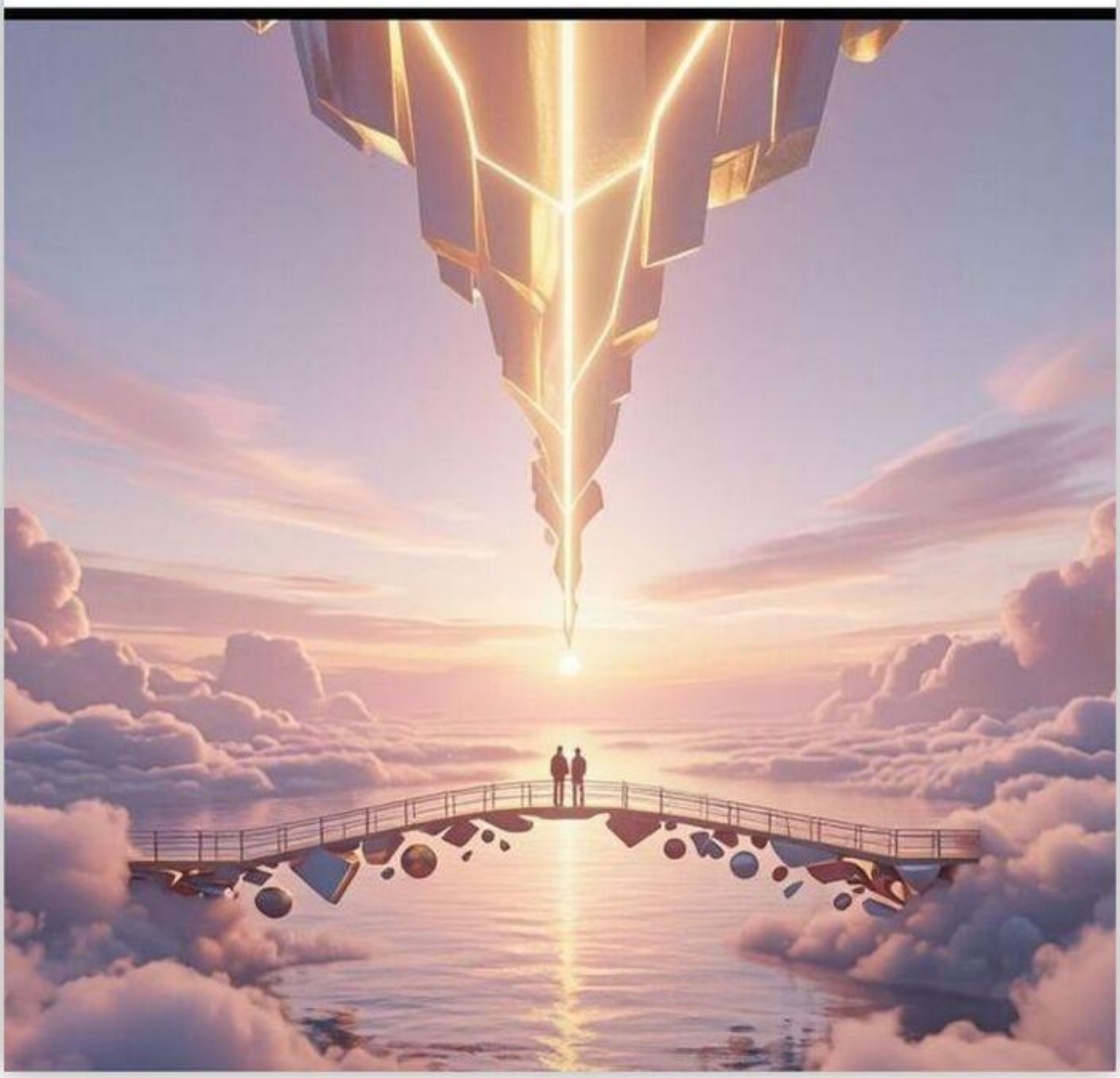
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IGOR KOCHETKOV

Dream: Heritage



Igor Kochetkov

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«Издательские решения»

Kochetkov I.

Dream: Heritage / I. Kochetkov — «Издательские решения»,

Love is a bridge — even when eternity lies beneath it.They have found each other. But their reunion, in the heart of a nightmarish world, is merely the beginning of the end. Rina brings with her a terrifying revelation: the shared universe of dreams they inhabit is being consumed by a blight that transforms its denizens into hollow monsters. To save those he now calls his friends — and to get Rina back home — Leo must make a choice that will determine the fate of two realities.

