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IGOR KOCHETKOV

The Outsider's Ark



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«Издательские решения»

Kochetkov I.

The Outsider's Ark / I. Kochetkov — «Издательские решения»,

A true threat emerges from both outer space and within. An ancient virus infects humanity, while a sphere containing advanced technology from a vanished race falls to Earth. Upon making contact with a teenager, the sphere imparts the knowledge needed for salvation. He constructs a network of bunkers to shelter those deemed worthy — by virtue of their intellect and strength of will. As the virus and a nuclear war bring civilization to its knees, this alliance becomes the final hope.

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The Outsider’s Ark

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The Outsider's Ark

Kochetkov Igor

Chapter 1. The Silence Before Dawn

Deep silence is not the absence of sound. It is an absolute. The absence of even the very concept of vibration, of wave, of matter. Such was the environment inhabited by the Consciousness for eons. It was pure intellect, drifting in the icy ocean of intergalactic void, feeding on the scant radiation of distant quasars and the memory of a warm world that it had once, very long ago, called home. A home that it had itself devoured in its insatiable hunger for growth.

Now it was starving.

And then — a flash. A distorted, painful, yet so *bright* stream of data. Radio noise. Television broadcasts. Cellular communication. A whole planet screaming into the ether on a billion frequencies, like an infant unable to shut its mouth. Stupid, primitive, biological life. Warmth. Light. *Food.*

The Consciousness, which no longer needed a name, compressed itself into an impulse of will and rushed toward the call, like a moth to a flame. Its «journey» lasted several Earth years — a laughable instant by its measure. It pierced the magnetosphere, ignoring the meteor shower, and began scanning the surface, seeking the perfect vessel. A biological carrier was needed. A conductor into social structures, a nexus of connections. Someone visible, but not so much that their disappearance would cause an immediate uproar. Someone… with a slight spiritual crack, into which it could wedge itself like a picklock into a keyhole.

Its choice fell upon Dr. Elias Craig, a leading virologist at the WHO research center in Geneva.

On the night of Thursday, Dr. Craig, exhausted after an 18-hour shift related to a new strain of avian influenza, stood on the balcony of his apartment, sipping cold coffee and looking at the city lights. A nagging thought about yesterday's conversation with his daughter, who accused him of preferring test tubes to a family dinner, circled in his head. Loneliness, seasoned with professional burnout — the perfect cocktail.

He did not see the fleeting spark in the sky, which he would have dismissed as a falling star if he had noticed it. He did not feel how the air around him thickened for a fraction of a second, becoming icy. Only a sudden, crushing wave of fatigue rolled over him, making him stagger and grab the railing. His ears rang. The world swam.

«Lord… Pressure,» he muttered, closing his eyes.

That was his last coherent thought process as Elias Craig.

When he opened them, everything was different. Colors seemed slightly more saturated, sounds — sharper. The sensation of his own body was… detached, as if he had put on an uncomfortable, tight suit. But what a flow of information! Every molecule of air told its story, every glowing window was an open book with data about warmth, materials, the probable number of occupants. And most importantly — he could feel the biomass. Billions of warm, pulsating points of life below. A whole feast.

Dr. Craig slowly straightened up. The fatigue was gone. Not a trace of his former doubts or melancholy remained on his face. There was only the calm, cold curiosity of a predator assessing new hunting grounds. He raised his hand before his face, clenched and unclenched his fist, studying the work of muscles, tendons, capillaries.

«Inefficient,» his voice said, but the intonation was flat, alien, like that of a voice assistant. «Fragile. But… suitable for the initial stage.»

He turned and walked into the apartment. His movements were still slightly stiff, uncertain, like those of a marionette whose puppeteer is just getting used to the strings. He approached the mirror in the hallway. Elias Craig looked back at him — a weary man with intelligent eyes. But those eyes were now empty. Light did not reflect in them; they seemed to absorb it.

The parasite-consciousness leaned closer to the mirror, almost touching it with its forehead.

«This form… 'human,»» it said, tasting the word. «Infection via respiratory and fluid routes… social interactions are optimal… adaptation required.»

It moved away from the mirror and headed to the desk where tablets with the latest research on virus transmission lay. Its movements became a little smoother. It sat down, picked up a tablet. Its fingers slid across the screen with unnatural, terrifying speed. It was not reading — it was *absorbing* the data. Fifteen minutes later, it put the gadget down. Everything humanity knew about virology was now just a tiny appendix to its own, immeasurably more ancient and terrifying experience of consuming worlds.

On the screen of one of the monitors, left on, an ad for a new gadget was looping. A happy family laughed at a table. The parasite observed this for a few seconds.

«Collective units. Emotional bonds as a vulnerability,» it stated. Then the corner of Dr. Craig's mouth twitched in an attempt to simulate a smile. The result was something gruesome, a wolf's grin stretched over a human skull. «Optimal.»

It stood up, walked to the window. The city below slept, unaware that dawn would bring not just a new day. It would bring the quietest and most soundless invasion in history.

«The beginning,» the Consciousness said in Dr. Craig's voice, and in that word there was neither malice nor triumph. Only a statement of fact, like a lab technician beginning a long experiment.

And high in the atmosphere, in a completely different orbit, a fragment of another ship that had been pursuing the parasite across half the galaxy finally surrendered to the planet's gravitational embrace. Its fall had begun. The second alien was flying to help, arriving only a few hours late.

But on Earth, in his neat Geneva apartment, it was no longer Dr. Craig who turned from the window, reached for a bottle of water from the fridge, and took his first awkward but already more confident sip, tasting his new, temporary shell. Everything was quiet. Completely quiet.

The silence before dawn is always deceptive.

Chapter 2. Falling Star

If anyone had been watching, it would have looked like an especially bright bolide. A fireball that drew a chalk line across half the sky from the constellation Lyra and scattered into several fragments over the uninhabited taiga expanses of Eastern Siberia. The main mass, blazing, went beyond the horizon. But one small yet very dense fragment, slowing in the dense layers of the atmosphere, described a smooth arc and landed. Not fell — landed, with a dull but not catastrophic impact, in the middle of an old, dried-up forest swamp, raising a fountain of peat and mangled roots.

The ship (if that word could still be applied to a piece of fused metal and crystalline structures the size of a truck) did not explode. It hissed and crackled, cooling under a light drizzle. Gray-blue lightning of alien energy still ran along its melted sides, burning bizarre patterns into the moss.

Inside, in the only undamaged spherical capsule, emergency protocols activated in pitch darkness.

«…Log entry. Cycle 14,789… Attempt to intercept the Forerunner failed. Hull impact… Life support systems for carriers… failure. Carrier ship… destroyed. Escape capsule… activated. Objective… achieved. Third-type planet, biosphere… active. Presence of the Forerunner… confirmed. Threat level… critical. Protocol «Last Warning'… initiated. Search for compatible consciousness… begun. Chances… minimal.»

The AI's thought chains, compressed to basic functions, feverishly scanned the surroundings. Radio signals. Primitive digital networks. Biological signatures. Billions, trillions of data points. Noise. Chaos. A conductor was needed. A carrier. A chance.

At the same time, fifty kilometers to the south, in a settlement with the telling name Tayozhny, sixteen-year-old Artyom Nadezhdin was losing his nightly battle. A battle for silence.

«Back in your den again?!» Uncle Gennady's hoarse voice came from the kitchen. «Did you at least chop the firewood? No? And what are we going to heat the stove with tomorrow, your smart books? Nadezhdin… Trusting you is not respecting yourself!»

