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IGOR KOCHETKOV

Dream: Fault



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«Издательские решения»

Kochetkov I.

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Guilt can pay for anything — except for its own price.Leo blames himself for the accident that plunged his sister into the abyss of a coma. In his desperation, he discovers a final glimmer of hope: a mysterious clinic tucked away in the mountains that offers the impossible — a chance to peer into the realm where Sofia's consciousness has drifted. The price of admission? His own sanity.

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Dream: Fault

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Fault

Kochetkov Igor

Chapter 1. Shards of an Ordinary Day

The sun beat against the windshield, shattering into a thousand hot little sunbeams. Leo squinted, spun the steering wheel with one hand, and turned down the radio with the other, where some enthusiastic voice was announcing a record-breaking heat wave.

"Le, can I?" A hand reached from the back.

He met Sofia's gaze in the rearview mirror. Twelve years old, and in her eyes — a perpetual motion machine, an eternal question. She was already holding her phone ready, the earphone cord twisting in her fingers like a little black snake.

"You think I don't know you want to swap my playlist for some heart-wrenching pop?" he snorted, but he was already reaching for the jack.

"It's not pop!" Sofia protested, but her eyes were laughing. "It's art. You're just old."

"Old?" Leo raised an eyebrow with exaggerated dignity. "I'm twenty, sunshine. This is my prime. And your 'art' is three chords and tears about broken hearts you haven't even had yet."

She made a face. In the back seat, a bouquet of her hair — honey-colored like the very sun they were driving toward — flared up. Mom said Sofia took after her — just as restless, with the same explosive temperament. And Leo, supposedly, took after Dad — patient, steady as a rock. He wasn't so sure. Rocks didn't feel that constant, quiet anxiety, that aching urge to protect, to shield, which sometimes woke him in the middle of the night when he heard Sofia tossing and turning behind the wall.

The car — his parents' gift for his eighteenth birthday — hummed softly, eating up miles of asphalt. They were returning from the dacha, from a world of pine scent and sand wet after rain. Grandma had loaded them up with jam, pickles, and laments about how much they'd both grown. As she got into the car, Sofia whispered, "Imagine, she slipped apples into my pocket. In case we break down in a field and starve to death." They both snorted at that.

"Fine, mistress of musical taste," Leo gave in, handing over control of the audio system. "But if there's that one of yours… what's his name… with the haircut like a scared hedgehog, I'll throw the phone out the window. On my insurance."

Sofia triumphantly plugged in the jack. A second later, the cabin filled with a beat — surprisingly upbeat and melodic. Not what he'd expected.

"See?" Her voice sounded right by his ear. She'd leaned against the back of his seat. "And you're biased. It's great!"

He nodded his head to the rhythm. Yeah, great. Everything was great. The sun, the road, the light breeze from the slightly open window mixing with the smell of heated plastic and her shampoo — strawberry and something else, sweet. The music. Her laughter when he started singing along to the ridiculous chorus, deliberately off-key.

That day was assembled from shards of ordinary happiness. From little things. From her elbow on his shoulder. From the argument over who would finish the last candy from the glove compartment. From his grumbling about her things scattered on the back seat. From the silence that fell between tracks — not awkward, but warm, filled with the simple knowledge: we are here, we are together, we are driving home.

He didn't know then that he would remember every shard. Every detail. The shade of the sky (ruthlessly blue, without a single cloud). A grain of sand stuck to her sneaker. The melody of that very song. He would remember with such painful sharpness that years later he would wake in a cold sweat from its echo in the silence.

Right now, he was just driving. The road was straight and empty, running off into the heat-shimmering haze. Sofia, settled more comfortably, had gone back to her phone, humming under her

breath. Leo put his hand on the gearshift, felt the smooth plastic under his fingers. Life was simple, understandable, and solid, like this car interior part. It seemed it would always be this way.

He didn't see the truck pulling out from the side road. He only saw the sudden, monstrous shadow covering them from the side, like the wing of a black bird. And time, so flexible and lazy just a moment ago, suddenly compressed into one sharp, chilling point.

The shards of an ordinary day turned into shards of glass, metal, and his former life. But that would happen in a moment. And right now, he was just driving, and the sun was beating against the windshield, and everything was fine. Perfectly, deceptively fine.

