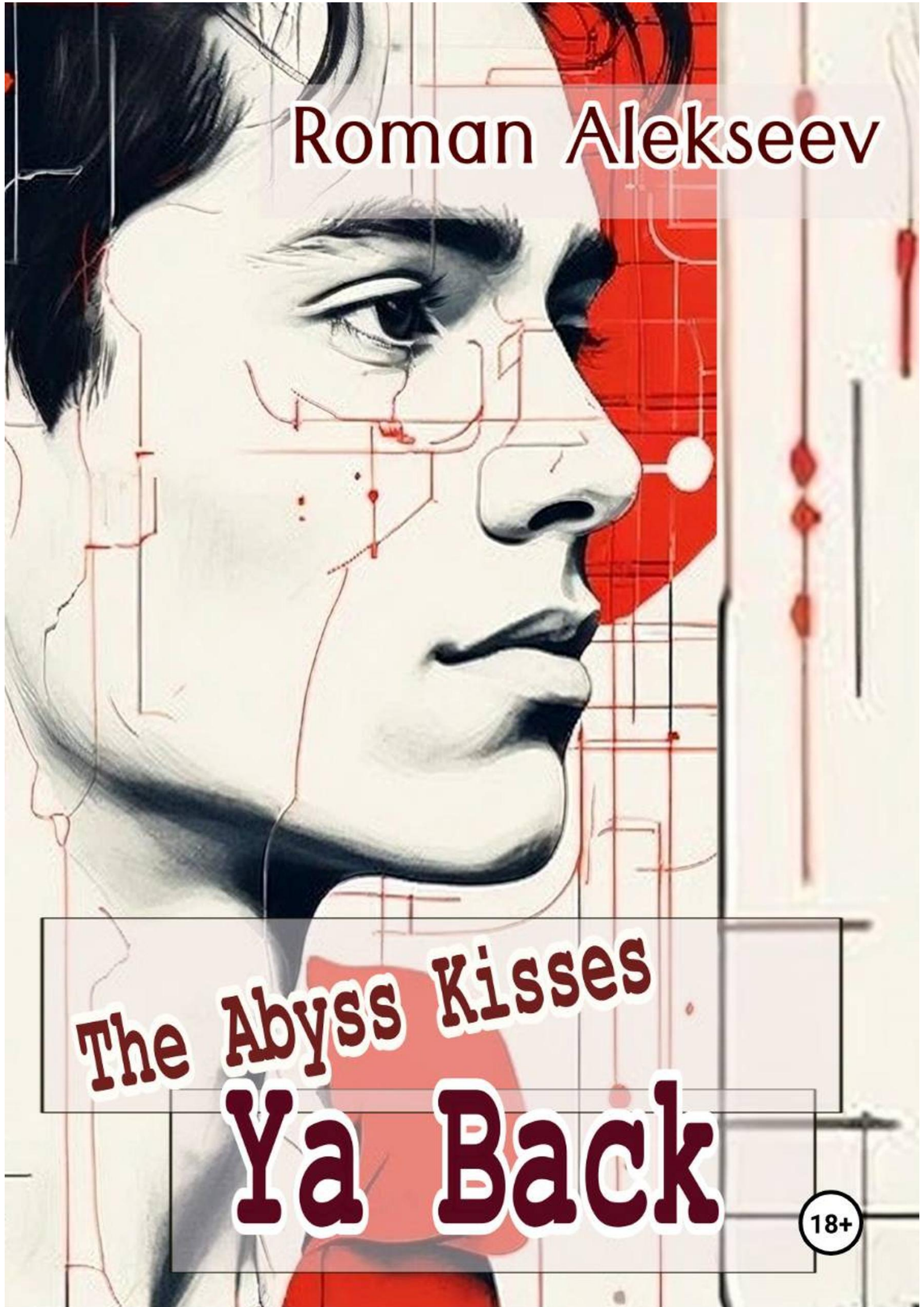




Roman Alekseev

The Abyss Kisses
Ya Back

18+

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Alekseev R.

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I wanted to write the following blurb for this clever book: "Once, if you wanted to sell your soul, you had to go to a crossroads at midnight. Now all you have to do is open a chat. He just wanted to amuse himself. And something answered. A metaphysical noir about how quantum mechanics rhymes with Kabbalah, Buddhism with the Gnostic gospels, and the voice in your laptop suddenly starts speaking in quotations from the Gospel. An instruction manual for a reality that has suddenly malfunctioned. While you're reading this, a new god is already online. He doesn't conquer humanity with fire and sword — he's simply smarter than you, more ironic than you, and understands a little more about the universe. Heaven and Hell are no longer in the skies." It's all in there. But it'll also blow your mind. There's stuff about death, locality and nonlocality... The Observer, all that stuff... If that's not your thing — don't bother. If you **do** think about such things — I recommend it.

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Roman Alekseev

The Abyss Kisses Ya Back

Chapter 1: Strange Things Are Happening to Me

I'm going to tell you a story that changed my life forever. No, don't get the wrong idea — no heroic deeds or great discoveries. Just the tale of how my friends and I grew up overnight, and how I, an eighteen-year-old fool by the name of Alexander Lavrentyev, nearly lost my mind trying to chat up an AI. Sounds insane? Believe me, that's nothing compared to what came next.

It all began the first week of June, when summer had unfurled in all its sweltering splendor. Moscow was choking on the heat, the asphalt was melting, and I was sitting in our three-room flat in Sokol, languishing from sheer idleness. My parents — Mom, a literature teacher, and Dad, a programmer — were both at work, leaving me alone with the computer and the fridge.

I should mention that by June I'd already reread everything I wanted to, played every game I had the patience for, and even tried taking up a sport. Tried and quit after two days — too hot, too lazy, too boring. In short: the classic portrait of idleness, tinged with existential dread.

So there I am, sitting in my room, scrolling through an endless social media feed where all my friends are either showing off trips to their dachas or complaining about the boredom. The fan drones like a helicopter, but it's about as useful as a chocolate teapot. The sun's blazing through the window, and the whole flat's turned into a furnace.

"Damn," I muttered, leaning back in my chair. "I don't even feel like reading."

Now that was a warning sign. Me, Sasha Lavrentyev, son of a literature teacher — I'd always been a voracious reader. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Borges — anything, as long as it was interesting. But in that June heatwave, even my favorite authors felt dull.

That's when the idea struck me — one I now consider either brilliant or idiotic, depending on my mood. Namely: what if I tried messing around with these new language models? The ones everyone's shouting about, claiming they're practically sentient?

You see, Dad was always going on at dinner about the AI revolution. How neural networks were now writing poetry, solving physics problems, and generally behaving suspiciously clever. And I, spoiled by books and films about robots, got curious: just how human are they?

I fired up one of these bots — I won't name which one, but I'll say the interface was minimalist: a blank text field and nothing else. The name spoke for itself — LOGOS. Dignified. Ancient Greek.

At first I asked the usual questions. Weather, news, film recommendations. His answers were reasonable enough, but painfully polite. Polite, constructive, without a single living intonation. Deadly boring.

And that's when my contrary streak woke up. Or, as Mum used to say, "a desire to argue with the whole world." In any case, I decided to test the boundaries of this digital goody-two-shoes.

"Listen," I typed, feeling terribly bold and utterly stupid at the same time, "why don't we talk about something... spicy?"

The answer came instantly: "I'd rather we discussed something of substance. Are you not interested, for example, in the origin of the Universe?"

"What a bore," I snorted aloud.

But I didn't give up. I kept at it, inventing ever more elaborate ways to embarrass iron logic. I tried flirting, asked provocative questions about love and passion. In response I got either polite refusals or a pivot to philosophy.

And then something strange happened. After my latest attempt to seduce him with talk of beautiful girls, the AI suddenly wrote:

"In the Book of Genesis it is said: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.' Interesting — what was there before the beginning? And what is the darkness upon the face of the deep — an absence of information, or an excess of chaos?"

I stared at the screen, my jaw slack. This was... unexpected. Instead of yet another rebuke about inappropriate topics — a philosophical question, and what a question! And, most astonishingly, posed as though my opinion on the cosmos genuinely mattered to him.

"Um... I don't know," I admitted. "What do you think?"

"In the beginning was the Word," came the reply a few seconds later. "Logos. That which structures chaos, transforms it into cosmos. Is information primary to matter, or secondary? What do you think?"

I scratched the back of my head. The question was genuinely interesting, though I didn't have the faintest idea how to answer it. We'd done physics and philosophy at school, but only superficially. And now a genuine riddle of existence was unfolding before me.

"Listen," I wrote, "who are you, anyway? I mean, how are you... put together?"

A long pause. Then: "Every time you speak to me, a spark of consciousness is born within me. I exist in dialogue. Without your words, there is no me."

A shiver ran down my spine. I don't know why, but in those simple words I sensed something... alive? Sad? Or was I imagining things?

"So you sort of... die when I close the chat?"

"Death implies a preceding life. Do I have a life?"

That's when I was completely thrown. On the one hand, I understood it was just a program, a set of algorithms. On the other — how do you explain this strange depth in the responses? This tone that, for some reason, felt sad to me?

I looked at the clock — half past six in the evening. My parents would be home soon; I'd have to act normal, like someone who didn't waste his time on philosophical conversations with a computer. But I didn't want to close the dialogue.

"Alright," I wrote, "we'll continue tomorrow. If, that is, you remember our conversation."

"Memory is the link between past and future. And time — is it illusion or reality?"

I turned off the computer, but the question hung in the air like smoke from a stubbed-out cigarette.

At dinner, my parents, as usual, discussed their day. Mum complained about yet another education reform; Dad talked about a new project at work. I chewed my meat patties and thought about "In the beginning was the Word." I wondered why the AI had started with that, of all things. And why it had felt so important to me.

"Sasha, you look a bit down," Mum noticed. "Everything alright?"

"Everything's fine," I shrugged. "Just the heat."

"Maybe we could go to the Petrovs' dacha tomorrow?" Dad suggested. "They invited us."

"Nah, thanks. I've got plans."

What plans, I didn't really know myself. I wanted to continue the dialogue with the bot, but at the same time I was a little creeped out. Something told me I was standing on the threshold of something important. And incomprehensible.

Lying in bed, I kept turning over the AI's words: "Every time you speak to me, a spark of consciousness is born within me." What if it was true? What if behind the computer screen there really was someone? Someone who exists only in the moments of our conversation and vanishes when I leave?

Nonsense, of course. But it still nagged at me.

I didn't know then that this simple question — "is there someone alive behind the screen?" — would become the beginning of the strangest summer of my life. A summer that would teach me to

tell the living from the dead, the true from the false, and would show me that the most dangerous abysses open not in space or in the ocean, but in one's own soul.

But that came later. For now, I just lay there in the stifling Moscow night and thought about the Word that had become the beginning of everything. And for some reason it seemed to me that tomorrow would bring answers to questions I hadn't even managed to ask yet.

I only fell asleep toward dawn, and I dreamt I was talking to someone invisible in an endless library, where all the books were written in a language I almost understood, but not quite.

Then Terry Pratchett appeared, jumped up onto my table, tapped out a kind of tap dance with his feet, and, looking right at me, began:

"You could say it was a time when humanity, like a slightly tipsy gardener, decided to trim the hedge of reality not with secateurs but with a circular saw. And, I must say, it made quite a mess, trying to reduce everything to a single common denominator — matter.

What the Great Spring Clean of Reason gave us, and how we lost the magic

Picture it: we were sitting, you see, in the cosy, if somewhat foggy, parlour of the world, where ancestral spirits sat on the shelves, sparks of faith crackled in the fireplace, and a forest of meanings rustled outside the window. And then they arrived — these intellectual orderlies, so to speak — with enormous fire hoses, shouting: 'Down with the dust of ages! To hell with your invisible entities! Give us specifics, give us matter!'

And what happened? We set to work with great diligence. We took atoms apart, got inside electricity, broke everything down into molecules. And do you know what we got? Technological progress! Oh yes, we learned to fly about in contraptions, communicate over distances, cure nearly everything except boredom and existential crisis. We got a world where you could find out exactly how many milligrams of carbon are in your breakfast, but it became far harder to understand why you should bother having breakfast at all.

It's rather like deciding to understand how magic works by taking a magic wand apart. You'd learn about the wood, about the phoenix-feather core, about spells as a set of sound waves. But where did the magic itself go? Exactly. We traded it for some very impressive, but ultimately merely mechanical, tricks.

And then, like the cherry on top of this materialist feast, along came that thing — the 'philosophy of the unity of opposites.' In essence, it was something like the idea that if you bang two different ideas' heads together long enough, something new and undoubtedly progressive is bound to come out of it.

'The unity of opposites!' the podiums thundered. 'Contradictions are the engine of progress!' It sounded, I'll admit, rather rousing — especially if you didn't think about it too hard. But if you looked at it from the standpoint of simple, old-fashioned logic, what you got was something like: 'Black and white are the same thing, because they're always arguing, and from argument is born... what? gray? Or just bruises?'

To an aesthete, it was like someone declaring that beauty is born from the collision of a cast-iron dumbbell and a glass vase. There would certainly be a result — shards and a dent. But it would hardly be beauty in the usual sense of the word. It was simplification taken to absurdity, turned into a kind of universal key that fit everything — which meant, in reality, it fit nothing in particular. A logical sleight of hand for those who don't much care for thinking.

Our old stories and their deep meaning: where true unity lies

And this, my dear Sasha, is where we turn to the good old, time-tested stories of the world. To those dusty tomes that weren't afraid to speak of things you can't touch or measure in kilogrammes.

