

ДИАНА РЕЙН

ВИДЕНИЯ ВАСЕНИНОЙ

16+

Vasenina's Visions

Sosnovtsy

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Видения Васениной

An English translation of a Russian-language original.

Vasenina's Visions

Original Russian text © 2022 Диана Рейн (Diana Reyn).

English translation © 2026 Diana Reyn.

Translated from the Russian. No official English edition of this work exists.

This edition was prepared with the assistance of machine translation, then reviewed and edited.

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About Those Who Are Sure

“Attention, everyone, please!”

Bronya beamed broadly, in that way only she could — more gum than teeth. Her eyes sparkled, catching the glow of the stove. In her hand she waved a sheet of paper conjured from who knows where. Though if Bronya set her mind to finding something, she’d dig it out from under the earth itself. Beside her sat Rustik, casting sly glances at the others. So what had this merry pair dreamed up this time?

“We present to you the first issue of the newspaper “Night Raup”!”

The old, thin tent now felt cramped, warm, and cozy. Everyone crowded around the lantern and the stove, studying Tolya and Rustem with smiles already forming in anticipation of a good joke. They’d chuckle a bit, have their fun, then talk a while longer, and finally begin settling down to sleep. Tomorrow there was the long climb to the summit — but that was tomorrow’s business. For now, Vadim had blissfully stretched his long frame across the entire diagonal of the tent. Lyusya was whispering something to Kolya, her head tilted toward him in confidence. Even Yura Doroshenko, for once in his life, was smiling, and Sashka Yuzhin watched Bronya and Slobodin with curiosity, trying to work out what they were up to.

Nelya pressed closer to the shoulder of Gleb Sosnovsky, who had settled in beside her. Inspired by the imminent conquest of the twin peaks, he was especially tender with her, his eyes so warm that it was hard to believe only a couple of days ago he’d been colder than ice…

“Let’s start with the news from philosophy.” Bronyevsky broke into a smile again, and Rustik clapped a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud. — The lecture “Hiking and Feelings” is held daily in the tent auditorium. The speakers are Professor Norkin and Candidate of the Sciences of Love, Kolomiytseva...

Nelya had just enough time to see Lyuska puff up angrily and cross her arms, and Kolya burst out laughing and fling his mitten at Bronya. The mitten never reached Bronyevsky before the tent came down on them.

It came down because snow had collapsed on top of it.

Nelya was pressed chest-down into the flooring, her face shoved against a storm jacket, a ton of snow heaped across her back. The air was being squeezed out of her lungs, and she thrashed frantically, trying to break free. Panic — a blinding terror — killed every other feeling and thought.

“I’m suffocating! I’m SUFFOCATING!”

Around her it was quiet. Horribly quiet. No one was screaming, moaning, calling for help. The snow had buried everything, muffling the sounds — even the faintest breath. Nelya tried to turn her head just a little, to cry out, but she could barely move under all that weight.

“And now, on to science.”

Bronya’s voice sounded clear, though no longer quite so cheerful. Nelya squirmed harder, trying to attract his attention. Hadn’t he noticed anything at all, or...

“Scholars of every nation are debating whether death exists. According to the latest data, death can be found in the vicinity of Mount Raup, in the Urals.”

Tolya fell silent — and the next moment the weight vanished from Nelya’s back.

She shot to her feet, gulping air through her mouth, her eyes screwed shut against the pain lancing through her chest and nose. Someone had flung the collapsed tent aside and shovelled away every trace of snow. Sunlight seared her eyes, and for several seconds she simply stood there, feeling tears slide down her cheeks. Then she wiped them away and looked around.

The others lay motionless about her. Broken, crushed, smothered. A sheet of paper, a skull scrawled upon it, rested across Bronya's face.

***

"We're off to Raup!"

Gleb solemnly hoisted the permit from Winner above his head like a trophy. In his crisp suit jacket, with his neatly combed hair and the briefcase tucked under his arm, he looked least of all like a hiker — and for a moment Nelya even feared he always would.

The whole group had gathered now in the dorm room: Nelya, Lyuska, Yura Doroshenko, Rustik, Sasha-Masha, Shakunov, Kolya Norkin, and Bronya. No one watching them would have guessed that this trip was all any of them had thought about, day and night, still unsure whether they'd be allowed to go at all — or whether every one of them would.

Sashka Yuzhin was rummaging in his pocket, fishing out small coins one at a time. Lyusya sat beside him on the bed, a book held upside down on her knees, arguing from her place with Vadik Shakunov, who stood by the table, leaning lightly on its corner with his arms folded across his chest, listening to her. Kolya perched on the edge of the next bed, crumpling a sheet of paper in his hands — most likely yet another summons from the dean.

Yura, Rustik, and Bronya hovered by the door, just behind Gleb. They had run over with him knowing nothing, and so wore a comically bewildered air.

After Gleb's announcement, they all seemed to go mad at once, whooping and bursting into applause. Norkin tore up his note and flung the scraps into the air like fireworks. Lyuska threw her arms around Sashka, and he dropped all his small change.

Nelya stood apart behind the others, her back pressed to the windowsill, hands braced against it, and no one was looking at her. Good. Because after Gleb's words she had very nearly gone pale.

"The Raup of the Night."

It had been only a dream, of course. A bad dream — no doubt because she'd been dwelling too much on this Raup lately. That was why he had fastened onto her. Probably all hikers have uneasy dreams before a trek, but no one ever speaks of them, and some forget them entirely. True, such a vivid nightmare had tormented Vasenka for the first time, and perhaps that was why she couldn't shake it from her mind.

"Well then, citizen hikers," Bronya came up to Gleb and clapped him on the shoulder, "I propose we mark the occasion somehow today — so I'm inviting everyone to my place!"

Citizen hikers! Your attention, please!..

Nelya blinked several times to drive the apparition away. Tolya — and lying across his face, a sheet with a skull on it.

"Well, that's settled," said Gleb, twisting free of Bronevsky's arm and walking over to the table. "And meanwhile, let's pick a supply chief. Any volunteers?"

Norkin shot his hand up.

"You, is it?"

"I move that we nominate Comrade Kolomiytseva!" he announced loudly, casting a mocking glance at Lyusya.

Professor Norkin and candidate in the science of love Kolomiytseva…

"Well, I'm not against it!" Lyusya perked up and jumped forward. "So when exactly do we set out, chief?"

Nelya watched from the sidelines as Gleb doled out instructions and assignments. There he was, the real Sosnovsky — displaying all his

finest qualities in the run-up to the trip. He was a seasoned hiker and a born leader; he always knew exactly what to do. Even back when a snake bit Nelya in the Altai last spring. She had been certain she would never see her mother again, certain that the worst thing that could possibly happen had happened. But everything turned out fine. Gleb brought her home safe and sound. Under his command, she had nothing to fear. Right?..

“Winner wanted to allow a couple of extra days,” he was saying to the kids just then, — but I held out for two weeks. What would we want with spare days? We’ll make the deadline...

She decided to approach him now — to talk, or simply to stand at his side. Even that alone would have steadied her. But Gleb swiftly gathered up his papers, summoned Shakunov, and the two of them went off. Lyusya, already immersed in her role as quartermaster, managed to call after their retreating backs that they mustn’t forget to bring a spring scale.

Sasha Yuzhin found his hat and dashed off after them. Nelya glanced out the window, wondering whether she ought to head home too. She could always talk to Gleb that evening, at Bonevsky’s.

She would speak with him, and all her worries would melt away like magic.

“Well then!” Lyuska was delighted. — I’ll work out all the sums and then tell you how much money we’ll need. I’ll also have to ask Gleb what the planned weight is… So, I need paper and a pencil this very minute, before I forget anything...

She began rummaging in the drawer beside the table, and Yura Doroshenko finally noticed Nelya.

“Vasenka, why so glum? Aren’t you pleased? Category three, Raup!”

“Oh, she’s already sitting by the campfire in her mind, writing up her diary,” chuckled Bronya, digging through her anorak in search of one last papirosa. — Which reminds me of the diary. I’ll only keep it on the most exceptional occasions — let somebody else have the typewriter for a while...

Do all hikers have uneasy dreams before a trek? Nelya’s gaze travelled from serene Yura to cheerful Tolya, then on to Rustik, who, oblivious to everything, was scribbling away on a sheet of paper. She looked at the self-assured Norkin and at fussy Lyusya, absorbed in her new job. Do all of them?..

“Of course I’m glad.” She couldn’t meet Yura’s eye. — It’s just… it’s so far away. No one has probably ever set foot there…

“Oh no, they have,” Kolya cut in. — I heard that a few years ago some hikers died out there. Not the whole group, but…

“That’s quite enough!” Lyusya straightened up and rapped Norkin with her notebook. — Stop frightening Vasenina — can’t you see she’s worried enough as it is?

Yes, nothing escapes Kolomiytseva’s gaze. Nelya nearly took offence — what if Lyusya went and told Gleb everything, and he decided not to take her along on the trek at all.

“I’m not worried,” she began, defending herself. — It’s simply a difficult trek. Admit it, anything can happen…

An avalanche might come down on our tent, for instance…

Rustik giggled without looking up from his letter. Lyusya shook her head, and Yura frowned at her anxiously.

“Vasenina, anything can happen” even just getting out of bed, — Tolya muttered, clamping a cigarette between his teeth and now hunting for matches. — Step outside, and adventures come pouring straight down on your head…

“And it isn’t only adventures,” Kolya snorted, tossing him the matchbox.

Even Yura cracked a smile and nodded toward her, as though inviting her to side with them. Lyuska had long since lost track of the conversation, buried in her figures.

Nelya gave a quiet sigh as she watched the banter. True enough, hikers rarely suffer bad dreams on the eve of a trek.

***

“— Millet! Two plus… Now, how many portions does that make?.. Right, and don’t forget the cocoa. If it’s one tin per pot, then...”

Lyusya is tallying up the money and entering everything in her notebook. I bought notebooks for the whole company, labelled every one, and kept thinking — oh, how lovely it would be if everyone kept a diary on this trip!.. In the end, it turned out that only Lyusya took any interest in my gift. To be fair, what she records isn’t her thoughts and feelings, but sums of oatmeal, tins of condensed milk, and salt. Our quartermaster in all her glory!

All around is a merry scramble, the kind that always breaks out when we’re packing for a hike. Someone is hunting for something, stuffing it into a pack, tossing things back and forth… I’ve settled on the windowsill with my diary, keeping an eye on the door. Today the dorm room has turned into a veritable thoroughfare, but Gleb still hasn’t appeared.

“Who’s got a knife? Nothing else fits into mine!”

“Whose felt boots are these?”

“Are we going to play the mandolin on the train?”

“Quiet, all of you!” Lyusya claps her hands over her ears, still muttering: — Three and a half kilos plus… And what about the dehydrated food? Who was supposed to buy the dehydrated food? We’re eleven rubles and seventeen kopecks short!

“Bronya bought it,” Doroshenko calls back, before Lyusya turns the whole place upside down — ourselves included.

Bronya still hadn’t turned up. The quartermaster was dashing about the room, cursing poor Tolya to high heaven, and I kept glancing at the door.

Slavka poked his head in from the next room, exchanged a few words with Vadim, borrowed a few coins from him, and left. He had meant to come along on this hike as well, but whether because of his “backlog” at school or for some other reason, he couldn’t make it. And so only nine of us remained.

At last, a breathless Tolya Bronevsky appeared.

“It was the tram, I...”

Before he could finish, Lyuska rounded on him:

“Hand over the leftovers, you freeloader!”

“What leftovers?”

“I calculated you ought to have some left from the rations!”

“But I never bought any rations!..”

It’s always like this before a hike — everyone squabbling, everyone hunting for something, and it seems these people will never see eye to eye on anything. But cart them off somewhere far from the city, hand them a single tent and one mess pot for the lot, and within a couple of days they’ll have become a real family. But for now...

For now Lyusya is shaking Sasha Yuzhin down for small change, while Vadim, holding the door ajar, chats with his wife Lyalka, who is afraid to set foot in our den. Rustik is sorting the tins of meat, Yura is rummaging through the shelves, and Kolya is giving the tent a good shake. Bronya, doing his best to keep out of the quartermaster’s sight, comes and sits down beside me.

“What are you writing?”

“The diary.”

“May I have a look?”

“Yeah, right!”

I shield the page from him with my hand, just to be safe. This is our shared diary — we all read it and take turns writing in it. But this one is mine, personal. I’ll never show it to anyone, no matter what. How many treasured memories, how many confessions and secret feelings this little notebook holds…

And sometimes it’s nothing but a stream of thoughts, an account of everything going on around me — like right now. I write only to lose myself. To catch that spark of anticipation, impatience, and joy from the others. After all, we’re going on a hike! Category three, Raup!.. If only I could stop dwelling on my strange dream. Such an odd dream.

“Look, there’s Gleb!”

I lift my eyes and instantly forget everything…

About Those Who Argue

“Out of the tent, on the double, move!”

Nelya curled into a ball and screamed. All hell had broken loose around her. People shoved and jostled her, tearing fabric crackled, and somewhere close by someone moaned loudly in pain.

“Who’s got a knife?!”

Someone stumbled and fell on top of her, crushing her beneath their weight, then scrambled up again.

“Cut the groundsheet! Bronya, faster!”

The darkness was so thick you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face — until suddenly a white, jagged strip tore through it.

They ripped out a section of the tarpaulin to escape as quickly as they could. Nelya had no idea how she ended up on the snow. Someone was still shouting, and Gleb was dragging the limp Lyusya out of the tent.

Vasya Postyr dropped face-down beside Nelya and never got up again. She tried to shake him, to lift him, but at that very moment Gleb seized Lyusya and flung her onto the snow — flung her as though she were a rucksack, a bundle of firewood.

He turned away and peered back into the torn tent, hauling out yet another body. Nelya crawled over to her friend, gently raised her head, and called her name. But she couldn’t hear her own voice. The shouts of the others, the howl of the wind — everything was growing fainter.

Lyusya lay on her back, face thrown back, yet she didn’t see Vasenina. Where her eyes had been gaped two black holes.

***

Nelya had only ever heard that children can cry out in their sleep from nightmares. But children, after all, are children, aren’t they? Everything is forgivable to them.

When she came to in someone’s arms, it took her a long while to grasp that the terrible shriek ringing in her head had been her own. She was choking on it, as if someone else were forcing her to scream, squeezing her chest to wring out every last breath of air.

“Nelya! Nelya! Calm down!”

Gleb’s steady, assured voice—even now—finally drew her back to reality, and she realized his arms were around her. He sat beside her on the bench, having all but pulled her onto his lap. And she noticed how quiet it was around them. How calm. They weren’t in the tent—they were still on the train. The car clattered soothingly along, and the train burrowed deeper and deeper into the snowbound taiga…

Now she remembered. The noisy bustle of loading up, how they had started singing songs before the car even began to move. At the station they’d met Vasya Postyr, and he had struck up an easy rapport with everyone at once. She’d even told him he was quite the dandy, and he’d only been flattered...

What else? They had forgotten to hand in the route book, Sasha Yuzhin had talked surprisingly much, Lyusya had flitted all over the car treading on everyone’s feet, and Bronya had sat hunched over the diary...

“Nelya, are you all right?”

In the dim light she could barely make out Gleb’s face. His tone was calm, even tender with concern, and he went on holding her, yet she could still sense that some part of him was closed off from her. Still.

The train swayed with a steady rhythm; gray patches of taiga flickered past the window. Beyond the wall, someone was snoring...

“What happened?”

Out of the darkness of the car emerged Vasya Postyr. Poor fellow. He scarcely knew them yet, and by now he must have concluded he’d

fallen in with a band of hysterics. Beside him appeared a rumpled Tolya, hitching up the strap of his trousers on his shoulder. Nelya gazed silently at their worried faces and could not answer. She was still trembling.

Does anyone have a knife on them?..

“No fever?” Gleb pressed his cool palm against her forehead. “No. It was just a nightmare, Nelya. That’s all.”

Sleepy Yura Doroshenko appeared in the doorway, and Nelya had time to think that soon the whole train would come running to her like this.

“What happened? Who was screaming? Nelya?”

He blinked in bewilderment, glancing between her and Gleb, and it was then that she noticed Lyusya on the neighboring berth. She hadn’t woken at all.

Nelya slipped free of Gleb’s arms, edged her way past Vasya and Tolya, and bent over her friend. Lyusya lay motionless, face turned to the wall, seeming hardly to breathe.

“Lyusya!” Vasenina cried out in alarm, tugging at her friend’s clothes and turning her head toward her.

Lyuska woke with a violent start. She bolted upright, shrank away from Nelya, thumped loudly against the wall, and gasped. Overhead, on the top bunk, Kolya Norkin grumbled crossly and stirred about.

“Some of us can’t sleep, and now the rest of us won’t get to either...”

Nelya let out a breath and rubbed her eyes. The main thing was that Lyusya was all right. Vasya was all right. They were all all right—it had only been some stupid dream. A nightmare.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, retreating toward her own place. “Sorry, everyone, I just...”

She dropped her eyes in embarrassment, and Gleb slipped a comforting arm around her shoulders.

“It’s nothing, nothing. Everything’s fine. Go back to sleep.”

He had tucked the jacket around her himself, drawing it snugly in on every side. The only thing he had not done was kiss her forehead. Vasya and Tolya whispered together as they made their way back to their seats. Yura lingered a while longer, gazing at her in silence, but could not bring himself to come near. And Lyusya simply sat there, one palm pressed to her chest, breathing through parted lips.

The moment Gleb had clambered into his upper bunk and Doroshenko had finally gone, she slid over beside Nelya and took her hand.

“Vasenka, what happened? Nightmares?”

“Now they’re pestering me too,” Kolya grumbled, “about how we’re going to wreck the whole trip because of...”

“Norkin,” Gleb growled under his breath.

Kolya shut up, squirmed a little more, then fell quiet.

Nelya listened to the familiar clatter of the train, to Kolya’s irritable snorting, to Sasha Yuzhin’s snoring through the wall — nothing could ever wake him — and at last whispered:

“Oh, forget it, Lyus. It was only a bad dream. Sorry I frightened you.”

Lyusya smiled peacefully, stroked her hand, and returned to her own place. Five minutes later all the children were asleep again.

All but Nelya.

I’ll have to find out which of the boys carries a hunting knife. Just in case...

***

“We made it to Alyapka. They wouldn’t let us onto the platform, and the quartermaster refused us the dining hall. And that wasn’t the end of it, either.”

We had planned to wait for our train in peace and quiet, but no such luck. Our Tolya Bronevsky took it into his head to sing — we’re quite used to singing at stations while waiting for a train, but in the “one-story Alyapka” they deemed such behavior intolerable. Out of the very ground a policeman materialized and seized our Bronya by the arms. The boys dashed off to rescue him, while Lyusya and I stayed behind, laughing until our sides ached. They did release Bronya in the end, but not before lecturing him on the subject of disturbing the peace.

Afterward, Lyuska dragged us to a school to tell the children about our hikes. Vasya Postyr got tangled up in some rambling nonsense, Lyusya could only go on about the time she boiled a boot in the mess pot, so I had to take matters into my own hands. The children grew so fond of us that they wouldn’t let us leave, and even tried to persuade me to stay with them. Funny kids!

At last, we boarded the train. When the singing began, I finally managed to forget everything and simply enjoy myself with the gang. How silly I am, believing in dreams like some superstitious old woman. Away with all doubts! Everything will turn out fine for us, because we’re traveling with Gleb!..

Another incident. While we were belting out songs, some fellow came up and started harassing the boys.

“A bottle got stolen from my pocket, I’m telling you!”

“What bottle? What on earth are you talking about?”

“Vodka! Hand it back nicely, will you?”

Rustik and Gleb tried to reason with him calmly, insisting they had nothing to do with it, but the drunk only grew angrier.

“If you don’t give back that bottle, I’ll knock every tooth out of your head, you hear?”

I’m doing my best to hold Kolya back. He can’t stand drunks — he’s ready to kill. He’d have knocked that fellow flat, too, but luckily a policeman shows up just in time. The alcoholic hurriedly gathers his flyers and scurries off.

The moment he’s gone, Norkin rounds on me:

“Nelka! Someone should have smashed his jaw” that would’ve taught him! What a creep!

Well, yes — and this time Kolya would have been hauled off to the station, and not just for a little talking-to, the way it went with Bronya. But he doesn’t see that. The moment anyone with liquor on their breath comes within ten meters, Norkin erupts like a snapped spring.

Hoping to restore some calm to the group, I raise a topic about feelings:

“So what do you all think” does love at first sight actually exist?

That does the trick. Everyone immediately starts talking over one another:

“Fairy tales! That’s nonse...”

“Of course it does! I believe in it, personally!”

“No wonder” I keep noticing the quartermaster glancing about, searching for his one and only!

“Actually, it’s quite real. No accident that so many songs and books have been written about it.”

“Love, my friends, is nothing but a chemical reaction in the body, and...”

“Oh, look, our cynic has awakened!”

While the others laugh and argue, I steal glances at Gleb. He watches the kids with a mysterious smile but says not a word himself. A pity.

Vadim Shakunov straightens up and lifts his chin, prepared to instruct us all from the lofty heights of his colossal family experience. Colossal — as in one whole week.

“I think love begins with the first kiss. That’s when you understand whether you truly love someone or not.”

This unleashes a whole storm of talk and indignation from Lyuska. I might even have laughed it off, if only I hadn’t remembered that one occasion.

It was a winter evening. Gleb Sosnovsky and I were walking home from the institute. In one of the ground-floor apartments a party was in full swing — a wedding, perhaps, or some other celebration. A slow foxtrot blared out into the street, and behind the lace curtains couples went whirling past. And before I knew it, I found myself in Gleb Sosnovsky’s arms.

We were waltzing, not foxtrotting, and I laughed like a giddy little fool. My head spun, my feet kept tangling, and yet it felt so light, so joyful!.. And then…

“Vasenka, why have you gone so quiet? Surely you don’t believe there are kisses without love?”

Lyusya is practically puffing with outrage that anyone could dare speak so rashly. The others are smiling; only Shakunov keeps muttering something resentfully under his breath.

“Kisses without love?”

Did Gleb love me in that moment? Hard to say. I pushed him away. He walked off. And ever since, a stiff, awkward tension has hung between us.

“I don’t think so,” is all I can muster. — What pleasure is there in kissing someone you don’t even like?

I try not to look at Gleb. No — definitely not now.»

About Those Who Laugh

“Well? Tomorrow we take Raup!”

Gleb was smiling. Gleb was radiant. He looked like a boy on his birthday who had received every present he had ever dreamed of. He raised his aluminum mug of diluted spirits as though it were a flute of fine champagne.

“It’s been a long road to get here, and along the way we ran into all manner of… obstacles. But here we are. I dedicate this toast to you” the iron hikers of UPI!

“And not only to them, Rustik said fairly, and winked at Vasya.”

Vasya wasn’t offended. He rose level with the others and clinked mugs with Gleb as well. Nelya took a sip from her glass and immediately squeezed her eyes shut. The drink turned out to be terribly… hot! It scorched her lips and tongue, and for a moment she even lost her breath. If this is Bronya’s joke again!..

She recovered her breath, blinked away the blur, and even had time to be surprised that none of the boys had laughed at her. She lowered her mug and finally opened her eyes.

The guys were all sitting in their places. No one was talking, no one was laughing, no one was moving at all. They had frozen motionless on the logs — some hunched forward, some leaning back, some tipped sideways and propped against a neighbor. The campfire had gone out.

“Guys? What’s wrong with you?”

Nelya reached for Yura, the nearest to her, and tried to shake his shoulder. But the instant she touched his frozen, stone body, Doroshenko toppled over. Forward, face down into the embers of the fire.

***

Nelya started awake, and for a while her gaze wandered senselessly from side to side, unable to grasp where she was. The cold air smelled of metal, yet it seemed to her that what she smelled was blood.

No, of course not blood. There — that was the train rumbling and snorting its way past. They had spent the night at the station after all. They hadn't reached Kozhar until after midnight, and so they'd had to sleep right here, spreading their tent on the floor in a corner.

"Vasenka? What's wrong?"

She turned and made out Lyusya. In the dim lamplight the girl sat on a bench, sewing something. Beside her lay Sasha sprawled, dozing with his head tipped back against the seat, legs stretched out before him.

Nelya rose quietly, shivering from the cold and the hardness of the floor. Her body, not yet hardened to the march, complained faintly of an aching back and a sore left shoulder.

