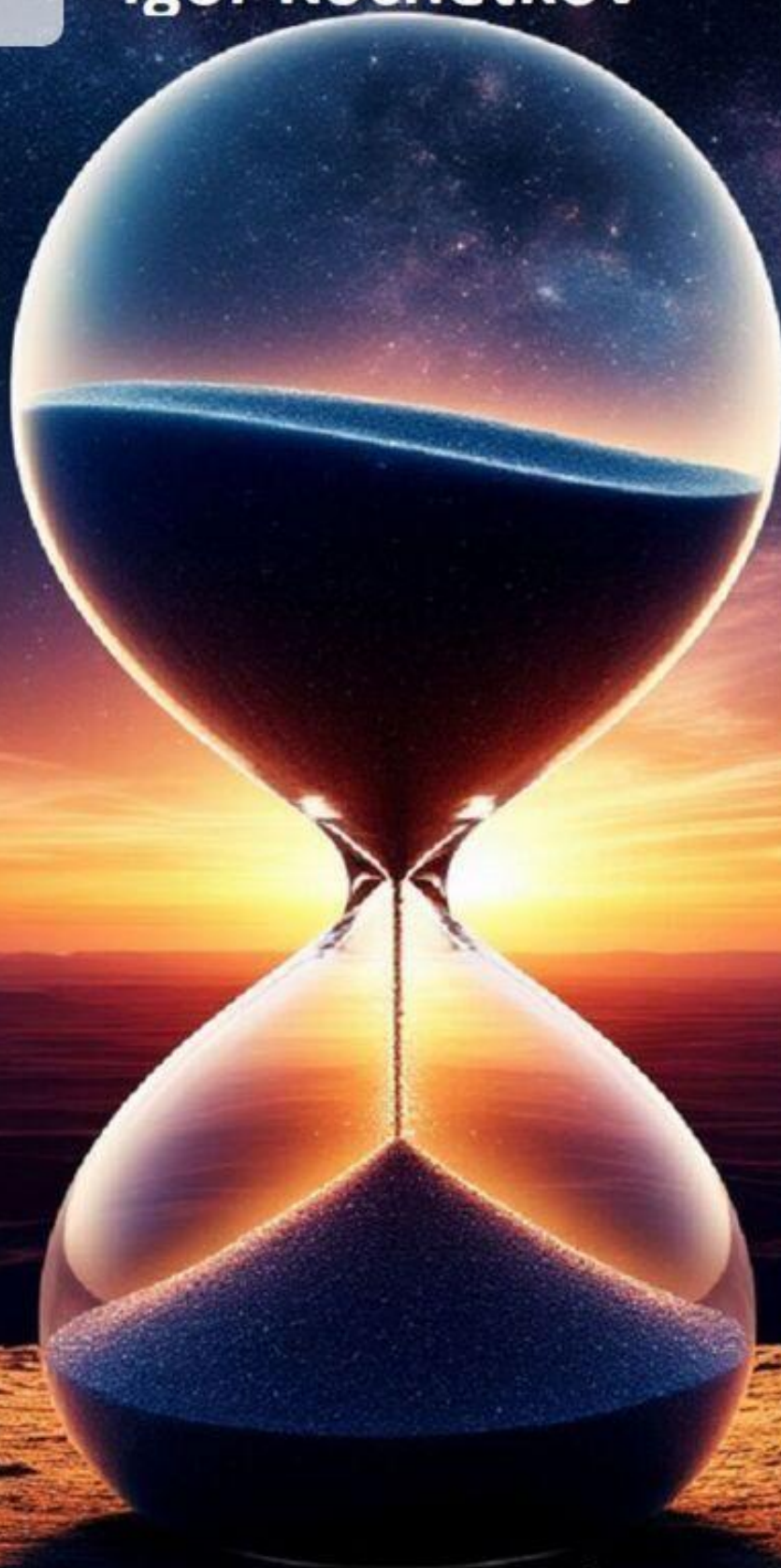


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Igor Kochetkov



The illusion of time

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«Издательские решения»

Kochetkov I. N.

