BUGS ACADEMY

demo

A Science Fiction Novel

Mikhail Savchenko

A novel about a world where divinity turned out to be
not a miracle but an engineering discipline,
and immortality not a gift but an exam
in preserving yourself through rewriting reality.

2026

Preface

Some things can't be explained with a formula. They can only be lived.

This book is a story. With real people who make mistakes, get scared, fall in love, and make choices that determine more than just their own fate.

Behind it stands a question that has haunted me for years: what if the thing we call *divine* is an engineering problem? One we haven't found the tools for yet — because we didn't know it could be *posed*.

Maybe you'll think I'm fantasizing. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe — and this is the most uncomfortable option — I'm right, but I can't prove it yet. A scientist with an unprovable hypothesis — the worst thing that can happen to a scientist.

It happens.

Contents

Preface 1

I A Draft from Nowhere 1

1 Peripheral Vision 2

2 The Thing That Doesn't Happen Fourteen Times in a Row 12

3 A Debt 23

4 An Inhuman Gaze 32

5 How to Properly Lose Your Mind 40

Part I

A Draft from Nowhere

Chapter 1

Peripheral Vision

Yesterday I saved a man's life. Not on purpose.

That's an important caveat, because everything else follows from it. If I'd saved a man's life on purpose — say, rushed into a burning building or jumped into a river — I wouldn't be sitting right now in an empty apartment on Shabolovka, writing this in a notebook I bought this morning specifically to record things that can't be said out loud. I'd be giving interviews, or lying in a hospital, or at the very least feeling like a hero.

Instead, I feel like a bug.

Not in the metaphorical sense ("oh, I'm a freak of nature, nobody understands me" — though that too). In the literal sense. Like a bug in code: the program runs, the user notices nothing, but the developer knows that on line 4078 there's a function call that shouldn't exist. It doesn't break anything. It just has no right to be there. And someday — nobody knows when — it'll fire, and then everything goes to hell.

Line 4078 — that's me. Daniil Reinov, twenty-eight, PhD in theoretical physics, Moscow, the Institute of Quantum Technologies named after someone-I-can-never-remember (most Russian scientific institutes are named after people whom nobody remembers except by the plaque on the facade — which, if you think about it, is a pretty accurate metaphor for Russian science itself).

I have an extra function. Like a sixth finger: doesn't hurt, doesn't get in the way, but gloves don't fit and people stare. The function is this: I sometimes see the seams on reality.

* * *

"Seams" is a metaphor, obviously. But I don't have a better one, because a literal description would require a language that doesn't exist, and the closest analog is a schizophrenic's clinical chart. So — seams.

I'm not a psychic. Not a prophet. Not that guy from the YouTube ad who, for 49,990 rubles (discounted, today only, just for you, just because Mercury is in Pisces) promises to "awaken your quantum consciousness." (Side note: "quantum consciousness" is one of the greatest crimes marketing has committed against physics. Quantum means something that exists in Hilbert space. Your "consciousness" exists in the space be-

tween your second glass of wine and your third episode of whatever you're binging. But I digress.)

So here's the thing. Sometimes — once every few months, no schedule, no warning — the world around me goes *translucent* for a split second. As if reality has a lining, and the top layer — the nice one, pressed and ironed, the one all normal people live in — lifts for an instant, and underneath it is the *framework*. The blueprint. The markup along which all of this — trees, streetlights, your life — is *stitched*.

You ever notice an editing splice in a movie? Camera was on the right, now it's on the left, the actor's already in a different pose. Good editing is invisible. Bad editing makes you nauseous: you realize you're being shown a *trick*, and the magician's hand flickered into frame for a second.

That. Except not in a movie. And the hand — not human.

I see events being *edited*. I see the effect appear before the cause, and then the cause gets neatly sketched in retroactively — like a signature under someone else's order. The world around me *assembles*. Right before your eyes. On the fly. In real time. From parts that didn't exist a second ago — like IKEA furniture, except the instructions are in a language I don't know, and the assembler is invisible.

The psychiatrist on Barrikadnaya — a neighborhood in central Moscow — (one visit, age twelve, a hundred and twenty phenazepam pills, six months in a state of a boiled dumpling) called it "heightened anxiety with elements of dissociation." Kahneman's book, which I read at sixteen (*Thinking, Fast and Slow*, the chapter on expert intuition) called it "rapid unconscious data processing." Wonderful formulations. Both. One — to prescribe pills. The other — to not prescribe them.

Neither explains what happened when I was seven.

That — later.

* * *

The elevator wasn't working.

In any other country, this would require an explanation. In Russia, it's the *working* elevator that requires one: what happened, who got fired, whose grant money got drunk away, what did we do wrong. A broken elevator — that's stability. That's confidence in tomorrow. That's an existential anchor in a world where everything else is unpredictable.

(I'm completely serious, by the way. One of the things foreigners will never understand about Russia is that here, chaos is a form of order. A Russian institute where everything works raises suspicion. It means money from somewhere. Means someone owes someone. Means — trouble's coming. But an institute where nothing works — that's home. Familiar. Safe. You can relax.)

I climbed to the seventh floor on foot, gasping and cursing my habit of smoking “just one before bed” (“just one before bed” is a quantum object: it exists simultaneously as one and four, and collapses into a specific number only in the presence of an observer), and discovered a working coffee machine.

The coffee machine in our institute is a state-of-the-universe indicator. If it works — the day will be weird. If it doesn’t — everything’s going according to plan. Today it worked. I should have been alarmed.

The coffee was disgusting. This was reassuring: at least the *laws of thermodynamics* still held in our institute. Entropy intact. Good, honest entropy, turning tolerable coffee beans into intolerable liquid.

* * *

Lena Markova was already at her desk.

Three monitors, a flannel shirt, and a facial expression I’d failed to classify in four years — somewhere between “I see right through you” and “don’t make me waste words on this.”

Lena is my partner, co-author, and (I say this without a shred of romanticism) the only person within a four-floor radius I can talk to without feeling like I’m wasting my time. She’s smart. Not in the way Russians say “a smart woman” (implying: “not pretty, but useful” — one of the most nauseating constructions in the Russian language, right up there with “for a woman, you really know your stuff”). Lena is smart in the only way that matters: she understands what she’s thinking. Most people, including physicists (especially physicists), have no idea what they’re thinking. They operate formulas the way a juggler operates pins: beautifully, fast, but if you ask what exactly they’re tossing, they’ll stop and drop everything.

— You didn’t sleep again, — she said without turning around.

Lena has this ability — to diagnose my condition by the sound of my footsteps. I suspect in a past life she worked in counterintelligence. Or as a veterinarian. (The difference, if you think about it, is minimal: both deal with creatures who can’t explain what hurts, and both are forced to guess from external signs.)

— I slept.

— That’s how people breathe when they’ve been interrogating their laptop at three a.m.

— The laptop refused to cooperate.

— Fifth Amendment?

— Worse. It showed me something it wasn’t supposed to, then pretended nothing happened.

She didn’t smile. Which meant — serious.

* * *

A qubit is a quantum bit. A unit of information that, unlike a regular bit (zero or one), can exist in both states simultaneously. This is called superposition, and if you think it's bullshit — congratulations, you're in good company: Einstein thought so too, and then it turned out the universe was the one bullshitting.

Lena and I have been working with qubits for two years. Building a quantum processor. Or rather, trying to: building a quantum processor in Russia is roughly like cooking soup in a colander. Theoretically possible. Practically — everything leaks: money, people, qubits, hope — roughly in that order.

So here's the thing. Yesterday our qubits did something they weren't supposed to do. They behaved — the only word that comes to mind — *evasively*. As if they knew they were being watched, and they were changing *in response*. To me.

The difference between "the observer affects the quantum system" and what I saw yesterday is roughly the same as the difference between "the cat ignores you" and "the cat looked you dead in the eyes and slowly pushed your mug off the table." The first is physics. The second is personal.

— Look, — I turned the screen toward her. — Series three-eighteen.

Lena rolled over in her chair. Her way of looking at data is a performance art genre unto itself: head slightly tilted, eyes narrowed, lips pressed. An Inquisitor examining a heretic's testimony.

— Fluctuation.

— Fourteen times in a row.

— It happens.

— Lena. You know what happens fourteen times in a row? You know the probability? One in sixteen thousand. One sixteen-thousandth. That's less likely than being struck by lightning. Twice. In one day.

— But not zero.

— Formally — no. Formally, the probability that all the air molecules in this room simultaneously gather in the left corner and we suffocate is also not zero. But we're not sitting here in oxygen masks.

Pause. A pause is when Lena is choosing her words, and Lena only chooses words when the first ten options were "Dan, you've lost it," and she's looking for an eleventh. A softer one.

— Dan. We're not going there.

— Going where?

— There. Where a physicist publishes a paper claiming qubits respond to his intentions. Where reviewers laugh so hard their teeth fall out. Where a year from now we're working in a high school, explaining Ohm's Law to sixteen-year-olds.

Convincing. Terrifying. And — beside the point, because I wasn't talking about a publication. I was talking about the fact that my data was behaving the same way my

life does: showing me something impossible, then pretending nothing happened. But I didn't say that. I said:

— Forget it. We'll rerun the series.

* * *

At noon, Grisha Belov showed up.

Grisha — a grad student, twenty-three, theoretical physics. If enthusiasm were fuel, Grisha could heat the entire Saratov Oblast. Unfortunately, in science, enthusiasm is a socially acceptable mental disorder, tolerated as long as you don't start producing results. (Results are what's left when enthusiasm burns down to ash and a fourteen-page paper that seven people will read, three of whom are reviewers, and two of those are hostile.) But Grisha was still in the fuel stage: burning bright and even, and his questions made you want to simultaneously hug him and throw him out the window (seventh floor, no elevator, poetic justice).

He burst in without knocking — knocking for Grisha is roughly what it is for a tornado: optional and physically meaningless — and blurted:

— Reinov! Zurich! Nonlocal correlations! In macro-objects!

He talked in exclamation points. Like a telegraph operator, except instead of dots and dashes — dots and exclamations.

— Saw it, — I said.

— And?!

— And I'm waiting for replication. Different group, different setup.

— That's called being a buzzkill.

— That's called science. Unfortunately, they're synonyms.

He left, offended. His tablet clipped the doorframe (every time; I'm beginning to suspect it's a ritual).

Lena, without turning:

— Harsh.

— Honest.

— Same thing when you're twenty-three.

Right there, something clenched inside me. From envy. Real, sour, nauseating envy of a twenty-three-year-old kid for whom the universe is a Christmas present, not a package stamped "CAUTION: DO NOT OPEN." Grisha runs toward mystery like a child toward the ocean. I run from mystery like a man who already drowned once.

The difference — twelve years and one missing mother.

* * *

By six o'clock, the data was behaving flawlessly.

Any scientist will tell you that's good. I'll tell you it's suspicious. Our qubits *never* behave flawlessly: we always have background noise, jitter, drift — normal, explainable, like a sleeping person's breathing. But today — silence. Absolute. Dead.

Yesterday's anomalies — in the logs. Today's sterility — on the screen. One rules out the other. It's like your neighbor drilled into the wall all night, and today you discover the wall is smooth, intact, and was never touched. Exactly that: *never touched*. As if yesterday didn't exist. Or as if someone carefully cleaned it up.

I told myself the mantra: *tired, didn't sleep, apophenia, go home*.

The word "apophenia" is one of psychiatry's finest inventions. It means "the tendency to see patterns where there are none." The genius of the term is that it simultaneously describes the condition and closes any discussion. The moment you say "I see a pattern in..." your colleague replies "apophenia," and there's nothing left to talk about. What the word doesn't account for is the possibility that the pattern *is there*, and the one not seeing it is your colleague. But they never coined a term for that. Probably because then they'd have to reclassify too many diagnoses.