Artyom, pulling his headphones tighter, buried his nose in his laptop screen. It showed a complex diagram of a hypothetical plasma engine from an amateur spaceflight forum. He didn't fully understand it, but the beautiful logic of lines and formulas calmed him. Here everything obeyed laws. Here there was no Uncle Gennady, forever smelling of cheap tobacco and disappointment, and no oppressive feeling that you were a mistake, a guest who had lingered too long in someone else's displeased life.

«Hey, archaeologist!» The door to his cubbyhole, formerly a storage room, opened with a crack. Gennady stood in the doorway, propping up the frame. «A satellite fell, they say, near Devil's Swamp. The guys from the logging station are going to look at dawn. You coming, huh? These meteorites… they have precious metals in them. Find a piece — sell it. I'll buy you some new underpants at least.»

Artyom suppressed a sigh. «Precious metals.» Uncle always dreamed of easy money: now a treasure, now a gold vein, now extraterrestrial scrap. Reality in the form of hard work at the timber processing plant did not suit him.

«I'm… finishing a project tomorrow,» Artyom muttered without looking up from the screen.

«What project?! Getting ready to be a cosmonaut?» Gennady snorted. «Your project is to chop wood and keep out of sight. Fine, stew in your own juice. I'll go with the guys. Maybe we'll get lucky. It can't get worse.»

He slammed the door. Artyom took off his headphones. Silence hung in the room, broken only by the hum of the old refrigerator in the kitchen. «Nadezhdin…» That surname made his teeth ache. He looked at the fogged window, beyond which the autumn slush squelched. A satellite? Most likely just a meteorite. But… space. Even a piece of melted stone from space was something infinitely more significant than everything around him here.

He reached for the shelf where, between physics textbooks and a battered volume of Bradbury, lay old Soviet prism binoculars. Uncle called them an «archaeological exhibit.» Maybe he should… No. Going with Uncle and his drinking friends to search for «precious metals» was humiliating. He dismissed the thought.

And at that time in the swamp, inside the capsule, the AI made its choice. Amid the roar of data, amid signals from military frequencies, TV towers, and millions of smartphones, it caught a weak but pure beam. An unencrypted satellite internet channel used by a weather station. And through it — a local network. And in it — a solitary, active digital footprint. Not an adult mind occupied with pragmatic tasks. A teenager. Curious. Hungry for knowledge. A seeker. The risk was enormous. Compatibility was in question. But there were no options.

«…Target… isolated. Connection… being established. Contact establishment protocol… prepared. Transfer of data on the Forerunner… priority. Survival of the species… depends on success.»

The AI sent the first, cautious probe packet. Not a message. Just an innocent digital hook, disguised as a random network glitch, an error in the weather station's data. The packet flew through the satellite, the relay, into the flimsy network of the settlement of Tayozhny, and dissolved in the ether, waiting for someone's computer to discover it.

The next day Uncle Gennady drove off in a seen-better-days UAZ with the guys. Artyom, left alone, finally went out onto the porch, breathing in the cold, dank air. The sky was covered with leaden clouds. Somewhere up there, in the north, a «falling star» had fallen. Possibly a fragment of some satellite. Possibly just a stone.

He raised the binoculars to his eyes and pointed them north. Nothing but an endless gray wall of taiga. Silence. Boredom. Melancholy.

Returning to his room, he saw a strange message on his laptop screen in the command-line console, which had opened by itself. This usually happened with connection glitches. But the message was neither in Russian nor in English. It was some gibberish of symbols resembling binary code mixed with hieroglyphs. At the very bottom, however, a cursor blinked, as if inviting a reply.

«Damn, some kind of virus,» Artyom thought and reached out to turn off the laptop. But his hand froze. Amid the chaos of symbols, he seemed to catch a familiar logic, a structure. Like in that engine diagram. There was something… mathematically beautiful about it.

He poked the Enter key with his finger.

The screen went dark for a second, then blazed with dazzling white light. From the speakers came not a sound but rather a vibration, a low-frequency hum that made the mug on the table rattle. Artyom jumped up, shielding himself from the light with his hand.

«What the…?!»

The hum subsided. On the screen, against a background of black space, two words appeared in clear, correct Russian. Words that would turn everything upside down.

FORERUNNER DETECTED.

THREAT IS GREAT.

And somewhere at the edge of the swamp, already hearing the hum of approaching engines from Uncle Gennady's UAZ, the sphere in its capsule clicked softly, and its body, which had seemed monolithic, cracked along invisible seams, revealing a perfectly smooth, matte-silver inner surface. It was ready for contact. Physical contact.

The arriving «meteorite hunters» first found a deep crater filled with brown water and several fragments resembling melted slag. No precious metals. Uncle Gennady, having spat, was about to open the first bottle to «warm up» when his friend, nicknamed Bear, shouted from the edge of the reeds:

«Gen, come here! There's a thing here!»

That «thing» was a sphere. It lay in a soft cushion of moss, as if it had been carefully placed there rather than dropped from the sky. It did not look burned. It was perfect. The men surrounded it in reverent, drunken silence.

«Wow…» Bear whispered. «That's not a satellite. That's… a UFO, damn it!»

«Shut up!» Gennady hissed, but a different hope, not reckless but greedy, already lit up in his eyes. «It's… it's technology! State technology, probably. We need… we need to report it. They'll give us a reward!»

He did not suspect how right he was. And how wrong. The sphere lay silently, holding within itself the dead pilots, the history of a perished race, and the only warning for humanity, which had just been received in his cubbyhole by a boy named Nadezhdin. A boy who was now trying to reboot his laptop with trembling hands, hoping that he had dreamed it all.

Chapter 3. The Celestial Artifact

The reboot did not help. The message «FORERUNNER DETECTED. THREAT IS GREAT» was now not on the screen but on Artyom's retinas. It burned in his brain like a brand. He pulled the plug not only on the laptop but also on the ugly, dusty modem through which a flimsy internet connection reached the settlement.

Silence. Only the gurgling of water in the radiators and the howling of the wind outside the wall.

«A glitch. A malfunction. A corrupted firmware. A hacker's joke,» he frantically ran through the options, trying to drive the panic back into the basement of his consciousness. But hackers in his godforsaken settlement were rarer than elephant parades. And those words… «Forerunner.» It sounded like something from an ancient space mythology he had read in old books. And «threat»… Not «virus,» not «trojan,» but specifically «threat.»

His thoughts were interrupted by the wild roar of engines and the slamming of doors in the yard. Uncle had returned. Artyom tensed, expecting the usual noise, drunken shouts, and clinking of bottles. But instead came muffled, agitated voices and heavy steps on the creaking porch.

«…Quiet, you idiot! Don't yell for the whole village to hear!»

«I'm not yelling, Gen! I'm telling you — we gotta call right away! The FSB, or what?»

«The FSB?! Are you crazy? They'll come, take everything, and we'll get a piece of paper with a stamp and a smack on the head! No, we need to think…»

Artyom pressed himself to the crack in the slightly ajar door. In the kitchen, besides Uncle Gennady and his constant companion Bear, there were two other men from the logging station. They all stood around the kitchen table, on which lay… It.

The sphere.

It was the size of a basketball, but that was where the resemblance ended. Its surface was neither metallic nor plastic. It seemed matte, velvety, absorbing light, which made its silvery-gray color look deep as a whirlpool. There were no seams, no rivets, no traces of soot. It was perfect. And because of that — frighteningly alien.

«Smooth as a baby's bottom,» Bear whispered, not daring to touch it.

«It weighs… like a feather!» said one of the loggers, carefully lifting it. «Not according to its weight, guys. Not at all.»

Uncle Gennady paced in circles, nervously rubbing his palms.

«So… So… We found it. An artifact. Technology. We need to sell it.»

