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IGOR KOCHETKOV

Dream: Discovery



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«Издательские решения»

Kochetkov I.

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Sometimes, to find something is to lose oneself.His sister has been saved, but Leo no longer belongs to his former life. His soul remains behind — trapped within the dream-worlds alongside the girl who became his beacon amidst the chaos. To find Rina, he must risk everything once more, becoming a test subject for a clinic where no one even bothers to pray for his survival.

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Dream: Discovery

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Discovery

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Chapter 1. The Empty Eyes of Hospitals

Returning home turned out to be an illusion. Not a real return, but merely a transfer to another cage — a cage whose walls were built of memories, the smell of hospital antiseptic, and the ticking of a clock on the wall, measuring out emptiness.

Leo woke from his own scream, his fingers digging into the sheet, still feeling on his palms the cold roughness of cave stone or the heat of a strange wind from the Peak of Departure. Nearby, behind a thin wall, Sophia was peacefully snoring — alive, healthy, returned. Her laughter at breakfast was the sweetest and most bitter sound in the world. Every time he looked at her, Leo saw a double exposure: his sister spreading jam on toast, and that frightened girl with eyes full of darkness, deep in the stone labyrinths.

He had saved his sister, but he had not shed the guilt. He had traded it for another burden — a heavy, unspoken longing.

Rina.

Her name had become an obsessive rhythm in his blood, an echo in the too-quiet rooms. He remembered everything: the hoarse whisper in the darkness of the camp, the warmth of her shoulder pressed against his by the dying campfire, the resolve in her gaze when she spoke of the "Last Anchor." And the last thing he saw — her footprints leading to an empty place of power, where only dust and betrayal remained.

She was not a dream. She was more real than this world, which now seemed like a cardboard set. And if she existed there, then she must exist here too. Somewhere. In a coma, in a vegetative state, under a different name — but here.

Thus began his crusade through the temples of oblivion.

He became a shadow, gliding through endless corridors flooded with fluorescent light. He studied patient lists in city hospitals, traveled to private clinics, sent inquiries to specialized centers across the country. He searched for Katerina, Rina, any girl between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who had fallen into a coma around the time of his own immersion. His bedside book became a medical reference on neurological disorders, and his language — the dry officialese of discharge summaries and reports.

Each visit was the same ritual of disappointment.

He stood at the doors of wards, peering inside, and met gazes that were not gazes. Empty eyes staring at the ceiling, at nothing. Breathing, even and mechanical, obeying the hiss of machines. Young bodies frozen in time, and old ones tired of running. He scrutinized every face, searching for even a drop of the familiar — the curve of an eyebrow, the shape of lips, a mole on a temple. But he found only faceless suffering, depersonalized by medicine.

The nurses, at first sympathetic, began to look at him with weary anxiety. "Young man, you should see a psychologist." The doctors waved him off: "We see people like you with 'breakthroughs of consciousness' and 'dream theories' every day. Come back to reality."

Reality. What an irony. The very reality they so defended was now for him a flat, faded picture. There, in the dream worlds, colors were poisonously alive, pain — sharp and real, and love — the only law capable of moving mountains. Here, everything was muted, wrapped in cotton wool of habit and denial.

One day, in the semi-basement archive of the regional hospital, an elderly archivist, seeing his obsession, poured him tea from an enamel mug.

"Looking for someone, kid?"

"A girl. She… got lost."

"Everyone here is lost," the old man sighed hoarsely, pointing to the shelves of folders. "What lies here are not people, but files. Diagnoses. Medical histories. There is no person here. His soul, if it is stuck anywhere, it's not in these papers."

Leo stepped outside, and the ordinary evening city fell upon him: the hum of cars, laughter from a café, couples walking arm in arm. The world lived, moved, breathed. And he felt like a ghost among this life. He had a home, a family, a sister saved at the cost of part of his soul. But the most important part of that soul remained there, in the world denied by all this reasonable, practical, blind reality.

He raised his head to the sky, already darkening, and imagined countless worlds superimposed on this one, like transparent tracing paper. Somewhere among them she was struggling, surviving, waiting. Or already not.