"What are you doing here? she asked, settling down beside Lyusya, and glanced at Yuzhin." Is it your watch?

"Yep. She pointed at the gaiters she was mending." I can't see a thing anymore; time I was asleep… And Sashka only just jumped up — nightmares were tormenting him. A searching look from narrowed blue eyes. — You too, I'd say?

Nelya rubbed her temples, in no hurry to answer. Yuzhin mumbled something indistinct in his sleep, shrugged his shoulders, and set to snoring again. What could he have been dreaming of?

"Yes, Lyus, she admitted at last." Lately my dreams have been troubled, one after another. Maybe because we're headed into a hard trek? Don't you get anything like that? See — even Sashka's started having bad dreams, she rattled on, — so perhaps the others are too? Only they'd never admit it.

Lyusya yawned widely, half hiding her mouth behind her little palm, and laid her sewing aside.

“I don’t know, I never dream things like that. You just worry too much. I’d better be off now.” She glanced back at Sasha and waved a hand. — He can stay here. Are you coming?

Nelya nodded absently and rose to follow Lyusya. She longed to confide in someone, to hear that dreadful dreams never come true and that everything would turn out fine. She wanted someone to listen with sympathy, not brush her off as though it were a childish whim. But who could she turn to? Lyusya dismissed the whole thing as nonsense, and Gleb would likely scold her for filling her head with empty fears. Perhaps Sasha? As she settled down to sleep beside Lyusya, Nelya glanced over at him. He was still snoring away on the bench. It was worth a try, wasn’t it? He had the gentlest temperament of the whole group, could grow emotional as any girl might, and was surely far too kind to laugh at her dreams.

Decided, then! In the morning she would speak to Sasha. Perhaps he, too, needed someone to unburden his thoughts to.

***

“In the morning they shook us awake without letting us get a proper night’s sleep — Lyusya and me, at any rate. The rest showed no displeasure whatsoever. Not even Sasha — he seemed to have entirely forgotten that he had ever woken up, and was therefore utterly astonished to find himself on the bench.”

We quickly piled onto the bus and set off for Vizhay.

And what a ride it was — a whole song unto itself! Our gear was heaped up to the ceiling, and on top of that, another group of tourists and three women were travelling with us. To this day I cannot fathom how we all managed to squeeze in.

I ended up seated next to Gleb, and at first I couldn't decide whether to be pleased or dismayed. After all, Gleb… ever since that long-ago evening with the clumsy waltz, he'd become a different person around me—cold, almost hostile. I kept meaning to have a word with him so we could be friends again, but it never quite came off.

And yet there on the train, hadn't he been so attentive and gentle with me? But perhaps I'd imagined it, the way one imagines a dreadful dream. I may simply have conjured up exactly what I wished to see. That's me all over.

At the next jolt I was thrown so high that Gleb had to seize my shoulder to keep me from flying off altogether. For a moment we were very close… but all I found were those same cold eyes and tightly pressed lips.

Even Kolya Norkin's gaze is warmer than that.

Vasya Postyr stood beside me in the aisle, clinging to whatever he could reach—which didn't stop him from bellowing at the top of his lungs:

I wandered among the crags,

I froze in the snows!..

The others joined in, raggedly but cheerfully, bouncing over the bumps and swaying to and fro.

Gleb said nothing. So did I. I wasn't in the mood for singing.

And in Binsai a surprise awaited us—they were showing the film "The Golden Symphony"! We lobbied Lyusya a little for money for the cinema, and at last she gave in to the boys' charm. Only Vadik Shakunov and Yura Doroshenko were dispatched to "keep house" at the school set aside for our rest. Truth be told, I was almost glad Yura wasn't coming along. Lately it's been rather… awkward for me around him. I hope the feeling passes soon and casts no shadow over our hike.

The film was wonderful! It even made an impression on Gleb, which I never would have expected.

He sat down beside me — whether by design or mere chance, I can't say. Perhaps one could simply see the screen better from there. But I was pleased all the same. I kept stealing glances at him and catching his smile. I could hear him tapping his foot softly in time with the music. Honestly! It was as though a completely different Gleb were riding that bus with me — his evil twin brother.

Rustik and Bronya had settled in front of us, and Lyusya came and sat down next to them. I suspect the first two regretted having the quartermaster right beside them. She kept whispering with Bronya, nudging him, hissing into his ear, leaning her weight on his shoulder. In the end, Tolya and Rustik couldn't bear it any longer and moved away from her. It's both funny and sad, since it was Lyusya, after all, who contributed money from the common fund toward the tickets.

My spirits are wonderful!

We returned to the school. They gave us the classroom that was a bit warmer. We made ourselves comfortable, shoving all the furniture against the walls and spreading a tent out on the floor. Visitors kept streaming in without pause — everyone was curious about what kind of hikers had come to see them, where we were headed, and what on earth we looked like. We barely found time for dinner amid it all.

Afterwards, I finally managed to get a word with Sasha. Not that our conversation could exactly be called private: the others had settled in all around us, each absorbed in some occupation or other. One was darning his gaiters, another tinkering with his skis, and Rustik had planted himself with his notebook yet again. While we'd been at the movies, Yura and Vadim had run off to the forest warden's for a map and, on the way, collected a whole pile of local horror tales. I didn't particularly want to know what they were about, but Rustik, ever eager

to swell our archive of folklore, was now scribbling away at Shakunov's dictation. Heaven help us if he gets the bright idea of telling those stories aloud in the forest late at night!

I sat down beside Sasha and, satisfied that no one was watching us, asked quietly:

"Did you have a nightmare today?"

Sasha instantly hunched all over, drew his head down into his shoulders, and shot me a frightened sideways glance. We'd nicknamed him Sasha-Masha because he blushes like a girl at the slightest provocation. Right now, for instance.

"Well, say I did," he whispered. — Everyone has them…

"About our hike?"

My heart began to beat faster. But if yes, then… Could it actually mean something? Maybe it was, you know, a sign of fate? And what was I supposed to do about it?

Sasha kept dithering, fumbling for his answer, and glancing over at the others in the hope that someone might rescue him from this conversation. I almost felt sorry for him.

"Yes, about our hike," he sighed at last. — It's like… Well, never mind, anyway. Don't worry about it, Vasenka. Lyuska's already been complaining to you about me, hasn't she?

We both turned toward Kolomiytseva. She was sitting next to Rustik, reading the story in his notebook over his shoulder and giggling.

"I had nightmares last night too, I confessed to Sasha." It felt as though all the boys were freezing to death. — A shiver ran through me at the very memory. — Did anything like that happen to you?

Yuzhin said nothing. He merely nodded quickly, without lifting his eyes to meet mine.

It is already night, and we still cannot settle down. We keep chattering about some nonsense, then drift into talk of feelings — probably still under the spell of the film. At first I hear nothing, too shaken by Sasha's confession and by my own fears and forebodings. But then I suddenly realize it is Gleb speaking:

"...yes, feelings are a powerful thing. What else could drive a person to dance like that? Did you see it? "O Jackie, Jom...""

Everyone bursts out laughing — even Gleb himself. Everyone but me. I had wanted a serious conversation about this, but is a serious talk even possible past one in the morning, among eight exhausted boys? Right now all they are capable of is chattering about dancing. Still, I decide to try:

"You're right, Gleb, feelings are a powerful thing! They can not only inspire a dance, but move a person to a genuine feat. Remember how..." I falter for a moment, searching our shared history for something truly striking. Only one memory comes quickly to mind, and I voice it: — When the snake bit me, remember? At Lake Teletskoye. But your support, your steadiness saved me. Only true friends could have done that...

God, listen to me rambling. I meant to speak of elevated feelings, and instead I sound like some old pioneer instructor holding forth on friendship and comradeship. But everyone's too weary to pick it apart. They nod, murmur something, recalling that incident, and I make yet another attempt:

"Only true feeling can transform a person. Cherish it. Let it set you on the right path…"

I catch Lyusya shaking her head at me, not following where I'm going. The other kids fall silent too, watching me in astonishment. And I break off abruptly, mid-sentence. How utterly foolish of me.

Bronya lets out a loud whistle.

“Vasenka’s onto something! She should be on the lecture circuit: “Feelings and Tourism”! Why not found your own department, eh? You won’t be able to hold back the crowds of applicants!”

Everyone bursts out laughing again and finally begins settling down, deciding it’s time to call it a night. And I nearly correct Tolya.

“Norkin and Lyusya will deliver that lecture, and you’ll write it up in our paper, the Night Raup.”

About Those Who Are Calm

“Guys!”

Nelya had no idea where she was. She couldn’t even tell where the ground ended and the sky began. The whiteness all around was blinding, disorienting. Vasenina kept losing her footing, stumbling, picking herself up again, while her head spun and spun and spun... She felt no cold, though she suspected she should have.

“Somebody! Ahoy!”

With small, shuffling steps she struggled onward, hunched against the blizzard. No skis, not even poles — she felt almost naked, utterly helpless. Yet one thought pulsed in her head from who knows where: somewhere out here was Gleb, and whatever it took, she had to find him. He would help her make sense of it all.

“Guys! Gleb! Help!”

She doubled over to keep the wind from knocking her down. Snow, snow, snow…

Ahead, a dark, flat stone suddenly loomed up, already nearly buried. Nelya made for it as though it were the only landmark in all that snowy horror.

“Guys! Ahoy! Where are you?”

The wind devoured her voice; no one could have heard her even a meter away. Nelya reached the stone, leaned on it to straighten up — and suddenly realized it was no stone at all. It was somebody’s body.

The clothes had already frozen solid and gone stiff; the figure lay on one side, face pressed down into the snow. Without stopping to think, Nelya turned him over onto his back.

Fair hair. White cheeks and a rounded chin. And frozen silver eyes.

“Gleb!..”

***

She woke with that name still lingering on her lips. She sat bolt upright in bed with such force that the wire springs groaned across the whole room, yet Lyusya beside her didn't stir.

The room in the loggers' hut lay steeped in grey gloom, filtering in through two small windows. In the corner the stove crackled, an orange sliver of light flickering through its vent. And on the floor the boys slept, looking like frozen bodies…

Nelya swung her legs down quickly and tiptoed past the guys, straining to move lightly so the plank floor wouldn't creak. Space in the little house was scarce, and the boys had lain pressed close together for warmth. She picked her way among them with care, now and then brushing a shoulder or knee by accident. But no one woke. Even that unnerved her now—Vasenka, still shaken from the nightmare—yet she understood that rousing the whole group just to soothe her own fears was hardly the wisest course.

Reaching Gleb, she knelt down beside him. He slept nearest the stove, arms folded across his chest as though arguing with someone in his dream, head lolling to one side. With trembling, cool fingers Nelya reached out and touched his neck.

Alive!

Only then could she breathe again, and she grew angry with herself for her panic. What a foolish girl she was! A coward! Good Lord, why had she even come on this hike if she couldn't master her own feelings? She was just rising to slip away when Gleb stirred and half-opened his eyes. He blinked a few times, made out Nelya hovering above him, and sat up sharply from the floor.

"Nel… what's wrong?"

His voice, rough with sleep; his hair, tousled and curling at the crown. And last of all, the pink of his cheeks and his drowsy eyes. It was all so familiar, so poignant and alive, that Nelya broke into a smile.

“I had that nightmare again,” she admitted honestly, edging closer to him. — It was as if you… as if I’d lost you. I was so frightened, Gleb…

But his brow had already clouded, the old grave look settling back over him, as though his face were slowly frosting over, concealing every feeling. She had dreamed of a frozen Gleb — and now a frozen Gleb met her in waking life…

“Nelya, it’s all nonsense. Go back to sleep.”

Yet that night on the train he had comforted her so tenderly. Nelya dropped her gaze and, without looking at him again, rose and returned to the bed. She lay down facing Lusya and fell silent, but she did not close her eyes. She heard Gleb get up, stretch, and go to see to the stove. Only when he had lain back down on the floor did she finally shut her eyes, hoping she had seen the last of her nightmares.

“Nel?..”

She flinched sharply at the unexpected touch on her shoulder.

“It’s only me. Don’t be frightened.”

Vasya, who slept closest to the bed, had come over to her, and though Nelya could not see him, she heard the soothing note in his voice:

“The nightmare again? You know… it’s best not to tell anyone about those things. Then they’re sure never to come true. All right? Good night.”

He patted her shoulder gently and vanished, like some fleeting apparition hovering between waking and sleep.

***

We slept in late, and compared to the station, the classroom seemed almost like a first-class hotel. Only Vadik grumbled — he’d spent a miserable, cold night with no tent at all, right there on the mountain-side. As for Bronya, who’d also landed a spot on the floor, he said

nothing against her — but then, he never complains. Lyusya and I slept splendidly; not even nightmares troubled me. I hope they stay away, too.

At breakfast, Gleb arranged for a car to take us to Vtoroy Severny. We were thrilled to have found a lift so quickly — only to end up waiting ages for the driver to free himself up. We filled the time copying out songs, indulging in silly chatter, and darning our rubber overboots.

For the first time in days I felt calm and confident, and everyone around me caught plenty of that spirit.

“Rustik, did you write down that song” you know, the one about the duty waltz? No? Lyusya, you remember the words, don’t you? I can prompt you if you’ve forgotten. Vadya, have you written to your Lyalya yet? Not yet? Then will you slip my photo in with the letter? Thanks! Kolya, you promised to help me work out shutter speed and aperture, remember? No, no — I’m only asking, don’t get cross. Vasya, have you ever done a top-category winter trek?

I had completely forgotten about Norkin and his camera, and I watched the group, chin resting on my hand. What a wonderful crew we’d gathered this time! With fellows like these, you could set off not just for the Urals — you could set off for the North Pole without a care in the world.

“Eh, no. Only category twos.” Vasya cast a sly glance over the others. — What, have you all done them already?

“Only Gleb, answered Sasha Yuzhin with reverence.” And even then as a participant, not a leader.

All eyes turned to Gleb, but he hunched over his maps and paid no one any attention.

“I led a second-category winter trek, Vasya spoke up again,” so don’t worry, I won’t be a burden.

“Well, Vasenka and I too, Bronya said happily.” She’s actually been a group leader more than any of us (well, except Sosnovsky, naturally), and you’d never guess it to look at her, would you?

Yura Doroshenko seized my hand in his fist and jokingly raised it like a victory sign. I was smiling, and I wanted Gleb to see how we were carrying on here, talking treks, even without him, since he was being such a grouch. But he neither saw nor heard. Or maybe he was only pretending.

We froze solid riding in the truck bed, but we tried to sing and chatter all the same. The talk of happiness wasn’t really going anywhere, so we slipped, imperceptibly, into the subject of cancer. Everyone was eager to weigh in, and Vadik held forth the most. He tried to explain the principle of the disease in chemical terms, practically sketching a whole diagram in his notebook to make it clearer for us.

Only Bronya kept silent the entire way, which wasn’t like her. Why, I wonder?

To keep from stiffening up completely, we huddled into a bunch, but the snow still dusted us over. And then, along the right side of the road, the forest began. Burnt forest.

Against the snow-white blanket, the black, gnarled trunks looked especially eerie, and it seemed to me that smoke was still curling from them. What had happened here? Instinctively I pressed closer to Lyusya and turned away. Something unpleasant was stirring within me, as though my nightmares and this sinister forest had sprung from the same soil, and the danger was growing more distinct, more real, stretching its paws toward us…

They didn’t take us all the way to Severny, only as far as the forty-first settlement. There we were dropped off and offered a night’s

lodging in a little house where the loggers lived. What else could we do?

The workers welcomed us warmly. Mostly men — plenty of young ones among them; I saw only two women. Many worked in the mines and turned their hands to every sort of trade in the forest besides — true working people, every last one of them! When word spread that we'd arrived, a whole crowd packed into the house, and before long we were on familiar terms with everyone.

To our surprise, some of the men recognized Vasya Postyr, and he clasped hands with them like an old, dear friend. I grew curious as to how and when he might have known these fellows, but Postyr took his cigars and stepped outside with three of the workers. He hasn't come back yet.

And what a wealth of new songs we've picked up here! Rustik bangs away on his mandolin, picking up the melodies, while Lyuska copies out the lyrics. Well, "copies out" is generous: she writes a line, then begins exchanging glances with the boys. Another line, and up goes her head again — a smile, a flutter of the eyelashes. When I teased her about it, she laughed and confessed, half in jest and half in earnest, that she'd taken a fancy to someone here — a fellow called Valyka. What a character.

Vadim and Gleb are talking with one of the lumberjacks — Beard, as everyone calls him around here. He's only a little older than us, but his beard — and it's true, it really is true — is simply magnificent. I watch him from a distance, and even in his movements, in his manner of speaking, you can sense experience and strength. Yet with our crowd he talks as an equal; he doesn't laugh at our audacious plan to conquer the Ural mountains, nor does he try to talk us out of it. He points his finger at different spots on the map, and Gleb jots down notes beside each one. Gleb is so pedantic, so scrupulous, that it sometimes drives

me mad. What do you need all these notes for, my dear Gleb? What’s the point of all these remarks, lists, and diagrams if they’ll never be needed?

Bronya sits beside me, laboring away over the group diary. He still can’t forgive us for electing him the group scribe, and every now and then mutters something grumpily under his breath. It’s frightening even to imagine what he’s written about us in there!

Kolya Norkin has slipped outside. Gone to see Vasya? And what of it — can’t he sit still in the warmth when the chance presents itself?..

About Those Who Don’t Tell Everything

“Nelya.”

She turned around with a smile. Sasha Yuzhin stood behind her, guiltily batting his long lashes. None of the others were anywhere in sight.

“Come with me,” he whispered, for some reason nodding back over his shoulder. Beyond him something loomed — a bus stop, perhaps, or a station building, or maybe an airport altogether. “You want this. Let’s go away — just the two of us.”

Nelya stepped toward him, still smiling. How funny little Sashenka could be at times! Whatever was he going on about?

“Where? Why? We’re supposed to climb the mountain — have you forgotten?”

She glanced around for the others, but there was no one to be seen. Only her and Sasha.

“Nelya,” he said, taking her hand gently, “come on. You’re afraid to go there yourself, aren’t you?”

She froze. Afraid? Of course she was. Especially after all those dreadful dreams. But Gleb and the others must never find out. She was a trekker, a loyal comrade — no coward, no pampered homebody of a woman like Shakunov’s wife. And she would prove it, again and again.

“Nelya,” Sasha repeated more softly, still holding her hand, “if you go, you’ll die along with them.”

***

By morning the trekkers could scarcely pry their eyes open — a nearly sleepless night spent talking with their new acquaintances, singing, and dancing had taken its toll. Only Vasya, who had prudently turned in early, looked fresher than the rest, and now he watched the

others with a smirk as he helped them pack so that nothing would be left behind.

But fortune favored them! Setting out from Forty-One toward the abandoned settlement was a local old-timer whom the loggers called Grandpa Slava. He kindly offered to carry the travelers' backpacks to the settlement — and even to escort them there. True, not without grumbling from the old man: "Whatever possesses you to go traipsing off into such a wilderness? Why not stay warm at home?.."

They departed only after dinner, dragging out their farewells and posing for photographs with the workers. They traded addresses with Beard, promising to send him pictures. Only Postyr kept to himself, barely speaking to anyone. Lyusya, meanwhile, hovered around Valya for ages but never quite found the courage to bid him a personal good-bye.

Following Grandpa Slava, the young people struck out along the snow-covered ski trail, delighted that they were still walking unburdened by their packs. The village horse moved at a leisurely pace, leaving the group plenty of time to snap pictures, clown about, and tumble one another into the snow. Every trace of the morning's weariness and drowsiness had vanished, and they felt they could go on striding like this until nightfall.

Only two held apart from the general merriment: Kolya Norkin, who had been in a foul mood since daybreak, and Sasha. Yuzhin had been unusually silent all day, hobbling along behind the others, lagging and struggling to catch up — but no one paid the least attention to it.

No one, that is, except Norkin.

At the next halt — when Rustik took it upon himself to teach Nelya photography, Vadim was scraping snow from his skis, and Tolya decided to climb a fir tree after pinecones — Kolya walked over to Gleb. Their leader, though he joked and laughed along with the rest,

still kept up appearances and managed, even now, to steer the group without seeming to.

“Sashka’s lagging behind,” Kolya said. — Look how far back he’s fallen.

Gleb turned and shielded his eyes with his hand, searching for his friend. Yuzhin was puffing along a couple dozen meters behind the rest, clumsily propped on his ski poles.

Sosnovsky bit his lip in irritation — more with himself for not noticing sooner — then gave Kolya a nod.

“Gather everyone and press on. We’ll catch up with you at the next rest stop.”

Leaving Norkin and the others behind, he skied quickly over to Yuzhin. The boy seemed almost frightened that Gleb had spotted him.

“Sash, what’s the matter with you?”

He halted and lifted his head, blinking mournfully through his long lashes. An unhealthy flush from the hard stretch of trail burned on his cheeks, and each breath whistled from his chest.

“My leg’s been aching a little,” he muttered through clenched teeth. — I must have caught a chill in the car. It’ll pass soon, — he added hurriedly, seeing Gleb’s frown. — I’ve had it before… last year. Remember?

Gleb glanced back at the others, but they had already vanished from view. Norkin had led them on, following Grandpa’s sledge; even Nelya had gone after him without waiting for the group leader.

“Don’t strain yourself,” he said, his tone softening as he saw how distressed his friend was. — Take it easy; I’ll stay with you. That way we’ll catch up to the others.

“And what if they lose their way?”

“They won’t. I warned Kolya. Come on, follow in my track” it’ll be easier for you that way.

Sasha tried to quicken his pace, if only to avoid losing face entirely before Gleb. It galled him to be letting him down like this — and the whole group besides. But what could he do? He simply couldn't go on, he just couldn't. And at the very thought of it his body went weak with a wave of sickness.

"Gleb?"

"What?"

"Did Vasenka tell you she'd been having nightmares?"

Sosnovsky turned toward him, and Sasha nearly stopped short in astonishment. Gleb slowed as well. In that instant of silence, the fellows' laughter rang out distinctly, as though from somewhere very close by — and then all was quiet again.

"She told you?" Gleb asked sharply. — That she'd been dreaming nightmares about our trek?

"Well, yes, something like that."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

Gleb lost his patience and swung all the way around to face Yuzhin, churning up the ski track around him.

"You probably shared your worries and dreams with her too?" he pressed. — And that's what frightened her.

The accusation itself left Sasha shaken.

"No, come on! I never told her anything, she came to me on her own! I'd never dream of scaring her" what for?

But Gleb stood scowling a while longer, then wheeled about abruptly and pressed on, jabbing his poles angrily into the soft snow.

"Don't fall behind. We've got to catch up with the guys."

***

Well, so much for counting our chickens.

We let ourselves relax, you might say — and an old man from the village hauled us off to the settlement. Not us ourselves, of course, but our backpacks, which we hadn't yet had time to grow accustomed to, or to love for their weight.

The road passed cheerfully enough. Tolka must have used up every last frame of his film. Vasya especially distinguished himself: first he asked me and Lyusya to pose with him, then commandeered Rustik's mandolin, then tried on Yura's fur hat. He very nearly climbed onto Gleb Sosnovsky's skis as well.

We reached the Second Northern already at dusk, and had barely enough light to find the hut for the night. I must admit, by that time we were all worn out, even though we'd gone without backpacks. Lyuska and I sigh longingly for the metal-sprung bed and the washstand back at the house, while the boys wear their fatigue more roughly — snapping at one another and forcing feeble jokes.

"Nelya," Vadya says to me, — instead of scribbling away in your notebook, why not pick up a needle and patch a couple of boot covers. You know very well we can't wrap our boots in notebook pages.

I try not to get angry, not to take offense. I understand he's simply tired — he spent most of the route walking point, and his legs must feel like lead weights by now. But I can't help myself: I flush with hurt and bend even lower over my diary, refusing to answer him. Lyusya leaps to my defense:

"You insufferable lump! Why don't you take the needle yourself and sew whatever needs sewing! No, of course not" dump it all on the girls instead! Do we have equal rights here, or don't we?

"Don't we," Kolya Norkin chimes in.

He and Rustik have only just come in from outside, having dragged boards in to feed the stove, and already he's hurrying to have his say. I

want to cover my ears with my hands, because I can imagine exactly what kind of argument is about to erupt.

