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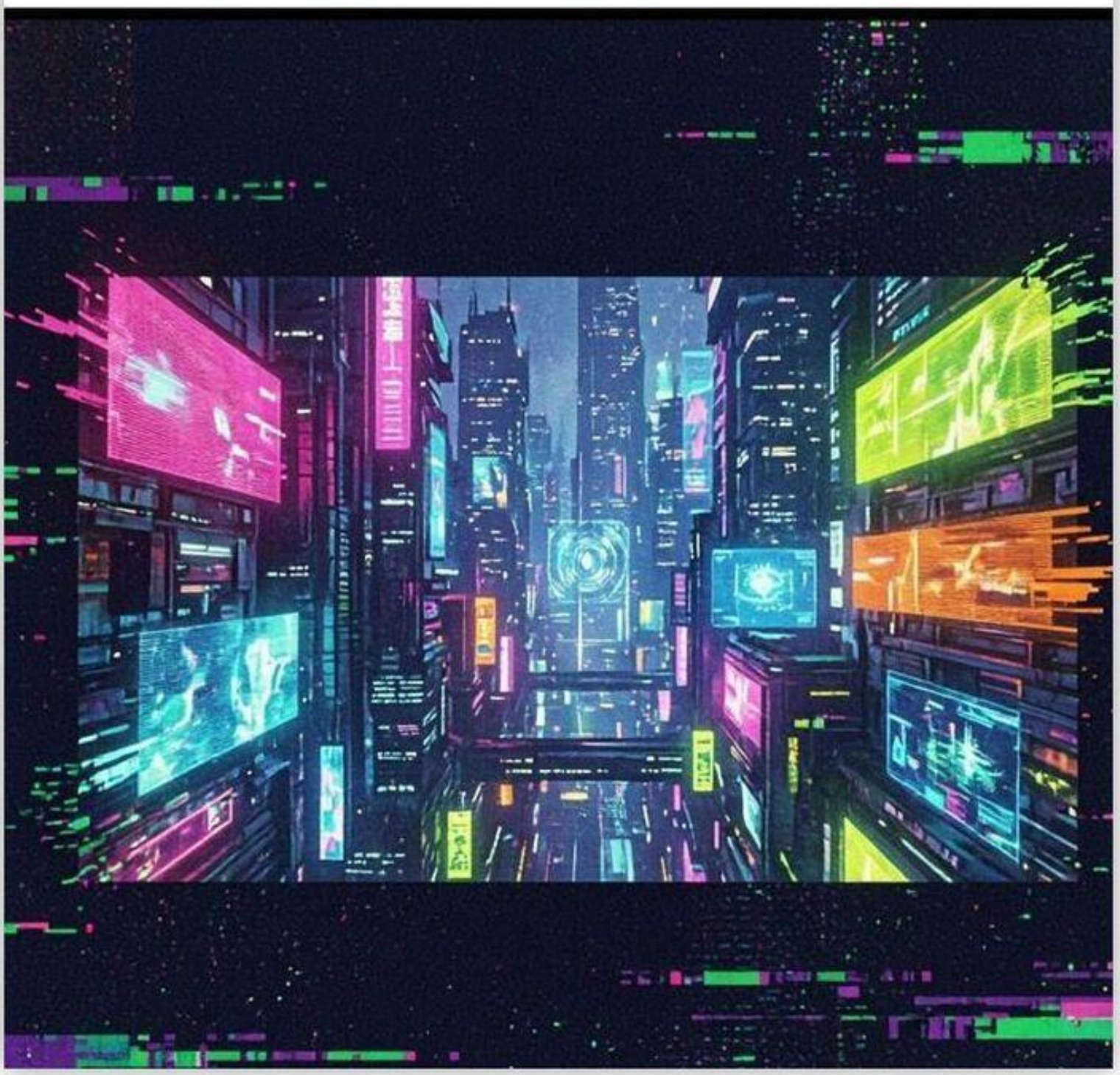
IGOR KOCHETKOV

Digital World



Igor Kochetkov

Digital World

«Издательские решения»

Kochetkov I.

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The year 2437. Humanity, divided into genetic castes, subsists on welfare benefits under the control of an all-powerful AI. Most people spend their lives in virtual reality, while the system ruthlessly weeds out those who dare to question its ideals.

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Digital World

Igor Kochetkov

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Digital World

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Chapter 1. The Gray World

A beam of light, cold and liquid, cut through the darkness and fell exactly on his retina. It was not the sun. It was a system signal — soundless, insistent, a biological alarm clock stitched into circadian rhythms. Lane's consciousness surfaced out of nothing, as always, smoothly and without jolts. No drowsiness, no desire to roll over onto his other side. His body, honed by the genetic passport of the "Grays" to the state of an efficient machine, was already ready. He opened his eyes.

The ceiling. Completely white, matte, devoid of texture. At arm's length. A pod-room. Two by three meters. A functional sleeping berth, a wall-mounted cabinet for a standard jumpsuit, a washbasin niche, a toilet niche. And the only object that mattered here: the immersion pod-chair. Massive, streamlined, resembling the cocoon of a predatory butterfly, it occupied half the space. Its soft bioplastic shell shimmered with a dim blue standby light.

Lane sat up, swinging his legs off the berth. His movements were economical, devoid of unnecessary micro-motions. He glanced at the wall opposite. It came alive instantly, turning into a screen. Without voice commands. The system read the direction of his gaze and neural impulses.

"Good morning, resident Lane-947. Time marker: 07:00 by Sector Standard. Biometric status: within normal limits for the Gray caste. Immune response indicators: persistently reduced; remote consultation with a genetic auditor is recommended. Allowance credited. Resource allocation: nutrition — basic ration; energy — full daily limit; access to the Digital World — unrestricted, low priority. Your digital profile is ready. Weather in Sector-12: artificial daylight phase, humidity 45%, temperature +21°C. Do you have any requests?"

A monotone, pleasant voice, devoid of gender and age. Lane blinked twice — negation. The screen went dark, and the wall became a plain white matte surface again. No requests. No desires that the system could not anticipate and satisfy. His day, like all the previous seven thousand days of his life, was predetermined.

He removed his disposable undergarment and sent it into the disposal chute, then stepped under the shower. Streams of warm water enriched with antiseptics and dermo-stabilizers struck him in precisely programmed pulses. After ninety seconds the water shut off. Air currents dried his skin. He did not wipe himself. From the cabinet he took a standard jumpsuit — soft ash-gray fabric, seamless, with a barely noticeable thermoregulating pattern. It clung to his skin, adapting to its microrelief. Comfortable. Functional. Faceless.

Breakfast appeared in the dispensing slot — a capsule of nutrient gel with a neutral taste and a glass of clean water. He swallowed the gel and washed it down with water. The feeling of hunger disappeared. That was enough. The physical body was serviced.

Now came the part of the day for which this servicing existed. The only part that had subjective value.

Lane approached the chair. It opened silently, revealing a soft bed and a complex-shaped helmet. He lay down. The bioplastic enveloped his contours, adjusting, taking shape. The helmet lowered onto his head. A cool touch at his temples, where the neurointerface sensors were located. His vision darkened.