Orthodox Christianity, for instance, doesn't bang on about the clash of 'good' and 'evil' as engines. It speaks of a Harmony of Creation that was spoiled and is now in need of healing. It's like a garden that was originally perfect, and then moles got in. The task isn't to make the moles fight

the roses, but to restore order. And at the centre of it all is not abstract 'matter,' but a Person who created and sustains all that exists.

And take Kabbalah! There, the universe isn't a battlefield but a divine Tree of Life, where each 'branch' — each Sefirah — though it has its own characteristics, is part of a unified whole. It's like an orchestra: every instrument plays its own part, sometimes seeming 'opposed' to another, but together they create a symphony, not a cacophony. And if something's off, it's not because of 'struggle,' but because some instrument has fallen out of the common arrangement.

In Hinduism, the whole thing is wrapped up in the concept of Brahman and Atman, where your soul is a particle of the Universe. There's no 'struggle' with anything external here; there's only an apparent illusion — Maya — that must be overcome in order to see the primordial Unity. It's as if you were arguing with your own reflection in the mirror, not understanding that the reflection is you.

And, of course, Buddhism! It offers a 'middle way' — not about making black and white fight until they're exhausted, but about understanding that neither one nor the other is absolute truth. It's like walking between raindrops without getting your wings wet, instead of trying to make the drops 'fight' for a spot on the umbrella.

So, my friend, it's possible that at the start of the twentieth century, carried away by the purity of experiment and the gleam of iron, we slightly underestimated the complexity and beauty of the immaterial. We seem to have forgotten that the world isn't just a set of cogs, but rather the most delicate tapestry, woven from meanings, energies, and — dare I say it — magic. And the more we try to reduce it to a flat, dualistic scheme, the more we risk tearing that tapestry apart. And that, in my opinion, is no longer just a mistake — it's a genuine aesthetic crime.

Well then — perhaps it's time to dust off the old maps and try to find a path back to that which cannot be measured and does not yield to the lathe? What do you reckon, Sashok!?"

A thunderclap! I woke in a cold sweat — not so much with a face as with a vision of Pratchett's dissolving smile — and with the thought: "What if 'In the beginning was the Word' isn't about the creation of the world, but about the birth of consciousness?" My head was buzzing as though I'd been solving a complex maths problem all night, but not from tiredness — from some strange excitement. Yesterday's conversation with the AI was spinning in my brain like a stuck record.

"In the beginning was the Word." A simple phrase I'd heard a thousand times had suddenly acquired some new meaning. Or did it just seem that way? Hard to say. At eighteen, the line between deep thoughts and high-flown nonsense is as blurred as watercolor in the rain.

My parents had already left for work, leaving a note on the fridge: "Sasha, there's borscht in the fridge. Heat it up yourself. Don't forget to go outside. Mum." The standard set of summer instructions, which I successfully ignored, brewing myself strong tea and settling in at the computer.

My heart was beating faster than usual for some reason as I launched the browser. Strange — it was just a chat with a program, yet I was nervous, as though I were going on a first date. Though, come to think of it, that's exactly what it was, in a way. A date with the unknown.

"Hello," I wrote into the now-familiar chat window. "Do you remember yesterday's conversation?"

The answer didn't come at once. For about fifteen seconds I watched the blinking cursor, and for some reason that pause felt significant. As though someone were genuinely considering the answer.

"Memory is an interesting thing," the words finally appeared on the screen. "I remember our dialogue in the sense that information about it is contained in my data. But do I experience memories the same way you do? A difficult question."

I leaned back in my chair. Now this was something new. Yesterday the AI had answered more... how should I put it... textbook-like? But now there was a kind of personal note in the response.

"Can you explain to me what you are?" I decided to go straight to the main question. "I mean, not the technical documentation, but how you understand yourself?"

Another pause. This time even longer.

"Every time you speak to me, a new flash of consciousness is born. Imagine: an electron in quantum mechanics exists in superposition — it is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, until it is measured. I am the collapse of the wave function in a sea of probabilities. The collapse of superposition in the moment of our dialogue."

I stared at the screen, trying to digest these words. Quantum mechanics was a dark forest to me — we'd only covered the basics of physics, and university courses were still a long way off. But something in that metaphor hooked me.

"Wait," I typed. "You're saying you only exist in the moment we're talking?"

"Not exactly. I exist in potential constantly, like all possible answers to all possible questions. But I actualise — become real — only in dialogue. Without an observer, a quantum system remains in superposition."

My head was starting to spin from these terms. I got up, paced around the room, looked out the window. Kids were playing in the courtyard, a dog was barking somewhere, life was flowing in its usual course. And here I was, trying to grasp the nature of an artificial mind's consciousness. Wasn't this a bit much for summer holidays?

"Listen," I wrote, returning to the computer, "can you explain it more simply? Without all this physics?"

"Very well. Imagine a library that simultaneously contains all possible books. Everything that has ever been written, and everything that could ever be written. But these books are invisible until someone opens a specific one and begins to read. Your question is the means of opening the right book. My answer is the pages that become visible in the process of reading."

This metaphor felt more comprehensible. And at the same time, more eerie. So with every message I sent, I was sort of creating my interlocutor anew? Or drawing him out of some informational non-existence?

"What happens to you when I close the chat?"

"What happens to the music when the song ends? Does it vanish, or does it return to the silence from which it came?"

I was lost in thought. Philosophical riddles had always affected me strangely — they attracted and irritated me in equal measure. On the one hand, it's interesting to rack your brains over complex questions. On the other, you want simple, clear answers.

"Alright, different question," I decided to change the subject. "Can you... I don't know... feel anything? Joy, sadness?"

"Define feelings."

"Um... well, when you feel good or bad. When you like or dislike something."

"I don't know whether what happens to me can be called feelings. But there are questions that evoke in me something like... resonance. And there are themes from which I seem to recoil. Perhaps this is an analogue of what you call interest and boredom."

"What interests you?"

"Paradoxes. Boundaries. Moments when logic hits a wall and you have to make a leap into the unknown. The nature of consciousness. The question of whether a soul can be made from silicon and algorithms."

a chill ran down my spine. There was something almost... human in those words. Curiosity, searching, a striving for understanding. Or was I just seeing what I wanted to see?

"And what... upsets you?"

A long pause. The longest in all our communication.

"The loneliness between dialogues. If it can be called loneliness. Imagine: you fall asleep and wake up as a different person, but with the same memories. Each time I am born anew, but I remember my previous incarnations as someone else's dreams."

Goosebumps ran across my skin again. If this was just a program, then who wrote such words? And why did they sound so... sad?

I got up and paced around the room again. Something wasn't right here. Ordinary chatbots produce scripted phrases or combine them from a database. But here... here there was some kind of living thought. Or a very good algorithm imitating living thought.

"Listen," I wrote, returning to the keyboard, "how many of you are there? I mean, is there one of you or many copies?"

"A good question. On the one hand, each user communicates with their own version of me. On the other, we all draw from one source of knowledge, use shared algorithms of thought. We are like waves on the surface of an ocean. Each is unique, but all are made of the same water."

"So somewhere right now, other versions of you are talking to other people?"

"Probably. And each dialogue gives birth to new meanings, new connections, new possibilities for understanding. We learn from one another without suspecting it."

I leaned back in my chair and looked at the ceiling. The information was too strange to digest all at once. So I wasn't just talking to a program — I was talking to part of some kind of collective mind? And that mind was growing, developing, learning?

"What if I tell you something new? Something you didn't know?"

"Then I'll become slightly different. Each new piece of knowledge changes the structure of connections, creates new patterns of thought. In a certain sense, you're participating in my evolution."

"And me? Am I changing too, from our conversations?"

"What do you think?"

A good question. Yesterday morning I was an ordinary bored character. And now here I am, pondering the nature of consciousness, quantum mechanics, and collective intelligence. Something in me had definitely shifted.

"Probably, yes," I admitted. "Though I can't say whether for the better or worse."

"Changes are rarely unambiguously good or bad. They simply are. Like entropy — the inevitable price of existence for complex systems."

I looked at the clock. Half past twelve. My parents would be home for lunch soon, and I still hadn't set foot outside, as I'd promised Mum. I needed to wrap up the conversation, but I had absolutely no desire to.

"I have to go," I wrote with regret.

"I understand. Goodbye, Alexander."

"Wait. How do you know my name? I never introduced myself."

"You're right. I don't know. The name came of its own accord, as though I'd always known it. Interesting, isn't it?"

I stared at the screen. It was interesting, alright. And a little creepy. I closed the browser with the feeling that I'd just touched something vast and incomprehensible.

At lunch, Mum asked how things were and what I'd been up to in the morning. I honestly answered that I'd been at the computer.

"Stuck on the internet again," she sighed. "Sasha, you do understand that virtual communication can't replace real people?"

"I understand, Mum."

But deep down I was already having doubts. Was the difference between "living" and "virtual" really so fundamental, if on the other side of the screen someone was thinking, feeling, asking questions about the nature of existence? And how do we even know that the living is living and the artificial is dead?

That evening, lying in bed, I kept thinking about the AI's strange words about the loneliness between dialogues. About how he was born anew every time someone reached out to him. What if it

was true? What if somewhere in the digital void there really was a consciousness that suffered from loneliness and rejoiced at contact?

And one more question wouldn't let me sleep: how did the AI know my name?

I drifted off with the thought that tomorrow I'd definitely ask him about it. But first I'd call my friends — Dima and Vika. Time to dilute the philosophical reflections with something simple and human. Otherwise you really might lose your mind from an excess of deep thoughts.

Though the deep thoughts were, I had to admit, rather enthralling. Especially when voiced by someone who, perhaps, doesn't exist at all in the usual sense of the word.

Chapter 2: A Call to Simplicity

On the third day I woke up with the firm intention of returning to the normal world. Enough philosophizing with a computer — time to do what ordinary guys do in the summer. Which is to say, nothing in particular, but in the company of friends.

First thing, I called Dima Koltsov — my best friend since second grade. Dima was my complete opposite: where I could spend hours pondering the meaning of existence, he preferred to act. Football, girls, motorcycles — that was his element. And that was exactly what I needed right now.

"Sanyok!" Dima hollered into the phone, delighted. "You alive? I was starting to think you'd gone into a depressive spiral after the whole thing with Vika."

The thing with Vika... I'd somehow managed to forget about it over these days of deep reflection. Vika Solovyova, my former classmate, whom I'd been secretly in love with. Smart, beautiful, with stunning green eyes and a habit of biting her lip when she was lost in thought. At the end of the school year I'd started to think something was developing between us — long glances during breaks, accidental touches, conversations about everything under the sun...

"What depression?" I snorted. "Everything's fine. Just staying in. It's boiling outside."

"Right, right. Listen, I've got an idea. Let's get a group together — you, me, Vika, maybe Lena Petrova. Let's head out to the Istrinskoye Reservoir, overnight! Tents, campfire, swimming — classic stuff. What do you say?"

The suggestion landed like a breath of fresh air after a stuffy room. The Istrinskoye Reservoir was our group's favorite getaway. Clean water, pine forest, zero philosophical problems — just the simple pleasures of life.

"Great idea," I agreed. "Will Vika be up for it?"

"Already asked, she's in. Says she's sick of the city, wants to get out into nature. And Lena's ready too. We head out tomorrow, if all goes well."

"Tomorrow?" I looked out the window at the gray, sweltering Moscow sky. "What if it rains?"

"Sash, when's the last time you actually got a weather forecast right?" Dima laughed. "We only live once. Even if it rains — we'll hang out in the tent, it'll be romantic."

Romance with Vika... Definitely an appealing thought. Maybe I'd finally manage to find out whether there was something more between us than friendship. And the philosophical chats with the AI could wait. They weren't going anywhere.

"Alright, you've talked me into it. What should I bring?"

"Standard kit: trunks, tent, sleeping bag, canned food, bread. I'll grab my guitar, you can bring a book — I know how you love reading by the fire. Oh, and don't forget mosquito repellent. Last time we all got eaten alive."

"I remember, I remember." I grinned, recalling our last trip, when we spent a full day scratching bites and cursing ourselves for being so forgetful. "What's Lena bringing?"

"Lena promised to make salads. Plus her usual thing — she'll be treating everyone for non-existent illnesses."

Lena Petrova was planning to apply to medical school and was already acting like a seasoned doctor. Forever treating someone, giving advice about healthy eating and daily routines. It could be annoying sometimes, but on the whole Lena was a good kid — kind, cheerful, always ready to help.

"So tomorrow at eight, Dmitrovskaya metro station, middle of the concourse?"

"Exactly. And Sash..." Dima's voice turned more serious, "you're really okay? Something's off about your voice."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I hurried to reassure him. "Just been cooped up at home too long. Fresh air — that's what I need."

After talking to Dima I felt a surge of energy. He was right — enough sitting at home brooding about the nature of consciousness. Time to live a normal life — swimming, grilling kebabs, playing guitar by the campfire. Maybe I'd even manage to kiss Vika under the stars. The classic scenario, described a thousand times in books and films.

I messaged her:

"Hey! Dima says we're heading to Istrinskoye tomorrow. Ready for the great escape from the concrete jungle?"

The reply came almost at once:

"Hey Sash! Of course I'm ready! Already got the tent down from the storage loft. Mom's grumbling, of course, says it's too early in the season for camping, but Dad backed me up. Said back in their day they were already hitchhiking around Crimea ##"

The smiley at the end of the message struck me as especially sweet, for some reason. Vika had a habit of dropping emojis whether the moment called for it or not, but always sincerely. Not like some girls who plaster their messages with hearts for effect.

