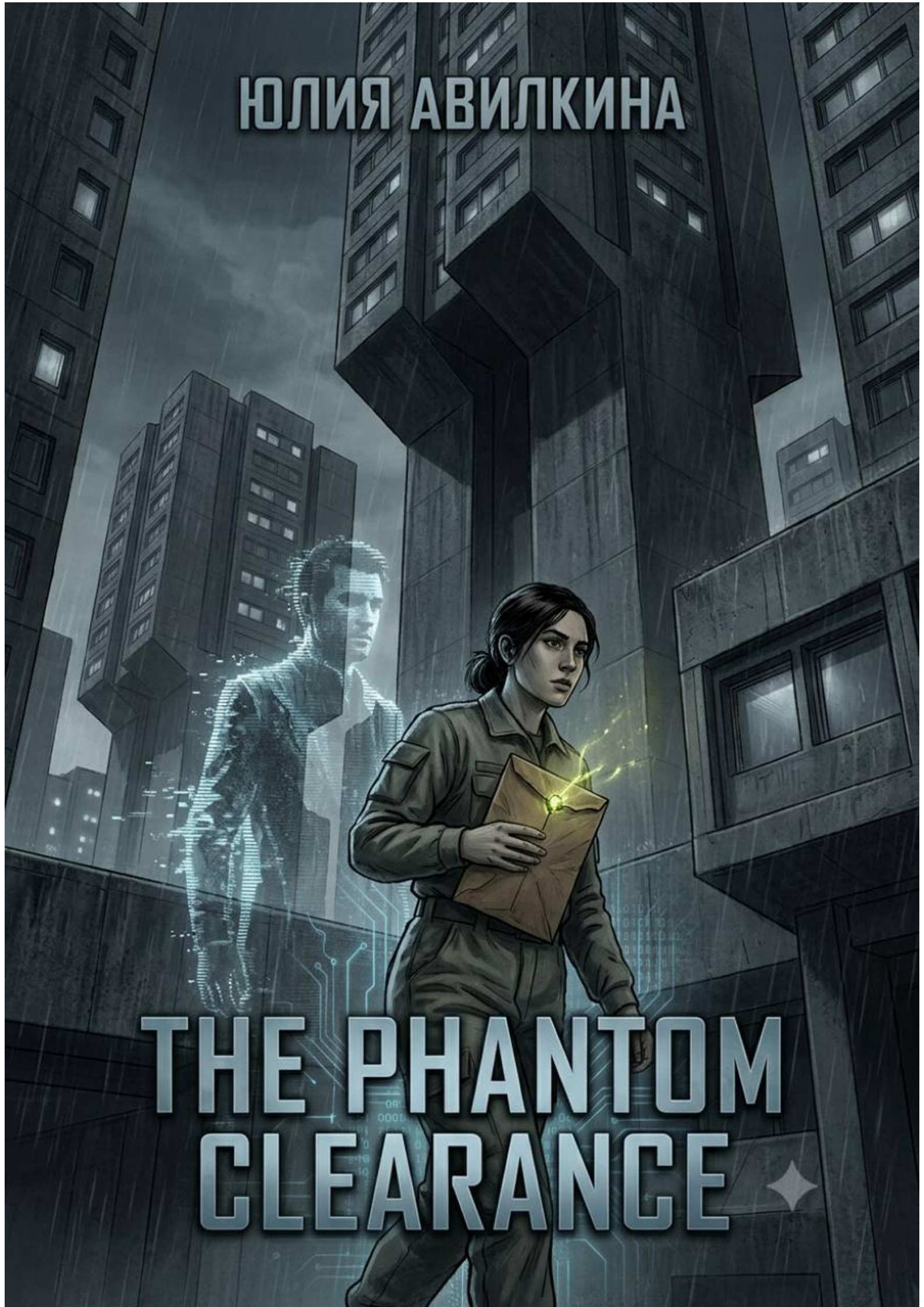


ЮЛИЯ АВИЛКИНА

THE PHANTOM
CLEARANCE



Юлия АВИЛКИНА

The Phantom Clearance

«Автор»

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In the monolithic, concrete world of Great Grimsby, human life is a hardwired algorithm. Every movement is calculated, and emotions are erased to serve the Systems endless bureaucracy. Nora is a perfect, faceless cog in this machine, spending her shifts mechanically stamping gray envelopes. Until one day, a single envelope breaks the monotony, carrying an impossible anomaly: the living scent of pine needles. This tiny crack opens a dangerous path. Soon, she is visited by Jonathan, a brilliant analyst who discovered a fatal error—the sudden erasure of citizens from existence. Trapped inside the city's power grid, he exists only as a digital ghost manifesting in Nora's cell. Drawn together by a shared awakening, they forge an impossible bond that transcends the physical world. As the Oversight closes in, a glitch transforms into a rebellion. To find the ultimate clearance to freedom, they must gamble everything to prove that human connection cannot be balanced to zero.

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Chapter | 5 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 18 |

Юлия Авилкина

The Phantom Clearance

Chapter

CHAPTER 1. DUTY

(POV: Indicator 4-B-21)

The morning started not with a dawn, but with a vibration.

At 06:00 sharp, the walls of the living cell emitted a low-frequency hum. It didn't grate on the ears, it didn't frighten, and it didn't interrupt dreams—no one here had dreams. It was merely a physical wave that penetrated the thin mattress, sank beneath the skin, and unerringly targeted the nervous system, forcing the body to an upright position.

She opened her eyes.