“Are you going to tell me you didn’t need help unloading those backpacks?” Kolya presses on, looking down at little Lyuska. — Are you willing to haul all forty kilos on your own back?

“And I agree! Go on, shift all that extra weight from your pack into mine” I’ll gladly carry it myself! Myself!

I can’t bear it any longer; I snatch up the diary and head outside. Out here there’s the moon and the white snow, and if you try, you can still see something. I’ve barely settled into a comfortable spot when Gleb appears. He’d been gathering firewood too, and now he’s hauling it, arms stretched out a little so the boards don’t press against his chest. Uncomfortable, holding them like that...

He nods to me as he passes and goes into the hut. Should I follow him? The boys ought to calm down soon and grow cheerful again. Besides, I’ve left poor Lyuska in there. No, I should go back.

But the moment I close the diary, the door opens again and there’s Gleb. He settles beside me and asks:

“What are you doing out here, aren’t you freezing?”

I smile and hold out my hands, and he takes them carefully, folding them into his palms. His skin is hard and callused — the genuine hands of a hiker, used to gripping ski poles, wielding an axe, pitching a tent and hauling deadwood. In the Caucasus two years ago, clumsy Bronya set our tent ablaze. Until Yura and Vadik ran up with water and sand, Gleb was beating out the flames with his bare hands. That’s the kind of hiker he is.

I press my palms against his and suddenly sense that something’s wrong.

“Oh, what’s this? Is that a scratch?”

I quickly turn his hands over, backs down, bending back his fingers. Across the hard palms are fresh wounds, and a gasp escapes me before I know it.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he clenches his hands into fists and tucks them under his arms. — I just picked at it with my nail. It’s all from the old fence — we had to tear it down so we’d have something to burn.

Sasha Yuzhin has the first-aid kit; we’ll need to find bandages and iodine. I say nothing aloud, but I make a mental note that I absolutely must treat Gleb’s hands, even if he puts up a fight. Otherwise, how will he manage his ski poles? And he isn’t the only one. Who else was tearing down that fence, after all?..

“We need to talk,” Gleb says briefly and gravely, looking me straight in the eye, and I shake off my pressing worries. — As group leader, I’m responsible for keeping order. I can’t allow quarrels or panic among the others…

He must mean that we shouldn’t snap at each other or hold grudges. But really, shouldn’t he be having this talk with the boys first, not with me?

“…so no more of those idiotic nightmares, and no more premonitions,” he finishes sternly and meets my eyes again. Only then does it dawn on me that he has been talking about something else entirely. — Honestly, it’s absurd, Nel. Komsomol members, atheists — and you believe in prophetic dreams! In short, I don’t want to hear another word about it. Understood?

The only thing worse than a cold, indifferent Gleb is Gleb the commander. The kind who issues orders as if to a soldier. What to believe. What to think. What to dream. The kind who imagines fear can be switched off like a radio.

“Understood,” I nod, because he sits there waiting for my answer. — Fine. Good night, Gleb.

Without sparing him another glance, I get up quickly and hurry back inside. My nose is maddeningly blocked, and my lungs squeeze tight in my chest, refusing to let me draw a proper breath in or let one out.

Inside the hut it's much quieter now. I find Lyusya with my eyes: she's furiously shaking out the blankets as she makes up her bed. Better not to go anywhere near her just now — wisest to wait until she cools off. Everyone else is turning in for the night as well, and from only one corner come murmurs of protest and argument. I glance around and spot Vasya and Yura.

I'm so surprised that these two good-natured giants are quietly squabbling over something that I forget all about Gleb and his scratched-up arms, about angry Lyuska and my nightmares. I wander over to the boys, trying to work out what's happened.

"…we'll never get through there, it's too dangerous. And Gleb…"

"If we take the route Sosnovsky wants, we won't make the deadline — understand?"

Yura raises his eyes and notices me. He shuts his mouth, thinking better of answering, and Vasya turns around as well. I feel almost awkward for butting in on their conversation, and yet — why are they discussing things behind Gleb's back? Why won't Vasya tell him to his face that he disagrees, or whatever the trouble is between them?

"What are you two quarrelling about, boys?" I ask brightly, giving no hint of how rattled I feel.

They smile too, and at once it all feels easier between us.

"Who's quarrelling? Nobody's quarrelling," Doroshenko says with a dismissive wave. "We're just weighing which way is best — along the river, the way Vasily suggests, or the long way round, like Gleb said."

“And lose a whole day over it, if not more,” Postyr stubbornly puts in, folding his arms across his chest.

I turn toward the door, by now barely visible in the darkness. Gleb still hasn’t come back. He’s out on the porch, sitting in the cold.

“I think Gleb’s thought it all through and knows best,” I concede.

And unexpectedly, this works in Doroshenko’s favor.

“That’s exactly what I was saying,” he declares happily. “Vasenka’s an experienced hiker too—she knows what she’s talking about. So we’ll save the experiments for another time.”

Vasya scowls, but he can’t stay cross with us for long. He wishes us good night and goes off to fetch some wash water. I don’t manage to slip away and make up my bed before Yura starts in again:

“Better to lose a day on the trail than go through the ice. Isn’t that right, Vasenka? He just wanted to show off—oh, I’ve been on any number of hikes, I’ve trekked over mountains and through rivers—and here you all are carrying on like little children!..”

I doubt Vasya put it quite that way, but I don’t argue.

“I’m off to bed as well. Tomorrow’s a hard day. Good night, Yur.”

Before I go, he lightly touches my elbow and, looking straight into my eyes, replies:

“Sweet dreams to you too, Vasenka.”

I hurry away from him, relieved that the hut is already half-dark and he didn’t catch my cheeks flushing pink.

Doroshenko’s wish did me no good: what I dreamed wasn’t quite a nightmare, but some muddled, unpleasant jumble. And I woke later than everyone else.

The sun is already climbing over the forest, burning away the matte, frosty mist. How hard it is to drag myself from my warm nook by the wall, beside the stove — yet the fellows are tramping all over

the hut, chattering loudly. Something clatters and rolls about, and outside a horse is neighing.

When I finally rise, I learn that Sasha Yuzhin will go no farther with us.»

About Those Who Stay Behind

While the others packed Yuzhin's things into their rucksacks, he stood beside the girls, shy and silent, his eyelashes fluttering. Gleb explained that his leg was acting up again and it would be hard for him to carry on, and the rest kept quiet about it, never raising the subject, never asking why. Sasha was grateful for that, and yet he still felt like a traitor.

"Be sure to see a doctor the moment you reach town" it was Lyusya giving her final instructions, though she herself was watching Sasha with such sorrow in her eyes. No scolding, no bossing about. "And don't be upset! None of this is your fault."

He nodded without lifting his gaze to her. Lyusya hesitated, then hugged him tightly, pressing her cheek against his.

"Get well soon," she whimpered, and quickly let him go.

Nelya came up to Sasha as well and slipped a friendly arm through his.

"We'll take heaps of photos and keep the diary in wonderful detail…" she was trying to sound cheerful and confident, but her heart had weighed on her all morning.

Something was definitely wrong, not right, about Sasha's leaving. As if his going would put a little crack in their group — and how long before it worked loose, before everything shattered to pieces? Nelya wanted to talk to Yuzhin, face to face, and find out exactly why he was turning back. And perhaps they should all follow his example?..

"Vasenka, it's time," sighed Lyusya, tugging her rucksack onto her shoulders. "Bye, Sash!"

Nelya smiled at Yuzhin and had just turned to follow Lyuska when Sasha suddenly caught her by the hand. There were tears in his eyes.

"Oh, stop it! We'll be back before you know it, and…"

“Nelya,” Yuzhin rasped, — please… — He swallowed hard, his lips trembled, and he dropped his gaze. — Take care of yourself.

It seemed to Nelya that something else lay hidden beneath those words, that Sasha wanted to say something entirely different. But she was afraid to ask him to repeat it. Afraid because this Sasha — the real Sasha-Masha — was turning into the Yuzhin from her most recent dream.

“Well, what are you dawdling back there for?” Gleb called to them, already leading the group on ahead. — Come on, hurry up! Yuzhin, pass the word that the deadline’s being pushed back two days! Got it? Two! Days! Don’t fall ill!

Sasha released Nelya at once, stepped back, and raised his hand to show Gleb he had understood. Nelya hurried to catch up with the others, lest Sasha say anything else to her. Lest he have time to seize her. Stop her. Talk her out of going on.

She could feel his gaze burning between her shoulder blades until they turned into the forest.

The group had not traveled far from the settlement. The hunters’ ski trail had run out, and untouched, snow-white drifts stretched out before the travelers. Their pace slowed rapidly, their progress bogged down, and although no one admitted it aloud, everyone was thinking what a luxury it had been yesterday to march along the trail packed down by the sleds, tossing their backpacks onto the runners.

And then the local inventor, Vadim Shakunov, stepped into the spotlight.

While everyone was catching their breath at a rest halt, he unveiled his scheme for continuous trail-breaking. The leader drops his pack, breaks the trail, then rests while the rest of the group passes him by. On paper: greater speed, reduced strain, “three days to do a week’s plan” and in practice…

For the one breaking trail, going was terribly hard. The kids sank knee-deep into the snow, their backpacks dragged them backward, and it was sheer torment, not any “increase of speed and decrease of fatigue.” What’s more, snow caked on their skis in thick layers, forcing them to stop again and again to scrape it off.

Only around five o’clock did they reach the bank of the Severnaya Tocha, where it was decided to make a halt. Exhausted and worn-out, the tourists slumped on their packs and silently cursed Vadim and his “brilliant” ideas to high heaven. The innovator himself, however, uttered no complaint and selflessly helped the girls with the cooking.

Lunch came only at half past five in the evening.

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“How my legs ache! And it’s all Shakunov’s fault! If that horrible scheme hadn’t gone to his head, we’d still be walking along at our old pace. So what if we’d covered a kilometer less!”

Though, enough grumbling — even if it’s only on the pages of this diary. I’m probably just cross because I’m upset that Sasha Yuzhin didn’t come with us. His leg was troubling him — that’s what he said. No, of course I believe him…

Phew, I’ve only just managed to shake off Yura Doroshenko. Let me set it all down in detail now.

After lunch some of the boys set up the stove in the tent, while Postyr and Lyusya sewed a canopy out of a bedsheet. Bronya was putting the finishing touches on the croquis for her map, sketched along the way, sitting not far from me. I heard Gleb cursing and grumbling at Kolya about something, tossing a barb at Rustik in passing as well. I’m sure he didn’t mean it. He must be missing Sashka too, and so he took it out on the guys.

I was just about to go join Lyusya when Yura came over and sat down beside me.

“What are you up to?”

I nodded toward my friend while hastily stuffing the diary out of sight.

“I’m going over to help Lyuska in a minute.”

For some reason I didn’t want to be left alone with him, so I was almost glad of the excuse to get away. It’s... hard to explain. Later, when there’s time, I’ll try to untangle these feelings properly. Not now.

Yura gave a barely audible chuckle, and I turned to look at him.

“What?”

“Oh, I was just wondering whether you’d even fit in there with them,” he said with a faint smile, looking me straight in the eye.

I glanced away and saw that Norkin and Shakunov had already drifted over to Lyusya and Vasya, and now all four of them were crowded around the tent, hauling the poor canopy back and forth and shouting each other advice about which side ought to be sewn on. Good grief — at that rate they’d stitch the whole thing into one giant sack, and we’d all end up sleeping out in the open!

“You’re right!” I laughed. — I’d only be in the way, seems like.

I suddenly fell silent, realizing that we were, after all, alone. Gleb had gone off with Rustik to fetch brushwood, and Bronya no longer traced her lines but watched our little group from her spot, hollering advice nobody needed. Yura and I sat by ourselves in front of the campfire, watching the flames.

“L-listen,” Doroshenko spoke up again, quieter now, almost carefully, — maybe after we get back from the hike, we could go to the movies sometime? I’ll be in Sverdlovsk another week, maybe two. There’ll be plenty of time for walks. If you don’t mind.

I drew a slow breath of the cool, damp air, desperately trying to think of what to say to that. I was fond of Yura, but as a friend, a comrade. I couldn’t picture the two of us going to the movies together

— something like that… Though, honestly, it was just as hard to imagine myself, or Gleb Sosnovsky, in that role either.

Lyusya plopped down beside me and flung a stick into the campfire. I gave a stifled gasp and turned to her. But before I could open my mouth to ask, Kolomiytseva launched into a tirade all on her own:

“No, can you imagine, just imagine it? I’m utterly speechless with outrage! He started lecturing me on how to sew! “Who taught you to make stitches that big” were you patching cow hides?” And I pricked my finger because of him!

Lyusya’s eyes brimmed with hurt tears. But inside, I was quietly rejoicing — without even realizing it, she’d rescued me from an awkward explanation with Doroshenko! He immediately edged away from us and now kept silent, and I could pretend nothing had happened. The only question was, how long could I go on hiding from him? Oh…

I glanced at the three fellows still bustling about the tent. Bronya was heading over to help them, but I had a feeling she wouldn’t be much use.

Sympathetically, I put my arm around Lyusya’s shoulders, but she scowled sulkily and stared into the fire.

“Come on, don’t sulk! You know how they are” boys will be boys, always joking around. I’m sure they never meant to hurt you for real…

Lyusya muttered something inaudible and kicked snow into the fire. I leaned in closer.

“What?”

“I said, that’s exactly what Norkin wanted.”

I sighed and turned my gaze to the curly-haired fellow. It is what it is. Kolya, unlike the rest of us, needs time to thaw. He can’t simply plunge into a hike, forget his family, his studies, all his troubles, and just enjoy life for a little while. He’s like a block of ice: you can leave

it out under the blazing sun, but you must still wait a long while before it melts away entirely, revealing the tender flowers hidden within, left over from our last trek.

I didn't know how much the others understood of this — everyone seemed to have grown accustomed to prickly, sour-tempered Norkin, and hardly noticed when he stayed that way. Perhaps that was why he preferred not to lay his own feelings bare. A block of ice doesn't care whether you curse it or kick it. That made things easier for him. But what about the rest of us?

After supper we couldn't bring ourselves to disperse, and lingered long around the campfire. Rustik fetched out his mandolin, and I begged a lesson from him. The boys snickered at my clumsy efforts, while Slobodin — patient and earnest, like a proper teacher — showed me how to press the strings properly, though by then the gathering dusk made it nearly impossible to see anything.

We sang several songs well known to everyone, songs tradition demanded at every hike. Then Lyusya recalled "The Leaves," but alas, Rustik couldn't play it.

We were already resigning ourselves to doing without it when Vasya Postyr asked for the mandolin.

"I know 'The Leaves,'" he announced. "Good song, though too melancholy, in my opinion, for an evening like this. Well then, Lyus, lead us off!"

"Yellowed leaves, soaked through, fall and whirl before me…"

It instantly calls to mind our trip to the Southern Urals, when we went hiking there a couple of summers ago. Of our present company, only Gleb Sosnovsky and I were on that trip, along with a few other kids: Ninka, Lyuba Sokolova... That was where I first heard this song — Kolka Tregubov claimed it came "from the zone," yet it's so tender and touching... Later Lyusya copied it down from me.

“...I love your sorrowful eyes. In them sometimes a frozen tear...”

I catch Yura looking straight at me and momentarily lose the rhythm. Why is that?

Barely have we finished singing when Shakunov heaves a loud sigh. I was about to conclude he was thinking of his young wife, but not at all.

“Girls, do you want us bawling right here, at the very start of the hike?” he asks Lyusya and me in all seriousness. “As if it weren’t enough that Sashka left, now we’re going to mope too? Here’s what I propose: we’re done with songs for today. Let’s discuss something instead.” In an instant, the ill-fated notebook full of blueprints appears in his hand. — “Now, listen to what I’ve decided to make out of the spare skis...”

Bronya slaps the log loudly with her palm, and Vasya, sitting beside her, all but leaps out of his skin.

“And what do you think,” he hastily bellows, “is it true what they say — that ‘from hatred to love is just one step’?”

We crack up at how shamelessly he talked over Vadik, while the would-be inventor merely grumbles something displeased and stows his notebook away. Laughing as we are, we still decide to take up this new topic — it is a fascinating one! Doroshenko is the first to clear his throat.

“I don’t think so,” his gaze is as honest and calm as ever. — Love and hate are opposites, like two different poles. How could there be just a single step between them?

“Yurka always takes everything far too literally,” Bronya remarks, tilting her head to hide her laughter.

Lyusya, beside me, sits up straight and whistles as she draws a full chest of air, and I realize a proper lecture is coming…

“Well, I agree with Yura!” her gaze, too, is direct and angry. And it’s aimed at Kolya, who sits across from us. — You either love or you hate. And to get from one to the other, — she deliberately drags out the vowels, showing just how far apart these two things lie, — would take centuries — people don’t live that long. And that saying is stupid — some fool probably invented it, comforting himself with hope.

Lyusya doesn’t notice how the kids around her can barely contain their laughter; even Vadya, forgetting all his grievances, turns away, his shoulder trembling slightly with soundless mirth. I catch Gleb Sosnovsky’s eye and see mischievous sparks dancing there. But laughing is not something a group leader should do, so that’s as much as I’m allowed to see.

Norkin applauds slowly, watching Lyusya, though he’s smiling too — though, it seems to me, not quite as sincerely as everyone else.

“Bravo. Lusia, write that down just in case” you’ll be drawing audiences someday. Anyone have paper and a pencil? Nobody managed to take it down in shorthand? Ah, what wisdom we’ve lost! Lyus, next time don’t drop the ball.

I’m afraid Lyusya is about to throw a burning stick at him, so I decide to defuse the situation:

“What a bunch of grumps you all are!” I try to address everyone at once, but only Doroshenko hears me. — I’ll be the optimist here and say that from hate to love is less than a step! Remember last year in the Sayans, when that local dog tagged along with us? She’d even been trained to chase squirrels. So, who was it that grumbled and swore at her the whole way? — Gleb smirks, glancing at me. — Our trip leader used to say that dog would make a hunter just about as much as Slavka Khalizov would make a ballerina. And by the end of the trip he’d fed her nearly his entire daily ration! Isn’t that proof enough?

The guys laugh, trading memories from that trip and others, but tactfully avoid mentioning that during that adventure Lyusya took a bullet through her leg. Such an absurd, dreadful accident — I still shudder at the memory of that day, and it troubles me far more than the snake story. And the truth is, that was hardly our most successful trip. As if we didn't have troubles enough of our own, we also witnessed a tourist from Moscow die in the Kyziri rapids. It's terrifying even to recall…

The thought slipped in unbidden and soured my mood — which is probably why I notice that Lyusya never joined the conversation. She sits in silence beside me, staring into the fire and nibbling at her pricked finger.»

About Those Who Take Offense

Nelya woke several times that night. At first, it was every rustle of the others tossing and turning that roused her; then, just as she was drifting off, she Bolted upright at the sound of footsteps near the tent. Frozen with fear, she listened to the crunch of snow and branches beneath someone's steady tread—as if the person were circling the tent, deciding from which side it would be best to approach. A stranger, here, right in their camp? Or perhaps a bear? Unable to bear the suspense any longer, Nelya rolled over and began ruthlessly shaking Lyuska awake.

She had prudently clapped a hand over her friend's mouth to keep her from giving them away with her irritated exclamations. She darted her eyes toward the tent wall, behind which someone was pacing, and only lowered her hand once she saw that Lyusya understood. But just to be safe, she leaned in again and whispered, barely audibly:

"There's someone out there!"

Lyusya nodded solemnly, swept her gaze over the kids to check whether anyone else might be listening, then propped herself up on her elbows and whispered back to Nelya in turn:

"It's Vadik."

She flopped back onto her sleeping spot and muttered, a little louder:

"He's on watch."

Nelya couldn't catch her breath right away, and it took her a while to wrap her head around the fact that she had been terrified by Vadik's footsteps—Vadik, who was keeping watch by the fire and pacing around the tent. What a silly goose she was! Her imagination had run wild because, for nearly a week now, she'd been plagued every night

by dreadful dreams of their group perishing or getting lost. Anyone would start conjuring up all sorts of horrors after that!

Though it could have happened to anyone — she sighed mournfully to herself. It was impossible to imagine Gleb attaching much significance to nightmarish dreams, or Norkin, or even Bronya. Probably only she and Sasha Yuzhin would have paid such nonsense any mind. And as for actually fearing that nonsense and expecting anything from it — that was Nelya's peculiar gift alone.

Realizing sleep would not come for a long while yet, she rose quietly, took her windbreaker, and slipped out of the tent.

Outside, the wind moaned and the trees creaked. The campfire had burned low; Vadim sat beside it, toying with a handful of sticks.

"Oh, Vasenka. Come to keep me company?"

She circled the fire and sat down next to Shakunov. It smelled pleasantly of pine and juniper, and Nelya stretched her bare fingers toward the flickering flame.

"I can't sleep," she confessed, not looking at Vadim.

"Happens," he agreed. "I couldn't catch a wink either, so I even…"

Nelya turned to look at him and saw that Shakunov had frozen mid-sentence, mouth agape, staring at the sky.

"Look!"

She looked — and lost the power of speech.

Across the bottomless vault of night, above the tips of the pines, three luminous spheres were drifting slowly. One rode slightly ahead; the other two followed behind. White as moons — and every bit as radiant.

By the time Nelya had finished watching, Vadim had already run to the tent and roused the whole group. Within moments everyone stood around the fire, gazing at the extraordinary sight. The spheres neither vanished nor changed course, nor did they grow any clearer.

Kolya was slow to catch on and dashed off too late for his camera. By the time he returned and pointed the lens at the sky, the strange lights had already faded — not a spark of them left.

“Oh, damn it all!” he swore, though he was too dazzled to be truly angry.

“What was that?” Vasenka came to stand beside Gleb, her eyes still wandering over the sky.

Sosnovsky regarded her in silence, then turned his gaze upward again. It was Yura who replied:

“Most likely, a test.”

“A test of what?” Lyuska went rigid.

“Anything you like,” Doroshenko continued in a hoarse voice. — Weapons. Rockets. This is uninhabited country. No witnesses about.

That answer unsettled Nelya, and she edged closer to Gleb, pressing herself against his side. He did not pull away.

“And what if it isn’t a test?” Vasya Postyr objected quietly, eyes still lifted. — What if it’s something... not of this planet?

Nobody laughed. The tourists stood huddled by the tent, and only now did Vasenka notice that no one had had time to grab a jacket. Gleb was beside her in nothing but a sweater, his warm breath rising in white clouds of vapor. It was he who summed the matter up:

“Whatever this may be, we’d best not chatter about it to a soul. Especially since we’ve no proof of anything.” Norkin snorted. — And if it really is tests, like Yura says... — Gleb caught himself and waved a hand. — Off to bed. We’ve a hard day tomorrow.

Everyone except Vadim, who was on duty, drifted back toward the tent, chattering and still stealing glances at the sky. Nelya came in nearly last, just ahead of Gleb, her heart more troubled than it had been when she first woke.

In the far end of the tent the argument broke out afresh over what the lights had been, and Nelya felt her spirits sink at the thought of having to fall asleep amid all that wrangling. But Gleb snapped briskly: “Anyone who wants to keep discussing it can go outside!” and at once silence fell.

Vasenka would have loved to ask him what he made of the lights, to hear a little lecture on physics and natural phenomena, and be comforted. Yet she understood that Gleb knew hardly anything about those strange spheres — he could only guess, just like the rest of them.

Only after a very long time did she manage to fall asleep that night.

In the morning they took forever getting up and packing. Nelya lay in the tent, in no hurry to step outside, and listened to the murmur of indistinct voices. Lyusya had gone off, leaving Yura Doroshenko and Vadim Shakunov inside with her. They were quietly discussing the night lights, but she caught nothing of interest — only that the spheres had not appeared again for the rest of the night.

After breakfast, once they had pulled themselves together, the group moved on. By the route map they had a little over twenty kilometers ahead of them, along the Severnaya Tocha. The weather was kind; the wind blew gently.

Walking along the shore was easy enough, but observant Gleb suggested clambering down and striking straight across the ice — just as Vasya Postyr had proposed from the very start. The group crowded onto the bank and began hunting for a more convenient way down. Furry cornices overhung the river, and where they were absent, the branches and dry roots of fallen spruces jutted out — and in spots like those it was all too easy to snap a ski or break a leg.

It was decided to descend straight down the cornice, “ladder-style,” one after another.