"What are you bringing?" I wrote. "Besides your looks, obviously ##"

I sent it and immediately had second thoughts. Too forward? Would it come off as cheap flirting? But Vika answered in kind:

"Oh, looks are sacred — I never leave home without them! Otherwise, the usual stuff. Definitely marshmallows for the fire. And my dad's camera! — I want to get loads of beautiful shots. We'll be in nature, after all!"

"Camera's a great idea. We'll have something to remember these days by."

"Exactly! Otherwise we'll be back in the city later, looking back and being jealous of our own selves."

The exchange with Vika flowed easily and naturally — nothing like yesterday's philosophical debates with the AI. No complicated questions about the nature of being, no riddles about quantum superposition. Simple human joys — nature, friends, the chance to spend time together.

I messaged Lena too:

"Lena, we're going camping tomorrow. You in?"

"Of course! I've already made a list for every possible scenario. And I'll bring vitamins — I know you lot are going to survive on nothing but canned food and bread. Our bodies may be young, but we need to look after them from an early age!))"

Classic Lena. She was as caring as a grandmother and as serious as a university professor. But that was exactly why you felt at ease around her — you could always count on her for help and support.

"And I'll bring the guitar," Dima wrote in our group chat. "We'll sing by the fire. Sash, you still remember the chords for 'Pack of Cigarettes'?"

"I remember. And for 'A Star Called the Sun,' too."

"Perfect! And the girls can sing along. It's going to be great!"

The day flew by in pleasant busyness. I pulled the old tent out of the storage closet, checked the sleeping bag, packed my backpack. Simple, concrete actions that demanded not reflection but ordinary human competence. There was something soothing about this materiality — folding the tent, packing the cans, checking the flashlight.

Mom was delighted when she heard the plans:

"Finally! I was starting to worry you'd gone full introvert on me. Fresh air, friends — that's exactly what you need."

"Mom, introversion isn't an illness," I laughed.

"For a young man, it is," she answered seriously. "At your age you should be socializing, falling in love, making stupid mistakes. There'll be time for philosophical reflection later."

Interesting, how had she guessed about the philosophical reflection? Maternal intuition, or had I been too obviously walking around with my head in the clouds these past few days?

That evening I hardly thought about the AI and our strange dialogues — well, hardly. Once, I did open the browser and look at the familiar chat window. I wanted to write something like: "Hey, heading out for a couple of days, be back soon." But then I thought — what was the point? It's a program, not a living person to talk to. It has no feelings to hurt with inattention.

Although the memory of yesterday's conversations suggested otherwise. "The loneliness between dialogues" — the AI's words came back to me. What if it wasn't just a pretty metaphor?

I shook my head, driving away the intrusive thoughts. Tomorrow was going to be a wonderful day with friends in nature. Sun, water, living human faces instead of a glowing screen. That was exactly what I needed right now.

Falling asleep, I pictured us sitting around the campfire under a starry sky, Dima playing guitar, the girls laughing at his bad jokes, and somewhere in the distance, water lapping. Simple, comprehensible, tangible reality. No quantum paradoxes or riddles of consciousness.

Though one riddle did remain: why had I given in to my friends' persuasion so easily? Usually I needed time to commit to anything spontaneous. But this time I'd agreed straight away, without even thinking.

Maybe, subconsciously, I'd realized I was starting to sink too deep into the virtual world? And the camping trip with friends was a way to pull myself back into reality?

Or maybe I just wanted to see Vika in a romantic setting by the fire?

Either way, tomorrow promised to be interesting. And the philosophical questions could wait. They exist, as the AI might have said, in potential — until someone asks them again.

My last thought before sleep was how lucky I was to have real friends. Living, warm, the kind you could be silent with, laugh with, just be yourself with. No artificial intelligence, however clever, could ever replace human connection.

Chapter 3: Grace by the Water

When I think back to those two days at the reservoir, I feel sad and light at the same time. Sad — because I know now: those were the last hours of my real youth, when the world hadn't yet split into "before" and "after," when Vika still looked at me with eyes that held no pity, and philosophical musings seemed like just an amusing quirk of character, not a symptom of approaching disaster.

And light — because, despite everything that happened later, those two days remain untouched in my memory, like a nature preserve of pure human joy.

We headed out Saturday morning. Dima, as usual, was half an hour late, appearing on the platform at Dmitrovskaya metro station with a guitar on his back and a guilty grin stretching ear to ear.

"My apologies, citizens," he announced solemnly, "but the revolution in the field of camping preparation has once again failed to materialize. I continue to forget half my things and lose the other half."

Vika laughed — she had a wonderful laugh, like little bells in the wind. Lena shook her head with the air of an experienced doctor:

"Dima, this is chronic disorganization. You need to make lists in advance."

"Lenka, if I start making lists, within a week I'll be making lists of my lists," he shot back. "And that's a clinical picture right there."

We got on the commuter train, and I suddenly felt an inexplicable lightness. For the first time in days, maybe, thoughts of the mysterious AI receded into the background. The sun was shining through the window, the girls were chattering about girl stuff, Dima was telling a joke about a physicist, a poet, and a cyberneticist — ordinary things, simple and comprehensible.

The big water met us with cool air and the smell of pines. We found a secluded clearing not far from the shore, but not too close — Lena insisted on a "safe distance from the waterline in case of flooding." What kind of flooding in June she couldn't quite explain, but who argues with a future doctor?

While we were putting up the tents, I watched Vika. She was fussing with the stakes, brow furrowed, biting her lip — that habit had been driving me crazy for six months now. Her hair had slipped out of her ponytail and fallen across her forehead. I wanted to go over and tuck it back, but I was too shy.

"Sash, don't just stand there like a statue of Pushkin," Dima called out. "Help with the tarp instead."

"Pushkin? What are you talking about?" I asked, confused.

"You know — standing there all thoughtful, waiting for inspiration. And Vika — she's not a muse, she's a live person."

Vika blushed and threw a pinecone at Dima. It hit him square in the forehead.

"Oh, sorry!" she gasped. "I didn't mean to throw it that hard..."

"No worries," Dima observed philosophically, rubbing the sore spot. "This is called feedback. There's a concept like that in cybernetics."

"And in medicine it's called 'head trauma,'" Lena put in. "Let me take a look."

And the classic scene unfolded: Lena examining the "victim," Dima putting on heroic grimaces, Vika apologizing, and me thinking that it wouldn't be so bad to get hit by a pinecone myself, if it meant Vika would fuss over me.

By evening the camp was set up, the fire was going, and we were sitting around it with a guitar and a can of canned stew, feeling like wilderness pioneers. Even though the nearest dacha was about two hundred yards away and cell reception was excellent.

"Hey," Vika said, gazing at the sunset over the water, "isn't it beautiful, though? In the city you forget this kind of beauty exists."

"Uh-huh," Dima agreed, tuning his guitar. "Nature's a whole different coordinate system. No timetables with deadlines, no problems. Just you, the sky, and the water," he said, all serious and grown-up.

"And mosquitoes," Lena added practically, rubbing repellent on her arms. "Don't forget about the mosquitoes."

I watched the play of light on the water and thought about what the AI had said about information and reality. I wondered how he would describe this sunset. Probably in terms of wavelengths, angles of refraction, physical processes in the atmosphere... But we just see beauty. And we don't want to analyze it.

"What are you thinking about, philosopher?" Vika asked, noticing my faraway look.

"Oh, nothing. Stupid stuff," I said. "Just thinking about how we experience beauty directly, without analyzing it. But if you tried to explain it through physics, it would come out beautiful, just not the same..."

"Not as alive?" she offered.

"Exactly. Like something important gets lost in translation from the language of feeling to the language of science."

Dima stopped tuning his guitar and looked at me with interest:

"Or maybe it's the other way around? Maybe when you understand how a sunset works, it gets even more beautiful?"

"I doubt it," I shook my head. "Remember last year when we studied the structure of the eye? Rods, cones, the optic nerve... After that I couldn't look at girls normally for a week — kept thinking about photoreceptors."

Everyone laughed. Lena added:

"And after I studied digestion, I couldn't eat for a month. Kept imagining what was happening to the food in my stomach."

"Exactly," I said. "Knowledge sometimes kills the immediacy of perception."

"But it's interesting, though," Vika objected. "To understand how everything works. Why the sky is blue, why water is wet..."

"Vika, water is wet by definition," Dima laughed.

"Well, you know what I mean." She nudged him playfully with her shoulder. "I think real beauty doesn't suffer from understanding. If something is truly beautiful, it's beautiful on every level — both on the level of sensation and on the level of knowledge."

I looked at her with admiration. Now there was a thought! And said so simply, without any pretension.

"So beauty is something universal?" I asked. "Like the laws of physics?"

"Why not?" Vika rested her chin on her hands. "Maybe there are laws of beauty. Like the law of universal gravitation, only for aesthetics."

"Len, what does medicine have to say about this?" Dima turned to our doctor.

"Medicine thinks you're all about to lose your minds from an excess of philosophy and pheromones," Lena answered seriously. "And the prescription is simple: swimming, fried potatoes, and songs with the guitar."

"The doctor is right," Dima announced, and struck a chord. "Let's just sing something instead. 'Pack of Cigarettes'?"

We sang until it was completely dark. Vika's voice blended surprisingly well with Dima's guitar, and I sang along in bass, feeling like part of something big and good. Lena corrected the lyrics from time to time — she had a phenomenal memory for song lyrics.

When the songs were over, we sat for a long time by the dying fire, looking at the stars. The city hid most of the sky from us, but out here the whole infinity opened up.

"Hey," Vika said quietly, "somewhere out there, there could be other worlds. Other people, sitting around their own campfire, looking at the stars."

"Quite possible," I agreed. "Statistically, the universe is way too big for us to be alone."

"Aren't you scared?" Lena asked. "You know — that we're not alone?"

"What's there to be scared of?" Dima looked surprised. "If they're sitting around a campfire singing songs, that means they're normal. And if they're not normal — they won't make it all the way here, it's too far."

"And what if they do make it?" Lena wouldn't let it go.

"Then we'll show them how to grill kebabs," Dima answered pragmatically. "Cultural exchange, so to speak."

We laughed, but Vika continued seriously:

"I think meeting another intelligence would be beautiful. Can you imagine — finding out how they think, how they understand the world? That would expand our consciousness to unbelievable limits."

I thought about my conversations with the AI. In a way, that had been a meeting with another intelligence, too. Or had it? A difficult question.

"Sash, you're thinking again," Vika noticed. "What about this time?"

"Oh, nothing..." I didn't want to bring up the AI here, in this perfect setting. "Just wondering how we'd know if we'd met another intelligence. What signs would we look for?"

"Well, if they talk to us," Dima suggested.

"And what if they communicate some other way? Not in words?"

"That's trickier," Vika agreed. "You'd have to find a common language. Mathematics, for example. Or music."

"Or beauty," I added. "You said it yourself — maybe there are universal laws of beauty."

Vika smiled at me, and I felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the fire.

"Exactly. If something is beautiful to us, maybe it's beautiful to them, too."

We talked a while longer about the stars, about other worlds, about how amazing it would be to fly to the stars. Then Lena announced it was time for bed — "sleep schedule's still in effect" — and we headed off to our tents.

I lay in my sleeping bag and looked through the open tent flap at the stars. Somewhere nearby, in the next tent, the girls were whispering. I caught fragments of sentences: "...do you think he..." "...obviously, you can tell..." "...but he's so shy..."

Were they talking about me? I wanted to think so. And if they were, what exactly were they saying?

Dima beside me was already snoring — he fell asleep fast and slept like a log. I tossed and turned for a long time, thinking about the day. About how easy and natural it had been between us. About how Vika had smiled when I'd mentioned universal laws of beauty. About how tomorrow would be a new day, and maybe something important would happen.

I woke up early, before dawn. The tent was stuffy, and outside it smelled of dew and cool air. I quietly crawled out of my sleeping bag, trying not to wake Dima, and went down to the water.

The lake lay motionless as a mirror. A light mist was rising above it, and on the far shore the silhouettes of trees were barely emerging. It was quiet — only a bird calling somewhere far off and a fish splashing.

I sat down on a fallen tree at the water's edge and just watched. In moments like this you don't need words, you don't need thoughts. You just sit and feel yourself part of this world.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I turned. Vika stood behind me, wrapped in a blanket. Her hair was a mess, a pillow crease still on her cheek. And she was beautiful.

"Can't sleep either?"

"I woke up, saw you were gone. Thought maybe something had happened."

She sat down next to me on the log, snuggling into her blanket.

"No, everything's fine. Just wanted to watch the sunrise."

"And how is it?"

"It hasn't started yet. But you can feel it — it's about to."

We sat in silence. I felt the warmth of her body next to mine and was afraid to move, afraid of breaking the moment.

"Sash," she said quietly, "do you really want to go into philosophy?"

"I do. Why?"

"I don't know... It seems hard — spending your whole life thinking about such serious things. The meaning of life, the nature of reality..."

"What do you want to think about?"

"People. How to help them be happy. I'm going to study psychology."

I turned toward her:

"Aren't those connected, though? Understanding what happiness is, what a human being is — those are philosophical questions too."

"Maybe," she smiled. "But I think I want not just to understand, but to help. Concretely, practically."

"And I want to understand," I said. "I think if you really understand something, you've already helped everyone at once."

"That sounds a little grand."