Searches through databases, hospitals, archives had hit a blank wall. Rina was not there. Not in any system of this world.

And that meant only one thing. To find her, he would have to leave this "real" world again. Return to where he had just barely escaped from. But now not for atonement, but for love. Not to save the past, but to gain the future.

He looked at the last address on his list — the "Awakening" clinic, looking at him from Dr. Sun's business card, which had been in his wallet since that very time. The gates. The trap. The only bridge.

The decision matured within him, cold and clear as the mountain air of those very Himalayas. He would not just return. He would make a deal. With his fate. With his health. With the devil himself, if necessary.

In the empty eyes of hospitals he had not found her. So he would find her in the living eyes of a dream. Or lose himself forever.

Chapter 2. A Contract with One's Own End

The "Awakening" clinic had not changed. The same sterile smell, the dimmed light, and the feeling that you were not in a medical facility but in a futuristic crypt. Only now Leo looked at it not through the eyes of a desperate brother craving a miracle, but through the eyes of a soldier returning to a minefield he had already once crossed.

Dr. Sun met him in the same office, behind the same titanium desk. There was neither surprise nor triumph on his face. Only cold, analytical interest, as if he were observing a predictable phase of an experiment.

"Leonid. I have seen your requests in my database over the past month. Seven attempts at unauthorized access. Very persistent."

"You knew I would come back," Leo said hollowly, not sitting down. He felt the walls pressing in on him, reminding him of the caves.

"I allowed for the hypothesis. Monitoring of your brain activity after your return… showed stable anomalies. A stable trace. Like a scar on a neural map. You brought something back."

"Her name is Rina," Leo blurted out, and the name, sounding in that soulless room, became an act of rebellion. "She was there. In the world where I found my sister. She stayed behind. I have to find her."

Sun leaned back in his chair, folding his fingers into a steeple. His gaze was like a scalpel.

"'Find.' An interesting goal. More ambitious and far more vague than saving a specific, physically existing person with known coordinates in reality. You are asking me to launch you into the abyss in search of a mirage. On the basis of your personal memories and feelings."

"She is not a mirage!" Leo struck the desk with his fist, and the titanium tabletop responded with a dull thud. "She was as real as I am! Her tracks led to the Peak of Departure. Your own theory! Coma worlds are connected, there are paths, nodes! If I could find Sophia, I can find her too."

"You found your sister because there was a biological, neural connection, a synchronization that we amplified. Distorted, but an umbilical cord. With this… Rina you have no such connection. Only your narrative. Your desire."

"Then give me the instrument!" Leo's voice cracked. "You study this! You want data? I will bring you all the data you want! Maps, laws, types of beings! Everything I saw! But help me go back there. Consciously. Not as a passive 'guest,' but as… as a researcher."

Silence fell in the office, broken only by the quiet hum of servers behind the wall. Sun studied him. He saw not a young man, but a unique instrument ready for anything. A prototype that had passed field tests and voluntarily returned to the test bench.

"Conscious immersion with the purpose of navigation," Sun said slowly. "Do you understand what you are signing up for? The 'guest's gaze' is one thing. A brief, controlled shock. What you are proposing… will be the systematic exploitation of that very anomaly in your brain. We will rock the boat of your consciousness in order to learn to control it. Each immersion will drain you. Not only physically. Your psyche, your personality… they may not withstand the constant stretching between two realities. You may forget which is whose dream. You may decide that this world is the illusion. That is a direct road to schizophrenia or to the very coma from which we pulled you out. Forever."

Leo listened, and with every word the cold resolve inside him did not melt but crystallized.

"I can no longer live here, Doctor. Half of me stayed there. I will either go mad here, in longing, or I will go mad there, trying to find her. I choose the second. With meaning."

The corner of Sun's mouth twitched. Something resembling respect, mixed with scientific excitement.

"Good. But you will not go alone. This is not a story about a lone hero. This will be an expedition. You are the guide, the unique bearer of experience. But you will need others."