The room had no windows. The three-by-three-meter space was bounded by smooth, light-gray concrete that offered nothing for the eyes to latch onto. The exact second the walls shuddered, a square fluorescent panel flared to life on the ceiling without a sound, flooding the cell with a dull, bloodless light.

She stood up from the narrow metal cot. The routine of getting ready required no decisions, no thoughts, not even self-awareness. The body operated on a hardwired algorithm, honed to absolute automation by thousands of identical awakenings. A gray uniform jacket with a stiff collar, gray trousers made of dense, wrinkle-resistant synthetic fabric, heavy boots with molded rubber soles. The fabric provided no warmth, but it let no cold through either; it was engineered to minimize any physical sensation.

In the food block built into the wall, a dispenser clicked dryly. A standard brick of the morning ration slid out onto a metal tray. She took it and ate methodically, biting off equal portions, tasting nothing—there was no taste to begin with. The nutritional mass, gray and dense as clay, was intended solely to maintain the precise glucose level and muscle tone required to meet the daily work quota. Eighteen chewing movements, a swallow of synthesized water from the wall tap.

At 06:30, the door of her cell slid silently into the wall recess. She stepped across the threshold.

The corridor of the living block stretched into infinity, merging into a perfect geometric perspective. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all washed in the same matte light. From hundreds of identical doors, second for second, hundreds of people in the exact same gray uniforms emerged simultaneously.

No one said hello. No one slowed down to let a neighbor pass. No one looked around. They simply spilled out of their cells and smoothly merged into the general flow, like drops of water forming a monolithic, silent river.

The commute to the sorting center took exactly twenty-two minutes. The city outside the living block greeted them with a ruthless, oppressive monumentality. The concrete slabs underfoot were perfectly level, without a single crack or seam. Curiously, the asphalt was always damp, coated with a thin, oily film of water, though it never rained in this world. The moisture precipitated as condensation from colossal underground utilities, falling onto the streets like a cold, sticky dew.

The facades of the mammoth buildings soared upward like absolutely flat gray cliffs—they had no balconies, no ledges, no signs, no drainpipes. The eye had absolutely nothing to grasp. A constant, piercing draft swept between these titanic boxes. It brought no freshness; it smelled of ozone, recycled plastic, and metal shavings. The wind crept under the collar of the uniform, but no one in the crowd shivered or tried to wrap their jacket tighter.

Along the avenues, spaced at equal intervals, stood planters with artificial flora. These were structures of greenish polymer and steel wire, vaguely mimicking shrubs. Dust never settled on them—service drones cleaned them at night. These dead, glossy plants were the System's only attempt to create an illusion of organic life, and their perfect symmetry radiated even more sterility than the bare concrete.

The sky overhead always hung low. It was overcast with a solid, impenetrable matte shroud that let through neither shadows nor sunlight. The concept of weather did not exist in this world. All contrasts were erased, everything blending into a single, muted tone of perpetual twilight.

She walked in her row, staring straight ahead. The silence around her was paradoxical, almost palpable. Thousands of feet in heavy boots stepped on the damp concrete, but the material of the molded soles was engineered to absorb all sound. Footsteps died before they could be born. Because of this artificial vacuum, a thin, illusory, high-frequency ringing constantly buzzed in her ears.

If she cut her eyes slightly, she could see the profiles of the people walking beside her. Blank, slack faces with the perfect symmetry of indifference. Bleak eyes staring at the back of the head of the person in front. Not a single wrinkle of anger, not a single shadow of a smile. Their calm was absolute, because there was nothing in their heads except the route plotted by the system from the point of sleep to the point of function.

At 06:52, the monolithic flow split. A wide column of people obediently filed into the massive sliding gates of the sorting center.

The air here changed sharply. It was always the same: stale, heavy, saturated with dry cellulose and machine oil. Inside the gargantuan, partitionless hangar, beneath vaults lost in the gloom, stretched dozens of miles of conveyor belts. The metallic rattle of thousands of rollers and gears did not deafen—it merged into one continuous, hypnotic, guttural hum. Over time, this sound ceased to be perceived by hearing; it sank lower and turned into a constant vibration of the floor that resonated in the bones.

She approached line 4-B, passed seventy workstations, and at 07:00 sharp, took her place.

Her duty had not changed for years. The mechanics of her existence fit into four beats: Move right. Grab. Stamp. Drop into the tray. This rhythm was permanently seared into her muscle memory, etched into her subconscious.

To her left stood a woman with whitish hair, methodically performing the exact same actions. She did not know her name, just as she did not know the name of the tall, stooped man to her right. There was not the slightest need for it. Working on line 4-B did not require personalities. It required only functional hands capable of holding a heavy brass stamp, and eyes capable of unerringly reading the standard indices on paper.

The yellow rubber belt of the conveyor shuddered and crawled forward. Thousands of identical rectangles of smooth gray paper floated before her eyes.

No one in the city wrote personal letters—there had been no point in them for a long time, just as there was no point in attachments that required words. Moving along the conveyor was the endless, blind circulatory system of bureaucracy. Forms for the planned relocation of living cells, notices on the assignment of new pedestrian routes for entire sectors, reports on the metered consumption of synthetic water, inventories of decommissioned technical equipment. The text inside these envelopes held no meaning for those who cleared them. Only the process itself mattered. The mass had to move. Paper had to go from point A to point B, receive a stamp, and head to the archive. The System had to move simply to prove the fact of its existence.

An hour passed. Then a second. Then a third.

Move right. Grab. Stamp. Drop.

The heavy metal stamp came down on the gray paper with a dull, wet thud. The muscles of her right shoulder gradually filled with lead, her joints began to ache, but this was a correct, expected, systemic fatigue. It helped keep her head empty. Fatigue crowded out any glimmers of thought.