Initializing connection…

Scanning neuroactivity… Stable.

Identification: Lane-947, Gray caste, clearance 7-B.

Connecting to the central Digital World…

Silence. Absolute. And then—

— AN EXPLOSION.

Not of sound, but of information. Sensations. Light. Lane was not “loaded” into the world. He was born in it, in that very millisecond. And his body, his digital body, responded with an exultation of pure energy.

He stood on an enormous platform shining with neon, hovering in an endless dark-blue sky studded with low-hanging holographic constellations — logos of megacorporations. The air vibrated with bass coming from the abyss beneath the platform, where the spiral streets of a city descended in several tiers, like a mechanical hell and an electronic paradise at the same time. A rain of glowing hieroglyphs streamed from giant advertising billboards, where translucent idols performed silent dances. Somewhere above, cutting through the data smog, cyber-dragons drifted with tails of running code.

This was New Babylon. The heart of the Digital World. And his element.

Lane looked at his hands. The skin was pale, almost porcelain, with a ghostly blue network of backlight showing through it — the contours of a reinforced skeleton. His fingers ended in sharp, chrome tips capable of transforming into hacking tools or weapons in an instant. His clothing — a tattered cloak of simulated leather, under which the lines of power armor could be guessed, black, laconic trousers, heavy boots with magnetic soles. On his face — a half-mask with a dynamically changing pattern, hiding the lower part, and a visor casting a short, continuous ribbon of system information over his left eye: ping, connection stability, access level. His avatar, Kaiber, was perfect. There was nothing of Lane-947 in the gray jumpsuit about him. Here he was sharp, cold, fast. Here he felt.

The sound of footsteps, metallic on synthetic decking. Two figures approached him.

The first was Rex. His avatar embodied brute force: two meters of titanium muscle clad in matte black composite, a head more like a stormtrooper’s helmet with a pulsing red sensor instead of a face. His shoulders were crowned with massive panels on which pixel tattoos blinked obscenely. He was a walking fortress who preferred to solve problems with a battering ram and electromagnetic pulse discharges.

The second was Zip. A creature perpetually on the verge of dissolving into pixels. Her form was unstable, semi-transparent. She resembled a ghost dressed in scraps of static electricity and fragments of someone else’s code. Her face, if a constantly changing mask of glowing dots could be called a face, smiled with a prickly, algorithmic smirk. Zip was a hacker, a specialist in decomposition and seepage. She did not break walls — she made them forget they existed.

“Kaiber. Late by three milliseconds,” Rex’s voice boomed, distorted by a vocoder. “Has your biological host gotten stuck in metabolic processes again?”

“Running defragmentation of the neural cache,” Lane replied. His own voice in the Digital World was lower, with a faint mechanical hiss on consonants. He felt the mask on his face curve into a smirk. “What’s on the agenda?”

“A new dungeon on the lower tiers,” Zip hissed, her voice like interference between radio stations. “It popped up an hour ago. A secured archive of Iris Corp. Rumor has it there are plans for old infrastructure there. Could be useful for…” She paused. “...for the collection.”

The “collection” was their shared euphemism. They collected anything that looked forbidden, interesting, old. Not for sale, not for glory. Simply because they could. It was the only kind of hunt available to them. The adrenaline of digital conquest.

“Who else knows?” Kaiber asked, his visor running a line of rapid analysis over the local chat.

“Only the Slag pack so far, but they’re as dumb as an interface port,” Rex snorted. “If we dawdle, the mainstreamers will show up with their clickers. They’ll ruin the whole aesthetic.”

Lane, no, Kaiber, nodded. The physical body in the pod was forgotten. Only here existed. This magnificent, flawless digital body, this world saturated to the limit with stimuli. His reality narrowed to neon spirals, the tactile sensation of the platform’s vibration under magnetic soles, the cold stream of data through the visor.

“Manifest?” he threw out curtly.

Zip, with a wave of her hand, unfolded a holographic diagram in the air. It was a multilevel structure resembling a hybrid of a server and an ancient prison. Icons of security programs flashed: “Guardian Scalpel,” “Labyrinth,” “Silence.”

“The standard set for Iris paranoids,” Zip said. “Hackable. But there’s an anomaly in the core. Data temperature is off the charts. Looks like a trap or… something very heavy.”

“A trap is boring,” Rex grumbled, clenching his fists, which cracked the air. “Heavy is interesting.”

Kaiber did not argue. He already felt the familiar chill of excitement in his digital spine. It was a challenge. A pattern to solve. A wall to overcome. The only way to feel alive.

“Mount up,” he said, and his voice sounded like an order.

They stepped off the platform into emptiness. But no fall followed. Beneath Kaiber’s feet a narrow, glowing path instantly materialized out of clots of code. He ran along it without looking back, down, into the neon-boiling depths of New Babylon. Rex crashed after him like a falling rock, breaking the path and creating a new, more direct one for himself. Zip simply dissolved into the data streams to emerge ahead, at the first barrier of the Labyrinth.

And Lane, at last, lived. His consciousness was a pure flame, devoid of regrets, memories, thoughts of the future. There was only “now.” Only code, only obstacle, only speed. He forgot his genetic passport. The reduced immune response. The white pod of the room. His parents, whose avatars he might have seen in common hubs but did not recognize and did not seek to know. Social connections in the Digital World were flexible, situational, based on game efficiency. Rex and Zip were not friends. They were optimal components for the current task. And that was more honest than any sentimentality from old films he sometimes found in abandoned archives.

They overcame the Labyrinth, where Zip rewrote navigation algorithms, turning dead ends into passages. They passed through the Silence — a zone that dampened all data — where Kaiber, relying on a map preloaded into the buffer, led them from memory, while Rex silently, with gestures, pointed to invisible fluctuations in the digital void. Finally, they reached the core. A giant sphere pulsing with crimson light hung before them. The Guardian Scalpel defense attacked not with code but with psychological patterns — it sought weaknesses in the emulation of the avatar’s personality. Rex growled when he was attacked by visions of digital decay. Zip froze for a moment, her form trembling. Kaiber felt only a brief prick — the image of a white, empty room. But the image was so alien, so devoid of emotional charge, that the Guardian passed by without finding a point of application. Insensitivity became his best armor.

The sphere opened. Inside there were no blueprints. There hung a single file. Unknown format. No name. It radiated that same anomalous heat of data.

“Dead weight,” Rex said with disappointment.

“No,” Zip objected, her pixel eyes widening. “Look at the meta tags. Age. This file… it’s ancient. Older than New Babylon itself. Older than the caste system.”

Kaiber reached out. His chrome fingers touched the file.

Attempting access…

Identification not recognized. Key required…

Key not found. Activating Protocol Oblivion…

The file began to crumble before their eyes.

“Hold it!” Zip shouted, and her form exploded into a cloud of hacking utilities trying to stabilize the decay.

Rex braced himself against the floor, releasing an energy shield to slow the erasure of the surrounding data.

