18+

Michael Kiroff

The Sign of the Six
Знак шести



Двуязычная фантастика
для чтения на английском
(B1+)

RU-ENG: Параллельный перевод

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Аннотация

НЕЗАКОННОЕ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВ, ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВ, ИХ АНАЛОГОВ ПРИЧИНЯЕТ ВРЕД ЗДОРОВЬЮ, ИХ НЕЗАКОННЫЙ ОБОРОТ ЗАПРЕЩЕН И ВЛЕЧЕТ УСТАНОВЛЕННУЮ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВОМ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ.

Чтобы заговорить на английском, не обязательно пускать чужака в голову. Но коммандера Мика никто не спросил. Теперь в его сознании живёт Кара, и вместе им предстоит угнать звездолёт и остановить войну.

«Знак шести» — дерзкая космоопера о верности, а также тренажёр живого языка (B1+). Параллельный текст, разбор идиом, вопросы для обсуждения. Читайте в оригинале, чтобы

уловить иронию и флотской юмор. Героям есть что сказать. А скоро и вам.

Содержание

О книге	6
Chapter 1	8
Chapter 2	19
Chapter 3	24
Chapter 4	31
Chapter 5	35
Chapter 6	44
Chapter 7	48
Chapter 8	51
Chapter 9	56
Chapter 10	60
Chapter 11	63
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	67

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О книге

Чтобы заговорить на другом языке, необязательно пускать чужака себе в голову. Но коммандера Мика Ирши никто не спросил.

Теперь в его сознании живёт ещё кое-кто — со своим характером, памятью и неудобной правдой о войне. Вчерашние враги становятся своими, приказы начинают мешать, а дружба оказывается веским основанием для угона космического корабля. Мик ведь своих не бросает. Даже если знакомство началось несколько ближе, чем ему хотелось бы.

«Знак шести» Михаэля Кироффа — фантастическая повесть о свободе, верности и людях, которые находят друг в друге дом. Здесь спорят с начальством, шутят перед лицом опасности и говорят то, чего в учебниках обычно не встретишь.

У героев своя задача — понять друг друга и остаться собой. У читателя появляется ещё одна: услышать эту историю по-английски. Уловить иронию, разобраться в крепкой флотской реплике, понять, что скрывается за коротким ответом. Когда хочется узнать, чем всё закончится, у английского появляется отличный союзник — любопытство.

Издание для самостоятельного чтения от уровня B1: английский текст и русский оригинал, пояснения к разговорным выражениям, алфавитный глоссарий и вопросы после

каждой английской главы. Читайте, сверяйтесь и обсуждайте вслух — героям здесь точно есть что сказать. А скоро и вам.

Chapter 1

That was one hell of a hit. I blacked out, and it looks like it's been a while. Where am I now? Hardly opening my eyes. I'm in a small, enclosed space with no windows. A wave of fear. Am I a prisoner of the mushroomers? If so, that's all, folks. Sure as hell they'd send me for experiments, and no one ever returns from those. But wait, the walls are made of a familiar composite material, and the light spectrum is also familiar. This looks more like… a cell. A cell in a prison or maybe a guardhouse.

My head is pounding…

Okay, let's get a grip [1]. Or try to, yep. At least I'm among my own people. But that means I must have been… arrested? Exactly, arrested. But why? I wasn't noticed, I wasn't involved, I wasn't suspected. Wait, correction. Now it seems I have been «involved.» I need to figure out the reason. Military counterintelligence? It can't be. First, I'm certainly not a spy. And I'm not even their agent.

It's hard to frame me: I just went on vacation from my ship, and before that, I was in sight of the entire crew for almost a year. A criminal case? That's also unlikely, for the same reason. The fight in the bar yesterday wouldn't be enough to get me arrested, and besides, no one was seriously hurt except for that guy with the broken jaw, and he was the one who started it. There are

plenty of witnesses, and the scanners recorded everything. But what if… Okay, let me think back to what happened.

I entered the bar, sat down at the counter, ordered a double, and lit a cigarette. I was sitting with my back to the room, of course. The drink was great, so I asked for another round and added a pint of porter. Yes, and they know how to pour beer there too — good old Arya Stout tasted especially divine. Or maybe it just seemed that way because it was my first day of vacation? Anyway, I repeated the order and had another cigarette. And how many more times did I repeat it? I don't really remember.

Okay, never mind. What happened next? I heard some raised voices behind me, so I turned around and saw… what did I see? Some jerk was harassing a girl, really crudely. She clearly didn't like it. His «support group» was standing off to the side. Their faces were hard to make out, but the logs should have recorded them, and it wouldn't hurt to clarify how much I'd had to drink at that point. Let me check the logs. What? No access. How is that possible? What about self-diagnosis? No access?

Do I have any access at all? What about the primitive graphical menu? And…

It's good that my usual reaction to a strong shock is not fainting, not stupor, and not a full-blown hysteria, but just unstoppable nervous laughter. I love to giggle in life, it seems. Although this time, it looks like I overdid it. And not mildly, either. Now, of course, it's clear where I am: this is an illegal private prison. All the real rich guys have them, even though

they're not supposed to be allowed by law. But it's known that there's no such thing as honest politicians, there only might be not enough money.

But if one has a lot of money… Well, you get the idea. And it's not hard to guess why I'm being punished so elaborately. Why? Because my life has only intersected once with people capable of such revenge. Three years ago. And also in a bar. Only then, I was just sitting with my comrades at a table in the corner, not bothering anyone. But that young guy…

Apparently, his rich daddy had provided him with everything available «on the civilian market», as well as some prohibited or contraband items. So the kid had gotten a bit too big for his britches. He'd had a few drinks and started loudly claiming that he could beat up anyone, even a fleet officer. We just smiled. But he came over to us, and we were in uniform. «Let's have a sparring match,» he said.

One of our guys even tried to talk him out of it — «We're not on the arena, we're just sitting, drinking beer, everything's fine.» But the kid wouldn't back down and chose me. Of course, I'm the shortest one in our group. I told him then, «But what if something happens, who's going to take responsibility?

Some random guy?» And he replied, «There are witnesses all around, a fair sparring match without weapons or murder, I give my word that I won't have any claims regardless of the outcome.» Too bad I didn't remember his name or his affiliations. I should have written it down. Although… I was counting on the logs —

like, I'd retrieve them if something happened. And now I won't be able to, it seems.

Our ancestors were right when they wrote things down with a pencil in a notebook, and then put the notebook in a bank vault, and sent the key to themselves by mail with a note «to be delivered in X years.» Because you never know. Well, hindsight is always 20/20 [2]. Anyway, after that, everything was simple and clear: the guy had strength, speed, and obviously received knowledge of the right moves and understanding of what to expect from a fleet officer through a hypnocourse (which is definitely illegal!).

The only thing he didn't have was experience. So he managed to scratch my cheek, but I broke three of his ribs. After that, the young man turned pale, stopped fighting, and — to his credit — announced loudly, «It's all fair, I lost, I have no claims against the officer!» And he even repeated it, obviously for the record, «No claims!»

The people around were delighted, exchanged money (it turns out they were even making bets), they put biogel on my cheek, and poured me a glass «on the house.» And the incident seemed to be over… But no such luck. Because, as I understand, the father didn't forgive me for his son's broken ribs. Apparently, he thought that the amount of money in his pocket meant that a commander in the fleet should voluntarily lie down in the first round in front of his offspring.

And if not, then it's an unforgivable offense, and he needs

to take revenge. Even though his son himself declared, «It's all fair, no hard feelings.» «Shut up, kid», the father probably told him. And this was definitely him. Because for his revenge — my god, just to «soothe his ego»! — he spent more than you can theoretically win in the national lottery (I don't even remember if there have been any «full jackpots»). Either that kind of money means nothing to him, or he's one bloody stubborn bastard.