Chapter 2. The Line Between “Before” and “After”

The sound was dull and wet, like the blow of a giant hammer against meat. Leo didn’t hear it — he felt it with his whole body. The car’s bones howled in a piercing falsetto, the glass turned into white grit and showered inward in a needle-like rain. He was thrown forward, the seatbelt bit into his shoulder and chest, squeezing all the air out of his lungs with a hoarse “oof.”

The world spun in a mad kaleidoscope: a distorted sky flashed by, a piece of asphalt, sparkling metal shavings. The car, spinning like a top, was dragged sideways with a wild screech until it slammed into something immovable with a dull thud that made Leo hit his head on the side pillar.

And then silence came. Incomplete, ghostly. His ears rang as if a particle of that hellish screech had remained in them. Steam hissed from the ruptured radiator. Liquid dripped — oil, water, or maybe something else. It smelled of burning, gasoline, and the acrid dust of the airbags that hung around him like white, lifeless petals.

“Sofia.”

The thought cut through the fog in his head, sharp and cold. He jerked, trying to turn. His body responded with a dull, diffuse pain, but it obeyed. Whole. Alive.

“Soph?” His voice came out strange, hoarse. “Sofia!”

The only answer was that same ringing silence. With mad strength he yanked the belt, unbuckled it, pushed the airbag aside. The back seat…

There was no Sofia there. There was a doll made of her clothes and a pale, dust-covered face. She sat with her head unnaturally tilted to one side, her forehead pressed against the back of the front seat. Her beautiful, honey-colored hair was stained with a dark, almost black spot slowly creeping from her temple.

“No,” Leo groaned. “No, no, no…”

He tried to get out, but the door was bent and wouldn’t open. With furious, inhuman strength he rammed his shoulder into it, once, twice — with a crunch and a screech it gave way. He tumbled out onto the asphalt, hot and rough, stumbled, fell to his knees. He felt nothing. He got up, ran around the car.

Their “family tank,” which he had so often teased, was now a horrifying sculpture of crumpled metal. The side that had taken the impact was caved in almost to the center of the cabin. To the place where Sofia had been sitting.

He yanked the door again. It wouldn’t budge, jammed shut. Through the cracked glass he saw her face. It was calm, as if she had simply fallen asleep to that very song. If not for that dark spot. And not for that strange, fragile unnaturalness with which her body was twisted.

“Hold on,” he muttered, not knowing to whom, grabbing the sharp edges of the frame, trying to tear the door out as if something depended on it. “Hold on, sunshine, now, now…”

Somewhere in the distance a siren wailed. Then another. The sounds came as if through a thick layer of cotton wool. The world around him lost its colors, smells, meanings. There remained only him, this mangled iron trap, and the silence inside it.

Someone roughly grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him away. He saw faces in uniform, moving mouths, but couldn’t hear the words. They were saying something to him, trying to sit him on the curb, to examine him. He broke free, pushed them away like an annoying fly, and rushed back to the car. To her. “Men with big tools” were already working there, the screech of hydraulic shears merging with the wail of sirens into one continuous, meaningless hum.

They took her out for a very long time. Carefully, like fragile porcelain. When they finally laid her on the stretcher, he saw everything. Too much. A mangled leg, twisted at an impossible angle. Small, bright red scratches on her arms. And the main thing — the deathly pallor of her skin and her closed, as if forever, eyelids.

“The girl is alive!” someone shouted, and that voice broke through the cotton wool. “Weak pulse, shallow breathing! Quickly!”

Alive. The word struck his temples, filling him not with relief but with a new, chilling wave of horror. Because how was she alive? In what? In this mangled body? In this silence to which she did not respond?

He lunged toward the stretcher, but was again gently but firmly stopped.

“Brother? How are you? Any injuries?”

Leo was silent, watching as they loaded her into the maw of the ambulance. His gaze fell on his hands. They were scratched, with blue traces of future bruises, but whole. Working. Hands that had just been turning the steering wheel. That had turned on that very song.

The line between “before” and “after” was thin as a windshield. And it had shattered. Forever. “Before” remained there, in the sunny cabin, to the sound of funny music. “After” began here, on the scorching asphalt, in the smell of blood and gasoline, under the howling echo of sirens carrying away into nowhere the most important thing he had.

He stood in the middle of the road, completely alone, and watched the taillights of the ambulance with the red cross disappear into the haze. And inside, emptiness grew. Quiet, bottomless, and absolutely black. An emptiness that in a moment would begin to fill with one single, all-consuming feeling.

Guilty. It’s me.