He pressed a button on the desk. A minute later, three people entered the office.

Teresa. A woman of about twenty-five, with huge, seemingly all-seeing eyes and a pale, almost transparent face. She looked not at Leo's face but slightly to the side, as if she saw a colored halo around him. Her fingers nervously picked at the edges of her cardigan.

Mark. A trim, cropped-haired man over forty. His gaze was seasoned, calm, assessing. In his look was the habit of quickly scanning space for threats. He stood with one leg slightly back, as if ready to move.

Tom. Thin, in thick-lensed glasses. He did not look at Leo but stared at the tablet he held in front of him, his fingers twitching from time to time, as if typing on an invisible keyboard.

"This is my… research group," Sun introduced them. "They have studied the data from your first immersion and the data of other, less successful 'guests.' You are the key to the practical application of their work."

Teresa took a step forward; her voice was quiet, melodic, but with a metallic undertone.

"Your aura… it is all in scars. There, where you were. And from it stretches a thread. Toward there. Very thin, almost broken, but it exists. I see it."

Leo clenched his fists. "A thread."

Mark nodded, briefly and businesslike.

"Sun gave us the records of your first outing. Behavior under conditions of unpredictable threat, adaptation, decision-making. Not bad for an amateur. But chaotic. We will work on tactics. There, judging by everything, there are also patterns. Just different ones."

Tom finally tore himself away from the tablet; his eyes behind the glass seemed enlarged.

"Your brain activity pattern during phase transition… it is statistically unique. But it contains overtones, coincidences with the patterns of spontaneous prophetic dreams and lucid dreams in the control group. Hypothesis: you do not simply enter a random world. You, roughly speaking, tune in to a certain… frequency. If we can determine and stabilize it, we will be able not simply to throw you into the whirlpool, but to try to set a vector. To search not for a needle in a haystack, but for a certain straw in a certain sector of the haystack."

Leo looked from one to the other. A clairvoyant. A soldier. A genius analyst. A team for hunting a ghost.

"And what is your goal?" he asked, addressing all three. "Why do you need this? You are not doing it out of charity."

Teresa touched her temple.

"I see lights. People. There. They burn, and their light is being extinguished by something… cold. I cannot not look. And I cannot not try to help."

Mark shrugged.

"I worked twenty years in zones where reality was also a very conditional concept. Here I am paid to study the unknown. And if one can apply skills to pull people out of there instead of killing them — why not?"

Tom buried himself in his tablet again.

"Data. Pure, incredible data about the nature of consciousness and reality. It is worth any risk."

Sun rose.

"That is all. Team 'Somnambula.' Your mission is not rescue. The primary mission is reconnaissance, mapping, establishing patterns. Leonid is your guide and primary immersion operator. Your task is to ensure his stability, conduct observations, and, where possible, return him alive and with information. The search for the specific subject 'Rina'…" He looked at Leo. "…is your personal subgoal, Leonid. And my assumption. For now, as long as it does not threaten the main mission."

Leo understood. His pain, his love had become a funded research project. He had sold himself into the slavery of science. And he was ready for it.

“When do we begin?”

“Tomorrow,” Sun said. “Today — final preparations, medical tests, equipment synchronization.” He came close to Leo and lowered his voice so that only he could hear. “Remember our first conversation? ‘The price will be high.’ Then you were paying for a chance. Now you are signing up for installment payments with interest. Each immersion will take payment from you. A fragment of health. A fragment of connection with this world. Are you sure she is worth it?”

Leo looked at the empty wall, but saw not it, but the edges of an alien sky, the dance of strange colors.

“She was already worth it,” he answered quietly.

He had signed a contract with his own end. Not with instant death, but with slow, conscious dissolution. And he would not take the first step into that abyss alone. Beside him now were three people whose motives were a strange mixture of altruism, curiosity, and duty. The team was formed. The hunt had begun.

Chapter 3. The First Expedition: The Crystal World

Immersion always began with a fall.

