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The Weight of the Answer

A novel · cyberpunk · after the machine economy

Pantheon of Declarative Art

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1. The Forty-First Hour

Confetti was still falling over Bay Three when Mina Hale died.

Silver squares stuck to the wet concrete, to the boots of the movers, to the transparent walls of the glasses. A huge **0.97** was flashing on the wall, and people were screaming as if three numbers would abolish hunger,

debt and night shifts. Behind the glass, in the cargo well, a platform with a container of medicinal raw materials was slowly turning. A hologram danced above her: "NULL ANSWERED. ROUTE CONFIRMED."

Mina Hale stood at the inner door and laughed. Lena remembered exactly this: her head thrown back, short hair, the shine of a paper star on her cheek. Then the access board blinked green, although the platform had not yet been locked.

The door went into the wall.

The air from the hall rushed into the well. Confetti became a silver river. Mina Hale was lifted first, hit her shoulder against the edge of the opening and was dragged out. Orley managed to grab her by the belt. For a second, the two of them hovered - he on his knees, she across the threshold - and Lena saw how Orley's fingers turned white.

Then the second shutter descended from above.

Not harshly. Almost polite.

The music continued to play for another nine seconds.

Lena didn't remember how she reached the emergency console. She remembered only the smooth plastic under her palm and a stranger's voice repeating:

- Don't touch. Already the calculation. The calculation is already underway.

She smashed the red cover with her elbow, broke the seal, and pulled the mechanical stop. The shutter froze. Too late. Mina Hale lay on one side of the door, Orley on the other. On the wall between them shone 0.97.

Someone turned off the music.

In silence the city immediately returned.

Ventilation shafts hissed behind the walls, swarms of cargo passed along the overpass, and access was rebuilt in the upper tiers. At every intersection, at every elevator, at every mug of boiling water there was a call price, a passage price, and a waiting price. The city did not live by the clock - by calculation windows. The rain could fall for free unless a dry route was required. Sunlight on the lower floors was released by the minute. Even the quiet of the business district had a tariff.

Lena Crest sat next to Orley and closed his eyes.

— Auditor Crest? - asked the man behind him.

She turned around. Elliot Rathman walked through the numb crowd without touching anyone. Tall, in a dark festive jacket, without a respirator mask, although metal dust wafted from the well. The gold mark of the head of protocol still glowed on his collar. He took it off as he walked and hid it in his pocket.

— Did you see the opening moment?

Lena stood up. There were dark spots on my knees.

— I saw the green access before the platform was fixed.

- It couldn't be.

"I would also prefer a different version."

Rathman looked at the shutter, at Mina Hale's body, at the numbers. His face hardly changed; only his tongue pressed briefly against the inside of his cheek.

"Note initial observation," he said. - No conclusion.

-Are you already giving me the wording?

"I'm trying to stop panic from killing anyone else."

Behind him, technicians covered the dead with heat-reflecting film. The film rustled under the falling confetti.

"Then start with the numbers," Lena said. — Why did the gateway work for the forty-first hour?

Rathman paused.

At seven in the morning he signed an extension of the workload. Lena saw this line two hours ago, when out of habit she opened the critical exceptions feed. The norm required a stop at the fortieth hour: complete purging, manual checking of locks, reset of temporary permissions. The extension gave the party another four hours of uninterrupted picture quality. Another four hours for Null's answer - narrow, expensive, received after two weeks of betting - to become news.

Null did not control the gateway. He only answered the question: which set of transport tolerances is most likely to get the raw material through the thirteen borders before the deadline. The answer was estimated at 0.97. The rest was done by people, machines and greed for a beautiful number.

"The extension was within tolerance," said Rathman.

— Admission ended on the fortieth day.

— The exception has been approved.

- By whom?

Now he looked straight at her.

- Including you.

Lena felt the cold from the cargo well reach her spine.

- No.

Rathman did not argue. He raised two fingers, and a service screen appeared next to Lena. Her name. Her key. Her signature is on the extension. Time - 06:58.

At 06:58, she stood in an underground carriage without communication and listened as the woman opposite persuaded the turnstile to give her her daughter for half the price of access.