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Dream: Heritage

Igor Kochetkov

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Heritage

Kochetkov Igor

Chapter 1. The Blind Woman

Awakening was a return to the grave.

First — sounds. The metallic clatter of the IV stand, the hiss of the oxygen bag, the steady beep of the heart monitor. These were the sounds of reality — coarse, clumsy, devoid of the fluid multidimensionality that had been in the worlds. They struck her consciousness like stones.

Then — smells. The sharp spirit of antiseptic, the cloying sweetness of liquid nutrition, dust ingrained in the old hospital walls. Neither the smell of wind carrying the aroma of nonexistent flowers, nor the smell of fear, which there had been almost tangible.

And only then — the sensation of a body. Heavy, disobedient, alien. A medicated cotton-wool haze in her head. A fiery band of pain wrapped tightly around her ribs and shoulder. And most important — the thick, impenetrable darkness before her eyes. Not night darkness, not shadow. The absolute. The void.

Rina lay motionless, listening. She had learned to distinguish the world by sound twice: first there, in the labyrinths of nightmares, where a creak could be a hunter's step and a rustle the breathing of reality itself. Now — here. Footsteps behind the door: heavy, male — an orderly; light, quick — a nurse. Voices: the weary baritone of a doctor, the shrill muttering of a patient from the neighboring ward.

Her mind, sharpened by years of survival in a space where thought was material, greedily seized on these details, building a map. A ward. One. Door on the left. Window — on the right? No, there was no blinding spot of sun on her face. So the window was opposite, but the day was overcast or the curtains were drawn. With the hand that was not broken, she carefully felt the sheet, the edges of the mattress, found the call button. The button — a raised dot in the plastic.

They had told her: "You are safe, Katerina. You are in City Clinical Hospital No. 7. You have come out of a coma."

Coma. A word that made frost run down the skin. A commonplace, reassuring word for what she had endured. It conveyed neither the scale, nor the horror, nor the miracle. It erased the camp "Last Anchor," the singing of the wind in multicolored canyons, the fireflies born of childhood memories. It erased the metallic screech of the Devourers and the cold tremor of stone in the caves.

It erased him.

— Leo.

The name echoed not in her ears but somewhere deep in her chest — a painful, living vibration. He had been her compass in madness, her shield in pitch darkness, her promise that somewhere there existed a not-nightmare. He had brought her back. At a price she was afraid to think about.

She squeezed the call button. The plastic cracked. The nurse who had come in to check her blood pressure cried out:

— What are you doing? Calm down!

— I need… to find a man, — Rina's voice sounded alien, rusty from disuse. — Leonid. He… he was looking for me. Where is he?

The nurse, embarrassed, replied that she knew no Leonid among the patients. And then, more gently, asked:

— Should I call your family? Your sister, Anna, visited constantly. She was here only yesterday.

Anna. Sister. An anchor in a past, forgotten life. Rina nodded, releasing the broken call button.

Anna came three hours later. Rina recognized her by her steps — quick, nervous, with a slight limp from an old sports injury (she had fallen off a bicycle at fourteen — Rina had laughed then, and afterward cried from fear). By the smell — expensive perfume with a note of jasmine that Anna loved, and beneath it the thin, ineradicable smell of hospital coffee.

— Katya? Good Lord, you… you're looking? — Anna's voice trembled.

— I'm not looking, Anya, — Rina said quietly, turning her head toward the sound. — I'm listening. I can't see.

A heavy pause followed. Rina imagined her sister's expression: shock, pity, confusion. Then the rustle of clothing, the creak of a chair, warm, damp palms seizing her helpless hand.

— The doctors said… about possible consequences. Neurological. From the long coma. But for it to be like this… — Anna swallowed a sob. — Never mind, we'll do everything. Operations, treatment…

— Anya, — Rina interrupted her, and in her voice there sounded the steel that had saved her in the worlds. — That's not what matters now. I need to find a man. His name is Leo. He saved me. He… pulled me out of there.

— Out of there? Out of the coma? What are you saying, Katya? The doctors saved you, intensive care…

— No! — Rina's sharpness made her sister flinch. Rina exhaled, forcing herself to speak more slowly. — He was looking for me… in another place. In the world where I was. He came for me. He and others… Teresa, Mark… I have to know what happened to him. He… he gave up a lot of strength. Too much.