The illusion of time / I. N. Kochetkov — «Издательские решения»,

An AI designed to predict cataclysms predicts the inevitable end of life on Earth. One way to save humanity is to colonize a new planet.«The Illusion of Time» is a story about the price of salvation, the lengths people are willing to go to survive, and what happens when evolution is the key to survival.This is an English-language adaptation of the original Russian work «Иллюзия времени», written and translated by the author.

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The illusion of time

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ON EARTH

The Impending Catastrophe

The presentation of the new neural network «Prophet», which predicted upcoming natural disasters, was a resounding success. Its terrifying accuracy in timing and details offered hope for reducing human casualties. The top manager of the «Global» company was Mickey, and he personally presented the product. Everyone was delighted, rejoicing that the future had become less hazy, and that people in any given area could be confident they were not at risk of unpredictable natural events.

After widespread integration — in all countries where there was a risk of earthquakes, typhoons, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and other natural phenomena — an emergency response group was formed.

The data was updated daily and everything was fine, but one day everything changed. Mickey had taken that day off. For a special reason: it was his anniversary with his girlfriend, and he wanted to propose to Rosa. Everything was going splendidly: an expensive restaurant, pleasant music evoking shared memories... But then a phone call...

— Hello, Mickey, you need to come to the office urgently, — Karl said in a trembling voice.

— Karl, have you lost your mind? You know how important today is to me! Whatever it is, it can wait until tomorrow, — Mickey replied, slightly nervous.

— It concerns not just 'tomorrow', but everything! — Karl responded with resignation.

— Your maximalism will be the death of me.

— If you don't come now, you'll hear the news like everyone else, and then there'll be no time to react.

— Alright, I'll be there in an hour.

Mickey got up from the table.

— Darling, I'm sorry, but the company can't survive a day without me.

With a heavy heart, Mickey left Rosa and headed to the office. There was already a commotion around the main building: crowds of onlookers, paparazzi, and media representatives were intercepting everyone entering and leaving, shouting: «Is it true that «Prophet» predicts the end of the world, or is it a glitch?»

Mickey decided to go through the back entrance. Thoughts swarmed in his head:

«A glitch? How could this happen? Shares will plummet, we're done for...»

— Mickey, how long must we wait for you?! — the chairman exclaimed in a panic.

— What happened?

— To the conference room, now!

The conference room was already packed; it seemed the whole company had gathered.

— Quiet, quiet! — the chairman said authoritatively as he entered with Mickey. — Let's begin. Karl, the floor is yours.

— Today we updated the forecasts based on fresh data and got this...

A looping cut-scene simulating widespread cataclysms was displayed on the screen.

— Is this a joke or a glitch in the forecasts? — Rick said nervously.

— This is no glitch. It's all serious. That's the problem, — Karl replied.

— But that's impossible! We looked at forecasts for many years ahead and saw nothing like this, — Mickey continued, somewhat strained.

— Our forecast only went up to two years; this projection is for five.

— Before we scare everyone with the apocalypse, let's verify the data. And for the public, we'll leak a simulation of the best-case scenario, — the chairman suggested.

— This *is* the best-case scenario, and it's already online, — Karl said sadly.

— What? Then what's the worst-case? Put it on screen, — he demanded, his voice coming out sharper than intended.

Karl obediently began to fuss and soon displayed all the necessary information. The giant screens covering the entire wall showed data that left no room for doubt: the planet faced inevitable doom.

Silence fell in Global's operations center.

Karl, the lead developer of the «Prophet» AI system, gritted his teeth and emitted an unnatural sound, like a wheeze.

— This isn't just a climate shift, it's a chain reaction that will lead to the collapse of the entire thermohaline circulation and inevitably change the conditions for life on Earth.