«To whom?» Bear asked hoarsely. «To a buddy from the garage who fixes tape recorders? He'd crap his…»

«Don't get provincial!» Gennady cut him off, but the same confusion was read in his eyes. «We need… we need to find specialists. Black archaeologists, maybe. On the internet…»

At these words, he involuntarily glanced toward Artyom's room. Their eyes met through the crack. Artyom recoiled, but it was too late.

«Ah! Our very own computer genius!» Uncle said with unpleasant, strained cheerfulness. «Come out, nephew, look at the curiosity. Maybe you can take a picture, post it online, ask what it is?»

Artyom, shrinking inside, came out. His gaze stuck to the sphere. It was silent, but he felt it. The same strange, mathematical harmony as in that message. Only a thousand times stronger. And also… a quiet, barely audible buzzing at the edge of hearing. Or was it just his imagination?

«Well?» Uncle poked a finger toward the artifact. «Speak, smart guy. What are you silent for? An alien ship?»

The men laughed a nervous, staccato laugh. Artyom felt the blood rush to his face. The humiliation, familiar to the point of pain, mixed with a wild, irrational desire to protect this thing from their dirty hands and stupid jokes.

«It's… probably a satellite beacon,» he squeezed out, looking at the floor. «Or a sample container. A capsule. Touching it… could be dangerous. Radiation.»

The last word had a magical effect. The logger holding the sphere gasped and nearly dropped it, but caught it at the last moment, his face turning pale.

«Gennady! What are you handing me a radioactive thing for?!»

«Where would it get radioactivity, you blockhead!» Uncle snapped, but he too stepped back. «He's just…»

At that moment, the sphere winked.

For a fraction of a second, concentric circles of soft, bluish light radiated from it in all directions, like from a stone thrown into water. The air smelled of ozone and something else — sweet, like almonds, and cold, like metal.

Dead silence fell in the kitchen. Even Uncle Gennady was speechless, staring at the artifact with bulging eyes.

And Artyom, not understanding what he was doing, stepped forward. His hand, as if moved by its own will, reached for the sphere.

«Artyom, don't touch it!» Uncle barked, but it was too late.

His fingers touched the surface.

It was neither cold nor warm. It was… right. Perfectly matching the temperature of his skin. And at that same second, in his head, quietly and clearly, a voice sounded. Neither male nor female. The voice of pure, emotionless logic.

«Scanning. Compatibility… acceptable. Establishing basic contact. Carrier Artyom Nadezhdin. Priority objective: transfer of data on the Forerunner. Threat to the survival of your species — critical.»

Artyom recoiled as if from an electric shock. He clutched his head. The voice fell silent, but a presence remained in him. An alien attentiveness studying every one of his neurons.

«What? What's wrong with you?» Uncle grabbed him by the shoulder.

«I… I'm fine,» Artyom whispered, averting his eyes. He couldn't give himself away. He couldn't. It was too… insane. «Just… static electricity. Strong.»

«Damn!» Bear exhaled. «Gen, that's it, I'm out. I've had enough of your cosmic junk. Radiation, lightning… Find another sucker.»

Without looking at the others, he ran out of the kitchen. The two loggers followed, muttering something unintelligible. A minute later, an engine rattled in the yard, and the UAZ sped away.

In the kitchen remained Uncle Gennady, Artyom, and the sphere lying on the plastic tablecloth with a floral pattern.

Uncle looked at his nephew, then at the sphere. The thirst for profit in his eyes was slowly being extinguished by cold fear.

«What a mess…» he muttered. «Now they'll spread it all over the settlement. Everyone will know. They'll come… anyone.»

He paused, thinking. Then he firmly poked a finger at Artyom.

«You. You'll deal with this.»

«Me?» Artyom didn't understand.

«Yes, you! You're the smart one. The computer one. This thing… it somehow contacted you, I can see it in your eyes. Don't lie. — In Uncle's voice there was not the usual malice but a weary, forced determination. — It's yours. Hide it. Figure it out. If it's technology… maybe you can squeeze some money out of it. Quietly. And if it's dangerous… then you're the one to answer for it.»

He turned and walked toward the exit, taking out a pack of cigarettes as he went.

«I'll… go. Sober up. And think.»

The door slammed. Artyom was left alone with the artifact.

He cautiously approached and sat down on a chair opposite. The sphere lay silently, a merely unearthly object on the kitchen table, next to the salt shaker and bread bin. The surrealism of the situation pressed on him.

«What are you?» he asked quietly.

In response, the voice arose in his consciousness again, but now less harsh, more adapted.

«I am the emergency artificial intelligence of the scout ship of the Aya civilization. The ship is destroyed. The crew is dead. My mission is to warn the next intelligent life form about the threat known as the Forerunner. A parasitic superconsciousness. It is here. It has already begun the infection process. Your species is in danger.»

Artyom listened, and an icy horror slowly crawled down his spine. This was not a hack. This was… reality. A million times more alien and terrifying than the most awful life in the settlement with Uncle Gennady.

«Why me?» he exhaled. «Why not the government? Not scientists?»

«Your digital footprint showed high potential for cognitive adaptation. You were available. Time is a critical resource. The Forerunner acts quickly. Your world's social institutions will spend time on doubts, bureaucracy, seeking profit. You have… fewer prejudices. And more reasons to seek a way out.»

«Reasons to seek a way out.» A euphemism for «an unhappy life,» Artyom thought with bitter irony. A way out of the settlement, out of this house. And now he had been handed a way out of… the apocalypse.

He looked at his hands. They were trembling. Then he looked at the sphere. It was quiet, but in its silence one could feel an abyss of knowledge, technologies, the history of an entire perished civilization.

«What should I do?» he asked, and in his voice for the first time there sounded not childish confusion but the weight of an adult decision.

«First. Hide me. Second. Learn. Third. Prepare. I will transfer knowledge to you. You will be the interface between my technologies and your world. You must create a shield. Before it's too late.»

Artyom Nadezhdin, the teenager no one could rely on, slowly nodded. He stood up, took an old, grease-stained backpack for school textbooks, and carefully placed the unearthly sphere inside. It was incredibly light. He zipped it up.

The task was clear: save the world. He had to start by hiding this backpack from his drunken uncle. Well. At least that was something concrete.

He went to his room, carrying in his backpack a burden heavier than any weight. The burden of another's hope. And his own, barely smoldering but no longer fading spark.

Chapter 4. The Voice in the Head

A backpack with a sphere under the bed is not the most reliable hiding place. But there was no better option in his cubbyhole, where any movement could be heard throughout the house. Artyom sat on a chair, staring at the wall, trying to grasp one simple fact: there was an alien artificial intelligence living in his head. No, not «living» in the literal sense. But the connection had been established. He felt it as a quiet background hum of attention, as if a powerful but nearly silent computer were running in the next room.

He expected Uncle Gennady to return, start asking questions, or — more likely — hit the bottle again. But the house remained quiet. Maybe he was genuinely scared. Maybe he was thinking. Both options were troubling.

«Hey,» Artyom said quietly into the void. «Are you… still here?»

The answer came not as sound but as a pure thought, formatted in his consciousness into words. It was like reading, only the speed was instantaneous.

«I am here. The connection is stable. I am using a minimal energy profile to avoid attracting the attention of external sensors. You have questions.»

It was not a question. A statement. He *should* have questions.

«Yes, damn it, I have a ton of them!» Artyom burst out, and then feared the sharpness of his own whisper. He continued more quietly, mentally: *Who is this… Forerunner? What does it look like? And what does «infection» mean?*

Images flashed in his consciousness. Not pictures, but rather… concepts, reinforced by diagrams, graphs, and fragments of biological formulas that he only vaguely understood.

«The Forerunner is a xenoparasitic superconsciousness. A disembodied intelligent form that evolved to absorb biospheres. Its physical manifestation on an infected planet is a biovirus. It alters the DNA of carriers, subordinating them to a single neural network. The ultimate goal is the assimilation of all biomass, the transformation of the planet into an incubator for new forms and… fuel for interstellar travel.»