They took away my neural network, and probably all my implants. Although they might have left the implants, what's the point of them without the network? Especially a specialized one that's already synchronized with them? If you put in a different one, even of the same model, it won't «see» them. So, the implant slots are occupied. That means I can't use them, and I couldn't put in new ones even if I wanted to. So, they didn't touch the implants. Just to make me suffer more. And as for the money…

Everyone knows that putting in a neural network (if you have one, of course) is a piece of cake. Just one injection. The microcapsule is simply «launched into a vein», and it will then unfold, multiply, modify itself, and get where it needs to go (and, I suspect, where it shouldn't go, too). But removing it after it's been deployed…

That's an extremely complex and lengthy neurosurgical operation, requiring exclusive equipment and highly skilled specialists. A single mistake, and the patient is dead, and that's not an option, I'll explain why later. But if you're sure of success, removing a neural network is almost the «perfect crime»,

perfectly fitting into the well-known hole in our legislation.

Which nobody fixes, as I used to think, simply because considering the cost, nobody would pay that much just to have fun. Actually people do such things, I mean replace a network. But when there's at least a specific goal that justifies the expenses. And «just for fun.».. Now I don't think that anymore. And I started to suspect that the «hole» is not being fixed on purpose. Just for such rare cases. Because…

Because it's not a crime. And our police do work, after all, and they might even catch a billionaire if he's done something really serious. Let's look at it this way. If they'd cut my head off, I'd have died. But that's homicide. Murder. A serious criminal offence.

If they find evidence (and they usually do in the end, nobody's perfect), even the most privileged citizen can get a pretty long sentence, up to life imprisonment. So, you can buy yourself a holovisor in your cell, food from a restaurant, and even prostitutes on Fridays, but what's the point? Prison is prison. And you can't access the network from there. And they won't let you out. The prison guards don't take bribes: if they catch you involved in smuggling contraband, you'll go to jail.

If you help someone escape, you'll get a sentence, and the time the escaped prisoner didn't serve will be added. Even if they catch the prisoner later. In general, our prison guards are honest. Not because they're good people, but still. Next. They could have, for example, cut off my leg with a dull saw. Not murder,

of course, but «serious bodily harm» that's also a sentence, and a pretty long one.

And what is the removal of a neural network? It's not even theft, because everything they've taken can be put in a hermobox and returned to me. It's «damage to someone else's property», and that's all. An administrative offense that only leads to a fine. And how can a fine, even a large one, scare a person who has so much money? Not at all. There's no harm to my health: I'm alive and well. There's no complete loss of ability to work: my leg is still attached.

Although, in fact, I do have a loss of ability to work, since all the work with equipment, including waste management, is done through the neural network. But legally, there isn't one, because my physiology is normal, my psyche is OK, too, and I can install a «basic», free network at any moment.

It's true that it's only enough to control a food processor, a holovisor, a vacuum cleaner, and the aforementioned street waste collectors, but I do have the opportunity, right?

And the fleet command, upon learning of my problem, will think very carefully. Because our neural networks are not only expensive, they're also released individually for each person. A separate order has to be placed. Then there's the removal of the old implants — that costs as much as half a frigate. Well, eventually they'll do everything. But in the general order of things and without rushing. Because the budget isn't elastic. And there are many commanders in the fleet!

And if I install a «free» network now, they'll have to spend even more money to remove it, which will push my turn back to who-knows-where. Or when. That is, they've put me in a situation that's not fatal, but extremely, extremely unpleasant. And they've put me there for a very long time. And they've done it in such a way that if they get caught (and that's very possible, if the fleet security service gets off its butt), they won't face anything worse than a fine. Which, to them, is nothing.

Okay, since I still have nothing to do, I'll try to remember the faces and names. No logs, no network, but my own memory is still something, right? Our ancestors lived for tens of thousands of years without any networks and managed just fine. Do I remember the face of that «first» young guy? It seems I do. That's good. And the second one? Also yes, although I'd never seen him before, that's for sure. But, what about his company? It was dark, hard to see. Damn.

Although I have a suspicion that one of the «darkened» ones was that «first» guy. At least, he looks similar. But I'm not sure. «Similar» isn't enough. Now, the girl. Bright, very attractive, curvy… Completely not my type, by the way.

I prefer those that playboys call «gray mice.» And not because of low self-esteem: from experience, I know that «still waters run deep», which is what attracts me. Okay, never mind. I rushed to «save» her, and I was dressed in civilian clothes, on vacation, so the guy attacked me… And got what was coming to him, accordingly, in the face. Served him right, in my opinion. You

can't aggressively harass women like that. And I'm the hero and all that… Wait.

Why did I say the word «save» to myself in quotes? What's bothering me? Not then, I was drunk then, what's bothering me now? Think, Commander Mick Irshi, think. What was off? The behavior? Generally natural. Not scared enough? But it wasn't a dark alley, there were people around. What else? The eyes? Ah, yes. The facial expressions, gestures, voice — all corresponded to the situation. But the eyes — absolutely calm and even somewhat detached.

As if the person… Ah, yes. As if the person was at work. And why «as if»? A girl from an escort service, hired to play a certain role. Very likely. Why not an agent? Because a professional's eyes would have also corresponded to the situation. But her eyes, they didn't. I can perfectly imagine it: «Hey, sweetie, there's a job. We're paying by the hour, we won't touch you, but you have to do this and that.» And what's it to her? The money is right there, and they won't even touch her, why not agree?

And what they're going to do with someone — that's none of her business. So, what if I hadn't gone to «save» her? Obviously, there was a «plan B.» It was enough for me to just turn around at the noise, and if I had stayed in place, it would have been «What's your problem?» and then the rest would have followed the script. Later, I remember, I threw him out of the bar… And that's where I made my mistake. Not that I threw him out. I could have even given him a kick to speed things up. But I approached the door.

And after throwing him out, I turned around. Still standing near the door. And got hit in the back of the head with a heavy stunner. That's when everything went black, including me. Probably, they added something to make sure I didn't come to too soon. One thing is clear: a planned operation to catch me specifically. Well, they succeeded. Now, they'll probably make sure I'm healthy, and then let me go. Maybe after giving me a kick. Well, I've been outplayed.

If I get the chance, I'll remember this, I'm vengeful too. But for now, all I can do is lose with dignity. And to start, I'll try to get some sleep, since there's nothing else to do here anyway.

After reading

1. Why does Mick first fear that he has been captured by the mushroomers?

2. What happened in the bar three years earlier?

3. Why would removing his neural network cause such serious problems?

4. Why does Mick suspect that the girl in the bar was playing a role?

5. Would you have intervened in the bar? Explain your answer.

Примечания

[1] Get a grip — разговорное «собраться, взять себя в руки». Через let's герой обращается к самому себе как к собеседнику.

[2] Hindsight is always 20/20 — «задним умом все крепки». 20/20 обозначает нормальную остроту зрения: после собы-

тия всё кажется очевидным.

Chapter 2

Caught! I've been caught, damn it!

Pilot Kara slipped out of the control cocoon: it was dead, just like the entire ship was practically dead. And one can bet a «snowflake» of the Tinners is already approaching. The most terrifying thing that can happen in battle. Not death, no. Capture. Because nobody returns from it.

The war started beautifully: after the Separation (which happened a long time ago and, as Kara assumed, was quite bloody), the two branches of humanity stood apart, there was enough space for everyone. They even tried to trade with each other when the dust settled [3]. The Tinners developed technologies, while the Neumen (called «mushroomers» by the enemies) focused on self-improvement. Inevitably, they changed themselves in the process, but for the best!