Chapter 3. Silence Within Four Walls

The hospital room smelled of death. Not rot or decomposition, but pure, laboratory death — a mixture of antiseptic, old paint, mustiness from the ventilation, and the silent despair that had seeped into the very walls. This smell had become Leo's new air, which he had been breathing for three weeks now.

He sat on a hard plastic chair by the bed, clutching its armrest like a lifebuoy. His world had shrunk to four walls, to the measured hiss of the ventilator, to the monotonous beep-beep-beep of the cardiac monitor. Green lines ran across the screen, drawing an electrocardiogram of vegetative existence that was meaningless to him.

Sofia lay amid this web of tubes and wires, small and incredibly distant. Her face, almost untouched outwardly except for a couple of scratches and a bruise at her temple, was calm. Too calm. As if she were simply fast asleep and would open her eyes at any moment, make a face, and say: "What are you staring at? Old man." But she didn't open them. Her eyelids remained heavy curtains separating her from the whole world. From him.

Doctors came and went, felt her pulse, shone flashlights into her unseeing pupils, shook their heads. Their words floated around Leo without catching on his consciousness: "coma of unclear origin," "severe traumatic brain injury," "brainstem contusion," "prognosis cautious, but…" This "but" hung in the air, thick and viscous as syrup. "But" meant they didn't know. "But" meant eternal hope, which with each passing day became more and more like torture.

The door creaked. His parents entered. Mom — Anna — moved like a sleepwalker, her face, always so lively, had become a wax mask carved with new wrinkles. Dad, Mikhail, looked ten years older; his broad shoulders were hunched under an invisible weight.

"Leonid," his father's voice was hoarse from sleepless nights and cigarettes smoked in the staff room. "You have to eat. And sleep. At least a couple of hours at the hotel."

Leo silently shook his head without taking his eyes off his sister. Sleeping was impossible. In his sleep he saw the impact again, heard the crunch, watched her body go limp. He woke up screaming, in a cold sweat, and his first impulse was to rush here to make sure the green line was still running across the screen. That she was still here. Even in this terrible dream, but here.

"Son," Mom sat down beside him, put her hand on his shoulder. Her touch was light as the touch of a ghost. "You're not to blame. It was an accident."

These words, said for the hundredth time, burned like red-hot iron. Not to blame. But that was a lie. He was driving. He was distracted by her laughter, by her attempts to change the music. He didn't see that fateful shadow. Every click of the ventilator, every beep of the monitor awakened in him the same inner scream: I'm to blame. I. To blame.

"I need to talk to her," he muttered in response, not for them but for himself. "Sometimes they hear. Doctors say sometimes they hear."

He leaned closer, overcoming the smell of medicine and hospital, searching her face for the slightest sign of life beyond these mechanical breaths in and out.

"Soph," his whisper was barely audible even to himself. "It's me. Le. You… you just rest, okay? Gather your strength. Everything will be fine. We… we'll buy you those sneakers you wanted. And I won't grumble about your music anymore. I promise."

Nothing. No flutter of eyelashes, no change in the heart rate on the monitor. Only silence. Deep, absolute, piercing through. A silence louder than any scream.

His parents exchanged glances. In their gaze was unbearable pity mixed with their own grief, which left no strength even to save their son. They were broken. Their family, so solid just a month ago, now lay in ruins: their daughter — in a coma between life and death, their son — in a coma of his own guilt and despair.

Evening turned to night. The duty nurse, a woman with a tired but kind face, looked in to adjust the IV drip.

“Boy,” she said quietly, “you’ve been here since morning. Go, take a walk. Get some air. She’s not going anywhere. We’ll look after her.”

He shook his head again. To leave would mean to betray. To leave her alone in this white, death-smelling void. He couldn’t. His place was here, on this chair, on this front line in the war against nonexistence.

The night dragged on endlessly. The monitor’s beeping counted off the seconds, each of which was an eternity. Leo looked at his sister’s motionless face, and his mind, exhausted by sleeplessness and grief, began to paint monstrous pictures. What if she wasn’t just sleeping? What if she was there, inside, locked in darkness? What if she was afraid? What if she was calling him, and he couldn’t hear?

This thought sent a shiver through him. He grabbed her hand — the one free of catheters. It was cool, lifeless. He squeezed it, trying to transfer at least a drop of his warmth, his life.

“I’m here,” he whispered through the lump in his throat. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll find a way. I will definitely find a way to bring you back.”