Mia's voice carried notes of uncharacteristic panic. She was a theoretical physicist responsible for cross-referencing data from the «Prophet» system.

— Double-check all the data, and if it's correct, assemble the response team and notify the UN.

To say the chairman was beside himself with rage and indignation would be a vast understatement of his inner suffering and turmoil at that moment. In his mind, this meant not the end of the world, but the end of his comfortable, leisurely life — which, in his opinion, he had earned through years of work and overcoming obstacles.

The Warning

Til was not merely troubled, but genuinely agitated. Hundreds of behind-the-scenes scenarios and possible situations that led to this crisis swarmed in his head. Before these events, Til had been an ordinary journalist, notable only for always drawing conclusions about conspiracies and shadowy activities in everything. This inquisitiveness produced extremely interesting but entirely untruthful articles; he always intrigued readers who craved not bare facts, but something that stirred the mind and allowed them to step beyond the ordinary.

When he was assigned to cover events of this magnitude, Til had no thought that the world would soon descend into chaos. He only wanted to invent a backstory so compelling that everyone would forget the horrors of the future and instead praise his genius — what a great guy he was, how he'd figured it all out.

Today's agenda was a discussion of the problem related to the «Prophet» system's forecast. The meeting was to be held at the International Emergency Rapid Response Corps building.

Til repeatedly ran through new scenarios of what they would ask and what he would answer. Gradually, delegates from all countries began to arrive in the conference hall. Mickey, Mia, and Hook (who, in the local hierarchy, was considered a significant political bigwig) approached the central podium from which the speaker usually addressed the audience.

— Welcome, everyone, on this beautiful day, — Hook said.

— Hmm, interesting. Why is it beautiful only for you? — Til jeered.

Frowning, Hook began to scan the crowd, looking for the insolent person who had ruined his dramatic opening.

— Today on the agenda is an event we cannot ignore. The «Prophet» system has produced a forecast of a multi-stage chain of catastrophes that will sweep across every corner of the Earth.

— And why should we trust a piece of metal? — Til wouldn't let up.

This time, Hook made eye contact with the insolent journalist and, with a natural expression, indicated that this was not the time for sensations — just listen.

— It will all start in the north... — Hook continued. — And within a month, it will cover every corner. There will be no escape from these events, neither in the sky nor underground. All the details have long been online, and you've surely seen them. Our only chance is to unite in a coalition, gather all possible resources, and leave Earth. I call this operation — «Ark».

The silence in the hall was shattered by erupting shouts and comments; everyone began asking questions simultaneously:

— Who will decide who stays and who goes?

— What are the chances for those left on Earth?

— Who gave you the right to decide for everyone?

— Are you sure the «Prophet» system isn't mistaken?

At that moment, Til forgot all his fervor. He could no longer deliver passionate speeches in such a crush and noise. Only one thought was in his head — a lost initiative...

— I understand this is difficult to comprehend and accept, — Hook began authoritatively, — but I can confidently say that the «Prophet» system has no glitch and cannot have one, as it has proven its exceptional reliability. We have gathered today precisely to decide who those competent people will be — the ones who will save the human race. Please display the candidates on the screen and let everyone watching this broadcast vote. The planned crew will number ten thousand people.

— But you said only half the spots are vacant? Who are the others? Who decided that? We disagree... — An uncontrollable rumble rose from all sides, turning into hysteria.

— Mr. Hook, you need to move to the command center; it's becoming unsafe here, — said Anna, who was responsible for the politician's personal security at this meeting.

— Darling, from today on, nowhere is safe, — Hook said with unseemly familiarity.

As he left the stage, Hook swept his gaze over the crowd. In his head, a plan had already formed to select people according to his own discretion, not as he had just promised everyone.

The Coalition

A month after the alarming conference, a meeting of government representatives from around the world took place. Everyone present understood that the fate of not only their families but also their loved ones and entire entourage was being decided. Everyone they knew or had seen had already contacted them multiple times to secure a spot on the «Ark». Some realized that they themselves could be removed from the lists at any moment, as there were extremely many aspirants with certain advantages.

