

THE TUNNEL

By Yana Vagner

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Excerpt

If it were light, shame would burn them at admitting these things. But the night was dark.

William Godling, LORD OF THE FLIES

Sunday, July 6th, 23:00

The scorched city never cooled off, not even by nighttime. Still, things eased off after the sunset, and there were twice as many cars as usual on the suburban road, bumper-to-bumper traffic starting ahead of the highway circling the city. Quite a few people simultaneously decided to return to the city from their *dachas* on the later side, and the stream of vehicles thickened and slowed to a crawl, merging from a three-lane highway into a joyless Sunday jam. Despite the late hour, the heat was unbearable, and, once they entered the tunnel, the air thickened with exhaust and stopped moving altogether.

“Close the window,” Sasha said. “I can’t breathe.”

Mitya could have objected that closing the windows would make things even worse. The luxury of hiding inside their vehicle belonged to those whose air conditioning still worked. In their Toyota, it broke last year. But there was no point in debating—he stopped winning arguments a long time ago—and so he simply pressed the button, pushing away the unwelcome thought of the window regulator malfunctioning fifty percent of the time. The passenger window twitched, crawled upwards, and immediately, treacherously fogged up again. The beer he drank at noon left no happy aftertaste; there was only heartburn and condensation on the car window. Mitya turned his head and breathed through his nose.

Inside the tunnel, the three rows of cars inched forward slowly, like meat through the grinder. In the last fifteen minutes, they moved about three hundred meters and then stopped. For the last ten minutes, the car radio had been gurgling and rattling, drowning out any words or music; instead of switching it off, Sasha turned the volume all the way down. Once again, Mitya said nothing because the closed windows and these horrible sounds were her only argument at that moment. No matter how mad his wife was, she never picked a fight in front of Asya. Not even once in ten years. Fragile enough already, this unspoken truce had to be protected at all costs.

In the backseat, his daughter stared at her phone. When he looked back, hoping for an exchange of sympathetic glances, she did not smile or grimace, as she would have done only a couple of years ago.

She didn't move as much as an eyebrow, and her suddenly grown-up face bore an unfamiliar, irritated expression.

"Mom's asking what time we'll be back," she said. "I got school tomorrow, by the way."

"I would love to know what time we'll be back," Sasha said, staring straight ahead. "But we won't know until we get back."

That was how they spoke to each other these days: avoiding eye contact and tossing their lines up in the air as if unsure who their audience was. He could have pretended they were speaking to him and responded, or even made a joke, but today he had absolutely no energy for this sort of thing.

Asya tapped the phone, waited, and tapped again.

"There is no reception here. Fantastic," she said, sliding down and banging her knees on the back of the driver's seat.

Sasha bit her lip and held the steering wheel tighter, but did not respond. Mitya avoided her gaze. *It's fine, it's all fine*, he said to himself. *We'll just drop Asya off and finish fighting at home. Curse this heat, the dacha, and the beer.* He looked away and closed his eyes.

The radio gurgled one last time and fell silent.

Sunday, July 6th, 23:26

"This is crazy, we haven't moved in half an hour," Sasha said. Her voice sounded tense. Mitya opened his eyes. Indeed, the traffic stood still. It was unbearably stifling inside the car, and his head ached even worse.

"Should we step out and see what's going on?" Asya said. "Look, everyone else is coming out."

She was right. Tired from sitting in their cars, more and more people came out and were now shuffling between rows, speaking softly. Now and then, someone would raise their hand to their forehead and crane their neck forward, as if hoping to detect the problem and figure out the reason for the traffic jam.

"There is nothing to see," Mitya said. "The tunnel is three and a half kilometers long; we can't see anything from here."

"Sure, let's just sit here and wait," Asya said.

"We should have left this morning," Sasha said, staring straight ahead.

Mitya recalled that the reason they didn't leave in the morning was because his morning started at noon, with a bottle of beer he downed standing by the refrigerator in nothing but his underwear, in the middle of someone else's kitchen littered with forgotten breakfast dishes. Going to the dacha wasn't even his idea. It certainly wasn't his idea to bring Asya. However, not leaving in the morning was certainly his fault.

"I have an interview at Red Gates tomorrow at 9," Sasha said.

“Mom must be going nuts,” Asya said.

The air did seem fresher outside, just a tad. With a sigh of relief, Mitya unfolded himself, took a few steps, and immediately performed the same senseless ritual as everyone else: he stretched out his neck and looked ahead, toward the beginning of the tunnel. Not surprisingly, he saw nothing except three dense lanes of cars that could have been reaching as far as the Kremlin. Mitya’s gaze extended only about three hundred meters ahead; after that, the stream of cars bent at an angle, locked inside concrete walls like water inside a pipe.

“What’s going on out there?” a woman inside a Porsche Cayenne asked, lowering her window.

He turned, ready to snap: *How would I know?* But her eyes were tired and sad, and the woman herself was incredibly, poignantly beautiful, one of those women who instantly made you remember you hadn’t shaved and were still wearing yesterday’s T-shirt, with a wet spot between your shoulder blades.

“Must be an accident,” he said. “Don’t worry, we’ll start moving soon. We’re inside the tunnel, so everything takes longer.”

“Accident my ass,” a husky, ruddy-faced guy from a Patriot SUV interjected. “An accident would have been cleared up already. It must be a government motorcade, for sure. Moving some big dick from place to place, and we’re stuck in here because of him.”

