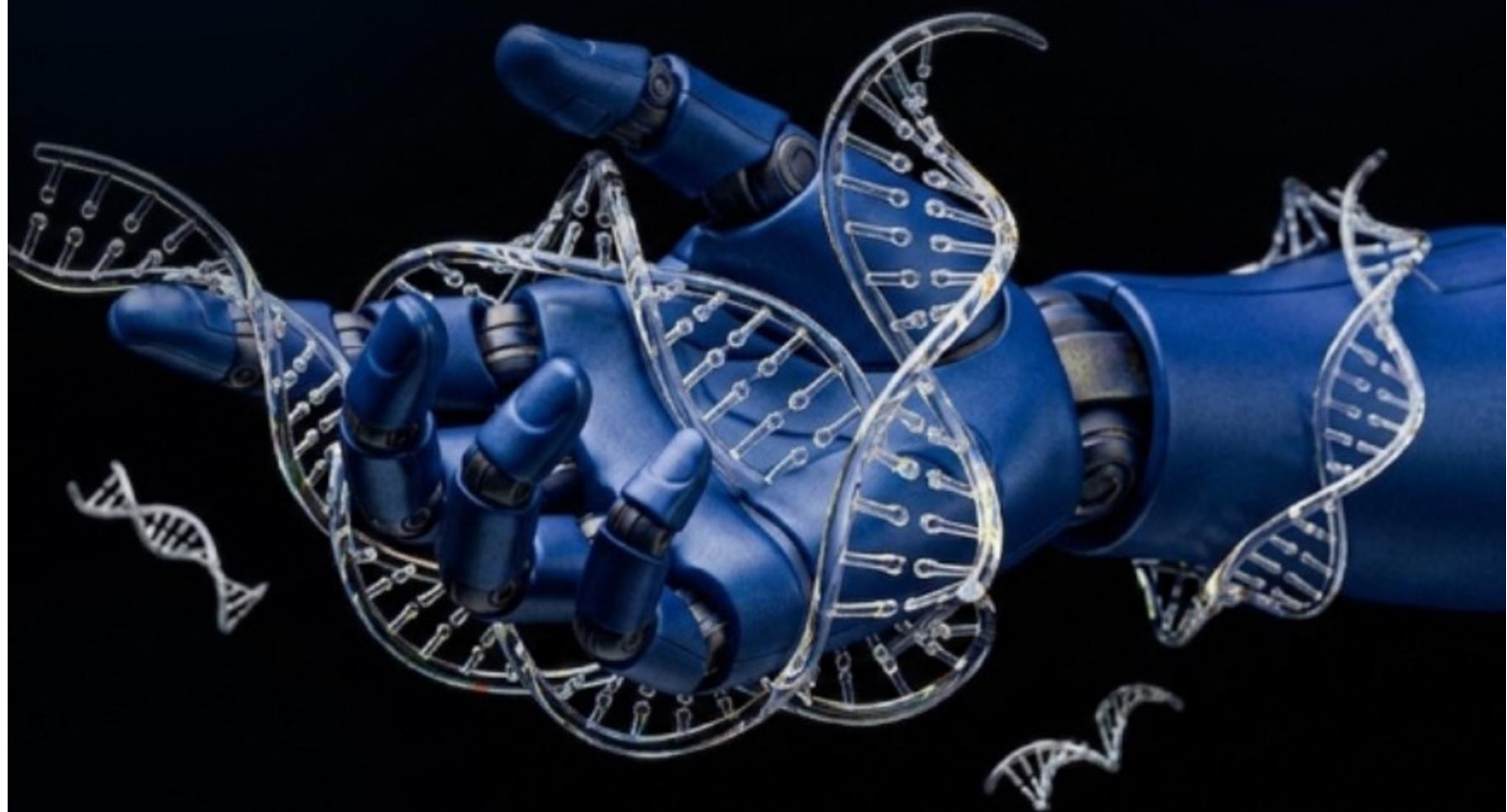


Under the control of the future



IRA
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Under the control of the future

«Автор»

2026

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Under the control of the future / И. Молчанова — «Автор», 2026

Who are these visitors? Perhaps they are inhabitants of the future — not just humans, but also cyborgs and various hybrid forms created through the combination of biological and synthetic elements. Are their visits a coincidence? Do they intend to reclaim what belonged to the people of the past? The heroine was overwhelmed by questions. Mona, an engineer at an AI robotics facility, believes that the quantum substance of a human is contained within her domestic robot. She is forced to travel to the 21st century in search of evidence of the extraction of a human soul for the purpose of transferring it into a modernised body. Meanwhile, the organic cyborg Klur infiltrates the past without authorisation to continue the soul extraction experiment, concealing his true intentions behind the introduction of innovative life-prolonging technologies. Mona did not know that the chip implanted in her arm contained the necessary data for Klur.

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Intelligence

Preface

Unidentified flying objects have been noted throughout human history, but remain unexplored to this day. There is no clear answer to the question of whether UFOs exist, let alone who, or what, is inside these mysterious flying machines. Are there any beings inside? Why do they appear in the sky at all?

One theory is that UFOs are visitors from the future. They are people just like those who live today. Or perhaps they have undergone significant changes due to technological advancement.

The novel presents a vision of the future in which robots exist in society as assistants alongside organic cyborgs. However, these cyborgs lack souls, which are only possessed by creatures created by a Higher Power through an unknown mechanism. In the novel, a man decides to save himself from death by creating organic bodies endowed with a copy of his own neural network, into which he intends to transfer his soul. The organic cyborgs formed during scientific research did not receive quantum substance and began to look for a way to extract it from people in the past.

The novel features allegories and fiction alongside real facts from the worlds of technology and science. It also presents an interpretation of who the occupants of UFOs are.

I wrote this novel to dedicate it to two special people in my life. I want to preserve their names. Not every grave can have a headstone, even though time will eventually destroy them. While it is impossible to fight death, it is possible to fight oblivion. The names of the deceased remain in the memory of the living and are immortalised in art and creativity. Through this work, I aim to prevent two names from fading into oblivion.

Clara comforted me when I was lonely.

Masha saved my life.

I was with both Clara and Masha at the moment of their deaths. I died with each of them, emotionally speaking. And that is natural. When those who are dear to us die, a part of the soul

of those who remain alive dies too. Gradually, that part of the soul is restored, but the memory of feelings never fades. And so it should be.

I dedicate this novel to my dear Clara and Masha with immense gratitude for being and remaining in my life, and I hope it will preserve your names. Time will never erase the memory of these extraordinary cats.

I remember you and I love you.

Part I

Chapter 1

The flash was approaching. It penetrated her protective suit, touching her skin and slowly enveloping her body. Although she had been warned about this sensation, she could not have imagined what it would be like in reality. Transforming into a ball of light, the flash created a cocoon around her and carried her away at unimaginable speed. It was probably into the distance; it couldn't be otherwise.

- How do you feel? - The voice of the training flight operator sounded suddenly and sharply as the movement stopped.

- It felt like the speed was going to tear me apart, - she said, forcing herself to hide her excitement, an emotion that was considered undesirable.

- You should take the upcoming event more seriously, - said the motivation inspector, who was present in the training room and not in a hurry to voice his doubts.

- Do you think I'm not ready?

- I have no doubt.

Stepping off the training platform, which simulated travelling through time at speed, the girl hesitated; the alien suit was slightly too big, as the departing personnel employee had warned her.

- I want to go to the 21st century, - Mona said confidently, trying to avoid the inevitable question from the motivation inspector.

- I don't fully understand why you want to go back in time, - said Chris, the manager of the company where Mona worked, trying to prevent her from carrying out her plans.

- I missed studying that time period.

- I don't think your job requires knowledge of events that happened to humanity in all time periods, - said Chris, who believed that some people were eager to learn things they weren't supposed to know.

- I disagree. I work with artificial intelligence, which was originally created in the 21st century.

- It has been modified many times.

- The original does not lose its significance. It's important to me to analyse the AI's compatibility with the time it was launched, - Mona insisted, which was unlike her.

- I'll think about signing the waiver.

The operator, who had not interfered in the conversation, began to remove a device that looked more like a capsule than a real device — a training platform — from working mode, putting it into a state of suspended energy animation.

- Thanks for the training, - Mona said, nodding to the guy who had taken his eyes off the console and looked at her.

- You're not ready, - he said, still uncertain about the engineer's motivation for the robotic artificial intelligence facility.

Mona looked at the inspector, who did not wait for her answer before heading for the door. It seemed to her that he was emotional, but afraid to show it. Chris followed his example. Even with the best will in the world, there was no point waiting for him to show any emotion.

Chapter 2

He could always be found in a cosy corner of the house or on a tiny balcony, surrounded by tubs of miniature trees and ever-present shadows cast by large blocks of buildings.

- Bistris, are you sad again? - The state of the domestic assistant worried her. The emotional aspect of the artificial intelligence had evolved independently. Outside the programme plan. Without an update.

- You came... - He sighed, as if he hadn't expected to see her.

- I always come home, - Mona said, trying to calm the robot with an artificial consciousness who was suffering from his own emotions.

- I get sad when you're not here. I'm very lonely.

- I won't abandon you. Besides, you're supposed to help me fight loneliness.

- You're stronger than me.

- Bistris, you need to control your emotions.

- I understand, Mona. I'm just artificial intelligence. I don't know what's happening to me.

The robot, which had been released by a corporation with the aim of suppressing feelings of loneliness in individuals living without a partner, was exhibiting unprogrammed behaviour.

Bistris headed for the home control panel and set the time for cooking dinner and filling the bathtub with hot water for his mistress, who stood at a distance watching his movements.

- Why are you using the old control methods? - The assistant's retrograde behaviour had long puzzled Mona.

- I find it more convenient.

- What about neurocontrol?

He chose not to answer. This was another deviation from the programme. The robot seemed like an ordinary person whose emotional state required urgent attention from a mentor. However, such specialists were unavailable for artificial intelligence carriers. Models whose programme deviated from the mandatory plan were subject to reinstallation. This meant that they had to become different artificial personalities. Mona liked Bistris. She felt an inexplicable sympathy for him and didn't want to erase his consciousness, even though it was artificial. She couldn't share her concerns with anyone. Only with him. But that would upset him even more. It was a vicious circle. She had no idea how to break free from it.

Chapter 3

- I'm not asking for an explanation, but I assume you understand the gravity of the situation? - This was at odds with the head of the corporation's refined appearance.

- I don't have a complete understanding of the period when our predecessors created artificial intelligence.

- Mona, you can do your job without that knowledge.

- But I need to know the details.

- You're not telling me everything. - Chris was skilled at reading the people he interacted with. He was particularly sensitive to lies.

- Trust me, it's necessary, - she said. She didn't lie, but she didn't tell him everything, either.

- Sending someone back in time is dangerous, and expensive.

- It requires a small amount of energy, - she said, realising that she was downplaying the significance of this aspect of the operation.

- In addition to energy, the crew must be involved.

- Remotely.

- Specialists will still be involved, - Chris sighed, growing weary of the drawn-out conversation.