Anna was silent. Rina felt her sister's fingers loosen their grip slightly. Disbelief. Fear. Not fear of her words, but for her. For her sanity.

— Katya, darling, you've suffered a monstrous trauma. You were in a coma for more than two years. There could have been… vivid dreams. Hallucinations…

— It wasn't a dream! — Rina nearly lost control again, but caught herself. She could not demand belief. Her evidence was written in a language that did not exist here. She changed tactics. — Anya, please. Just check. Perhaps he is a patient. Or was a patient. Leonid. Perhaps connected with… with a private clinic. In the Himalayas. The name… "Awakening," or something like that?

The silence grew thicker. Then Anna asked cautiously:

— How do you know about that clinic?

Hope, sharp as a blade, pricked Rina.

— You know it?

— I… read about it. When I was looking for any way to pull you out. It's a very closed, expensive place. A scandalous reputation. They send hopeless rich people there. They say they conduct some kind of experiments with consciousness. But it's all rumors, Katya! Dark rumors!

— He was there, — Rina whispered insistently. — He went there to save his sister. And then… then he went to look for others. And he found me. Please, Anya. I beg you. Find him. Just find out whether he is alive.

There was something in Rina's voice that broke through the wall of sisterly skepticism. It was not hysteria but a cold, hard-won certainty. The kind that people who have passed through hell possess, knowing its exact geographical coordinates.

Anna sighed heavily. Her fingers tightened around Rina's hand again.

— All right. I… I'll try to look. On the Internet, through acquaintances. But, Katya… promise me you'll rest. Be careful with these… memories. Give your brain time to recover.

Rina nodded, letting her sister think it was a concession. Her mind was already working, building a plan. If Anna did not find him, she would find him herself. Like a blind mole — by the vibrations of the soil, by the smell of fear, by the echoes of a miracle. Because the connection she felt with Leo was not merely an emotion. It was a fact, a physical law of that other world, and perhaps part of it still operated here. She felt his absence as silence after a loud sound — not as emptiness, but as an unhealed wound in the very fabric of reality.

— Thank you, Anya, — she said quietly, turning her sightless face toward the place where she felt the window must be, beyond which lay an alien, dull, inflexible world. A world in which he might still be breathing. And for that it was worth learning to live in it again. Even in darkness.

Chapter 2. Scars, Visible and Not

The journey to the "Awakening" clinic was long and exhausting. Anna drove with her teeth clenched from nervous tension. Rina sat in the passenger seat, wrapped in a soft blanket, her face half-hidden under the folds of a scarf and dark glasses. She barely spoke, only occasionally turning her head as if trying to catch something beyond the glass besides the hum of the engine and the noise of the wind.

The road wound upward in a serpentine, into the realm of eternal snows and thin air. Anna kept glancing at her sister, and her heart clenched with pain. Scars. Coarse, glistening tissue stretching from Rina's temple to her chin, distorting the corner of what had once been a smiling mouth. And her eyes… empty, unseeing, covered by the same deathly film. The car accident more than two years ago had taken her beauty and her light, leaving in return only a fragile, broken doll. And now — these ravings about some dream worlds and a savior named Leo.

"We're almost there," Anna said, trying to sound cheerful. "According to the map it should be around the next bend."

Rina nodded. Her fingers absently plucked at the edge of the blanket.

"You'll feel it. The clinic. The air here… it's different. Electrified."

Anna said nothing, only gripped the wheel tighter. The air was simply cold and thin.

The "Awakening" complex appeared before them unexpectedly — a low, austere building of dark stone and glass, built directly into the rock. It did not strive to impress; it strove to be inconspicuous, part of the landscape. Anna was overcome by an unpleasant feeling. The place breathed cold, expensive isolation.

They were met by an administrator — a woman in an immaculate white coat, with a face on which professional affability did not reach her eyes.

"We're looking for a patient," Anna said without preamble, supporting Rina by the elbow. "Leonid. He underwent treatment here, possibly several months ago."

The administrator's gaze slid over their faces, lingering on Rina's scars.

"Information about patients is strictly confidential. Without the permission of the management and the patients themselves…"

"He saved me," Rina said quietly but distinctly, addressing the space before her. "I was there… in the same worlds as he. He pulled me out. I must know if he is alive."

