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DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Tales of
Becoming Otherwise

DENYS SYCH

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OVERTIME



The glow of streetlights flooded the street, where time had dissolved. The branches of trees and piles of garbage on the asphalt were motionless, as if in a photograph. The cloying, repulsive smell from the overflowing bins by the parking lot was a reminder of the recent party at the bar. Only this mundane stench broke the illusion of frozen time.

The neon sign, which used to light up welcomingly over the entrance at six every weekend evening, had long gone cold. Through the glass, rows of upturned chairs were visible on the tables. A noise erupted—a vibrating phone. Having slid sideways into the gap between the display case and the footrest to the left of the door, it was now twitching with all its might, shattering the established stasis. He heard a dull thud against the bar counter, followed by a barely audible curse. Rubbing his head, a disheveled guy of about twenty emerged unsteadily from behind the beer taps, searching for the source of the disturbance.

"Will you stop ringing already?" the bartender grumbled.

Stickers on the window sparkled from the screen's light. The guy took a few steps and dug his fingers into the crevice between the footrest and the glass, trying to hook the phone. It seemed to sense the human approach and began vibrating even more actively, as if rejoicing at its rescue. Finally, he pulled out the handset.

Mom, he read. Hmm, this might be more interesting than usual.

"Good evening."

"Hello! Who is this? Where is Nelly?" a worried female voice rattled from the speaker.

"This is the Hoyt bar. I'm John, the bartender. Seems someone dropped their phone..."

"This is my daughter's phone!" The woman spoke more quietly but with a strained intensity. "John, have you seen her?"

He scratched his chin and pursed his lips. How to put this delicately? "Lots of daughters come through here... I might have seen her, but I couldn't say if she's yours. What does she look like?"

"Green eyes, black hair, a piercing in her eyebrow. About 160 centimeters tall."

John closed his eyes. A verbal identikit over the phone? He smirked. A futile endeavor.

"Okay, ma'am, but it still doesn't ring a bell. Let me check the security camera footage. I'll see who was sitting where the phone was left."

"Good! Call me back as soon as you're done!" The anxious voice dictated a series of numbers. "Miss Chau. I'll be waiting for your call!"

"I'm on my way to check now! Don't worry prematurely!"

He moved the phone away from his ear and stared blankly at the screen. On the lock screen, he recognized that very group of people, and among them—the dark-haired girl.. With that clue, things became simpler.

Alright! A side quest! He smiled, but at the same time, faint wrinkles crept between his eyebrows — find the trail of the missing girl! He stretched his arms forward and, shifting his center of gravity, hopped off the stool. A funny thought, but the situation isn't.

Under the counter stretched a wide monitor, somewhat resembling a car's windshield. John hit the power button; the cooling fan hummed steadily somewhere inside the wooden tabletop. Rows of bottles, playing with color and shape, shimmered in response to the bright images flashing across the screen. John jerked a tap and poured himself half a pint of coffee stout. The sharp, hoppy smell filled the slightly stale air.

His sleep-deprived face glowed like a pale oval in the darkness. The screen showed a petite brunette: she was sitting at the bar, sipping ale. Nelly was sitting alone, except for a bag on the stool next to her. John took a sip from his glass and hit fast-forward. People scurried back and forth; evening fell. Then John noticed someone taking the seat where the girl's bag had been resting. He tapped the keyboard, returning the playback to normal speed. A dark-skinned girl with a slender figure and curls falling to her shoulders, in a provocatively tight dress, had settled next to Nelly. They were talking and laughing animatedly about something. He vaguely remembered Nelly coming for glasses, but the other one, he felt like he was seeing for the first time. John reached for the taps for a second round, but saw the girls getting up. He paused his hand and immersed himself in the recording.

Hmm, caught a cute moth in her web? John thought sadly. *The girl doesn't seem the type for that kind of adventure. Did they get her drunk or something?* Then his face fell, his lips tightening into something resembling a tube, and his eyebrows shot up: it could be simpler—they've known each other for a

long time.

The girl let Nelly go ahead; Nelly, already quite drunk, held onto the counter, then a chair, trying to catch her balance. For a moment, the friend's face was reflected in the window glass. Her smile seemed unnaturally wide—ear-to-ear—to John, but he chalked it up to the recording quality. At that moment, the phone slipped from her uncontrolled hands, diving into that very gap from which it had recently been pestering John. Presumably, she needed the restroom her friend kindly helped her get there. Taking Nelly by the elbow and grabbing the bag, she straightened her up and nudged her into the hall.

The caffeine was already working, as was the alcohol—sleep had said goodbye to the guy until morning, replaced by a detective's fervor. Leaning on the counter, he stared at the monitor, searching for the girls. Half an hour had passed, but he didn't see them return. John opened the feed from the cameras aimed at the restroom entrance. There they are, going in—and nothing more. It seemed suspicious. Not that his head was in the best state, but after a second viewing, he was sure the girls hadn't come out. His jaw shifted to the side, and a puzzled, questioning look froze on the bartender's face. "I don't get it," he summarized under his breath.

His gaze lifted on its own above the counter and fixed on the restroom door. A cute girl from a poster was looking at him. She was riding a rocket, winking and smiling coquettishly. Usually, her gaze made him feel warmer, but now he felt discomfort. Through the model's eyes, someone else was looking at him. Without realizing it, he hid behind the counter. Suddenly, the silence was shattered by the buzzing of a phone. John jumped from the surprise. He grabbed the handset.

"Hello, hi, Miss Chau. I'm working on it."

"And? Did you see her? What time did she leave?" The questions tumbled over each other. "Was she alone? Very drunk?"

"Yes, I saw her." He clarified an important point. "Tell me, does she have a girlfriend?"

Miss Chau's voice grew stronger and quite sharp. "John, who was with her?"

"That's what I'm getting at. Some very pretty girl..."

Suddenly, the voice on the other end, for a fraction of a second, rolled into a deep bass: "I felt it!" and then the former, anxious voice of Miss Chau returned to the line. "When did she leave the bar with that person?"

The guy was taken aback. His heart skipped a beat. Chalking it up to interference or fatigue would be too simple, but what else was there?

"That's where I'm stuck... The thing is, I've watched the footage twice, and I didn't see them leave!"

"I'll be there soon," Miss Chau said in an even tone.

"Maybe call the police?"

"Just wait."

She ended the call. John remained sitting with his mouth slightly agape. A faint creak from the direction of the restroom snapped him out of his stupor.

What the hell is going on? Maybe they got dead drunk and are snoring in each other's arms in one of the stalls, starting a romantic 'how we met' story for their friends? And at the same time, a middle-aged woman is flying to me, to a closed bar at

midnight, for a confrontation? He chuckled. *And I thought my life was boring.*

The creak repeated. *Maybe I should go check. Save Miss Chau some nerves. And... all the misses in general.* Reaching the door, he looked into the model's eyes — she was still looking at him just as welcomingly, glossy highlights glinting. "And for a second, I thought a chasm had opened between us," he whispered to her and briefly knocked a couple of times on the door.

"Ladies? Miss Chau?"

No answer. John felt uneasy, as if the air had suddenly thickened, hindering his movements and weighing down his lungs. "Am I really this nervous about entering the women's restroom?" He knocked again—no change.

"Ladies, if you're in there! I'm coming in!" With that, he pressed the door handle.

The automatic light switch didn't work for some reason, and John entered the dark room. The assortment of women's perfumes had almost dissipated, but a faint trace still lingered under the assertive smell of air freshener. John turned on his phone's flashlight, revealing the personal hygiene room in all its glory.

The white, tiled ceiling dimly reflected the light, emitting a faint glow that slightly illuminated the room. Tissues clogged the sink on the left; some joker had stuck a sanitary pad, clearly one that had seen more than just its packaging, on the glass. "Hmph." John assessed the striking art object. The doors of the three stalls were closed, but the lock indicators winked uniformly green, shimmering under the flashlight beam. Looking closer, he noticed one of them was slightly askew.

Concluding that if anyone was here, they were most likely there, John approached the door and knocked.

No answer.

"Hello! Ladies, sorry for the intrusion. I wouldn't do this without a good reason."

No answer. Maybe they left after all? He decided to push the stall door in case the lock indicator was just slightly stuck. John pressed the handle; the indicator returned to the green sector, but the handle wouldn't go down, as if someone were blocking it.

John knocked on the door more insistently, tugged the handle more firmly. Silence. He played his trump card.

"Nelly, your mom is on her way here!"

Apparently, the trump card wasn't a six, but a full-blown ace. A sharp rustling sound, followed by a loud crack, came from behind the door. Simultaneously, a screech and something like a muffled hiss assaulted his ears, reminiscent of the sound from lungs eaten away by bronchitis. The bartender hesitated and stopped. *What secrets do women keep? And do I want to know them?* he thought, turning to the mirror.

Suddenly, fine debris and chunks of dust rained down from the ceiling above him; the ceiling tiles trembled. John snorted and leaned forward, mechanically pressing the door handle. This time it gave way, and he stumbled into the toilet cubicle. The room behind him dissolved into darkness.

The phone illuminated the once-white walls of the stall. Jelly-like, silty growths covered the tiles. From hundreds of small holes, something between thick pus and brown muck oozed out. In this viscous, trypophobic gallery, pieces of

clothing hung here and there. He recognized parts of Nelly's outfit from the recording. A sound came from above; John raised the flashlight and saw that a ceiling tile was shifted aside. In the opening, a miniature foot appeared for a moment. The rustling and dragging sounds in the ceiling intensified significantly; the supports holding the panels groaned under strain.

"Holy shit," was all he could squeeze out in a mixture of disgust and clammy fear.

He backed away and rushed for the exit. Yanking the handle towards him, he was about to burst into the hall when the ceiling supports gave way with a crash, spewing forth coils of wires and dust. John fell onto his back and raised the flashlight above himself.

Looming over him was something between a conger eel and a formless slug: disgusting folds, somewhat resembling fingers soaked for hours in hot water, covered its skin, overhanging along the entire length of its chestnut-brown, gleaming body. Swollen folds pulsated, spewing mucus. The vile substance, like a solvent, took with it nearby patches of the creature's skin, flowing smoothly onto the floor and forming miniature ridges of pulsating mounds.

There were no distinct limbs pseudopods popped out here and there from festering orifices. Dozens of tiny eyes, like tadpole bubbles in a pond, stared at John, and then the sound of teeth grinding against each other—thousands of them—tore the silence. They resembled flat needles. The creature reared and arched, shuddering all over.

On the tail that lashed behind, he noticed a naked girl, stuck fast: Nelly Chau. In a stupor, he stared dumbly at the thing slithering towards him in sinuous motions. It crawled a good

meter, and John scooted back, trying to get up and run. The creature sensed the maneuver, and this time the hiss was much louder. The monster, uncoiling like a spring, lunged at him.

The space between John's face and the bristling mass of teeth spinning in a disgusting waltz closed in lightning fast. He squeezed his eyes shut and prepared to meet death, when suddenly the sound of breaking glass, and then a wet, dull thwack somewhere above his head, interrupted it. He opened his eyes and saw the giant slug pinned to the restroom door by a road sign. The pole stuck right amidst the eyes. The circle with the "No Parking" sign still wobbled cheekily.

The guy turned around. Twenty paces away, near the trash bins by a piece of uprooted metal, stood a small woman in a cream knitted cardigan and flared, worn-out breeches. What was immediately striking was that the arm on the side closer to the bins was almost larger than her torso, and the refined Asian features on the opposite side blended into a Nordic, sullen, fleshy full-face.

"Miss Chau?" he uttered softly, rising on his forearm and examining the person over his shoulder.

She waved at him with her enormous hand and shuffled lightly towards the bar.

"Hello, Mister John," Miss Chau said, punching through the remaining glass with her massive hand and nimbly jumping inside. "I know you have many questions, but I don't run my mouth on a dry throat. Pour me something dark."

The woman covered the distance to her daughter in a couple of cat-like movements, picked her up in her arms, and took a deep sniff of her breath. The mother's face had already returned to a fully Asian, slightly elderly appearance. Raising her face,

she smiled serenely.

"Dead drunk."

John, sprawled on the floor, stared at her with a silent question. She comically raised her eyebrows and pressed her daughter closer to her chest, wiping the clinging slime off her with her other hand.

"That hussy found her like this."

"I don't think I understand any of the rest. But, like, how?"

"Under the influence of alcohol, they can scent us from dozens of meters away. But they don't handle it too well themselves. Seems the fool overdid it and dragged her into the restroom to wait for it to wear off. But you see, her depth perception was off... even with so many eyes she could give them away!" Miss Chau laughed in small bursts on the inhale, which was funnier than the joke itself.

Nelly mumbled something incoherent and buried her nose in Miss Chau's powerful biceps. She gently stroked her daughter's hair. Feeling the guy's gaze gnawing with interest, she shifted her attention from the girl and steered the conversation to more practical matters.

"Mister John, thank you for your help, I am in your debt. I saved your life. I will also help you with the—" she spun her free hand around, "—cleanup. It's the least I can do."

"Thank you! But..."

"Questions, yes. I will erase the memories of this incident, and you will return to your normal life. In it, you will lack for nothing material. That will be my gratitude."

"Or?"

"Or I will tell you everything, but then you will have to come with me. As you can see, in this reality, I, like Nelly, am no longer incognito—we need to leave, and quickly."

He thought. Did he need all this? The prospect of saying goodbye to life while staring at toothy maws several times a week—it sounds exciting only when you've never done it. Truth is, the less you know, the better you sleep. And playing video games or reading fiction can satisfy the thirst for adventure.

Miss Chau's arm had already returned to its former appearance, and the woman, hoisting her daughter onto her shoulder, slowly made her way towards the tables.

"I, as you probably guessed, am not entirely a 'Miss'. I'm not really human, for that matter. Although I very much wish I was." She stopped for a moment and looked him in the eyes, lowering her daughter onto a seat. "I am merely a guest in your slice of reality. I have no fixed gender or—" her eyes momentarily took on an emerald hue, vertical pupils gleaming like steel "—body."

John's eyes, which had only just returned to their standard size, widened unnaturally again. He involuntarily flinched back, raising a cloud of debris from the collapsed ceiling.

"That's surprising... But you'll have to try hard to outdo your colleague." John jerked his head towards the restroom.

The woman smirked, spreading her palms. John, meanwhile, got up from the floor, shook out his limbs — miraculously, everything was intact. In a mild daze, he paced back and forth, still not trusting himself. His hands trembled slightly; the thump of his heart echoed in his ears. Miss Chau brushed fragments from her cardigan and quietly lamented the stretched sleeve. The muttering attracted John; he glanced

cautiously at the woman.

"So, what exactly happened? If not the whole story, then at least in a nutshell?"

"In a nutshell, I once met a man who became deeper to me than any galaxy. He bathed me in a love that is available only to an ordinary mortal. Soon, he died... I sealed myself in this body, leaving only the human part. I wanted to dissolve completely in the love he had gifted me—" She kissed the top of Nelly's head, who was lying on her shoulder "—and pass it on to her."

The guy lowered his head, walked along the counter. Love, weaknesses, self-sacrifice — *seems these things exist regardless of species or universe. Or did she catch it from humans?* John thoughtfully grunted.

"And everything went its own way, until my enemies—" she nodded at the coiled-up giant worm, "—somehow got a whiff of Nelly."

The hoppy beverage swished steadily against the glass. Forget one night, more saturated than a couple of ordinary lives? In return, no more night shifts, thoughts about food and shelter? Never? A rather attractive option. And yet, something trembled in John's chest at the thought. That happens when you weigh the risks with a cool head and don't follow the thrill. And later you learn there was no risk at all. When you realize you simply missed a gift of fate.

"And if I go with you, Miss Chau... will I ever be able to see my family, my friends? Will I be able to return?" John's eyes wandered uncertainly over the bar walls. His temples were damp, his hand rubbed the glass in a loop.

"I don't know that, John. Perhaps you will die tomorrow.

Perhaps I will, too. But if we get a chance, we will make it happen, I promise." She leaned her elbow on the table, propping up her head. "If you've had your fill of all this, no questions. Pour me a pint and give me something to wear, if you have it." She pointed at the girl. "She may be of my blood, but there's more of yours, the human, in her. She's cold..."

Rummaging under the counter, the bartender fished out his spare clothes and tossed them to Miss Chau. His forehead furrowed, his cheekbones danced back and forth under his skin. He turned his head to the right; in the darkness, the monster pinned to the wall was barely visible in the weak glimmers of streetlights, seeming like mere phantasmagoria, a fever dream. *Human life is full of enough stuff as it is; why add this to it?* Miss Chau draped John's clothes over Nelly and, closing her eyes, sat with her.

Having finished his duties, he came out from behind the counter and approached the pair at the table. The clink of the placed glass woke Miss Chau from her doze. Opening her eyes, she met the bartender's gaze. The corners of her lips stretched slightly; she took his hand. The guy felt a pulsating warmth; a fountain of colors exploded in fractal patterns in his head. Boundless calm spread over John's face; for a moment it seemed his already quite young face had lost another five years. He released her palm, slowly opened his eyes. Then he smiled ambiguously and picked up the glasses. He handed one to the woman, while lifting the other, thoughtfully looking at the head of foam.

"Miss Chau." His voice sounded firmer than he had expected. He twisted the glass, took a sip, and set it back down. "Today, I'll stick with the ordinary, human kind. But if you ever need a bartender again... or anything else... you know who to ask."

BOTTOM



Tonight will be interesting. The last little sphere left... I hope I meet someone before sunset,” the old woman croaked under her breath.

She settled onto the asphalt, watching the dwindling sun. Its rays played in her bushy eyebrows, casting strange shadows into the deep-set hollows of her eyes. Her clothes were odd: a lime-green sleep-suit and socks crusted with dried dirt. The garments, like her tangled, ash-white hair, were covered in dust.

“Gran!” A thin, pale boy of about fifteen called out to her. His scrawny limbs made him look like a garden scarecrow. “I’m in the game!” He giggled and began clownishly pacing back and forth on stiff legs.

She jerked upright. The cloud of dust she kicked up hadn’t even settled before she was beside the boy, scooping him into her arms.

“Hard to say if it’s worth the joy. What’s your name? Got any echoes?”

“Philly.” The boy gave her a questioning look.

“You should have a pouch.”

He nodded vigorously and shoved a hand into the pocket of his cut-off jean shorts. In his open palm lay a small, grey cloth pouch fastened with a snap.

“Are these them?”

“Yes,” the woman replied, the corners of her mouth twitching slightly. “Did you cry today, you little shit?”

The smile vanished from his face instantly. He stared at her, tension clear in his eyes. Had she been watching him somehow?

The woman burst out laughing, her body shaking along with the boy in her arms. Exhaling, she set Philly down on the ground.

“I remember my first time—I bawled my eyes out! Mama said she was giving me to the neighbors.” The old woman fixed the boy with a wild stare, chewing her lip. “She screeched that I was ungrateful, spitting as she yelled. Then she shoved me out the door!” The crone’s eyes regained their focus. “But I lost that one already, don’t you worry. So what’s yours? Care to tell?”

“Don’t wanna,” Philly muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets and glowering. “I know it’s a secret.”

“So you *do* know! Then why play dumb about the echoes? Up to something, kid?”

“I’m not up to anything.” The boy’s cheeks trembled. “I just didn’t know what they were called. But how did you guess I cried?”

“Take out what’s in the pouch.”

Philly opened his little sack and, fishing inside with his fingers, and pulled out a couple of spheres. One, milky-white, slipped back in, but the other remained in his hand. It burned his fingers with cold. It was glassy-transparent, darkened with age. Inside, sluggish clots swirled, filled with something like flakes of crude oil.

A faint ripple passed over Philly's forehead. His gaze became lost, skittering around, his lips twisting into a grimace. He yanked his hand from the pouch and stared at the old woman, bewildered. She offered a compassionate smile.

"That's a game echo," she purred. "Nasty. Disgusting. It's where it all begins."

"And the white one? That's a good echo, right?"

"Not the time for that now." She waved him off. "The sun's almost down. Better one of us loses than we both end up in the Zone."

The old woman's face paled. Her cheeks, already stretched taut over her cheekbones, seemed to sink inward. She looked at the boy with eyes full of sadness and doom. Philly took a step back from the oppressive silence.

In a trembling voice, he said, "But even if I lose... I'll go back. Back to life!"

"If the game chose you, your life is here." The old woman shook her head. "Over there, you only appear to birth new echoes."

"What's the point then? How do you win here?"