“Rublevka Highway is like this all the time,” a tanned hunk said, stepping out of his convertible. “Once they blocked the entire highway for an hour and a half. I stopped taking it, it’s just easier to go around than to wait.”

“Sure, it is,” Patriot said, staring unkindly at the shiny convertible with white seats and a half-dressed nymph in the passenger seat. “Although, if you ask me, you should just stick to Rublevka and get out of the way of people who have to work tomorrow.”

“I have to work tomorrow, too,” Convertible said, raising his chin in indignation. “I get up at six every day if you must know.”

I don’t have to work tomorrow, Mitya thought.

“An hour and a half?” the Cayenne woman said, horrified. She pressed her hands to her face with a short sob that was so full of despair that Mitya took a step closer for a better look.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Don’t worry,” Patriot said. “As soon as we let all these Rublevka people pass, we’ll start moving.”

“I don’t live on Rublevka,” Convertible said, frowning.

“That’s why you’re stuck here with us, asshole,” Patriot said cheerfully.

“Forgive me,” the Cayenne woman said, her slender hand still covering her eyes. “I just really need to get home. I had a very rough day.”

There was another woman in the passenger seat of the Porsche. Quiet until now, she snorted loudly, reached across her despondent companion, and tapped the window button. Mitya had just enough time to see that her face, too, looked tear-stained, and then the glass rose and hid both women from view.

“It’s so fucking hot,” Patriot said with unexpected ennui. “I don’t remember it ever being over forty degrees Celsius for three weeks in a row. Like bloody Africa, for fuck’s sake.”

“And no one has bothered to turn off their engines,” Convertible said through gritted teeth. “Everyone is just sitting here, polluting the air. I get that everyone has AC, but we have no roof, we can’t breathe.”

“I turned mine off,” Mitya said, thinking of the windows Sasha had battened down. “My AC is broken.”

“I got no AC at all,” Patriot said.

For a while no one said anything. Next to them, the rotund Porsche Cayenne with two sad women inside continued purring.

Just ahead, the door of the Patriot SUV flew open, letting out a sturdy woman in a tight pink T-shirt. The woman—she had to be Patriot’s wife—appraised them with a disapproving look.

“It’s almost twelve,” she said, as if challenging not just her husband, but also Mitya and Convertible. All three immediately glanced at their watches guiltily.

“The kids haven’t even had supper,” she said.

“What do you want to do, push everyone out of their way with my bare hands?” Patriot began, but his wife already slammed the door closed.

“Right,” Patriot said looking around. “All right.”

He began walking resolutely across the lines toward the patrol car. Mitya and Convertible trudged behind, driven by the inexplicable guilt before Patriot’s hungry children and his angry wife.

The portly captain dozed off with his mouth open, head thrown back, as if someone shot him in the forehead. Even in his sleep, he looked displeased. Patriot knocking on the grimy window and waking him up did nothing to improve his mood.

“Yo,” Patriot said with forced cheerfulness. Both cops stared at him with displeasure. “What’s up over there, huh? Motorcade shit?”

“We’re not highway patrol,” the captain said grimly, repeating what he’d already shared with the moon-faced woman in a Peugeot.

"I mean, you guys got a radio," Patriot said. "You got the same frequency, right? I mean, we haven't moved in like forty minutes."

"We. Are. Not. Highway. Patrol," the captain said, enunciating every syllable and looking up at Patriot with eyes mottled with sleep.

Suddenly, Mitya felt very angry, livid at the boorish captain, at the heat, at the traffic jam, at this endless, horrible day.

"Listen," he began. "I'm sure you guys need to get somewhere, too. Let's figure out what's happening over there."

That was when he saw a man in a blood-stained shirt lying in the back seat; he was handcuffed, and his face bore signs of a recent confrontation. The man lifted his bloodied head, looked at Mitya, and suddenly winked at him.

Meanwhile, the fat captain switched on his radio and stuck the speaker into Mitya's face, stretching the coiled wires precariously far.

"Here, ask them yourself," he said.

The speakers gurgled, hoarse sounds merging into a senseless homogenous hum.

"We're under the river," the captain said cheerfully. "There are twenty meters of water plus three meters of concrete above us. Nothing's going to fucking work here."

"What if I walked over there?" the younger cop said. "Maybe I could quickly check what's going on."

It was obvious that this wasn't the first time he'd proposed something like this, and that he, too, was sick to death of sitting inside the car with his unpleasant superior and the roughed-up detainee. The senior cop put the speaker down, twisted the head off a mangled bottle of mineral water, took a sip, put the cap back, and only then nodded, lazily and reluctantly.

"Sure," he said. "But if things start moving, I'm not waiting for you. You'll have to get back on your own."

Monday, July 7th, 00:12

Maneuvering between the rows proved to be very difficult. Cars stood too close to each other, and so they had to navigate open doors and groups of bored and overheated drivers. Bringing the first lieutenant turned out to be a bad idea after all; instead of stepping out of his way, people kept rushing over to him with questions, complaints, and curses. Mitya was beginning to think they would've made it quicker without him. However, an hour-and-a-half deadline was unrealistic regardless.

"Fucking tunnel," Patriot said hoarsely. "Who the fuck came up with a tunnel that long?"

He'd finished his water a while ago, tossing the empty bottle under someone's car. His T-shirt was soaked, and his face looked red and puffy as if he'd just rolled out of a sauna.

“They are not meant for pedestrians,” Convertible said grimly.