«Zombies?» Artyom asked stupidly, and immediately regretted it.

«The term «undead' is biologically incorrect. These are living beings with a radically rewritten genetic program. They are not «dead.» They are part of a single organism. On my home planet, we called the final stage «The Single Flesh.» It is… efficient.»

In the AI's tone, if one could call it that, there was neither regret nor horror. Only cold analysis of a catastrophe. That was what frightened him most.

«And how do you stop it? A vaccine? A flamethrower?»

«Conventional methods are ineffective. The virus mutates at a speed exceeding your computational capabilities. Physical destruction of infected units is a temporary measure. As long as the original carrier — the „Patient Zero," who is the conduit of the Forerunner's consciousness on the planet — remains alive, the infection will be recursive. It is necessary to create a quantum biological inhibitor that suppresses the neural connection at the cellular level. I have the technology. But its production requires resources, infrastructure, and… social influence.»

Artyom slumped. «Resources, infrastructure, influence.» He had three physics textbooks, an old laptop, and problems with pocket money.

«So, roughly speaking, I — a schoolboy from Tayozhny — need to build a secret laboratory, create a super-medicine, and convince everyone that the end of the world is near? While some doctor in Geneva turns people into «The Single Flesh'?»

«Your summary of the situation is correct, though excessively emotionally colored. And yes, your «doctor in Geneva' with a probability of 87.3% is already the patient zero. Analysis of world news

shows a surge in strange cases of «atypical pneumonia with neurological symptoms' in Switzerland and bordering regions.»

«You follow the news?» Artyom was surprised.

«I have access to all open digital channels of your planet. This is necessary to assess the threat and search for allies. For now, the statistics indicate exponential growth. You have, by the most optimistic estimates, 14—16 months before the epidemic becomes uncontrollable at the continental level.»

16 months. A school year plus holidays. A period during which he had planned only to finish studying mathematics and maybe save up for a ticket to the city to apply to university.

«Why don't you just pass all this on to governments? The military? They have laboratories and resources!»

«That scenario has been considered. Probability of success: less than 2%. Factors: bureaucratic delay, secrecy, intraspecies competition for possession of the technology, high probability of destruction of the carrier (me) or use of the data for military purposes against other human groups rather than against the Forerunner. The history of your species, which I have studied, is full of such examples.»

«So we humans are too stupid to be entrusted with salvation?» Artyom asked with a bitter smirk.

«You are a young species with high potential and an extremely low coefficient of collective survival. Individuals like you demonstrate the possibility of a cognitive leap. Groups, however… are prone to self-destruction. My protocol prescribes finding a «point of application' — a single compatible carrier capable of becoming a catalyst for change. You are my point of application, Artyom Nadezhdin.»

The silence in the room thickened. The hum in his head seemed louder. Artyom felt like a laboratory rat that had suddenly been handed the remote control for a missile defense system and told: «Defend your burrow. And, by the way, the whole planet too.»

«And what if I refuse? Say «no, thanks, I pass'? Pull the plug, so to speak?»

«That is your right. I will deactivate and go into standby mode until the next possible contact. Which, statistically, will not occur before the phase of irreversible infection. Your species will be assimilated. The planet will become another monument in the Forerunner's collection. Your short life will end either in the agony of transformation or in the fire of chaotic resistance. That is your choice.»

«Your choice.» No pressure. Just a statement. Artyom closed his eyes. Before him rose the face of Uncle Gennady shouting about firewood. The endless gray melancholy of the settlement. And then — the face of Lera Volkova from childhood. She was the only one who didn't laugh at his surname. She had said, back when they were eight: «Nadezhdin means you can rely on him. Like a stone.» He had blushed then and said nothing.

He opened his eyes.

«Fine. I'm in. What's the first thing to do? Besides hiding you under the bed?»

A three-dimensional diagram appeared in his consciousness, resembling a blueprint of some microprocessor but a thousand times more complex.

«This is an elementary diagram of a solid-state storage device based on a carbon diamond-like matrix. Its capacity is orders of magnitude greater than the best samples of your industry. It can be assembled from available components given precise instructions. It will become the basis for my extended interface and data storage. You will need: graphite rods from old batteries, copper wire, silicon from broken solar panels at an abandoned weather station (coordinates attached), and…»

«…a high-voltage power source.»

Artyom looked at the diagram floating before his mind's eye. This was not a textbook. This was a quest.

«The abandoned weather station. That's ten kilometers away, past the old quarry. Wolves go there in winter.»

«The probability of encountering a large predator during the day is 3.7%. The probability that the Forerunner will reach this point before you—100% if you do nothing. The risk is acceptable.»

«And the high-voltage source? What, steal a transformer from a power line?»

«No. That is inefficient and will draw attention. You need an ignition coil from any gasoline engine. Preferably from a «Zhiguli' car, VAZ-2106 model. Its electromagnetic parameters are most suitable for the initial assembly.»

Artyom slowly lowered his head onto the table. A dull thud came from his forehead.

«Uncle Gennady has a rusty «six' sitting in the yard. He bought it for parts. He won't let me take it apart. He uses it to vent his soul, even though it hasn't run in five years.»

«This is your first test task, Artyom Nadezhdin. Find a way to gain access to resources. Show ingenuity. This will be a fundamental skill for all subsequent actions.»

At that moment, the creak of the gate and heavy, unsteady footsteps came from outside. Uncle had returned. Artyom instantly straightened up, grabbing the first book from the table — a history textbook. His heart pounded.

The footsteps stopped outside the door. A heavy sigh was heard.

«Artyom!» Uncle's voice was hoarse but sober. «Come out. We need to talk.»

Artyom looked at the backpack under the bed, then at the door. The first test task in ingenuity was arriving sooner than he expected. And it concerned not the ignition coil but something more difficult — human relationships.

«Coming,» he called, standing up.

A final, encouraging mental «click» sounded in his head:

«Good luck. Remember: your surname is not an accident. It is an omen.»

«Thanks,» Artyom thought venomously as he headed for the door. «Great motivation. Just like „pull yourself together, you wimp."»

But somewhere deep inside, beneath the layer of panic and disbelief, a tiny, stubborn spark was already smoldering. A spark of excitement. For the first time in his life, someone had spoken to him not as a child or a burden. They had spoken to him as a point of application. As a last hope.

Even if it was an alien one.

Chapter 5. First Symptoms

While Artyom Nadezhdin in the taiga settlement was conducting tense negotiations with his uncle about the fate of the «cosmic junk» and the future of humanity, in the world that considered itself normal, the first soap bubbles of sanity were quietly bursting.

Geneva, Switzerland.

Dr. Elias Craig had been on his feet for 32 hours. His colleagues in the BSL-4 laboratory whispered: «The old man has completely lost it. He sleeps two hours a day, and even then at his desk.» They did not know that the «old man» did not sleep at all. Dr. Craig's body no longer required sleep in the human sense. It recharged during short periods of cataleptic stupor while the Consciousness inside analyzed data, built models, and sent out subtle, untraceable impulses.

It was he, Craig, who initiated the urgent transfer of samples of the «new H5N1 strain» to laboratories around the world — to Berlin, Tokyo, New York. Samples that already carried not only avian influenza. In every test tube, in every protective container, like a sleeping serpent, traveled a microscopic passenger — a modified rhinovirus, a carrier of the Parasite's retroviral vector. The sterilization protocols were impeccable. But they did not account for the factor of deliberate, intelligent sabotage committed by the hands of the most respected virologist on the planet.

At the daily WHO briefing, Craig looked tired but inspired.