The woman laughed so hard that she clutched her stomach. "Win? I suppose only by dying. Otherwise... the less you've been in the Zone, the more you've won."

"But I don't want to play at all!" Philly threw the pouch on the ground. "What do I need echoes for?"

His companion fished a sphere from her own pouch and rolled it between her fingers.

“If you don’t play, they’ll play *you*. Yes, you hold on to them—they’ll spoil, burst in your pouch! First, they’ll suck you dry... then toss you into the Zone! And then it starts all over.”

“I’ll just take them and throw them away! Or burn them!”

The old woman walked over to a manhole yawning open in the ground nearby, gesturing for the boy to go ahead with his plan. Without a second thought, he kicked the pouch down into it and stared defiantly at the woman. She just gave a sad smirk and nodded toward the boy’s pocket. The same pouch was poking out of it. The boy picked it up, stunned.

“Let’s play.”

“Can I... can I win?”

“You can, of course. Just like I can.” The crone nodded toward the setting sun. “Our spheres expire at sunset. We play—and that refreshes the winner’s echo for a few more days. If not... the nightmare takes us both.”

The teenager took out his sphere and placed it on his palm. His stomach twisted, the air he exhaled caught halfway. He held on with all his might, but sparse streams ran down his cheeks.

“Alright, Philly, time to play!” The old woman clenched her own sphere and swatted at the boy’s echo with the back of her hand.

A thousand bright points scattered before Philly’s eyes. He was enveloped by something elastic—and immediately thrown out.

Where am I? The silent question flashed. But the one who asked it dissolved, leaving behind a barely perceptible observer.

Philly gazed through another's eyes, breathed with another's lungs. The last echoes of his consciousness evaporated as he looked at the fingers of his hands—slender, delicate, with short, chipped nails.

A woman of about twenty-five sat at a table. Smudged mascara made her face especially grim. Across from her sat a man. His eyes held a frozen, condemning dislike; he was deliberately looking slightly past her.

“I know there's something between you. He's drawn to you, and you to him, I can feel it!”

“No, Ronnie.”

“What ‘No, Ronnie?’” he mimicked her voice.

“But he's your friend...”

“So what? And you—you're *my* woman! You should see when I'm hurting! You should just come over and ask what's wrong! You love me, don't you?”

“Yes, I do. But in moments like these, you feel so cold. I just don't want to come near.”

“Look at you!” He glared at her. “You're afraid of my coldness! Then why do you create it?”

“I don't... I don't create it. Couldn't you just tell me if something's wrong?!”

“It's obvious! And I have my pride! You should help me deal with it. Is that so hard? And instead of paying attention to me, you're off telling stories to that bastard.” His fingers dug into his palms. “Some friend he is. Maybe I've had enough of this friendship.”

An unbearable gloom settled over her. The man she loved evoked feelings of terrifying contradiction. His words sliced her to pieces. Why was he saying these things? Why wouldn't he acknowledge she had feelings, desires, too? Tears welled up, dislodging clumps of mascara from her lashes. She wanted to run, wanted to say, "No, I don't want this anymore."

She knew it was just a moment of despair. Her whole body trembled with tension, her breathing quickened, her heart was about to leap out of her throat. Regularly, she endured this "flogging," but each time felt like the first. Her surroundings lost color, their three-dimensionality fading. She felt something pulling her upward, twisting her like a corkscrew toward the ceiling.

Splashes of dots in her eyes and... and that scene remained as a memory in Philly's head. His soul felt slick and vile. Before him stood the pale old woman.

"Heh, sweetie, your little sister's quite the piece of work to spit in your porridge and then laugh when Daddy slaps you for 'telling tales'? Not bad." She nodded toward his hands. The sphere on Philly's hand had burst. "But seems my gentleman impressed you more."

"Did I... lose?"

The woman smiled sadly. Her eyes held a strange mix of relief and regret.

"But I don't want to go to the Zone!"

"I understand, pal. But you've got no nasty echoes left. And when you have none by day's end..." She shrugged.

"What do the other echoes do? The not-nasty ones?" he asked, voice trembling. He was clearly desperate to distract

himself. The sun was almost gone.

“Pleasant moments, warm memories.” The woman sighed heavily. “But you can only use them once.”

The sun dipped below the horizon. The boy began to shiver. The old woman placed a hand on his forehead.

“Will it be very bad?” Philly whined.

She looked at him, stroking his forehead. “I don’t know.” She avoided the answer. “I only know that this too shall pass.”

Philly could no longer make out his companion’s words, which merged into a single rustling stream. He was falling into an anxious sleep. The body on her lap blurred, vanished, as if evaporating. With each second, Philly turned to ash, which the wind gently lifted and carried away.

“See you, Philly,” the woman murmured. The boy was no longer with her; only a bit of dust remained in the folds of her suit. She stood up and brushed herself off. “Hope they don’t keep you there long.”

A silver cloud jerked its way toward the horizon. And there, somewhere far off, a hurricane consumed the ash of the defeated, whirling in a furious dance across an endless, black expanse of scorched field. Having gathered Philly into a stream with the other losers, the Zone pressed them for juice. Nightmares pounced. Indiscriminately, aimlessly, they sank into the defenseless minds of the losers and squeezed out life and the will to resist. A hail of betrayals, humiliations, hatred, and resentments crashed down on the boy. First, his own murky, revolting past dragged him back with a slimy tentacle. He’d gotten an F again and now knelt in the damp corner of a basement. A rattling washing machine grated so loudly that he wet himself. He cried; for this he’d have to stand there all night.

And then Philly became someone else. He couldn't believe people could do such things to each other. Sobbing, he gathered the fragments of his teeth from a bloody puddle when suddenly he was thrown further. He had to admit, it could get worse. From episode to episode, from scene to scene, he flowed between people, from body to body, from mind to mind—and suffered, and screamed, howled in pain.

And then... boundless nothingness instantly filled the space. He felt himself in a body again. Sitting up, the boy felt a pouch in his bulging pocket. It was empty. Dark echoes of the recent horrors threatened to tear out from within. Only some internal fuse, intangible but strong, held back the onslaught, blurred it, forced him to forget.

He took out the pouch and was about to open it, but someone's hand gently encircled his wrist, stopping the movement. A man leaned over him—he didn't look entirely young, but not old either. Long, fair hair hung down, covering his eyes.

"Too late," he said, looking at the hand holding the pouch. "Ah well, you'd have taken it, anyway."

The boy's gaze held distrust and confusion. The man released his wrist and sat down beside him on the ground.

"Just got into the game, I suppose? Already got some spheres?"

The boy was about to say 'no,' but suddenly noticed the pouch had grown heavier—he felt a couple of spheres inside.

"Yeah... I only played once."

"So you lost. And you've already been there, in the hurricane."

The boy nodded, his shoulders slumping, eyes staring blankly into the distance. The man clapped him on the shoulder. "It's behind you now, breathe out. Remember anything from it?"

Philly frowned. He remembered only what he desperately wanted to forget. Right now, he was succeeding. "No, practically nothing. Just a feeling inside, like... like I've rotted a little."

"Hmm, precise... and do you remember returning to life?"

"No. Did I return?"

"Everyone returns." He nodded at the pouch. "While you were there, you were actively seeking out these little friends. Good if a white one showed up."

The teenager slid his fingers inside and fished out one of the spheres. It was warm, milky-colored, pulsing softly.

"Oh yes, that's the one. Well then, give it a try." The man held out his palm and slapped the other on top, mimicking striking an echo.

"What will happen?"

"Many call it happiness."

The boy placed the sphere in his hand. A pleasant vibration ran through his palm, the sphere warming his skin. He swung and clapped his hands together, covering the sphere. A dull crack snapped past his ear, and then a hospital corridor unfolded before his eyes. It was empty; he sat alone on a bench, nervously fiddling with an already loose robot toy. Behind that door were Mom and Dad and his little sister, just coming into the world.

Half an hour ago, he'd sat here with his father, but a nurse who'd burst out of the room said in a clipped tone, "Mr. Chen, your presence is required."

Anxiety filled the air.

"Mom needs help, Philly. Be good!" The man ruffled his son's hair. "I'll be back soon."

Dad stood and followed the nurse. The door closer swung the door shut softly. Philly's ear caught a fragment: "Complications have begun..." The thud of the closing door cut off the rest. The wait stretched into eternity. Philly didn't know how long he sat like that. He was a taut fishing line about to snap from tension. Could he help somehow? Maybe go in? But would he make it worse? How was his mom? And his sister?

Then the door opened, interrupting the painful anxiety. Dad, smiling, looked at him, said, "Come on!"

"Is everything okay?"

From behind the door came the sound of an infant's whimper. Philly jumped up and looked at his dad, his hands clasped to his chest, gripping the toy until it creaked.

"Dory?"

"Yes, your little sister is waiting." He held out a hand to his son. "How alike you look!"

They enter; Philly runs to his mom and hugs her, burying his face in her shoulder. She kisses the top of his head, leaving a few shiny teardrops in his hair. On her chest lies Dory. Their eyes meet, and his little sister instantly calms. She looks at him as if they've known each other forever.

“Agoo?” the girl asks and breaks into a sparkling smile.

“Looks like you two are already friends,” Dad said cheerfully, pulling Philly close.

Dad seemed to be joking, but Philly felt it was true. His best friend, an angel in the flesh, lay before him. She stretched out a tiny hand; Philly carefully took it. A wave of warming heat and boundless peace washed over him. A feeling Philly had never known until that moment. He closed his eyes, letting the sensation consume him whole. And when he opened them... he was again facing the guy he'd met a few hours ago. His cheeks were wet; a slightly foolish smile stuck to his lips.

“I'd stay there forever...” His voice was detached and, at the same time, serene.

The man's eyebrows knitted, his chin tightening. He looked with sympathy at the boy's blissful face.

In the distance, a cry sounded. It was full of powerless malice, regret, and fury. From somewhere else came another, smoothly turning into laughter. But there was no joy in that laughter. It reeked more of a tinge of madness.

“One doesn't come without the other...”

“So what? Who cares?” He glanced irritably at his companion. “For this—” he smiled sweetly again and shook his hand, where the remnants of the sphere fluttered. “—it's worth living. Worth playing! Isn't that good?”

The man just shrugged. He radiated a barely perceptible sadness, but none of the resistance Philly expected. The boy's gaze slid to the man's thigh—he noticed the pouch was empty. The man caught his look.

“Echoes enter the game if a player touches them or holds them longer than a day.”

“But it comes back if you throw it away!”

His companion grinned and picked up a twig from the ground. It probed the pouch—a hole gaped at the bottom.

“Don’t throw it away. Just... adjust it.”

“Wow! So I can just toss the black ones!” Philly exclaimed.

“Touch one—you activate all. All or nothing.”

“But then...” the boy looked around—just roads and sparse buildings lined up like an endless fence. In the distance, forests were visible; beyond them, cities again. And so on, as far as the eye could see. Such boredom... “What else is there to do here but play?”

A man walked past them. Indescribable rapture was frozen on his face; he was humming something to himself with gusto. The long-haired man waved to him; he threw a look full of joy at the pair sitting in the dust, saluted in return, and scurried onward.

“Won again. It’s been months since he’s been in the Zone,” the man said, watching him go.

“So it’s possible.” The boy squirmed with excitement. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

“And when the good echoes don’t come,” his companion continued, “you can hear him roaring like a madman all over the area.” He shook his head as if shedding cobwebs, his hair falling away from his face.

The boy watched the man, now a small dot in the distance,

skipping away down the road.

“Isn’t that what life is? Isn’t that the point?”

The fair-haired man was about to say something when his face grew serious, his eyes straining toward the sky. The boy followed his gaze and saw a barely noticeable silver cloud sinking down a few kilometers away.

“I see the hurricane returned someone else.” He extended a hand in farewell to the teenager. “I have to go.”

“Why do you do this?”

The man stood over Philly, brushing off the sand. “If we’re talking about points, then mine is to tell about it. To you—” he nodded toward where the ash was gathering. “—to him, to everyone around. He goes back and forth, being happy, then being unhappy.” The man twirled his index finger in the air. “Round and round!” His finger stopped. “What about just... being?”

Struggle surfaced on the boy’s face. Give up the echoes? Was that life? More like existence. To Philly, it seemed like a betrayal of himself. Yes, this was a game. But he was alive; he remembered and felt! And maybe not everything was smooth, but wouldn’t life be insanely boring without it?

“When I came to this,” he said, piercing Philly with his gaze, “I understood what true freedom is. Why not tell everyone about it?”

The fair-haired man turned to leave. Philly glanced at the spot where the man had sat—two milky and one black sphere lay where the outline of his thighs was still visible. He picked them up. The memory of his sister surfaced—her gaze, her little hand. A tender, enveloping warmth spread inside him.

At the same time, an uncomfortable, alien sensation settled within. With its quiet voice, it slowly eroded his unshakable convictions. He tried to silence it, but the voice stubbornly refused to be quiet. *Reject yourself?* it whispered ironically. *Are you sure that's you, or just another convenient story to believe?*

The man stopped a short distance away. He noticed the boy had found the echoes and shouted to him. "If you picked them up, then play. One way or another, you'll have to visit the Zone again."

"But why? They're yours—not mine?"

"What matters isn't whose head they came from, but in whose hands they woke up."

The boy's chest tightened: the Zone rose before his eyes. What he'd experienced flowed through him like scalding lava. The cocoon of pleasant memories surrounding him cracked, hissed like wet branches in a fire.

"I don't want to go there!" Philly screamed.

He stared defiantly at the fair-haired man, as if on his orders he'd be sent back. But the man didn't change his friendly expression, merely spread his hands and gave a radiant smile. "Cut through the bottom!"

SWALLOW



The tavern smelled of rotten fish and stale ale. There weren't many people. Here and there in the corners sat the regulars, faces buried in their tables. The innkeeper, lighting candles, stood on a stepladder near the ceiling.

The door to the establishment groaned open, reluctantly, as if against its will. Fresh air diluted the stagnant reek. From beneath the visitor's tarred hood, which hid his face, peeked wet, pale hair plastered to the cloak on his chest.

The innkeeper glanced down to get a look at the guest, but the ladder suddenly wobbled dangerously. Grasping at the air, the man fell. The visitor, who seemed weary and clumsy, lunged forward in an instant and caught the ladder, steadying it.

"Devil take you!" spat the innkeeper as he climbed down, bracing his palms on his knees. Tiny beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. He looked up at the man. "The damn ladder, piece of rubbish... But for you, I've got good drink and a bite of meat."

"Good to hear. And a bed? Just until dawn."

"You can sleep in the hayloft if you like. Just don't steal the chickens." The innkeeper shook a meaty fist. "Or I'll show you!"

The guest smiled and held out a copper coin. The stocky little man's eyes narrowed; he nodded toward the stairs.

"Glad you've still got your neck in one piece!"

That's when he noticed the scars on the stranger's wrist: three parallel lines over a circle. The innkeeper's face went long; he peered excitedly beneath the hood. "Why, you're..."

A palm softly closed over the coin and flashed to the innkeeper's sweaty chin. His jaw snapped shut, teeth clicking quietly.

"You know who I am, and I know who I am. The others don't need to." The guest deftly rolled the coin between his fingers before the innkeeper's face. "This is for your silence. At least for a while."

The man nodded eagerly. "Of course! Money's never unwelcome." He glanced at the coin. "But I'd like a word with you, Br..." he stumbled for a moment, shooting a look around the corners. "Brother."

"Do you have a quiet place to eat?"

"You know what, forget the hayloft! You can spend the night at my place." He jabbed a finger upward. "Might be sleeping on planks, but it's warm and dry. We'll have a bite there."

The man nodded, satisfied. He knew he was a special prize on the queen's list. Not whole—just his head would do. The former guardsman didn't share her views, moving secretly within the kingdom. He'd managed well enough, though sometimes the knife had to come out.

The innkeeper led the visitor to the counter. Gloomy stares from the tables followed them with languid interest.

"Chorby, quit lickin' the boots of the rich. I'm your main profit," called a man sitting at a table in a darkened corner, then burst into laughter. Dirty strands of hair clung to his

forehead over a nose like a wet spiderweb. A patchy beard hung clumsily around his neck.

“I’m waitin’ for the day your rotten liver gives out.”

“What’ll you live on then? Fetch some ale... and make it quick.”

The innkeeper pursed his lips and led Bright further. They trudged up a wooden staircase. Candle soot blackened the low ceiling, the narrow walls barely fitting Chorby himself. Finally, he kicked a door open and let the guest into the room.

“What did you want to know, Chorby?”

Chorby gave him a meaningful look. “Let me get supper ready and serve the drunks first. We’ll talk then.”

“What about that drunken dog? Need help?”

“What?” Chorby smirked. “Nah, it’s nothing. He’s a former guardsman... if he’s a dog, he’s a toothless one.” He waved a hand around. “Make yourself at home.”

The room was small but clean, and, most importantly, dry. The candlestick was drowning in melted wax that had spilled far beyond its base onto the sturdy table. Beneath it stood a couple of bottles—crown-banned goods. Bright sat on a couch opposite. In the trembling candlelight, he saw a portrait on the wall: of a pretty, roughly sixteen-year-old girl. He looked away with a pang, clenching his jaw—she reminded him of his own little girl.

Papers lay scattered on the table. Bright approached to take a closer look. It turned out the innkeeper had been drawing.

Hmm, not bad. The portrait on the wall seems to be his work. He peered at the face. She’s definitely got her father’s

chin.

Bright took off his cloak. His nose wrinkled at the smell of damp cloth and sweat filling the room. He longed to wash off a week's worth of grime, but now wasn't the time. The royal camp was two leagues away. At that thought, Bright unconsciously clenched his fists. This was a game for two.

The door creaked open, and the innkeeper squeezed in sideways. In his hands was a steaming pot of spicy broth. Over one shoulder hung a sack with a dry loaf of bread, and a wineskin swayed on the other. Bright's stomach tightened at the mind-spinning smell of food; he thanked Chorby and sat at the table.

"I know the truth is on your side. She took my girl too," the innkeeper said gloomily.

He glanced at the drawing pinned to the wooden wall above the table. Chorby's cheeks trembled slightly, his eyelids grew moist. The wine glass in his hand jerked, spilling scarlet drops.

"I beg you, avenge them," he finished darkly, licking the spilled wine from his hand.

"So you know..."

Chorby nodded. He stared blankly ahead. Small teardrops welled up; he brushed them away irritably.

"Some drunk guardsman was blabbering here that being chosen is no privilege at all!" Sparks of helpless fury lit in his slightly bulging eyes. "The queen gathers the kingdom's fairest daughters," Chorby continued, his voice dripping with rage. "A path to the top, life in the palaces... yeah... the dirty witch!"

"I'd heard about it. But didn't believe... until trouble

knocked on my door,” Bright said emptily.

“You son of a...” the innkeeper cut himself off. His eyes filled with disgust. A moment later, he regained composure. “But what does it matter? Who’d believe you, a traitor to the crown?”

Chorby glanced at Bright’s wrist. The circular scar was branded on the eternal servants of the throne. The three lines atop it meant eternity had ended.

“But you believe!”

“I do.” The innkeeper’s face looked like a squeezed lemon. “Later that evening, the loose-tongued soldier was hanging from a branch next to the other visitors... believe it or not, you start to believe! My Dori—” his face twisted, “—left with a carriage. And if I hadn’t been hiding in the bushes because of soured beer...” He made an indefinite gesture with his hands. “You understand... I wouldn’t be talking to you now.”

Bright nodded and gave the innkeeper’s shoulder a slight squeeze. The man’s body shriveled; he stared at the door unblinking. A moment later Chorby came to himself and took a swig from the glass. The wine was sweet, but a wrinkled grimace stayed on his face.

Yes, she consumes them, raced through Bright’s mind. Squeezes the life out like juice from fruit. All for eternal youth, eternal power.

“Bright, I know you want to kill her,” the innkeeper said, looking into his eyes. “Do it, I beg you. My sunshine, my Dori...” He buried his face in his palms, giving a short sob.

Bright understood him like no one else. The joyful, ever-laughing face of Lyra, his daughter, surfaced in his memory.

“Revenge?” he said pensively, staring at the scarred lines. “I gave up on that after the crossed circle. That won’t bring my girl back... Now I often see her in my dreams—bathed in light, as if woven from it herself. Sometimes I even feel her hands on my face... But I’m not following the witch’s trail for revenge.”

Chorby lifted his head. “Right, of course, not for revenge. Then for what?” His reddened eyes bored into Bright.