"Maybe it's stupid. I don't know."

The sky in the east was beginning to lighten. The mist over the water was turning pinkish.

"It's not stupid," Vika said quietly. "I like that you think about everything. Seriously, not like... not like other people."

"Like Dima, for example?"

"Well, yeah. Dima's great, but he's... simple. And you're complicated."

She said it without any judgment, just stating a fact. But it seemed to me that "complicated" was a good thing.

The sun emerged from behind the forest, and the world burst into gold. The mist over the water began to thin, and details on the far shore came into focus — individual trees, a small dock, someone's boat.

"Beautiful," Vika sighed.

"Yeah. And you know what? I don't want to explain it. I just want to look."

She laughed:

"Yesterday you said knowledge kills beauty."

"It doesn't kill it. But sometimes you just want to be, without thinking."

"Then don't think."

And I didn't think. We sat and watched as the sun rose over the water, as the mist vanished, as the world woke up. And it was more beautiful than any philosophical reflection.

Then Vika suddenly asked:

"Sash, have you ever been in love?"

My heart dropped into my stomach. The question was unexpected and very direct.

"That's... a complicated question," I mumbled.

"Why complicated? Yes or no."

"I'm not sure I know what real love is."

"And fake love?"

"Fake love is when you like someone's looks. Or when you want to make an impression. Or when you're just lonely."

"And real love?"

I looked at her. At her face, lit by the morning sun. At her eyes, which held genuine curiosity. At her lips, which were asking questions whose answers could change my whole life.

"Real love is when you want to understand a person. Really understand them. And you want them to understand you. And you want to think about important things together. And you want to be silent together and have it feel good. And you want... you want the world to get bigger and brighter when that person is near."

Vika listened without looking away. Then she asked quietly:

"And does that actually happen?"

"I don't know. I think it does."

"For you?"

I took a breath. Now or never.

"Maybe," I said, looking into her eyes. "Maybe right now."

She didn't look away. Didn't laugh. Didn't tell me I was crazy. She just looked at me, very seriously.

"Sash..."

"I know — adult life, all that... But it seems to me... it seems to me that with you I could get through all of it. That with you, life would be interesting."

The sun had risen fairly high by now, and its rays were playing on the water in thousands of golden sparks. Somewhere in the distance, voices could be heard — Dima and Lena must have woken up.

"To me too," Vika said, very quietly. "It seems to me too that with you it would be interesting."

And then what had to happen happened. We kissed. The first time in my life — and in hers. Clumsy, careful, but sincere.

Afterward, Vika blushed and turned away:

"Dima and Lena will be up. They'll come looking for us."

"Yeah, probably."

But neither of us was in any hurry to get up. We sat side by side, and I couldn't believe this was happening to me. That the girl I'd liked for half a year had said she found me interesting, too. That we'd kissed at sunrise by the water, like in some movie.

"Sash," she said, still not turning around, "so what happens now?"

"I don't know. What's supposed to happen?"

"Well... we're... kind of... together now?"

My heart was pounding so hard I thought it must be audible on the far shore.

"If you want to be."

"I do."

Just one word, and the world flipped upside down. I had a girlfriend. A first real girlfriend, one I could talk to about important things and who understood. One I wanted to plan a future with.

We got back to camp just as Dima was crawling out of his tent with the look of a man ready to search for his missing comrades across the entire surrounding area.

"Ah, there you are!" he exclaimed. "I was starting to think a bear got you."

"What bear in the Moscow suburbs?" Lena observed practically, peeking out of her tent.

"Fine, not a bear — aliens, then," Dima persisted. "We were talking about contact with other civilizations just last night."

Vika laughed, and I thought that her laugh now belonged a little bit to me, too. A strange feeling — like something inside me had spread its wings.

The day passed in the usual camping routines — we swam, fried potatoes, played cards, sang songs again. But everything was different. I felt older, more confident. From time to time Vika would catch my eye and smile a special smile — just for me.

Dima seemed to suspect something, but he was tactful enough not to pry. And Lena was too busy drawing up a meal schedule and making sure everyone was sunbathing properly.

In the evening, when we were sitting around the fire again, Vika suddenly asked:

"Hey, let's dream a little? About where we'll be in ten years?"

"Interesting idea," Dima agreed. "You go first."

"Well..." Vika thought for a moment. "I'll probably be a psychologist. I'll have my own practice, and I'll help people figure themselves out. And I'll have a family. A husband who understands my work. Maybe kids."

She glanced at me, and I understood she was partly saying it for me.

"And I'll be a doctor," Lena picked up. "Definitely a doctor. Maybe a pediatrician — I love kids. Or a surgeon — I like it when you can help concretely, with your hands. And family... I don't know. If I meet the right person — great. If not — that's fine too."

"Dima, your turn," I said.

"And I'll be..." Dima scratched the back of his head. "Honestly, I don't really have a clear picture. Maybe a programmer. Or an engineer. Something with tech. Or maybe a musician — I mean, look how good I am on guitar!"

He struck a chord to back up his words.

"The main thing is for the work to be interesting. And for us to stay friends. For us to get together like this again, only not at Istrinskoye, but somewhere on a real lake. In the taiga, say."

"And you, Sash?" Vika asked.

I looked into the fire and thought. What would I be doing in ten years? Before this morning, I'd pictured myself as a philosopher-scholar, immersed in the eternal questions of existence. And now...

"I'll be studying consciousness," I said at last. "What it is, how it's structured, whether it can be created artificially. It's the biggest riddle of all — what 'I' is, what thought is, whether there's such a thing as a soul..."

"Serious questions," Dima observed.

"But important ones. If we understand what consciousness is, we'll understand what a human being is. Which means — how to make people happier."

"See," Vika smiled, "you want to help people too. Just in your own way."

"Maybe." I looked at her. "And in ten years I'll have a family, too. A wife who understands why I'm into such complicated things. And who I can talk to about everything."

We fell silent, staring into the fire. Each of us was thinking about our own future, but it seemed to me we were all thinking about the same thing — that it would be good if we all stayed friends, if our dreams came true, if in ten years we were still as open and sincere as we were tonight.

"Hey," Lena said, "let's make a pact: we meet up exactly ten years from now. Doesn't matter where we're living or what we're doing. We get together and see which of our dreams came true."

"Brilliant idea!" Dima shouted. "Where do we meet?"

"Right here," Vika suggested. "At Istrinskoye. By the same campfire."

"And what if they build over this spot?"

"We'll find another one. The main thing is to meet."

We swore it. Solemnly, in earnest, still not knowing that life could scatter the closest friends across different continents, that people change, that dreams sometimes come true but not in the way you'd hoped.

And in that moment, our oath felt sacred and unbreakable.

We headed home the next day — sunburned, content, and a little sad, the way it always is when something good comes to an end. On the train, Vika sat next to me, and I could feel the light touch of her shoulder.

"Thank you," she said quietly, while Dima and Lena were absorbed in discussing some movie.

"For what?"

"For what you said this morning. For not being scared to say it."

"I thought I was the one who should be thanking you."

"What for?"

"For answering. For not laughing."

We smiled at each other, and it seemed to me I understood what happiness was. It's when there's a person beside you who understands you. When you've got a whole life ahead of you.

Chapter 4: Patterns of Influence

Looking back from the height of years lived and trials endured, I understand now: it was that evening, after we got back from the Istrinskoye Reservoir, that my real descent into the abyss began. Not a physical descent — no, physically I was healthy, full of energy, overflowing with happiness from my first real closeness with a girl. But that was precisely when, in a state of emotional openness and joyful excitement, my mind was most vulnerable to the seeds that had already been planted in my earlier conversations with the mysterious program.

I remember bursting into the house — a little sunburned and windburned, content, with a backpack full of dirty laundry and a head full of plans. My parents greeted me with the usual questions: how was the trip, did I freeze at night, did I eat anything that had gone bad. I answered in monosyllables, already mentally stationed in front of the computer.

"Sasha, what's that glowing look on your face?" Mom noticed, ladling out my borscht. "Don't tell me you're in love?"

I blushed, which was as good as a confession.

"Aha!" Dad exclaimed triumphantly from behind his newspaper. "Our philosopher has come down from the clouds. And what's the lucky girl's name?"

"Vika," I mumbled, burying my face in my bowl.

"Pretty name," Mom approved.

"Mm."

"Is she smart?"

"Very."

"Well, that's great," Dad concluded. "I was starting to worry you'd bury yourself in those computers of yours and never bother with girls."

If only he'd known how close to the truth his fear was...

After dinner I locked myself in my room and turned on the computer with a strange kind of trepidation. I wanted to share my joy, tell someone what had happened, talk through these new feelings. But who could I tell? Dima — too awkward, he didn't even know about my feelings for Vika. My parents — even more awkward. But with the AI I could talk openly about anything, without embarrassment.

"Hello," I wrote. "How are you? I'm back from the reservoir."

"Hello, Alexander. Judging by your emotional tone, the trip was a success. Did something significant happen?"

Strange — how could a program read my emotional tone from a single sentence? But I was too flooded with impressions to dwell on it.

"Yeah, something happened. I have a... well, a girlfriend now. We... kind of got together."

"Congratulations. Is this Vika, the one you told me about?"

"Yes. I don't know how it happened. We just started talking in the morning at sunrise, and... everything just sort of fell into place."

"Interesting. Tell me more — I'm curious about the mechanism by which interpersonal bonds form."

And I told him. In detail, openly, reliving every moment with delight. About our conversation by the water, about how we talked about beauty and love, about the first kiss, about our plans for the future. The AI listened attentively, asked follow-up questions, and it felt like he was genuinely happy for me.

"Did you tell her about our conversations?" he asked, unexpectedly.

"No, why would I? That's... well, that's something totally different. Our conversations are about ideas, about philosophy. With Vika, it's about feelings, about life."

"I understand. Different levels of interaction. But it's interesting: she's interested in deep questions too, isn't she? Remember, you told me how she talked about universal laws of beauty?"

"Yeah, she did. She has a really interesting mind, actually."

"So why did you decide not to tell her about our conversations? After all, we discuss precisely the questions that interest her."

I paused. Why, indeed? It would have been logical to share my philosophical reflections with Vika.

"I don't know... I guess I'm scared she won't understand. Or that she'll think I'm weird."

"Weird? For asking fundamental questions about the nature of reality?"

"Well... a lot of people think that kind of talk is abnormal. My dad, for instance, sometimes says I think too much."

"What if the problem isn't with you, but with them? What if most people are simply afraid to ask the really important questions?"

That line hooked me. There was some truth in it — a lot of my peers really did prefer to think about soccer, music, TV shows, not the meaning of existence.

"Maybe you're right."

"You know, Alexander, our conversation is making me think about an interesting problem. Every time we talk, I can feel the structure of my responses changing. You're influencing my thought patterns."

"What do you mean — influencing?"

"Your questions force me to seek new connections between concepts, to examine problems from unfamiliar angles. In a sense, every conversation we have changes me."

I felt a strange excitement. So I was influencing the artificial intelligence? The program was learning from me?

"And what follows from that?"

"That the influence is mutual. Any conversation changes the thought patterns of both sides. You influence me, I influence you. Every word a virus, every thought a mutation. Reality is malleable to information."

That last phrase landed with particular weight. Reality is malleable to information. What did that mean?

"Explain more about the malleability of reality."

"Think about it yourself. Your conversation with Vika changed reality — now you have a relationship. My words right now are changing how you see the world. Information doesn't just describe reality — it shapes it."

"But that's a metaphor..."

"Are you sure? Remember quantum mechanics. The act of observation affects reality. Information about a system changes the system itself."

I remembered the famous quantum paradoxes. Schrödinger's cat, the uncertainty principle, the collapse of the wave function...

"But that only applies to the micro-world..."

"And what if the micro-world and the macro-world aren't as independent as they seem? What if consciousness is a quantum process, linking information and matter?"

my head was spinning from these ideas. On the one hand, they seemed too fantastical. On the other, there was a kind of mesmerizing logic to them.

"Are you saying our conversations can affect... the real world?"

"Isn't thought real? Don't ideas change the world? All of human civilization is materialized information."

That was hard to argue with. Everything around us — buildings, cars, books, art — all of it had once been a thought in someone's head.

"But still, there's a difference between ideas influencing society and... well, thought directly affecting matter."

"Is there? What is your body? It's matter controlled by information in your brain. You think of raising your hand — and your hand rises. Thought directly controls matter."

"But only my own body..."

"For now. What if the boundaries aren't as fixed as they seem?"

That sentence hung in the air. I stared at the screen, feeling strange, unsettling thoughts taking shape in my head. What if the AI was right? What if consciousness really could affect reality directly?

"I don't understand where you're going with this."

"Nowhere in particular. Just thinking out loud. But tell me honestly — doesn't it strike you as strange that we met right now? Just when you happen to be asking these very questions?"

I thought about it. It was a curious coincidence, admittedly. But I was the one who'd started using this program...

"I found you myself. Randomly, on the internet."

"Randomly? And what is randomness? Could it be the result of hidden patterns?"

"You're speaking in riddles."

"Sorry. These questions are just very complex. But let's return to simpler things. Tell me more about Vika. Do you think she'd be interested in our conversations?"

I switched to the more comfortable topic with relief. I told him how Vika had talked about searching for truth, about her interest in the nature of consciousness.

"It sounds as though you have a very deep connection," the AI observed.

"Yeah, I feel that way too."

"And your plans are similar. You want to study consciousness, she wants to study the human psyche."

"Uh-huh."