Not a physical one, but a metaphysical one — a rapid slipping into the funnel of one's own consciousness, which the clinic's equipment rocked and directed. Leo lay in a cocoon of wires and sensors, listening to Tom's even voice in his headphones counting backward. His clenched eyelids saw not darkness but a frantic kaleidoscope of images, sounds, smells — fragments of memory mixed with the swirling chaos of the borderland.

"Pattern stabilizing," came Tom's voice, already from somewhere far away. "Transition frequency close to the parameters of the first recording. Preparing for phase anchoring… three… two…"

And the world cracked.

It did not arise; it precisely cracked, like the thinnest ice under the first step. Leo opened his eyes — or what served here as eyes. He stood on a surface shimmering with pearl and silver; beneath his feet was not earth but a huge, transparent plane stretching into infinity. Beneath it, in the depths, blocks of pure, flawless crystal of the most incredible shades slowly moved and shimmered: from icy blue to warm honey amber. The sky was the same — a crystal dome in which glowing clots, like amethyst clouds, floated.

The air was cold, crystal clear, and ringing. Every movement, every breath produced a barely perceptible high sound, as if someone were running a finger along the rim of a glass.

One. I am alone.

Panic, sharp and familiar, gripped his throat. He looked around. Neither Mark, nor Teresa, nor Tom. Only endless, fragile beauty. Sun's theory of "group immersion with individual materialization" had developed its first crack. They were scattered like grains of sand in this vast, soundless crystal bell.

"Team, respond," he said aloud, and his voice scattered into a hundred echoes running along the plane.

Silence. Only ringing.

And then — in the earpiece, which here was not a device but part of his perception — came uneven breathing and Teresa's voice, strained to the limit:

"Leo… I see you. Your thread. It is burning. But here… here all the lines are so bright… they cut the eyes. And around you… cracks."

"Cracks? What cracks? Where are you?"

"I don't know… Everywhere and nowhere. I see pictures… You are standing on a mirror, and beneath you… a huge figure is sleeping. Don't move."

Leo froze. He looked under his feet. In the depths, among the slowly drifting blocks of amber, the outlines of something massive, smoothed, resembling the hunched back of a giant could be discerned. It was not just stone. It was a form.

"Mark! Tom!" he called again, trying not to raise his voice.

"Here," came Mark's calm, collected voice. "Materialized twenty meters to your left, judging by Teresa's description. I see you. I am standing by… let's say, by a crystal stalagmite. Not moving. The surface reacts to pressure. Tom, your location?"

No answer. Only a faint hiss of the ether.

"Tom!" Leo almost shouted.

And then a new voice came — Tom's, but not in the earpiece, but right here, nearby, distorted by panic:

"Error! The pressure pattern is nonlinear! I… I am not on the surface! I am inside!"

Leo and Mark turned simultaneously toward the sound. Ten meters from Leo, from the very thickness of the transparent plane, Tom's distorted face was emerging like a ghost. His glasses were

broken, and he himself seemed embedded in the hard, diamond-like material up to his chest. He was desperately trying to break free, but each movement caused a series of thin, ominous cracks spreading from him like a spiderweb.

"Don't move!" Mark commanded, already moving toward him, but not at a run — with careful, gliding steps, as if on thin ice. "Leo, to me, by the same path. Teresa, guide him, tell him where to step. Where is it safe?"

Teresa's voice sounded like a taut string:

"Leo, half a meter to the right… now two steps straight… stop! To the left of your track… I see the light fading. There is emptiness. Go around."

Leo, whose heart was pounding somewhere in his throat, obediently followed the instructions. He walked looking not at his feet but into the void, trusting the vision of a woman he barely knew. His own "gift" — the sense of reality here — was silent, stunned by the fragile foreignness of this place. This was not his world. He was only a guest. A very unwanted one.

He reached Mark, who was already kneeling at the edge of the "trap" where Tom was frozen. The cracks around him were already glowing with cold blue light.

"He is not just stuck," Mark said quietly. "He is crystallizing. The matter of the world is assimilating him."

"What do we do?" Leo whispered.