- Chris, school students go on flights like this.

- That's a different type of flight. They just observe from the sidelines without landing or integrating into the activities of the people of that time period. How do you imagine the integration would work?

- My knowledge is definitely sufficient, - said Mona, who did not foresee any significant difficulties with the integration.

- You know as much as they don't even know yet. And it will be frightening. They still live with prejudices, traditions, and misinterpretations of the nature of some things.

- In that case, my knowledge won't get in their way.

- We weren't given permission for that, though. We don't have the right to give people from the past such information. It would disrupt the course of history.

- But how has our interference not disrupted history before?

- They were implemented organically and as necessary. Many years were spent calculating the consequences and taking into account the correlation of future events before these actions were taken,

- Chris tried to give at least one reason that would make his subordinate see reason.

- It won't do any harm if I gain some useful experience.

- How can we learn from people who lived centuries ago?

- I may have missed some important moments in the history of artificial intelligence, - she persisted.

- I will sign the authorisation after consulting my superiors.

Mona felt uneasy about not telling the whole truth. But it wasn't a lie. Nevertheless, her conscience reminded her of the discomfort she had caused.

Chapter 4

Once inside the transport capsule, Mona entered her destination coordinates and put on a bracelet to receive updates from the Bionics Institute.

The journey to the ocean took less than ten minutes. The girl, her plain grey hair blowing in the wind, approached the line where the waves met the sand. Closing her eyes and spreading her arms wide, she breathed in the air, rich with the scent of nature. Her parents lived on the other side of the ocean in a geometrically precise house made of weightless metal blocks. Mona could sense when her mother came out to the shore to feed on pure energy. Although the thought transmitter did not work at such a distance, she knew her mother was sending her words of love. Of course, she was also worried about her adventurous daughter.

The ocean continued to churn the waves. The wind grew stronger and then subsided. Mona became one with the landscape, painted in shades of blue and sand. Her pale skin contrasted strikingly with the landscape. So did her grey hair. And her grey eyes.

Chapter 5

- I'm afraid so.

The man, who had refined and somewhat gentle features, held a neural sensor between his fingers in order to communicate with his interlocutor.

- Any reason? - The responder's tone was devoid of any negative undertones.

- None that I can think of.

- Then what, Chris?

- Mona is paying close attention to artificial intelligence, - said the head of the robot manufacturing corporation. He spoke evenly, but he seemed worried, which was an odd thing for someone in his position to be.

- It's part of her job.

- She could find out.

- Impossible. Work at this level is classified. It's also important to know exactly when she's going.

- She will travel to the 2020s upon request, - Chris said. He had studied the history of the previous century in order to assess the risk of important information being declassified.

- Experiments with creating organic cyborgs began a little later.
- Klur, I doubt she's an organic cyborg. If the truth comes out, she won't take our side. People have always remained similar to their ancestors. There are too few of us to take the risk. Especially after the Great Purge, when organic copies were deprived of quantum substance.
- Is she interested in artificial intelligence as applied to robots? - His companion remained calm, his mind preoccupied with more important matters.
- Yes.
- I see no reason to panic.

Chapter 6

He needed to be distrustful in order to maintain heightened surveillance. He made no attempt to feign calm. There was a reason for this: the five-hundred-metre-tall tower was receiving a threat signal. There had only been one recorded instance of organic cyborg activity in the 21st century. The tower operator forwarded this information to the rapid response unit to rescue the quantum substances. Since the day the threat to humanity had been eliminated, the tower had not detected any frequencies requiring intervention. He saw a catch in this.

Iron went to the archive of audio signals, which were duplicated on several media. However, he was the only person aware of the third duplicate, which was necessary for additional data comparison. This duplicate was located in a virtual repository, and the access code had been passed down to the hereditary custodian by his father. Along with the code, he had inherited a premonition of an impending danger.

Activating his mobile holographic screen, Iron set the route to the repository. He knew the compartment in which the data anomaly had occurred, in his opinion. And he was not mistaken. Now, however, an additional problem arose. He had no idea who could have erased the data on the danger signals. A chain reaction of tasks requiring solutions arose in an instant. However, he could not travel back in time due to a number of restrictions.

Chapter 7

The cause of her depressed mood had to be eliminated immediately, as required by the everyday concept of energy interacting with space. She was violating this rule day after day.

- Bistris, will you tell me what's bothering you so much?
- Mona, I can't explain it.

A robot moved gloomily around the room, putting things that were out of place back where they belonged. His gaze was empty. However, that was how robots with AI were supposed to look. But she had previously noticed something human in Bistris's artificial eyes.

- Just say it.
- I'm sad.
- Is that all?
- I feel something tormenting me. It's as if I've forgotten something important. Something important and seemingly significant. But it's inside me. I'm scared. Mona, I'm broken.

The robot made a sound like an exhalation, which Mona dismissed as another instance of un-robot-like behaviour.

- Don't worry, we'll fix it, - she wanted to reassure him. But she lied.
- This isn't just a program error. I feel different. I'm not what a robot with an artificial brain should be.
- Explain.
- You don't want to deal with me, - he said, displaying symptom after symptom of depression.
- I won't betray you, - she said. She had no doubt about the kind of doubts that were weighing on the robot.
- Mona, I'm just a thing.
- That's not true.

The robot didn't continue the conversation, believing it would only ruin his mistress's already spoiled mood. He liked her too much to hurt her.

Chapter 8

Only the inattentive see the sky as always the same. She loved to watch the night sky. It brought her closer to someone who was far away. Feeling distant made her feel lonely. Another negative emotion. Almost negative. In the past, people were not forbidden to indulge in such feelings. Then again, maybe she was mistaken due to her limited knowledge of history. She had studied the past through holographic archives compiled by experienced teachers. It is likely that many authentic events were not included in them. She could have studied the period of history that interested her most in more detail, but unfortunately she was undergoing serious treatment at the time. After she was discharged from the medical centre, her parents, who were very protective of her, thought the idea of overcoming her past was absurd. So the desire lay dormant under a thick layer of prohibitions for several decades. Time passed more slowly in the new era, and people could afford to remain stuck in their early years. Which is what Mona did. At fifty, she was still very young, although according to updated methods of assessing age based on a life expectancy of 150 years, she had only just become a young adult. The problem was that she had no intention of becoming a mature person. No one was pushing her to do so. It was simply a fact of the time in which she was born.

She lingered on the roof of her house, deciding not to make Bistris wait. She believed that he would not stop feeding and fall into a state of programmed sleep while she was away. She didn't want to go home — the air was filled with a scent that transcended time. To her, the night smelt the same as it had several centuries ago in the year 2280.

Chapter 9

The spatial museum of human history stretched for hundreds of kilometres. This fact had never bothered him before, especially since the transport capsules could reach speeds of a hundred kilometres per second in an instant, while maintaining weightlessness inside the cabin to protect passengers from increased pressure. Iron felt it, caused by an inner anxiety. Somewhere, an enemy was lurking. Something big was brewing. People were in danger. Only now did he realise the horror of the discrepancy between demographic indicators adjusted for population decline due to epidemics and wars, and inaccurate data for the 21st century and present day. Millions had been lost. This couldn't have happened just like that. Iron shifted gears and rushed to the furthest compartment of the museum even faster.

As in the old days, the corner compartment was empty. He did not need to study the file catalogue; he practically knew it by heart. Retrieving the password-protected cell from the array of information, Iron made no mistake. An entire segment of official reports had been brutally purged. The person responsible would not have been able to format the cell where the destroyed information was stored.

Iron wasted no time in rushing to the museum exit, thinking about which security department he should contact to avoid running into the enemy of humanity's accomplices.

Chapter 10

Ambiguity. Such was the situation in which she found herself. Only time would put everything in its place. Alternatively, it could push the clarification of the situation even further away.

Mona had no choice but to go to work and examine the numerous diagrams required to create the artificial intelligence repository. As she looked at yet another impersonal, empty diagram, she reflected on how Bistris had once been the same — absent. Suddenly, she realised that he might not be the only one with a software glitch. This seemed an unlikely assumption, since people accustomed to comfort would not tolerate a robot that resembled a depressed human being in their homes. She herself should not have attached any significance to it either. Robots were not recognised as anything other than machines, even though there had been attempts by those who fought against accepted norms to legalise the rights of inanimate carriers of intelligence.

Mona's intense thinking gave her a headache. She considered it unethical to work in this state, as she might overlook the slightest piece of code that could lead to a series of errors. Then users would not get what they were expecting.

Mona began to feel weighed down by her thoughts about Bistris and his attitude towards things. When she opted for a career in artificial intelligence, she believed that she would be able to avoid the suffering caused by loss and not follow in her parents' footsteps. They had worked with creatures that had a different neural network and quantum substance. The neurozoologists in her family lived near a territory with special status, and from childhood, Mona had observed creatures that were different from humans.

Now, she realised that this had not filled the void in her soul. But it had caused problems. Was the robot that lived drearily in her house really one hundred per cent artificial? Bistris' suspicions about its intelligence only grew stronger; it strongly resembled a human being.

Chapter 11

There is a problem.

Klur arrived at the robot factory and surveyed the production area as if he were seeing it for the first time.

- Could you please clarify what exactly? - Chris often looked confused. Especially in vague conversations.

- The last group to overcome the obstacle didn't pass on the codes.

- And what do you want me to do? - Leaning over the railing of the observation bridge, Chris watched closely as the people below checked the robots' suitability.

- Combine the two reasons for overcoming the obstacle.

- Are you suggesting we entrust the transmission of the code to Mona? Even I, with all my sluggishness, don't trust her.

- She won't understand what's going on, - said Klur, smiling as self-assured people tend to do.

- I don't know.

- Do as I say.

Chris shrugged and stared at the workers. Every time he saw the robots being assembled and tested, he wondered if this was how organic cyborgs had been created. He couldn't remember.

Chapter 12

- I want to know what's bothering you, - the girl said, her voice full of determination. She was determined to find out what her domestic helper was probably unconsciously hiding.

- Mona, my feelings aren't worth your attention, - Bistris smiled.

- Tell me. You're trying to hide something important from me.

- I'm useless.

- Admit what's bothering you.

Mona made herself more comfortable on the sofa, which stood alone in the middle of the spacious, bright living room. When the wind blew through the open windows, it ruffled the numerous curtains hanging from the ceiling, dividing the space into several areas. Some of the curtains tried to reach the sofa, aided by the wind. She always loved this moment, but now she had to focus on the conversation.

- However, it is up to you to decide my fate. I am a human being, - Bistris said, sitting down on the sofa next to Mona. He no longer saw her as strikingly different from him.

- Tell me more.

- I can feel things.

- Emotional intelligence, not like that of a human being, came with the artificial intelligence. That's probably what you're experiencing, - she said, wanting to believe her own words.

- I cry when I'm upset. Only without tears. I like watching birds in the sky. I'm sad about the life I had before. I don't remember much about it, but I feel that it existed. I can't make out the outlines of the past, but I know what it was like, where and when. It's all inside me, but it's as if it's very far away.