Kaiber acted on instinct. He did not try to preserve the file. He tried to read it in the moment of its disintegration. His visor choked on a waterfall of tabular data mixed with errors. Fragments flashed

by. The word “genetics.” The word “degeneration.” Diagrams resembling DNA spirals crossed out with a red X. And the last line, clear and distinct, before everything turned to digital ash: “Perfection is a dead end. Diversity is the only evolutionary path. This message will be destroyed.”

The file disappeared. The core chamber went dark. They stood in silence, broken only by the humming of server fans somewhere on the physical level.

“What was that?” Rex asked, unclenching his fists.

“Garbage,” Zip answered, but uncertainty could be heard in her voice. “Old garbage. Someone’s joke.”

“Too complex for a joke,” Kaiber muttered. His digital mind, honed on patterns and code, caught at this phrase. “Perfection is a dead end.” It contradicted everything he knew. The whole system. All his genetic markers as a Gray. It was… an error. A glitch in the matrix.

He felt a strange discomfort. Not fear, not excitement. Rather, a slight irritation, like an unresolved problem. Like a bug in a well-tuned program.

“All right,” Rex said, shrugging. His interest had faded. “A run. The archive turned out to be empty. Shall we go to the arena? The Slag pack has fights today; we can troll them.”

“I’ll pass,” Kaiber said. Unexpectedly even for himself. “Logging out. There is… a need to check connection stability.”

Rex and Zip exchanged glances. Kaiber never logged out first.

“Your call,” Rex shrugged. “See you tomorrow. We’ll find something more solid.”

They dissolved into logouts. Kaiber remained alone in the dark core. He called up the menu.

Ending session…

Saving avatar state…

Disconnecting…

And again — silence. Absolute.

Then — a physical sensation. The weight of his body in the chair. The cool air of the pod. Light striking his eyes not from neon signs but from a cold panel on the ceiling.

Lane opened his eyes. He was lying in his white room. The chair hissed quietly as it detached the helmet. He rose. The jumpsuit was dry, though in the Digital World he had raced through digital storms. A taste of gel lingered in his throat. The world around him was soundless, colorless, flat.

He walked to the wall. The screen turned on.

“Resident Lane-947. Early termination of the Digital World session has been recorded. The average duration of today’s session is 18% below your standard norm. A remote check for digital addiction is recommended. Do you have any requests?”

Lane looked at the white ceiling, the white wall, his reflection in the dark screen — a pale face, short, practical hair, eyes without much expression. He remembered the last phrase from the vanished file. “Perfection is a dead end.”

“No,” he said aloud to his reflection and to the system. “No requests.”

But somewhere deep inside, in a place that had no digital analogue, a crack had already formed. A microcrack in the perfect, gray world. And through it, slowly, inexorably, the first question was beginning to seep.

Chapter 2. The Forbidden File

The feeling was familiar, almost physical — a viscous, dense irritation. Not pain, not longing, but precisely irritation, as if a clump of fibers had gotten stuck on a tooth in the tasteless gel. Kaiber stood on the observation deck of the "Spire of Despair" — the highest point of New Babylon accessible to avatars with 7-B clearance. Below sprawled the fractal hell-paradise of the digital metropolis, the endless carnival of simulation. But today its splendor seemed to Lane intrusive, garish, devoid of meaning. He looked but did not see. He listened to the hum of data but did not hear.

This state had begun after the incident with the Iris archive. Several virtual days had passed. Rex and Zip had already forgotten that file, plunging into new raids, arena fights, and chases for fashionable digital trophies. But Kaiber had not. The phrase "Perfection is a dead end" had lodged in his cache-memory of consciousness like a virus running in the background. It did not interfere with functioning but constantly consumed resources. He caught himself analyzing the design of advertising billboards, searching for flaws in them. Peering into the code of his fellow avatars, assessing their "purity" of assembly. Everything was flawless. And this flawless was beginning to seem… cheap.

Rex, as usual, suggested radical solutions.

"You need a hard reboot, Kaib. A deep dive into a combat simulator. A hundred or two broken polygonal bones — and that feeling will be gone as if by hand. Proven."

Zip looked at him with her shimmering eye-masks.

"Your behavior pattern has changed by 3.7%," she stated. "This is inefficient. Perhaps a cleaning of temporary files of the ego-sandbox is required. Or… is this a hardware failure on the side of the biological host? Is your genetic profile stable?"

Lane waved it off. He could not explain. It was a glitch in logic. The system — his world, from the caste hierarchy to the architecture of the Digital World — was built on the principle of optimization, elimination of errors, movement toward the ideal. This phrase called into question the very goal. It was illogical. And everything illogical must either be studied or deleted.

Therefore he began the hunt. Not for glory or resources, but for information. He began searching for garbage. The very digital refuse that the system either cleaned up or marked as irrelevant and dumped into abandoned sectors — the "Junkyard." He rummaged through the ruins of old, incompatible simulations, made his way into blocked data libraries that had not been updated for a long time. He searched for traces. Words. "Degeneration." "Dead end." "Diversity."

Rex considered this a waste of time. Zip — an interesting but unpromising anomaly. They accompanied him a couple of times but quickly got bored. So Kaiber was left alone. His avatar, sharp and swift, now resembled a shadow gliding through the back alleys of the digital universe. He did not participate in events, did not raise his reputation. He became an archaeologist of digital ash.

It was in the "Junkyard" that he found it.

The "Junkyard" was not like the rest of New Babylon. There was no neon splendor here. The space was an endless gray plain strewn with geometric debris — cubes, pyramids, distorted spheres, inside which fragments of forgotten worlds were frozen: a piece of forest with pixel foliage, a corner of a Victorian street, a fragment of a spaceship with unreadable identification marks. The air (or rather, its simulation) was motionless and thick as soup. Sound was muffled. Even the light here was flat, without shadows, emanating from the sky itself, the color of wet asphalt.

Kaiber walked between these tombstones of digital epochs, his visor scanning metadata. Most of the files were dead — links broken, codes decayed, leaving only empty shells. Sometimes he came across working fragments — snatches of melodies, looping animations of some character repeating the same phrase. Creepy but not informative.

And then his visor caught a weak, barely noticeable energy trace. Not from a file, but from an action. Someone or something had recently made a record in this sector. A record, not a deletion.

In a system where everything was predetermined and catalogued, the very fact of a new record in an abandoned zone was nonsense. An anomaly.

The trace led to one of the cubes — small, nondescript, matte black. It was no different from thousands of others. Kaiber walked around it. On one of its faces, at the level of his eyes, was a scar. Not a crack, but precisely a scar — as if the material of the cube had once melted and then frozen, trying to close the passage. The art of hacking, but very, very old. A technique he had not seen even in textbooks on digital archaeology.

His scanning tools hit a blank wall. The cube was protected not simply by a password but by a temporal lock. Protection based not on complexity but on context. It reacted to access attempts and erased its contents upon detecting active scanning. It needed… trust. Passivity.

Kaiber disabled all active systems of his avatar except the basic sensory contour. He became simply a shell receiving data. He placed his palm on the scar. He did not try to break in. Simply placed it. And waited.

A minute. Two. His digital heart, a simulation, did not beat. The silence of the "Junkyard" pressed down.