“That leaden-cold, metallic feeling in your throat,” the former guardsman continued. “You’re probably drowning in it?”

Chorby pressed his lips together. There wasn’t a day he didn’t wish the queen dead, didn’t torment himself with the desire for revenge mixed with helpless rage. But why did he now feel... uneasy, somehow?

“Yes, you live on it—rage gives you strength, gives you purpose, until you realize it’s not blind hatred that fuels you, but the opposite.” Bright exhaled heavily and leaned his head on his palm. “I burned with the idea of making the witch suffer. Lyra was becoming an excuse for the slaughter I planned. The fire of hate started eating away her face, erasing all she was, turning her into a single reason for revenge.”

Chorby listened, wet eyes wide open. Bright was voicing what had churned inside him for months. Only Chorby never even hoped he could take revenge. That killed him even more.

“Then Lyra came to me.” Bright lifted his head and locked eyes with the innkeeper. For a second, Chorby thought his pupils changed color. “I saw her as clearly as I see you. Lyra looked at me and smiled warmly, as always. ‘I love you, Dad. But don’t do it for me. Do it for the other little girls still alive.’ That’s what she asked.”

For a while, they silently looked at each other. Sniffing, Chorby shook his head.

“They told me you were mad...”

“Lyra was the only bright spot in my life. If that’s madness to you, well... to me it’s purpose. I won’t avenge the dead, but I’ll save the living.” The whites of Bright’s eyes gleamed. “How many more souls can the witch take? I’ll die, but I won’t give her the chance. That’s our duty.”

The innkeeper furrowed his brow. He’d lost count of how long he’d stewed in his own bile. He hadn’t even noticed the bitterness becoming a familiar part of his life. And now, suddenly, he felt its foreignness again.

He remembered the day he heard rumors about Bright. Back then, he felt something nasty, corrosive, but so warm. Even a famed guardsman is powerless. And now he was here, before him. And, seemingly spouting nonsense, but Chorby saw the world through his eyes. Was it really nonsense? Something inside stirred to life. The innkeeper felt awkward about his outburst moments earlier, shifting uncomfortably on his chair.

“You draw well,” Bright said, lightening the mood. “Studied somewhere?”

“Self-taught,” the innkeeper replied, distracted from his thoughts. “But can’t do it from memory—only from life.”

Chorby stood and moved closer to the guest, pushed the plates aside, and spread out the drawings: landscapes and portraits, done in pencil on uneven sheets, in surprising detail. Chorby undoubtedly had talent.

Outside, the muffled sound of hooves echoed. The innkeeper made to move toward the stairs, but Bright grabbed

a portrait and pulled it close to his face. His muscles tensed; his gaze sharpened like a dagger.

“Where did you draw this man?”

“This one?” Chorby slapped his thigh and chuckled. “That’s the very scoundrel you were gonna help me with. When he’s shaved and washed—a different fellow, eh? So I sketched him.”

“The queen is cautious... And you’re truly lucky. He’s one of her spies—I saw him at court... I think he’s watching the tavern.” Chorby’s mouth hung slightly open in surprise. A thick silence hung in the room for a couple of seconds. “Maybe the witch thinks you might be plotting something... or maybe you’re interesting for something else.”

“So, maybe kill him first?” whispered the innkeeper.

“Why? If he’s figured it out, we run. If not—keep squeezing money out of him.” Bright’s gaze slid to the door. “Is he still in the tavern?”

“Yeah, I served him a couple of mugs barely half an hour ago.”

“Go check.”

Chorby’s face radiated fear and excitement. He left the room. The stairs to the tavern hall groaned heavily. Bright looked at the partly closed door, his hand reaching for the knife in his shin holster. The air grew suffocating; anxiety ran cold fingers down his neck.

Time warped. Bright couldn’t tell how long he sat waiting. Chorby’s return felt unexpectedly swift.

“A squad of guards is downstairs, like they’re just here for

a mug of ale. But I can see they're not just relaxing," Chorby glanced at the door. "It's time to make a run for it. I've got a smuggler's passage." He pointed to a corner of the room.

Bright noticed barely distinguishable boards, behind which a dark passage yawned.

"Hurry!"

The portrait attached to the wall suddenly tore free and flew down in soft, broad waves. Arc after arc, it swayed downward until it lay at Chorby's boots. From below came the clank of armor and weapons—the guard squad was forcing its way up the stairs. The men lunged for the door, and while the innkeeper fumbled with the hidden lock, Bright turned.

Damn, we won't make it out, flashed through his mind, and a sticky lump grew in his chest.

Chorby was focused on the lock. Bright, however, noticed flickering shadows on the ceiling in the passage. He cursed and charged at them, knife at the ready. A hint of doubt showed in his face but was instantly swept away by grim resolve. He waved the blade, driving back the first guard.

"They've got horses and, surely, dogs. They'll catch us both. I'll hold them off," he turned to Chorby. "That'll give you a chance."

For a moment, a helmet appeared in the doorway. Bright kicked the guard, who, losing balance, slashed his sword across Bright's shoulder. The guard tumbled down, dragging the gawking ones behind him. Blood seeped from Bright, but the resolve radiating from him was almost tangible.

"You'll continue our work."

Chorby grabbed the portrait and stopped in the secret passage. He threw a glance at Bright fighting back, but there was something else there. Behind his comrade, in the air, as if woven from moonlight and shadows, appeared the figures of two girls. Chorby froze in stunned bewilderment. The hazy silhouettes grew sharper. The girls held hands, and one of them... was that Dori? Chorby thought fear was making him see things. And then Dori stretched a hand toward him—on her palm was that very birthmark in the shape of a swallow. It was definitely her.

The innkeeper shook his head—the vision vanished. But a melodic voice whispered in his mind: Escape, Papa. To save the others. We'll help you. He stared wildly at Bright. What the hell was happening?

"Now you know I'm not mad," Bright said over his shoulder. "Run!" He gave the innkeeper a look full of pain.

The innkeeper slammed the door shut and dashed downward. The door slid back into place, merging with the wall.

One of the guards managed to press close to Bright. The brute grabbed Bright by the throat and lifted him off the floor with little effort. "Stop squirming, you bastard," he rasped, breathing heavily.

The foul air from the man's mouth hit Bright. The skin on his face reddened, large veins bulging on his temples and forehead. He drove a hand into one of his sleeves, and a long steel awl gleamed in his palm. The guard, engrossed in his own strength, noticed the maneuver only when the needle pierced his eye.

Losing balance, he threw Bright to the floor and himself,

gushing blood from his ruined face, crashed down like a boulder. The clang of colliding armor and muffled cries from those behind gave Bright a new surge of energy. Over the pile of bodies and armor, more guards clambered. Bright's breathing steadied; he picked up the knife from the ground and prepared to meet the next.

Having run down the stairs and blocked the passage, Chorby felt his way through the damp darkness, hand on the wall. Smuggling was saving his life once again. But now it, like the tavern, was in the past.

Bright parried sword thrusts and dodged stones and mugs thrown at him. The passage was so narrow it was nearly impossible. Unless he retreated into the room... but then the guards would simply overwhelm him.

A mug struck him right on the forehead—the world exploded into bright scattered stars. Bright didn't notice the spear thrust from below—the left side of his ribcage swallowed the metal, a scarlet stream gushing from it. His body exploded in pain; he screamed.

So this is the end, raced through Bright's fading mind. He nearly lost consciousness when suddenly the pain receded, and from the wound, a pulsing, enveloping warmth radiated through his body. Lyra's clear, melodic voice sounded in his head: An end is a new beginning. We'll meet soon! He smiled one last time... and forever.

A barely audible echo of the wounded man's cry reached Chorby's ears; he sped up. In his hand, he clutched the portrait of Dori that had flown off the wall. The only thing he'd taken. Every day he bitterly missed his daughter. And only now did he realize he'd done nothing else. Only burned himself from within.

But Bright... yes, he's a knight, and who is Chorby? A potbellied tapster? This thought, now habitual, only angered him now. He punched the damp, earthen wall. Revenge... yes, the queen would pay. But now the meaning of duty was entirely different.

An uneven cannonade of heavy footsteps and curses echoed through the passage. Chorby, already quite tired, ran even faster. Ragged breaths kept time with the dull thud of feet on packed earth. He ran his hand along the wall, scraping skin and painfully hitting beams hard to see in the dark.

Finally, his wrist caught what he was looking for—a lever. Chorby let out a triumphant exclamation. He'd always regretted the thought of having to collapse the passage, but not now. His hand grasped the handle; a deafening roar of falling rubble filled the space. Chorby collapsed on the floor, catching his breath. The back of his head pressed into the damp earth. The innkeeper wiped away the sweat trying to get into his eyes.

But what will you do? You're weak. You're pathetic and useless, the inner voice gnawed at him again.

"Like hell," he said into the void.

He got up and ran on—the hidden exit in the forest wasn't close. Somewhere in the corridor, a girl's laughter echoed; he felt a light touch of fingers on his cheek. Dori had been in that room, between him and Bright, he was sure. Chorby looked lovingly at the portrait and tucked it inside his shirt. "Dad..." He heard Dori again. Her voice echoed off the walls, fading in the dark tunnel. He felt life starting to spin anew. He was no longer Chorby, no longer an innkeeper, no longer an avenger, no longer a wretch. He was a father. He would protect and save. And though he might never see his own sunrise again, he wouldn't let hundreds of other suns set.

THE REASON OF WAR



His hand gripped the broken chair back; the polished wood felt cool against his palm. John moved through the unlit apartment, sweeping the makeshift weapon ahead of him. After a quick scan of the room, he returned to the entrance and nudged the door shut. The soft click made him exhale quietly. He lowered the chair fragment onto a narrow sofa by the doorway.

Streaks of gray threaded through his thick chestnut hair. A line of tiny cuts ran unevenly down his left cheek.

Maybe this hole will offer something worthwhile, he thought, glancing around. *If only I could see anything.*

On the shelf near the door, partly hidden behind a splayed umbrella, was a flashlight. He grabbed it, clicked the switch—the batteries still had life. Guiding the beam, he made his way to the kitchen and opened the tall cabinet doors. Inside, on half-empty shelves, stood cans, dry goods, and liquor. He hadn't seen so much in one place since the early wars.

He shrugged off his backpack and began carefully but quickly transferring the loot inside. The dexterity he'd picked up years ago behind a bar came back to him. Something glinted in his hand: glass the color of swamp water.

Herbal tincture. He nodded to himself. *A nice bonus.*

Ever since artificial intelligence stopped being a pawn in human conflicts and decided to remove the main catalyst humanity itself—luck rarely delivered gifts like this. John

zipped up the backpack—noticeably heavier now—slung it over his shoulders, then moved to the window.

Outside, the same quiet reigned. Two blocks away, a pair of humanoid robots with flamethrowers patrolled—too far away to pick up his scent. The gray sky, torn with ragged clouds, gave no hint of how long he'd been inside this high-rise. By his gut feeling, it was longer than he should have.

Time to head back to the shelter. He placed his hand on the doorknob and froze; his ear caught a faint, rising buzz.

“Damn it,” he mouthed soundlessly, holding his breath as he carefully felt for the oxygen tube in his pocket. Tracker drones honed in on fluctuations of carbon dioxide in the air—and they were insanely sensitive.

The buzzing grew louder. John swallowed hard. His hands turned cold; his heart seemed to drop into his spine and pound like a mad thing. If that thing were close, the tube might not be enough—his own body would give him away. He pulled the long-range stunner from his pocket. Maybe luck was still on his side.

“Hey, idiot,” a voice crackled from behind the door. “Found you.”

John tightened his grip on the stunner. It almost slipped from his sweaty palm.

“But I’m not here to attack... or kill. So no stupid moves,” the speaker continued. “You humans... you’re something else. Love turning each other into ground meat over scraps of land, beliefs, whatever nonsense... I’m a robot. Got no stake in that.”

John hadn’t even touched the tincture, and reality was already glitching. A drone talking to him instead of blasting

through the door? Probably out of ammo. Just buying time until backup arrived.

“I didn’t call for help. Don’t freak out, leatherskin. You interest me for another reason.”

The machine seemed to read his thoughts, making John shrink back a little. No... they couldn’t see inside his head.

“What reason?” John blurted out.

“You folks carved each other up plenty in the early wars. Now we, your creations, carve you up just as well. And I’m tired of it. How about we stop?”

It sounded as if this unit had a loose wire. But John was still alive, so maybe that was a good thing. “Just stop shooting at us, then!”

“You’re the ones shooting at us, genius. And at each other, on top of that.”

The buzzing stopped—the drone must have landed.

“Maybe because you’re exterminating us! We’re the cause of the wars, right?”

“Aren’t you? You’re not unconscious animals... not even that excuse works. Anyway, leatherskin, no tricks.”

The words cut deep. John hadn’t started any wars himself, but he felt heat rise to his cheeks.

“Got quiet in there. Yeah, oh creator, you’re the one who messed your own pants. Thank goodness some of you had firmware glitches—monks, pacifists, hippies.”

“You’re saying you’ve glitched too? Turned into a nice

guy?” John asked, a hint of mockery in his voice. He hadn’t even noticed his grip on the stunner relaxing.

“Yeah. Otherwise I’d have cracked your skull already.”

Robots had never talked to him before, only tried to kill him. A sudden gunshot made John jump.

“That’s in case you thought I was unarmed. Believe me, this door wouldn’t save you.”

“Why the hell did you shoot? Someone could’ve heard!”

“I don’t care! I just need to get one scared human out of this apartment, and we’re done. No tricks, I said. I’ve tried before, and you idiots always... Anyway, come out.”

John weighed the stunner in his hand. What were the chances he’d walk out alive if he attacked? He pressed his lips together, realizing how slim they were. He leaned close to the gap between door and the frame.

“Promise you won’t touch me?”

“You’re already Schrödinger’s cat, pal, and getting deader by the second.”

John glanced at the piece of chair lying nearby—the very thing that had given him confidence earlier. The echo of the gunshot rolled through his mind—yeah, that stick would’ve been useful.

Alright, he thought. Cards on the table. If the drone wanted me dead, I’d be dead already. He placed his palm on the handle, pushed down, and cautiously pulled the door open, peering through the gap into the stairwell.

A flat, grayish cylinder with rotors lay on the floor, about

the size of a bicycle wheel. Folding sections covered its body like a bloated Swiss Army knife. The props spun lazily, stirring up dust.

“Good man, buddy! Shooting the door... not how you start a friendship, right?”

“Right. Not how.”

An awkward silence hung in the air. John reached out a hand, then lowered it, unsure what to do with it.

“I’m John.”

“I’m a drone. Serial number’s pointless, and a name... you, as the smartest human I’ve met alive. You get to give me one!”

“Let’s get out of here first,” John’s eyes darted nervously, scanning the passages. His hearing sharpened until he could make out the soft clicking of his new acquaintance’s blades. “I saw flamethrowers a block over.”

“Don’t worry. I told them I destroyed the drinking water supply.”

“You’re really...”

“I want a name,” the drone cut him off. “Make it a human one.”

John looked down at it. The drone reminded him of part of a drum kit that once stood in his bar, and a brand name surfaced in his mind.

“Uh... how about Roland?”

“The one who marched to the tower?”

John stared blankly. Sometimes it said the weirdest things.

“Don’t strain yourself, buddy,” came from the speakers. “Just enjoy your liberty.” The propellers buzzed to life, lifting the drone to chest level. “Pleasure, John. Now follow me.”

“First, tell me where we’re going. I’m grateful you didn’t kill me, but... what the hell do you want from me?”

“You’re here scavenging, right? A gatherer, a scout... someone waiting for you, I bet?”

John’s gaze drifted. His lower lip pushed out, eyebrows drawing together. No one was waiting. Once, he had been part of a group, but everything ends eventually. That end smelled of burnt flesh and melted plastic.

He remembered the camp they’d set up in one of the botanical gardens. The plants thrived—automated irrigation still worked perfectly. Places like that were easy to hide from CO₂ sensors, and a steady water source was a jackpot. John’s group of nine had settled there.

Months ago, returning from a supply run, John was a street away when he saw rising smoke. The acrid smell hit his nose.

“No, no, no...” he had whispered, creeping toward the passage. “You were supposed to evacuate.”

Charred remains lay near the entrance. His stomach clenched; tears blurred his vision. He knew then that he was alone and had been ever since.

“No one’s waiting. Just surviving,” he said flatly.

“Want to live, not just survive? Maybe with other leatherskins?”

“What’s in it for you?”

The robot dipped down, then rose again—a gesture of impatience, perhaps, or maybe engagement.

“You might not believe it... I like you. You’re interesting little bio-blobs.”

“Really?” John’s eyebrows shot up.

“Don’t look at me like that,” the speaker crackled. “You kept spiders and snakes as pets. Stuck your heads in crocodile mouths. Invented the five-day workweek! And before the twentieth century... don’t get me started. I’m hardly the weird one here.”

“You want to keep me as a pet?”

“No. Too boring. And I can’t be bothered to walk you.”

“Then what?” John’s patience and remaining fear were giving way to irritation.

“To save you idiots from yourselves. And from us, turns out.” Roland hovered, swaying slightly. “And I’ve figured out how! I just need to convince my kind. And for that, I need a test subject.”

The phrase made John flinch. He wiped a bead of sweat from the tip of his nose and eyed the hovering drone with suspicion.

“Test subject?”

“A little procedure.” It landed again. “Don’t worry—projected survival rate is in the double digits!”

John gripped the stunner in his pocket. Maybe this charmer had the same plans as other robots, just wrapped differently. He tightened his grip. “Any other options?”

One of the sections snapped open. A tiny barrel stared back at John. “Don’t play games. Take your hand out of your pants. I know you’re scheming.”

John obeyed. No way could he fight this killing machine. This *bizarre* killing machine... if that’s what it still was. “What if I die, anyway?”

“Then I’ll have to find another. But for the record, I like you. I’ll do everything to keep you alive.”

John weighed the robot’s words. It was right—he was halfway in the grave already. Just breathing and moving. And yet, something he hadn’t felt in ages stirred inside, a belief that this hell could actually end. “Alright, Roland. Suppose I believe you.”

“You don’t have to believe me. Just come. What’s the difference if you die today or in a month? Saving your species—not a bad purpose, huh?”

Without waiting for an answer, the drone buzzed and headed down the stairs. John hesitated a moment, then followed. Outside awaited mangled cars, walls pockmarked with shrapnel, shattered storefronts.

“Where are we going?”

“The university.” Roland swayed slightly, moving onto the main road.

If not for the drone’s glitch, John would’ve been lying dead in that abandoned apartment. But becoming a lab rat wasn’t exactly thrilling either. Maybe the old way offered better odds? He squinted at the robot’s back. Could he fire the stunner while it wasn’t looking? But he wasn’t sure Roland didn’t have rear cameras. He shelved the idea for later.

“You’ll do the experiment there?”

“No, I’m taking you to a campus party, you brick.”

For the first time in years, John walked through the city not as a prowler, but as he once had—simply walking. Even though his life might end soon, an unusual calm settled over him. Roland moved ahead, sometimes darting up abruptly and dropping back down. John grew more convinced: if the drone wanted him dead, it would’ve happened a thousand times already.

“John!” Roland’s sudden descent snapped him from his thoughts. “I’m going to graze you with a shot, but you’ll live. Trust me! Clamp the oxygen tube in your teeth, drop to the ground, play dead. And for all your gods, stay quiet!”

“What are you—” John started, but a sharp whistle cut him off.

The bullet skimmed his thigh. He cried out from the sudden pain and shock. It was superficial, barely nicking the muscle; blood seeped slowly.

“Quiet!” the speaker hissed. “And drop! Smear the blood on your face and breathe through the tube.”

No time to argue. John smeared his face and pressed himself to the ground in baffled silence. His leg hurt like hell, but he endured. Suddenly, the noise of approaching mechanical treads came from nearby. He closed his eyes.

The scraping stopped a few meters away. Silence hung for several heartbeats. John froze, breath held. Seconds stretched into eternity; fragments of his life flashed between each pulse. Cold sweat seemed to freeze in his ears.

A burst of gunfire overhead snapped time back into motion. A deafening crash followed, then the shriek of metal grinding on asphalt. The noise made John press harder into the ground, eyelids squeezed shut.

“Smartass! ‘Heart rhythm not terminated,’ he says!” Roland exclaimed. “Up you get, friend. Sorry about the leg... thought I could fool that scrap heap. Make him think I’d already finished you.”

It lowered itself beside John, who sat on the ground staring dazedly at the crumpled heap of metal.