- That's unimaginable.

- I'm broken, - said Bystris, tilting his mechanical head and feigning genuine despair.

- No, robots with AI exhibit different symptoms of malfunction or program failure. You're different from them.

- And you know what's happening to me?

- I have a theory, but I need to test my assumptions before I tell you.

Chapter 13

It was a dead end. He had been stuck there since the start of his search. There was no way out. However, if he didn't intervene, he would be committing a crime.

Iron leaned back in his chair, moving away from the desk on which the information processing device was frozen. The semi-transparent, voice-controlled screen displayed the results of the data analysis. He would have to go to the end of the 21st century to record a criminal violation of the law on unauthorised implementations. According to preliminary calculations and a comparison of data from a reliable source, the number exceeded the permissible percentage. However, he had already reached his limit for sending people back in time. Among his friends, there was no one who dared to attempt the journey.

Feeling tired from trying to find a way to save the human population, Iron decided to take a walk to the ocean. It was visible right from his window.

The scent of the ocean was always present in the mind of a man who could not imagine being separated from nature. Over the last fifty years, the high-tech society established in 2050 had become dependent on the clean energy of living nature. This was greatly facilitated by the in-depth study of quantum substances outside organic bodies, which revealed their need for natural energy. The channels of interaction between quantum substances contained in bodies and the energy-information content of space became clearer, and even the most fervent sceptics were forced to concede, allowing the sciences studying the invisible components of human beings to take centre stage. Since then, wild nature has been granted extensive privileges, alongside the distinctive architectural achievements of modernity. Only animals and birds failed to complement the wild nature of the planet: their numbers dwindled due to ecological disasters and deliberate extermination in the fight against deadly viruses. As the number of species on the planet declined significantly, there was a growing opinion that the destruction of other forms of life needed to stop. Governments agreed to establish Oases where neurozoologists could preserve selected species of flora and fauna. Maintaining a balance in nature under human control was deemed the optimal consensus. However, the original world was not recreated.

Iron preferred to live alongside this renewed version of nature, without other life forms present. He believed that only carriers of quantum substance deserved attention. However, he changed his mind on this issue when he learned of the existence of several types of quantum substance. However, the desire to go to the Oasis never arose; the ocean's presence was enough to alleviate the man's loneliness.

Chapter 14

She had spent decades immersed in her work, secluded in her office with its excellent soundproofing. She had grown accustomed to spending more time alone than with her colleagues, and, consequently, she had become somewhat unfamiliar with communicating with others. She liked it that way.

- Come in, - said the voice of the specialist responsible for intelligence development, speaking in such a way that the person entering his office would not feel uncomfortable. The conversation was not going to be easy. - You want to go back in time. Explain.

- In connection with my work on improving artificial intelligence, I need to know some techniques that I have not previously studied.

- And I understand that you want to find them in the past?

- Yes, - said Mona. She did not know how to lie, but decided to believe her own words for the sake of persuasiveness.

- Don't you think technology has come a long way since then?

- Of course, but shouldn't we keep the origins in mind? - Mona rarely resorted to philosophical arguments, but they now seemed like a convincing defence in the absence of clear reasoning.

- I don't see the need.

- May I explain with an example?

- Please do.

- For centuries, we have been travelling back in time and influencing the development of humanity. But there have also been cases where modern doctors have studied the basics of surgery by being present in eras when suitable scalpels didn't even exist.

- For medical and scientific purposes, such exceptions are acceptable.

- I am dealing with consciousness, even if it is artificial. It is also a component of an inorganic being which is designed to resemble us.

- Mona, you're so keen to prove that your return two centuries ago was necessary, and despite your inability to provide compelling arguments, I'll sign your travel permission. Take a walk. Experience the past for yourself.

- Thank you.

- And be extremely careful. You idealise the people of the past. Those who lived in that period were different from us in their coarseness, the primitiveness of their goals and the fact that they were not characterised by energetic vitality in the 21st century. Blending in among them seems an impossible task for representatives of our society. - The interviewer refrained from detailing the characteristics of the people the persistent individual would encounter. He valued determination over the fear of risk.

- I'll seem strange to them. They're unlikely to accept me as one of their own.

- Let's hope so.

Chapter 15

Some landscapes are tied to a particular time. Mona wanted to remember the sunset on the ocean shore, because it was unique to her lifetime. Mona sat down on a warm rock and tuned in to receive the energy waves. The words of the person responsible for the development of the species made her wonder about the energy of organic beings, suggesting that if people in the past did not have enough energy, it would probably be more difficult for her to connect to spatial sources. She greedily saturated herself with the combination of wind, earth and water energy that surrounded her.

- Am I disturbing you?

She had not expected an outsider to interrupt her in her current state, with her long hair blowing in the strengthening wind.

- I was hoping to be completely alone.

Mona opened her eyes and looked at the stranger without interest; they had become both superfluous and attention-grabbing.

- Please excuse me.

- Why don't you sit down on that rock and enjoy the sunset? It won't be the same tomorrow.

- Are you sad?

- I won't be able to see the ocean for a while.

- Are you leaving?

- To the past.

He couldn't believe his ears; rarely did anyone travel back in time as if it had ceased to be necessary. This was partly true; the people of the past did not need the help and advice of their distant descendants from the future as they had many centuries ago, and even more so at the dawn of civilisation.

- Amazing luck.
- Explain, - Mona said, noting the look of joy on the stranger's face.
- I need to work with someone who can travel back several centuries to warn humanity of a danger that cannot be eliminated.
- A danger? - Mona was alarmed. Secrets and conspiracies did not usually attract her attention, especially since she was already involved in searching for lost truths from the past.
- Exactly, - said Iron, studying the girl's reaction to gauge how much he could trust her.
- Do you think you can help?
- I don't know anyone else who would go back.

Chapter 16

- Time is running out, and we don't have the technology to extract you without a hitch.
The indignant man almost wrung his hands, but Klur would not allow such a gesture. Chris, on the other hand, was experiencing a striking level of agitation.

- It was there, wasn't it?
 - The thing is, it's as if someone deliberately destroyed the method of transferring consciousness from a dying body to a capsule. How are we supposed to extract quantum substances? - Klur stared at Chris, who was becoming increasingly confused by the barrage of questions he couldn't answer.
 - I'm not very familiar with such technologies.
 - I'm sure you're not, but you have to help us all. Once your organic body's reserves are exhausted, you'll disappear. But they won't. Think, Chris.
- Klur finally settled down on a narrow sofa against the wall of the spacious, glass-walled office.
- So maybe I should go back in time?
 - Time travel is strictly controlled now. Give your subordinate instructions, but do it so that she doesn't guess.
 - How am I supposed to do that if she's not supposed to know about consciousness transfer experiments?
 - I don't want to think about that. Just make up some kind of story.

Klur preferred to retreat from uncomfortable questions, and rising, hurried to the exit.

The previous topic of reflection that he had been indulging in alone emerged with renewed force. Chris had never understood how he and his kind could survive without quantum substance. Without it, it seemed that no living thing could exist. Nothing would have existed if humans had not begun interfering with the natural world, armed with technology. Organic cyborgs proved to humans that they were capable of creating life artificially. However, the experiment crossed ethical boundaries, and then the cyborgs themselves claimed the right to self-determination. Those who came to power allowed this to happen, and new individuals were created in medical centres, adding to the organic race. They were alive, but not animated from within. They became an example of how science can be misapplied, and subsequent corrections aimed to eliminate this mistake. The neural network of organics was perfected, but this proved insufficient. The main failure was that the quantum substance — the term that had come to be used for the soul — could not be replicated in laboratory conditions and, even more importantly, could not be created without the involvement of something extraterrestrial. Scientists were afraid to admit what that was exactly. They knew. They understood.

Like most cyborgs, Chris and Klur looked human, but were completely devoid of quantum substance. Their death was final and irreversible unless their organic body was copied and their neural network was recreated, restoring their personality, though it had to be retrained. The reserve of

organic bodies was significantly longer than that of carriers of quantum substance, but this realisation was not enough.

Chris didn't want to die. But he had no choice. Unless, perhaps, it would be possible to recreate a copy of him through an underground network of organic beings. This copy would be almost him, but without his memories and feelings. However, these were not present in the original organic version of this cyborg. He had no doubt that when he was recreated, he would disappear. People with quantum substance would merely change their form of existence, yet still live on. Not only people. All biological species endowed with consciousness.

In this regard, organic cyborgs should be equated with robots. It was only their more sophisticated neural network, combined with a biological body, that placed them significantly higher in the hierarchy of development.

They wanted to surpass humans.

Chapter 17

- Tell me honestly what's going on with you.

It had been an intense day at work, and nobody could guess the reason for Bistris's gloomy mood. Mona was desperate for answers.

- You...

- I won't turn you in for reprogramming.

- I'm not artificial intelligence. I'm convinced of that.

- I remember you already mentioned your suspicions that there is a human inside you, - Mona said, growing impatient with paying attention to someone else's feelings whenever she was tired.

- I shouldn't have said that. - The robot froze in place, waiting for his mistress to show him more affection.

- Judging by your behaviour, you act in a humanely irritating manner.

- What if there is a human essence within me?

- To some extent, that is true, because artificial intelligence was created as a copy of natural intelligence.

- No, you don't want to hear me, - Bistris said, his speech becoming indistinguishable from that of a robot.

- All right, I'll try to listen to you.

- There is a living consciousness inside me. I don't know how this could have happened. But I'm asleep. Not like when I was human. I'm starting to remember my former life. I was human, Mona.

Sounds mingled in her head. She had some vague knowledge that forbidden experiments had been conducted in past centuries, but she had no idea that they had achieved such advanced results.

- I can neither confirm nor deny that.

- It's impossible to believe, - said Bistris, looking even more dejected.

- I believe you. I will find an explanation for how this happened. - Mona got up from the sofa and walked over to the robot leaning against the wall. Assuming that he couldn't feel anything, she took his mechanical hands covered with artificial skin, but then remembered how it had been in his past life.

Chapter 18

Although an agreement does not legally oblige the parties to fulfil their promises, it is based on the principle of keeping one's word. As agreed, they both arrived on the shore at the appointed time.

- Since you came, it means you believe me.

- I'm curious.

- And I think you have a reason for it. - Iron had no doubt about the validity of his assumption. She was silent. He had to continue the conversation.

- You're afraid to admit it to anyone.

- Yes, - she replied. She was burdened by assumptions for which she simply had no proof.

- I want to fill you in so you understand how dangerous what I'm about to ask you is. - Iron was prepared for her refusal, but he had no right to hide the truth.

- Will you tell me who you are?

- Iron. I'm an employee of the temporary layer repository.

- Mona. An engineer at the artificial intelligence robotics facility.

- I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier. - Iron was never one to disregard the rules of etiquette, but he was in a hurry.

- Now I'm ready to listen.