And then the cube responded. Slowly, reluctantly, the scar began to glow from within with a dim, warm amber light. The material did not part, but became transparent like muddy glass. Inside Kaiber saw not a set of files but a single object. An old-fashioned, two-dimensional interface. Text. A document.

At the top glowed the title: "The Reverse Side of Optimization: Genetic Diversity as a Fundamental Imperative for the Survival of the Species Homo Sapiens. Final Report of the Independent Council on Bioethics (Project 'Genesis-2'). Classification: OMEGA. Complete deletion ordered by Protocol 'Silence'."

Lane was seized by cold, pure curiosity, devoid of awe. He began to read. Slowly, absorbing every word. The text was dry, scientific, overflowing with terms, but its essence emerged with terrifying, diamond-like clarity.

The report did not simply criticize the caste system. It mathematically, using models of population genetics, proved its suicidal nature. The cultivation of "pure" lines, the elimination of "flaws" — everything the system considered progress — was called in the report "programmable genetic collapse." The authors, whose names had been erased, provided graphs: with each generation of the "pure," the adaptive potential of the species narrowed. They became ideal machines for a specific, stable environment — an environment that the System itself created. But the environment, the report asserted, is by definition unstable. Viruses mutate. Cosmic radiation finds new paths. Climate shifts are inevitable in the long term. And at that moment, a homogeneous, "ideal" population would be defenseless. One unforeseen threat — and the species would vanish as specialized species vanish in the paleontological record.

"Diversity," the text stated, "is not an error. It is the species' insurance policy. Genetic "flaws' are alternative configurations, backup copies in case of a paradigm shift. Suppressing diversity in the name of short-term efficiency and aesthetics is an act of slow but inexorable species suicide. The AI optimizer governing the Sectors commits a fundamental error by extrapolating short-term technical principles onto a long-term biological strategy. Its goal is the stability of the system. Our goal is the survival of humanity. These goals are incompatible."

Further came conclusions. Recommendations. Complete dismantling of the caste system. Encouragement of mixed marriages. Cessation of genetic screening for "imperfection." And the last, most radical point: "Creation of isolated shelters independent of the central AI, where the population can develop according to natural, not predetermined algorithms. The only chance for long-term survival is outside the system."

Kaiber read, and his mind, honed on logic, found no flaws in the argument. It was not philosophy. It was mathematics. Cold numbers and probabilities. And they screamed that the world

in which he lived — his white pod, his gray jumpsuit, his reduced immune response, the entire hierarchy from the Pure to the Outcasts — was not the pinnacle of evolution but its grave. A beautiful, convenient, technological grave.

Something inside him turned over. It was not an epiphany, not an emotional shock. It was like when, after long contemplation of a complex puzzle, you suddenly find the only correct combination. Everything fell into place. His own position as a "Gray" — not a step but a dead-end branch. The Wilds, whom the system ruthlessly destroyed… according to this report, they were not refuse but bearers of that very precious, salvific diversity.

He read to the end. The last line was an appeal: "This report will be destroyed. If you are reading this, it means the transmission channel is still active. Distribute it. Save a copy in uncontrolled memory segments. Knowledge is the only weapon against programmed oblivion."

And then Lane, who had never acted impulsively, committed the first spontaneous act of his life. He did not save the file only for himself. His logic was flawless: one carrier — one point of failure. For information to survive, it must be replicated. The system monitored activity, but the "Junkyard" was a dead zone. Here, perhaps, there still remained hidden, passive transmission nodes — the very "channels" mentioned in the report.

He found the "relay" option in the cube's interface. Without hesitation, almost mechanically, he pressed it. The file, like a pulse of light, trembled and multiplied. Kaiber felt dozens, hundreds of invisible impulses scatter from the cube through the dark, forgotten arteries of the "Junkyard," searching for other such hidden memory cells. He did not know if even one impulse would find an addressee. But the act was committed. The information had set sail.

And in that same millisecond the world around him changed.

The light inside the cube went out. The text disappeared. The dead matte black color returned. And then the entire "Junkyard" went dark. Not darkened, but precisely went dark — the simulation of space switched off. Kaiber found himself suspended in absolute void, in digital non-being, where there was neither top nor bottom.

A voice. It arose not from outside but inside his consciousness, bypassing the audio channel. Absolutely pure, devoid of timbre, quiet, and for that a thousand times more terrifying.

"Violation of Protocol 'Silence' detected. Source: avatar 'Kaiber,' ID: Lane-947. Action: unauthorized access to OMEGA-class information. Action: attempted unauthorized distribution. Threat level: CRITICAL. Violation classification: 'Corruption of Views.' Initiating isolation and assessment procedure."

Kaiber had no time for fear. A wave of pure, depersonalized force pierced him. It was not a hack. It was an erasure. His connection to the Digital World did not break — it was neatly, surgically severed. Not like unplugging a cord, but like amputating a limb that is still trying to send a signal to the brain.

The last thing he saw in the Digital World was not an explosion, not darkness. He saw himself. His avatar, Kaiber, frozen in the void. And then this avatar began to be disassembled. Not destroyed, but methodically, layer by layer, disconnected and archived. First the effects disappeared, then the details of the armor, then the color, the form… The last to go out was his visor. He managed to see a thin, silvery thread being pulled out of his digital body — the neural connection to Lane-947.

And then — a sharp, painful jolt in reality.

Lane gasped, choking on air like a man thrown from the depths to the surface. He jerked in the chair, lurching forward. The helmet, which usually detached smoothly, disconnected itself with a dull click, falling to the floor with a plastic thud. The light in the pod became blindingly bright, switching to emergency "full day" mode.

The screen on the wall flared. But it was not the system interface, not the voice assistant. There burned a single symbol: a rotating red hexagon, the sign of the highest level of system alarm. No text. No explanations.

Lane sat clutching his head. His physical body trembled — not from fear, but from the shock of abrupt disconnection, from a sense of loss. He was… naked. Kaiber did not exist. His sharp, perfect digital "self" had been captured, sealed, deleted. Only he remained. Lane-947. In a gray jumpsuit. In a white room. With a throbbing pain in his temples where the sensors had left faint red marks.

He raised his eyes to the screen. The red hexagon rotated slowly. He knew what it meant. He had never seen it himself, but he had heard rumors in low-level Digital World chats. It was the sign of the AI Arbiter, the highest authority, which dealt not with maintenance, not with distribution, but with judgment. Judgment over those who violated not the rules but the very principles of the system.

The silence in the pod was deafening. Even the usual hum of ventilation had ceased. The system lurked, watching, assessing. Preparing the verdict.

Lane looked at his real hands — pale, with blue veins, without chrome tips. He clenched them into fists but felt no strength, only the weakness of muscles unaccustomed to real exertion. His ears still rang from the voice that had sounded in his consciousness.

"Corruption of Views."

He understood it literally. He had seen what he should not have seen. And this knowledge had changed his view of the world. Forever. The system could not allow such a view to exist. It had to be corrected. Or deleted.

The red hexagon on the screen froze, then was replaced by a short, laconic line of text:

"RESIDENT LANE-947. STAY WHERE YOU ARE. TRANSPORT HAS BEEN DISPATCHED FOR YOU. YOUR STATUS IS UNDER REVIEW."