"No data. We act on instinct. Teresa?"

"He… he is dimming," tears could be heard in Teresa's voice. "His aura… this blue light is eating it. We need… to break the rhythm. Sound! Everything here rests on sound!"

Sound. Leo remembered the ringing with his movement. He looked at Mark. Mark nodded, taking from the sheath on his belt not a pistol but a heavy, blunt object resembling a titanium hammer — an instrument for tactile impact in unpredictable environments.

"Step back. And cover your ears in the literal and figurative sense."

Mark aimed and with all his strength struck the crystal surface a meter from Tom.

The blow brought not thunder. It brought a chord.

A dull, low, vibrating hum rolled across the plane. The blue cracks flickered. Tom's face contorted with pain, but his arm, protruding from the surface, jerked more strongly.

"Again!" Leo shouted. "But not there! Teresa, where to strike?"

"To his right! Higher! I see a knot… a point where the tension lines converge!"

Mark moved and struck a second time. This time the sound was higher, pure as a bell. The dam broke. Literally. The surface around Tom did not shatter but delaminated like thawing ice. With a terrible crunch, Tom tumbled out of his prison, falling to his knees and choking on coughs.

"Alive?" Mark asked, helping him up.

"F-functional," Tom muttered, adjusting his broken glasses. He immediately stared at his hand, which still glowed with a faint bluish reflection. "Curious. Phase congruence at the submolecular level… I was on the verge of complete absorption."

"We'll discuss it on the shore," Mark cut him off. "Teresa, how do we get to you? And how do we get out of here?"

"I… I see a door," her voice cleared. "Two hundred meters from Leo. Or rather, not a door… a distortion. As if the picture has cracked along the frame. There the frequency is different. That is the exit."

"Lead," Leo said simply.

The path to the "exit" became the team's first coordinated action. Teresa, from her unknown hiding place, conducted their movement along an invisible map of tensions and voids. Mark walked first, checking the way; Leo helped Tom, whose body still strangely rang with movement. They moved through the crystal world as through a minefield, where each mine was reality itself, ready at any moment to reject or absorb them.

And as they moved, the world reacted. Where they passed, they left not footprints but faint, fading melodies. The crystal "clouds" began to drift faster. And in the depths beneath them, that same gigantic figure, resembling a sleeper, stirred slightly. The whole world sighed, and the ringing in the air dropped half a tone.

"He is waking up," Teresa whispered. "Faster."

They saw the "door." It was a vertical crack in the very fabric of sky and earth, a shimmering slit beyond which swirled the familiar gray mist of the borderland.

Mark let Tom and Leo go first.

"Get out. I am the rear guard."

"No," Teresa said in the ether. "I am already there. I… was never with you here. I saw you from outside. I am looking at you now from the portal."

Leo, already halfway through the shimmering slit, turned around. He took one last look at the crystal world — beautiful, deadly, alive. He met Mark's gaze, and Mark nodded to him. Then he stepped into the mist, pulling Tom with him.

The return was like a sharp, painful jerk to the surface after too deep a dive. Leo shuddered, opened his eyes in the real world. He vomited onto the floor beside the chair. Teresa, sitting in a similar chair nearby but without any signs of nausea, looked at him with her huge eyes full of unspoken images. Tom was already at his terminal, feverishly typing something, his hands still trembling slightly. Mark emerged from his capsule last, calmly and evenly, and only by his tense jaw muscles could one see what effort it had cost him.

Dr. Sun watched them from the balcony.

"So?" he asked.

"Group immersion is possible, but materialization is random and depends on individual consciousness patterns," Tom began at once. "The world demonstrates the properties of a coherent oscillatory system. Exposure to sound of a certain frequency…"

"The world is alive," Teresa interrupted quietly. "And fragile. And it did not want us. We were… a scratch on the glass."

"Survival tactics in such an environment require adaptation," Mark added. "Standard protocols do not work. We need a constant 'scout' with nonstandard perception." He nodded toward Teresa.

All eyes turned to Leo. He wiped his lips.