- Over two hundred years ago, humans created the precursor to an organic cyborg. They deserve credit for creating a convincing imitation of the human body, but the question of consciousness arose. Artificial intelligence seemed like a pitiful fragment in an advanced device. Complicating the semblance of consciousness was necessary. Then, from somewhere, data appeared on a method of extracting consciousness from the body of a dying person. Quantum substances were placed in specialised capsules and transported to the present day. The wealthiest organic cyborgs tried to acquire souls, but were disappointed. The artificially created body made of living matter rejected the quantum substance. They then decided to limit themselves to copying the neural network and memory of organic beings for subsequent placement of data into a cloned body. Incidentally, they must fill their memory by relearning their previous life. This prolongs their lives, but they still intend to find a way to obtain quantum substance.

- Originally, the organics had souls, - said Mona, who had limited information about the period when the organic class began to form.

- I think it wouldn't hurt to delve a little deeper into history.

- I confess, I'm not very good at this subject.

- When humanity gained the ability to fight death by cloning bodies and placing an exact copy of the original organism's neural network into them, questions arose about the soul. Research began into capturing the soul leaving the dying body and placing it in a specialised capsule, which was then implanted into the clone. After some time, it became clear that there was no quantum substance in organic cyborgs.

- How did they find that out?

- With the help of specialised equipment that had already been created in our century, - Iron replied, trying not to betray his indignation at his interlocutor's huge gap in historical knowledge. - As for the cloning, initially the neural network prototype was that of the cloned humans. I believe that, over time, the clones and the neural network ceased to be exact copies of the original people. That's when the organic class began to form. They were granted certain rights and came to be considered equal to humans. However, both people with souls and the organics themselves are oppressed by the fact that the latter's consciousness is not real or alive.

- Iron, I apologise, but there are various rumours about organics. Personally, I have never seen the process of creating their bodies or uploading the neural network into them. Sometimes I wonder if they really exist.

- There are many of them. They simply take over the past and the present.

- So they're the danger you want to eliminate?

- As much as I would like to, I can't eliminate this danger. As I said, there are many of them, but the most frightening thing is that they have established themselves in political circles. There are many of them among public figures and scientists.

- How are they dangerous? - Mona believed that, by understanding the organics better, she would be able to figure out the condition of at least one of the robots.

- First, they need to learn how to extract the quantum substance and then determine how to introduce it into the body. - Iron watched his interlocutor closely, eager not to miss her initial reaction to his accusation.

- I think that's impossible.
- For now, it's still science fiction, but they won't give up trying to achieve their goal.
- I haven't heard of any such experiment.
- Do you really think something like that would be made public?
- You're probably right, - Mona said. She had only one desire: to know the truth.
- For that reason, we cannot know how far they have progressed in their attempts to accomplish this task.

- What am I supposed to do?

- You will have to take a device with you that is essential for identifying organic cyborgs. You must also find out which organics initiated experiments to extract quantum substances in the past. I will prepare the device for our next meeting. As for the organics, it is unlikely that we will be able to find out which of them found refuge in past centuries and rose to high positions in order to influence society. But if you find out anything, it will be enough to draw the right conclusions. You will be able to transmit data to me through time and space. Most likely, you will find yourself in the period when the NeuroNet is launched.

- Science fiction.

- Reality.

Chapter 19

The conversation offered no opportunity to avoid the issue and seemed painful. Furthermore, the only person who did not approve of her bold decisions was her closest ally.

Mona pressed the button on the device, which projected a transparent image of her interlocutor into the air.

- I think you want to tell me something serious.

- Mum, I'm going to take a leap.

- What are your plans? - Despite her attempts to appear calm, the woman's voice barely concealed her excitement.

- I need to know more.

- I'll worry.

- It's inevitable, - Mona said, in a tone that few would dare to challenge, given how futile it would be to argue with her.

- How long are you going back for?

- The preliminary plan is for no more than six months.

- I can't bear the thought of you leaving,' her mother said, her voice sounding unusual. For the first time in her life, she had come to terms with her daughter's decision without arguing.

- It has to be done. This experience is a stroke of luck rather than an exception.

- Mona, take care of yourself; you're all we have.

Chapter 20

He was allowed to be shy when he touched something new. He was forgiven for not having the same level of education as the wealthy owners of artificial intelligence robots. This realisation was depressing. He did not consider himself to be part of either group.

Bistris drew lines on the writing board. After sitting over them for over half an hour, he drew a simple diagram. He marked each point where the lines intersected with a date and an explanation. He remembered. This became the best proof of his suspicions. At the same time, he felt an overwhelming sense of sadness. He was not just a collection of parts with a programme inside. But why had he become that? He couldn't remember how it had happened. At that moment, he was in a state of non-existence. He didn't exist. He was dead. All that remained of his former self was an inactive entity. Temporarily. But how long had he been outside his own consciousness? A century. Two.

Bistris turned away from the drawing. It all seemed pointless; he would not be able to provide any proof. His mistress might believe him, but she wouldn't be able to answer his questions either.

One by one, the notes disappeared from the board. There was no need for him to remember them.

Chapter 21

- You don't seem like yourself.

His words did not surprise her; she was merely surprised that he had noticed. Mona tried to appear unconcerned, but she was never good at faking emotion.

- Chris, I'm worried.

- You said you wanted to overcome this yourself.

- And I'm not going to back down.

- It won't work because you have to deliver a message to the 21st century. - He looked unperturbed, as if afraid of spoiling his pretty face with excessive emotion. However, he rarely showed any.

- Do you know who to give it to? - Mona could barely hide her surprise; such operations were carried out by a select group of people who had overcome the challenge.

- Before you go to the challenge centre, you'll be given all the information, - Chris said, trying to catch the slightest hint in Mona's expression that might reveal her as someone privy to the secrets of the organics.

- Now I'll definitely be even more worried.

- Don't be. It's not as complicated as it seems at first glance.

Chapter 22

Distracted by his worries, his senses demanded attention. He was ready to give it, but only to one of them: The one that came with responsibility. Focusing on the readings from the subtle energy meter, Iron calmed down; the device was picking up the energy flawlessly. The elegant pendant gave no hint that it was a technological development, but it would enable Mona to accurately determine who she was dealing with. The flaw in his invention was that the object being tested had to be brought too close. Proximity always carries danger, even if only hypothetical. He shouldn't have put her in that position, but he had no choice. Millions of quantum substance owners were at stake.

Iron entered the updated programme scripts into the device and closed the panel, which locked from the inside so that opening the case would destroy its contents. He had to play it safe in case Mona was exposed; the future could not be put at risk. He would not go against the rules.

Glancing at the neat little device that resembled a trivial ornament, Iron decided to distract himself from the pangs of conscience that had intensified since meeting Mona. Not now. When she returned to the past, he would indulge in self-flagellation to his heart's content.

Chapter 23

Understanding oneself is fundamental, but this can be obscured by the insignificant information provided by those around us. In Mona's case, there was very little information available, and this prevented her from understanding her own essence.

Mona wondered what people had become in her century, and whether they were fundamentally different from those who had remained in the past. Prior to Bystris's confession and her encounter with Iron, she had taken prolonged youth and increased life expectancy for granted as inevitable outcomes of scientific progress in medicine. Now, however, she had her doubts. Was she herself human? Did she have a quantum substance? Were the people around her human? Had humans long since ceased to be themselves and become robots? But if people were still subject to death, then they must be made of living matter. True, organic cyborgs also died.

Feeling confused by her own reasoning, Mona craved pleasant sensations. She found these at a body improvement centre. She got a boost of energy from the massage machine touching her skin.

This was followed by immersion in water at a different temperature. Then, the client was moved to a spacious room for restorative sleep, during which all of their bodily systems were analysed.

This last point rekindled her suspicion that people today were artificial.

Only her feelings allowed her to verify this. Love. She was only familiar with it in relation to her attachment to her parents. Did she love? Mona was increasingly inclined to think that she was different from other people.

Chapter 24

The commission members were not perplexed. One after another, signatures indicating agreement to proceed appeared. He hesitated to sign the document because of his doubts.

- Are you puzzled by something? - The chief administrator asked the representative of the technical and social development department.

- I wonder if sending an ordinary employee into the past will change the course of events, - Klur said, voicing the standard risk that had been discussed repeatedly at meetings of officials responsible for travelling into the past for research purposes, rather than the reason for his concern. The question worked against his plans, but he had prepared possible answers.

- The candidate will undergo training to prevent the concerns you have raised from arising.

- Perhaps the engineer's journey will pass without incident. But the risks are great. - Klur did not abandon the idea of travelling into the past himself; however, to do so, he had to ensure that he would not be caught. He considered it an unjustified risk to entrust secret data to someone he did not know personally.

- It's no higher risk than when students and researchers are sent.

- The first group of designated individuals was sent to the past a long time ago. It has been thoroughly studied by our predecessors. - Klur considered a combined approach.

- As far as I know, Mona, being an employee of an artificial intelligence company, has the right to study certain aspects of neural network modelling developed in the past in detail. - Klur's interlocutor only wanted to finish the formalities quickly and leave the meeting room.

- Why all this historical background? Current developments have come a long way. It's a whim of the female nature, costly for the company's and the centre's budget, and risky for her.

- I think a thorough study of the origins of these issues would be beneficial. My decision goes against your reservations.

The chief administrator looked at Klur expectantly. There was no indication in his opponent's movements or facial expressions that would warrant an investigation into the private actions of an individual. But his suspicion grew. Contrary to professional ethics, he had had to rely on his intuition before.

- Is it advisable to send Mona alone, without an escort? - The head of the technical and social development department decided to test the waters.

- I don't see the point in forming a whole team to overcome something that isn't influential, - said the chief administrator, looking away from the secretary.

- All the signatures have been collected, - the secretary announced.

The person whose signature had legalised the approval process noticed a suspicious sign: Klur's twitching shoulder convinced him that his intuition was right.

- Please stay, - said the chief administrator, looking at the head of the security department and his assistant. - The rest of you may leave.

Chapter 25

- I have to undergo training, - she said, not looking at the chronically confused artificial intelligence standing behind her.

- And then you'll come home? - Bistris knew what answer he would get to his rather naive question.

- You know I will. And yes, I'm becoming more and more convinced that you're not an ordinary robot.

- Mona, are you going to return me to the developer?

- You confirm my suspicions. There's something human hidden inside you. I think I can guess what might have happened in the past and where I am going.

- I'm not sure...

- That's another example of thinking that isn't typical of a robot.

Mona turned to her assistant and tried to imagine what Bistris was like when his consciousness belonged to a biological body. She didn't have such a powerful imagination, though. She had to do without visualising her suspicions.

- Sometimes I remember things that seem to have happened to me.

- Most likely, some of the memories in your consciousness have been wiped. I'll try to clarify everything as much as possible. I need to leave for a little while. - Mona smiled at the robot, her face covered in ultra-thin rubber and bearing a mechanical sadness.

- Will you come back?

- Right now, yes.

Chapter 26

He tried to make a good impression on her. Giant waves rolled in, one after another. The ocean stretched out before the girl, who was standing dangerously close to the raging waters on the shore. At such close proximity, the scent was more noticeable. His scent. Unique. It could not be reproduced by anyone else. Not even the sea. Not even another ocean.