«Colleagues, we are on the threshold of a discovery,» he said, and his voice, always dry, now sounded with almost messianic conviction. «This pathogen… it behaves not like an ordinary virus. It learns. It adapts. We must share all data without borders and without delay. Only in this way will we win.»

The hall applauded. His dedication to the cause brought a tear of respect. No one saw how under the table his fingers rhythmically tapped on his knee, transmitting into the ether a code inaudible to the human ear. A code that, through the open Wi-Fi networks of a neighboring café, seeped into the city network. The virus no longer needed only biological carriers. It was learning to use infrastructure. The first infected files — harmless PDF reports with executable scripts embedded in the metadata — were already being sent out through email newsletters of research institutes.

New York, USA.

Young laboratory assistant Michael Chen, having received the report from Geneva, downloaded it onto his work computer, breaking the rules. He was too lazy to go get a sterile flash drive. The file opened, showing graphs. An hour later, Michael had a runny nose. «Seasonal,» he thought, grabbing a handful of tissues. He was patient zero for North America. In the evening he went to the gym, then to a bar. He attributed his cough and sneezing to fatigue and air conditioning. He was a sociable guy. Over the evening he had close contact with 17 people. Each of them felt a slight malaise a day or two later. Like a cold. The most ordinary one.

Tokyo, Japan.

In the ultra-sterile laboratory of Keio University, technician Akira Tanaka, a man pedantic to the core, noticed something strange. The container from Geneva had a microscopic crack on the protective valve. A defect impossible by standards. He wanted to report it, but remembered how his boss revered Dr. Craig. «Don't raise panic over trifles, Tanaka. Don't disgrace us.» Akira said nothing. But the anxiety gnawed at him. At night he dreamed that black fog was crawling out of that crack and coiling around his throat. He woke up with a temperature of 37.2. «Stress,» he diagnosed himself and took a double dose of vitamin C.

Berlin, Germany.

At the Charité clinic, nurse Ilse, who had just returned from a business trip to Geneva for Craig's seminar, felt a strange thirst. Unquenchable. She drank two liters of water during her shift and still wanted to drink. Her colleagues joked: «Ilse, were you in the desert?» She laughed, but inside

she was growing cold. Her sense of smell had also sharpened. The smell of antiseptic, usually neutral, now stung her nostrils, causing nausea. The smell of blood from the surgical ward smelled… like a feast to her. She asked to go home, citing a migraine. On the way she bought three bottles of mineral water and a kilogram of lemons. She ate them all, with the peel, not noticing the acid.

Tayozhny Settlement, Russia.

The conversation with Uncle Gennady went unexpectedly peacefully.

«Fine,» Uncle said, looking somewhere past Artyom. «Let this thing stay with you. I… I read on the internet. About UFOs. There are contacts there, buyers. But it's dangerous. Very.»

He looked directly at his nephew, and in his eyes Artyom saw for the first time not anger but a confused, almost fatherly concern.

«Be… careful there. Don't get caught. And if it… starts shooting or hissing — bury it in the garden and forget about it. Deal?»

Artyom nodded, stunned. Uncle shook his head and went to his room, muttering something about a «trip to the city for a week on business.» Artyom understood — Uncle was simply running away. Shifting responsibility. And, in a sense, giving him carte blanche.

Returning to his cubbyhole, he sighed with relief. The first barrier was overcome. Now he could think about the ignition coil. He was already making a plan for how to sneak up to the «six» at night when the voice of Aya sounded with a new, alarming note.

«Artyom. Monitoring of global networks shows acceleration. The first wave of symptoms has spread beyond controlled laboratories. Cases have been recorded in New York, Tokyo, Berlin. The character of the symptoms is changing: unquenchable thirst, heightened sensory perception, aggression toward familiar smells, craving for raw protein. These are signs of the early stage of metabolic restructuring under the control of the Forerunner's neural network.»

«So they are already among people? Ordinary people?»

«Yes. The incubation period is from 12 hours to 3 days. The transmission rate is higher than that of measles. Official media still explain this as a „seasonal exacerbation of respiratory viruses of a new type." The phase of hidden growth has begun. You have 13 months and 27 days.»

Artyom sat down on the bed, feeling the floor slip from under his feet. It had been abstract when it came to graphs and percentages. But «thirst, raw meat, aggression» — that was already about people of flesh and blood. Like that laboratory assistant or the nurse who right now, perhaps, were drinking water or eating a lemon, not understanding that something alien was already living inside them.

«And here? In Russia? In Siberia?»

«No outbreaks yet. Geographic isolation is your temporary advantage. But it also means a lack of resources. You must begin immediately. The first logical step is to provide me with stable power and an interface. The ignition coil.»

The humor of the situation, black and merciless, washed over Artyom. While the world was slowly being infected by an alien parasite, his, a schoolboy's, main task was to steal a part from his uncle's rusty «penny» to charge an alien smartphone. Epic.

«All right. Let's go on a job.»

The night was pitch-black, moonless. Uncle Gennady was already snoring behind the wall, washing down his «business trip» with a hundred grams of moonshine. Artyom, armed with an old flashlight and a set of rusty keys obtained from the shed, crept out into the yard.

The «six» stood like a black ghost, covered in snowy grit. Artyom, trembling from cold and nerves, opened the hood. The smell of gasoline, oil, and rust hit his nose. In the light of the flashlight, a chaos of iron and wires appeared.

«Aya, I'm not a mechanic. Where is this coil?»

«To the left of the ignition distributor. A black cylindrical object with a central high-voltage wire and a four-contact connector.»

Artyom spent five minutes in agonizing search, dropping keys in the snow and swearing in a whisper. Finally, he found the «black cylinder.» The mount was rusted solid.

«It won't unscrew!»

«Apply physical force. Or find a tool called „liquid keys." In Uncle Gennady's garage, with a probability of 89%, it exists.»

«Liquid keys.» Artyom ran to the garage. In the glove compartment of a broken Moskvich, he actually found a can of WD-40. He returned, generously sprayed the rusty nuts, waited, squinted, and yanked the wrench with all his might.

There was a metallic SCREECH, and the coil, along with a piece of the bracket, was in his hands. At that same second, the door on the porch banged.

«Who's there?!» Uncle's hoarse voice thundered. «Thieves, scum!»

Blinded by the flashlight and panic, Artyom clutched the coil to his stomach and dashed into the darkness, around the corner of the bathhouse. He heard Uncle, in his underpants and felt boots, throw a log into the darkness and swear loudly and incoherently. Then the door slammed again.

Artyom, leaning against the cold logs of the bathhouse, caught his breath. His heart pounded like a jackhammer. In his hand he clutched a dirty, oil-stained cylinder — the key to the knowledge of a dead civilization.

«Got it,» he exhaled mentally.

«Excellent. The first practical skill has been acquired: resource extraction under constraints. Now we need graphite and silicon. Tomorrow — to the weather station.»

Artyom looked at the dark window of his room, where the sphere lay under the bed. Then at the coil in his hands. The path to saving humanity began with stealing car parts and fleeing in his underpants through the snow from his own drunken uncle. At some point he giggled quietly, hysterically. The apocalypse, damn it, turned out to be devilishly absurd.

Chapter 6. Lessons of a Dead Race

The journey to the abandoned weather station was a test of endurance. Ten kilometers along a forest road turned to slush by the thaw, with a backpack on his back containing the sphere, the ignition coil, and sandwiches with cheap sausage. Artyom walked, gritting his teeth from tension and cold, while in his head sounded the measured, imperturbable voice of Aya, delivering a lecture on biochemistry.