"I was useless. There, alone, I could do something. Here…" he looked at Teresa, "…without you we would have lost Tom in the first minute."

He had not found Rina. He had not felt her. He had merely almost lost one of those who were now his only bridge to her. This was not a triumph. It was a harsh lesson.

They were not a team of superheroes but a group of the lame, making their way through a dark forest, holding on to each other. And that forest was endless.

Leo glanced at the monitor, where the last recording of his encephalogram froze — a wild, unstable zigzag. The price. The first installment.

He nodded to Sun.

"Ready for the next expedition."

Chapter 4. The Second Expedition: The World of Silence

This time the immersion was not a fall but a suffocation.

The transitional chaos was replaced not by the ringing of crystal but by an absolute, all-consuming silence. Not merely the absence of sound, but its annihilation. The air here was thick, cotton-like, viscous. It did not transmit vibrations. Leo opened his eyes, and the world met him in shades of sepia and faded gray.

He stood in the middle of a boundless plain covered with something like compacted ash dust. The sky was low, flat, the color of old slate. No trees, no stones, no sign of a horizon — only a monotonous plane lost in a hazy mist. And silence. So heavy that it pressed on the eardrums from within.

There was a click in his ear, and he heard Mark's voice, muffled as if from under water:

"…I see you. Everyone within a fifty-meter radius. Synchronization successful. Tom, comms?"

Tom responded, his voice unnaturally clear in that oppressive silence:

"Channel stable, but with delay. Physical parameters of the environment… anomalous. Sound waves fade almost instantly. It is not recommended to move beyond direct line of sight."

"Teresa?" Leo asked, barely parting his lips. His own voice sounded muffled and strange, as if he were speaking inside his own skull.

"I am here," her whisper was like the finest cobweb. "Here… there are no colors. Everything is in shades of fading. And… points. Of quiet fear. There are several."

Leo looked around. Mark stood about thirty meters away, having taken a stance, his figure seeming the only sharp object in the blurred world. Tom, a little closer, crouched, touching the ashen ground. And he saw what Teresa had pointed to. About a hundred meters away, almost merging with the landscape, sat a hunched figure.

He moved toward it, his steps producing no sound, only slowly spreading imprints in the dust. Mark gestured that he was going on a parallel course, covering him. Tom remained at the point as a landmark.

As they approached, the figure acquired features. It was a young man, about twenty-five, in a worn hospital pajama. He sat hugging his knees and rocking back and forth with a barely noticeable amplitude. His eyes were open, but his gaze was directed inward, into some infinite inner emptiness. He was not simply "lost" from the database. He was the embodiment of this very silence — an emptied, abandoned vessel.

"Hey," Leo called quietly, lowering himself to his knees in front of him. "Can you hear me?"

The man did not react. His rocking did not stop. Leo carefully extended his hand to touch his shoulder. And at that moment Teresa cried out in the earpiece:

"No! Don't touch him! Pull your hand back!"

Leo instinctively recoiled. At the same instant he saw: from the place where his hand was supposed to touch, a wave crawled along the sleeve of the man's pajamas — not of color, but of even greater absence. The fabric did not tear; it simply… lost color, became part of the dusty background, and the skin beneath it acquired a deathly, waxy hue. This world did not crystallize like the previous one. It dissolved. Erased boundaries. Absorbed quietly, soundlessly.

"He… he is becoming silence himself," Teresa whispered, her voice strained. "His aura is almost extinguished. He is being drawn in. We need… we need to pull him out of here. But not physically. With sound? No… here sound dies. With light?"

Mark came up from the other side, studying the situation.

"Direct contact is dangerous. The world is hostile passively, through apathy. We need to… stir him up. Break this calm."

Leo looked into the man's empty eyes. In them there was no horror, no dreams. There was nothing. It was worse than any monster. It was what anyone who stayed here too long could turn into. What Rina, perhaps, had already begun to turn into in some other, equally merciless world.

Save your sister. Find Rina. These two mantras beat in his temples. But now, looking at this stranger, he realized a third, new one, being born right now in this oppressive silence: Do not leave them here.