In the end, the differences became noticeable. And everything would have been fine, but, among other things, the average Neuman became faster, stronger, and simply smarter than the average Tinner. Development affected everything, but primarily the brain and consciousness. However, people remain people: the advantage is perceived as a threat, the threat generates fear, and fear leads to aggression.

And war became a matter of time: among the Tinners,

there were more and more people who said, «Only we are the true humans, and the mushroomers are monsters, freaks, and mutants.» And both sides began to build warships. Although the Tinners' ships were technically superior, the Neumen excelled in mastery and their crews' extraordinarily fast reactions.

After the first clash, it became clear that «it's not the ship that flies, but the pilot»: the Tinners took a heavy blow and lost almost half of their fleet. Someone even talked about an imminent victory, but it wasn't meant to be: the past was common to both enemies, and so were their basic instincts. The Tinners didn't give up. That's when they developed neural networks, nano-implants that could «bring up» their weak brains to the level of the Neumen.

It got to the point where a novice Tinner pilot with a good pilot's network flew at least as well as an experienced Neuman, if not better [4]. And the pendulum swung in the other direction: now, the quality of the ships decided everything, and the Tinners had better ships. They simply were better. The Neumen began to be noticeably squeezed, so they had to do something. They did something, but… In moral terms, they put themselves on the same level as the Tinners.

Because before, the Tinners were the only ones in the wrong, since they started the war. Now, the Neumen were the first to conduct experiments on prisoners. And here, too, you can't hide or silence the fact that we started it, Kara thought. Neural networks were thoroughly studied to create something similar,

but on a completely biological basis. It's not hard to guess that the fate of the test subjects was unenviable.

No, they usually didn't suffer (although who knows, such details are not told to ordinary pilots), but they didn't survive, either. The result was achieved, and the advantage returned to the Neumen. But, again, only for a while: «snowflakes» appeared in space. In the Neuman language, «snowflake» is «veturi», but nobody wanted to call this horror by such a beautiful word, so the word from the Tinners' language became common.

This small ship, always purple and apparently unarmed, approached a Neuman ship and… And that's it. The command was still celebrating the appearance of «splitters», which allowed to defocus, or «resonate», laser and even disintegrating beams of the enemy: such protection was much more effective than the Tinners' reflective fields. The Neumen's ability — not their equipment's, but their own!

— to «drive crazy» the guidance systems of torpedoes led to the fact that the Tinners completely stopped using them, since not a single one reached its target. But the «snowflakes.».. As soon as one approached a ship — any size, from a fighter to a battleship — it «fell silent.» It stopped responding to calls and firing, dropped out of formation, and drifted away.

If possible, the Tinners landed boarding parties, and if not, the completely defenseless ship was easy to destroy. What the «snowflakes» did — did they kill the crew? Or put them into some kind of trance? Or something else? — was unknown: not a

single ship was saved. Over a very long time — not a single one. Therefore, all one could do was to shoot down the «snowflakes» at a distance.

Small, agile, how to hit them from afar? But somehow they had to, because if the «snowflakes» got closer — it was all over. Even if the «snowflake» was shot down afterwards, the ship (or, worse, ships) it had caught was already beyond saving. Of course, the Neumen fought back. They developed special «anti-snowflake» turrets. They came up with «hunter torpedoes»: as soon as a «snowflake» emerged from under the protection of large ships, a torpedo waiting in the space would activate promptly.

But still, the situation was stuck in a precarious balance.

And then, almost a collapse occurred. On a far from beautiful day, the Tinners… stopped using beam weapons, replacing them with railguns. And this was truly terrifying. A beam, any beam, can be desynchronized, defocused, or something else can be done to it… But what can you do with a uranium and tungsten alloy slug flying at five-sixths the speed of light? There's nothing to desynchronize. There's no guidance system.

It's just a piece of metal. Small enough to be hard to detect. And fast enough to not lose much to beams in terms of speed or energy. In this case, purely kinetic, but if something makes a hole in you, what difference does it make what exactly it is?

That's exactly what happened to Kara's ship — a one-seat small raider. They didn't just make a hole in it, they turned it into

a sieve, knocking out 90% of its functionality. And it was done by just a pair of fighters. Casually. They fired and flew away without finishing it off. And that was the most terrifying thing. Because it meant that somewhere nearby, such a beautiful and nasty purple thing was already looming. Suicide?

For the Neumen, it's an absolute taboo, fixed at the genetic level. The scientists who created the initial «Neuman genome», capable of infinite development, thought about anything but war and its related problems. Now, though… Now it seems Kara will find out what the «snowflake» does. She'll find out, but she won't be able to tell anyone.

And with that, her consciousness faded out.

After reading

1. What are the two branches of humanity called?
2. How did neural networks change the balance of the war?
3. What happens when a snowflake approaches a Neuman ship?
4. Why can Kara not choose suicide instead of capture?
5. Which weapon or technology in this chapter seems the most frightening to you? Why?

Примечания

[3] When the dust settled — «когда страсти улеглись». Речь не о буквальной пыли, а о времени после потрясений.

[4] As well as …, if not better — «не хуже …, а возможно, и лучше». If not здесь усиливает сравнение, а не выражает обычное условие.

Chapter 3

Mashik Abramyan headed the most, as he himself said, amusing department of Fleet Security Service. The Department of External Investigations. The name seemed to suggest that this department conducted investigations not directly related to the fleet, and outside, so to speak, the fleet's territory. And that's why everyone around thought that this was a cover for the Agent Intelligence Service.

Some even laughed at the foolishness of the fleet's personnel, whose cover stories were always so transparent. The fleet did have an Agent Intelligence dept, but all its employees wore the uniforms of the Supply Service. And the Department of External Investigations was engaged in… external investigations. Exactly what it was supposed to do according to its name. However, since no one believed that, the investigations were conducted with deadly efficiency and, as a rule, in complete secrecy.

And this, in the opinion of Colonel Abramyan, was extremely funny. Therefore, he entered the staff room with a habitual smile.

«Hello, thief!» he said joyfully to the head of the supply service, Lieutenant Colonel Foxmann, and shook his hand. «What have you stolen this time?»

«Hello, cop!» Foxmann smiled, responding to the handshake. «I'm reporting, Colonel! Ten brand-new „Osa-5" class fighters have been written off as scrap from long-term storage by the

forces of the unit entrusted to me. Now they need to be urgently smuggled somewhere out, before the intelligence guys find the thing out. Can you help?»

«Of course, I'll help. I have some ideas. Come to my office after the briefing. Okay, Robi?»

«Got it! Right in your office?»

«Yep, the security is good there. Will be waiting for you.»

«Great, I'll bring the beer!»

Mashik knew pretty well that Robert Foxmann was not a lieutenant colonel, but a rear admiral, and not of the supply service, but of that very Agent Intelligence Service. The other officers also suspected that «something was fishy here [5],» but the eternal teasing between these two was something normal, especially since they sometimes managed to pull off really good jokes. Like the time they pranked the inspector from the General Staff — oh, that was still remembered.

And it was known to everyone that Foxmann and Abramyan were classmates and old friends.

Just then, the head of Fleet Security Service, Admiral Leonardo Kurie, entered the operation room.

«Hello, everyone,» he said.

Admiral Kurie consistently and firmly promoted so-called «informal communication» in his service. But he did this not because he was some kind of «democrat.» On the contrary, the admiral was not a democrat. He simply believed that all these «I dare to report, sir…» took precious seconds from his own life.