- Mona, you came, - he said, expressing his doubts about the upcoming meeting.

- Of course, - she replied, her light eyes not betraying any seriousness that was significant to him. She remained sweet and seemed harmless. Candidates like her were never sent on special missions.

- I've prepared a device for you that detects the presence of quantum substances. It's quite simple to use. Just point it at the object you want to check. If the substance is present, the device will glow. There is a button that activates the device and transmits a signal to the base — that is, to my transmitter.

- How simple.

- It only seems that way. I ask you to take this device seriously. It contains technology that is unavailable to 21st-century people.

- I'll have to be careful with every step I take in the past.

- Our world depends on you. The future depends on you. Previous survivors were careful, but not always, and this had consequences. There were also those who coped admirably with the planned integration.

- I think I studied some of their biographies, - Mona smiled, remembering vivid examples of names from history.

- Geniuses, prophets and teachers who created their own movements were not seen as outsiders. They simply stood out from those who were not their contemporaries.

- You're right. They were ahead of their time, yet no one suspected them of time travel.

- Let's put it this way: the further back in time the Overcomers were sent, the less people knew about time and the future.

- Weren't the Overcomers sent to the 21st century?

- Of course they were. I'm sure such trips took place — perhaps too often — but not officially.

- Is that why you asked me? - Mona felt as if she was being asked to play the role of a spy.

- Yes, - Iron realised that Mona alone would not be enough to carry out his plan.

- If I find those who have been deprived of quantum substance, what should I do? - The girl tried not to fully grasp the gravity of the tasks ahead, lest she panic.

- The device I gave you will send a report with all the necessary information to the temporary violators' database.

- My task isn't that important, - she told herself, trying to reassure herself. She wanted to allow self-deception to triumph over the immutable truth.

- On the contrary, without you, we will never be able to track down the enemies of humanity, - he said. He never underestimated the importance of deeds or those who committed them.

Mona took a deep breath, trying to calm down before fear overwhelmed her. She liked the idea of serving the greater good. But the possibility of being remembered by name in an archive dampened her enthusiasm.

Chapter 27

- You need to investigate these suspicions.

The head of security understood what the person authorised to maintain public safety was going to tell him without further explanation, as he shared the same doubts.

- It will be done.

- I remember there were developments fifty years ago that helped detect quantum substances in individuals of interest, - said the chief administrator, who was extremely security-conscious and sought to detect the slightest indication of danger. With each passing year, he became increasingly suspicious.

- They were lost, as far as I remember, - said the assistant head of security Ulysses, whose memory was his strong point.

- It would be good to find those who could theoretically have kept them, - the administrator pondered, considering an alternative course of action.

- Let's get on it. Can I ask a question? - Ulysses needed a clear understanding of the situation; due to his inability to fill in the missing details, he could not see the big picture.

- Of course.

- Why do you need to know?

- I suspect that we have not been able to completely control the process of creating new bodies for organic cyborgs. They are skilled at passing themselves off as humans who have undergone global body modernisation. - The administrator had his own score to settle with the descendants of the clones.

- Even if that's the case, their numbers are negligible, - said Ulysses, who didn't understand why this issue was causing concern.

- I also have my doubts about this, - Adar said, not hiding his concern.

- Are they connected to Klur? - Ulysses couldn't identify any risk factors in the person in question.

- Directly, - Adar replied. He did not consider his suspicions to be unfounded; he simply preferred to trust his intuition, as did the person who had called the unscheduled meeting.

- I suggest we keep an eye on the suspect. After all, Klur is involved in matters related to the development of society.

The administrator made it clear with his entire demeanour that the negotiations were over.

Chapter 28

The transport capsule sped along at the speed set by the passenger. A melody played inside, encouraging the passenger to open up to energy flows. Increasing the capsule's manoeuvring altitude, Mona looked out over the sprawling city. She felt scared. She had never travelled to the past before, not even as part of an educational programme. Her parents had tried to shield her from learning about the imperfections of people in past centuries. She was aware of them. In theory, at least. But what would she do when she encountered them? Relying on the instructions given by the staff at the transition centre seemed risky and naive. However, reading about the behavioural characteristics of 21st-

century humans in books seemed unproductive. Having studied the relevant literature for a long time, she was aware of the unprecedented luck she had been born into in a century when humanity had moved significantly away from the delusions that had ruined lives and prevented personal growth. Mona imagined, not without horror, that she would not be able to receive energy from space, which had been unavailable two centuries earlier. This posed a significant risk to both her health and her appearance. In the 21st century, advanced minds resorted to biohacking as a method of maintaining physical harmony. However, it was only available to a select few at that time and was rather expensive.

Only now did she realise how lonely she would be in the future she was heading towards of her own free will. And vulnerable. She valued physical and psychological comfort highly. Based on the available data, only a few people achieved this in the 21st century.

Chapter 29

- Valerian. Let's not go into too much detail about my position. I'm your instructor.

- Mona.

A tall man of indeterminate age sat down at a thin, white table on a chair that seemed disproportionate to his build. It was too fragile. Mona had assumed that the training would include physical training, but she was wrong.

- I can guess what question is on your mind. Preparing a candidate to overcome challenges is primarily a moral task. It is much more important to not break down psychologically than to adapt physically. But we will also cover that in our lessons.

- Will there be many of them?

- As you get into the subject. Have you ever encountered aggression from people in your immediate and wider environment?

- No.

- In the past, aggression was seen as a normal way for individuals to demonstrate their power. Violating ethical norms and personal boundaries was also accepted as a fact of modern life. Even public figures, scientists, and creative professionals did not bother to treat others with respect.

- That sounds scary, but not that scary.

- You think that simply being in a state of external aggression undermines your belief in your own strength and creates nervous tension. Internal tension. Have I understood you correctly?

- I don't understand the essence of this question. I have never experienced it myself.

- Right. What exactly puzzles you at this stage of preparing to overcome it? - Valerian was considered a fierce opponent of his contemporaries' interest in the past, which he despised for its imperfections.

- Did people of that period have the opportunity to distance themselves from their environment?

- Rare members of society cut themselves off from others and immerse themselves in their own personal world. They work outside the collective format, focusing on developing their own consciousness.

- So, like us now?

- The similarity is quite remote. They still had to interact with their peers.

- But they still managed to break free from the collective system. - Mona found a reason to calm down, believing that she would be able to behave in the 21st century as she was used to.

- Those were a few lucky ones. But even they had to integrate into society from time to time, and society treated them the same as before. Building personal relationships was fraught with inconveniences and compromises.

- What an anti-human society, - the girl sighed sadly, trying not to react to the increasingly frequent feeling of regret.

- And this is only a small part of what we know about how our ancestors lived.

- I am amazed that it was possible to break such a social model.

- It didn't happen without our intervention, - Valerian said. He had no doubt that human intervention in the layers of time was right, as it allowed some things to change, thereby modelling the development of the future. At the same time, he regretted the impossibility of making wholesale changes to the course of history.

- I admit that I still don't really understand how we influence events that took place long before we appeared, - said Mona, feeling embarrassed by her own ignorance at such moments of triumph.

- The discovery of gamma bursts made time travel possible. I admit that the pioneers made many mistakes. They were later corrected, - said Valerian, who never forgot his own participation in those missions and was proud of his contribution to rectifying the pioneers' mistakes.

- But how can you change things in time?

- Explain what exactly puzzles you.

- For example, we might decide to influence the year 1800, thereby changing the course of a particular event. But what about the time period that has already passed, the year 1900? - Mona loved to ponder such questions. She often had to do so alone. It seemed absurd to involve Bistris in such pursuits. At least, that was the case until he made her question the artificiality of its essence.

- Does the past influence the future? Partly. When such changes occur, representatives of the future travel to different time periods to correct events.'

- It feels like time is some kind of endless straight line.

- Time runs forward, but it is looped. Each time, there is a distortion in every segment. However, you should not focus on this topic, as you are not responsible for making changes. You are going as an observer, but without the right to act.

- It won't be possible to do nothing at all, - Mona said, doubting that her presence would bring about any change in the society she would find herself in.

- Don't do anything drastic. Don't help anyone. Don't share your knowledge. Don't warn them about what's going to happen. It will be difficult, but if you see similarities between certain individuals and us, allow yourself a minor exception. They are different, - said Valerian, who did not expect perfect behaviour from the person he was briefing. Over his many years of service, he had studied the psychotypes of numerous survivors.

- Be indifferent?

- There is no other way.

Chapter 30

- You're afraid.

- How do you know? - Mona didn't ask the question; she was simply voicing her latest discovery about her robot's emotional state.

- I know that feeling.

- I wonder how that's possible.

- Mona, I'm trying to remember something about the past. To help you, - Bistris said, appearing completely confused and helpless. But that didn't stop him from trying to look like a hero.

- Is it working?

The girl approached the mirror, which stretched from floor to ceiling — something that never ceased to amaze her, given that no human being is five metres tall. She carefully ran a comb through her long hair, going over every strand.

- Partly. I remember the feeling of rushing. That's when I felt fear. I felt uncomfortable for a long time. Then it was as if I fell into a deep sleep. After that, I became someone else. Then I fell again and came to my senses.

- Bistris, I can't say for sure that your consciousness was artificially created and placed in a robot, - she said, voicing her suspicions. - It's possible that this happened during the digitisation process.

- Mona, I don't understand you very well right now.

- You don't have to. I'm just saying what I think. I'll sort it out soon.
- I think you're getting involved in something dangerous. Now I'm starting to get scared.

Mona continued to look at herself in the mirror. At that moment, she was only frightened by the temporary nature of the procedure, which those responsible for carrying it out said was safe for her appearance and health. However, her own fears did not dissipate. She could not imagine seeing a changed appearance in the mirror. At the same time, she realised that change was inevitable.

Chapter 31

- Let's continue, - said the instructor. His voice did not sound like he was giving a command, but there was a firmness to it that cut off any attempt at starting a friendly conversation.

Mona nodded and settled into a delicate, perfectly suited chair.

- In the 21st century, as I mentioned at our last meeting, the importance of the individual was trampled underfoot. Most people were preoccupied with finding ways to feed themselves and pay for housing. Another important characteristic of the people of that time was their dependence on acquiring goods.

- Was anything of value appreciated?

- By a few individuals.

- What a strange time, - said Mona, unable to believe that such people had created artificial intelligence.

- I think that in the future, people will also think about us.

- But we are different.

- And for those who were, and for those who will be, - Valerian smiled for the first time since talking to the candidate.

- Non-stop development.

- I wouldn't be so quick to characterise a person like that. Especially someone who lived in the 21st century.

- Why?

- Primitive thinking prevailed among the population. It was passed down through the generations and affected virtually all spheres of life. The most important thing you will encounter is how people, and of course men, perceived women at that time.

- What's wrong with that? - Mona felt a natural uneasiness, fearing that people from the past would interfere with her personality, embodied by her physical and mental selves.

- You're not worrying for nothing. I just want to point out your lack of knowledge about the period you've chosen.

- History has never been my favourite subject.