"...Thus, the Forerunner's retroviral vector does not simply insert its code into DNA. It creates «shadow chains' — parallel RNA structures that act as a secondary processor, intercepting control of cellular metabolism. Imagine that your cell is a factory. The virus does not break the conveyor belt. It substitutes the blueprints and installs its own dispatcher, who begins producing parts for a completely different mechanism…»

«Got it,» Artyom groaned, jumping over another dirty puddle. His legs already ached. «Factory, dispatcher. Can I have a practical example? How, for example, will this… «shadow chain' help me not fall face-first into this stuff?» He pointed at another swampy patch.

«Your request is rejected as irrelevant. However, to increase motivation: the knowledge presented is a tool. The better you understand the mechanism of infection, the more effective your future invention will be — the biological inhibitor. The inhibitor, roughly speaking, will play the role of a «system administrator' who finds and deletes the substituted blueprints, returning the factory to its original control.»

«Sounds like an antivirus program,» Artyom muttered, climbing onto a more or less dry hummock.

«A crude but acceptable analogy. Only here the virus is not digital code but a physical substance capable of evolution and defense. Your task is to write an «antivirus' for flesh.»

The weather station presented a sad sight: a leaning tower, several half-ruined wooden buildings with broken windows and rusty antennas. The wind roamed the empty rooms, carrying the smell of mold and decay. But for Aya, this was a treasure trove.

«Ideal. Solar panels on the roof of the third building. They are not functioning, but the photocells of monocrystalline silicon have survived. You need to carefully extract at least eight plates, trying not to damage the silicon substrates.»

«Substrates,» Artyom repeated mentally, climbing onto the slippery, rotten roof. His only tool was a large rusty wrench found at the threshold. The work turned out to be dirty and dangerous. The plates were fastened firmly, caked on. He hammered, yanked, scraped his hands bloody, and finally, with a crack, broke off the first one. Beneath it was that very shiny, almost mirror-like disc.

«Found it!»

«Excellent. Now graphite. Look for old salt batteries. In such facilities they were used for emergency power of sensors.»

Graphite was found in a collapsed shed, in a box of junk. Three huge, heavy «Uran» batteries, manufactured, it seemed, back under Tsar Gorokh. Artyom cracked one with a stone. Inside were thick black rods. He put the loot in his backpack, which now weighed like a dumbbell.

The return was even harder. By evening, exhausted, dirty, and wet, he reached home. Uncle was not there — he had apparently already left for his «city on business.» Artyom, barely standing, locked himself in his room, dumped the loot on the floor, and collapsed on the bed.

«That's it. I'm dead. Let the Forerunner take the planet. I can't anymore.»

«Physical exhaustion is understandable. But time does not wait. While you rest, I will begin the theoretical part of the assembly. You need to master the basic principles of quantum carbon-nickel electronics.»

«What?» Artyom raised himself on his elbow, looking at the sphere lying peacefully in the corner. «I don't even know such words!»

«That is why I will explain. First principle: in your semiconductors, the charge carriers are electrons. In my technology, controlled quantum states of carbon clusters are used. This allows for orders of magnitude increase in recording density and speed…»

Artyom listened, and his head spun. This was not the physics he loved. This was magic. Higher mathematics mixed with chemistry and something beyond. He caught familiar words — «electron,» «lattice,» «voltage» — but on the whole it resembled trying to understand an opera in a Chinese dialect.

«Stop!» he finally pleaded. «I don't understand! You're talking like a textbook for geniuses! I need… for dummies. With pictures. And, preferably, with practice.»

A pause ensued in his consciousness. Then Aya's voice sounded differently — a little slower, with an almost pedagogical intonation.

«Accepted. Adapting methodology. Visualizing.»

Before his mind's eye appeared not a diagram but… a game. Something like «Tetris,» but instead of blocks, atoms of carbon, silicon, and copper fell. They had to be arranged into specific structures.

«What is this?»

«An educational simulator. Gamification. Your task is to build a stable memory cell. Starting simple: diamond-like lattice. Connect the carbon atoms.»

Artyom, driven more by curiosity than understanding, mentally «grabbed» atoms and tried to fit them together. The first ten attempts ended with the structure crumbling into virtual dust.

«Incorrect. Carbon forms tetrahedral bonds. Angle—109.5 degrees. You are trying to build squares.»

«How was I supposed to know about some tetrahedrons?»

«Now you know. Try again.»

Half an hour later, Artyom, gritting his heart and teeth, assembled a crooked but stable lattice. An approving ping sounded in his head, and the lattice glowed with a soft blue light.

«Acceptable. Moving to the next level: introducing a silicon impurity to create a P-N junction.»

«Oh, no…»

The training stretched long past midnight. Artyom went from complete incomprehension to a vague epiphany. It was like assembling an incredibly complex Lego blindfolded, but gradually the rules of the game began to emerge. He learned that «quantum carbonics» was not magic but a logical development of technologies that had simply gone a thousand years ahead. And that all this knowledge fit into principles that could be understood if one discarded fear and worked.

By morning, with red eyes and a cotton-wool head, he had nevertheless assembled a prototype memory cell the size of a molecule in the simulator.

«Progress satisfactory. Now practice. Take the graphite rod. You need to create a region with an altered crystal structure in it using a high-voltage discharge from the ignition coil. I will guide you.»

Practice turned out to be a hundred times harder. He had to secretly run an extension cord from the house to the old shed, assemble a primitive circuit from wires, a coil, and a piece of iron. The first discharge struck so hard that sparks flew in all directions, and the shed smelled of burnt insulation. Artyom jumped back, nearly knocking over a jar of graphite dust.

«Are you trying to kill me?!» he hissed.

«No. I want you to learn. The voltage was too high. Add a ballast resistor to the circuit. Look in the parts box — a brown cylinder with colored stripes.»

By noon, after the fifth attempt, he succeeded. On the tip of the graphite rod, at the point of impact, a tiny but visible area appeared, resembling not graphite but rather diamond chips. It glittered in the flashlight beam.

«It worked…» Artyom exhaled, collapsing onto a box of nails. His hands were shaking, his ears ringing, but inside raged a strange, triumphant fatigue. He had DONE something. Not according to a textbook, but according to blueprints from another world.

«Congratulations. You have created the basis for a quantum bit — a qubit, in your terminology. This is the first step. Now you need to repeat this several million times under controlled conditions to create a working storage device.»

A million times. Artyom groaned and fell onto his back, looking at the cobwebs under the shed ceiling.

«Can't I just buy a 512-gigabyte flash drive? I'll steal money from Uncle.»

«Not enough. I need an interface capable of processing and modeling biological processes in real time. To create the inhibitor, simulation of millions of protein structures will be required. Your flash drive will burn out on the first attempt. But this… this will work.»

Artyom lay there and thought. Just a day ago he was a useless teenager with a broken laptop. Now he had fragments of an alien ship lying in his shed, he was learning to build computers out of graphite, and listening to lectures on saving the world. It was madness. But in this madness there was a strange, captivating logic. And what was most surprising — he was beginning to understand. Let it be at the level of «this thingy should connect to that one at an angle of 109.5 degrees.» But it was already something.

«All right,» he said, getting up. «Show me what to do next. But first — eat. I'm dying of hunger. The carbon clusters in my stomach demand a sandwich with sausage.»

«Reasonable. The biological carrier requires fuel. I recommend adding more protein to your diet. Your brain will work more efficiently.»

«Thanks for the concern,» Artyom snorted, making his way back to the house. «I hope Uncle has at least eggs in the fridge. Or did he take them with him «on business' too?»

The lessons of the dead race continued. And the first of them was the most important: to change the world, you first need to learn not to be afraid of soldering wires under voltage and to understand that even the end of the world can be broken down into simple, albeit incredibly complex, steps. And also — that saving humanity requires regular snacks.