And he didn't want to waste those seconds.

He physically felt how they were dripping… dripping away… And they would eventually run out! Therefore, any officer, and even sometimes a non-commissioned officer, could address him by his name. And not just by his name, but «hey, buddy!» What mattered was what the person said. The admiral didn't care how they said it.

«Anyway, as always,» the admiral said, «what's urgent, what's stuck, any news? Share.»

«We failed the «Sect Seven' project,» said Dari Pru, the head of the Psionics department. «All our agents have been exposed and captured. I think it's a systemic error.»

«Are you sure?»

«Unfortunately, yes. We clearly missed something, and I'm not ready to send further people to die.»

«Do you recommend stopping?»

«We can continue researching, but we shouldn't send agents for now. It's pointless.»

«I understand. I support you. Any other news?»

The people fell silent for a moment, but then Hillard Vesnichka, the head of the Internal Discipline department, suddenly spoke up.

«We've lost an officer.»

«Are you sure? How, where did he disappear? Who?»

«Commander Mick Irshi. He was on leave. He was under investigation about some minor thing, either smoking on duty or

something like that. We tried to contact him — no result. We tried to find him at his place of residence during his leave — no result. The offense is minor, you don't run to the edge of the galaxy, covering your tracks, for something like that. That's at most a reprimand, or maybe even nothing! But the guy just vanished.

Either he was kidnapped or murdered, or he was involved in something much more serious. Although, personally, I don't believe the latter.»

«Hillard, your instincts have never failed. Let's assume that our commander got into a jam. And we need to find him. Mashik, did you hear?»

«Yes, Admiral,» Abramyan replied, «Should we start the investigation?»

«Start it. With the involvement of serious resources. And I ask you, Robert, to help Mashik.»

«Will do, boss,» Foxmann replied, «But what's so important about this commander?»

«It's not that he's important, but that a senior officer of the fleet has disappeared on our planet, in the rear. That's a shitty mess. It shouldn't be like this. No one denies accidents, but if it's not an accident — then it's a hole in our security system that you could pull a cruiser through. We need to find the guy, and most importantly — we need to figure out all the circumstances of his 'disappearance'.»

«Understood, Admiral,» Abramyan and Foxmann replied in

unison.

After the meeting, Robert Foxmann indeed knocked on Mashik Abramyan's cabin door. «Hello,» he said, «I brought beer, as I promised.»

«Come in, comrade, come in. You see, we've got some work to do.»

«Yes, I see. This job is cursed. But you were saying something about the fighters?»

«Yes, I was. Are they marked?»

«They're marked, but in a clever way. Any 'tracking devices' and beacons can be found. And something tells me that if the mushroomers get interested, they'll find everything in a moment.»

«No surprise, Robi. And what did you come up with?»

«A modified alloy for the armor. The hulls. This will definitely be noticed, but they'll write it off as [6] technological progress, since this alloy is really better than the serial version.»

«And it's not going into production?»

«It's never going into production. Too expensive. But our opponents don't need to know that.»

«I understand. And indeed, it's a beautiful solution. But I want to get the scanning data for the alloy: what if it's not the mushroomers who get interested, but our local criminals? And that's already my area of responsibility. You understand.»

«I understand, and my guys will dump all the data to you.»

«Good. Then we'll just see where the birds pop up.»

«Exactly, comrade. Exactly. That's the plan.»

«Excellent. Agreed. And what about this commander?»

«Mick Irshi? He really has disappeared, as far as I know. No kidding.»

«This is a problem, Robi. This is a big problem.»

«The main crap is that this is exactly your problem, Mashik. I don't have the right to interfere, it's not my jurisdiction. I mean, I'll help, but only on an unofficial level. Take on part of the investigation… I won't be allowed to. It's not my competence.»

«But I actually know how you could help. And I'm asking for your help.»

«What can I do?»

«Look. I'm going to assign my best detective to this case. Her name is Jul Kiedis. She's a professional. She's a talent. She's a master. But she needs protection. Can you provide it?»

«In other words, I'm not participating in the investigation at all, I'm just ensuring the safety of one of Fleet Security Service employees?»

«Exactly.»

«Great idea, friend. For this, I can easily sign off on a couple of agents, and no one will say a word to me, since it's about the safety of our service! Great idea. I'm in.»

«Thanks, Robi.»

«No problem! My guys from the office need some warmup. And now they'll stretch their legs.»

After reading

1. What does Abramyan's department actually do?

2. How are Foxmann's fighters marked?

3. Why does Kurie take the missing officer's case seriously?

4. How can Foxmann help without taking over the investigation?

5. Do you prefer formal or informal communication at work? Why?

Примечания

[5] Fishy — разговорное «подозрительный, нечистый». Выражение описывает ситуацию, а не запах рыбы.

[6] Write something off as something — «списать на, объяснить чем-либо». Здесь необычный сплав примут за результат технического прогресса.

Chapter 4

Holy cow, yet another stunner? It's time to let me go. Or have they come up with some new nasty plan? I opened my eyes. This time, I wasn't in a cell, but in a very advanced medical capsule. Whoa! And what was going on here? I was curious. And standing over me… Ah, yes. The rich guy himself. So my theory about «revenge for the son» was very much plausible: the father had shown up, and there was no getting rid of him!

«What do you want?» I asked politely. And to my surprise, he replied:

«Our corporation has been developing neural networks based on 'pure biology' for a long time, similar to those created by the mushroomers. What they're doing is effective. But we haven't been able to replicate the entire functionality yet. There are only a few working prototypes, so it's too early to talk about mass production. And one example turned out to be glitchy: all the test results are crooked. And it's exactly this one that we've installed into you.

A crooked, glitchy, and inexplicably working — if it's working at all — neural network. And now the 'cherry on top' [7]: this is a bioset. That means, it can't be removed. You're doomed, kid, and that's exactly what I wanted. You broke my son's three ribs. I don't forgive that. Now you'll be released. Go and live as you can.

Or don't live, if you can't. You can even try to take revenge… If you dare.

Because in a couple of days, when the network is fully 'seated', you'll likely turn into a vegetable. And all the documents with your signature, confirming your consent to participate in the scientific experiment, are right here. I won't say 'just business', because for me this is very personal. You hit my son. And now you won't even die, that would be too easy.

You'll argue with your own brain, and we'll watch and laugh. Now get out of here. Go wherever you want. The guards won't even hit you, that's too petty. Welcome to hell, Commander Mick Irshi.»

And I walked out. They didn't hit me in the face, indeed. But I wasn't planning to turn into a vegetable — who does, really? Show me anyone who does! I was planning to survive and take revenge. And for now, I headed in the direction of the fleet's headquarters building. I had to report that I was at least still alive. But I didn't make it.

After a couple of kilometers, I was overcome with pain, and a group of teenagers instead of picking a fight with me asked if they should call an ambulance for me.

«Yes!» I groaned, «Please! I'm dying!»

«Okay, dude, okay, we've already called,» they replied. «Just don't die, or they'll blame us, but we didn't kill you!»

«You didn't,» I found the strength to reply. «You're not involved, guys. I just feel really bad.»

«Hey, do you hear the siren? That's the medics, they're already on their way. Don't die, man! Hold on! [8]»

«I'm holding on…»

«They're here. Hey, hey, over here! This guy is dying, we called you!»

Then they injected me with some «cocktails», put me on a drip, and pushed me on a stretcher into a medical boat. And I passed out again. But honestly, if I ever meet this group of thugs, I'll buy each of them a drink and shake their hands. Because, apparently, they saved my life. And that's important. They didn't just pass by. They called the emergency services. They didn't leave me to die.