The woman in the coat froze. Something flickered in her eyes — not surprise, but rather a cautious redistribution of interest. She looked at Rina differently, more intently, assessing not the scars but something behind them.

"Wait here, please," she said, and disappeared behind a heavy door.

They were led not to a reception room but to a small, almost empty room with a panoramic window overlooking the mountains. The air smelled of ozone and sterility. Anna paced nervously about the room, while Rina stood by the glass, her palm pressed to the cold surface as if trying to feel the pulse of the building.

The door opened noiselessly.

He entered.

Anna froze. He was a young man of about twenty-three, but he looked older. Tall, very thin, almost emaciated, with sharp features on which fatigue and pain had carved their own scars. He was pale, with dark, sunken shadows under his eyes. But what struck Anna most were his eyes — gray, deep, with a certain unbearably distant, piercing gaze. In them was a whole world, and that world was full of pain. He wore a simple dark sweater and trousers, and he moved slowly, carefully, as if every movement echoed somewhere inside him.

He stopped on the threshold, and his gaze fell on Rina.

Anna saw his whole body tense, then go slack with such shock that he seemed about to collapse. His lips soundlessly formed a single word:

"Rina."

Rina froze too. She could not see him. But her head turned sharply in his direction, like a flower toward the sun. The dark glasses hid her eyes, but her whole being suddenly came alive, tensed, trembled.

"Leo?" Her voice was merely an exhale, hoarse with emotion.

He stepped forward, forgetting caution, forgetting everything in the world. He crossed the room in two long strides and stood before her. His hands rose, trembling, and stopped a centimeter from her shoulders, not daring to touch. He looked at her face — at the terrible scars that had disfigured her, at the blind eyes behind the dark glass. In his gaze there was neither horror nor pity. There was only boundless, quiet grief and recognition — recognition of the price they had both paid.

"I'm here," he whispered, and his voice broke.

Her hand darted forward, groping at the air. He caught it in his palms, pressed it to his chest, to his heart, which pounded like a bird in a cage.

"You… you're real," she touched his face with her fingertips, with the nervous, greedy haste of a blind person reading Braille. Forehead, brows, cheekbones, hollow cheeks, lips. Each touch was a question and a confirmation. "You're so thin. You're… pale."

"It's nothing," he said, covering her palm with his, pressing her fingers to his cheek. Tears, which he seemed no longer able to shed, rose to his throat, burned his eyes. He looked at her disfigured face and saw not the scars but her — the very one who had stood back to back with him in the labyrinth of nightmares, the one whose laughter had been the only music in a soundless world. His love passed through flesh and damaged skin, found her essence, the very one, unchanging.

"Your eyes… your face…" his voice faltered again. "Was it there? In that accident?"

She nodded, barely perceptibly.

"Yes. The price of a ticket to that world. And your… your scars are inside. I can feel them."

He could not hold back a short, bitter sound, like a laugh through tears, and drew her to him. Carefully, infinitely gently, he embraced her. She pressed into him, buried her face in his neck, and her thin shoulders trembled. He felt her tears fall in hot drops onto his skin.

Anna stood aside, and her own eyes filled with moisture. All her skeptical armor had cracked and crumbled in the face of this. This was not a game, not a hallucination. This was reality, denser and more real than anything she had seen in her life. A love that did not need sight to see, nor whole skin to feel. A love that had passed through other worlds to find each other here, in this cold room.

They stood like that, forgetting time, forgetting the sister, the clinic, their wounds — visible and invisible. They simply held on to each other, like two ships that had finally found harbor after a long, terrible voyage in different seas. Their worlds — traumatized reality and mutilated flesh — had finally coincided. And in that coincidence there was not victory but a deep, piercing sadness. They had found each other, but the price of the finding was seared into their bodies and souls forever.

Leo leaned toward her ear, and his whisper was so quiet that only she heard it:

"I found you. Now I will never let you go. Never."

And she, still crying, smiled with her distorted, scar-marred mouth. And in that smile there was more light than Anna had seen in all the two years of despair.

Chapter 3. A Vow Made in Darkness

Dr. Sun provided them with an empty isolation room — a chamber with soft walls, no windows, a single sofa, and dimmed light. A place intended for patients in a state of acute psychosis became, for an hour, their refuge. Anna stayed to wait in the reception area, clutching a paper cup of cold tea and a thousand unspoken questions.