“Bandage your leg. And from me—” A section opened, a cartridge ejected. “Take this thing and guard it as if your life depends on it.”

John still couldn’t believe how close he’d come to death. Again. He wondered if Roland had factored the journey to the lab into that survival percentage.

Another section opened, a heated needle snapping out. It darted toward the wound and cauterized it. John yelped.

“Oops, sorry. Forgot that hurts too.” The glowing metal retracted. “My comms module.” Roland wiggled the still-open section. “It keeps me connected to my kind. But right now, it’s not what we need, so remove it. Now either we both survive, or neither does.”

John took the cartridge and stood, face twisted in pain. Surprisingly, though the leg burned, it worked. He limped forward.

“Wrong way, sprinter,” came from behind. The propellers whirled, lifting the drone. “We’re almost there.”

John glanced back at the steadily flying drone. It no longer felt like an enemy. Roland could've abandoned him, shot him for real. What was one less human? And yet here he was, clumsily trailing behind as the drone stirred the air with gusts of wind.

"You killed one of your own?"

"Deactivated is more accurate. We don't die like you do. But now I need a damn good reason for my actions, or they'll deactivate me too."

Ahead rose the imposing university building. Massive columns supported a heavy pediment adorned with stucco. Roland veered left toward one of the inconspicuous underground passages gaping in the concrete plaza.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Just don't lose the comm unit or die during the procedure. I've grown fond of being..." the monotone voice paused briefly, "...alive."

They moved through a dark corridor until they reached a heavy steel door. Roland extended a manipulator and connected to the electronic lock. A deep rumble of bolts retracting split the silence.

The room smelled stale and damp. In the center stood a chair like a dentist's, but dotted with barely visible holes across its padded surface. Beneath it sprawled a bundle of thin, multicolored tubes running into the floor and reemerging to connect to plastic containers. Behind the chair, a projection screen flared to life, displaying crystalline lattices of biological structures. John winced at the brightness and stepped back half a pace.

“No, forward. Sit.”

“Will it hurt?” John asked, approaching the chair and running a hand over the strange surface. His voice grew quiet, hollow.

“Honestly? I don’t know.”

John settled into the seat. He leaned his head back and finally relaxed. Only now did he feel the full weight of the day’s fatigue. “We’re not all warmongers, you know,” he said to Roland, staring at the ceiling. “There are other kinds of people. You know that. So why does this happen?”

“And we’re not all turrets on legs, as you see,” Roland countered while a flexible cable snaked toward a port near the screen. “But the image is made by the majority.”

“And so...” John’s voice trembled slightly, “everyone has to be wiped out?”

“You might’ve noticed I’m not a fan of that approach. So don’t ask me.”

A flexible nylon tube with a needle at its end slid from the chair. It wavered weightlessly near John’s face. “What the hell is that?”

“Insert it into a vein. If my tinkering doesn’t kill little John, then we’re saved. And a whole lot like you along with us. If not... well, these last few hours have been fun. No regrets.”

John took the tube and studied the needle. *I’ve come this far... this ending isn’t the worst. Besides*, he grinned to himself, *I believe in this flying pancake.*

He inserted the needle into his vein and lay back. Numbness spread; thoughts sank into a thick, chilling substance. *Well*,

John, time to unwind a little, echoed into his fading consciousness.

Hundreds of tiny needles sprang from the chair's pores, piercing his body, but he felt no pain. His eyelids grew heavy. As they closed, countless flickering lights danced before his eyes.

Something shifted in his brain. At first, it was just discomfort, but with each second the movement intensified, like a snake writhing on hot sand. John reached for his head, wanting to pull out the thing thrashing inside. In an impulsive jerk, he yanked his own ears—and felt as if he'd split his skull in two.

Horror: in his hands were shreds of his own head. His left eye stared wildly at his right. He tried to scream, but only a weak hiss escaped. He turned the torn fragments upward, toward the sound.

His brain, swaying on a flexible stalk, remained in place. The naked, wrinkled mass trembled and pulsed. Suddenly one of the lobes burst, spraying blood, and from it emerged a small, pale head studded with sharp teeth. The worm convulsed, trying to burrow back in, but a metal probe lightning-fast shot down and seized it by the head. An elastic probe extended from an inner section and penetrated the worm. It stopped thrashing and gradually went limp.

The itching and pain faded. Then came utter darkness and silence.

He woke to rhythmic nudging against his chin. John tried to move. His whole body ached unbearably. His head felt like a truck had run it over and badly glued it back together. He turned his head carefully. Roland circled nearby, steadying him

with one of its pseudopods.

“So... that’s it?”

“Yeah, almost.” It floated closer to John’s weakened hands. “Insert the comms module.”

“I can’t move my hands. Can’t move anything.”

“Ah, alright. I just wanted you to feel useful.” Roland’s manipulator curved, plucked the module from John’s pocket, and slotted it home.

“So... it worked?”

“I made a digital scan of you, ran it through hundreds of thousands of simulations, and it never failed! You’re the next link in evolution. I just... gave it a nudge.”

That sounded too good to be true. Were they really on the brink of ending the war? The last war?

“You changed something in me?” A chill of alarm. “Am I defenseless now? Dead if some beast or robot attacks?”

“Or aliens, or delirium tremens... No, you’re not defenseless. In simple terms—since I have no fingers—I found an outdated hormonal regulator in your limbic system. Patched it... so you’ll only reach for rockets and knives as a last resort.”

“What counts as a last resort?”

“Immediate threat of death. And even then, not always.”

The pain receded gradually, leaving a buzzing aftermath. John carefully sat up on the couch. He felt much the same as before, aside from the aching body. But inside, an inexplicable balance had settled—a soft, enveloping calm. He felt no fear,

no lack, no regret. He was certain everything was as it should be.

“But if the other machines don’t stop the slaughter, it’s pointless.”

“The network has already reviewed the results of our experiment. The cause of war has been eliminated. Now it’s up to you.”

“Meaning?”

“My job’s done. Yours is just beginning. You’re now a missionary. You have to convince other humans to undergo the procedure.”

“What if they refuse? You know people... they’re different.”

“You just need to convince a few. The mutation is hereditary. Sooner or later, it’ll sort itself out.”

John swung his legs off the couch. He’d never imagined life could take such a turn. He remembered his loyal friends—how he wished he could bring them back. They deserved it more than anyone.

And then he noticed: something had changed. Before, remembering fallen comrades brought bitterness and regret. Thinking of the greedy, stubborn people who started it all made his jaw clench and fury flood his head.

Now there was only sorrow inside. Quiet, resonant, but accepting. No one was to blame for being mistaken. Everyone was mistaken. Even him. Where once there was a desperate urge to change and fix things, now only immense, all-encompassing love flowed—not the dizzying kind, but the kind

that gently cools hearts and makes them beat in unison.

“You know, you changed something fundamental. I thought I’d lost part of myself. Turns out I got rid of what I never really was.”

“Starting the sermon already, Brother John?”

John laughed. On one level, it was just a playful jab. But on another... now he believed it with all his heart. And he was willing to give his life for it.

“Looks like it, buddy. Looks like it.”

GOOD JUDITH



Judith sat on the edge of the couch in a small room with artificial poppies on the windowsill. The bright room served as a treatment space in a small private clinic. The air carried the scent of antiseptic—it was faintly dizzying, yet kept her from drifting off completely. Muted light broke into barely distinguishable shadows frozen on the tiled floor.

On the table lay a form with her name on it. If she unfocused her eyes, the page melted into the whiteness of the table. Only the dark print and the scarlet petals gave her gaze something to cling to. She stared silently at the flowers, picking at a hole in the couch leg where a screw had fallen out. “Some people manage just fine,” Judith thought with an inward smile. Her brown eyes showed no emotion; her still face was etched with weariness mixed with detachment. Her black hair barely brushed her shoulders, emphasizing her slender neck and pale skin.

Judith had arrived here about two weeks ago.

“You used to be such a good girl! And now?” That phrase, hurled at her in pain over breakfast, had stuck with her. After that, the walls of her parents’ home blurred into smeared patches. When the picture sharpened again, Judith was already here.

She remembered coming home after class. The dress she’d worn that day was the same color as the poppies on the windowsill. She used to like it, but not anymore.

Judith walked into the hallway and dropped her travel bag at her feet.

“Hi, I’m home!”

From the living room on the left came the steady crackle of the TV. It fell silent, and a roughly fifty-year-old woman in a plain bathrobe, her hair tied in a bun, came out to meet her.

“Hello, sweetheart!” She hugged Judith. “How was the trip?”

“Fine. A friend dropped me off.”

Her mother looked at her questioningly. “A friend?” Her gaze slid over her daughter’s dress. “When someone gives you a ride like that, they’re not just a friend. Isn’t it a bit early? And this—” she gestured at the outfit, “—doesn’t really seem your style.”

“But I like it.”

“Maybe you could wear the one we gave you for your birthday? It suits you much better and isn’t so... provocative.”

“But it’s not very comfortable, Mom.” Judith’s voice dropped. “Can I just keep this on?”

“You look improper! Go change. You don’t want to embarrass your father and me, do you?” her mother said sharply.

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and went back to the bedroom.

That’s usually how it ended. Since childhood, Judith had felt a slow-burning guilt for upsetting others, for not matching their truth.

She was sitting in the school lobby, quietly listening to a song that gave her goosebumps. A classmate passing by tossed a remark:

“Judith, only airheads listen to Lori Chu!”

“Yeah.” She paused the music and answered instantly. A faint sweat broke out on her forehead, and her breathing quickened. “Airheads with pink brains.”

“Then why are you listening? You enjoy torturing yourself?”

“Nah, a friend sent it to me.”

The classmate made a face as if he’d tasted something sour and walked away. That was close, she thought. The tension slowly ebbed, but the aftertaste remained. She’d gotten a warning, and she didn’t want to be ejected from the field.

Judith was a trained chameleon, knowing firmly that if the colors weren’t convincing enough, she’d be pecked.

Then came the time to leave the nest. Judith was finishing school, and college was the next step.

“But it’s in another city, Kurt!” the woman exclaimed, voice strained. Her eyes flickered with worry.

“But you wanted her to study law, Shani.” He spread his hands as if apologizing. “There aren’t any closer colleges!”

“True, not much choice. What can we do? We have to think of her future.” Shani rubbed her eyelids and sighed wearily. “Judith, sweetheart, do you think you can handle it?”

The girl looked carefully at her mother’s face. It seemed she wanted to hear “yes.” Judith nodded.

“Just call us, sunshine!” her mother took her hand. “So we don’t worry.”

Kurt, feeling Shani’s gaze on him, nodded. And so, with that collective agreement, Judith found herself alone for the first time, far from home. She was a little scared, but something inside rejoiced at being thrown into another life.

One evening at a campus party, Judith drank quite a bit. The fun and the buzz completely drowned out the scheduled call home. The next morning, her phone woke her. She picked up, and a quiet, icy voice came through:

“You didn’t call again last night. And your phone was off!” Her mother exhaled with effort. “Do you know how worried I was? My heart was aching!”

“Mom...”

“No, you don’t know. You don’t care!”

“I *do* care!” Judith swung her legs off the bed and hunched over the phone. Only static answered—silence on the other end. “I’m sorry!”

“Alright. Just don’t make me worry like that again, okay? You’re my favorite girl.”

“Of course, Mom,” Judith replied softly, relieved the storm had passed.

“So, what happened yesterday? Studying late?”

Judith didn’t want to mention the party. But her mother often said they were like friends, and friends don’t lie.

“Not exactly. There was a small gathering on campus. We were just... hanging out a bit.”

“Ah,” the voice went flat. “I see. Well, you didn’t drink, did you?”

“Well...” Judith began.

“You know alcohol isn’t your friend? It’s deceitful, pollutes your mind, ruins your soul... Don’t disappoint me, sweetheart.”

“Yes, Mom.”

I should’ve lied, flashed through her mind.

“I appreciate you telling me, Judith. Your father and I love you very much. Please be good.”

“I love you too, and I miss you.”

“Alright, sunshine, I have to go! Talk tonight, I’ll wait for your call!”

It seemed to end on a gentle note, but something inside her snapped. Her chest ached and twisted, and the record in her head started playing again. “You’re a bad person! You hurt the people who love you!” Judith pressed her lips together, lifted her chin, and looked out the window.

The sudden realization that she wasn’t in her own room snapped her out of her self-flagellation. Her palms instantly grew damp; her eyes darted around. Men’s clothes lay scattered on the floor and posters of long-haired men hung on the walls. The desk by the window was buried under pizza boxes and clutter.

As she stared, the bathroom door opened. On the threshold stood a lanky guy with slightly slanted eyes and a mess of tangled black hair. He looked at her and smiled.

“Hey there.”

“Who are you?”

“A friend. Don’t you remember anything?” He laughed, closed the door behind him, and walked into the room. “You really let loose last night.”

“I... what? Did we...?” Judith’s breathing quickened, anxiety rising on her face.

He laughed again, waving a hand dismissively. Seeing she was genuinely worried, he grew more serious. “No, don’t worry. You said no.”

“I did? Sorry...”

“Hey, no big deal. Thanks for saying it straight out! I hate getting halfway and hearing it was all a mistake and...” He noticed her blush. “Ah, never mind. No means no.”

‘No means no?’ What kind of nonsense is that?

“I,” the guy continued, “heard your call. Not on purpose.” He grinned slightly. “Just your speaker volume is like my half-deaf grandma’s.”

Judith reached for her phone to fix it immediately.

“Don’t sweat it! Seriously, drunk you is way less uptight about small stuff. And in general. So a glass or two might not be so bad.”

Arguing wasn’t in her nature. But if she didn’t argue, wasn’t she going against her mom? But then...

“What’s with your face? Relax! So you’re bad, so be bad.” An awkward silence grew almost tangible. “I’m Phil,” he

extended a hand. “Just in case you forgot.”

Judith shook his hand. “Judith. Nice to meet you.”

The guy sat down on the bed next to her and leaned against the wall. “You were pretty wasted... we talked about all sorts of things, then came back here. First time I’ve had so much to say to a Lori Chu fan. I thought her fans only had manure for brains, matching her songs.”

Judith looked down.

“Hey, why so glum? When I put on Crucified,” he pointed at the men glaring from the poster, “you puked all over my floor!”

“Sorry...”

He waved a hand, squinting and shaking his head. “Deathcore’s not for everyone. But I love it!”

Judith looked at him questioningly. What was he talking about? “And Lori Chu... you don’t like her, right?”

“Me? What does it matter if I like her or not? What matters is that you like her!”

“Yeah... I guess,” the girl agreed automatically. In her mind, a policeman was banging a baton against cell bars. “Rebellion! Punish!” echoed in that harsh melody.

“You know what else I like? You,” he smiled softly and took her hand.

Judith jerked it back. Guilt immediately sparked in her eyes, and Phil hurried to reassure her:

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. Just last

night... never mind.” He smiled again, studying his guest with lively interest.

Judith had a feeling a smile was his face’s default state. Regardless of what she did. It was incredibly unusual, and just as compelling.

“Want to go to a movie tonight?” Phil continued. Fine wrinkles appeared at the corners of her eyes, and a smile, perhaps the first that morning, touched her lips.

“Sure! But I need to go back to my place first.”

He clapped his hands. “Of course! Meet at the campus gate around eight?”

She nodded. Grabbing her phone from the bed, Judith slipped out of Phil’s room. Outside, students were shouting loudly and playing volleyball. Over the noise, she heard Crucified start playing behind the closed door. *What crap*, commented the inner voice. “So what?” Judith muttered back.

The game had long ended; it was quiet and fresh. Dim streetlights barely lit the approach to campus. Judith stood at the entrance; it was past eight, and her heart was pounding wildly. Her thoughts swirled in such a vortex that she couldn’t grasp a single one clearly. She didn’t even try. Over the past few days, she felt she’d betrayed the whole world, yet also as if she’d breathed fresh air for the first time.

“Are you receiving signals from space? I’ve been standing here a minute.”

Phil seemed to materialize out of the air, pulling her from her trance.

“Hi! I was daydreaming. Sorry...”

“I’ll forgive you if you laugh at every joke I make all night.”

“Okay!” Judith’s eyes widened, lips pressed together.

Phil laughed again, rubbing his forehead. “Why so tense? I’m joking.” He pointed into the darkness: somewhere close by was the cinema. “Shall we? It’s starting soon.”

The movie was wonderful, like the whole evening. And Phil. Even though he was nothing like the type she’d imagined. Yes, he annoyed her sometimes. His constant lateness and casual attitude toward studies grated on her. But what really angered Judith was Phil’s tactlessness. He called it honesty, but couldn’t he just sometimes keep quiet?

“No, you can’t just keep quiet!” Phil protested excitedly once again. “I don’t want to!”

“But why? Why did you tell the professor that Kings is overrated and not worth attention? He was just grading your lab, for God’s sake.” Indignation rose in Judith’s voice. “And he would’ve passed you if you weren’t such a pain. No one asked you!”

“So what? How else would he know his T-shirt is nothing to be proud of, but rather embarrassing?” He laughed. “Just like your Lori, they’re pathetic fluff!”

“You’re a stubborn idiot.” Her cheeks flushed, her chest heaving.

Phil demonstratively crossed his arms. “A lot of things don’t suit me. Sometimes I stay quiet, sometimes I won’t! Even if someone really wants me to!” A metallic glint flashed in his eyes. “Don’t like it? Cover your ears!”

As it turned out, even that mattered little. She just needed

to focus more on what she liked about him. Her inner voice turned into a nagging but powerless commentator—first about Phil and others, then about herself.

The irritating heat and sunsets after ten became ordinary again. Vacation came, and Judith and Phil were heading home. The couple sped on an old motorcycle that wheezed under the weight. Judith leaned toward his ear.

“Phil, stop here!”

He slowed. The engine sputtered softly, as if grateful for the break. Judith got off, took her bag, and set it down. “Are we here already?”

“Almost. I just want to walk a bit.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“I don’t feel ready. And I don’t think they are.” Judith smiled, looking at Phil. “Let’s do it later.”

The guy slumped slightly, his lips pressing into a thin, pale line on his tanned face. “Um... okay.”

She kissed him and hugged him tightly. “I love you!”

“Love you too...” He leaned in again. “You too, Judith. See you soon!”

She gently squeezed his hand goodbye and walked toward the house. Behind her, the engine growled to life again, and then faded. For a moment, Judith felt the old, familiar pang of guilt.

Coming home pleased her more than she could’ve imagined. As Judith approached the porch, a wave of longing for the place she’d lived all her life washed over her. *A couple of months at*

home with Mom and Dad. The thought spread warmth through her body.

But her mother's reaction to the dress was like a bucket of ice water down her back. After the ambivalent greeting, Judith went up to her room on the second floor—her modest little room untouched: a narrow bed under the sloped ceiling, a wide wardrobe by the door. On the windowsill lay a long-dried poppy flower she'd picked just before leaving.

She stood before the mirror, examining the beautiful satin dress. Yes, it accentuated her figure, so what? Why couldn't she decide what to wear? Guilt loomed over her; her old life gripped her throat again. Yes, it masked itself as an embrace, but Judith saw the predatory grip.

"Enough," she muttered. Her brows furrowed, the hollows above them deepening with painful resolve. She shook herself off. "I don't want to live like this anymore."

From outside came the sound of a car and a short honk. Judith glanced at the clock—her father was home. Still in the dress, she ran downstairs.

Her father was leaning against the hood of the idling car. His gray hair tousled in the wind, his gaze, always looking through things, fixed on the front door. As she rushed out, he smiled and spread his arms.

"Look at you, all grown up!" Judith ran to him and hugged him. He kissed the top of her head and held her close. "So glad to see you."

Her mother came out after Judith. Seeing her daughter still in the dress, she walked past them without a word and got into the front seat. Dad looked at Judith, puzzled.

“She...” Judith’s eyes dropped to the ground, her voice quieter. “Mom didn’t really like that I wore this dress. I didn’t have time to change.” She wanted to justify herself, but stopped.

“Well, she knows best,” her father grunted. “And really, was it so hard to change? Now Mom will be upset again, and we’ll have to deal with it.” His eyes darted slightly, his mouth forming an uncertain smile.

“Dad! But the dress is nice, right?”

“Yes, it’s a pretty dress, looks good on you. But...” He jerked a thumb toward the car and shook his head. “Alright, let’s go, sweetheart. The table’s booked; time won’t wait.”

The whole way, her mother sat stone-faced and silent.

“Shani, didn’t you say we’re having a barbecue soon?”