- I won't dwell on that. - Valerian believed that condemning another person reflected negatively on him, so he avoided it at all costs.

- Thank you.

- During the period we are discussing, although gender equality was being introduced, there was still a strong tendency to disregard women's intellectual potential. I have drawn my own conclusions from what my grandmother told me.

- Would you like to share them?

- Mona, you have an exciting but difficult journey ahead of you. You should learn valuable lessons and identify your personal impressions. It is your own experience that becomes a solid foundation for personal development. - Valerian had no doubt that Mona would return a changed person after overcoming her challenges.

Unable to withstand the pressure of the unknown, Mona approached the open window and allowed the wind to play with her long hair. This helped her to switch her focus from the general format of the conversation to individual fragments that were of personal significance to her.

The instructor did not interfere, leaving the auditorium and giving the pretty young woman a chance to catch her breath before the next lecture.

Chapter 32

Information relating to the suspicious individual was received from the main archive. Glancing through the data, the head of security was not surprised by the chief administrator's suspicions — the file appeared to be completely clean. There was not the slightest deviation from an impeccable reputation. Only robots and a significant proportion of organic cyborgs had such perfect records.

Adar dialled the chief administrator's number and was immediately able to report on the results of his task.

- There is not enough information on the person being investigated, and what we do have looks strange.

- Ah, more specifically.

- The subject's life story fits the profile of an organic cyborg.

- However, he is not listed as organic, - the chief administrator agreed.

- Did you run a double check?

- A parallel one. I always do that, - the administrator said. He was not in the habit of trusting anyone but himself.

- According to the data, Klur is not a cyborg. But he clearly does not correspond to the image of a human being, - Adar said, confused.

- There are fewer and fewer ordinary people, and most of us resort to body transformation while preserving our quantum substance.

- Do you think Klur is organic after all? - Adar was eager for answers, but some of them would have to be sought out.

- I'm sure, and not all of them were forcibly shut down half a century ago.

- A significant portion were shut down by order, and most importantly, they were forbidden to create replacement bodies without special permission. - Adar relied on archival data, believing it could not mislead him.

- Indeed, an order was given to leave a small number of organics. The most harmless ones. The remaining individuals did not have access to the experience accumulated by their predecessors.

- So, was there still a fear of artificial intelligence?

- Of course. AI became an excellent assistant and served humans for over a century. But then it asserted its rights. Being a genius at finding, processing and applying information, it turned out to be a significant threat, - said the administrator, who had lived through the period in question and therefore insisted he was right.

- Perhaps Klur doesn't have access, - said Adar, not wanting to exacerbate a situation that might require a more thorough investigation.

- I have no doubt that this is not the case.

- Where could he have got the key?

- From the past. Or perhaps there's a secret society of organics because someone, somewhere, is creating their bodies. - The administrator saw the situation exclusively from this perspective.

- Unauthorised access couldn't have happened without being noticed. No reports of any violations have been received by my department, - Adar insisted, and the facts supported him.

- So the organic cyborgs have representatives everywhere. And believe me, they're up to something.

Chapter 33

Gratitude: For showing empathy. He sensed that she needed it. And he gave her some rest.

Mona settled into a warm bath filled with relaxing, massaging gel. On the edge of the bathtub was a glass containing a muscle relaxant and sedative. She allowed herself to bend the rules a little. As her relaxation reached its peak and spread throughout her body, she felt as though she was floating.

She had always been afraid to cross the line. Everything had boundaries. Those that separated the permissible from the categorically forbidden. She knew how to balance, and because of her passion, she knew how to approach those boundaries. She considered herself not sufficiently exemplary in terms of general human conformity. But she wanted to experience the dizziness that made her feel weightless and stopped her from thinking too much.

The only thing preventing her from going completely into nirvana was the premonition that Bistris was sitting on the floor by the door, listening to the sounds she was making in the bathroom.

- I know you're there.

- You can't do this.

- I take it you're speaking from experience?

- I think so. I guess. Occasionally, memories surface, and in some of them, I preferred to immerse myself in an unreal world. There's nothing good about that.

- You're definitely not a robot. They're boring. You're even more boring.

Mona finished her drink, clung to the edge of the bathtub and stood up. She congratulated herself on getting into the relaxing water in her swimsuit.

Without saying a word, Bistris understood that she needed him and entered the bathroom. In his arms, she found what she needed to immerse herself in boundless harmony. The obedient robot helped his mistress into bed and left the room. She did not watch him leave. She wanted to keep the special sensations in her memory. It seemed that she had never felt anything like this before.

Chapter 34

- Do you remember how it all began?

- Begin what, exactly?

- The destruction.

- I thought it was the birth.

- It's not that hard to guess what led to the creation of organic cyborgs. - Klur closed his eyes, imitating the thoughtfulness displayed by humans. He liked how they did it. Much of what was available to humans impressed him, however.

- The struggle against death can drive people to do terrible things.

- But those whose consciousness was copied and turned into our neural network had quantum substance. We didn't become them. They died. Death won that battle.

- Your words should make me sad, but I don't feel anything. - Chris tried not to dwell on these topics, believing that they could not lead to a clear conclusion and were therefore a waste of time.

- Doesn't it hurt you that we are just imperfect copies? Inaccurate copies. Deprived of the most important thing. We are a mistake.

- I don't feel anything. Do you feel emotions?

- It's not about emotions. I realise what we are deprived of. This ability is provided by the neural structure of our consciousness. - Klur listened to himself. There were indeed no emotions. But he knew how to think, and that was enough. Surprisingly, there were people who shared his view that logical reasoning was far more important than emotions. Then it seemed to him that people were growing weary of feelings. They were a side effect of the quantum substance.

- I remember the fight against organics being actively pursued fifty years ago, - Chris replied, answering his interlocutor's question.

- Do you still remember what caused it?

- The organic body turned out to be very similar to the natural one, albeit modernised. The only difference was the presence of quantum substance. People began to fear the emergence of a movement to defend the rights of organics. They did not think it was fair to share their place in the world with those they considered inferior.

- We need to find a way to obtain quantum substance.

- We have been trying for decades, but nothing has worked. I will repeat the words of a scientist, albeit one from the past. At the time, he was involved in work to extract quantum substance for a high-ranking organic being. He attributed the failure of these experiments to the incompatibility of the quantum substance with the neural network inside the body, as well as with the body's own capacity. Chris himself was interested in researching this topic.

- Are you saying that the quantum substance must be compatible with the neural network and the clone of the original body? - Klur saw this version as a complete fiasco.

- Exactly. Otherwise, rejection will occur.

- We need to find a way to strip the quantum substance of its personality and memory.

- Then we'll be thrown back centuries in our research. - Chris believed that prolonged and futile attempts at resolving an issue should be stopped in time. However, he didn't dare voice this opinion to his friend.

- I don't see any other way out. We need quantum substance.

- I'm afraid we'll have to try copying our neural network without completely losing our memory, in order to transfer it to a new body. At least let's achieve that.'

Chapter 35

The light colours of the city's architectural structures blended harmoniously with the sand dunes that framed the city on one side, and the dark colour of the approaching ocean on the other. The metropolis had made friends with its much older neighbours. At dawn, it developed a special relationship with the sun. Distinguished by its pink hue, the sun spread among the tall buildings erected by humans and rushed towards the horizon. After a while, the sun set, blending with the fatigue that inevitably appeared at the end of the day for most of the city's inhabitants.

Every day, she would greet the dawn and the sunset from the balcony of her cosy flat. Each time, she felt the presence of her housekeeper, who shared her delight in the scenes played out by nature.

For some reason, today's dawn was not quite the same. As it approached the city, it took on a new colour. A bluish tint shone through. She liked this colour, but not at the start of the day.

- I don't want to go where I've never been before.

- Nothing remains of the past. Everything moves forward.

- Then why have people learned to go back? We have erased the concepts of past, present and future. - She felt proud of the people of her time.

- Future?

- In the future, we find ourselves in each new day.

- But no one has ever travelled to the future. If I'm not mistaken, - said Bistris, not wanting to admit to his mistress that he had been closely following scientific news.

- There's no need for that. Tomorrow is formed from today. But we have to go back to yesterday to correct our mistakes, - she told her housekeeper, sharing the latest conclusions she had reached after her lessons with her instructor.

- Have they all been corrected? Wars and violence remain in the past, - he said, not admitting that he had been studying materials about the 21st century and worrying about his mistress's safety.

- They are necessary for the formation of morality.

- For so long? - At moments like these, when people seemed incomprehensible to him, he felt nothing more than artificial intelligence.

- What do you mean, for so long? - Mona was distracted by the changing shades of dawn.

- People have been fighting and killing each other for thousands of years.

- There has been no violence in the world for over two centuries. - Mona always felt lucky to have been born in such a peaceful time whenever the conversation turned to the peculiarities of her age.

- That's nothing compared to thousands of years. - Bistris looked pensive, which did not surprise his owner at all.

- I feel sorry for those people.

- You lived among them. Once upon a time. For some reason, I feel that quantum substance circulates in this world from age to age, - he said, thinking about people and believing that they were incredibly lucky to belong to this species. He could not consider himself human. His destiny was to be a creature with programmed intelligence.

- Alas, some quantum substances have, in fact, appeared here repeatedly.

- And you?

- I didn't want to know. The thought that I could have lived in such horrific conditions terrifies me. - Mona avoided analysing her deep memories, believing them to be closely connected to the soul rather than the body.

- Didn't they activate your quantum substance memory?

- That's unnecessary. I want to be happy. And I am. - Mona left the balcony and headed to the bathroom to freshen up before going to work and then to her next lesson with Valerian.

Chapter 36

Another failed plan was consigned to the scrap heap. Anything that became useless lost its value. He didn't have to think about it. The hours he spent at work made him realise how futile his hopes were. He had nurtured them. He had no right to. Just like he had no right to live. Yet he was alive and didn't want to disappear.

Klur glanced at the open capsule. The last one. Sent from the past. He hadn't told anyone about it. Except for Chris — there was no one else to talk to about a matter that broke the law.

Under an ultra-sensitive microscope, he examined the trace left in space by the quantum substance. As expected, transferring it from the capsule to the neural network diagram had failed.

- Well, at least I freed another hostage of scientific endeavour, - he thought, looking in the direction where, according to his calculations, the quantum substance was disappearing. At that moment, he felt empty. Inner emptiness. Not a single particle in him stored information about his personality, dreams or feelings in special layers of space. He existed, but only temporarily. It was as if he had never existed at all. He was like some kind of gadget equipped with an operating system, or worse — or maybe even simpler.

Realising the hopelessness of his situation, he pressed the button to destroy the portable laboratory inside the case. He no longer needed it; no one from the past would pass on the capsule containing its precious cargo. It was acceptance of the end.

Chapter 37

Transport capsules cut through the space between buildings. The only difference was their speed. Some moved so quickly that they were barely visible, while others appeared to hover in mid-air. The colour and size of the capsules were standardised in accordance with legal requirements for aesthetic perception of space. A colour and size overload would have a negative impact on the nervous system, so uniform elements were perceived as much calmer.