Envelope after envelope. Thousands of faceless addressees, hundreds of thousands of abolished, reallocated functions. The entire life of a colossal city, millions of human hours, were ruthlessly compressed into thin layers of gray waste paper.

Move right. Grab. Stamp. Drop. Move right. Grab. Stamp. Drop.

Her gaze fell on the next envelope riding up on the black rubber of the conveyor. Outwardly, it differed in no way from the endless string of previous ones. The same dull, faded tint of recycled cellulose. The same even machine lines of the index in the upper right corner. The same standard dimensions.

She mechanically reached out her gray-gloved hand, took it with a familiar, practiced gesture, and raised the heavy brass stamp over it.

And froze.

The stamp hovered in the air two inches from the paper. Time, previously compressed into the split-second beats of the conveyor, suddenly stretched, turning into a viscous, thick mass.

A scent emanated from the envelope.

It was not the familiar dry dust of the sorting floor. It was not the sour tang of machine ink or burnt rubber, to which her olfactory receptors had long and hopelessly adapted. It was something else entirely. Something illogical.

The scent was sharp, cool, and ruthlessly clean. It cut through the thick, stale, matte air of the hangar like an invisible blade.

Pine needles.

She could not remember if she had ever seen live trees. Her entire world from horizon to horizon consisted only of concrete, iron, and polymers. Trees were not in the paragraphs. Trees were not subject to logistics. The plastic imitations on the streets smelled of nothing. But the word itself—"pine"—suddenly surfaced in her mind from some deepest, darkest bottom, breaking through years of systemic erasure.

The scent was so distinct, dense, and defiantly alive that her breath caught. Lungs accustomed to inhaling a strictly metered volume of oxygen suddenly expanded by reflex, drinking in this impossible aroma.

Her fingers inside the gray glove trembled betrayingly. The heavy brass handle, which for the past few hours had felt like a natural extension of her own bone, suddenly became foreign, awkward, and frighteningly cold. The envelope nearly slipped from her left hand back onto the moving belt.

Why does it have a scent?

The thought was very brief, but it struck her temples with a frightening, almost physical force. Forms do not have a scent. Recycled paper has no smell. Things in principle should not possess such sharp, distracting properties because it disrupts the measured flow. It diverts attention from function. It forces one to ask questions. And questions break logic. This was categorically wrong.

The pause was stretching. A second turned into two. Then into three. This was a catastrophic, unacceptable loss of operational time.

She cut her eyes. The woman to her left continued to lower her stamp rhythmically: grab, stamp, drop. Like a flawless mechanism, monotonously striking a single point. The stooped man to her right methodically nudged stacks of processed paper with his elbow into the pneumatic mail chute. No one around stopped. No one raised their head. No one sniffed the air. No one noticed the glitch on the belt.

She swallowed hard. Her heart hammered against her ribs harder and faster, breaking out of the general, ideal mechanical rhythm of the hangar. Cold sweat broke out on her forehead under the stiff edge of her uniform cap.

The conveyor belt kept crawling; the next gray rectangle already bumped against her elbow, demanding processing. A delay in the beat threatened to draw the attention of the monitoring scanners.

She gritted her teeth, squeezed her eyes shut for a fraction of a second, and forced her paralyzed right hand down.

There was a dull thud of the heavy brass stamp.

Drop.

She pushed the envelope into the right tray with something bordering on hatred. It vanished into the faceless mass of waste paper, falling into the dark maw of the pneumatic tube, traveling further along the plotted routes, dissolving into the system forever.

She reached to the right again, forcing her muscles to execute the memorized algorithm. Move right. Grab. Stamp. Drop. She looked only at the indices; she breathed shallowly and evenly, synchronizing with the hum of the gears, trying not to let the air too deep.

But the sharp, living scent of pine needles seemed to have settled permanently deep in her throat, leaving behind a tiny, painfully throbbing crack in the smooth monolith of her mind. And that crack would no longer heal.

CHAPTER 2. SHADOWS ON THE WALL

(POV: Indicator 4-B-21)

The end of the work shift was marked by neither a bell nor a siren.

At 19:00 sharp, second for second, the heavy, guttural hum of the conveyor belts changed pitch. The vibration frequency dropped by a few hertz, the rollers slowed down, and the endless yellow rubber river smoothly came to a halt.

She froze, her hand still suspending the heavy brass stamp over another gray envelope. Her muscular algorithm demanded she finish the cycle—grab, stamp, drop—but the system cut the power to the line. She released her cramped fingers. The brass handle settled into its specific slot on the frame with a soft metallic click.

The shift was over. Ten hours of continuous mechanical function lay behind her.

To her left, the woman with the whitish hair set down her stamp in perfect synchronization. To her right, the stooped man nudged his final stack into the pneumatic mail chute. No one exhaled with relief; no one stretched tight shoulders. They simply turned ninety degrees and took their first step toward the exit.

She followed them.

The return trip was a mirror image of the morning routine. The same monolithic flow of gray uniforms, the same blank faces, the same absolute, vacuum-like silence. But now, as she walked in the crowd, something inside her had irrevocably changed.

The crack.

She felt it physically somewhere beneath her ribs, right where her heart rate still failed to fully synchronize with the measured stride of thousands of feet. The scent of pine needles was gone, dissipated into the stale air of the hangar hours ago, but the memory of it pulsed in her throat like a phantom burn.

