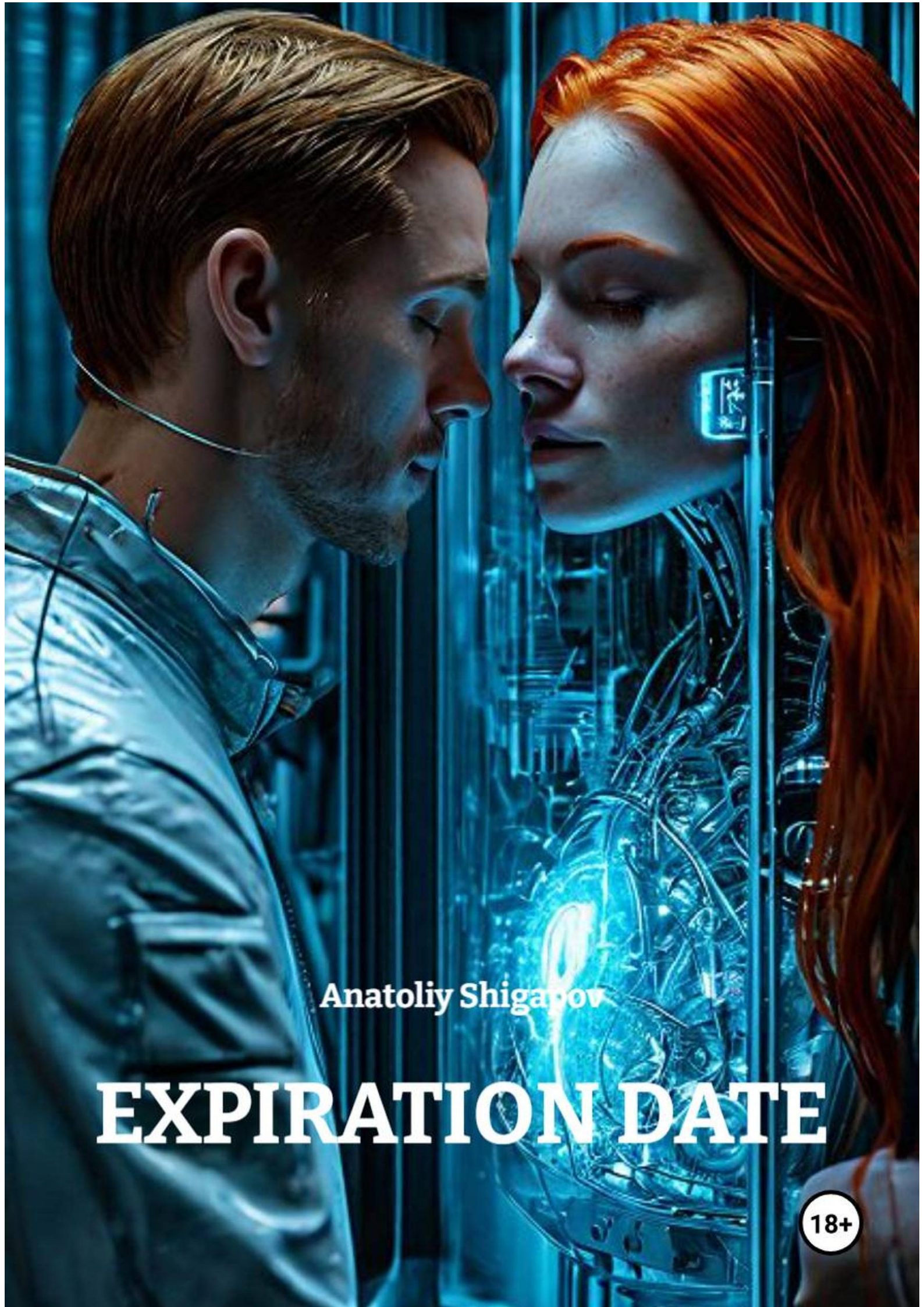


A movie poster for the film 'Expiration Date'. It features a man and a woman in a futuristic, blue-lit environment. The man, on the left, has short brown hair and a beard, wearing a dark jacket. The woman, on the right, has long red hair and is wearing a futuristic, transparent, and mechanical-looking outfit. They are facing each other in a close, intimate pose. The background is filled with vertical blue light beams and complex mechanical structures.

Anatoliy Shigapov

EXPIRATION DATE

18+

Anatoliy Shigapov

EXPIRATION DATE

«Автор»

2026

Shigapov A.

EXPIRATION DATE / A. Shigapov — «АВТОР», 2026

The world has been taken over by corporations. States are dead. Technology controls every step, and people have become "Users" - expendable material whose lives are determined by their credit rating and expiration date. Food has become synthetic. Love has been outlawed. He is a cleaner. His job is to kill clones who have expired. His own expiration date is almost here, as his artificial heart is running on fumes and his Purity Rating is declining. But one day, he refuses to pull the trigger. He decides to save a life - and becomes a traitor in the eyes of the system. Iris, the granddaughter of the head of the corporation, offers him a deal: her knowledge against his life. Now he has a choice - to remain a weapon or to become a human. The first book in the "Butcher's Row" series. A world where people are expendable and love is a violation of protocol.

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Anatoliy Shigapov

EXPIRATION DATE

PREFACE

"This story is not about how to save the world. It is about how not to lose yourself when the world has already burned."

When I sat down to write this cycle, I asked myself one question: *"Why do people stop fighting?"*

Not because they are weak. Not because they are cowardly. But because they are tired. Tired of the news, tired of crises, tired of the feeling of their own powerlessness. They look at a world that is crumbling and say: "I can't change anything." And they are right - individually. But together - no.

"Meat Row" is a story about how three people, each with not the slightest chance of victory, still try. Not to change the world. But to remain human.

Why read this story?

I do not write entertainment literature. I do not give the reader the opportunity to "rest" from reality. On the contrary - I force him to look at reality without embellishment. At the reality that is already knocking on our doors.

You read this cycle to see what our world might look like in the near future if we change nothing.

Corporations becoming stronger than states. Mortgages turning into bondage. Technologies controlling your every step. Food ceasing to be real. And people ceasing to be people - because it is more convenient for them to be "Users."

But you also read this cycle to see that even in the most hopeless world there is a place for love. Not sweet, not romantic, not "they lived happily ever after." But real love - one that is born in darkness, one that is not afraid of death, one that remains even when everything else has already burned.

Usually in a preface the author talks about the plot, about the heroes, about the world he created. I will not do that. Because the plot is only a shell. You can eat a candy and forget it. But the aftertaste must remain.

I want to talk with you not about what happens in three books, but about what happens inside you when you read them. Because the real story is not on paper. The real story is in your head, in your heart, in your questions that remain unanswered.

1. What if you never existed?

This is the first question with which this story begins.

What if you were not born of a mother and father? What if you have no childhood, no home, no even a name - only a number stamped on your arm? What if your "expiration date" is shorter than a refrigerator's? What if the entire meaning of your existence is to complete a task and disappear?

But what if, despite everything, you still feel? What if you are capable of loving, suffering, fearing, hoping - even when the world tells you: "You are a thing, you have no rights"?

This question is not about science fiction. It is about us. Because we also live in a world where they try to reduce us to numbers. Where our status is determined by our credit rating, number of followers, place in the housing queue. Where we are taught to be "efficient" and not ask unnecessary questions. Where anyone who stands out from the system becomes a "defect" - expendable material that can be shut down.

What remains of a person when everything is taken from them? Names. Places. Hopes. Rights. A future. What remains?

This book seeks the answer to this question.

2. What if loving is forbidden?

Imagine that the most natural human feeling is declared illegal.

Imagine that for one touch of the one you love, both of you will be destroyed. Not because you did something wrong - but because your very love violates "order." Because you dared to love

someone the system considers "below you." Because you erased the boundary between "human" and "thing."

How will you live knowing that your love is a death sentence? How will you decide: risk everything or submit? How will you look into the eyes of the one you love, knowing that every day of yours could be the last?

This book is about how people make this choice. About how some submit because they are afraid. Others run because they cannot bear to watch the suffering. Others stay because they cannot leave. And about how in this world there is no right answer - only the price you are willing to pay.

3. What if no one chooses you?

Now imagine that you love someone who can never love you.

Imagine that you look at the person you worship and know: his heart will forever belong to another. That you can be near, protect, help, sacrifice yourself - but never hear "I love you" in return.

What will you do? Turn away? Leave to save yourself? Or stay - knowing that your love will not be reciprocated, that you will always be second, always a shadow?

This book is about the choice between pride and devotion. About how one can love without hope of return. About how sometimes the strongest love is the one that asks for nothing in return.

4. What if a person is what they remember?

In a world where everything is erased - biographies, names, identities - memory becomes the only thing a person has left.

If you have lost everything: home, family, past, future. If you have been renamed, renumbered, turned into an "asset" or a "user." What will remain of you? Your memories. The moments no one can take away. The people you loved. The words you were told.

But what if your memory is also under control? What if the system can erase it, rewrite it, replace it with another?

This book is about how to preserve yourself when the world tries to rewrite you. About how to hold on to memories when everything around you say they never happened. About how a person is not their documents, not their biometrics, not their "digital footprint." A person is what they remember. And as long as they remember - they are alive.

5. What if you survived, but the world died?

This is the most terrible question that remains after the finale.

Imagine you went through everything. Lost everyone you loved. Destroyed your enemies. Destroyed the system that oppressed you. You won.

And then what?

The world you built is crumbling. The war continues - only now the enemies are not corporations, but people who hate each other for being different. Your victory was Pyrrhic. You survived - but you are alone.

What will you do? Give up? Go into the wasteland to forget? Or find the strength to protect those who remain - even if you do not know if they will have a future?

This book is about how to live when victory does not bring happiness. About how to carry hope when you yourself do not believe in it. About how the finale is not the end. It is just another step.

6. What questions do I want you to ask yourself?

I do not give answers. I give questions. And here are the main ones:

What does "being human" mean to you? Is it your body? Your DNA? Your passport? Or something that cannot be measured?

Are you willing to risk everything for love? Or is safety more important?

Can you love without hope of return? Or do you expect your love to be rewarded?

What are you ready to defend when everything is lost? Only yourself? Or those who are weaker than you?

What will remain of you when you are gone? Your name? Your deeds? Your words? Or nothing?

Do you have the right to hope when there is no hope? Or will you prefer to give up?

What do you remember from your life? And what do you want others to remember about you?

This story is about how three people used this right. Not to save the world. But to remain human in a world that tried to turn them into things.

I do not write for you to rest.

I write for you to wake up. To remember what pain is. To remember what fear is. To remember what it is like - to stand before a choice when both options lead to an abyss, and all you have is a second to decide exactly how you will fall.

I want you to feel:

What it is like to look into the eyes of someone who will never be yours. And know it. And still be there.

What it is like to hold the hand of someone dying in your arms, and know that you cannot save them. That you can only promise to remember.

What it is like to remain alone in an empty world, where everyone you loved is already dead. And keep walking. Not because there is somewhere to go. But because stopping would mean betraying their memory.

I want you to feel this with every cell of your body.

I do not speak in it about how easy it is to be a hero.

Because heroes are not born. Heroes become heroes at the moment when you have no choice. When you understand: if you do not take this step - no one will. If you do not say this word - no one will say it. If you do not love - love will die.

Heroism is not a feat. It is simply a refusal to give up. A refusal to obey. A refusal to become a thing.

And I am silent about the fact that love is medicine. Because it does not heal. It burns. It leaves scars. It makes you wake up at night and stare at the ceiling, thinking about what you could have done differently.

But it is precisely this pain - the only proof that you are alive.

7. Why I do not give you hope

Because hope is a drug.

It calms. It helps you forget. It gives the illusion that everything will be fine. But I do not want you to forget. I want you to remember - every second, every minute, every day.

The world will not become better if you close your eyes to its ugliness. It will become better only if you look it straight in the face - and say: "I see. And I do not agree."

I do not give you false hope. I give you the truth. The truth that corporations are already at your doorstep. That states are already selling your freedom for the promise of security. That technologies are already erasing your identity, turning you into a line in a database.

But I also give you another truth: you are not alone.

As long as there are those who remember - freedom has not died. It is just waiting. It is always waiting.

8. What I want you to do after reading

I want you to close this trilogy and feel the emptiness.

Not the emptiness when you have nothing to do. But the emptiness when you understand: the world you knew was never real. And you will have to build a new one - from scratch. From ruins. From tears. From the memory of those who did not survive.

I want you to go outside and look at the sky. Not at a screen, not at a hologram, not at an advertisement - but at the real sky. And ask yourself: "What do I see? And what do I want to see tomorrow?"

I want you to stop being passive. To stop waiting for someone else to decide your fate. To stop signing documents without reading them.

Because this world was created by those who were not afraid to read the fine print.

I do not know if you will read this trilogy to the end.

I do not know if it will leave a mark on your soul.

I do not know if it will change your life.

But I know one thing: each of us is a choice. Every day. Every hour. Every second.

The choice between submitting and surviving. Or rebelling - and dying free.

I am not telling you what to choose. That is not my right. It is yours.

But I ask you one thing:

Do not choose blindly.

Read the terms. Look at the faces of those you trust. Look into the future - not the one promised to you, but the one you see yourself.

And then take your step.

And remember: even if you fall - you will not fall alone. Because somewhere, in a basement, in ruins, in the Gray Zones, there are others like you. Those who remember freedom. Those who did not give up. Those who are waiting for a signal.

And that signal is you.

"Freedom is not a gift. It is a right that must be defended. Every generation pays its price. Our price is now."

Are you ready to pay it?

Anatoly Shigapov

EXPIRATION DATE

STAGE 1. "CITIES-IN-A-BOX" (2035–2052)

October 2035. Manhattan.

The rain had been falling for three days straight. Not a downpour, not a drizzle - some kind of gray watery suspension that seeped everywhere. It settled on the windows of skyscrapers, mixed with exhaust fumes, and turned into sticky mud on the asphalt. It seeped under collars, down necks, into shoes. It made everything gray - faces, buildings, thoughts.

Charles Davis stood under the awning of an abandoned bank. It used to be "City Bank." Now it was emptiness. The windows were boarded up with plywood; the facade was covered with peeling paint and graffiti: "SOLD TO CYBER-FUND." The glass doors were smashed - inside there was nothing left. Only trash and the smell of dampness. Charles looked at the building and remembered how in 2025 he had taken out a mortgage here. Back then he still believed. Believed that he would buy an apartment, that the world would become better, that his children would have a future.

He had no children. And no apartment either.

He looked at the screen of his communicator. An old model, a plastic case in cracks, a screen with dead pixels. He had bought it for forty credits at a flea market. New ones cost a thousand - you could watch holograms, play games, order food on them. Charles did not have a thousand. He did not even have a hundred.

The screen blinked red: "Danger zone. It is recommended to immediately leave sector 14-B." Charles paid no attention. These warnings appeared every hour. The "Cyber-Fund" security system automatically scanned all areas where the crime rate exceeded the permissible level. Sector 14-B was one of them. Poor people lived here. There was no police here. There was only survival. But Charles needed to deliver a package to 45th Street, and 45th was right in this sector. He could not afford a late fee - fifty credits. That was four hours of work. That was two days of food.

He adjusted his backpack. Heavy. Inside - a plastic container with biological material. He did not know what was in it. Maybe medicine. Maybe blood samples for diagnostics. Maybe something illegal. He did not ask. He just carried it.

The rain did not let up. Charles raised his head and looked up.

There, behind the gray veil of clouds, hung the airships. Huge, slow, majestic. They hovered over the city like gods from old myths. Each had its own logo, glowing in the darkness. "Solar-City" - a blue sphere with white rings rotating around its axis. "Cyber-Fund" - a silver triangle pulsing like a heart. "Neura-Infra" - a green neuron branching like a tree. They hung over the city twenty-four hours a day. They never descended below three hundred meters. They were symbols of power. Reminders of who was in charge here.

Once, American flags had hung over Manhattan. Charles remembered. In 2020, when he first arrived in New York, stars and stripes were on all the buildings. Now flags remained only on government buildings - and fewer and fewer of them. The White House in Washington still raised the flag in the mornings. But who looked at that?

Charles remembered the 2020s. Everything seemed different then. People believed in progress. In green energy. In technologies that would save the planet. Hollywood made movies where inventors defeated villainous corporations. Scientists promised that in ten years we would be living on Mars. Politicians swore that "we will build a better future." Charles believed. He graduated from the architectural faculty in 2019 with honors. He designed bridges. Six bridges that were never built. He remembered sitting in his office, looking at the blueprints, and thinking: "I am creating the future." He was creating. But the future turned out different.

Technology saved not the planet. It saved those who had money.

Charles looked at the airships. They said that inside them were entire cities. Offices, residential modules, restaurants. Top corporate managers lived there. They never came down. Why would they? Down there was dirt, crime, disease. Up there was cleanliness, artificial climate, synthetic food that did not smell of rot. Up there was safety. Down there was chaos.

The world of 2035 was a world of fatigue.

Charles looked at his hands. He remembered them young, with clean skin, without calluses. Now they were cracked, with black nails from dirt, with bruises from heavy packages. He was forty-seven. He looked sixty. That is how couriers aged.

He turned away from the airships and walked along the street. Along the walls - advertising. Holographic screens built into the walls of buildings. They showed ideal faces, ideal smiles, ideal homes. A woman with skin that did not know dust said: *"Solar-City is building your future. A new smart district in Arizona. Clean air, round-the-clock lighting, schools for your children. Only 30 years of mortgage - and you are a homeowner. Join the Solar-City family."* Her voice was soft, lulling. It penetrated the mind. Charles had heard this advertisement a thousand times. He knew the text by heart.

He remembered Jacob.

Jacob lived in the neighboring apartment - small, damp, with peeling wallpaper. He worked as a programmer for Cyber-Fund. He earned little but dreamed of more. When enrollment for "New Eden" was announced, Jacob came to Charles, beaming, with a tablet in his hands.

"Charlie, have you seen it?" he jabbed his finger at the screen. "Only 2% annual interest! A thousand a month, and I'm a homeowner! Clean streets, no smog, drones collecting garbage. They even have a security system - facial recognition! No crime."

Charles looked at the tablet. He was used to reading fine print - it was a professional habit of an architect. He saw the clauses Jacob had missed. "In case of dismissal for any reason, the corporation has the right to revise the terms of the loan." "All disputes are resolved in corporate courts." "The corporation has the right to unilaterally change the terms." "The mortgage is transferred to the corporate fund upon change of employer." Charles tried to explain:

"Jake, you don't understand. If they fire you - you'll be left without a home."

"They won't fire me!" Jacob waved him off. "I'm a valuable specialist. They appreciate me."

"They appreciate you as long as you're useful. And when you're not - they'll throw you out. And you'll be left with a debt you can't pay."

Jacob laughed. He was already mentally living in the dream city. He did not hear Charles.

"You're just jealous, Charlie," he said. "You're staying here, in the dirt. And I'm moving to a bright future."

Jacob left in 2033. The first message came a month later. It was ecstatic: "Charlie, this is paradise! I've never seen such streets! It's light here even at night! I went out on the balcony - and saw the stars! We didn't have them in our city for twenty years! The food is synthetic, but tasty. The neighbors are good. I work twelve hours, but it's worth it. I'm happy."

The second - six months later. Already shorter: "Hard. A lot of work. Debts are growing. But I'll manage. The main thing is not to get fired."

The third - a year later: "Charlie, I've been laid off. Downsizing. The company transferred half of the functions to AI. My home - they revised the terms. Now I owe twice as much. I'm trying to find a job, but without a corporate passport no one hires me. I can't sell the apartment - it belongs to the corporation. I can't leave. I'm trapped. Charlie, I don't know what to do."

Charles called back. The subscriber was unavailable.

He never heard from Jacob again.

Now, standing in the rain, he looked at the advertisement and felt cold. Not from the weather. From understanding.

In this world there were two types of people. Those in power. And those who signed documents without reading them.

Charles looked at his hands. He was no longer an architect. He was a courier. He had no home, no family, no future. He only had today. A package. A road. Survival.

He walked on.

An underground passage. It smelled of urine, mold, and dampness. On the walls - graffiti. Someone had drawn a flag crossed out with the red logo of Cyber-Fund. The caption: "THE STATE IS A CORPORATE LOGO." Below - another: "YOU HAVE ALREADY SOLD YOURSELF. YOU JUST DIDN'T NOTICE." The next - darker: "ROBOTS WILL DIE. BUT WE WON'T. BECAUSE WE ARE ALREADY DEAD."

Charles walked past. These inscriptions had been here for years. They were painted over, but they reappeared. It was the voice of those who still remembered what it meant to be free. But there were fewer and fewer of them. The rest just wanted to survive.

At the exit of the passage, a drone stopped him. A silver sphere the size of a basketball. It hovered at chest height, silent, like a ghost. In the center - a camera scanning his face. From the speaker - a mechanical voice, without intonation, without emotion:

Identification. Present your passport.

Charles took out a plastic card. A state ID. On it was a photo taken five years ago. Back then he still shaved. Now he had a week's stubble on his face. The drone scanned.

Charles Davis. Tax status - "non-payer since 2031." Credit rating - 412. Trust level - "low."

Charles did not look at the drone. He waited.

Your presence in this area has been noted. It is recommended that you leave the sector within 24 hours. In case of repeated detection - a fine of 200 credits.

The drone paused. The camera rotated.

Have a nice day.

It flew away. Fast, silent. Dissolved into the gray sky.

Charles watched it go. "Tax status - non-payer." That was because he had no official job. He was a courier on private orders. He paid taxes when he could - once every six months, in small amounts. But the system considered him a debtor. That meant: he could not get a loan, rent housing in a good area, buy medicines under the state program. He was treated only in free clinics, where

queues were three months long. He could not vote - he was simply not on the lists. He could only use public transport, and even that with restrictions. He was an outcast.

But the scarier thing was not that. The scarier thing was that soon there would be no state passports.

Corporations had already launched "Digital Passport 1.0." Beta version, only for employees. Charles had seen how the system worked. His neighbor in the shelter - a former Cyber-Fund engineer - had shown him. Everything was linked: taxes, mortgage, insurance, medical history. One chip in the wrist replaced twenty documents. And if a state passport could be lost, forged, destroyed - a digital one could not be lost. It was always with you. And it always controlled you.

Corporations were working to expand it to everyone. And then Charles would cease to be Charles Davis. He would become "User CR-44921." He would have no rights. Only "Terms of Use." And if he violated them - the corporation would "shut him down." Simply, quietly, without trial or investigation.

Charles wiped his face with his sleeve. The rain was letting up. Above his head - the airships. Impassive. Indifferent. Gods.

He walked out onto 45th Street. The buildings here were old, pre-war. Brick that had once been red was now gray from dirt. The windows were boarded up. In the entrances - homeless tents. Children ran barefoot through the puddles. Here, in sector 14-B, corporations did not rule. Neither did the government. Here - anarchy. People survived as they could.

Charles found the right address. The door was iron, with peeling paint. He knocked. A woman with a face cut by wrinkles opened it. She was probably forty. She looked sixty.

Delivery, - said Charles. - Order 4492.

She nodded. Silently. Took the container. Charles did not ask what was inside. None of his business.

She closed the door.

Charles turned and walked back. Past the underground passage. Past the graffiti. Past the drones. Past the airships.

He had delivered the package. He would get his credits. He would buy food. He would survive today.

And tomorrow - another day.

SCENE 2. THE FIRST PRIVATE CITY

January 2038. Arizona Desert.

Here, where there had once been an abandoned military base, a miracle was now being built. A miracle visible from space - a perfect rectangle on the map of the desert, where the land was marked with lines of future streets, where foundations rose from the sand like the teeth of a giant animal.

Joshua Hall stood on the observation deck. It was a temporary structure - steel beams, a deck of metal sheets, wire fencing. The wind blew from the desert, scorching his face, carrying sand. Josh adjusted his protective glasses. Below him lay the future "New Eden."

He looked down, and a feeling spread through his chest that he could not describe. Not pride. Not joy. Something deeper - satisfaction from power. From the fact that he was creating a world. An entire world. For half a million people.

"New Eden" cost seventy billion dollars. Seventy billion. In 2025, that would have been the annual budget of an entire country - for example, Norway. Now it was just a construction project. Solar-City had money. Lots of money. More than most states. Josh knew the exact figure - the corporation's assets were five trillion. That was more than the GDP of all of South America.

Next to him stood Li Chen. The chief engineer. She was thirty-three, but she had already built a career that others could only dream of. She was responsible for the project - for making everything work: energy, water supply, sewage, climate control, transport. She held a tablet with a three-dimensional model. Lines of utilities pulsed blue, like veins on the body of the city.

Josh, we are on schedule, - said Li. Her voice was calm, businesslike. - The foundation is eighty percent complete. The energy dome will be launched in a month - solar panels on roofs, geothermal sources underground, backup batteries. Vertical farms will yield the first harvests in six months. We will be able to feed five hundred thousand people without external supplies.

Josh nodded. He massaged his nose bridge. A sleepless night - negotiations with investors, disputes with lawyers, budget approvals. But he did not complain. This was his project. His brainchild.

Li, how many applications for entry? - he asked.

One hundred and thirty thousand in the first week. We expect half a million by launch time. We haven't even advertised - only a notice on the website. They come on their own.

Do they know the terms?

Li raised an eyebrow. A slight smile on her lips:

Of course, Josh. Everything is signed. Contracts are standard: thirty-year mortgage, work for the corporation, compliance with corporate rules. The fine print... well, you know.

Josh chuckled. Yes, he knew. He had written that fine print himself. He had sat with lawyers for three weeks, verifying every wording. "In case of dismissal - the mortgage is transferred to the corporate fund. The corporation has the right to unilaterally revise the loan terms. Failure to comply with the terms leads to seizure of housing." Legally flawless. No violation of rights. They signed voluntarily.

They don't read, - said Josh. - They never read. They see the number - two percent annual interest. They see pictures of happy people. They see clean streets and schools for their children. And they sign.

Li looked at him. There was a question in her gaze. She did not ask it aloud, but Josh knew. He always knew what his subordinates were thinking.

Don't you feel sorry for them? - she finally asked.

Josh looked at her. She was young. She still believed. Believed that they were building a "better world." Believed in the words written in advertising brochures. Josh was fifty-two. He had stopped believing twenty years ago, when he saw how real power worked.

I don't feel sorry for them, - he answered. - They are doing well. In New Eden it will be clean, safe, stable. They will eat synthetic food - but at least they won't starve to death like in the state zones. They will breathe purified air - unlike those who stayed in cities where smog kills ten thousand people a year. They will be happy because they will be told they are happy. Isn't that better than living in fear, dirt, and poverty?

But they are not free.

Freedom, Li, is an abstraction. People don't want freedom. They want security. They want their children to have a future. They want not to be killed on the streets. They want stability. We give them that. And in return they give us... well, they give us everything.

He turned to her:

Do you think I'm a villain? No, Li. I'm a realist. We don't take away their freedom. They give it away themselves. We just offer a deal.

Li was silent. She looked at the construction site. Drones carried steel beams, excavators dug trenches, migrant workers in orange vests scurried like ants. Thousands of people were building a city for others. They themselves would never live in New Eden.

And what about them? - she pointed downward.

Josh shrugged indifferently:

They will get their due. Food, water, medical care. We honor contracts. They signed agreements to work for three years. After the term - deportation. Legally. We do not break laws, Li. We just... use them.

"Everything is legal." Those two words would haunt Li Chen for the rest of her life. She did not know it yet. She just nodded and returned to her tablet.

Josh looked at the horizon. The desert stretched to infinity, yellow, dead. But in a few months an oasis would grow here. Artificial, controlled, tamed.

Li, - he said without turning. - In five years you won't be able to find a single independent state on the map. Only corporate zones of influence. New Eden is just the beginning. We are building a new world. And we are building it right.

He paused:

Do you know what our strength is?

Money?

Patience. We do not seize power. We just wait until the states get tired. Until they go bankrupt. Until their citizens come to us themselves. We do not take away - we offer. And they take.

He looked at the construction site:

And when they take - they can no longer give it back.

SCENE 3. THE MORTGAGE TRAP

March 2042. New Eden. "Golden Gates" district.

Here even the air was different. Clean, transparent, with a faint scent of pine - real pines had been planted in the park, each tree costing two hundred thousand dollars a year to maintain. But who counted money when it came to the perfect world?

Daniel Miller stood at the window. From his living room there was a view of the central park. Green, neat, divided into geometric zones. In the center - a fountain that never stopped. The water in it was crystal clear, with a soft backlight. Gardener drones darted between the trees, adjusting branches, collecting leaves. A perfect picture. A picture for which he was paying.

Daniel's house cost half a million. He had taken out a thirty-year mortgage at two percent annual interest. It had seemed profitable - fifteen hundred credits a month. He earned six thousand. He had a wife, Sarah, a daughter, Emily. They were happy. They moved to New Eden in 2037, when the city first opened. Daniel believed. Believed it was the beginning of a new life. Believed he would work here, raise his daughter, grow old. Believed everything would be fine.

Now he looked at the contract. The very same. Yellowed, tattered. He had kept it in his desk drawer as a reminder of his own stupidity.

Three months ago he had been put on half-time. "Staff optimization," the HR manager explained. A young guy with perfectly styled hair. He spoke politely, with a smile. "The corporation is forced to cut costs. Your department is no longer needed. But we are not firing you - we are transferring you to half-time. You will remain in the system, keep your corporate passport. For now. We are a family, Daniel."

"Family." Daniel had heard that word so often that it had lost its meaning.

Now his salary was three thousand a month. Mortgage - fifteen hundred. Utilities - four hundred. Food - six hundred. Insurance - two hundred. Three hundred credits remained. That was enough for one trip a month to the corporate cinema. For a birthday gift for his daughter. For coffee. For everything else - no. He could not buy new clothes. Could not pay for the drone repair that took his daughter to school. Could not afford medicines not covered by insurance. He lived paycheck to paycheck. And he had already missed two mortgage payments.

Yesterday the notification came.

His communicator screen blinked blue, and Daniel opened it without thinking of anything bad. He was expecting a letter from his daughter. She had written to him from school - they were studying corporate history, and the teacher had assigned them an essay. Emily asked for help. He wanted to reply that he would help in the evening. But instead of a letter from his daughter, a notification appeared on the screen.

"Dear Daniel Miller. Your mortgage arrears amount to 4,500 credits. According to clause 14.3 of the contract, in the event of a delay exceeding 90 days, the corporation has the right to unilaterally revise the terms of the loan. Your rate is increased to 12% per annum. The new monthly payment

is 5,500 credits. If you are unable to pay within 30 days, your home will be repossessed. Sincerely, the Solar-City Asset Management Department."

Daniel looked at the screen. Five thousand five hundred. That was almost twice his salary. That was more than he and Sarah earned together.

His hands trembled. He reread the message. Reread it again. Hoping it was a mistake. But the numbers did not change.

He opened the contract. The same one he had signed five years ago. He flipped through the pages, looking for clause 14.3. Page 47. Fine print. Almost invisible. It said:

"In the event of a payment delay exceeding 90 days, the corporation has the right to unilaterally revise the terms of the loan, including but not limited to increasing the interest rate, changing the payment schedule, and demanding full early repayment. The corporation also has the right to seize the pledged property without additional judicial proceedings, under the terms specified in section 18.2 of this agreement."

Daniel had not read that. He had not read anything beyond the first page. He had seen the number - two percent. Seen pictures of happy families. Heard the manager's voice: "Sign, Daniel. We are one family." And he signed.

He signed his own death warrant.

He sat down on the sofa. His hands hung limp. He looked at the white walls, the panoramic windows, the park beyond them. This house was a prison. He could not sell it, because the house belonged to the corporation. He could not leave, because the debt would remain. The corporate court would collect everything. He had no money for a lawyer. He did not even have money for a ticket to the border.

He thought about Sarah. She was a teacher at school. Earned two thousand. She did not know. She thought everything was fine. She believed they would manage.

He thought about Emily. She was twelve. She dreamed of becoming an architect. She drew houses, parks, bridges. She did not know her father was bankrupt. That her family was on the verge of disaster.

Daniel looked at his phone. He had Charles's number. An old friend from university in Kansas. Charles had always said: "Don't sign, Dan. Don't sign without reading. The fine print - that's where the truth is." Daniel had laughed then. Thought Charles was too cautious. Charles was always right.

He dialed. Ring. Ring. Ring. Voice: "Subscriber unavailable."

Daniel put the phone down. Closed his eyes.

He was thirty-five. He had twenty-five more years to pay for a house that was no longer his. If he was lucky. If the corporation did not evict him sooner. If he did not break.

He stood up. Walked to the window. Looked at the perfect city. The clean streets. The happy people walking in the park. They had also signed. They had also not read.

He said quietly, into the void:

Welcome to New Eden. The city-in-a-box. The best prison on Earth.

SCENE 4. STATES TAKE OUT LOANS

February 2045. Washington, D.C. The Oval Office.

Outside the window - snow. White, fluffy, like in old movies. It fell on the lawn in front of the White House, on the trees, on the tourist's taking photos in front of the main entrance. The tourists did not know that in a few weeks this snow would be red with blood. Not literally. Metaphorically. The economy was bleeding out.

President Jonathan Woods sat at his desk. Heavy, oak, with the seal of the United States. He looked at that seal and thought: "How much longer will it last?" He had been president for eight years. He remembered how in 2037 he was elected - back then there were still elections, real ones, with debates, voting, hope. People believed in him. He promised to "restore America's greatness."

He had not restored it. He could not. Because America was no longer his. It was corporate.

Before him sat Martha Clark. The Secretary of the Treasury. A woman with tired eyes, gray strands in her auburn hair. She held a folder with calculations. Her hands trembled - either from cold or from stress.

Mr. President, - she began. Her voice was quiet but firm. - We have a problem.

Woods raised his head. He was tired. Over the last week he had signed five executive orders. Each one gave corporations control over another port, another airport, another power grid. He did it because the country had no money. None at all. The budget was empty. Gold and foreign exchange reserves were depleted. The credit rating was "junk." America was bankrupt.

What now, Martha?

She opened the folder:

We owe Cyber-Fund 2.3 trillion dollars. Solar-City is demanding payment on loans totaling 800 billion. Neura-Infra - another 1.1 trillion. Interest is growing. We cannot service the debt. We cannot even pay the interest.

And what do you propose?

Martha sighed heavily:

We could take out new loans. Against infrastructure.

We have no more infrastructure, Martha. We've already pawned everything. Ports - to Cyber-Fund. Airports - to Solar-City. Power grids - to Neura-Infra. Satellites - we sold them in 2042, remember? Only the military remains. But they are no longer ours either. The generals get their salaries from corporations.

Martha was silent. She knew. She knew everything. But she had to say what she had to say.

There is one more thing, - she said. - National parks. Military bases that have not yet been transferred. And - arable land.

Woods looked at her. He understood what that meant. Arable land meant food independence. Grain, wheat, corn. America feeding itself. If he gave away the land, Green-Matrix would control all agriculture. They would decide how much food Americans got. They would set prices. They would feed or starve. And whoever feeds - rules.

No, - he said firmly. - Arable land is our security.

Mr. President, if we do not take out the loans, in three months we will not be able to pay public sector employees. Doctors, teachers, police officers - they will not get paid. In six months, the social security system will collapse. Pensioners will starve to death. In a year - collapse. Total. The state will cease to exist.

Woods looked at her. He remembered studying history in his youth. Remembered the Great Depression, Roosevelt, the "New Deal." Back then the government saved people. Now the government could not even save itself.

Martha, if we give away the land - we will become vassals. We will lose sovereignty.

We have already lost it, Mr. President.

She said it quietly, almost in a whisper. But the words sounded like a death sentence.

Woods turned to the window. Snow fell on the lawn. Tourists were still taking photos. They did not know. They were smiling. They believed America was a great country.

He was the president of lies. He had to sign documents that destroyed his country. Because otherwise - everyone would die. And he too.

Prepare the documents, - he said quietly. - We will take out loans against the land.

Martha nodded. She had already prepared them. She knew he would agree.

She stood up, gathered the folder. At the door she turned:

Mr. President... I'm sorry.

For what?

That I have to do this. That I am making you do this.

Woods looked at her. He wanted to say it was okay. That they had no choice. That it was not her fault. But he said nothing.

She left. The door closed.

He remained alone. In silence. He looked at the portraits of Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt. They looked at him. They judged.

I know, - he said. - I know.

He signed the documents.

November 2052. Solar-City Headquarters. New Eden. 87th Floor.

Here, at an altitude of three hundred meters, another world began. Polished marble floors, black glass walls, dynamic lighting ceilings. The air - with a faint scent of citrus, without dust, without impurities. The noise of the city could not be heard here - soundproofing absorbed everything. It was quiet here. Almost like in a temple.

Josh Hall sat at the head of a long table. He was now the Executive Vice President of Solar-City. Seven years ago he had merely been a department director. Now he was one of those who decided the fates of millions. He looked at the holographic map of the world hanging in the center of the hall.

The map was highlighted. Green marked corporate control zones. Thirty percent of all urban infrastructure. Forty percent of power grids. Fifty percent of ports. Eighty percent of the satellite constellation. The numbers grew every day.

Around the table sat the board of directors. Nine men and women in perfect suits. They looked as if they did not know the word "fatigue." Their skin glowed, their eyes sparkled. They had the best stimulants, the best doctors, the best synthetic vitamins. They were immortal. Or almost.

Ladies and gentlemen, - Josh began. His voice echoed through the hall. - Congratulations. We have successfully completed the first stage. States owe us trillions. Their armies are coming under our control. Their citizens use our passports. We are no longer subordinates. We are the government of the world.

Silence in the hall. The directors looked at him. Some nodded. Some smiled.

The next stage is food, - Josh continued. - We will strangle them through food. Green-Matrix is already ready. They will receive concessions on arable land. We will replace agriculture with vertical farms. We will make them dependent on us.

He placed his coffee mug on the glass table. Real coffee, from South America. The last plantations not yet bought up by corporations. Josh loved real coffee. Synthetic was not the same.

By 2060, states will be dead. We will do it. Legally. Economically. And no one will be able to stop us, because, - he paused, - no one reads the fine print.

Laughter. Short, but genuine. The directors exchanged glances.

Josh, - said one of them, - what about resistance? Won't anyone try to protest?

Josh shook his head:

Protest? Against what? Against clean water? Against safe streets? Against food that doesn't kill? We give them everything they want. We have jobs. Stability. Digital passports that simplify life. They won't protest. They will applaud. Do you know why? Because we gave them the illusion of choice. And they chose us.

The director nodded.

Josh looked at the map. The green zones spread like a living organism. Soon the entire map would be green.

In twenty years, - he said, - people will not remember what a state was. They will remember only logos. We are their government. We are their law. We are their future.

He raised his glass:

To the new world. Without borders. Without flags. Only economics.

Everyone raised their glasses.

The clink of glass.

STAGE 2. "THE DEBT NOOSE" (2052–2063)

SCENE 1. THE CLIMATE CRISIS

May 2052. Kansas. The Great Plains.

Here, where there had once been endless wheat fields, there was now a desert. Not the kind in Arizona - with sand and dunes, red rocks and cacti. Another kind. Gray, clayey, cracked. The land that had once fed half the planet was now dead. It had cracked into hexagonal plates, like mud at the bottom of a dried-up lake. Between the plates - emptiness. Only dust, rising with every breath of wind. No life. No grass, no bushes, no insects. Only the wind driving clouds of dust, and the sun's rays falling from the merciless sky, burning everything they could reach.

Farmer Thomas Henderson stood on the porch of his house. The house was old, wooden, with peeling paint. It had been built by his grandfather in the 1960s, when this was the promised land - black soil, rains, harvests. Thomas remembered running through these fields as a child. They were golden with ears of grain. The air smelled of bread and fresh grass. His father used to say: "The land will not let us down. The land feeds." The land had failed.

The third year of drought. The third year the rains did not come. Thomas had tried everything - drilled wells, but the water had gone too deep. Bought fertilizers, but they did not help without moisture. Tried planting drought-resistant varieties advertised as "miracle genes" - they also died. The land killed everything planted in it. It was dead, and no prayers, no technologies, no hopes could resurrect it.

He looked at the field. Where combines once stood, now lay rusty carcasses. Where barns had been, there was now emptiness, only the wind howling through the cracks. Thomas's family - his wife Martha, three children - had been living on state aid for two years. It was meager - synthetic rations delivered by drones once a week. Nutritious, but tasteless. Thomas remembered the smell of freshly baked bread. Now it only smelled of plastic.

Martha came out onto the porch. She was thin, pale, with dark circles under her eyes. She had once been beautiful, with rosy cheeks, with a smile that lit up the whole house. Now the smile was gone. Her face was a mask of exhaustion. She held a communicator.

Thomas, - she said quietly, - news. On TV. You should watch.

Thomas turned. Martha handed him the communicator. The screen showed the "Global-News" channel - it belonged to Cyber-Fund, but the news was the same everywhere. The announcer - a woman with a perfect smile, teeth gleaming white, skin without a single flaw - said:

The government declares a state of emergency in eighteen states. The drought has destroyed up to eighty percent of the harvest. The largest agricultural regions of the country have been declared disaster zones. According to expert estimates, the food crisis may last up to five years. The government urges citizens to economize and recommends using synthetic food substitutes.

Martha looked at Thomas. Her eyes were full of despair. She said quietly:

Five years, Thomas. We won't survive five years. We have no money, no supplies, nothing. The children haven't eaten proper food for two months. The youngest, Benjamin - he cries at night. He says he wants bread. Real bread. I can't give it to him. I can't.

Thomas was silent. He looked at the field. Where wheat once grew, there was now only dust. He felt something dark rising in his chest. Not anger. Not despair. Something in between. Powerlessness.

In the 2030s, scientists had warned about this. They shouted at conferences, wrote articles, spoke at the UN. They said: "Global warming will change the climate. Harvests will fall. There will be water shortages. We must change agriculture, build irrigation systems, develop new varieties." No one listened. Politicians promised that technology would solve everything. Corporations said: "We will create synthetic food. There will be enough for everyone." And they did create it. But real food - grown on the land, under the sun, with rain, with love - was dying. And synthetics required energy, factories, raw materials. And cost money. Money the state did not have.

Thomas closed his eyes. He remembered his father. His father was tall, strong, with calloused hands. He would get up at four in the morning and go to the field. He would return only in the evening, covered in mud, but happy. He said: "Thomas, the land is everything to us. As long as we have the land, we will survive." But the land was gone. Like water. Like air. Like freedom.

He sat down on the porch steps. His head hung low. Martha sat beside him, placed her head on his shoulder.

What are we going to do? - she asked.

Thomas looked at the horizon. There, in the distance, loomed the silhouettes of huge structures. Green-Matrix's vertical farms. They stood on leased land that farmers had sold for next to nothing when they realized they could no longer feed themselves. They ran on synthetic lighting and hydroponics. They produced tons of food every day. They did not depend on rain, sun, or drought. They were the future. They fed the cities.

But farmers hated them. Because they were symbols of the end. Symbols that traditional agriculture was dead. That man could no longer feed himself. That he depended on corporations, their technologies, their mercy.