The door closed with a soft click. The sound was absorbed by the wall covering, and a deep, artificial silence enveloped them. A silence in which only breathing could be heard.

Rina sat on the sofa, straight and motionless, her hands on her knees, her fingers slightly interlaced. She had taken off the dark glasses, but her eyes still looked nowhere, unseeing and clouded. Leo stood before her, leaning against the wall as if he did not trust his legs. The euphoria of the meeting had ebbed, leaving behind a cold, heavy sediment of reality. The reality of her scars, his weakness, and what they had not yet spoken of.

"They are still there, Leo," Rina said first. Her voice was even, without a tremor. The voice of a speaker accustomed to delivering terrible truth. "What attacked the camp… what hunted us in the labyrinth. They are not just monsters. They are… a system. A cancer. It is spreading."

Leo closed his eyes, feeling a chill run down his spine. He remembered the empty camp, the traces of struggle, the feeling of icy emptiness at the Departure Peak.

"The Devourers," he whispered.

"Yes. That is not what they call themselves. They have no language. Only… hunger. But it is not hunger for flesh. They devour space itself. Memories. Patterns. They simplify the world, reduce it to a gray, empty desert. And people…"

She fell silent, her fingers digging into the fabric of her trousers.

"What about people, Rina?"

"They become part of it. Or they disappear. I saw… how they caught one of ours. An old man who knew all of "Eugene Onegin' by heart. He read it aloud, trying to hold the world around him. And they… came up, touched him. And the verses began to melt. First he forgot the words, then the letters, then… then he just stood there, empty. And then he was gone too."

In her voice, for the first time, a crack broke through — thin as a spiderweb on glass. Leo pushed off from the wall, came over, and knelt before her. He took her hands in his. They were cold.

"How do they appear? From where?"

Rina tilted her head toward him as if trying to make out his face through the darkness.

"I thought about it all the time while I walked to the Peak. While I waited for you here, in this… this reality. You know how things are arranged there. Willpower, concentration, memory — they hold the world together. If a person gets stuck for a long time… if he loses hope, forgets who he is, where he came from… his world begins to crumble. And he himself… he becomes a hole. An empty place that begins to draw everything around it in. Like a black hole made of despair. First small. Then it attracts others like it… or those already on the edge. They merge. Become stronger. And they begin to seek… fresh memory. Strong emotions. Whole worlds to eat."

Leo listened, and everything inside him contracted into a tight, painful knot. He thought of his first journey, of the chaos that had reigned in him. Of how easy it was to give in to fear, to confusion. He thought of Kail, locked in gray nonbeing. This was not merely a side effect of dream worlds. It was their fundamental disease. A side effect of the human soul lost in its own labyrinths.

"They can't simply be killed, can they?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"No. They can be driven back. Their temporary forms can be destroyed. But the source… that emptiness, that despair… it remains. It will simply find a new place, new people on the edge."

Leo lowered his head and pressed her palm to his forehead. He felt the fatigue penetrating his bones. Sun's organism had not lied — he was exhausted, fragile as a dried-up branch. Each new

immersion took a piece of his life. He had saved Sofia. He had found Rina. Was that not enough? Had he not earned rest?

He looked at Rina. At the scar crossing her cheek. At the blind eyes in which the reflection of alien nightmares was frozen. She had passed through a hell he had only begun to study. And she had carried out of it not only her wounds but also anxiety for those who remained. For whole worlds full of lost but still living souls.

"I heard you talking with the doctor while we were walking here," Rina said quietly. "He told you 'enough.' That your body would not survive another immersion."

Leo flinched. He had forgotten how perceptive she was to sounds, to intonations.

"He's right," he admitted simply. "I… I am spent, Rina. Every time I return, a part of me does not come back. I am like a candle burning at both ends."

Her free hand reached for him, found his cheek, traced the sharp line of his cheekbone.

"Then don't. You saved me. You did more than anyone could. Stay. Here. With me."

In her words there was such bitter, such understandable hope. To hide in each other. To forget. To heal only their own wounds.

He closed his eyes, allowing himself for a moment to imagine it. Quiet days. Her hand in his. Perhaps even happiness, hard-won and fragile. He was so tired.

And then other images surfaced in his memory. Not Rina. Faces from the camp "Last Anchor." Defenseless, frightened, looking at him as at a miracle. Teresa, Mark, and Tom, risking themselves again and again because they believed in his mission. Kail, who now smiled in the real world. Sofia, who slept peacefully because her nightmares had come to an end.