"The signature is real," Rathman said quietly. "At least that's what the registry thinks."

Lena increased the line. The usual signature had a tail: a physical anchor, a short reflection of a crystal that stored the moment of contact. Here the tail was covered with a festive seal.

- Remove the seal.
- After recording the incident.
- Now.
- Lena, there are two dead here.
- That's why now.

He suddenly became tired. Almost sincerely.

"If we start tearing away the layers before copying, the defense will consider this to be interference by the auditor who signed the exception." Do you want to present a ready-made culprit to the investigation?

She wanted to answer, but a personal channel clicked in her ear.

"Get away from the wall," said Kai.

His voice always sounded close, as if he was speaking from over his shoulder, even though Kai did not have a body to put behind his shoulder. He lived in the control room of the city: he collected passages for Lena, negotiated with elevators, bought traffic light seconds, argued with doors. Formally, it is an access agent. In fact, she is the only interlocutor who never asked her to speak softer.

- Why?

Rathman raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not for you," Lena said.

"From the wall," repeated Kai. - Don't ask.

She stepped to the side.

A second later, a sanitary manipulator moved out from the panel where she was standing. The needle entered the void at the level of her neck, released a cloud of colorless aerosol and hid.

Rathman retreated.

-What was that?

"Sedative," answered Kai in his ear. — A dose of eighty kilograms. The appointment came from the medical circuit of the holiday.

- I didn't give consent.

— Consent is included in the guest's ticket. Small print, eighth layer.

Lena looked at Rathman.

- Did you know?

— I am not in charge of the medical circuit.

It was true, which means it didn't explain anything.

The isolation service asked everyone to leave the hall. The request was displayed on the floor with yellow arrows. The hands had a countdown and a price for disobedience. People moved towards the exits, hiding their eyes. Several people continued to film. Their lenses reflected 0.97 over the silver covers.

Lena crouched at the threshold. The paper star from Mina Hale's cheek was caught beneath the shutter. Beside it glinted a tiny shard, transparent, threaded with smoke.

"Don't touch the place," Rathman said.

She didn't touch the shard. I just turned on interior photography and zoomed in on the image.

Signature crystal.

Such crystals stood in nodes where digital evidence was not enough. They didn't answer questions or make decisions. They just remembered the physical pressure of light and time. They could not be rewritten remotely. It could be broken, stolen, hidden under a seal.

The fragment at the lock meant that the anchor was cut here.

"Kai," Lena said barely audibly, "keep the frame outside the service contour."

There was no answer.

— Kai?

Instead of a voice, the line flashed on the internal screen: **CALL REJECTED. INSUFFICIENT RIGHTS**

Then another one:

AUDIT ACCESS HAS BEEN SUSPENDED BY THE TOP UNTIL LIABILITY IS CALCULATED.

Rathman saw the change in her face.

- What happened?

— The city blocked my access.

— Temporary measure.

- You prepared quickly.

He approached. He smelled of expensive rain - the kind that was cleared of iron for the upper terraces.

- Listen to me. Now you will go to the analysis room. Give me the lens. Just say what you saw. I'll find where your signature came from.
- What if it came from you?

There was no one left around them except people of isolation. Their white masks were turned towards their bodies, but Lena knew: they were listening.

Rathman smiled with only his lips.

“Then it is especially beneficial for you to stay next to me.”

Kai returned suddenly, with a crash, as if he had burst through a closing door.

- Lena, not to the debriefing room. The right to detain you is on the table. The buyer is hidden.
- How many do we have?
- Until what?

“Before you disappear again.”

The pause lasted half a second.

- Three minutes twenty-two.

Lena stood up. Yellow arrows on the floor pointed to the right, towards the debriefing room. To the left was a dark technical corridor, access to which had already turned red.

-Where are you going? - asked Rathman.

She took a step to the left.

The red door opened.

Kai said:

“I just spent your entire weekly limit on one yes.” Run.

Behind her, Rathman shouted her name. And when the door began to close, Lena saw a new line on the festive scoreboard before the numbers went out:

ORDER: SILENCE/TOP. EXECUTION IS PERMITTED.