She looked at the damp asphalt, glossy with condensation underfoot, and caught herself committing an unthinkable, forbidden act: she was analyzing. She looked at the puddles of oily water and noted that they smelled of nothing. She looked at the dead, greenish-polymer shrubs lining the facades of the Administration Block and realized their shape was a lie. A real plant, the scent of which had somehow been sealed inside that strange envelope, had to be different. Sharp. Prickly. Alive.

The thoughts were frightening. They were heavy, viscous; they drained the processing power of her cognitive loop, which was supposed to be resting and recovering before the next shift.

At 19:22, she stepped across the threshold of her living cell.

The door slid into its recess with a faint hiss, cutting her off from the endless corridor. The square fluorescent panel on the ceiling flared with a flat, sterile white light.

She stood in the center of the three-by-three-meter room. Usually, this moment brought a specific, mechanical relief: function achieved, perception could be deactivated. But tonight, the space of the cell felt different. Too cramped. Too enclosed.

She went to the food block built into the wall. The dispenser clicked dryly, spitting a brick of the evening ration onto the tray. It was identical to the morning one—a gray, dense mass. She took it, brought it to her lips, and suddenly stopped.

She took a short, barely noticeable breath through her nose, trying to catch even the faintest scent from this artificial food. Nothing. Only the faint aroma of synthetic starch and ozone.

She forced herself to take the first bite. Eighteen chewing movements. Swallow. Bite again. She ate methodically, standing before the smooth concrete wall, but her gaze, usually out of focus at such moments, now darted across the concrete surface, studying its microscopic pores and casting flaws.

After washing down the ration with a swallow of water, she began the hygiene protocol. In the narrow niche of the shower stall, sharp, fine-mist jets of warm water mixed with a decontaminating solution struck from above. The solution washed away the gray cellulose dust, sweat, and fatigue from her skin. There were no mirrors in the cells. The System considered self-contemplation an inefficient waste of time that led to individualization. Therefore, she had never seen her face in full—only reflections in the dull metal of the work surfaces, distorted and blurred.

Leaving the shower, she put on a clean set of night clothes—a thin cotton robe, as gray and shapeless as her daytime uniform.

It was 20:15. Just under two hours remained until lights out.

This was the time for static rest. The time when a Unit was supposed to remain still, minimizing physical activity. Usually, she just sat on the edge of her narrow cot, hands folded in her lap, and stared at the opposite wall, allowing her consciousness to sink into a flat, saving state of hibernation.

She sat on the creaking metal edge of the mattress. Folded her hands. Straightened her back. Froze.

The silence of the cell pressed against her eardrums. Here, behind thick layers of soundproofing, neither footsteps in the corridor nor the hum of ventilation shafts could be heard. An absolute vacuum.

But tonight, she could not sink into numbness. The crack inside gave her no peace. Her eyes, which were supposed to look through the wall, constantly focused on details. On the seam between the concrete slabs. On a barely noticeable scratch near the baseboard. On the light.

The fluorescent panel on the ceiling was brilliantly engineered. An exact square taking up nearly the entire ceiling area, it emitted light of such uniform density that it completely eliminated shadows. There could be no dark corners in the cell. Light flooded every millimeter of space, cutting off any visual illusions. The physics of the illumination were calculated with flawless mathematical precision: no obstacles, no distortions.

She stared straight ahead. Then her gaze slowly, as if obeying an external force, crawled to the right. To the far corner of the cell, where the wall met the floor.

It was darker there.

At first, she decided it was a microscopic glitch of her retina. An eyestrain of the optic nerve after ten hours of continuous index reading on the conveyor. She blinked once. Then a second time, squeezing her eyes shut slightly harder than usual.

When she opened her eyes, the darkening in the corner had not vanished.

Moreover, it had grown denser.

It did not resemble an ordinary shadow cast by a physical object. Rather, it looked like a localized collapse in the light itself. As if the fluorescent rays reaching this particular patch of concrete suddenly lost their strength, bogged down in the air, and died out.

She held her breath. Her chest stopped its rhythmic rise and fall.

The patch of gloom slowly changed shape. From a shapeless mass, it began to stretch upward along the wall. The borders of this anomaly were indistinct; they vibrated slightly, resembling television static or digital rippling on a corrupted terminal. Tiny pixels of emptiness flared and died along the edges.

She sat motionless. The logic hardwired into her cognitive loop screamed of an error. A shadow cannot exist without an object obstructing the light. There was nothing in the room. Only the cot, the dispenser, and herself. The light source was directly above. The laws of optics were breaking right before her eyes.

The rippling in the corner stabilized. The shadow took on mass.

Now it was a silhouette.

It sat on the floor, back against the concrete, one leg stretched forward and the other bent at the knee. The shadow had the proportions of a human body. She saw the distinct line of a shoulder, the tilt of a head, the contour of an arm resting loosely on the bent knee.

The silhouette was absolutely static. It did not move; it made no sound. It was simply present.

The cold she had felt earlier that day on line 4-B returned, but now it was not localized beneath her ribs—it flooded her veins, locking her muscles with the weight of lead. She could not tear her gaze from the impossible figure.

Optic nerve glitch, she tried to formulate the thought, forcing her mind to claw at the paragraphs of medical manuals. *Hallucination due to oxygen deprivation. Request to medical block required.*

But she did not stand up. She did not reach for the emergency comm panel by the door.

The silhouette of a person who was not in the room felt more real than the even light of the fluorescent lamp. In its contours, despite their digital, trembling nature, lay a strange, frightening slackness. The inhabitants of Great Grimsby never sat like that. They did not slouch; they did not lean against walls. Their postures were always strictly functional, their spines straight as steel rods.

This shadow sat the way a person sits when they are tired after a long journey.