It was an oath thrown in the face of the silent hospital walls. An oath of despair. But at that moment despair was the only thing he had left. It burned in his chest with a cold, inexorable flame, burning away everything else — fear, fatigue, doubt.

The silence within the four walls thickened, becoming tangible. It was his prison and his cross. But somewhere at the edge of consciousness, in the darkest corners of the internet that he frantically scrolled through on his phone in the rare minutes when his eyes closed on their own, a ghostly glimmer was already flickering. A clinic. Somewhere far away. Somewhere in the mountains. That promised the impossible. That said one could look where words spoken at the bedside do not reach.

But that would come later. Right now there was only him, the silence, and her cold hand in his hot palm. And the monstrous, all-consuming weight of waiting in a world where time had stopped.

Chapter 4. The “Awakening” Clinic

Snow. There was so much of it that it stopped being weather and became a state of the world. A white, silent void in which the outlines of cliffs, the sky, and the horizon itself drowned. The wind, howling through the Himalayan gorges, screamed outside the jeep, making the thin metal vibrate. Leo pressed his forehead against the icy glass, trying to make out something through the swirling blizzard. Nothing. Only whiteness, pressing on his consciousness.

The journey here had been like a desperate escape from reality. Selling the car — that very car, mangled — which had miraculously been deemed repairable. Petty, humiliating requests for money from acquaintances whom he and his parents had avoided over the past months. Lying to his parents about “a new experimental therapy in Switzerland” that was expensive but offered hope. Their eyes, extinguished, suddenly flaring with a weak, painful spark of that very hope. He took that hope like a torch and ran with it into the darkest, most remote place he could find.

The “Awakening” Clinic did not look like a hospital. It was a low, squat structure of dark stone and glass, built directly into the rock, like a giant sterile mushroom grown on a mountain slope. No signs, no pointers. Only coordinates in the deep layers of a forum for desperate relatives, where borderline states of consciousness were discussed, and a terse description: “Dr. Sun’s Research Center. Neurointegrative practices.”

The jeep driver, a stern Nepali who had not uttered a word the entire way, merely nodded toward the building and turned around to disappear into the white haze. Leo was left alone on a tiny platform before a massive door of blackened metal. The wind immediately began tearing at his light city jacket, creeping under his clothes with icy fingers. He knocked.

The door opened soundlessly, letting him into complete silence and warmth. The air inside was dry, sterile, with a faint smell of ozone, like in a computer classroom. A woman in a white coat appeared before him, her face devoid of any expression.

“Leonid?” she asked without preamble. Her accent was almost imperceptible.

He nodded, barely able to unclench his frozen jaw.

“Follow me. Dr. Sun is expecting you.”

He was led through corridors lined with smooth dark stone. Light came from hidden panels in the ceiling, giving a soft, cold glow. No windows. No paintings. No sounds except their own footsteps, muffled by thick floor covering. This was not a medical facility. It was a bunker. Or a temple to some new, impersonal god.

Dr. Sun’s office was equally austere. A large desk of black wood, several chairs, a wall-screen on which a three-dimensional model of neural connections was currently slowly pulsating. Behind the desk sat the doctor himself.

Dr. Sun looked about fifty, but it was hard to say for sure. He had a narrow, intelligent face with high cheekbones and attentive, incredibly dark eyes that seemed older than the rest of him. He studied Leo not as a patient or a client, but as an interesting specimen.

“Have a seat, Mr. Leonid,” his voice was quiet, even, perfectly modulated. “You’ve come a long way. I hope the weather didn’t impress you too much. We get that here.”

Leo lowered himself onto the chair, feeling out of place in his soaked sneakers and worn jeans against this sterile luxury.

“My sister…” he began, but Sun gently raised his hand.

“Sofia. Twelve years old. Car accident. Coma of unclear origin, third month. Indicators consistently vegetative.” He listed everything without a single piece of paper. His fingers slid over the desk surface, and Sofia’s medical record, her scans, her charts appeared on the screen. Leo swallowed. This ease with which they possessed the most intimate information about his life made him uneasy. “Standard medicine offers you only palliation and waiting. You are looking for a non-standard path.”

“I’m looking for a way to reach her,” Leo blurted out, clenching his fists on his knees. “Doctors say she might hear. But that’s not enough. I want… I have to see what’s with her. Where she is.”

Sun nodded slowly, as if expecting exactly these words.