This world isn't hopeless, even though I think it is. But these guys…

After reading

1. What has the corporation installed in Mick?
2. Why does the rich man want revenge?
3. Who calls for medical help when Mick collapses?
4. Why does the encounter with the teenagers change Mick's view of the world?
5. What small act of kindness has made a strong impression on you?

Примечания

[7] The cherry on top — «вишенка на торте». Обычно это приятное дополнение; здесь выражение использовано издевательски.

[8] Hold on — «держись». В этой сцене это призыв не сдаваться и дождаться помощи; в другом контексте выражение может означать «подожди».

Chapter 5

Jul Kiedis carefully entered the bar — the same one where her investigation was supposed to start. After all, it seemed that everything had happened here. She had… somewhat mixed feelings. She had a constant feeling of directed death aimed at her. A sniper? A bomb in a trash can? Well, who knows, but never before had Jul felt so clearly and strongly that someone wanted to kill her.

And two guys, the size of a large closet, were constantly following her. But she didn't sense any threat from them. On the contrary, it seemed that they were not following her, but… protecting her. Exactly, protecting her. A nice gift from her service? That's not likely, in their department, they never had such «killer-dobermans.» They looked more like guys from the agent network. Maybe «double-zero-something.» «Had the chief brought Foxmann in?» she thought. Maybe that's exactly what happened.

And then thanks to the chief: any support was relevant now. If these two mastodons, clearly with guns under their jackets, were on her side — that was positive. But it was still scary.

Approaching the bar, she said:

«Please, a double whiskey, no ice, and another glass of strawberry soda.»

«Wait a sec, I'll get it all right away,» the bartender replied

and indeed poured everything very quickly.

But on the next stool, a local criminal element suddenly appeared.

«Hey, chick, where did you come from?» he asked.

«I'm not a chick,» Jul replied, «Why don't you go your own way, comrade?»

«Whoa! You called me comrade! That means you're up for anything, right?»

«Not right. I'm waiting for the tram. You know what a tram is?»

The small-time crook listened, assessed the situation, and understood. No, Jul didn't think that her expression or voice had an effect on him. But her railgun, pressed against his balls, clearly had an impact.

«Sorry, babe, I made a mistake,» he said, «We all make mistakes!»

«No problem,» she replied, «It happens. No hard feelings [9].»

«No hard feelings!» the guy repeated and disappeared. But a very striking girl, sitting nearby at the bar, looked at Jul with interest.

«I've never seen Ratty Weiss retreat so quickly,» she said, «You clearly have a talent. Can you teach me?»

«Maybe I can teach you,» Jul said, «But I propose a deal. I'll teach you how to get rid of such small-scale scum, and you tell me what happened here eleven days ago.»

«So you're a cop?»

«Shut up! My brother is missing! He's completely disappeared, vanished completely. And the last place he was seen was this bar. And I'll do anything to find him! I don't have any other family! And you're saying 'you're a cop'… Don't offend me, okay?»

«Sorry. Forgive me. So you're looking for your brother?»

«Yes. And I want to find him!»

«My name is Sniya. And yours?»

«I'm Jul.»

«What's your brother's name?»

«Mick. His name is Mick.»

«Mick… You know, I have something to tell you, friend.»

«What is it?»

«Eleven days ago, a friend of that little rat, Slippery Matt, paid me good money to play the role of a girl who gets harassed by thugs. I agreed, money doesn't smell. One guy rushed to save me. Now I understand that it was a setup: when he threw Slippery Matt out of the bar, he was apparently stunned and taken away. And what if that guy was your brother?

Short, five feet nine or ten inches, very distinctive eyebrows and eyes… Eyes like yours. It could really be your brother, Jul.»

«Yes, it sounds like Mick, indeed…»

«But you shouldn't get involved in this.»

«Why not?»

«They have Valenteinis Jr. in their company. You know what kind of family that is?»

«The bio-research empire?»

«Exactly. They'll kill anyone.»

«Well, we'll see about that, Sniya. We'll see.»

«You're serious? You think you can take on such an opponent?»

«I do. And I'm taking them on. By the way, thanks for the information. Now I know where to look.»

«Brave one… By the way, are you aware that two guys, apparently from the assassin's guild, are following you?»

«Yes, Sniya. Those guys are my security.»

«Even so… However. I'm no longer interested in how you scared off Ratty. I'm much more interested in whether I can become like you. Can I?»

«Do you really want to?»

«Yes! I'm damn bloody tired of being an 'escort', a 'girl on call'. I'm so… sick of it! I want to love the guys I want to love, not just because of a contract! But… who will let me? Let me help you find your brother, and then…»

«You do understand that my job is… hmm, somewhat unjust and generally dangerous, eh?»

«Don't scare me, friend, I'm in.»

«Seriously?»

«More serious than anything.»

«Then welcome to the club, Sniya. A small detail: there's no exit from this club. Only on a morgue gurney. Are you still ready?»

«Yes!»

«Well, you're the one who's digging your own grave. Look straight in my eyes.»

«What will happen?»

«Mental binding. No way out after that.»

«So you…»

«Yes, me. And now you, too. Are you looking in my eyes?»

«Yes, damn you, Jul! I'm signing up for this project! And whatever happens, let it happen.»

«There are two problems, though.»

«What are they?»

«First: three dolts with automatic weapons who are approaching this bar. And the only thing that comes to my mind is that they're going to wipe out the witnesses. And who's the witness here, Take a guess.»

«Damn. It's me.»

«Exactly. And the second problem is that you're not armed. You're not armed, are you?»

«No…»

«We need to arm you urgently. Do you think those thugs have weapons?» Jul nodded towards the group of teenagers whose leader she had recently «taught a lesson.»

«Probably. They're too confident lately. But why would they give me a gun?»

«They won't give it to you — they'll give it to me. Let's go.»

They approached the group of teens, who were drinking beer,

and Jul said:

«Listen, guys, I need a gun. And I'll be really grateful to whoever provides it to me.»

«You've already got a gun anyone would envy!» said Ratty Weiss.

«That's true, but I need another gun. And I'll be very grateful for it.»

«What will your gratitude look like?» someone else from the group asked.

«It will look like me not shooting you all down right here and now. Is that clear?»

«Yoni, don't mess with her,» Weiss said, «She's a pro. Probably from the guild. She'll spread us on a sandwich without breaking a sweat [10]. It's better to be friends with people like her.»

«Okay, boss…»

«So, 'boss', what you got here?»

«We don't have railguns. But I have a sawed-off shotgun. Yes, it's a firearm. «The century before last', as they say. It roars like thunder. But: if you hit someone, that someone falls and won't get up. Proven. We took down one guy with it. In short, it's a powerful thing.»

«And ammunition? You need ammunition for a firearm, right?»

«About thirty rounds left, plus twelve in the magazine.»

«Not many…»

«Look, you can take down a whole squad with that!»

«Young man, rounds can be too few, very few, or few but you can't carry more. Anyway, let's take what we have. And… I'll owe you a favor [11].»

«You didn't shoot my balls off, even though you could. I'm grateful to you anyway.»

«Really? Then we're even. Hand over the gun.»

«Here you go. And here's a package with ammunition.»

«Thanks, kind stranger. Don't sin anymore.»

«Not much chance of that now…»

«Here, Sniya,» Jul handed her the shotgun, «This is now your weapon. Just be careful: it's a firearm, which means it has recoil when you shoot. Can you handle it?»

«I can handle it, Jul. I'll manage just fine. But where are you going? There's danger there! I know a back way, we can leave unnoticed.»