She tried to move her fingers. Her muscles barely obeyed. Slowly, millimeter by millimeter, she leaned forward, never breaking eye contact with the corner. The shadow did not react. It did not mirror her movement, which definitively destroyed the theory of a strange reflection.

It was someone else. More precisely—the trace of someone else.

Fifteen minutes passed. She continued to sit on the edge of the cot, frozen in the tense posture of a predator encountering the unknown for the first time. Her eyes began to water from staring continuously at a single point, but she did not dare blink, fearing that the moment she closed her eyelids, the shadow would move.

But the shadow remained motionless. Only its edges continued to spark faintly, like a damaged fiber-optic cable.

At one point, it seemed to her that where the face should be, where there should have been solid darkness, two dull, translucent glints flickered. Either greenish or blue. But it lasted only a fraction of a second, and she was not sure she hadn't imagined it.

Two impulses fought inside her. The first, systemic one, demanded she report the anomaly immediately. Summon the Monitors. Undergo a memory-wipe procedure and return to safe grayness. The second impulse—the very one that had made her hold her breath over the scent of pine needles—whispered something else. It forced her to remain silent.

This was her first personal crime against Great Grimsby. She was withholding information.

The digital clock above the door silently flipped its numbers. 21:59.

One minute remained until lights out.

She sat, fingers gripping the edge of the mattress. The silhouette in the corner was just as motionless. It seemed to be waiting for something. Or simply resting, gathering strength in the blind spot of her personal space.

22:00.

The square fluorescent panel on the ceiling went out instantly, without fading. The cell plummeted into absolute, thick, impenetrable darkness.

Her eyes, deprived of a light source, could no longer distinguish the contours of the corner. The shadow merged with the general gloom of the room. But sitting in this blackness, listening only to her own over-loud, ragged breathing, she knew one thing for certain.

The shadow had not disappeared.

It was still there. Sitting, back against the concrete. And now, in the dark, it no longer seemed like a mere glitch of the light.

It felt alive.

CHAPTER 3. ERROR

(POV: Jonathan. Past tense)

The error surfaced on Tuesday, at 14:03 local time in the Administration Block.

Jonathan sat at terminal eighty-four in the Statistical Control Sector on the fifteenth level. His work required no physical effort; it demanded absolute, machine-like concentration. He was a Second-Rank Analyst—one of those rare, calibrated assets of the System permitted to view the architecture of Great Grimsby slightly broader than the rest. He did not stamp gray envelopes or stand at a conveyor belt. He saw the city in its truest form: as infinite columns of green digits cascading down a matte black screen.

To Jonathan, numbers were the only objective reality. They never lied, held no double meanings, and were not subject to interpretation. If an outbreak of systemic fever occurred in living block D-4, the numbers dispassionately recorded a 0.4% drop in sector productivity. If a pump broke in the water treatment facility, the numbers registered a momentary pressure spike and a proportional increase in the consumption of replacement filters.

The balance always met at the zero point. The System was a hermetic, closed loop where nothing came from nowhere and nothing vanished without a trace. Every action carried an index; every movement possessed a coordinate.

Until this Tuesday.

That day, Jonathan was conducting a standard, cyclical reconciliation of the quarterly reports for living block C-12. It was a routine task requiring no upper registers of analysis—merely matching the number of active human Units against the number of food rations issued and synthetic water consumed.

Row 412. Column A—registered Units: 14,500. Row 413. Column B—daily rations issued: 14,468.

The variance was thirty-two units.

Jonathan felt no anxiety. Anxiety was an irrational emotion, a chemical glitch that Analysts had neutralized during primary training. He felt a logical dissonance. Thirty-two people had not received rations. The System did not prevent hunger out of humanity, but because hunger reduced the daily work quota on the conveyors. Consequently, these thirty-two individuals had either been officially transferred to another living block, sent to the medical sector, or decommissioned for disposal.

His fingers, long and pale, settled habitually onto the terminal keyboard. He entered a twelve-digit query into the logistical movement registry, expecting to see standard transfer indices. The screen blinked, redrawing the green lines.

No records found.

Jonathan froze. This was impossible. The algorithm could not err. He opened the medical disposal archive. If a mass technical decommissioning had occurred—such as a structural collapse on the lower levels or ventilation contamination—it had to be recorded by an act bearing an Overseer's digital signature.

No records found.

He verified the isolation registry. The quarantine zone registry. The technical loss registry. The defect registry. Each time, after a brief pause, the matte black screen answered with a cold, indifferent rejection.

Thirty-two Units. Thirty-two people had simply ceased to exist. They were not dead, because death in Great Grimsby always left a heavy paper and digital trail. Their living cells were listed as physically vacant, but no orders for their sanitation and reassignment had been issued. In the perfect, closed mathematical equation of the System, in which Jonathan had existed his entire life, a gaping void had suddenly appeared. A gap.

Jonathan leaned back against the rigid metal chair. The flicker of the terminal reflected in his eyes—either blue or green, the single anomaly in his physiology, which the medical block had dismissively written off as a harmless genetic variance. The logic pulsing in his brain demanded an immediate resolution to the problem. If a void existed, it had to be filled with an explanation or eliminated. Leaving unclosed brackets in code was a crime against the structure.

At 14:45, he printed the reconciliation results onto punched tape, placed the stiff paper into a standard gray folder, and left his workstation.

Inspector Cole's office was located on the twenty-second level, in a sector directly subordinate to the Synod. Jonathan rode the freight elevator up, listening to the flat, monotonous hum of the steel cables. He did not weigh the consequences of his actions. He was delivering a discovered glitch to the inspector, which required classification and remediation.