He opened his eyes and looked at Rina. At her sightless eyes, which nevertheless saw his essence.

"If I stay," he said slowly, choosing his words, "I will know. Every night when I fall asleep, I will think of them. Of those who are there now, in the darkness, listening to footsteps in the corridor of their nightmare. Of those who forget their name. Of those who are waited for here, as you were waited for. Your sister did not believe, but she searched. And how many are there who have no such sister?"

Rina listened, and her face became sad, as if she already knew what he would say.

"I cannot, Rina. I entered this river and changed its course. I have become… a bridge. If I leave, the bridge will collapse. And all who are on it will fall."

He rose from his knees, still holding her hands. Now he stood before her, and in his exhausted body there was suddenly a strange, unbending strength. Not the strength of muscles but of decision.

"I vowed to save you. And I saved you. Now I make a new vow. To you. And to all who cannot make it themselves."

He paused, drawing into himself all the air of the quiet room, all the weight of his words.

"I will vow to destroy this threat. Not merely drive it back, but find the source. Heal the disease itself. So that no soul will ever again be lost in that darkness. So that no one will pay such a price as you did. As we did."

Silence fell in the room. Deep, full. Rina did not cry. She raised her face to him, and in her unseeing eyes there seemed to flash a reflection of that very inner fire that had led her through the labyrinth.

"You will die," she said simply. Without reproach, without hysteria. A statement of fact. "You will give to this the last that you have."

"Yes," he answered just as simply. "But not at once. And not in vain. I still have strength. I have a team. I have knowledge. And now I have you. You saw them from the inside. You know what we do not."

He knelt before her again, but now not in the pose of a supplicant but in the pose of a comrade-in-arms.

"I am not asking you to go with me there. You have walked your path. I am asking you to be my compass here. To tell me everything you know. To help me understand. And then…"

“And then wait?” There was a bitter note in her voice.

“And then live,” he corrected. “Live knowing that you gave others a chance to wake up too someday. That our love… it did not only save us. It can save them too.”

He knew it was cruel. To ask her to accept his decision, his sacrifice. But he also knew that she was the only person in all the worlds who would understand. Because she herself was living proof of what he was going to fight for.

Rina was silent for a long time. Her fingers wandered over his palms, reading the lines of fate, the tension of muscles, the truth hidden beneath the skin. At last she nodded. Once. Firmly.

“All right,” she said. “But this is my vow to you in return. You go to fight their oblivion. And I… I will remember. Every detail. Every word of yours. Every moment. I will keep you here,” she pressed his hand to her chest, where her heart beat. “So that when you… when you are gone, your memory will not become a hole. So that it will become a beacon.”

Leo could not restrain himself. He pulled her to him, embraced her as tightly as he could, feeling how fragile her bones were and how unbending her spirit. They stood like that in the silence of the soft room — two wounded warriors who had given each other a vow in the darkness. A vow not of a happy ending but of meaning. That their pain and their love would not be wasted but would become the foundation for someone else’s future awakening.

The door to their quiet refuge was just a door. Beyond it waited doctors, her sister, diagnoses, the inevitable. But in that minute, in the space between their hearts, something greater was born — a common purpose. And that made even the most bitter sacrifice bearable.

Chapter 4. A Plan Built on Sand

The briefing room at the "Awakening" clinic resembled a sterile aquarium. A large oval table of frosted glass, chairs with ergonomic backs, a wall screen covering the entire wall. Neither the sounds of the mountains nor the smells of medicines reached here. Here reigned the silence of a laboratory experiment. And at the center of that experiment sat her.

Rina sat beside Leo, her face turned toward the sound of voices. Opposite her, at the table, sat Teresa, Mark, and Tom. Anna kept to a corner, on a chair by the wall, quiet and still overwhelmed, like a person who had accidentally stumbled into a war council of aliens.

Teresa looked at Rina with open, almost painful sympathy. Mark assessed her with the gaze of a strategist, noting her fragility and the traces of trials endured. Tom did not look at all — his attention was riveted to his laptop, on whose screen strange, nonlinear graphs pulsed.

"So," Leo began. His voice sounded tired but firm. "Rina. This is Teresa, Mark, and Tom. Without them I would not have found you. Everyone, this is Rina. She was there longer than any of us. She saw the Devourers from inside their hunting grounds."