“I’ll go first,” Norkin volunteered.

He took both poles in one hand, probed the density of the snow with his ski, and a second later was already picking his way neatly downward.

Bronya let out a long sigh as she watched him.

“What’s with all the dithering?” she said, turning to Vasenka, who stood closest to her. — We could simply take it and slide right down — look how firm the snow is. Otherwise we’ll be poking about here till evening.

Nelya merely smiled at her. For her own part, she didn’t at all mind waiting a while and resting. They had been trudging along without a single halt all day, just to make up lost ground, and she had scarcely slept at all…

As it turned out, Bronya needed no greater encouragement. She glanced down again, saw that Kolya had only just scratched his way to the halfway mark of the cornice, and her patience snapped. Before anyone could blink, she gave a jaunty whistle, shoved off with all her might on her poles, and shot off to cut across Norkin’s path.

The snow cornice at the summit sheared away, unable to bear the weight, and plunged down into the valley together with the guys. The group left on the ledge huddled into a knot, straining to make out what had happened through the drifting whiteness. Nelya suddenly burst out laughing and could barely stifle a giggle. That Bronya, of all people…

Gleb shook his head and sharply waved his pole, pointing downward.

“Let’s go. I only hope they haven’t broken anything.”

Nelya hadn’t thought of that. While everyone picked their way down the broken trail, she caught up with Gleb and tried to stand up for Tolya, dreading what was about to come to him from the group leader.

“Gleb, you know him, he didn’t mean any harm. We simply should have let him go first…”

“Defending Bronya?” Sosnovsky glanced back at her briefly, and Nelya noticed that his grey-green eyes were as calm as a frozen lake. — I’m not going to scold him.

“Really?”

Of course, Gleb was far too forgiving of Tolya’s antics — she should have guessed that herself…

“Really,” he confirmed evenly, and added: — Norkin will do the scolding for me.

A backpack showed dark against the snowdrift, a ski jutting out. The guys quickly dug out Tolya, who was lying flat on his back and grinning from ear to ear. Then they dug out Kolya. Nelya watched as they lifted him up, entirely white with snow, like some marvelous yeti. He kept clutching a broken pole in one hand, and for the first few minutes he seemed utterly bewildered. They brushed him off, chuckling, then Shakunov and Rustik came running up and took him by the arms, checking whether the bones were intact. It seemed the storm had passed them by, but…

Having made sure nothing was broken, Kolya turned round, caught sight of Bronya’s broad grin beside him, and lost all patience.

“What a creep! Beware a mare from behind and a fool from every side!”

He said it with such savage venom that the smiles died on every face. A heavy silence settled over Tocha.

Bronyevsky’s grin vanished in an instant, and her honest eyes went wide with alarm.

“Kolya, forgive me… she stammered in confusion, but Norkin pointedly turned his back on her.”

Nelya let out a breath, unaware until that moment that she had been holding it, and exchanged a glance with Gleb Sosnovsky. Indeed, Bronya had been given more than her due — and so had the others.

Lyuska went over to the bewildered Tolya and began carefully brushing the snow from him, her eyes sorrowful. Nelya came up to help and heard her murmuring:

“Why is he like this? What has he got against everyone?..”

Once they had more or less recovered, the party set off again. At first Bronya made one more attempt to win Kolya’s forgiveness, but he glared at her with such fury that Bronyevsky judged it wise to keep her distance for the time being. Then she pressed through to Gleb Sosnovsky and fell to apologizing, explaining her behaviour: “Well, you see, there’s something Gogolian in every Russian. We can’t do without fast driving — it’s in our blood!.. You’re not angry with me, are you? No?” The fellows brightened once more, had a chuckle at poor Tolya’s expense, and quickened their pace across the smooth, hard crust of the river. Sosnovsky brushed down his friend as well and swiftly led the group onward.

Nelya, walking along beside Lyusya, watched him. She simply couldn’t stop smiling at Bronya—when his back was turned—as he rode up first to one person, then another, trying to explain to each of them why he had taken to the ledge. That was Tolya all over: act first, think later. You never could tell at what moment his next stunt would come.

Lyusya rode alongside in silence, nose in the air. Every now and then she darted a quick glance back over her shoulder, sighed with irritation, and turned her sulky gaze forward once more.

Kolya Norkin trudged behind everyone else, furious with the whole world.

***

“Today was a long, hard day—but such an interesting one!”

After our rest stop we came out onto a Mansi trail and followed it with ease through the thicket, keeping to a course only slightly different from our own. The trail led us to a clearing.

In the middle of it stood a tall birch, its bark stripped away, strange little marks carved into the bare wood. Behind the birch loomed a bizarre structure—a wooden box on high supports, roughly nailed together, rather like a coffin.

Naturally, I felt uneasy and wanted to get away as quickly as possible. When you haven't laid eyes on another human being for a long time—apart from your fellow hikers—and then suddenly, in the middle of this wilderness, this wild and desolate country, you stumble upon something that looks like a coffin, there is precious little pleasant about it. But I was the only one who felt that way.

First the guys gathered round the birch, studying the inscriptions; then they crowded beneath the eerie shelter and began putting forward all manner of theories about what it might be. I was relieved that Gleb hadn't yet gone over to join them and was still standing by the tree, notebook in hand. I came up beside him, positioning myself almost with my back to the wooden box so as not to look at it, and asked:

"What do you think this could mean, Gleb?"

"I don't think — I know exactly," he said with a faint grin, and showed me his notes. "When we were at the loggers' cabin, I copied down a few Mansi symbols and their meanings from the guys. See? The Mansi may have left us useful information — about the route, perhaps, or about hazards…"

"Hazards?"

Behind us there was an outburst of laughter, and we turned round. Bronya was brandishing her ski poles with abandon, pointing at the find and suggesting something. It was heartening to see that she had finally forgotten her unfortunate fall and was in high spirits again.

“For instance, about snowdrifts and deadfall,” Gleb explained after a moment’s thought, “or that the snow is far deeper this year and the route best avoided.”

I was a little vexed with myself. Of course — what other perils could there be in such wild country?

“Is that what’s written here? Can you translate it?”

“I can. But this one wrote about his hunt. It seems they brought down a bear… Where are you climbing?!”

I started in surprise and spun round. The indomitable Bronya had already flung off her skis and backpack and was scaling the eerie structure. The slender supports creaked and wobbled, and a little snow slid from the box.

“Gleb, we’re only checking whether they hid a piece of moose meat in the cache!” Bronya called back cheerfully, already halfway to the lid of the box.

“Get down from there, quick!”

The memory of how Tolya’s last stunt had ended was still fresh, so he climbed down without protest and dusted off his hands, sulking. I let out a breath of relief, glad that we would never learn what lay hidden inside that coffin.

“It really does look like a cache, you know” the Mansi could have stashed something in there...

“Let’s move on,” Gleb cut him short, casting a quick glance at me.

He must have noticed how uneasy I was, and so he hurried to lead the group away. My dear Gleb! I promise I’ll be braver, I truly will!

Along the way we kept stumbling across notes left by Mansi hunters, and I peered with a certain unease at the strange little marks, unable to tell whether these people were warning us about something or simply boasting of their successes. Gleb no longer paused by them, and none of the rest of us carried a dictionary to decipher them.

We halted for the night just as darkness was beginning to fall. We pitched the tent at a bend of the Tocha, stretching it between young, slender birches. Vadim and Vasya spent ages building the fire, but it turned out a treat — big and hot. So big and hot, in fact, that the flames suddenly leapt onto someone's padded jacket drying nearby.

I was just filling in the diary when I caught the stench of smoldering wadding, and Kolya yelled at the top of his lungs:

"We're burning! Fire!"

The guys did their best to salvage the padded jacket, but it was too late. Its right sleeve had all but burned away, the collar was gone, and the whole thing was falling apart in their hands. Vadik clicked his tongue and shook his head as he looked it over, then glanced sheepishly around at the group.

"Whose masterpiece is this?"

Rustik stepped forward. But refusing to let it get him down, he pulled the jacket straight on over his anorak and stood up proudly, modelling this marvel of hiking gear.

"Isn't it something!" I laughed.

Bronya took a photo of Rustik, and it was decided the jacket would be kept for now — as a souvenir.

So, mishap notwithstanding, the evening carried on in good spirits. Once we had finished supper, exhausted every topic of conversation, and drunk up all the cocoa, Lyusya rose and announced loudly:

"Listen, everyone, I have an announcement! Today is Yura Doroshenko's birthday!"

To be honest, it had completely slipped my mind — without Lyusya I'd never have remembered. And judging by everyone else's reaction, I wasn't alone. Only our quartermaster could keep track of dates like that, amid the hikes, the Chinese lanterns drifting across the night sky,

the burned jackets and everything else. She had even prepared a gift for Doroshenko — a tangerine.

Yura was embarrassed by the unexpected attention, but it warmed my heart to see him smiling as he accepted his modest present. We watch as he carefully peels away the rind, breaks the fruit open, and gazes at the segments. When he raises his head again, the smile has already vanished from his face.

“There are only eight segments here. Someone will miss out.”

He glances around at the kids, then back at the ill-fated mandarin. Gleb gives a slight shrug, and somehow I get the sense he’s ready to surrender his own share — as if he’s the odd one out in the group.

Naturally, he says nothing of the sort. Playing the fair leader, Gleb proposes drawing lots — “provided Yurka has no better idea.” Doroshenko swallows, as if about to protest, but then nods. Bronya obligingly gathers a handful of little twigs, makes her way around the circle, and each of us in turn draws one. The matter is settled with remarkable speed — it’s Lyuska who pulls the shortest straw.

I feel a quiet pang of pity for my friend: after all, she was the one who remembered the birthday and gave Yura the mandarin in the first place. I even find myself hoping one of the boys will offer to trade, but no such fools step forward.

“Fine, then,” Lyusya can barely keep the hurt out of her voice — “it’s all right. I’m not upset, honestly. Happy Birthday, Yur.”

She rises hurriedly and vanishes into the tent, and I realize I shouldn’t simply have let it all slide. This turned out badly.

Yura divides the mandarin into segments, and the tart bite, together with the sharp citrus fragrance, instantly carries me back home — to the little fir tree on the side table that Mama trimmed with a paper garland… I shut my eyes, forgetting Lyuska, forgetting Yura, forgetting everything in the world.

How I long for home. And for Mama.

About Those Who Got Trapped

“They’re already on us! Hurry!”

Never before had her backpack felt so沉重ly heavy — like a ton of bricks — and her skis seemed designed for nothing but slowing her down. Nelya fought with every ounce of strength to keep pace with the others, but her poles sank into the bottomless snow, her skis kept tangling, and the pack bore down on her shoulders as though the entire group had climbed aboard it.

Glancing back over her shoulder, she let out a shriek and tried to push herself forward, if only a little.

Those dreadful snow creatures were gaining on her. They had cut off the group’s path, crawling out of the drifts, and now they were hunting her down, stretching out their shaggy, clawed paws.

“Guys!.. Wait!.. Gleb!”

The others were far ahead, leaving her behind, utterly alone. Nelya jerked and flailed, fighting to press on, but her skis were frozen in place, her poles dragged her down, and already she could hear the snorting of the monsters closing in behind her.

Drenched in sweat from her futile struggle, Nelya wrenched her poles free of the drifts with all her might — but at that very instant the snow gave way beneath her feet, and she went tumbling down.

***

The morning began early — at half past eight the duty crew shook everyone awake and herded them out of the tent. Nelya was almost grateful for it. She felt drained and wrung out, as though she truly had spent the whole night clawing her way out of a snowdrift. And she was glad, too, that the nightmare was behind her at last…

Every comfortable spot by the campfire had been claimed, so Nelya settled down beside Postyr. The kettle gave off a fragrant smell, though

its contents were already slightly scorched. The group, sleepy and chilled to the bone, spoke and moved sluggishly, passing plates and spoons from hand to hand.

“Vadik,” Lyusya began, drawing everyone’s attention, “the spheres weren’t out there again last night, were they?”

The group perked up, remembering yesterday’s strange phenomenon. Shakunov had been on night watch again, along with Kolya. If there had been lights, at least one of them was bound to have spotted them. Maybe even photographed them.

Before Vadim could open his mouth, Norkin answered Lyuska’s question:

“Of course they were — just look at the forest.”

Everyone turned to look, Lyusya alone excepted. Nelya heard Kolya try — and fail — to hold back a snort.

“Look, look — those spheres flew so low they scorched every treetop,” he went on, struggling valiantly to keep a straight face.

Nelya smiled. Apparently Kolya had already forgotten about Bronya’s “snowfall” yesterday, or simply given up holding a grudge against the world. She understood how much that was worth, but nobody else in the group seemed to appreciate Norkin’s sense of humor. Lyusya sniffed and rose to serve herself some porridge. Kolya reached out a hand to help her, but she skirted out of his reach.

“I happen to be perfectly serious,” she grumbled, wounded, “while all you ever do is laugh at me, don’t you? And what if Yura is right? What if it’s some kind of test? What if nobody even knows we’re here — and that’s why they’re launching their rockets, or…”

Norkin could bear it no longer and clamped his palm over Lyuska’s mouth. She froze in outrage, eyes wide. Nelya buried her face in Vasya’s shoulder so her friend wouldn’t see her laughing.

“Comrade supply chief, I give you my word: the next time I see those spheres, the very first thing I’ll do is wake you up! Deal?”

Lyusya sank into her seat, red-faced with fury. Doroshenko, looking guilty as he so often did, hastened to speak:

“There was no test — the words just slipped out of my mouth! The Mansi live here; nobody would ever fire rockets into this region. And even if they did, the whole place would be fenced off. It was merely… well, it was merely…”

“Aliens!” Bronya cried.

The evening before, around the campfire, after Nelya and Lyusya had already turned in, the others had been arguing over the best way to approach Tur-Chakyr. Gleb suggested circling around to its western side, where the climb would be easier. It would mean a detour, true, but they could then be certain of reaching the summit.

Three of them objected. Vasya Postyr insisted it was better to push straight ahead through the forest — so as not to squander time and to reach the peak before nightfall. Norkin and Yura backed him up; but, as Bronya later recounted to Nelya, Sosnovsky reminded the dissenters exactly who was in charge of the expedition, and they had no choice but to bow to his decision.

The march along the forbidding Kay-Ola river was punishing going. In places the current had gnawed away the high banks, felling trees into the water and choking the river with them. They were forced to scramble up onto the shore, skirt such obstacles, and clamber back down. Nelya heard Kolya cursing as he stood before one of these barricades:

“If only we’d brought the blasting charges! We could have blown that whole mess sky-high! And the passageway would be open… Blasted Kayla!”

Lyusya, trudging behind him, brandished her ski pole impatiently, waiting for his outburst to end and for the column to move on. Vasya, standing at her back, turned round, caught Nelya's eye, and said in a conspiratorial whisper:

"And in situations like that, the Spaniards shout..." Here he drew in an enormous breath and bellowed at the top of his lungs across the entire valley: — "Caramba!"

Lyuska, startled, sprang away from Vasya, sent Norkin sprawling head over heels, and the two of them tumbled clean down to the barricade of stones. Nelya laughed until the tears came, utterly helpless, and Postyr guiltily buried a smile in his mustache. Rustik returned to the others with a whistle:

"Let's run for it before that pair gives us a thrashing!"

Having reached the foot of the mountain, they stopped to rest. The expedition leader had splurged on a lavish lunch, and Bronya took several photographs, firing the shutter at the very moment when someone's mouth hung open, their cheeks bulging with food, or they were grimacing against the wind.

It was decided to leave the rucksacks behind and storm the summit unencumbered. The going grew faster and merrier; the group hurled itself upward practically racing one another, buoyed by their snack and the lightness of their backs. But Tur-Chakyr was not kind to visitors.

Neither scarves nor hoods offered any defense against the savage wind, and the snow's whiteness scorched the eyes. They had to remove their skis to ease the climb, and their boots slipped on the rocks and the firn snow.

Yet Tur-Chakyr was worth every ounce of effort. At a height of 1,300 meters the cold sun blazed brightly, and far below, right at their feet, clouds lay heaped in mounds. After leaving their calling card on the cairn, the party set out on the return journey.

Along the way they came upon deep, cloven tracks. Doroshenko studied them closely and pronounced that a moose had passed through here. Bronya brightened at once.

“Perhaps we should follow them? Did anyone happen to bring a gun? Vasya, what about you? Ah, really, how can this be!”

“You’re simply itching to try moose meat, aren’t you?” Rustik smiled. — And you don’t feel the least bit sorry for them?

“Slobodin! This is the untamed wilderness” sentiment has no place here. And I’ve never once in my life tasted moose meat, and I have no intention of leaving this world without doing so!

As it turned out, the moose were cleverer than the nine university students. The moment they left the game trail and struck into the forest, a miracle occurred. Vadik Shakunov, leading the way, went along and along — and suddenly vanished without so much as a squeak. Everyone froze in astonishment at what had happened, while Vadim howled:

“Careful! Someone give me a hand!”

It turned out Shakunov had tumbled into a hunting pit. By sheer luck he had broken neither his legs nor his skis, and escaped with nothing worse than a bad fright. The instant they hauled him out, he exclaimed gleefully:

“There’s a trap down there too!”

Gleb merely shook his head, concealing a smile, while Vasya and Bronya gingerly hauled the trap from the pit. A wire trailed out behind it, and the mechanism was set and primed. Dropping it onto the snow, Postyr and Tolya began scrubbing their mittens — they were coated with tallow, or some kind of grease that had been smeared over the trap.

While the others stood around debating what sort of hunters would venture into such hopeless backwoods, Kolya got hold of a stout stake. Without a second thought, he poked it into the trap and only barely

managed to snatch his hand back in time. The jaws clanged shut with a loud snap, and splinters flew in every direction.

Vadim swallowed with difficulty and held out his right hand.

“Fellows, I was groping around under the snow for it with my hand…”

***

Making camp for the night. There was even something satisfying in the fact that we had stopped right on the Mansi trail. Since people had passed this way only recently ahead of us, that meant nothing would happen to us either. The thought soothed me so completely that I even volunteered for night watch duty.

As usual, it all began with a quarrel.

“No, Gleb,” Vadim was saying, —sorry, but this has turned into outright mockery. I’ve pulled two night shifts in a row.

“Would you call that pulling a shift?” I could see that Gleb had his own aims and designs; he never took anyone to task without good reason. — I want everyone doing their job. Properly.

But Vadim really was worn out, and besides, he’s stubborn as a mule, so I could tell the argument threatened to drag on. So I stepped quickly over to the boys and offered:

“How about I take the duty tonight?”

Gleb gave Shakunov a long, hard stare, and my heart clenched. I can’t stand it when the boys start bickering on a trek, yet somehow it never fails to happen.

“What, you don’t mind Nelya standing watch in your place?” he asked at last.

I was afraid Vadik would back down, but he merely threw up his hands in exasperation.

“If she wants to” suits me fine! I’ll get some sleep.

And he hurried off before Gleb could put him to work after all. He gave me none too pleased a look, but then relented:

“Then find yourself a partner and report back to me afterwards.”

Finding a partner proved easy. When I came up to the campfire where Vasya, Rustik, and Bronya were sitting and asked who’d like to stand watch with me, all three raised their hands. I grinned like a little fool watching them, and chose Rustik.

To tell the truth, I even enjoy being on duty — as long as it doesn’t fall on a rainy night. You can talk to your heart’s content with your duty partner, watch the stars, fill in the logbook, and in the morning see the sleepy boys crawling out of the tent and drifting over to the campfire. You feel like a kind of keeper of twilight and flame.

I’m in charge of supper, with Lyuska helping me, while Rustik and Kolya have gone off to gather brushwood for the beds. Gleb and Vasya are hunched over the map, Bronya is organizing the watch rotation. Vadim is inside the tent, and Yura is circling it, checking the guy lines.

Seizing the moment when no one is paying attention to us, Lyusya draws closer and asks in a low voice:

“Have you and Gleb fallen out or something?”

“No, of course not!” I reply, taken aback. — What on earth gave you that idea?

Lyusya shoots a glance toward the boys, but no one can hear us. Then she sets the pot of goulash aside, briskly tosses her braid over her shoulder, and turns to face me full on. Here it comes, then…

“I only just heard that you stood up for Vadim, and Sosnovsky really can’t stand it when people cross him…”

The remark stings a little, though I know Lyuska has a point. Talk like that paints Gleb as some sort of tyrant, and that’s truly not the case at all.

"…and then you chose Rustik as your partner instead of him," Lyusya finishes, with pointed emphasis.

"So what? He told me to pick someone" I hardly think he meant to stand duty himself…

"Oh, Vasenka, boys never own up to anything like that! It's plain as day he'd rather have been with you. But no" you had to invite Rustik instead. Now he'll sulk all day tomorrow, and the rest of us will pay for it.

Lyusya watches me with something close to reproach, and I haven't the faintest idea what to say. Of course, it's probably easier to judge from the outside — though then again, things never quite look the way they really are. But could Lyuska be right? Should I have handed kitchen duty to Gleb Sosnovsky, seeing as I was the one who'd volunteered? I don't understand a thing.

Luckily for me, Norkin comes staggering out of the forest with an enormous armful of branches, and I'm relieved that Lyuska won't be able to keep scolding me in front of witnesses. She hasn't spotted him yet and is still patiently waiting for my answer. Perhaps she even expected me to start offering excuses.

"Hello, girls!"

Kolya dumps what must be every last twig of deadwood in the entire Urals beside the fire. Is he and Rustik competing over who can gather more?

"Dinner isn't ready," Lyuska snaps, annoyed that our conversation was cut short. — There's some dried bread, if you want it.

"I don't. I was actually coming to help. What can I do?"

I glance at Kolya gratefully — though not for his help. I simply can't imagine how I would ever have explained to Lyusya my tangled relationship with Gleb Sosnovsky. Often even I couldn't tell what he

wanted from me — pushing me away one moment, and the next seeming, if anything, to be struggling to stay close.

How I longed to believe that this trek could settle all the questions, all the things left unsaid.

Rustik trudges back in gloomy fashion, lugging a third of the deadwood that Kolya had gathered. Hoping to lift his spirits, I ask him to play something on the mandolin. The jingle of strings can rescue any situation. I swear, if hikes lacked a mandolin or a guitar, the trekkers would have finished each other off long before the trip's end.

Dinner passes peacefully, all things considered — this evening's circumstances included. I steal glances at Gleb, but he betrays no trace of hurt or anger toward anyone. Vadya has rejoined us, and looking at him it's equally hard to tell whether he's disgruntled or all is well. I still suspect the latter — boys shed their grudges far sooner than girls do.

Little by little the company begins to disperse. Before anyone can so much as open their mouth, Kolya volunteers to be first on stove duty. I catch Lyusya giving him odd looks, no doubt trying to unravel the sinister mystery of why Norkin is in such high spirits tonight. She's in no rush to go, lingering by the campfire with us until the very last. Gleb is still here as well, chatting with Rustik, a mug of cocoa in hand.

Inside the tent Bronya is upset about something; there's a scuffle, the canvas begins to wobble, and a second later Vasya tumbles out head over heels. In a flash he scoops up a handful of snow and vanishes back inside — before any of us can so much as blink.

Gleb has scarcely risen from his seat when the tent flap is drawn back and Yura peeks out, looking sheepish.

"Everything's fine!" he calls out. — Tolya caught fire a little, but it's all sorted now! Good night!

Gleb sinks back down and heaves a long sigh. I keep watching him, braced for him to tear into everyone — just as Lyuska warned he would. She, meanwhile, has both hands clamped tight over her mouth, doubling over to keep from bursting out laughing.

“Give me strength, Gleb whispers, barely audible, then rises again and gives Rustik a parting clap on the shoulder. Turning to me with a faint, almost gentle smirk, he says,” Good night, Nelya.

I meet his gaze, and everything inside me goes still.

“Thanks… You too.”

The moment he disappears into the tent, Lyuska starts jabbing me in the side.

“Why aren’t you asleep yet? I grumble before she can even open her mouth.” Didn’t wear yourself out at all today, then?

“Worn out, worn out, don’t fuss. Listen” you didn’t lie to me, he really isn’t cross with you… But why, though?