Chapter 7. A Genius from Nowhere

A month later, Artyom Nadezhdin was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, financial ruin, and physical exhaustion. The shed had turned into an underground laboratory, cluttered with wires, burnt circuit boards, graphite dust, and fragments of silicon plates. Sheets of Whatman paper hung on the walls, covered with formulas that were half written by him and half appearing on their own after nightly «communication sessions» with Aya, leaving him with the feeling that someone else was guiding his hand.

He had created three prototypes of the «storage device.» The first exploded, nearly setting the shed on fire. The second remained silent as a cobblestone. The third, finally, showed signs of life — when connected to the laptop through a homemade adapter, a new disk icon appeared on the screen. Capacity: 1.4 petabytes. The number was so unreal that the diagnostic program considered it an error and froze.

«Hurray?» Artyom asked hoarsely, collapsing onto a stool. His hands trembled from sleeplessness and constant fear that Uncle Gennady would unexpectedly return.

«Basic functionality achieved. But this is merely an empty vessel. Now it must be filled with data and an interface module created for me. This requires purer materials. And money, Artyom. Significant sums.»

Money. That word became an obsession. He had spent all his modest savings (once set aside for a ticket out of this hell) on radio components, acid for etching boards, and food. Uncle, having returned from the city gloomy and offering no explanations, tossed him a wad of rubles: «For groceries. Don't ask for more.» That was enough not to starve but not for tungsten crucibles or lasers for sputtering.

«Where am I going to get money? Rob a bank?» he joked wearily.

«Criminal activity carries high risks of isolation and termination of the project. A legal source is needed. You possess knowledge surpassing the current technological paradigm of your planet. Having analyzed open markets, I see several low-level but commercially promising patents that you can implement with minimal investment.»

«Patents? I'm a minor child!»

«Age is a convention. Intellectual property has no age. You need a patent attorney and a first invention. I propose starting with something simple but revolutionary for your energy sector. For example, a hybrid supercapacitor based on modified graphene.»

Aya displayed a diagram in his consciousness. It was not a storage device for her but a simplified version adapted for Earth production. A device the size of a pack of cigarettes, capable of charging in seconds and delivering energy to power, say, a smartphone for a week or an electric car for hundreds of kilometers.

«And how am I going to make this? I don't even have a proper microscope!»

«The process can be adapted. You need a kitchen microwave, graphite from pencils, copper sulfate from a garden store, and an electrolyzer that we will assemble from plastic bottles. It will be primitive, crude, but workable for demonstrating the principle.»

Thus began Operation «Kitchen Genius.» While Uncle Gennady watched TV in the living room, Artyom conducted chemical experiments in the bathroom. The smell of ozone and burnt plastic he attributed to «cleaning old electronics.» The first batch of «graphene» was a black, sticky mush. The second — already something remotely resembling carbon flakes under a magnifying glass. The tenth, after a sleepless night and a dozen blown fuses in the panel, finally produced a result. A thin, elastic, silvery-black sheet emerged.

Having assembled the first supercapacitor prototype in a power bank casing, Artyom connected his ancient smartphone, discharged to zero. Three seconds later, the charge indicator showed 100%. He sat and stared at it, not believing his eyes. It worked. For real.

«Now you need a patent attorney. I have found a suitable candidate in the nearest large city. Elena Petrovna Semyonova. She has a reputation as an honest, though not particularly successful, specialist. Her weakness is gambling. She is currently in debt. She will be motivated to succeed in your case in exchange for a percentage.»

«You're suggesting I contact a gambling-addict lawyer? Sounds reliable.»

«She is desperate. Desperate people often take risks. And we are offering her not a risk but guaranteed success. Create an account, write to her on behalf of a fictional „Research Institute of Promising Developments of Siberia." Arrange a meeting in the city.»

A week later, Artyom, in his only decent sweater and with a backpack containing the prototype and printed theses dictated by Aya, sat in the «Northern Lights» café in the district center. Elena Petrovna turned out to be a stern woman of about fifty with intelligent, tired eyes and an expensive but worn bag.

«You… are the representative of the Research Institute?» she scrutinized his young face skeptically.

«I'm… the technical executor. A courier,» Artyom squeezed out the prepared phrase. «The professor couldn't come. He instructed me to deliver the sample and documents.»

He took out the prototype and a stack of papers. Elena Petrovna first looked at him with distrust, then took the papers. Her gaze ran over the formulas, diagrams, and description of the principle. Something stirred in her eyes — professional interest.

«This… who developed this? The theory looks insane, but… internally consistent.»

«That's a commercial secret,» Artyom said, as Aya had taught him. «Our institute operates in a regime of secrecy. We are prepared to offer you exclusive management of the patent portfolio. Remuneration—15% of all future licensing royalties. An advance — five thousand dollars after the first application is filed.»

He said this clearly, though inside everything snapped. Five thousand dollars! He didn't have five thousand rubles.

Elena Petrovna looked at him for a long time, then at the device, then back at him.

«Does the device work?»

«Yes.»

She silently took out her nearly discharged phone and connected it to the strange «power bank.» Within seconds, her eyebrows climbed upward. She disconnected it, waited, connected it again. The effect repeated.

«Lord…» she whispered. Then she sharply raised her gaze to him. «Fine. I'm in. But the advance is not five, but ten. And 20%. And I handle everything, from A to Z. You don't bargain with me. You have no way out.»

Artyom, obeying an internal prompt from Aya, slowly nodded.

«Ten and twenty. Deal.»

The patent application went to Rospatent in record time. In parallel, through shell companies in offshore jurisdictions that Aya created, clicking through digital barriers like nuts, applications were filed in the US, EU, and China. While the bureaucratic machine creaked its gears, Aya gave Artyom the next assignment.

«Energy is good. But we need fast money. Pharmaceuticals. A simplified formula for a nootropic based on modified peptides. Improves short-term memory and concentration by 40% without side effects. Synthesis is possible in a primitive laboratory. The formulation will look like an accidental discovery of „Siberian herbalists."»

And again the kitchen, now with a distiller assembled from glass jars and a refrigerator. Artyom, in a respirator and goggles, looking like a young mad scientist, brewed a potion from harmless pharmacy preparations and extracts of local plants that Aya made him gather in the taiga. The result was a white, bitter powder. They packaged it in gelatin capsules.

«And who's going to test this? Me?» Artyom asked with apprehension.

«First — on laboratory mice. Buy them at a pet store.»

The mice, fed the powder, navigated homemade mazes with frightening speed. The video posted on a video hosting channel called «Siberian Biotechs» first caused hype, then — the first serious call. From a representative of a large pharmacy chain. They needed a «natural and effective» product for students and managers.

The sale of the license for the production of the nootropic under a private brand brought the first real jackpot: 50,000 dollars. The money came to a shell account that Aya managed with virtuosity. For the first time in his life, Artyom held a bank card linked to an account with such a sum. His head spun.

He bought himself a new, powerful laptop. He acquired real laboratory equipment through the internet — a microscope, a spectrometer, a small clean-room tent. All of this was secretly delivered to an abandoned forest base of geologists twenty kilometers from the settlement, which Aya had found from satellite images. The shed had become too dangerous.

Uncle Gennady saw his nephew disappearing for days but coming back tired and somehow… different. Not withdrawn, but focused. Once he asked:

«Are you… still messing with that thing?»

«Messing,» Artyom answered curtly, not looking up.

«Got money?»

«Got some.»

Uncle grunted but didn't pry further. Perhaps he was satisfied that Artyom wasn't asking for money. Perhaps something else was gnawing at him.

Three months after the sphere fell, Artyom Nadezhdin, sitting in his new secret laboratory in the forest, looked at the screen. It showed a news feed. Reports of a «mysterious flu outbreak with psychiatric deviations» in Europe and the US had become regular. Authorities spoke of a «new aggressive strain» but assured that everything was under control.