After the first kilometer, he, too, looked rather worn out. His linen shirt stuck to his back and soft leather moccasins were covered with dust. Mitya tried not to think of what he himself looked like. He was very thirsty, and his head was pounding. The goddamn tunnel appeared infinite: a long tight bowel, stuffed with cars, indignant people, and exhaust fumes. *And we still have to make our way back*, he thought wistfully. *To be honest, there is absolutely no point in going anywhere. Even if we get to the exit, what are we going to see? Some monstrous accident with dead bodies, spilled motor oil, and a fountain of fuel? Or, perhaps, one of those idiotic motorcades that brought traffic to a standstill. Even if we figure out what’s happening, nothing’s going to change, and this stupid boy in uniform can’t help us. They’ll simply send us back to get us out of the way, and we’re going to have to walk the same fucking three kilometers back.*

“Fucking A,” Patriot said, breathing heavily as he glanced at his watch. “It’s Monday.”

“Should we go back?” Convertible said. He stopped and looked around. “Just think about it—what if they start moving? They’re going to flatten us like pancakes. Not like there is a sidewalk in here.”

“Kind of dumb, no?” the first lieutenant said hesitantly. “What are we going to tell them?”

“Just tell them you shat your pants,” Patriot said. “Go back, ladies, we’ll handle it without you. Right, Four Eyes?”

He placed a heavy sweaty paw on Mitya’s shoulder.

The last time Mitya had been called Four Eyes was in middle school when he was about twelve. More than anything, he wanted to shake off Patriot’s hand and turn back, but the way back was no longer possible. Even a short hesitation was enough for the cop uniform to work its charm: a small, but very intense crowd had gathered around them. Everyone was staring at the first lieutenant, and none kindly.

“When are we going to start moving?” someone asked.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” someone else said in the back.

“How long is this going to continue?” a female passenger of an overcrowded bus asked pitifully. “We’ve been sitting here like cattle.”

“Sorry, sorry,” a suntanned man in sweatpants said, pushing his way through the mob. “Our train is leaving the Kyiv train station in forty minutes; we’re cutting it pretty close—would hate to miss it. Can we--somehow, you know? What do you think, lieutenant?”

“I don’t know anything,” the tortured first lieutenant groaned. “Let me through.”

He lowered his head and attempted to squeeze through, carefully moving his body sideways, but the crowd closed in with an alarming humming sound. The passengers locked inside the bus screamed. Some old man went as far as pulling on his sleeve with all his insignificant body weight.

“Hold on!” the old man said. “Tell us what’s going on! I’m an honored veteran of labor!”

The first lieutenant tried to shake him off, his sleeve making a ripping sound. The old man grabbed on with all his might, like a dachshund pulling a fox out of its hole. Patriot narrowed his eyes and reached for the old man. The suntanned man intercepted; his face looked ominously dark.

“We’ve been away from home for six months, get it?” he said, no longer friendly. “We have tickets, we have everything, all we need is to get out of your goddamn Moscow.”

Four or five equally sturdy, suntanned men climbed out of a shabby blue minivan to support their companion.

“No one asked you,” Patriot growled, moving closer.

They clinched and froze, these two nearly identical angry dudes. Squeezed between them, the first lieutenant and the grey-haired veteran of labor went limp simultaneously, as if on command. Convertible looked pale; he appeared to have stopped breathing. *Lovely*, Mitya thought. *We’re about to get pummeled.*

However, the fight never happened. The tinted glass of the stretched executive Mercedes-Maybach slid down, and a cold managerial voice commanded:

“Stop this ruckus immediately.”

It was a woman’s voice, not even particularly loud, but everyone immediately recognized its authoritative confidence. It was the voice of a government official, a school principal, and a tax inspector. This voice did not allow for arguments; instead, it promised inevitable retribution. It worked equally well on both Patriot and all six of his suntanned opponents. All of them immediately deflated and shrunk in size. The young first lieutenant felt the impact even more; he flinched and tried to pull his shirt down along with the old man still attached to his sleeve.

The window went back up slowly as if the incident had been resolved by this short remark. Mitya had just enough time to see that the owner of this unpleasant voice was not alone in the car. In the Mercedes’ dark interior behind her, Mitya glimpsed a pinched yellowish profile, gold-rimmed glasses, and a thin mouth curled in distaste. The mirrored glass closed, hiding everything from view. However, a moment later, the door opened, and the woman climbed out of the car. She gave the motley crowd a disapproving look as if they were a bunch of schoolchildren caught with a cigarette in a bathroom, and immediately lost interest in everyone except for the first lieutenant.

“So, what’s going on here?” she asked, addressing only the first lieutenant. She crossed her arms on her chest and waited for his answer with the confidence of someone who knew the explanation would follow right away. Despite the mature, tired voice, she was relatively young, about thirty-five, forty maximum. She had big bones, short blond hair, and the face of a woman who knew she wasn’t beautiful and had no desire to hide it. An expensive pantsuit—more of a proof of status than a coquettish accessory—looked too tight on her body.

“Umm,” the first lieutenant began, then fell silent, waiting for support.

“We got a train to Kyiv to catch,” one of the suntanned guys said immediately.

“We’ve been here for an hour already!” one of the bus passengers said.

“I’m an honored veteran of labor!” the old man reminded everyone.