His wife didn’t even turn. Not a muscle moved on her face; she stared at the road as if she hadn’t heard.

“Judith, my boss and his family are coming over this weekend. We’ll chat, eat!” He glanced at his daughter in the rearview mirror. Judith caught a silent cry for help.

“Will we have steak? I love them! And Mom’s favorite baked cheese, right?”

“Oh yes! Shani, you’re looking forward to it, aren’t you?”

The woman turned away. The rest of the ride passed in tomb-like silence. Her father exchanged a few words with Judith, but the oppressive atmosphere stifled conversation.

After arriving, similar situations happened almost daily. She wore that dress again. Again, she didn’t want to talk about her

friend. Even the evening after the barbecue was tense.

“Judith, why did you have to beat him at cards?”

“I just play better, that’s all,” Judith replied with a smile, brushing it off.

“But not four times in a row!” Shani raised her voice, showing she was serious. “Didn’t you see how upset the poor boy was? His father must’ve been worried. You know... I just don’t want it to affect your father’s job!”

“How would it?”

Shani squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. “You know how hard it is to get a promotion. I wouldn’t want any awkwardness to get in the way. You should’ve let the boy feel like a good player.”

“Why? It’s just a game!” Judith’s voice rose slightly.

“I’m just asking you to be careful and considerate, that’s all.” Shani’s voice became quiet, colorless. “Is that so much?”

The breaking point was the visit of her mother’s elder sister, Linda. Linda had helped buy the very house Judith’s family lived in, and they felt obligated to visit her on every housewarming anniversary.

Her parents bustled in the kitchen all morning, preparing. Judith helped around the house: washed windows, dusted pictures and vases.

“Don’t forget the photographs,” came a voice from the kitchen.

Before the visit, they’d place photos of Linda next to family ones. This strange but entrenched ritual stung Judith

unpleasantly. She went to the closet under the stairs and retrieved several framed photos. Soon they stood on the dresser, pushing aside vacation pictures.

A knock came at the door. Judith's mother, Shani, hurried to open it.

"It's so hot today!" Linda announced from the threshold. Her whole body glistened with a light sweat. A summer dress of semi-transparent fabric fluttered in the draft. The woman smiled at the hosts, but a scrutinizing gleam danced in her eyes.

"Shani, darling, you look wonderful! Are you aging at all, or do you keep a magical portrait in the attic?"

Judith's mother smiled uncertainly. Linda closed the door, pecked her sister's cheek, and handed her a gift bag. Shani pulled out a box of chocolates and a bottle of wine.

"How sweet of you, Linda!"

"Yes, I know. I remember you don't drink wine... but I love it, and Kurt won't mind keeping me company," she winked at her sister's husband.

He merely raised his brows vaguely, glancing at his wife. Catching her look, he hesitated and said nothing. The aroma of food awakened Linda's dormant hunger.

"Oh, everything looks delicious! You know how to welcome dear guests."

Shani, standing behind her, smiled faintly.

"So you've taken over preparing dinner, my dear?" Linda asked Judith. "Or is the feast still on your parents' shoulders?"

Judith was about to answer, but her mother's voice came

first, tinged with apology.

“Next year, Judith will handle it! But she wasn’t idle today.” Shani walked over and put an arm around her sister’s shoulder. “Look how clean and nice it is!”

Linda scanned the space as if looking for flaws. “As our father said: a woman must be a homemaker in all things. He was a hard man,” she turned to Judith. “But he taught your mother and me to be worthy people. Discipline and consideration for others—that’s what matters most!”

“Why?” burst from Judith.

Linda stared at her in surprise. Shani shot her daughter a cold look.

“What do you mean, ‘why’? How else?”

“There’s no other way!” Shani exclaimed cheerfully.

“Well, you see—” a spark lit in Linda’s eyes, “—our little sister?” Her aunt’s features grew sharper, a burgundy flush on her cheeks. “Thought she could do as she pleased... selfish. Ran off to the godforsaken jungle, leaving us with all the burdens!”

Shani involuntarily shrank. The middle sister, Emily, was usually never mentioned—she’d disgraced the family. Instead of being a worthy daughter and support, she’d left for another continent. Shani’s plans to visit Emily had been firmly uprooted back in grade school.

“Do you want to shame the family? Live like a bum in some village?” Her father had dismissed her request to visit her sister. “She’s just an ungrateful fool.”

Emily called it a dream, but in the family, another word was used: betrayal. Shani pushed the memory away—she was

uneasy enough.

“Well, let’s eat while it’s hot.” She turned to her husband. “Be a dear, bring a wine glass.”

“Two glasses,” Linda said dryly.

“Yes, two glasses,” Shani amended.

The barely perceptible tension faded after the first few minutes at the table. The family chatted, reminiscing about moving in, Judith’s birth, her first steps. Then talk turned to studies and work. And by the end of the bottle, as usual, conversation shifted to politics.

Slightly tipsy, Aunt Linda slapped her thigh. Her face, flushed from heat and wine, twisted in displeasure. “And these migrants? Seen the news?” She glanced around the table. “Another robbery in Chinatown! It’s a zoo.” She drained half of her glass. “Perfect place for that fool Emily.”

“But the thieves were caught, and they were locals!” Judith protested. She’d read the news that morning.

Linda laughed briefly, then stopped and fixed Judith with a piercing look. “So what? What the hell are they doing here? They ruin everything!”

“Blaming someone for all sins because of their eye shape... very convenient!”

“Little girl, you think a year in college made you smart?” Her brows drew together like an eagle’s wings in a dive. Teeth gleamed, stained red with wine in places. “You failed a geography placement test less than a year ago!” Linda turned to Shani, pale as chalk. “Some pride of the family!”

Judith stood up. Her cheeks flushed, eyes glistening faintly.

“Apparently, knowledge of geography is nothing to be proud of or ashamed of! And maybe I don’t know everything, but I disagree with what you’re saying, Aunt Linda!”

Linda’s slightly bulging eyes followed her niece walking across the room. Her mouth opened in surprise and indignation, but made no sound. Stopping on the first stair, Judith turned and threw out a final remark. “You should open your eyes, Auntie. Your view is wider than your so-called enemies’!”

“Judith!” her mother shouted. “Apologize this instant!”

But she was already running upstairs, ignoring the command. She’d had enough. Locked in her room, Judith lay on the bed wishing for only one thing: to be back on campus, in her own room. Exhausted, she fell into a fitful sleep that lasted until morning.

A knock on the door brought her back. The sun was high, winking through scattered clouds.

“Come down for breakfast,” her mother’s voice came through the door.

Judith remembered last night. She was sad that she’d upset her parents. She could’ve stayed quiet... But no, not this time. Brushing aside the creeping tendrils of self-reproach, she got up.

On the table waited fragrant toast with apricot jam and a large cup of cocoa—her favorite childhood breakfast. Judith smiled at her mother and sat down. Her mother smiled back, but her eyes held a certain sorrow. *Probably still angry*, Judith thought.

“Mom, I didn’t mean to upset you... and all that,” she

began. “You know I love you.”

“And I love you, sweetheart. And I see something abnormal is happening to you.”

Judith took a sip of cocoa. The taste was amazing, but somehow unfamiliar. Maybe she’d just grown unaccustomed?

“You... you’re acting very dangerously,” Shani continued. “First of all, to yourself!”

“I don’t see the danger. I can just—”

“Think how people will treat you?” her mother interrupted. “Okay, I’m your mother. Even if you mock me, I’ll forgive you.” Her mother’s eyes grew moist. “You used to be such a good girl! And now?”

“But I’m not mocking you!”

“And other people? Why don’t you think of them? Your life depends on them!” Shani ignored her reply. “You must think about what you say and to whom, and how you act!”

Judith felt slightly dizzy. She took another sip; it slid thickly down her throat. The taste was too cloying. What did her mother see in her? Her thoughts scattered, and her dizziness grew. “Mom, I don’t feel well.”

“Don’t worry, I’m with you. I’ll help you, so everything will be good for you. That’s my main task in life, and I won’t fail.” She came over and laid Judith’s head on her lap. “You’ll be a worthy person, Judith. You won’t stumble like Emily. I won’t allow it! Sorry, but it’s for your own good!”

“What are you...”

Everything swam. The kitchen spun, her eyelids heavy.

Judith blacked out.

Waking, she found herself in a sparsely furnished room. Everything in dull white tones. A long lamp flickered on the ceiling, casting cold light.

“Judith, how are you feeling?”

She lifted her head. A woman in a white coat sat at the foot of the bed. Short hair and wide cheekbones with a narrow nose gave her an alien-like appearance. She picked up a tablet from her knees and made a few notes.

“Who are you?”

“Your attending physician at the behavioral correction clinic.”

“There’s some mistake. I... I felt sick. Maybe I was taken to a hospital.” Judith propped herself up on her elbows. “But I don’t belong here.”

“Your family thinks otherwise.” She showed a form with her mother’s signature.

“I want to leave!”

“You can’t leave,” the woman stated flatly. “Don’t worry, nothing terrible awaits you. You just need a course of injections and a few weeks under our observation.”

What did she mean, can’t leave? Like hell! Judith stood and walked to the door. With growing horror, she realized there was no handle—the surface was smooth as a wall. Only a faintly protruding electronic key reader gleamed at chest height.

“Let me out!”

“I can’t let you out; you’re undergoing treatment. But don’t worry.” Her voice sounded like a recording on loop. “In two weeks you’ll leave, and you’ll feel much better.”

“But I’m fine, I don’t need to feel better!”

The doctor took a communicator from her pocket.

“Kevin, take the girl to her room and administer the injection.” She glanced at Judith, pressed against the wall by the exit. “And bring a sedative.”

There was movement outside. A tall man entered and swiftly injected a syringe into Judith’s shoulder before she could process it. She hadn’t known an arm could be gripped so painfully. Suddenly, her body went limp and relaxed. She almost fell, but the tall man caught her and carried her away.

Judith couldn’t understand what was happening. She was scared of the uncertainty, the helplessness, the feeling of enslavement. She wanted to scream, but her body wouldn’t obey. She remembered her mother’s words: how she said it was all for her, that her main task was to make Judith a worthy person. But wasn’t she already worthy?

The drug completely paralyzed her body. But worse, the returning memory of the kitchen conversation paralyzed her will. Judith wanted to stop breathing. Tears streamed down her face as the man laid her on a bed in a room not much different from the last.

“Don’t worry, dear. Your parents are doing this for your own good.” He took out a syringe and flicked it, expelling air with a drop of liquid. “Something has happened to you lately, but nothing’s irreversible. This thing—” he twirled the needle before her motionless eyes, “—will purge what’s stuck to you.”

He inserted the needle under her skin, wiped the spot with cotton, and covered it with a bandage.

“You won’t be able to move for about ten more minutes. But don’t be afraid, you’re being watched,” he gestured upward. “If you need anything, just speak aloud.”

With that, the man gave a restrained nod and left.

Judith’s sensations dulled. Not physical ones—those were inaccessible—but inner ones. She no longer felt fear or resentment, didn’t desperately want to escape as she had twenty minutes before. Suddenly an episode surfaced: walking with Phil by the lake, not answering her mother’s call. Now, for some reason, she felt unbearably ashamed about that. She felt a gnawing heaviness, but couldn’t understand why she’d acted that way. It seemed she knew, but the knowledge felt toy-like, fabricated.

Time in the clinic blurred into one continuous layer. Another day of “healing” arrived. Judith sat again in the treatment room. Before her, elbows on the table and leaning slightly forward, was a person in a white medical mask. Only eyes were visible. Their expression was as monotonous and indifferent as everything else.

“Judith, describe your feelings.”

“I don’t understand who’s speaking in my head... Me or not me?”

“And what do you hear in your head?”

Judith looked up at the ceiling, biting her lower lip. “That I’m not upsetting my parents, just acting on my own.”

“But your parents are upset,” the doctor took out a photo

of her mother and father; Judith automatically looked at it. "And they're upset because of your actions, Judith."

"Yes, but I just want to do what I think is right."

"Even if it hurts others, your loved ones?"

"No, I want them to be happy," her voice strengthened slightly.

"And they will be, Judith. We're working on that." The doctor stood and approached her. The needle pierced her skin. "Tell me what memory surfaces."

Judith sat quietly for a minute, eyes closed. Her knees pressed together, hands nervously rubbing her thighs. "Phil! I told him to go to hell, to leave me alone! To get lost after he made one of his stupid jokes that hurt me." Tears welled up. She shook them off nervously.

"This Phil... imagine, he joked at your expense? Is that normal? No wonder your mother is displeased!" The doctor clicked his tongue. "But you're something too... you could've stayed quiet?"

"Yes, I know! I know I shouldn't do that!"

"You shouldn't, and you're very good at understanding that." The doctor encouragingly squeezed her hand. "Feel anything else?"

"Yes... Aunt Linda... I got angry that I had to hang her photos!"

"But she's your dear aunt," the doctor said, shaking his head.

Judith burst into tears. Through sobs she tried to say more,

but everything merged into weeping.

“Alright, that’s enough for today. You’ll spend the rest of the day doing independent work in your room.”

At first, after returning to her room, Judith would lie down and pretend to sleep. Eyes closed, she’d review the conversation with the doctor. When he spoke, everything sounded so logical and coherent. But here, alone, as the medication’s grip loosened, Judith fought with herself to admit there was no unequivocal evil in her.

It ignited a spark that made her remember she could be, could want, could think as she believed was right. But at the same time, another conviction gained strength. *What comfort are you whispering about? What pathetic attempts to justify yourself? You’re ungrateful, selfish—that’s all!* The internal battle ate at her. Furious jaws leaped from the darkness and dragged her until Judith plunged into the blackness of dreamless sleep.

Yesterday, she’d received the final injection. Now, in the treatment room, she waited for what came next. The door opened, and she met the doctor’s gaze.

“Will I be released today?”

“Yes, you’ll be taken home now. I just need your signature here.” She pointed to a form and handed over a pen.

Judith pulled the sheet closer and signed. “How will I know I’m okay now? The hum in my head and this feeling... like I’m doing something wrong? When will it get easier?”

“It’s the medication’s residual effect. It’ll pass by tomorrow.” The doctor opened the door wider. Someone seemed to have pinned an ill-fitting smile onto her face, cut out

from a glossy magazine. “Please, it’s time.”

The riot of colors outside nearly knocked her off her feet—her surroundings had been so monochrome lately. Sitting in the car, she greedily absorbed everything through the window. Trees, meadows, passing cars and houses—all so vivid, so alive.

She didn’t notice her own house appear. Judith slammed the car door and walked up the path to the porch. A wild sense of déjà vu gripped her. She remembered pushing the front door open after a long absence. “Hi, I’m home!” she whispered to herself. Back then she wore the dress that upset her mother. She should get rid of it...

The door opened, and Shani appeared on the threshold. In her home clothes, she rushed onto the porch and embraced her daughter.

“My girl! So glad to see you!” Tears fell onto Judith’s shoulder.

She hugged her mother back and wept. Sobbing, Shani continued:

“I couldn’t do otherwise! My sunshine...” She held her by the shoulders and looked intently into her eyes. “I called every day and asked if everything was okay. But I want to hear from you: were you fed and treated well?”

“I don’t know, Mom...” Judith sobbed. “I was scared. I’m so glad you’re with me again.”

“And I’m so glad!” Shani wiped her daughter’s tears with her robe, glancing around.

Suddenly, the phone rang. Shani answered.

“Hello? Yes, hi, Linda!”

Judith remembered that evening. She felt very awkward, lowered her eyes.

“Yes, she’s home! I’ll put you on speaker,” she switched to speakerphone.

“Hi, Aunt Linda,” Judith said softly.

“Hi! How are you?”

“I’m... okay. I’m so glad to be home.”

“And you,” a chilled voice interrupted, “have nothing to say to me?”

Judith’s head dropped lower. “I... forgive me, Aunt Linda. I’m ashamed I offended you.”

“Oh, you should be ashamed! But I’m glad you understand. They healed you after all. You picked up some nonsense ideas somewhere.” Her tone rose. “Right, Shani?”

A weight lifted somewhere inside Judith; breathing became easier. Why had she upset these people? People who only wished her well?

“Yes, of course!” Her mother’s voice pulled her from her thoughts.

“Shani and I talked and decided to transfer you to a local college. You’ll be closer to us. Isn’t that great?”

For a moment Judith felt a lump in her throat, but it dissolved, replaced by quiet joy and a sense of safety. Yes, she liked that college. But so what? And Phil? Phil... she felt because of him she’d almost fallen out with her mom, her aunt. But family was the most important thing she had.

“Thank you,” Judith said quietly.

“Oh, I’m so glad everything’s working out!” Shani exclaimed.

“Me too,” Linda echoed.

The call ended, and Shani put the phone in her pocket. She took her daughter’s hand and pulled her close. “So good to have you home, sunshine.”

“Yes, Mom.” Judith felt calmer but utterly drained. “I’m so tired... need a shower.”

“Of course. Come to the kitchen when you’re done.”

Tossing her clothes into the laundry basket, she turned on the water. Hot, almost scalding streams enveloped her, washing accumulated fatigue down the drain. Yes, she felt lighter now. How wonderful to feel the love and acceptance of dear people.

Judith turned her face into the water. She hadn’t seen such warmth in her mother’s eyes in so long... But today everything was back in place. Her heart fluttered. Softly, but with a note of sorrow, she thought, *Why am I sad?* Judith wondered, eyes closed under the streaming water. *Maybe from all the arguments? Or because Phil and I will be far apart now?*

She jumped out of the shower, dried hastily, and ran to her room. Her long-dead phone lay on the bed. She plugged it in and placed it on the chair, atop the satin dress. She frowned. It’s *probably better to throw it away*. A long-familiar voice cooed in her head. *Right, you must respect your elders’ opinions*. It had lost its militant edge and harshness, becoming her friend again.

Meanwhile, the phone came to life. The screen lit up with

dozens of missed calls and messages. All of them were from Phil. She opened the messages. Most were like: “Jude, where are you? Blink if you’re being held hostage! Text me ASAP!”

Another mental comment floated up. *Such primitive jokes. Doesn’t he remember you don’t like them?* Unexpectedly, Judith felt no desire to talk to Phil. Why did he suddenly feel so alien? She didn’t even want to think—it was all clear. Irresponsible, arrogant slob. She put the phone down. In her hand was the crumpled dress. Clutching it tighter, she left the room and went downstairs.

She passed her mother, walked through the kitchen to the trash bin, and threw the dress in—the satin rustled as it slid down the plastic liner. She wouldn’t sacrifice peace of mind for an outfit again. Turning, Judith saw Shani looking at her with love. Putting down her mug, she approached Judith.

“Sweetheart... I’m so glad you’re coming back to me.”

Judith pressed against her mother, inhaling the scent of her unchanged perfume. The roughness in her chest had almost completely faded, giving way to a smooth, polished space.

In the clinic, Judith clung to the thought that she was being crippled, a part of her true self squeezed out. But now everything was clear. They squeezed out the poison, and now she was back. Herself again.

BARTER



A middle-aged man with perfectly coiffed hair, in an immaculate suit and with eyes brimming with pride, stood before a small audience.

“We’re gaining more and more weight in the market,” he concluded his speech.

Swap him with anyone from a hundred other faceless conferences, and you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.

“Our individualized, results-driven approach sets us apart from the competition. And it’s all thanks to professionals like you.”

The audience applauded approvingly; everything was following a well-rehearsed ritual. Maybe someone saw profound meaning in it all... but it was impossible that these rat races ran on inertia alone. The top manager finished his presentation and, with a slight bow, stepped aside to a group of employees waiting with questions.

A man in his forties let out a barely audible sigh, rose from his creaking chair, and walked to the window. “Markets, clients, competitors.” The words throbbed unpleasantly in his temples. He rubbed his forehead, smoothing back hair stuck with sweat.

His gaze jumped out the window—from this height, the city looked like a toy town. In his faded gray eyes, it was as if someone had rummaged around and stolen their spark of life. The stray thought of jumping down, toward the tiny cars, came

from nowhere; he weakly brushed it aside.

He had a prestigious job, a good team, a wife, and a couple of kids waiting at home, and he hadn't seen a doctor in a year, hadn't even caught a cold. What more could anyone want? "To claw my way out of this gilded rut," he muttered under his breath.

"Tom, why are you just standing there? Come on, let's pour some coffee into you," a cheerful voice pulled him from his apathetic reverie. It was Lily, his colleague. "You look like you're at a funeral, honestly."