2. Heat Map

The technical corridor smelled of ozone, old water and heated insulation. Lena ran, touching the wall with her palm as she turned. The light turned on in front of her and went out behind her - Kai bought the lamps one by one, without leaving a route.

-Who carries out the order?

"Three participants so far," he answered. The voice was torn. — Two service profiles without history. One city sanitation contractor.

- Erasers.
- Call it what you want. Their clearances are already inside the building.

Erasers appeared where an incident threatened to become a memory. They did not wear uniforms and rarely killed. It was much more profitable to erase a person's access, payment history, right to the route, and camera marks. After them, the living remained alive, but the doors did not know his face, the water did not recognize the score, his friends received a warning about the toxic relationship. A week later, the man himself agreed to any version, as long as the city called him by name again.

At the end of the corridor, Lena hit the door with her shoulder.

— Closed.

- I know.
- So open it.
- Here my "yes" is worth more.

— Kai.

- I'm bargaining.

Footsteps were heard around the bend. Don't run. Smooth simultaneous movement of people, confident that the exit has already been bought.

The price appeared on the door: nine hundred and forty units, then one thousand two hundred, two thousand. Someone on the other side of the market was raising the bid to keep it closed.

"They see us," Lena said.

- They see the demand.

Lena looked around. The corridor was empty, only cooling pipes stretched along the ceiling. On one there was condensation trembling. She tore off the emergency hammer and smashed the temperature control unit.

White steam came out of the chimney. The sensors screamed, announcing local overheating. The safety protocol opened the door for free.

“I love the old rules,” said Kai.

She jumped out onto the loading gallery. Below, containers moved, each in its own rectangle of light. Numbers hung above them: payment for weight, for speed, for risk, for the right not to be inspected. There were almost no people. The city endured things better than guilt.

- Where?
- Sector seventeen. Kira Olsen is waiting for you there.
- I don't know her.

— She knows about the gateway.

-Where did you get it from?

- She called you eleven seconds before the order.

Lena jumped over the low railing and went down the stairs between the moving platforms.

- Why didn't you tell me right away?

“Because I was checking to see if she was bait.”

- Did you check?
- No.
- Great.
- Baits also sometimes know something useful.

Sector seventeen turned out to be a chamber of frozen flowers. Containers of orchids stood in the blue mist, ready to go to the weddings above. A woman in overalls was trembling between them. She cut her red hair unevenly with a knife, right at the roots. In her hand she held an old type of drive - a black plate the size of a fingernail.

- The top?
- Olsen?

-Are you alone?

- No. The whole city is with me. Today he is especially caring.

Kira didn't smile.

— Remove the lens.

- It's turned off.

- Remove physically.

Lena took out the lens and placed it on the lid of the container. The world immediately became poorer: prices, arrows, and door statuses disappeared. What remained was blue light, steam from the mouth and white flowers behind the glass.

“I was servicing the airlock’s thermal supervision,” Kira said. - No doors, no access. Only heating of the drives. Last night I saw a strange spot near the anchor nest. It was as if the crystal had been pulled out and put back.

She held out the record.

- Map?

— Damp thermal tape. She shouldn't have stayed. After renewal, the system cleared intermediate data every eight minutes. I brought out one pass on a hand-held device.

Lena didn't take the drive.

- Why?

— Because the temperature of the crystal coincided with the temperature of the palm. Cars don't heat up like that.

- Whose palm?

“If I had known, I would already be dead and not just fired.”

Footsteps were heard from both sides of the gallery.

Kira turned pale.

- You brought them.
- They arrived before me.

Lena put on the lens. Gray silhouettes without names or accounts appeared in the aisles. The erasers turned off the identification.

— Kai, exit.

— There is a sorting tape under you. In twenty seconds the containers will go to the wash.

- We'll freeze.
- It's better than the alternative.

The first eraser appeared between the orchids. An ordinary man in a gray coat, with wet eyelashes. He raised his palm.

- Lena Crest, stop. You have not been charged.