“You’ve come to the right place, Mr. Leonid. But you must understand what you’re dealing with. We don’t treat bodies. We map consciousness. More precisely, what remains of it in borderline states.” He leaned back in his chair, folding his fingers into a steeple. “We call our method the ‘Guest’s Gaze.’ Non-invasive neurosomatic projection. Roughly speaking, we create a bridge between two consciousnesses — the active one, yours, and… the reduced one, hers. You become an observer within her mental landscape.”

Leo froze. His heart was pounding somewhere in his throat.

“I… will see her dreams?”

“Not exactly. You will see her reality. The space into which her ‘I’ has retreated, escaping from trauma. Everyone has their own. For some it’s a static memory, a loop of a single moment. For others — a chaotic stream of images. For others… something more structured.” A spark of something that could be scientific interest or something darker flickered in Sun’s eyes. “The ‘Guest’s Gaze’ allows only observation. You cannot interact, change anything. You are a camera. A ghost.”

“But I can understand!” Desperate hope sounded in Leo’s voice. “See what she’s experiencing there! Maybe find a way…”

"...to wake her up?” Sun finished for him. He paused. “Theoretically, understanding the structure of her consciousness could provide a key for external stimulation. But that’s already the realm of hypotheses. Our goal is research. We offer you to become part of this research. Without guarantees.”

“How much?” Leo asked dully, already feeling his last money melting in his pocket.

Sun named the sum. It was astronomical. More than everything Leo had. He paled but nodded.

“I have part of it. The rest… I’ll find it. I’ll do anything.”

The doctor looked at him studyingly again.

“Money is merely a formality. Payment for the risk. The risk primarily for you, Mr. Leonid. Immersion into a shattered consciousness is not a walk in the park. You may encounter… images, trauma. It can leave scars on your own psyche. Are you ready for that?”

Leo raised his eyes to him. In his eyes there was no longer fear, only steel determination forged in the silence of the hospital room.

“I’m ready for anything. Show me where she is.”

The corner of Dr. Sun’s mouth twitched in something remotely resembling a smile.

“Good. Tomorrow we’ll begin preparation. Rest today.” He pressed a button on the desk, and the woman in white entered the office again. “Take Mr. Leonid to his room. And prepare the ‘Observer-Guest’ protocol for tomorrow morning.”

As Leo followed the guide back through the soundless corridors, a strange mixture of feelings overwhelmed him. Frivolous hope struggled with a chilling premonition. This place, this “Awakening” clinic, did not inspire hope. It preserved it, placed it in sterile conditions for study. Dr. Sun was not a savior but a scientist, looking through a microscope at their — his and Sofia’s — pain.

But for Leo that was enough. A microscope was better than blind silence. Even if he saw hell in the eyepiece, he would know. And knowledge was already a form of action. A form of atonement.

He entered his room — just as minimalist, with a bed, a desk, and one view out the window: the same dazzling, merciless whiteness of the Himalayas. The “Awakening” clinic was silent around him, like a giant machine preparing to swallow his consciousness and spit it out into the unknown. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would look into the abyss in which his sister was lost.

Chapter 5. The Price of a Glance into the Abyss

The procedure room resembled a chamber on a spaceship or, what was more frightening, a crematorium. All surfaces were smooth, matte white, absorbing sound. In the center stood two capsule-chairs of polished metal and milky plastic, entangled in bundles of wires and flexible tubes leading to consoles by the wall. The air hummed with a low, barely perceptible drone — the work of hidden generators and cooling systems. Leo, clad in a thin coverall of conductive fabric, felt like a laboratory rat prepared for the most sophisticated experiment.

Dr. Sun, in his immaculate white coat, floated between the apparatuses, checking readings. Beside him, at the second capsule, lay Sofia. She had been brought here under cover of night, in a special medical module — the whole operation was shrouded in a haze of semi-legality that Leo preferred not to think about. To see her here, in this sterile hell, rather than in the familiar hospital room, was unbearable. Even paler, even smaller among the high technology. The only thing connecting her to that world was the quiet hiss of the portable ventilator.

"The 'Guest's Gaze' is not a dream," Sun's voice sounded like a lecture in an auditorium. He attached cold sensors to Leo's temples. "It is a controlled projection. Your consciousness will use her neural activity as… a map. You will see what she sees. Or rather, what her basic consciousness perceives. Remember: you are an observer. A ghost. Any attempt at interaction, any emotional surge on your part can break the connection or distort the picture. You are here to watch. Only to watch."