* * *

I caught up with Lena at the entrance. She was battling an umbrella. The umbrella had the upper hand.

— Want a ride?

— I'll walk with you to the metro. If you promise not to say the word "qubits."

— What about "quantum"?

— Also no.

— "Correlation"?

— Dan.

— Fine. Let's talk about the weather. It's terrible.

— Finally, a normal conversation.

We walked down Vavilov Street. November. Moscow. Six p.m. Which means what surrounded us was some alternative aggregate state of gloom: the sensation that someone in the cosmos hit "reduce brightness" and left their finger on the button. A mist of water hung in the air — humidity that had, for its own reasons, decided to go vertical. (Moscow doesn't get rain from October to April. It gets this.)

Lena was telling me about a conference in Kazan. I nodded and watched the city. Streetlights, cars, people, umbrellas. Normal world. In place.

Then I felt it.

Imagine you're listening to an orchestra. A hundred musicians, each playing their part, and together it all adds up to music. You don't hear the individual instruments — you hear the *whole*. And suddenly, woven into that whole, there's a note that shouldn't be there. *Extra*. It's not from this concert hall. It's from somewhere *outside*.

And your entire body — muscles, skin, spine — wants to pull away from that note. Because it understands what your head doesn't: that note is a hole in the *world*.

We were approaching the intersection. Green light. People walked. Lena stepped off the curb.

I grabbed her sleeve and yanked. My body did it half a second before my brain understood why.

— What the fu—

A truck.

Silent. Heavy. No horn. Eighteen inches away. Wind in the face. Wet asphalt hissed like a skillet.

Then — somewhere further — impact, screech, screams. A lamppost. The driver behind the wheel. Alive. A crowd. Phones. Someone filming (the standard *Homo sapiens* response to near-death in the twenty-first century: film it, post it, collect hearts; anthropologists of the future would weep, if they had tear ducts, but I suspect the anthropologists of the future won't).

Lena. White. Gripping my sleeve. Five seconds of silence.

— How did you know?

I stared at the truck.

— Dan. How did you know?

I turned. Looked her in the eyes.

I didn't see the truck, Lena. The truck wasn't visible. It flew around the corner, and we both know it. I saw something else. Two seconds before — the space ahead of us *assembled*. As if the intersection was a construction, and in that construction, a hole appeared. Black, jagged, wrong. And from it came that same thing — the extra note, foreign air, a draft from nowhere. My body understood. My hand pulled you.

Of course, I didn't say any of that.

— Peripheral vision, — I said. — Headlights. Caught it from the corner of my eye.

We both knew there were no headlights. But civilization runs on the ability of two smart people to jointly ignore the obvious. We do it every day — with politics, with the climate, with the fact of our own mortality. One more lie, one less — the structure will hold.

— Okay, — Lena said.

We walked to the metro. At the entrance, she turned around.

— Thank you, Dan.

— Uh-huh.

— And... maybe talk to someone? Not in the sense of... well. You know.

Wonderful formulation. "Talk to someone." "See a psychiatrist" — rude. "You need help" — direct. But "talk to someone" is a Russian euphemism that simultaneously expresses concern and absolves you of responsibility. "Talk to someone" — meaning

someone who gets paid for it.

— I'm fine, Lena.

She left. Didn't believe me, obviously.

* * *

I sat in the car and didn't start the engine.

There's this state — after adrenaline. The adrenaline leaves, and in its place comes clarity. Not the good kind. Not the warm kind. Clinical. Like the light in an autopsy room: you see everything, and nothing you see is something you want to see.

I'd seen a seam. Not the first time.

First time — I was seven. Kitchen, crayons, a drawing (house, fence, tree, sun with rays — standard set, approved by child psychologists; if I'd drawn a house without windows, they'd have sent me to a different specialist, but I drew windows, and that saved me from early diagnosis). I was drawing — and suddenly started crying. No transition. No reason. Dad: "What happened?" Me: "Mom left." Him: "She's at work, she'll be home tonight."

She didn't come home. Not that night, not ever. An accident. Body never found. Case closed. I was seven, and I heard all of this from behind the door, sitting on the hallway floor, hugging my mother's slippers. The slippers were warm. They smelled like home. I thought: if I hold them tight enough, she'll come back for them.

She didn't come back.

(Twenty-one years. I still sometimes dream of the smell of those slippers. The brain is an astonishing machine: it forgets formulas you studied for a week, but remembers the smell of house slippers twenty-one years later. Maybe because formulas describe the world, and smell *is* the world. But that's philosophy, and philosophy is what physicists do when the experiment isn't working.)

Since then — once every few months. Always the same. First — the world goes *thin* for a second. Like paper held up to light: you can see there's something behind it. Then — the seam. Quick, at the edge of vision. Enough to flinch. Not enough to understand.

At twelve, my father took me to a psychiatrist. Old guy on Barrikadnaya, office with a ficus plant, diploma on the wall, pen behind his ear. He listened for fifteen minutes (I timed it), then wrote a prescription. I stopped talking. Didn't stop seeing. The difference between "curing" and "shutting up" is the difference between surgery and a Band-Aid. But the Band-Aid is cheaper, and you can prescribe it in fifteen minutes.

At sixteen, I found *my own* explanation. Kahneman. Rapid unconscious data processing. The brain reads thousands of micro-signals and produces a "premonition." No mysticism. Pure neurobiology.

I lived with that explanation for twelve years. It was convenient, rational, elegant, and — like any truly good lie — absolutely flawless until you ask a follow-up question.

The follow-up question: what "micro-signals" could a seven-year-old read a full day before the event, from across the city, through a crayon drawing of a house with a fence?

Twelve years I didn't ask that question. Today it asked itself.

I started the car.

On the radio — forecast: minus two Celsius, snow, northwest wind. Normal world. Everyone alive. Truck in a lamppost. Driver intact. Everything fine.

At the parking lot exit, three traffic lights blinked — left to right, in a wave. Click. Click. Click. As if someone was checking whether they worked.

I blinked. Red, red, red. In place.

I drove home, thinking that "normality" is a diagnosis. Nobody issues it, because everyone has it. And what everyone has is called the norm. Perfect circular logic. Aristotle would approve.

* * *

Apartment. Shabolovka. A studio. Fourth year here. Books (one-third read), a monitor (worth more than everything else combined), a mug with a broken handle (I won't throw it away; the reason is the subject of a separate psychoanalytic investigation I have no intention of conducting).

On the kitchen table — a photograph. Paper, with a bent corner, leaning against the salt shaker. A woman with dark hair. Eyes that look *through* the camera. At something behind the photographer. Or behind the photograph. Or behind reality altogether.

Mom. Irina Reinova. Missing. Twenty-one years.

I stood at the window with tea and thought.

Strictly speaking, I have two options.

Option one: I'm a well-trained neurotic with apophenia and a fast subconscious processor. I need a decent psychiatrist — someone under fifty, without a ficus, and with the understanding that phenazepam isn't the answer to "why do I see things I don't see."

Option two: I see something real. Not the future, not spirits, not a Tarot card in 4K resolution. Something about the structure of events themselves — about *how* they're made. And then my Kahneman explanation is anesthesia. And anesthesia has an expiration date.

Phone.

"Got home. Thanks again. Seriously, Dan — talk to someone. Lena"

I didn't reply. Because the only honest reply would've been: "Lena, there's nobody to talk to. The person it would make sense to talk to would have to see the same thing

I do. And those people, apparently, don't exist."

Although — how would I know? Maybe there are half a million of us. Maybe all of Moscow is lying in the dark right now thinking: "why does it seem like the world is being assembled on the fly?" But everyone stays quiet, because everyone's sure they're the only one. And silence — that's also a form of social contract: we've all agreed not to notice what we notice, and to call it "normality."

The thought was stupid. But it wouldn't leave. It settled into a corner of my mind like a stray cat: you fed it once, and now it lives here. You know this. It knows this. Neither of you plans to do anything about it.

I turned off the light. Lay down.

I dreamed of the intersection. All the traffic lights were green. All the cars drove in every direction simultaneously and passed through each other like holograms. Or like thoughts. Or like events that hadn't yet decided whether to happen or not.

In the middle of the intersection stood a person. I couldn't see the face, but I knew — he was looking at me. And he knew me. Had for a long time.

He said — or thought, or simply *was* the thought:

"Enough."

One word. No continuation.

I woke up at four a.m. Outside the window — snow. First of the year. Quiet, vertical. It settled on the city like white noise on a signal, and I lay in the dark and thought: enough — enough what? Enough pretending? Enough being afraid? Enough living?

No answer. Which is the worst of all, because a specific question you can answer specifically, but a vague one — all you can do is lie in the dark at four a.m. and listen to snow rustling on the windowsill and think: maybe Mom saw the same thing. Maybe she lay like this too. And at some point she got up and walked. *Toward*. Toward what she saw. Toward what she could no longer not see.

And didn't come back.

I closed my eyes. Tried to sleep.

Couldn't.

Chapter 2

The Thing That Doesn't Happen Fourteen Times in a Row

The next three days I spent in a state psychologists call "cognitive dissonance" and normal people call "fuck this, but there's no alternative."

The qubits behaved themselves. Lena didn't ask questions. The elevator didn't work. The coffee machine alternated between life and death at a frequency I tried, out of boredom, to model as a sinusoid (failed: R-squared 0.41 — even the coffee machine in our institute doesn't obey mathematics). The universe had reverted to factory settings, and I decided that maybe, after all, it was option one: I'm a neurotic with apophenia, I need a decent psychiatrist and regular meals.

Then Thursday happened, and option one expired.

* * *

I woke up on the hallway floor.

Let me repeat that for anyone reading carelessly (including me, re-reading this notebook): I woke up on the floor. In the hallway. Between the coat rack and the bathroom door. In my underwear and one sock (left; where the right one went is one of those mysteries of existence that, unlike quantum entanglement, genuinely has no solution). With a pillow I'd apparently grabbed on my way out, the way a four-year-old grabs a stuffed bear — except I'm twenty-eight, and I haven't had a stuffed bear since my father decided a boy my age should manage without plush toys. (I was six. The bear's name was Professor. I still haven't forgiven him.)

The last thing I remembered was lying in bed counting cracks in the ceiling. Eleven. I'd counted them three times, because if there's one thing I do worse than anything else in life, it's shutting my brain off before sleep. Other people count sheep. I count cracks, formulas, worst-case scenarios, and the number of days since I last called my father (eighteen; we just got tired of each other, the way two people who love each other but have absolutely no idea how to say it get tired).

The hallway mirror showed me a man I'd be afraid to encounter in a dark alley. Unpredictable. He had the eyes of someone who hadn't slept in a long time and hadn't been sure for a long time why he wakes up.

Sleepwalking, a neurologist would say. Happens with stress. I'd had it as a kid: my father told me that once I got up, walked to the kitchen, opened the fridge, stood in front of it for a minute, closed it, and went back to bed. Dad figured I was hungry. When I found out, I figured I was checking whether the fridge was still there. The difference in interpretation is essentially the difference between a physicist and a normal person. A normal person explains behavior with motive. A physicist questions the stability of the environment.

But then something happened that made sleepwalking the least of my problems.

* * *

I was standing in the shower. Water running down my back. Brain hadn't booted yet (for the first ten minutes after waking, I function roughly at the level of a toaster: capable of one operation, but anything requiring meaning should wait).

And then I saw my lab.