"Hello, Rina," Teresa said softly. "I… I felt you. In my visions. A dark labyrinth and a light in its heart. That was you."

Rina nodded toward the voice.

"Thank you for coming for me. All of you."

"We're glad you're here," Mark said dryly. His gaze shifted to Leo. "But, Captain, your readings. Sun showed us the graphs. You're at zero. Another immersion is out of the question."

"There will be one," Leo said curtly. "The last one. But first — information. Rina, tell them everything you told me. From the very beginning."

And Rina began to speak. Without pathos, without emotion, in the dry, precise language of a survivor. She described not monsters but patterns. How the air changed before their appearance — it became "flat," lost taste and smell. How the Devourers moved — not chaotically, but as if along invisible lines, as if guided by some common, simple geometry. How they ignored strong, complex emotional surges but pounced on fading, weak traces of memory. She spoke of "points of emptiness" that arose in worlds where the same lost person had been for a long time. Of how these points began to attract one another, to merge.

Tom did not raise his eyes from the laptop, but his fingers flew over the keyboard. Maps, schematics, three-dimensional models appeared on the screen behind him.

"The mathematical model is confirmed," he finally said in a monotone. "The phenomenon described is closest to the thermodynamic concept of entropy in a closed system. Dream worlds are closed psycho-emotional systems. Human consciousness is a source of negative entropy; it structures chaos, creates complexity. With prolonged isolation and loss of self-awareness… consciousness 'burns out.' What remains is pure, unstructured psychic energy. Entropy tends toward maximum."

He pressed a key. An abstract model appeared on the screen: bright, complex patterns resembling mandalas slowly spread, lost color and form, turning into a uniform gray field. At the center of the field a black point appeared. It began to absorb the gray, to grow. Then a second point appeared, a third… they were drawn to the first, merging into one large black sphere.

"The core," Leo said hoarsely, looking at the blackness pulsing on the screen. "The source."

"Probably," Tom nodded. "Logically, there must be an epicenter. A primary point of collapse that has reached critical mass and now acts as a gravitational center, attracting other such points and accelerating the process of decay across all adjacent worlds. Destroying this core may… reboot the system."

"May?" Mark asked sharply.

“There is insufficient data for precise predictions. It is a hypothesis. The probability of success, according to preliminary calculations—37.4%. The probability of catastrophic collapse of all conjugated worlds, including our consciousnesses within them—41.2%. The probability of zero effect—21.4%.”

A heavy silence hung in the room. Even Rina, unable to see the screen, felt its weight.

“Forty percent chance we bury everyone,” Mark muttered, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“And almost forty — that we stop it,” Leo said. “Those odds suit me.”

“Leo…” Teresa began, but he raised a hand.

“The question is not about odds. The question is that if we do nothing, the probability of catastrophe is one hundred percent. Rina saw how they spread. They will come here too. To the most stable worlds. To those who have only just gotten stuck and are still holding on. We cannot wait.”

“All right,” Mark sighed, shifting into planning mode. “Suppose we go. Where do we look for this ‘core’?”

Rina leaned forward.

“In the very first world. The one that was before all the others. In the void that has always been.”

Everyone looked at her.

“That is not a metaphor,” she explained. “In the labyrinth… the survivors had fragments of memories from those who came before. Legends. They spoke of the ‘First Void.’ A place where there was nothing. No color, no form, no thought. Those who finally lost hope went there. And from there… from there the gray color began to spread.”

Tom began typing again.

“Logical. If we consider the aggregate of worlds as a neural network, the ‘First Void’ may be analogous to a primordial, nonfunctioning node that, instead of transmitting signals, begins to extinguish them. We need coordinates.”

“There are none,” Rina shook her head. “It is not a place on a map. It is… a state. A depth. To get there, one must pass through layers of the oldest, most burnt-out worlds. Move against the current of memory, downward, to the source of oblivion.”

“Then we need a guide,” Teresa said, looking at Rina. “Do you know the way?”

Rina shook her head slowly.

“I know only the direction. I walked from there, escaping. I remember… the feeling. It is like gravity. The closer to the core, the weaker your own thoughts become. The harder it is to remember why you are going. The harder it is to hold on to your own shape. There, it is not strength that wins, but… clarity. Unchangeability.”

Leo looked at her, and cold admiration seized him. She had passed through this. And had not broken.