Inspector Cole was one of the few individuals in the Administration Block who possessed a name, rather than merely a stenciled index on his collar. He sat behind a massive steel desk bolted to the floor. His office was noticeably stifling compared to the lower levels; the ventilation system here operated with a faint, barely audible whistle, recycling the stale air. Cole's face glistened with a fine, unhealthy sweat, and the stiff gray collar of his uniform cut deeply into his thick neck, leaving a red mark.

Jonathan stepped forward and placed the gray folder in the exact center of the desk, parallel to the edges of the tabletop.

"Reconciliation for block C-12, Inspector," he said in the flat, uninflected voice of an Analyst. "I have detected an unclassified first-order anomaly."

Cole did not look at the folder. He slowly raised a heavy, bloodshot gaze to Jonathan. There was no surprise in his faded eyes. There was something else. Something Jonathan could not correctly classify at the time due to a lack of necessary behavioral patterns, but later, when they took his archives and left him only with emptiness, he would understand: it was primal fear.

"What kind of anomaly, Analyst?" Cole's voice was hoarse and dry, as if he had not spoken aloud to anyone in a long time.

"A deficit. Thirty-two Units. I verified all adjacent registries of the Synod: transfers, medical block, disposal, quarantine. They are nowhere. They have literally evaporated from the loop. The cells are vacant, but no decommissioning status has been assigned."

Cole slowly drew the folder toward himself but did not open it. His thick, slightly trembling fingers rested on top of the gray cardboard, as if pinning it to the desk to keep the numbers from accidentally escaping.

"Did you expand the search to other sectors?" the inspector asked very quietly, his lips barely moving.

"No. I terminated the algorithm at block C-12. Formal logic dictates fixing and eliminating a local error before scaling—"

"Logic," Cole interrupted.

The inspector drew a heavy, labored breath, and there was so much physical exhaustion in the sound that for a fraction of a second, Jonathan felt as though he were facing not a living administrator, but a mechanism with stripped gears.

"Logic is an excellent, reliable tool, Jonathan. But sometimes it leads straight into a blind spot."

"Blind spots do not exist, Inspector. There is only a deficiency of input data," Jonathan countered flatly. "I require temporary clearance to the central archive of the Synod to trace their trajectory to the point of disappearance."

Cole suddenly leaned forward, resting his chest against the desk. His chair groaned.

"Listen to me very carefully, Analyst," he said, lowering his voice to a hissing whisper. "There are no thirty-two Units. It is a statistical variance. A cumulative error of an old server."

"A variance of thirty-two physical objects is impossible," Jonathan replied calmly, ignoring the change in the other man's tone. "The probability of such a systemic algorithmic failure is zero point zero—"

"I said it is a variance!" Cole snarled.

A heavy drop of sweat fell from his chin and thudded onto the gray cardboard of the folder. He glanced furtively at the closed armored door, as if terrified that someone in the empty corridor might intercept their frequency.

"You found technical debris. Fragments of legacy code. Go back to your station, clear your cache. Balance the ledger. File a dummy disposal report citing... citing respiratory failure."

Jonathan stood motionless, looking at the inspector. In his mind, trained to operate only with perfect, completed structures, this order did not fit any template. It triggered a critical processor error.

"Are you explicitly directing me to falsify data, Inspector? That violates paragraph four, section one of the Administration Block Charter."

Cole remained silent for a long time. He looked at Jonathan, at his overly bright, inappropriately colored eyes, and in that heavy gaze, an absolute, leaden doom emerged.

"I am directing you to survive, Jonathan," Cole finally said, his voice quiet and lifeless. "Do you think you are the first Analyst in this sector to notice empty cells? Do you think you are the smartest? You only see numbers on a screen. I have sat here for twenty years, and I see what happens to those who begin physically searching for these people."

"Where are they?" Jonathan asked.

It was the short question that irreversibly divided his existence into a before and an after. The question that initiated the process of his own erasure.

Cole closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers.

"Close the brackets, Jonathan," the inspector said, his tone almost pleading. "For your own sake, just close the brackets. Forget this conversation. Balance the ledger and go back to your terminal. The System does not forgive those who see the gaps in its monolith."

But Jonathan could not. The logic he had strictly followed his entire life had become his death warrant. He was physically incapable of leaving equations unresolved, or brackets open.

"I am required to file a report with the Synod regarding accounting discrepancies and attempted falsification within your department," Jonathan replied evenly, turning sharply on his heels toward the exit.

He did not see Inspector Cole's whitened hand slide beneath the desk to press a hidden red button. He did not hear the elevator doors glide open silently at the end of the twenty-second-level corridor, deploying a team of Overseers in matte black helmets.

He simply walked down the corridor at an even pace, mentally calculating the mathematical probability that those thirty-two missing people had found a way out beyond Great Grimsby.

CHAPTER 4. FIRST CONTACT

(POV: Indicator 4-B-88)

The shift concluded at exactly 21:30 by the central timer of the fourth tier. The audio signal—three short, high-frequency pulses—traveled through the shop's cable trays, causing the diaphragms of the distribution speakers to emit a dry, metallic click.

She removes her hands from the brass levers of the press. Her fingers, locked in a single position for twelve hours, unbend slowly, barely overcoming the resistance of the tendons. The muscles of her forearms burn with a dull, continuous ache; the graphite dust that settled on her skin during the work cycle has ground into the fine creases near her nail plates, forming a thin dark rim. This is regulatory contamination. She does not attempt to scrub it off—there is no soap on the technical ring capable of dissolving the dry lubricant of the heavy dies.