"We cannot pull him out of here," Leo said quietly. "His body is somewhere in reality. But we can… give him an anchor. Break the rhythm."

He remembered how in the camp "Last Anchor" people sang to keep from going mad. Even off-key, even without words — just to hear any sound other than the whisper of the wind in the strange crowns.

"We will sing," he said to Mark.

Mark raised an eyebrow but after a second's hesitation nodded.

"Logical. An attack on sensory deprivation. Tom, Teresa, join in. Anything. The main thing is together and loud."

And they sang. Or rather, they tried. Leo began with a meaningless "a-a-a," chanting, violating all laws of vocal art. His voice in this environment sounded dull and pathetic. Mark, hoarsely and out of time, picked up some marching song. In the headphones, Teresa's thin, trembling voice joined in, humming a melody that seemed to have no end. And even Tom, after a pause, began to mutter monotonously something in Latin — probably a scientific formula.

It was not a choir. It was a cacophonous howl against non-being.

And it worked.

At first the man simply stopped rocking. Then his eyelids trembled. His empty gaze slowly, with incredible effort, as if breaking through a layer of ice, focused on Leo. In the depths of his pupils a tiny, frightened spark flashed — the first emotion, the first difference from the background.

"Can you… hear us?" Leo asked tensely, not stopping his "singing."

The man's lips moved. No sound came out, but Leo read them: I hear.

"Your name? What is your name?"

Again the soundless movement of lips: A-r-t-e-m.

"Artem, listen to me. You are asleep. You are in a coma. This world is your dream. A bad dream. You must want to wake up. Remember something. Something loud. Bright. Real."

Shadows flickered in Artem's eyes. Fear, confusion… and suddenly — a faint glimmer. He again soundlessly pronounced: Car. Siren. Loud.

"He was in an accident," Leo realized instantly.

"Yes! Siren! Hold on to that sound! It is real! It is outside! It is your anchor! Hold on to it and swim up! Wake up, Artem!"

He spoke, shouted through the oppressive silence, putting into the words all the force of his will, all his experience of breaking boundaries. And he saw the spark in Artem's eyes flare up, saw his figure, which had been almost indistinguishable from the landscape, begin to acquire clarity, saturation. The world of silence resisted: the ashen dust at his feet began to rise slowly, trying to wrap around him like a shroud. But Artem was now fighting. He clenched his fists, his mouth opened in a soundless cry, in a call to that very siren that existed in the other world.

"The portal, Teresa! Where is the exit?" Mark shouted, stopping his singing.

"He… he is creating it himself! Look!"

Right in front of Artem the air trembled and tore open, revealing a gray slit of the borderland. But it was not their exit. It was his path. Artem, gathering his last strength, lunged toward that slit. For a moment he turned, his gaze met Leo's. In it there was not gratitude — not yet. There was wild, animal relief. And hope.

And he disappeared.

The silence, broken for a second, closed in with new, ominous force. Now it felt insulted. The ashen plain rippled like water.

"Our exit! Quickly!" Mark commanded, and they, stumbling, rushed to the point where Tom had remained, already pointing them to a new, gaping crack in the gray sky.

They tumbled out of the world of silence like corks from a bottle — heavily, with an ache in every joint. In reality Leo vomited again, this time from a sense of emptiness and a strange, aching victory.

A few hours later, as they sat in the lab sorting through scant data, Teresa approached Leo. In her hands was a piece of paper.

"His name is Artem Glukhov," she said quietly. "Car accident, a year and a half in a vegetative state. A clinic in Nizhny Novgorod."

She handed him the paper. It was a printout of a news item from a week ago, marked by Sun. The headline: "MIRACLE OF AWAKENING: AFTER A YEAR AND A HALF IN A COMA, PATIENT REGAINS CONSCIOUSNESS." Below — a blurry photo of a smiling young man in a hospital ward.