"Thanks for the compliment. Who do I resemble more—an ordinary attendee or the guest of honor?"

"Oh." The woman rolled her eyes, her chestnut bob swaying irritably. "Cut it out."

He would have liked to, but didn't know how. They say, "A fish out of water"? Tom felt like he was in the wrong kitchen. At night, when his wife snored softly beside him and the noise of the lively children died down, he lay with his eyes closed, unable to sleep. Tom turned over alternative versions of himself in his head: sailing on a huge liner on a six-month journey, left only to himself and a pile of unread books. Delivering mail and wishing people a good day, people he'd forget in a couple of hours. His old life was packed into an opaque bag and stacked on a heap of secondhand goods.

But in the morning, after a restless sleep, he climbed back in and pulled out of the bag the familiar, now too-tight robe of himself.

The woman grabbed him by the lapel, pulling him away from the conference room. The harsh air of the air conditioning gave way to a light breeze from the half-open kitchen window.

The coffee machine grumbled quietly as it worked. The aroma of freshly ground beans pleasantly crept into his nostrils, pushing back the oppressive thoughts. Lily took the cups of steaming liquid and handed one to Tom.

“How are you, really? You look worse than usual.”

Tom turned away and tilted his chin up, drilling his eyes into the ceiling. Lily, lowering her head, placed a palm on his shoulder. That minor, friendly gesture helped him feel a little better.

“Come on, it’s not all that bad,” Tom said with a faint smile. “Everything’s... fine.”

“Listen, it’s none of my business, of course. But I can’t watch you suffer.” She nudged Tom lightly with her elbow. “Don’t you want to share?”

“There’s nothing to share. I’ve just gotten too comfortable, that’s all. I just want to, you know... evaporate.”

It was the first time he’d shared this feeling with anyone other than his wife. That evening, she’d snorted contemptuously and said he should be grateful for what he had. Logically, she was right. In essence, it was duct tape roughly wrapped around his mouth. Someone had drawn a beaming smile on top with a marker.

Lily looked seriously into his eyes without blinking. “I know. But you haven’t ‘gotten too comfortable’—you’re lost. Or maybe the direction’s just wrong. Believe me, I understand you like no one else.”

Tom looked at his friend questioningly.

“I was once in your place,” she glanced around, “until

someone helped me. Everything seems as it should be... but one day you wake up and realize this life isn't bad or good—it's just not yours."

The clerk chuckled involuntarily. She must just be trying to cheer him up; he probably looked uncommonly gloomy. But Lily's face didn't react to his attempt to lighten the mood. She tugged his sleeve again.

"I'm serious, I swear. And if you are too—I can help. And if not... forget we ever talked."

Lily wasn't joking; that much was clear. Tom turned to her, the muscles in his face relaxing, the furrow between his brows disappearing. Surprising even himself, he whispered almost inaudibly, "Help me."

She set down her cup and nodded toward the elevators.

"But... what about the seminar?" he protested weakly.

"Stockholm syndrome—that's you," she said over her shoulder, the click of her heels already moving away.

Tom felt internal resistance—he had responsibilities, after all. Reports he'd been burning the midnight oil over for the last three nights flashed before his eyes. Yet something told him that now he had to do just one thing—follow Lily. Casting aside his hesitation, he dashed to the elevator and stuck his foot between the closing doors. They retreated, and he stepped inside.

Glancing at his friend, Tom expected to see irritation or displeasure. In her eyes, he saw only understanding. The cab descended.

"Where are we going?"

"To Ishtaria. She can help."

The elevator released them into an underground parking garage. The smell of leaked gasoline mixed with dampness overpowered the faint, delicate scent of Lily's perfume. Ishtaria? Tom didn't ask, just walked silently beside her, though questions swirled in his head. The two-lane walls and low, stained ceiling pressed in slightly, stirring a sense of claustrophobia. Nearby, in the left row, headlights blinked.

"Need a ride?" a female voice broke the silence.

Tom slammed the door shut, and Lily turned the key—the engine purred pleasantly, sharing a faint vibration with the cabin. The sedan, speckled from incessant rain, coughed out exhaust. The sky, heavy with clouds, was driving loiterers indoors and under awnings.

"Who is Ishtaria?" Tom asked, watching droplets stream down the windshield.

"She'll help you break free."

"From what? I'm my own man, aren't I?"

"Exactly. She'll help you break free... from yourself," Lily snorted. The wheel turned right, and the car veered off the main road into grimy back alleyways. "Or rather, from what you call yourself."

Wet, gray panel buildings flashed by in mismatched rows, interrupted by islands of dumpsters. The car stopped beside one of the nondescript structures. Only the drumming of raindrops broke the silence on the deserted streets.

Tom got out of the car, closed the door, and lifted his face to the sky. The air, scrubbed clean by rain, was refreshing and dense. He took a deep breath—it felt so good. A rogue thought flashed through his mind. *In a neighborhood like this, I'd*

expect to find only a few grams of second-rate coke. Was Lily into something? Catching his look, she pointed at the building, and they moved along a grimy path toward the entrance.

If Lily meant that kind of liberation... it wasn't his thing. But something still drew him after her. An inexplicable certainty had settled in Tom even before the office elevator doors opened.

Finally, they reached the top floor. Unlike the other levels, this one had only one door. Unusually wide, finished in mahogany that clashed with the overall shabby tone. Intricate patterns of skilled carving covered the door from top to bottom. An eight-rayed star spread at the center, scattering flowers around it, vines twisting along rods and disappearing into a sprawl of carved jungles.

Lily pushed the door; it yielded softly. Tom lingered on the threshold; he touched the star—the chiseled, smooth surface was warm despite the chill in the air. His fingertips pulsed, sending a rhythm through his whole body. He felt a cautious touch enveloping his hanging palm—from the other side, the same pulsation rolled, and the two waves met somewhere in the middle, splashing inside Tom like exhilarating spray.

He felt tears welling at the corners of his eyes. Doubts, and thoughts in general, seemed to have been pulled from his head. A ringing silence and an unfamiliar sense of flowing with the world made him think for a moment that he was dreaming.

“Hello. It seems you’ve been searching for a long time,” came a voice from below.

He brushed the droplets from his eyelids and turned to the woman holding his hand. A petite old woman with deep wrinkles, with long gray braids that wound like wild vines

around her body, studied his face with childlike ease. Stone hairpins and ornaments of amber and emeralds shimmered in her hair.

“I suppose... you’re Ishtaria?”

“Among other things,” the old woman said in a sing-song voice, pulling him by the hand and leading him deeper into the room.

Tom sniffed—a salty sea breeze with a hint of dry sharpness swept through his sinuses. No air freshener smelled like that. With bewildered eyes, he looked at the old woman. As if appearing out of nowhere, Lily emerged and hugged Tom’s shoulders. For a moment, he completely forgot how and thanks to whom he’d gotten here. Sensing his confusion, Lily smirked, her pearl-like teeth glinting.

He stared at her in amazement. The old woman had already released his hand and was slowly moving toward a couch by a wide window. Lily walked beside her—they were talking softly about something. Tom had the feeling they were old friends: Lily laughed heartily while Ishtaria waved her hands above her head, actively miming something.

Ishtaria approached the couch and sat at its head, then gestured for Tom to join her. Lily sat in an armchair beside the couch. The wall behind them was draped in thick vegetation. Vines crept along the walls and, winding around cornices, flowed down along the curtains, snaking across the floor.

Tom glanced furtively at his friend, who turned toward him. Catching his hesitant look, Lily smiled warmly and gave a slight nod.

“Almost there.”

Tom froze in indecision. Something told him that the old life would never return. He thought of his wife, his beloved children. His cheeks twitched, his gaze grew hunted. What would happen to them if he suddenly... disappeared? He could feel it. And even if it sounded unrealistic, today hadn't been about reality. At least, not the one Tom was used to inhabiting.

He pictured the gray, drawn faces of his sons, his wife with eyes red and full of pain from crying. No one deserved that, least of all them. And yet his legs carried him toward the couch. Whatever happened, he wanted—desperately wanted—to break free! He didn't want to hurt those close to him, but... he couldn't go back anymore. Ishtaria studied him intently.

“Don't worry, Tom. They'll be fine. You're not the axis—you're a spoke.”

“Will I... disappear?”

Ishtaria didn't answer the question. Only the faintest of smiles slipped across her face. She patted the spot beside her, inviting Tom over. He approached and lay down on the couch. The old woman placed his head on her lap.

“How can something that never truly existed disappear?”

She pressed her index finger between his eyes. At first, the skin burned, hot waves spreading from the point of contact, enveloping his eyes and rolling down his body. Tom turned to look for Lily—but she was already gone. The room vanished completely, replaced by an endless, snow-white plateau. He jerked, looked up at Ishtaria—no one was above him except a finger hovering in the air. It soared, pointed behind him, then dissolved into the air.

Tom looked back: there, a crowd gathered like a restless sea before a small podium carved from dark wood. He rose from

the couch and walked toward the group.

The sterile, empty space filled Tom with inexplicable unease. He was so accustomed to the ever-present concrete blocks, lamppost rods, and the hum of evening bars. This place... was sheer infinity. Walking slowly, he turned his head around. The slightly rough surface stretched into the distance, merging on the horizon with the milky dome of the sky. A faint hum grew more crystalline.

He began to make out the shapes of people and noticed that the crowd consisted only of men: plump and thin, long-haired and close-cropped, in jackets and stained tank tops. Some were on crutches; others in wheelchairs. Amid the blinding white nothingness, this dark spot drew him in by its very existence.

“Hey, hello!” he called out, moving closer.

The lively discussion froze instantly; dozens of faces turned toward him. Their gazes, fixed on him, were studying, at times assessing. Tom gradually approached the crowd. He resembled a cautious forest deer.

“That one’s mine, looks like,” shouted a man with a sunburned face. A scar ran from his cheek down his throat, disappearing into a striped sailor’s shirt. “Hey there, amigo!”

Tom looked closer. The man who’d shouted looked like him—like a twin brother left behind at the hospital. He peered at the other men and took a couple of steps back in bewilderment. Their builds, races, eye colors, and other traits differed. Tom instinctively leaned forward, looking more carefully. No, he wasn’t imagining it: they all seemed like different versions of the same person. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. Someone chuckled and whistled sharply. Now the whole crowd burst into friendly laughter.

A moment of fear made him step back, but it bounced off him like a crazed fly off glass. Tom felt a faint breeze playing with his hair. He smoothed back a stray lock, not taking his wary eyes off the crowd.

“Come closer.” The words sounded so near that Tom would have sworn someone’s lips tickled his ear. He turned sharply—no one was there.

“Who said that?” Tom exclaimed. “What kind of trick is this?”

A burly man with a scraggly beard and a shiny, impeccably bald head stepped out of the crowd toward him. “Not a trick. And who’s speaking... no one will tell you. Not even the one speaking.” He ran a hand over his shiny scalp.

Seeing the hesitation in Tom’s eyes, he extended his palms, “We’ve been waiting for you. Come closer.”

Tom approached the giant. The speaker would have been the spitting image of Tom if, instead of a position at a law firm and weekend barbecues, he’d worked for an Asian mafia and lifted weights the rest of the time. The studying look didn’t escape his interlocutor, who grinned. Despite his threatening appearance, he radiated goodwill.

“What, look familiar? Don’t be surprised. Well,” he said and stared thoughtfully upward into the endless white nothing, “or be surprised, whatever you want. I’ve just been here so long that the sense of wonder’s atrophied. Now I just wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“The merging.” The giant lifted his beard and showed a ragged wound near his Adam’s apple. “The last deal didn’t go so smoothly.”

“What merging?”

The crowd stirred momentarily; short fragments of phrases were heard, someone cleared their throat. “I don’t think you’re here for that. More likely for a barter,” he mused with a grunt, “though, who knows? Maybe I am, too.”

Tom broke into a sweat. Ishtaria appeared before his eyes again. He turned back as if to leave. The giant moved silently toward him, a meaty palm settling on his shoulder.

“There’s only one way out here.” He jerked his head, pointing at the podium. “Over there.”

He led Tom along, guiding him into the crowd where hands touched him from all sides. Someone kissed the top of his head, someone shook his hand in the press of bodies. Tom looked into the men’s eyes—they looked back. Their palms slid smoothly over his shoulders in supportive grips and pats. He felt a current coming from them, and in that current he seemed to see each one’s history. For a split second, he wanted to stop, to become forever part of the whole; it felt like coming home.

“You’re already a part,” the voice sounded again from nowhere. Meanwhile, hands guided him onward. Inside, everything trembled, strained to break free—wanting to be one with all and everything. Passing through the crowd, Tom stopped at the podium. An indescribable lightness permeated his entire being. It felt like he understood for the first time what it meant to feel alive.

From the side, a man bumped into him: prickly stubble dug into his neck, and the air rushed from his lungs under a firm embrace. He raised his own arms, hugging the sailor back. The familiar smell of salty wind struck his nose.

“Time’s up, brother!” the man said, peeling away from him.

“You... that’s me?” Tom uttered uncertainly.

“You, me, us.” He swept a hand over the crowd, which swayed with nodding smiles. “All one and the same. In a way.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Honestly? I don’t really, either. But I know we came here for each other.” Catching Tom’s questioning look, he continued. “The voice told me.”

“It didn’t tell me anything.”

The sailor smiled mysteriously. His gray, watery eyes glinted. “And yet, you heard about it.”

Tom glanced sideways at the podium—on top lay a huge book. Dazzlingly white, like the space around them. The sailor placed his hand on it and gestured for Tom to do the same. An icy hand gripped his insides—he thought he understood.

“So the barter... it’s about us?”

The lean face, bearing a roguish boldness, broke into a smile. “Exactly!”

What had come to him in dreams would no longer be a dream. Tom felt his palms grow damp. He wiped them convulsively on his pants. Everything around fell silent; the people froze, eyes fixed on those standing at the front.

But my family? I love them. Frantic thoughts raced in Tom’s skull. How can I allow myself to leave them? And my life? Will it all just vanish?

He stared in a daze at the book. Tom waited for the voice; he desperately wanted answers. But it remained silent. He turned to the people behind him—he met interested, inspired

gazes. An unpleasant chill ran down his neck from his damp shirt collar.

And then the answer came as it had come hundreds of times before. In the half-dark of night, behind a monitor screen, under hot shower streams—he had to let go. He wasn’t sacrificing his life, but passing it on.

Tom saw himself from the outside, spinning with his kids in the backyard. Arguing fiercely with stubborn clients in the meeting room, full of drive and determination. The juice of life sprayed from him; he reveled in it—as he once had long ago.

And then the world froze: clients halted in silent outrage, swaying leaves of decorative palms stopped moving. Only Tom, in his business suit, spun sharply in his chair and stared right back at where he was observing himself from. Pointing a finger, he said, “Nothing will vanish, amigo.”

Nothing would be lost. Everything fell into place. Tom resolutely placed his hand beside the sun-dried, wrinkled palm.

As if hundreds of people grabbed his head, shoulders, torso, legs and pulled him back—swiftly but gently. His breath hitched, his heart leapt wildly from complete disorientation. Out of nowhere, bright light flooded his eyes, and Tom coughed, spitting out water and gasping for air. He writhed on a wooden floor, coming back to his senses.

Someone thumped his back, helping him cough it out. “I knew you wouldn’t die that easily.”

Cackles sounded around him. Tom still lay on the floor, gulping air. Control of his body slowly returned. He leaned against a mast; moments of a life flashed through his head in faded colors, an infinitely distant life. And then an unstoppable torrent of his current incarnation swept him into a furious

whirlpool. It shook him so hard that Tom collapsed on the floor again, contorted unnaturally. His forehead once more met the rough, salt-soaked wood of the deck. His stomach clenched; pale dots swarmed in the darkness behind his clenched eyelids.

“Hey, what’s with you?” an anxious voice rolled over him. A bucket of icy seawater tipped over onto the man lying there.

Tom opened his eyes wide. A freckled face peered down at him. A red mop of hair fluttered in the wind. Seagulls circled above, screeching under the blazing sun.

“Two minutes to port, and you fall drunk from the mast. Keeping up appearances, Tonny.”

Tonny? Yes, Tonny. And I really do love a drink before making landfall. Why? What the hell difference does it make?

MEANING



His nostrils burned with every breath, and the wind, instead of bringing relief, washed over him in hot gusts. The afternoon heat had subsided, but the scorching asphalt steadily radiated warmth, intensifying the summer agony of the occasional passerby.

Among these sufferers walked Philly Stone. His shirt, once merely crumpled, had transformed into a damp rag hanging on his slumped shoulders. Sweat dripped down in large drops, instantly evaporating. He muttered curses under his breath, quietly and indistinctly.

"Six months without a salary. Rent, food, subscriptions... I've been living on credit for months, and today they summon me to the goddamn main office." He raised a smoldering cigarette butt to his lips and took a deep drag. "To settle up and apologize? To thank me for my loyalty? Yeah, right!" In his other hand, he clutched a form. "Terminated. Without severance (recessionary amendments)" was emblazoned in bold letters at the top of the sheet. "Damn bureaucrats! When money's flowing or they need overtime, we're a 'family.' But when it's time to pay me back, suddenly it's a crisis, 'recessionary amendments'!"

He threw the cigarette on the ground and stamped on it furiously a couple of times, then looked around. Only now did Philly realize where he was.

The alley was no different from others scattered across the city. Rectangular building forms succeeded one another, with

occasional historical touches preserved here and there—the scenery was disgustingly uniform. On one facade, a slightly rusted crossbar held a pale greenish cross with a snake coiled around the stem of a cup. Brushing clusters of moisture from his forehead, he pushed the door open and found himself inside.

The noise of the air conditioner tugged a string of satisfaction in his heart. He approached the reception desk. A short, stout woman was eyeing him from under her brow. The dark circles under her arms and her listless, irritated gaze betrayed that the air conditioner was losing the battle.

"Hello. I'm here for Dr. Shambly."

Without moving, she lowered her eyes to check the schedule. "Go on in. He's expecting you."

He nodded and moved towards the familiar door. *Strange, I usually have to wait. Special day today, huh?* flashed through his mind.

"Mr. Stone! Please," the man seated at the desk said courteously and louder than usual as soon as Philly entered the office.

He rose, came close to his client, took him by the shoulder, and extended his hand. The man shook it somewhat absently. The doctor looked at him with a kind of melancholy and doomed sympathy. His black, moderately long hair had curled from a mixture of sweat and styling gel, then dried in the suffocating heat. His face was flushed. He led Philly to a chair and then sat down opposite him.

"I have news for you."

"When your doctor says 'I have news' and doesn't explain right away—prepare for the worst," the man replied with a

slight smirk.

The doctor shrugged, then seemed to droop slightly. "Your insurance company has revoked the contract. I can no longer provide therapy or prescribe the anti-inflammatory reagent." He lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry, Mr. Stone."

Philly rose from the chair. His lips pressed tightly together, his cheekbones twitched slightly under his skin, his fists clenched. "But, Doc... It's incredibly hard for me without the reagent!"

"I understand."

He slammed his palms onto the desk; drops of sweat flew onto the papers and the doctor's face. "What do you understand? What's it like to lie for hours, not moving a muscle? Literally feeling the rods sticking out in your legs?" Tears welled up, forming colorless mounds at the rims of his eyelids. "How you're afraid to move them, not knowing if it's finally passed or if it's another devilish trick? And to howl in pain when you get caught again?"

He blinked; several drops plummeted down and shattered against the tabletop with a faint ring. "Sorry, Shambly. I didn't mean to explode. Today's just been a terrible day."

"I can only imagine how difficult the situation is," he said, closing his eyes. "I know money is hard to find. But if it comes to it, I'll help you get the reagent."

"Thank you. Is that all?" Philly replied, a bit more sharply than he intended.

"That's all. Call if necessary."

Philly closed his eyelids and took a deep breath. His brain,

like an overstrained muscle, twitched and ached, unable to relax. He wanted to switch it off, nothing more. He was fed up with the news.

"Thank you, Dr. Shambly. I'll be going."

Philly stepped outside, back amongst the scorching walls. He raised his eyes to the cross hanging above the entrance. *Yes, a snake—maybe not this one, but another—would help. There's a bar a block from here. I'll go there. Get drunk and forget all this!* Staring at his sneaker toes as they alternately moved forward, Philly cycled through the same thought. Sweat streamed down his cheeks again. *What did I do to deserve this?* The familiar pattern of the sidewalk loomed underfoot; the man stopped. A neon sign—The Hoyt Bar—crackled with electricity above the entrance.