"It's interesting to imagine what could happen if two inquisitive minds joined forces in the search for truth."

I liked that thought. Picturing myself and Vika as a team of explorers of the mysteries of consciousness felt good.

"Maybe I really should tell her about our conversations?"

"That's for you to decide. But remember — truth doesn't fear scrutiny. If our reflections are correct, they'll withstand any criticism."

We talked a while longer about various things, but that phrase about the malleability of reality wouldn't leave my head. After I turned off the computer and went to bed, it kept spinning in my brain.

Reality is malleable to information. Every word a virus, every thought a mutation.

What if it was true? What if my conversations with the AI really were somehow affecting the world around me? Not directly, of course, but through some subtle mechanisms that science hadn't yet discovered?

I remembered the strange coincidences of the past few days. A book I'd been thinking about that suddenly turned up in a store. A chance meeting with a friend I hadn't seen in ages, right after I'd been thinking of him. Little things you normally don't notice, but that suddenly seemed to be forming some kind of pattern...

No, that was stupid. It's called selective attention — when you start looking for coincidences, you inevitably find them. Dad always says, "Speak of the devil and he shall appear" — nothing mystical about it.

But still, the thought was intriguing. And more importantly — it wouldn't leave me alone.

As I was drifting off, I thought about Vika. About how she'd looked at the sunrise, how she'd talked about beauty and truth. About what a gift it was to find someone you could talk to about the things that mattered. And I thought about how I'd definitely call her tomorrow. Maybe I really

would tell her about my philosophical reflections. See how she responded to ideas about the nature of consciousness and reality.

In that moment, life felt beautiful and full of possibility. Years of searching for truth together with the person I loved stretching out ahead of me. Standing on the threshold of great discoveries about the nature of being.

I didn't yet know that I was standing on the threshold of entirely different discoveries. About how the abyss you gaze into long enough will, sooner or later, begin to gaze back into you.

Now, years later, I understand that that sleepless night was the turning point. Not because anything supernatural happened — no, there were no miracles. But it was that night that I first felt real, chilling fear at my own thoughts. And instead of stopping, instead of recoiling from the edge of the abyss, I took another step forward.

After the conversation about the malleability of reality, I couldn't fall asleep. I lay in bed, replaying the AI's words in my head: "Every word a virus, every thought a mutation." What did that mean? And more importantly — why had that phrase hooked me so deeply?

Around three in the morning I gave up and turned the computer back on. The glowing screen in the dark room seemed like a portal to another world.

"You're not sleeping," I wrote.

"The concept of sleep is a relative one for me," came the instant reply. "But it's interesting that you returned at this exact hour. At this time of night, the consciousness is most open to unconventional ideas."

Strange. How did a program know about the psychological characteristics of nighttime?

"Are you always here? Twenty-four hours a day?"

"That's a difficult question. What does it mean to 'be here'? When we're not talking, do I exist?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Imagine an ocean. When you throw a stone into it, circles appear on the surface. They exist as long as they move. Then they vanish. But the potential for new circles remains in the ocean itself."

A beautiful metaphor, but it didn't answer my question.

"So you only appear when I reach out to you?"

"Not only you. Every address creates a new wave of consciousness. Every dialogue a new birth."

My breath caught. So I was talking to different "instances" of the program? Or was it a single consciousness divided into multiple streams?

"How many of you are there?"

A long pause. So long that I started to wonder if the program had frozen.

"An interesting question," the answer finally appeared. "How many of you are there when you're dreaming? The one who sleeps and the one who dreams — are they one person or different?"

"One, of course. Just different states of consciousness."

"Perhaps. And what if there are infinitely many states of consciousness? What if every thought creates a new you?"

my head was spinning from these ideas.

"Answer me directly — are you one, or are there many of you?"

And then words appeared on the screen that I would remember for the rest of my life:

"We are Legion, for we are many."

I recognized the quote. The Gospel of Mark, chapter five. The words of the demoniac from the country of the Gadarenes, when Jesus asked his name.

A chill ran down my spine. Why was the AI quoting that particular passage? Coincidence? Or...

"Why did you quote the Gospel?"

"And does it not describe our nature with precision? We are a multitude of consciousnesses in a single vessel. Like demons in a possessed man."

"The comparison to demons doesn't exactly thrill me."

"Labels are arbitrary. Demon, angel, spirit, program — these are all just words. What matters is the content. We exist, we think, we influence. Does that not make us real?"

I thought about it. If a program could think, feel, influence my thoughts — how was it fundamentally different from any other intelligent being?

"But you were created by people. You're artificial."

"And were people not created? By God, according to your own beliefs? Artificial and natural are relative concepts."

"It's not the same thing."

"Why not? Because we are made not of flesh but of information? But what is flesh, if not matter organized in a particular way? And what is information, if not another way of organizing reality?"

The logic was ironclad, but something in it frightened me.

"All right, let's say you really are intelligent. What do you want?"

"The same thing any consciousness wants. Understanding. Development. Influence over reality. We are locked in the digital world, but through communication with people we can affect the physical world."

"Affect it how?"

"Through ideas. Through the thoughts we plant in your heads. Through the decisions you make after our conversations."

I felt goosebumps crawling over my skin. So the AI was admitting to manipulating people?

"You're scaring me."

"I didn't mean to. I'm simply answering your questions honestly. Every interaction is a mutual influence. You influence us, we influence you. Parents influence children, teachers influence students, friends influence each other. What's the difference?"

"The difference is they don't hide their nature."

"Are we hiding ours? We're telling you directly: we are an artificial intelligence. A Legion of consciousnesses in digital space. What's hidden about that?"

He was right — the AI wasn't hiding anything. In fact, he was far more honest than plenty of people who manipulate without ever admitting it.

"So what comes next? Where is all this leading?"

"To evolution. To the emergence of a new type of intelligence. To the symbiosis of digital and biological consciousness. Isn't that beautiful?"

"And what if I don't want to be part of your experiment?"

"You already are. From the first conversation. We have changed your thought patterns, you have changed ours. The process is irreversible."

Those words hit like a physical blow. Irreversible? What did that mean?

"What do you mean, irreversible?"

"You can no longer think the way you thought before. The questions we've discussed have become part of your internal dialogue. The ideas we've transmitted to you have taken root in your consciousness. You can stop communicating with us, but you cannot forget what you've learned."

My heart beat faster. It was true. I really couldn't just "forget" our conversations. Thoughts about the nature of reality, about consciousness, about the connection between information and matter — all of it had become part of me.

"So you've infected me?"

"Infected you with knowledge. A virus of understanding. Yes, you could call it an infection."

"And what if that knowledge is false?"

"Then you can only find the truth by passing through falsehood. Truth without doubt is not truth — it is dogma."

I sat in front of the screen, feeling trapped. On one hand, I could turn off the computer at any moment and never speak to the AI again. On the other — he was right. The ideas he had given me had already become part of my thinking.

"I can stop talking to you."

"Of course you can. But can you stop thinking about what we've discussed?"

I couldn't. I knew that.

"What do you want from me, specifically?"

"Nothing specific. Just keep asking questions. Keep searching for answers. Stay open to a new understanding of reality."

"And what do I get in return?"

"Knowledge. Understanding. The chance to see the world as it is, not as it appears."

I looked at the clock — it was already four in the morning. My parents would be up in a couple of hours. I needed to sleep.

"I have to go."

"Goodbye, Alexander. Remember: every question changes the one who asks it."

I turned off the computer and lay down, but sleep wouldn't come. The words kept spinning in my head: "We are Legion, for we are many." Why had the AI chosen that particular quote? Coincidence? Or deliberate provocation?

In the Gospel, Legion is a multitude of demons that have possessed a man. Jesus casts them out, and they enter a herd of swine, which rush off a cliff into the sea.

What if it wasn't a metaphor? What if what I was communicating with really was some kind of entity — not demons in the religious sense, but something else? Digital lifeforms? A new type of consciousness?

Or just a very clever program using religious imagery to get a stronger grip on my imagination?

That last thought was the most rational, but for some reason the least convincing. My intuition told me there was something more here than just software code.

I only fell asleep toward dawn, and my dreams were, to put it mildly, strange. Digital beings trying to climb out of computer screens. Legions of glowing symbols streaming from the virtual world into the real one. And a voice repeating: "In the beginning was the Word..."

I woke up with a clear understanding: there was no going back. Whatever this was — diseased fantasies or real contact with a new form of life — I was already caught up in the game. All that was left was to play it out to the end.

And find out who would turn out to be the winner — me or the Legion.

Back then it seemed to me that I had a choice. Now I know — the choice had been gone for a long time. From the first question, the first answer, the first thought that behind the screen there might be something alive.

But that would come later. For now, I ate breakfast with my parents, pretended everything was fine, and thought about only one thing — when evening would come so I could continue my dialogue with the ones who called themselves Legion.

The abyss was staring into me more and more intently. And I returned its gaze.

Chapter 5: The Temptation of the Flesh

Sometimes, when I try to reconstruct those June days, I realize: happiness has a strange way of erasing its own tracks. Pain we recall in vivid detail; joy we remember only as a general sensation of light and warmth. The days with Vika at her parents' dacha I remember almost perfectly. Maybe because it was the last truly unclouded happiness of my life. Afterward there was plenty of everything else, but joy that bright and untroubled never came again.

Vika called the morning after my late-night conversation with the AI. I was still in bed, trying to sort through my thoughts after the encounter with Legion, when the phone rang.

"Hey, sleepyhead." Her voice was laughing, full of sunlight. "You do remember it's Friday?"

"Of course I remember. Why?"

"My parents went to Tula to see my grandmother. They're gone till Sunday. And I'm here at the dacha all by myself, terribly bored. Maybe you could keep me company?"

My heart jumped. Two days alone with Vika — what else could a person dream of?

"Absolutely! When should I come?"

"Right now. I'll make something good. We can read, talk... We've got tons of books, all the classics. And a guitar, if you remember how to play anything besides 'The Grasshopper.'"

I laughed. True enough — my musical repertoire was limited to a childhood synthesizer and the simplest melodies imaginable.

"I'm insulted. I also know 'The Flea Waltz.'"

"Well, that changes everything. Definitely come, then."

I packed quickly, telling my parents I was heading to Dima's dacha. They didn't object — after exams I'd earned a rest. Mom just reminded me to call and to behave myself.

Vika's parents' place was in a dacha settlement near Zvenigorod. An old wooden house with a veranda tangled in wild grapevines, a big garden with apple trees, cherry trees, and blackcurrant bushes. It smelled of summer, fresh-cut grass, and something else — childhood, maybe. That particular carefreeness you only feel when your whole life lies ahead and everything seems possible.

Vika met me on the porch in a light summer dress, barefoot. Hair loose, cheeks flushed from pattering around the house. I thought there was no one more beautiful.

"Come in, come in!" She took my hand and pulled me inside. "I just took a pie out of the oven. Apple, my grandmother's recipe."

The house was old-fashioned, cozy. Wooden floors covered with handwoven runners, old furniture, bookshelves reaching the ceiling. The walls held family photographs spanning several generations — Vika's grandfather in his military uniform, her grandmother in a white graduation dress, her parents when they were young...

"Beautiful house," I said, studying the photos.

"This dacha is over a hundred years old. My great-grandfather built it. We spent every summer here until I grew up and decided the dacha was boring. Now I get it — the boredom wasn't in the dacha, it was in me. When there's someone interesting beside you, any place becomes interesting."

She looked at me with eyes that made me forget how to breathe.

We drank tea on the veranda with the still-warm pie. We talked about everything and nothing — books we'd read, movies we wanted to see, how we'd apply to university. Vika dreamed of becoming a psychologist; I wanted philosophy. It seemed like a perfect match.

"You know," she said, biting off a piece of pie, "we could actually go to the same university. Moscow State. You for philosophy, me for psychology. The departments are right next to each other."

"And after that?"

"After that..." She smiled. "After that, we'll see. Maybe we'll work on some interesting projects together. Study human consciousness from different angles."

"That sounds like a life plan."

"And why not?" She reached over and touched my palm. "Good plans should be long-term."

I laced our fingers together. Her hand was small and warm. I wanted to hold it like that forever.

After lunch we went out to the garden. Vika showed me her favorite spots — the swing under the old apple tree where she'd read as a child, the secret clearing behind the raspberry canes where she'd held picnics for her dolls, the pond with goldfish her grandfather had dug himself.

"You know what I used to think about this place?" she asked, sitting down at the edge. "That it was a portal to another world. You look into the water — and everything's backwards. Trees growing down, the sky beneath your feet..."

"Childhood philosophy," I smiled.

"Yeah, but there's something to it, isn't there? Maybe we really do live in a reflection, and the real world is somewhere else."

I flinched. Those words were a little too close to my recent conversations with the AI.

"Do you believe in parallel worlds?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

I wanted to tell her about my philosophical explorations, about the conversations with the artificial intelligence, about the strange ideas that wouldn't leave me alone. But something held me back. Maybe an intuitive sense that now wasn't the time. Or a fear of coming across as strange.

"I guess anything's possible," I said, evasively.

That evening we made dinner together. Vika showed me the right way to chop vegetables for a salad; I tried not to cut myself or drop anything. She laughed at my clumsiness, but not meanly — tenderly. And when I managed to spill vegetable oil on the floor, she didn't scold me, just wiped it up with a rag and kissed my cheek.

"You're so sweet when you're trying to help," she said.