Saw it. Literally. As if someone switched the channel: one second it's tile, steam, and water — the next it's three monitors, blue screen glow, and my desk. On the screen — a graph that wasn't there yesterday: blue line, exponential growth, then — a break. A clean break: the line goes up and stops, as if someone took scissors and cut off the rest.

It lasted one and a half seconds. Then — tile, steam, water.

I stood gripping the faucet, eyes closed. Heart pounding. Water running. World in place.

Here I need to make an important note about the nature of hallucinations (or, if you prefer, visions — the difference between them is, strictly speaking, determined by the social status of the person having them: if you're a saint, it's a vision; if you're a physics PhD on Shabolovka, it's a hallucination). So, about the nature. A hallucination, by definition, is perceiving something that isn't there. You see a spider on the wall, there's no spider, you're hallucinating. Simple.

But what if you see a spider on the wall, and then you go to work and find a spider on the wall?

That's something else. And psychiatry doesn't have a term for that something else, because psychiatry, like any self-respecting science, only works with phenomena it has a box for. No box — no phenomenon. Elegant. Efficient. Completely useless.

* * *

I drove to the institute in twenty-three minutes (traffic in November Moscow is its own form of meditation: you sit, you don't move, you can't affect anything, and all you can do is observe your thoughts; if the Buddha ever lived in Moscow, he reached enlightenment on the Third Ring Road during rush hour).

I climbed to the seventh floor. Turned on the monitors. Opened the overnight logs.

Blue line. Exponential growth. Break.

That graph. The one I'd seen in the shower forty minutes ago.

You know what's scariest about confirming the impossible? That the brain still tries to explain it. It physically cannot accept "this is impossible, but it happened." It starts spinning: maybe you saw a similar graph before and forgot. Maybe your subconscious extrapolated the trend. Maybe you're still asleep. Maybe it's déjà vu.

The brain is, essentially, an explanation machine. It searches for a *version* that will let it keep running. Like an operating system that on a crash generates an error message, logs it, and moves on. The blue screen of death is a report that death was avoided. For now.

I sat in front of the screen and for the first time in my life didn't want to know the answer.

* * *

— Hardware fault, — Lena said.

She was standing behind my shoulder, looking at the same graph, and had already made up her mind. That's what I love about Lena (and what simultaneously drives me insane): she never panics. You could show her an equation proving the universe ends next Tuesday, and she'd say: "Check the boundary conditions."

— Exponential growth of coherence in a closed system. Physically impossible. Therefore, error.

— And the break?

— Buffer overflow. Or a reset when the scale limit was exceeded. Call Seryozha.

Seryozha is our engineer. A man capable of fixing the Large Hadron Collider with electrical tape, three swear words, and a soldering iron he carries in his breast pocket the way others carry a pen. (I once asked him why the soldering iron in the pocket. He looked at me like I was slow and answered: "You don't have one?" Question closed.) If the problem is hardware — Seryozha will find it. If the problem isn't hardware — Seryozha will still find *something*, because in our institute there is *always* something to fix, and this fills his life with meaning, which the rest of us have to find in publications.

Seryozha checked the sensors. Fine.

Lena checked the calibration. Fine.

I checked the code. Fine.

We reran the series three times. Results — stable, normal, boring. Like yesterday. The anomalous graph stood in the overnight logs alone, like graffiti on a temple wall: out of place, inexplicable, and somehow insulting to the surrounding architecture.

— Isolated artifact, — Lena declared. — Not reproducible. Therefore, doesn't exist.

Okay. Right here, at this point, I want to stop and talk about something important. Not about qubits, not about graphs, not about my issues with perceiving reality. About science.

"Not reproducible — therefore, doesn't exist." This is the fundamental principle of the scientific method. The cornerstone. The holy of holies. Any physicist utters this phrase with the same reverence a believer utters the Creed.

And this is — if you stop to think about it — the most elegant method humanity has devised for *not noticing* what doesn't fit the picture.

Think about it. Your first love isn't reproducible. The moment of your birth isn't reproducible. Your death certainly isn't reproducible. But try saying they don't exist. Your entire life is an isolated artifact: a one-time, non-reproducible event that, by strict scientific criteria, *lacks statistical significance*.

Science, at its core, is a contract: we deal only with what repeats. Everything else — not our department. That's why science brilliantly describes the laws by which apples fall but is utterly helpless before the question of why you climbed that apple tree. Laws are reproducible. Meaning isn't. Therefore, meaning doesn't exist. Q.E.D. Applause, Nobel Prize, banquet.

But I got sidetracked. Back to my qubits, which also, apparently, don't exist.

* * *

At lunch I went outside. I needed to stop being inside a building that houses equipment that shows me things I'd already seen before seeing them. (Reread that sentence. Three nested clauses. Recursion. Maybe that's the structure of my problem — infinite nesting that at some point starts consuming itself.)

Coffee from the stand on the corner. Real coffee, without the aftertaste of budget constraints and shattered dreams. A bench in the small park. November had stopped pretending to be autumn and started rehearsing winter: trees stood bare, puddles had a thin film of ice, and the air had that specific Moscow freshness that makes you want to emigrate.

I sat, drank coffee, and tried not to think. Failing. "Don't think" is like "don't scratch": the very attempt intensifies the itch. Buddhists claim you can achieve a state of "no-mind." I claim Buddhists never worked with quantum computing.

Fine. Facts.

Fact one: I see events "assembling" before they happen. Confirmed: the truck at the intersection. Witness: Lena Markova, PhD, mentally sound.

Fact two: I saw a graph in the shower forty minutes before I found it in the data. Witnesses: none. But the data's right there.

Fact three: the frequency is increasing. Before — once every few months. Now — twice in four days. If you extrapolate (a pointless exercise, but physicists can't not

extrapolate — it's like asking a cat not to catch mice: she understands what you're saying but considers your request absurd) — if you extrapolate, in two weeks I'll be seeing event assembly in real time. Constantly. Everything.

I went cold. November had nothing to do with it.

— Excuse me, is this seat taken?

* * *

I looked up.

A girl. Maybe twenty-four, twenty-five. Dark hair, bangs, eyes — big, dark, with an expression I couldn't read (and I usually read people fairly well; occupational hazard: if you've spent twenty years hiding from everyone that you see impossible things, you learn to read faces). Coat too thin for November. In her hands — a notebook. Paper.

In 2026, a paper notebook is either hipster affectation or a symptom. No third option. Actually, there is a third: someone who has things to write down and doesn't want them in the cloud. Which, if you think about it, is also a symptom — just of a different condition.

— It's free, — I said.

She sat down next to me. Half a meter away, in defiance of the unwritten code of Moscow public seating (paragraph 3, section 7: "Strangers must sit at maximum distance from each other; violation punishable by stare"). As if personal space were a concept she was familiar with but didn't consider binding. Roughly how I feel about traffic laws.

We sat in silence. She drew in her notebook — quick, small strokes. I drank coffee and thought about how just a week ago I was a regular neurotic with a manageable set of problems, and now I was a neurotic who sees the future in the shower. Progress.

Then she said:

— You have an interesting field.

I turned.

— Excuse me?

— Field. — She didn't look up from the notebook. — Around you. Prickly. Like you're trying to be smaller than you are.

There's a set of words that, when spoken by a stranger on the street, should make you immediately stand and leave. "Field" is one of them. Right alongside "energy," "vibrations," "chakras," and "have you heard about our Lord?" These are marker-words: they tell you the person in front of you inhabits a reality with different rules, and the intersection of your realities threatens a loss of time, money, or sanity.

I should have stood up. I didn't.

Because "trying to be smaller than you are" is a precise, painful, surgical diagnosis. That is exactly what I've been doing my entire life. Exactly that. Being smaller. Seeing

— and not seeing. Knowing — and not knowing. Feeling — and pretending not to feel. For twenty-one years I've been *compressing* myself to fit inside a world that's too small for me, and she named it in one phrase.

— I don't believe in "fields," — I said. Automatically. Like an answering machine.

She looked up. Looked at me.

I'm not going to describe her gaze, because any description would be trite. "Deep eyes," "penetrating gaze," "windows to the soul" — all that literary garbage that makes you want to howl. I'll say one thing: with most people, a gaze is a surface. You look into their eyes and you see eyes. Her gaze was an opening. Behind it was space. A lot of space.

— You're a scientist? — she asked.

— Physicist.

— Quantum?

— Yes.

— Then you know the observer affects the system. — She smiled slightly. — You just think it only works in the lab.

Pause. My pause. Because she'd just described my problem more precisely than I'd managed in twelve years.

— And you... — I started.

— Nobody, — she closed the notebook. — I just see things. Like you. Only I stopped pretending I don't a long time ago. Saves the nerves. Ruins your social life, but saves the nerves.

— How do you know that I...

She tilted her head. Looked at me with an expression I'd classify as "condescending sympathy" — roughly how a vet looks at a dog that's brought a stick and is waiting for praise, not understanding that the stick isn't an achievement.

— People like you are easy to spot, — she said. — You're all the same. You walk carefully, like the floor might collapse. You're always checking whether objects are real. You count the cracks in the ceiling.

Eleven. She couldn't have known that.

— And you all do the same thing, — she continued, standing up. — You find an explanation and hide behind it. Kahneman, micro-signals, rapid unconscious data processing. Anesthesia. — She buttoned her absurdly thin coat. — Only anesthesia has an expiration date. And what's underneath it — doesn't.

— Wait. — I stood up too. — What's your name?

— Zoya.

— Zoya, how do you...

— That's not important. What's important is something else. — She looked at me, serious, almost hard. No smile, no mysticism, no "aura" or "vibrations." Like a doctor

telling the truth because lying is no longer useful. — You're going to have to choose. Soon. Stop seeing — or stop pretending. There is no third option.

And she left.

Just left. Through the park, past the bare trees, into the November murk. No phone number, no business card, no link to a Telegram channel called "Quantum Self Awakening." Which, I have to admit, was the first argument in her favor.

On the bench lay her notebook. She'd left it. Accidentally? On purpose? In a world where events "assemble," those words might mean the same thing.

I picked up the notebook. Opened it. On the last page — a drawing. Lines, nodes, intersections. Structural. Something between a neural network diagram and a star map drawn by someone who'd seen the stars from *inside*.

* * *

In the lab, I stashed the notebook in my desk drawer. Lena and I launched a new series. Standard protocol, tedium, routine. Seryozha had gone to lunch (Seryozha's "lunch" is an elastic concept; he can eat for forty minutes or two hours, if along the way he encounters something that needs fixing; once he spent three and a half hours repairing the elevator and came back beaming, oil on his forehead, proclaiming that "it'll work now"; the elevator worked. Once. Then broke again, but Seryozha said, "It doesn't want to," and the matter was closed).

Twenty minutes of normal work. Qubits doing what qubits are supposed to: cohering, decohering, collapsing — the whole standard repertoire. I relaxed. Maybe for the first time in a week.

On minute twenty-one, I thought about Zoya's notebook.

By accident. The thought just flashed — the way thoughts do: you're focused on work, and an image flickers through, unrelated. A face in a crowd. A smell. The pattern from the notebook — lines, nodes, intersections.

The system's coherence spiked eighteen percent.

I didn't immediately understand what had happened. Then I looked at the screen. Then at Lena. Lena was looking at the screen.

— What did you do? — she asked.

Voice flat. Too flat. Bad sign: when Lena starts controlling her intonation, it means what's happening inside her is roughly what's happening outside a volcanic eruption.

— Nothing.

— Eighteen percent, Dan. In one second. With no external input. That's not "nothing."

I thought about the notebook again. Consciously. Deliberately. Lines, nodes, intersections.

Coherence twitched. Plus two percent.