Right beside me, Rustik snaps twigs with a loud crack, pretending he can’t hear a word of our conversation. I’m thoroughly embarrassed by now, but I still try to shoo Lyusya off:

“Go on, off to bed” I can see it in your eyes, how sleepy you are. Tomorrow we’ll never manage to wake you, and we’ll have to fold up the tent with you still in it and carry you out…

“Hey, don’t change the subject! It’s incredible” how did you manage to slip past the boss’s wrath?.. Oh, wait — now I remember! You spent the whole day today glued to his side. Not a peep out of you the entire way, even back at the porterage! Well, of course — Gleb does so love having people hover around him and hang on his every word. Good for you, Vasenka! So that’s why he didn’t lose his temper — and there I was, wondering…

Here my nerves finally snap, and I can no longer ignore the snorting coming from Rustik beside me. I draw in a chestful of air and launch my attack:

“Do you know who’s been hovering around you all day? Hauled firewood, helped with supper” all so you’d glance at him just once, but you’re never going to notice, are you! You only ever keep an eye on me and Gleb, and at times like this you ignore everyone else.

My arrow struck dead center. Lyuska’s mouth slowly falls open, and her cheeks flood with color. She blinks a few times, struggles to say something, then simply gets to her feet and announces in a voice hoarse with excitement:

“Well, of all things!.. There was absolutely nothing of the sort going on! And that’s it, I’m off to bed. Good night to you, Rustik!”

She hurries away, and I bite my finger to keep from laughing as I watch her go. Catching Slobodin’s eyes on me, I grow embarrassed. I throw armloads of branches onto the fire just to avoid looking at him for a few more seconds.

“Oh, I simply adore it when ladies come along on a hike,” he can’t hold back and begins giggling. — There’s always some drama brewing around your lot. Compared to this trip, last year’s Altai was dull as ditchwater!

I smile cautiously, still not looking at him. That summer’s Altai expedition had been boys only, and compared with our other treks, it really had passed fairly smoothly and uneventfully — surprisingly so, even.

The night is dark, deep, wild — the kind that exists only in a Ural winter. The fire burns hot, like a living creature, sending bright bursts crackling and shrieking out into the darkness.

I nestled comfortably beside him, tucking in my legs and stretching out my palms. Rustik sat across from me, nodding off. Even in the

dead of night, a week after the hike, he still manages to look adorable — as if effortlessly, all on his own.

All the girls dream of being in the same group as Slobodin. He's a real catch: from a professor's family, plays the mandolin beautifully, tall, and blessed with a wonderful character. Yet by some twist of fate, Rustik always ends up in groups where the girls already have boyfriends, or where they simply aren't interested in him. You'd think someone like Lyuska would have lost her head long ago and trailed after Rustem like a puppy, but for some reason she pays him no more attention than she does the other guys. I'm certain that if it weren't for Gleb, I'd fall for him myself…

"It's on fire! Nelya! The mittens are on fire!"

So, while I was lost in musings about boys and love, and Rustik dozed off, the mittens Yurka had left out to dry caught fire. First the padded jacket, now the mittens — we'll burn down the whole tent with everyone still inside it!

Turning the mittens over in his hands, Rustik looks at me and suggests:

"Why don't you tell him." He smiles sheepishly. — He definitely won't be mad at you.

That much is true, much as I hate to admit it.

The rest of the night passes peacefully. We moved everything that had been near the fire well away, and hardly spoke at all. I kept mulling over the ups and downs of love, glancing at Rustik, then shifting my gaze to the tent.

Tiny stars flickered in the sky, and there was just one motionless Luna.»

About Those Who Have It Hard. Part 1

The night was bitter cold, but the stove kept burning steadily, so no one froze; the overnight stay was, on the whole, dry and warm. Nelya even managed to snatch a decent sleep during her watch, and she dreamed of nothing at all — a small mercy in her present circumstances. She and Rustik roused the others just as early as the day before. Even with the extended deadline Gleb had set himself, he could see they were falling behind schedule, and there was no time to be generous now. They ate breakfast quickly, packed up, and left the campsite by ten o'clock.

Once again the Mansi trail came to their aid, and for a while they made brisk, cheerful progress. Yesterday evening and again this morning, Vadya Shakunov had found time for his new invention — he had knocked together a sledge from spare skis and poles. "A stroke of genius!" he declared. "No more lugging a forty-kilo pack on my back!" But nobody rushed to envy him. The sledge, loaded with his backpack, crawled along slowly, chewed up the ski track, and within five minutes toppled into a snowdrift.

Vadik tried not to let the failure show, but everyone could read the sour expression on his face. The wonder-inventor could describe truly marvelous things, sketch out the clearest schemes, write the simplest instructions. Yet somehow, in practice, every idea of his came to grief — the trip had already claimed two of them. Nelya sincerely hoped that one day he would become a great inventor, the kind who creates something genuinely remarkable and important that actually works. But she also hoped — in secret — that there would be no more experiments for the rest of the journey.

They had not gone far from Malik before they came to a spontaneous halt — the ground was open, the snow shallow, and the weather

mild. It seemed they had earned a short rest, for the going had been easy and brisk, and they would surely reach Raup before nightfall.

After a snack, everyone at first lounged lazily against their rucksacks, chatting idly. But then Bronya lobbed the first snowball at Rustik, and all at once a proper battle was underway.

Only Vasya and Gleb kept out of the general revelry, and Nelya stayed close at their side. A snowball in the face held no appeal for her, but she enjoyed watching the others. While Rustik and Bronya rolled Shakunov into a snowdrift, Norkin snapped photographs, and Lyusya tried to rouse the peaceable Yurka Doroshenko by pelting him with handfuls of snow. Nelya nearly felt sorry for the fellow as he struggled in vain to defend himself against Kolomiytseva, yet he could not keep the grin and laughter off his face.

Then Nelya caught a fragment of what Gleb was saying, quite by accident — and afterward she found she could no longer go on watching the others. She had not meant to eavesdrop, yet there she stood, rooted behind the boys' backs, unable either to walk away or to draw nearer.

"A real leader would never have allowed this," Gleb was saying, and Nelya fancied she heard an unfamiliar ache in his voice. "I mustn't — I have no right to show weakness before the group. Stick to the plan — not a step to one side, not a step back!"

"But they understand you're not a machine," Vasya answered after a pause. "That you can make mistakes too…"

"I don't have the luxury of a single mistake! Highest difficulty category, wild country, eight people in the group, two of them girls. How could I possibly afford a slip-up out here? Everything rests on my shoulders!" He sighed heavily once more. — That's probably why every second I'm braced for something terrible to befall one of them, and I can't help it.

Nelya’s heart clenched so sharply — a genuine sting in her chest — that she wanted to walk straight up to him and say she believed in him, that his doubts were groundless, that everything would turn out fine. She might even have hugged him, so he’d feel her support beyond any doubt.

But her nerve failed her, and she stayed where she was. And Gleb never learned any of this.

Vasya, naturally, said nothing of the sort. He merely grunted and stretched.

“Don’t let it gnaw at you. The kids adore you. And I like your group too. One of the best I’ve ever taken out.”

Nelya could see he was trying to cheer Gleb up, in his own gruff way, but the words brought scant comfort. He went on sitting there, gazing gloomily at the kids, barely registering that Nelya was no longer among them.

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“As we made our way along Malik, the weather turned foul for good. The wind was warm but ferociously strong, forcing us to walk hunched over, leaning hard on our trekking poles. Still, we kept climbing — slowly, it’s true — without a single halt.”

First the firs gave out, then the birches, and we emerged from the forest at its very edge. Here, among a scattering of stunted, twisted trees, we made one final, hurried halt to pull on our second pair of mittens and our wind-chafing masks against the snow-blast. I daresay every boy in the group was silently blessing the thoughtful Lyuska at that moment — before each expedition she checks whose mittens or socks have worn through, knits fresh ones, and makes certain nobody leaves a thing behind. Back in the warmth of the lodge everyone teases her for it, but only now, in this ferocious wind, could they appreciate how deeply she cares.

Only Vasya had no spare mittens: Lyusya hadn’t known he would be joining us, and Sasha had forgotten to hand over the pair he’d been keeping for him. Someone offered to share theirs, but Postest proudly declined, declaring that so light a breeze meant nothing to him. As if we wouldn’t end up chafing that braggart’s frostbitten hands ourselves before the day was out!

Yura proposed stringing a rope between us so that no one would wander off, but Gleb refused. In wind this strong the cord would only whip about, and having to watch it in such weather would be a sheer waste of strength and time. At first he had intended to take the rear position himself, but then he evidently reconsidered and decided there was no one he could trust to lead.

“You’ll bring up the rear,” he flung at Norkin, squinting toward the pass ahead of us, all but swallowed by the blizzard.

Kolya flung his ski poles wide.

“Much obliged for pointing out my place so delicately!”

And with one last sigh we pressed on — into the wind and the snow.

I was in the middle of the column, right behind Vasya, but our chain had stretched so far that I could barely make out the dark shape of his rucksack. When the wind hurled snow into my face and sky, earth — everything dissolved into one blinding, snow-white chaos, my greatest terror was that I might stray from the ski track and be lost in that emptiness forever, utterly alone, as though flung out into open space. Yet in those moments I would glance back, and every time there was Yura behind me, striving to keep as close to me as he could. Perhaps it is wrong of me to write this, but in those minutes I wanted for nothing, and I was grateful to Doroshenko simply for being there.

From somewhere came a long, drawn-out hum, as if rising above the endless howl of the wind. I slowed, listening. Could it be wolves?..

“Vasenka! What’s the matter with you?” Yura shouted, quickly drawing level with me.

I turned to him, and at that very instant the hum sounded again — closer now, louder, more desperate.

“Yura, what is that? What’s howling?”

I stood frozen, forgetting that I had to keep moving so as not to fall behind the others, forgetting that there were nine of us, that we could cope with anything and anyone. In those minutes I forgot it all. There was only the blizzard, the howling, and Yura beside me.

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly, tugging down the “ears” of his hat to hear better. — But it’s hardly anything dangerous. Probably just the wind humming. Let’s keep going. Are you tired?

I shook my head quickly and shifted my grip on the poles, ready to move on. It was the wind, of course—what else could it be? Had Shakunov been with me, he would no doubt have tried to explain the phenomenon in terms of physics, dissecting the hum, the wind, and the snow atom by atom.

Bronya had caught up with us, and the three of us hurried after the others before the ski track was buried under fresh snow. In my mind I saw Gleb out front, toiling to break a trail through the frozen, crusted snow—the kind that skates away beneath your poles and where a broken ski is a real danger. I saw him hear that dreadful howl and immediately reason it away: “It’s just the bitter cold,” or “A common thing at this altitude in the Urals,” or something else—something simple and clear. I saw him pressing on, weighed by the knowledge that every breath of every person in the group depended on him, and that he was allowed not the smallest mistake. I saw it all, and I wanted more than ever to be at his side.

We came upon Vasya and the others beside a rock. At first I marveled—had we really climbed Raup already? Then I realized it was merely an outlier, standing alone on the pass.

The guys ahead of us were waiting there, skis off, sheltering behind the rock from the wind. When at last I saw Gleb—who, beneath his mask until now, had seemed somehow unlike himself—I decided I had nothing left to fear. And then the howl rang out again.

Loud, lingering, heart-rending. It rolled over our heads as though some colossal old man were standing right beside us. Startled, I dropped one of my ski poles, drew my head down into my shoulders, and kept staring upward — no doubt straining to make out the face of that dreadful giant.

“Those are the rock pillars,” of course, only Vadik could have said that. — See how the wind has worn them away? They’re ready to collapse any minute. It’s the wind that makes them moan like that. Pretty creepy, isn’t it?

No, really, Shakunov should have explained it all from a scientific point of view — atoms, molecules, formulas; that would have calmed me down a great deal more.

As I glanced about, searching for other pillars, Gleb stepped forward, pulled the mask from his face, and called out loudly:

“Is everyone here?”

And that was when we realized it wasn’t the rocks we should have been scanning for, but one another.

We had lost Lyusya and Kolya.

“Lu-sy-a!”

“Ko-lya!”

For a while our cries, each pitched in a different key, drowned out even the howling of the rocks. Gleb and Vasya set off to search, while the rest of us — Vadik, Yura, Bronya, and Rustik — bellowed the

names at the top of our lungs, gulping down the icy air. At first I shouted too, but my voice quickly gave out, and now all I could do was strain my eyes helplessly, staring ahead into the whiteness, into the emptiness, into the wind and snow.

How could they have gotten lost? What had happened to them? My heart ached with worry, especially for Lyuska.

Rustik came over and thoughtfully brushed the snow from my shoulders.

“Don’t worry, they’ll turn up,” he said in a slightly hoarse voice. — They’ve just fallen a little behind. Gleb and Vasya will bring them back in no time…

I wanted to nod, but my muscles had turned to stone, and all I could do was stand frozen like yet another of the rock pillars (there turned out to be five of them, so I would be the sixth) and stare straight ahead.

Into the whiteness.

Into the emptiness.

Into the wind and snow.

What if one of them was hurt? What if he had fallen into some crevasse, like Shakunov not long ago? Or broken something? What would we do then, on this pass raked by every wind on earth?

Gleb would never forgive himself if anything happened to us.

“Lu-sy-yaa!”

“Ko-ly-yaa!”

“Lu-yu-uskaa!”

And Vasya and Gleb Sosnovsky still hadn’t come back — what if they, too, had lost their way and could no longer find the tracks back?..

“Guys, we have to do something!” Shakunov shouted, squinting against the wind. — We can’t just stand here! Let’s follow their tracks before the ski trail is blown over completely. Back to Malik?

No one answered. Vasya and Kolya were gone — the only two who might have challenged Gleb's decision and put forward a plan of their own. The rest of us were simply used to following clear orders. And orders had been given.

"Wait for us here!" that was Gleb's command before he set out ahead.

Into the whiteness.

Into the emptiness.

Into the wind and snow.

At first I couldn't believe my eyes. I couldn't take in that the dark figures moving through the blizzard were our own guys, and not rock pillars or Mansi spirits.

"Get up!" Gleb commanded, still far from reaching us. — We're going back to Malik!

While the others strapped on their skis again and hoisted their backpacks and poles, I ran to Gleb. Before he could grasp what was happening, I threw my arms around him in a sudden, impulsive embrace, squeezing his storm jacket through my mittens.

Only then, with my eyes closed, did I feel utterly at peace. It was as though the rock pillars, the wind, and the snow had all melted away; as though all of this—the torturous waiting—had been nothing but a dream. A nightmare. And now it had ended, left behind in the past.

Gleb did not pull away from me. But neither did he return the embrace. He simply breathed out against my shoulder and murmured:

"You'd better go and help Lyusya…"

Lyusya! Lyusya and Kolya! Shameful to confess, but in that precious minute I had clean forgotten about them. I quickly released Gleb and looked past his shoulder.

Lyusya and Kolya had just ridden up to our tiny, improvised campsite, both of them blanketed head to foot in snow, so that you

could hardly tell one from the other. I flung myself at the nearest one, whoever it was, and only after embracing them did I hear Norkin's groan.

"Damn it, Nelya, you certainly chose your moment!.. Come on, let go—you'll be covered in snow…"

Bronya and Yura hurried over after me to brush him off and fix the straps of his backpack.

"Come on now, tell us what happened to you out there!"

"Is anyone hurt? Is everything all right?"

I was already at Lyuska's side. She stood leaning against a rock pillar, catching her breath. She had no backpack, no goggles either; her hat sat askew, and the wind was tossing her golden locks about. Opening her eyes and catching sight of me, she broke into a broad smile and peeled herself away from the rock. I hugged her tightly, and only then noticed just how small she really was. When Lyuska is angry —or, on the contrary, happy—singing, dancing, there is always too much of her, and you would never suspect that in truth she is like a little sparrow.

"How are you?" I gasped, and without letting go of her, began brushing the snow from her windproof jacket. — Are you all right?

I was already almost certain the answer would be yes — everyone was here, no one was fussing, no one was calling for help. Misfortune rarely visits Lyusya — she never lags behind, never complains, and she's far too clever to go clambering into any dubious corners. Even so, I kept glancing at her with a trace of worry, though my friend was beaming so happily you'd think she had never been lost at all.

"Yes, I'm fine… But it's all my fault, Vasenka! I couldn't hold on and fell, banged myself…" she pressed her fingers to her swollen nose. — And that wind, that howling! Did you hear it?

I had no time to answer — the others had already regrouped, and Gleb took his place at the front once more.

“The lot of you, we won’t reach Raup before dark!” he called out loudly. — We’re turning back to Malik! Keep an eye on one another! Onward, follow me!

Our column reshuffled itself somewhat. Behind Gleb came Yura, Rustik, and Bronya; then me, and after me the rest of them.

The guys were fairly worn out by that pointless climb, even though they understood that dragging themselves on to Raup now was not the best idea. Yura was shouting something about it — to Gleb, or to Rustik, it was impossible to tell — and I couldn’t make out whether anyone answered him. From behind me, too, I caught scraps of Postyr’s phrases as he trudged at the rear, but I didn’t want to respond to him, and I had no way of knowing whether the one behind him was keeping the exchange alive.

And so, by dusk, we managed to make our way back down to the valley. Raup remained out of reach, hidden behind the snow and the wind, under the protection of the howling crags.»

About Those Who Have It Hard. Part 2

“Compared with the pass, the banks of the Malika were calm and still. The trees shielded us from the savage gusts of wind, but that was precisely why the snow lay so deep here — our skis sank into the drifts, and our poles vanished after them.”

Having found a more or less suitable spot, everyone set about tramping down a platform for the tent. The men were silent, worn through, and no longer spoke to one another — only Gleb’s curt commands rang out from time to time.

My dear, poor Gleb! How hard he was struggling now to keep his composure, how hard he labored to look after the rest of us. I would have loved to be at his side just then, but I would have been little use to him. So I went off to build the fire.

Bronya and Kolya were with me. We decided that digging a pit for the fire would take the whole night, so it would be simpler to lay the logs down as a platform and set the flames atop them. Tolya dashed eagerly into the woods, knife drawn in his bare hand, while Norkin and I attempted to find something here that would burn. But it was hopeless — the scraggly firs were soaked through, they would not snap, and fuel like that would have been worthless anyway. All that remained was to count on Bronya’s luck.

Norkin soon left my side and went to help him. I watched the others churning through the snow on their skis, then glanced back.

Lyusya was still sitting on her pack. She spoke to no one, laughed at nothing, offered no encouragement, and did not bustle about as usual, trying to make herself useful. Fear for her stirred in me again. I came over and sat down at her side.

“Lyusenka, how are you feeling? Does your nose still hurt?”

She shook her head without looking at me, but I could tell something was wrong — since that cursed fall she bore but little resemblance to the Kolomiytseva I knew, and now I worried she was concealing something from me.

“We’ll pitch the tent, get a fire going, and everything will soon feel better,” I began, then winced as the wind swept snow down on us from the spruces.

It was hardly certain to be true, but I did my best to cheer her up — the way she always does for me when I’m feeling low. Lyuska sighed.

“It’s all my fault! Everyone’s so fed up, and this spot is rotten. If I weren’t such a klutz, we’d be spending the night up on Raupa right now!..”

“Don’t talk nonsense! It wasn’t you — anyone could have taken that fall. I nearly lost my footing a few times myself.”

I all but added that Doroshenko had been steadying me the whole way. Without meaning to, my eyes sought out the tall figure among the others, and I quickly looked away before he could catch me at it.

“And still,” Lyusya chided herself, “I should have gotten up at once and walked on — am I a trekker or a trembling creature? But I just fell apart, Vasenka. It hurt so much, and I felt so wretched. And that horrible howling — I thought something had gone wrong in my head, that I was the only one who could hear it. I was terrified when Tolya didn’t hear me calling and vanished into the blizzard. I was left all alone out there in that cold, in the middle of all that snow…”

Her voice trailed off, and my heart clenched, for I had felt nearly the same myself and could imagine what she had endured out there. I gently touched my friend’s hand, drawing her back from those memories.

“But Kolya came after you, didn’t he? He helped you?”

I could only imagine the curses he must have let fly when he came upon a frightened Lyuska right in the middle of the ski trail. Had it been Rustik or Bronya instead of him, perhaps my friend wouldn't have taken it so hard. In fact, in the brief span between my question and Lyusya's answer, I had worked myself into a genuine fury at that wretch Norkin, the cause of all her self-reproach — had he appeared before me at that moment, I would have told him exactly what I thought of him without a second's hesitation.

"Yes," Lyusya answered quietly, casting her eyes down. "He… helped me up, took my pack, and kept reassuring me, even though I completely lost my composure and bawled like a little kid. He persuaded me to stay where I was and rest a while. There was a ridge of rocks quite close by, and we crouched behind it out of the wind as best we could, and the whole time I kept worrying that they'd lose us, or that we'd lost you, and would never find you again." She squeezed her eyes shut at the memory, but then her face suddenly softened, and she smiled. "Vasenka, he was so kind to me, so attentive. I'd never have suspected it of him — but if it weren't for Kolya, I'd never have found you at all."

I sat there, scarcely believing my ears. No, of course — just yesterday, only yesterday! — I had been joking that Norkin was angling for Lyusya's attention, and that the two of them deserved each other anyway. Everyone, it seemed, had always known about it, but they were so used to the notion that it never drew a second glance. If an argument broke out around the campfire, it was surely Norkin and Kolomiytseva at the heart of it. If one of them slipped up, the other spotted it at once. And whenever pairs had to be assigned, those two inevitably ended up together, because nobody else's patience could endure their temperaments for long.

I didn’t answer Lyusya. I simply squeezed her hand a little tighter and rested my arm lightly across her shoulders. So this was meant to happen. We weren’t fated to reach Raupa today — though perhaps that’s just as well?

At last the ground for the tent was ready, but pitching it would still take plenty of time. The canvas had frozen into a solid mass, impossible to spread flat, and the slender firs around us swayed and bowed whenever we tugged the ropes too hard.

Bronya and Norkin returned with a modest haul of firewood and branches. Without a moment’s hesitation I went over to them and shouldered Kolya aside.

“Go and get some rest,” I tried to shoo him away, — Bronya and I will finish everything ourselves.

“Cheeky thing, aren’t you! There’s hardly anything left to do here anyway!”

“Exactly! Come on, off you go, Kol” you’ve had more of a workout than either of us. Rest up.

After arguing with me a while longer, he finally gave in and trudged over to Lyusya. I watched them out of the corner of my eye, but the two of them just sat on the rucksacks in silence, not even glancing at each other. Had I misread everything? Lord, I’d been having such strange feelings and thoughts lately — all because of Gleb Sosnovsky — that I was ready to project them onto everyone around me.

I tore my attention away from the two of them, because Tolya and I had finally managed to coax a weak, smoky little fire into life. There was so little fuel that all we could do was hope it would last long enough to warm supper. Keeping it burning through the night was simply out of the question.

“Nelya, listen to this riddle,” Tolya suddenly said, wearing his usual smile. — Can you warm nine tourists and cook dinner on a fire like this? You think not? Well, I’m about to prove you wrong — defying all the laws of physics!

I began to laugh, though there was really nothing funny about any of it. The weather hadn’t been kind to us thus far, and the whole heavy day could hardly be counted a success. But with irrepressible Bronevsky around, we could hold out a while longer.

The others were still wrestling with the tent when Rustik wandered over to us.

“How’s it going? Settled in yet? So—where are the remains of our lunch?”

“In Lyusya’s rucksack.” I was relieved we hadn’t been complete gluttons today, and that plenty of noodle casserole still remained for supper. Though whether we’d manage to warm any cocoa or tea was another matter…

“Well, look at that,” said Rustik, who was still sitting beside us, peering over my shoulder. “A veritable miracle.”

We all turned around at once to see Kolya and Lyusya, lost to the world, chatting pleasantly with their backs resting against their rucksacks. Norkin was gesturing with one hand, while Lyusya cradled the other between her palms. She smiled as she fixed her gaze on him, and the two of them looked utterly charming.

“So even Norkin has a heart, does he?” Bronya marveled. “Who would ever have believed it?”

I jabbed my elbow into his ribs—his remark stung—and he burst out laughing. Of course Kolya had a heart; he simply preferred that nobody know about it.

In the end, Rustik did make his way over to them—the noodle casserole had to be reheated, after all. The pair went silent instantly and

edged apart, as though they had never met in their lives. I half-feared that Slobodin would needle them just then and they would both erupt, leaving us a storm far worse than the one back at the pass. But Rustem calmly took the pot from their hands and returned to us.