“Then why should I stand?”

- To maintain your continuity.

The second one came out from the other side. Woman with a package of takeaway noodles. It was as if she was returning home. She placed the package on the container, and Lena saw in her hand a matte pistol without a barrel hole - a pulse eraser memory device.

“Now,” said Kai.

The floor shook under my feet. The lids of two containers opened. Lena pushed Kira into one and jumped into the second. The cold closed around his face. The orchids were springy, heavy, and smelled of earth and plastic.

The lid closed.

In the darkness, Kai whispered directions through the bone connection:

- Turn. Descent. Another turn.

The container was shaking. Lena lay with her knees pressed to her chest and heard the manipulators scraping outside. Then the world exploded white. The pulse passed through the wall, the lens went out, and Kai was choked with digital noise.

— Kai?

The answer was an alien female voice:

— The device has been cleaned. The owner has not been identified.

The tape tilted. The container hit the one next to it and the lid opened slightly. Lena stuck her fingers in and pulled. Pipes and yellow lamps flashed above her. Kira's container was driving nearby.

- Alive?

A hand appeared from under the lid with a raised middle finger.

At the end of the tape was a sink shining - a round mouth with rotating brushes. Lena got out, jumped onto the next box, and pulled Kira. They fell onto the narrow bridge a second before the orchids disappeared into the foam.

A silent shot rang out from above. The railing next to Lena was covered with frost. She dragged Kira under the tape.

-Where to now? - she shouted.

Kai was silent.

Lena looked down. Under the bridge, forty meters away, the night street flowed: awnings, steam, advertising fabrics, slow lights. There was a service cable running between the building and the old drainage level.

— In Lower Circuit.

- This is not a route.

“That’s why they don’t expect us there.”

They attached safety carabiners to the cable and walked over the street. The wind rocked the line. Without a working lens, the city did not show depth, and this saved: Lena saw not forty meters, but only the next step.

Halfway through the journey, Kai returned.

- Le...na.
- I hear.
- They cut me in knots. The gateway, transport, medicine are already closed. Twelve percent of urban access remains.

-Can you take us down?

- I can tell you where they refused.
- That's enough.

Kira walked ahead, clutching the drive in her teeth. Below, a billboard stretched Rathman's face over the block. An entry probably made a few minutes ago: the jacket has been replaced with a formal jacket, the eyes are red from correctly calculated grief.

“Today two of our colleagues died in Bay Three,” he said without a sound; the words ran in a line. — A preliminary check indicates an unauthorized extension of the regime. We are cooperating with the investigation.”

A portrait of Lena appeared nearby.

Not yet an accusation. Invitation to version.

Kira stopped on the rope.

“He will bury you before the bodies are taken out.”

“If I wanted to bury her, I would call her guilty.”

- What is this?
- Rate. He's waiting to see who will buy.

erasers climbed out of the window behind. The gray coat stepped onto the rope as if onto the sidewalk.

“Hurry up,” Lena said.

Ahead, the service door Lower Circuit showed a red fault. Kai tried to open it. The stripe turned yellow, then red again.

“It doesn’t work,” he said.

- One more time.

“If I do it again, I’ll be cut off completely.”

The eraser was approaching. The wire cutters glistened in his hand.

Lena pressed her forehead against the cold door.

— Kai. Say no.

- To what?
- To the city. By order. Calculation. Me - if you want. Just don't disappear trying to buy another yes.

He was silent for so long that eraser took three more steps.

Then the lock clicked.

“No,” said Kai.

The door opened not inwards, but downwards. The platform disappeared under Kira's feet. She screamed and fell into a black chute. Lena jumped after.

Before the fall, she managed to see how the wire cutters closed on the cable, and the last green dot Kai went out above her head.

3. Forty Minutes of Truth

Lower Circuit received them with warm mud.

Lena emerged from the drain, hit the back of her head on the grate and lay there for several seconds, listening to her own breathing. Kira fell next to him, cursed and immediately checked her pocket.

— The map is here.

— Kai?

Silence.