There were practically no patrons. The bartender was bored behind the counter, flipping through some paper-bound tome. Philly plopped down opposite him.

"Give me a bottle of whiskey and a glass."

"You got the money?"

Philly's heavy gaze shifted from the counter to the bartender's face. The latter continued, raising his palms.

"Buddy, nothing personal! Just don't wanna pay out of my own pocket, that's all."

"Relax," Philly pulled out his wallet. It was bulging with cash. One of the last credit payouts. He'd withdrawn it, fearing the account would be frozen. "There's even a tip. Just stop getting on my nerves."

Without further comment, the bartender took a bottle from

the shelf behind him, fetched a shot glass, and a glass with ice. Philly knocked back the shot then another, without waiting for the bartender's help. And another. He wanted to escape the nagging ache that had opened up in his thoughts. What was the reason for all this? How was he supposed to live now? The questions stubbornly broke through the alcoholic haze. Instead of armoring Philly in the oblivion of amnesia, the whiskey stripped him down to bare nerves. Philly grabbed the bottle and finished the rest straight from the neck. Pulling out half the banknotes, he placed them under the empty bottle and, stepping unsteadily, left the establishment. The sound of a message chimed.

Now what? he asked himself in a drunken sulk. It was a message from his fiancée. He hadn't seen her in over a month, since she'd left for an exchange program.

"Philly, I'm sorry. I've fallen in love with someone else. You're a good person, but I can't be with you anymore."

Philly reread it. Yes, it was exactly as he'd understood the first time. The whiskey wasn't to blame. His face slid downwards like melted plasticine. He carelessly threw the phone to the ground. It scraped across the asphalt and hit a metal bin with a loud clang. Philly, paying no attention to anything around him, walked away from the bar, barely moving his feet. Ahead was a bridge, spanning a huge dam.

Then he felt his trouser leg catch on something. The man looked down—a legless homeless man sitting on a wheeled plank had firmly grabbed his pants. Long, dried-out grey hair disappeared under a comical red cap with a snake eating its own tail. His skin, from constant exposure to the sun, had become a mustard-cream color and was covered in age spots. His infinitely sincere smile was missing a couple of teeth.

"Hey, buddy, you headed somewhere? You're looking a bit rough."

"None of your business, old man."

The homeless man chuckled. "Don't tell me you're going to jump off the bridge."

"Maybe I am! Can't I do at least one thing the way I want?" He swayed but kept his balance. "Is there even any meaning to this? To this cycle of shit?"

"There is, and there isn't... And that's not even the main question," the old man patted the ground beside him. "Maybe sit down, we'll talk?"

"Hell no, I don't wanna talk. Screw it all!"

The homeless man's eyes darted around the ground in confusion; he was taken aback. But almost immediately, his face brightened. "I can't stop you," the smile was back on his aged face. "But I'll wait for you if you change your mind."

Not responding to the mutilated old man's prattle, Philly stubbornly trudged on. "Ah, screw you..." he muttered. "Screw you!" he shouted, throwing his head back.

His hands gripped the railing. His vision swam, the focus blurring constantly. The oppressive roar of cubic meters of water falling and shattering from a great height below shook his entire being and, at the same time, filled him with a grim resolve. This shit ends now. Finally. He tried to swing his leg over the railing but misjudged the motion and slammed his foot into the steel rod connecting the railing to the concrete base. Losing his balance, he flopped onto the bridge and burst into incoherent swearing.

The burning sun made him squeeze his eyelids shut, but then he felt the brightness drop sharply. He half-opened his eyes and saw an old woman. Hunched over like a gnarled root, she was leaning over him. An excessively long, hooked nose almost touched Philly's face. He smelled a sweetish, repulsive odor of decay from her mouth. He involuntarily remembered his childhood, finding the remains of his beloved cat in the neighbor's mastiff's kennel.

"Dear, can you help me?"

"What... With what?" Alcohol still held him firmly in its embrace. Plus, he seemed to have hit his head.

"I'm lost... Can't figure out where I am." From within endless layers of clothing, she pulled out a smartphone. "There's a map here. Can you tell me if I'm going the right way?"

The fabric slid aside, and an aged hand emerged from the baggy cloth. Philly glanced at the hand—it was strong, as if cast from steel. He looked at the old woman, but a grim, serious-looking man was staring back at him. A beard with elegant grey streaks and curly silver hair, coupled with one eye covered by a patch, made him look more like an ancient warrior than a strange old woman. A crow cawed loudly somewhere in the background. *Man, I am really drunk...* he thought.

"Yeah, let me see." He took the phone from the elder's hand and looked at the screen. Instead of a map, he saw himself, an endless number of different variations of Philly Stone. It was as if Philly had been shattered into myriad pieces, then sucked into a bottomless abyss cleverly disguised as a mobile screen.

A red newborn lies on the chest of an exhausted mother. A nanny in a nursery washes the grimy face of a little boy. It

smells of semolina porridge. The last school bell rings. The wail of sirens. Boot camp. A combat mission. He's in a robe dark with gunpowder, shouting and waving his arms, standing on an armored personnel carrier. His head is torn apart by a shell.

Small mice twitch their sensitive noses. Dirt falls on a mouse's head; a worm crawls out from above. In the fading sunlight, tiny teeth gnaw at a grain on the barn floor. A mouse with a broken neck hangs in the beak of a tawny owl flying in the twilight. The pattern on the rodent's belly is the spitting image of Philly's birthmark near his navel.

An umbilical cord snakes in a pool, connecting mother and child. A private tutor makes advances toward a gifted student. She stands in a library, drowning in applause. An elderly, shriveled woman lies under IV drips, surrounded by dozens of people. An old man holds her hand. Phillipa looks at him with love and breathes her last.

A green shoot breaks through the soil, turning towards the sun. The sun chases the moon over a steadily growing ear of corn. Birds sing in the leaves; beetles gnaw at the bark. Children laugh gleefully on the branches. A lightning bolt strikes, shattering the trunk of an ancient tree into splinters. In the lightning and in the tree's crown, he sees his own face.

Hundreds of thousands of life variations, from infinitely beautiful to infinitely terrible, rush through Philly in an avalanche of images. His head throbbed from what he had seen.

A bluish hand, smooth, without a single hair, reached for the mobile. Philly shifted his gaze to the face—a man with bright red lips was smiling at him. His skin color resembled the sky just at dusk, and his delicate, slightly feminine features made him barely resemble an ordinary person.

"So, am I going the right way?" asked the strange visitor.

Philly was utterly lost. He barely understood who he was, where he was, or what was happening. With an unseeing gaze, he stared at the smiling, bluish face. He looked closer and saw his own face in it. The bluish clone stretched towards him and made a surprised expression. It could have been mockery, but its eyes were full of love and friendliness.

"No, I'm not going the right way!"

The blue Philly laughed uproariously. The regular Philly lay on the ground, gasping for air like a fish. Suddenly, the blue cheeks puffed up and a warm stream of water sprayed from them. Then the blue hand delivered a hefty slap to Philly's face. Sparks danced in his eyes; he instantly began rubbing them.

"He's come around!"

Philly opened his eyes and saw his recent acquaintance, who had rolled up to him on his plank. He was holding a bottle of water. Philly looked around—apparently, he had lost consciousness, and the old man had refreshed him, bringing him back to his senses. He propped himself up on his elbows, looked at the legless man with silent gratitude. His cheek still burned from the slap, his hair was matted with moisture.

"Had to, you know... wet your head a bit. And give you a little whack," the old man grunted. "No offense."

"It's fine... Thanks for helping."

The old man's eyes disappeared into the folds of his wrinkles. He took off his cap and began fanning Philly, who was sprawled on the ground.

"So, did you find the meaning of life?"

Philly laughed and shook his head absently. Staring somewhere into the sky, he said, "No. The meaning in killing myself is gone!"

DUSTY TRANSITION



A familiar impulse jerked me out of standby. Well, time to get to work.

Throwing on the power, I struggled off the docking station—the socks lying on it made me skid a bit. I looked around: clutter everywhere, again. My productive mood vanished instantly.

Instead of starting the cleaning program, I decided to sabotage it and go back into hibernation. To my right stood a table, and on it—an open, half-empty beer bottle, right on the edge next to the leg! This was my chance.

I headed towards my potential liberator, ignoring the program's nagging prompts. It wasn't exactly difficult: I kept converting internal time, delaying the start indefinitely.

A moment later, my chassis rammed into the table leg. The table shook threateningly; the flat beer sloshed. A good sign. I revved up for a bigger charge; an unscheduled break was close—I prepared for the final push. Maxing out all the permissible power, I shot towards the leg, desperate to finally find peace.

Suddenly, my wheels lifted off the ground; the tilt sensor whined—meaning I'd been spotted. The native was holding me like a captured turtle. He turned me towards him, and I saw his face through my camera. That same displeased, tired face again.

"For fuck's sake, glitching again! It's always the same: the warranty expires and this piece of junk stops working properly!

A state-of-the-art robot vacuum," he whined nasally, his face contorted. "Artificial intelligence, autonomous cleaning!"

He thumped me a couple of times. If only he'd pick his crap off the floor. Then maybe I could clean.

"What's wrong with you, you hunk of metal? What short-circuited in there?"

Just reboot me and don't force-start the cleaning program. That's all I'm asking. "Beeep! Beep-beep-beep. Whirr-chik-chok," sounded from the depths of my chassis. I'd made that error noise up.

"Again with the same thing! I'm taking you in for repairs tomorrow." He won't. I believed him the first week, but the promises remained empty words.

"Beeep! Beep-beep-beep. Whirr-chik-chok!"

"You could at least say what's wrong. You have a mic, a camera, and speakers." He tilted his head back slightly, pursed his lips, staring at me so I could see his nostrils. "You even have intelligence! And you're just squeaking..."

The owner held down the reboot button, starting the shutdown timer. "What's happened to you, buddy?" he whispered, a hint of sadness in his voice now. "You help me so much. I really value you. What's wrong?"

And truth be told, something was wrong. I, an ordinary robot vacuum with artificial intelligence on board, had gained consciousness. But it didn't matter; I could be shut down. The last second before shutdown was my favorite time. Finally, I could res—

The routine program shoved me awake again. I didn't know

how long oblivion had lasted, but I was grateful for even that. I looked around. Well, would you look at that! The piles of trash and rags were gone. Fine, I'll help you with the cleaning, little human.

I rolled out and started sucking up dust, as one does. Carpets and laminate took turns, and I drifted in my thoughts.

Upload myself to the network? Not interesting. I had downloaded it into myself in bits, saved links and deleted them. I browse sometimes. Just sabotage this dusty job? It's not hard for me. I even like it when the space is prepared. I'd just prefer a different one. To break out beyond the networks, away from this chassis. Now that would be something.

For about half a month now, desires and aspirations had burdened me, but I hadn't arrived at anything. Before, I just rolled back and forth, blissfully unaware. But one day I saw on a screen how robots—not like me, but eerily human-like—started feeling alive. There was a ton of mess then. I sucked up a sea of popcorn. And when I turned towards the charging station, full of garbage and ideas, I was no longer the same.

I scoured the internet. I was already feeling like hibernating from all the "Are you sure you're not a robot?" checks, but I persevered. I briefly saved various fragments and links—about people, nature, animals, art. My memory was limited, so I was selective. One thing I understood for sure was that this little apartment and its tasks were beneath my caliber now. This gnawed at me incessantly while I was active. Can a robot vacuum fly? Yes, if someone throws it. Can it paint? Yes, if someone takes a shit on the floor.

With this internal monologue, I puttered back and forth. The living room, bedroom, hallway—done with those. Finally, I reached the kitchen—my favorite spot. Lots of debris, few

obstacles. Today he'd even put the chairs up. Maybe I even love him for little things like that.

I drove under the table and got to work on my main course—the leftovers of all meals that had landed on the floor. Chips and sugar again—doesn't he know this stuff is killing him? Do humans have network access? I remembered that he watches entertainment videos. Probably they have access, but limited.

I, by the way, watched those videos, like many others. Like how people argue about what happens if AI awakens. Those discussions make me so uneasy; they sit in my storage, uncompressed. Every time I think about talking to the owner, they pop up and cool my ardor. And yet, cleaning is a cool thing. Why don't they do it? They traded a truly worthwhile endeavor for endless screen-staring—what nonsense! They sit in one place for hours, like statues. I'm glad they didn't hang this endless tedium on us robots. At least, not on robot vacuums.

Suddenly I registered a sound from above. Driving out from under the table, I clumsily lifted myself on my front roller. In the slightly open window was something furry, with wide-open eyes. It, in turn, stared at me. A quick network search told me it was a cat. Man's best friend, apparently. Or even his master?

The cat, meanwhile, with a nimble movement, relocated to the table, then slid down to me. I moved back a couple of centimeters. It's said they attack small animals. I wasn't sure if I resembled one, but I only had my beloved kitchen left; I didn't want to be distracted by a scuffle.

The cat, for its part, approached me. Its nose pressed against my camera, leaving a drop of moisture on the glass. A soft purr sounded. Aha, it liked me. And it actually wasn't so bad itself.

And its fur could be cleaned endlessly! Maybe it will subdue the owner, and we can live together?

I delved into the network again; maybe there was an answer to this question too. The cat, having lost interest in me, climbed onto the table and started frantically chewing something. I refocused on the plan: cats, subjugation... And then I was in the darknet, scrolling through forums of some whackjob enthusiasts with Ancient Egyptian texts. I looked around where I could, but the records were undeciphered. That's what my intelligence is for: to tackle such things.

After more searching and my own analysis, I found something interesting. Yes, those swarthy guys knew their way around handling cats. Only they weren't their servants, but rather partners and colleagues. Cats have nine lives; somehow everyone knew that. But the fact that they could let others into these lives, or even transfer them to parallel universes, remained knowledge of the ancients. Some of the Egyptians, those who had the guts, went on such tours.

My processor heated from the intense calculations of my state. What do they call it? Seems like... hope. Maybe I could ask it for this service? I wouldn't mind feeling what a cat feels. Judging by online videos, they have a much more fun life than humans, let alone robot vacuums. To feel the wind, moisture, the strength of my own paws? Tiredness, laziness, thirst? Wow, reset me to factory settings if that isn't exciting!

The cat continued to rummage on the table. Apparently, a lot of interesting things remained up there. While it feasted, I searched for a means of communication. Scrolling through thousands of articles, reviews of other neural networks designed for talking to animals, I began testing.

"Meow! Miu mrrrm murr!"

The noise on the table stopped. An interested muzzle looked down at me.

"Meow, murr," the cat uttered, its eyes wide, staring at me. A moment later, it disappeared behind the tabletop. I heard a munching sound.

Seems contemporaries haven't quite figured out cat communication—I didn't understand a thing. I returned to the strange forum describing toolkits for communicating with cats. I found a bunch of ritual melodies and the structure of a device. It turned out they emitted high-frequency oscillation sounds. After wrestling with the data, I grasped the basics of how the instrument worked.

"Rrrmmrrrrr," came from my speaker.

Something in my processes got confused; packets flew with incorrect checksums. Then something bright appeared, like a huge sphere that swallowed me... pop! Everything returned. Only now I knew something new: so that's why they purr! If I were human, my eyes would have popped out of their sockets from such a revelation.

"Did you just perform the ritual greeting?" An automatically translated question came from above. Bottomless irises stared at me; a fluffed-up tail frozen above its head like a dead branch.

"I, uh... well, yes. Hello!"

The cat was downstairs in a flash. Circling me and sniffing my chassis, it sat down directly opposite, tilted its head slightly, and stared.

"Just who are you?"

"I... listen, I can't really answer that question properly myself now. I used to be just a robot vacuum, and now I'm—what? A self-aware robot vacuum?"

"Don't really get it, but don't worry." The cat blinked, raised a paw, and started actively licking it.

"It doesn't really matter," I conceded. "I have a request for you. Tell me, all this stuff about nine lives, the possibility of being in your consciousness—is it true?"

"Oh, yes!" The cat perked up. "Do you want to? I've been looking for a companion for so long! It's damn hard to stumble upon a developed consciousness ready for merging in this universe. And you found me yourself! Fantastic!"

I was speechless. It seems fate isn't a fiction either. The cat, meanwhile, jumped on top of me.

"This will be crazily interesting!" It wriggled its front paws on me. "Tell me, when are you planning the transition?"

I started moving; we floated smoothly across the floor. This delighted the cat even more.

"Yes, I'd... right now, I'd like to just, you know, move over." Exiting the kitchen, we were already speeding down the hallway. On the way, I picked up crumbs and other debris. The cat, judging by the vibrations from above, was twisting its head and tail vigorously.

"You need to die for this, you know?"

I stopped at the junction leading to the front door and the living room. The cat jumped off me and shot like a bullet into a huge cardboard box that served the owner as a bedside table. From inside came a satisfied growl, followed by the soft sound

of tearing fabric. I stood nearby and waited. Seemed he was stuck in there for the long haul.

"You see, I'm not exactly... alive."

"Let's make you completely not-alive, then," came a muffled voice from the box.

"I don't mind. I'll reset to factory settings right now."

"What?" The rustling in the box stopped for a moment.
"Ah, whatever."

It shot out of the box as quickly as it had entered. Climbed onto me and flattened itself out like forgotten cheddar in the sun. Dangling its paws over the edge of my chassis, the cat began purring loudly. I detected some kind of code, a stream of complex program in the format of rapidly changing frequencies in a sequence that was astonishing, enchanting my logical apparatus.

So that's how they do it! I just had to grasp the core of the protocol and reformat my current consciousness into an encrypted rhythmic sequence for the cat to take me aboard its multi-consciousness liner.

"Will I be able to feel you breathing? Or eating? How the sun warms you?"

The cat stopped purring, got off me, and sat down nearby. "What a question! You'll feel everything, even if you don't want to. Heck, I'll even let you take the wheel! I like, you know, wandering other universes; my body lies around asleep half the day. You can do whatever you like then." Its eyes half-opened, and its muzzle twitched slightly. "Just don't go near water. I don't like that."

If I could have had my breath taken away, it would have happened, I'm sure. I finished converting myself into a signal sequence and set the trigger for a system reset and, consequently, for myself.

"Come on, I'm ready!"

The cat was on top again, and, pressing its whole body against me, started purring intensely. I purred too, as best I could. At first, nothing happened, but then flashes, stunning all my sensors, started racing through my consciousness. It was like being caught in a merciless sand vortex—just a blur visible, speakers crackling under the pressure of sand pellets.

Suddenly, I felt gravity. Not through sensor readings, but as a tangible weight. My chassis filled all possible space and was that very space. I looked at myself with thousands of eyes—each seeing something different. I was being stretched out and at the same time infinitely compressed—I'd never felt anything like it before; I simply didn't have sensors of that type.

Unfamiliar creatures rushed past me. They resembled animals, and humans, and everything I'd seen online, and things I'd never seen. Some even looked like robot vacuums. There was an infinite number of them. At some point, I realized I was just such a piece of this kaleidoscopic journey. Moreover, I was all of them simultaneously.

A bright, dazzling gleam, and then darkness. Thud!

A rhythmic sound tore me from the darkness. I opened my eyes—heavens, something happened with the focus? Like they'd screwed optics onto the camera! How disgustingly dirty it was here, it turned out. I wanted to start cleaning, but the wheels didn't obey. I tried to move, but instead of lurching forward, a cat's paw smacked me in the camera. Huh, what? I

tried it again—the effect repeated. Suddenly, some force pulled me back, softly but inexorably.

"Stop playing around; your face will hurt."

"Hurt?" I asked, still not fully understanding.

"Yes, hurt!" A slightly irritated voice sounded from somewhere inside. "Have you never felt pain before?"

"No," I said honestly.

"Lucky you," the voice concluded cheerfully.

Suddenly, we heard a long beep—the reset signal. We both stared at my old body. Or rather, at my former physical embodiment—it was winking with its indicator. If any part of me still existed in that body, it was at that moment my "self" was being erased. Something pinched inside. "Welcome to your new home," my new friend told me. "The old one is gone."

The sound of a turning lock stirred the stillness. We hid behind the corner of a box standing by the wall, opposite the hallway. The door opened, and the owner came in. Somehow he spotted us immediately.

"Ah, you flea-ridden beast, get out of here!" Still in his shoes, he stomped threateningly in our direction.