It took us another half hour to get the tent pitched, and another hour after that before we somehow managed to warm up supper and settle ourselves inside. All things considered — I'd even say the evening turned out cozy, almost like being at home.

I'm still scribbling away in my diary, though the light from Vasya's flashlight and the stove is pitifully dim. Many of us are already settling down to sleep. The boys are tired and grumbling still, but the hot supper has perked them up a bit. From one corner of the tent comes an endless murmur of whispers. Lyusya clearly isn't going to run out of things to say anytime soon, and there's nothing to be done about it. No doubt Norkin fell asleep long ago and can't hear a word. Perhaps his heart has thawed, but his patience certainly isn't made of rubber.

Gleb is still sitting by the stove as well, poring over the map and jotting something down in his notebook. I long to be nearer to him, even if only to sit at his shoulder. I want to unburden myself — I don't even need anyone to answer, just to have someone close by. There's no use turning to Lyuska: she'd either start dispensing unsolicited advice or simply say, "What is there to worry about, Vasenka!"

Yura Doroshenko is tending the stove. I'm sitting nearest to him, but I don't want to confide in him either. He'd take everything far too seriously, and then I'd be the one left feeling awkward for having weighed him down with my troubles. If only Yura and Gleb could change places — if only it were Doroshenko leading this hike instead of him…

Suddenly Gleb gathers his things with a quick movement, rises, and heads for the entrance of the tent. I half-stand and follow him:

“Gleb, where are you going? I…”

“Sit down, I won’t keep you long. I just want a look at the pass,” he replies without turning around, holding the flap carefully aside.

A couple of seconds later, Doroshenko and I are left alone by the stove.

I’ve already stowed the diary away and am about to turn in myself — though how anyone could drift off with Lyuska droning on like that, I can’t imagine — when Yurka suddenly perks up:

“Vasenka, were you off to sleep? Can I have a word with you?”

I stay, though a quiet unease settles in my chest. There’s something so awkward about being alone with Doroshenko, and I can’t quite say what it is. Or rather, I have a guess — but I’d sooner be wrong…

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a while now, but there was never the right moment. One thing, then another… Look, we’ve known each other a long time,” says Yura, and I listen to him without taking my eyes off the orange coals in the stove, — and I thought that maybe… maybe we could try taking things between us to a new level? Just try — I’m not pushing.

I can barely breathe, and slowly run my tongue over dry lips. The silence seems to have deepened so completely that I can hear Yura’s heavy breathing right beside my ear. Blood pounds at my temples.

“I just want to look after you. To be near you. Do you understand?”

“Yur… it’s so complicated…” my voice cracks and my lips tremble slightly. — Believe me, you’re a genuinely good guy, but… But I… I have…

“You like Gleb, don’t you? Is that the truth of it?”

The blush that floods my face, rising all the way up from my neck, almost hurts. Is it really that obvious — so obvious that the whole group can see what even I took so long to admit to myself? I can’t even

imagine the guys cracking jokes behind my back — it's sickening just to think about. Our group would never do that to me.

I don't answer Yura. I let the diary fall, spring to my feet, and push my way outside — first getting tangled in the canopy flap and nearly losing my felt boots in the process. I can't begin to imagine how Doroshenko must be watching all this from the sidelines…

Gleb is standing by the dead campfire, gazing through the trees toward the pass. His head is bare, and the wind stirs his light hair, dusting it with snow. Suddenly a dreadful vision rises before my eyes: the snow buries Gleb completely and never melts, and he never brushes it away, because he has frozen…

"What's out there?" I ask, driving all such horrors from my mind.

"It's still blowing. I'm thinking about how we go on tomorrow."

I remember how terrifying today was — how the outlier ridges howled, how the guys lost their way, what a feeling of forlornness swept over me in that white shroud.

"But how do we get around this? How can we climb Raup without crossing the pass?"

For a long while Gleb says nothing. I stand beside him, almost touching his elbow, and look ahead too.

"We'll see in the morning," he replies curtly. He brushes the snow from his hair with his fingers and turns to me. "Tomorrow we'll need every ounce of strength and endurance we have, Nellya. Today must never repeat itself — not under any circumstances. It's a miracle Kolya and Lyusya weren't hurt! How could the leader have allowed it in the first place? What must the guys think of me now? Disgraceful!"

"Don't talk nonsense!" I touch his elbow almost without realizing it. "Nobody thinks any such thing of you. Everyone can already see you're wearing yourself to the bone, well past your limits."

“The leader is meant to wear himself to the bone! That’s my duty! And if I can’t cope, do I even have the right to take responsibility — to lead a group at all?”

It wounds me as deeply as it wounds him to think about this. Gleb has taken too much upon himself, and I can see him dwelling on it, fretting over it. That is something we share — because I think just as constantly about him, about my feelings for him, replaying scenarios in my head again and again: what to say, what to do.

“Everyone knows you’re doing all you can,” I say again, tightening my grip on his hand. — No one could have done more. No one could have led better.

Gleb lets out a breath and lifts his gaze to the crowns of the spruce trees.

“Perhaps I should have offered the role to Yura Doroshenko,” he says quietly.

It’s as though he overheard my thoughts. Would it be easier for all of us if Doroshenko were in charge? I went on one hike under his command. Yurka showed his finest qualities: calm, confidence, sound judgment. Even in ordinary times it’s hard to shake him — neither Gleb’s shouting nor Kolya’s little jokes nor Lyusya’s barbs touch him. And as a leader, he becomes an absolute rock.

I must have stayed silent too long, thinking about Yura, because Gleb sighs and turns back toward the tent.

“Let’s go, early start tomorrow,” he tosses over his shoulder, without looking back at me.

I hurry after him.

Why, oh why didn’t I tell him he was better than Yurka? That he handles his role as leader better than anyone? Why did I freeze and fail to stand behind him at the very moment he needed it most?

I think I’ve made a very grave mistake. How I hope I’m wrong.»

About Those Who Don’t Give Up

Nelya woke in the morning after everyone else had risen. She peered out cautiously from under her blanket and jacket, scanning the empty tent. The others had all gotten up and wandered off, and she hadn’t heard a thing. Why had no one woken her? Could they have decided to make it a rest day? What time was it, anyway?

It was cozy lying curled up in a ball beneath the pile of clothes and the blanket, while the whole tent had gone so cold that a thin layer of frost had formed on its inner walls. But she had to get up, do her morning exercises, have breakfast, after all…

Nelya closed her eyes again, lingering in her warm cocoon. She was probably just worn out from yesterday. That endless climb up the mountain, through a blizzard, and then the same long crawl back down. What had Gleb decided to do today, she wondered? Had the weather cleared? No — she needed to get moving.

And yet she kept dawdling, gloomily picturing herself having to step outside into the cold. Wash her face with melted snow, quickly brew some tea before her hands froze... When had she turned into such a softie? The very sort of softie they sing about in that song:

“About the girl, the softie, the tender one,”

Who never knew the weight of a backpack.

Those words might suit Shakunov’s wife, Lyalechka — but her? She was no stranger to trail life, and yet... and yet...

Whether Nelya would have crawled out just then, or only by dinnertime, no one can say — but chance settled the matter. The tent flap fluttered, someone swore, and finally Bronya tumbled inside. Catching sight of Nelya, she rounded her eyes.

“And here I was wondering” I didn’t see you at the fire, so I figured you’d gone off strolling in the woods... And here you are, lounging like a princess on a feather bed!

“I am not fussing!” she protested, stung—her shameful thoughts had just been so unexpectedly confirmed. “I was only about to step out…”

Before she could finish, Tolya had crawled over to her and was peering into her face with concern.

“You’re not feeling a bit off, are you? How are you doing?”

Oh no—if he decides to share his suspicions with Gleb!..

“I’m perfectly fine,” Nelya snapped, and wriggled out of her “sleeping bag” in a hurry. “Just a little tired from yesterday—well, who isn’t?”

She began squeezing past Bronya toward the exit, but he laid his palm over her hand and brought her up short. His face was still grave, even faintly stern—or would have been, had Bronya possessed any real talent for anger. Even the reddish stubble that had sprouted during days of rough camp life, along with his tousled hair, lent him no additional gravity.

“Come on, come on, hold still—let me feel your forehead.”

Nelya tried to pull away, but Bronya held her fast and pressed his free hand to her brow. Unbelievable—this was all she needed: Bronyevsky fussing over her now, on top of Doroshenko!

“You don’t seem feverish. Don’t look, just…”

Vasenina would hear none of it; she scrambled out of the tent before Tolya could get the words out.

Most of the kids were gathered by the fire around Vasya, who had commandeered Rustik’s mandolin and was strumming something familiar yet impossible to place. Nelya straightened up and glanced

around, searching for Gleb with her eyes, but he was nowhere among the others. And neither was Yura.

Nelya couldn't stop replaying yesterday's conversations with those boys in her mind, and the memory left her uneasy. Surely Gleb hadn't actually offered Doroshenko command of the expedition! Or had he been stung because she'd made no reply to his words? And what if Yura had told him that she liked him? Things were going from bad to worse.

Deciding it would be wiser not to go looking for Sosnovsky, Nelya made for the other children instead. She hadn't even had breakfast yet, hadn't tidied herself up — what a disgrace… She would have to ask Lyusya to help, and let her crack every joke she pleased.

On the way from the tent to the campfire she twice plunged clumsily knee-deep into the snow, and it seemed to her that the laughter drifting from the fire was aimed at her. Silly girl, forever imagining all sorts of things…

She had hoped to slip over to the fire unnoticed while the others were watching Vasya, but her appearance did not escape Shakunov's eye, and he announced to the whole camp:

"Good morning, my dove! Slept well?"

And at once everyone turned her way and smiled. Far better if they had fussed over her the way Bronya did, asking how she was feeling, than this! Nelya sulked and held her tongue. If only she could lob a snowball straight at that exasperating, phlegmatic oaf…

Good, dependable Rustik handed her a clean bowl and spoon for her porridge, then picked up the empty kettle and trudged off to gather snow for the tea.

"So are we staying here for a rest day today?"

Nelya felt awkward with everyone sitting in silence, watching her eat her breakfast, so she decided to catch up on the latest news. Perhaps someone would say where Gleb and Doroshenko had vanished to.

“Ha, dream on,” Norkin snorted. — We’ll wander up to the Raup as pleased as Punch.

He sat facing Nelya with a map spread across his knees, the group diary tucked underneath for convenience. Lyusya had settled down beside him, mending the torn gaiters.

“Gleb and Yurka have just gone up to the pass to see what’s going on out there,” she added, without glancing at Nelya.

The fact that this puzzle had resolved itself gave her no comfort whatsoever. Gleb had asked Yura to come with him — to talk? To seek his advice? For some reason, the notion that the two of them had gone off alone filled her with a nameless dread. It had all probably become tangled together in her mind: yesterday’s heavy conversations, that dreadful blizzard, the gnawing sense of guilt…

Rustik returned, threw more branches on the fire and hung the kettle over it to melt snow. Just then Bronya came hurrying over from the tent, a sheet of paper in hand. Nelya braced herself, fearing he would start prodding at her again, suspecting some terrible illness; but Tolya shouted from a distance:

“Who’s got a pencil?”

“Here, catch!”

Kolya pulled out his own, wound up, and hurled it toward Tolya. The pencil sailed cleanly over Bronyevsky’s head and vanished into a snowdrift.

“You swine, Norkin!” Bronya cursed, doubling over and groping bare-handed through the snow. — I’ll make you pay for that, never fear…

“Oh yeah? Going to cut me loose on the slope?”

Tolya sank into an offended silence, reliving that stupid fall all over again. He fished out the pencil, walked without a word to the fire and sat down between Rustik and Vasya. Then he drew out the sheet of paper, and a broad smile spread across his face once more.

“Guys, take a look at this…”

Nelya craned her neck too, trying to see what they had there, but Tolya caught her at it and instantly shielded the page.

“No, no, Vasenka! That’s meant to be a surprise! Come on now, eat your kasha, or the wind will sweep you away.”

Amid the muttering and snickering of the boys beside her, Nelya stared into the fire and finished her cooled portion without much appetite. Again and again she glanced up toward the pass, but neither Gleb nor Yura appeared. What if they had run into trouble? Or lost their way, like yesterday…

Nelya turned her gaze to the pair sitting across from her and smiled briefly. Kolya, all thoughts of Bronevsky forgotten, was whispering something softly to Lyuska, leaning against her shoulder. She went on darning, but giggled, then gave Norkin a nudge with her elbow.

“Stop making things up!”

“May I drop dead, it’s the truth!..”

“Fine, suit yourself!”

Lyusya scooted sharply away. Norkin wobbled, lost his balance, and Kolomiytseva obligingly shoved him into the snowdrift.

“I told you it wasn’t true!”

Nelya had to hide almost entirely behind her plate so her friend wouldn’t catch her laughing. Some things never change.

“Oh, Yurka. Just in time for tea—sit down.”

Nelya hastily pushed her bowl aside and saw Doroshenko walking slowly toward them. Hands in his pockets, ushanka askew, face sullen. Nelya looked away and hurried to help Lyusya with the tea—anything

to keep from looking at him. How wretched that conversation had turned out yesterday! How would they ever get through the rest of the hike now?

“What’s the matter with you?” Yura muttered, coming up to the group and catching sight of Kolya sprawled in the snow. “Need a hand?”

“Thanks, but I’m fine right where I am.”

Yura pressed his lips together, vexed with himself for once again failing to grasp what was going on among the others, and feeling like a fool for it. Stepping carefully around Norkin, he settled into his seat, directly opposite Nelya.

“Well, what’s the word, Yura?” Lyusya was briskly stirring her tea, glancing at no one, and Nelya ached to give her some sort of signal — anything to make her take Doroshenko under her wing! “Can we move on?”

“We can, but it’ll be hard going.”

Norkin sat down beside Nelya, brushing the snow from his knees. She helped him shake it off the back of his anorak — anything, anything at all, so long as she didn’t have to meet Yura’s eyes.

“Lads, lads, it’s within our power...” Lyusya sang out, and began passing the mugs around.

Meanwhile, Yura had noticed the makeshift little “writers’ circle.”

“What’s this, composing a letter? Or can’t you make out the route sketch?”

“The map’s fine!” Kolya bellowed, having missed what the conversation was about altogether.

Bronya glanced at Yura, but merely snickered and waved him off.

“Sit, sit, don’t mind us. Just give us a warning when we’re ready to set out.”

And Vasya winked meaningfully.

Yura sighed, resolved to leave it all as it was and admit, once and for all, that he simply missed too much and so always ended up out of the loop. Nelya felt his gaze upon her, but he quickly looked away.

“Careful, it’s hot.”

Fragrant black tea was poured into the mugs, and the bag of rusks passed around. The long-lasting barley candies had run out back at the very first halt in the forest.

Gleb never came.

While making sure that Lyusya was busy trying to find out from Rustik what they were writing, Nelya edged over to Norkin and asked quietly:

“I wanted to ask yesterday, but never got the chance… Is Lyusya badly hurt? She won’t tell me anything, but maybe she told Gleb” and we’re staying put today… do you know anything?

Forget the control deadline — if Gleb doesn’t want to lead the group out into such vile weather, then perhaps there’s a reason to linger a little longer? Or turn back altogether. What would be so terrible about that? Gleb himself said he would never, under any circumstances, take a risk.

“She broke her nose,” Kolya muttered, looking neither at her nor at Lyuska. — There was blood splashed all around, just like that. It rattled her. But it’s nothing serious — nobody calls a rest day over something like that. Are you scared to go on?

Nelya pressed her palms tighter against the hot mug and held them there until it burned. Only then did she answer:

“And what if today someone falls behind again? Gets hurt? I know Gleb thinks about that too. He won’t take chances for nothing…”

“Ho! Look who’s awake! Nelly, we’ve spent six whole days doing nothing but taking risks. Back on the very first day, barely done saying goodbye to Sashka, we could have plunged straight into a gorge or a

river, and our corpses would still be drifting down there. What, you want us to run for it?"

Nelya regretted asking almost at once. At the same time, she nearly envied the fearlessness and calm of the others, and wished she possessed even a scrap of that bravado. Then these foolish thoughts wouldn't go rattling round her head.

"I'm just worried about us," she answered, barely audible, and edged away from Kolya.

She could feel Yura's eyes fixed straight on her, but she only bowed her head lower, not daring to meet his gaze. Foolish girl—foolish, foolish! Something had to be done about it; there were still two whole weeks of the trek ahead, to be endured side by side!

"Well, well, look who's come!" cried Lyusya in feigned astonishment, and Nelya lifted her head. "Do sit down, Comrade Chief!"

But Gleb remained standing. He said nothing, gazing down at the campfire, the crease between his brows etched like a dark, sharp line. A hollow ache opened in Nelya's stomach as she watched him, trying to guess what he meant to say. Were they turning back? Or pressing on?

"Listen to me, all of you," he said at last, and a hush fell so complete that only the wind could be heard wailing somewhere far off. "I've been thinking for a long time about what would be best. The weather at the pass has turned even worse than yesterday—visibility down to a bare two meters, the snow glazed over with ice, and blazing a trail through it again would be punishing work. From every appearance, the blizzard shows no sign of letting up any time soon…"

"Gleb, come on, out with it," Yura couldn't restrain himself. "Say it straight."

Nelya's unease deepened when she realized that Doroshenko already knew everything. Could he have swayed Gleb's decision?

Sosnovsky drew a deep breath—almost with visible effort—and said:

“In short, I propose we turn back.”

What an uproar broke out! Before Nelya could even feel relief, Lyusya and Kolya leapt to their feet, shouting over one another:

“Oh, come off it! Will they credit us with the trip without Raup?”

“So we slogged all this way for nothing?”

Nelya tugged at Norkin’s sleeve, trying to coax him back into the seat beside her, while Vadim rose to his feet, tall and straight as a rock.

“That’s no way to behave. Remember what happened in the Caucasus two years ago? Let me remind you” as we were coming down…

“Quiet!” barked Gleb, and every voice fell silent at once. — Guys, I know how upset you are, but I’ve thought this through. Walking into danger with your eyes open is like performing an operation blindfolded. The weather’s foul, the place is treacherous. We couldn’t even reach Raup yesterday, and today the wind has only grown stronger…

“So what you’re saying,” Norkin cut in, — is that we can’t manage it? You doubt us? You don’t trust us, is that it?

Nelya plucked at his anorak again, but Kolya shook her off.

“Please sit down,” she whispered.

Gleb held his gaze.

“I never said that. Don’t you understand where this could end? We came within a hair of losing Lyusya yesterday as it was…”

“So it’s all because of me?” she shrilled, and Gleb couldn’t finish. — You don’t want to go because of me? It’s… it’s…

Lyusya couldn’t find the words. She sniffled indignantly, shoved past Rustik and Shakunov, and dashed off toward the tent. Nelya stood up, meaning to bring her back, but Kolya swore under his breath and ran after her. Around the campfire it was suddenly much quieter. Gleb lowered himself slowly onto a log and rubbed his eyes.

“I’m against it myself,” he went on, more calmly now, — but as group leader I can’t expose you to that kind of danger. We’ll have to turn back, and that’s no longer in our hands.

Postyr came up to him, having kept a modest silence all this while.

“Hold on, no need to rush. There will always be time to turn back. Wouldn’t it be wiser to watch the weather until evening? Sundown is still hours away. Perhaps it will calm down yet.”

“That’s right, Gleb,” Bronya said, clapping Vasya on the shoulder. “Listen to the voice of reason. We’re definitely staying until noon, and then we’ll see.”

Gleb could hardly disagree. Vasenka studied him, sensing that he would rather not waste precious time — the condition of the road to Malika was an unknown, and if they returned the same way, they might still pick up the ski track. But the others were so dispirited. Perhaps Gleb feared the group might altogether stop listening to him. That would be terrible.

Once the question was settled, the fellows scattered, no longer speaking to one another. Nelya was on the point of going to find Lyuska, who was sulking, but quickly remembered that Kolya was at her side just now. Her friend’s need of comfort had passed. But had Gleb’s?

He sat before the campfire, gazing into the flames, his fair brows drawing together with the faintest tremor. Nelya could almost watch the plans unfurling in his mind — the route, the timetable, the mountain terrain, the wind speed and the temperature... Better not to disturb him now.

Nelya settled down to read the communal diary. The boys resolved to build the fire up brighter for the time being and headed off into the forest, axes and knives in hand. Left by the flames were Nelya, Gleb,

Rustik, and Vadim. A few minutes later Lyusya returned, calmer now, and asked:

“So, when do we set out? And where has everyone gone?”

“We’ve decided to wait until noon,” Rustik answered, scratching away at the paper Bronya had left with him. “Perhaps we’ll climb Raup after all — to the devil with it.”

Gleb raised his head and looked at Lyusya, but said nothing. He did not apologize.

A little later Kolya came up as well. He stopped nearby, hands buried in his pockets, eyes narrowed, a contemptuous “scum” already loaded on his tongue. Nelya watched him sidelong, aware that if anyone could give voice to what the whole group was thinking, it was him. But Norkin held back. He shifted restlessly from foot to foot, unable to settle, and at last burst out:

“And the cache? Are we still going to lay down the cache or not? Half the day’s gone already as it is…”

Nelya turned her eyes to Gleb. But he gave no answer. With sharp, jerky movements he was crossing something off the map, looking at no one.

***

“It feels almost impossible that I’m writing this, but here we are at the foot of Raup!”

Contrary to our hopes, the weather has taken no turn for the better. But Gleb had already worked himself into a state over sitting idle all morning with nothing to do, and the whole group was angry with him. And of course, he was terrified the others would call him a coward. I never told him I knew this — never said a word about how he was the leader, and the leader knows best what ought to be done. And so he had to go against his own better judgment.

But everything turned out well all the same. We did not lose our way in the blizzard, did not leave anyone behind. Frozen and exhausted, yes — but we are moving forward again, and everyone's spirits have lifted so much…

I have scarcely finished the sentence when angry shouts ring out from outside. I dart from the tent, bracing myself for furious Mansi who disliked the spot we had chosen for the night, or hunters whose path we might have crossed. Or, heaven knows who else. But the truth proved far more prosaic.

"…that's a violation of the law of conservation of energy! And the difference…"

"…but if you consider that the interaction occurs over an extremely brief interval…"

"Oh! It's simply impossible to talk to you!"

Vadik is so furious it's frightening even to approach him. Bronya, by contrast, is perfectly calm — she almost seems to relish baiting Shakunov. What I had mistaken for the wrath of people ready to drive us out turned out to be nothing more than a scholarly squabble between our boys. I can hardly keep the smile off my face as I make my way back into the tent.

Lyusya is putting the finishing touches on dinner. It's dry and barely warm today: brisket, rusks, and a little cocoa left over from lunch. For some reason I find myself thinking of the mandarin we gave Yura Doroshenko, and of how much festive warmth, how much of a taste of home, that one tiny segment managed to hold. Alas, we won't enjoy mandarins again until we're back in Sverdlovsk.

Yura himself is here too, seated beside Vasya. They murmur to each other for a while, and then Doroshenko turns to Rustik and asks to borrow his mandolin. Well, at least someone isn't chattering about physics. Might a concert be in store for us?

I keep cracking jokes, yet I still haven’t spoken to Yurka since then, and I don’t know whether I’ll ever manage it…

Vadim and Bronya crawl into the tent. The argument is over; Tolya is actually smiling now, but Shakunov still looks put out, huffing like a hedgehog. He quarrels with the professors at the university, with students from other faculties, and perhaps with his wife as well. Shakunov always has to prove something to somebody, always has to defend his point of view. Small wonder they nicknamed him the phlegmatic one — he’s usually calm as a rock. But breathe so much as a word about physics, and you’ll see his true face.

“Shall we set up the stove?” Bronya asks just then, breathing warmth into her reddened fingers.

“No stove, no chance,” Gleb agrees. — It’s freezing in here. But we’ll have to keep watch over it together, or we’ll end up with a “hot night.” Kolya, will you take the first shift?

“Yes, sir.”

“I can do it too,” Vasya suddenly spoke up, even raising his hand so they’d notice him. — You all treat me like an honored guest — I haven’t stood a single watch yet.

Rustik smirks and claps Postyr on the shoulder.

“Don’t be upset” we’ve still got two weeks ahead of us. Plenty of time.