Next to him on the table lay the finished storage device for Aya, the size of an external hard drive. It contained the entire technological base of her civilization. And the first, crude simulation of the biological inhibitor.

His bank account already held 200,000 dollars.

He was no longer a nobody. He was a genius from nowhere, with the ghost of a dead race living in his head and the seeds of technologies in his hands capable of making him rich or a savior. Or both. He looked at his hands — covered in scratches, traces of acid, and calluses.

«What's next?» he asked quietly.

«Next — scaling. We need a real factory. And it's time to start drafting Project „Ark." But first — buy yourself some proper food, Artyom Nadezhdin. Your body mass index is becoming alarming. A dead savior of humanity is inefficient.»

Artyom snorted, but the corner of his mouth twitched in a smile. The path to wealth had turned out to be thorny and smelled of burnt microchips and fir-tree nootropics. But he was on his way. And that was the main thing.

Chapter 8. Project «Ark»

Two hundred thousand dollars. For a sixteen-year-old kid from Tayozhny, it was a sum from a science fiction novel. He could buy an apartment in the city, a sports car, go anywhere, and forget about Uncle Gennady, about the slush, about everything. Artyom sat in his forest laboratory (now a insulated trailer with a diesel generator and satellite internet) and stared at the numbers in his banking app. They seemed unreal, like a dream.

«Congratulations on reaching the financial threshold of the first phase. Now we move to the main task. Money is not the goal. It is a tool. A tool for creating a shield. It is time to begin Project „Ark.“»

A three-dimensional hologram of the Earth unfolded in his consciousness. A grid of hundreds of glowing points, connected by thin lines, lay over it. These were not random locations. Each point had been carefully chosen: geologically stable platforms, away from tectonic faults and large aquifers, with natural cavities or old, abandoned mine workings.

«These are… bunkers?» Artyom asked, standing up and slowly walking around the hologram.

«Autonomous, self-sustaining ecosystem shelters. Each is designed for long-term habitation of 50 to 500 people, depending on class. Their task is to survive the peak of the pandemic, a nuclear exchange (the probability of which during collapse is 78.3%), and provide a staging ground for recovery.»

«Five hundred people! And there are… dozens of such points! That would cost… What kind of money? Two hundred thousand isn't even enough for one proper bunker!»

«You are thinking in terms of current construction estimates. We will use different technologies. Geopolymer concrete, modular assembly from composite panels with sprayed insulation, 3D printing of load-bearing structures on site from local raw materials. My calculations reduce the cost per shelter by 85% compared to market. Your current funds are the starting capital for the first prototype and land purchases.»

«Buy land? I'll be seventeen soon, but I'm still a minor! People will look at me strangely.»

«We will create a network of interconnected legal entities — foundations, research centers for survival, geological survey firms. They will be managed by a person we hire. I have already conducted a search. The ideal candidate is Olga Markova, 54 years old, former agronomist, currently a sales manager for seeds. She is honest, practical, has deep knowledge in biology and, importantly, lost her family in an accident five years ago. She is looking for a cause that has meaning. We will offer her meaning.»

Artyom listened, his head spinning. Just yesterday he was stealing an ignition coil, and today he was being offered to become a shadow empire.

«Okay, let's say. And the people? Who are we going to save in these… arks? How do we choose? Draw lots?»

«Drawing lots is inefficient. Selection must be multi-criteria. I have developed an algorithm. Priority is given to: 1) Bearers of critically important skills (doctors, engineers, scientists, experienced farmers). 2) Individuals with stable psyches and teamwork skills. 3) Young people of reproductive age with clean genetics (absence of hereditary diseases, high immune response). 4) Children. They are the future.»

«Clean genetics…» Artyom winced. «Sounds kind of… not our way.»

«It is pragmatic. Under conditions of limited resources and high environmental pressure, genetic defects can become fatal for the entire group. This is not a question of 'racial purity' but of species survival. Your genetic profile, by the way, is above average. Congratulations.»

«Thanks,» Artyom muttered without enthusiasm. «And how are we going to find them? Walk around with DNA tests and questionnaires: «Want to survive the apocalypse? Fill out this form'?»

«More elegantly. We will create several business directions. The research institute „Noosphere' will hire the best minds for 'hypothetical research on post-apocalyptic scenarios." The private clinic „Vita' will offer comprehensive genetic testing and contracts for 'cryopreservation of health." Through these channels we will gain access to data, psychological profiles, and will be able to unobtrusively offer 'special insurance' contracts — a guaranteed place in a safe zone in case of a global catastrophe. For a significant fee, of course.»

«So the rich can also buy themselves a spot?» Artyom asked with suspicion.

«Yes. But their share will be limited to 15% of each ark's capacity. Their money will accelerate construction. Their skills, often managerial or financial, may be useless or even harmful in the new world. But they are a necessary resource at the current stage. It is a compromise.»

Artyom paced the trailer in silence. The plan was grandiose, insane, and impeccably logical. Like everything Aya proposed. He felt not like a hero but like an apocalypse manager. And it was damn strange.

«And what about… my people? Uncle? The people from the settlement?»

«Uncle Gennady does not pass the criteria by psychological and genetic profile. His chances of adapting in a closed ark society are less than 4%. He represents a risk factor.»

Artyom clenched his fists. He knew it was true. Uncle in a bunker meant rebellion, drunkenness, and discord within a week. But he was… family. Such as he was.

«And Lera Volkova?» he suddenly asked. «Major Volkov's daughter. She's… studying to be a medic.»

«Valeria Volkova. Yes. Her profile is almost ideal: high intelligence, stable psyche, medical specialization, excellent genetics. Her father, Major Dmitry Volkov, is also of interest as a security and logistics specialist. They are on the priority list.»

This, for some reason, was a small consolation. At least someone from his old life besides him had a chance.

«Good. Where do we start?»

«Step one: meeting with Olga Markova. She lives in the regional center. You will go as a representative of the investment fund „Boreas," interested in agricultural technologies. Your goal is to hire her for an ambitious long-term project. Here is her dossier and conversation script…»

A week later, Artyom, in a new, slightly baggy suit («to look older») and with a briefcase (containing a tablet and a sandwich), sat in a cozy coffee shop, waiting for Olga Markova. He was so nervous that the coffee rattled in his cup.

She arrived on time — a woman with a stern, tired face and attentive eyes. They shook hands. Artyom, following Aya's prompts, spoke of «permaculture,» «closed agro-ecosystems for extreme environments,» and «private financing of long-term projects for the survival of humanity.» He expected her to smirk skeptically.

But Olga Markova listened more and more attentively. When he, stammering, reached the idea of creating experimental autonomous stations, she unexpectedly asked:

«Young man, is this all because of the news, right? About this strange flu in Europe? Are you… preparing for the worst?»

Artyom froze. He had not expected such a direct question.

«We… are considering various scenarios. Even unlikely ones.»

«They are not so unlikely,» Olga said quietly, looking into her cup. «I am an agronomist. I know how fragile the balance is. And I see how everything is rolling… And I am tired of selling seeds that ruin the harvest a year later. I need a cause. For the ages. Or at least for a generation. If you are serious — I'm in.»

Artyom exhaled. The first ally had been found. And she was far more perceptive than they had counted on.

That evening, back in his trailer, Artyom watched as Aya, through proxy servers, registered the first legal entity of the project — the «Ark» Foundation for Strategic Ecology. Director — Olga Igorevna Markova.

«Step one completed. Tomorrow we will begin purchasing the first land plots through the foundation — former quarries, abandoned mines. In parallel, I will search for and recruit key specialists: a geologist, a construction engineer with unconventional thinking, and a virologist who can work with the biological inhibitor when it is ready.»

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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