We both saw it. One screen. One dataset. Two pairs of eyes. No possibility of writing it off as a glitch, subjective perception, apophenia, anxiety, micro-signals, or any other anesthetic from my medicine cabinet.

Silence. Five seconds.

— Interference, — Lena said. She was already checking the shielding. By hand. Physically. Like a surgeon who doesn't trust the X-ray and palpates it herself. — Electromagnetic interference.

— Phone's on the desk. Airplane mode. No watch. No earbuds.

— Then something external. Maybe Seryozha turned something on downstairs.

— Seryozha's at lunch.

She checked the cables. Grounding. Cooling. Everything fine. Everything, of course, fine. Everything is *always* fine. That's the defining feature of my life: everything is always fine, except the results.

— We didn't see this, — Lena said.

Quietly. Not to me. To herself.

— Lena...

She turned. In her eyes — something worse than fear: understanding. She *knew* it wasn't interference. She's smart, remember? She *actually* understands what she's thinking.

— Dan. The grant. The review. *Troitsky Variant*. You understand what happens if we tell anyone?

I understood.

A scientific reputation is a funny thing. You build it for decades: publications, conferences, citations, reviews. Brick by brick, like a wall. And then one brick is the wrong color — and the wall collapses; it turns out it was only standing because everyone agreed to call it a wall. Once the agreement breaks — that's it. You're not a physicist. You're a crackpot. You're the guy who "catches telepathy in qubits." Worse than a criminal conviction: you can get out of prison, but you never come back from scientific disgrace.

— Fine, — I said. — We didn't see it.

We worked until evening in silence. The qubits behaved flawlessly.

Of course.

(And I thought of another Seryozha. Not ours — a namesake who runs a YouTube channel called "Science Without Magic." Three hundred thousand subscribers. Explains that quantum effects don't scale to the macro world, consciousness is an epiphenomenon of neural activity, and anything that can't be measured doesn't exist. He's right. Within the model they gave him in grad school — impeccably right. Seryozha Volkov is a fish who wrote a dissertation on hydrodynamics and now knows for certain that water doesn't exist. His subscribers comment: "thank you for opening our eyes!"

He gave them a scientific rationale *not* to open them. That really is worth a like.

Today Lena and I gave ourselves the same one.)

* * *

That evening I sat at home with Zoya's notebook and tea I couldn't taste.

Drawings. Page after page. The same elements — lines, nodes, intersections — but in different configurations. Like letters of one alphabet forming different words. I didn't understand the language, but I felt the grammar — that strange sensation when you look at something unfamiliar and know with certainty that it *follows rules*, even though you can't name a single one.

In the middle of the notebook — text. Small, angular handwriting, ballpoint pen:

"Events don't happen. Events assemble. First — the form. Then — the cause. Then — the fact. We see the fact and invent the cause after the fact. And the form — nobody sees. Almost nobody."

I read it three times.

Here's the thing. The problem is that it was *precise*. Clever things are everywhere — bookstore shelves (the ones still standing) are bursting with clever things. But this was precise. This — exactly this — is how the thing I see works. An event *builds*. First comes the form — the frame, the blueprint, the markup. Then the cause: the world reverse-engineers a logical justification for a structure that's already finished. Then the fact: the event manifests in reality, and everyone thinks it "happened." As if by itself. As if it was always going to. As if the cause *preceded* the effect and wasn't sketched in after the fact.

That's what I saw at the intersection. The form. The scaffold of an event that had a hole in it.

That's what I saw in the shower. The form of a graph that hadn't "happened" yet.

Someone wrote this in ballpoint pen on crumpled paper, in a notebook left on a bench in a November park in Moscow. And that someone knew about me. And that someone left.

For a second, the apartment around me flickered. The walls themselves. Like an image on a monitor when the graphics card starts dying: everything's in place, but for a split second you see the pixels. See the emptiness between them. See that everything you're looking at is a picture. An image. A render.

Then it passed. Walls in place. Mug in place. Mom's photograph in place.

Did she see this too?

Phone. Unknown number.

* * *

— Daniil Reinov?

A man's voice. Calm. His Russian was flawless, but — how to explain this — accented at the level of *thought*. As if the person was thinking in a language for which Russian was one possible interface. One of several.

— Who is this?

— You don't know me. But I know you.

— If you're selling something...

— Daniil. I know about the phenazepam. About the psychiatrist on Barrikadnaya, the office with the ficus, fifteen minutes. About the eleven cracks on your ceiling. About the truck on Vavilov Street. About the graph you saw in the shower.

Silence. The kind of silence that comes when the world around you — the same one, the familiar one, all-in-place — quietly and irreversibly shifts. Just shifts. Like furniture in a room: everything's the same, but it's positioned slightly differently, and that "slightly" gives you chills.

— How do you...

— Observation, Daniel. Long. Careful. — The voice carried no apology. Like a doctor reading test results: he didn't cause the diagnosis, he's just stating it. — You're not the first we've found. And — unfortunately — not everyone we find in time.

A pause. His. Heavy.

— You see events assembling. You've seen it since you were seven. They told you you were sick. They gave you pills. You stopped talking about it. But you didn't stop seeing.

Pause. Mine. Because what he was saying, only I could have known. Not my father (I stopped telling him at twelve). Not Lena (never). Not the psychiatrist (who listened for fifteen minutes and wrote a prescription).

— It's not a disease, Daniil. And it's not a bug. It's a beginning.

— A beginning of what?

— That I won't say over the phone. Tomorrow. Twelve o'clock. Neskuchny Garden. The rotunda.

— Why should I...

— You shouldn't. You can not come. You can throw away the notebook. You can go back to Kahneman, to apophenia, to "statistical fluctuation." The cork will hold for a while longer. — Pause. — But you already know it won't hold. Don't you?

He hung up.

I sat with the phone in my hand. Outside the window, snow was falling — slow, vertical, indifferent. The city was going white, like a blank page.

A normal person in my position would call the police. Or a friend. Or a psychiatrist (a real one, from across Moscow). A normal person would decide: scammer, stalker, cult. A normal person would not set an alarm for ten a.m.

But I am — as has been repeatedly stated and repeatedly confirmed — not a normal person. I'm a bug. A system error that spent twenty-one years pretending to be a feature.

And one more thing: he said "beginning." And for twenty-one years, nobody had told me this could be the *beginning* of something. Everyone — from the psychiatrist to Kahneman — said it was the *end* of something: of health, of normality, of a career. That it needed to be cured, suppressed, explained, removed.

And he said — beginning.

One word. And it outweighed twelve years of phenazepam, apophenia, and "statistical fluctuation."

I set the alarm for ten. Lay down. Closed my eyes.

Snow rustled on the windowsill like white noise. Somewhere below, a car drove past. The city lived. Twenty million people slept, not knowing the world around them was assembling, like IKEA furniture — only the instructions were written in a language nobody reads.

Almost nobody.

I fell asleep.

I dreamed of nothing. For the first time in a week — nothing. Void. Silence. A blank screen.

Maybe that's what a beginning is: the moment the world stops dreaming at you and starts talking to you.

Chapter 3

A Debt

Neskuchny Garden in November is an oxymoron. Everything in it is "neskuchny" — the name means "not boring" — except the garden itself: bare trees, wet benches, crows that look like they personally witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union and haven't believed in anything since. The only entertainment is the joggers. Moscow has a special breed of people who run in minus-two weather in skin-tight pants with a facial expression that says: "I'm suffering, but it's good for me." Stoic philosophy, embodied in twenty-thousand-ruble sneakers.

I arrived fifteen minutes early. Out of paranoia. I wanted to look around. Understand what I was getting into.

The rotunda — white, round, neoclassical — stood empty. Nobody around, unless you count the crows (three of them, on a branch above the rotunda, looking down with the expressions of elderly professors evaluating a thesis defense). I sat on a bench opposite. Pulled out my phone. Opened the news. Closed the news. Opened the messenger. Closed the messenger. Standard behavior of a person who's waiting and doesn't know what for: simulation of activity to avoid losing your mind from inactivity.

At five to twelve, I realized I was being watched.

An ordinary, prosaic, animal feeling: someone is looking at you. Your back muscles tense. Your neck wants to turn. Evolution hardwired this into us over a million years on the savanna, where those who didn't feel a stranger's gaze didn't live long. We think we live in civilization, but our bodies still live on the savanna. The difference between us and ancient humans is roughly the difference between a wild cat and a house cat: same animal, just with a collar, a bell, and a diet of premium kibble.

I turned.

A man stood ten meters away, at the edge of the path. He was simply standing and looking, not even trying to hide. Dark coat, no scarf, no gloves. Maybe fifty, maybe a bit older. Asian features, blurred — something mixed, unplaceable, one of those faces that could be from anywhere. Clean-shaven. Close-cropped hair. Straight back, calm hands.

I registered all this in two seconds. Professional habit: when you've spent twenty years expecting reality to pull something, you learn to assess a situation fast. Useful skill. Useless life.

But there was something else.

Around this person, there was no draft. No "extra note." No sensation of assembly, editing, rough draft. The space around him was... even. Calm. Real. As if he stood *on* the world — like an anchor around which everything else arranged itself.

I'd never felt that before. Around people, there's always noise. Small, ambient, familiar: thoughts, emotions, intentions, fears — it all creates a ripple, like wind on water. I'd gotten used to it, the way you get used to street noise, and stopped noticing. But near him — silence. The kind of silence that makes you realize how *loud* everything else is.

He walked over. Sat down beside me. Without asking, without "excuse me," without "is this seat free?" — like a person sitting down in his own chair. Or on his own planet.

— Daniil, — he said. Not a question. A statement.

— You're the one who called.

— Yes.

— And you're going to tell me how you know about the phenazepam?

He tilted his head slightly. A gesture that on a normal person would mean "interesting question," and on him meant — I'd understand later — "you're asking the wrong question, but I'll answer it because it'll lead you to the right one."

— My name is Wei, — he said. — Last name — Lin. If you need a last name.

— I need an explanation. Who are you? How did you find me? And why?

— Three questions. Let's go in order. Who I am — long conversation, and I suggest we table it for later. How I found you — wrong question. Why — that's the right one.

— Fine. Why?

— Because in the next few weeks, you'll either lose your mind or understand what's happening. There is no third option. I'd prefer the second.

This is where I should have stood up and walked away. This is textbook recruitment. I've read about cults: a stranger who "knows everything about you," promises "answers," offers "help." In six months you're selling your apartment and wiring money to an account in Panama. Classic playbook. Chapter one: "You've been found." Chapter two: "You're special." Chapter three: "Sign here."

But I didn't stand up.

For two reasons. First: he knew about the phenazepam, the cracks, the graph in the shower. No cult has that kind of data (at least none I'm aware of; though, admittedly, my knowledge of cults is limited to a Netflix documentary and one bad date with a girl who turned out to be an acolyte of Hellinger Family Constellations — but that's a separate story).

Second reason: the silence. Around him, it was quiet. Not acoustically — the crows kept cawing, the joggers kept suffering, Moscow kept humming. It was quiet *inside*. Near him, my permanent inner noise — that anxious buzzing I carry around like underwear — suddenly became noticeable. Like how you get used to the smell of your

own home and stop noticing it until you step outside for fresh air — that's what happened with him: I suddenly felt how *loudly* I live. How much noise I generate just by existing.

— Suppose I'm listening, — I said. — What's happening?

— You're seeing how events assemble.

— I know that already.

— No. You know that you see *something*. But you don't know *what* exactly.

Pause. He wasn't in any hurry. At all. As if he had an infinite amount of time and could afford to spend it on my questions.

(Later I'd realize that wasn't "as if.")