«And what about those two guys who are supposedly my security? What if they need help? Are you suggesting we just leave them? No, Sniya, here's another lesson: we don't abandon our comrades. And we won't abandon you either, if anything happens. Just like I didn't abandon my brother and went to look for him, understand?»

«I understand… One for all, all for one?»

«Good phrase, where's it from?»

«I read it in some book.»

«It really fits our situation. Now let's go and see what's going

on with the guys. And yes: if anything happens, shoot without hesitation!»

«What if I kill someone?»

«Then you'll kill someone. Just understand one simple thing: if you take someone's life, you might get in trouble and even end up in court. But only if you're alive yourself! If you get killed, it might not matter to you who pulled the trigger and got caught… because you'll just be buried.

So keep your shotgun at the ready, and if you see someone with aggressive intentions, shoot without thinking. Got it?»

«Got it. Although you're a bloody killer, Jul.»

«Me? A killer? I'm white and fluffy, I love my husband and our beautiful daughter.»

«You're married?!»

«Yes! Why does that surprise you?»

«It surprises me, honestly.»

«Well, be surprised and blessed. Now we're leaving the bar. Your sector is the left hemisphere, mine is the right.»

«My left… What?»

«Shut up. Hemisphere. Use your brain.»

«Okay…»

After reading

1. What story does Jul tell Sniya about the missing man?

2. What does Sniya reveal about the incident eleven days earlier?

3. How does Jul obtain a weapon for Sniya?

4. Why does Jul refuse to leave through the back way?

5. What would make you trust someone you had only just met?

Примечания

[9] No hard feelings — «без обид». Устойчивое выражение: feelings здесь не переводится буквально как «чувства».

[10] Without breaking a sweat — «без малейшего труда». Буквально «даже не вспотев»: подчёркивается превосходство Джул.

[11] Owe someone a favor — «быть обязанным кому-то услугой». Речь о будущем ответном одолжении, не о денежном долге.

Chapter 6

Well, I'm in the hospital now, where I was taken by the brave rescue rangers. Thanks to them, and to that group of thugs who called them. Something just didn't feel right, and I'm not sure I would have survived without medical intervention. But I did survive, and now I'm lying here on the hospital bed. The administration even told our headquarters that I'm here.

I heard the response: «Everything is fine, continue treatment, the patient is „ours", the fleet is paying.» They thought I was in some kind of accident. And that's how it works in the fleet: if you're in an accident, or something like that, they'll find you in the hospital and pay for your treatment. Because we're the fleet. First, they'll treat you, and only then will they ask what happened. That's respect. I like that.

And the nurse who was assigned to me, I like her too. She's nice-looking. But then she said:

«Officer, you have visitors. Should I let them in?»

Visitors? To me? That's interesting. And of course, I said «let them in.» I'm curious!

Two men and two women burst into the room. There was no doubt about the men: they were definitely from the intelligence agency. Too broad shoulders, hard to mix up. And they were wearing those cool hats. I want a hat like that! A hat like that makes even a walking closet look elegant, and that's what these

guys were. Noticing my interest, one of them extended his hand and said:

«My name is Guido! And this is my brother, Nuncio. Let's get acquainted?»

«Let's get acquainted, guys!» I replied, shaking his hand. «I'm Mick Irshi. Will you introduce me to the ladies?»

«Of course! This blonde is Jul Kiedis, Senior investigator of Fleet Security Service's External Investigations department.»

«Wow, I'm impressed! Nice to meet you, ma'am!»

«Don't bother, Commander Irshi. And meet my friend. Her name is Sniya.»

I looked at «her friend» and suddenly realized, I was seeing the same girl from the bar. The same one. Only now she didn't have that «distant look» in her eyes. She had a normal look. Even, possibly, an interested one.

«Sniya?» I said. «Nice to meet you.»

«And I… I mean, I'm glad, too. Glad that you're alive. And you, it turns out, are not Jul's brother?»

«Not before. Sort of. But now, it seems, yes.»

«So you deceived me?» she turned to Jul.

«Yes. Sorry. It was necessary. I deceived you.»

«You're a plague.»

«Yes! But look, we did it. We're alive, and Mick is alive, too. Isn't it worth it?»

«And indeed, we found our guy,» Guido said. «And now we can provide him with protection. No one will get to him. Is that

bad? What's wrong with that?»

«I'm not arguing, Guido,» Sniya said. «But I want to guard Mick's bedside myself. I have a shotgun, Jul gave it to me.»

«Allowed,» Nuncio declared. «My brother and I will be outside, and you with your shotgun will be inside. Like the last line of defense [12]. Ready, comrade?»

«Ready, Nuncio!»

«Excellent! Jul, I mean Major Kiedis, do you confirm?»

«Confirmed. And I'll probably head to the base. You'll manage without me.»

«We will! So go ahead, don't worry.»

«Will do. Good luck, guys.»

«Thanks. By the way, Guido, can we get some coffee around here?»

«Damned if I know [13]. A reconnaissance operation is needed.»

«Well, take care of it, okay? And I'll guard Mick's bedside for now,» and Nuncio pulled out a rather large railgun.

«These two will definitely handle everything,» Sniya said to me.

«I don't doubt it. They're serious guys.»

«And you know what I want right now?»

«How would I know?!»

«I want to kiss you.»

«What? You — to kiss — me?! Why on earth would you want to do that?»

«Just because.»

And then she kissed me. Listen, guys, this is something awesome. I've never been kissed like that before. I've never even had a girlfriend, just lovers, not more than that. And now… And I knew that Sniya was «originally» from the escort service. That is, by definition… Well, a prostitute, what can I say. But she didn't kiss me like a «professional», no. There was love in her kiss, there was passion, there was the scent of strawberry fields. You can't just pass that by.

And I, of course, responded. And then… And then I was twisted again, and passed out again.

After reading

1. Who visits Mick in the hospital?
2. What does Sniya discover about Jul's story?
3. How do the visitors organise Mick's protection?
4. Why does Sniya's kiss surprise Mick?
5. What makes a person feel safe when they are vulnerable?

Примечания

[12] Last line of defense — «последний рубеж обороны». Line обозначает рубеж или уровень защиты, не обязательно линию на местности.

[13] Damned if I know — грубоватое разговорное «а чёрт его знает». Это готовая реплика о незнании, а не буквальное условие.

Chapter 7

«Mashik, what's going on with that commander? Did you find him?»

«Yes, Admiral, sir. Found. He's currently in the hospital. Wounded, but will survive. Agent Kiedis reported, Commander Irshi became a target of the Valenteinis clan's revenge. For some story he wasn't even guilty of. It's just that clan… Well, you understand.»

«Provide covert protection. I don't care about that clan. What's important to us, to the fleet, is that the guy survives. Do you understand?»

«Yes, Admiral, sir. He's currently being guarded by Foxmann's men.»

«I'm giving them a full carte blanche [14]. They can use any resources, including stormtroopers and orbital bombing. I'm speaking on record. Do you understand?»

«Yes, Admiral, sir.»

«Carry out the order, Colonel Abramyan.»

After dialing a different number, the colonel said:

«Jul, while you're resting, go ahead and make another hole in your tunic. Because you've just earned another medal. The one that jingles when you walk. You managed to save a guy the fleet's top brass is interested in, without even conducting a proper

investigation. They won't leave this without a reaction, and you deserve that medal.»

«What, seriously?» Agent Kiedis replied, continuing, «Colonel, sir, I've also managed to commit a disciplinary offence. Possibly even a criminal one.»

«How did you even…?!»

«Well, you see. My younger daughter goes to school, and one of the teachers… Can you imagine, he started harassing her because she's Jewish! She's only thirteen years old, Colonel, sir, just thirteen! And this idiot…»

«What did you do?»