Leo nodded, swallowing convulsively. His mouth was dry as dust. Fear had frozen his insides into an icy lump, but he drove it deep down, to the very bottom. For this he had gone through everything. For this moment.

"What… what should I expect to see?" he squeezed out.

Sun shrugged, and there was something frighteningly dispassionate in that gesture.

"Anything at all. A static image. Chaos. A memory loop. Sometimes…" he paused, "sometimes consciousness, trying to save itself from unbearable reality, constructs entire worlds. Primitive ones, based on fragments of memories, fears, desires. You may become the first person to see the architecture of such a world from the inside."

Leo looked at his sister's face. "Entire worlds." So she wasn't in a void. She was somewhere. This thought simultaneously seared with hope and terrified him.

"We begin calibration," Sun announced and placed a helmet resembling an inverted basket of black plastic and fiber optics on Leo's head. The world narrowed to a narrow slit before his eyes. "Relax. Breathe evenly. The system will guide you to the threshold itself."

Leo leaned back against the soft back of the chair. Cold suckers of sensors on his chest, arms. The hiss of an injector administering a light sedative cocktail — "to reduce cognitive noise." His body became heavy, distant. The hum of the equipment turned into a monotonous background, then began to change, rising and falling, merging with the rhythm of his own heart.

The darkness behind his eyelids ceased to be merely the absence of light. It became matter. Thick, viscous, pulsating. Leo felt his thought — no, not thought, but his very attention — stretching somewhere forward, as if on a thread. Sparks flickered in the darkness. Not colors, but vague impressions: a flash of warmth (the sun in the car?), a sensation of falling, a distant, distorted sound of a siren.

And then — a plunge.

The darkness parted. But what he saw was neither a picture nor a dream. It was a sensation translated into an image. He did not see with his eyes — he perceived with his entire being.

Pain.

It was everywhere. Not sharp, but dull, diffuse, like leaden heaviness in every molecule. It was the color of dull, rotting iron. It was the sound of a low, continuous hum that made you want to howl. It was the world.

Leo floated — no, his consciousness drifted — through this nightmarish soup. He tried to find form, boundaries, but there were none. Only endless, suffocating pain-substance. And in this substance floated fragments. Fragments of her.

Here a flash: her own hand before her face, but distorted, huge, motionless. Here an echo: his voice calling "Soph!", but stretched out like a recording on a demagnetizing tape, turned into meaningless roar. Here a feeling: oppressive cold (hospital sheets?), mixed with burning (medication in veins?). Everything was mixed, deprived of cause-and-effect connections, like the contents of a blender after an explosion.

And through it all — fear. Primordial, animal fear of a lost child. Fear of the dark, where there is no top or bottom. Fear of loneliness, absolute and complete.

Mom? Le?..

A thought, not a sound. A weak, barely discernible impulse of despair breaking through the pain. She was here. She was all of it — this pain, this fear, these fragments. Her consciousness had not built a world. It had been torn to pieces by trauma and floated in its own hell.

"Sofia!" Leo tried to shout, but he had no mouth, no voice. He was merely a clot of awareness, and his own horror, his love, his guilt struck his perception like a hammer.

The pain-world shuddered. The fragments flashed faster, the hum grew, turning into a deafening screech. In the chaos, something coherent momentarily appeared: the image of his face, as she had seen him last behind the wheel. But the face was distorted by a grimace of horror, the eyes empty as a dead man's. Her fear for him. Fear that something had happened to him.

He understood. She was not simply stuck in the pain of her injuries. A part of her, the deepest part, was locked in the moment of the accident. In the moment when she saw his frightened face and became frightened for him. Her last conscious thought was not about herself. It was about him.

This realization crashed down on Leo with such force that his own physical body in the chair jerked in a convulsion. The price of a glance into the abyss turned out not to be the risk to the psyche that Sun had spoken of. The price was in the knowledge. In the knowledge that his sister, even crushed, torn apart, continued to love him. And that this hell in which she dwelt was partly his creation.

The connection began to break. White noise swallowed the images. The last thing he managed to feel was a tiny, weak impulse resembling a call. Not "help me," but "where are you?"

Then — a sharp, painful jerk.

He gasped, coughed, convulsing in the chair as if electrified. Real sensations crashed down on him: cold sweat on his back, trembling in his limbs, nausea rising to his throat. Someone removed the helmet. The bright light of the procedure room hit his eyes, making him squeeze them shut.