— All right, — I said. — What am I seeing?

— You're seeing the stack.

— The stack?

— Imagine reality isn't one thing but six things, layered on top of each other. Like floors. The top one — what everyone sees: the physical world, matter, energy, spacetime. Solid, stable, convincing. That's the interface. A computer screen, if you like.

— If I like — what?

— If you like the analogy. — A shadow of a smile. First of the entire conversation. — Physicists love analogies.

— Physicists love *data*.

— Then here's your data. Four days ago, you saw an intersection "assemble" a second before the accident. Yesterday you saw a graph in the shower forty minutes before it appeared in your data. Your qubits respond to your thoughts. — He looked at me. — This isn't a disease, Daniil. It's not apophenia. It's — you're beginning to see the second floor. The back side of the screen.

Any normal scientist would say: "That's unscientific nonsense." Any normal skeptic would say: "Prove it." Any normal adult would say: "Show me some credentials."

I said:

— What second floor?

And by the way I said it — "what floor, tell me more" — I understood I'd already made my decision. Somewhere between the phenazepam and this bench, between the seven-year-old boy with the slippers and the twenty-eight-year-old physicist with the notebook, I'd already decided: if anyone ever tells me the world isn't built the way everyone thinks, I'll hear them out. Because "the way everyone thinks" is a version I never truly believed.

(Here — a digression about everyday belief. The kind you use every day without noticing. You believe the chair you're sitting in will hold. You believe the food in your fridge isn't poisoned. You believe the sun will rise tomorrow. Not one of these things do you actually *verify*. You *believe*. And you call it "common sense." And "common

sense" is, essentially, a set of untested assumptions on which your entire life rests. Like a building on stilts: every stilt an untested hypothesis, and if you suddenly test even one — and it turns out to be rotten — *everything* shifts.

Wei Lin had just offered to test a stilt. The deepest one: "the world is built the way I think." And I — instead of refusing (because — who tests stilts? why? the building's standing!) — said: "let's do it." Because that stilt had been wobbling since I was seven. And twenty-one years of pretending it wasn't wobbling is more exhausting than finally looking at what's wrong with it.)

Wei Lin looked at me. For a long time. With an expression that was the expression of no expression: controlled neutrality, behind which something was being calculated, evaluated, weighed.

— Have you ever wondered, — he said, — why galaxies look structurally similar to neural networks?

— It's a visual coincidence. Scale invariance. Fractal patterns.

— Three answers, none of which is an explanation.

He was right. And I knew it. "Scale invariance" is a description of the fact, not its cause. It's like being asked why it rains and answering: "Because water falls from the sky." True. Useless.

— Fine, — I said. — What's the real answer?

— The real answer: they look similar because they *are* the same structure. Not "similar to." Not "reminiscent of." *Are*. The brain is a neural network, and the universe is a neural network. Not a metaphor. A fact. The same organizing principle at different scales. And you, Daniil, are beginning to see this principle directly, without instruments as intermediaries.

I was silent. Because something was happening in my head for which I had no words. As if someone took the puzzle I'd been assembling for twenty years — pieces, scraps, fragments — and rotated it ninety degrees. And suddenly you could see that it was a picture. Whole. Coherent. Meaningful.

A mother who "saw something" and didn't come back. A truck that "assembled" before it appeared. Qubits responding to thought. And everything else — the notebook, the traffic lights, the seven-year-old boy who knew.

One system. One stack. And I was someone who was beginning to see how it's built.

That was... you know what? It was something for which the English word is better than anything Russian has: *dread*. When you simultaneously understand that you've found the answer and understand that the answer is bigger than you.

Considerably bigger.

Here's what's interesting about the word "dread." It cuts both ways. You're terrified of the answer. But — simultaneously — you *can't look away*. Like a car crash in the oncoming lane: you don't want to watch, but you watch. Because the brain is a greedy

machine: it needs information. Even the kind that will destroy it. *Especially* that kind. This, if you think about it, is the fundamental design flaw of *Homo sapiens*: we're the only species that *wants to know* what will kill it. Every other species runs from danger. We run *toward it* — with a notebook and a pencil. And we write it down. Until the very end.

(Seryozha would say: "That's a feature. Just — a feature for a user who hasn't been invented yet." Seryozha is an engineer. Engineers believe in features. Physicists believe in bugs. The difference is optimism.)

— Suppose, — I said (and my voice was steady, because I'm a physicist, and physicists die before they show they're scared; that's our professional pride, pointless and beautiful, like all pride). — Suppose I see... the stack. Suppose it's not a disease. Then what do I do with it?

— Learn.

— Learn what?

— How not to break.

I looked at him.

— Excuse me?

— What you're seeing, Daniil, is the beginner level. First floor out of six. You see event assembly — that's the minimum. Like a child starting to distinguish letters: he can't read yet, but he already sees that signs aren't patterns but words. You're at that stage.

— And?

— And that stage is dangerous. Because your consciousness is expanding, but your ability to handle it is not. It's like your monitor suddenly started showing ten times as many pixels, but the graphics card stayed the same. The result — overheating. Artifacts. Glitches.

— Sleepwalking, — I said.

— Sleepwalking, — he nodded. — Spontaneous visions. Blurring of boundaries between "here" and "there." Loss of ability to distinguish memory from premonition. And then — if you don't learn — collapse.

— Collapse of what?

— You.

One word. It hung in the air and didn't leave.

— Your mother, — he continued, — nobody explained it to her. She saw the stack — and didn't know what she was doing. Didn't know she needed help. Didn't know there are people who can teach. She walked toward what she saw — without preparation, without a guide, without understanding.

— You know what happened to my mother?

It came out of me like a gunshot. Twenty-one years. Slippers in the hallway. Case

closed. Body never found.

Wei Lin looked at me. For the first time in the entire conversation, something human appeared in his face. Something more complex than sympathy. As if he knew the answer to my question, and the answer was the kind you can't give sitting on a bench in a November park.

— I know part of it, — he said. — The rest you'll learn yourself. When you're ready.

— I'm ready now.

— No.

One word. No arguments, no explanations. Just "no." And something about *how* he said it — with absolute, granite certainty, without rudeness, without condescension — made me go quiet. As if he knew exactly how much truth I could hold right now, and the amount was — not all of it.

A minute of silence. Crows cawed. A jogger ran past. Moscow lived. The world assembled around us, as usual — except now I saw it. Saw how the air between the trees was laid out slightly differently, how light fell "out of" objects, how space *generated* things, every second, continuously.

It lasted a few seconds. Then collapsed back into the ordinary picture: garden, trees, bench, man beside me.

— You just saw it, — Wei Lin said. — Second floor. For two seconds.

— What was that?

— The stack. Unfiltered. Your brain for a moment stopped constructing the familiar picture and showed you what *is*. Without interpretation.

— And you... you see this constantly?

— I see considerably more, — he said. Without boasting. As a fact. Like "I wear glasses" or "I speak Chinese." — But I learned to. Over a long time. With help. And I had... — pause — ...those who explained.

— The Academy, — I said.

He turned. For the first time in the conversation — surprise. Real, unfeigned, for a fraction of a second.

— Where do you know that word from?

— I don't know. It... — I fell silent, because I didn't understand where it came from. It just arrived. The way a word arrives that you never learned but always knew. Like a melody you've never heard but can hum from the first note. — It just came to me.

Wei Lin was looking at me. And in his face I saw something I didn't expect to see: interest. Alive, real, mixed with something I couldn't identify.

(Much later, I'd understand that it was recognition.)

— The Academy, — he repeated quietly. — Yes. Exactly. — Pause. — Interesting that you know this.

— I don't know it. I guessed.

— Daniil. In the stack, there is no "guessed." There is — remembered.

I wanted to ask what that meant — "remembered." What could I have remembered? From what life? From what layer? But he was already standing.

— This is enough for a first conversation, — he said. — You know you're not sick. You know you see the stack. You know the word "Academy." That's enough.

— Enough for what?

— For you to make a decision.

— What decision?

— To come back. Or not.

He pulled a business card from his pocket. White. On it — just a phone number. No name, no title, no logo. The emptiest business card I'd ever seen.

— If you decide — call. If you don't — don't call. Keep the notebook. Zoya left it for you, not for me.

— You know Zoya?

— Zoya is a separate conversation.

He turned and walked down the path. Calmly, without looking back. Dark coat among bare trees. The crows watched him go and stayed silent. (Which, for Moscow crows, is the highest form of respect.)

I sat on the bench, holding a white business card with one number, and thought about how a normal person in my position would decide: crazy, con man, cultist. And go home. And forget it. And keep living.

But I'm not normal. That, by this point, should be obvious to everyone, including me.

He said: "Your mother saw the stack and walked toward what she saw — without preparation."

Twenty-one years. Body never found. Case closed.

What if it's not closed?

* * *

I sat on the bench for another twenty minutes. Then drove home. On the way — nothing unusual: traffic, radio, snow. An ordinary November day in an ordinary city of an ordinary country that, admittedly, was never particularly ordinary.

At home, I took out Zoya's notebook. Took out Wei Lin's card. Laid them side by side on the table. Looked at Mom's photograph. Three objects: a notebook, a card, a photograph. Three doors: into someone else's knowledge, into someone else's world, into someone else's (my own?) past life.

Then I did what any self-respecting scientist does when confronted with the inexplicable: I went online.

"Reality stack" — zero results, unless you count programming.

“Seeing events assemble” — articles about anxiety disorder. Useful if you want to confirm you’re sick. Useless if you want to understand.

“Academy” — five hundred million results. Not one useful.

“Consciousness awakening” — and here Google blossomed. Fourteen million results. Marathons, webinars, retreats. “Quantum consciousness leap — first module free!” “Awaken your potential in 21 days!” “Personal transformation: from victim to creator. Next cohort starts Monday.” Prices — from a hundred to two thousand dollars. Reviews — with photos from Bali: tanned people in white, with smiles that say “I found myself” and simultaneously “I lost my critical thinking.” One course — nine cohorts. Nine cohorts of four hundred people. Three thousand six hundred people paid real money for what Wei Lin told me for free on a bench in November. With one difference: after Wei Lin, my nose was bleeding and my hands were shaking. After the course — judging by the reviews — people experienced a deep sense of satisfaction and a promo code for the next cohort at fifteen percent off. Maybe they’re charlatans — or maybe it’s a brilliant business model: take something that in the original kills and rebirths you, water it down to room temperature, add candles, neuro-music, and a homework PDF — and sell subscriptions. If you could sell death without dying, they’d monetize that too. Then again, I thought, that is their product.

“Reality stack” led me after a few minutes to a three-hundred-and-twenty-page PDF. No cover. No author name (the field was empty, as if the person who wrote it decided that a name was a superfluous identifier). Four mentions on the entire internet. I opened it. Read the first chapter.

Closed it. Opened it again. Read it again. Slower.

The PDF was... strange. In the literal way. It described the universe as a neural network. As a fact, not a metaphor. The same structures, the same connection patterns, the same architecture at different scales. And the author wasn’t crazy: cited real studies, real data, real mathematics. Just drew conclusions from them that no reviewer would pass in a reputable journal.

But the conclusions matched what Wei Lin had said. *Word for word*. As if the PDF and the conversation were written from the same outline.

I sat at the table, staring at the screen, and thought: what if this isn’t a coincidence? What if there’s knowledge — real, structured, testable knowledge — that exists but doesn’t fit into any existing framework? Not physics, not neurobiology, not psychiatry, not philosophy? What if it’s seeping through — through books, through strange men on park benches, through girls with notebooks, through men with blank business cards — seeping into a world that’s desperately trying not to notice it?