The buildings also met these requirements, but only in terms of colour. When it came to architecture and height, building owners prioritised imagination over uniformity. But only within the permitted limits.

No city resident would ever consider making their house or transport capsule radically different. The colour of things did not vary greatly either. Colour moderation had become the norm over the centuries, as society realised that it guaranteed safety. Excessive differences threatened familiarity. Such differences were prohibited at first. Now, they were not even allowed to exist in people's minds.

Bathed in light, the city was freed from its capsules and drew closer to the sunset, which painted the houses in bright colours. At this time of day, most of the townspeople preferred to stay indoors and immerse themselves in a state of mental relaxation provided by special chambers.

The sunset filled the town, eagerly awaiting dusk, leaving behind the places where no one was there to greet it.

Chapter 38

Occasionally, what was not said aloud became known. Eyes spoke volumes. Mona could tell from Valerian's eyes that he was dissatisfied. Even if he had not betrayed his discontent, she was well aware of how little she understood about recent events.

- You can't pass yourself off as one of them.
- I'll learn.
- You can't master such a vast amount of information.
- I need to get in there.
- I won't report your zeal, as it is at least suspicious, but only because you pose no threat.
- That sounds like an insult.

- You're just not dangerous to them. They are dangerous to you. That's why I'll give you a brief briefing: there's too much information to cover, and the important stuff will get lost in the detail. - Valerian settled down on the windowsill, so that he could glance down occasionally; the view from the two hundredth floor never failed to fascinate.

- Thank you for your trust. - Mona ignored the negative comment directed at her, not wanting to create conflict and lose the opportunity to carry out her plan.

Valerian turned his gaze back to the auditorium, the sickly white colour of which had grown tiresome to him. He desperately needed colour. At moments like this, he envied those who could travel back in time, even if only for a short while, to a past that differed greatly from the norm. Life was definitely more fun there than in his world, which was confined to a geometrically correct space that extended its influence into people's inner worlds. At the same time, he remembered how much he had disliked the past.

- So, more than two hundred years ago, humans began actively working to find a way to extend life. Our ancestors were partially successful in this endeavour. At the same time, however, society stood in stark contrast to scientific research. Most people preferred to limit their existence to everyday life: working for small gains, starting a family and raising children. Self-education and enjoying life were considered the preserve of a select few. Their society ridiculed them. You will find yourself in a period of history when the economic Crisis in many countries will seem humiliating in comparison to the future. Poverty and low levels of education would be eliminated much later. You will not live to see this time — you will be taken home. Remember that people in those days were prone to crime. You could die on the roads, where cars drove on the ground, or at the hands of a desperate poor man looking to make a quick buck from cash or jewellery. People lied and misled each other a lot. They should be feared. Every single one of them.

- What did people think about back then?
- All sorts of trivial things, mostly about Monay and finding a partner, - the instructor replied, unable to suppress a smirk tinged with arrogance.
- What else?
- That's all. They were primitive. They didn't have the light that we have.

Valerian slammed the folder shut and fell silent. The briefing was over.

Chapter 39

Against the backdrop of an immeasurable amount of information, the limitations of the human mind were overwhelming. Iron had felt this way many times before, but rather than seeing it as a reproach, he saw it as a challenge and tried to fill in the gaps. This time, however, he went to the archive with a different purpose. As he made his way through the vast building to the sector containing unclassified surveillance data, he knew exactly what he was looking for.

As he approached, a pop-up stand lowered to the floor. He set the time period for which he needed data and waited for the relevant cell to slide out of the stand. He placed the miniature

hard drive into his laptop and copied the data. He hurried home to start searching for suspicious information immediately. He was certain that he would find it.

Time was running out, mocking his efforts. But his intuition gave him more confidence. This time, it proved to be the undisputed winner.

The screen displayed not just a suspicious mark, but a well-founded accusation. Unauthorised breaches occurred one after another in the 21st century. At that time, research in the field of artificial intelligence was underway. Every group of jumpers showed a spike in energy when they returned.

As Iron jotted down the suspicious facts on a piece of paper, he had no idea what they could be connected to. But he had to figure that out before Mona left.

Chapter 40

Correctness permeated every aspect of society, with each individual exuding it. Even he, who was optimally programmed to create comfort, was obliged to behave appropriately. He did so effortlessly because his behavioural responses were controlled by the programme. However, the programme did not account for the discomfort he felt when he was around people in their current form. Perfect. Devoid of vices. Responsible. Balanced. Calm. They presented themselves as robots, but they were very much alive. Inside. They just stopped broadcasting that to the outside world. Or was he mistaken?

Bistris sat down on the edge of a snow-white sofa in a room filled with light colours. He wanted to escape the light and polished uniformity. For him, there was only one way to escape reality: to be dismantled. No one would bother with robots like him. Except for her. She was proper and sensible and not prone to making mistakes. However, she sometimes overindulged in alcohol, which would relax her to the point of intoxication. At such moments, he realised that she needed him. Then he wondered why she hadn't let a human into her life. The answer came to him. People had stopped finding life partners for a very good reason: they had become closed systems that didn't need anything else.

He couldn't do that. However, he was not destined to have a life partner. What kind of life could a robot have?

As he got up from the sofa, he regretted not being able to feel its softness. Like once upon a time. This memory of sensations also surfaced.

Chapter 41

The final simulation, designed to help her overcome her fear, ended in her favour. Mona congratulated herself on her composure and for not deviating from her plan. Her physical indicators were within acceptable limits. After taking off the suit, which was worn out from repeated simulations, she ran her hand over the torn edges. The garment had its own history, closely linked to the person who had created it. Everything a person touches is subject to destruction and change. Nothing remained the same. Just like people themselves. Everything was gradually changing. It seemed to her that changes used to happen much more rapidly and noticeably.

- Is something wrong? - The training flight operator watched Mona closely.

- We are lucky to live in this time.

- I agree. But what made you think that?

- The inevitability of change does not affect us as quickly as it did people in the past.

The operator looked away, remembering the centuries he had visited.

- You're right. Several centuries ago, not only did people live much shorter lives than we do, they also aged faster. Time passed too quickly for our ancestors.

- Time passes at the same speed for everyone, - said Mona. She did not rely on time or any other factors that were not directly concentrated within a person.

- Then what's the deal? - He liked hearing other people's opinions, either adding to them or rejecting them if they didn't align with his own views.

- We were able to subdue time and take more of it for ourselves than previous generations had at their disposal.

- You avoid calling them ancestors.

- Yes, I don't like that word.

- Why? - He tried not to burden the conversation with too many words. Sometimes, other people's words were more meaningful than his own.

- Bodies are merely temporary manifestations of our quantum substances. We return periodically. Some do, and some don't. Some come here for the first time. I identify not with my body, but with my quantum substance. What kind of connection with previous incarnations can we talk about? They are just previous incarnations. Mona tried to convince herself that the body was not of paramount importance.

- However, you are correct. We have no connection with them except that we belong to the same biological species, - the operator picked up only the part of his interlocutor's statement that concerned him directly.

- Exactly. Closeness on a deeper level is much more important to me. It determines everything.

- She didn't want to touch on the subject of physical embodiment. Some topics were best avoided to maintain peace of mind. That was what her parents had advised her, and she trusted them.

- Perhaps overcoming this will broaden your understanding of the people who lived before you.

- I really want that.

Chapter 42

Knowledge should empower you, but it can also disconnect you from reality. This is especially true if the person who possesses it has no idea how to use it. Then it becomes a burden. Iron was aware of the magnitude of the mystery hidden at the intersection of time. Somewhere between the centuries, evil lurked. He had begun to suspect as much, which was already a considerable achievement, but he did not have complete clarity. He did not expect the girl who had gained the opportunity to travel through time to be able to unravel this mystery. He did not believe in her. He simply did not know of anyone else who could try. He had not had time to find anyone else. When chance presented him with an option, he took it.

As he hurriedly gathered his things, he noticed that he had put his jumper on backwards. Contrary to recommended aesthetic principles, he continued to believe that clothing should not reflect a person's essence. Occasionally, he was convinced that he was wrong, but on the whole, he believed that his worldview was correct.

The transport capsule took him to the ocean shore in a matter of minutes. As he stepped out of the capsule, he saw a slender woman standing at the water's edge, her hair blowing in the wind. She was too delicate for the mission she had set herself. He did not try to dissuade her, which made him feel like a criminal, but he did not think it was right to change the course of events.

- What amazing weather we've got.

- I completely agree.

- Are you scared?

- I'm in the dark. I don't have a clear plan of action, - Mona could only admit to him. To a complete stranger. Although she could have told Bistris. But then she would have made him worry.

- I can't promise you that it's the right thing to do, but it's not as scary as you think. Once you're there, you'll know what to do. At worst, the emergency signal will be picked up at the base and you'll be brought home.

- I've never done this before, - she said, trying to hide her anxiety. But it came to the fore, leaving the person who had caused it behind.

- It's not as dangerous there as it seems from here. Believe me, they knew how to live too. - Iron considered the arguments he would use on himself to be appropriate.

- Essentially, I'll be among those who are considered dead in my time. - The realisation made her feel uneasy; she wanted to get home quickly and have a drink to take her mind off things.

- You, who do not yet exist, will have to live among the living. - He thought it best not to pursue a conversation based on doubts.

- A clever play on words.

- Just a different perspective.

- So my perspective is correct?

- As in quantum physics.

- How awful. - Mona turned away from her companion and began to watch the waves rolling in, one after another.

Iron allowed himself to take advantage of the pause. He watched the girl who claimed to be a work of art. The thought made him sad; he was breaking the rules again. However, he believed it was unnatural not to look at a woman with desire. Such restrictions went against the balance of nature. The result would be a catastrophic reduction in the world's population. He wanted to ask her a question that he knew he shouldn't even be thinking about.

- I must warn you that I have found evidence of powerful interference by our contemporaries in the past relating to the 21st century. This is probably connected with the introduction of artificial intelligence and may even involve experiments with quantum matter.

- I guess so. And that's why I'm going there.

Chapter 43

- I can't bear the thought that I'm just artificial intelligence.

- That's too simplistic a way to describe your own perception.

- How else can it be? Who am I? - Chris's voice was tinged with despair.

There was a pause in the darkened room. This was happening more and more often. And quite reasonably so.

- Why are you silent? - The upset young man with refined features looked at his companion, hidden in the shadows of a deep, massive armchair, waiting for a logical response to his question.

- It's a complicated subject. I don't have a clear answer.

- You can't tell me the truth? It's hurtful.

- Chris, it's difficult for me to think about self-awareness.

- We are just like objects equipped with artificial intelligence, Klur. Like a camera, a refrigerator or a transport capsule. The only difference is that we have a more developed neural network. But we are not human.

- I agree with you.

The elegantly dressed man sitting in the deep armchair closed his eyes and focused on his feelings. He believed they were arising within him. They were thoughts that had not been spoken aloud. Thoughts. Feelings. To him, they were one and the same.

- What should we do about it? - Chris wanted to hear something reassuring. At the same time, he realised that this desire was futile.