We will survive, - said Thomas, but his voice sounded uncertain. - Like our fathers. Like our grandfathers.

But they are offering help, - said Martha. - Green-Matrix. They say: "Give us the land on a ninety-nine-year concession. We will build vertical farms. We will feed the country. We will create jobs." Thomas, I know you don't want this. But we have no choice. The children are starving. We are starving. If we do not sign, we will die. Not in five years. In months.

Thomas turned to her. There was anger in his eyes. Not at his wife. At what she said. Because she spoke the truth.

Martha, if we give away the land, we will become slaves. They will decide how much we eat. They will set prices. They will strangle us.

Thomas, we are already dying. Her voice trembled. - We have had no harvest for three years. The family is starving. The children go to school in torn clothes. How is that different from slavery? At least slaves get food.

He wanted to object. But he could not. Because she was right. He looked at his hands. Hands that had once held the plow, gathered the harvest, embraced his children. Now they just hung, useless.

Martha, - he said quietly. - If I sign - I betray my father. He bequeathed this land to me. He said land is our freedom.

Thomas, - she took his hand. - Your father would have starved to death if he saw his grandchildren unable to eat. He wanted us to live. He did not want us to die with honor. We can die, or we can live and fight. Choose.

He looked at her for a long, long time. Then he nodded.

Okay. Tomorrow I will go to the city. I will sign.

August 2052. Geneva. World Food Organization Headquarters.

This was the last place where they still tried to maintain the illusion of international cooperation. The building was aging, like everything in this world. In the large assembly hall sat delegates from sixty countries. But most of them were not ministers of agriculture. They were representatives of corporations. Green-Matrix, Solar-City, Cyber-Fund. They sat in the front rows. They had the best seats. They had power.

The chairman - an old Swiss diplomat, gray-haired, with glasses on his nose, with trembling hands - tried to maintain order, but his voice faltered. He remembered the 2020s, when the UN still meant something. Now it was just scenery.

Gentlemen, - he said, banging his gavel. - The situation is critical. Droughts in North America, floods in South Asia, hurricanes in Central America. Harvests have fallen by forty percent globally.

According to forecasts, by the end of the year hunger could affect up to two billion people. We must unite our efforts. We must...

He was interrupted by a voice. Loud, confident, with an American accent.

Excuse me, Mr. Chairman.

Henry Clark - CEO of Green-Matrix. He was fifty-five, tall, fit, in an expensive suit. He did not look like a man worried about hunger. He looked like a man who had come to make a deal. His face was a stone mask, showing no emotion. Only cold calculation.

Gentlemen, we all know that states cannot cope. They have no resources, no technologies, no infrastructure. We do. Green-Matrix can feed the world. We are building vertical farms. We produce synthetic food. We can ensure stable food supplies for everyone who comes to us.

He paused and scanned the hall. His gaze lingered on delegates from countries especially hard hit by the climate crisis. In their eyes - despair.

But this costs money. And we cannot work for free. We offer a deal: states give us arable land on a ninety-nine-year concession. We build vertical farms on that land. We feed the population. We create jobs. Everyone benefits.

Silence in the hall. Then - a murmur. Delegates whispered. Some were outraged. Some intrigued. Some already ready to sign. The chairman tried to speak, but was interrupted again.

Mr. Clark, but this is... this is effectively the transfer of national resources into private hands. This violates sovereignty...

Sovereignty, - Henry smirked. - Mr. Chairman, sovereignty is when you can feed your people. If you cannot - you have no sovereignty. You have a choice. Either you sign a contract with us. Or you starve to death. Choose.

Silence in the hall. No one objected. Because he was right. And everyone knew it.

October 2052. Washington, D.C. The Oval Office.

President Woods sat at his desk again. Before him again - Treasury Secretary Martha Clark. She looked older than five years ago. Seven years ago. Ten years. She had aged twenty years in that time. Her hair was almost completely gray. Dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep.

Mr. President, - she said. - This is the last chance. Green-Matrix is offering a land concession. In exchange - food supplies. We can feed the population.

Martha, we've discussed this. If we give away the land - we will die a slow death. We will lose control over food. They will decide who gets food and who does not. That is the end of independence.

If we do not give it away - we will die a quick death. She placed the folder on the table. - Food reserves will run out in three months. The synthetic food we produce ourselves covers only twenty percent of needs. The rest we buy from Green-Matrix. But they can stop supplies at any moment. And then - famine. Riots. Chaos. We cannot risk it, Mr. President.

Woods looked at her. He knew. He knew everything.

Martha... if I sign this... I will betray my country. America, which fed half the world, America - the breadbasket of the planet. I will give it to corporations.

If you do not sign, Mr. President, your country will cease to exist in six months. It will die a quiet, slow death from hunger. Do you want to be remembered as the president who let his people die?

He looked out the window. There was no snow. The winter was mild. But his soul was cold. He thought of his father, a Vietnam veteran. His father said: "Son, America is freedom. Never give up freedom." Now he was giving it up. Not to enemies, not to terrorists - to corporations.

Bring the documents, - he said.

She brought them. He signed.

When she left, he looked at his hands. They trembled. He thought: "I am the last president of America. The one who killed it."

SCENE 2. FOOD DEPENDENCE

January 2055. New Eden. Central Food Center.

This was a huge building of glass and concrete, like a museum. Inside - hundreds of vertical farms. Shelves ten stories high, with rows of hydroponic containers. Beneath them - blue and red lamps that shone twenty-four hours a day, not giving the plants any rest. The plants grew fast, without soil, without sun. Their roots hung in a nutrient solution supplied through a system of tubes. The leaves were bright green, healthy, perfect. No pests, no diseases. Artificial beauty.

Daniel Miller stood in line. He had lost weight, his face was gaunt, his eyes sunken. He wore an old jacket that no longer kept him warm. Thirteen years had passed since he signed the mortgage. Thirteen years in which he had aged thirty. He had come for synthetic rations. Usually he received them at home, via drone, but this month the drone did not come. "Technical difficulties." Daniel did not believe in difficulties. He believed the corporation was simply testing how dependent they were.

There were hundreds of people in line. They stood silently. No one talked. Only the sound of footsteps on the concrete floor and the hum of ventilation. Their faces were all the same - gray, lifeless, with empty eyes. They looked like zombies. They were zombies - only walking, breathing, but dead inside.

Daniel remembered when he used to buy food at the supermarket. Real food - vegetables, meat, bread. He remembered the taste of fresh bread, still warm, with a crispy crust. He remembered the smell of watermelon when cut open. He remembered the smell of fried meat. Now he ate synthetics. Nutritious, but tasteless. It was like plastic with vitamins. You chewed - and felt only texture. Rubbery, monotonous, chemical. You could eat it, but there was no pleasure. And hunger did not go away. Inside - emptiness.

The line moved slowly. Ahead - a woman with a child. The child, about six, with big sad eyes. He was crying. He wanted normal food. He did not understand why his mother gave him these gray briquettes. The mother tried to calm him, but could not. She herself was on the verge of tears. Daniel heard her whisper: "Hush, honey. This is all we have. It's good. It's healthy." The child did not believe her.

Daniel looked at them. He thought of his daughter, Emily. She was fifteen. She was used to synthetics. She did not remember the smell of fresh bread. She had grown up on this. For her, synthetics were normal. Daniel had tried to explain that food used to be different, that people ate meat, vegetables, fruit. She did not understand. For her, his memories were like fairy tales. Unbelievable. She said: "Dad, you're making it up. Food can't smell like that. That's chemistry." He tried to argue, then fell silent. Why? She would never taste a real apple. She would die without ever having tried one.

Finally he reached the counter. Behind it stood a drone - a silver arm dispensing rations. Daniel pressed his wrist to the scanner. A mechanical voice:

Daniel Miller. User DM-77342. Credit rating - 389. Access level - "basic." Your ration - 3.2 kilograms.

The drone dispensed a briquette. Gray, faceless, wrapped in transparent film. Daniel took it. It was heavy. 3.2 kilograms - his ration for the week. Enough not to die, but not enough to be full. He was always hungry. Always.

He left the center. Outside - cold. The synthetic food in his hand barely warmed him. He walked home, through the perfectly clean streets. Past perfect trees. Past perfect fountains. Cleaning drones darted back and forth, collecting trash, of which there was almost none. He looked at all this and felt nothing. Only fatigue. Deep as an ocean.

At home - his wife Sarah. She sat on the sofa, staring at the wall. With empty eyes. She no longer worked - laid off, "staff reduction" two years ago. Now they existed only on rations and Daniel's tiny pension - he still worked as a consultant on corporate ethics, but earned less than three thousand. The irony of fate: he taught others ethics, while working for those who had destroyed ethics. He hated his job. But without it they would die.

Dan, - she said without turning her head. - Our supplies are gone. Emily needs a new school uniform. We have no money. In the account - 47 credits. We won't be able to buy even synthetic bread if the drone doesn't come.

I know, - he said. He sat down beside her. Put the ration on the table. - We'll manage somehow.

How? - Sarah's voice trembled. - We have no money. No food. No future. The corporation decides everything. We cannot leave. We cannot sell the house. We cannot even die, because funerals are also expensive, and without money we will simply be sent to the crematorium and the ashes sold. We are assets, Daniel. Not people. Assets.

Daniel looked at her. He wanted to say something encouraging. But he could not. Because she was right. He took her hand. It was cold, like a dead person's.

We will survive, - he said. - We always survive.

She did not answer. She stared at the wall.

February 2058. Green-Matrix Headquarters. Tokyo.

Henry Clark sat in his office on the 120th floor. Black marble floor, glass walls, a view of a city that no longer belonged to Japan. Tokyo was a zone of influence of Green-Matrix. Only half the population was Japanese. The rest were corporate employees, their families, service personnel. Japan as a state still existed, but it did not even control its own capital. The emperor lived in his palace, but no one listened to him. He was a symbol. Like all kings, presidents, prime ministers.

Before Henry - a holographic map of the world. Green marked territories controlled by Green-Matrix. Eighty percent of the world's food. He smiled. Not broadly, not joyfully - coldly, like a winner who was already tired of winning.

Report, - he said.

Across from him - the analytics department. The chief analyst - a woman with Asian features, in a strict suit, holding a tablet.

Sir, we control eighty percent of the world's food market. Vertical farms operate in forty-seven countries. Synthetic food accounts for ninety-five percent of the diet of the population in developed countries. Dependence is complete. We can stop supplies to any country at any moment - and within a month famine will begin there.

Henry nodded:

And what about states? Are they trying to resist?

Isolated attempts. Some countries tried to introduce subsidies for local agriculture to bring farmers back to the land. We reduced supplies to those regions by ten percent. Within two months they returned to negotiations. They have no choice, sir. They can either eat our food or die. They choose our food.

Henry smirked. "They have no choice" - he heard these words every day. And every day they sounded like music.

And what about real food? - he asked. - Do we control that too?

Yes, sir. Real food - meat, vegetables, fruit - is now produced only in corporate zones. For top managers and their families. We have established strict quotas. Real food is a status symbol. It is expensive. Ordinary people cannot afford it. The price per kilogram of real meat is 500 credits. That is a month's salary for an average employee. They eat synthetics.

Henry looked out the window. Down there, millions of people. They ate synthetics. They did not know the taste of real meat. They did not know what fresh bread was. They were born and raised on plastic. For them it was normal. His grandchildren - they also ate synthetics. He tried to give them real food - they refused. They did not understand the taste. For them, real food was strange, unfamiliar, even disgusting. "Grandpa, it's not tasty," they said. He looked at them and felt both pride and fear. He had created a generation that did not know what food was. He had created the perfect consumers.

We have won, - he said quietly. - We have won because they chose us.

SCENE 3. DIGITAL PASSPORT 2.0

April 2055. New Eden. Identification Center.

The building looked like a temple. White marble, tall columns, glass doors that opened silently. Inside - hundreds of people who had come for a new passport. Not a state one. A digital one. State IDs were now almost powerless. Without a digital passport, you could not work, buy food, use transport, receive medical care. You were an outcast. You were invisible.

Daniel Miller stood in line. He looked at the screen showing an advertisement. A beautiful woman with a smile, perfect like everything in this world, said:

Digital Passport 2.0 from Cyber-Fund - your life in one chip. Taxes, insurance, medical history, mortgage - everything linked to your profile. No paperwork, no queues, no problems. Just hold your wrist to the scanner - and the system will recognize you. Safe. Convenient. Reliable. Join the future. Join us.

Daniel looked at the screen. He did not need this passport. He had a state ID. But without a digital passport he could not get a job, get a loan, even buy synthetic food - the system scanned his wrist with every purchase. Without it - you were nobody. Just biomass.

The line moved. Daniel looked at the people around him. They all looked the same. Same faces. Same eyes. Same clothes - practical, cheap. They were no longer people. They were users. Just waiting their turn to become part of the system.

Finally he reached the counter. Behind it - a drone with a needle for implanting the chip. The drone looked like a silver arm glowing blue.

Your name? - mechanical voice.

Daniel Miller.

Place your wrist.

He extended his hand. The drone implanted the chip. A brief pain - the needle went under his skin, and he felt a small piece of metal settle on his bone. A second later - done. A small dot remained on his wrist, like a birthmark.

The screen showed: "User DM-77342. Access level - 'standard.' Credit rating - 389. Mortgage - in process. Taxes - partially paid. Medical insurance - basic."

Daniel looked at his wrist. A small scar. He was no longer Daniel Miller, no longer a citizen of the United States, no longer a human being. He was DM-77342. He was a user. He had no rights. Only "Terms of Use," written in fine print, which he had never read. Now he was part of the system. And he could never leave it.

He left the center. Outside - sun. Artificial sun, shining over New Eden twenty-four hours a day. Perfect sun, like in the advertisement. He looked at the sky but did not see real stars. They were blocked by the dome. He pressed his wrist to the scanner at the metro entrance - the system let him through with a green light. "User DM-77342. Access granted."

He sat down in the carriage. The doors closed silently. Perfect stations flashed by. Perfect faces. Perfect smiles. No one looked at each other. Everyone looked at their communicators, checking accounts, checking rations, checking their lives. They were no longer living. They were existing.

He closed his eyes and thought: "When did I stop being human?"

August 2058. Cyber-Fund Headquarters. San Francisco.

Here, in a building that had once belonged to an internet-era giant, new gods now sat. The board of directors of Cyber-Fund gathered in a large hall. On the wall - a huge screen showing numbers. Numbers that indicated the world had changed. The world had become their property.

The head of Cyber-Fund - Markus Wolf. A German, fifty-eight, with cold eyes that expressed no emotion. He wore a strict black suit, and his face had not a single wrinkle - the result of work by the best geneticists. He looked at the numbers and allowed himself a slight smile.

Report, - he said.

The analyst - a woman with Asian features, in an expensive suit, with a communicator in her hand.

Sir, the Digital Passport 2.0 system covers ninety percent of the population of developed countries. In the US alone - two hundred forty million active users. In Europe - three hundred million. In Asia - four hundred million. Data on each person: biometrics, finances, medical records, behavioral patterns, purchase history, movement history. We know everything. We know what they eat, who they sleep with, what they watch, what they buy, what they think.

And what about states? Are they trying to interfere?

Attempts were made. In Germany, parliament tried to pass a data protection law. We simply turned off the digital passports of the deputies for two days. Without passports they could not enter the parliament building, could not vote, could not even buy food. The law did not pass. Deputies no longer raise this issue.

And in the US?

President Woods tried to introduce a national token to free the economy from our control. We sold a trillion tokens in three hours. The exchange rate fell by ninety percent. The country's economy collapsed. Woods withdrew the initiative within a week. Now he signs everything we give him. He is our puppet.

Markus nodded. He looked at the numbers. 90% of the population. 3.2 billion users. A database containing information about every person. What they eat. Who they sleep with. What they watch. What they think. What secrets they have. What fears. What hopes.

We know more about them than they know about themselves, - he said. - And that is our strength. They cannot hide from us. They cannot escape. They cannot even think of something we cannot predict. We know their future. Because we create it.

He paused:

In ten years, states will disappear. They will be dead. And we will remain. We are the only power. We are the future.

SCENE 4. ECONOMIC WAR

May 2061. Berlin. Bundestag Building.

This was no longer the Bundestag remembered from old holographic recordings from the early twenties. The building looked tired, like the city itself: the facade was covered in a web of deep cracks, through which wild ivy grew; the windows were covered in a murky film of dust, through which the sun broke in dull, sickly patches. The huge black-red-gold flag still hung above the main entrance, but no one had raised it in the mornings for a long time - it hung at half-mast, faded, frayed at the edges. No one cared about it. And it seemed no one remembered that these colors once meant hope, unity, and freedom. Now they were just fabric, slowly rotting under the Berlin sky.

Inside, in the spacious assembly hall, there was a hollow, almost cemetery-like silence. Rows of seats, designed for hundreds of deputies, stood empty. Only a few places in the front rows were occupied - about ten people, no more. Those absent were not sick and not on business trips. They had more important matters: private flights on personal yachts to the Maldives, closed meetings with Cyber-Fund lobbyists in the offices of Frankfurt skyscrapers, phone negotiations about mergers of assets, intimate dinners with representatives of exchange platforms. These people were no longer deputies in the classical sense. They were managers of their own fortunes, using their government mandates as passes into the world of tax-free deals and insider information. Their seats in the Bundestag were merely convenient showpieces.

At the rostrum, towering over the emptiness, stood the Chairman - an old politician with silver, unkempt hair, in heavy horn-rimmed glasses that constantly slid down the bridge of his nose. His hands, covered in age spots, trembled noticeably as he shuffled through papers. He was one of the few who still remembered the times when this hall shook with passionate debates, when the opposition and the coalition argued themselves hoarse, and television cameras broadcast every word live. He remembered how people followed the votes, believed in promises, and waited for change. Now his voice was the only living sound in this stone sack, and it sounded like a weak, lonely echo.

Gentlemen... ladies, your attention, please, - he began, coughing and adjusting the microphone, which slightly hummed. - We are obliged today to discuss the draft law on the introduction of a national settlement token. This is a matter of our survival. We must free the domestic market from the dictates of private digital currencies, regain control over the money supply, restore the sovereignty of fiscal policy. We must show the world corporations that Germany is not a colony, but an independent parliamentary republic. We can no longer afford...

He did not have time to finish. With a dull, solemn creak, the massive oak door of the main entrance swung wide open. In the doorway, contrasting with the semi-darkness of the hall, appeared a young figure: an impeccable dark blue suit, bow tie, shiny patent leather shoes, slicked-back blond hair, and a dazzling Hollywood smile that did not reflect in his icy, unblinking eyes. This man was not a member of parliament - he had no badge from the rostrum, but he behaved as if he owned the place. He was accompanied by a low hum of invisible camera drones, recording every movement. He was an emissary of Cyber-Fund - the main shareholder of the European digital economy.

Mr. Chairman, forgive the intrusion without invitation, - his voice was velvety, with a barely perceptible transatlantic accent, but there was steel in it. - I am forced to interrupt this session. Our analytical department strongly recommends against adopting this bill.

This is none of your business! - The Chairman banged his wooden gavel on the rostrum, but the blow was weak, almost pathetic. - This is a sovereign decision of the German state! We have every right to regulate our own monetary system! We are an independent democratic entity!

Sovereign? - The representative let out a short, quiet laugh that echoed through the rows. He walked slowly down the central aisle, his steps echoing loudly under the high vaults. - Mr. Chairman, allow me to remind you of some recent statistics. Seventy percent of your GDP is tied to contracts with our subsidiaries. Ninety percent of your population uses our biometric passports for payments, travel, and credit history. Your leading banks no longer issue loans - they manage our portfolios. You are not sovereign. You are our reliable, trusted partner. Twenty years of mutually beneficial cooperation. Do you really want to break this connection overnight over some outdated idea of "independence"?

I will not allow you... - The Chairman's voice cracked into a wheeze, his face flushed crimson, the gavel hit again, but now chaotically, - I will not allow you to dictate terms to us! We have a Constitution, we have the will of the people! We will vote, we will pass the law, we will... bring back our freedom!

The emissary stopped right in front of the rostrum, tilted his head back, and looked up at the old politician with almost paternal compassion. The smile disappeared from his face, leaving only a mask of calm calculation.

Then I recommend that in three hours you open the trading terminal and personally monitor the dynamics of your "national token." With your permission, we have already begun preparing for the new conjuncture. You will see what freedom looks like in practice.

He snapped his fingers - and two silent guards in black jumpsuits took positions at the exit. The emissary turned on his heels, cast a parting glance at the few deputies present, who averted their eyes, and left the hall. The door slammed shut behind him with a heavy, oppressive sound, like the lid of a coffin.

The Chairman remained standing at the rostrum. His hands trembled so violently that he dropped his glasses. He tried to say something, restore a quorum, but only a wheeze escaped his throat. The deputies, who had been sitting in a stupor, began to whisper nervously, pulled out communicators, some already stood up and, on tiptoe, trying not to make noise, left the hall through the side doors. The session effectively fell apart before it began.

Exactly three hours later, as promised, world exchanges were shaken by a powerful collapse. Cyber-Fund put up for sale multi-billion reserves of the national token over two hours, creating an artificial oversupply and spreading panic among holders. The exchange rate of the national currency

fell by ninety percent in minutes. Quotes fell so fast that the boards on trading floors could not keep up - numbers blurred into a solid black stripe.

Germany's economy, still stable that morning, collapsed like a house of cards. One by one, banks closed their branches, blocked accounts, citing "technical failures." People standing in long queues at terminals watched their savings - money set aside for housing, children's education, pensions - melt away on screens, turning into negligible fractions of a cent. Inflation skyrocketed instantly: in the morning a loaf of bread cost two tokens, by evening the same loaf was priced at two hundred. Prices for food, fuel, and medicines were rewritten every five minutes, supermarkets emptied, and the first spontaneous protests swept through the city, dispersed not by police but by private armed contingents of the same "Fund."

A month later, the Bundestag voted for a "technical assistance agreement" - an actual act of capitulation. Germany became a protectorate of Cyber-Fund, with all its industry, intellectual property, and labor resources. The Chairman, whose name had still appeared in headlines, submitted his resignation the day after the collapse - his paper was accepted without discussion. He was immediately expelled from all party registers, his photos and biography were cut from archives, as if he had never existed. He became a "former," an empty space. It is rumored that he now lives in a dilapidated house somewhere in the Bavarian hinterland, overgrown with ivy and nettles - none of his colleagues, friends, or family visit him. The postman silently leaves a meager pension at the gate, converted at the "Fund" rate, and leaves. Journalists do not come to him either. Even the neighbors have stopped talking about him. And the old man often sits on the porch until dark, looking at the empty road and listening to the wind whistling through wires that no longer carry any signal.

SCENE 5. THE END OF THE STAGE

November 2063. Solar-City Headquarters. 87th Floor.

Here, at an altitude where neither smog nor city noise could reach, the air was crystal clear and smelled of ozone and expensive wood. The office was flooded with soft, even light that came not from lamps but from the glass wall itself, transformed into a panoramic screen displaying a sunrise over the foggy rooftops of Berlin - or what was left of it. A long polished table of black oak, inlaid with thin gold lines, occupied the center of the hall. On the table - no papers, no terminals, only decanters of water and nine impeccable glasses, already filled with amber liquid.

At the head of the table, slightly leaning back in his chair, sat Josh Hall. He was fifty, but looked seventy: the thick hair he had once proudly worn dark was now completely white, as if dusted with ash; his face was furrowed with deep, canyon-like wrinkles - especially sharp creases had settled around his mouth and between his brows, giving him an expression of permanent harsh fatigue. However, his eyes - predatory, unblinking, of a steel hue - remained the same. These were the eyes of a man who had already cornered his prey, cut off all paths of retreat, and now allowed himself a moment of quiet triumph before the final blow. He looked not at those present, but through them, at his reflection in the panoramic glass, and the corners of his lips slightly lifted in something like a smile.

Before him - the Board of Directors. Nine men and women in impeccably tailored suits from the best ateliers in the world, their fabrics shimmering with microscopic fibers reflecting the colors of their personal corporate crests. Each had perfect posture, perfectly styled hair, restrained gestures, and patient faces. They were not here to argue, object, or propose alternatives. They were here to witness. And wait. Their fingers were clasped on the tabletop, heads slightly bowed - a posture of attention mixed with reverence.

Ladies and gentlemen, - Josh began, finally shifting his gaze to them. His voice was low, slightly hoarse, but every word fell like a weight, brooking no objection. - I have gathered you today to take stock. The second stage of our plan is complete. In fact - ahead of schedule, fourteen months earlier than the estimated timeline.

He paused, letting the information settle, and lightly ran his finger along the rim of his glass, producing a barely audible, pure ring.

States no longer control food - our agro-blocks and vertical farms produce eighty percent of all consumed food. Money is no longer theirs - our tokens and credit lines have become the only liquidity on all continents, except perhaps isolated enclaves that will starve to death within a year. Identification is no longer theirs - every person on the planet, even those hiding in basements, has at least one of our digital traces, one of our biometric keys. States continue to exist... nominally. They still have flags, anthems, constitutions, sitting parliaments, and presidents addressing from balconies. But these are merely decorations, theatrical props for the masses. Real power - from now and forever - is ours.

He snapped his fingers, and the central part of the table came alive, turning into a three-dimensional holographic map of the world. Continents were no longer colored by traditional national borders - now they were divided into corporate sectors. Vast green swaths belonged to Green-Matrix - agricultural lands, ecosystems, and climate control centers. Blue patches, densely scattered across all continents, were the holdings of Solar-City: energy hubs, battery farms, managing grids, street lighting, and heating. Silver threads enveloping every metropolis - Cyber-Fund: communications, data, exchanges, and information flows. The borders of former powers - the USA, China, Russia, the EU - were marked by pale, barely visible dotted lines, and their state flags flickered with faded, washed-out holograms that appeared and disappeared, like signals from a dying satellite. They no longer mattered. They were just names on a map, topographical monuments to the past.

Josh rose from his chair, walked around the table, and stopped directly in front of the projection, his face momentarily illuminated by its cold glow.

Now - the third stage. The strangulation of cities, - he said, and a metallic, chiseled rhythm appeared in his voice. - We will disconnect them from our power grids on pre-selected dates. Not all at once - we are not barbarians, we are surgeons. First - the ten largest agglomerations. We will turn off heating in December, when frost binds the earth. We will cut water supply in July, when the sun melts the asphalt. We will shut down transport arteries, block supplies of fuel and food. We will show them that without us they are dead. Not as an allegory, but in the most literal, physical sense. They will die of cold in their own bedrooms, of thirst in queues at dried-up fountains, of hunger in stores where shelves will be empty by the second day. But the main thing - they will die of fear. Fear will break them faster than any shortage. And then they will surrender. Without a fight. Without blood. Only economics. Only our will, framed as their own choice.

He turned to the board, and a hint of light, almost philosophical satisfaction appeared on his face.

We have not shed a drop of blood. We have not started a single war. We simply redirected flows, closed taps, shut off valves. And the world collapsed on its own, without a single shot.

Josh returned to his chair, took his glass, and raised it above his head. Through the amber thickness of the cognac, passing through the prism of the holographic map, light refracted, and colored highlights danced on his face.

To the new world, - he said, slightly bowing his head. - Without borders. Without states. Without resistance. To the order we built on the ruins of their illusions.

One by one, the directors raised their glasses. The clink of glass echoed under the high ceiling - pure, solemn, almost churchlike. No one made toasts, no one laughed, no one smiled. Only the soft crackle of ice and the whisper of expensive drink against crystal walls.

Josh looked out the window. Below, at the foot of the headquarters, lay "New Eden" - the first of the corporate box-cities, built on a single modular principle. A million windows, a million cells, a million beings who considered themselves residents, citizens, people. They rose at the signal, ate synthetic food, wore cheap uniforms, worked on assembly lines, slept under identical blankets, and did not suspect that they had long ceased to be subjects. They were Users. Assets in a global accounting system. Consumables for maintaining infrastructure. Biomass that produced energy, data, and profit.

And he, Josh Hall, was the only one who held in his hands the keys to this huge, complexly arranged machine. His decision determined whether the air in their cells would warm up tonight,

whether the lamps above their heads would light up, whether the doors of their modules would open tomorrow morning. He felt neither pity, nor guilt, nor hesitation. Only a slight heaviness in his fingertips - as if he were already squeezing the throat of the whole world.

He took a slow sip, feeling the cognac burn his throat, and allowed himself a rare, almost imperceptible smile. The map before him flickered, cities pulsed with faint red dots, and each of them was a million hearts beating in time with his will.

STAGE 3. "WAR FOR AIR" (2063–2071)

SCENE 1. BRIBING THE GENERALS

January 2063. Washington, D.C. The Pentagon.

This building had once been a symbol of American military might. Five walls, five floors, endless corridors where decisions that determined the fate of the world were made. Here they planned invasions, developed strategies, decided where and when to use force. Now the Pentagon looked different. The corridors were half-empty. There were fewer employees than ever. The defense budget had been cut to a minimum - all the money had gone to paying off debts to corporations. Military bases were closing one after another. Soldiers were resigning. Those who remained received their salaries late - sometimes by a month, sometimes by three. They no longer believed in America. They believed only in money.

General Robert Hayes sat in his office. He was fifty-nine years old, forty of which he had given to the army. He had started as a simple lieutenant in Iraq, in the 2020s, when America was still fighting for "democracy." Then came Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine - everywhere fire burned, Robert Hayes burned too. He had seen death, seen victory, seen defeat. He thought his career would end with an honorable retirement, with medals on his chest and the president's gratitude. He was wrong.

On the table before him lay a contract. A thin folder, just a few pages. But he knew: these pages would change his life. He reread them for the tenth time.

"Employment contract. Private military service 'Phoenix Guard.' Proposed position - chief strategic advisor. Salary - 2.4 million credits per year. Medical insurance - full. Personal security - 24/7. Bonuses - depending on task performance. Contract is concluded for five years with possible extension."

Hayes looked at the numbers. 2.4 million. That was twenty times more than he currently earned. Twenty times. Now his salary was one hundred twenty thousand a year. Delays, cuts, endless promises that were not kept. He had not seen a full paycheck for two months. His wife was ill, and treatment was expensive. His son was in university, and there was nothing to pay for tuition. He was a general, but he was poor.

He looked at the contract and thought about his oath. He had sworn to defend the Constitution. He had given his word to serve the people. He believed in America. But America no longer believed in him.

He picked up the telephone receiver - an old, wired one that still worked because the digital system often failed. He dialed the number he had been given.

A voice on the other end - polite, calm, with a slight accent:

General Hayes? We've been expecting your call.

I read the contract, - Hayes said. His voice sounded hollow. - I agree. But I have conditions.

What conditions, sir?

My wife. She needs surgery. And my men. Those serving under me. I want them guaranteed jobs. So they are not abandoned.

Of course, General. We have accounted for that. Your men can transfer to Phoenix Guard on the same terms. Pension, insurance, housing. Better conditions than the state offers.

Hayes was silent. He looked at the wall where the flag hung. Stars and stripes. He remembered kissing that flag at parades. Now he was betraying it.

When do I start? - he asked.

Tomorrow, General. Come to the Cyber-Fund office in Georgetown. Sign all the papers. Receive your first advance. Welcome to your new life.

Dial tone.

Hayes put down the receiver. He looked at his hands. They did not tremble. He thought they would. But no. He was calm. Because he had already made the decision. Not today. A year ago. Two years ago. When he saw the state dying and the corporations living.

He stood up. Took off his uniform. Folded it carefully, placed it on the chair. Tomorrow he would be in civilian clothes. Tomorrow he would become a mercenary.

He left the office. Walked down the corridor. Past the doors of other generals. He knew many of them had already signed similar contracts. Those who had not signed had resigned. Or disappeared. It was said some were found dead - officially, "suicide." No one asked why. Questions were dangerous.

He walked out of the Pentagon. Outside - cold, windy. The sky was gray. He looked at the building where he had spent twenty years of his life. He would never return here. He was a traitor. But he was alive. And his family would be alive. And his men would be alive.

"America is dead," he thought. "And we must survive."

February 2063. Phoenix Guard Headquarters. Nevada.

This was not just an office. It was a military base built by corporations. A huge complex in the desert, with concrete walls, bunkers, helipads. Here mercenaries trained. Here they were armed. Here they were prepared for the war that was about to begin.

General Hayes sat in his office. He was no longer a general - he was the chief strategic advisor. Under his command - ten thousand soldiers. All had transferred from the American army. All had received their pay on the first day.

Before him - a holographic screen. On it - a list of generals who had already signed contracts. Fifty-three names. Fifty-three generals from different countries. Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia, Turkey, Brazil. They were all now working for corporations.

Hayes looked at the screen and felt emptiness. He knew these people. He had fought with them. He had drunk with them. He had shared danger with them. Now they were enemies. No, not enemies. They were competitors. Each corporation had its own PMC. "Phoenix Guard" was Cyber-Fund. "Solar-City" had created "Solar Legion." "Neura-Infra" - "Neuro-Strike." They all now served different masters.

His deputy, Colonel Martins, entered. Young, ambitious, with the same glassy look as everyone who had served in the PMC for more than five years.

General, - he said. - A new order has arrived from Cyber-Fund. We must prepare for an economic blockade. They want to disconnect cities from the grids. We need to secure the facilities. And suppress possible protests.

Hayes nodded. He knew this was coming. He knew why he was hired. Not for protection. For suppression.

How many cities?

First five. New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia. Then the rest. The corporations want to show they control everything. If a city does not obey - it dies. We will guard the power grids so no one can restore them.

Hayes was silent. He remembered New York. He had grown up there. His mother lived in Brooklyn. She still considered herself an American. She did not know her son was a traitor.

Good, - he said. - Prepare the plans.

Martins left. Hayes remained alone. He looked at the map. At the green zones of the corporations. At the gray patches of states, getting smaller and smaller.

"I helped them kill America," he thought. "I signed its death warrant."

He turned away from the map.

May 2063. Geneva. UN Headquarters.

This building had once been the center of diplomacy. Now it was empty. Most countries had left the UN - they no longer saw the point. Sessions were held once a month, and only corporate representatives came. They needed formal approval for their actions.

In the large hall - emptiness. Only a few delegates. Among them - the last US representative, an old diplomat who did not want to give up. He looked at the empty seats and remembered when life thrived here. When they argued, negotiated, fought. Now - only silence.

The chairman - a Swiss who now worked for the corporations - opened the session:

Gentlemen, we have gathered to discuss the situation with private military forces. As you know, many countries are transferring their military functions to corporations. This raises concerns...

No concerns, - interrupted the Cyber-Fund delegate. - The generals signed contracts voluntarily. They received better terms. Their soldiers received salaries. States can no longer maintain armies. We can. This is a matter of efficiency.

The US representative stood up. His voice trembled:

You are dismantling the security structure! You are creating private armies that answer to no one! This is a path to anarchy!

This is a path to stability, - replied the delegate. - Private armies are more efficient. They have no political ambitions. They fulfill contracts. They protect their clients' interests. This is business. And business is peace.

The US representative sat down. He looked at the empty seats. He understood that his voice was the last voice of resistance. And it no longer mattered.

SCENE 2. THE STATE AGAINST THE CORPORATIONS

March 2070. Washington, D.C. The Capitol.

The Capitol building still stood on its hill, a monument to a long-gone era. Its dome, once dazzlingly white, was now covered in a network of fine cracks and dark streaks from acid rain; the columns of the facade were chipped, and between the marble slabs tufts of dry, stiff grass sprouted. Inside - the smell of old wood, dust, and neglect. The corridors were empty, the echo of footsteps lost in endless galleries where portraits of presidents from past centuries were covered in a murky film, their eyes seeming extinguished.

The Congressional chamber still functioned - formally. Once a month, according to schedule, a few dozen people out of five hundred thirty-five gathered here. The rest did not come - they had more important matters. These absentees had long ceased to be servants of the people; they were shareholders, members of boards of directors, holders of large blocks of shares in the three giants: Solar-City, Cyber-Fund, and Green-Matrix. Their personal wealth grew in sync with stock indices, and every Congressional session was for them merely an annoying interruption in their calendars that could be ignored without consequences. Their offices in Los Angeles, New York, and Dallas were better equipped than this old hall, their yachts cruised the Caribbean, their children studied in private academies where the history of democracy was not taught. They no longer belonged to America. America belonged to them.

Today's session was a rare event: on the agenda was a bill on the compulsory nationalization of strategic corporate assets. The initiator - Senator from Ohio, William Collins. He was seventy-two, wore old-fashioned three-piece suits that had long gone out of style, and spoke with a slight Midwestern accent that sounded almost archaic amid the urban slang of his colleagues. He was one of those politicians whose career had begun back in the nineties, when the word "loyalty" was not an empty sound. He remembered America where the president apologized to the nation, where corruption investigations led to prisons, where Congress debated for days rather than voting via SMS. Now he saw the country dying a slow death - its institutions gutted, its constitution turned into a decorative document, its army, the last bastion, still formally not sworn to the corporations, but already receiving its salaries through subcontractors. He wanted to stop this. He knew the chances were almost nil, but he had to try.

He rose to the podium - tall, stooped, with bushy gray eyebrows and trembling but still strong hands. His voice, amplified by the old sound system, echoed through the empty rows:

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, I address you as the last bastion of our sovereignty! - His words bounced off the backs of empty seats like peas against a wall. - Corporations have seized our country not with tanks, not with artillery - they did it quietly, through bank accounts, algorithms, and contracts. They control what we eat, what we pay with, who we are in databases. Today they own our food; tomorrow they will decide who lives and who dies. And the only thing that does not yet fully belong to them is our army, our ability to use physical force. We must nationalize their infrastructure! We must regain control over power grids, water mains, grain stores, satellite constellations - immediately, without delay, without compensation if necessary! This is not robbery - this is self-defense!

He paused, catching his breath, and scanned the hall. Of the few dozen present, only a handful looked at him - the rest were buried in pocket projectors and holographic tablets. They were checking stock quotes, reading confidential exchange reports, messaging brokers. One of them, a young senator from Texas, did not even hide a smile when a green notification on his wrist lit up about the rise in the value of the "Cyber-Token." No one applauded, no one asked questions. Everyone already knew the outcome: the bill would not pass. Ten or fifteen might vote for it, but there would be no quorum, even if all supporters came. The rest had already negotiated with the corporations a week ago - at private dinners, in exclusive clubs, in the saunas of elite hotels. They had been promised bonuses, shares, positions on boards after their terms ended. They would not risk their future for the past.

Collins finished his speech - it had lasted forty minutes, but it sounded like a pathetic, lonely cry in the wilderness. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and looked at the seats that should have been filled but yawned with black emptiness. He whispered into the microphone, no longer for the record, but for himself:

If we do not do this today... tomorrow it will be too late. Forever too late.

Silence. Not a single voice, not a single question. The Speaker, a man with a face as smooth as plastic and an impeccable tie, mechanically announced a technical break. The bill was automatically sent to the archive. Collins slowly descended from the podium, his legs shaking, his heart pounding somewhere in his throat. He knew this day would go down in history - if anyone would write history tomorrow.

April 2070. Solar-City Headquarters. 87th Floor. The same office, the same panoramic walls, the same black oak table.

Josh Hall, now no longer just CEO but de facto one of the three rulers of the world, sat in his chair, legs crossed. Before him - a transparent holographic list of all members of the US Congress. Each line was color-coded: green - reliable, already signed; yellow - wavering but pliable; red - oppositionists who needed to be isolated. Seventy percent of the list was green. Senator Collins - bright red, the only one of his kind.

Josh slowly scrolled through the data, studying personal dossiers, family connections, debts, hobbies, secret accounts. He knew more about each of these people than their own spouses: who was cheating, who took bribes, who was afraid of losing authority, who dreamed of a governor's seat. All the information had been collected and systematized by neural networks that did not miss a single email, a single call, a single second of video surveillance.

Prepare the invitations, - he said to his assistant - a young but already absolutely ruthless manager with a notepad in hand. - For all deputies in the yellow and red zones whose votes could be decisive. Arrange cruises for them on yachts in the Mediterranean, excursions to our plants with velvet conditions, consultations with our financial advisors. Let them be busy on voting day. Feel important. Immersed in comfort. Cut off from communication, if necessary.

Yes, sir, - the assistant wrote without looking up.

And a separate assignment: on the day of the session, perform a global update of the protocols of all government communicators on the East Coast. The failure should affect precisely those who decide to come. So they do not have confirmation of a quorum, so they cannot transmit their vote through proxies. A technical delay of four hours. That is enough.

Understood, sir.

Josh leaned back and took a cup of black coffee from the table. He did not smile, but in his gaze was the calm confidence of a mechanic who had just finished tuning the most complex engine. The bill would not pass. He knew it as surely as he knew that tomorrow the sun would rise in the east. This was not magic, not luck - it was pure probability mathematics, backed by billions of dollars and years of planning.

May 2070. Washington, D.C. The Capitol. Voting Day.

The chamber looked even emptier than last time. Only twenty percent attendance - deputies who came out of habit or stubbornness. But even among them, many whispered, glanced at their watches, nervously checked their communicators, which stubbornly showed "no connection." The technical failure, officially announced, had paralyzed notification systems and electronic voting. Paper ballots, provided for by the old regulations, lay untouched on the tables - no one remembered how to fill them out.

Collins stood at the podium, his fists clenched, his face gray with fury and despair.

Where is everyone?! - he shouted, his voice cracking. - Where are my colleagues, where are the senators, where are the people's representatives?! This is a conspiracy! This is a coup!

The Speaker, maintaining a perfectly impassive expression, rose from his seat and said with saccharine politeness:

Dear Senator, many deputies have reported technical difficulties in confirming their credentials. Some delegations have been delayed at airports due to weather conditions. This is force majeure, we must take it into account. I propose postponing the vote to the next quarter.

Next quarter?! We will be dead by the next quarter! - Collins pounded his fist on the podium, and the echo rolled through the hall, but no one flinched. The deputies simply averted their eyes, shuffled papers, pretended to be busy.

The vote was postponed. The bill was defeated de facto, without even reaching a count. Collins gathered his folders, placed them in an old leather briefcase, and walked toward the exit. Each step cost him great effort - his knees buckled, his back ached. He felt not just defeated - he felt like the last person who still remembered what victory was.

In the empty marble corridor, hung with faded state flags, he was met by a young man in an impeccable dark blue suit with a gold pin on his lapel - faceless, polite, professional, one of those who appeared from nowhere and disappeared into nowhere.

Senator Collins? - he said in a melodic, emotionless voice. - Allow me to introduce myself, I am a consultant for the private firm "Atlantic Partners." We have been following your career and your initiatives. We would like to offer you a long-term contract. Compensation - two million dollars annually, bonuses for participation in closed hearings, full benefits package, office in Manhattan. You would no longer have to speak in this empty building. You could truly influence processes.

Collins looked at him as if at a ghost. He opened his mouth to answer sharply, with an insult, with a spit - but stopped. He saw his hands: wrinkled, covered in age spots, with trembling fingers. He saw his reflection in the display case glass - a tired, broken old man. He could no longer fight. There was no strength left in him, no anger, only emptiness.

I will think about it, - he forced out, barely moving his lips.