An official’s charisma turned out to be stronger than the cop’s, because the sweaty, exhausted first lieutenant was instantly forgotten. Complaints and demands flowed freely once again, this time addressed to the woman from the Mercedes. She grimaced and raised her hand like a conductor frustrated with an inadequate orchestra; in the respectful hush that followed her gesture, she posed one more question to the young first lieutenant:

“I assume you do not have any information, am I correct?”

The first lieutenant shook his head guiltily.

“Where is your vehicle?”

He pointed to the far tail of the infinite cavalcade.

“I see,” the Mercedes woman said. “Here’s what needs to be done.”

She didn’t finish her sentence, interrupted by a new noise, inexplicable and complex, as if built of a multitude of independent sounds. Frowning, she looked around in search of the noise that was clearly located somewhere ahead, by the exit. Everyone else did the same, from those who stood between the lanes to those still sitting in cars and even those who were still locked inside the bus. A faint ripple moved through the rows of cars as it usually happens right before the traffic jam clears. Doors slammed closed, engines purred, and headlights flashed. All six construction workers hopped back into the blue minivan. The old veteran of labor scuttled over to his Lada Kalina.

“Are we moving?” Convertible asked nervously. “Dammit, I knew we should have...”

“Hold on,” Patriot said.

Along with everyone else, they had been staring ahead, and so they all saw the bike at the same time. The first thing they registered was the sound of screeching tires and roaring engine bursting into the crooked pipe of the tunnel, followed by the bike itself—swift, predatory, bright yellow, ridden by a leather-clad figure. It rushed straight at them, dangerously leaning sideways and maneuvering along the tight rows of cars, stripping paint off their sides and ripping off the side mirrors. Ignoring the screaming from the owners of damaged cars, the bike flew—despite all logic—in the opposite direction, toward the entrance. Another second, and it disappeared, melted into the concrete bowel, followed slightly behind by the roar of its engine. For a moment, shocked silence reigned. And then a woman shouted from inside the bus:

“Look, look! Over there!”

Monday, July 7th, 00:23

There was a flood of people. They came from the same turn in the tunnel as the yellow bike, instantly filling in all the space between the rows, like water flowing through a pipe. At first, it seemed as if they were running in silence, but soon the source of the vague distant humming everyone heard a few minutes ago became clear—it was them, the runners. The humming noise was a combination of stomping feet, breathing, and a multitude of voices. They were still too far away for the individual words to be heard, but piece by piece, the tunnel came alive in waves, like a flash mob at a stadium. People jumped out of cars, grabbed their stuff, picked up their children, and joined the stream, simultaneously slowing it down and speeding it up.

Strangely enough, none of the observers moved from their spots, as if they needed an explanation or had to see the source of distress with their own eyes before they gave in to the panic. All the faces bore the same expression: empty and confused, with no hint of fear just yet. The impulse had not yet transmitted as if it only worked at a closer distance. *That's how people look when they stare in the face of an attacking enemy*, Mitya thought, and his own calm reaction surprised him. *That's how they look when they see a tsunami coming. When a wave as big as a five-story building flies directly at you, there is no point in running, you can only watch.*

“Oh my god, is there a fire?” a woman asked.

Only then the spell was broken, and the fog was lifted. The people on the bus were the first to scream. They pushed and pulled, making the bus rock from side to side. They knocked on the driver's glass, and finally, the doors opened with a hissing noise, and three dozen freed passengers spilled out and rushed around, alarming the others.

“Fire!” a woman cried pitifully. “We're going to burn alive!”

“Water, the water's coming, we're underneath the river!” another voice joined in.

A car door flew open, then another, and the tight space between the cars filled out in an instant. There was no smoke or water to be seen, and the true reason for the panic remained unknown, but after the first scream, none was necessary. Someone was taking bags out of the trunk, someone was struggling with a child seat, pulling out a sobbing infant, a bag of Granny Smith apples spilled on the ground, and everyone was screaming simultaneously and unintelligibly. There was no time left: the running mob had finally reached them, attacking like an enemy cavalry, roaring and stomping. Both groups collided and merged. They rushed at each other, trampling the fallen ones and slipping on the rolling apples, not on purpose but simply because the ones running from the tunnel exit had been infected by fear a while ago. They knew the real reason for the fear, while those who got in their way hadn't had enough time to fully process it.

Mitya pressed his back to the hot side of the bus. His head still felt empty, the only thought being how dirty the bus was and how he would probably have to throw away his T-shirt. He took a step forward, but someone bumped his shoulder, then again, then he stepped on a crumpled bag of groceries and fell on his knees, thinking about someone inevitably stepping on his glasses, and then managing to catch them in his fist. He was grabbed under his arms, pulled into the bus, and jerked up on his feet. Mitya put his glasses back on and found himself facing the ruddy, sweaty Patriot. Behind

Patriot's wide back stood the Mercedes woman and the young first lieutenant. Convertible was nowhere to be seen.

"Thanks," Mitya said hoarsely.

They stood in the narrow aisle between the wide maw of the bus and the Lada Kalina. The Lada Kalina was empty. No longer at the wheel, the little old man left behind an open trunk filled with some multicolored rags, an open driver's door, and a still steaming, floral-patterned thermos with no lid in the cup holder.

"Well," the Mercedes woman said. She leaned forward, reached in front of her, and grabbed one of the runners, a short, puny man with a plastic cat carrier pressed to his chest. She pulled him out of the crowd.

"What happened there?" she asked.

"Let me go," the puny little man shouted. He tried to jerk himself free, but the cat carrier constricted his movements. Inside, a large white cat screeched angrily.