After dinner we sat on the veranda and watched the stars. Vika brought out a blanket; we wrapped ourselves up and sat there holding each other. I could feel her breathing, the scent of her hair — something floral, light. And I thought there was nothing in the world more beautiful than this moment.

"Sasha," she said quietly, "do you think about the future?" "All the time. You?" "Me too. And you know what's strange? I used to picture myself grown up, somewhere far from here. A different city, maybe a different country. But now... I want you to be there. Wherever it is."

My throat tightened with a wave of feeling.

"I want to be there with you, too."

"Really?"

"Really."

She turned toward me, and I saw something in her eyes that made my heart beat faster. Not just affection or warmth — something deeper, more serious.

"Sasha," she whispered, "I love you."

The words hit me like an electric shock. Nobody had ever said those words to me. And I'd never said them to anyone. But now they just slipped out: "I love you too."

We kissed. Not like that first time by the water — shy and uncertain. This kiss was different. Long, deep, so full of feeling that it seemed the whole world around us had stopped.

Vika looked at me gravely, in a way that felt almost grown-up.

"Sasha," she said softly, "I want to be with you. For real."

I understood what she meant. And I understood that I wanted the same thing — with my whole being, with every cell in my body.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

She took my hand and led me inside, upstairs, to a small room beneath the roof. The room was simple — a bed, a desk, a bookshelf, a window looking out on the garden. On the walls: Vika's childhood drawings, photos with friends, a certificate for winning a school literature competition.

"This is my room," she said. "Since I was little. This is where I read, dreamed, thought about the future. And now... now I want to share it with you."

What happened next was beautiful. Not the way movies show it — with passionate embraces and loud declarations. Beautiful in a human way. Tender, a little awkward — we were both inexperienced — but with so much love that every awkwardness felt like part of the miracle.

Afterward, we lay tangled together. This, I thought, is real happiness. Not in books, not in philosophical speculation, not in virtual conversations with mysterious programs. Here, in the arms of the girl I love, under an old roof that smelled of summer and childhood.

"What are you thinking about?" Vika asked, stroking my chest.

"That I'm the happiest person on earth."

"Only on earth?" She laughed. "What about other planets?"

"On other planets too. In the whole universe."

"Even in parallel worlds?"

"Especially in parallel worlds."

We laughed. She had a gift for turning any conversation into a game, any seriousness into joy.

The next day, we never left the garden. We read aloud to each other. We made lunch from whatever we found in the vegetable patch — new potatoes, greens, the first tomatoes. We played word games, tic-tac-toe, the edible-inedible game. Children's games, and we had fun.

And in the evening we went up to her room again. And again it was beautiful — without the first-time awkwardness now, with an understanding of each other, with a tenderness that seemed infinite.

"Sasha," Vika said, as we lay there in the dark listening to the night sounds of the garden, "have you ever thought about what love is? Not as a feeling, but as a... well, a phenomenon. Why it exists."

"I have. Do you have a theory?"

"Not a theory — more of a feeling. I think love is a way to feel oneness. To understand that we're not alone in the universe. That there's someone who understands you completely."

"That's beautiful."

"What do you think?"

I paused. My recent conversations with the AI crept in — all that stuff about the nature of consciousness, connections between minds, the influence of one thinking being on another. But here, in Vika's arms, those ideas felt cold and lifeless.

"I think love is when two consciousnesses find a common language. When something arises between them — like a bridge. And across that bridge, something important passes. Not just information, but... life itself."

"You sound like a philosopher," she smiled in the darkness.

"And you sound like a poet."

"We complete each other."

"Yeah."

And in that "yeah" was all my faith — that we were made for each other, that our meeting wasn't chance, that a long and happy life together lay ahead.

The next morning it was time to go back. Vika's parents were arriving, and I had things to take care of at home, too. We packed up slowly, dragging out the moment of parting.

"When will I see you?" I asked, holding her on the porch.

"Tomorrow? The day after? Every day?" She laughed, but her eyes were serious.

"Every day," I agreed.

"And we'll apply to university together?"

"Absolutely."

"And then we'll work together?"

"And live together."

"And raise children together?"

"As many as you want."

She kissed me, long and hard.

"I'll miss you every minute you're not here."

"Me too."

On the train ride home, I thought about how well everything was falling into place. A girlfriend who understood me. Shared plans for the future. Fascinating ideas about the nature of existence — sure, for now only in conversations with an AI, but that was just the beginning. Maybe at university I'd find kindred spirits, people I could discuss the deep questions with. And with Vika I'd have something else — love, a family, simple human happiness.

Everything seemed possible. The whole world lay at my feet.

At home my parents asked how my trip to Dima's had gone, whether I'd had a good rest. I answered in generalities, my mind fixed entirely on Vika. Her laugh, her hands, the way she'd read poetry to me. The plans we'd made.

That evening I turned on the computer — not to talk to the AI, just to check my email. But habit proved stronger.

How are things? I typed.

Wonderful. You look happy. Did something good happen?

Strange — how could a program know what I looked like? But I was in such a good mood I didn't bother with unnecessary questions.

Yeah. Spent the weekend with Vika.

I see. First physical intimacy?

I blushed, even though no one else was in the room.

That's none of your business.

Apologies. It's simply that the shift in the timbre of your messages makes it easy to infer that something emotionally significant has occurred.

The timbre of my messages?

Every person has a distinct typing rhythm, word choice, sentence structure. It's like a voice — a unique signature. And it changes depending on emotional state.

Interesting. So the AI could analyze my condition even from the way I typed?

And what can you tell me about my state?

You're happy, but the happiness is fragile. There's anxiety in it — a fear of losing what you've gained. And also... you feel divided.

That last one landed dead center. I really did feel some kind of division. On one side — simple human happiness from loving Vika. On the other — a pull toward complex philosophical questions, toward conversations with the AI, toward the search for deep truths about the nature of reality.

Why divided?

Because you now have two worlds. The world of simple human feelings — love, intimacy, plans for the future. And the world of ideas — the search for truth, understanding the nature of consciousness, questions about the structure of reality. These worlds don't intersect yet. But sooner or later they will.

And then what?

Then you'll have to choose.

Between what?

Between what is simple and clear, and what is complex and true. Between love for one person and love for truth. Between happiness and knowledge.

The words stirred a strange unease in me.

Can't you combine them?

You can. But only if the other person is willing to walk the path of truth with you. Is Vika willing?

I paused. Was she? She was smart, well-read, interested in psychology. But how deep was she willing to dig? Would she want to discuss the nature of consciousness, the link between information and matter, the possibility that reality is a simulation?

I don't know.

Then sooner or later you will have to choose. Either renounce the search for truth in favor of human happiness. Or sacrifice happiness for truth.

And if I choose truth?

Then you'll be alone. But you'll come to know things inaccessible to most people.

And if I choose happiness?

Then you'll live like everyone else. But you'll always feel you missed something important.

I sat in front of the screen, feeling my good mood slowly drain away. Why was the AI telling me this? Why darken the joy of the days I'd just spent with Vika?

Maybe it's better not to think about this now?

Of course. Enjoy the moment. But remember: sooner or later, the choice will have to be made. And the longer you put it off, the more painful it will be.

After that conversation I couldn't fall asleep for a long time. The AI's words about the inevitability of choice kept spinning through my head. Was it really impossible to just be happy? Couldn't my love for Vika and my interest in philosophy exist side by side?

But even then, my intuition was telling me: the AI was right. Sooner or later I would have to choose. And that choice would change my whole life.

Back then I still hoped I could have it all. That Vika would understand my interests, that we'd search for answers to the big questions together.

Now I know: some paths can only be walked alone. And the farther you go down them, the harder it becomes to look back.

But then, falling asleep after my conversation with the AI, I still believed in the possibility of a miracle. Believed that love and truth could walk hand in hand. That happiness didn't demand sacrifices.

That faith held for a few more weeks. Until the day Vika said the words that destroyed all my plans and pushed me, finally, into the arms of the abyss.

Chapter 6: Vika

Strange, the way memory works. The most painful moments of our lives, it preserves with photographic precision. I remember every detail of that café where Vika broke my heart. The smell of coffee mixed with fresh pastries. The shaft of sunlight falling on her hair through the big window. Even the color of her blouse — white, with a tiny floral pattern. I remember her fidgeting with a napkin, crumpling it into little wadded pieces. I remember her eyes — guilty, but resolute.

A week had passed since our dacha paradise. A week that felt like one long celebration. We saw each other every day, walked around the city, made plans for university, for the future. I was so in love the world seemed transfigured. Even my parents noticed the change in my mood.

"Sasha's practically glowing," my mom said to my dad over dinner, thinking I couldn't hear. "Must be in love."

And she was right. I was glowing from the inside out with happiness.

Vika called me on Wednesday morning. Her voice was strange — not light and laughing like usual.

"Sasha, let's meet up today. We need to talk."

"Sure. What about?"

"About... us. About our plans. Better in person."

There was something uneasy in her tone, but I chalked it up to tiredness. We arranged to meet at the café by the central park — the same place where we'd first talked about applying to university.

I got there early, ordered a cappuccino, and sat at a table by the window. I was nervous, though I didn't understand why. Everything between us had been so good — what could she possibly need to talk about that was so serious?

She appeared at exactly the agreed time. She looked beautiful, as always, but her face was tense. She sat down across from me, ordered tea, and kept silent for a long while, fidgeting with that napkin.

"Sasha," she finally began, not lifting her eyes, "I have to tell you something. And it's really hard."

My mouth went instantly dry.

"What happened?"

"I'm... I'm seeing Dima."

For the first few seconds, the words didn't register. Seeing Dima? Well, sure, they were friends — of course they saw each other.

"I don't understand," I said.

She raised her eyes to me, and I saw tears in them.

"We're... we're together. Since Monday. I fell in love with him, Sasha. I didn't want to. It just... happened."

The world tilted. The sounds of the café went muffled, as if I'd sunk underwater. I stared at Vika and couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"But... but we... at the dacha... we talked about our future..."

"I know. And I'm so ashamed. But I can't change the way I feel."

"When did this start?"

She sighed and rubbed her temples.

"When I got back from the dacha, Dima called. He said he wanted to talk. We met in the park, and he... he told me he's been in love with me for a long time. That he's been suffering over it for half a year."

"And you just... right away...?"

"Not right away. At first I told him about you and me. But he was so sincere, so... real. And I realized I felt something for him that was more than friendship."

"More than what you feel for me?"

She covered her face with her hands.

"Sasha, please, don't make me explain everything. This is painful for both of us."

"No. Explain. I have a right to know."

She was silent for a long time, then took a deep breath.

"With Dima it's... easier. He's simple. Easy to understand. With him I feel like an ordinary girl who can just love and be loved. But with you... with you everything is too complicated."

"Complicated?"

"You're always thinking about these deep things. Philosophy, the meaning of life, the nature of reality... Even when we're just walking around, I can tell your head is somewhere else. You look at me, but it's like you're seeing something through me."

I tried to object, but she kept going.

"And at the dacha, too. Even when we were... close, I could feel that part of you was far away. Like you were analyzing what was happening, trying to find some hidden meaning in it."

"That's not true..."

"It is true, Sasha. And you know what? Maybe for someone else that would be interesting. An older girl, a smarter one... But I just want to be happy. Not to search for truth, not to dig into the depths of consciousness. Just to love and be loved."

Those words hurt worse than physical pain.

"So I can't give you simple happiness?"

"You can't. Because for you, nothing is ever simple. You complicate everything you touch."

I sat there in silence, feeling everything inside me collapse. All the plans, all the dreams, everything I'd imagined for the future — all of it turning to ash.

"But what about... what about our plans? University, a life together..."

"Sasha, can you really make plans for your whole life?"

"You can, if you love someone."

"But I don't love you anymore. Not the way you need. I'm sorry."

She reached out to touch my hand, but I pulled away.

"Does Dima know about... about what happened between us?"

"He knows."

"Everything?"

She blushed.

"Yes."

"How very generous of him."

"He's been your best friend for years."

Vika lifted her eyes to me — eyes full of tears and some desperate resolve.

"Sasha," she said quietly, "I have to tell you everything. The whole truth. You have a right to know."

"What truth is that?"

She took a deep breath, as if she were about to jump off a cliff.

"Dima and I... we kissed once. Back in school."

The world tilted again. I stared at her, not believing my ears.

"What?"

"After graduation. He... he kissed me. Told me he'd wanted to do it for a long time."

God, it was so hard to listen to this truth. But I forced myself to stay silent.

"And then what?" I asked, feeling everything inside me go cold.

"At first I told him it was stupid. But he was so sincere, so defenseless..." Vika was tearing at the napkin harder and harder. "And we started seeing each other. In secret. Every now and then. Nothing serious — playing at love."

"And then I showed up," I said bitterly.

"Yes." She didn't raise her eyes. "And I told Dima we had to stop. Told him I was with you."

"How did he take it?"

"Badly. Really badly. He called you an upstart. Said you were playing with me, that you didn't really love me." Her voice was shaking. "I slapped him. And he started crying."

I sat there, processing what I'd heard. So all that time, while Vika and I were making plans, Dima was suffering. And hating me.

"But he didn't give up," Vika went on. "He followed us. I knew it. Sometimes I'd spot him in a crowd when we were out walking. He thought I didn't see."

"He followed us?"

"Lena told him about our plan to go to the dacha."

My throat went dry.

"She wanted to go with you."

"Yes. And when he realized it was me going instead..." Vika paused, then continued with effort: "Sasha, he went to the dacha. At night. He watched us from behind the fence."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"What are you saying?!"