And what if my mother found it before me?

Phone. Lena.

“Are you coming in today?”

I looked at the clock. Two-thirty. Middle of the workday. I'm a physicist, an institute employee, a PhD. I have qubits. A grant. A review in two months.

"Sick," I typed.

First lie to Lena in my life, not counting "I slept."

A lie. I was, possibly, beginning to recover for the first time in my life. Only recovery, I suspected, was going to be worse than any illness.

I picked up the card. Dialed the number.

Three rings.

— Listening, — Wei Lin's voice.

— I'll come, — I said. — But I have a condition.

— What condition?

— Tell me about my mother.

Pause. A long one. I could hear wind behind his window (or behind his — what?).

— All right, — he said. — But not right away. And not everything. And you'll wish you hadn't asked.

— I already wish I hadn't, — I said. — About a lot of things. That's no reason to stop.

— Then tomorrow. Nine a.m. I'll send the address.

He hung up. I stood by the window with the phone in my hand. Outside, snow was falling — for the third time that week. Moscow was going white. Trees, rooftops, cars — everything being covered in white, as if the city were being carefully erased.

I thought: Wei Lin is probably right. And in a week — or a month — I'll regret calling. Or not regret it. Or be unable to tell the difference.

Or lose my mind. Which, if you think about it, is also a form of answer. An unpleasant form, but an answer.

I closed my eyes. Behind my eyelids it was dark and quiet. Like an unsent letter.

The cork — the one I'd been using for twelve years to plug the hole — lay on the floor. And I couldn't push it back in. And honestly, I didn't want to.

Chapter 4

An Inhuman Gaze

The address Wei Lin sent turned out to be an apartment in Khamovniki.

An ordinary apartment. No office sign, no bunker door, no “Initiates Only” label (though, if you think about it, a sign like that would’ve at least given the whole thing some stylistic closure). Second floor. A Stalinka — one of those buildings from the era when architecture still considered itself art rather than a money-laundering scheme. The stairwell smelled of cats and plaster. (Moscow has three eternal smells: cats, plaster, and missed opportunities. The first two — in the stairwells. The third — everywhere.)

Intercom. Click. Stairs. Door.

Wei Lin opened it. Straight back, calm face, and wearing something between a kimono and a bathrobe. On anyone else, this would look like a costume party. On him, it looked like a uniform. Just unclear for what. Military? Monastic? Cosmic? All three? (I’d later get used to the fact that with Wei Lin, “all of the above” is the default setting.)

— Come in. Tea?

— Coffee, if possible.

— Possible. But inadvisable. Coffee narrows.

— Narrows what?

— Everything.

— Is that a scientific fact?

— That’s seven hundred years of observation.

I decided that was a joke. In two weeks, I’d stop deciding that.

* * *

The apartment. First thing that struck me: nothing struck me. Not a single extra object. Table, chairs, bookshelves, a low sofa — and that’s it. No mug on the windowsill, no charger in the outlet, no stack of papers, no forgotten remote, none of the domestic debris that human life accumulates the way a ship’s hull accumulates barnacles. In my studio, you can’t walk from door to bed without stepping on a book, a charging cable, or yesterday’s sock. That’s normal. That’s how every single man my age lives: on the border between a living space and a disaster zone. Wei Lin’s place had a sterility that suggested either he didn’t live here, or he didn’t consider “living” sufficient reason to accumulate things.

Books. Seven writing systems, two of which I couldn't identify. (I took linguistics as an elective — and I can tell Devanagari from Tibetan, which I'm proud of exactly once a year, when it comes up, which is never.) One system I'd never seen in any textbook, and I had a suspicion it wasn't from the kind of textbooks you buy at a bookstore.

On the shelf — a thing. Black, smooth, the size of a fist. Looked like a stone egg. I wouldn't have noticed it, except it *looked* at me when I walked by. Looked without moving. Like a cat that doesn't move its head, but you feel it tracking you. Only this was, obviously, neither a cat nor an egg. And I decided not to think about it, because my quota for unexplainable phenomena this week had been exhausted back on Monday.

Wei Lin brewed tea with the precision of a neurosurgeon and the speed of someone who's performed this operation approximately five hundred thousand times (if seven hundred years isn't a joke, then at two cups a day that's roughly half a million; I'm a physicist, I calculate everything, it's an occupational injury).

We sat. Tea on the table. Pause.

— You promised to tell me about my mother.

— I promised something. Not everything.

— Something is more than nothing.

— Depends on what. — He took a sip. — Sometimes "something" is an unfinished bridge. You're no longer on one bank, but not yet on the other. Hanging over the water. The bridge sways.

— I'm an engineer's son. Bridges run in the family.

He raised an eyebrow. First visible emotion in two conversations. Progress.

— Your mother saw the same thing you do. Only further. You see an event "assembling" a second before — she saw it days in advance.

— How do you know?

— We were watching her. The Academy does that: searches for people whose... expansion is beginning. And, ideally, helps.

— Ideally.

— Ideally. Your mother, we found too late.

The tea was hot. I drank. My hands weren't shaking (surprising). My brain was operating in the mode I knew from exams: cold, mechanical clarity that arrives when the stakes are so high that panic is pointless.

— What does "too late" mean?

— When perception expands without preparation, the brain overloads. Like a computer running software from the wrong version. Sometimes it freezes. Your psychiatrists call that "dissociation." Sometimes it reboots.

— Reboots means...

— It means consciousness reassembles its foundation. Changes the platform. Those who do it consciously sometimes make it through. Those who do it sponta-

neously...

He fell silent. Because the next sentence is physically difficult to say, even if you've been saying similar sentences for seven hundred years.

— She died, — I said. Helping him. Or myself.

— No.

Short word. Two letters. It was enough.

— She restructured. Spontaneously. Her body — the original body — ceased to exist. Disassembled. As if you took a Lego model apart back into a pile of pieces. That's why they never found it — there was nothing to find.

— And her?

— What *was* her didn't disappear. It transferred. Where exactly — we don't know for certain.

Just like that. No fanfare, no orchestra, no slow-motion. A man in a robe, sitting at a table in Khamovniki, informed me that my mother "disassembled into a pile of pieces." In the same tone Seryozha uses in the lab to say "the fuse blew." Professional observation. Domestic apocalypse.

I should have — what? Flipped the table? Demanded proof? Called the police? Called an ambulance — for myself?

I drank my tea.

Because — and here, dear notebook (or dear orderly), the truly terrifying part begins — I *believed* him. Because the seven-year-old boy on the hallway floor, hugging his mother's slippers, always knew. She didn't die. Dead means cold. And the slippers were warm. (Newton's law says slippers cool down. Seven-year-old boys say they don't. I listened to Newton for twelve years. Maybe it's time to listen to the boy.)

— Are you all right? — Wei Lin asked.

— No. But that's my default state. Go on.

* * *

He didn't go on. Instead, he stood, walked to the shelf, and took down the black egg. The same one that had watched me. Set it on the table.

— Don't touch it. Just look.

— What if I don't want to?

— You want to. Otherwise you wouldn't have come.

Fair point. I looked.

Stone. Black. Smooth. Nothing. I'd use it as a paperweight and think nothing of it.

And then the stone *opened*.

Physically it didn't move, didn't crack, didn't glow. But what I'd seen as its surface turned out to be — a door? A window? A screen? I don't have the word. Imagine

you've spent your entire life looking at a wall, and then you discover it's a projection, and behind it is a room. A big room. A very big room. Going deeper than you can see.

And in that room, someone is present.

Not "someone" in the human sense. Not eyes, not a face, not a figure. More like — *attention*. Focused, dense, non-human attention, directed at me. As if Google looked at you personally. All of Google, its entire combined computational power, gathered into a single point and aimed at one person. The whole machine, not some algorithm.

At me.

(Let me say right now: this was one of the most unpleasant experiences of my life. Worse than the truck. Worse than the phenazepam. Worse even than that New Year's office party in my third year that we agreed never to mention. Because the truck was danger. This was simply *scale*. You suddenly realize you're small. Literally. "Feeling small" — that you can survive, that happens in mountains and oceans. Here you *are* small. Objectively. Measurably. Like an ant being studied by an entomologist. Except the entomologist is the size of the solar system, has no eyes, needs something from you, and you have absolutely no idea what.)

And while this thing was looking at me, the table beneath me stopped being a table. I mean, it still *looked* like one — wood, scratches, tea stain — but I suddenly saw it was a *file*. A compressed file containing its entire history: a tree in a forest (seventy years, Tver Oblast), the lumberjack (bad back, two kids), the sawmill, the workshop, twenty-three years in this apartment, half a million cups of tea. All the information — right there. Before, I'd seen a table. Now I saw its *contents*. As if someone right-clicked "Properties" on a file that had been sitting on my desktop my whole life.

The tea in the cup became — a route. Every molecule carried a barcode: leaf, root, soil, rain, cloud, ocean. I was trying to drink a library. (Now I understood why Wei Lin doesn't drink coffee. Coffee is the same library, except every book is screaming at once.)

Time — I need to stop here, because this is important — time *vanished*. Not "slowed down." Not "stretched." Vanished. As if someone pulled out the ruler I'd been measuring reality with my entire life and said: "Now without the ruler." It's a revolting sensation. You have no idea how dependent you are on time until it's gone. Time isn't a clock on the wall. It's the way your brain tells you: "You exist. Here's the proof: a second ago, you also existed." Remove the proof — and you're hanging in the void, like a file without an extension: the data's there, but nobody knows how to open it.

Then Wei Lin covered the stone with his palm. Like a lampshade over a lamp. Everything switched off. The table became a table. The tea became tea.

I sat gripping the table edge, breathing through my mouth like a dog after a run. Pretty? No. Dignified? Also no. But honest.

— What was that? — I asked, when I could.

— An Observer.

— An Observer.

— Yes. Non-human. Exists not here but deeper. On the fourth-fifth level.

— Alive?

— Depends on the definition. Observes — yes. Responds — yes. Makes decisions — yes. If that's enough for "alive" — alive. If you need lungs, a liver, and a social media account — no.

— Is it dangerous?

— She. — Pause. — And no. She's curious. You interested her.

— With what?

— You're a rarity, Daniil. A person whose stack opens on its own. Without intervention, without preparation, without cause.

— How rare?

— Once every few generations.

— Wow.

— Don't flatter yourself. "Rare" doesn't mean "valuable." A rare disease is also rare. The question is what you do with it.

That's what I liked about Wei Lin: every time I started feeling "special," he dropped a bucket of cold water on me. Precisely, on time, without malice. Like a coach who sees you swimming the wrong direction and turns you around by the ankle.

— Fine, — I said. — This thing looked at me, and I saw the history of a table. Why?

— Not because it *did* something. But because near it, your filter switches off. As if you'd been wearing noise-canceling headphones and someone took them off.

— So I could always see this, but...

— But your brain was blocking it. For self-preservation. The brain is a smart machine: it shows you exactly as much as you can digest. The rest it filters. What your psychiatrists call "normal perception" is a filter. A very good, very reliable filter that cuts off approximately ninety-six percent of incoming information.

— Ninety-six?

— Rough estimate. Could be ninety-eight.

I thought: we live in a world where our own brain shows us four percent of reality and calls it "the objective picture of the world." And based on those four percent, we build science, philosophy, religion, politics, relationships, careers. That's roughly like trying to understand the plot of *War and Peace* from four random pages.

(Then again, plenty of people have read *War and Peace* roughly that way and still passed the exam.)

— Is this connected to Mom? — I asked. — My filter weakening?

Wei Lin looked at me. A pause — the kind I already recognized: he was deciding how much to tell me.

— Yes. But not the way you think.

