandberg / Angel / 27 / Sweden / Swimming coach, lifeguard / Single / Really an Angel. And what is it that attracts Blonda so much?!

Jorge Ruedo Rojo / Joleo / 38 / Spain / Astronomer / Single / The Absent-minded Scientist is a hero. Hope we go to his wedding with BeBe. And by the way, he discovered the satellite Joleo of the planet Saturn

Beatrice Bianchi / BeBe / 39 / Italy / Doctor, therapist / Divorced, one daughter / Emotional, good-natured (see previous comment)

Chen Yuming / Yu / 33 / China / Journalist / Single / Claustrophobia

Simon Red / Runner / 23 / USA, Virginia / Student, future architect, athlete / Single / Very aggressive. Crush on Blonda, hates Angel

?Leeloo 10? It's strange. She is my friend, and I know absolutely nothing about her.

I quickly draw the fields, fill in the information and try to analyze it. But the longer I am looking, the more I understand that we could not be more different. Whatever parameters I compare,

the players are too different from each other. Names, professions, countries, age... There is clearly a lack of data, some specific and extremely important information.

At this moment, there is a knock on the door. I quickly hide my diary under my pillow, and after a couple of seconds Alex peeks in. I'm glad to see him. As always.

«Hi! I can't sleep at all without a new dose of the coordinator. So you'll become coordinator-dependent. How do you feel?» He closes the door behind him and sits on a chair across from my bed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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