"I'm not letting you go until you tell me," the Mercedes woman shouted in response. "What! Happened! There?"

"I don't know, for god's sake," the puny man said desperately. "The doors closed, do you understand? Huge, enormous doors! And a car was squished, flattened like a pancake! We're locked in, don't you get it? Let me go!"

He finally jerked himself free and disappeared. Patriot turned to Mitya.

"What are you doing standing here?" Patriot screamed; his eyes were wild. "Come on, run!"

He dove into the stream of runners. Completely devoid of thought, Mitya took a deep breath as if before a jump and followed.

"Hey," the first lieutenant yelled. "Wait for me!"

He took a step forward, bracing himself, but the Mercedes woman raised her muscular arm and took hold of his collar, or rather grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and pulled.

"Hang on," she said. "You're not going anywhere, lieutenant."

Monday, July 7th, 00:32

Asya shifted the backpack under her head, trying yet again to get comfortable. She turned on her left side, then on her right, her nose pressing against the stuffy back of the seat. Her legs felt numb. The back seat of the Toyota was too short, and her backpack was too stiff. The clock showed half past midnight, and the heat felt unbearable. Her legs bent at the knees ached, and more than anything she wanted to go home. Just go home, that was it. *I'm never going anywhere with them*, she promised silently to herself and her mom. She lay on her back and closed her eyes. *Never, ever again.*

The grey-haired priest in the Lexus wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and turned up the AC. He sat up in his seat and glanced in the rearview mirror. He pulled down his lower eyelid, sighed, and tossed a handful of brightly colored pills into his mouth.

“All vehicles,” the radio suddenly barked in the patrol Ford. The two men inside, the portly captain and his handcuffed prisoner, both worn out by the heat, flinched and woke up. “To provide,” the radio gurgled and immediately shut down. The captain fiddled with the knobs and made it worse: the signal disappeared entirely, leaving behind nothing but a lifeless crunching sound. The captain glanced at his watch, cursed, reached for a mineral water bottle, and tossed the last few drops into his mouth.

“It won’t work,” the handcuffed man said, yawning. “I’m going to call my attorney tomorrow morning, and all hell will break loose. Human rights activists, media. Picketing at the entrance to your building. By the way, your lieutenant saw everything; he won’t lie for you. Tomorrow you’re going to drive me home with apologies. You may even lose your job.”

The captain crumpled the empty bottle and tossed it under the seat, then turned and quickly and efficiently slammed his fist into the prisoner’s mouth.

“I caught you, and I will put you behind bars,” he said. “Fuck your picketing.”

He leaned back in his seat, closed his eyes, and was about to doze off when the sleepy silence was pierced by the sharp sound of an engine. The captain frowned, opened the door, and poked his head out between the rows of cars. Two seconds later, nearly missing the moonfaced drama queen from the Peugeot and almost decapitating the captain, a yellow sports motorcycle rushed past.

Monday, July 7th, 00:36

Filled with cars but devoid of people, this section of the tunnel resembled a ransacked supermarket. Open trunks, headlights left on, discarded bags, and stomped-on apples. Three or four forgotten engines purred softly, and an open door chimed mournfully somewhere nearby. *Just like in The Martian Chronicles*, thought the well-read first lieutenant. They must be almost there, another five, ten minutes, and they’ll reach the exit on the other side. And he was still here, for whatever reason--fuck if he knew. Only because she wouldn’t let him go, this strange, unpleasant broad.

“Well, lieutenant,” the Mercedes woman said. “Let’s go see what’s going on.”

“I kind of have to get back,” he said spitefully. “I must report back. That’s what I was sent here for.”

“And what are you going to report?” she asked coldly. “You haven’t actually seen anything yourself. What do you suppose is true—the fire or the flood? Or that the doors are made of concrete and whatever else is there, a crushed car? Before you report back, you must get reliable information, haven’t they taught that much, lieutenant? Enough talking, let’s go. We’re wasting time.”

Not waiting for an answer, she walked along a row of abandoned cars, clicking her sensible heels on the concrete floor.

"It's first lieutenant," he informed her back, knowing already that he was going to obey and follow her as if she had the authority to order him around, as if he didn't have enough bosses without this Mercedes bitch. "My rank is first lieutenant."

She didn't even look in his direction.

"Wait," someone said behind him. Convertible climbed out of the bus. He looked pale and roughed up. His linen shirt was missing several buttons, and there was an angry scratch on his forehead. "I'm coming with you."

The passage between the rows of cars was narrow, and they had to form a single file, stepping over plastic bags, bottles, and all the other trash. The Mercedes woman marched like a Kremlin cadet, setting the pace. Keeping up with her was not a trivial task. *She's not even out of breath, like a fucking Terminator*, the first lieutenant thought angrily. *Where do they even find people like her?* Behind him, Convertible huffed and puffed, stepped on his heels, and finally tripped on something, headbutting the first lieutenant and nearly knocking both of them down. Another side-swept mirror crunched under their feet.

"Hey, why don't you head back?" the first lieutenant said, glancing behind him. "Your girl has been waiting for you for a while. We need to be here, but you really don't, do you?"

Convertible did not respond, but simply shook his head. There was a chance he didn't even hear the question. His face was empty and tense like that of a man who had come up to the water's surface, grabbed onto the side of a boat, and refused to let go, even if someone slammed an oar onto his fingers. *You're terrified, aren't you*, the first lieutenant thought with unexpected pleasure.