«Well, I shot him to hell.»

«With your service railgun?»

«Yeah…»

«You're a handful, Agent Kiedis. Alright, I'll cover you [15]. Give your husband my regards.»

«Thank you, Colonel, sir.»

«You're welcome.»

After reading

1. Where is Mick when Abramyan reports to the admiral?

2. What resources does Kurie authorise for Mick's protection?

3. Why does Abramyan tell Jul to make another hole in her tunic?

4. What does Abramyan's response to Jul's confession show about their relationship?

5. Should loyalty to a colleague have limits? Explain your

view.

Примечания

[14] Carte blanche — «полная свобода действий». Заимствованное выражение используется в английском без перевода.

[15] Cover someone может значить «прикрыть». Здесь начальник обещает защитить Джул от последствий, а не обеспечить огневое прикрытие.

Chapter 8

So, again. I'm in the hospital. And someone kissed me passionately. Someone? Not just someone, she's sitting right there, with a large-caliber shotgun on her lap. And she's the one who's supposed to be guarding me. What's her name? Sniya? Probably, yeah, Sniya.

The woman of completely not my type. But there are two problems. First, she kissed me so passionately and tenderly, I remember it exactly. And second, she's still sitting by my bed, holding the gun and intending to protect me from any enemies. Why does she need me? Who the hell knows. But someone who's not needed isn't guarded, fighting sleep and holding an ancient gun.

I gathered all my pitiful strength and croaked:

«Sniya, get some rest finally. There should be other guards, right? You must be tired.»

«Mick, you're alive?» she jumped up, «You're really alive? Yes, there are guards! And I really should get some sleep. But I couldn't, you understand? What if you had died?»

«Is it that important to you that I don't die?»

«Yes! My past life is over. And my current one depends on whether you live or die. Maybe I love you? Who knows. But it depends. That's life. You're not going to… die on me [16], are

you? You'll stay with us?»

«Sniya, I'll stay. I promise you. I'll make it through. At least so I don't upset you. But you get some sleep now, okay?»

Interestingly, she listened to me. She fell onto my bed, still holding the antique firearm, and instantly fell asleep. To be honest, I did the same. I woke up a few hours later. I felt more or less okay. Sniya was sleeping peacefully, having dropped her shotgun on the floor. But I already felt that my railgun was still with me, and I could easily draw it and, if there was trouble, defend… Sniya. Down to my last round. Sniya? Defend?

Where did I even get these thoughts?

But I do have them. And, to make matters worse, in my own head — damn it, I have only one head, and I don't like this approach to it! — I heard a completely unfamiliar voice:

«Where am I?»

At this point, I, excuse me for the truth, freaked out [17]. My own brain had never talked to me like that before, like «I'm a separate entity in here.» I always thought my head was mine, and I was the one thinking with it. But now it turned out that wasn't the case.

«What the hell is going on?» I exclaimed.

And I got a response:

«My name is Kara. And it seems they've done something really shitty to me. And who are you?»

«I'm Mick,» I replied, «And I probably understand what they did to you.»

Somehow I immediately understood. Those bastards are making bioneuro networks from captive mushroomers. Erasing their personalities. But this time, they couldn't erase it. And it's not a guy, it's a girl. And her only chance to survive as a personality is to «settle» in my head. Because she doesn't have any other head to go to.

«Kara, let's try to come to an agreement,» I said, «I don't want you to lose yourself, lose your personality. But I don't want to lose myself either, you understand?»

«I'm a girl, you're a guy. It'll be very hard. Are you ready?»

«I'm ready, Kara. I'll do everything for this. I don't want your death.»

«Don't you want it? Are you sure? Even if I interfere with your thoughts?»

«Yes, interfere all you want, for the gods' sake. You'll live, got it? I won't give up on this. I won't abandon it.»

«Are you aware it's exactly me who wants you to protect Sniya? She's a girl, just like me. I can't protect her, but you can.»

«What do I need to do?»

«Just be with her. Just be. And I'll forgive you for the loss of my life, my body, everything.»

«Kara, no one could ever take away everything from you. You'll have to live in my head? That's fate. But I… I'll give you that space. You understand? If I have to leave the fleet because of this — so let it be, I'll leave the fleet. I'll change my profession. I'll become someone completely different. But I'll never abandon

you. I'll never leave you. I could never do that, you understand?»

«Mick, I understand. And I'm asking you for only one thing: don't abandon Sniya. Can't you see, as she is now, she's heading straight for addiction or something worse… No one saved me. But she still has a chance. You couldn't help me, but you still can help her. Do it! This is the one thing I can ask you for.»

«Yes. Yes, Kara. I've already told you, I'd help you always and in everything. By the way, want to joke around? I always thought that someday I'd be able to share my life, my bed, and my „whole household" with a girl. But sharing my own brain… That's cool. And funny!»

«Yes, it's funny. And now you'll never get rid of my presence in your head.»

«What if I actually enjoy your presence?»

«You enjoy it? Then we'll have a blast like hell!»

After reading

1. Why is Sniya still sitting beside Mick's bed?
2. Who speaks inside Mick's head?
3. How does Mick explain the creation of biological neural networks?
4. What does Mick promise Kara?
5. Could you share every thought with another person? Why or why not?

Примечания

[16] Die on someone — эмоциональное «умереть у меня, оставить меня своей смертью». On me подчёркивает, как по-

теря затронет говорящего.

[17] Freak out — разговорное «сильно испугаться, запаниковать, потерять самообладание». Здесь описывает реакцию на чужой голос в голове.

Chapter 9

I woke up around nine am. Yes, my name is Sniya, and I'm… a prostitute. An escort girl. Although now… probably not. Not anymore.

I was lying on a hospital bed, on the edge, wondering how I even stayed there. And I had a shotgun, but I dropped it when I fell asleep. But I didn't feel any danger, I remembered that there were guards outside the door. Good guards. And the guy on the bed… that was the one they wanted to frame, using me as bait. And they did frame him! I honestly thought they would kill him. But they didn't.

And then this crazy girl Jul came, and it became clear: if anyone disagreed with her, there would be corpses. And then everyone agreed with her. And she gave me the shotgun. And then there were corpses anyway. Oh my god, I think I killed at least two people! Me, a killer?! But yes… I definitely killed two people. To death. And then one of the guards… what was his name? Nuncio? Probably yes, Nuncio.

He told me: «It's okay, stay as the last line of defense.» And then I fell asleep…

«Sniya, are you here?» Mick asked.

I was shocked. The guy who had severe injuries, all bandaged up and with an IV in his left hand, and according to the data, had serious brain damage, was talking to me quite sensibly. I was

really shocked.

«Mick, are you alive? Is this really you? Are you here with me?»

«With you?» he replied, «That's an interesting question. I have reasons to believe that I'm exactly with you. But Sniya, I don't like the huge size of your breasts.»

I was taken aback. Because usually, people only complimented me on my tits. And he continued:

«Sniya, sweetie, we both have no way out. Our past life is over. And there's nothing we can do about it. We need to survive somehow. Together is easier than alone. Will we do it together?»

Suddenly I realized that I wanted to be together with this bandaged guy. He wouldn't have offered it for no reason, would he?

And then everything started spinning: Mick was being discharged from the hospital, as his health was no longer in danger. But his life still was, as a whole squad of guards, including Nuncio and Guido, and a new team that arrived on a real landing boat, were protecting him. That's when I found out that Mick was a commander in the fleet. A senior officer and all that. I saw him in his uniform, with badges and medals.

Wow, who did I get involved with and what kind of mess did I get into? And he told me:

«Don't be afraid. Everything will be new, absolutely everything, but please, don't be afraid. Okay?»