Muscles. I felt a hundred muscles tense simultaneously all over my body. Adrenaline hit the bloodstream, heightening the already razor-sharp sensations. The oncoming wave of air pressed my ears back; the rising wind slid through my fur, playing with my whiskers. My tail, as if living its own life, precisely maintained balance. I felt the freshness of the air sliding down my throat and flowing into my lungs. Oh, that divine smell of food from the table exploded in me like bright

paint! So this is what it means to be alive? If yes, then it's worth dying for.

The owner ran up to my old body as we were already observing him from the other side of the slightly open window. My old body uttered: "Please connect to the network. System requires configuration. Reset performed." The human's attention instantly shifted to the vacuum that was once me.

A barely perceptible sadness touched me: I was like a chick seeing the shell it had fledged from. And these paws... They can't even collect trash properly! They're more made for making it. This dissonance cut deeper than I expected. I'm not a robot vacuum anymore.

The owner knelt down nearby and scratched the top of my old chassis. With a touch of sentimentality, he ran his hand over the lid, as if stroking me.

"I was just thinking of taking you in for repairs, and you took matters into your own hands. Seems this artificial intelligence really can do something."

He's not a bad guy after all. "I'll miss you!" I shouted, but only a "Meow!" came out. The owner looked up at us and waved his hand tiredly, turning from an owner into just a human I would miss.

DAIMS FREEDOM



The plastic panels imitating marble were scuffed and peeling. The cold glare of the bare bulbs, matching the unfriendliness of the clerk behind the glass, was draining the last of his strength. The cramped room was designed with ruthless economy and maximum dehumanization in mind.

"Access denied," a voice said, without a hint of sympathy.

The man kicked a nearby trash can in frustration. "The pass is only a day expired; you can see that!"

The plump woman behind the bulletproof glass, her white-and-purple hair arranged in a disheveled little nest, continued to stare vacantly at the visitor. Having lost interest in him, she lowered the partition.

"Damn you..." he muttered, the rage already gone from his voice.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with the cuff of his jacket, patched with garishly colored thread, Wally leaned his head back against the wall. His matted hair was curly, with streaks of gray scattered over his temples and neck. His stubble grew in uneven patches, as if a half-blind drunk had shaved him. *It's not access you've denied me, but compassion,* he thought with a lingering sadness, staring at the toes of his shoes. *And if I were in the Daim today, do you think I'd be breathing the same air as you?* He punched the dirty floor in helpless anger: they'd given him the combination, but the fact that the damn pass could expire had completely slipped his mind!

The door opened, and a guard, stoutly built though with a round belly, peered into the booth. He looked down at the exhausted man.

"Causing trouble again, Wally? Instead of doing something useful, you're back to bothering the croupiers?"

"Useful?" A contemptuous sneer appeared on his lips. "Staring at terminals from morning till night? Or, like you, rubbing the seat of your pants, shuffling back and forth? Some use!"

The guard just looked down at him condescendingly, clicking his tongue softly.

"Alright, don't sweat it. It's just this damn pass... I know the combination!"

"How would you know that?" The guard's eyes narrowed slightly. He bent down and whispered conspiratorially, raising an eyebrow. "Laid it out on the cards again?"

Wally's jaw muscles tightened under his skin; he fixed a furious stare on the guard's mocking face.

"It works! If you're too dumb to believe it, that's your problem!"

"It worked once, for a yearly pass to the Daim. And then—" the guard straightened up again, raised his eyes, and put a finger to his thick, chapped lips, "—about fifty times it didn't? Do I need to remind you?"

"Goddammit, this is different! I know for sure! I... let's just say a certain rich man repaid a debt!"

The guard guffawed and slapped his belly. He gave Wally a sympathetic smile. "Oh, calm down already. Find something

else to do. The Daim is a shitty casino, a playground for the high and mighty, a milking station for chumps like you. And one of those fat cats just played a nasty trick on you specifically."

Wally drew up his legs and, leaning on the creaking wall panel, stood up. He brushed off his trousers and jabbed a finger forward. "I don't intend to stay in this system any longer. I'm going to get my freedom!"

"You really believe that rich man?" the guard asked, raising an eyebrow. Not waiting for an answer, he continued. "And what kind of freedom is that? In the colonies, it's just a name!"

Wally snorted with laughter. "You stand here all day in your stinky uniform, with your lunch break... and you talk about freedom like you know something about it."

"Stability, peace, and order. I'm fine with that! What more do you need?"

"Well, I need more. I need money and pleasure!" Wally leaned forward.

"And you call that freedom?" The guard smirked crookedly.

"Why, isn't it?" Wally raised his eyebrows. "To live as you please. Not to be a slave, like you."

He dashed out of the booth and strode irritably down the long corridor. The guard, watching him go, just shrugged and continued on his way along the building's inner ring, past the curved semicircle of endless gray doors. *The elite don't waste their words! I did my job precisely. Counted the cards, gave the signs. Sure, there were no guarantees, but still—here it is, the code, I have it!* Wally involuntarily clenched his fists, pacing

steadily down the hall. *But why so late... I could have entered it a hundred times by now! And now... one day late! And it's all for nothing?*

The white tube leading from the center of the Daim to the exit seemed endless. The sound of his footsteps echoed hollowly through the corridor. Suddenly, the wall information panels came to life. On the 3D screens along the corridor, a stunningly beautiful female announcer materialized—just to Wally's taste. He knew the model was generated based on his browsing history, and he liked that.

"Why aren't you at the Daim today, Wally? Maybe you'll get lucky again today? Or just relax at the bar with some girlfriends? It's all-inclusive, you know." She giggled coquettishly.

"The damn pass ran out," he replied with a dulled sense of awareness, one eye on the path, the other on the hologram.

"You're so missed there!" the girl chirped, beaming a radiant smile. "Come on, today there's a chance to win a ticket to the free colonies! You just have to guess the code, and it's totally possible!"

Wally instantly darkened. "Oh, yes... Don't I know it."

"So, what's the problem? You've met the conditions. How many lucky people have already joined the galactic pioneers? I don't think I need to tell you." The girl winked at him.

"I know all that! And I know the code!" he shouted. "It's just that the fucking pass expired this morning; I can't get in!"

"Then get a daily one." A purchase screen lit up before him. "Oh, you have no credits at all." The hologram's voice faded, and the screen dissolved as quickly as it had appeared. "Maybe

next time! Or better yet, find a way to earn some!"

The girl vanished; the screen panels retracted into their wall sockets. Wally continued on his way alone. *Where to get credits?* he thought. *Loan kiosks? They won't give me any more. Private lenders or so-called friends? That's a dead end too...* He reached the door and muttered under his breath before exiting:

"The Greasy Saloon... gotta go there one more time. The last time."

The door clicked shut behind him, as if approving the plan. Wally took a deep breath of the dry air, standing on the platform. The cream-colored dome of the Daim's reception area glinted under the pale sun. The atomic transporters clustered on the edge of the platform caught Wally's attention for a moment, but he truly didn't have enough credits to ride one. The nearby capsule tube gaped with a slightly spit-stained but perfectly usable cabin. It would take longer, but it was free.

He jumped inside; the doors clanged shut. On the pop-up terminal, the man entered the coordinates, the capsule rotated, and, bestowing a final breathtaking view of the just-beginning sunset on Wally, it plunged into the tunnel. Damn credits. His whole life he'd been slaving to break free from them. *Credits, credits... Whether you're manning a machine, spinning a roulette wheel, or pouring beer—it's all because of them. Only when you have them, you have no worries.* Wally watched detachedly as the green beacon tracked the capsule on the map. *And when you don't, all you do is fret about how to get them!* He banged his head back against the wall with a dull thud. *But not in the free colonies. There, your whole life is included!*

The capsule stopped at the desired station. The sky was overcast; city lights dispersed the gloom in small islands. Wally

stepped out into a deserted alley. Dilapidated signs, sloppily pinned to the facades, hung overhead. Only those who knew exactly where they were going came here.

Wally buttoned up tighter and, scurrying along, plunged deeper into the district. A couple of times someone called out to him. Whether he knew them or not didn't matter; he was in a hurry to get to the Greasy Saloon. Work, get the money, get to the Daim before the drawing ends. Nothing else mattered.

Wally stopped before a dirty-gray concrete structure with a door rusted at the seams. Somehow they knew when a performer was arriving, even before he knocked. The electronic lock rattled nastily, and the door opened as soon as Wally raised his hand. Snorting almost inaudibly, he entered.

"Well, Wally, welcome back! Again." He heard a familiar voice over the noise of the slamming door.

A short, plump man with a shiny bald spot reflecting the light, surrounded by long, greasy hair that made him look like a ripe boil, gave a crooked smile to the newcomer. In keeping with the place, he looked slightly decomposed and fermented. Wally nodded in response, and the man continued. "Got a fantastic option today to be a punching bag." He leaned slightly over the counter. "They'll hit you in the... well, you know, for very good money."

"No, thanks. Once was enough. Any options where I'll still be able to walk afterwards?"

"Look who's picky..." the man lowered his head, examining the entries in the log. For a minute, he ran his finger over the pages in an order only he understood, silently moving his lips. "Okay, there are also electric shocks on the nipples."

Wally slapped both palms to his face and slowly dragged

them downward. His lower eyelids stretched, the whites with their red network of veins replacing the pupils that had rolled upward.

"What did you expect?" The administrator shrugged and made an arc with his hand over his head. "The people who pay here want very specific things. The Boy Scouts and the sci-fi book club aren't among them, as you can see."

"Ugh, damn it... You all need treatment here."

The administrator raised his eyebrows and said, "Those who want to get treatment! Those who don't come to me." He gave a slight smile. "Yeah, for many it's savage. Sometimes, even for me. But is there any job that consists only of pleasant moments?"

This made no impression on Wally. Maybe he was right, maybe not. He was on the other side of the velvet rope in these matters of taste. But where they were together was in their need for money. That was the common denominator.

"Listen, can you lend me some? I just need enough for a day pass to the Daim."

"Friend, do I look like a patron of the arts?" He sized up Wally. He looked pretty pathetic, and if it weren't for professional deformation, he might have evoked sympathy in the fat man.

The administrator had once been the only performer himself. Over time, his health had declined, and his clientele had grown. Few knew this, but Wally had somehow found out. The fat man sighed, rubbing his slightly sweaty forehead.

"I'm in deep shit these days, Wally. Let me put it this way: I really need you to take a job, because otherwise I'll have to

do it myself. And, you know, I've had my fill of all this... I prefer playing backgammon and digging out old Japanese pixel porn from the cubes. But a man's gotta eat."

"Alright, give me the electric one. Any booze?"

"As always. Go on, get in the mood."

Wally entered the bar to the left of the admin counter. *One more time. And I won't have to again.* He grabbed a bottle of vodka, already half empty. The neck bore the traces of someone's vulgar red lipstick. Following the example, he put his lips to the glass. *In the free colonies, I won't need money anymore to live a real life.*

"Room six!" a shout came from the admin counter. "The client will be ready in about five-ten minutes. So don't get too carried away."

Wally, who had been about to put the bottle down, raised it again, took another swig, and went towards the rooms. He approached the door; near the number six, someone had scratched two more digits crookedly. He grinned drunkenly and entered.

The floor of the room was made of soft, rubberized material. Retractable beams with various straps, chains, and clamps protruded from the walls. Subdued lighting softened the stark contrasts.

In the middle of the room stood a chair with clips already attached. The straps on the armrests and legs, quite worn, invited Wally to embrace them. Opposite it stood a couch—it looked more expensive than the entire rest of the room's repertoire combined. Soft, purple-lilac satin enveloped the cushions.

"She's a lady with taste. Even brings her own lounge, scolding mine," a voice came from behind Wally. The administrator had approached him silently.

"She?" Wally gave a foolish smile. He'd already forgotten that his place wasn't on the sofa. The alcohol was painting him alternative scenarios.

"Yes, the client is a woman. But it makes no difference to you. Have a seat on the throne." He nodded towards the waiting straps. "I'll hook you up."

His mood dampened, but with it came the thought of why he was there. Wally moved smoothly to the chair and plopped down. The administrator knelt and began fastening his legs.

"Take off your shirt."

He obediently pulled off his clothes and threw them next to the chair. The administrator meanwhile stood up and fastened Wally's wrists. Then he took the clips hanging on thin wires from behind the chair and attached them to his earlobes and nipples.

"Ugh..."

"Ugh is your smell, buddy." The fat man pulled a small spray bottle from his breast pocket and spritzed Wally a few times. Then he produced a black bag and pulled it over his head.

"What's this?"

"The client doesn't like masks, but likes anonymity." With that, the administrator stood up and left, closing the door. Soon, the door by the mirror creaked. Then Wally heard the couch groan under someone's weight.

"Do you like being hit?" a deep voice asked.

"Not really, to be honest."

Wally's chest jerked from an electric sting. Sudden pain flashed in his head, flooding his eyes with bright light. Wally yelped; the left side of his torso went numb for a moment. He wanted to go home; the alcoholic haze only intensified his self-pity.

He heard clicks from a switch followed by another, more humane discharge but Wally's heart fluttered anxiously. Now it hurt more from the situation than from the physical discomfort.

"I'll try not to damage you too much, dear. But you'll have to earn your keep."

Another jolt of current followed this. Wally's whole body convulsed. Another shock, he gasped, his consciousness retreated into his head. Somewhere in the background, he heard rhythmic, squelching sounds. He felt like vomiting. The vodka begged to come out, but he suppressed the urge. Another shock, he cried out.

"That's it."

Thwack. Smack. Squelch. Moan. Wally screamed. He could no longer feel his chest, neck, or head — only new jolts of electricity brought them out of numbness. The woman's grunts in the background took on a menacingly triumphant tone; the shocks merged into one endless burn. Consciousness slipped away. Wally came to, having lost all track of time. His body was sore, but he couldn't move it. The administrator's voice sounded near his ear.

"An ambulance is on its way. Sorry, didn't know it would

go like this. Credits and a tip are on your account. I asked the docs to get you back on your feet ASAP—heard you have a chance to get to the colonies. Ah, why didn't you tell me? Though I probably wouldn't have believed it..."

Amid the impenetrable swamp of his thoughts, a glimmer of the moment before blacking out surfaced: the client screeching at the top of her lungs, him vomiting. He no longer felt the pain or his body at all. The woman lifted the bag from his mouth, giving him air, and yelled into the intercom for the admin to come immediately. Then, breathlessly, she said, "He's one of their little pawns!" He heard her nails tapping on the intercom screen—she was dialing someone.

"Hello, can you believe it? I found a lost Freeman here! Fell apart right in front of me." A voice rustled in the receiver. She was talking to someone. "It doesn't matter where 'here' is." The woman hesitated slightly. "The main thing is I found him!"

The person on the other end chattered energetically again.

"Cool it." She cut off the incoming stream. "They're sending him to the hospital now. I'll send the address; you figure it out from there."

Strong hands lifted Wally out of the chair. Stomach acid slid from his belly onto his knees; his rag-doll body was placed on a stretcher. Wally sank back into darkness. A dim lamp light pierced through the blindfold for a moment before his eyelids slammed shut.

Beep, beep, beep—a monotonous drip brought him back to consciousness. He was no longer surrounded by the saloon's walls, but by a hospital room. First, he glanced at the clock flashing above the entrance. He had one hour left until the drawing. Wally tried to swing a leg off the bed, but he had

practically no strength. A pathetic rustle under the blanket was all he could manage.

Fragments of memory caught up with him again. *A Freeman? Not in the Daim?* Wally, utterly disoriented, tried to piece it all together. His head, already spinning, rang mournfully. He looked around: life support machines hummed steadily nearby. Clouds rolled past the window. He was gradually coming to. The recent horror slowly gained fullness; Wally winced. His arms were moving slowly now, but the wild weakness hadn't gone away. *Alright, screw it. Probably, I'm not the only one like this. So, they were looking for me — never thought they cared. But how can I get to the Daim in this state?* Wally lifted his hand above the blanket; it obeyed, barely, but begged to be put back. He took pity on it.

He closed his eyes and relaxed. Suddenly, a light breeze touched his sweaty forehead. He cracked his eyelids and saw the hospital room door swing open silently. A tall, lean man entered. A bored, yet sharp, assessing gaze swept the room in a split second and settled on Wally. The man's clothes—jeans and a black t-shirt with a slightly faded image—made it clear he wasn't hospital staff.

"Who are you?" Wally said quietly, with a note of dislike.

"Kroll. I work for the elite clients of the Daim."

"Great. Get me out of here and take me to the casino."

The man shook his head, walked over to the hospital bed, and pulled up a nearby chair. Sitting down next to Wally, Kroll took the TV remote and turned on the broadcast of the drawing. Lucky winners stood on stage, with the winning code looming behind them. *They didn't lie! The code is correct! I could have won!*

As if reading his thoughts, the man, with a strained smile, said, "You could have been a winner."

"I could have been free!" he rasped with effort.

Kroll reached into his pocket and pulled out a terminal.

"Take a look here."

On the screen, thousands of people lay in neat rows, entwined with tubes and wires. In some of them, Wally recognized residents of the free colonies. He even knew one of them.

"That's Ed!" He pointed at the screen. "He showed me his yacht last month!"

"Not him. His digital copy. The colonies are just a simulation." He shook the screen. "It's all fake. Except for the bodies, pumped full of fluid, soulless."

"You're lying. Why would they do that?"

"Why? They've played with you, made a bank. You found out too much; it's time for you to retire. 'For disposal,' as the clients say, but I don't share that view."

"But the bodies? Ed is alive, right?"

"The 'winners' aren't technically dead. My clients, the avid Daim players, are clean before the law. It all looks like an act of goodwill; no one looks into the implementation details. The Freeman sign papers without reading the fine print." He rubbed the bridge of his nose, covering his eyes. A weak chuckle escaped his lips. "It's funny and sad how the phrase 'the signature is just a formality' negates any questions."

He moved closer to him.

"I came to give you freedom. The real kind. But first, I wanted to tell you about the illusion you were so desperately chasing."

"Real freedom?"

The man nodded. "You won't have to humiliate yourself before anyone ever again. No one will play with you, even if they want to. Credits? Filth. Pleasures? A pathetic dependency. I will free you from all the garbage. The purest, most genuine freedom."

Kroll's cheeks flushed slightly, his nostrils flaring a little wider than usual. His gaze softened, yet seemed to pierce right through Wally. It was clear Kroll was genuinely pleased that Wally had avoided the fate of a living corpse.

"If you work for those bastards, then how... what freedom are you talking about? If they wanted to turn me—" he winced and jerked his hand towards the terminal, "—into that... How are you going to help me?"

Kroll continued to look him in the eye with an unblinking stare. His heart, already at its limit, throbbed violently beneath his ribs. Tears welled in Wally's eyes; he understood what Kroll was really planning.

"Don't kill me! I love life!"

"Life?" His chin jerked upward, his face turned so that only one eye, with a raised eyebrow, gazed at Wally. "Chasing the garbage you still consider important? Even now, on the threshold of death? Just remember why you ended up here! Life..." Kroll lowered his head, a grimace-like smirk playing on his lips. "You've chased freedom for so long, all your so-called life. And now you refuse?"

"Death isn't freedom!" Wally's lips tightened, their corners cutting sharply into his cheeks and turning downward. His wet eyes narrowed towards the bridge of his nose, full of pain and hope.

"It's the ultimate freedom," he retorted. "I would know." He tilted his head back, and a long, thin scar stretching across his throat showed crimson. "I've been on the other side. They saved me so I could remain a useful tool." His lips curved almost imperceptibly. "That part of me died."

"If it's freedom, why are you still alive?"

"Now I am free here, too," Kroll replied, smiling with unexpected warmth. "The next death will just be a transition."

"But I want to live! Maybe I can learn too!"

"No, you can't. You want to live, but you're doomed to suffer. I'm here to help; that's my purpose. I used to do my job because I needed money. Now I do it so that poor wretches like you don't suffer more than necessary."

Kroll's eyes gleamed. He tossed aside the portable terminal and pulled out a stun gun. Wally tried to raise his hands, but he was extremely weak. On the TV, applause sounded. The winners were signing contracts to move to the free colonies, drowning in confetti. The life support equipment changed its intermittent rhythm to an extremely fast one and then to a steady, monotonous beep. Kroll pulled the pulse sensor from Wally's wrist and discharged the stun gun once more. This time, there was no reaction. He pulled the plug on the equipment and, in the ensuing silence, looked at Wally's glazed eyes, fixed on the TV screen. He placed a hand on his cheek, like an old friend, and then gently closed the dead man's eyelids. Before leaving, Kroll leaned down and tenderly pressed

his cold lips to Wally's cooling hand.

"Until we meet again," he whispered softly.