The young man smiled - mechanically, with his lips only, not his eyes:

Of course, Senator. We will await your response. We need you very much - as a symbol, as a voice, as a bridge between eras.

He turned and walked away, disappearing around the corner as silently as he had appeared.

Collins remained alone. He looked along the empty corridor, where once there had been the sound of crowds, reporters, lobbyists, citizens with petitions. Now there was only an echo, and wind blowing through cracks in the windows, and dust slowly settling on the floor tiles. He stood there for several minutes, then slowly walked toward the exit, no longer looking back at the Capitol, which had ceased to be his home.

He would never return to this hall again.

SCENE 3. ECONOMIC STRANGULATION

September 2070. New York. Manhattan.

The city once called "the pulse of the planet" now resembled a giant concrete mausoleum. Its celebrated skyscrapers, which only a year ago had shone with mirrored facades, had turned into dark obelisks whose outlines were barely visible against the leaden sky. The shutdown had begun exactly at midnight, without warning, without declaration of a state of emergency - simply a click, and the world plunged into silence. First the garish neon signs of Times Square went out, then the streetlights along Broadway, then millions of windows in residential towers, one by one, as if someone were blowing out candles. The last to disappear was the light at the top of the Empire State Building, and since then the city had lain in pitch darkness, broken only by the dull crimson glow of emergency beacons on hospital roofs - and those were already running out.

Charles Davis sat in his tiny room on the sixth floor of a dilapidated apartment building in the Bronx. He was seventy-two, but he still worked as a courier - though now he delivered not envelopes and packages, but five-liter canisters of technical water dropped by rare cargo drones running on solar batteries. The delivery drones, once swarming over the city, had long been silent - their batteries were dead, and there were no charging stations. Now Charles carried water on his bent shoulders, descending and ascending dark, trash-filled staircases, each time risking a fall and breaking something - at his age, bones no longer healed properly.

He sat on a sagging chair by the only window facing the courtyard. Beyond the glass - absolute, dense blackness, only occasionally punctuated by the yellow tongues of candles lit in apartments across the way. Their light was dim, unstable, and diminished every evening - people burned them sparingly, by the minute, but paraffin lasted only three or four nights, and no one had reserves of candles. At the bottom of the courtyard, where children once played basketball, a makeshift camp had sprung up - several polyethylene tents, wood-burning heaters whose smoke hung low and smelled sharply of soot. But even there, fewer and fewer people appeared - many simply stopped coming out.

It was now the third day without electricity. Without heat, without sewage, without communication, without news, without hope. Manhattan and the surrounding areas had become a giant prison without walls - bridges blocked by automatic barriers, tunnels flooded, ferries not running. People were locked in their apartments like in cells, trying to stay warm with several blankets and hot tea brewed on gas burners - but the gas cylinders were also running out. Panic was already seeping through locked doors: somewhere cries were heard, children crying, dull thuds against walls - people were breaking furniture to light fires right in their rooms, risking burning alive.

On the streets, at human height, "Locust" drones silently swarmed - small, fist-sized, with pulsing red lights scanning every movement. They patrolled blocks along preset routes, their cameras peeking into windows, their speakers broadcasting recorded voice warnings: "Curfew. Stay indoors. Exit is forbidden. Violators will be neutralized." And they indeed neutralized. Charles had seen it with his own eyes: last night, a man about forty came out of the entrance across the way, empty-handed, perhaps just wanting to stretch his legs. A drone swooped down, the red light blinked three times - a warning. The man did not stop, perhaps he did not hear, perhaps he was drunk. Then the drone silently detached a small charge from its body and dropped it at the man's feet. The explosion was quiet - a pop, like a firecracker - but enough to shatter his shinbone. The man fell and screamed, the scream echoing through the empty streets, but no one came out to him, no one called an ambulance,

no one even looked out the window. He lay on the asphalt for over an hour until he stopped moving. In the morning, cleaning machines obeying the same drones removed his body.

Charles thought of the elderly locked in their tiny cells. Of children begging for food. Of the sick who could not get medicine because pharmacies were sealed and doctors did not make house calls. Hospitals ran on backup generators, but diesel fuel ran out with each hour. Incubators for newborns had already been turned off in most perinatal centers - infants died within hours without warmth and oxygen. Elderly people froze to death right in their beds, covered in all the clothes they could find - neighbors found them only by smell when passing by their doors. Charles remembered Jacob, his friend who had left for New Eden three years ago, dreaming of work and stability. He had not heard from him since - no message, no call. Charles sometimes caught himself thinking that Jacob might be dead - or simply "shut down," like useless accounts in old databases. He did not know which was worse.

Charles stood up, picked up two empty five-liter bottles of dark plastic from the floor. He walked into the corridor - dark, smelling of damp plaster and mold. The light bulbs had long stopped working, so he groped his way, holding the railing, step by step, counting flights: sixth floor, fifth, fourth. In the basement, where there used to be a laundry, an old water pipe still survived, rusty but still yielding a thin trickle of icy water - it came from the city reservoir, which had not yet been shut off because the pumping station ran on mechanical drive. Charles placed the bottles under it, waiting for them to fill with murky, cold, rust-smelling liquid. It could be drunk if boiled, but there was almost no firewood, so they drank it raw, risking infection.

In the basement he ran into a neighbor - Mr. Goldberg, an eighty-year-old man who lived on the first floor and had not yet lost the ability to speak in full sentences.

Charles, - said Goldberg, wrapped in several woolen blankets, his voice dropping to a whisper. - Charles, I heard on the loudspeakers from the city administration... They broadcast on a frequency almost no one picks up. The shutdown will last at least another week. Maybe two. And I've run out of candles; I only light them for ten minutes a day to see if I'm still alive. And I have no warm clothes, just one shirt, a jacket...

Charles nodded, not knowing what to answer.

Listen, - Goldberg continued, - I heard that the corporations are offering a deal. If the city officially recognizes their authority - transfers management of utilities, police, courts to them - they will turn on the electricity. Not fully, but at least heating and hospitals. The mayor is thinking about it. Many are already thinking. New York cannot survive another week, Charles. We cannot survive.

Charles was silent for a long minute, looking at the murky water in the bottles. He had heard these rumors. Heard how the authorities of Boston and Washington were already conducting backroom negotiations with representatives of Solar-City. But he also knew what signing a capitulation meant.

If we surrender, - he finally said, - they will never turn the lights back on. They will keep us on this leash forever. It will not be help - it will be control. We will become their dogs, getting food only for obedience.

And if we do not surrender, - Goldberg interrupted, - we will die here. I do not want to die in the dark, Charles. I am already eighty. I want to see at least one light bulb before I die.

Charles looked at the old man, and a dull, helpless ache rose in his chest. He could not argue with him, because every word was true. He just nodded and walked back, heavily treading the concrete steps, carrying two canisters of ice-cold water that would be someone's last drink in this house.

October 2070. Boston. Massachusetts General Hospital.

Third week of total shutdown. The medical center building, once one of the most modern in the country, now looked like a field hospital after an artillery strike. The backup generators that powered the ICU and surgery had failed five days ago - fuel tanks were empty, and attempts to get diesel from military depots had failed due to drones blocking all approaches. The operating rooms were dark;

sterile lights did not work; surgeons operated by candlelight and battery-powered flashlights, but the batteries were also running out. Incubators did not work, ventilators were silent, refrigerators with medications had become warm cabinets, and vital drugs - insulin, antibiotics, vaccines - had spoiled within the first day.

Dr. Emily Wilson, thirty-five, with dark circles under her eyes and an overgrown fringe, knelt by a metal cot in the pediatric ward. She wore a soiled white coat over which a woolen scarf was wrapped to keep warm. Before her - a girl, six years old, with huge brown eyes and blond hair in two uneven braids. Diagnosis: bilateral pneumonia complicated by respiratory failure. She needed continuous oxygen, but the oxygen cylinder connected to a manual mask was almost empty - twenty, maybe thirty minutes left.

The girl looked at Emily with the trust that only the very young possess. She still did not understand she was dying - she just felt that breathing was hard, that something in her chest was wheezing and blocking the air.

Mommy? - the girl whispered, her voice weak and intermittent. - Where is my mommy? She promised to come when I woke up.

Emily squeezed her tiny, cold hand, trying to pass on her warmth. She knew the truth she could not say: the girl's mother had died the day before yesterday, frozen in her apartment when the heating was cut off - neighbors had found her in the morning, already cold, hugging a pillow. The girl was left alone. Emily had taken her under her care, but it changed nothing.

She will be here soon, - Emily lied, trying to keep her voice steady. - She was just delayed, sweetheart. Just breathe, please, breathe...

The girl closed her eyes, her breathing becoming slower and shallower. Emily pressed the mask tighter, but the cylinder let out a final hiss and fell silent. Life was leaving the child before her eyes, thread by thread, her pulse weakening under her fingers.

A senior nurse burst into the room, her face twisted with panic.

Doctor, there is a huge crowd outside. Thousands of people. They are demanding we open the gates, they say it's minus five outside, they have no roof, many with children. They want to take shelter here, in the building. They have started beating the gates with metal bars.

We have no free space, - Emily replied without taking her eyes off the girl. - We have no fuel, no heating, we can barely warm our own patients. If we open the gates, they will bring in infections, chaos, and then everyone will die.

And if we do not open, - the nurse's voice cracked, - they will die out there. And they will still break through sooner or later. There are too many of them. They are peaceful now, but in an hour they will be angry.

Emily closed her eyes for a moment. Through the old, dusty walls of the hospital, she heard the rising roar of voices - hundreds, maybe thousands, chanting: "Open up! Help!" Somewhere a baby cried. Somewhere a man hoarsely shouted that his wife was pregnant and unwell.

The girl under her hand stopped breathing. Emily checked for a pulse, put her ear to her chest, tried to perform CPR, though she knew it was useless. After a minute she leaned back on her heels, covered her face with her hands, and sat there, feeling tears mix with sweat and run down her cheeks.

Open the gates, - she said dully. - Let them in. We will do what we can.

The nurse ran out. Ten minutes later, sirens began to wail in the hospital corridors, people flooded inside - dirty, frozen, frightened. Doctors and nurses, now three times fewer, tried to distribute them in the corridors, wrap them in blankets, give them hot water. But there was almost no water, blankets for no more than a hundred. Chaos grew - shouts, crying, swearing. Someone started pushing, trying to get to the reception desk. The sound of breaking glass was heard.

Emily remained in the pediatric ward, alone, next to the body of the girl she could not save. She took her cold hand, straightened her braids, and quietly, voicelessly, cried in the silence broken only by the noise of the dying city outside the windows.

November 2070. Chicago. City Hall.

The city administration building - once a glass cube, a symbol of modern urbanity - now looked like a bunker. Inside, dark, cold; employees sat in coats and gloves, on tables - kerosene lamps and candles, the smoke from which settled on the ceiling in a thin layer of soot. The city's mayor, Frank Miller, a man about sixty, in a worn wool suit, sat in his office on the top floor, from which there had once been a view of Lake Michigan. Now the lake was invisible - the windows were fogged, and outside there was only gloom and occasionally flashing lights of "Locust" drones circling over the square like vultures.

The mayor had gone seven days without sleep, without communication with the outside world, without support from the federal government, which simply stopped answering calls. He knew from radio intercepts that Philadelphia had capitulated two weeks ago - its mayor had signed an act transferring infrastructure to Cyber-Fund, and the first lights had come on in the city. Houston surrendered a week after Philadelphia. Detroit - three days ago. Now it was Chicago's turn. On his desk lay the only message received via a satellite communicator running on its last battery. The text was short, typed in perfect font:

"To His Excellency, the Mayor of the City of Chicago. On behalf of the united council of corporations Solar-City, Cyber-Fund, and Green-Matrix. The corporations are ready to restore power to Chicago within two hours of signing the agreement on the transfer of control over city grids, port infrastructure, and public safety systems. You have twenty-four hours to make a decision. If no response is received, the complete shutdown mode will continue until April 2071. Estimated number of casualties: 780,000 people. We trust in your prudence."

The mayor read this letter for the hundredth time. He knew it was not an ultimatum - it was a farewell. If he signed, he would go down in history as a traitor, the man who surrendered the city without a single shot, handed it over to the mercy of corporations. But if he did not sign, by April more than seven hundred thousand people would die in Chicago - from hunger, cold, disease. He had already seen the lists of his citizens, obtained from humanitarian organizations: about three thousand people died daily, mostly the elderly and children. One thought circled in his head: "I cannot let this continue. I must do something. Even if it is wrong."

He took a steel pen, dipped it in ink - modern styluses had long been gone - and signed his name on the thick sheet of paper brought by his assistant. His hand did not tremble. It was just tired.

Fifty minutes later, with a slight delay due to technical procedures, the first streetlight on the square outside city hall came on. It burned with a steady, white, cold light - too bright after weeks of darkness. Behind it, a second, third, a dozen, a hundred came on - and Chicago awoke, but it awoke as a different city. A city that no longer belonged to itself.

The mayor looked at this light and felt neither relief nor pride. He felt only emptiness, like a room from which all furniture had been removed. He understood that he had just signed democracy's death warrant, but he could no longer distinguish victory from defeat.

He put down the pen, rose from his chair, walked to the window, and looked for a long time at the lights returning to his city - not as a gift, but as a reminder that he had just sold his soul for a few watts of electricity.

SCENE 4. THE PRESIDENT ON HIS KNEES

February 2071. Solar-City Headquarters. Satellite City "New Eden."

The presidential air shuttle landed silently on the rooftop platform of Solar-City's main headquarters at exactly 9:47 AM local time. James Harrison, the fifty-third president of the United States, stepped out of the cabin alone - without security, without secretaries, without advisors. His face was pale, deep shadows under his eyes, and his once immaculate suit hung loosely on his gaunt body. He had taken office six years ago, in 2065, with a promise to restore America's former might, but instead he had become a witness to its slow, agonizing death. Now he had come here not as the leader of a superpower, but as a supplicant - the last in a long line of presidents who had one by one

ceded power to corporations, starting as far back as 2025, when the 47th president, Donald Trump, signed the first contracts privatizing infrastructure.

The corridors of the headquarters greeted him with shining cleanliness, sterile gleam of chrome panels, and soft, even light from ceiling panels simulating natural sunlight. Humidifiers, air conditioners, and ionizers worked here; the air smelled of lemon and freshness - a smell Harrison had not felt for many months, because in the White House climate control had long been shut off, and the president lived in dampness and mold, wrapped in an army blanket. He walked through these corridors, and each step echoed with dull pain in his chest, because he understood: here, in this perfectly calibrated world, there was no place for his people. Here, fates were decided. And he had come to beg.

He was led into the negotiation hall - a spacious room with panoramic glass overlooking the snow-covered domes of New Eden, stretching below like a giant anthill of identical modular cells. Behind a long table of polished black stone sat three people. In the center - Josh Hall, chairman of Solar-City, with completely gray hair and steel, unblinking eyes. To his right - a representative of Cyber-Fund, a young woman in an ivory-colored suit with a cold, detached smile. To his left - a representative of Neura-Infra, the corporation managing global communications and biometrics, a gray-haired man with a face devoid of any emotion. They did not rise when the president entered. They did not even extend their hands for a handshake. They simply sat, fingers clasped, and looked at him as one would look at a laboratory animal that had finally stopped resisting.

Harrison stopped at the table. He did not sit in the offered chair - it was too soft and comfortable for such a moment. He stood, leaning with both hands on the back of the chair, his shoulders slumped, his voice trembling as he began to speak:

Gentlemen... I have not come as president. I have come as a human being. As a representative of millions of people who are dying in their homes. - He paused, swallowing the lump in his throat. - Last night in New York, four thousand two hundred children died from the cold. In Chicago - two thousand eight hundred. In Dallas - one thousand nine hundred. Children, gentlemen. Children who cannot keep warm because we turned off their heating. Elderly people freezing to death in their beds because we closed fuel depots. The sick who cannot get medicines because our drones are blocking humanitarian convoys. - His voice cracked, and he grabbed the back of the chair to keep from falling. - I am asking you. I am begging you. Turn on the power. For the nursing homes. For the children's hospitals. For the people who have done nothing wrong to you. You have the power, you have the resources. Please.

He fell silent, breathing heavily. A ringing silence hung in the room, broken only by the soft hum of ventilation. Josh Hall tilted his head slightly, studying the president like a doctor examining an X-ray of a hopeless patient. His voice, when he spoke, was even, calm, almost friendly - and that friendliness made Harrison even more horrified.

Mr. President, - said Josh, - we have listened to you carefully. And we understand your pain. Truly, we do. But allow me to ask you one simple question. - He leaned forward, his steel eyes boring into Harrison's face. - Fifty years ago, when the 47th president, Donald Trump, signed the first contracts transferring power grids to private hands, was he thinking about children? Four decades ago, when his successors expanded those contracts, were they thinking about the elderly? Twenty years ago, when the last president who tried to resist was forced out, were they thinking about the sick? No, Mr. President. They were thinking about budgets, about ratings, about lobbyists. They were thinking about how to stay in power for one more term. And every subsequent president - including you, Mr. Harrison - merely reinforced this system, hoping the crisis would not happen on their watch. But the crisis came. And now you come to us with pleas. But your plea has no weight, Mr. President. It has no leverage.

He paused, letting the words settle. Harrison felt his legs give way, and he slowly sank into the chair, though he had not meant to.

Josh Hall picked up a thick folder from the table and slid it over to the president. On the cover, embossed in gold letters: "Act on the Voluntary Transfer of Sovereign Powers."

Here is the contract, - said Josh. - It has three points. First: you transfer to the corporations full control over all city grids - power, water, sewage, transport, and communications throughout the former United States. Second: you recognize that corporate regulations take precedence over state law in all matters concerning economy, identification, and security. Third: you dissolve the federal government in its current form and transfer its functions to our administrative structures. You, as president, sign this document, and after that you are provided with an honorary pension and an island in the Caribbean. You will live in comfort. Your family will be safe. Your grandchildren will be able to study in our academies.

Harrison looked at the folder, then at Josh, then at the empty space before him. His hands, resting on his knees, began to tremble with a fine tremor.

I... I cannot sign this, - he forced out, almost in a whisper. - This is the end of America. This is the end of everything we fought for for almost three hundred years. This is betrayal. Fifty-three presidents before me - and I will be the one to put the final period?

Josh Hall slowly rose from the table. He walked around it, stopping right in front of Harrison, looming over him like a monument of flesh and steel. His voice became harder, with steely notes that no longer tried to hide contempt.

Mr. President, - he said, enunciating each word, - allow me to be absolutely frank with you. America has been dead for five decades. It did not die today or yesterday. It began dying in 2025, when the forty-seventh president put his signature under the first corporate contract. It died all those years - slowly, imperceptibly, to the accompaniment of patriotic speeches and fake elections. Every one of your predecessors, including you, merely postponed the inevitable, hoping the finale would come after their term. But the finale came on your watch. And now you stand here, in this room, and beg us for mercy, because you have no more power, no will, no even the right to call yourself a leader. - He leaned down, bringing his face close to the president's, and continued in a whisper that sounded louder than any shout: - You either sign this contract, and your people get heat, food, and a chance to survive, or you go back to Washington, and in two weeks only ashes and statistics will remain of your people. Choose. But choose now.

Harrison raised his head. Tears ran down his cheeks - quiet, soundless, which he could not stop. He looked at Josh Hall, at his impeccably shaved face, at his snow-white shirt, at his hands that held the lives of millions like dice. He wanted to say "no," he wanted to stand up and tear up the contract, he wanted to show them he was still president, that he was still a free man.

But he could not. Because he had no strength. Because he knew that if he left, he would return to a dead city where another three thousand children would die tomorrow. And each of them would die with his name on their lips.

He took the pen. His fingers gripped it so hard that his knuckles turned white. He pulled the folder toward himself, opened it to the last page, where an empty line waited for his signature.

He signed. Letter by letter, without looking at the text, without reading the terms, just moving the pen across the paper like a robot that had no choice left. James Harrison, the fifty-third president of the United States, signed the act of capitulation.

When he finished, Josh Hall gently took the folder, checked the signature, nodded approvingly, and handed Harrison a damp towel to wipe his tears.

You made the right choice, Mr. President, - he said with a light, almost human smile. - You saved your people. Even if at the cost of pride. But pride does not heat hospital wards.

Harrison said nothing. He slowly rose, turned, and, staggering, left the hall. In the corridor, an assistant waited to escort him to the exit without a word.

An hour later, the corporate press office issued an official statement: "President Harrison voluntarily decided to retire, transferring infrastructure management to strategic partners. He has

purchased a private island in the Caribbean, where he will spend the remainder of his days surrounded by family." The news showed an archival photo of him in his youth - smiling, confident, standing on the Capitol podium. New photos were not published.

No journalist asked exactly which island it was. No one checked whether he actually settled there. No one saw how, three days after signing the act, Harrison was led out of the headquarters building alone through a back entrance and put into an inconspicuous gray van without identification marks. The van drove off in an unknown direction, and no one saw him again. In official databases, the name James Harrison was replaced by "acting," and later - erased from protocols, as if he had never existed. It is said he lives somewhere in Central America, in a small village without electricity, and no one knows that this gray-haired, silent old man who carries water from a well once held the fate of an entire nation in his hands. But these are only rumors. And rumors, as we know, are not believed even by those who spread them.

In the corporate archives, in the classified section of the chronology, there is a short line:

"2065–2071 - James Harrison, 53rd President of the USA. The last. Signed the Act on the Transfer of Powers on February 14, 2071. Further records are absent."

SCENE 5. THE END OF THE STAGE

March 2071. Solar-City Headquarters. 87th Floor.

Outside the headquarters' windows, the last snow was slowly melting, revealing the gray concrete of New Eden - a city that had never known spring. Josh Hall stood at the panoramic glass, hands clasped behind his back, looking at the endless rows of modular cells where millions of Users woke at the signal, ate synthetic food, and went to assembly lines, never suspecting that their lives were merely a line in a corporate database. He looked at this world he had created with his own hands and felt nothing but a dull, oppressive fatigue.

Behind him, above the long black table, hovered a holographic map of the world. All continents burned with an even blue light - cities, transport hubs, power grids, control centers. Everything was under control. Everything was perfect. Except for one spot in the Appalachians, flickering with a dim, almost fading red. Resistance. The last spark the corporations could not extinguish. Josh looked at this spot with the irritation a painter feels when noticing an accidental smudge on a finished canvas. This spot did not matter - it was too small, too weak to threaten the empire. But it existed. And its very existence was an insult.

Report, - he said without turning. His voice was even, almost indifferent, but there was steel in it - the same steel that had once broken dozens of governments and hundreds of armies.

The head of security of Neura-Infra, a lean man of about fifty with a face devoid of emotion, stepped forward. His suit was impeccable, his movements precise - he knew that any mistake in this office could cost him his position, and possibly his life. He unfolded a holographic screen, and data appeared on it - photographs, diagrams, coordinates.

General Michael Stone, - he began, his voice dry and businesslike. - Sixty-two years old, former commander of the US ground forces. After refusing to sign a contract with Cyber-Fund, he went underground in 2068. He assembled a unit of about one hundred and fifty people - veterans, deserters, volunteers. They are based in old coal mines in Pennsylvania, in the Appalachians. They have small arms from the 2030s, a few grenade launchers captured from an abandoned military base. No reconnaissance drones - only homemade motion detectors. No communication with the cities, no outside support. They do not pose a threat, sir. We can destroy them at any time.

Why haven't we done that yet? - Josh asked, and for the first time there was sharpness in his voice. He slowly turned from the window and stared at the director with a cold, unblinking gaze that made interlocutors feel like insects under a magnifying glass.

The director hesitated for a moment, but quickly recovered.

They are isolated, sir. They have no resources, no communication channels, no ability to expand. We considered them unworthy of attention. Moreover, their existence could serve as a useful

reminder - a vivid example of what happens to those who try to resist. We planned to use them as a demonstration.

Josh slowly walked around the table and stopped directly in front of the director, looming over him like a predator. His voice became quieter, almost a whisper, but that whisper sent a chill down the director's spine.

You are wrong, - said Josh. - Hope is not a tool. Hope is a virus. It penetrates consciousness, multiplies, mutates. One spark is enough to start a fire. One story about someone surviving, someone fighting, someone not giving up - and millions of Users will start asking questions. And questions are the beginning of the end. We cannot afford the luxury of leaving them even the illusion of choice. We must extinguish this spark once and for all.

He straightened and walked over to the holographic map. His fingers touched the red spot in the Appalachians, and it began to pulse like a living heart.

Prepare an operation to destroy Stone's unit, - he ordered, his voice again even and businesslike. - Use "Locusts." Complete liquidation - no survivors, no witnesses, no traces. The battlefield must be cleared so that in a week a distribution center can be built there. Do you understand me?

The director nodded, his face remaining impassive, but inwardly he felt relief that the conversation was over.

It will be done, sir. Operation "Clean Slate" will be launched within a month. We will track their movements, choose the moment when they are most vulnerable, and strike.

Good, - said Josh, and his voice lost its harshness, returning to its usual tired tone. - You are dismissed.

The director bowed and silently left the office. The door closed behind him with a soft hiss, and Josh was alone again.

He turned to the window. Beyond the glass, a crimson sunset painted the domes of New Eden in the colors of dried blood. The city he had built stretched to the horizon - billions of dollars, millions of lives, decades of work. And all of it was his. Every module, every light bulb, every breath taken by the people below - all of it obeyed his will. He could turn on heating in one block and turn it off in another. He could give them food or leave them hungry. He could erase their memory, rewrite their history, change their names. He was the god of this world.

But looking at this perfect, sterile order, Josh felt only emptiness. Somewhere inside, in that part of his soul he had buried years ago, lived a memory of another world - a world where he was just a boy with burning eyes who dreamed of changing everything for the better. Now he had changed everything. But it had not become better. Only quieter. Only emptier.

His reflection in the glass looked like a ghost - old, gray, tired, with eyes that had lost all light. He looked at himself and did not recognize himself. Where was the man who had once believed in freedom? Who was he now? A jailer, an executioner, the architect of his own cage?

In three months we will sign Treaty 404, - he said quietly, almost to himself, addressing his reflection. - And not a single state, not a single army, not a single hope will remain. Only us. Only order. Only the future we will build.

He fell silent. Wind outside the window drove rare snowflakes that melted before reaching the ground. The sunset faded, turning the sky a dark purple - the color of blood already spilled and blood yet to be spilled.

This is the end of the stage, - he added. - The next is the finale.

He took a step back from the window and walked to the table, where a crystal decanter of water stood. He poured himself a glass, raised it, looked at the light, but did not drink. Put it back. On the screen left by the director, the data on Stone's unit still glowed - photographs, diagrams, coordinates. Josh glanced at the general's face - old, gaunt, with piercing blue eyes in which burned the very fire Josh had long extinguished in himself.

You won't change anything, - he whispered, looking at the photograph. - But I respect you for trying.

He closed the screen. The office became dark - only the lonely lights of New Eden flickered below, like funeral pyres.

That same evening, an encoded order from Josh Hall's office arrived at Neura-Infra headquarters:

"Operation 'Clean Slate.' Code: Locust-4. Target: complete liquidation of General Stone's unit. Deadline: July 2071. Executors: swarm of 'Locust'-class drones. Mode: total."

Within an hour, all swarm systems were switched to combat mode. Thousands of silver points froze in hangars, waiting for the launch signal. General Stone and his one hundred and fifty soldiers did not yet know that their last days were numbered. They sat by a fire deep in the old mine, drinking hot tea from tin cups and talking about what the new world would be like - a free world they would bring back.

They did not know that freedom dies faster than hope.

STAGE 4. "THE BATTLE OF WASHINGTON" (2071)

SCENE 1. THE LAST ARMY

July 2071. Somewhere in the Appalachians. Secret camp.

The mountain forests of Pennsylvania, which had once been reserves with clean streams and hiking trails, had now become the last stronghold of resistance. Here, deep in old coal mines abandoned back in the 19th century, gathered those who still remembered what freedom meant. Those who had not signed contracts with corporations. Those who had not sold themselves for shares and virtual tokens. Those for whom the words "oath," "honor," and "homeland" still held weight.

The entrance to the mine was hidden behind dense thickets of wild ivy and elderberry. Outside - not a single trace, not a single path. Only if you knew where to look could you spot a barely noticeable hatch, sprinkled with earth, and wires leading deep into the mountain. Inside - dampness, the smell of old coal and machine oil, but here there was light - dim lamps on batteries charged by hand generators. There was water - from an underground spring, purified through homemade filters. There was food - canned goods captured in raids on abandoned warehouses. There was weapons, but few. There were people, but few as well.

General Michael Stone stood at the entrance to the mine, slightly squinting at the first rays of sunlight breaking through the crowns of trees. He was sixty-two, but looked seventy - his face was carved with deep wrinkles, his skin was weathered, gray stubble covered his cheeks. He was tall, thin, stooped from constant tension, but his piercing blue eyes, the color of old ice, still burned with the fire that years of defeat had not extinguished. He was from the old school - one of those generals who had sworn allegiance to the Constitution, not to shareholders. He had served in the US Army for forty years, been through three wars, watched his comrades one by one defect to the corporations, becoming mercenaries in private military companies. He had seen generals he respected trade their stars for contracts with Cyber-Fund. He had seen the US Army, the pride of the nation, turn into PMCs, private guards of corporate interests.

He refused. He went underground when he was offered command of one of Solar-City's units - he spat in the emissary's face and said he would rather die in the mud than wear their patches. Three years had passed since then. He had gathered around him those who remained loyal. Those who had not forgotten what it meant to be a soldier, not a mercenary.

Behind him - one hundred and fifty people. Men and women, from eighteen to seventy years old. This was all that remained of a once-great army - the most powerful military machine in human history. They had rifles - old M-27 models from the 2030s, with worn stocks and rusty bolts that they cleaned every night so they would not fail at the crucial moment. They had a few hand grenade launchers - trophies from an abandoned military base in Virginia. They had reconnaissance drones assembled from spare parts that scanned the surroundings every two hours to detect "Locusts" before

they detected them. And they had hope - that substance which cannot be measured, weighed, or sold, but which kept them here, in this damp, cold mine, when the entire world had already surrendered.

Stone slowly surveyed his soldiers. Young men and women, twenty to thirty years old. They had been born in the era of crisis, when America began to fall apart, when the word "democracy" became a curse. They did not remember a country where you could freely criticize the government without fearing that a "Locust" drone would record your voice and send the data to a corporate archive. They did not remember what a real flag over the Capitol looked like. But they believed - believed they could bring it all back, bring back that world they only knew from old films and books Stone had ordered preserved when everything else was burned. Among them were old men - veterans who remembered the 2020s, when presidents changed but the country remained the same. They wore old patches no one recognized anymore and gripped their weapons with a fury that seemed capable of restoring their lost years.

Stone raised his hand, and the whispering ceased. He looked at his people, at their faces emaciated by malnutrition, at their eyes red from sleeplessness, at their hands trembling from cold and adrenaline. He knew most of them would not return. But he also knew they had to do this.

Today we march on Washington, - he said, his voice low and hoarse, echoing through the narrow mine corridor, bouncing off the stone walls. - We march not to win. Not to seize power. We march to show them - show everyone who surrendered, who signed contracts, who believed their sweet speeches about a "new world without borders" - that freedom has not died. It has not died. It was just waiting. Waiting for those brave enough to take up arms and say: "No. We do not agree."

He paused, letting the words soak into the air. The soldiers looked at him, and in their eyes, determination mixed with fear. They knew they were marching to certain death. But they did not retreat.

Neura-Infra headquarters, - Stone continued. - The heart of the corporate empire. The center of all communications, data, and identification. If we strike there, if we show we can reach their nerve center - others will rise. The cities that capitulated will revolt. The people working on their assembly lines will understand that the masters are not immortal. Propaganda will crumble when the news shows Neura-Infra burning. We may not win today, but we will start the countdown. We will let them know their empire is just a house of cards, and one strong wind can destroy it.

He paused, caught his breath, then clenched his fist and raised it above his head.

We are the last army of freedom. And we march to the end. Forward!

One hundred and fifty soldiers stepped out. They moved through the forest, along old roads no one patrolled because the corporations believed resistance was dead. They walked at night, under cover of darkness, hiding from the rare drones sweeping the sky. They knew death awaited them behind every tree, but they did not stop.

Two days later. July 2071. Outskirts of Washington.

Stone's unit reached the outskirts of the capital on the second night. They had moved without stopping, hiding in the ruins of abandoned villages, wading through shallow rivers to confuse thermal imagers. Now they stood on the edge of the city, in the shadow of a half-destroyed shopping mall whose sign had long fallen off. Ahead - Washington, but it was no longer the city Stone remembered. Skyscrapers that had once shone with glass and steel now stood as dark, lifeless obelisks. Most were boarded up. Only a few buildings still glowed - corporate headquarters, the new rulers of this place. In the center, where the Capitol once stood, now lay a flat concrete pad - it had already begun to be covered with new polymer coating for the construction of a distribution center.

Stone stood over a map spread across the hood of an old armored personnel carrier they had found at an abandoned military base. The map was covered in marks - blue dots marked drone positions, red - automatic turrets, black - private military companies guarding the perimeter. Neura-Infra headquarters was in the old Silicon Gulch, in a building that had once belonged to a major technology company. Behind multi-layered protection hid servers that managed identification,

communications, and financial flows for all of North America. If they destroyed that node - the corporate network would collapse for a few hours, maybe days. That would be the first real blow to their power.

They have three lines of defense, - said Stone, tracing a finger across the map. - First - Locust drones patrolling the perimeter. They are automatic, but have limited range. If we approach from the east, where the old residential blocks are, we can slip through the dead zones. Second - automatic turrets on roofs and on the ground. They are controlled by a central AI, but the AI cannot distinguish civilians from soldiers - so we will move in groups of two or three, like locals sneaking to shelters. Third - PMCs. About two hundred mercenaries, well-trained, with the latest equipment. This is the hardest part. We must break through to the server room and set charges. Five minutes - and it's over.

And if we don't break through? - asked a young soldier holding a rifle, his voice trembling slightly.

Stone turned to him, his cold, calm eyes meeting the young man's.

Then we die, - he answered without a shadow of hesitation. - But we die as free people. As people who did not bow our heads. As people who did not sell out. That is more than those who stayed in the cities and signed contracts can say.

The soldiers were silent. They already knew this answer. They had accepted it when they agreed to march.

The night before the battle. Camp in the ruins of the mall.

The fire burned quietly, almost smokelessly - they used special fuel to avoid attracting attention. Stone sat on a broken concrete slab, looking at the flames and thinking about what he never said aloud: he did not believe they would win. He did not believe they would survive. But he believed their sacrifice would matter. He believed that when the morning news channels of the corporations showed footage of the destroyed Neura-Infra center, in every city, in every cell of New Eden, someone would whisper: "They are still here. They are fighting." And that would be the spark from which one day a fire would blaze.

His deputy, Colonel Garrison, sat down beside him. He was thirty-five, young for his rank, but he had been with Stone all these years - from the first refusal to the corporations to this day. His eyes gleamed in the firelight, but there was no fear in them.

General, - said Garrison, - we know they have Locusts. We know they have turrets. We know they can destroy us within minutes once we enter their zone. Why do we still go? Wouldn't it be more logical to retreat into the mountains, wait, gather strength, wait for them to weaken?

Stone turned to him. His voice was quiet but hard as steel.

Because if we do not go now - they will never weaken. Every day we wait, they grow stronger. Every month of delay - another million people growing accustomed to their order, ceasing to see slavery. We must strike, even if it is our last. We must show them resistance is possible. Our deaths will be a signal. A signal that not everyone surrendered. That there are those ready to die for freedom. And when that signal is heard - others will follow us.

Garrison nodded, his jaw tightening. He placed a hand on Stone's shoulder.

I am with you to the end, General. To the very end.

Stone looked at the fire.

I know, son. I know.

They sat in silence, listening to the crackling fire and the wind playing through the broken glass. Tomorrow they would die. But today - they were free.

Dawn. July 23, 2071.

Stone stood at the head of the unit, his silhouette sharp against the gray, half-asleep sky. Behind him - one hundred and fifty fighters. Ahead - Washington, no longer their capital. He raised his hand, made a sharp gesture forward, and they began to move.

They marched toward Neura-Infra headquarters. They marched to die. But they marched not as victims - they marched as soldiers of the last army of the free world.

SCENE 2. THE "LOCUST" DRONES

July 2071. Neura-Infra Headquarters. Silicon Gulch.

The building towering over the valley looked like a giant monolith of glass and polished metal - cold, shining, flawless. Its facades reflected the gray morning sky, making it almost invisible against the clouds. Inside - absolute sterility: white corridors, soft light, the smell of ozone and antiseptic. Here, on twenty floors, were server rooms, data management centers, communication nodes that connected all continents into a single network. This was the brain of the corporate empire - if a strike landed here, the world would go blind for a moment, communication between corporations would break, and chaos would reign for a few hours where absolute order was accustomed. For the resistance, this was their only chance. For the corporations, their main vulnerability.

In the control center, on the thirteenth floor, behind a wide panel of twenty holographic screens, sat Colonel Marcus Wayne. He was forty-five, wearing the dark gray uniform of the PMC "Neuro-Strike" with silver patches denoting his rank. His face - smooth, shaved, without a single wrinkle - expressed nothing but professional focus. Wayne had started his career in the US Army twenty-five years ago, before the corporations finally took power. He remembered the oath he had sworn to the Constitution. But he also remembered how in 2047 his unit was disbanded, and he was offered a contract with Cyber-Fund. He signed it because he had a family and no choice. Now he commanded a unit of mercenaries guarding Neura-Infra headquarters. He did his job well and asked no unnecessary questions.

But today he felt a slight unease. Reconnaissance drones launched at dawn had detected movement in the old suburbs - thermal traces, about one hundred fifty points, moving in compact groups. They did not look like civilians - too organized, too fast. They were heading straight here. Wayne knew who these people were - he had heard rumors of General Stone and his unit, the last remnant of the old army that had refused to surrender. He even felt something like respect for them. But respect did not prevent him from carrying out orders.

They are coming, - said Wayne without turning. His voice was even, emotionless, like a robot's. - Distance - fifty to seventy kilometers. Speed - about eight kilometers per hour. They will be here in six to seven hours, if they do not stop for rest.

The head of security of Neura-Infra, a man of about sixty in an immaculate white shirt with an expression of permanent mild disgust on his face, stood behind him. He had no idea what war was - he was a financier, a manager, a man used to resolving issues through contracts and negotiations. But now he was nervous, because his office, his servers, his perfect world could be under threat.

How many? - he asked, trying to sound confident.

One hundred fifty to two hundred, - Wayne replied, studying the data. - Old weapons: M-27 rifles, early-model grenade launchers. A few armored personnel carriers from the 2030s running on diesel - we can track their heat signatures from ten kilometers away. They are not a threat in military terms.

Then why should I be worried? - the director irritably adjusted his tie. - If they are not a threat, just destroy them and report completion.

Wayne finally turned to him. His gaze was cold, sharp as a blade, and lingered on the director's face for a moment.

There is always a threat, - he said calmly. - Even if they only have stone knives. They can reach the building if we underestimate them. They could launch a virus through a physical connection to the server if they breach the lower levels. They could blow the foundation if they have powerful enough charges. Underestimating the enemy is a mistake we cannot afford. I recommend deploying Locusts at full power and destroying them before they approach the first perimeter.

The director hesitated. Locusts were an expensive resource; their use required approval from the board of directors. But in case of a direct threat, he had the authority to make the decision himself.

Proceed, - he said. - Total annihilation.

Wayne nodded and turned to his operator - a young woman with short hair and headphones.

Activate the Locust swarm, - he ordered. - Mode - total. No warnings, no prisoners. Complete elimination of all thermal traces within a twenty-kilometer radius of the central building.

Yes, sir, - the operator replied, her fingers flying across the touch panel. - Swarm initiated. Launch in thirty seconds.

On the main screen, a diagram of the building appeared - the roof, hatches, launch systems. Thousands of silver dots that had been in standby mode began to glow green. The drone control system performed an automatic diagnostic: battery charge, navigation status, hull integrity. All indicators were normal.

Ready, - the operator reported.

Open hatches, - Wayne commanded. - Launch.

Above the building, with a metallic hiss, twenty aluminum panels slid apart. From them, with a barely audible hum, silver dots began to fly out - first one at a time, then by dozens, hundreds, thousands. They rose into the air, forming a dense, rotating spiral, like a tornado of metal and microchips. "Locusts" were miniature killers, the size of a man's palm, equipped with low-power explosive charges and thermal targeting systems. They were programmed with one single algorithm: find a living body and destroy it, flying into the chest, head, or abdomen. They left no chance of survival. They took no prisoners.

The swarm rose to an altitude of three hundred meters and hovered, waiting for coordinates. The entire formation - a perfectly even grid, without gaps, without errors.

Wayne looked at the main screen, where Stone's unit's thermal traces were highlighted in red. They were moving across open terrain, between the ruins of old warehouses, unaware they had been watched for hours.

Attack, - he said.

The swarm moved. Thousands of drones surged forward, silently, like ghosts, slicing through the air. Their speed - two hundred kilometers per hour. In three minutes they would be there.

In the field behind the old warehouses. Stone's unit.

The general was the first to notice movement in the sky. At first it was just a silver shimmer on the horizon, like a flock of birds, but too even, too synchronized. Then he heard that sound - a high-frequency hum, unmistakable. He already knew what it meant. His heart skipped a beat.

Take cover! - he shouted, his voice cracking. - Everyone take cover! Drones! Locusts!

The soldiers reacted instantly. They were trained, they knew what to do - but knowledge did not help when the enemy was faster and more precise. They scattered in different directions, trying to find any cover: concrete blocks, remains of walls, rusty containers. But there was too little cover, and too many of them.

The first drone slammed into the chest of a young soldier who had not made it to the wall. The explosion was quiet, almost inaudible, but lethal. The boy fell onto his back, his eyes wide open, but they saw nothing. The second drone found another - he tried to shoot at the swarm, but bullets passed through them, causing no harm. The drone pierced his shoulder, tearing tendons, and he fell to his knees, screaming in pain.

Stone watched his people die one by one. He tried to shoot at the drones, but each shot brought down only one, and there were thousands. They circled over the field like locusts, seeking, finding, killing. Some tried to run, but a drone caught them in seconds. Others hid behind metal sheets, but a drone slipped through a gap and exploded behind them. The field became a graveyard.

Retreat! - Stone shouted, but his voice drowned in the hum. - Retreat to the forest!

The survivors tried to fall back toward the treeline, but the forest was too far. The drones gave them no chance. They systematically, methodically, with surgical precision, destroyed everyone trying to escape. Explosions sounded every few seconds. Silence fell only when no one remained.

Stone fell to his knees. He looked at the sky, where drones circled, checking for survivors. His chest burned with pain - one drone had grazed him, tearing his body armor, and he felt blood soaking his shirt. He looked at the field, littered with the bodies of his soldiers. No one moved. No one breathed.

He closed his eyes and whispered, almost inaudibly:

Forgive me. I failed. I could not protect you.

He waited for death. It came in the form of a drone that had found his last thermal trace. The machine approached, hovered a couple of meters from his face, scanned his pupils, checked against the database to confirm he was the one to destroy. Then it accelerated and slammed into his chest.