"Dr. Sun tracks such cases," Teresa explained. "Especially those that coincide in time with our expeditions. He received this today. Artem… he woke up three days ago. And today… he asked a nurse to pass something on. He said he had a dream. That in the dream there was silence, and that he was saved by three angels with terrible voices. And one of them… with eyes full of such longing that it would have been enough for everyone. He wants to find him. To say thank you."

She placed before Leo a sheet with the address and name of the clinic in Nizhny Novgorod.

Leo took the paper. His fingers trembled slightly. He had saved his sister. He was searching for Rina. And now, completely by accident, he had saved another person. A stranger. And this stranger had woken up. And wanted to thank him.

Something turned over in his chest. It was not joy. It was the realization of a monstrous responsibility. If Artem was there, then there were others. Dozens. Hundreds. Just as lost, dissolving in silence, in crystal, in their nightmares. And he, Leo, with his crippled soul and a team of equally flawed "specialists," was perhaps the only one who could reach them.

The mission "find Rina" suddenly acquired a new, grandiose and terrifying scale. He could not simply search for one. Passing by others doomed to oblivion, he could not not extend a hand. Even if that hand trembled. Even if the price for each such rescue was his own health, his connection to reality.

He looked at the team. At Mark, methodically cleaning his "hammer." At Tom, staring at graphs with Artem's data. At Teresa, with her eyes that saw the pain of others.

"Save everyone" — that was not a noble decision. It was an inevitable consequence. The first hook that caught on his wounded soul. He folded the paper with the address and put it in his pocket. Not as a trophy. As a debt note.

And the world of silence, which they had left behind, now lived in him — as a quiet, constant hum of duty that could no longer be ignored.

Chapter 5. The Trap in the Gray Void

The expedition began with a malfunction right at the start. The transitional mist, instead of dispersing, thickened into a homogeneous, dense gray mass. Leo materialized not in a world, but in its antechamber — or a trap.

He stood in a sphere the size of a basketball court. Its boundaries were blurred but palpable: a soft, elastic resistance, like a thick layer of transparent gel. Outside — nothing. Only the same impenetrable gray-white haze. Inside — a flat gray floor, without a single detail, without sound, without smell. Stability here was not a blessing but a curse. Complete sensory deprivation, taken to the point of absurdity.

"Team, come in. I'm in a trap. Some kind of buffer world. I see no exit," he said into the comm.

The answer came with a delay, distorted by interference:

"We see you… the point is stable… but surrounded by a phase barrier. Tom is analyzing… Hold on, Leo."

There was nothing to hold on to. The hours, if they flowed here at all, dragged torturously. He explored the boundaries. They yielded, bent, but did not tear. A punch was absorbed soundlessly, leaving no dent. His "guest powers," which usually responded to will, were silent here. The world was inert, infinitely passive, and therefore — an absolutely reliable cell.

A plan matured out of desperation. If this world is a buffer, an absorber, then it must react to dissonance. To the intrusion of another instability. His first jump had been a mistake — maybe he shouldn't try to break the wall, but provoke the world to draw in something else? Create a funnel. But for that he needed a second pole, a point of attraction… or a victim.

He concentrated not on a rupture, but on distorting the very "fabric" of the trap. He imagined not a breach, but a funnel, a whirlpool drawing matter from outside. He poured into this thought all his will, all the despair of the trapped, feeling the anomaly in his brain hum strainedly, overheating.

And the world responded. Not with a rupture. With a spasm.

The boundary of the sphere in one place trembled, rippled. The gray non-being outside suddenly contracted, then lunged inward, like water through a broken dam. But along with the haze, it also drew in something else — a disheveled, screaming figure.

Leo barely managed to jump aside. A young man, slightly younger than him, in a torn T-shirt and sweatpants, crashed onto the gray floor. He looked around wildly, gasping for air that was empty and tasteless here.

"Quiet!" Leo commanded, but his voice was muffled and lost in the void. "Don't make any sudden movements!"

The young man froze, staring at him with eyes full of terror. The trap, having accepted the newcomer, closed again. The boundaries became slightly clearer. The price for the attempt — now there were two of them in this soft cell.

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