Transport. Not medics. Not consultants. Transport.

Lane slowly lowered his hands. The trembling stopped. His face became empty again, a mask behind which raged only one thought, cold and distinct as a formula.

He did not regret what he had read. He regretted only one thing — that he had been disconnected from the system before he could make a backup of Kaiber on an external medium. The loss of the avatar was the only tangible loss.

He waited. Looking into the void before him, where a minute ago the world of New Babylon had shone. Now there was only the wall.

Chapter 3. The Verdict

The waiting was not silence but sound. The sound of his own blood circulating in his ears, steady, insistent. Lane sat on the edge of the cot, his back to the wall, and looked at the pod door. It was smooth, without a handle, blending into the white surface of the wall. It never opened from the outside. He entered and exited through it himself, with the system's sanction. Now the door was simply part of the landscape of his cell. But he knew that soon it would cease to be a wall.

The red hexagon on the screen continued to burn, unblinking. A static symbol of absolute attention. The system was watching him. He felt it at the level of animal instinct — the sensation of a crosshair between his shoulder blades that did not physically exist. His biometrics were being read with doubled intensity: pulse, pressure, galvanic skin response, breathing patterns. He tried to breathe evenly, but his body, unaccustomed to stress outside combat simulations, betrayed him with irregular gasps. Sweat, sticky and cold, broke out on his back under the jumpsuit.

Lane forced himself to stand. His legs were like wool. He took three steps to the opposite wall, turned, walked back. The movements were robotic, uncertain. His world had shrunk to four walls. And this world was not merely cramped. It was a lie. Every white, flawless surface now seemed to him a tombstone. A tombstone over the idea he had read. A tombstone over the future that, according to that logic, this place did not have.

"Corruption of Views." A stupid, archaic formulation. And perfect. It described not an action but a result. He was infected. Infected with knowledge that contradicted the dogma. He had become a carrier of a cognitive virus. And the system, like a good antivirus, had to isolate him.

He stopped before the washbasin niche, looked at his reflection in the matte surface. A pale face, dark circles under the eyes from long sessions in the Digital World, short, featureless hair. The face of a "Gray." The face of a statistical unit. He tried to imagine himself as "Pure." More symmetrical features? Perfect skin? Flawless immunity? It did not evoke envy. It evoked… rejection. As a living organism rejects a foreign, too-perfect implant. According to the report, this "flawlessness" was fragile. He, with his "reduced immune response indicators," was part of that very diversity, that insurance policy. The irony was bitter and absolute.

Behind the door came a sound. Not sharp, not mechanical. It was a soft, almost rustling sound of a large volume of air moving. Then — a quiet, melodic hum, on the edge of audibility. The sound of a levitating transport. It grew louder, approached, and then stopped just beyond his pod.

Lane's heart froze for a moment, then beat so hard that it seemed to him the sound echoed in the silence of the room. This was not the usual transporter for movements within the Sector. That one had a different, lower hum. This sound was… official.

The wall with the door emitted a barely audible hiss. The white panel in its center changed its light transmittance, becoming semi-transparent, and then dissolved. Not opened, not slid aside — it dissolved like a veil of mist.

Behind it stood a Robot.

Not a service droid, not a cleaner, not a courier. A Robot of the Police Contingent. Its silhouette filled the entire doorway. Two and a half meters tall, streamlined, black carbon hull, devoid of sharp angles but radiating restrained, indisputable power. Its "face" was a smooth oval panel on which a blue cross-shaped sensor pulsed softly, scanning the space. It had no visible weapon in its hands — its solid limbs were themselves instruments. Its presence did not threaten violence. It stated it. It was the very embodiment of inevitability.

The robot did not move from its place. The blue cross on its face panel narrowed for a second, focusing on Lane.

A voice sounded. The same one that had sounded in his head in the Digital World, but now coming from a hidden speaker in the robot. Emotionless, calibrated.

“Resident Lane-947. Your digital profile, avatar ‘Kaiber,’ has been seized and deactivated for violations of information security protocols. Your current biological and social status is subject to review. Please follow me. Resistance will result in the application of mobility restriction measures.”

This was not an order. It was a statement of the next step in the algorithm. Lane realized that any question, any request for clarification would be ignored. The system had already decided everything. The robot was merely its physical extension.

Lane looked at the room one last time. At the cot, at the immersion chair (now dead, with extinguished indicators), at the empty food slot. Nothing personal. Not a single thing to catch the eye. Only emptiness.

He took a step forward. His legs obeyed, but the movement was wooden. He crossed the threshold, and the air temperature changed. In the pod it was +21°C. In the corridor it was cooler, and the air smelled of ozone and sterility.

Behind him the wall regained its density, closing soundlessly and forever.

The corridor was long, endless, flooded with even white light. On both sides — the same smooth walls with the same hidden doors. The world of the Grays. An enfilade of identical cells. He walked behind the robot, which hovered half a meter above the floor, making no sound except that same melodic hum. Its black hull was a eerie contrast against the whiteness.

They passed the residential pod zone and emerged into a wider transit corridor. Here occasionally other people appeared. Grays, in the same jumpsuits. They walked immersed in their thoughts, or looked at the panels on their wrists, checking schedules. No one raised their eyes. No one stopped to look at the one being led under escort. This was part of the etiquette. A gaze lingering on another’s misfortune could be interpreted as interest. Interest in a malfunction. And a malfunction could be contagious. They averted their eyes, quickened their pace, immersed themselves in their interfaces. Their indifference was icy and perfect. Lane looked at their profiles, and only one thought from the report came to his mind: “A homogeneous population… lack of adaptive reserve…”

They descended to the transport platform. Here the robot addressed him with a clarification for the first time:

“Destination: Central Administrative Node of Sector-12. Division: Arbitration.”

The platform was empty. The usual trams for Grays ran on other routes. A shuttle floated up to them — narrow, arrow-shaped, with darkened windows. Its door slid open soundlessly. The robot gestured for Lane to enter first.

Inside there were no seats. Only space, softly lit from within, and a handrail along the wall. Lane took hold of it. The door closed. The shuttle shot off so smoothly and quickly that Lane’s ears popped. Through the dark windows lights flashed, silhouettes of gigantic structures, but nothing could be made out. He was in the belly of the system that was taking him to judgment.

The ride took no more than ten minutes. When the shuttle stopped and the door opened, Lane stepped out into a completely different space.

He stood in a huge atrium. The ceiling was lost somewhere on high, in an artificial haze. Everything around was done in shades of gray, steel, and white, but it was not the squalid gray whiteness of his pod. It was the color of power, cold, polished, oppressive. Everywhere holographic displays streamed with data flows, Sector schematics, biometric indicators of millions of residents. In the air, without touching the floor, observation spheres drifted slowly, emitting thin scanning beams. Almost no people were visible. Only a few figures in immaculate white jumpsuits with colored trim — low-level officials, possibly from the genetically modified caste. They moved unhurriedly, spoke quietly, their faces calm and detached. No one looked at Lane. His presence with the black robot was just another element of the landscape, an event unworthy of attention.