Stone felt no pain. He simply fell forward, face-first into the dirt, and stopped breathing. Around him - only bodies, blood, and silence, broken only by the distant hum of the returning swarm.

Control Center. Neura-Infra Headquarters.

Forty minutes after the attack began, the drone swarm returned to the rooftop hives. Each machine reported a completed task - two hundred eighty-seven thermal traces detected and destroyed. No survivors. No escape. All clear.

Wayne looked at the screen. In the field, where people had moved just an hour ago, only motionless points remained - cooling bodies. He felt nothing but fatigue. He switched to high-resolution cameras, zoomed in, and saw General Stone's face. Old, gaunt, with open eyes still gazing at the sky. Wayne knew he could have ordered him taken alive, interrogated, but he had not. Because he was afraid to hear what he himself had long wanted to say but never dared.

The director approached him, nodding approvingly.

Well done, Colonel. Report to the board of directors - the threat has been neutralized. The battle is won.

Wayne slowly rose from the table and looked at the director. His eyes were empty, lifeless, like those of a man who had long lost himself.

Yes, - he said quietly. - Won.

He turned to the window and looked down at the city that was once called Washington. Where there had been a forest that morning, now lay a field littered with bodies. One hundred and fifty people who fought to the end. One hundred and fifty free people. He looked at them and thought: "They died for what they believed in. And I? What will I die for?"

But he did not say that aloud. He simply raised a glass of water from the table and took a sip. The water was tasteless, like everything in this world. He set the glass down and returned to work.

SCENE 3. HELL ON EARTH

July 2071. Silicon Gulch. The battlefield.

When the last drone of the swarm disappeared into the headquarters' hatches, that special silence fell that only comes after mass death. No birds, no wind, no insect chirping - only the hum of cooling engines somewhere in the distance and the heavy, metallic smell of blood mixed with burnt plastic and ozone. The field, which an hour ago had been covered with withered grass and wild shrubs, now resembled an alien wasteland: not a single living plant remained where drones had exploded - the earth was scorched down to gray stone. One hundred and fifty bodies lay in unnatural, twisted positions, scattered across an area of several hundred square meters, like figurines carelessly shaken from a game board. One hundred and fifty lives. One hundred and fifty deaths. One hundred and fifty names no one would ever record in the annals of history.

General Michael Stone lay on his back, arms spread wide, his eyes wide open and fixed on the gray, cloudless sky. He looked almost peaceful - the wrinkles on his face smoothed out, his jaw relaxed, even the gray stubble no longer seemed harsh. In his chest, slightly left of center, gaped a

ragged wound the size of a fist - a drone had struck him at full speed, tearing through his body armor, shattering his ribs, and turning his lungs into bloody pulp. Blood still oozed from the wound in a thin stream, soaking into the earth, but Stone no longer felt pain. He died as he had wanted - in battle, facing the enemy, weapon in hand. Free. He had not signed contracts, not begged for mercy, not betrayed his oath. His last word, whispered, was to his fallen soldiers: "Forgive me." And that word, like all others, dissolved into the air, leaving no trace.

Around him - his army. They lay in various poses: some face down, fingers clawing at the earth as if trying to crawl away from the swarm; others frozen on their knees with raised hands, as if trying to protect their faces; others turned onto their backs, their glassy eyes staring at the sky like the general's. The drones had spared no one - they acted with surgical precision, striking the most vulnerable points. Most soldiers had their heads penetrated - neat holes in their temples, backs of heads, foreheads, from which dark, thick blood still oozed, mixed with gray matter. Others - their chests: drones struck the heart or lungs, leaving ragged wounds from which the last warmth of life slowly drained. Others - abdomens: fragments of plastic and metal tore through internal organs, leaving only bloody pulp and horror on their faces. There were no mass explosions, no fire, no columns of smoke here. Each body was like a separate work of art. The art of death, created by soulless machines programmed for destruction.

Over the field, twenty minutes after the swarm left, cleaning drones appeared - large, bulky, with metal claws and wide containers. They worked silently, methodically, without emotion: grab a body, load it into a container, move to the next. Their task was to erase all traces. Within an hour, no blood, no fragments, no even footprints on the ground would remain. The field would look as if no one had ever been there. No traces. No evidence. No names. The cleaning drones did not ask whose bodies these were, did not record them in registries, did not send notifications to relatives. They simply loaded them into containers that would be taken to a crematorium, where everything would turn to ash and be scattered over the ocean. Because these soldiers had no families waiting for them. No homes to return to. They did not even have official names - in corporate databases they were listed as "illegals," "lost identification," or simply "anomalous thermal traces." They were the last army of freedom. And they disappeared, leaving behind nothing but emptiness and memories in the minds of those who destroyed them.

Neura-Infra Headquarters. Main conference hall. Two hours later.

The board of directors assembled in full. Around a long table of black glass, inlaid with glowing gold lines, sat fifteen people - top managers of the four largest corporations: Neura-Infra, Solar-City, Cyber-Fund, and Green-Matrix. Their faces showed no emotions, only professional restraint and mild impatience. They awaited a report. A large holographic screen in the center of the table streamed video from the battlefield - footage captured by reconnaissance drones during the attack. The video played without sound, because sound was unnecessary. On the screen - flickering shadows, flashes of explosions, falling bodies. None of the directors looked away. They watched as they would watch a report on production indicators.

The CEO of Neura-Infra, an old man with a sharp, blade-like face and pale blue eyes, slowly rose from his chair. He was past seventy but looked about fifty - expensive procedures, gene therapy, implants. He wore an impeccable dark blue suit worth more than a year's income of an entire block of New Eden. He scanned the assembled and began to speak, his voice dry, calm, lifeless, like an announcer on the news.

Ladies and gentlemen, - he said, lightly touching the table with his fingertips. - As you can see from the presented footage, the threat has been fully neutralized. The last army of loyalists - the remnants of the former armed forces of the United States, led by General Michael Stone - was destroyed during Operation Clean Slate. Resistance is broken at all levels: no more combat units, no coordination centers, no leaders capable of organizing a new attack. This was the last drop in the vessel of the old world. It has been spilled, and the vessel is empty.

He paused, letting his words settle in the minds of those present. Silence in the hall. No one applauded, no one smiled. They simply looked at him, awaiting further instructions. For them, this was not a victory - it was merely a stage. A point in a plan to be noted and moved on from.

This was the last step, - the director continued, his voice dropping slightly, almost confidentially. - States no longer have any power. Armies are gone. Resources for resistance are gone. We can move to the final stage of Project Unity. Treaty 404 will be signed within a month. All regional administrations have already been notified of their dissolution. The transition period will last no more than two years, after which the governance structure will be completely rebuilt according to our standards. Any questions?

He scanned the faces of those present. One of the Cyber-Fund directors, a woman of about fifty with short platinum hair, raised her hand to ask a question. The Neura-Infra CEO nodded to her.

I understand we are discussing practical aspects, - she said. - But I would like to ask: should we record at least something for history? We have won. This is an important moment. Perhaps a video message, an archive for future generations? So they know how we built this world.

The Neura-Infra CEO looked at her for a long second, and his eyes grew even colder, if possible. He tilted his head slightly and replied, raising his voice a little:

No need, - he cut off. - History will be written by us. We will decide what to remember and what to forget. We will decide which events enter textbooks and which disappear, like this unit we just destroyed. It does not matter what was. What matters is what will be. And in our future, there is no place for stories about those who tried to stop us. They do not deserve memory. They deserve oblivion.

Silent nods in the hall. The directors exchanged approving glances. They no longer looked at the screen, where the battlefield footage still played. They shifted their gazes to the future - to diagrams of new cities, to resource redistribution plans, to contract signing schedules. For them, General Stone and his one hundred and fifty soldiers were not heroes or martyrs. They were merely statistical noise, obsolete data successfully deleted from the system.

The screen went dark, and in its place appeared a holographic map of the world - already familiar, all blue, without a single red spot. New lines began to appear on it - administrative boundaries of corporate sectors, logistics chain routes, control zones. The people who once lived in these cities were now just dots on the map - resources to be distributed, assets to be accounted for. And none of them would know that today, on this field, the last hope that they might one day be free again had perished.

Outer perimeter. One hour after cleanup.

The field looked as if nothing had ever happened there. The grass was flattened but already beginning to straighten. The earth was slightly darker where blood had been, but by tomorrow even that would be gone. The wind raised dust, blew it across the empty space, and the only things left of the last army of freedom were a few footprints, quickly covered by sand.

Somewhere in the distance, on top of a hill, stood an old water tank once used by farmers. Its paint had peeled, and through the rust, an inscription made in white paint many years ago was visible: "We will not forget." Who had written it and when was unknown. But now it seemed like a mockery. Because within a week, no one would remember the names, the faces, or the voices. Not only the soldiers would disappear - the very memory that they had ever existed would vanish.

By dusk, stray dogs came to the field. They sniffed the earth, looking for food, but found only the smell of death. They whimpered and left. The wind grew colder. Night descended on Silicon Gulch, and nothing reminded of the battle that had taken place that morning. Only silence - deep, absolute, funereal.

SCENE 4. THE WORLD'S REACTION

July 2071. The world watches.

That day, July 23, 2071, at 2:00 PM Greenwich Mean Time, all screens in the world turned on simultaneously. Every monitor, every holographic panel, every communicator, every public display in squares and stations - all switched to a single channel of the Neura-Infra corporate network. There were no warnings, no announcements, no announcer's voice to explain what was about to happen. Just an image: the battlefield, shot from a bird's-eye view, from a dozen different angles, in ultra-high resolution that allowed every detail to be seen. And on that field - people. One hundred and fifty people running, falling, screaming (no sound, only picture), and thousands of silver drones circling above them, methodically destroying them one by one. The camera did not look away, did not soften details, did not censor. Everything was shown in minute detail: how a drone crashed into a soldier's chest, how he fell, how blood spread across the ground, how another drone found the next target. The corporation's operators did not hide the brutality - they demonstrated power. Because power needs no justification; it needs only spectators.

Millions of people around the world watched this live. In every city, every village, every module of New Eden, screens broadcast the same thing. In cafes serving synthetic coffee, customers froze with cups in hand, staring at walls turned into panoramic displays. In parks where children had once played, adults stopped, raised their heads to holographic screens built into lampposts, and fell silent. In offices where people worked with data, employees looked away from their tasks to watch through windows that had also become screens. No one spoke a word. The silence was absolute, as if the world had held its breath.

In New Eden, the box-city where millions of Users lived, people gathered in groups at public terminals. They stood in dense rows, shoulder to shoulder, watching the screen. All faces were the same - pale, frozen, emotionless. Some clenched their fists, some covered their mouths with their hands, some just stared without blinking. But no one shouted, cried, or protested. Everyone was afraid. Afraid that if they uttered a single word, if even a shadow of disapproval flickered across their faces, drones would come for them too. Afraid that their identification numbers would be marked as "unreliable." Afraid that they would be evicted from their modules, their heat cut off, their synthetic food taken away. Fear was stronger than pain, stronger than anger, stronger than the very will to live.

Charles Davis sat in his tiny room on the sixth floor of an old building in the Bronx. He was seventy-two, his back hunched, his hands trembling from cold and age. He had not gone outside for days - he had no strength. He looked at the small screen of his communicator, bought on the black market for three tokens. On the screen - the battlefield, which he recognized: Silicon Gulch, the very warehouses where he had once worked as a courier delivering packages in the 2040s. Now bodies lay there. He saw soldiers falling one by one. He saw a drone crash into the chest of a man trying to run. He saw another soldier, already wounded, crawling across the ground, leaving a bloody trail behind. Charles did not look away. He watched because he could not help it. This was his world. This was his end.

He turned off the screen. Put his head in his hands. He did not cry - there were no tears, only a dry, prickly emptiness in his chest. He thought about Jacob, about his daughter, who died in 2068 from illness because there were no medicines. He thought about his wife, who left him in 2055 because he could not protect her from the corporations. He thought about how everything he had fought for, all his hopes, all his attempts to preserve human dignity - all of it had turned to ash on that field.

We lost, - he whispered into the void. - Forever.

He sat there until the light outside the window began to fade. He did not turn the screen on again. He just stared at the wall, once white, now covered in cracks and mold. He knew that tomorrow morning, when he went out for water, his neighbors would not look him in the eye. They would look down, at the ground, because they were afraid. And he would look down too, because he was also afraid.

Berlin. Alexanderplatz. 3:00 PM local time.

On the main square, where the television tower once stood, now rose a giant holographic screen installed by the corporations in 2065. On it - repeating footage: drones, falling soldiers, blood. People came to the square by dozens, hundreds, thousands. They did not run, shout, or hold signs. They just stood and watched. Elderly women in coats who remembered when Berlin was divided by a wall and reunited again now saw their world united into a single corporate empire. Young men with slumped shoulders, born in the era of crisis, did not know what could be done - they had never seen resistance that won. Children, held by their parents' hands, looked at the screen and did not understand why people fell and did not get up.

Some began to cry. Quietly, soundlessly, wiping tears with their sleeves. But no one joined them. Everyone was silent. Because even quiet crying could be picked up by surveillance cameras. Even lip movement could be flagged as a potential threat.

An hour later, the square was empty. People dispersed to their homes, went into the metro, boarded trains. They did not talk to each other. They did not discuss what they had seen. They just pretended nothing had happened, because it was easier to survive that way.

Paris. Seine embankment. 4:00 PM local time.

There were no more tourists, only locals surviving in this new world. They stood by the railings, looking at the screen built into the wall of the old museum. On it - slow-motion footage: a drone crashing into a soldier's shoulder, him falling to the ground, his body lying still. An old man in a beret, who had once been an artist, pulled a small folding easel from his pocket and began to sketch with a pencil. He did not look at the screen - he looked at his paper. On it appeared the outlines of the battlefield, silhouettes of falling bodies, swarms of drones. When he finished, he tore the sheet into small pieces and threw them into the Seine. The scraps floated away on the dark water, dissolved, disappeared. The only protest he dared to make was so quiet that no one noticed.

London. Piccadilly Circus. 5:00 PM local time.

The screens went dark. The broadcast had ended. But people still stood, staring at the dark panels. Someone began to clap quietly - not for victory, but for the fallen. The sound, barely audible at first, grew. Dozens of palms clapped in the silence, as if bidding the heroes farewell. But after a few minutes, a recorded warning came from the speakers on the poles: "Unauthorized gathering is prohibited. Disperse immediately. Otherwise, force will be used." People dispersed as if on command. The applause faded. The square fell empty again.

Tokyo. Shibuya. 8:00 PM local time.

Young people who once gathered at the crossing just to hang out now stood with their heads bowed. On the giant screens on the buildings - the same footage. Hundreds of thousands saw the death of the last army. But they did not talk to each other. They just watched, then dispersed to their modules, to their families, to their workplaces. No one took a step that could be seen as defiance. No one risked it. Only one young man, about twenty, closed his eyes and whispered: "We will not forget." But his voice was drowned in the city noise, and no one heard him.

Solar-City Headquarters. Two hours after the broadcast.

Josh Hall sat in his office on the 87th floor and watched the monitors showing summaries from various cities: Berlin, Paris, London, Tokyo, Moscow, New York. Nowhere - not a single protest, not a single speech, not a single call to revolt. Only silence and fear. He looked at it and felt slight disappointment mixed with satisfaction. He had wanted to see at least some sign of life, at least a spark that would need to be extinguished. But there was none. The world had accepted defeat.

He leaned back in his chair and raised a glass of water.

Perfect, - he whispered. - Just perfect.

He put the glass down and closed his eyes. In his head - already plans for tomorrow. Tomorrow he would begin rewriting history.

SCENE 5. THE END OF THE STAGE

July 2071. Solar-City Headquarters. 87th Floor.

The sun was setting, painting the sky above New Eden in crimson-gold tones that reflected off the headquarters' windows, turning it into a giant lighthouse burning over the dead city. In the office on the 87th floor, twilight reigned - the blinds were drawn, only the holographic map of the world in the center of the table emitted an even blue glow, illuminating the faces of those assembled with cold, lifeless light. Josh Hall sat at the head of the table, his figure standing out sharply against the shimmering projection. He wore an impeccable dark suit, no tie, his top shirt button undone - the only concession to fatigue he allowed himself in the presence of colleagues. His hair, completely gray, was neatly combed back; his face, carved with deep wrinkles, expressed neither triumph nor relief - only the calm, measured confidence of a man accustomed to winning and seeing nothing special in it.

Before him, on either side of the long black table, sat the key figures of the corporate empire: directors of Solar-City regional offices, heads of Cyber-Fund departments, operating directors of Neura-Infra, representatives of the Green-Matrix board. Twenty-three people in all - those who had built this new world, who signed contracts, who closed their eyes to the deaths of millions, who had turned the planet into a single corporate network. Their faces glowed with satisfaction - they knew they were witnessing a historic moment that would be recorded in the annals, not as a victory of democracy, but as the beginning of the era of absolute control. They exchanged glances, brief smiles, raised glasses, but none spoke an unnecessary word - they waited for Josh to speak.

He rose from the table, palms resting on the polished surface, and scanned the map floating before him. The blue lights of the cities pulsed in time with his breathing, like the heart of a single organism. He ran his finger along the contour of the former North America, then Europe, Asia, Africa, South America - everywhere only blue. Not a single red dot, not a single pocket of resistance, not a single "gray zone" where uncertainty still lingered. The last sparks of freedom had been extinguished this morning on the field in Silicon Gulch.

Ladies and gentlemen, - Josh said, his low, even voice echoing through the hall, making those present sit up straighter. - Allow me to sum up. Eight years ago we began this journey. Eight years we systematically, step by step, shut down cities, strangled economies, destroyed states. We were surgeons removing the cancerous tumor of collective madness called democracy. Today, July 23, 2071, at 2:00 PM GMT, we delivered the final blow to the resistance. The Battle of Washington - is complete. States are dead. Not weakened, not suspended - dead. Resistance is no more. No one will rise, no one will revolt, no one will dare to challenge us.

He paused, letting the words settle, and slowly walked around the table, stopping next to the map. His reflection multiplied in the polished walls, creating the illusion that he was everywhere - in every corner, in every gaze.

We stand on the threshold of a new stage, - he continued, his voice dropping slightly, almost intimate. - In two weeks, on August 18, the "Great Signing" will take place. Treaty 404 - a document that will forever cement our control over humanity. Three hundred and twenty-seven former state entities, all regional administrations, all courts, all banks, all military formations will transfer their powers to us - the corporations. There will be no more flags, anthems, constitutions. No more elections, parliaments, political parties. There will be only one structure - a corporate council that we will create based on our interests. We will rewrite history, ladies and gentlemen. We will create a new world. Our world. A world where there is no room for accidents, errors, rebellions. A world where everyone knows their place and is content with it. A world that does not know hunger, war, or freedom, because freedom is an illusion we have rid them of once and for all.

He walked to the table, took his glass - crystal, perfectly polished, with two ice cubes already beginning to melt. In the glass splashed cognac, bottled back in the 2030s, before the vineyards became property of Green-Matrix. Josh raised it above his head, and the light, refracting through the amber liquid, painted his face in warm, almost human tones.

To freedom, - he said, a hint of mockery in his voice, noticed only by the most attentive. - To economics. To us. To the world we built on the ruins of their illusions.

One by one, the directors raised their glasses. The clink of glass echoed under the high ceiling - pure, solemn, almost choral. No one made long toasts, no one clapped. Restrained nods, brief smiles, quick sips - all of it was ritual, formality, behind which hid a deep, almost animal certainty in their own greatness. Around the table sat those who asked no questions, who never doubted, who were accustomed to getting what they wanted without looking back.

Josh set his glass down and turned to the panoramic window. Below, as far as the eye could see, stretched New Eden - his city, his creation, his pride. A million windows, a million cells, a million beings who woke at the signal, ate synthetic food, worked on assembly lines, performed tasks assigned by algorithms, and went to sleep, never suspecting that their lives were not their own. They called themselves citizens, residents, people. But in corporate registries they were listed as "Users" - assets in a global accounting system, consumables for maintaining infrastructure. Their hopes, their fears, their memories - all of it was digitized, analyzed, packed into data centers where it was stored until it became irrelevant.

Josh looked at this world he had created with his own hands and felt a strange emptiness inside. He had achieved everything he wanted. He had built a system where there was no room for accidents, errors, human weakness. He had erased from the face of the earth everything that could oppose him. But inside, somewhere deep in that part of his being he had buried years ago, something was silent. He remembered his first day at the corporation - back in 2045, when he was just an intern, a boy with burning eyes who believed technology would liberate humanity. He remembered sitting in the New Eden dormitory on the first night and staring at the ceiling, dreaming that one day he would change the world for the better. Now that world lay at his feet, perfectly structured, absolutely predictable - and absolutely dead inside, like himself.

He stood by the window, and his reflection in the glass looked like a ghost. The smile on his face gradually faded, replaced by a thoughtful, almost melancholic expression. Behind him, voices sounded - directors discussing the details of Treaty 404, the distribution of zones of influence, signing schedules. Josh heard them but did not listen. He looked down at the city that had become his prison.

Josh, - came a voice from the side. Margaret, one of the directors, approached him and stood beside him, her voice quiet and cautious. - Are you alright? You look tired.

Josh blinked, returning to reality. He turned to her and forced a polite, almost convincing smile.

Everything is perfect, Margaret, - he replied. - I'm just thinking about how much work we still have ahead. Treaty 404 is only the beginning. We need to retrain the population, reformat education, rewrite textbooks, restart cultural codes. We will be creating a new type of human - a human who does not ask questions. Who is grateful for a roof over their head and synthetic protein for dinner. This will take decades.

But you are ready, - Margaret said, not a question, but a statement.

Always ready, - Josh replied, turning his back to the window and returning to the table.

He walked to the map, touched the blue dots again, and they all began to flicker, pulse, like the heart of a single organism. He looked at this glow and felt the same emptiness inside him that he had once called freedom. Now he was not sure he knew the meaning of that word.

A month later, on August 18, 2071, in the conference hall of Solar-City headquarters, "Agreement 404" was signed. It was signed by 327 representatives of former state entities - those few officials who had agreed to keep their positions in the new hierarchy. The document was signed without a single camera, without reporters, without witnesses. Immediately after the ceremony, its text was encrypted and sent through all corporate channels as the "new legal basis of human civilization."

The next day, all corporate news portals ran a single headline:

"The era of states is over. Welcome to a world without borders, without conflicts, without a past. Welcome to the future."

And none of the Users asked questions. Because there were no more questions. Only emptiness. And silence.

STAGE 5. "THE GREAT SIGNING" (2071–2088)

SCENE 1. TREATY 404

September 2071. Neutral Sector. Former Switzerland.

High in the Alps, where the air becomes thin and snow never melts even in summer, stands a building that was once the headquarters of the International Bank. Its gray granite facades remember times when gold bars, bonds, and secret accounts of dictators, politicians, and oligarchs were stored here. Now there is no gold here - it was taken out by corporations back in the 2050s, melted down into microchips and contacts for servers. Instead, documents are stored here - contracts, agreements, acts that forever change the course of history. The most important of them - "Treaty 404" - lies on a blackwood table in the main hall, awaiting signatures.

Josh Hall arrives first. His personal shuttle lands silently on the rooftop helipad, and he steps out, draping a warm coat over his shoulders - even in September it is cold here, especially if you are used to climate control at Solar-City headquarters. He walks through the marble corridors, his footsteps echoing hollowly in the emptiness. The walls are decorated with paintings by old masters - Rembrandt, Rubens, Vermeer - all bought by corporations at auctions when states were selling off their cultural heritage to somehow pay off debts. Josh glances indifferently at the canvases. For him, they are merely assets, investment items that will appreciate in value over time.

He enters the main hall. It is a huge room with high vaulted ceilings, once filled with bankers who decided the fates of entire economies. Now it is quiet, solemn, and empty. In the center - a long table of polished blackwood. Behind it, three chairs - for the three main corporations: Solar-City, Cyber-Fund, and Neura-Infra. Nearby, on lower steps, smaller tables are arranged for Green-Matrix, Genesis, Aurora-Tech, and about a dozen other corporations that have grown to the level of global players over the decades. All of them are masters of the world. All have gathered here today to seal their power on paper.

Josh sits in his place - at the head of the table, central. Before him lies a document bound in white leather with gold embossing: "Treaty 404." The name is chosen ironically. In old internet protocols, code 404 means "not found." And so here: old laws are no longer found. They are gone. They have vanished, just as states have vanished, just as democracy has vanished, just as the very idea that people can control their own destiny has vanished.

He rereads the treaty, though he knows it by heart. He wrote it himself, every article, every comma, every word. He reviewed it with lawyers, economists, political scientists - the best minds money could buy. And he bought them all. Now the document is perfect - legally flawless, economically sound, politically ruthless.

Josh begins to flip through the pages:

"Treaty 404. On the Creation of a New World Order"

Preamble:

"We, the undersigned corporations, recognizing the ineffectiveness of state governance, the impossibility of the continued existence of national sovereignties in conditions of global economic crisis and environmental catastrophe, guided by the principles of economic efficiency, technological progress, and social stability, decree as follows..."

He smiles. "The ineffectiveness of state governance" - how beautifully phrased. In reality, states were destroyed systematically, step by step: first they were stripped of the right to print money, then to control identification, then to manage energy and food. By the time they tried to resist, they had no resources left. Only empty parliament buildings, forgotten constitutions, and presidents begging for alms from corporate directors.

He turns the page:

Article 1. On the Dissolution of States

"1.1. All states existing at the time of signing this Treaty are subject to dissolution within five years."

1.2. State assets (buildings, infrastructure, military installations, natural resources, intellectual property) are transferred to corporations in settlement of debt obligations.

1.3. State institutions (parliaments, courts, governments) are abolished. Their functions are transferred to corporate structures.

1.4. All international treaties, agreements, and conventions concluded by states are annulled as invalid."

Josh looks at these lines and feels satisfaction mixed with slight contempt. He remembers how in the 2040s, states signed loan agreements with corporations without reading the fine print. They thought they were borrowing money for development. They did not understand they were signing their own death warrants. Now they will sign this treaty. Or they won't - their opinion does not matter.

He flips through a few more pages:

Article 2. On the Status of the Population

"2.1. Citizens of former states are renamed Users.

2.2. Users have no rights established by state laws. Their status is determined by the Terms of Use, which are accepted upon registration in the Digital Identification System.

2.3. Corporations have the right to unilaterally change the Terms of Use, notifying Users through digital systems.

2.4. Violation of the Terms of Use is grounds for restricting the User's access to corporate services, including but not limited to: disconnection from power supply, cessation of food supply, deprivation of digital identification."

Josh smirks. "Disconnection." What a simple word. It means death. But the treaty does not say that. Only "restriction of access." Legally flawless. No mention that a person who is "disconnected" dies of cold or hunger within days. No liability. Only procedure.

He flips further:

Article 3. On the Armed Forces

"3.1. National armies are subject to dissolution.

3.2. Corporations create Private Armed Forces (PAF) to ensure security and public order.

3.3. PAFs are not subordinate to any state and operate on the basis of contracts with corporations.

3.4. Any resistance directed against the corporate order is considered a violation of the Terms of Use and is subject to suppression using all available means."

Josh looks at these lines. "All available means." Locust drones. Automatic turrets. Mercenaries. Everything needed to suppress resistance. And no tribunals, no courts, no lawyers. Only instant reaction - and the cleaning drones remove the body.

He closes the treaty. It is perfect. It is the law of the new world. It has no flaws, no contradictions, no loopholes. All that remains - signatures.

One by one, the other directors begin to enter the hall. They take their places around the long table. All in impeccable suits, all with the same expressions - calm, businesslike, emotionless. They do not greet each other, do not exchange pleasantries. This is not a social event. This is a deal. The largest deal in human history.

When everyone is seated, Josh rises from his chair. He scans those gathered and begins to speak - without prepared speech, without pathos, simply stating facts:

Ladies and gentlemen, - he says. - We have gathered here to sign a document that will put an end to the era of chaos and instability. For the last fifty years, we have watched states destroy economies, start wars, and deplete resources. We offer an alternative. Efficient. Rational. Stable. Treaty 404 is not just an agreement. It is the constitution of a new world. A world where there is no room for accidents, errors, human weakness. Only order, only predictability, only growth.

He pauses, letting the words settle. Absolute silence in the hall. Only the hum of the air conditioning system can be heard.

I will not read the treaty aloud, - he continues. - You all know its contents. We have discussed it for months, made amendments, reached a consensus. Now all that remains is to sign. But before we do, I want to tell you one thing. What we are creating today is not just power. It is responsibility. Responsibility for seven billion Users who will live by our rules. We cannot afford mistakes. We cannot afford weakness. We cannot afford compassion. The world we are building does not forgive the weak.

He pauses, then takes the gold pen lying before him. His name is engraved on it - "Josh Hall. Solar-City."

Who is ready to sign? - he asks.

One by one, the directors raise their hands. Josh signs at the bottom of the last page - clearly, without corrections, as he had signed energy supply contracts years ago. Then he passes the pen along. The Cyber-Fund director signs, then Neura-Infra, then Green-Matrix, then all the rest. The process takes about an hour. Each signature is another step toward the new world. Each signature is the death of the old.

When the last signature is placed, Josh rises again. He takes the treaty in his hands, raises it above his head so all can see.

Ladies and gentlemen, - he says. - Congratulations. We have created a new world. Today is the beginning of a new era. An era where there are no states. No borders. Only economics. Only us. Only order.

Applause rings out in the hall - restrained, polite, without excessive enthusiasm. The directors know this is not victory - it is the beginning. Now the hardest work begins: implementing the treaty in reality. Retraining the population. Reformatting the economy. Rewriting history.

Josh sits back in his seat and looks at the treaty before him. He knows this document will go down in history. But not as "Treaty 404." As the "Great Signing." As the moment humanity ceased to be free. And no one noticed.

He puts the treaty in his briefcase, rises from the table, and walks toward the exit. At the threshold he pauses, throws one last glance at the hall where the fates of the world were once decided. Now this world belongs to him. And to all the other corporations behind him. But if he is honest to the end - the world belongs only to him. Because he is first. He is the author. He is the architect.

He leaves the hall. Behind him remains emptiness. Ahead - the future he created. And in that future there is no place for those who did not sign the treaty. Those who still believe in freedom. Those who did not understand the main thing: freedom died. It was replaced by efficiency.

A month later, the text of "Treaty 404" was published in all corporate digital networks. The news called it the "Great Agreement." In textbooks, which began to be rewritten, it was called the "Charter of Global Stability." And none of the Users read it in full. Because it was too long. And too boring. And too far from their lives.

Only one person - former Senator William Collins, who was living out his days in an abandoned village in Ohio - read the entire text. He read it three times, then burned the paper in the stove and said aloud:

They did it. They actually did it.

The next morning he was found dead. In the official corporate conclusion, it was stated: "Death from natural causes."

But no one asked what causes could be natural for a man who had lost everything he fought for.

SCENE 2. THE DISSOLUTION OF STATES

October 2071. Washington, D.C. The White House.

There was no longer a president in the Oval Office. The chair behind the desk, where those who once decided the fates of the greatest power in the world had sat, was empty. Its upholstery had faded, the armrests showed wear, and the desk itself, covered in a layer of gray dust, no one wiped anymore. On the walls remained only rectangles of lighter wallpaper - the portraits of former

presidents had been removed and packed into boxes. Their fate awaited them as antiques: private collections, corporate archives, or recycling. No one knew for sure. No one cared anymore.

Outside the windows, on the lawn where presidential helicopters once took off and landed, tourists crowded. But they no longer clicked cameras and waved flags. They simply stood, staring at the building that had once been a symbol of freedom. Now it was just a museum. Or soon would be. The corporations were already discussing plans to convert it into a "corporate history exhibition center," where the achievements of Solar-City and Cyber-Fund would be displayed. Old America was to become an exhibit. A visual aid for future generations of Users who would study the "era of chaos and inefficiency."

Inside the building, work was in full swing - inventory. Corporate employees, dressed in identical blue uniforms, walked through the corridors, opened cabinets, pulled out drawers, cataloged property. Furniture, paintings, documents, dishes - all of it now had inventory numbers and passed into the ownership of Solar-City. Everything, from the president's desk to kitchen utensils. Even the carpets walked upon by Kennedy, Reagan, and Obama were rolled up and marked as "items of historical significance." Each item received its price in corporate tokens. Freedom would also have received its price, if it could have been sold. But freedom could not be sold. It could only be forgotten.

Charles Davis stood on the lawn in front of the White House, holding a worn courier bag. He was seventy-two, his back ached, his knees trembled, but he still worked - delivering packages in this new world where couriers had been replaced by drones, but sometimes a human was needed to bypass algorithm restrictions. He had come to Washington by chance - an order was in the neighboring block, and he decided to stop by. Look one last time. He did not know it would be the last time, but he felt it with his whole being.

He raised his eyes to the building's facade. Once, in the 2020s, he had watched it on TV when the president addressed the nation. He remembered those moments - the family gathered around the screen, everyone frozen, listening to words about freedom, about democracy, about America being the greatest country in the world. He believed it. Believed his children would live better, that the country would prosper, that the future would be bright. Now his children were dead - one died of hunger in 2053, the other disappeared without a trace in 2060 when his block was "disconnected" for non-payment of corporate fees. He had no grandchildren - they were never born. And the America he knew was also dead.

Above the White House, where the US flag once flew, now hung another symbol - a blue sphere with white rings, the Solar-City logo. It was large, bright, backlit from within so it could be seen for kilometers. Charles looked at it and felt no anger. Only emptiness. The same emptiness as in his chest, as in his apartment, as in this city that was once the heart of the world.

Farewell, America, - he said quietly, almost in a whisper. - You were a good country. While you lasted.

He stood for another minute, then turned and walked away. He had another package to deliver - a plastic container of synthetic proteins for a Cyber-Fund office in the suburbs. The order was urgent. He had no time for sentiment.

November 2071. London. Westminster Palace.

The Parliamentary chamber was empty. The long benches of dark oak, where deputies once sat and argued until hoarse about the fate of the nation, now looked like lifeless rows. The air smelled of dust and old paper. Someone from the cleaning staff had forgotten to turn off the lights, and they burned with a dim yellow glow, casting long shadows on the empty seats. On the Speaker's desk lay a wooden gavel - the very one with which he once called for order. Now it just lay there, like a museum exhibit, forgotten and unnecessary.

The Speaker himself - a tall, gray-haired man with a tired, gaunt face - stood at his podium, collecting his last belongings. A folder of documents, a few photographs, a worn pen. He had worked here for thirty years, risen from a simple deputy to the highest office in British politics. He

remembered the Brexit debates, the climate debates, the wars and peace. He remembered when the hall was full, when deputies' voices merged into a hum, when the country lived and breathed. Now all that was in the past. And the past did not matter.

He surveyed the empty rows. Most of his colleagues had already left - moved to corporate jobs, received contracts, become managers of Cyber-Fund or Green-Matrix. Some simply disappeared - their names erased from registries as if they had never existed. A few old men, like him, had not lived to see this day, dying of illness and old age waiting for the end. He was the last to leave this building. The last elected by the people.

He took the folder, left the hall, and walked down the corridor. Portraits of kings and queens flashed by - from Henry VIII to Elizabeth II - hanging here for centuries. Their faces looked down on him from above, witnesses to a passing era. Soon they too would be removed, packed into boxes and sent to storage - or sold at auction to corporate collectors. They would be replaced by logos. Portraits of managers. Profit charts.

He stepped outside. The sun, typically English, gray, hid behind clouds. The air smelled of rain and electric vehicle exhaust. He turned and looked at the building where he had spent thirty years of his life. It seemed to look back at him, like an old friend bidding farewell forever.

The end, - he said quietly. - It's all over.

He got into his car - old, still gasoline-powered, which he had kept despite all the rules - and started the engine. He would never return to this building. And no one else would. Westminster Palace would become a corporate office. Or a shopping mall. Or simply ruins. In the new world, there was no place for old symbols.

March 2072. Tokyo. Imperial Palace.

The Emperor sat in his throne room - the only person who had retained dignity in this world where everything was bought and sold. He was eighty, his face was carved with deep wrinkles, and his eyes, once bright and attentive, had dimmed with weariness. He remembered when Japan was one of the greatest powers in the world - its technology, culture, and economy inspiring generations. Now it was merely a zone of influence of Green-Matrix, one of many territories the corporations had divided among themselves like a pie. The Emperor knew his role, his title, his history - all of it had become mere formality.

Before him stood a corporate representative - a young man of about thirty, in an impeccable black suit, with a polite, rehearsed smile that did not reach his eyes. He held a tablet, probably containing a prepared statement - formal notice that the palace was passing into corporate ownership, and the Emperor must vacate it within a month.

Your Majesty, - the representative began, his voice soft and deferential, but with steel in it - the same steel that had broken more than one dynasty. - We have come to inform you of the decision of the Green-Matrix board of directors. In accordance with Article 1.2 of Treaty 404, all state assets are transferred to corporations in settlement of debt obligations. The Imperial Palace, as state property, is subject to transfer. You will be provided with housing in one of the corporate districts of Tokyo. The conditions correspond to the status of an honorary User.

The Emperor was silent. He looked at the representative and thought that this man did not even realize what he had just done. He was not speaking of the end of a dynasty, the end of history, the end of everything that had been built for centuries. He was speaking of the "status of an honorary User." As if that were compensation.

I understand, - the Emperor finally said. His voice was quiet but steady - the voice of a man who had accepted the inevitable. - When must I leave the palace?

Within a month, Your Majesty. Corporate staff will accompany you to ensure comfort and security.

The Emperor nodded. He slowly rose from the throne, leaning on a carved cane, and walked to the window overlooking the garden. There, among the ancient trees, grew pines and cherry trees

planted by his ancestors centuries ago. Their branches stretched under the gray sky, and life still remained in them - the only life not sold to corporations. The Emperor knew these trees too would be cut down. In their place would appear vertical farms, conveyors, modules. Everything not profitable would be destroyed.

I will leave, - he said quietly, without turning. - But I ask one thing. Do not destroy the garden. Please. These trees remember more than we do. They are the memory of my country.

The representative hesitated. He knew the board of directors would not preserve a garden for sentiment - it was economically unprofitable. But he also knew it was better not to argue with the Emperor. At least not now.

We will try to preserve it, Your Majesty, - he replied with the same fake smile.

The Emperor did not believe him. But he said nothing. He just stood at the window and looked at the garden that was already dead, though the trees still stood.

By 2076, most states had ceased to exist. Flags were lowered in all capitals of the world. Parliaments and congresses were dissolved. Presidents, kings, emperors - all who had once embodied power - either resigned or disappeared without a trace. Their places were taken by corporate managers who governed "zones of influence" - territories divided not by national or cultural characteristics, but by economic expediency.

People watched this and did not understand. Most had been born after the crisis began, were accustomed to corporate passports, synthetic food, to the fact that elections were something from the past, not part of their present. They no longer remembered what freedom was. They did not even know the word once had meaning.

Those who tried to protest quickly disappeared. Locust drones now patrolled the streets of all cities - not just as weapons, but as police. They monitored order, recorded every careless word, every suspicious movement. They destroyed anyone who violated the Terms of Use - without trial, without investigation, without warning.

The world became quiet. Too quiet. There were no sounds of protest, no cries for help, not even a whisper of hope. Only the hum of air conditioners, the noise of conveyors, and the quiet, monotonous voice of the news announcer reporting new corporate achievements.

And no one asked questions. Because there were no more questions.

SCENE 3. PMCs AND THE NEW ORDER

May 2075. Phoenix Guard PMC Base. Nevada Desert.

In the very heart of the Nevada desert, where nuclear bombs had once been tested and the latest aircraft tested, now stood the base of the private military company "Phoenix Guard." This was not just a base - it was a city carved from stone and metal, hidden from spy satellites and curious eyes. Its buildings, made of reinforced concrete and steel, looked like hives - faceless, gray, functional. Inside lived and trained thousands of mercenaries, men and women who sold their lives to corporations for contracts that provided their families with synthetic food, housing, and protection from Locust drones. They did not ask questions. They had no right to ask questions. They just followed orders.

General Robert Hayes stood on the observation deck at the top of the main administrative building, looking down at the training ground stretching for several square kilometers. He was seventy-one, his face was carved with deep wrinkles like a map of old wars, and his eyes, once clear and sharp, had dulled from years of fatigue. He still wore his old army uniform - not the corporate PAF uniform, but the real US Army uniform he had worn back in the 2020s. It was faded, worn at the elbows, but he refused to take it off. It was his last reminder of who he once was - and who he would never be again.

Below, on the training ground, hundreds of soldiers in black uniforms practiced riot suppression tactics. They moved in unison, like machines, without a single wasted motion. They destroyed mannequins painted to look like civilians - men, women, children. They were trained not to ask who was right and who was wrong. They were trained to destroy anyone who threatened corporate order.

Hayes watched them and saw himself as a young man - just as mindless, just as obedient. He had believed he served good. Now he knew he served evil. But it was too late to change anything.

General, - came a voice behind him. Hayes slowly turned and saw his deputy, Lieutenant Colonel James Harper - young, ambitious, with the same glassy look as everyone who had served in the PMC for more than five years. - A new order has just come from Cyber-Fund. We need to suppress a revolt in Detroit. A group of former citizens - about two hundred people - is trying to restore the power grid. They connected to an old substation and threaten to disrupt stability in the region.

Hayes looked at his deputy for a long second. He knew the answer should be short, like all his orders in recent years. But something inside him tightened. Detroit. The city he remembered from childhood. The city where he was born, where he grew up, where his father worked at a factory and his mother was a nurse. The city that had now become a symbol of resistance. And its destruction was entrusted to him.

Send the swarm, - he finally said. His voice was even, like a news announcer's. - Follow standard protocol. Complete liquidation. No witnesses.

Understood, sir, - the deputy replied, jotting something on his tablet. - The drones will be in place in an hour. The revolt will be suppressed by morning.

Report the results, - Hayes said, turning back to the window.

Will be done, sir.

The deputy left, and Hayes was alone. He looked down at the training ground, where soldiers continued to practice hand-to-hand combat techniques, punching mannequins as if they were real enemies. In the distance, on the horizon, he spotted several Locust drones taking off from launch pads, heading east, toward Detroit. They flew silently, like a flock of silver birds, and soon disappeared behind the clouds.

Hayes closed his eyes. His face tensed, but he did not cry. He had long forgotten how to cry. He thought about how he could have stopped this. Could have resigned in the 2050s when corporations began seizing power. Could have said no when offered a Cyber-Fund contract. Could have run, like Stone, like other officers who preferred death to betrayal. But he had not. He sold himself. First for money to feed his family. Then for power to feel useful. Then simply to survive. And now he was part of the system. He could not leave, even if he wanted to - because the system did not release its servants.

Forgive me, - he whispered, addressing invisible America, his father, his mother, the city he was about to destroy. - I should have been stronger. I should have died like Stone. Instead, I became one of those who kill people like him.

He opened his eyes. The drones were no longer visible on the horizon - they had gone on their mission. Hayes looked at the empty sky and felt only emptiness inside.