An additional plan was also discussed: placing the remaining people on ships, in bunkers, or even in stasis in near-Earth orbit. This extraordinarily important development had appeared quite recently and had not undergone sufficient testing, but hope had already taken root in people's minds. However, time did not permit the full implementation of all plans — less than five years remained before the inevitable.

Although the representatives of all countries were experienced diplomats, the tension in the air only grew. The vast hall, intended for major conferences, was packed to the brim. Everywhere there were security guards speaking different languages, media representatives, and political aides. It all resembled an anthill.

Hook was appointed head of the project, as he had led the crisis center from its very inception. No one intended to argue with this, which greatly flattered his ego.

— Today we will appoint those responsible for the projects, — Hook began. — There are four directions on the list. First: assemble an expedition for a space journey to promising habitation sites. I volunteer to oversee this project myself. The essence is as follows: place the crew into stasis, arrive at a potentially favorable location, send a signal to the remaining survivors, and then prepare this foothold for a new civilization.

Second: launch into orbit as many ships as we can build in five years. Put everyone into stasis, wait for a signal from the first group, and upon receiving it, begin moving toward the new world.

Third: refit all existing nuclear threat bunkers. This option is akin to preservation. It allows one to wait for the restoration of favorable conditions on Earth, though that may never happen. However, if the seals hold, other groups could retrieve the capsules and awaken those left behind.

Fourth: place people on watercraft that could theoretically survive the cataclysm, although the probability of this outcome is lower than for the other options — but it is more accessible for the majority.

— What do you mean, 'accessible for the majority'? — Til interrupted nervously. — Are you planning to sell seats? Is that even humane?

— Not you again, — Hook muttered under his breath.

— Money will soon have no value, so there is no question of selling. The only measurable value is what you can give to humanity...

— But who will decide who gets to live? — Til persisted.

— A special commission, — Hook replied. — Right now we are deciding who will be in which group, and then recruitment for each group will begin, according to capabilities. So, let's begin.

Preparing for the Journey

Humanity united in the face of a common danger, and the plan was as follows.

First group — named «Ark»: ten thousand people, selected for health and skills, would set off for conditions suitable for humanity. Potential planets were chosen carefully; everyone understood there was no room for error, nor time to test all options. The transport chosen was a state-of-the-art spaceship named «Space Wanderer». It could hold one hundred thousand and could be operated autonomously even without a crew, made possible by the ultra-modern AI «Pulse». The mission was to colonize another planet, subsequently transmit data from survivors, and prepare the colony for life.

Second group — named «Morpheus»: one hundred thousand people, selected for skills, would be placed into stasis and sent to space stations in Earth's orbit. In autonomous mode, they would await a signal from the «Space Wanderer» and, upon receiving it, set a direct course for the new colony. This would eliminate search operations by all groups and provide a backup mission in case the first failed.

Third group — named «Bear»: two million people would descend into equipped bunkers; the selection criteria were dictated by the country in which the shelter was located. Some would have stasis capsules, some would not, depending on the shelter's location. The lucky ones in stasis could calmly await the rescue expedition from space; the rest would only have the chance to live longer...

Fourth group — named «Poseidon»: everyone else. They would be saved using watercraft, and the difference between them was an abyss with no visible bottom. The military had submarines and aircraft carriers; commercial magnates had huge liners and even ships specially assembled for this purpose. This group had no stasis capsules, which inevitably showed that while this group might not be doomed to a quick death, they faced inhuman difficulties.

In the coordination center of the «Ark», work was in full swing, for only one month remained before departure. The crew was ready, all instructions for the main plan were written, but contingency plans for «what if» scenarios were being formed much more slowly than the questions themselves.