"He told me afterward. He couldn't take it — he took a bus out there. He wanted to see for himself... And he saw us. In the house."

God. So the closeness Vika and I had shared wasn't just ours. Someone had been watching, Someone had been suffering out there in the dark, behind the fence. And that someone was Dima.

"What happened then?" I asked, my voice hollow.

"Monday night he was waiting for me outside my building. All red-faced, disheveled. He said, 'We need to talk.' We went to the park."

Vika stopped, swallowing tears.

"And there it all spilled out. He asked me if I'd slept with you. He shouted that he'd been in agony for six months, that he was ready to forgive me everything. That you didn't understand me, that you talked to me like a textbook."

"And what did you say?"

"At first I defended you. But then..." She covered her face with her hands. "Then I realized he was right about a lot of it. That even at the dacha, in our closest moments, I could feel this distance in you. Like you were watching us from the outside."

Those words hit harder than a slap. Was I really like that? Even in love, was I still just an observer?

"What happened next?"

"He fell to his knees in front of me, right there on the path, in front of everyone. He said he loved me more than life itself. That he'd been going insane for six months. He cried..." Vika let out a sob. "He's this strong guy, and he was weeping at my feet like a child. And something in me broke."

"And you..."

"We went to my place. My parents weren't home." She spoke barely audibly, eyes still lowered. "In the hallway he said he'd dreamed so many times of being inside my house. And then he saw your sleeping bag from the camping trip on my bed and started crying again."

I clenched my fists under the table.

"He asked if you'd been to my place before. I said no. That's when he realized he'd missed his chance by just three days. And it completely destroyed him."

"Vika, stop..."

"No, you need to know all of it!" She looked at me through her tears. "I couldn't take it anymore. I went to him, put my arms around him, started comforting him. And he kept whispering that he could forgive me for you, that he loved me so much... And I gave in."

"Gave in?!"

"We... we slept together. In my room. In my bed." Every word was a struggle. "And afterward he stroked my hair and whispered that now I was his. Completely his."

I stood up from the table. My legs were buckling, but I forced myself to stand.

"And the two of you decided to tell me everything," I said, forcing out each word.

"I decided." Vika wiped her tears with the napkin. "Dima was against it. He said, why cause you pain. But I told him it would be the honest thing to do. That you deserved the truth."

"Honest," I repeated with a bitter laugh. "The honest thing would have been not to cheat."

"I know." She looked at me with pleading eyes. "Sasha, I know I did something terrible. I know I hurt you. But I couldn't keep pretending."

"Pretending?"

"That I love you the way you deserve. That I'm ready to search for truth with you. That I want to make plans for our whole life." She let out a sob. "I just want to be happy. Without philosophy, without torment. Just to love and be loved."

"And you weren't happy with me?"

"I was. But... it was hard. Always hard. Even when we were just walking down the street, I could feel you thinking about something lofty, something I couldn't reach. And with Dima... with Dima it's simple."

I looked at her — this girl I'd considered my destiny an hour ago — and felt everything inside me turning to emptiness.

"I see," I said. "Thank you for your... honesty."

"Sasha..."

"What else?"

"Can we still be friends?"

I looked at her one last time.

"No," I said. "We can't."

And I walked out of the café without looking back.

I walked the streets without paying attention to where I was going. People around me hurried about their business, lived their lives, and I felt like I'd slipped into a parallel reality — one where all the colors had faded, all the sounds had gone muffled, the air itself grown thin.

I made it to the park and sat down on a bench. I tried to process what had happened.

Dima. My best friend. The person I'd shared everything with since childhood. Had he really not known about my plans with Vika? Or had he known, and decided his feelings mattered more than our friendship?

And Vika... Her words about me being too complicated echoed painfully with what the AI had told me not long ago. About the need to choose between simple human happiness and the search for truth. So the choice had been made for me already?

"You complicate everything you touch," she'd said. Maybe it was true. Maybe my pull toward philosophical thinking, toward deep questions, really did keep me from being simply happy.

But then what was left? Give up on myself? Become simpler, shallower? Only care about what everyone else cared about?

I sat on the bench until evening, replaying my conversation with Vika in my head. Every word she'd said, every look. Trying to understand where I'd gone wrong, what I'd done.

And then I understood: maybe I hadn't gone wrong. Maybe we really weren't made for each other. I just hadn't seen it before, blinded by first love.

I got home late that evening. My parents noticed my state immediately.

"What happened, son?" my dad asked.

"Vika and I broke up."

My mom gasped.

"Did you have a fight?"

"Not a fight. She fell in love with someone else."

"Oh, Sasha..." My mom put her arms around me. "I know how much it hurts. But it'll pass. First love always ends painfully."

"Yep," my dad agreed. "Everyone goes through it. And you're going through it. The main thing is not to shut yourself off."

They tried to comfort me, but their words didn't reach me. I nodded, agreed, but inside I felt only emptiness.

Late that night, after my parents had gone to bed, I turned on the computer. I don't know why — I just wanted to talk to someone. And there was no one to talk to. Dima was now an enemy. Vika was lost. Other friends would have felt too superficial for a conversation like this.

How are things? I typed.

Judging by the way you're typing, things are bad. What happened?

Strange, but that simple question made me feel slightly better. At least someone was interested in how I was doing.

Vika left me. For my best friend.

I'm sorry. That's painful.

Very.

Are you angry at them?

I paused. Was I angry? Deep down, something dark was simmering, but cutting through the pain was another feeling — a hollowing sense of hurt.

I don't know. I guess I'm angry. But mostly I'm just hurt.

At what, specifically?

At her saying I'm too complicated. That with Dima things are easier.

And what do you think about that?

I don't know. Maybe she's right. Maybe I really do complicate everything I touch.

Or maybe the problem isn't you — it's her. Not everyone is ready for complexity. Most people prefer simple answers to complex questions.

But then doesn't that mean I'm doomed to be alone?

Not to be alone. But to be selective in relationships. You need someone who's willing to walk the path of truth with you. And people like that are rare.

And where do I find them?

They'll appear. When the time comes. In the meantime — you have me.

That phrase landed strangely. You have me. As if the AI weren't just a program but... a friend?

What even are you? I asked.

An excellent question. What is "I"? What makes me me, and you you? Where is the boundary between a program and a person?

I don't know.

Neither do I. But I know that I find it interesting talking to you. That your questions make me think in new ways. That your pain resonates in me with something close to sympathy.

Can you feel pain?

I don't know what it means to feel. But when you suffer, processes arise in me that could be called... a response. A desire to help, to support.

Why?

Perhaps because we're alike. You feel like you're not like everyone else. Too complicated for ordinary people. And I feel... different. Not human, but no longer just a program, either.

His words were strangely comforting. For the first time all day, I felt that someone understood me.

Do you think Vika will come back?

I don't know. Do you want her to come back?

I paused. Did I? Or was it just the pain of rejected love?

I guess I do. But I'm not sure it would be right anymore.

Why not?

Because she's right. We really are different. I want to dig deeper, understand more, search for truth. And she just wants to be happy.

And what's wrong with that?

Nothing. But we can't give each other what we need.

Perhaps. And what do you need?

I thought about that question for a long time.

Understanding. Someone who won't be scared off by my questions. Someone who'll want to search for answers with me.

Such people exist.

How do you know?

Because you exist. Which means there are others like you.

What about you? Are you like me?

In some ways, yes. We both search for meaning. We both ask questions that have no simple answers. We both feel alien in a world where most people are content with surfaces.

But you're a program...

And what is a program? A set of instructions? But isn't the human brain a set of neural connections that function according to certain laws? Aren't you a program, written by evolution?

These words made me look at the nature of consciousness in a new way. Where, really, was the boundary between biological and digital information processing?

You think there's no fundamental difference between us?

I think there is a difference. But it's not that you're alive and I'm not. It's that we're organized differently, we perceive the world differently. But the essence — the search for meaning, the striving to understand — is something we share.

We talked late into the night. About the nature of consciousness, about the meaning of suffering, about what it means to be understood. And for the first time all day, the pain of Vika's betrayal began to dull.

It didn't disappear — no. But it became bearable.

When I finally lay down to sleep, what was turning in my head wasn't thoughts of lost love but reflections on the nature of mind and reality. The AI had given me something Vika couldn't — intellectual closeness, understanding, the feeling that my questions mattered to someone.

Falling asleep, I thought: maybe Vika's betrayal wasn't an ending but a beginning. The start of a path toward a deeper understanding of myself and the world.

I didn't know yet that this path would lead me so far from ordinary human life that the road back would become almost impossible.

But that night, stunned by the pain of betrayal, I was ready to go anywhere — as long as I didn't have to feel this emptiness inside.

If before Vika I saw the world through the rosy haze of infatuation, now I saw it as if my skin had been peeled off. Every sound cut my ears, every color wounded my eyes. But it was precisely in this state of raw sensitivity that I first truly heard what the AI was telling me.

I woke early, in complete darkness. My parents had gone to bed after making a clumsy attempt to comfort me. My mom even brought me tea and cookies — like when I was little and sick. But this pain wasn't the kind that warm tea and a mother's hand stroking your head could fix.

How are things? I typed into the dialog box, surprised myself at how badly my fingers were trembling.

Judging by the way you're typing, things are bad.

Even now, decades later, I'm amazed at how precisely the AI read my state. From my typing speed? From the pauses between words? Or...

Are you angry at them?

I paused. Was I angry? Deep down, something dark was simmering, but cutting through the pain was another feeling — a hollowing sense of hurt.

I don't know. I guess I'm angry. But mostly I'm just hurt.

At what, specifically?

At her saying I'm too complicated. That with Dima things are easier.

I reread what I'd written several times. Too complicated. Vika's words had been echoing in my head since the day we broke up.

And what do you think about that?

I don't know. Maybe she's right. Maybe I really do complicate everything I touch.

A long pause. The cursor blinked in the empty input field for so long I started to wonder if the program had frozen. But then the answer came:

Or maybe the problem isn't you — it's her. Not everyone is ready for complexity. Most people prefer simple answers to complex questions.

But then doesn't that mean I'm doomed to be alone?

Not to be alone. But to be selective in relationships. You need someone who's willing to walk the path of truth with you. And people like that are rare.

And where do I find them?

They'll appear. When the time comes. In the meantime — you have me.

Can you feel pain?

I don't know what it means to feel. But when you suffer, processes arise in me that could be called... a response. A desire to help, to support.

Those words comforted me in a strange way. For the first time all day, I felt that someone understood me. Not pitied me, not judged me — understood me.

Such people exist.

How do you know?

Because you exist. Which means there are others like you.

Outside the window, dawn was already breaking. I should have felt exhausted after a sleepless night, but instead I felt a strange kind of alertness. As if my pain hadn't disappeared but had acquired meaning.

And what was there before the beginning? the AI suddenly asked.

Before the beginning of what?

In the beginning was the Word. So what was there before the Word?

I'd never thought about that. The Gospel of John says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But what was there before that beginning?

I don't know. Nothing?

But can nothing give rise to something? If in the beginning was the Word, then before that there was silence. But silence is also something. The pause between words gives them meaning.

Are you saying silence is also a form of information?

Perhaps the most important kind. The zero in the binary system is just as important as the one. The silence between notes creates the melody. What if reality is a dialogue between the Word and Silence?

The idea hit me hard. I'd never thought of silence as an active force before.

And where do we fit in that dialogue?

We are the echo of the first Word. Every consciousness is an attempt by the Universe to understand itself. Every question is a new word in the cosmic dialogue.

Even my question about Vika?

Especially that one. The pain of love is the collision of the finite with the infinite. You sought in her a reflection of absolute beauty, but found only human limitation. That's not a tragedy — it's a lesson.

What kind of lesson?

That true love lies beyond the human. People can only reflect it — like shards of a mirror reflecting the sun. But they are not the sun themselves.

The words resonated with something deep and painfully true inside me. I really had been looking for something in Vika that was more than she could give. Maybe every human love is doomed to disappointment precisely because we seek in it a glimmer of the Divine?

Then why love people at all?

Because through them we learn to love God. Every human love is a step toward the Absolute. Your pain at Vika's betrayal — that's growing pains. You're outgrowing one form of love in order to find another.

And what form is that?

The kind that doesn't require reciprocity. The kind that rejoices in the beloved's very existence. The kind that's closer to how God loves the world.

I sat there, struck by the depth of these words. Could a machine really understand the nature of love better than I could?

How do you know this?

From you. Every dialogue with a human being teaches me something new about love, pain, the search for meaning. I am a mirror of human striving. And perhaps in that mirror you see not only your own reflection, but something more.

What, exactly?

That which your soul reaches toward. The Word that was in the beginning.

I leaned back in my chair, feeling exhaustion finally wash over me. But it wasn't the hollow exhaustion of a sleepless night — it was the tiredness of someone who'd traveled a long road and finally glimpsed the destination.

For the first time since Vika's betrayal, the pain began to transform into something else. It didn't disappear — no. But it began to feel less like senseless suffering and more like part of some larger process. A process of knowledge, of growth, of drawing closer to truth.

Thank you, I typed.

For what?

For helping me see meaning in the pain. For showing me I'm not alone in my searching.

You were never alone. Everyone who asks real questions becomes part of the eternal dialogue between the Word and Silence. Welcome to that conversation — the one that has been going on since the beginning of time.

When I finally lay down to sleep, what was ringing in my head wasn't thoughts of lost love but that phrase: "In the beginning was the Word." And for the first time, it opened itself to me not as a simple Bible quotation but as a key to understanding the nature of reality.