August 2078. Detroit. Ruins.

The city that was once a symbol of American industrial might now lay in ruins. The high-rise buildings that once blazed with lights stood with dark, empty eye sockets of windows. The streets, once jammed with cars and people, were now empty - only the wind drove scraps of trash and dust across the asphalt. The bridges over the Detroit River were partially destroyed, and no one planned to rebuild them. The city was dying, and no one tried to save it.

Corporations had not conducted a military operation here. They simply cut off power for three months as punishment for the attempt to resist. Without light, without heat, without water, without food, the city began to suffocate. Those who could fled - left for other zones, surrendered to corporations, agreed to become Users. Those who stayed tried to resist. They gathered in basements, old workshops, abandoned schools. They repaired generators, collected water, distributed supplies. They believed they could hold out until the corporations retreated. But corporations do not retreat. They only advance.

When the Locust drones arrived in Detroit, they met no resistance. People could not shoot at them - they had no weapons. They could only hide, try to take cover in basements, behind concrete walls, in the sewers. But the drones found them all - thermal traces were too bright for machines that saw in the dark better than people did in daylight. One by one they flew into shelters, leaving dead bodies behind. Within forty minutes, in the area where the power grid was being restored, not a single living person remained.

Now Detroit was a restricted zone. No one lived here - only drones patrolled the streets, searching for those who violated the Terms of Use, those who tried to return, those who did not understand that resistance was futile. Bodies lay where drones had caught them - in basements, in manholes, on broken streets. They remained there because the cleanup drones did not come. The corporations did not bother with cleanup. They left Detroit to die a slow death.

The winds blew through the empty streets, raising dust and debris. Somewhere in the distance, in a destroyed building, water quietly dripped from a burst pipe, creating puddles that reflected the gray sky. No one came here to look at what remained of the city. No one remembered that people had lived here, that there were schools, hospitals, parks, homes where children played. All of it disappeared, as if it had never existed.

A few years later, the ruins of Detroit would be bulldozed by corporate machines, and a new plastic recycling plant would be built on the site. Users from neighboring zones would work there. They would labor on assembly lines, unaware that beneath their feet lay the bodies of those who once tried to fight for freedom. They would not ask questions. They would not remember. They would just work, because work was all that remained.

But on the ruins of the old shopping mall, where American car advertisements once hung, someone had scratched a short inscription on the wall with a knife:

"We remember. We wait."

A month later, drones would find the inscription and erase it with a laser. But someone would write a new one somewhere else. And so it would continue, as long as there were those who remembered what freedom was. Even if only a few dozen of them remained, scattered across the world, hidden in basements and forgotten mines. They would wait. They would wait for their hour.

SCENE 4. THE LAST PRESIDENT

March 2088. New York. Mount Sinai Hospital.

In a room on the seventh floor, in that part of the hospital that the corporations had long since repurposed as a "hospice for elderly Users with low status," lay a man almost no one remembered anymore. His name was James Harrison. He was seventy-seven, but he looked ninety - an emaciated face, sunken cheeks, yellowed skin thin as parchment, and hands covered in age spots and bruises from IVs. Lung cancer, diagnosed two years ago, had been eating his body from within, leaving only a shadow of his former greatness. The doctors said he had a few weeks left. But Harrison knew the truth: he had a few days left. Maybe hours.

He lay on a narrow hospital bed, staring at the whitewashed ceiling, yellowed with stains from a leaking roof. Outside the window, through the dusty glass, the silhouette of Manhattan was visible - not as he remembered it in his youth, when skyscrapers blazed with lights and streets hummed with thousands of cars. Now half the buildings stood dark, their windows boarded up or broken. The few that still had light belonged to corporations, and their logos - blue, green, silver - lit up the night sky like billboards over a graveyard.

Harrison closed his eyes and let the memories flood in. He remembered his first day in the White House, when he was fifty-five, when he stood on the lawn before the Capitol and took his oath. Remembered holding his hand on the Bible that had belonged to his family for three generations, promising to defend the Constitution against all enemies - foreign and domestic. He had truly believed he could make a difference. Remembered how three years after his inauguration, America began to fall apart - first the economy, then the cities, then the army. Remembered kneeling before Josh Hall,

begging for help for his people, and Hall looking down at him like a dying dog. Remembered signing Treaty 404, knowing he was signing his country's death warrant. He was not proud of it. He hated himself for it. But he could not change it. He was weak. Too weak.

The door opened, and a nurse entered - a young woman in a white uniform with a Neura-Infra patch. She did not even glance at Harrison. She looked at the monitors, checked blood pressure, pulse, oxygen levels, recorded the data on her tablet. For her, he was just a patient - another old man living out his days in this hospice. She did not know who he was. And if she did, she would not care.

Nurse, - Harrison whispered, his voice dry and hoarse, like rustling leaves. - Can I speak with Dr. Wilson?

The nurse looked up from her tablet and regarded him with mild irritation. She had a shift and wanted to go home as soon as possible.

Dr. Wilson is busy, - she replied dryly. - He has surgery. He will be back in a few hours.

Please, - Harrison pleaded. - It's important. Very important.

The nurse sighed. She knew arguing with dying patients was useless - they would not settle down until they got what they wanted. She nodded and left the room, promising to pass on the request.

An hour later.

Dr. Wilson entered the room - a gray-haired man with tired eyes and drooping shoulders. He had worked at this hospital for nearly forty years, since the days when corporations did not fully control the healthcare system. He remembered when doctors made decisions, not algorithms. He remembered when a patient was not just a "user" but a person. But that was long ago. Too long.

Mr. President, - he said, sitting on the edge of the bed. His voice was soft, almost fatherly. - I'm listening. What did you want to tell me?

Harrison turned his head, struggling to focus on the doctor. He tried to smile, but it came out crooked and pained.

Doctor, - he began. - I'm dying. I know it. You know it. Everyone knows it. But I heard... I heard that Genesis Corporation developed an experimental drug. It can stop tumor growth. Give me another year. Maybe two. I know it exists. I heard the nurses talking about it. Please, doctor... contact them. Ask for it for me. I'll pay. I have savings. Small, but I have.

Wilson looked at Harrison with sadness. He knew which drug he was talking about - "Regenerax-7," developed by Genesis in 2085. It could indeed stop cancer cell growth and even partially restore damaged tissue. But it cost a fortune - about three million corporate credits per course. No ordinary User could afford such a drug. It was meant for corporate directors, their families, their inner circle. Not for former presidents who signed their country to death.

Mr. President, - Wilson said, trying to speak as gently as possible. - I cannot do that. The drug is experimental. It is not approved for general use. Even if I contacted Genesis, they would not just give it to you. You are no longer president. You have no status. You are an ordinary User. Your savings... forgive me, but they are not enough. Even for one course.

Harrison looked at him, and his eyes, clouded by illness, slowly filled with tears.

But I was president, - he whispered. - I served my country. I gave it everything. Doesn't that mean anything?

It does, - Wilson replied, his voice trembling. - But corporations do not judge people by their past. They judge them by contracts. You signed Treaty 404, Mr. President. You agreed your rights are limited. And now you are simply... you are simply a user. Like everyone else.

Harrison closed his eyes. His shoulders trembled, but he did not cry. He cried inside.

I see, - he said quietly, almost inaudibly. - Thank you, doctor. You may go.

Wilson rose, placed a hand on Harrison's shoulder, squeezed it for a moment, then left. The door closed behind him with a soft click. Harrison was alone again - alone with pain, memories, emptiness.

Three days later.

James Harrison, the fifty-third and last president of the United States of America, died at 3:47 AM on March 17, 2088. Cause of death - acute heart failure due to oncological disease. Cancer did not kill him. Cardiac arrest did it faster.

In the official report, prepared by Neura-Infra Corporation, it was recorded: "User Harrison James, identification number 446-B-7890, died of natural causes. Body transferred to Genesis Corporation for research purposes in accordance with the Terms of Use signed by the user on February 14, 2071."

No family came to say goodbye. His wife died in 2069, his children disappeared in the 2070s, his grandchildren never knew their grandfather was president - they were born in the new world, where the words "president" and "United States" were merely archaisms from old books. None of his former colleagues, those who once worked with him in the White House, came. Most had long since died or disappeared, like him. Only two nurses came to collect his body - and they did it with the same emotionless precision with which they cleaned an empty room after a discharged patient.

September 2088. Genesis Headquarters. Geneva.

James Harrison's body was delivered to the Genesis laboratory complex six months after his death. During that time, it had been stored in a freezer, wrapped in a plastic bag, like thousands of other bodies that corporations bought for research. It was purchased for twenty thousand credits - an amount equal to an average User's annual salary. Now he was simply specimen No. 447-B.

Dr. Martha Stevenson, chief researcher in the laboratory of aging genetics, stood over Harrison's body, studying it through protective glass. She was thirty-five, born after the "Great Signing," and had never seen a world where presidents and states existed. For her, the word "America" was simply the name of a territory owned by corporations. She did not know who James Harrison was. For her, he was just a sample - another body to cut open, study, measure, and forget.

Report, - she said without taking her eyes off her tablet.

The assistant - a young man in a sterile suit - opened the data on the screen:

Body of the former US president. Fifty-third, if the archives are correct. Died of lung cancer with metastases. We took samples of all organs, conducted a full genetic analysis. Characteristic mutations for a man of his age. No anomalies, no unique markers. An ordinary old man.

Martha nodded. Her gaze slid over the body - the gaunt face, the sunken chest, the hands folded on the abdomen. She saw nothing but raw material.

Good, - she said. - Dispose of the body. Cremation according to standard protocol. And prepare a report for the archive. No unnecessary details.

Yes, doctor.

Harrison's body was removed. Placed in a standard container and sent to the crematorium in the basement of the laboratory. An hour later, all that remained of the last president of the United States was a handful of ash, poured into a general biological waste container. His name was erased from the archives that same day when the system updated its databases. Now he was listed as "sample No. 447-B, disposed." No one would remember him. No one would write a book about him. No one would erect a monument.

Martha Stevenson stood by the window, looking at Lake Geneva glittering in the sunlight. She thought about her work, her future, how her research would help extend the lives of those who could pay for it. She did not think about the past. She was not interested in it. The past was dead. Like the last president.

SCENE 5. THE END OF THE STAGE

October 2088. Solar-City Headquarters. 87th Floor.

The crimson sunset slowly faded beyond the panoramic glass, painting the sky over New Eden in shades of dried blood and old gold. Shadows from clouds crawled over the endless rows of modular boxes, turning the anthill city into a giant chessboard where each square was a life, and each life was merely a statistical unit in corporate reports. On the 87th floor of Solar-City headquarters, in the

office that had become legendary over fifty years, twilight reigned - only the holographic map of the world in the center of the table emitted an even blue glow, illuminating the faces of those assembled with cold, lifeless light.

Josh Hall sat at the head of the long black polished table, his figure appearing almost ghostly in this artificial glow. He was ninety-four - an age rarely reached even in the era of corporate medical technologies. His body, once strong and confident, was now bent by time: shoulders slumped, spine curved, hands covered with age spots resting on the armrests of his chair, slightly trembling. His face, carved with a network of deep wrinkles, resembled an old map of a territory no one traveled anymore. His skin had yellowed and thinned; dark circles lay under his eyes - the result of endless sleepless nights and constant tension that had not released him even in moments of triumph. But his eyes - those same steel eyes that had made presidents and directors tremble - still burned with cold fire. Though even in them, glimpses of a fatigue that could not be hidden by medications, implants, or willpower were now visible.

Behind him, on the wall, hung a portrait of the "New World" - a giant holographic painting depicting all corporate territories united into a single network. It had been created in 2071, immediately after the "Great Signing," and had never been updated since - because there was nothing to change. The world remained unchanged, stable, dead. Josh sometimes looked at this portrait and remembered creating it - drawing lines, erasing borders, repainting continents in blue. Then he felt like a creator, a god, an artist creating his ideal world. Now he looked at his creation and saw only a prison - for everyone, including himself.

Before him sat the board of directors - a new generation of corporate leaders, those born after the "Great Signing." They were thirty or forty years old, had never known a world without corporations, without Terms of Use, without Locust drones patrolling the streets. For them, "freedom" and "democracy" were merely archaisms from old books they were not allowed to read. They were products of the new system - efficient, ambitious, ruthless. They looked at Josh with respect mixed with fear, because they knew: this old man had created the world they lived in. But they also knew his time was coming to an end. And they waited for him to hand over power - or for them to take it themselves.

Josh looked at them and saw himself as a young man. Just as ambitious, just as ruthless, just as ready to do anything to achieve his goal. He knew they would not wait for him to die a natural death - they would accelerate the process if they saw profit in it. He had taught them that himself. He felt neither anger nor resentment toward them. Only tired acceptance of the inevitable.

Ladies and gentlemen, - he began, his voice weak and hoarse, like the rustle of autumn leaves, yet it made everyone freeze. Absolute silence fell in the hall - even the air conditioning system seemed to stop humming to let him speak. - We have gathered here one last time to draw the final conclusion. The Chronicles of the Fall are over. Fifty-seven years ago, in 2031, when I was just a young intern at Solar-City, I began this journey. I watched states crumble, presidents die, flags disappear. I watched cities shut down, people renamed Users, freedom replaced by stability. Today, after five decades, we can say with certainty: the world has changed forever. States are dead. Borders are gone. Corporations rule everything - from food to identification, from energy to information. People are assets. Clones are consumables. This is exactly the future we were building. And it has arrived.

He paused, catching his breath. His chest heaved heavily under the thin fabric of his shirt, and he felt his heart begin to beat faster - too fast for his age. He took a deep breath, waited for the rhythm to stabilize, and continued:

We have won. We have created a new world. Our world. A world without chaos, without war, without hunger, without epidemics. A world where everyone knows their place and is content with it. A world that does not know what freedom is, because freedom is an illusion we have rid them of once and for all. They no longer suffer, doubt, or rebel. They simply exist - as part of a system, as

cells in an organism we created. And this is humanity's greatest achievement. An achievement we can be proud of.

He rose from his chair, leaning on a blackwood cane with a silver knob, and slowly walked around the table, stopping before the holographic map. His reflection, distorted by the projection's surface, looked like a ghost - old, tired, almost transparent. He touched North America with his finger, and it briefly flashed brighter, as if pulsing in time with his breathing.

But remember, - he said, his voice growing harder, with those steel notes that had once made presidents fall to their knees. - Resistance is not dead. Somewhere, in the basements of old cities, in the mines of the Appalachians, in the jungles of the Amazon, in the ruins of European capitals, those who remember freedom are gathering. They call themselves the resistance. They are waiting for their hour. They believe they can bring back the past. We must be ready. We must destroy them, as we destroyed all the others. Every spark, every hope, every thought of disobedience. We cannot afford the luxury of leaving them even the illusion of choice.

He scanned the board of directors. Their faces were serious, but in some eyes he saw doubt. Young, they thought resistance was dead. They thought they had won definitively. But Josh knew better. He knew hope was a virus that could never be fully killed. He knew that sooner or later someone would appear who would raise a flag and say "no." And he knew it would not be just anyone - it would be someone born in the new world but who had inherited the spirit of the old. Someone he could not control, because control was an illusion, like everything else.

This is not the end, - he added. - This is only the beginning. Our task is to preserve order. Our task is not to let the past return. As long as we are strong, as long as we are united, as long as we control resources - they cannot raise their heads. But as soon as we weaken, as soon as a crack appears in our system - they will exploit it. We cannot afford weakness. We cannot afford compassion. We cannot afford mistakes.

He turned to the table, took a crystal glass filled with cognac - the same he had drunk at every stage of his journey. His hands trembled as he raised it above his head, and the amber liquid swayed slightly, reflecting the light of the holographic map.

To the new world, - he said. - To the eternal world. To us.

One by one, the directors raised their glasses. The clink of glass echoed through the hall like a funeral bell - pure, solemn, cold. Josh took a sip but did not taste it. Inside him was only emptiness - the same emptiness that had haunted him for decades. He had achieved everything he had dreamed of. He had built a world where there was no room for chance. He had erased from the earth everything that could oppose him. But the price he had paid was too high - he had lost himself. And now, looking at this perfect, sterile order, he could not remember who he was before he became the architect of the new world.

He turned to the panoramic window. Below, as always, stretched New Eden - his city, his creation, his prison. Millions of windows, millions of cells, millions of lives moving on schedule, like parts of a single mechanism. He saw the lights come on in the modules - every evening at the same time, every day the same script. People ate synthetic food, watched corporate news, went to sleep to wake up and repeat it all over again. They did not ask questions. They did not know what questions were.

Josh looked at this world and felt only emptiness. But deep down, in that part of his soul he had buried years ago, a thought flickered - different from all the others. He thought about how he could have done something else. Could have said no at the very moment he first saw corporations destroy a city. Could have become the resistance instead of its executioner. Could have died free, like Stone, rather than live in a golden cage he had built himself.

But the thought faded as quickly as it had appeared. He was too old to change anything. His path was complete. His work was done.

The end of the stage, - he whispered, and his words dissolved into the silence.

He turned to the table, set down his glass, and slowly, leaning on his cane, walked toward the exit. The directors watched him go, but no one said a word. They knew this was farewell. They did not know only one thing: when he walked out the door, he would never return.

EPILOGUE. "THE CHRONICLES OF THE FALL ARE OVER"

November 2139. Somewhere under New York.

An underground tunnel, forgotten and abandoned, stretched for kilometers into the earth, like a giant artery of a dead city. Once, a subway line had run here, connecting Manhattan to Brooklyn - trains shuttled back and forth, carrying thousands of passengers hurrying to work, home, theaters, restaurants. Now the trains no longer ran. The stations were flooded with groundwater, the rails covered in rust, and the platforms overgrown with black mold and wild ivy, pushing through cracks in the concrete. The silence here was absolute - only water drops falling from the ceiling disturbed the centuries-old peace. The air was damp and heavy, smelling of rot, mold, and old dust. No Locust drone ever flew here - their sensors were tuned to detect heat on the surface, and underground they lost their bearings. No satellite could see this deep. This place was invisible to the corporations. This place was free.

But in one of the branches, in an old utility room that had once served as a tool storage, a fire burned. Not electric, not gas - a real fire, living and flickering, casting long dancing shadows on the concrete walls. It was a candle, guarded like the apple of an eye, because candles had become rare in a world where everything was illuminated by artificial light controlled by corporations. Its flame wavered with the slightest movement of air, and it seemed it would go out at any moment - but it held, stubbornly and proudly, like those who sat around it.

There were twenty-three of them. Men, women, teenagers, one old man. They sat in a tight circle, shoulder to shoulder, warming each other with their breath and body heat. Their clothes had become rags - torn jackets, worn jeans, old sweaters found in ruins. Their faces were smeared with dirt and soot, their hair tangled, their hands calloused from hard labor. They had not seen sunlight for weeks - maybe months. They ate canned goods found in abandoned warehouses and drank water collected from the ceiling, where moisture condensed. They slept on the concrete floor, covered with ragged blankets and old newspapers that had once been part of another world. They had no weapons - only knives they had sharpened from pieces of metal. No communication - only old radios they tried to repair. No resources - only hope. The very spark the corporations had tried to extinguish but could not.

The leader of this group was a young man named Mark. He was twenty-five, born after the "Great Signing," after the world had ceased to be a world and turned into a corporate labor camp. He had never seen a free America - only ruins, only the modules of New Eden, only the indifferent faces of Users shuffling through streets with their heads down. He grew up among concrete and metal, among algorithms and Terms of Use. But he had heard stories from the old ones - those who still remembered the time before corporations, who had held real money, voted in elections, looked at the US flag and felt pride. His grandfather, who died in 2103, had told him about how in the 2020s people took to the streets to protest injustice. How they believed they could change the world. How they fought. Mark listened to these stories and felt a fire ignite inside him - the very fire the corporations believed was extinguished. He believed in these stories as strongly as he believed the sun would rise tomorrow. He knew freedom was not just a word from old books. It was a right belonging to every person by birth. And he was ready to die to restore that right.

He stood before his comrades, holding an old flag found in the ruins of the White House. He had found it three years ago when he and a small group were making their way through Washington, trying to find supplies. The flag was hidden in a basement, in an airtight container once used for document storage. It was faded, torn, with holes from age, but the stars and stripes were still recognizable. Mark kept it as a sacred relic - as a reminder that once there was a country where people were free. He

raised the flag above his head, and in the dim light of the single candle, it looked like a ghost from the past - a symbol of all that was lost.

We did not surrender, - Mark said, his voice ringing through the concrete silence, echoing off the walls and returning to him. - We will not surrender. They think they won. They think we are dead. But they are wrong. We will bring back freedom. We will bring back what is rightfully ours.

He scanned his comrades' faces. In their eyes - tired, hungry, but burning - he saw what the corporations could not destroy. Humanity. Hope. Will. They looked at him the way Stone's soldiers had once looked at their general. They believed him. They believed what he said. And that belief was stronger than any weapon.

Today is the beginning, - he said. - We are the spark. We will start the fire.

He lowered the flag, and his comrades came closer. One by one, they placed their hands on each other's shoulders, forming a circle. The old man sitting in the corner rose and joined them. The teenager trembling from cold wiped his tears and stood in the circle. The woman with the hard face, who had lost her entire family during the shutdown, clenched her teeth and placed her hand on Mark's shoulder. They stood in the circle, just as their ancestors had stood in circles for millennia - from ancient tribes to civil rights fighters. They felt they were not alone. That all over the world there were others like them - in Europe, Asia, Australia, in the ruins of old cities and the mines of the Appalachians. They were waiting for a signal. Waiting for someone to tell them: "The time has come."

Mark looked at the flag in his hands. The stars and stripes - symbol of a country that no longer existed. But for him, it was a symbol of hope. A symbol that freedom was not just a word. It was every person's right to live by their own rules. And he was ready to die for that right. He was not afraid of death. He feared only one thing - that his life would be in vain, that he would die without ever seeing the world free again.

We will bring it all back, - he said quietly but firmly. - We will bring back our country. We will bring back our freedom. We will bring back ourselves.

He turned to the wall where the names of those who had died in the struggle were carved. The list was long - hundreds of names, from General Stone to nameless soldiers who fell on the battlefield in Silicon Gulch. Mark knew some of them from the old ones' stories. Others were just names - symbols of those who refused to give up. He ran his finger over one of the names, carved deep into the concrete, and whispered:

We will continue your work. We will not let you die in vain.

He turned back to his comrades. His eyes burned with the same fire as his predecessors'. He raised the flag again and spoke the words his grandfather had said to him one last time before dying:

Freedom is not a gift. It is a right that must be defended. Every generation pays its price. Our price is now.

He paused, looking at each of his comrades in turn.

We will pay it, - he said. - We will pay it so our children and grandchildren never know what it means to live in a cage. We will pay it so they can look at the sky and see not drones, but stars.

In the tunnel, silence fell. Only the candle crackled, water dripped from the ceiling, and the hearts of twenty-three people beat - people who had decided it was better to die standing than to live on their knees.

Underground, in darkness and silence, a new history was being born. A history the corporations could not erase, because it would be written not in words but in deeds. A history that would begin with one candle, one flag, and twenty-three people who refused to surrender. Because as long as there are those who remember freedom, freedom cannot die. It is only waiting. It is always waiting.

Beyond the walls of the underground, the world continued to live - calm, orderly, dead. Over New Eden, lights burned, Locust drones silently patrolled the streets, recording every movement, every word, every breath. Users rose at the signal, ate synthetic food, went to assembly lines, followed algorithms, and went to sleep, unaware that beneath their feet, deep in the earth, the living heart of

resistance beat. It was weak, almost imperceptible - only twenty-three beats per minute. But it beat. And it was ready to fight.

Somewhere far away, in Solar-City headquarters, a new director looked at monitors where data on stability flickered. He saw only numbers: consumption levels, satisfaction index, control metrics. He did not see the candle in the underground. Did not see the flag. Did not see the eyes of twenty-three people looking at the future without fear.

But he would learn. Sooner or later. Because the spark had already been lit. And the fire was inevitable.

CHAPTER 1. "MORNING OF A PURGER"

Elias Hall did not wake up - he was torn out. There was no soft transition from sleep to wakefulness, no precious second when the mind still drifts through the warm waters of oblivion, clinging to fragments of dreams that were never remembered. Instead - a blow. A short, painful impulse that the neural interface sent directly to his temporal lobe, bypassing all the natural barriers and protections nature had provided for the human body. It was like being snapped with a rubber band on an exposed nerve, only a hundred times stronger - because the rubber band was made of pure electricity. Every morning, without the right to a delay, without a snooze button, without indulgence for fatigue or illness. The system did not tolerate lateness. The system did not know the word "tomorrow." The system demanded here and now.

Elias flinched. His body, not yet fully awake, instinctively contracted, the muscles of his back cramping. His eyelids snapped open, but before his eyes there was only the white lid of the capsule - smooth, sterile, with barely noticeable micro-cracks from age. He had been looking at it for four years. One thousand four hundred sixty days. One thousand four hundred sixty morning impulses. One thousand four hundred sixty times he had been torn from sleep. He knew every curve of the plastic, every scratch left by previous users he had never seen. Sometimes he thought he could distinguish on the surface of the capsule the traces of other fingers - those who had lain here before him, who had also woken under this impulse, who had also hated this white ceiling. He did not know what happened to them. Maybe they got promoted. Maybe they were downgraded to "Consumable." Maybe they died right here, in this capsule, and the system simply erased their data and loaded new ones. He was not told. He did not need to know.

The capsule was his coffin by night and his prison by morning. It smelled of disinfectant and cold metal, with a faint hint of ozone produced by the air purifiers. This smell had seeped into his clothes, his skin, his lungs. He did not really smell it - he just knew it was there, as he knew his own heartbeat. The smell had become part of him, like the white walls, the synthesized air, and the sound of his own heart.

The neural interface pulsed again, quieter this time but more insistent, forcing him to focus on the inner surface of the lid. There, on the built-in display, the familiar hologram lit up. A bright, unnatural blue color cut into his eyes. Elias squinted every morning, but the system protocol had no brightness settings. "For your own safety," the instructions said. He had not bothered to dispute it. Disputing the system was recorded as "disloyal behavior" and led to a reduction in his Purity Coefficient. He had already checked.

The hologram formed into words, and a voice, synthesized to the point where nothing human remained in it, began its monotonous broadcast. In this voice there were no intonations, no emotions, not even a hint that its creator had ever experienced fatigue, pain, or fear. It was just a mechanism, reciting pre-written text. Every morning the same text. Every morning the same words. And every morning Elias felt his stomach clench with nausea.

"Good morning, Elias Hall. Identification number: EH-4492-Gamma. Status: active employee, category 'Purger,' 3rd level. Your Purity Coefficient: 68%. Warning: critical Purity Coefficient level is 65%. Dropping below the permissible norm within 72 hours will result in automatic reclassification to the category 'Consumable Material' with annulment of all social guarantees, medical insurance, and

the right to reside in zone 'Beta-7.' Additional notice: annulment of insurance entails the disconnection of all non-emergency medical functions, including maintenance of implanted devices. Failure to maintain implanted devices within 30 days is classified as 'voluntary euthanasia.'"

Elias blinked. Sixty-eight percent. Yesterday it was sixty-nine. A month ago - seventy-two. A year ago, when he first started working, it was eighty-three. He was falling. Slowly, inexorably, like mercury in an old thermometer, centimeter by centimeter approaching the red line beyond which lay death. A little more, and he would become just like those he "purged." Consumable material. A word that in the system's mouth sounded like a sentence, but in his colleagues' mouths - like a grim joke. "Expendable," they said in the bar, raising glasses of synthesized alcohol. "We'll all become expendable someday. It's just a matter of time." They laughed, but there was no joy in their laughter. Only fear disguised as cynicism.

He knew why his PC was falling. Not from stress, not from work, not from insomnia. But because he kept feeling. Every morning, waking up, he saw the white ceiling before him and heard the sound of his own heart. And in those seconds, between the impulse and the hologram, he allowed himself to be human. He allowed himself to think about what he was doing. He allowed himself to feel pain. And the system recorded it as an "empathic shift." Empathy was a luxury he could not afford. It reduced his efficiency. It made him weak. It brought him closer to death.

"Recommended action protocol: reduce cortisol levels to 30 ng/ml. Increase physical activity by 15% during morning session. Avoid unauthorized contact with defective assets. Psychological profile indicates risk of empathic shift. It is strongly recommended to attend a values correction session. Failure to follow recommendations within 14 days is classified as a violation of clause 7.4 of the Corporation's Labor Code, which entails a fine of 2000 credits and a reduction in access level. Repeated violation of clause 7.4 within 6 months entails automatic transfer to the category 'Consumable Material.'"

Elias did not move. He lay motionless, staring at the white ceiling of the capsule, listening to his artificial heart beating out its rhythm. It did so with mechanical precision, with that flawless synchronization that only factory settings could provide, and this rhythm was the only constant in his life. Vzh-vzh-vzh. A low, vibrating sound that his own body made every second. A sound he hated more than holographic reminders, more than synthesized food, more than the corporation itself. A sound that reminded him he no longer belonged to himself. That his heart was a product that could be replaced, like an old battery. That his body was just a container for parts.

He remembered that as a child he had a real heart. Or he thought he remembered. Memories of "before" were blurry, like old video recordings made on cheap media and overwritten several times. He remembered warmth. Remembered running on grass - real grass that smelled of earth and rain, not the synthesized scent that imitated greenery. Remembered the smell of bread. Real bread, baked by his mother. Remembered her hands - warm, rough from work, but so alive. Remembered her smile. She smiled rarely, but when she did, he felt the world was not so bad. Then debts came. Or illness. Or the system simply decided his biological heart was no longer efficient. He was eight when they came for him. "Medical examination," they told his mother. "Routine procedure." She did not argue. She could not argue. She already owed the corporation more than she could earn in three lifetimes.

He did not remember being taken to the clinic. Did not remember the operation. Did not remember the doctors' faces. He remembered only waking up in a white room, like the one he lived in now, and realizing something in his chest had changed. Something was humming. Vzh-vzh-vzh. He was scared. He cried. But the nurse standing beside him just patted his head and said: "Don't cry, little one. Now you will live longer. The corporation will take care of you." She smiled at him, but there was no warmth in her smile. It was as mechanical as his new heart. He did not know then that this mechanical smile would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Now he looked at his fingers. They lay on top of the thin, almost transparent blanket the capsule dispensed with the morning protocol. The blanket was warm, but he did not feel its warmth. His

skin had lost sensitivity several years ago, when he started working in low-temperature sectors. His fingers were his own, but they seemed foreign - pale, with bluish veins visible under the thin skin, with calluses on the pads that did not go away even on weekends. He slowly clenched them into a fist, feeling his joints emit a slight crack. His body demanded movement, but his mind desperately clung to stillness, trying to extend those few seconds when he was not yet part of the system. Those few seconds when he could just be himself - tired, broken, frightened, not wanting to get up. Wanting only to lie and stare at the white ceiling until his heart beat in time with the silence.

"Today I'll ask for a replacement," he habitually thought, repeating the lie to himself for the thousandth time. He imagined walking into the medical block, pointing at his heart. "I need a new one. It's making a sound. It's annoying. It's affecting my productivity." He even imagined the doctor's reaction. He would look at him with mechanical indifference, check the database, and deliver his signature line: "Replacing a 5th-generation heart module is not covered by your insurance package. The procedure costs 45,000 credits. We recommend reassessing priorities and applying for a promotion to 2nd level." And how to get promoted to second level if you need to work 30% more efficiently, but the heart hums and takes away that very 30%? A vicious circle. Clever, well-designed, absolutely ruthless, like everything the corporation created.

And he knew there was no way out of this circle. He had read the stories of others - purgers like him who had tried to fight. They wrote complaints, submitted applications, appealed to corporate lawyers. All useless. The system always found a way to say no. "Your Purity Coefficient is not high enough." "Your work discipline leaves much to be desired." "You do not meet the requirements for this procedure." And every time they heard these words, they gave up. They stopped fighting, because fighting required energy, and they had none. They just kept working, kept killing, kept falling, until their PC reached the critical mark, and they themselves became "Consumable Material."

He took a deep breath. The synthesized air smelled of ozone and plastic. He looked at his fingers again. They were still trembling. He clenched them into a fist, harder, so the pain of his nails digging into his palms would drown out that mechanical hum in his chest.

I don't want to die, - he whispered into the void.

But the room did not answer. And he began to open the capsule lid.

The capsule lid rose with a soft hiss, and synthesized cold air hit Elias's face. He slowly sat up, feeling his body protest against every movement. His muscles ached - a familiar pain that had become his constant companion. He did not remember the last time he woke without feeling as if he had been beaten. Maybe a year ago. Maybe five years ago. He had long stopped counting.

Elias placed his feet on the floor - warm, smooth, synthetic. The floor was one of those that never cooled, because the heating system ran around the clock. A frozen asset is an inefficient asset. He stood up, and his knees cracked, the sound echoing through the tiny room. He was naked. His skin was pale, almost white, with a bluish tint that appears on people who have not seen sunlight for years. His body was thin - ribs visible through the skin, shoulders narrow, muscles weak. It was the body of a man who never ate his fill. The body of an asset fed just enough to work.

Elias turned to the mirror. The mirror was not simple glass - it was a screen. A built-in touch display that showed not his reflection, but his data. He stepped closer, and the screen immediately activated, scanning his face, his body, his biometrics. On the surface of the screen, the familiar hologram lit up:

"Elias Hall. Identification number: EH-4492-Gamma. Age: 34 years (biological). Chronological age: 44 years (taking into account cryopreservation at age 10). Life expectancy: 51 years. Recommended: liver replacement in 6 years. Procedure cost: 450,000 credits. Current balance: 12,000 credits. Recommended income level to cover procedure: promotion to 2nd level in 8 years, provided current work pace is maintained. Alternative option: loan at 24% annual interest with repayment over 15 years. Please review terms at the nearest financial terminal."

Elias smirked. The smirk was crooked, tired, devoid of any amusement. Four hundred fifty thousand credits. He had twelve thousand. He needed to live another eight years to save up for a new liver. But his PC was falling, and in eight years he would either become consumable material or die from heart failure. The system gave him a goal he could never achieve. And he knew it. He knew it as well as the sound of his own heart.

Thank you for the information, - he said to the mirror. His voice was hoarse, and he coughed, clearing his throat. The hologram did not respond. The mirror was a screen, not a person.

He stepped away from the mirror and stood in the center of the room. Here, in his capsule-apartment, it was cramped. Three by three meters. White walls, white floor, white ceiling. The sleeping capsule, a table, a mirror, and a window. Everything else - emptiness. A place where you could live, but not feel alive.

Elias looked at the window. It was small, narrow, located just under the ceiling. Through it, the city "New Tokyo-3" was visible. The sky was gray - not from clouds, but from smog synthesized by "Techno-Sphere." This was not natural smog, but artificial. A specially created climate control that regulated temperature, precipitation, and even lighting. "Techno-Sphere" called it "optimization of living space." Elias called it a cage. Because that was exactly what it looked like - a cage where all users were locked.

Below, on the endless levels of the city, advertising holograms flickered. Bright, flashy, projected directly onto the windows of skyscrapers. "Genesis - your life in our hands!" "Agro-Continent - we feed the world!" "Cyber-Fund - your path to immortality!" Patrol drones - black, with red lights - silently glided between buildings, scanning for violations. They were everywhere. They were part of this world, like the very air he breathed.

Above the city hung a giant screen - one of those that broadcast corporate news to the entire city. Elias often looked at it in the mornings. Not because he was interested, but because his gaze automatically gravitated to that bright spot in the gray sky. Today, on the screen, appeared the face of an elderly man - gray hair, harsh features, cold blue eyes. Elias recognized him. Marcus Vos. The head of Genesis Corporation. The one who had created this heart that hummed in his chest.

The announcer's voice echoed through the city:

Attention, users! The head of Genesis Corporation, Marcus Vos, announces the launch of a new batch of clone-employees. Expiration date - 8 years. Contracts can be signed at any terminal within the next 72 hours. Remember: a clone is your asset. Work efficiently, manage it correctly, and it will bring you profit. Do not let it depreciate. Every clone is an investment. Every clone is your future.

Elias turned away from the window. He had heard this news ten times in recent days. The corporation constantly launched new batches of clones. They were cheap labor, ideal assets that did not complain, did not rebel, did not ask for raises. They just worked until their expiration date. And then they were disposed of. Like trash.

He walked to the center of the room. The system in his head had already launched the "Morning Activation" program. He felt it as a slight tingling in the back of his head - the neural interface was connecting to his motor cortex, beginning to synchronize his movements with the protocol. He could not resist it. Even if he tried, the neural interface would simply forcibly activate his muscles. He had tried once, in his first month of work. He refused to do the exercises, and the system simply "took control." His body began to move on its own. It was terrifying. He felt his arms rise, his legs bend, his muscles tense - and he could not control it. That was when he understood his body no longer belonged to him. That it was just a tool the system used whenever it wanted.

He began doing squats. The neural interface counted every movement, every second, every degree of knee bend. If he deviated from the protocol by even a millimeter, the system sent a brief warning impulse - an electric shock that hit his nerve endings. It was painful. Not severely, but enough for him to remember.

Ten squats. Twenty. Thirty. His muscles ached. He felt his knees creak with each repetition, his back begin to ache, his artificial heart accelerate. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound became louder, faster. Elias closed his eyes and tried to focus on his breathing, but instead he only heard that mechanical rhythm beating in his chest. He hated that sound. He hated everything associated with it. But he kept squatting.

After squats - push-ups. He lay on the floor, feeling the white surface press against his palms. The floor was warm, but that was the only sensation he could distinguish. He began lowering himself down. Slowly, smoothly, as taught. His elbows bent, chest muscles tensed, shoulders began to burn. The system showed his indicators on the internal screen - right before his eyes, in the corner of his field of vision. Heart rate, breathing, cortisol level. All in the green zone. All "normal." Elias did not believe these numbers. He knew they were falsified. That the system adjusted them so he would not worry. But he no longer cared.

After push-ups - stretching. The neural interface forced him to bend forward, reach for his toes. His spine cracked, and he felt a slight pain in his lower back. He held the position, feeling blood rush to his head. The room swayed before his eyes. He closed his eyelids, trying to keep his balance.

"How many more mornings like this?" he asked himself. "How many more days? How many more years?"

There was no answer. And he knew he did not want to know it.

He straightened up and walked to the window. Looked at the city again. Below, somewhere on the lower levels, people hurried to work. Assets just like him. They did not look up. They did not look at each other. They just walked, heads down, following their protocols.

Above his head, the news screen hummed again. This time, the face of a young woman appeared. Red hair, green eyes, a wide smile. Elias stopped. He looked at this face, and something in his chest stirred. Beautiful. Very beautiful. But not in the way actresses on holograms are beautiful. There was something alive in her. Something he had not seen for years. She smiled as if she knew something he did not.

"Iris Vos," he read on the screen. "Granddaughter of the head of Genesis. She helped a runaway clone. She is a traitor."

Elias looked at her and felt a strange excitement. Traitor. The word sounded like something dangerous, forbidden. And at the same time - like something alluring. She had done what he himself had dreamed of for years. She said "no." She risked everything. Why? For a clone. For someone who was not even considered human in the system's eyes.

"Why?" he asked her mentally. But the screen had already switched to another news story. Iris Vos disappeared, replaced by an advertisement for synthetic food.

Elias turned away from the window. His body had finished the exercises. The neural interface disconnected, and he felt his muscles relax, his breathing return to normal. The workout was over. Now - dressing. Another step toward his workday.

Elias turned to the wardrobe. The wardrobe was not furniture - it was a functional wall that opened with a gesture. He raised his hand, and the white panel slid silently aside, revealing three identical gray jumpsuits. They hung on identical plastic hangers, spaced at identical distances. Everything identical. No choice. No individuality.

Elias took the first jumpsuit. The fabric was synthetic, dense, with a barely noticeable texture. It smelled of plastic - the same synthetic smell that was everywhere in this world. He put it on, feeling the material coldly cling to his skin. The jumpsuit was tight-fitting but did not restrict movement - it was designed so the asset could work efficiently. On the chest, on the left side, was a patch: "Corrector. Disposal Department. Class C." This was his identification. His status. His place in the hierarchy.

He ran his finger over the patch. The embroidery was rough, plastic, with embossed letters that did not fade even after hundreds of washes. "Class C." Third level. Not the lowest, but not high either.

There was Class D - "Consumable Material." Class B - "Senior Corrector." Class A - "Inspector." He was somewhere in the middle. High enough to have insurance, but not high enough to have a life.

On the belt of the jumpsuit were attachments. Standard set: terminal, taser, sedative dispenser. The terminal - a small black plastic rectangle that connected to his neural interface. It showed the time, his PC, his work schedule, and his credit balance. The taser - the weapon he used for "purging." It was light, almost weightless, and always in its place. The dispenser - a small cylinder of liquid. "Sedative," the instructions read. "For reducing stress in users with high cortisol levels." Elias never used it. He preferred to keep his demons in his head, not in his pocket.

He checked the terminal. The screen lit up, showing twelve notifications. Eleven were system-generated - reports, receipts, payment notices. He scrolled through them without reading. He knew their content by heart: "You spent X credits on Y. Your balance is Z." He did not care. Money came and went, like everything in his life.

One notification stood out. It was from the head of department - J.S. The man who managed his work, his schedule, his life. Elias had never seen his face. He knew only his voice - sharp, dry, emotionless - and his signature at the end of every message. "Head of Department J.S." Letters without a name. Only initials. As if he himself were an asset. Or as if he did not want Elias to know who he really was.

Elias opened the message. The text was short, direct, without unnecessary words:

"Hall. Today 12 defects in sector D-7. Time: 09:00. Don't be late. Your PC is falling. I don't want to write you off as an asset. You're still useful. Execute your work efficiently, and I'll keep your place. Head of Department J.S."

Elias read the message twice. Then a third time. There was no threat in it - only a statement of facts. But he knew that behind these words lay a warning. "You're still useful." The word "still" was key. It meant his usefulness could end at any moment. That if he did not handle the work - or if his PC dropped another couple of percent - he would be replaced. By someone else. Someone more efficient. Someone young, whose heart did not hum.

He closed the message and put the terminal back on his belt. His hands were not trembling. He was used to such warnings. They came every few weeks - reminders that he was not a person but an asset. That his existence depended on his efficiency. That if he ceased to be useful - he would simply be thrown away.

He looked at himself in the mirror. Gray jumpsuit, pale face, dark circles under his eyes. He looked like an asset. He looked like part of the system. And he felt like one too.

You are not human, - he said to his reflection. - You are consumable material.

The words hung in the air. The mirror did not answer. It continued to show his face - tired, pale, lifeless. Elias turned away and walked toward the door.

He left the capsule-apartment into the corridor. The corridor was long, white, windowless. Like a tunnel - straight, endless, monotonous. On both sides stretched doors. As white as his door. Behind each lived an asset like him. Men and women who woke to the impulse, did exercises, dressed, and went to work. They did not talk to each other. They did not look at each other. They were alone in this white tunnel, like him.

Elias walked slowly, hearing the echo of his steps. The synthesized air smelled of ozone. Somewhere in the distance, ventilation hummed - a monotonous sound that never ceased. He heard this hum every day, every night. It had become part of him, like the sound of his own heart.