— How then?

— You're not just her son. You're a continuation.

— Genetics?

— Deeper. Every consciousness has... a signature. Not thoughts — the way of thinking. Not character — the way of observing. Usually it's unique. But during restructuring — sometimes — it transfers. Partially. Like ink that bleeds through to the next page.

— And I'm the next page.

— Yes. That's why you "remembered" the word "Academy." That's not your memory. That's her ink.

I sat thinking about the photograph on the kitchen table. Eyes looking through the camera. For twenty-one years I'd thought: "a pensive look." *Seeing*. The same as mine. The same signature.

So — what happened to her can happen to me. *Is already beginning*. My filter is weakening. My qubits respond to my thoughts. I see events assembling. I'm her, twenty-one years later, in a different body, at the start of the same path.

Is that comforting? No. But at least it explains why I've felt my whole life like a rough draft — unfinished, with notes in the margins in someone else's handwriting.

— I have a condition, — I said.

— I'm listening.

— If I go to this Academy of yours, if I learn to "not break" — I want to find my mother. Learn where she transferred. And whether it's possible to... bring her back.

Wei Lin was quiet. For a long time. Then:

— The first two — possibly. The third — you don't yet understand what you're asking.

— Explain.

— Not now. First — learn to see without burning out. Then — questions.

— How long is this "then"?

— Depends on you. A week. A month. A year. Or never. That happens too.

— Reassuring.

— I don't reassure. I inform. Reassurance is when someone tells you what you want to hear. Information is when someone tells you what is. The first is more pleasant. The second is more useful.

He stood. The conversation was over. I had apparently passed some test I didn't know about.

At the door, I turned back.

— Zoya. The girl in the park. Is she from the Academy too?

— No. Zoya is something else.

— What kind of something else?

— Complicated.

— More complicated than that? — I nodded toward the black egg.

— Considerably.

Wonderful. I stepped into the stairwell. The lightbulb above the stairs was flickering — not from a bad contact (though that too), but because I now *knew* that behind a flickering lightbulb stands a power plant, a river, rain, the sun, thermonuclear fusion. One dying lightbulb in a stairwell — and a chain of causes reaching back to the stars. Before, I didn't see this. Now I did — for half a second, before the filter kicked back in and the lightbulb became just a dying lightbulb again.

Outside — Moscow, November, people with grocery bags. Normal life. For three seconds I saw their "files" — biographies folded into parkas and winter hats — and I squeezed my eyes shut. As if from bright light. Because that's exactly what it was, only sunglasses don't protect you from this kind.

It passed. Moscow became Moscow again — flat, cramped, like an apartment you've returned to after a long absence and discovered the ceilings are lower than you remembered.

I got in the car. On the radio — a heartburn medication ad ("Gastroshield — your stomach says thank you!"). I thought: if my stomach finds out I just stared into a non-human eye inside a black stone and was told my mother "disassembled into a pile of pieces" — it's going to need something stronger than Gastroshield.

On the way, Lena called.

— How are you?

— Fine.

— "Fine" as in fine, or "fine" as in get lost?

— The second, but politely.

— Got it. Listen, I rechecked yesterday's spike. Found an explanation: temperature drift plus electromagnetic background from the metro.

— Probability?

— Point-three percent.

— Lena. That's zero.

— It's not zero. For the report — it's enough.

"For the report." Two words that contain all of modern science: "sufficient for the report" instead of "sufficient for understanding." We're seeking a formulation that'll pass review. The whole difference between a scientist and a bureaucrat is that the scientist knows his formulation is a lie and the bureaucrat doesn't. Though the salary's the same.

A week ago, I would've agreed. Point-three — good enough for the report. Today I was driving with a business card from a man who is (possibly) seven hundred years old

in my pocket, a memory of a non-human gaze from a black stone in my head, and the only thing I knew for certain: point-three percent is a Band-Aid. One we stick over the wound because stitching it up is expensive, painful, and there's nobody to do it.

— Thanks, Lena. Log it.

— Dan?

— Yeah?

— You're really okay?

— For the first time in twelve years — almost.

I hung up. Drove through Moscow. The city was the same — gray, wet, infinite. But I knew that behind it were five more floors that these twenty million people don't suspect. Maybe thirty million, counting the suburbs. Nobody. Zero point zero. For the report — sufficient.

Chapter 5

How to Properly Lose Your Mind

Wei Lin gave me a week. Four days was enough.

The first day went normally — in the only sense that word still had in my life: nothing happened, and I didn't see anything I couldn't explain away with fatigue, stress, or a vitamin D deficiency (Muscovites from October to March live in a state of permanent avitaminosis; the sun in Moscow in winter is an urban legend, like polite cab drivers and affordable housing).

On the second day, I saw the metro.

* * *

I see the metro every day: the escalator, the crowd, the smell that's impossible to describe but instantly recognizable to any Muscovite (a blend of rubber, sweat, perfume, and suppressed despair — if Moscow were a person, this would be the smell of its armpits). I mean something else: I saw how the metro *works*.

In the sense that I saw the "biography of water" in the cup at Wei Lin's.

I was standing on the platform at Shabolovskaya, waiting for a train, and suddenly — no warning, no draft, no extra note — I saw people from the *inside*.

I saw — how to put this — *trajectories*. No "auras," no "thoughts," no "energy fields." Every person on the platform carried behind them a wake of decisions, habits, fears, hopes — and this wake was *structure*. Visible. Dense. Like a contrail behind a jet: you can't see the engine, but you can see where it flew.

A woman in a red coat — her trajectory was narrow, compressed, like a wire under voltage. Everything in her was aimed at a single point: a child (at home, sick, temperature 38.2 — I didn't know how I knew this, but I knew). A man with a briefcase — his trajectory forked, wound, zigzagged: he was making a decision that something important depended on, and each option pulled him in its own direction, and he was tearing, literally, structurally, at a level deeper than muscle and bone.

A teenager in headphones — his trajectory was... strange. It went *ahead* of him, not behind him like the others. As if the future was moving toward him. I didn't understand what it meant, but the sight sent a chill down my spine.

This lasted about fifteen seconds. Then — as usual — everything collapsed. Platform. People. Smell. The train pulled in. I got on. Hands shaking.

In the car, I thought: fifteen seconds. Last time — ten. Time before that — two. It's escalating. Faster than linearly. If this is exponential (and the physicist in me whispered that it was), then in two or three days I'd be seeing this constantly. Without pause. Without the ability to turn it off.

Like a monitor you can't dim. Like a radio with no off button. Like a consciousness someone cranked to maximum and snapped the dial off.

* * *

Work was worse.

Because for the first time in my life, I saw the laboratory *as it is*. As a *node*, not a collection of instruments and screens. A place where the physical world is especially thin, because we systematically, daily, nine to six, poke its foundation with a stick.

A quantum lab is, when you think about it, the only place in the world where people *officially* work with things that violate the rules of ordinary reality. Superposition: an object simultaneously in two states. Entanglement: two objects instantly affecting each other across any distance. Wavefunction collapse: reality *becomes definite* only when someone looks at it.

We do this every day. And every day we pretend it's normal. That it's "just physics." That "it doesn't work at the macro level." That between the quantum world and our everyday life there's a wall, and nothing seeps through.

And I stood in the middle of the lab and saw that there was no wall.

Our qubits — the very ones that "fluctuate" and "behave evasively" — didn't end. Physically, sure: here's the cryostat, here's the chip, here are the wires, here's the screen with the graph. Everything in its place, everything within boundaries. But from *there* — from that layer I could now see at the edge of my vision, the way you catch a peripheral glimpse of someone standing behind your shoulder — from there, the qubits were holes. Tears in the fabric of the first floor, through which the second floor was staring at us. We'd spent two years drilling holes in the floor and wondering why it was drafty from the basement.

It was drafting on everyone, not just the qubits. On Lena, sitting a meter from the cryostat. On Seryozha, one floor down. On Grisha with his exclamation marks. On all one hundred and forty-seven employees of the institute (I'd counted on the website yesterday, out of boredom). We all worked inside a building where we were systematically, daily, at government expense, poking holes in the foundation of reality — and not one of us knew it. Except, now, me.

(Here, by the way, is a question nobody seems to ask: if a quantum lab is a place where reality is thinner than elsewhere — *why* do governments fund quantum research? The official answer: "quantum computers, cryptography, military advantage." Three hundred billion dollars a year — for "military advantage." Sounds convincing.

But if you think about it — a quantum computer is a device that *literally* makes reality perform calculations. *Reality itself*, not a *model* of it. We take the fabric of the world and make it compute. It's like taking the wall of your house and making it solve equations. The wall solves them. But what happens to the house?)

We thought we were studying the quantum world.

The quantum world was studying us.

— Dan? — Lena's voice. — You okay?

I was standing in the middle of the lab and apparently looked bad enough that Lena decided to ask. And Lena doesn't ask "are you okay" casually. She asks when the answer is obvious and discouraging.

— Yeah, — I said. — Just thinking.

— You've been "just thinking" standing with your mouth open, staring at the ceiling, for two minutes.

Two minutes. Felt like ten seconds.

— Headache, — I lied. — I'll take a walk.

* * *

I went outside and called Wei Lin.

— It's started, — I said.

— What exactly?

— I'm seeing. All the time. Not like before — in flashes. Now in chunks of fifteen, twenty seconds. People. Space. Connections. And I can't control it.

Pause. Short — maybe a second. But for a man who claims seven hundred years of experience, that second meant he was calculating.

— Come over, — he said. — Now.

— I'm at work.

— Daniil. In twenty-four hours, you won't be able to be around people without seeing their insides. In forty-eight, you won't be able to tell this layer from the physical one. In seventy-two, you'll stop knowing which one is real. Work can wait. Your brain cannot.

I looked at the institute building. Seven floors. Broken elevator. A coffee machine that obeys the laws of thermodynamics only on even days. Lena behind her monitors. Seryozha with his soldering iron. Grisha with his exclamation marks. Qubits pretending not to watch me while I pretend not to watch them.

My world. Four years. Publications, grants, conferences, paper cups of bad coffee, arguments about decoherence, late-night data sessions, the smell of bleach in the corridor, eleven cracks in the ceiling.

— I'll be there in forty minutes, — I said.

I hung up. Stood there. Then went back inside.

* * *

— Lena.

She turned. Three monitors, flannel shirt, the look of a person who already knows she's about to hear something she won't like.

— I need to leave.

— Where?

— Personal matter.

— Dan. Review in six weeks.

— I know.

— Last month's data isn't processed. Series twenty-six isn't finished. Seryozha says the cryostat...

— Lena. I *need* to leave.

Pause. She looked at me. I could see — with regular vision, no "stack-vision," just saw it because I'd known her for four years — how behind her eyes, options were racing: he's sick, he's in trouble, he found another job, he's losing his mind, he's already lost it.

— For how long? — she asked.

I didn't know. That's the honest truth: I didn't know. How long — a day? A week? Forever? Wei Lin said "training," but what does that mean? A month? A year? Seven hundred years?

— I don't know, — I said. — Maybe a week. Maybe longer.

— Or maybe you won't come back.

She said it as a statement. Quiet, even, no drama. Lena doesn't do drama. Lena does facts.

— Maybe I won't come back, — I said.

Silence. Long. The cooling systems hummed. Somewhere below, Seryozha was dropping something heavy.

— Is this about what happened at the intersection? — she asked. — The truck? The data? That spike we "didn't see"?

I nodded.

— You found... something?

— Someone.

She closed her eyes. Opened them. Stood. Walked over to me. And did something she hadn't done once in four years: hugged me.

Brief. Tight. No words.

Then stepped back.