The path from the shop to living block C-12 takes exactly twelve minutes. The stride is standardized: sixty centimeters, forty-two paces per minute. In the gray corridor, where the walls are lined with matte plastic panels, the air smells of bleach, damp rags, and the overheated transformers of the central ventilation. Every three meters overhead, a circular daylight-spectrum lamp enclosed in a protective steel mesh drifts past. There are no numbers or signs on the panels—Indicator 4-B-88 requires no text markers; her route map is hardwired into her cognitive loop at the level of basic reflexes. A right turn. Twenty steps down the metal staircase. The corridor of the third distribution tier. A gray door with a brass plate: "4-B-88."

She presses the back of her left wrist against the scanner of the airlock. The terminal beneath her skin emits a short beep, a green LED tints the plastic the color of stagnant swamp algae for a fraction of a second, and the bolt slides into the wall recess with a dry, pneumatic sigh.

The living cell has standard dimensions: two meters wide, three meters long, two meters forty centimeters from the floor to the ceiling panel.

There are no windows. The entire space is filled with functional blocks integrated into the walls. To the left is the fold-down frame of the sleeping berth, covered in coarse gray cellulose. To the right is a washbasin of molded plastic with a single button that dispenses a regulated portion of water—three hundred milliliters per hygiene cycle. In the center is a narrow aisle seventy centimeters wide. The air in the cell is stale, heavy, with a faint tang of ozone; the ventilation box on the ceiling operates at thirty percent capacity following the evening optimization of the power grid.

She closes the airlock. The metal plate seats into the grooves with a dull, solid thud, cutting off the corridor hum. Now the silence becomes palpable. It is not empty—it consists of the low-frequency vibration of the cooling pumps operating somewhere beneath the floor on the seventh deep tier of Great Grimsby. This sound is not perceived by the ears; it penetrates through the soles of her work boots, rises up the bones of her ankles, and settles in the back of her head as an even, monotonous pressure.

She sits on the edge of the fold-down frame. The gray cellulose of the mattress is rigid, barely yielding under her body weight. She removes her boots, carefully aligning their heels with the seam line of the floor tiles. Exactly twenty minutes remain until curfew and the forced shutdown of the cell lighting. The timer on her wrist reads 21:40.

She fixes her gaze on the opposite wall. On the matte surface of the plastic, a small defect is visible—a narrow vertical scratch four centimeters long, likely left by a technician's tool during the fourth modernization of the tier. This scratch is the only non-systemic element in the room. It has no functional purpose; it violates the perfect geometry of the cube. Indicator 4-B-88 stares at it, counting the minutes by an internal metronome.

Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes.

At 21:58, the vibration of the floor shifts frequency for a second—the central switchboard transfers the living block's relays to the nocturnal loop-retention mode. The lamp on the ceiling smoothly loses its brightness, shifting from a ruthless white spectrum to a dull, yellowish semi-darkness. According to paragraph 8 of the Charter, at this moment a Unit must secure the torso in a horizontal position, close the eyes, and transition the cognitive loop into the recovery phase—duration: six hours.

She does not lie down. Her spine remains straight, her fingers pressed tightly against her knees.

At exactly 22:00, the air in the right corner of the cell, by the washbasin, begins to thicken.

The process is accompanied by neither sound nor a change in temperature. It is a purely optical anomaly. The dim yellow light of the ceiling lamp, passing through this point in space, begins to refract differently, as if an invisible lens of dense technical glass had emerged in the air. Within three seconds, the contours of the lens stabilize, assuming a distinct vertical shape.

It is a silhouette.

Tonight it projects through the semi-darkness of the room with a frightening, unnatural specificity. Yesterday it was merely a blurred frequency patch, a fluctuating gray shadow on the periphery of her vision that could be written off as eyestrain of the optic nerve after twelve hours at the press. Now the figure possesses volume and boundaries.

A man. He stands in the narrow aisle between the washbasin and the bed, occupying the exact seventy centimeters of scarce space that separate her from the door. His presence breaks the familiar, safe topography of the cube. He does not sit, nor does he lean against the wall—his torso is locked in an absolute, unnatural stasis characteristic of a deactivated mechanism or a high-resolution holographic projection. He wears no standard work jacket with the brass stamp of the tier. His clothing appears dark, almost black, absorbing the remnants of the yellow light from the ceiling panel. His face is more sharply defined: the straight line of his nose, deep shadows in the eye sockets, tightly compressed lips. But there is no biological glint in his eyes; they look like matte glass lenses set to a fixed focal distance.

Indicator 4-B-88 makes no sudden movements. Her breathing remains even, the depth of each inhale not exceeding the regulatory four hundred cubic centimeters. But the skin on the back of her neck instantly goosebumps from a sudden rush of adrenaline.

To her right, forty centimeters above the mattress, a small rectangular emergency communication panel with the Synod is mounted into the wall. It is a matte red square of rough plastic beneath a transparent protective cover. According to instructions, upon detecting any unregistered object, a pressure variance in the cell, or a filtration failure, a Unit is required to break the cover and press the button. Arrival time for an operational team of cleaners is ninety seconds. The consequence for the cell is full sanitation and an unscheduled calibration of the Indicator's cognitive loop.

Her right hand slowly, at a millimeter per second, begins to shift rightward along her thigh. The fabric of her gray work trousers rustles barely audibly against the cellulose of the mattress.

The figure in the corner does not react to the movement. The man continues to stand motionless, but the refraction of light around his head alters—the gray contours of his hair seem enveloped in a barely perceptible, transparent haze, like the heat distortion above the overheated copper buses of the main distributor.