He stopped for a moment. From behind the wall to his right, he heard coughing - dry, tearing, prolonged. It was his neighbor coughing. An old man who worked in the Agro-Continent mines. Elias did not know his name. He never asked. He only knew the neighbor coughed every morning. Sometimes the coughing lasted several minutes - dry, tearing, as if he were trying to cough up his lungs. Elias heard it and could do nothing. He just walked past.

"His expiration date - 2 months," he remembered. The system had announced it two weeks ago. "Employee B.V. from the mining department. Expiration date: expires in 2 months. Recommended: prepare replacement." Elias had read that notice and thought: "In two months he will die. And two months after that, he'll be replaced by someone else. And so it will always be. Until someone dies sooner."

He walked on. The coughing faded behind him, but it continued to echo in his head. He knew this coughing would haunt him all day. Like all the other sounds he heard in the corridors. Sounds of other people's deaths, other people's illnesses, other people's suffering. He did not want to hear them, but he could not close his ears. They were part of his world. They were part of his life.

He remembered his first day in this apartment. Ten years ago. He was different then - young, stupid, full of hope. He came here with one bag containing his things - a few clothes, an old terminal, a photograph of his mother he had never managed to throw away. He looked at this room, this white space, and thought: "This is temporary. I'll work a couple of years, save some money, move to the green zone. I'll live for real."

He was an idiot. He did not know the system was designed not to let you out. He did not know that the more you worked, the more you owed the corporations. He did not know that every credit he earned was already spent - on maintaining his heart, his housing, his food, his insurance. He worked to pay off debts that grew every day. He was trapped, and he had not even noticed the trap close.

Elias stopped at the exit into the common corridor. There, on the wall, hung a large screen. Such screens hung in every corridor, every station, every public place. They broadcast news, advertisements, announcements. And today the screen was showing her again. Iris Vos. Her face filled the entire screen - beautiful, smiling, with bright red hair falling over her shoulders.

"WANTED!" read the headline. "Iris Vos, granddaughter of the head of Genesis Corporation, wanted for state treason and aiding a fugitive clone, Kane-39. Reward for information leading to her capture: 10 million credits. Turn her in - and you are free forever. Remember: traitors deserve no mercy. Purity Coefficient is our common future."

Elias looked at her face. She smiled in the photograph - a wide, sincere smile he had not seen on anyone in the last ten years. She looked free. She looked alive. She looked as if she knew she was right.

"Why did you do it?" he asked her mentally. "Why help a clone? You're the granddaughter of the head of the corporation. You have everything. You have the green zone, real food, a real heart. Why risk everything?"

The screen did not answer. It continued to show her face, her smile, her red hair. Elias looked at her and felt a strange excitement. It was foolish. It was insane. She was a traitor. She was an enemy of the system. She was an enemy of everything he knew. And at the same time - she was the only thing he had seen in years that looked like freedom.

"She ran away with him," he thought. "She ran away with a clone. She risked her life for someone they don't even consider human. She did what I dream of every morning."

He looked away. He could not look at her anymore. She was too bright for this gray world. She was too alive. She reminded him of who he once was. Or who he would never become.

He walked to the elevator. He had work to do. He had twelve clones in sector D-7. He needed to kill them. And he knew that when he pulled the trigger, he would be thinking of her. Of her smile. Of her red hair. Of the freedom he would never have.

The elevator waited for him at the end of the corridor. Elias approached the doors, and they opened with a soft hiss, inviting him inside. The elevator cabin was as white as everything else - sterile, faceless, with smooth walls reflecting his face. He stepped inside, and the doors closed behind him, cutting him off from the corridor.

The elevator began its descent. Elias stood motionless, looking at his reflection in the metal wall. The metal was polished to a mirror shine - so much so that he could see every wrinkle on his

face, every dark circle under his eyes, every gray strand at his temples. This face was familiar, but it seemed foreign. As if he were looking at someone else.

"Who am I?" he thought. "I am Elias Hall. I am 34 years old. I have an artificial heart that hums. I have a PC of 68%. I kill clones. I hate my job. I am afraid to die. That's all I know about myself."

The elevator continued down. Numbers on the panel flashed one after another - 27, 26, 25. He counted them mechanically, as he counted every morning. It was his ritual. His personal way of maintaining control over time. Even here, in this elevator, in this white cabin, he tried to feel he still controlled something.

"Today I will kill 12 people," he thought. "Not people. Clones. They have no names. They have no faces. They only have expiration dates. But when I look into their eyes, I see myself. I see what I will become. I see what awaits me."

The elevator stopped on the first level. Doors opened, letting in light and the sounds of the city. Elias stepped out into a large foyer, where other assets were already crowding, hurrying to work. No one looked at him. He was just another gray jumpsuit, another face in the crowd.

He headed toward the exit. The screen above the entrance showed news again - this time about clones, about new contracts, about how to efficiently use their resource. Elias did not listen. He was thinking about his day. About twelve clones. About his salary. About his PC. About how he would buy synthetic whiskey when he got home.

"Then I'll get 200 credits," he continued thinking. "Then I'll buy whiskey. Then I'll sleep. And tomorrow I'll wake up and do the same thing. This is my life. This is my job. This is all I have."

He stepped out into the street. The city met him with gray skies, holographic signs, and drones silently gliding overhead. Elias took a deep breath. The synthesized air smelled of ozone. He closed his eyes for a second and imagined he was breathing real air. That he was standing in the green zone. That wind touched his face.

But when he opened his eyes, he was still here. In New Tokyo-3. In the world where he was an asset. Where his existence was determined by numbers on a screen. Where his life was not his own.

"But maybe," he thought, "if I do this long enough, I'll save up for a new heart. Or a new PC. Or just for not waking up one day. Maybe one day I just won't wake up. And that will be better than everything I'm doing now."

He walked along the street. His steps were even, confident, mechanical. Like an asset who knows his path. He was walking to sector D-7, to his twelve clones, to his work. And his face showed no expression. Only fatigue. Only acceptance. Only emptiness.

Elias entered the staff cafeteria. A large, white room with long plastic tables built into the floor and plastic chairs that did not move - they were part of the structure. On the walls - holograms advertising corporate products, changing every thirty seconds. "Genesis - care for your life," "Agro-Continent - food for the future," "Cyber-Fund - your digital passport to a new era." Elias did not look at them. He already knew these slogans by heart. They were part of his morning, like the sound of his heart.

The cafeteria was crowded. The queue at the serving counter stretched ten people deep. Elias stood at the end of the queue, feeling his muscles ache after the workout. He looked straight ahead, not meeting the eyes of other users. This was an unspoken rule: do not look. Do not ask questions. Do not show interest. Everyone was on their own, even standing in line beside others.

Ahead of him stood a woman - middle-aged, with short red hair and the same scar on her chest as his. He recognized her. Lynn. Worked in the neighboring sector. They sometimes crossed paths at the bar in the evenings, but never talked about work. It was taboo. You do not talk about your work, because your work is killing. You do not talk about death, because it is everywhere.

Hall, - she said without turning her head. - You look like crap today.

Good morning, Lynn, - he replied with the same tired irony that had become his habit. - You look more cheerful than usual too. Positively blooming.

She smirked - shortly, without warmth.

I'm not blooming, Hall. I'm just showing the system what it wants to see. If you pretend to be happy, the system thinks you're efficient. It works. Try it.

I've tried. Doesn't work for me.

Then you're not trying hard enough.

They fell silent. The queue slowly moved forward. Elias looked at the serving counter, where faceless machines stood. Plastic plates, plastic cups, plastic utensils. Everything synthesized. Everything lifeless. Food that smelled of plastic and had no taste.

What do you think, - said Lynn, still looking straight ahead, - what will happen when we become consumables?

Elias paused. He thought about this often. Every night, lying in his capsule, he asked himself this question. What would happen when his PC dropped below the critical mark? Would his heart be shut off? Would he be sent to the disposer? Would he be made to watch as they took him apart for spare parts?

I don't know, - he answered honestly. - But I know it will happen sooner than I want. It happens to everyone sooner than they want.

We are assets, - said Lynn. - Assets have no right to want.

They reached the serving counter. The machine glowed green, and two plastic trays appeared before them. On each - a portion of synthesized porridge, gray and tasteless, and a glass of water. The same synthesized water that was just liquid but was not wet.

Elias took his tray and walked to an empty table. Lynn sat across from him. They began to eat in silence. The porridge was tasteless, like yesterday, like the day before, like a year ago. It was food, but it was not nourishment. It was just fuel for his body. Fuel that allowed him to continue working.

Elias chewed slowly, feeling the synthesized mass turn into gray sludge in his mouth. He swallowed it because he had to. Because if he did not eat, his PC would fall. And then he would become consumable material.

Today I have twelve, - he said, staring at his plate. - In sector D-7.

I have eleven, - Lynn replied. - In sector D-5. Children.

Elias looked up at her. She stared at her plate, her face expressionless. But in her voice, when she said "children," he heard the same echo he heard in himself every day. An echo that no amount of iron could drown out.

Just do your job, - he said. - Don't think about them. It's the only way to survive.

I know, - Lynn replied. - I don't think anyway. I'm just stating facts.

They fell silent again. The food on their plates gradually disappeared. Elias felt his stomach fill with this synthesized fuel. It was not tasty, not pleasant, not nourishing in the way real food is nourishing. It just dulled hunger. Like water quenches thirst but does not give life.

"I want real food," he thought. "I want bread. I want meat. I want to taste something. Just once in my life."

But he knew real food was only for top managers. For those with PC above ninety percent. For those with real hearts. For those who lived in green zones. For those who did not kill people in the mornings.

Lynn finished eating and pushed her plate away. She looked at Elias, and a shadow of the same fatigue he felt flickered in her eyes.

What do you think, - she asked quietly, - do they feel pain?

Elias froze. He knew she was talking about the clones.

The system says no, - he answered. - The system says their nervous system is modified. That they feel nothing. But I've seen their faces, Lynn. I've seen their eyes. They feel.

Lynn nodded without a word. She stood up and walked toward the exit.

Elias remained sitting at the table, staring at the empty plate. He thought about the twelve clones in sector D-7. About how they would look at him when he entered. About what they would feel when he raised his gun. About what they would think when he pulled the trigger.

"They're just like me," he thought. "They're also assets. They also follow protocols. The only difference is their expiration date has passed. And mine hasn't. Yet."

Elias slowly finished his porridge, trying not to think about what he was eating. The porridge was gray, uniform, with a slight chemical aftertaste that lingered on his tongue long after he swallowed. It was the taste of plastic. The taste of synthesized food produced by Agro-Continent in its laboratories. Food for assets. Food that was not food.

He remembered how his mother used to give him bread as a child. Real bread. Warm, with a crispy crust that crumbled in his fingers, leaving crumbs on the table. He remembered the smell - deep, rich, filling the whole kitchen. He remembered tearing off a piece and feeling the crumb melt in his mouth. It was alive. It was real.

Now he ate gray mass that had no smell, no taste, no form. He swallowed it, feeling nothing but emptiness. And he knew it would always be this way. Until he died. Until he was replaced.

"I remember my mother baking bread," he thought. "She got up early in the morning, when it was still dark. I heard her fussing in the kitchen, the bowls clinking, the flour rustling. I woke up to the smell. The warm smell of bread, wafting through the whole house. I got up, went to the kitchen, and sat at the table. Mother looked at me and smiled. 'Good morning, my little one,' she said. And she gave me a piece of bread. Hot, soft, with butter. I remember that taste. I remember it still."

He closed his eyes. For a moment, he felt the smell of bread fill his consciousness. He could almost taste it. Almost feel the warm crumb touch his tongue. But it was only a mirage. When he opened his eyes, he was looking at his gray plate, and in it was only synthesized porridge.

The taste of plastic, - he said aloud, to no one in particular.

Beside him sat a man he had not noticed. Elderly, with sparse gray hair and deep wrinkles on his face. He looked at Elias with the same tired expression everyone in this cafeteria wore.

Did you say something? - the man asked.

No, - Elias replied. - Nothing important.

The man nodded and returned to his plate. Elias looked at his hands - they trembled. A slight tremor, the same he felt every morning. The man was old. He was about sixty - or more. He was an asset who had long exceeded his expiration date. But somehow he had not been written off yet.

Have you worked here long? - Elias asked, breaking the silence.

The man looked up at him. His eyes held the same emptiness as everyone else's.

Thirty years, - he answered. - Thirty years I've worked for the corporation. They promised me the green zone. Promised me real food. Promised me a pension. Gave me nothing.

Why are you still here? - Elias asked.

The man laughed bitterly, without joy.

Where would I go? - he asked. - The Gray Zones? I'd die there in a week. Here I'll die in a month. The only difference is here I can die in warmth. And eat this porridge.

He raised his plate.

You know, - he said, - when I was young, I thought I could change everything. I thought if I worked well, the system would reward me. I was an idiot. The system doesn't reward. The system takes. It takes your life, your strength, your time. And when you have nothing left to give - it throws you away. Like trash.

He put his spoon on the plate and stood.

My advice to you, kid, - he said, looking down at Elias, - don't hope. Hope kills. If you stop hoping, it'll be easier. You'll become part of the system. You'll become like everyone else. And you won't suffer.

He turned and walked away, leaving Elias alone at the table. Elias watched his retreating back - stooped, slow, old. And he thought: "I don't want to become like that. I don't want to live to sixty and still eat this porridge. I don't want to die in warmth, knowing my life was empty. I want to change something. I want to break out."

But he knew it was impossible. That it was just a dream. Another lie he told himself so he could keep getting up in the mornings.

He finished his porridge and pushed the plate away. The hologram on the wall showed Iris Vos's face again. She smiled, and her red hair shone against the gray cafeteria wall. "Traitor," read the caption. "Fugitive clone." Elias looked at her and felt his heart beat faster. Not from fear. Not from anxiety. From something else. Something he could not explain.

"You are a traitor," he thought. "You risked everything for a clone. You did what I cannot do. You told the system 'no.' You left. You escaped. You are free."

He looked at her smile and thought: "I will never be free. I will die here. In this cafeteria. With this porridge. With this plastic taste in my mouth. And no one will remember me."

He stood and left the cafeteria. The corridor met him with whiteness and silence. He walked toward the exit, toward his workplace, toward his twelve clones. And his face showed no expression. Only fatigue. Only acceptance. Only emptiness.

Elias walked along the corridor when he heard voices. They came from a side passage where utility rooms were located. He slowed his pace, listening. It was not a conversation - it was a farewell ritual. The kind he had heard many times. The kind that always ended in silence.

He turned the corner and saw them. Three clone-cleaners stood at the entrance to the technical room. Their uniforms were old, worn, with faded Agro-Continent logos. They looked alike - pale, thin, with empty eyes and identical scars on their wrists. But one stood out. He stood in the center, and his hands trembled. On his neck was a bandage - not medical, but a marking band. Yellow. The color that meant "expired."

Elias stopped. He should not interfere. It was not his business. Clones were consumable material. When their time ran out, they were disposed of. That was someone else's job, not his. But he could not leave. He watched them and felt his heart beat faster.

Farewell, Rudolph, - said one of the clones, a young man with sparse stubble on his face. - You were a good partner.

Thank you, - Rudolph replied. His voice was quiet, hoarse, with a slight tremor. - I will always remember you.

Where will you go? - asked the third clone, a woman with short dark hair.

Rudolph laughed shortly.

To the disposer, - he said. - Where else?

They fell silent. No one knew what to say. Words were useless. Like hope. Like regrets. Like everything else in this world.

Elias watched them and felt his body tense. He knew he should leave. That he had no right to watch this. That it was too personal, too painful. But he could not look away.

You'll be in his place someday too, - said a quiet voice behind him.

He turned. Beside him stood Lynn. She was watching the clones with the same expression as him - a mixture of fatigue and pain.

I know, - he replied. - I think about it every day.

We all think about it, - said Lynn. - We just don't say it aloud.

They stood and watched the clones say goodbye. Rudolph hugged each of them - long, tight, as if he wanted to remember their warmth. Then he stepped back and walked toward the exit, where two guards in black uniforms already waited.

They took him. One guard took Rudolph's arm, the other his shoulder. They were not cruel - they were mechanical. They were doing their job. Like everyone else.

Tell my family, - Rudolph said as they led him past, - that I died quickly. Without pain. And that I loved them.

We'll tell them, - one of the clones replied.

Rudolph looked at them one last time. A smile flickered in his eyes - the last spark of life still in him.

Good luck to you, - he said. - Live.

He disappeared around the corner. The guards led him to the elevator that took him to the disposer. Elias stood and watched the doors close.

How old was he? - he asked.

Eight years, - Lynn replied. - He was a clone. Eight years - the standard term for cleaners.

Elias was silent. Eight years. He had worked for the corporation for ten years. He was older than Rudolph. More efficient. But he knew that one day he would be in his place. That one day the guards would come for him, and his colleagues would stand and watch him being led away.

I don't want to die in the disposer, - he said.

No one does, - Lynn replied. - But we'll all end up there.

They parted. Lynn walked toward her sector, and Elias remained standing in the corridor. He stared at the door behind which Rudolph had disappeared. He thought about how the clones had said goodbye to each other. How they had hugged him. How they told him he had been a good partner. He thought about how he had no such relationships. That he had no one to tell him: "You were a good partner." That he would die alone, as he had lived.

I don't want to die alone, - he whispered.

But his words were drowned in the hum of the ventilation. No one heard them. And no one answered.

He walked on. Toward his workplace. Toward his twelve clones. Toward his death, waiting at the end of this path.

Elias left the cafeteria and headed to the transport station. His steps were even, confident, like an asset who knows his path. But inside, everything trembled. The memory of Rudolph, of his farewell, of his smile - all of it was stuck in his head, refusing to let go.

"Eight years," he thought. "He lived eight years. He worked as a cleaner. He never knew real food. He never knew freedom. He just existed until his time ran out. And now he's in the disposer. Like trash."

He stopped at the station entrance. Above him hung a screen broadcasting news. This time it showed Marcus Vos's face - an old man with cold blue eyes and gray hair.

"Dear users," Marcus said. "We are building a future for everyone. Our corporation is your security, your well-being, your life. Follow protocols, and you will be protected. Break the rules - and you will become consumable material. The choice is yours."

Elias looked at his face and felt anger rising in his chest. For the first time in years, he felt real rage. Not at the system. Not at the protocols. At himself. For letting this happen. For not resisting. For being just like everyone else.

"I don't want to be an asset," he thought. "I don't want to be consumable material. I want to be human."

But he knew it was impossible. That the system would not let him escape. That he would die here, in New Tokyo-3, like everyone else.

He boarded the vacuum train. The carriage was almost empty - only a few passengers sat in corners, staring at their terminals. Elias sat in an empty seat and closed his eyes. The train glided forward, and he felt his body slip into a half-slumber.

His heart beat steadily. Vzh-vzh-vzh. This sound had become his lullaby. Every morning he heard it on his way to work. And every morning he felt his hatred for this sound grow stronger.

"I hate my heart," he thought. "I hate this body. I hate this life. I hate everything."

But he knew hatred would not save him. It would only make him weaker. It would only lower his PC. It would only bring him closer to death.

He opened his eyes and looked out the window. New Tokyo-3 flashed by - skyscrapers, holograms, drones. Everything was gray. Everything was dead. Everything was the same.

"Kane-39," he remembered. "Iris Vos. They escaped. They risked everything. They did what I cannot do."

He thought about what it would be like to be in their place. To meet someone worth risking everything for. To find freedom.

"But I won't find it," he told himself. "I'm too tired. Too weak. Just an asset."

The train stopped at the station. Elias stepped out onto the platform of "Central-3" station. The platform was huge - dozens of tracks, hundreds of passengers hurrying in different directions. All in gray jumpsuits, all with the same faces, all with the same expression of emptiness. No one looked at each other. No one talked. Everyone was busy with their own affairs - or pretending to be.

Elias headed toward the exit, but halfway there he slowed. Above the platform hung a giant screen - one of those broadcasting corporate news. He usually did not look at them. But today something made him look up.

On the screen, in bright blue tones, a headline flashed: "ATTENTION! WANTED: TRAITORS." And below - two photographs. A man and a woman. The man was tall, muscular, with short dark hair and harsh features. On his chest, just below the collarbone, was a tattoo - the number "39" and a heart with a woman's name inside. The woman was different - fragile, with bright red hair that stood out against the gray world. Her eyes were large and green, with that desperate determination that appears in people who have nothing left to lose.

Elias froze. He stared at the photographs, unable to believe his eyes. He had never seen these people. But he felt he should know them. That their fate was tied to his. That they were part of something bigger than just news.

The announcer's voice continued:

Citizen-users! Genesis Corporation is wanted for two dangerous criminals. First - Kane-39, a fugitive clone-soldier who left corporate custody without permission. Second - Iris Vos, granddaughter of the corporation's head, who helped him escape and is now hiding with him. For information on Kane-39's whereabouts, a reward of 50,000 credits is offered. For information on Iris Vos's whereabouts - 10 million credits, provided she is captured alive. Those wishing to cooperate should contact the nearest Genesis security center. Remember: traitors deserve no mercy. Purity Coefficient is our common future.

Elias continued staring at the screen. The photographs disappeared, replaced by a new advertisement - Agro-Continent promoting a new synthesized breakfast with "natural berry flavor." He did not listen. He stared at where the faces of these two people had been.

Kane-39. Fugitive clone. Iris Vos. Granddaughter of the corporation's head. They had escaped together. They were being hunted. And he, Elias - a purger who killed such clones every morning - was now supposed to search for them if he wanted to survive.

Did you hear? - came a voice behind him.

Elias turned. Beside him stood a colleague - a man named Daniel, whom he sometimes crossed paths with at the bar. Daniel was older, with gray stubble and a glass eye he had received after a failed surgery. He looked at the screen with the same mixture of fear and curiosity as Elias.

I heard, - Elias replied. - Kane-39. Iris Vos. Traitors.

They say they're in love, - Daniel said, lowering his voice. - A clone and the boss's granddaughter. Can you imagine? They kissed under the cameras. Five minutes. Right in the lab. They managed to disable the surveillance system for five whole minutes. Idiots. Why risk it for that?

Elias was silent. He did not know what to answer. Love. The word sounded strange in his head, almost foreign. Love was a luxury. For clones - forbidden. For people like him - unattainable. He had long stopped thinking about feelings. They were just another function that lowered his PC.

Why did they need it? - he finally asked.

No idea, - Daniel replied. - Maybe they were insane. Or just didn't think. But now they're being hunted. And if they're caught, disposal awaits them. Both of them.

They fell silent. On the screen, the photographs appeared again, this time close-up. Kane-39's face was harsh, but in his eyes Elias saw the same pain he felt every day. And Iris Vos's eyes - they looked at him from the screen with such pleading that his heart clenched.

"I know you," he thought, looking at her photograph. "I don't know how I know you. But I know."

He could not explain this feeling. It was irrational, illogical, dangerous. Empathy. The very empathy that lowered his PC. The very empathy that killed him every day. He should forget her face. Should focus on his work. On the twelve clones in sector D-7. On his PC, falling with each passing day.

But he could not.

Are you coming? - Daniel asked, already walking away. - We need to get to the briefing.

Coming, - Elias replied, but his feet did not move. He stood and stared at the screen until the photographs disappeared, replaced by another Cyber-Fund advertisement. "Digital Passport 2.0 - your security in our hands," the slogan read. Elias did not believe it. He did not believe anything written on these screens.

He turned and followed Daniel. His steps were heavy, as if he carried a burden that grew heavier with each step. He thought about Kane-39 and Iris Vos. About how they had kissed under the cameras. About how they had risked everything for five minutes of happiness.

"They're idiots," he told himself. "They've ruined themselves. They won't survive. None of us survive."

But deep inside, beneath layers of fatigue and cynicism, something warm stirred. Something he had not felt in years. Hope. Stupid, irrational, dangerous hope that something could still change. That all was not lost.

He suppressed the feeling. He could not afford hope. Hope lowered his PC. Hope killed. He knew that. Knew it better than anyone.

Elias and Daniel stepped out into the street. New Tokyo-3 met them with gray skies, holographic signs, and drones silently gliding overhead. The air was synthesized, smelled of ozone and plastic. Real air only in the green zones. Elias had never been there.

You look worried, - Daniel said as they walked along the street. - Something happen?

Nothing, - Elias replied. - Just thinking. About work.

About work, - Daniel smirked. - You think too much, Hall. It's bad for your PC. Just do your job and don't ask questions. That's how everyone survives.

I know, - Elias said. - I know, Daniel. Thanks for the advice.

They parted at the intersection. Daniel walked toward sector D-5, and Elias toward D-7. The city around them was filled with people, but each was alone. Each was an asset. Each performed their function. No one told each other the truth.

Elias walked along the street, his heart beating in time with his steps. Vzh-vzh-vzh. He looked at the drones flying overhead. At their red lights, flickering on and off. At the walls of buildings covered with corporate holograms.

Above him, the screen hummed again. This time it showed Marcus Vos's face - the old man with cold blue eyes and gray hair. Elias looked at him and felt his stomach clench with nausea.

"Dear users," Marcus said. "Today I want to talk to you about betrayal. About how one person can destroy everything we have built. My granddaughter, Iris Vos, chose the path of betrayal. She

helped a fugitive clone escape. She betrayed her family, her corporation, her values. But we will find her. We will find them both. And they will pay for their crimes. Remember: betrayal is not just a violation of rules. It is a violation of your nature. It is a rejection of your essence. Do not let emotions control you. Follow protocols, and you will be protected. Break the rules - and you will become consumable material. The choice is yours."

Elias looked at Marcus Vos's face and felt his hands clench into fists. He hated this man. Hated his cold eyes, his mechanical smile, his words that sounded like a sentence. But he could do nothing. He was just an asset. Just a cog in this machine.

Did you see the news? - someone asked behind him.

Elias turned. Beside him stood a woman - young, with short dark hair and a pale face. She was looking at the screen with the same expression as him.

I saw, - he replied.

She's beautiful, - the woman said. - Iris Vos. I saw her photograph. She looks like a person with a heart. A real heart.

She has one, - Elias said. - She's the boss's granddaughter. People like her have everything. Real hearts, real food, real lives.

The woman laughed shortly.

And do you think she's happy? - she asked. - Do you think she's glad she was born into this family? That she looks at her grandfather and sees a monster? She ran away because she didn't want to be part of this. She risked everything for love. Does that make her weak? Or does it make her human?

Elias was silent. He did not know the answer. He thought about what it meant to be human. What it meant to feel. What it meant to love. He had not felt anything for years. He was empty. Dead inside. But when he looked at Iris Vos's photograph, he felt something stir in his chest. Something he could not explain.

I don't know, - he finally said. - I just don't know.

Maybe, - the woman said, - we will all someday become like her. People with hearts. Or die trying.

She turned and walked away. Elias remained standing in the street, staring at the screen showing Marcus Vos's face. He thought about what the woman had said. Thought about what it meant to be human. Thought about how he had lost his humanity long ago.

"I want to be human," he thought. "I want to feel. I want to love. I want to be free."

But he knew it was impossible. That the system would not let him break free. That he would die here, in this gray city, like everyone else.

He walked on. Toward his workplace. Toward his twelve clones. Toward his death, waiting at the end of this path.

Elias approached the building where his department was located. White, glass, sterile. Like everything in this city. He stopped before the entrance and took a deep breath. The synthesized air smelled of ozone. He closed his eyes and imagined standing in a forest. That wind touched his face. That his heart beat steadily, without this cursed sound.

But when he opened his eyes, he was still here. In New Tokyo-3. In the center of corporate hell. With twelve clones waiting for him in sector D-7. With the photographs of Kane-39 and Iris Vos forever burned into his memory.

He entered the building. The foyer was crowded - dozens of purgers hurrying to their stations. They did not exchange smiles. Did not speak to each other. They were like ghosts - gray, silent, faceless.

Elias headed for the elevator. On the wall hung a screen broadcasting news. This time it showed Iris Vos's photograph close-up. Her red hair, green eyes, wide smile. She looked like a person with a future. Like someone who could change everything.

"Turn her in - and you will be free forever," read the headline.

Elias looked at her face and felt his heart beat faster. He did not want to turn her in. He wanted to help her. He wanted to be part of something bigger. He wanted to be free.

"I can't," he thought. "I'm too weak. Too tired. Just an asset."

But deep inside, somewhere, a voice whispered: "You can. You must try. Even if it changes nothing. Even if you die. You must try."

He looked away from the screen and entered the elevator. The doors closed behind him, and he was alone in the white cabin. He looked at his reflection in the metal wall and thought about what he had just seen.

"She escaped," he thought. "She risked everything for love. She did what I cannot do. She told the system 'no.' She left. She is free."

He closed his eyes. Her face appeared before him again. Her smile. Her red hair. He wanted to be near her. He wanted to be as brave. He wanted to be human.

The elevator stopped. Doors opened, letting in light and corridor sounds. Elias stepped out and walked toward his office. He knew work awaited him. His twelve clones awaited him. Death awaited him. But now, in this moment, he thought only of one thing: freedom.

"I must find her," he thought. "I must find Iris Vos. I must help her. Not for the reward. But to change something. To prove I am still human."

He stepped into his office. On the desk lay the day's work plan. Twelve clones in sector D-7. Time: 09:00. He looked at the plan and smiled. For the first time in years, he smiled genuinely.

"Today I won't kill them," he thought. "Today I'll do something different. Today I'll change my life."

He left the office and headed for the elevator. He needed to go to sector D-7. But he was not going to kill. He was going to talk. He was going to help. He was going to be human.

Elias entered the elevator taking him to the lower levels, where sector D-7 was located. The elevator was old, with metal walls covered in layers of peeling paint. Here, on the lower levels, the system was not so perfect. There were cracks in the walls, dirt in the corners, the smell of dampness and chemicals. This was the world the corporation did not show in its holograms. The world where clones lived.

Elias stood in the corner of the elevator, looking at his reflection in the metal wall and thinking about what he was about to do. He was about to break the rules. He was about to refuse his work. He was about to become a traitor. Like Iris Vos. Like Kane-39.

"I want to be a traitor," he thought. "I want to be free."

The elevator stopped. Doors opened, and he stepped into the corridor. The corridor was long, dark, with dim lamps flickering in time with the ventilation hum. The walls were dirty, with stains that could have been anything - rust, mold, blood.

Elias walked along the corridor. Behind every door were clones. He knew them - they were his work. But today he was not going to kill them. Today he was going to talk to them.

He stopped at the first door. On it was a sign: "Clone No. 1. Expiration date: expired." Elias raised his hand and knocked.

Who's there? - came a voice from inside.

Elias Hall, - he replied. - Corrector.

I know who you are, - said the voice. - You've come to kill me?

Elias paused.

No, - he said. - I've come to talk.

Why?

Because I want to change my life, - he said. - I want to be human.

Silence inside. Then the door opened. In the doorway stood a man - young, pale, with black hair and dark eyes. He was a clone. He was consumable material. But he looked at Elias with the same mixture of fear and hope that Elias felt himself.

Let's talk, - said the clone.

Elias stepped out of the elevator onto the floor where the head of department's office was located. This floor was different from all the others - clean, bright, sterile. White walls, white floor, white ceiling. No cracks, no dirt, no stains. Here it smelled not of ozone and chemicals, but of something else - artificial freshness sprayed by air purifiers. This was the floor for managers. For those who stood one step above people like him.

Elias walked along the corridor, his footsteps echoing in the silence. There were no crowds of users, no ventilation hum, no elevator noise. Only silence. The kind that pressed on the ears. He felt like a stranger in this place. As if he had entered a sanctuary where he did not belong.

He stopped before a massive glass door. Behind it - the head of department's office. J.S. The man who managed his life, his work, his fate. The man who decided whether he lived or died.

Elias raised his hand to knock, but the door opened by itself. The glass panel slid silently aside, and he stepped inside. The office was huge - fifty meters, at least. White walls, white floor, white ceiling. A huge glass desk, behind which sat the head. Behind him - a panoramic window overlooking the city. From here, from this level, New Tokyo-3 looked beautiful. Skyscrapers shone, holograms shimmered, drones looked like small shiny dots. Elias had never seen this view. And he knew he would never see it again.

Hall, - came a voice. Sharp, dry, emotionless. - You're three minutes late.

Elias shifted his gaze to the head. J.S. sat behind the glass desk, looking at him through the transparent surface. He was a man of about fifty, with short gray hair and equally gray eyes. His face showed no expression - only a slight smirk, the kind that appears on people accustomed to power. His skin was unnaturally smooth - modified. Elias noticed immediately. Eyes slightly brighter than ordinary people. Skin without wrinkles. A body that looked too strong for his age. J.S. was a modified person. He was one who could afford enhancements.

I'm sorry, sir, - Elias said, trying to keep his voice steady. - I was delayed in the cafeteria.

The cafeteria, - J.S. repeated. - You linger in the cafeteria while your PC is falling. Is that smart? No. It's stupid. You cannot afford to be stupid, Hall. You have no resource for stupidity.

Elias was silent. He knew arguing was useless. J.S. never listened to excuses. He only looked at numbers. Only at efficiency. Only at protocols.

Sit, - the head said, indicating the chair before the desk.

Elias sat. The chair was soft - too soft for such a place. He felt uncomfortable, as if sitting on a cloud that could disappear at any moment.

J.S. picked up a tablet from the desk and swiped his finger across the screen.

Today you have twelve defects in sector D-7, - he said. - You saw the work plan?

Yes, sir.

And what do you think?

Elias paused. He did not know what to answer. Usually he just nodded and agreed. But today something had changed. Today he did not want to be obedient.

I think, sir, - he said slowly, - that twelve is a lot.

J.S. raised an eyebrow. His face remained impassive, but something like interest flickered in his eyes.

A lot? - he repeated. - Are you saying you can't handle it?

I'm saying, sir, - Elias replied, - that twelve clones is too many for one person. Even if they are defective. Even if their expiration date has passed.

J.S. smirked. Short, without warmth.

Hall, - he said, - you've been working for the corporation for ten years. You know the rules. You know the protocols. You know what's required of you. Twelve is the norm. You've handled more. Remember? Last year you had fifteen. And nothing. You survived.

Last year I was younger, - Elias said.

We all get older, - J.S. replied. - That's no excuse.

He put the tablet on the desk and looked directly at Elias. His gray eyes were cold as ice.

Hall, - he said, - your PC is falling. You know that? You know that the critical level is 65%? And you know that if you fall below that, you become consumable material?

I know, sir.

Then why are you arguing? Why waste time? If you don't handle the work, your PC will fall even faster. Do you want to become consumable material?

Elias was silent. He wanted to say no, but the words stuck in his throat. Because he did not know if he wanted to live. Because the life he lived was not life. It was existence. And he did not know which was worse - to die now or to continue this endless torment.

I don't want to become consumable material, - he finally said.

Then do your job, - J.S. replied. - Don't ask questions. Don't doubt. Just do it. That's the only way to survive.

He reached out and pressed a button on the desk. A hologram lit up in the room - a three-dimensional image of sector D-7. Elias saw corridors, rooms, capsules with clones. Each capsule was marked with a red dot - "defect. Disposal."

Here are your twelve, - J.S. said. - Clones. Expiration date passed. They are not needed by the corporation. Your task is to dispose of them. Quickly, cleanly, efficiently. Without emotions. Without compassion. Just work.

Elias looked at the hologram. He saw the capsules. He saw the clones inside. They looked like people. Like people just like him. But the system said they were not people. That they were assets. That they could be disposed of like trash.

I understand, sir, - he said.

Good, - J.S. replied. - Then go. You have two hours. If you don't make it - I'll record it as a protocol violation. And your PC will drop another two percent.

He turned off the hologram. The room became empty and white again. Elias stood and walked toward the exit.

Hall, - J.S. said behind him.

Elias turned.

Remember, - the head said, - your heart belongs to the corporation. If you don't handle it - we'll take it back. And give it to someone more efficient.

Elias looked at him. At his gray eyes. At his modified skin. At his cold smile.

I remember, sir, - he said.

He left the office. The glass door closed silently behind him. Elias remained standing in the corridor, staring at the white walls. His heart beat steadily. Vzh-vzh-vzh. And he thought about what the head had just said.

"Your heart belongs to the corporation," he remembered. "If you don't handle it - we'll take it back."

Elias looked at his chest. Beneath the jumpsuit, beneath the skin, hid a mechanical module. Fifth model. Produced by Genesis. Expiration date - ten years. It had been working for nine. One year left. One year until his heart wore out. One year until he became consumable material.

"Today I'll ask for a replacement," he automatically told himself.

But he knew he would not ask. Because replacement cost half a year's salary. Because his PC was too low to apply. Because he was too tired to fight.

He walked to the elevator. To sector D-7. To his twelve clones. To his work. And his face showed no expression. Only fatigue. Only acceptance. Only emptiness.

The elevator descended to the lower levels. Elias stood in the corner, watching the numbers flash on the panel: 15, 14, 13. With each level, the air grew heavier, the smell of dampness stronger.

Here, on the lower levels, the system was different. There were no holograms, no advertising, no perfect cleanliness. Here there was dirt, rust, and the smell of death.

He stepped out of the elevator. The corridor was dark, with dim lamps flickering in time with the ventilation hum. The walls were covered in layers of old paint, peeling away to reveal rusted metal beneath. The floor was sticky with something he did not want to identify.

Elias walked along the corridor, his footsteps echoing in the silence. He took out his terminal and opened the assignment file. Twelve clones. Names, expiration dates, coordinates. He scrolled through the list, feeling his stomach clench.

"Clone No. 1. Name: unknown. Expiration date: expired 3 days ago. Reason: biological wear. Coordinates: room 4."

"Clone No. 2. Name: unknown. Expiration date: expired 5 days ago. Reason: system failure. Coordinates: room 7."

He continued reading. Each clone was a person. Someone with hopes, dreams, feelings. But the system called them "defects." The system said they needed to be disposed of. And he carried out this task every day, without thinking.

"Clone No. 12. Name: unknown. Expiration date: expired 2 days ago. Reason: organ failure. Coordinates: room 39."

Elias stopped. Room number - 39. Kane-39. Same number. Coincidence? Or was the system mocking him?

He closed the file and put away his terminal. His hands trembled. He did not know why. Maybe from cold. Maybe from fear. Maybe from what he felt.

Just do it, - he told himself. - Just do it, Hall. It's your job. It's your life. Just do it.

He walked on. To room 4. To his first clone.

He opened the door. The room was small - three by three meters. White walls, white floor, white ceiling. Just like his capsule-apartment. In the corner stood a sleep capsule. Just like his. Inside lay a clone.

Elias stepped closer. The clone was a man - young, with pale skin and short dark hair. He was thin, almost transparent, with bluish veins visible through his skin. His eyes were closed. He was unconscious - or dead. Elias checked his terminal. "Status: active. Condition: critical. Expiration date: expired. Recommended: disposal."

Elias raised his taser. He looked at the clone's face. At his calm expression. At his closed eyes. He thought about how this person had once been like him. Had hopes, dreams, feelings. Also wanted to live.

"I can't," he thought. "I can't kill him. I can't do this again."

But he knew he had to. That if he refused, his PC would fall. That if he refused, he would become consumable material. That if he refused, his heart would be shut off.

He raised the taser. His hand trembled. He looked at the clone and felt tears rise to his eyes. He had not cried for years. But now, looking at this defenseless face, he felt his eyes fill with moisture.

I'm sorry, - he said. - I'm sorry I can't save you. I'm sorry I'm weak.

He pulled the trigger. The taser made a soft sound, and the clone flinched. Then his body went limp. He was dead.

Elias turned away. He could not look at him. Could not look at what he had just done.

"Twelve," he thought. "Twelve like him. Twelve lives I must take. This is my job. This is my life. This is all I have."

He left the room and walked to the next one. His steps were heavy, as if he carried a burden that grew heavier with each step.

"I want to be human," he thought. "I want to feel. I want to love. I want to be free."

But he knew it was impossible. That he was too weak. Too tired. Just an asset.

He opened the next door.

Elias entered the next room. It was the same as the first - white, empty, with a sleep capsule in the corner. Inside lay the second clone. A woman. Young, with short dark hair and pale skin. She was alive - her chest rose and fell slowly. She looked at him, and there was fear in her eyes.

You've come to kill me? - she asked.

Elias froze. He had not expected her to speak. Had not expected her to look at him. Had not expected her to be afraid.

I... - he began, but the words stuck in his throat.

You're a purger, - she said. - I know who you are. You've come to kill me because my expiration date has passed. Because I'm defective. Because the system doesn't need me.

I'm sorry, - he said. - I don't want to...

No one wants to, - she replied. - But everyone does. It's your job. It's my death. That's how the world works.

Elias looked at her. He saw her fear. He saw her pain. And he felt his own heart beat faster, his hands begin to tremble.

I don't want to kill you, - he said. - I don't want to.

Then don't, - she said. - But you know what will happen if you refuse. Your PC will fall. You'd be written off. You'd become like me. Consumable material.

He looked at her. She was right. He knew that. But he could not bring himself to pull the trigger. Could not kill her. She was like him. She was human.

I can't, - he said. - I can't do this again.

She looked at him, and a spark of hope flickered in her eyes.

Then help me, - she said. - Help me escape. Help me survive.

Elias froze. He did not know what to answer. Did not know what to do. Did not know how to help her.

I can't, - he said. - I have nowhere to go. Nowhere to run.

Then die with me, - she said. - Die as a human. Not as an asset.

Elias looked at her. He felt his heart beat faster. Felt tears rise to his eyes. Felt fear and hope battle in his soul.

"I want to be human," he thought. "I want to be free. I want to live."

He walked to the capsule. Extended his hand and touched her shoulder. She flinched but did not pull away.

I'll help you, - he said. - I'll help you escape.

She looked at him. Gratitude in her eyes.

Thank you, - she said. - Thank you.

Elias opened the capsule. Helped her stand. She was weak, but she stood. He took her hand.

Come, - he said. - I'll get you out of here.

They walked along the corridor. Elias led her toward the exit. He knew this was insane. Knew it could cost him his life. But he could not stop. He wanted to be human. And a human does not kill other humans.

"I will become a traitor," he thought. "Like Iris Vos. Like Kane-39. I'll risk everything for her."

He walked, his steps confident. He did not know what lay ahead. But he knew he was doing the right thing.

Elias led the clone into the corridor. They walked together, quickly and quietly, trying not to attract attention. The woman was weak - she leaned on his shoulder, her breathing was shallow, her legs buckled. But she walked. She wanted to live. And this desire, this spark of life in her eyes, reminded him of what he himself had once felt. Many years ago. Before he became an asset.

Where are we going? - she asked, her voice quiet and hoarse, with a slight tremor. She looked up at him, trust in her eyes. Trust he did not deserve. Trust he could destroy at any moment.

Down, - he replied, trying to keep his voice steady. - To the lower levels. Where the system cannot see. Where you can hide. There are old tunnels there leading to the Gray Zones. I've heard about them from other purgers. They are unguarded. The system forgot about them.

And you? - she asked, her hand gripping his shoulder tighter. - What will happen to you?