"Interesting," he heard Sun's voice somewhere nearby, calm, analytical. "Strong empathic interference. But the structure… fragmented, primitive. Typical for deep organic trauma. Did you understand anything?"

Leo opened his eyes. His gaze fell on Sofia in the neighboring capsule. She lay exactly as before. Motionless. Quiet. But now he knew. He had seen the hell in which she floundered. A hell where she was still looking for him.

He pushed away the assistant's hand trying to hold him and stood up. His legs gave way, the world swam.

"I understood everything," his voice was hoarse from tears that had not yet broken through. "She's not just sleeping. She's trapped. In hell."

Sun looked at him attentively.

"And what do you intend to do with this knowledge?"

Leo slowly turned to him. In his eyes, a minute ago full of horror, a new fire now burned. Not hope. Determination. Mad, desperate determination.

“Knowledge is not enough,” he said quietly, but in such a way that each word fell like a guillotine. “Observing is not enough. You said that theoretically more is possible? To enter? To interact?”

Sun frowned.

“The ‘Guest-Actor’ protocol… It has not been tested. The risks for the operator and the subject increase by orders of magnitude. It could kill both of you. And the cost…”

“I didn’t ask about risks or cost!” Leo’s voice broke into a shout, the echo of which resounded dully in the white room. “Is it possible to enter there for real? Is it possible to pull her out?”

Dr. Sun looked at him for a long time, and in his gaze something human finally flickered — not sympathy, but rather cold curiosity of a scientist who has seen a perfect, suicidal experiment.

“Theoretically… yes. For that you need not a ‘gaze’ but a full immersion. A transfer of consciousness. But for that you will have to plunge into the same coma. The outcome is unpredictable. You may not return. You may burn up there in a second. You may go mad, even if you return.”

Leo did not hesitate for a second. He had already seen the abyss. And he knew that the only place he could now be was at its bottom, beside her.

“Prepare the protocol. I’m going in.”

Chapter 6. The Threshold of an Alien Sky

The pain was different. Not sharp like a blow, and not dull like an aching wound. It was dissolved in the very process of becoming, in the birth from nothing. Leo did not open his eyes — he had none. He did not inhale — no breathing was required. He manifested. Like a photograph emerging in developer, but in three, no, four dimensions, where the fourth was the very sensation of "I."

And the world… the world appeared together with him.

He did not get to his feet — he realized he had a form. Human, familiar, but weightless as a thought. He stood on… on what? The surface beneath him was neither solid nor liquid. It was the idea of a surface. It responded to his intention to be standing rather than floating. And it changed. A light breath of doubt — and beneath his "feet" rippled an elastic, pearlescent wave. Panic — and the ripples froze into sharp, glassy spikes, which immediately crumbled into golden dust when he took himself in hand.

"Stabilize your form," Sun's voice came from somewhere very far away, as if from another universe, distorted, devoid of timbre. "Remember: your body here is a projection of your self-perception. Hold the image. Clear and firm."

Leo forced himself to recall his reflection in the mirror. Height, proportions, face. The sensation of muscles beneath skin. Gradually the form stopped trembling and solidified. He felt a semblance of weight. He looked around.

What he saw made him forget about breathing, which he did not have.

He stood on a plain of iridescent, translucent substance resembling either cloud or frozen light. This plain stretched into infinity in all directions, merging at the horizon with a sky that was not blue but a shimmering canvas of all colors at once and none in particular. Colors did not simply exist — they sounded. Where deep indigo predominated, there was a low, vibrating hum. Bands of gold emitted a pure, high chime. And all of it moved, flowed, like a giant living watercolor painted by a mad god.

The air (if it was air) was filled not with smells but with memories of sensations. Here — the fleeting, sweet taste of grandmother's jam from the dacha. There — the coolness of wet sand between bare toes. A little further — the distant, distorted smell of burning and gasoline, which made something clench inside his projection.

This was not the chaos of pain he had seen as the "Observer-Guest." This was something else. Formed. Albeit insane. Her world? No. Too complex, too… multidimensional. It was like a border space. A threshold.

"You are at the threshold," Sun's voice confirmed, as if reading his thoughts. "The subject maintains a stable but primitive world somewhere deep. What you see is a buffer. An area where her perception mixes with the fundamental protocols of this layer of reality. Different laws apply here."