Departure

Lu walked with an imperturbable expression toward the ultra-modern ship, which evoked admiration even among the initiated. Its size was staggering; before this day, such objects had never been lifted from the ground into near-Earth orbit. Of course, scientists had ensured it would ascend lightly — everything necessary had already been sent to the orbital station by cargo ships that had made continuous flights throughout those years.

Ibrahim accompanied the ship's captain, as he was the chief engineer of the rescue expedition and was distinguished by a manic pursuit of cleanliness. His meticulousness in every task had helped solve the expedition's problems and contributed to the creation of the «Space Wanderer». Without exaggeration, the project would not have been ready without him, as the stasis capsules were his personal development, with the participation of the genius physician Kim.

There were no journalists at this event. Everyone had a role in their own plan. By an incredible stroke of luck, the only person able to document events on the «Ark» project was Til. Walking up the gangway, he filmed everything with his miniature professional camera, periodically providing commentary.

Departure day was set for the following evening; today a total pre-launch inspection was pending. The air was filled with both anxiety and hope. Given that the crew was mostly scientific, everyone was eager to encounter something new and unknown, so they pushed aside thoughts of current life on Earth.

Anna, a security agent, approached Lu:

— A fine evening to say goodbye to Earth, isn't it? — she began, somewhat affectedly. — Do you have anyone left behind that you'll miss?

— I have been entrusted with the success of the expedition, and thus the survival of humanity. I have given up much for this, — Lu said, slightly drawn out, as if preparing his answer. — What concerns me more is this ship. I've always wanted to command something like this.

— Only the ship, or human lives as well? — Anna quipped.

— Only God plays with lives. I was chosen because I can handle this better than anyone else, without being limited by some banal vanity, — Lu replied, half justifying, half philosophizing.

— And whom do you consider vain: politicians, businessmen?

— It could be anyone who is only interested in momentary gloss, without understanding that everything turns to dust. In a hundred years, your great-grandchildren won't remember you — if they exist at all.

— Does that bother you?

— What exactly?

— That they are taking away all the material part of your life. The relatives who might remember you.

— That may be a sacrifice, or a price — call it what you will — but my unattainable dream and fantasies will soon become reality. And I will see everything with my own eyes.

— What if only emptiness awaits you out there? — Anna interrupted.

— Precisely I will help answer that question, — Lu replied enthusiastically.

Ibrahim, who had gone off to check the docking bay, returned to the captain with a report on the status of the systems. Anna decided to take an extra lap around the ship and inspect everything for possible sabotage.

Lu ordered that the ship's command crew gather for the final briefing.

The meeting room was located on a hill overlooking the entire valley of the classified facility.

On departure day, all time was taken up by loading people. A significant amount of time was spent on zoning, as ten thousand people entered through a single main airlock.

There was unease in the queue, not because of the crush, but because of something more global — commensurate with a flock leaving someone behind. Everyone understood that the world would change, but it was impossible to prepare mentally for this. No one who was not flying on this expedition was present at the site, to prevent sabotage.

Then came sunset, everyone in their places, and Lu, gazing at the sky, awaited clearance from the control tower.

Finally the start signal came, and Lu commanded:

— Let's go!

And the metal giant, reminiscent of something from a hypothetical projection of future spacecraft, began to fire its ion engines — located not only on the main propulsion unit but also around the perimeter, allowing both vertical landing and takeoff.

Apocalypse

The entire crew watched with bated breath through the open portholes, of which there were many throughout the ship. At that moment, the «Space Wanderer» was in Earth's orbit, performing a final refueling to lighten the load for transporting the ship and crew from Earth to orbit.

Within these three hours, the process foretold by the «Prophet» system was supposed to begin.

Some still hoped that the consequences would be less severe than announced. Every crew member had someone left on Earth, which inevitably caused inner turmoil.

At that moment, Georges was not thinking about the tragedy on Earth, but about the fact that he had once again slipped through the fingers of justice. He was a very thin man of middle age, brown-eyed, with slightly swarthy skin. The probability of a criminal getting on such an important expedition was almost zero. But Georges was a lucky man, and he got what he wanted even in far less advantageous circumstances.