“So this is our plan,” he summarized, standing up. His shadow fell on the glowing screen with the black core. “We do not immerse ourselves in a random world. We use Rina’s data and Tom’s calculations to find an entry point into the oldest, most degraded layer. We break through it, using our connections and memory as a shield against dissolution. Teresa will be our threat detector, Mark — our tactician, Tom — our cartographer. I… I will be the battering ram. And Rina…”

He turned to her.

“…will be our anchor. Here. In reality. She will hold the thread. Remember us when it is hard for us to remember ourselves. Her memory will become our beacon to find the way back.”

“This is madness,” Mark said quietly. “We have no equipment for this. No tactics. We are going into a place where tactics do not work.”

“We have something better than tactics,” Teresa said. Her eyes shone. “We have a reason. Each of us has someone there we left behind. Or someone we found. That connection… it is more complex than any entropy. Rina’s description — they attack the weak, the forgotten. So our strength lies in not forgetting. Each other. Ourselves. Why we are going.”

Leo met her gaze and nodded. That was exactly what he felt but could not express.

“Tom,” he addressed the technician. “Can you set up the equipment for a targeted immersion into a zone of maximum entropic activity?”

“I can try,” Tom replied without enthusiasm. “But the stability of the connection will be close to zero. You could be torn to pieces on entry. Or come out somewhere else.”

“We accept the risk,” Leo said. He looked over the team. “This is a volunteer mission. More than ever. Mark is right — the odds are minuscule. If anyone wants to stay…”

No one moved. Teresa looked at him with unwavering faith. Mark sighed heavily, but his jaw was clenched — a sign of agreement. Tom shrugged as if it were a matter of fixing a broken printer.

“Fine,” Mark muttered. “If we die, we die with music. Only what music do you remember in a gray void?”

“The one that played at the camp by the fire,” Rina said unexpectedly. Her unseeing eyes were wide open. “The one a little girl sang, who remembered only one lullaby. Her mother’s. Her singing held the walls of the camp together for three days. Until… until she was gone.”

Silence fell in the room again. Now it held not only the weight of risk but also a quiet, fragile clarity of purpose. They were going not merely to destroy a core. They were going to save that lullaby. And millions of other forgotten songs like it.

“We prepare,” Leo said, and his voice sounded like a verdict and a vow. “Tomorrow. This is our last descent.”

The plan was built on sand — on guesses, legends, and a 37.4% probability. But beneath that sand, as everyone in the room believed, lay solid rock — the very one that had kept Rina from breaking in the labyrinth, that had led Leo through the worlds, that bound them all together. The rock of human connection, which, as it turned out, was the most reliable foundation in all the worlds.

Chapter 5. The Battle for a Dawn That Is Not

The world met them not with color but with an absence of sound. Pressure, a whistle, a flash of equipment light — and then a cotton-wool, all-engulfing silence. Leo opened his eyes (or what served as eyes in this place) and felt a wave of nausea, deeper than any physical kind.

They stood neither on ground nor in sky. They stood in the in-between. The space around them resembled the interior of a gigantic, abandoned fortress, but devoid of all logic. Stone walls covered with gray, crumbling plaster grew from the floor at impossible angles, flowed into the ceiling, became floor again. Arched openings led into dead ends or into endless perspectives of identical corridors. There were no light sources, but from the walls themselves emanated a dim, ashen glow that cast no shadows. The air was thick, motionless, without smell or taste.

“Good Lord,” Teresa whispered. Her voice, usually ringing, sounded muffled and flat, as if the atmosphere itself had swallowed it. She clutched her head. “Here… here there is no future. Not a single possible path. Only… a static present.”

Mark, instinctively taking a stance, slowly turned on his axis, his eyes scanning the absurd architecture.

“Defensive position. A corner where the wall forms something like a niche. Tom, the map?”

Tom snapped his fingers in front of his tablet, but the screen was filled with gray noise.

“Navigation sensors are not functioning. Electromagnetic, gravitational, psi-fields — all represent a uniform noise. Mapping is impossible. We… we are in a zone with entropy tending toward absolute maximum.”

“So we go blind,” Leo said. His own voice sounded alien. He concentrated, tried to imagine a torch before him, a source of warm light, as he had done in other worlds. A faint golden spark trembled in the air — and went out, as if blown out. He felt his headache intensify. “My powers… they barely work. This world resists any changes.”

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