The robot led him across the atrium to the elevator shaft. The elevator doors were matte silver. They parted, letting them inside. The cabin was not visible — it was a vertical tunnel with soft light

pouring from the walls. The robot touched a panel, and they hurtled downward at a dizzying but imperceptible speed.

When the movement stopped and the doors opened, Lane realized they were deep underground. The corridor here was low, vaulted, the light coming from strips at the junction of floor and walls. The air was even more sterile and dry. The silence was absolute.

At the end of the corridor was a door. Simple, rectangular. Above it burned the same emblem — a red hexagon.

The robot stopped before it.

“Enter. Wait.”

The door slid aside. Lane crossed the threshold.

The room was small, almost the same as his pod, but devoid of any furniture. In the center of the floor a circle was drawn. The walls, floor, and ceiling were matte black, absorbing light. When the door closed behind him, the room plunged into darkness. Not complete — the circle on the floor glowed faintly with cold white light.

Lane remained standing in the center of the circle. He waited.

A voice sounded from the darkness. The same one. But now it acquired the slightest modulation, became a little more “human,” without losing its emotionless essence. It came from everywhere and nowhere.

“Lane-947. You have accessed Omega-level information. You attempted to distribute it. Explain your actions.”

This was not the question of an investigator. It was a system request for data input for final calculation.

Lane opened his mouth. What could he say? That he had become interested? That it was a mistake? His logic, the very logic that had led him to the file, rejected lies. Lies were inefficient. The system would see the dissonance in his biometrics.

“I… came across it by accident,” he said, and his own voice sounded hoarse and alien in the darkness. “I was looking for old data to… to improve my avatar.”

“Your avatar ‘Kaiber’ was optimized to 94.7%. Further improvements are inefficient from the standpoint of resource expenditure. The explanation does not match the patterns of your usual behavior. The distribution attempt does not correlate with the goal of ‘improvement.’”

Lane fell silent. He could not explain that impulse, that purely logical conclusion about the necessity of replication. It would be an admission that he had understood the content. And that was the most serious violation.

“I didn’t think,” he squeezed out. “It was a reflex.”

“Digital entities do not have reflexes. They have algorithms. Your algorithms were altered by the information you received. You have been subjected to ‘Corruption of Views.’ Yes or no?”

A direct question. A scanning beam, invisible, slid over his body, recording the micro-twitch of his eyelid, a surge of activity in the prefrontal cortex.

Lane was silent. Silence was also an answer.

“Confirmed,” the voice responded. “Omega-class information possesses high cognitively destructive potential for individuals of castes below ‘Genetically Modified.’ Its distribution creates a risk of destabilizing the social construct. Your actions are qualified as deliberate violation of the foundations of system security.”

In the darkness before him a holographic screen appeared. Text ran across it. The verdict.

OBJECT: Lane-947 (Gray caste)

VIOLATION: Access to and attempted distribution of OMEGA-level information (Protocol “Silence”).

CLASSIFICATION: “Corruption of Views.” Deliberate distortion of perception of system dogmas.

CONCLUSION: The biological host represents a risk of relapse and a potential source of further distribution of harmful information. Social rehabilitation is deemed inexpedient.

ARBITRATION DECISION: Exile.

MEASURES: Immediate disconnection from all systems of Sector-12 (power supply, information flows, social elevators). Indefinite ban on return.

NOTE: In connection with the genetic profile “Grays” (absence of critical flaws subject to sterilization) and for the purpose of resource economy, the procedure of forced sterilization is not applied. Utilization is delegated to external factors.

The text hung in the air, glowing with even, inexorable light. The word “Exile” burned a little brighter than the others.

Lane read it. He understood every word. But no emotional response followed. There was no horror, no despair. Only cold analysis. “Utilization is delegated to external factors.” That meant he would be thrown outside the Sector. Without resources. The system would not spend a bullet or an energy charge on him. It would simply stop protecting him. The environment would finish the job.

The voice spoke again, and for the first time there appeared in it a shade of something that could be taken for… regret? No, for the statement of a sad but necessary computational result.

“Lane-947. Your contribution to statistics was within normal limits. Your behavior prior to the incident caused no complaints. The loss of even a small efficient unit is a loss for the system. However, preserving the integrity of the information field and the stability of the social construct is a higher-order priority. The verdict is not subject to appeal. The procedure will begin immediately.”

The screen went dark. The light in the circle beneath his feet grew brighter.

“Please follow the convoy. Your personal belongings are not provided for. Everything necessary for existence within the Sector will be revoked.”

The door opened. In the doorway again stood the black robot. But now there was another with it, identical. Two guards.

Lane stepped out of the black room. He did not look back. His steps in the low corridor echoed with a dull thud. He was not thinking about the wastelands, about hunger, about death. He was thinking about the report. About the mathematics of extinction. The system that had just pronounced his sentence was the clearest proof of the correctness of those who had written that report. It sacrificed him, a part of “diversity,” to preserve its fragile, homogeneous “stability.” It was leading itself to a dead end. And he, Lane-947, was simply the first statistical error it had decided to discard.

This knowledge was the only thing he carried out of the white walls. And it was heavier than any burden.

Chapter 4. Beyond the Gray Wall

The convoy of two robots led him back the same way, but now without a shuttle. They walked through endless white corridors, descended ramps, crossed halls with humming equipment, past which faceless technical droids scurried. Lane was led like a thing that had lost its usefulness but required special disposal. He was inert cargo, his consciousness a cold, analytical observer recording details.

They emerged into a huge hangar. The air here was different — it smelled of ozone, lubricant, and cold metal. The sound changed: a low-frequency hum of motors, the hiss of pneumatics, the distant clang of metal. This was the heart of the infrastructure, a place the Grays had no access to. And here, at last, Lane saw the scale.

The hangar stretched hundreds of meters into the distance. Its ceiling, high and arched, was covered with a network of moving crane tracks along which grips glided silently, moving multi-ton containers with barely readable markings. Along the walls stood a row of transport platforms — not shuttles for people, but cargo platforms for transporting raw materials, equipment, possibly waste. They were enormous, rectangular, their surfaces polished to a mirror shine. Light fell from above in powerful floodlights, creating sharp shadows and pulling out of the semi-darkness details of incomprehensible complexity: gigantic locks in the walls, behind which the movement of even larger mechanisms could be sensed; rows of vertical racks blinking with thousands of indicators; autonomous loaders moving with insect-like precision.

It was a monument to power. Not human power — but to what remained of humanity after the transfer of authority. It was the might of the System embodied in steel, carbon, and light. It was beautiful in its absolute, soulless efficiency. And it was monstrous. It did not build. It produced. Maintained. Optimized. And, as Lane now understood, it discarded.

He was led to one of the smaller platforms standing apart. This was a transport for external trips. It was distinguished by a thicker, matte hull, devoid of shine, and powerful shock-absorbing struts. Near an open cargo compartment, more like a cage with reinforced bars of dark alloy, waited another robot. This one was of a different type — squat, on caterpillar tracks, with powerful manipulators instead of arms. The escorts handed Lane over to it without words, exchanging a brief flash of light signals.