People everywhere began to cry out. Georges paused for a second at the panoramic porthole and glanced briefly at his homeland, where he had left both his elderly parents and his beloved. He just froze, fixed in an unnatural pose. The sight of the changing planet was horrifyingly mesmerizing; the feeling was as if a tsunami were before him — incredibly beautiful and simultaneously terrifying.

At that moment, Earth began to tear apart along tectonic plates, causing tsunami waves, and at some point the entire planet was covered with water, except for rare mountain peaks. All the lights that had burned in the night part of the planet went out and did not reappear. Everywhere was only darkness.

Georges only then began to realize that he would never see his relatives again, and that not only would justice not remember him, but neither would all those he had ever interacted with. Yet for a second, a grin appeared on his face, symbolizing his inner state — here was a second chance to start not just from scratch, but to live an absolutely new life in an unknown world.

Over the internal loudspeaker, Lu announced that it was necessary to proceed to the cryo-sleep preparation section.

The procedure included an assessment of current mental state and the collection of organism data before the long sleep.

Georges remembered that his health card did not correspond to his actual condition, for in the expedition he had taken someone else's place. Accordingly, there was a risk of not waking from cryo-sleep, and this thought greatly alarmed him.

Walking along the deck toward the assembly point, he met Tom. Stocky, excessively smiley, but at that moment somewhat sad, Tom addressed Georges.

— Friend, we've all lost someone, but we have a mission, — Tom began encouragingly. — The path to Eden through dreams, — he added philosophically.

— And who are you, exactly? — Georges replied.

— I'm Tom, an agronomist. Whether the expedition participants are fed will depend on me. And you?

— I'm Georges, a law enforcement representative.

— Are we expecting troublemakers? — Tom asked, surprised.

— I hope only minor ones — what if someone becomes a drunkard after cryo-sleep for unknown reasons.

At that moment Tom's pupils dilated, as he had precisely this flaw, and he himself thought he had managed to hide it. But he took this coincidence as the perceptiveness of the law enforcement officer. And just in case, he decided to retreat from such a formidable interlocutor.

— Well, see you around, good luck, — Tom said, spreading his face in a feigned smile, and hurriedly left.

Entering the hibernation section, Georges saw a huge room with many people.

People crowded near the entrance; doctors and assistants worked in the reception area. It was evident that those who were prepared lay down in an approaching capsule, and after it closed, it moved to another section — this was done specifically so that everyone could be loaded through a single transport hub.

However, in the queue, everyone was worried not about the current immersion into a long sleep, but whispered among themselves about whether the other groups had managed to survive.

This moment of immersion was chosen intentionally to avoid panic due to fear of not waking up. Everyone at that moment was thinking not of themselves, but of the Earthlings.

Approaching the first operator, Georges hesitantly extended his wrist, on which a QR code was printed — here it served as passenger identification. Of course, Georges had obtained it illegally, so he was overcome with anxiety.

The operator entered the data and said he needed to proceed to the administrator's desk. But seeing that others were not sent there, Georges decided to ask what was wrong.

— Why do I need to go there? Shouldn't I be placed into cryo-sleep?

— My consultation capabilities are limited. Please approach; they will explain everything there.

Georges was seriously frightened, suspecting that his disguise had been exposed and that he would simply be thrown into open space.

Approaching the administrator, he extended his wrist and asked timidly:

— Why was I called here? Is something wrong? — Georges looked at the administrator with an ingratiating gaze.

— You should have been instructed that security personnel are loaded in the last hundred people, — the administrator replied with slight irritation, and continued, — Proceed to the situation department upstairs and wait with the others.

— Thank you, and goodbye, — Georges beamed with a smile. He felt such relief, realizing that not only had he not been exposed, but he had also been added to the privileged group.

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