"Mind the time!" the Mercedes woman barked at him. "Keep up, Lieutenant!"

One and a half kilometers back, in the epicenter of the crowd rushing toward the exit, the nearly deaf and practically blind Mitya jumped or rather trampled over a fallen person. He wasn't sure if it was a male or a female. He simply knew that he'd stepped onto someone's hand, a soft, living hand, and thought: *that's it, I can't do it, not anymore.*

"Andrey!" someone shouted next to him. "Andrey, honey!"

He was pushed from behind, stumbled yet again, lost his balance, and was about to collapse, feeling some degree of relief that it was almost over, but then Patriot screamed right into his ear:

"Here they are! Katya, hey Katya, I'll be right there! Don't come out!"

He charged like a war elephant.

Mitya looked up and saw the dusty front of the familiar SUV about twenty meters ahead, then the familiar Porsche Cayenne. Between the cars, the moonfaced Peugeot woman stood frozen with her mouth wide open. The overweight captain was climbing out of the patrol car with surprising agility.

Mitya reached the Toyota and jerked the door open. Sasha looked up at him, her eyes black with fear. Patriot rushed by, carrying a sleepy six-year-old kid under his arm. Patriot's wife and daughter in matching pink T-shirts followed.

"That's it, Four Eyes!" Patriot yelled, running by. "You're on your own now!"

Mitya was pushed once again; the opened door of his car cut into the flow. He spread his legs apart, found his center of gravity, and pulled them both out of the Toyota, first Sasha, then Asya, regretting for a second that Asya was too big to be carried. Holding their hands, he ran. In the crowd, he saw the beautiful Cayenne woman and her cranky companion, the little cab driver of the Renault, and the young Gazelle truck driver. Ahead of everyone else, was the barelegged nymph from the convertible. She took off her high heels and ran easily, as graceful as an antelope. Before the familiar section of the tunnel was left behind, Mitya saw the Peugeot woman out of the corner of his eye. She ran across the flow and threw herself at the overweight captain, holding onto him like onto a life preserver.

"Let go of me! I said let go, are you nuts?" The captain tried to shake her off, but the crazy bitch had a death grip on him and wouldn't let him take even a single step.

"You have to!" she shouted right in his face. "You must help me! My son, he can't walk on his own!"

She looked insane, rabid, as if she were about to sink her teeth into his cheek. For a moment, the captain found himself back in time, in that distant summer at his grandmother's house in the Voronezh region. He saw the rustling linden trees, the deserted village street, and himself, only ten years old, facing the wet muzzle of a dog, with its bared teeth, foggy eyes, and foaming mouth. Once again, he felt his childish helplessness and horror.

Giving in, he walked against the current toward the blue car with a folded wheelchair sticking out of the trunk. The entire time Mama-Peugeot was fiddling with the back door and the straps of the child seat, she kept her grip on the captain's elbow to keep him from changing his mind.

"Are you going to just stand here?" she asked furiously. "Come on, hurry up!"

Seeing a red-faced stranger instead of his mother scared the boy, and he began to scream. The captain grabbed the heavy eleven-year-old and carried him off, sweating and cursing.

The handcuffed man, forgotten in the back seat of the patrol car, struggled to sit up and shoved his shoulder into the locked door—once, then again.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Hey, captain!"

He leaned backwards again and began to slam his feet into the door.

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The man with the cat carrier wasn't lying. There was no smoke, fire, water, or even a police cordon at the beginning of the tunnel. Where an exit to the city used to be, rough-looking concrete gates shut close, giant numbers 0-61 painted in oil now on full display. Above them, in the ceiling arch,

electronic speed limit boards flashed STOP in bright red. A massive metal grate came down across the lanes, ten meters away from the concrete barrier. The grate must have descended quickly, because it didn't quite close all the way—an orange Volkswagen Golf was stuck underneath. The heavy welded structure sliced the small car in half, crushed its roof, and pushed out its windows. A black oil puddle formed under its tires.

Convertible approached the Volkswagen and tried to open the mangled trunk, but the warped car wouldn't budge. Inside the trunk Convertible saw a couple of duffel bags, a yellow hardshell suitcase, and a tennis racket. He pulled out the suitcase, put it aside, climbed into the trunk, and peeked inside the Volkswagen. Almost immediately, he climbed back out, looking as if he was about to be sick.

"I don't get it," the first lieutenant said. "Where did the hermetic doors come from? We're not on the subway."

"What's a hermetic door?" the Mercedes woman asked.

The question surprised the first lieutenant.

"Don't you read?" he asked. "These are hermetic doors. They block water, gas, radioactive dust, and all that. All sci-fi books are all about that now. The subway is the ideal refuge in case of a major catastrophe. You can survive a nuclear war in there."

"I don't have time for speculative fiction," the Mercedes woman said drily. "Plus, this is a ridiculous idea. The air does not get into the subway through the doors. Do you think these things block radioactive dust?"

She pointed up. The first lieutenant raised his head and looked into the mouth of an enormous air jet suspended from the ceiling. It resembled an aircraft turbine. Its heavy blades rotated, supplying air from the surface. He turned away, feeling blood rushing to his cheeks. He'd never considered any of this before.