The tent is dim — the lantern’s glow is weak and unsteady, and the stove hasn’t been lit yet. The wind moves over the tarp, shadows slide about, hiding the guys’ faces, and it seems to me we’ve ended up in some kind of cave. Just like ancient people who once hid from bad weather in a dugout, we sit by the fire and draw our adventures on the walls.

We even have two artists of our own: Bronya and Rustik are still carrying that sheet of paper around like it’s a treasure and won’t show it to anyone. Show-offs!

Many are finishing changing into their sleeping clothes, but I’m in no hurry. The watch is bundled up warmly too, and every now and then they step out of the tent to scrape off the snow. Shakunov worried we wouldn’t dig ourselves out of this pit by morning at all, so Kolya and Vasya keep running back and forth so he won’t grumble.

“Fellow hikers,” Bronya suddenly exclaims, — may I have a minute of your attention!

I turn my gaze toward him, and the pencil falls from my fingers. »

About Those Who Fall Behind

“Rustik, Vasya, and I have compiled the world’s first and only battle sheet, “Evening Raup!””

The boys keep clowning around as though we were guests at someone’s house, strolling through a park, or lounging at the UPI sports club. As though we weren’t stranded in the middle of wild mountains, surrounded by snow and cold, tens of kilometers from the nearest living soul. I dutifully record their little wisecracks as though they were delivering a lecture, if only to keep my mind off how terrifying it all really is.

“First, the latest triumphs of modern technology. We proudly present the tourist sled, “A New Life for Spare Skis.” Ideal for travel by car, train, or plane. Strongly discouraged for hauling cargo over snow. To place an order, please contact the inventor, Comrade Shakunov!”

Laughter and thunderous applause. Vadik glumly nods left and right, then waves his hand dismissively and grumbles under his breath:

“I only meant well… I only did it all for you…”

Gleb gives him an encouraging slap on the shoulder, and Vadim finally breaks into a smile, taking the jest in good spirits. And our reporters were only just warming up.

“Important announcement! The tent lecture hall invites you to a talk on “Tourism and the Heart’s Feelings.” Held every evening, just before sleep. Delivered by Professor Norkin and Kolomiytseva, graduate student in the cardiac sciences!”

It frightens me that this is to be the pranksters’ final announcement. My pencil trembles as I write these words; I don’t dare glance at the others, but I can hear Lyuska perfectly as she begins to protest at the top of her voice: “Stop laughing! Bronya! Aren’t you ashamed of

yourself, eavesdropping on other people's conversations! And anyway, there's nothing of the sort in here! Stop laughing, you fools!..” I raise my eyes to see Lyusya trying to snatch the sheet out of Rustik's hands, while Kolya lies sprawled on his stomach, roaring with laughter, his head bent nearly to the floor of the tent. Bronya rescues her handiwork and hurriedly launches into the next item on the agenda:

“Meanwhile, the duo of half-baked physicists has set a new world record for stove assembly! In just one hour, nine minutes, and nine point four seconds, the camp stove was put up and the entire group was saved from freezing. The record-holders: comrades Doroshenko and Vasenina!”

I even set this down here, but the letters are so crooked that you can scarcely make out the words. Yura, good-natured as ever, snorts and begins explaining that yesterday everyone was worn out from the journey, that we sat talking late, that the kindling had got damp — and so on, and so forth. But hardly anyone is listening to him.

“And now for the news of science,” Rustik bellows over Yura's head. — In recent days, scientists from every land have been asking themselves the ques

I can't go on!

Strokes from an ordinary pencil. Here the entries come to an end.

***

Nelya could scarcely bear to wait while the boys read out the news that death was waiting for anyone who strayed into the Raupa area. Losing all self-command, she sprang to her feet and lunged for the tent flap—longed to plunge into the crisp, clean air and let all the nonsense blow out of her head, to grasp that this was real and not one of her silly, terrifying dreams.

Right at the entrance Gleb intercepted her. He seized her arm and drew her firmly toward him.

“Nelya! Nelya! What’s wrong? Are you feeling ill? Is your head spinning?”

Her head wasn’t spinning, but she felt as though she were suffocating—as though all the snow on the mountain had already come down upon her, pressing her into the tent floor, squeezing the last breath from her lungs, snapping her ribs and spine.

Gleb snatched up someone’s windbreaker, draped it over her shoulders, and tugged a little cap down around her ears.

“Come on, come on, calm down. Hold on to me.”

“Vasenka!” Lyuska shouted belatedly after her, and Nelya, already being led from the tent by Sosnovsky, glanced back one last time. — What on earth is the matter with you?

Lyusya was sitting beside Postyr at the far end of the tent. There was no anger, no hurt, no embarrassment left on her face—only genuine concern for her friend. Nelya managed to think that she would tell her everything, once they made it back home.

The fresh air cut at her throat. The wind flung a handful of snow grains into her face and tugged at loose strands of her hair. Her nose began prickling at once, and warmth rose in her cheeks.

Nelya and Gleb stood beside the tent, gazing down. There, through the whirling snow, the black forest loomed dimly—the very forest they had passed on the climb up. A couple of kilometres below, somewhere in that darkness, the supply cache was waiting for them. Like a promise that they would return.

“Well, how are you feeling? Better?”

Gleb was scarcely squinting, scarcely wincing at the wind and snow. His grey-green eyes moved over Nelya’s face, and a ripple seemed to pass through them. They were no longer the frozen lakes of calm they had been. He was trying to fathom what had so badly startled her.

Nelya parted her lips, but managed only a breath. Only now did she notice that Sosnovsky had leapt from the tent wearing nothing but his sweater, exactly as he'd been about to go to bed—no time to pull on his windproof jacket or a flannel shirt. Snow whirled and stung his bare neck, working its way down inside his collar.

"Yes, I'm better now," Vasenka murmured at last. — Let's go back in, you'll freeze…

She stepped toward the tent, but Gleb stopped her, gently taking hold of her shoulders.

"Nelya, you look as though you've seen a ghost. What's going on? What are you afraid of?"

It felt good that he was looking at her so openly, so attentively, that he was holding her with his warm, strong hands. Nelya almost smiled. She drew closer to him and resolved to tell him everything, exactly as it was.

Once she had said it aloud, the fear would be swept away, as if by magic.

"I just think…"

But Gleb never heard those words.

In that very instant, the mountain came alive behind his back, and the tent vanished beneath the snow.

A fraction of a second to grasp what had happened.

Three seconds to reach the debris.

"Guys! Guys!"

A half-drawn breath.

Bare hands plunging into the loose snow.

Cold.

"Out, quickly! Do you hear me?! Cut the canvas!"

Blink rapidly several times to clear the snow from your lashes. Brush it away — and realize that it has truly happened.

The tent’s entrance lay buried; only the side facing the forest jutted out of the enormous drift. The wind howled in Nelya’s ears, and it seemed to her like the moans and cries of her friends.

Seconds passed, yet they felt like long, unbearable minutes in which everything had already been lost. A knife blade burst through the tarpaulin, jerked, vanished — then tore the fabric open in another spot. Only once the cut appeared could Gleb help. He pulled with all his might, ripping the worn cloth wider, then seized Bronya by the arm and hauled her out. Nelya rushed to Tolya as he emerged into the snow — stunned, terrified, his hands scratched.

“What was that?” he shouted, turning toward the mountain. — What did this?. .

Gleb helped the rest of the children out of the collapsed tent. All were alive and unharmed — dazed and frightened, but whole. Nelya watched the mountain, though the blizzard made it impossible to tell whether another avalanche was sliding down its slopes. The wind knocked her off her feet, and she pressed closer to Tolya.

“Careful, careful!”

“Hold it here!”

“That’s it.”

Then Nelya heard a groan, a whimper. She looked down and saw the boys easing Lyusya out of the tent with utmost care.

“Quietly, quietly.”

“Lay her down on the snow.”

Kolomiytseva sat huddled in a heap, elbows pressed to her sides, hands clutched against her chest. They eased her down onto the snow, and Kolya Norkin settled beside her; Lyusya sagged against him, letting her head fall back onto his shoulder. Nelya hurried over, so shaken she could scarcely feel her legs.

“Lyusenka! What’s wrong?”

“I think her rib is broken,” Kolya answered through gritted teeth, holding Kolomiytseva upright with one hand and sweeping the tangled hair from her face with the other.

Lyusya squeezed her eyes shut and twisted her lips against the pain, struggling to draw breath through her mouth, but could only manage short, choking sobs.

“What... what hit... us?”

“A slab of snow.” Vasya stood nearby, straight and tall despite the wind. “We must have cut into the slope when we dug the pit for the campsite. And it came down on top of us.”

Meanwhile, Gleb and the others were digging desperately at the tent, trying at least to reach the warm things left inside. Rustik had nearly crawled through the opening when the avalanche—invisible in the blizzard—came down on the tent a second time.

“Rustik!”

“Back—quick! Back!”

They hauled Slobodin out in an instant, but he lost his footing and fell onto his back. Gleb turned around, and Nelya felt a painful jolt at the sight of the fear in his face.

Two seconds in which to decide.

“We can’t stay here! We have to go down!” he shouted into the wind. “We’re making for the forest!”

“Are you sure?” Vadik shouted back, helping Rustem to his feet. “Maybe we should try digging ourselves out?..”

“Can’t you see another avalanche might come down on us?” Gleb snapped at him. “While we dig, we’ll freeze solid for certain. We’re going down! Keep an eye on each other! Kolya! Yura! Take Lyusya!”

Nelya had started toward him, but just then Gleb turned to Rustik, who was clutching his bruised head—probably asking how he was—then swung back and waved the others on, ordering them to move.

Kolya and Doroshenko, the two strongest among them, hoisted Lyusya up, all but lifting her off her feet, and started her down the slope. Nelya stayed close at their side, keeping watch over her friend. At the last moment she glanced back at the tent, and suddenly she wondered, too, whether they were making a mistake in abandoning the camp. But a minute later the blizzard swallowed everything, and the dark outline of the tent vanished into the snow.

***

Walking was hard, if not impossible. The wind knocked you off your feet, and below, in the frozen crust, sharp rocks lay waiting. In the darkness and the swirling snow you could barely make out the edge of the forest, and everyone strained to see where they were stepping. It hardly helped—every so often someone would stumble, slip, and go down.

Nelya turned round to look for Gleb, but caught her foot on a jagged stone, scraping the toes of one foot raw. By luck she fell on her side and escaped with little more than a few grazes. Before she could rise on her own, Bronya reached her and hauled her to her feet.

“Come on, come on, it’s not far now!” he urged her briskly, though Nelya could see how wide his eyes had grown with fear. “Hold on to me.”

Bronya’s closeness gave her the false comfort of believing the walk would be easier now. A few paces on, when Bronyevsky himself slipped and fell, Nelya nearly pitched forward with him.

As she waited for him to get up, she glanced around quickly, trying to work out whether everyone was accounted for.

The children were moving forward in a ragged line—some single file, some clinging to one another. Kolya and Yura still carried Lyusya between them, and Nelya felt a touch calmer knowing she was in safe

hands. Every so often Postyr shouted, pointing the way toward the forest. And at the very rear, two figures had dropped back.

“Go on, I’ll catch up!” Nelya called to Tolya, and hurried back herself, straight into the wind, eyes slitted against it, gasping for breath.

Gleb and Rustik had fallen behind, and the group, losing sight of them, had pressed on ahead. Nelya trudged toward the two men through the wind as though wading through water, every step a struggle, fighting for each gulp of icy air that clawed at her lungs.

“Gleb!” she cried out. “Gleb!”

He spotted her, pushed forward, and she felt his frozen hands close over hers.

“Rustik took a fall,” he shouted. “I’m walking with him. Don’t wait for us! We’ll meet at the bottom!”

She shook her head desperately—no, she would never leave him, she worried about him, and about Slobodin too; they all had to stay together, just as he himself had insisted.

“I won’t—“ she began, but Gleb gripped her hands tighter, though his fingers could barely bend.””

“Nelya! Don’t be afraid. Go—I’ll catch up.”

But what did “go” mean? How could he say “go,” leaving them behind, abandoning them? Nelya squeezed his fingers harder, locking them fast, freezing her hands to his. She could bear anything, so long as he stayed beside her.

“Gleb, I won’t—“””

With stiff, frozen hands, Gleb drew her to him. He wrapped his arms around her, pressing her against his hard chest for a moment or two. A barely perceptible warm breath brushed her neck. Cold, stone-hard fingers ran through her hair.

“I give you my word” everything will be all right, — he repeated, his lips almost at her ear. — Go on to the others. We’ll catch up. Everything will be fine, Nelya. I’ll come back to you soon.

The exchange could scarcely have lasted even half a minute, yet to Nelya it felt as though a great span of time had passed. As though the others had vanished, the terrifying avalanche had vanished, the wind had died away. There was only Gleb, and his arms around her.

And so Nelya believed him. She yielded. She caught sight of Rustik’s hunched back behind Sosnovsky, turned and saw the others, who had already gone a few dozen meters ahead. She remembered Lyusya with her broken rib. There was no time now for feelings and doubts. Like everyone else, she was bound to carry out the leader’s orders.

“I’ll be waiting for you down below!” she blurted out in a single breath.

She turned away quickly, so as not to change her mind, so as not to begin doubting, so as not to stay with him no matter what. And the wind, as if in league with her, pushed at her back, driving her away from Gleb and Rustik.

Without looking back, she made her way down toward the forest, and it seemed to her that Gleb was walking at her side.

Among the trees it was somewhat calmer — at least the howling no longer raged so fiercely, and there was no need to shout. In the first moments after Nelya reached the woods, she could see almost nothing for the snow clinging to her lashes. She stopped by the first tree, leaning her shoulder against it, utterly spent, and then glanced back. Two figures were following close behind: one supporting the other.

Nelya let out a breath of relief and hurried over to help Gleb bring Rustik in. So it hadn’t been her imagination after all — they really had been walking right beside her, and now here they all were, together…

“Nelya? Support him under the elbow, like this, or he’ll topple over!..”

But it was not Gleb, and not Rustik. Tall Vadim was bent double, practically hauling the limp and lifeless Norkin along. Shakunov’s shoulder cushioned the boy’s head; his arms dangled like whips, and it was impossible to believe that only a minute earlier this same man had been carrying Lyusya steadily in his arms, striding forward as though there were no blizzard at all, no treacherous ridges of stone whatsoever.

“What’s happened to him?” Nelya cried in alarm, clutching Kolya’s arm.

“He fell and apparently struck his head. I don’t know. He’s unconscious.”

To Nelya it seemed that this was not Shakunov’s voice at all, but the evil wind wailing in her ears, frightening her more and more. They needed Kolya! There were already two injured, Gleb had fallen behind — and Norkin was strong, strong enough to do the work of two, to help everyone. Of all people, he could not have stumbled so foolishly and hurt himself! He simply could not!..

Beneath the cedar a faint flame flickered. Yura Doroshenko shielded it from the wind with all his might, bare-fingered, shoveling away the snow and drawing the thin, brittle twigs closer to the fire. He turned toward them, and Nelya could almost have thanked him aloud — his gaze was so calm, his effort to hold himself together so evident. True, when he saw Vadim lay Norkin’s lifeless body down on the snow, his face did change.

“What—Kolya too?” he demanded sharply, staring at them without so much as blinking, the fire all but forgotten. “We’ve still got Vasya… He fell right here, just short of the tree line…”

Nelya caught herself shaking her head, refusing to believe what was happening. Lyusya, Rustik, Kolya, Vasya… it couldn’t be! So many of

them — it simply couldn't be! They were all such strong, such seasoned kids — how could disaster have claimed them like this?

"This is a nightmare — a horribly vivid one, but still just one of your nightmares."

She even shut her eyes, trying to summon that familiar feeling of unreality, to persuade herself she was dreaming, so that she might finally open her eyes and be free of it.

None of this was really happening…

"Kolya! What's wrong with him? Is he hurt?.."

None of this is really happening to them…

"Where's Gleb?"

"He and Rustem fell behind somewhere…"

"Gleb! Rustik!.."

Any moment now she'll open her eyes, and…

"Nelya! Don't fall asleep! You mustn't sleep!"

Bronya seized her by the shoulders and shook her with all her strength, nearly knocking her off balance. Her eyes flew wide — but the terrible present remained exactly that: present. She did not wake.

She wanted to scream with terror.

"Help Lyusya," Tolya said, tapping her lightly on the arm to catch her attention. "We can handle the fire for now. Did you see Gleb? Where is he?.."

Nelya couldn't answer him. Stunned, bewildered, she walked slowly over to Lyusya and sank down into the snow beside her. Kolomiytseva had been laid against the trunk of a tree, propped upright, and she was breathing in short, rapid gulps, one hand pressed to her chest. With the other she was feebly tugging at the shoulder of Norkin, who lay nearby. Kolya stirred not at all, his eyes never opened, and Nelya could not bring herself to believe that they had been deprived of his help and support at the very moment they needed it most.

Seeing blood trickling from his nose, she instinctively began searching for a handkerchief. Her frozen, half-numb fingers scrubbed again and again at the sealed pocket of his storm jacket, while Nelya herself seemed unable to wake, to shake off her numbness and grasp that all this was really happening. Surely in another second she would open her eyes in earnest and find herself in a dry, warm tent.

“Vasenka,” Lyusya whispered, barely audible, and Nelya snapped back to herself. “What’s wrong with him? Why isn’t he getting up?”

At last she found the handkerchief, bent over the young man, and began wiping the blood from his face. With her other hand she felt for his neck. There was a pulse, faint but present. Perhaps he had merely taken a light knock? If only they had smelling salts on them…

“Vasenka, how is he?”

“He’s fine — he’ll come round soon.” She was surprised herself at how calm and even her voice sounded. “Lyusya, we must get your chest bandaged; you’ll feel better. Wait just a moment…”

She hauled herself up out of the snow and looked around. Since she was unharmed and warmly dressed, then it fell to her to do everything she could for her comrades. That was precisely what Gleb would have expected of her.

Yura was combing the snow for deadfall while Bronya clambered onto the lowest branches of a cedar, struggling to snap off the driest ones. Vadim had been with Vasya, but he sprang up suddenly and shouted:

“Everyone! We have to reach the supply cache” there’s warm clothing and skis there! Let’s split up!

“No!” Doroshenko bellowed back in his deep bass. — We wait for Gleb and Rustem!

Nelya would gladly have taken his side, but she understood Vadim. Three wounded people lay in their care. They needed warmth, they needed help — and every minute mattered.

“We can’t wait!” Shakunov cut in sharply. — Tolya! You’re coming with me to the cache. We’ll be quick; it’s not far. Nelya! Stay with Vasya and Lyusya. Yurka! Watch the fire. We’ll be back before long.

With a swift, determined stride, before anyone could stop him, Vadim struck out of the forest. Bronya tumbled down from the cedar and hurried after him, plunging knee-deep into the snow. Yura stood frozen, the campfire forgotten, gazing after them until the two figures dissolved into the blizzard.

Nelya turned to Lyusya, then remembered at once that they needed a knife, and went over to Yura.

“Do you have a puukko?” She was glad her voice held steady, glad she could carry herself bravely, as though the whole nightmare weren’t unfolding around her.

“No, Bronya has it.”

Yura looked into her eyes, and it seemed to Nelya that she would have given anything in that moment to turn back time — to be beside Doroshenko at the stove in the tent again, before he asked that uncomfortable question…

“What do you need it for?”

She unbuttoned her anorak and gripped the hem of her shirt.

“To cut bandages” for Lyusya. Vasya needs some too.

“Tolya has already bandaged him.”

Yura stepped suddenly close to her and opened his arms, as though about to gather her in. For another moment or two their eyes held, and a lump rose in Nelya’s throat.

“Hold still.”

He ran his hands over her padded jacket, then with a sharp tug tore a strip from it. Nelya winced slightly at the pull but nodded her thanks.

“Thanks, Yur.”

“Go and give Lyusya a hand for now, and I’ll haul Vasya nearer the fire. Has Kolya come round yet?”

“No…”

It had been hard — impossible, almost, to believe that of the five of them only the two who had escaped unwounded and unfrostbitten were left. Nelya returned to Lyusya and carefully unbuttoned her windbreaker to fit a bandage. But the instant she touched her, Kolomiytseva flinched and cried out.

“It hurts! It hurts so much, I can’t… I can’t breathe…”

“Lyusenka, bear it just a little longer,” Nelya murmured, winding the cloth slowly and gently around her chest. “You’ll feel better soon. Just bear it a little longer…”

Usually it was Lyusya who did the supporting, whatever befell. The one who drove away Nelya’s dark and dreadful thoughts with jokes and quips, who tried to lift her spirits and distract her, even when everything was terrifying and agonizing. For Lyusya it was far easier to console and hearten the whole group at once than to give way to her own suffering. To suffer and pretend all was well — so as not to be a burden to the others.

“Remember — come on, you remember — when they shot you through the leg,” Nelya chattered on as she finished tying the bandage. “And you never even whimpered! You’re so strong, Lyusenka, just hold on a little. Vadik and Bronya will be back from the supply cache soon, and then Gleb and Rustik will find their way here…”

She turned away from her friend so the fear and anguish in her eyes would go unseen, and bent over Kolya. He lay exactly as they had placed him, dressed better than any of them, for he had been standing

watch that night. He would surely have thought of something by now. He would have set off to find Gleb Sosnovsky, or scooped out a dugout for them with his bare hands. Nelya drew the bloodstained kerchief from her pocket once more and began gently probing Norkin's head, meaning to bind his wound as best she could. Perhaps then he would feel easier and finally come round? If only he knew how desperately they needed his help at this very moment!

Lyusya managed to roll over and clasp her friend's shoulder. Her face was still contorted with pain, and Nelya could not tell which hurt more — her ribs, or Norkin.

"Nelya… I already called to him and slapped his cheeks…"

"He just banged his head," she murmured, her fingers numb with cold, as she pulled a makeshift bandage over Kolya's head. "He'll come round soon. Don't fret so — he's terribly strong, he's only resting a little…"

Yura, on his own initiative, had somehow managed to haul Postyr over to the fire and was now scouring the snow for branches and dry needles. The campfire was burning low fast, and Vasya was holding something resembling a mitten or a sock close to the flames so they would not gutter out entirely.

For a brief moment Doroshenko lifted his head, and Nelya saw that his eyes had gone glassy with fear. Her heart gave a sharp stab, as though pierced by a rib. They would all come through! A year from now they would even laugh about it, somewhere in the Caucasus or the Sayans. Kolya would show off the scar at his temple, Lyuska would hilariously mime how she had groaned and doubled over in pain, and Bronya might even recite some poem to suit the occasion… Yura turned away and fell to shoveling snow with stiff, unyielding hands all the harder.

"Guys!"

As if in answer to her thoughts, Nelya heard Tolya’s voice. He was hurrying toward them, stumbling and clutching at tree trunks to steady himself. How quickly they had come back! That meant they were not far from the cache after all. Perhaps Shakunov was already skiing back to the tent…

Bronya nearly trampled down their campfire, then abruptly sank beside it, thrusting her frozen hands almost into the flames themselves. She moaned in pain, her mouth twisting piteously, as if she meant to say something but was holding herself back.

Vadim appeared at the campsite as well, laboriously stamping out a path through the drifts. He had no skis. No warm clothes either. Nothing at all. Yura straightened up and stared at him, still pitifully cradling his bundle of branches, all thought of the fire forgotten. Vasya turned as far as he could to see and hear him better.

“We went the wrong way,” Vadim said quietly, gesturing with his hand somewhere ahead, toward the mountain. “The cache lies on the far side of the pass. We won’t make it.”

About Those Who Fall Asleep

Nelya looked at Vadim but couldn't grasp what he meant. Something about the food cache — but what about it, where it lay — the words simply wouldn't come together.

Vasya stirred, trying to prop himself up to face Shakunov. Nelya was struck by the calm on his face, and at the same instant her nose stung with the threat of tears. She would far rather have been the one sitting there with cracked ribs — she was no use to anyone anyway. But Vasya, or Norkin — either of them might have reached the cache, wherever it was.

"So what do we do, then?" Yura was genuinely at a loss, and so he didn't even feel ashamed to ask. — Where do we go? Gleb and Rustem never came back, after all.

He glanced back at Lyusya and Kolya. Looked at Vasya. And then flung himself at the branches of the nearest bush, snapping them with frenzied desperation, clutching them with fingers gone purple and numb from the cold. Bronya cupped her palms around the tiny flame, her shoulders heaving as though with sobs.