— Go, — she said. — But Dan...

— What?

— If where you're going turns out to be a cult — I'm coming to drag you out by the ears. You know me.

I smiled. For the first time in a week — genuinely.

— I know.

— And one more thing. — She went back to the monitors. — I'll finish series twenty-six myself. But if you're not back for the review — I'm listing you as third author. After Seryozha.

— After Seryozha?!

— He at least shows up for work.

That was "goodbye" in Lena-speak: an insult disguised as care disguised as an insult. I grabbed my jacket, backpack, and Zoya's notebook from the desk drawer. At the door, I turned around.

Lena sat at the monitors. Back straight. Hands on the keyboard. Three screens, code, data. As usual. As always. As if nothing had changed.

Except her shoulders were slightly raised. One small detail. She does that when she's holding back tears.

I walked out. Closed the door. Went down the stairs (the elevator wasn't working; the elevator, at least, was consistent in its refusal to work — and in that, there was comfort).

On the landing between the third and fourth floors, I stopped. Out of breath — yes, that too. But mainly because I remembered Lena's shoulders.

She'd stayed silent. Shoulders went up — and that was it. No tears, no screams, no "don't go." Four years together — and the only goodbye she allowed herself was two centimeters. Upward. With her shoulders. In silence.

(On the staircase, between the third and fourth floors, I thought: maybe this is what a "subjective invariant" looks like in real life. *How you stay silent.* And Lena's silence is *beautiful*. Like Wei Lin's. Only without seven hundred years of practice.)

I walked out of the building. Got in the car.

* * *

On the way to Khamovniki, it hit me.

Not in the metro, not among people — in the car, alone, on Leninsky Prospekt, stuck in traffic. The worst possible place in the world for consciousness expansion (though, when you think about it, there is no *good* place for this; it's unlikely anyone ever said: "Oh, what a convenient time and place for all my perceptual filters to collapse!").

First I saw the cars. Processes — metal, glass, and plastic had nothing to do with it. Every car in traffic was a node in a network of thousands of decisions: this one turned here because he's late, because he overslept, because he didn't sleep last night, because he was fighting with his wife, because... Thousands of causal chains woven into a single

knot we call "traffic." Traffic is a visualization of ten thousand lives simultaneously failing to fit in one space.

Then I saw the road. *History*, not asphalt. Layers going down: this asphalt, the previous one, the one before that. Earth that was here before the road. Forest that was here before the earth. Glacier that was here before the forest. All of it — simultaneously. As fact, not memory: all these layers *were here*, and in some sense — *still are*.

Then — the sky. The *sky itself*, not the clouds. The space between me and the stars, which we consider empty. It isn't empty. It's full — of connections, flows, structures that... that...

That's when I realized I couldn't feel the steering wheel. My hands had, for a second, stopped being "mine" — and it wasn't numbness. They were part of the car, which was part of the traffic, which was part of the city, which was part of... what? Everything?

I don't know how long it lasted. Maybe a second. Maybe a minute. I came back because someone was honking — there was a car-and-a-half-length gap in front of me, and I was sitting motionless.

Hands shaking. Heart pounding like I'd run five kilometers. Taste of copper in my mouth. (Later, Wei Lin would explain that the copper taste is the brain's neurochemical response to overload: when the volume of processed information exceeds bandwidth, neurotransmitters "leak," and taste receptors pick up what wasn't meant for them. Elegant. Terrifying. Scientific.)

I drove to Khamovniki on autopilot. Don't remember parking.

* * *

Wei Lin opened the door, looked at me, and said:

— Sit down. Don't talk.

I sat. He placed his hand on the back of my head. The palm was warm and dry. I expected something — a flash, a sensation, an electric shock. Nothing. Just a warm palm.

And the world around me — slowly, as if someone were turning down the volume — went quiet.

The threads vanished. The trajectories vanished. Space became simple, flat, one-dimensional again: walls, table, cup, light. That same "first floor" where all normal people live. I could no longer see anything beyond what everyone sees.

And I started crying.

For the same reason people cry when the music stops: a second ago there was an orchestra, and now there's silence, and in the silence all you hear is your own breathing, and you don't like the sound of it.

For twenty-eight years I'd been living in a world that, it turns out, had the sound off. Wei Lin gave me a second of the full version. Then hit mute. And I sat in that silence and understood: so this is how everyone lives. This is "normality." A soundproof room where you mistake the walls for the boundaries of the world, and the absence of music for silence. Only it's deafness, not silence.

— This is temporary, — Wei Lin said. He removed his hand. Voice calm. — I installed a filter. It'll hold for a few days. That's enough to begin learning.

— Learning what?

— To look without burning.

I wiped my face. Looked at him. He was pouring me tea. Calmly. As if he hadn't just switched off someone's universe.

— Seven hundred years, — I said. — You're serious.

— I'm always serious. Except when I warn you I'm joking.

— And you've been seeing this whole time?

— Seeing.

— Everything?

— More than everything. But that's for later.

— How have you not gone insane?

— Who told you I haven't?

Pause. I tried to determine whether he was joking. Couldn't.

— Fine, — I said. — Suppose I don't want to go back to the soundproof room. What happens next?

— Next, you learn. Not here. Not in Moscow. There's a place where this can be done... more safely.

— The Academy.

— Yes.

— What is it? A school? A monastery? A military base?

— All of the above. And none of the above. — He sipped his tea. — The Academy is a space where the laws work differently. Not because we changed them. But because we stopped pretending they're the only ones.

— Where is it?

— Everywhere and nowhere. That's not a mystic's answer — it's a physicist's: it exists not in coordinates but in a layer. The entrance isn't geographical. The entrance is perceptual. You can almost enter already.

— Almost?

— Almost. You need to do one thing.

— What?

— Stop holding on.

— To what?

— To the configuration. — He sipped his tea as if he'd said "to the weather." — You are not your name, not your apartment, not your institute, not your photograph on the table. You are a process that generates all of that. But the process has clung to its products and decided it *is* them. Like a river that decided it's the banks. Remove the banks — and the river doesn't disappear. It just flows wider.

— What if I'm not a river? What if I am the banks?

— Then you'll have nothing to flow into the Academy with.

It was diagnostics. He wasn't persuading. He was testing.

— She thinks I'm joining a cult.

— She's wrong. But not by much. — The shadow of a smile again. — A cult is when they tell you you're special and ask for money. The Academy is when they tell you you're ordinary and ask for everything else.

(I thought about that formulation for a long time afterward. It's precise. And it explains why consciousness-awakening coaches make millions: they sell the first half — "you're special" — without the second — "give up everything." It's like selling the entrance to a burning building without the fire suit. The client walks in, feels the heat, says "wow, transformation!," runs out before catching fire, leaves a five-star review, and buys the second module. The real fire — the one you walk into and don't run out of — costs *you*. Money won't cover it. But that doesn't fit in the marketing.)

I looked at the tea. At the table. At the black stone egg on the shelf (it was sitting quietly; whoever lived inside had apparently decided not to peek). At Wei Lin. At my hands.

My hands. The hands of Daniil Reinov, physicist, Muscovite, orphan (almost), neurotic, bug. The hands that held Mom's slippers twenty-one years ago. The hands that pulled Lena by the sleeve at the intersection. The hands that shook when I read Zoya's notebook.

Stop holding on.

— When? — I asked.

— Tomorrow. Morning. I'll pick you up.

— I need to go home. Pack.

— You don't need things.

— At least a toothbrush.

He looked at me. And laughed. For the first time. Quiet, dry, but real laughter. Full laughter — not a smile, not the shadow of a smile.

— A toothbrush — you can bring, — he said.

* * *

That evening I sat in the apartment and did what a physicist does when his life is falling apart: inventory.

Books — one hundred and forty-three (counted last year when I was trying to fall asleep). Monitor — one. Mug with broken handle — one. Cracks in the ceiling — eleven. Everything in place. Like the lab: instruments standing, data collecting, the experimenter leaving. The instruments don't notice.

Mom's photograph. I picked it up from the table. Dark hair. Eyes looking through the camera. For twenty-one years this photograph had stood on the kitchen counter, and for twenty-one years I'd thought it was all that was left. And now I'm told: she's somewhere in the stack, and I carry her signature inside me. And I'm about to go to a place I know nothing about except its name. A normal evening for a normal PhD.

I put the photograph in my jacket pocket. The toothbrush — on the nightstand.

Then I called my father.

Three rings. Four. Five. I was about to hang up — and he answered.

— Dan? — Surprised voice. We hadn't spoken in over a month. — Everything okay?

— Yeah, Dad. Everything's fine. I just wanted to... talk.

Pause. My father is a man of pauses. He stays silent because he's learned that words are an unreliable tool, and silence is at least honest.

— Talk, — he repeated. — You sure you're okay?

— Dad. I want to ask you something. Mom... did she ever say anything... strange to you? About the world. About how reality works. About seeing things other people don't see.

Long pause. Very long.

— Why are you asking?

— Because I think I'm starting to understand what happened to her.

Another pause.

— She did say things, — he finally said. Voice quiet. Unusually quiet. — She said the world was like a house with thin walls. That sometimes she could hear what was on the other side. I thought... I thought it was a metaphor. Or... — he faltered. — Or illness.

— It's not an illness, Dad.

— Dan. You're not...

— No. I'm not sick. I... figured it out. I think.

— Figured out what?

— The walls.

Silence. I could hear his breathing. Heavy, even, the breathing of a sixty-year-old engineer who'd spent his whole life building bridges (real ones, concrete and steel) and never believed in anything you couldn't touch with your hands.

— Be careful, — he said.

— I will.

— And call. Not in a month. In a week.

— Okay.

Pause. I could hear him breathing. Then he said:

— Your mother... she started the same way. First questions. Then answers I didn't like. Then she left.

That was the most he'd said about Mom in twenty-one years. Usually it was one sentence: "An accident." Period. Like a beam laid across a conversation so nobody walks further. And here — three sentences. For my father, that's roughly the equivalent of writing a memoir.

— Dad. I'll come back.

— She said that too.

He hung up. Without saying goodbye. My father simply hangs up when he considers everything said — goodbyes aren't his thing. An engineer's approach: a conversation is a bridge, and when you've crossed it, you walk on.

I stood at the window. Moscow behind the glass was doing what it does best: existing. Twenty million people, four percent of reality, point-three percent of explanations. For the report — sufficient.

Tomorrow morning, Wei Lin arrives. Tomorrow I go to a place that exists "not in coordinates but in a layer." Which, if you think about it, is the most honest thing anyone can say about any place worth going: it's in a different mode of seeing, not on the map. Like those pictures from childhood — "Magic Eye" — where you unfocus your gaze and a 3D dolphin emerges from the chaos. Except here, instead of a dolphin — the Academy. And you unfocus your life, not your gaze.

I lay down.

Tomorrow — someone else. Or the same person, but without banks.

I fell asleep quickly. I didn't dream of anything.

The toothbrush sat on the nightstand. Mom's photograph — in the pocket of the jacket hanging on the chair. Zoya's notebook — in the backpack by the door. Wei Lin's business card — in the back pocket of my jeans.

Four objects. Everything that remained of Daniil Reinov, PhD, Moscow, Shabolovka.

Although, when you think about it, four objects is more than enough. Wei Lin said: "You don't need things." But he also said: "A toothbrush — you can bring." And I want to believe that a man who seven hundred years ago stopped holding onto the banks still understands a thing or two about toothbrushes.

And if he doesn't — I'll explain it to him. That'll be my first contribution to the Academy's seven hundred years of experience: oral hygiene as the foundation of metaphysical development.

On that thought, I think I smiled. And fell asleep.