Monday, July 7th, 00:47

The handcuffed man finally managed to crawl over to the front seat of the patrol car. Luckily, his wrists were cuffed in front, not behind him, which made it possible for him to unlock the door. The buttons clicked and popped up, and he reached for the driver's door, but hesitated, turning to the glove compartment instead. There was nothing useful inside—a few pieces of paper, a stack of yellowing McDonald's napkins, and a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He climbed out and observed the situation.

There was no one around, except for a bearded old man in a shiny Lexus in the next lane. The old man looked ill and sleepy. The handcuffed man smiled, raised his manacled hands in greeting, then limped toward the entrance, disappearing between rows of cars.

At that very minute, the runners experienced some relief: the last third of the tunnel was empty, the dense sea of cars finally ending. The running mob dispersed and slowed down as if the cars had been the true reason behind the panic. As if now, when three wide lanes of dry, clean asphalt opened before

them, running and pushing felt too awkward. The last half a kilometer before the entrance to the tunnel, everyone fit comfortably, all three hundred people, and the timing was perfect because when the first rows had nowhere to go, the back rows stopped pushing, so no one was crushed. However—and everyone saw it at once—there was also nowhere to run.

The three-kilometer-long section of the tunnel was sealed on both ends. Massive gates of rough, spongy concrete blocked the tall entrance arch, and only the numbers were different: 0-60. Before the gates, the same heavy grate displayed bars as thick as ropes.

“What the hell,” someone said.

“At least, there is no fire,” another voice said. “Although I have a sneaking suspicion, we are going to be late for work.”

Strangely enough, a few people laughed. *How puzzled and embarrassed everyone looks*, Mitya thought. It was as if these people weren’t the ones running just a few moments ago, tripping over each other and knocking each other down like a witless, terrified herd. As if everyone needed to forget that humiliating flash of fear. At least, the reason for this fear had materialized and now had a solid shape. These gates—no one knew who closed them, why, and for how long, but there was no immediate danger to these concrete doors. Fire, water, or some kind of avalanche of rocks would have been significantly worse. Natural disasters were much scarier because one could not reason with the elements. But the doors with the mundane numbers on them had been thought of by someone, planned and prepared in advance, and behind them was someone’s will, which could be analyzed and cracked, and the logic could be extracted. And yet, where did they come from, these gates? And when would they open? Asya and Sasha stood by his side, and their hands were very hot.

“Step aside,” someone in the back said grimly. “Coming through.”

Obediently, the crowd parted. Mitya glanced back, recognizing the portly captain, the same one who, only an hour ago, muttered “We’re not highway patrol” through gritted teeth, and then sent the young first lieutenant to the tunnel exit to find out what caused the traffic jam. The captain looked just as annoyed. The chunky boy from the Peugeot hung limply from the captain’s arms, like a heavy ragdoll. The boy seemed to be asleep; his head lolled to the side and his legs dangled helplessly. However, as soon as the captain took a step, the boy began to thrush, grunting and headbutting the captain on the chin.

“He doesn’t like the way you’re holding him,” Mama-Peugeot said, grabbing the overweight captain’s elbow. “Don’t squeeze my son like this, you’re scaring him!”

The captain closed his eyes and stood still like someone silently counting to ten. Getting approximately to two, he bent down, placing his squirming cargo on the ground, and began to make his way toward the gates. This new situation did not make the boy any happier, and he rocked and whimpered. His mother knelt by his side; she didn’t try to hold him but instead simply patted his leg—carefully, as if this plump child’s leg clad in denim was made of glass.

“Take a few steps back, please,” she said loudly, looking up. “Just a couple of steps, he’s afraid of strangers.”

There was plenty of space, enough to let the angry cop through and to give the mom and her son some air. Now everyone was watching the captain; with each step that separated him from the Peugeot woman, his authority grew. He even seemed to be getting taller.

Slowly, he approached the steel grate, raised his head, and gave the entire structure a disapproving look. Then he grabbed the thick bars and shook them, once, and again, and eventually kicked the grate with his foot.

“Police, open up,” someone said.

The back rows giggled.

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“They must have pushed forward at the last moment,” Convertible said. “Probably waited at the red light, like everyone else, and then the gates began to come down, and they thought they’d make it through and sped up. And this thing fell on top of them. How is it normal, crushing human beings with a metal grate? We should take pictures before it’s back up, does anyone have a phone? I left mine in the car.”

He stood a few meters away, fiddling with the handle of the rescued suitcase. His face was still pale, but he sounded a little livelier.

The first lieutenant crouched next to the grate and leaned into it, trying to pull it up. The heavy structure did not budge.

“You don’t really think you can lift it, do you?” the Mercedes woman asked sarcastically. “By yourself, with your bare hands?”

Convertible stopped torturing the suitcase, stood next to the first lieutenant, and gripped the iron bars. It was obvious he, too, was sick of that horrible Mercedes broad. After pushing and pulling for a minute, Convertible straightened up and shook the dust off his hands.

“This is useless,” he said. “We should take a picture of it. For the relatives. Because they are going to lie through the roof, and the relatives won’t be able to prove anything. You can find them through your channels. There’s quite a lawsuit right here, they’ll thank...”

He didn’t finish because something shifted inside the Volkswagen, someone moved in there and moaned. Both the first lieutenant and Convertible immediately took a step back; both had the same horrible feeling that it was their useless fiddling with the grate that caused the suffering of the invisible person inside, and if they stopped pulling on it, stopped rocking the wrecked car, this suffering would stop.