"Different laws" was an understatement. Leo took a step. The place where he was supposed to step curved toward his foot, shortening the distance. The sky above this place flashed brighter, illuminating ghostly, translucent structures resembling petrified lightning or the roots of giant trees reaching both into the earth and into the sky simultaneously. He extended his hand, wanting to touch one of these arches. His fingers met no resistance, but the space around the arch thickened, became visible — a shining haze pulsing in time with his intention.

The power of a guest, he recalled from the briefing. The ability to influence the reality of this place directly, by force of thought. But not to change it — rather to interact with its fluid nature.

He concentrated on the arch. Not on touching it, but on the desire to understand it. The space thickened more, and suddenly a stream poured into his consciousness: not images, but pure abstractions. A feeling of safety (shelter?). A sense of path, road (direction?). The bitterness of loss

(memory of something destroyed?). The arch was not an object. It was a clot of meanings, torn, probably, from Sofia's memory and projected into the landscape.

Recoiling, Leo understood the main thing. Here everything was real. Not in the sense of physical solidity, but in the sense of intensity of experience. Fear was sharper, beauty more blinding, loneliness all-consuming. And the laws here were the laws of psychology, not physics. Thought gave birth to form. Emotion colored space. Will moved matter.

In the distance something stirred. Not in the usual spatial sense. Rather, a patch of sky forgot to shimmer and began to condense into something dark, angular. Leo felt attention upon him. Cold, indifferent, hungry. This was not part of the landscape. This was something else. An inhabitant.

Instinct screamed: run! But where? There were no shelters here in the usual sense. Leo instinctively wanted to be farther away. And space responded. The plain beneath him floated, the sky changed its palette to darker, more alarming tones, and he moved a hundred meters without even moving. The dark form in the distance froze, as if rebooting, assessing the new position of the target.

Leo's nonexistent breath caught. He could influence the world. But the world and its inhabitants, obviously, could influence him. And he did not know the rules of this game.

"Channel stable," Sun's voice sounded again, this time with a shade of something like satisfaction. "Projection maintained. You are the first to cross the threshold in active mode. Congratulations. Now find the anchor. Look for the trace. The thing that leads to the core, to her stable world."

A trace. Leo looked around, trying to drive away the growing panic and the feeling of absolute lostness. He was in someone else's paradise, which could turn into hell at any moment. And he needed to find the way into an even deeper, more personal hellish abyss of his sister.

He closed his eyes — his human gesture — and tried to remember. Not the picture from the "Guest's Gaze," but the feeling. That pain. That fear. That love mixed with horror for him.

And the world responded. Beneath his feet the pearlescent plain darkened, became viscous as tar. The sounding sky muted its melodies, leaving only a low, alarming hum. And directly before him, cutting through the surreal landscape, a crack appeared. Narrow, shallow, but from it stretched a weak, trembling trail of that very familiar despair. A trail that was the color of rust and tasted of blood on the tongue.

This was the trace. A path of her pain leading into the very heart of her nightmare.

Leo looked at the dark, angular form still hanging on the horizon. Then at the crack at his feet. The threshold of an alien sky had been crossed. Now began the journey. A journey into the unknown, where he was simultaneously savior, stranger, and the only hope for a soul lost in the labyrinths of its own mind.

He took a step toward the crack. Space contracted, and he plunged downward, into thick, dark tones, leaving behind the iridescent, mad paradise.

Chapter 7. The Language of New Laws

The crack did not lead downward — it led inward. Leo was not falling; he was being drawn in, like water into a drain, only the drain was made of congealed fear. The shimmering, multicolored chaos of the threshold gave way to a compressed, monochrome reality. He stood in a gorge of something resembling gigantic, compressed shadows. The air (or its equivalent) was thick, viscous, and smelled of static electricity after a thunderstorm and… dust. The dust of an old library where no one had opened the books for a long time.

The trace — that thread of rusty despair — hung here more distinctly, pulsing with a weak light like a bad neon sign. He walked along it, and the world around him changed, adapting to his inner state. When he concentrated on the trace, the walls of the gorge parted, forming a tunnel. The moment he was distracted, doubted — the passage immediately overgrown with black, needle-like growths resembling crystals of frozen pain.

Think. Want. Believe. It was not a magic spell but survival. Sun's briefing now seemed like a children's fairy tale. The theory of "will creating reality" in practice meant that any weakness of yours immediately materialized beneath your feet as a pit, above your head as a collapse, and from every shadow your own personified doubt could crawl out.

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