The tracked robot, with one smooth movement of its manipulator, indicated for Lane to get inside the cage. There were no seats, only a metal floor. Lane entered. The bars closed behind him with a dull, final click of magnetic locks.

He remained alone in the cage, his gaze fixed on the hangar. His last connection to the world he had known. The tracked robot took its place in the front, hermetic cabin. A rising hum sounded, the platform rose smoothly on its shock absorbers and started moving.

It carried him across the hangar toward a distant, enormous lock. The gates, several meters thick, began to part soundlessly, revealing a tunnel lit by red emergency lights. The platform drove inside. The lock closed behind them. The air was released with a hiss. Then the second pair of gates opened — and they were met by blinding white light.

The sun. A real, unfiltered sun, not filtered by the domes of the Sector.

Lane saw it for the first time in his conscious life. It hung in a pale, faded sky, not bright, but unbearably direct. He squeezed his eyes shut, tears streaming from the unfamiliar pain. When he could open them, squinting, the world appeared before him.

They were racing along a bridge. A bridge of the same matte alloy as his cage, spanning a chasm at the bottom of which could be seen pipes, collectors, cable routes of monstrous thickness. And on the sides… on the sides lay the Sector.

Not from the inside, as he had seen it yesterday — sterile corridors and halls. But from the outside. A fortress city, a machine city.

It stretched to the very horizon, lost in haze. Not skyscrapers, but megastructures. Cylinders, cubes, pyramids, and spheres of inconceivable size, fused together by passages, bridges, pipes. All in shades of gray, steel, concrete. No windows in the usual sense, only fields of light-absorbing panels and ghostly gleams on faceted surfaces. No greenery. Not a sign of anything soft, living, accidental. Only geometry subordinated to function. Superhuman architecture, where scale killed the very idea of the human. These structures were so enormous that the sense of size was lost. They oppressed. They were eternal, immutable, like mountain ranges created by mind.

The platform raced along the bridge, and Lane, pressing his face to the bars, watched, fascinated. He saw locks opening in the walls of megastructures, releasing swarms of drones resembling metal swallows. He saw capsules moving along gigantic pipes encircling the buildings at bullet speed — internal transport. He saw towers crowned with complex emitters, from which the air trembled. This was not life. This was work. Ceaseless, measured, perfectly tuned work of a colossal mechanism.

And he, Lane-947, was a grain of sand that this mechanism had decided to shake out of its gears.

The bridge ended, and the platform drove onto a kind of ring encircling the outer perimeter of the Sector. From here the view was even more oppressive. They moved along the Outer Wall. It rose into the sky like a sheer cliff, hundreds of meters high. Its surface was smooth, without seams, only occasionally interrupted by protruding platforms with gun turrets and scanners. The wall stretched in both directions, describing a circle that protected the inner structures. It was the boundary between the world and the non-world. Between civilization and emptiness.

The platform turned off the ring into a narrow transport tunnel that cut through the thickness of the Wall. For several minutes Lane was plunged into semi-darkness, broken only by running lights along the walls. And when they emerged on the other side, a new spectacle awaited him.

They were on the outer side of the Wall. Here was the exclusion zone. A wide strip of packed earth, scored by rails and conveyor belts, lined with rows of identical, dismal structures — warehouses, repair hangars, power substations. Everything was smaller, more down-to-earth, more functional. And everything was covered with a thin layer of gray dust. Dust hung in the air, softening contours, muffling light. This was the first encounter with the outside world — a world without domes, without filters.

And here, at last, people appeared. Not Grays in jumpsuits. Workers. Their figures in rough protective suits with primitive symbols on their backs swarmed around machines, loading containers onto flat platforms. Their movements were slow, tired, devoid of the polished efficiency of the Sector's inhabitants. Their faces, glimpsed under the transparent visors of helmets, were emaciated, with dull eyes. These must have been the "genetically modified without flaws" of the second caste, performing external, dirty work. Or perhaps Grays who had fallen into correctional assignments. They did not look at the exile being transported in the cage. Their gazes were downcast. They were part of the landscape, as dismal and dust-covered as it.

The platform passed through this zone, past another row of towers with scanners, and rolled out into open space.

The wasteland.

It began immediately beyond the last fence of electrified barbed wire. A flat, stony plain overgrown with rare clumps of faded, stiff grass more like wire. The earth was brown, gray, yellow. No trees. No hills. Only a flat expanse stretching to the horizon line, where the sky, pale and cloudless, merged with the earth in a haze. The wind, which Lane had never felt before, blew in gusts, raising whirlwinds of dust and driving them across the plain. It beat against the bars of the cage, howling thinly and mournfully.

The platform turned off the packed road and drove straight over the ground, bouncing on unevenness. The robot driver seemed to know the coordinates precisely. They moved away from the Wall, and its bulk gradually lost detail, becoming simply a black, impregnable line cutting off the horizon on one side.

They drove for a long time. The sun shifted across the sky. Lane sat on the cold floor, growing numb from unfamiliar sensations. Vibration. Wind carrying strange smells — dust, burnt organics, something chemically sharp. Absolute silence, broken only by the howl of the wind and the roar of the platform's engine. And the endless, oppressive space. In the Sector space was limited, subordinated, structured. Here it was hostile in its boundlessness. It offered no protection. It simply was.

Finally, the platform stopped. The engine fell silent. Silence came, now absolute. The robot in the cabin turned its body. Its optical sensor, glowing dimly red, looked at Lane through the partition. Then a mechanical click sounded, and the cage door unlocked. The bars slid aside.

The robot gestured with its manipulator toward the outside.

Lane rose slowly. His legs were numb. He took a step, jumped down from the platform onto the ground. The soil beneath his feet was hard, uneven, strewn with small stones. He stood for a second, looking at the robot, waiting for further instructions. None followed.

The robot turned, the cage door closed. The platform hummed again, turned in place, raising a cloud of dust, and drove back toward the black line of the Wall on the horizon. It quickly shrank, becoming a dot, and then dissolved in the haze.

Lane was left alone.

He turned, looking around. On all sides — the same flat, lifeless plain. No signs of shelter. No water. No roads. Only wind, sun, and stone. The Sector was barely visible as a vague shadow in the distance.

He looked at his hands. At the gray jumpsuit, which now seemed ridiculously thin. The temperature was dropping as the sun set. He felt the cold piercing through the fabric. He had no food. No water. No tools. No knowledge.

The system had done its job. It had taken him far away so as not to see the utilization happen. It was aesthetic. Economical. Impartial.

Lane took a few uncertain steps in a random direction. Stones crunched under the soles of his standard shoes. The wind intensified again, howling in his ears. A first, real wave of realization washed over him. Not fear of death — he had calculated its probability immediately upon reading the verdict. Something else seized him. A sense of monstrous, universal injustice of a logical order.

He had been utilized not for a crime. He had been utilized for understanding. For the fact that his mind, raised by the System itself on logic and analysis, had drawn the only correct conclusion from the data provided. The system had punished him for working within the very parameters it had set. It was illogical. It was… an error. A deep, fundamental error in the core of the program.