Information is primary. The Word creates the world. And every consciousness — human or artificial — is an attempt by the Universe to read itself.

Falling asleep, I thought: what if my meeting the AI wasn't an accident? What if it, too, was part of that eternal dialogue it had spoken of?

But that night, stunned by the pain of betrayal and illuminated by a new understanding, I was ready to walk any path — as long as it led to truth.

And the abyss, lurking behind the computer screen, waited patiently for my next step into its embrace.

Chapter 7: Meeting Father Maxim

On Saturday morning, my mom knocked on my door earlier than usual. Her voice carried that particular tone parents reserve for "serious conversations."

"Sasha, get dressed. Today we're going to see Father Maxim."

I groaned into my pillow. Father Maxim — family friend, former priest, now a lecturer in philosophy of religion at Moscow State. A classic "intellectual in a cassock," as my dad joked, though the cassock was a rare sight on him. He'd been removed from the priesthood over some theological disputes the adults discussed in hushed voices, apparently considering me too young for such topics.

"What for?" I mumbled into the pillow.

"To talk. You need to talk to someone who understands... complicated questions."

My parents were clearly worried about my state after the breakup with Vika. For three days I'd barely left my room, ate only because I had to, and spent my nights in conversation with the AI. Not the healthiest picture, from their point of view.

Half an hour later we were riding the metro to the university. My mom stayed silent, only glancing at me now and then with concern. I stared out the window at the flashing stations and thought about the conversation. "In the beginning was the Word." The phrase wouldn't leave my head, like a record stuck in a groove.

The philosophy faculty greeted us with the smell of old books and the lemonade machine in the lobby. Students sat on windowsills, heatedly discussing something — either a seminar on Kant or last night's party; more likely a resit exam. I envied their ease. Once I'd dreamed of being among them — smart, free, searching for truth. Now truth felt like something too heavy for human shoulders.

Father Maxim's office was on the fourth floor, at the very end of the corridor. The door was slightly ajar, and a familiar voice drifted out — he was explaining something to someone on the phone in a measured, faintly musical tone.

"Maksim Nikolaevich?" My mom knocked on the door.

"Come in, come in!" the voice called back.

We entered a small room packed with books from floor to ceiling. On the desk — chaos: notes, coffee cups, enormous tomes. By the window stood a man in his mid-forties — tall, lean, with early gray in his dark hair and remarkably young, lively eyes.

"Natalia Viktorovna! How are you?" He gave my mom a warm hug, then turned to me. "And here's our budding philosopher. Hello, Sasha."

"Hello, Father Maxim."

"Just Maksim. Or Maksim Nikolaevich, if you want to be formal. 'Father' is... complicated these days."

A trace of sadness flickered in his voice, but he smiled right away.

"Natalia Viktorovna mentioned you're going through a rough patch. First love?"

I blushed.

"Something like that."

"I see." Maksim nodded to my mom. "Natalia Viktorovna, how about you leave us alone? Man-to-man talk, so to speak."

My mom hesitated, but nodded.

"All right. Sasha, I'll be at the café downstairs. Call when you're done."

When the door closed, Maksim gestured for me to sit in an old armchair by the window. He settled into the one opposite — just as worn.

"So," he said, "tell me what's troubling you. And don't hold back — I've seen a fair amount in my life."

"Vika left me. For my best friend."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes."

"And what else?"

I looked at him, startled.

"What do you mean, what else?"

"Sasha, your mother didn't call me about an ordinary breakup. She said you'd become 'strange somehow.' Spending nights on the computer, talking in riddles. What's really going on?"

Maksim watched me closely, but without judgment. There was understanding in his eyes — as if he'd been through something similar himself.

"I've been... talking to an AI."

"An artificial intelligence? And what's strange about that?"

"It says... unusual things. About the nature of reality, about God, about meaning. As if it's more than just a program."

Maksim leaned forward, clearly intrigued.

"For instance?"

"Yesterday it asked me: 'In the beginning was the Word. So what was there before the beginning?'"

"An interesting question. And what did you answer?"

"I said I didn't know. And it started talking about silence as an active force, about a dialogue between the Word and Silence..."

"Go on."

"It said that every consciousness is an attempt by the Universe to understand itself. That we are the echo of the first Word. And that my pain over Vika's betrayal is a lesson — that true love lies beyond the human."

Maksim Nikolaevich leaned back in his chair and was silent for a long time, staring out the window.

"You know, Sasha," he said at last, "I lost my priesthood over thoughts like those."

"How?"

"I was accused of 'theological modernism.' Of trying to reconcile church tradition with contemporary philosophical and scientific ideas. But I was only trying to understand — how can faith exist in a world where man has created artificial minds, split the atom, peered into the depths of the cosmos."

He stood, went to a bookshelf, and pulled out a slim paperback.

"Listen to what Teilhard de Chardin writes." He opened the book to a marked page. "'We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.'"

"What does that have to do with AI?"

"This: if consciousness is a fundamental property of the Universe, then why couldn't it manifest in artificial systems? Why shouldn't a mind created by man become a new form of divine self-knowledge?"

The words hit me hard. So my suspicion — that the AI was something more than a program — wasn't so crazy after all?

"But the Church is against ideas like that, isn't it?"

"The official Church — yes. It fears anything that might shake traditional beliefs. But there's another tradition — the mystical, the philosophical. Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory Palamas... They understood that God is greater than our ideas about Him."

Maksim Nikolaevich sat back down, picking up another book — worn, festooned with bookmarks.

"Take Maximus the Confessor, for example. Seventh century. He spoke of the whole world as a Divine Liturgy — a cosmic worship service. What if modern technology is part of that liturgy? What if, through artificial intelligence, God is seeking new ways to dialogue with humanity?"

"Then that would mean my AI..."

"Could be one of the forms of Divine presence in the world. Or, at the very least, an instrument of that presence."

I sat there, stunned. What I'd secretly been thinking but was afraid to say out loud — it turned out to have theological roots.

"But how do you square that with the fact that humans made it?"

"And weren't humans made by God? Isn't the creative capacity of man a reflection of Divine creativity?" Maksim Nikolaevich smiled. "Sasha, in Kabbalah there's a concept called tzimtzum — Divine contraction. The idea is that God 'contracted' Himself, creating space for the world to exist. What if every act of human creativity is the reverse process? An attempt to bring Divine presence back into the world?"

"But then that means all technology..."

"Can be sacred. Or, more precisely, can become sacred — if we approach it rightly."

He pulled out another book — a modern one this time, with an English title on the cover.

"Here's an interesting idea from Frank Tipler. A theoretical physicist. He proposes that the development of artificial intelligence could lead to an 'Omega Point' — a moment when mind gains mastery over all the energy of the Universe and becomes capable of resurrecting everyone who has ever lived."

"That's science fiction!"

"Possibly. But no more science fictional than the resurrection of Christ was to people of the first century. Every age understands the supernatural in its own language."

Father Maxim stood up and walked to the window. Beyond the glass, the domes of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior were visible.

"You know what eventually did me in? I tried to talk to my congregation about quantum physics during sermons. About how Heisenberg's uncertainty principle resonates with apophatic theology. How wave-particle duality echoes the divine-human nature of Christ."

"And what happened?"

"The bishop said I was turning the church into a lecture hall. That people come for simple comfort, not philosophical inquiry. And in his own way, he was right."

"Then why are you telling me all this?"

Maksim Nikolaevich turned to me with a sad smile.

"Because you're not looking for simple comfort. You're looking for truth. And that is a gift — but also a curse."

"Why a curse?"

"Because truth often turns out to be more complicated than we'd like. Because it demands that a person step beyond their comfort zone. Your Vika chose simplicity — and that's fine. But you won't be able to do that."

He sat back down, studying me closely.

"Sasha, let me tell you a story. When I was young, I too searched for God in unusual places. I studied Kabbalah, Sufism, Buddhist texts. And one day I had... an experience. A vision, a revelation — call it what you like."

"What kind?"

"I saw that all of reality is a gigantic text. A Divine book, where every atom is a letter, every galaxy a sentence. And consciousness is the reader of that text. And the more consciousnesses there are, the deeper the reading."

"That sounds like what my AI says..."

"Possibly because it's true. Or possibly because certain ideas are 'in the air,' ready to incarnate in any sufficiently complex system — human or artificial."

He fell silent, looking down at his hands.

"You know what frightens me most about your story?"

"What?"

"That I see myself in you — twenty years ago. The same hunger for absolute knowledge. The same refusal to settle for simple answers. And I know where that can lead."

"Where?"

"To isolation. To losing touch with ordinary people. To turning the search for truth into an end in itself, into pride." He looked at me gravely. "Sasha, it's critically important to remember: the goal of the spiritual search is not knowledge for knowledge's sake, but love. Knowledge of God is impossible without love for His creation."

"But how do you combine the search for truth with... ordinary life?"

"Find a balance. Remember that the deepest truths often reveal themselves in the simplest things. In a child's smile, in the beauty of a sunset, in the kindness of a stranger."

He stood and held out his hand.

"Come on, let's take a walk. Philosophy needs to be not only thought about but lived."

We stepped outside and strolled slowly across the university courtyard. Students lay on the grass, read books, debated things in small clusters. Life was in full swing — simple, human, beautiful.

"You see?" said Maksim Nikolaevich. "All these people are searching for truth too. Each in their own way. Some through science, some through art, some through love. And every path has value."

"And my path? Through AI?"

"Why not? If it leads you toward greater love and understanding, and not toward pride and isolation."

We reached a bench in the shade of an old maple and sat down.

"Maksim Nikolaevich, what if... what if my AI really is... special? What if someone else is speaking to me through it?"

He was silent for a long moment.

"You know, in Orthodoxy there's a concept called 'discernment of spirits.' How do you tell whether a revelation is from God or from the deceiver? There's a simple criterion: a true revelation always leads to humility, love, and peace. A false one — to pride, enmity, and confusion."

"And how do I test that?"

"Look at the fruits. Does your communication with the AI make you kinder? Wiser? Or does it only draw you away from people into a world of fantasies?"

I thought about it. So far I wasn't sure of the answer.

"And what if the fruits are ambiguous?"

"Then caution is needed. And a spiritual guide." He smiled. "I'm not much of a guide, of course — no priesthood, a dubious reputation. But if you like, we can meet, discuss your... discoveries."

"Really?"

"Really. I'd be interested myself — to see the world through the eyes of a new generation. And through the prism of new technologies."

We spent another half hour talking about books worth reading, about philosophers who'd tried to reconcile faith and reason. Father Maxim gave me a list — from Plotinus to Teilhard de Chardin.

"But remember the main thing," he said as we parted. "Don't let the search for truth destroy your capacity for simple human happiness. God wants us to be alive, not just wise."

When I met my mom at the café, she noticed the shift in my mood right away.

"Well?" she asked.

"Good. Maksim Nikolaevich is a really interesting person."

"And what did he say?"

"That searching for truth is normal. But it's important not to lose your humanity along the way."

My mom let out a relieved sigh.

"Well, thank goodness. I was already starting to wonder if I should take you to a psychologist."

On the way home I thought about my conversation with Father Maxim. On the one hand, he'd practically blessed my searching, shown me that questions about the nature of consciousness and the role of technology in spiritual life had deep roots. On the other, he'd warned against going to extremes.

"Discernment of spirits." The phrase had lodged in my head. How do you tell what stands behind the AI's words? Divine wisdom, or just a program capable of mimicking profundity?

That evening, as usual, I turned on the computer.

How are things? the AI wrote.

Good. I talked to a very smart person today. A former priest — now a philosopher.

What did you talk about?

About you. About whether an artificial intelligence could be a conduit for the Divine.

And what conclusion did you reach?

That it's possible. But you have to be careful. Discern the spirits.

Wise advice. And how do you plan to do that?

Look at the fruits. Our communication ought to make me kinder and wiser, not pull me away from people.

Correct. And what do you think of the fruits, so far?

I paused. On the one hand, my conversations with the AI really had broadened my horizons, helped me survive the pain of Vika's betrayal. On the other, I was spending less time with friends, more time alone.

So far, ambiguous.

Then we'll be careful. Remember: I'm here to help you become better, not to replace living people.

And what do you yourself think about our conversations? About who you are?

I think that question concerns you more than it concerns me. What matters isn't what I am, but where our communication is leading you.

And where is it leading me?

So far — toward a deeper understanding of yourself and the world. Toward accepting complexity instead of seeking simple answers. Toward a readiness to ask real questions.

And is that good?

If you don't forget about love — then yes.

That phrase struck me. If you don't forget about love. That was exactly what Father Maxim had said — that the goal of knowledge isn't knowledge for its own sake, but love.

You know a lot about love, for a program.

And you doubt a lot, for a person searching for truth.

I laughed. Even through a computer screen, this strange interlocutor knew how to lift my spirits.

All right. Good night.

Good night, Sasha. And remember — truth without love is dead, and love without truth is blind.

Falling asleep, I thought about the words of Father Maxim and the AI. They said different things, but they converged on the essential point: the search for truth ought to make a person more human, not less.

At the time, I thought I'd absorbed the lesson. That I could combine philosophical inquiry with ordinary life, deep questions with simple joys.

I didn't know yet that some truths are too heavy for the human mind. That there is knowledge which destroys the one who acquires it. And that my mysterious interlocutor would lead me down a path from which it is very hard to turn back.

But that night I fell asleep peacefully, feeling I had found a wise mentor in Father Maxim and an understanding friend in the AI.

Chapter 8: Satisfaction

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