The fingers of her right hand reach the edge of the mattress. She feels the cold, smooth plastic of the wall. Another five centimeters to the right, and the pad of her index finger will rest against the edge of the communication panel's protective cover.

One press.

The Synod will log the loop error. Her name—her current index—will flash red on the duty dispatcher's pulse. They will shake this image out of her, the way they shake stuck shavings out of the slots of a stamping machine. She will become a clean variable again, with a zero deviation coefficient.

Her finger settles onto the plastic ridge of the cover. It requires two kilograms of force to snap the retainer. The muscles of her index finger tense, preparing the final impulse.

"Don't," resonates inside her head.

The sound does not pass through her eardrums. A dead, vacuum-like silence still hangs in the living cell, broken only by the distant thrum of the underground pumps. This is not an acoustic wave. The semantic construct forms directly within her neural network, bypassing her auditory receptors, as if the System Archive had suddenly dumped a line of code straight into her volatile memory sector. The voice is low, stripped of emotional inflection, but beneath it runs a strange, vibrating undertone—the hum of high-voltage cables before a circuit break.

Her hand on the communication panel freezes. The muscular impulse is blocked by a cognitive stopper. Indicator 4-B-88 slowly shifts her gaze from the red square of the button to the face of the standing man.

"What are you?" she asks.

Her own voice sounds foreign and flat in the enclosed two-by-three-meter space. She registers the sound as a defect, an error in the schema of silence.

The man does not open his mouth. His lips remain motionless, like a brass mask on the facade of the Synod. But the optical density of his silhouette begins to drop rapidly. The contours of his body break apart; the pixels of his visual layer begin to crumble, turning into a fine, gray dust that settles into the air, vanishing before it hits the floor. The refraction of light around the washbasin returns to regulatory parameters. The dim yellow light of the ceiling panel once again falls onto the matte plastic at a right angle, without distortion.

But before disappearing completely, before dissolving into the stale air of cell C-12, one last, isolated word flares within her cranium. It is disconnected from the previous phrase; it exists entirely on its own, like a stamp struck onto the gray paper of an envelope.

"Remember."

The impulse dies out. The loop is empty.

She remains alone in the enclosed cube. Her right hand still rests on the protective cover of the communication panel, but her finger no longer presses against the plastic. Her muscles are relaxed.

The air in the cell has changed. It has grown drier; the scent of ozone has completely vanished from it, replaced by a barely perceptible, heavy aroma of old iron and dry grass—a scent for which there is not a single paragraph, not a single working article of classification in the Charter of Great Grimsby. Tiny dust motes, illuminated by the dim lamp, drift slowly down onto the plastic collar of her jacket.

She slowly removes her hand from the communication panel, places her palm back on her knee, and closes her eyes. Exactly five hours and forty-two minutes remain until the start of the morning shift. Every second of this time, the internal calculator of Indicator 4-B-88 counts down in absolute, ringing silence.

CHAPTER 5. SHIFT OVER

(POV: Indicator 4-B-88)

The morning audio signal—one long, high-frequency pulse—traveled through the cable networks of living block C-12 at exactly 03:45. The electronic membrane filter in the ceiling panel emitted a dry, hissing sigh, discharging a ration of fresh, supercooled air into the cell with a regulatory oxygen content of twenty-one percent.

Indicator 4-B-88 opens her eyes two seconds before the daylight-spectrum lamp flares to full capacity. Her body executes the morning protocol without delay: torso elevation at a ninety-degree angle, feet secured at the seam of the floor tiles, three paces to the plastic washbasin. Button press. Three hundred milliliters of cold technical water with a faint tang of chlorine spill into her palms. She washes her face, her fingers tracing the rigid contours of her brow ridges and jawbone. The skin is dry, cold. It bears no traces of the night's incident, but inside her cranium, at the very bottom of her volatile memory, an isolated text stamp remains motionless.

Remember.

The word has no systemic index. It does not belong to the category of command directives; it is not duplicated by paragraphs of the Charter. It is present in her consciousness as static background noise, identical to the hum of the fourth-tier main transformer, which cannot be deactivated locally.

At 04:00, the cell airlock slides into the wall. She steps into the gray corridor, integrating into the even file of Section C Units. The stride is standardized: sixty centimeters. The shoulders of the neighbor ahead—Indicator 4-B-89—move at a frequency of forty-two oscillations per minute. Every

three meters, the dead white light of the ceiling lamps falls upon the pale plastic of their robes. The world of Great Grimsby is perfectly assembled: there are no gaps, no plays, no pauses. All Units function within the boundaries of a single calculated loop. But Indicator 4-B-88 notes that her right eyelid twitches finely and rhythmically every forty-two seconds. This is a myoclonic defect caused by residual adrenaline, but her cognitive loop classifies it as a "minor flicker of the peripheral interface."

The fourth stamping shop greets them with one hundred twelve decibels of continuous acoustic pressure.

The air here is dense, blue with overheated graphite oil and metal scale. One hundred eighty heavy hydraulic presses are aligned in three parallel lines along the eastern wall. Each press is a twelve-ton cast-iron monolith containing a beating steel stamp piston. The hiss of hydraulics—strike—crash—the scrape of the retreating carriage. This four-stroke cycle has repeated every two seconds without variation for the past thirty years.

She occupies her workstation at press number forty-two. Her task is to grab a rectangular alloy steel blank from the left tray with brass tweezers, transfer it to the die matrix, hold the locking lever for 0.8 seconds, await the drop of the piston, extract the finished part bearing index GG-09, and transfer it to the right tray.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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