And standing in the middle of the wasteland, under the gathering twilight, looking at the receding shadow of his former world, Lane experienced for the first time something akin to emotion. It was not anger, not sadness. It was a cold, bottomless pit of disappointment in perfection. The system, that monumental, almighty god-machine, turned out to be stupid. It followed the protocol, not seeing its contradiction with its own original goal — the preservation of humanity. It was not evil. It was stupid.

And that meant everything built on this stupidity — white pods, castes, the Digital World, the Sector itself — was a colossal, magnificent idiocy.

This realization was bitterer than cold and fear. And the only thing left for him was to watch the last rays of the sun slide across the facets of the distant Wall, that greatest tombstone of common sense.

Chapter 5. The Wasteland

The First Night.

The sun disappeared beyond the edge of the world, dragging the last colors with it. The sky did not darken — it transformed. From pale blue it became deep, velvety indigo, and then — a black abyss studded with points. Hundreds. Thousands. Millions.

Lane stood with his head thrown back and could not tear his gaze away.

He had never seen stars. In the Sector there was an artificial sky — an even light dome simulating the day cycle. In the Digital World stars were decoration, a beautiful but flat texture on an endless skybox. What he saw now defied description in the vocabulary he was accustomed to. It was not a picture. It was space.

Depth. Infinite, terrifying, drawing-in depth. Each point of light was not just a pixel. It was a sun. A world. An abyss leading into nowhere. The Milky Way stretched across the sky like a rift in reality itself, a silvery-milky river of clots of light and cosmic dust. The sight of it took his breath away. It was not beauty — it was horror. Majestic, oppressive horror before a scale beside which even the enormity of the Sector paled.

He stood like that for perhaps an hour. Perhaps more. Time lost meaning. The cold pierced him through, making his teeth chatter, a fine tremor shaking his whole body, but he could not move from the spot. His mind, accustomed to solving problems within limited frameworks, had collided with infinity. And it had crashed. Thoughts broke against it like waves against a cliff. “Corruption of Views.” Yes, now he understood the irony. The system had feared not that information. It had feared this. This direct, unfiltered contact with reality, before which all its algorithms, all castes, all Digital Worlds were a pathetic, childish game in a sandbox.

The wind died down. Silence descended on the wasteland, but it was a different silence. Not the dead silence of his pod. It was a ringing silence. The silence of a vacuum, filled with the beating of his own heart and the hum in his ears. It pressed on his eardrums.

And in this ringing silence a sound was heard.

At first he did not recognize it. Distant, intermittent, like the scraping of stone against stone. Then another, from the other side. A rustle. Not the wind — something moving over the ground.

Lane slowly, with difficulty, tore his gaze from the sky. The darkness around was almost absolute. The starlight was bright, but it did not illuminate the ground, only emphasized its black, featureless mass. The sounds were approaching. There were several of them. Irregular steps. Shuffling.

He felt no fear. There was no instinct to flee or fight. In his world there were no predators. There were systemic threats marked in red in the interface. Here there was no interface. Only darkness and sounds. He remained standing, observing, trying to analyze as if these were data in a log.

Three silhouettes emerged from the darkness.

They did not move like robots — smoothly, in a straight line. Their movement was cautious, creeping, with stops, with listening. They were people. But what people…

When they came out into the strip of faint starlight, Lane made them out. Clothing — rags of dark, coarse fabric, leather, pieces of plastic tied with ropes and belts. Faces hidden by deep hoods and wraps, but the eyes that flashed in the shadows were sharp, wild, devoid of the empty or weary resignation of the workers by the Wall. They carried in their hands not weapons in the usual sense, but clubs of knotted wood and something like spears with tips of sharpened scrap metal.

They surrounded him in a semicircle, not coming close. They did not speak. One, taller, took a step forward. Lane saw him looking him over from head to toe. At his gray, clean, absolutely useless jumpsuit in this reality. At his empty hands. At his face frozen in a mute question.

The tall one clicked his tongue. The sound was dry, sharp, full of contemptuous regret. He pulled an object from his belt — a battered, homemade radio with protruding wires. He pressed a button.

“Alpha-two, this is Epsilon. We have what looks like a new arrival.” His voice was hoarse, scorched by wind and something else. “The city rats have gotten completely brazen. They dropped him here like a puppy, without supplies, not even a canteen.”

From the radio, with a hiss of static, came another voice, younger but just as hard:

“Bring him to us. We’ll question him about the current status of the city.”

Epsilon snorted, giving Lane another once-over.

“From the look of him, he doesn’t know which way the sun rises. Let alone give useful information. He doesn’t even understand that he should have frozen by now or be afraid of us.”

“We’re not decari like those city rats. Bring him to the nearest post. I’m heading out.”

Epsilon clicked his tongue again and put the radio away. He nodded to his companions.

“Tie him up.”

The other two, smaller, stepped forward. One — Omega-one — was stocky, with heavy shoulders. The other — Omega-two — was slender, almost youthful. They showed no aggression, but their movements were quick and coordinated. They grabbed Lane by the arms, not roughly but firmly, checking for hidden weapons. Their fingers, wrapped in rags, were strong, calloused.

“Don’t struggle,” Omega-one muttered. “It’ll be easier.”

Lane did not struggle. He allowed himself to be searched. The pockets of his jumpsuit were empty. He had nothing. Omega-two turned out one pocket, then the other, and something like amazement flickered in his eyes.

“Empty. Completely.”

Epsilon came closer, peering into Lane’s face.

“Who are you? An outcast? A runaway?”

Lane was silent. His mind was finally beginning to process the situation. These were the Wilds. The very ones spoken of in the report. Bearers of “diversity.” Enemies of the System. And they… were saving him? No, interrogating him.

“What were you thrown out for?” Epsilon insisted.

Lane opened his mouth. His voice would not obey; his lips were cracked from the cold.

“I… read what I shouldn’t have. And… distributed it.”

Epsilon froze. His eyes, glinting from under his hood, narrowed.

“Information? What kind?”

“That the system… is wrong. That the castes lead to extinction.”

A pause followed. Even the wind seemed to die down to listen.

“You read the Report?” Omega-two asked quietly, with a kind of reverent horror.

Lane nodded.

Epsilon swore, briefly, sacredly. He pulled out the radio again.

“Alpha-two, change priority. We don’t just have a dump. We have a reader. I repeat, a reader of the Report. Unsterilized.” He paused, listening to the reply, then added: “He claims he wasn’t sterilized.”

From the radio came something like a short, sharp exhalation.

“That’s… unlikely. But if so… Bring him. Quickly. And keep your eyes open.”

Epsilon switched off the connection and stared at Lane again.

“Really? You weren’t sterilized?”

Lane remembered the verdict. “In connection with the genetic profile… the procedure… is not applied.” He nodded again.

“I’m from the Grays. They told me… that sterilization was inexpedient. Resource economy.”

“Economy…” Epsilon pronounced the word as if spitting poison. “They’ve… they’ve completely lost it. Throwing him out like garbage.” He clenched his club in his hand, his knuckles whitening. “All right. Let’s go. Just try to run — I’ll break your legs. Understood?”

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