Okay… I'm not against it, but not against what?

It became clear soon.

The lead of the guard squad, who Guido and Nuncio stood at attention [18] in front of and called «sir», strictly asked Mick: «And who is this girl, commander?»

And Mick replied: «Colonel, this is my girlfriend, Sniya. I love her, so any terrorist can use her to pressure me. She needs to be protected.»

At that moment, I was not just shocked, but… well, it's not suitable for children. Because the Mick's rank is already enough, and with all other… it's just too much. But what really got me was that he called me his girlfriend. I mean, I like him, but for him to call me his girlfriend out loud, in public… I didn't expect that. And then, «Colonel»? So the rescue squad is actually led by a colonel? Who is Mick, anyway?! And the colonel continued:

«We have an order. You need to return to your cruiser immediately, commander. If this girl needs protection, we can take her with us. On the cruiser, it's unlikely anyone can harm her. But we need to decide now, I don't have time to wait for every commander's nonsense!»

«Yes, sir!» Mick replied and… threw me into the landing boat. I tried to resist, but not even he, but one of the «specialists» told me: «Stupid, do you want to survive?» I do, I guess. I ain't got no need to be killed [19]. And if someone decides to, then I… then I'm really ready to hang out on the cruiser. By the way, what kind of cruiser is it?

After reading

1. What does Sniya remember about the fighting?

2. How does Mick introduce Sniya to the colonel?

3. Where are Mick and Sniya taken?

4. Why does Mick's public introduction matter so much to Sniya?

5. How important is it for you that other people openly acknowledge a relationship?

Примечания

[18] Stand at attention — «стоять по стойке смирно». Устойчивое военное выражение, без артикля перед attention.

[19] Ain't и двойное отрицание — нестандартная разговорная речь. В стандартном английском: I don't need to be killed. Здесь форма характеризует голос Снии; для нейтральной речи её копировать не стоит.

Chapter 10

«Mashik, report.»

«Reporting, sir. Commander Irshi's health is no longer in danger, he has been transferred from the local hospital to the medics' sector of his own cruiser. Who is he there, by the way? The first mate?»

«No, the chief gunnery officer.»

«I see. He… He was given a „crooked" network. A bio one. One of the new models. It can't be removed. And it… It's „location-less." Completely.»

«What? So he was set up?»

«Yes. And we know who did it. Agent Kiedis provided a full report on the investigation.»

«People like that need to be killed. It's the Valenteinis clan, you said?»

«Yes. And this clan… is the supplier of neural networks for our entire fleet. We can't just kill them.»

«So, my friend, just between us [20],» the admiral leaned in, «Each of us — you, Foxmann and… well, to be honest, I myself — has at least one team, specializing in simulating accidents. Three groups. Three groups, Mashik. But all the Valenteinis must die. As usual, no one needs to be tortured, we're not interested in anyone's suffering, I hope? But they must die. All of them. Is

that clear?»

«Admiral Kurie, are you confirming that you're giving me an order?» Abramyan asked, shaken.

«Yes, Colonel Abramyan, you and Rear Admiral Foxmann are receiving an official order to participate in this operation. I confirm it.»

«But… Leonardo, are you sure?»

«Yes, Mashik, yes. We're the Fleet Security Service. No one dares to interfere with us. No one, you understand? And if we give in [21] just once, no one will take us seriously anymore. Those who need to know will find out what happened to this clan. And, I hope, they'll understand correctly. We don't interfere in civilian affairs, but… but we won't let anyone, absolutely anyone, into our business. Even if it's the Emperor himself.»

«I didn't hear that last part, Leonardo.»

«And I didn't say it.»

After reading

1. What prevents Mick's new network from being removed?
2. Why is the clan initially difficult to attack?
3. What order does Kurie give Abramyan and Foxmann?
4. Why does Kurie see the case as a matter of institutional authority?
5. How would you distinguish justice from revenge in this situation?

Примечания

[20] Just between us — «между нами». Оборот предваряет

доверительную информацию.

[21] Give in — «уступить, сдаться давлению». Здесь адмирал говорит о последствиях даже одной уступки.

Chapter 11

Oh, what a wonderful change in my life! I actually passed out again, but I clearly remember I did it in a landing boat, surrounded by the guys in heavy suits. Well, at least they're our own people. And they didn't even beat me up. And they even put me in a med capsule. A med capsule? My god, I'm on my beloved «Maruun»! One can say, I'm home! This is really great.

«Kara,» I called out, «are you here?»

«Where would I go,» she replied, «By the way, you've finally been treated.»

«Really? And I do feel much better.»

«You can thank me for that, too.»

«You? Thank you, Kara! What for?»

«I «hooked up' your implants.»

«Hmm… And how did you do that?!»

«Just like that! Learn from the master while I'm still alive!»

«Listen, it's true, really! I can access all four now! But how?»

«I made a deal with them.»

«You're kidding.»

«But it works, doesn't it?»

«Yes. It works. What other good news do you have?»

«Mick, you're becoming dependent on me. You're starting to wait for good news from me.»

«Kara, you're living in my head. How can I not be dependent

on you?»

«Well, one-one. I'll tell you. With my help, you've become the most unique owner of a neural network in the inhabited space.»

«And how's that?»

«Just like that. In any network «of yours', a kind of beacon is installed. You probably know that to access the network, you don't really need your comm?»

«Well, that's clear. It's just more convenient through the comm.»

«Convenient. But your neural network constantly connects to the general network and sends test signals there. In a certain case, your consciousness could even be blocked by a signal from somewhere outside.»

«Hmm… And I didn't know about this? The age of terrible wonders isn't over yet.»

«No one told you about it. No one else was told either, actually. Access to this «reverse connection' is surrounded by so many laws and «high-level access' that all the documentation is classified as «burn before reading [22]». But technically — technically, the possibility was there.»

«Ah… But you say «was'? Not «is', but «was'?»

«Exactly, lovely silly Mick. A standard neural network is a computer. An AI. A set of programs. A very useful thing, but it works exclusively according to the programmed protocol. But I don't!»

«So you can…»

«Not just can. I've already disabled this block.»

«But can you turn it back on? Cool. Two-one.»

«Well, I can. But why would I need to? I don't want anyone rummaging around in your head [23].»

«Because you want to reserve this possibility only for yourself?»

«Again, you win. Two-two.»

«I'm not against it, Kara.»

«Seriously? You're allowing me to?»

«And you're offering me not to allow what you're already doing?»

«You can disable me. All of me. And I won't be able to do anything.»

«Disable you? I'm not crazy yet.»

«Many would think you're crazy if you don't.»

«Well, let them think whatever they want, I don't care. By the way. Can someone from the outside determine that you are you?»

«Very unlikely. The model is experimental, there's no data or statistics. Plus, I'm a smart girl and I give them a standard reaction to standard tests.»

«Excellent. Do you realize, we can mock everyone?»

«I hope so. Because, to be honest… It's hard for me to stay without my body and my whole life. You understand?»

«Kara, I'm really sorry.»

«You're not guilty. We were both set up. But it's hard for me, very hard. And I'm looking for any way to have fun. Forget. Not

to think about it.»

«I already promised to help you.»

«Yes, I remember. Help me. I really need it.»

And then everything exploded again. How many times will this happen? And… on my own cruiser? What the bloody hell is going on here?

After reading

1. What has Kara done to Mick's implants?
2. What hidden function do standard networks contain?
3. How does Kara conceal her identity during tests?
4. Why does Kara want opportunities to laugh and have fun?
5. Would you want a useful technology if someone else could secretly control it?

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