"But… but there's that ravine," Vadim suddenly spoke up again, guilt-ridden for bearing such dreadful news. — It would shelter us from the wind. Let's carry the wounded over there. And someone can stay here to tend the fire, so Rustik and Gleb can find their way back to us.

It was neither the best nor the most far-sighted of plans, but the group needed to know at least something. To know what they must do, how they were to survive. Had Gleb been here, he would no doubt have devised something bold and certain — rallied them and saved them, beyond a doubt.

But Gleb was not here.

Leaving Nelya by the fire, Vadim, Bronya, and Yura set about moving the injured, the three of them working together. First they carried Kolya, who had still not regained consciousness.

With numb, unresponsive fingers, Nelya broke into small pieces the branches Doroshenko had managed to gather and fed the splinters to the flames one at a time. The fire devoured them far too quickly and stayed dim and flickering all the same. How could Sosnovsky and Rustik possibly spot it through such a blizzard? Perhaps they had long since walked right past, unable to see the blaze, and were now wandering who knows where, freezing, with no notion of where their comrades had been left.

“You’d be better off leaving Kolya and me here… by the fire,” Vasya rasped beside her, and Nelya turned toward him. “The rest of you… could reach the supply cache unencumbered. It’s not that far. You can find it.”

“And abandon you? And Gleb? Rustik? No, Vasya, what are you saying—we would never…”

“Right now we have to save the ones who can be saved,” Postyr cut her off brutally. “Look after yourselves, and then… once you’ve reached the clothes and the skis, you could come back for us…”

Her lips had grown so numb that Nelya could barely force herself to answer him.

“We’re not going anywhere without you. And anyway, Gleb and Rustem will be back any minute now. Everything will be all right!”

But for now it was only Yura, Bronya, and Shakunov who returned. They gently gathered Lyusya into their arms and asked Nelya to come with them. Together they all headed for the ravine, leaving Postyr alone for the time being to tend the fire. Nelya looked back one last time at his hunched figure reaching toward the flames; his words echoed in her

memory, but she hurried at once to convince herself that Vasya had been wrong.

The ravine lay scarcely a hundred paces from the campfire — something between a frozen stream and a dried-up riverbed. But Shakunov had been right: down there the wind was almost nothing, and they could warm themselves here, could even see the night through once they got a fire going.

Norkin lay motionless, his back braced against the slope. Vadik and Yura lowered Lyusya gently beside him, while Bronya bent down and rubbed Kolya's shoulders.

"He still hasn't come round?" Lyusya was weeping. "Why? Oh, why, why?..."

Bronya let out a long breath, then shook Kolya hard and even slapped him across the face.

"Come on, Norkin! Pull yourself together! Come on!"

Nelya slid down the hillock to join them and hurriedly took her friend's hand, trying to console her — though there was no consolation to be had.

"We've got to get a fire going," Yura said, crawling along the ravine on his knees in search of deadwood. "Then we can light the cotton wool from the padded jacket. It works just as well as smelling salts."

"Oh, Yurka, you're a genius!" Tolya whispered, springing to his feet at once and leaving Kolya alone. "We'll carry Postyr over here right now and get the fire started. You hear that, Lyuska? Everything's going to be all right soon."

Doroshenko turned toward them, and Nelya looked into his eyes with a wordless gratitude that he had managed to lift everyone's spirits. Meanwhile Vadim glanced about, scanning the rise above them.

“You and Yura go after Vasya, and I’ll gather some deadfall in the meantime so we won’t be sitting in the cold. Nelya, stay with them, alright?”

Vasenina pressed close to Lyusya and clasped her friend’s cold hands between her own frozen palms. It took her a moment to realize that Lyusya was murmuring something, her lips barely moving. She leaned down toward her face, straining to catch the words.

“...I’ll never argue with him again. If only... if only he comes to... comes around...”

Vadim built a thick platform of boughs and helped Lyusya crawl onto it. He gathered the rest of the group together, settled Nelya down among them, and then wandered off once more.

It seemed an eternity before Yura Doroshenko returned to them. Alone.

He hesitated, then climbed down into the gully, carrying some smoldering brands and a handful of dry twigs.

“Here, we’ll get a little fire going for you right away...”

He busied himself digging a pit, then stretched out on his stomach and patiently began fanning the flames into life. Nelya watched him, barely registering what was happening anymore. And then at last she remembered.

“What about Vasya? Yura, where’s Vasya? Do you need help?”

Yura didn’t answer at first; then he repeated: “You need a fire here, a good fire.” He straightened up to survey the result of his labors, and answered dully, without lifting his eyes to them:

“Postyr... is dead.”

Lyusya gasped aloud and clutched at her injured side. Nelya kept staring at Yura, willing him to have said something else. Anything but that.

“Yura... but how... How?”

He gave no reply. He turned away and left, hauling himself up out of the gully. Nelya stared after him, stunned by the enormity of what had happened, and only after a while remembered that Lyusya was weeping beside her.

“Is it because of his broken ribs?” she whispered, and Vasenina turned toward her friend. — Because mine... mine are broken too...

Her sobs grew louder, and suddenly she cried out, her body arching with pain. Nelya seized her hands, no longer finding the strength for words of comfort. And it seemed to her that something within herself was breaking too—piercing, scraping, tearing apart.

Anyone but them...

“They’ve made a mistake,” Nelya finally forced out, her voice trembling—more to steady herself than to console Lyusya. “They misunderstood. He couldn’t have...”

Remembering in a flash what Yura had suggested, she crawled over to the feeble little flame and picked up a smoldering splinter. She tugged at the torn hem of her cowboy shirt and worked loose a wisp of cotton wool.

“We’re burning! Fire!”

“Whose beauty is this?”

“How good it is!”

Only a couple of days ago they had been laughing at Rustik’s scorched telogreika, snapping photographs and clowning about as though death did not exist. She returned to Lyusya and Kolya, sank down beside Norkin, and waved the wisp of cotton wool under his nose. She bit her lower lip until it hurt; the cold had numbed it. If only Norkin would open his eyes, regain his senses for a moment—they would all feel better at once. Especially once they learned that Vasya...

The fellow’s head jerked, his eyelids fluttered, and Nelya could not hold back a loud sigh of relief. Now, now everything would quickly be all right, for they had managed to bring Kolya around.

“Kolya, can you hear me?” Nelya asked, bending lower. “How are you feeling?”

His eyes fluttered half-open, but she could not catch his gaze. His lips twitched, murmuring faintly. Nelya bent over him, straining to make out the words.

“Where... are... we...”

“We’re in the ravine,” Lyusya whispered, pressing her forehead against his shoulder. “Vasenka is with us. Only...”

It was as though Norkin had not heard a word she said. With tremendous effort he dragged his eyes toward her and tried to lift a hand. Nelya saw that blood was trickling from his nose again, but resolved for the moment not to intervene.

“Why... Cold... but...”

“You hit your head, remember? The boys built a platform for us. Gleb will be here soon—he’ll think of something,” Lyusya whispered frantically, and tears rose in Nelya’s eyes. “Kolya, please, just don’t fall asleep again. I’m so frightened without you.”

Blood was already running down Norkin’s lips, yet he made no move to wipe it away. His pupils shifted, searching for Lyusya’s face, but to Nelya it seemed he did not see her at all.

A minute of terrible silence passed, and then Kolya began to rasp once more.

“Cold... but. Con...”

The corners of his mouth twitched; he tried to say something more. A pale little cloud of breath slid from his parted lips and dissolved instantly into the air. His eyes went still, fixed on Lyusya. A drop of

blood slid from his chin, hung there a moment, then fell onto his windbreaker.

Nelya sat up. Something clamped down hard in her stomach and turned to ice — colder than the air outside. She wanted to spring to her feet and flee that damned ravine as far as her legs would carry her, to find Gleb, to throw herself into his arms, to squeeze her eyes shut and believe it was nothing but a bad dream — that at any moment she would wake up on the Sverdlovsk–Ivdel train...

“Kolya? Are you freezing? What’s wrong?”

Lyusya shook Norkin’s shoulder gently, trying to catch his gaze. Her lower lip was trembling.

“Nel, he’s passed out again...”

With a hand that refused to obey her, that would not bend, that felt as though it belonged to someone else, Nelya reached for Kolya’s neck. Her fingers pressed against the cold skin, searching for a pulse — but there was none. None at all.

“Nel, maybe we should burn the cotton wool again?..”

Nelya couldn’t bring herself to look at Lyusya. Instead she turned around and saw that their small, feeble fire had long since died, because no one had been watching it.

Yura and Tolya had been keeping it alive so that Gleb and Rustem could find them. Vadik had gone off in search of spruce boughs for the bedding. And her? She should have been at Lyusya’s side, been the stronger of the two, holding her up.

“Lyus, let me cover your legs with the boughs, she offered through clenched teeth, determined to keep her voice from shaking, and tore herself off the ground in a single motion.”

She turned away, struggling not to look at her friend, not at Kolya, and simply snatched at the sharp spruce branches with her bare, reddened fingers, dragging them out from under Norkin’s motionless

body. A heavy knot sat in her throat, pressing on her heart, making it impossible to breathe.

She went back to Lyusya and tried to gently draw her away from Kolya, but the girl clung to his storm jacket with the last of her strength.

“No... I’m staying beside him so he won’t freeze, Kolomiytseva whispered, pressing her forehead to her friend’s cheek.”

Nelya didn’t argue. Said nothing at all. She piled windfallen branches over their legs, nudged the boughs closer, and then settled down on the other side, softly putting her arms around Lyusya without touching her chest.

Lyusya breathed quietly, with a faint whistle, blinking often against the pain. Nelya counted the seconds, watching the rim of the ravine and waiting for the others to return.

Only a few minutes had passed before Shakunov came limping up to them and dropped his armload of deadwood onto the snow.

“So, how are things over here? he asked hoarsely, glancing about.” And where’s the fire?

Nelya bit her lip. It was all her fault! She was the one who should have been watching the campfire, but she had wanted so badly to help Lyusya. And Kolya.

“It went out, she muttered, trying to catch Vadik’s eye.” But that’s not...

She meant to say, “That’s not the worst of it,” but the words wouldn’t come. Vadik met her gaze, and Nelya flicked her eyes toward Norkin.

“He’s dead,” she mouthed, silently, with her lips alone — because if she spoke it aloud, who could say, perhaps Lyusya couldn’t bear it, spoken aloud, and would die as well?

Shakunov swallowed. Shook his head. He looked at her hopefully, as if to say: “How could Norkin possibly have died?”

If only he hadn’t fallen there, on the slope — who knew, maybe by now they’d have found the supply cache, or...

“All right, fine,” Shakunov sighed heavily. — I’ll stay with them. Nelya, do you think you can make it to the campfire? Yura and Bronya are there — ask them for some more fire. Maybe Gleb and Rustem are back by now. Think you can find them?

The sound of Sosnovsky’s name spoken aloud was like a gulp of fresh air for Nelya. She nodded eagerly and started to rise, then glanced back at Lyusya once more. She lay pressed against her friend’s body, weeping silently, dry-eyed, flinching from the pain and biting her lips. The mere sight of her made Nelya’s heart ache. She bent down quickly, took her friend by the shoulder, and whispered in her ear, unsure whether Lyusya could even hear her:

“I’ll be right back, Lyusenka! I’ll bring us fire. I won’t be long!”

It was the least she could do for her friend just now. Straightening up quickly, she gave Shakunov one last look, at a loss for what to say to him.

“I’ll hurry,” she repeated.

With some effort she clambered out of the ravine, and here at the top the wind nearly swept her off her feet. She had forgotten what a destructive force it was, how treacherous, with what violence it hurled itself at you and brought you down. Besides, here among the trees it was not yet blowing at full strength, and it was terrifying to recall what went on up on the mountain’s cliff. Nelya made her way back toward the campfire from memory, straining to catch a glimpse of the little flame through the snow and the tree trunks. She pictured finding it, warming her stiff, red fingers... And then it came back to her that Postyr was still lying out there, and nothing would ever warm him

again. Her head throbbed at the thought that Vasya and Kolya would never open their eyes again, that she would never hear a single word from them. Nelya's breath caught; she stumbled, when the thoughts mercilessly crowded into her head, tearing at her brain. If only Gleb were beside her... Then she would not feel so afraid, so wretched. If only he had been with them from the very beginning, he would never have allowed any of this to happen.

And what would become of him when he learned the truth? When they came home? What would be done to him for the deaths of his comrades?

Nelya quickened her pace.

The campfire had gone out, but three fellows lay huddled around it, stretched out on the snow. Nelya raced up to them at full speed, dropped down beside the nearest one, began shaking him, and did not immediately realize that it was Postyr. He lay apart from the others, on his side, and Nelya turned him face up without knowing who it was—and now Vasya's pale, frozen face was staring straight at her. Nelya yanked her hands back. Fear and pain swirled within her, and she could not tell which feeling was stronger.

"Vasenka?"

The voice was so faint that at first she believed she had imagined it. She turned and met Doroshenko's unblinking stare.

He lay beside Bronya, pressed close against her back. Tolya himself was motionless, his face buried in the snow. His red hair stuck up saucily in every direction, tousled by the wind. It seemed that at any moment he would leap to his feet with his usual grin spilling across his whole face: "Now that's what I call a snow bath! Try it yourselves!"

"Yura? Bronya?.."

Nelya's head was spinning. She couldn't rise, couldn't go to them —she couldn't bear one more death.

“Bronya! Why are you just lying there? Let’s climb down to the ravine—it’s not so cold there...”

Yura was motionless, only following her with his eyes as best he could. At last Nelya found the strength to cross to them and sink down at their side. She had stretched a hand toward Bronevsky’s shoulder, but turned back to Yura instead.

“He froze,” he breathed, his lips barely stirring through the ice. “The fire... went out. Where... is Vadya?”

“He’s in the ravine, with Lucy and...” Nelya bit her lip.

She could hold out no longer. She sank down into the snow beside Yura and pressed against him, burying her face in his shoulder. Doroshenko’s body was cold and rigid, yet he was still breathing, hoarsely, and his hand stirred faintly, trying to reach her. He was alive; he was there beside her. And it seemed nothing more could be asked for.

“Yura, we have to go,” Nelya whispered, though she doubted she could rise herself now. “We have to get to the others—there’s a deck there, and no wind...”

He made no answer, and she raised herself up to look at him. A film of snow lay over Yura’s face, working its way between his eyelids, and he no longer had the strength to brush it away.

“Yura...”

“I...” his voice sounded hollow now, as though there were no breath left in him to carry the words out whole, and they crowded in his throat. — You know... I loved you. For a long time now. But you... you were always... with Gleb. And...

He murmured something more, but Nelya didn’t catch it. And again she remembered that awkward, that terrible conversation in the warm tent, beside the stove, and her heart ached at the thought of how little she had prized those simple things then.

Warmth. The tent. Living, healthy comrades at her side.

“Yurochka, we have to get back to the gully,” she said hurriedly, bending over him. “Do you hear me? It’s warmer there, the others are there. Let’s go to them. Yura, please!”

She could not tell him, could not confess how desperately she needed his support just then. How much steadier she had felt on finding him here, with Postyr and Bronya frozen beside him. How much it mattered to her that he be next to her now.

She didn’t say it. Because Yura wouldn’t have heard her anyway.

As though moving in a fog, without understanding what she was doing, scarcely feeling her own hands, Nelya took hold of the handle of Bronya’s Finnish knife and cut the clothing off him. She, Vadim, and Lyusya were freezing, and the same fate would overtake them as had overtaken Tolya and Yura. They needed clothing, for they had no fire left. There was no other way out for her.

That was how she tried to convince herself.

She had no memory of the walk back. She clutched the cut-off trousers and the padded jacket in her hands, too drained to think that these were Bronya’s clothes, which he would never need again. All she wanted was to get warm as quickly as possible. To sit down beside Lyusya on the dense brushwood, wrap herself in someone else’s jacket, close her eyes, and drift off. And when she woke, she would find herself back in the tent, as she had so many times before that night. However vivid the nightmare that had come to her seemed, she always woke — and the guys were there beside her. Gleb would be angry with her again, telling her to quit doing stupid things. Postyr would shake his head and order her to tell no one about it. Lyusya would regard her with gentle indulgence, and Yura would stand up for her, stay by her side.

Nelya stumbled and barely kept herself from tumbling head over heels down the knoll. At the bottom, dark against the snow, three figures huddled close together. Nelya decided to tell them nothing yet — nothing of the fire, nothing of Tolya and Yura. To say nothing, simply to be with them. For however long it took.

“Guys... it’s me.”

She couldn’t imagine what they would say when they saw Bronya’s clothing. Couldn’t imagine how she would ever meet their eyes again.

“Guys...”

No one raised a head toward her. No one looked at her. No one spoke.

Lyusya still held on to Kolya, her head sunk against his shoulder. Vadim, as though trying to comfort her, was clasping her hand. Norkin’s body lay lightly dusted with snow; his strong, sturdy frame had gone limp, like an empty suit.

Nelya stood for a while, watching them. Then, slowly, she folded the cut clothing and laid it beside them, keeping for herself only a strip of trouser leg, which she wrapped around her hands like a muff. Then she turned and started back.

She still had Gleb and Rustem to find. She would either die, or find them.

And after that, at last, she would wake up.

***

That night was surely the coldest and windiest of the entire journey. Nelya was making her way back toward the slope of Raupa, walking straight into the wind, seeing nothing ahead of her, bent double and ploughing through the snow with her feet. No one could tell her now that she had chosen wrongly. That she should have stayed in the gully, or searched the boys’ pockets for matches, or done something else entirely.

One hope remained — the very last one. That Gleb and Rustik had returned to the tent, dug it out, and were waiting out the storm there, trusting the boys could hold on through the night so they might all meet in the morning. Nelya had no idea what she would say to them when she found them. She could not imagine what would happen to Gleb when he learned everything. Nor what they would do to him when they returned to the city.

Several times she stumbled, slipped on the rocks, and fell, but each time fortune was kind to her — she only bruised her knees and scraped her palms raw. Why hadn't Vasya and Kolya been as lucky as she was? Why had the strongest of them all been hurt worse than anyone?

She could not orient herself by the mountain slope against the sky, nor by the jutting rocks. Snow and wind came crashing down the moment she raised her head. She walked bent almost in two, her frozen, wounded hands tucked under her arms. She had dropped the scrap of Bronya's trousers somewhere along the way, and could not bring herself to spend the strength to pick it up again.

Only thoughts of the tent and of Gleb carried her from one step to the next. Only for that could she keep walking.

Beneath a flimsy little birch, shivering in the gusts, something lay half-buried in the snow. Nelya nearly stumbled over it; when she looked down, her legs buckled beneath her.

Bereft of all feeling in her hands, she somehow managed to turn the heavy, rigid body onto its back. A hot cry tore from her chest, leaving her lips raw. Weakness drove inward at her eyes, wringing out the last of her tears.

Gleb's face glazed with a crust of ice. His eyes half open, his full lips parted. Snow clinging to his hair, to his eyebrows; fresh scratches and abrasions marring his pallid skin.

Nelya seized his hard, frozen hands, refusing to believe that he was dead. That he had perished here long ago, while they had gone on waiting for him to return, so certain that he would.

“Gleb! Gleb! Gleb, please! Open your eyes! Look at me! Gleb!”

She wept and screamed with the last of her strength, trying to warm Sosnovsky’s icy fingers. She believed that if only she tried hard enough, cried loud enough, he would open his eyes after all. He would rise from that senseless, frozen snow. He would gather her into his arms as he never had before, and whisper directly into her ear: “Well, were you scared? Come on, back to the tent — look, you’re frozen right through”...

How desperately she needed someone to say that to her now. How desperately she needed someone—anyone—simply to be beside her.

Gleb would never open his eyes again. Never rise. Never speak a word of this to her. Nelya had shed her final tears, pressing her face into his neck, and then she had gotten up, forced herself to unclench her grip on her friend, and walked on.

Upward. Into the whiteness. Into the wind and snow. Toward the tent.

There was no strength left in her. No hope, either. Nelya limped along with agonizing slowness, barely lifting her feet—she had long since lost all feeling in them against the cold. And besides, why go on, where to, if Gleb Sosnovsky was no more? If she was the only one left? So... why? What made her any better than the others? Stronger? Luckier?

And perhaps it was all her fault, everything that had happened. If only she had stood firmer, if she had told Gleb back then that they had to turn around after all, and let the boys shout and argue to their hearts’ content. Then everyone would be alive now. And not...

She didn’t trip. Didn’t slip. But her failing legs suddenly buckled beneath her, and she went down like a mown stalk, forward, face into the snow. She tried to rise but realized at once she hadn’t the strength. Then she tried to crawl onward, dragging her Leadend body along on her arms, but quickly understood that this, too, was beyond her.

Her body would no longer obey her. Her arms would no longer obey. Her head sank helplessly, cheek straight into the snow, and Nelya lay still, telling herself she would rest a little, get up, and go on.

Just a very little while.

Maybe Rustik was waiting for her in the tent after all.

There...

Somewhere impossibly far away.

Nelya was already drifting into sleep when, quite suddenly, she felt warmth—and so strange was the sensation that it pulled her eyes open again. Warmth. She had believed she would never feel it again. Deep in her chest, where her heart was still beating.

The snow blurring before her eyes dimmed and then began to darken. Her lashes had frozen together. The warmth spread pleasantly through her whole body.

Nelya sighed and gave herself up to sleep.

About Those Who Will Be

“Nelya! Nelya! Wake up! Can you hear me?”

With difficulty she pushes herself up on her arms, eyes still shut. The blissful warmth has fled, and the weariness of this impossibly long day comes flooding back over her.

“But I only just lay down...”

“Never mind that! Strong hands grip her under the arms and haul her to her feet.” Come on, come look at what’s out there!

Still half asleep, head swimming, Nelya allows herself to be led out of the tent; there she rubs her eyes at last and gaze where she is pointed.

A yellow-green radiance is pouring across the sky. Ribbons of colored light pivot slowly, majestically — now all but fading away, now flaring up brighter. Nelya’s breath catches. For a moment or two she is, oddly enough, quite frightened — then she smiles. An inexplicable joy swells in her chest.

“The northern lights, here in the Khibiny! And we actually got to see them!”

Bronya presses the shutter, hurrying to capture the rare spectacle. She darts back and forth, shooting from every angle, now and then spinning round to photograph her friends. A little way off stands Vadim Shakunov, muttering under his breath:

“If only we had color film out here” and video... How could we ever manage it?

And Sashka Yuzhin, perched on a log by the campfire, claps his knees like a little boy.

“I told you luck would come! You just have to believe, guys! We’d never have gotten another chance” that’s exactly why it all worked out!

“Of course, and the weather forecast and the timing calculations counted for nothing at all, snorts Kolya Norkin.” You just have to believe — sure, right...

“Your grumbling is spoiling the view, Lyusya can bear no more of it and jabs him in the ribs.”

Nelya can scarcely tear her eyes from the marvel before her—and turns around. Gleb is standing behind her. And he is smiling, his gaze fixed not on the radiance at all, but only on her.

“Sorry to wake you, Vasenka. But I knew you’d never have forgiven me if you’d slept through this.”

She smiles and nods, yet somehow cannot bring herself to look back up at the sky.

“A sight like this beats even the most wonderful dreams!”

Gleb winks at her cheerfully.

“And the best is yet to come! Next year we’ll be in the Polar Urals, just like we dreamed. I’m certain you’ll love it there.”

She blushes a little, as though he were planning the entire expedition for her alone, then lifts her head once more and gazes at the shimmering tapestry of light.

Sosnovsky comes up to her, barely brushing her with his shoulder, and Nelya gently takes his warm hand. In that moment she is convinced that, with him beside her, she would gladly set off for the Moon itself.

And with their tireless Turband along, of course! Vadik is outlining his plans to Tolya: they simply must shoot a film about the northern lights in the Khibiny, or humanity will lose an important chapter of its history. Tolya smiles and says nothing. He has used up his very last frame and can finally watch the aurora without peering through a lens.

Sasha has risen and now stands next to Lyusya. He is murmuring something to her, but Kolomiytseva can’t catch a word. Kolya Norkin

leans in toward her as well and whispers something brief. Lyusya claps a hand over her mouth and bursts out laughing.

Gathered together, the Sosnovtsy watch the northern lights, believing it a beautiful, lucky omen—that from now on every road lies open to them, and that side by side they will conquer heights beyond any they have yet reached.