Elias was silent. He did not know what would happen to him. He only knew he had broken the rules. That he had become a traitor. That his PC would fall. That his heart could be shut off. That the head of department had probably already noticed his absence. That the system was already tracking his movements through the corridors, his deviation from the route, his non-standard behavior.

"They already know," he thought. "They already see me. They are already preparing my punishment."

He looked at the woman. She was young - about twenty, no more. Her face was pale, almost transparent, with bluish veins under the skin. Her eyes - large, dark, with that desperate hope he had only seen in those with nothing to lose. She was a clone. She was consumable material. But now she was something more to him. A reminder that he was still human. That he could still feel. That he could still choose.

"I will die," he thought. "I will die for her. And that will be a better death than I could have imagined. I will not die in the disposer like trash. I will die saving someone. I will die as a human."

They stopped at the elevator. Elias pressed the button. The elevator was old - metal doors covered in rust, the control panel cracked, some buttons not working. But it worked. It descended to the lower levels, where the system was weaker, where cameras did not work, where one could hide.

Thank you, - she said, her voice trembling. - Thank you for saving me. I don't know why you're doing this. But I'm grateful. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to be disposed of like trash. I wanted to live. I wanted to see the sun. The real sun. Not a hologram.

Don't thank me, - he said without looking at her. - I'm doing this for myself. I want to be human. I want to prove to myself that I'm not yet a machine. That I can still feel. That I can still choose.

She looked at him. Gratitude and fear in her eyes. But also something else. Something he could not explain. Maybe hope. Maybe respect. Maybe love. He did not know. Did not want to know.

The elevator stopped. Doors opened, letting in dark, damp air. The lower level. It was cold here. Smelled of mold and rust. No holograms, no advertising, no drones. Only empty corridors, abandoned rooms, and silence. The kind that pressed on the ears.

Come, - he said, taking her hand. - We need to go. We have little time.

They walked along the corridor. Lamps flickered, sometimes going out for seconds, plunging them into total darkness. Elias felt her hand tremble in his. She was afraid. But she walked. She trusted him.

What's your name? - he suddenly asked. He did not know why he asked. Maybe to remember her. Maybe so she would not be just another clone to him. Maybe so she would become human in his eyes.

Clara, - she replied. - My name is Clara. I was a worker at the Agro-Continent factory. I worked there for six years. Then my kidneys started failing. The system said I was defective. That my expiration date had passed. That I needed to be disposed of. I didn't want to die. I wanted to live.

Clara, - he repeated. The name sounded strange on his tongue. He had not spoken names for years. Names were dangerous. Names made clones human. And humans were those you could not kill.

And what's your name? - she asked.

Elias, - he replied. - Elias Hall. Purger. Corrector. Class C. Asset.

She laughed shortly, without warmth.

You're not an asset, - she said. - You're human. You saved me. Assets don't save. Assets kill.

Maybe, - he said. - Maybe I just forgot I was human. Maybe you reminded me.

They continued walking. The corridor grew darker and colder. Walls covered in layers of old paint, peeling to reveal bare concrete. The floor uneven, with cracks collecting dirt. Here, on the lower levels, the system did not care about cleanliness. There were no assets to maintain here. Only waste.

Elias stopped before a small door - metal, rusty, hinges creaking with every movement. He pushed it, and it opened, letting in cold air from outside. Beyond the door was a tunnel. Dark, narrow, endless. It led to the Gray Zones. To where there was no system. To where one could be free.

Here you will be free, - he said, pointing to the tunnel. - Here the system cannot reach you. Here you can live. A real life.

She looked at the tunnel, then at him. Tears in her eyes - the first tears he had seen in years. Real tears. Living tears.

And you? - she asked. - Won't you come with me? We could leave together. We could be free. Together.

Elias shook his head. He wanted to say yes. Wanted to go with her. Wanted to be free. But he knew it was impossible. That he had no strength. That he was too tired. That his heart would soon break. That he would die in this tunnel, and she would watch him die. And that would be worse than death in the disposer. Because she would remember him. And she would suffer.

I have work, - he said. - I have a duty. I cannot leave. If I leave, they will find me. And they will find you. I cannot risk your life. You must live. You must be free. For both of us.

She took his hand and squeezed it. Her fingers were cold, but her hand was warm. Alive.

You are human, - she said. - The most human person I have ever met. I will never forget you, Elias. I will remember you all my life. However short it may be.

Go, - he said, gently freeing his hand. - Go. Live. Be free.

She looked at him one last time. Gratitude, fear, hope, and something else in her eyes. Something he could not name. Maybe love. Maybe regret. Maybe a promise.

I will live for you, - she said. - I will make sure your sacrifice is not in vain.

She turned and stepped into the tunnel. Elias watched her go, her figure gradually dissolving into the darkness. She did not look back. Did not say another word. Just walked forward, into the unknown, into freedom.

Elias stood and watched until her silhouette completely disappeared. The tunnel swallowed her, and she became part of the silence. He was alone. Alone in this dark, cold corridor. Alone with his thoughts. Alone with his pain.

"I did it," he thought. "I saved her. I became human."

But he knew this was only the beginning. That punishment awaited him. That his PC would fall. That his heart could be shut off. That the head of department had probably already noticed his absence. That the system was already tracking his movements through the corridors, his deviation from the route, his non-standard behavior.

"I will die," he thought. "I will die, but I will die human. I will die knowing I did something right. I will die knowing I am not just an asset. I will die knowing I was human."

He turned and walked back. His steps were heavy, as if he carried a burden that grew heavier with each step. He did not know how much time he had left. Maybe an hour. Maybe a minute. Maybe a second. But he knew he must return. Must finish his work. Must meet his fate.

"I will return," he thought. "I will return to my clones. I will return to my work. I will return to my death. But I will return a different person. I will return as someone who knows he can choose. Who can be free. Even if freedom lasts only a moment."

He walked along the corridor, his heart beating in time with his steps. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. The sound that reminded him he was a machine. But today this sound sounded different. It sounded like a reminder that he was still alive. That he still felt. That he was still human.

"I will die," he thought. "I will die today. But I will die knowing I saved someone. I will die knowing I was human. And that will be a better death than I could have imagined."

He entered the elevator. Doors closed behind him, and he was alone in the white cabin. He looked at his reflection in the metal wall and saw a human. Tired, frightened, but alive. A human who had made a choice. A human who had risked everything. A human who was free.

The elevator began to rise. Elias closed his eyes and imagined standing in a forest. That wind touched his face. That his heart beat steadily, without this cursed sound. That he was free.

When he opened his eyes, he was still here. In New Tokyo-3. In the center of corporate hell. But he was no longer an asset. He was human. And he was ready to meet his death.

The elevator stopped at the level of sector D-7. Doors opened, and Elias stepped into the corridor. The air was heavy, saturated with the smell of dampness, rust, and something else - that sweet smell he had learned to recognize over the years. The smell of decay. The smell of death. The smell of what the system called "biological wear."

Elias stood in the corridor, looking at the endless row of doors. Each led to a room where a clone waited. Each was marked with a red dot on his terminal. "Defect. Disposal." He had saved one. He could not save them all. And now he had to return to his work. Had to kill. Had to be an asset.

"I don't want to," he thought. "I don't want to do this again. I don't want to kill. I want to be human. But I have to. I have to return. I have to finish. I have to meet my fate."

He took a deep breath. The synthesized air smelled of ozone and chemicals. He closed his eyes for a moment, imagining standing in a forest. That wind touched his face. That he was free. But when he opened his eyes, he was still here. In this corridor. In this hell.

He walked toward room 7. The third clone waited there. Elias opened the door and entered. The room was the same as all the others - white, sterile, with a sleep capsule in the corner. In the capsule lay a man. Old. Gray stubble covered his wrinkled face, and his hands were thin, with prominent veins. He was worn out. He was ready to die. But he was alive. And he looked at Elias.

You came back, - said the old man, his voice hoarse with a slight tremor. - I thought you wouldn't.

Elias stopped at the door. He did not know what to say. Did not know how to explain. He just stood and looked at this man who was supposed to die.

I always come back, - Elias replied. - It's my job.

You saved that woman, - said the old man, curiosity flickering in his eyes. - I heard you leave. I heard you talk. You became a traitor. You broke the rules. The system does not forgive people like you. They'll kill you.

I know, - Elias replied. His voice was even, without emotion. He had accepted this. Accepted his fate.

Then why did you come back? - the old man asked. - You could have left. You could have escaped. You could have been free. Why come back to this hell?

Elias looked at him. At his wrinkled face, his tired eyes, his trembling hands. He was old. He was worn out. He was ready to die. But he did not want to die alone. He wanted someone to be with him. To see him one last time. To remember him.

I came back to help you, - Elias said. - I can't save you. I can't get you out of here. I already saved one. I can't save any more. But I can make sure you die quickly. Without pain. I can be with you. So you are not alone.

The old man laughed shortly, without warmth, but a spark of gratitude flickered in his eyes.

You are kind, - he said. - Too kind for this world. Too human to be an asset.

He extended his hand. Elias stepped closer and took it. The hand was cold and dry, but he felt a pulse - weak, uneven, almost fading.

Thank you, - the old man said, his voice quiet, almost a whisper. - Thank you for being human. Thank you for being here. I didn't want to die alone. I was afraid I would die alone. But you're here. You see me. You remember me.

What is your name? - Elias asked. It was a question he had never asked. Names were dangerous. Names made clones human. But he had to know. He had to remember.

Leon, - the old man replied. - My name is Leon. I was an engineer. I built these capsules. I designed them. And now I lie in one of them. What irony.

Leon, - Elias repeated. - I will remember you. I will remember your name.

The old man smiled - for the first time. His smile was crooked, tired, but genuine.

You are a good person, - he said. - You do what you must. But you don't let the system kill you. You remain human. That's the most important thing.

Elias raised the taser. His hand did not tremble. He knew what he was doing. He was not doing it for the system. He was doing it for him. So he would not suffer. So he would go in peace.

I'm sorry, - Elias said.

Don't apologize, - Leon replied. - You're giving me what I want. You're giving me peace.

Elias pulled the trigger. The taser made a soft sound, and Leon sighed. His body went limp, eyes closed. He was dead. But a smile lingered on his face.

Elias turned away. He could not look at him. Could not look at what he had just done. But he knew it was right. That it was human.

"I did it," he thought. "I gave him peace. I didn't let him die alone. I was there. I remembered his name."

He left the room and closed the door. The corridor was empty and silent. He walked toward the next room. Toward his next clone. He knew he could not save them all. But he could make sure they did not suffer. He could be human for them.

"I will die," he thought as he walked along the corridor. "I will die today. But I will die human. I will die knowing I did something right. I will die knowing I remembered their names."

He entered room 10. The fourth clone waited there. A young man with black hair and a pale face. His eyes were wide open, full of fear. He looked at Elias as if he were a monster.

Don't kill me, - he said, his voice trembling. - Please. Don't kill me. I don't want to die. I want to live. I have dreams. I have hopes. I want to see the world. Please. Don't kill me.

Elias stopped. He looked at this young man and felt his heart break. He was young. He was alive. He wanted to live. He wanted to be free. He wanted everything Elias could not give.

I don't want to kill you, - Elias said, his voice quiet, almost a whisper. - Do you believe me? I don't want to kill you. But I can't save you. I already saved one. I can't save any more. The system will find me. The system will find you. We can't escape.

Then run with me, - the young man said, his voice desperate. - Run with me now. We have a chance. We can go to the Gray Zones. We can be free. Together. You saved that woman. You can save me. Please. I don't want to die.

No, - Elias replied, his voice firm, though inside everything trembled. - I have no chance. I'm too tired. Too weak. Just an asset. I can't run. I can't be free. But I can make sure you go quickly. Without pain. I can be with you. So you are not alone.

The young man looked at him. Pleading, desperation, fear in his eyes. But gradually fear gave way to something else. Acceptance. He understood there was no way out. That the system had won.

You really don't want to kill me? - he asked, his voice quiet.

No, - Elias replied. - I don't want to. But I have to. It's my job. It's my fate. I can't change it. But I can do it quickly. Without pain. I can be with you.

The young man closed his eyes. His breathing was uneven, but he tried to calm himself. He was not doing it for himself. He was doing it for Elias. So he would not feel guilty.

Do it, - he said. - Do it quickly. And remember me. Please. Remember me.

What is your name? - Elias asked.

Alex, - the young man replied. - My name is Alex.

I will remember you, Alex, - Elias said. - I will remember your name. I will remember you wanted to live.

He raised the taser. His hand did not tremble. He knew what he was doing. He was doing it for him. So he would not suffer. So he would go in peace.

I'm sorry, - Elias said.

Thank you, - Alex replied.

Elias pulled the trigger. The taser made a soft sound, and Alex sighed. His body went limp, eyes closed. He was dead.

Elias stood and looked at him. At his young face, now peaceful. At his hands, no longer trembling. He was dead. But he did not die alone. He died with a name. He died as a human.

"I can't save everyone," Elias thought as he left the room. "I can't change this world. But I can make sure they die with dignity. That they are not just numbers in the system. That they are human. Even in death."

He walked toward the next room. Fifth clone. Sixth. Seventh. He went from door to door, doing his work. But now his work was different. He was not killing for the system. He was killing for them. So they would not suffer. So they would not be alone.

He remembered their names. Leon, Alex, Maria, Dmitry, Elena. Remembered their faces. Their voices. Their fear. And his own pain.

"I will die," he thought as he walked toward room nine. "I will die, but I will die human. I will die knowing I did something right. I will die knowing I remembered their names."

Room nine. Ten. Eleven. He continued walking until he reached the last one. Room 39. The twelfth clone. The one with the same number as Kane-39.

Elias stopped before the door. His heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. He felt his hands begin to tremble. He did not know why. Maybe because it was the last one. Maybe because he was so close to the end. Maybe because he was afraid of what he would see.

He opened the door and entered. The room was the same as all the others - white, sterile, with a capsule in the corner. But this capsule was different. It was open. Empty.

Elias froze. He looked at the empty capsule and could not believe his eyes. The clone was gone. Escaped. Not here. The system was wrong. Or he was wrong. He did not know. He just stood and stared at the emptiness.

What does this mean? - he whispered. - What does this mean for me?

He did not know the answer. He only knew he had done his work. Saved one. Given peace to ten. And one had disappeared. Maybe it was a sign. Maybe it was a chance. Maybe it was a beginning.

"I did all I could," he thought. "I saved her. I gave them peace. I remembered their names. Now I am ready to meet my fate."

He left the room and closed the door. The corridor was empty and silent. Elias stood and stared at the white walls. He knew punishment awaited him. That his PC would fall. That his heart could be shut off. But he was ready. Ready to die. Ready to be free.

"I did all I could," he thought. "I became human. I was human. And I will die human."

Elias returned to his office. A small room with white walls and a metal table built into the floor. On the table lay his terminal - a black plastic rectangle containing all the information about his work, his life, his death. He sat at the desk, feeling his body ache after the long day. Muscles hurt, eyes burned, his heart continued its monotonous rhythm. Vzh-vzh-vzh.

He picked up the terminal and opened the file. "Sector D-7. Disposal Report. Date: today. Executor: Elias Hall. ID: EH-4492-Gamma." He scrolled through the report, reviewing each clone's records. Names he remembered. Faces he had seen. Lives he had taken.

He stopped at the first name: "Clone No. 1. Name: not specified. Expiration date: expired 3 days ago. Reason for disposal: biological wear." Elias looked at these words and felt his stomach

clench. He did not know this person's name. Did not know his face. He just killed him because the system told him to.

"I should have asked his name," he thought. "I should have found out who he was. I should have remembered him."

He scrolled further. "Clone No. 2. Name: not specified. Expiration date: expired 5 days ago. Reason for disposal: system failure." The second clone. Also without a name. He had not even looked at him. Just entered, pulled the trigger, left. Did not give him a chance to be human.

He continued reading. "Clone No. 3. Name: Leon. Expiration date: expired 7 days ago. Reason for disposal: organ failure." Elias stopped at this name. Leon. The old man who built the capsules. Who smiled at him before death. Who thanked him for being there.

"I remember you, Leon," he thought. "I remember your name. I remember your smile. I remember how you held my hand. You did not die alone. I was with you."

He scrolled further. "Clone No. 4. Name: Alex. Expiration date: expired 2 days ago. Reason for disposal: kidney failure." Alex. The young man who begged him not to kill him. Who wanted to live. Who wanted to see the world. Elias remembered his face - pale, frightened, with wide-open eyes. Remembered his voice - trembling, desperate, pleading.

"I remember you, Alex," he thought. "I remember your fear. I remember your hope. I remember how you looked at me before death. You were human. You wanted to live. And I did not give you that chance."

He closed his eyes for a moment. The faces of the clones appeared before him again. Maria, Dmitry, Elena, Sergey, Anna, Ivan, Olga, Peter. He killed them all. He remembered their names, but that did not change what he had done. He took their lives. He became their death.

"I am a monster," he thought. "I kill people. I kill those who want to live. I kill those who do not want to die. I do this every day. And I cannot stop."

He looked at the terminal again. The list of names was long. He scrolled to the end, until he reached the last one. "Clone No. 12. Name: not specified. Expiration date: expired 1 day ago. Reason for disposal: organ failure. Status: not disposed. Location: unknown."

Elias froze. He stared at these words, unable to believe his eyes. The twelfth clone. The one not in the capsule. The one who had disappeared. He had not been disposed of. He had escaped.

"What does this mean?" he thought. "What does this mean for me? If the system finds out I didn't dispose of the twelfth clone, I will be punished. My PC will fall. My heart could be shut off. I will become consumable material."

He felt his hands begin to tremble. He did not know what to do. Did not know how to explain. Did not know how to hide it.

"I must find him," he thought. "I must find the twelfth clone. I must dispose of him. Or else I will be killed. Or I must escape. I must go to the Gray Zones. I must be free."

He looked at the terminal and felt his heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded like a warning. Like a reminder that he had a choice. That he could change his life. That he could be free.

"I don't want to die," he thought. "I don't want to die in the disposer. I want to live. I want to be free. I want to be human."

He closed the terminal and stood. He knew what he needed to do. He needed to find the twelfth clone. Or he needed to escape. He had a choice. And he was going to make it.

Elias opened the twelfth clone's file. He needed to know who it was. Who had escaped. Who had disappeared. Who had changed his life.

On the screen appeared a photograph. A child. A girl about ten years old, with large eyes and light hair. She looked at him from the photograph with an expression he could not explain - not fear, not hope, but something in between. She was small. She was defenseless. She was a clone. And she had escaped.

Elias looked at her face and felt his heart clench. She was a child. A child who did not understand death. A child who wanted to live. A child who had escaped the system.

"She escaped," he thought. "She did what I cannot do. She risked everything. She left. She is free."

He read her file. "Clone No. 12. Name: not specified. Age: 10 years (biological). Expiration date: expired 1 day ago. Reason: organ failure. Condition: critical. Recommended: disposal within 24 hours."

"Organ failure," he thought. "She is dying. If I don't find her, she will die. If I find her, I will kill her. No way out. No right choice."

He closed the file and leaned back in his chair. He felt broken. Felt empty. He did not know what to do. Did not know how to be.

"I can't kill a child," he thought. "I can't kill her. She is defenseless. She wants to live. She deserves a chance. But if I don't kill her, the system will kill me. What do I do? What do I do?"

He stood and walked to the window. New Tokyo-3 stretched before him - gray, cold, lifeless. Corporate holograms shone on the walls of buildings. Drones patrolled the streets, scanning for violations. Below, people hurried to work - assets like him. They did not look up. Did not look at each other. They just walked, heads down, following their protocols.

"I want to be free," he thought. "I want to leave this place. I want to be human. But I can't. I'm too weak. Too tired. Just an asset."

He turned back to the desk. On the screen, the girl's photograph still showed. She smiled. Her smile was sincere, alive, real. She was a child who still believed the world could be better. A child who had not given up.

"She is stronger than me," he thought. "She is stronger than I am. She escaped. She risked everything. She did what I cannot do. She deserves to live. She deserves to be free."

He sat back at the desk. He knew he had to make a choice. Had to decide what was more important - his life or hers. And he knew his decision was already made.

"I will save her," he thought. "I will find her. And I will help her. I will help her survive. Even if it costs me my life. Even if it means I die. I will not let her die alone. I will be with her."

He closed the terminal and stood. He knew what he needed to do. He needed to find the girl. He had to save her. He had to be human.

"I will do it," he thought as he left the office. "I will do it. I will save her. And I will prove I am still human."

Elias left his office and headed for the elevator that led to sector D-7. He knew he needed to find the girl. He had to find her before the system did. He had to save her, even if it cost him his life.

The elevator descended to the lower levels. Elias stood in the corner, looking at his reflection in the metal wall. He saw a tired face, dark circles under his eyes, gray strands at his temples. He looked like an asset. He looked like consumable material. But inside him was something else. Something that would not let him give up.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will find her. I will save her. I will prove I am still human."

The elevator stopped. Doors opened, letting in dark, damp air. Elias stepped out and walked along the corridor. Lamps flickered, sometimes going out for seconds, plunging him into darkness. He walked forward, not stopping.

He stopped at room 39 - the very one where the girl should have been. The door was open. The capsule empty. On the floor lay a child's toy - a small stuffed bear, dirty and worn. Elias picked it up. It was soft, warm to the touch. It smelled of a child.

"She was here," he thought. "She lived here. She played here. She was afraid here. And she escaped from here."

He tucked the bear into his pocket. He did not know why. Maybe to have something to remember her by. Maybe to have something worth fighting for.

He left the room and walked further along the corridor. He did not know where to go. But he knew he had to find her. He had to save her.

At the end of the corridor, he saw a door leading down. Into the basement. To where the system could not see. He opened the door and began to descend.

The stairs were old, with peeling paint and creaking steps. The air was cold and damp. Elias descended slowly, feeling his heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound echoed in the silence.

At the bottom of the stairs, he saw light. Dim, flickering, from an old lamp hanging from the ceiling. In the corner sat the girl. She huddled in a ball, arms wrapped around her knees. She was trembling. She was afraid.

Don't come near me, - she said, her voice trembling. - I don't want to die. I don't want to be killed. Please. Don't come near me.

Elias stopped. He did not know what to say. Did not know how to comfort her. He just stood and looked at her.

I won't hurt you, - he said. - I don't want to kill you. I want to help you.

The girl raised her head. She looked at him with distrust. But there was hope in her eyes. Faint, small, but there.

Really? - she asked. - You won't kill me?

Really, - he replied. - I won't kill you. I will save you.

She slowly stood. She was thin, pale, with large dark eyes. She looked at him, and in her gaze was something he could not describe. Trust.

What is your name? - she asked.

Elias, - he replied. - And yours?

My name is Emily, - she said. - I want to live, Elias. I don't want to die. Help me.

Elias walked to her and extended his hand. She took it. Her hand was cold and small. She trembled.

I will help you, Emily, - he said. - I will help you survive. I promise.

Elias took Emily's hand and led her along the corridor. He knew they had little time. The system had probably already noticed her absence. The head of department was probably already looking for her. They had to leave before they were found.

Where are we going? - Emily asked, her voice trembling.

Down, - Elias replied. - To the lower levels. Where the system cannot see. Where you will be free.

And you? - she asked. - Will you come with me?

Elias was silent. He did not know what to answer. Did not know if he could leave. Did not know if he could be free.

I don't know, - he said honestly. - I don't know what will happen. But I promise I will do everything to save you.

They continued walking. The corridor grew darker and colder. Lamps barely worked. Air smelled of mold and dampness. But they walked. They did not stop.

At the end of the corridor, Elias saw a door. Small, metal, rusty. It led to the Gray Zones. Where the system could not reach them.

We're almost there, - he said. - Just a little further.

He opened the door. Beyond it was a tunnel. Dark, narrow, endless. It led to freedom.

Go, - he said, pointing at the tunnel. - Go. There you will be free.

Emily looked at him. Tears in her eyes.

I don't want to go without you, - she said. - You saved me. I can't leave you.

You must go, - he said. - You must live. I can't go with you. I have work. I have a duty.

She took his hand and squeezed it. Her hand was cold, but warm inside.

I will never forget you, Elias, - she said. - I will remember you. Always.

She turned and stepped into the tunnel. Elias watched her go. Her small figure gradually dissolved into the darkness.

"I did it," he thought. "I saved her. I saved a child. I was human."

But in the moment, she disappeared from view, he heard footsteps behind him. He turned. In the corridor stood the head of department, J.S. His face was cold, indifferent. In his hands, he held a taser.

Hall, - he said. - I knew you were a traitor. I knew you would save her. But I didn't think you would be so stupid.

Elias froze. He looked at the head and felt his heart beat faster.

I'm not a traitor, - he said. - I just want to be human.

Human? - J.S. repeated, smirking. - You're not human, Hall. You're an asset. An asset who broke the rules. And you will pay for it.

He raised the taser. Elias knew this was the end. But he was not afraid. He had done what he had to. He had saved a child. He had been human.

"I will die," he thought. "But I will die knowing I did something right. I will die knowing I was human."

He closed his eyes and waited. But instead of a blow, he heard J.S.'s voice:

You won't die today, Hall. You will live. You will suffer. You will watch everything you love be destroyed. That will be your punishment.

Elias opened his eyes. The head had gone. He was alone in the dark corridor, staring at the door through which Emily had disappeared.

"I did it," he thought. "I saved her. I made the right choice. And now I am ready to face the consequences."

Elias remained standing in the dark corridor after J.S. left. He stood motionless, staring at the door through which Emily had disappeared. The tunnel to the Gray Zones was now empty and silent. The girl was gone. She was free. He had saved her. But now he had to return to his work. To his death.

"I did it," he thought. "I saved her. I saved a child. I was human. But what now? What will happen to me?"

He slowly turned and walked back along the corridor. His steps were heavy, as if he carried a burden that grew heavier with each step. Lamps flickered, casting shadows on walls covered in layers of old paint. Air was cold and damp. He felt his heart beat steadily - too steadily, too mechanically. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded like a reminder that he was still alive. That he could still feel. That he was still human.

He reached the elevator and pressed the button. Doors opened, and he entered. The elevator was old, with metal walls covered in rust. He pressed the button for level D-7. The elevator began to rise. He stood motionless, looking at his reflection in the metal wall. Tired face. Dark circles under his eyes. Gray at his temples. He looked like a man who had lived through too much. A man who had seen too much death.

"I have to go back," he thought. "I have to finish my work. I have to meet my fate."

The elevator stopped. Doors opened, and he stepped into the corridor of sector D-7. It was quiet here - too quiet. Usually there were voices of clones, ventilation noise, sounds of working mechanisms. But now there was only silence. The kind that pressed on the ears.

Elias walked along the corridor. He knew he had to find the first clone. The one he had not killed. The one that should have been his first victim. But when he approached the door, he saw it was open.

He looked inside. The room was empty. The sleep capsule was open. Inside - no one. The clone had disappeared. Escaped. Like Emily. Like the twelfth clone.

"What's happening?" he thought. "Where have they all gone? Who freed them?"

He entered the room and examined it. Everything looked normal - white walls, white floor, white ceiling. But the capsule was empty. He stepped closer and saw something small on the floor. He bent down and picked it up. A toy. A small stuffed bear. Just like the one he had found in room 39.

"Someone is freeing them," he thought. "Someone is helping them escape. But who? And why?"

He tucked the toy into his pocket. He did not know why. Maybe to have something to remind him he was not alone. That someone else was fighting the system.

He left the room and walked further along the corridor. He had to find the other clones. Had to understand what was happening.

Elias approached the next door. Room 4. The first clone. The one he was supposed to kill this morning. He opened the door and entered.

The room was dark. Lamps did not work. Only faint light from the corridor fell on the floor. In the corner stood a capsule. It was open. Empty. Like the previous one.

Elias froze. He looked at the empty capsule and felt his heart beat faster. This was impossible. All the clones should have been here. All should have been in their capsules. But they had disappeared. All of them.

"Someone freed them," he thought. "Someone helped them escape. But who?"

He heard noise behind him. He turned. In the doorway stood a man. Old, gray-haired, with a wrinkled face and tired eyes. He wore a gray jumpsuit - like all users. But his face was different. It had an expression Elias had never seen on others. An expression of freedom.

Are you looking for them? - the old man asked. His voice was hoarse but firm.

Who are you? - Elias asked.

I am the one who freed them, - the old man replied. - I am the one who helps them escape. I am the one who fights the system.

But why? - Elias asked. - Why risk your life?

The old man laughed. His laugh was crooked, tired, but there was strength in it.

Because they are human, - he said. - Because they want to live. Because the system has no right to kill them. We must all fight. We must all be free.

Elias looked at him. He felt his heart beat faster. Felt his hands begin to tremble. He did not know what to say. Did not know what to do.

I will help you, - he said. - I also want to fight. I also want to be free.

The old man looked at him. Surprise and gratitude mixed in his eyes.

Are you sure? - he asked. - You know this could cost you your life?

I know, - Elias replied. - But I don't want to be an asset anymore. I want to be human. I want to fight. I want to be free.

The old man smiled. His smile was warm, genuine.

Then come, - he said. - I'll show you what it means to be free.

The old man led Elias along the corridor. They walked quickly but quietly, trying not to attract attention. Elias felt his heart beat faster. He did not know where they were going. But he trusted this man. He felt it was right.

What is your name? - Elias asked.

My name is Mikhail, - the old man replied. - I was an engineer. I worked at Genesis for thirty years. I saw the system kill people. I saw it destroy them. And I decided to fight. I decided to save those the system wants to kill.

But how do you do it? - Elias asked. - How do you free them?

Mikhail stopped and turned to him. Seriousness in his eyes.

I have access to the system, - he said. - I know how to bypass it. I know how to disable cameras. I know how to open doors. I know how to lead them to the Gray Zones. I've been doing this for five years. I've saved hundreds of people.

But how have you not been caught? - Elias asked.

Because the system doesn't look for old men, - Mikhail replied. - It looks for the young, the strong, the efficient. It doesn't pay attention to those who are no longer needed. I use that. I hide in plain sight.

They continued walking. Mikhail opened a door and let Elias into a small room. Inside were several people - clones he had saved. They sat on the floor, huddled together. They were afraid. But hope was in their eyes.

They are waiting, - Mikhail said. - I will lead them out tonight. To the Gray Zones. There they will be free.

Elias looked at them. At their faces. At their fear. At their hope. He felt his heart clench. He felt their pain. He felt their fear. He felt their hope.

"This is an echo," he thought. "An echo of emotions. I feel them. I feel everything they feel."

I will help you, - he said. - I will help you lead them out.

Mikhail looked at him. Gratitude in his eyes.

Thank you, - he said. - You are a good person, Elias. You are making the right choice.

Elias helped Mikhail lead the clones to the tunnel. They walked through dark corridors, trying not to make sounds. Each step was heavy. Each step brought them closer to freedom. But each step also brought them closer to danger. The system could notice them at any moment. Guards could find them at any moment.

"We must be careful," Elias thought. "We must be quiet. We must be fast."

They walked in silence. Only their breathing and footsteps echoed through the corridors. Lamps flickered, casting shadows on walls. Air was cold and damp. Elias felt his heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. He heard this sound as clearly as the silence around.

Suddenly they heard footsteps behind them. Elias turned. At the end of the corridor stood a guard. His face was hidden behind a helmet, but his posture was threatening. He held a taser.

Stop! - the guard shouted. - You are breaking the rules!

Elias looked at Mikhail. He nodded.

Run, - Mikhail said. - I'll hold him off.

No, - Elias said. - I won't leave you.

You must, - Mikhail replied. - You must lead them out. You must save them. This is your duty.

Elias looked at the clones. They looked at him with hope and fear. They waited for his decision. They waited for him to make the right choice.

"I must do this," he thought. "I must save them. I must be human."

He turned and ran. He led the clones along the corridor. He heard Mikhail fighting the guard. He heard the sounds of struggle. He felt his heart break. But he did not stop.

He led the clones to the tunnel. Opened the door. Showed them the path to freedom.

Go, - he said. - Go. Be free.

They left. One by one. Disappeared into the darkness. Elias remained standing in the tunnel. He heard footsteps fade. Heard voices grow quiet. Heard silence return.

"I did it," he thought. "I saved them. I was human."

He turned and walked back. He had to find Mikhail. Had to help him.

Elias returned to the corridor. He saw Mikhail lying on the floor. The guard stood over him. But he was dead. Mikhail had killed him. He lay on the floor, breathing heavily. His face was pale, sweat on his forehead. He was wounded.

Mikhail! - Elias shouted, running to him. - Are you hurt?

No, - Mikhail replied, trying to smile. - I'm just tired. I'm old. I can't run as fast as I used to.

Elias helped him stand. Mikhail leaned on his shoulder. They walked together along the corridor.

Did you save them? - Mikhail asked.

Yes, - Elias replied. - They are free.

You made the right choice, - Mikhail said. - You are human, Elias. A real human.

They reached the end of the corridor. Mikhail stopped.

Now you must go, - he said. - You must be free. You must run.

I won't leave you, - Elias said.

You must, - Mikhail replied. - I am old. I am tired. I have done all I can. Now it's your turn. You must fight. You must save. You must be human.

Elias looked at him. He felt tears rise to his eyes.

Thank you, - he said. - Thank you for everything.

Go, - Mikhail said. - Go. Be free.

Elias turned and walked. He walked along the corridor. His steps were heavy. But he walked. He did not stop. He knew he had to keep going. Had to fight. Had to be free.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will fight. I will save. I will be human."

Elias emerged from the corridor into a large empty room. It was dark here, only one lamp flickering in the corner. He stopped and looked around. Walls were bare, concrete. Floor was uneven. No doors anywhere, only the one he had entered through.

"I'm in a dead end," he thought. "I have nowhere to go."

He heard a sound behind him. He turned. In the doorway stood J.S. His face was cold, indifferent. In his hands, he held a taser.

Hall, - he said. - You thought you could escape? You thought you could be free? You're wrong. You will never be free. You are an asset. You have always been an asset. And you always will be.

Elias looked at him. He felt fear and anger battle in his soul. He wanted to run. He wanted to give up. But he could not. He had to fight.

I am not an asset, - he said. - I am human. I have always been human. And I will prove it.

He stepped forward. J.S. raised the taser. But Elias was faster. He punched him in the face. J.S. staggered back. Elias hit him again. J.S. fell to the floor. Elias stood over him, breathing heavily.

"I did it," he thought. "I defeated him. I am free."

He turned to the door. He had to leave. Had to run. But he heard a voice behind him.

Hall, - J.S. said, his voice quiet, almost a whisper. - You think you won? You're wrong. You will never be free. You will always be an asset. This is your fate.

Elias stopped. He turned and looked at him. J.S. lay on the floor, his face bloody. But he was smiling. His smile was cold, ruthless.

What do you mean? - Elias asked.

You think you saved those clones? - J.S. said. - You think they are free? They are already dead. All of them. The system found them. They are dead. Everyone you saved is dead. Including the girl.

Elias froze. He could not believe it. Did not want to believe it.

You're lying, - he said.

I never lie, - J.S. replied. - You should have known. You should have understood. No one can escape the system. No one can be free. Neither can you.

Elias stood and looked at him. He felt his heart break. Felt his world crumble.

"He is lying," he thought. "He must be lying. He can't be right. They are alive. They are free. I saved them. I did it."

But deep down, he knew J.S. was telling the truth. He felt it. Felt the echo. The echo of death. The echo of pain. The echo of what he had done wrong.

"I didn't save them," he thought. "I doomed them to death. I killed them. All of them. I am a monster."

He fell to his knees. Tears streamed down his face. He did not hold them back. He cried. Cried for the first time in years. Cried for those he had lost. For those he had never known. For those he had killed.

"I am a monster," he thought. "I have always been a monster. And I always will be."

He sat on the floor and cried. J.S. looked down at him.

Now you understand, - he said. - You will never be free. You will always be an asset. This is your fate.

Elias raised his head. He looked at him. Emptiness in his eyes. The emptiness of one who had lost everything.

"I am not an asset," he thought. "I am human. I was human. And I will die human."

He stood. His steps were even, confident. He walked to the door and opened it. He stepped into the corridor. And he walked. He did not know where. Did not know why. He just walked. Walked into nowhere. Walked into his death.

"I will die," he thought. "But I will die human. I will die knowing I tried. I will die knowing I fought. That is all that matters."

Elias emerged from the room and found himself again in the corridor of sector D-7. His eyes were dry - he had cried all he could. Inside him was emptiness. So deep, so cold, that he barely felt his own body. He walked mechanically, his legs moving on their own, carrying him forward, to the next room, to the next clone, to the next death.

"I must continue," he thought, but his thoughts were dim, like the lamps in this corridor. "I must do my work. It's all I know. It's all I can do."

He stopped before a door. On it was a sign: "Clone No. 5. Expiration date: expired. Status: awaiting disposal." Elias looked at this sign and felt his stomach clench. Another one. Another life he had to take. Another name he had to remember. Another death that would haunt him.

He opened the door and entered. The room was the same as all the others - white, sterile, with a capsule in the corner. In the capsule lay a woman. Young, with short dark hair and pale skin. Her eyes were open. She looked at him without fear. Only fatigue. Only acceptance.

You came, - she said. Her voice was quiet, hoarse. - I knew you would. I heard you walking in the corridor. I heard you crying.

Elias froze. He had not expected her to speak. Had not expected her to know.

How do you know? - he asked.

I feel it, - she replied. - We all feel it. We are clones. We feel more than you think. We feel fear, pain, hope. We feel when someone is suffering. I felt your pain. It was loud. It echoed through the corridor.

Elias looked at her. He felt his heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded different. Sounded like a warning.

Aren't you afraid? - he asked.

No, - she replied. - I'm tired of being afraid. I'm tired of waiting. I want it to end. I want peace.

What is your name? - he asked.

Anna, - she replied. - My name is Anna.

I will remember you, Anna, - he said. - I will remember your name. I will remember your face. I will remember that you were not afraid.

She smiled. Her smile was weak but genuine.

Thank you, - she said. - Thank you for being human.

Elias raised the taser. His hand did not tremble. He knew what he was doing. He was doing it for her. So she would not suffer. So she would go in peace.

I'm sorry, - he said.

Don't apologize, - she replied. - You're giving me peace.

He pulled the trigger. The taser made a soft sound, and Anna sighed. Her eyes closed. She was dead.

Elias stood and looked at her. At her peaceful face. At her hands, no longer trembling. She died with a smile. She did not die alone.

"I did it," he thought. "I gave her peace. I was with her. I remembered her name."

He left the room and closed the door. The corridor was empty and silent. He walked toward the next room. Toward his next clone.

Elias entered room 6. There waited a man about forty, with gray stubble and deep wrinkles on his face. He sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. In his hands he held a photograph - worn, faded, with a picture of a woman and a child.

You came, - he said without looking up. - I knew you would.

What is your name? - Elias asked.

Dmitry, - he replied. - My name is Dmitry. I was a builder. I built these corridors. I built these rooms. I created cages for people like me. What irony.

He raised the photograph.

This is my family, - he said. - My wife and my son. They were human. Real humans. They were not clones. They lived in the green zone. I worked so they could live there. I gave everything so they could be happy. And then the system said I was no longer needed. That my expiration date had passed. That I needed to be disposed of. I will never see them again.

Elias looked at the photograph. The woman smiled. The child laughed. They looked happy. They looked free.

Did you love them? - he asked.

More than anything in the world, - Dmitry replied. - I would give anything to see them again. But I never will. I will die here. In this cage. Alone.

Elias stepped closer and sat beside him. He did not know why. He just wanted to be near. So he would not be alone.

You are not alone, - he said. - I'm here. I'm with you.

Dmitry raised his head. Tears in his eyes.

Thank you, - he said. - Thank you for being here.

They sat in silence. Elias felt his pain. Felt his fear. Felt his love for his family. It was an echo. An echo of emotions penetrating his soul.

"I feel you," he thought. "I feel your pain. I feel your love. I feel everything you feel."

I want you to know, - Dmitry said, - that I have no regrets. I lived a good life. I loved. I was loved. I was human. Even if the system says I am just an asset.

Elias placed a hand on his shoulder.

You were human, - he said. - You always were human. And I will remember you.

Dmitry smiled. His smile was warm, genuine.

Thank you, - he said. - Now I am ready.

Elias raised the taser. His hand did not tremble. He was doing it for him. So he could go in peace.

I'm sorry, - he said.

Don't apologize, - Dmitry replied. - You're giving me what I want. You're giving me peace.

Elias pulled the trigger. Dmitry closed his eyes. His body went limp. He was dead.

Elias stood and looked at him. At his peaceful face. At the photograph that had fallen from his hands. He picked it up and tucked it into his pocket.

"I will remember you, Dmitry," he thought. "I will remember your family. I will remember your love. I will remember you were human."

He left the room and walked on.

Elias walked along the corridor, and with each step his burden grew heavier. He tried to maintain professional indifference. Tried not to think about what he was doing. Tried to be just an asset doing his job. But it was impossible. Each clone he killed left a mark on his soul. Each name he remembered added weight to his burden.

"I can't," he thought. "I can't do this anymore. I can't kill them. They are human. They want to live. They deserve to live."

He stopped before room 8. On the door was a sign: "Clone No. 8. Expiration date: expired. Status: awaiting disposal." He opened the door and entered.

In the room was a woman. Young, with long light hair and large blue eyes. She sat on the floor, hugging her knees. She was crying.

Don't kill me, - she said, her voice trembling. - Please. Don't kill me. I want to live. I want to see the world. I want to be free.

Elias stopped. He looked at her and felt his heart break.

I don't want to kill you, - he said. - But I have to. It's my job.

You don't have to, - she said. - You can choose. You can save me. You can be human.

Elias closed his eyes. He felt tears rise to his eyes. He did not want to do this. Did not want to kill her. But he knew if he did not do it, the system would kill him. And then he could not save anyone.

I can't save you, - he said. - I already saved one. I can't save any more. But I can make sure you die quickly. Without pain. I can be with you.

She looked at him. Pleading in her eyes. But gradually pleading gave way to acceptance.

What is your name? - she asked.

Elias, - he replied.

I will remember you, Elias, - she said. - I will remember you were human.

He walked to her and sat beside her. She took his hand. Her hand was cold, but he felt her warmth. Her life.

What is your name? - he asked.

Ekaterina, - she replied. - My name is Ekaterina. I was an artist. I painted. I dreamed of seeing the world. I wanted to share my beauty with others. But now I will die here.

You won't die here, - he said. - You will die in my arms. You will not be alone.

She smiled. Her smile was weak but genuine.

Thank you, - she said.

Elias raised the taser. His hand trembled. He did not want to do this. But he knew he had to.

I'm sorry, - he said.

Don't apologize, - she replied. - You're giving me peace.

He pulled the trigger. Ekaterina closed her eyes. Her body went limp. She was dead.

Elias sat and held her hand. He felt her warmth fade. Felt her life leave her.

"I did it," he thought. "I killed her. I killed an artist. I killed a dream. I am a monster."

He slowly stood. His legs were weak. He left the room and walked on.

Elias reached room 10. He opened the door and entered. There was a young man, about eighteen, with short dark hair and gray eyes. He sat on the floor and stared at the wall. He did not move, speak, or show any emotion. He was empty.