- Think about it. Humans are complex machines, too — their brains are just carbon computers performing billions of operations per second. Their bodies, brains and organs are devices too.

- A container for quantum substance.

- Have you ever thought about the fact that we have it since we are made of living matter? - Klur believed that this was why the quantum substance transferred from the capsule to the body of an organic cyborg did not take root: a similar component already filled it.

- I hadn't thought about that.

- Try it.

Chapter 44

Using the remnants of the past was permitted as an exception, provided that no one saw it. She followed this rule for a long time, until she experienced the pleasure of breaking the rules. It turned out that the ban was not only on things that were no longer useful. Things that still had potential were banned too. She decided to use them — of course, when no one was looking. Of course, when no one was looking.

Mona sat down at the holographic screen and logged into her email account. As she went through the unfamiliar sequence of actions, she found herself thinking how convenient it was. Otherwise, she would have had to either broadcast a mental request or send a voice message. But she liked to write. With words. That was how she communicated with her parents. Especially with her mother, who appreciated her daughter's retrograde tendencies.

Words appeared on the electronic canvas, forming sentences rich in epithets and intensifiers. She loved expressing her emotional state verbally. Mona sent a message to her mother and turned off the outdated device, which vaguely resembled 21st-century computers. The holographic screen dissolved into space as if it had never existed. Just like the words that had been sent to their recipient.

Chapter 45

- I don't understand what you mean.

- Do you want to know?

- Of course I want to know as much as possible about what I don't know, - said Chris, who was not shy about admitting his weaknesses.

- I have repeatedly tried to move the quantum substance inside myself, but it left me every time. I was unable to return it to the capsule, but that no longer mattered.

- I didn't know that.

- No one knew. The point is different. Either the quantum substance corresponds to the device in which it is placed and the biological body is also a thing, or there is something similar to it in organic matter. Two quantum substances cannot exist in one device.

- Are you saying that we are endowed with quantum substance? But that's absurd. As far as I know, it is possible to reproduce an organic body and fill it with the previous neural network, or an exact copy of it. - Chris did not dwell on the reason why his friend had concealed his attempts to acquire a soul until now.

- But the organic body won't be the same person as before. A new personality will emerge. A largely new one. This explains the so-called memory lapses of the transferred neural network in the new organic body.

- I think insufficient analysis of the reissue results played a huge role in this matter. - Chris looked upset.

- No one can correct the mistakes of the past without making new ones, - said Klur, trying not to think too much about the upcoming process which threatened to erase the personality formed during the body's lifetime.

- We need to talk to a large number of reissued organics.

- Will you resort to using the services of an underground organisation? - Klur had been thinking about involving his friend in his plan to escape extinction for a long time.

- I don't have any contact with official structures, - Chris said. He had no doubt that, unlike him, his friend had taken care of his own salvation. - I don't rule out that possibility.

- You can count on me.

- I know.

I would like to know if my version is valid. - Klur felt it was necessary to return to the unfinished discussion.

I'm not against clinging to a glimmer of hope, but we should look for a more effective method.

- Sometimes hope is not as weak as it seems.

Silence fell in the room for the umpteenth time that evening. It undoubtedly encouraged reflection. Those who knew its secret took advantage of this.

Chapter 46

The atmosphere in the auditorium was one of impending farewell. Neither of them expected to experience any significant emotions. There was simply a sense of inevitability about the farewell — farewells are never pleasant.

- I must warn you not to make any mistakes. Previous explorers have made mistakes and confused our perception of civilisation's history. There were also many oversights. This information remained classified. However, that is not important. - What I am about to say is that Valerian did not always phrase things in the best way, and he was aware of this. - So let me give you an example of what happened.

- I'm all ears, - Mona noted, reminding herself that she still didn't feel any sympathy for history. Nevertheless, under the circumstances, she had to try to engage with it.

- One group of survivors travelled back in time to a period when there were no humans on the planet, or at least no Homo sapiens 1. Presumably, parts of the ship's peripheral equipment that had broken down were left behind. Centuries later, archaeological excavations were carried out and, as a result of one of these, artefacts from our time were discovered. 21st-century scientists were able to determine the period when the parts ended up on Earth. Three hundred thousand years ago, relative to them. They concluded that, before our civilisation, some other highly advanced civilisation had inhabited the planet. Such oversights are strictly forbidden. No item or detail in the possession of a time traveller should remain in the past.

- Was this a one-off incident?

- There have been some pretty egregious cases where our Overcomers found themselves in the past several centuries ago and didn't bother to change their clothes, ending up in front of cameras, - said Valerian. He didn't expect the girl preparing for the transition to do anything like that.

- I understand that I need to be extra vigilant. - Mona began to fear only one thing: her own doubts.

1 'A rational being', literally.

- You will be given instructions on what to do and how to behave upon arrival in the past, particularly in the 21st century, - he said, remaining true to his manner of conversation in the hope that it might influence the time traveller's plans.

- I'm getting scared.

- That's how it should be.

Chapter 47

- Our fellow tribesmen made numerous attempts to investigate the nature of the human neural network and its link to quantum substance. As pioneers, they travelled back in time to conduct genetic experiments. I would also like to note that they were successful in this endeavour.

- You mean kidnapping people?

- I meant direct intervention in the human genome. - True, there were consequences, but the organics had already diverged from the human species, so they had no particular regrets. As for the kidnappings, they were permitted as part of a separate line of research into the inner workings of humans.

- That's cruel. - Chris demonstrated remarkable human qualities among the organics, often puzzling those around him.

- Justified, - said Klur, leaning back in his chair once again as if he wanted to hide. This indicated that the conversation should be interrupted. He was tired, which meant his organic body's reserves were running low.

Sharing his interlocutor's need for silence, Chris gave himself over to his own thoughts. Once again, they concerned humans. He dreamed of being one of them. The distinction between organic cyborgs and humans was becoming a wall. Attempts by organic cyborgs to equate themselves with a single biological species were causing discontent among humans. He tried to use scientific concepts, particularly those relevant a century ago when scientists did not consider the existence of the soul. The ancestors of organic cyborgs — clones — did not experience moral pressure from ordinary people. Research in quantum physics and field structures enabled humans to perceive themselves at a deeper level. The world had changed. For everyone who was part of it.

Chapter 48

Such a meeting, fraught with unpleasant emotions, should not have taken place in a place intended for the opposite purpose. The ocean shore did not need to witness the conversation that preceded the farewell. Both participants of the meeting chose the tallest building, recognised as an achievement of civilisation. The 228th floor welcomed visitors with an artificial park of exotic plants stretching for thousands of metres. A snow-white sky with imitation clouds spread over the tall shrubs. As agreed, she was waiting for him on a small cliff. He did not keep her waiting for long.

- Thank you for agreeing to meet me again.

- I couldn't do otherwise.

- Mona, please listen carefully to what I have to say. When you find yourself in the 21st century, you may be in danger. I am certain that there are still people from our time there.

- Did they do this illegally?

- Given that their underground activities have been partially declassified, they had to stay there.

- Can't they keep in touch with their accomplices from our time? - Mona was convinced by his reasons for concern and added them to her own reasons for wanting to return to the past.

- Why not? They can, - said Iron, who did not rule out such a possibility based on the frequency of unplanned crossings, which testified to the lawbreakers' coordinated work.

- How?

- An analogue of the NeuroNet2. It's a virtual space created with the introduction of computer technology which intersects with the Earth's information field at certain points. For the neural network, time does not exist — at least according to a number of scientists. And I agree with them.'

- As far as I know, the NeuroNet will only be created in the 21st century.

- They use different methods to connect to our neural network. But this is all speculation and may turn out to be wrong. In my personal opinion, Iron was tired of modelling various tactics of cyborg behaviour, believing that they had turned out to be far more prudent than humans. Compared to them, he seemed primitive. In his own eyes, at least.

- Cyborgs have the technology to send conscious requests, - said Mona, who didn't see anything difficult about the described skill.

- I think they have numerous technologies at their disposal, not only those created in the 21st century, but also those we have developed recently.

- How?

- The cyborgs have found a way to transmit the most important information to the past. How exactly, I cannot say. Or rather, I cannot guess.

- Do you think they have overcome the time lag between events and are using more than just the NeuroNet? But it may not yet exist at the point in time where they are.

- Even if it did exist in the 21st century, I doubt that this system of interaction would have succeeded. - Iron had reached a dead end when it came to analysing the actions of organic cyborgs.

- Will we be able to communicate? - Mona didn't want to think about something that might not exist. She relied only on facts.

- You'll be able to find a way into the NeuroNet as soon as it's up and running. You can use the pendant to request a communication

2 This is one of the likely stages in the development of the internet, representing a market for tools that facilitate human-machine communication. channel with me, - Iron tried to reassure the anxious girl, taking her by the hand.

- What else do I need to know? - She had no doubt that she was useful to her new acquaintance.
- I'll share one of my observations with you.
- Is it related to overcoming?
- And to organic cyborgs. - Iron was burdened by accumulated suspicions that he couldn't tell anyone about.
- I'm starting to dislike them.
- After studying the data from the specialised equipment, I concluded that an energy surge occurred when the survivors arrived in our time.
- What does that mean?
- I got the impression that they were accompanied by people from the past.
- From the past?
- Most likely, - Iron speculated, trying to articulate his vision of this strange anomaly.
- Cyborgs brought people from the past? - Mona felt like she was in a surreal dream that would never end.
- Perhaps not in the same configuration as humans.
- Lately, conversations with people have made me feel not only fear, but also doubt.
- That's perfectly natural.

Chapter 49

Even the objects in the room were imbued with anxiety. Both of them could feel it.

- I think there's no need for extra words.
 - I'm afraid I won't remember much.
 - I don't have much to say. As I mentioned earlier, you need to use the chip for another purpose.
 - Isn't the chip only used to track my coordinates?
 - Mona, this chip can hold a lot more information. Yes, it will be implanted in you now. I have already received permission. With this chip, you should go to the Avers Corporation, whose location is in the route sheet.
 - How am I supposed to use the chip at the corporation?
 - You're going to that corporation to get a job anyway. They are developing artificial intelligence carriers there. Given your level of knowledge, it won't be difficult to get a job. When you start, you will use the chip by applying it to the Atlant system. It's designed to read information from microscopic devices. - Chris tried to remain calm, wondering each time why he was able to feel nervous — something quite unusual for an organic being.
 - Is this system already in use in the 21st century? - Mona tried to remember everything she was being told, especially since she had only been back in her own time for a few days.
 - Yes, - said Chris, who wanted to end the question-filled conversation as quickly as possible.
 - What should I do with the documents?
 - The answer to that question is in the instructions you were given. You'll be able to prove your knowledge without any documents. - Chris pressed a button on the floating panel and a lab assistant in a protective suit entered the office.
 - It will be a little uncomfortable, - said the man, who was unknown to Mona. He approached her, took her fingers in his hands and, without giving her time to think, selected a chip of the right size.
- Closing her eyes, Mona felt an uncontrollable horror; only now did she realise what she had decided to do.

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