Please don’t, the first lieutenant thought. *I don’t want to see it.*

But the mangled driver's door opened with a crunching sound, spilling shards of glass everywhere, and a man fell out onto the asphalt. He sank awkwardly onto his side, gasped in pain, and for a moment, lay still. Almost immediately, he stirred again and finally managed to sit up. He was very young, maybe twenty, almost a boy. His nose was bleeding, and his face was smashed, likely by the airbag that deployed and now hung limply inside the Volkswagen like a popped white balloon. The boy's left arm was broken and hung at a terrible angle; the fracture did not look good. The first lieutenant thought he saw the bone.

"Please help me," the boy said. "It really hurts."

But no one could help. They couldn't reach him because the heavy iron structure cut the Volkswagen nearly in half, locking the young driver in the tight space between the grate and the concrete gates, as securely as a cage at a zoo.

"We need a crowbar," the first lieutenant said helplessly. "Someone must have one, let's go ask around."

The Mercedes woman snorted.

"Don't be an idiot," she said. "This grate weighs several tons, look at what it's done to the car."

The Volkswagen boy threw a nervous glance back and finally saw what was left of his cheery orange car.

"Could you check on them, please?" he said.

"Don't," Convertible said immediately. "Don't look."

I can't, the first lieutenant thought miserably. *It's not for me, I should have gotten a job as an armored guard, like Lyokha, or a security guard at a bank. I could sit in a leather chair and check IDs.* He looked down, grabbed the welded frame, and pulled again.

"Let go of it already, you moron," the Mercedes woman said behind his back. "Come on, we have to get back."

"What?" the boy asked anxiously, struggling to get up. "Where are you going?"

Swaying, he looked inside his squashed car, where the back seat used to be. Something gurgled in his throat, and he began to cry.

The Mercedes woman observed the trash strewn on the ground, picked up a can of Coke that had rolled out of someone's bag, popped it open, and handed it to the boy through the bars. He grabbed it with his good hand, brought it to his bloodied lips, and drank greedily, choking and sniffing. The soda ran down his chin in pink foamy streams.

"What about him?" the first lieutenant asked. "Are we just going to leave him here?"

The boy flinched, choking and blinking furiously. His eyes were round, the lashes sticky with tears.

“Remove your shirt and wrap your arm as tightly as you can,” the Mercedes woman told him.

“No,” he said immediately, trying not to look at his terrible crushed elbow. “I can’t. I’m going to wait for the ambulance.”

“Listen,” Convertible began. “We’re going to find someone and bring them here...”

“No, let’s just wait!” the boy shouted. He dropped the unfinished can by his feet, shut his eyes, and squeezed his right fist, like a toddler at a toy store. “Let’s just wait, please, they’ll be here soon!”

“All right, let’s go,” the Mercedes woman said, looking at her watch.

“What if I stay with him?” the first lieutenant said without much enthusiasm. “You can go find a doctor.”

“Absolutely not. This is your job, *first* lieutenant,” she said spitefully. “You can go and find him a doctor. I don’t have time for this.”

She turned and walked away, her angry heels clicking and clacking on the asphalt. The first lieutenant and Convertible rushed after her, similarly relieved, as if staying in the empty, echoing section of the tunnel next to the car full of dead teenagers was too scary without this loud, unpleasant woman.

Left behind in his cage, the Volkswagen boy howled and writhed, having finally noticed the rows of deserted vehicles, switched-on headlights, and scattered belongings.

“Wait!” he screamed. “Where is everyone? Are you coming back? Please, don’t leave me here! I can’t be here alone!”

Monday, July 7th, 00:52

The captain’s struggle with the grate proved to be rather uninspiring. He gave up on kicking and tugging it pretty quickly, switching to walking back and forth from one wall to another. Eventually, he settled on standing in front of the iron bars with his hands behind his back and glaring at the rebellious steely structure, as if expecting it to crumble in shame under his equally steely gaze. The captain’s plump back radiated indignation and confidence, but the grate had won, and the crowd was getting bored.

“Excuse me, you’re stepping all over my feet,” a woman said. “Must you press against me like that?”

“I’m not pressing against you,” an offended man’s voice replied. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Then take a step back, why are you breathing down my neck?”

“Where would you like me to go, can’t you see people are pushing me from behind?”

“Tell them not to push, this is not a bread line, thank god!”

“Stop picking on him, lady, we’re all black and blue from your bag swinging around!”

The most ordinary everyday squabble was starting to flare up, the kind that could happen on a tram at rush hour, or the post office on the day pensions were issued. It was getting more and more heated, everyone joining in with vigor and even some sort of relief, because, compared to the recent silent, searing panic, this was normal and even, let’s admit it, necessary. It provided some distraction from staring at the spooky concrete doors with incomprehensible numbers in front of which the fat-faced lumbering idiot of a policeman stood in his sweat-stained uniform; these doors were now his problem. *At least, for the time being*, Mitya thought, because a voice came above this ordinary, harmless noise, a clear and sonorous voice of a summer camp counselor, and everything immediately fell apart yet again.

“I would like to know, how long are we going to be stuck in here?” the moon-face Mama-Peugeot said. She must have finally managed to pacify her son, and now stood to her full unimpressive height, possibly even on tiptoes. “Captain, do you hear me? I am asking you! What’s going on? Have you contacted your superiors?”

The fat captain put his arms down his sides and turned slowly, red-faced and ferocious, staring at her with disgust.

“I haven’t contacted anyone,” he said, almost relishing the moment. “There is no connection. No reception. Nothing at all.”