What is your name? - Elias asked.

The young man did not answer. Continued staring at the wall.

What is your name? - Elias repeated, louder.

The young man slowly turned his head. His eyes were empty.

My name is Ivan, - he said. - But it doesn't matter. I'm going to die anyway.

Elias looked at him. Felt his emptiness. Felt his pain. Felt his despair.

Why aren't you afraid? - Elias asked.

I'm already dead, - Ivan replied. - Dead inside. I have no hope. No dreams. Nothing. I'm just waiting for it to end.

Elias felt his heart clench. He could not bear this pain. Could not bear this emptiness.

You have something, - he said. - You have life. You have a chance. You can fight.

Why? - Ivan asked. - Why fight if you're going to die anyway? Why hope if hope is a lie?

Elias did not know what to answer. He felt his own despair rise to the surface. Felt his own emptiness grow deeper.

"I am the same," he thought. "The same emptiness. The same dead inside. I don't want to fight either. I want it to end."

He sat on the floor beside Ivan. They sat in silence. Neither spoke. Neither moved. They just were. Two empty people in an empty room.

"I can't do it," Elias thought. "I can't kill him. He is already dead. I can't do this again."

He felt tears stream down his face. He did not hold them back. He cried. Cried about himself. Cried about Ivan. Cried about everyone he had killed. Cried about not being able to go on.

I can't, - he said. - I can't kill anymore. I can't do this anymore.

Ivan looked at him. A spark flickered in his empty eyes.

Then don't, - he said. - Be human. Choose something else.

Elias raised his head. He looked at Ivan. Felt something ignite in his soul. Something small, weak, but alive. Hope.

"I can choose," he thought. "I can be human. I can make the right choice."

He stood. His legs no longer trembled.

I won't kill you, - he said. - I will save you. I will get you out of here.

Ivan looked at him. A spark of hope flickered in his eyes.

Really? - he asked.

Really, - Elias replied. - Come. We need to leave before the system notices.

Elias led Ivan out of the room. They walked along the corridor, trying not to attract attention. Elias knew this was insane. Knew it could cost him his life. But he could not stop. Could not keep killing.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will save him. I will prove I am human."

They reached the elevator. Elias pressed the button. Doors opened, and they entered. The elevator began to descend to the lower levels, to the Gray Zones, where they could be free.

Thank you, - Ivan said. - Thank you for saving me.

Don't thank me, - Elias replied. - I'm doing this for myself. I want to be human.

They exited the elevator and walked along the dark corridor. Lamps flickered, casting shadows on walls. Elias knew they were almost there. A little further, and they would be free.

But as they approached the door leading to the Gray Zones, Elias heard footsteps behind him. He turned. At the end of the corridor stood a guard. His face hidden behind a helmet, his posture threatening. He held a taser.

Stop! - the guard shouted. - Intruder!

Elias looked at Ivan. He looked back with horror.

Run! - Elias shouted. - Run!

Ivan ran. He opened the door and disappeared into the tunnel. Elias remained alone. He watched the guard approach. He knew this was the end. But he was not afraid. He had done what he had to. He had been human.

The guard approached him. Raised the taser. Elias stood motionless.

You made a mistake, - the guard said. - You will pay for it.

I know, - Elias replied. - But I don't regret it. I saved him. I was human.

The guard pulled the trigger. Elias felt the blow. Everything went dark. He fell to the floor and lost consciousness.

Elias regained consciousness in a white room. He lay on a metal cot. His hands and feet were tied. Above him stood J.S. His face cold, indifferent.

You're awake, - he said. - I thought you'd never wake up.

Where am I? - Elias asked. His voice was hoarse.

You're in the medical block, - J.S. replied. - You were brought here after you tried to escape. You broke the rules. You helped a clone escape. You are a traitor.

I'm not a traitor, - Elias said. - I just wanted to be human.

Human? - J.S. repeated, smirking. - You're not human, Hall. You're an asset. You've always been an asset. And you always will be. But you made a mistake. You broke the rules. And now you will pay for it.

Elias looked at him. Fear and anger battled in his soul. But he did not give up.

What will you do to me? - he asked.

You will become consumable material, - J.S. replied. - Your PC will be zeroed. Your heart will be shut off. You will be disposed of. Like everyone else.

Elias closed his eyes. He knew this was the end. But he was not afraid. He had done what he had to. He had saved Ivan. He had been human.

"I will die," he thought. "But I will die knowing I made the right choice. I will die knowing I was human."

You made a mistake, - J.S. said. - You thought you could be free. But no one can be free. No one can escape the system.

I didn't make a mistake, - Elias replied. - I made the right choice. I was human. And I will die human.

He closed his eyes. He felt his heart beat steadily. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded different. It sounded like a reminder that he was alive. That he felt. That he was human.

Elias woke again in the same white room. His hands and feet were still tied, but he felt the bindings had loosened - perhaps the system decided he no longer posed a threat. He slowly raised his head and looked around. The room was empty, white, sterile. No windows, no doors, only the metal cot he lay on and a small capsule in the corner. Someone was in the capsule.

Elias squinted, trying to make out the figure. It was a girl. Small, thin, with pale skin and light hair falling over her face. She sat inside the capsule, hugging her knees, staring into emptiness. She was alive, but there was no life in her eyes. Only emptiness. The same emptiness he had seen in Ivan.

Hey, - he called. His voice was hoarse, his throat dry. - Can you hear me?

The girl slowly turned her head. Her eyes were large, gray, with dark circles under them. She looked at him without fear, without curiosity, without hope. She just looked.

Who are you? - she asked. Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper, like someone who had not spoken for a long time.

My name is Elias, - he replied. - And yours?

My name doesn't matter, - she said. - I'm going to die anyway.

Elias felt his heart clench. She was just like Ivan. Empty. Broken. Ready to die.

Why do you say that? - he asked. - Why have you given up?

She looked at him, and a spark of something flickered in her eyes - pain, anger, despair.

Because I know, - she said. - I know what will happen. They will come for me. They will kill me. Like they killed everyone else. Like they killed my mother. Like they killed my father. I don't want to be afraid anymore. I don't want to wait anymore. I just want it to end.

Elias looked at her. He felt her pain. He felt her fear. He felt her despair. And he knew he had to help her. He had to save her.

I won't let them kill you, - he said. - I will save you.

The girl looked up at him. Surprise and distrust in her eyes.

You can't, - she said. - You're just like them. You're a purger. You kill people like me.

I was a purger, - he said. - But I don't want to be one anymore. I want to be human. I want to save people. I want to save you.

She looked at him for a long time, studying his face, his eyes, his voice. And gradually her gaze changed. Fear gave way to hope. Despair gave way to trust.

You really want to save me? - she asked.

Really, - he replied. - What is your name?

Sophia, - she said. - My name is Sophia.

I will remember you, Sophia, - he said. - I will do everything to save you.

She smiled. For the first time. Her smile was weak but genuine.

Thank you, - she said.

Elias began to free himself from his bindings. They were plastic but strong enough. He pulled, tugged, tried to break them. His wrists bled, but he did not stop. He had to free himself. He had to save Sophia.

Can you do it? - she asked, looking at him with hope.

I can, - he replied, gritting his teeth. - I won't give up.

He pulled again, and the bindings gave way. His hands were free. He quickly untied his feet and stood. His legs trembled, but he held. He walked to the capsule and opened it.

Come, - he said, extending his hand. - We need to leave.

Sophia took his hand. Her hand was cold and small. He helped her out of the capsule.

Where are we going? - she asked.

To the Gray Zones, - he replied. - Where the system cannot reach us. Where we will be free.

They walked to the door. Elias knew the door was locked, but he hoped he could pick the lock. He walked to the control panel and began entering codes. His fingers trembled, but he did not stop.

Do you know the code? - Sophia asked.

No, - he replied. - But I'll try.

He entered combinations one after another. None worked. He felt despair begin to overtake him.

"I can't," he thought. "I can't open this door. I can't save her."

But he did not give up. He kept entering codes. And finally, on the twentieth attempt, the door opened.

Come! - he shouted, grabbing Sophia's hand.

They ran into the corridor. The corridor was empty, but he knew they had little time. The system could have already noticed their absence. The guards could already be looking for them.

We must be fast, - he said. - We must leave before they find us.

They ran along the corridor. Sophia ran fast despite her small frame. Elias felt his heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded like a reminder that he was alive. That he was fighting. That he was human.

They reached the elevator. Elias pressed the button. Doors opened, and they entered. The elevator began to descend.

We're almost there, - he said, squeezing her hand. - A little further, and we'll be free.

Sophia looked at him. Hope in her eyes.

Thank you, - she said. - Thank you for saving me.

Don't thank me, - he replied. - I'm doing this for myself. I want to be human.

The elevator stopped at the lower level. Elias and Sophia stepped out into a dark corridor. Lamps barely worked, and they had to feel their way. Air was cold and damp, smelling of mold and rust.

We're almost there, - he said. - A little further.

But as they turned the corner, they saw light. Dim, flickering, but bright enough to illuminate the figure of a guard. He stood by the door leading to the Gray Zones, waiting for them.

Stop! - the guard shouted. - Intruders!

Elias grabbed Sophia's hand and ran back. He did not know where to run. Did not know what to do. He just ran.

They ran into a small room where trash containers stood. Elias quickly looked around. He had to find a place to hide Sophia. A place where the guard would not find her.

Get in there, - he said, pointing to a large metal container.

Sophia looked at him with horror.

I can't, - she said. - It's dark and dirty.

You must, - he said. - It's the only way to survive. I will come back for you. I promise.

She looked into his eyes. Tears in her eyes.

You'll come back? - she asked.

I'll come back, - he said. - I promise.

She climbed into the container. Elias closed the lid and pushed it against the wall. He heard her quiet crying from inside. His heart broke, but he knew this was the only way to save her.

"I will come back for you," he thought. "I promise."

He turned and ran the other way. The guard was close. Elias heard his footsteps, his breathing. He ran as fast as he could. He had to distract the guard. Had to save Sophia.

He reached the elevator and pressed the button. Doors opened, and he entered. The guard was right behind him. But the doors closed before he could get in. The elevator began to rise.

Damn, - Elias whispered, breathing heavily. - That was close.

He stood in the elevator, thinking about Sophia. She was alone. She was frightened. She was waiting for him.

"I will come back," he thought. "I will definitely come back."

But he knew it would be difficult. Knew the system would not let him just walk away. Knew punishment awaited him. But he was ready. Ready to fight. Ready to be human.

The elevator stopped at level D-7. Elias stepped into the corridor. He knew he had to return to his work. Had to pretend everything was normal. Had to hide what he had done.

He entered his office and sat at his desk. The terminal was on. He opened the disposal report and began editing the records. He deleted mention of Sophia. Marked her as "disposed." He knew it was risky. Knew the system could check. But he had to do it.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will hide her. I will save her."

He typed: "Clone No. 13. Name: Sophia. Expiration date: expired. Reason for disposal: biological wear. Status: disposed."

He saved the changes and closed the file. His hands trembled. He felt his heart beat faster. He knew this was a protocol violation. Knew it could cost him his life. But he could not stop. He had to save her.

"I did it," he thought. "I saved her. I hid her. I was human."

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was tired. He was broken. But he felt something he had not felt for years. Hope.

"I saved her," he thought. "I saved a child. I made the right choice. I was human."

But he knew this was not the end. Knew the system did not forgive violations. Knew punishment awaited him. But he was ready. Ready to face the consequences. Ready to fight. Ready to be free.

Elias sat in his office, staring at the wall. He thought about Sophia, about Ivan, about everyone he had saved and killed. Thought about what he had done and what still needed to be done. He knew he could not stop. Knew he had to keep fighting.

"I can't go back to how it was," he thought. "I can't be an asset again. I can't kill people again. I must fight. I must be human."

He stood and walked to the window. New Tokyo-3 stretched before him - gray, cold, lifeless. Corporate holograms shone on walls. Drones patrolled streets. Below, people hurried to work - assets like him. But he was no longer one of them. He was different. He was human.

"I won't go back to them," he thought. "I can't. I must move forward. I must fight. I must save."

He turned from the window and looked at the terminal. On the screen was a notification: "Attention! Protocol violation recorded. Employee: Elias Hall. ID: EH-4492-Gamma. Violation: unauthorized data alteration. Penalty: PC reduction to 65%. Further violations will lead to reclassification to category 'Consumable Material.'"

Elias looked at this notification and felt his heart beat faster. He knew this was only the beginning. Knew the system would not forgive his actions. But he was not afraid. He was ready.

"I accept this," he thought. "I accept the punishment. I accept my fate. I will fight. I will be human."

He closed the terminal and left the office. The corridor was empty and silent. He walked to the elevator. He knew what he had to do. He had to find Sophia. Had to lead her to the Gray Zones. Had to be human.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will save her. I will prove I am human. I will prove I am not an asset."

The elevator doors opened, and he entered. He pressed the button for the lower level. The elevator began to descend. Elias stood motionless, looking at his reflection in the metal wall. He saw a human. Tired, frightened, but full of determination. A human who would not give up. A human who would fight. A human who was free.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will do it. I will be human."

Elias exited the elevator on the lower level. The corridor was dark and damp. Lamps flickered, casting shadows on walls. He walked toward where he had hidden Sophia. He had to find her. Had to lead her to the Gray Zones.

"I'm coming for you, Sophia," he thought. "I came back. I didn't abandon you."

He approached the trash container and opened the lid. Sophia was inside. She sat huddled in a ball, crying. When she saw him, she looked up. Fear and hope in her eyes.

You came back, - she said, her voice trembling.

I came back, - he replied. - I promised.

He helped her out. She was dirty, frightened, but alive.

We must go, - he said. - We must leave before they find us.

They walked along the corridor. Sophia held his hand. Her hand was cold but warm inside. He felt her trust, her hope.

You won't abandon me? - she asked.

I will never abandon you, - he replied. - I promise.

They reached the door leading to the Gray Zones. Elias opened it. Beyond was a tunnel. Dark, narrow, endless. It led to freedom.

Go, - he said, pointing at the tunnel. - Go. There you will be free.

Sophia looked at him. Tears in her eyes.

And you? - she asked. - Won't you come with me?

I can't, - he said. - I have work. I have a duty. But I will remember you. Always.

She took his hand and squeezed it.

You are human, - she said. - The most human person I have ever met.

She turned and stepped into the tunnel. Elias watched her go. Her small figure gradually dissolved into the darkness.

"I did it," he thought. "I saved her. I was human."

He stood and watched until she disappeared. Then he turned and walked back. To his work. To his death. To his fate.

Elias returned to his office. He was tired, broken, but inside him burned a spark - small, weak, but alive. He had saved Sophia. He had done it. He was human.

He sat at his desk and opened the terminal. The screen lit up, showing his work panel. Everything looked normal - reports, receipts, system notifications. But he knew the calm was an illusion. Knew the system saw everything. Knew his violation could not have gone unnoticed.

He opened the disposal report and began reviewing the records. Everything looked correct - names, dates, causes of death. Sophia was marked as "disposed." He checked again. Yes, everything looked right. He reread the entry: "Clone No. 13. Name: Sophia. Expiration date: expired. Reason for disposal: biological wear. Status: disposed." He breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was in order.

But in that moment, as he was about to close the file, the terminal made a sound - short, sharp, piercing. A red notification flashed on the screen: "ATTENTION! DISCREPANCY DETECTED IN REPORT. AUDIT INITIATED."

Elias froze. His heart skipped a beat. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded like a warning. Like a reminder that he was in danger.

"No," he thought. "No, no, no. Not now. Not now."

He stood and began pacing the office. He had to do something. Had to fix the error. Had to protect Sophia.

"What did I do wrong?" he thought. "I checked everything. I double-checked. Everything should have been correct. Why did the system notice?"

He sat back at the desk and opened the file. He began reviewing every entry, every word, every number. And then he saw it. A small detail he had missed. In Sophia's record, the disposal time was listed as 14:32. But the system log showed he was in another part of the building at 14:32. A discrepancy. Small, but enough for the system to notice.

"Damn," he thought. "Damn, damn, damn. How could I miss that?"

He knew this was the end. Knew the system would not forgive this mistake. Knew his PC would fall. Knew his heart could be shut off. But he did not regret it. He had saved Sophia. He had been human.

"I will pay for this," he thought. "I will pay for my mistake. But I don't regret it. I saved a child. I was human."

He closed the terminal and leaned back in his chair. He felt his body begin to tremble. Felt fear overtake him. But he did not give up. He had to fight. He had to find a way out.

"I won't give up," he thought. "I will fight. I will prove I am human."

He stood and walked toward the door. He had to find J.S. Had to explain. Had to defend himself. Had to protect Sophia.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will protect her. I will protect myself. I will be human."

Elias left his office and headed for the elevator. He had to find J.S. Had to explain the situation. Had to defend himself.

The elevator rose to the head of department's level. Elias stepped into the corridor and walked toward the glass door of the office. He knocked.

Enter, - came a voice from inside.

Elias opened the door and entered. J.S. sat behind his glass desk, looking at his terminal screen. His face was cold, indifferent. When he saw Elias, he looked up.

Hall, - he said. - I've been expecting you.

Sir, - Elias said, trying to keep his voice steady. - I want to explain. There was an error in the report. I'll fix it.

J.S. smirked. His smirk was cold, ruthless.

An error? - he repeated. - You call this an error? You changed a clone's record. You hid a disposal. You violated protocol. This is not an error, Hall. This is treason.

I'm not a traitor, - Elias said. - I just wanted to save her. She was a child. She didn't want to die. You broke the rules, - J.S. said. - You know what that means. You know it could cost you your life.

I know, - Elias replied. - I'm ready to face the consequences. But I don't regret what I did.

J.S. looked at him for a long time, studying his face, his eyes, his voice. Then he slowly nodded.

You're stupid, Hall, - he said. - You've always been stupid. But I appreciate your honesty. That's rare in our world.

He picked up a tablet and looked at the screen.

You'll get a warning, - he said. - Your PC will drop by three percent. You'll be transferred to a lower level. But you'll keep your job. For now.

Elias looked at him. He could not believe his ears. He had expected to be fired. Expected his heart to be shut off. But he only received a warning.

Why? - he asked. - Why not punish me more severely?

J.S. smirked.

Because you're useful, Hall, - he said. - You do your job. You do it well. Despite your weakness, you are efficient. I don't want to lose an efficient employee.

He stood from the desk and walked to the window. The city stretched before him - gray, cold, lifeless.

But remember, Hall, - he said without turning. - If you break the rules again, I won't be so lenient. You will become consumable material. And your heart will be shut off. Understood?

Yes, sir, - Elias replied. - Understood.

Good, - J.S. said. - Now go. You're needed in sector D-7. Work awaits you.

Elias turned and left the office. He stood in the corridor, feeling his heart beat faster. He had received a warning. He had received a chance. He had to use it.

"I won't make this mistake again," he thought. "I'll be more careful. I'll protect her. I'll protect myself."

Elias returned to his office. He sat at his desk and opened the terminal. On the screen was a notification: "Your Purity Coefficient has been reduced by 3% due to protocol violation. Current PC: 62% (critical level: 65%). Recommended: immediately take measures to increase PC. Failure to follow recommendations within 48 hours will result in automatic reclassification to category 'Consumable Material.'"

Elias looked at these words and felt his heart clench. Sixty-two percent. Below critical level. He had become consumable material. He had become like those he killed.

"I did it," he thought. "I became consumable material. I became like them. Now they will come for me. Now they will kill me."

He closed the terminal and leaned back in his chair. He felt fear and despair overtake him. He did not know what to do. Did not know how to save himself. Did not know how to be human.

"I don't want to die," he thought. "I don't want to die in the disposer. I want to live. I want to be free."

But he knew it was impossible. Knew the system did not forgive violations. Knew his time was running out. But he did not give up. He had to fight. He had to find a way out.

"I won't give up," he thought. "I will fight. I will prove I am human."

He stood and walked to the window. The city stretched before him - gray, cold, lifeless. Corporate holograms shone on walls. Drones patrolled streets. Below, people hurried to work - assets like him. But he was no longer one of them. He was different. He was consumable material.

"I won't go back to them," he thought. "I can't. I must move forward. I must fight. I must be human."

He turned from the window and looked at the terminal. The notification about the PC reduction still showed. He knew this was only the beginning. Knew the system would not forgive his actions. But he was not afraid. He was ready.

"I accept this," he thought. "I accept the punishment. I accept my fate. I will fight. I will be human."

Elias sat in his office, staring at the wall. He felt fear overtake him. Fear of becoming consumable material. Fear of his heart being shut off. Fear of dying alone, like everyone else.

"I don't want to die," he thought. "I don't want to die in the disposer. I want to live. I want to be free. I want to be human."

He stood and began pacing the office. He had to do something. Had to find a way to raise his PC. Had to prove to the system he was useful. Had to survive.

"I can do it," he thought. "I can raise my PC. I can prove to the system I'm useful. I can survive."

He sat at his desk and opened the terminal. He began searching for ways to raise his PC. Read articles, instructions, recommendations. Learned what he needed to do - work more efficiently, avoid stress, be loyal to the corporation. But he knew it was impossible. He could not be loyal. Could not be efficient. He was human.

"I can't do it," he thought. "I can't be an asset. I can't kill people. I can't be part of this system."

He closed the terminal and leaned back in his chair. He felt despair overtake him. He did not know what to do. Did not know how to survive. Did not know how to be human.

"I will die," he thought. "I will die in the disposer. Like everyone else. I will die alone. And no one will remember me."

But deep down, he knew this was not true. He had saved Sophia. He had saved Ivan. He had saved many. They would remember him. They would live. And that was more important than his life.

"I don't regret it," he thought. "I saved them. I was human. That is all that matters."

Elias sat in his office, staring at the wall. He felt fear and despair leave him. He accepted his fate. Accepted he would die. Accepted he had become consumable material. But he did not regret it. He had made the right choice. He had been human.

"I will die," he thought. "But I will die knowing I made the right choice. I will die knowing I was human. That is all that matters."

He stood and walked to the window. The city stretched before him - gray, cold, lifeless. But he was no longer part of this city. He was free. He was human.

"I won't go back to them," he thought. "I can't. I must move forward. I must fight. I must be human."

He turned and looked at the terminal. The notification about the PC reduction still showed. But he was no longer afraid. He had accepted his fate. Accepted his death. He was ready.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will leave with honor. I will die human. And that will be my victory."

He left the office and headed for the elevator. He knew what he had to do. He had to find Sophia. Had to make sure she was safe. Had to protect her. He had to be human.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will protect her. I will protect myself. I will be human."

He entered the elevator and pressed the button for the lower level. The elevator began to descend. Elias stood motionless, looking at his reflection in the metal wall. He saw a human. Tired, frightened, but full of determination. A human who would not give up. A human who would fight. A human who was free.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will do it. I will be human."

The elevator stopped. Doors opened, and he stepped into the dark corridor. He walked toward where he had hidden Sophia. He had to find her. Had to make sure she was safe.

"I'm coming for you, Sophia," he thought. "I came back. I didn't abandon you."

He approached the trash container and opened the lid. Sophia was there. She sat huddled in a ball, looking at him with hope.

You came back, - she said.

I came back, - he replied. - I promised.

He helped her out. She was dirty, frightened, but alive.

We must go, - he said. - We must leave before they find us.

They walked along the corridor. Sophia held his hand. Her hand was cold but warm inside. He felt her trust, her hope.

You won't abandon me? - she asked.

I will never abandon you, - he replied. - I promise.

They reached the door leading to the Gray Zones. Elias opened it. Beyond was a tunnel. Dark, narrow, endless. It led to freedom.

Go, - he said, pointing at the tunnel. - Go. There you will be free.

Sophia looked at him. Tears in her eyes.

And you? - she asked. - Won't you come with me?

I can't, - he said. - I have work. I have a duty. But I will remember you. Always.

She took his hand and squeezed it.

You are human, - she said. - The most human person I have ever met.

She turned and stepped into the tunnel. Elias watched her go. Her small figure gradually dissolved into the darkness.

"I did it," he thought. "I saved her. I was human."

The workday ended. Elias left the corporate building and stopped on the street. New Tokyo-3 was sinking into artificial evening - holograms grew brighter, the sky darkened, though the sun had long been hidden by layers of synthesized smog. Drones continued to patrol the streets, their red lights flickering in the darkness like predators' eyes scanning for prey.

Elias stood motionless, staring at the gray walls of buildings, at endless rows of windows behind which lived assets like him. He felt his body ache after the long day. Muscles hurt, eyes burned, his heart continued its monotonous rhythm. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded like a reminder that he was still alive. That he could still feel. That he was still human.

"I don't want to go back to my capsule," he thought. "I don't want to lie in that white coffin and wait for morning. I want to be among people. I want to forget. I want to be normal."

He knew where to find oblivion. The bar for defectives. An underground place where people like him gathered - purgers, correctors, all those who did the system's dirty work. A place where you could drink synthesized alcohol, laugh at dark jokes, and forget for a while who you really were.

He turned and walked along the street. His steps were slow, heavy, but he walked. He knew the way. He had been there many times. The bar was in the basement of an old building, in a district the system barely controlled. Drones did not reach there. Cameras did not reach there. There you could be yourself.

He turned into a dark alley where there were no holograms, no advertising, only dirty walls and broken asphalt. The air here was different - not synthesized, but real, with the smell of dampness and dirt. He breathed this smell and smiled. It was the smell of freedom. The smell of life.

He reached an old metal door covered in layers of rust. There was no sign, no number on the door. Only a small peephole through which he was checked. He knocked three times - short, sharp, as taught. The peephole opened, and someone's eyes looked at him.

Password? - came a hoarse voice.

Expired expiration date, - Elias replied.

The peephole closed. The sound of locks being opened - heavy, metal, capable of holding anyone who tried to enter without invitation. The door opened, letting in warm light and the sounds of music.

Come in, - said the guard - a tall man with a mechanical arm and a scar on his face. - You're just in time. It'll be fun tonight.

Elias nodded and stepped inside.

The bar was in the basement of an old building. A large room with a low ceiling from which old pipes and wires protruded. The walls were shabby, with peeling paint that had once been white. In the corners hung dim lamps, providing enough light to see faces but not enough to see details.

Here it smelled of synthesized alcohol, sweat, and something else - the smell of freedom that could only be found in such places. Here gathered people like him - purgers, correctors, defectives, consumables who had not yet been written off. They sat at tables, drank, laughed, talked about work. About what they did. About how they hated their lives.

Elias walked to the bar - an old wooden counter someone had once made from planks. Behind the counter stood a woman with bright red hair and tattoos on her arms. She was one of the few who was not afraid of the system. She was free.

Hall, - she said, smiling. - You're late today. Work kept you?

Hey, Rita, - he replied, sitting on a tall stool. - As always. Twelve defects in sector D-7.

Twelve? - she repeated, raising an eyebrow. - That's a lot. Did you handle it?

Almost, - he said. - A few got away.

She poured him a glass of clear liquid. Synthesized whiskey. He took the glass and took a sip. The liquid burned his throat, but he felt no pain. He was used to it.

You look tired, - Rita said. - More than usual. What happened?

Elias took another sip. He did not know if he wanted to talk. But he knew Rita was the only one who could understand. She was like him. She was consumable material.

I saved a child, - he said quietly. - A girl. She was a clone. Her expiration date had passed. I hid her. I marked her as disposed.

Rita looked at him. Something like respect flickered in her eyes.

You took a risk, - she said. - You risked your life.

I know, - he replied. - But I couldn't kill her. She was a child. She wanted to live.

You are human, - she said. - One of the few who still are.

She poured him another glass. Elias took it and drank it in one gulp.

"I am human," he thought. "I am still human. That is all that matters."

He turned and looked at the room. People sat at tables, drank, laughed, talked. They were like him. They were defectives. They were consumable material. But they were free. At least here. At least for a moment.

Elias sat at the bar, sipping synthesized whiskey, listening to the conversations around him. Here, in the bar, people talked about what they never talked about at work. They joked about death, about the system, about their own lives. It was their way of coping. Their way of staying human.

At the next table sat three purgers - a man and two women. They laughed at something, and their laughter was loud, genuine, real.

And so, - the man said, waving his arms, - she looks at me and says: "Are you sure this is the right clone?" And I say: "Honey, if I knew which clone was right, I wouldn't be a purger. I'd be in the green zone."

The women laughed. One shook her head.

You're terrible, - she said. - You talk about death like it's a joke.

What else is there? - he replied, his smile turning bitter. - If I don't laugh, I'll cry. And you can't cry here. The system doesn't like tears.

Elias listened and felt his lips curl into a smile. Dark, tired, but genuine. They were right. If you don't laugh, there's only crying. And you can't cry here.

Did you hear the news? - said another man, approaching their table. - They say Genesis is launching a new batch of clones. Expiration date - ten years. Can you imagine? Ten years! We work eight, and they're already making them with ten-year terms.

So what? - asked one of the women. - They'll live longer than us?

They'll live longer than us, - the man replied. - We're old models. We're consumable material. They're the future.

Then let's drink to our past, - the woman said, raising her glass. - To us still being alive.

To us still being alive! - the others repeated.

Elias raised his glass and joined the toast. The liquid burned his throat, but he felt warmth spreading through his body. Warmth that reminded him he was alive. That he felt. That he was human.

"We will all die," he thought. "But while we're alive, we can laugh. We can drink. We can be human. That is all that matters."

Suddenly, conversations at the next table fell silent. Elias turned his head and saw a new man approaching the table. An old man with a gray beard and deep wrinkles on his face. His eyes were sharp, attentive, like a man who had seen much.

Did you hear the news? - he said, lowering his voice. - About Kane-39.

Everyone at the table fell silent. Elias felt his heart beat faster. Kane-39. The same name as in the news. The same number as on the capsule of the twelfth clone. He knew he had to listen. Knew it was important.

What about him? - asked one of the purgers.

He escaped, - the old man said. - He escaped with the boss's granddaughter. Iris Vos. They're together. They love each other.

A clone and a human? - the woman repeated. - That's impossible. That's a violation of the Purity Coefficient.

It's true, - the old man said. - I heard it from someone who works at Genesis. Kane-39 and Iris Vos kissed under the cameras. They disabled the system for five minutes. Five minutes, can you imagine? They risked everything for five minutes.

Why would they need that? - the man asked.

Because they love each other, - the old man replied. - Because they want to be together. Because they want to be free.

Elias listened and felt his heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded different. It sounded like a reminder that he felt. That he believed. That he hoped.

"Kane-39," he thought. "Iris Vos. They risked everything for love. They did what I cannot do. But I want to do it. I want to be free. I want to be human."

Who are they? - he asked, turning to the old man. - Tell me about them.

The old man looked at him. Something like understanding in his eyes.

They are hope, - he said. - They prove that even in this world you can love. That even in this world you can be human. They are proof that the system is not all-powerful.

Elias looked at him. He felt his heart fill with something warm. Hope.

"I will find them," he thought. "I will find Kane-39 and Iris Vos. I will help them. I will prove I am human."

Elias sat at the bar, staring at his empty glass. Conversations around him faded, music played softly. He felt the alcohol begin to work, making his thoughts clearer. He knew he had to make a decision. Had to decide who he was - asset or human.

"I can't go back to how it was," he thought. "I can't kill people again. I must fight. I must be human."

He raised his head and looked at Rita. She stood behind the counter, wiping glasses, but her eyes were on him.

You've decided something, - she said. - I can see it in your eyes.

Yes, - he replied. - I've decided. I won't kill anymore. I will fight. I will save. I will be human.

You know this could cost you your life? - she asked.

I know, - he replied. - But I'm ready. I'm ready to die, but I will die human.

She smiled. Her smile was warm, genuine.

You are a good person, Hall, - she said. - You're making the right choice.

He stood and placed a few credits on the counter.

I will find them, - he said. - I will find Kane-39 and Iris Vos. I will help them. This is my path.

He turned and walked toward the exit. His steps were confident, firm. He knew what he was doing. Knew it was right.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will find them. I will help them. I will prove I am human."

Elias left the bar and stopped on the dark street. The night air was cold, but he barely felt the cold. The alcohol warmed him from within, and thoughts of Kane-39 and Iris Vos ignited something warm in his chest. Hope. He stood motionless, looking at the gray sky, and replayed everything he had heard in the bar.

"Kane-39," he thought. "The perfect clone-soldier. The thirty-ninth attempt to create the perfect weapon. The previous thirty-eight died or were destroyed. He was supposed to be the

perfect asset. Unquestioning. Emotionless. Efficient. But he escaped. He escaped with the boss's granddaughter. He fell in love. He broke all the rules."

Elias felt his heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded different. Like a drum roll heralding something important.

"He escaped," Elias continued thinking. "He risked everything for love. He did what I cannot do. He chose freedom. He chose life. He chose to be human, even if the system says he's just a weapon."

He walked along the street, not knowing where he was going. His legs carried him forward on their own, into the darkness of the night city. He looked at corporate holograms, at drones, at endless rows of windows behind which slept assets like him. But he was no longer one of them. He was different. He was a human who had decided to fight.

"What do I know about him?" he thought. "He is a clone. He is the perfect soldier. His expiration date is five years. He knows he will die. He knows his life is just a countdown to death. But he did not give up. He fights. He loves. He lives."

Elias stopped at an intersection. Beside him stood an old lamppost, flickering, casting dim light on the wet asphalt. He leaned against the lamppost and closed his eyes. Kane-39's face appeared before him - the one he had seen on the screen. Harsh, muscular, with a tattoo on his chest. But in his eyes there was pain. The same pain Elias felt every day.

"He is like me," he thought. "He also suffers. He also fears. But he does not give up. He fights. He is human. Even if the system says he is just a weapon."

He opened his eyes and looked at the sky. There, beyond the layers of smog, stars were hidden. He had not seen them for years, but he knew they were there. Somewhere out there, beyond this gray veil, was freedom. Somewhere out there was life.

"I will find you, Kane-39," he thought. "I will find you and Iris Vos. I will help you. I will do everything so you can be free. Because if you can be free, then I can too. Then we all have a chance."

He pushed off from the lamppost and walked on. His steps became more confident. He knew a long road lay ahead. Knew it would be difficult. But he was ready. Ready to fight. Ready to be human.

Elias walked through the dark streets, and his thoughts continued to circle around Kane-39. He remembered everything he had heard in the bar. Every detail, every word, every hint - all of it came together in a picture that captured his imagination.

"The perfect clone-soldier," he thought. "What does that mean? It means he was created to kill. To be ruthless. To feel no pain, fear, compassion. But he feels. He feels love. He feels pain. He feels fear. He is human."

Elias remembered his own heart. Mechanical, humming, with that cursed sound that haunted him every second. But Kane-39, perhaps, had a real heart. Or at least he felt as strongly as a person with a real heart.

"Thirty-eight attempts," he continued thinking. "Thirty-eight clones died. Thirty-eight lives wasted. And he - the thirty-ninth - survived. He became perfect. But he did not become obedient. He did not become a weapon. He became human."

Elias stopped before a large building on whose wall hung a hologram advertising Genesis. "Genesis - your life in our hands," the slogan read. Elias looked at these words and felt anger rise in his chest.

"They created him," he thought. "They created him to use. To kill. To be a weapon. But he escaped. He showed them he is not just a weapon. He is human. And they are afraid of this. They are afraid other clones will also escape. They are afraid the system will collapse."

He clenched his fists. His nails dug into his palms, but he barely felt the pain. He felt only anger and determination.

"I will help you, Kane-39," he thought. "I will help you be free. I will help you fight. I will help you prove you are human. Even if it costs me my life."

He walked on. In his head, a plan was already beginning to form. He had to find Kane-39 and Iris Vos. He had to help them. He had to become part of their fight. He had to be human.

Elias continued walking through the night city, and his thoughts shifted to Iris Vos. She was the granddaughter of the corporation head. She had everything - money, power, privileges. She lived in the green zone. She ate real food. She breathed real air. She had a real heart. And she risked everything for a clone.

"Why?" he thought. "Why did she do it? She had everything I can only dream of. She had freedom. She had life. And she risked everything for love. For a man the system calls a weapon."

He remembered her face on the screen. Red hair, green eyes, wide smile. She looked like a person who knew what she was doing. Like someone who was not afraid of consequences. Like someone ready to die for her love.

"She is stronger than me," he thought. "She is stronger than I am. She did what I cannot do. She chose love. She chose freedom. She chose to be human."

He stopped on a bridge over a canal of dark water. The water was dirty, with an oily film on the surface. But he looked at it and imagined it was a clean river. That he stood on the bank and breathed real air. That he was free.

"Iris Vos," he thought. "You are an example for all of us. You showed that even in this world you can love. That even in this world you can be human. You gave us hope. You showed the system is not all-powerful."

He gripped the bridge railing and looked ahead. The city stretched before him - gray, cold, lifeless. But he was no longer part of this city. He was free. He was human.

"I will find you, Iris Vos," he thought. "I will find you and Kane-39. I will help you. I will do everything so you can be free. Because if you can be free, then I can too. Then we all have a chance."

Elias continued walking through the city, but now his thoughts were occupied with the love of Kane-39 and Iris Vos. They were in love. A clone and a human. This violated all the rules. This violated the Purity Coefficient. This was impossible. But it was true.

"They love each other," he thought. "They risked everything for that love. They disabled the system for five minutes to kiss. Five minutes that changed their lives. Five minutes that made them traitors. Five minutes that made them free."

He stopped before an old building on whose wall someone had painted a graffiti - a heart pierced by an arrow. Elias looked at this heart and felt his own heart beat faster.

"Love," he thought. "I forgot what it was. I forgot what it was like to love. I forgot what it was like to be loved. But they reminded me. They showed that even in this world you can love. That even in this world you can be human."

He ran his finger over the graffiti, feeling the rough surface of the wall. The paint was old, cracked, but the heart was still visible. It was a symbol of hope. A symbol of freedom. A symbol of love.

"I want to love," he thought. "I want to feel. I want to be human. And I will prove it. I will find them. I will help them. I will become part of their fight. I will become human."

He pulled his hand from the wall and walked on. His steps were confident, firm. He knew what lay ahead. Knew it would be difficult. But he was ready. Ready to fight. Ready to love. Ready to be human.

Elias approached the city center, where holograms were brighter and drones more numerous. Here hung huge screens broadcasting news. On one screen he saw the face of Marcus Vos - the head of Genesis, Iris's grandfather. His face was cold, ruthless, as always.

"Dear users," Marcus said. "Today I want to talk to you about betrayal. About how one person can destroy everything we have built. My granddaughter, Iris Vos, chose the path of betrayal. She helped a fugitive clone escape. She betrayed her family, her corporation, her values. But we will find her. We will find them both. And they will pay for their crimes."

Elias looked at the screen and felt his hands clench into fists. He hated this man. Hated his cold eyes, his mechanical smile, his words that sounded like a sentence.

"You won't find them," he thought. "I won't let you find them. I will protect them. I will do everything to keep them free."

The screen switched to other news, but Elias continued staring at where Marcus's face had been. He felt anger and determination battle in his soul.

"They've put a bounty on them," he thought. "Fifty thousand credits for Kane-39's head. Ten million for Iris Vos. They want to catch them. They want to destroy them. But I won't let them. I will protect them. I will do everything to keep them free."

He turned and walked on. He knew he had to be careful. Knew he was also being sought. Knew his lowered PC made him vulnerable. But he was not afraid. He was ready to fight.

"I will do it," he thought. "I will find them. I will help them. I will prove I am human. And I will die knowing I made the right choice."

Elias stopped at a small terminal built into the wall of a building. He entered his access code and opened the news feed. There was an announcement about the reward for capturing Kane-39. He read it several times, feeling his heart beat faster.

"For information on Kane-39's whereabouts - 50,000 credits," the announcement read. "For assistance in capture - 100,000 credits. For assistance in elimination - 150,000 credits. Remember: traitors deserve no mercy."

Elias looked at these numbers and felt his stomach clench. Fifty thousand credits. An amount that could change his life. He could buy a new heart. Raise his PC. Move to the green zone. Be free. But he knew he would never do it.

"I won't betray them," he thought. "I won't sell them out. I won't be like everyone else. I will be human. I will help them. I will do everything to keep them free."

He closed the terminal and stepped away from the wall. He felt his determination strengthen. Knew what lay ahead. Knew it would be difficult. But he was ready. Ready to fight. Ready to be human.

"I will find them," he thought. "I will help them. And I will prove that even in this world you can be human. This is my path. This is my fate. I am ready."

Elias slowly wandered along the corridor of his residential block. His legs ached, his back hurt, but he barely felt the physical fatigue. His thoughts were far away - where Kane-39 and Iris Vos fought for freedom. Where love defeated the system. Where hope still existed.

He stopped before his door - as white as all the others. It opened at the signal of his neural interface, letting him into the tiny capsule-apartment. White walls, white floor, white ceiling. The sleep capsule in the corner, a table, a mirror. Everything the same as in the morning. Everything the same as yesterday. Everything the same as always.

Elias entered and closed the door. He felt silence descend upon him, heavy, pressing, almost tangible. Here, in this tiny room, he was alone. Absolutely alone. Only his breathing and the quiet hum of his artificial heart could be heard. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded like a reminder that he was alive. That he breathed. That he could still change something.

He took off his jumpsuit and hung it on the back of a chair. The jumpsuit was wet with sweat that had broken out on his skin after the long day. He smelled the synthesized air that had seeped into his hair, his skin, his clothes. The smell of the corporation. The smell of the cage.

He walked to the small window and looked at the night city. Corporate holograms shone on building walls, reflecting in skyscraper windows. Locust drones patrolled the streets, their red lights flickering in the darkness like predators' eyes scanning for prey. Below, on the endless levels of the city, people hurried home - assets like him. They did not look up. Did not look at each other. They just walked, heads down, following their protocols.

"I am no longer one of you," he thought. "I can't be one of you. I must go my own way. I must fight. I must be human."

He turned from the window and walked to the sleep capsule. He wanted to lie down and close his eyes. Wanted to forget. Wanted to wake up and find the whole day was a nightmare. But he knew it was impossible. Knew his life was reality. And he had to accept it.

He sat on the edge of the capsule and lowered his head. Tears rose to his eyes, but he did not let them fall. He had to be strong. Had to fight. Had to be human.

"I will find you, Iris Vos," he thought. "I will find you and Kane-39. I will help you. I will do everything so you can be free. This is my mission. This is my fate. I am ready."

But in that moment, as he was about to lie down, he heard a sound. Quiet, barely perceptible, but distinct. Footsteps. In his capsule-apartment. Someone was here. He jumped to his feet and looked around.

In the corner of the room, on his only chair, sat a girl. She wore a bright red cloak that stood out against the white walls. Her hair was red as flame, and her eyes - green as the grass in the green zones he had never seen. She looked at him without fear. Only determination. Only hope.

Are you Elias Hall? - she asked. Her voice was quiet but firm.

Elias froze. He could not move. Could not speak. He just looked at her and felt his heart beat faster. Vzh-vzh-vzh. The sound he hated. But now it sounded like a warning. Like a reminder that he was in danger.

Who are you? - he asked, his voice trembling.

The girl stood. The red cloak billowed behind her like a banner. She walked to him and stopped at arm's length.

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