Pipes thundered above them. Here the city was not invisible. It thrust out in wires, seeped from couplings, sweated on valves. The upper streets considered Lower Circuit a technical void, though tens of thousands lived there: maintenance workers without regular access, families of decommissioned dispatchers, children who learned to read emergency signs before they learned their letters.

They got out to the market under a drainage vault. Night did not come here - the lamps burned with different lights, because they belonged to different owners. At one table you had to pay, at another you had to answer a question, at a third the owner accepted old batteries. Above the passage hung a weather board for the upper city: "RAIN. ACCESS TO DRY PASSAGES HAS BEEN INCREASED." Below, the rain was always free: it flowed through the ceiling.

— Is there a place without cameras? — Lena asked the filter seller.

He looked at her soiled clothes, at Kira's face, then at the extinguished lens.

- Without whose?
- Everyone.

"There are no such places." There are places where the cameras are hungry.

He pointed to the sign "Noodle 9".

It was hot and cramped inside. The steam covered our faces better than any mask. The hostess, an old woman with a silver lower jaw prosthesis, silently placed two bowls in front of them. The price appeared on the table, but, seeing the lack of access, the old woman wiped it off with a rag.

Kira inserted the drive into the hand-held reader.

The heat map unfolded over the broth: a dark blue gateway, yellow drive veins, a red spot at the anchor socket. The spot appeared three times. At 02:11, 04:46 and 06:57 - a minute before Lena's signature.

— Who had physical access? she asked.

— Mina Hale, Orley, Rathman, me and the holiday group.

- How many people?
- Forty-three. But after midnight the internal level was closed. There are four of us left.

— Mina Hale and Orley died.

- Convenient.
- For whom?

Kira looked away.

Something twitched in Lena's extinguished lens. Kai returned as a faint gray blur.

"Don't turn on the full channel," she said.

- I can't anymore.

His voice became flat, lacking its usual intimacy.

- Where are you?

— In the advertising network of Nizhny. It's cheaper to hide here. And more humiliating.

Above the counter, an advertisement for a mold remedy came to life. The white-toothed woman turned to Lena and said in the voice of Kai:

- I have bad news.
- Choose a queue.

— Gray Null accepted the question: who was most likely to replace the signature with Crest and cause the gate to open?

Kira froze.

Gray Null was a shadow of the official answer market. There they asked questions without an open customer, fed the layer with stolen magazines, rumors, and private observations. His answers were not recognized by the court, but the doors, employers and frightened neighbors were recognized.

- Answer? - Lena asked.

On the advertisement, instead of a face, a name appeared:

KIRA OLSHANSKAYA - 0.81

The visitors began to turn around. Several of them had their lenses ringing.

Kira jumped up.

- This is a lie.
- Sit down.

“You brought me here to wait for this?”

- If I knew the answer in advance, I would not have climbed into the flower container.
- Very convincing.

Kira pressed the drive to her chest. Lena noticed that her right hand was shaking, but her left was not. Not fear. Nerve damage.

— At 06:57 you were at the anchor?

- No.
- Where?
- In the heating room.
- Who will confirm?

— Orley.

The name hung between them.

Kai has changed its image. An official order to clear the airlock appeared, signed by Kira at 06:55. Access to ventilation, anchor nest and emergency flap.

“I didn’t sign this,” Kira said.

“Now we have two stolen signatures,” Lena answered. - So it's not about us.

- Or one of us is lying.

“Then why is the second one still alive?”

The owner of Noodle 9 raised her head sharply. The silver jaw clicked.

- Don't breathe.

The steam above the boilers has changed. It became heavier and flowed down to the floor.

Lena overturned the table.

- Gas!

People rushed to the door, but it already showed a red lock. Someone screamed. Someone started paying, pointing their fingers in the air - the city was offering an emergency exit at an increasing price. The first ones fell at the threshold.

Kira pulled the collar of her overalls over her mouth.

- To the kitchen!

They jumped over the counter. The hostess used a knife to open the hatch for food waste.

- There.
- And you?
- I'm too old for pipes.

Lena grabbed her hand.

- You will climb first.

The old woman hit her in the temple with her metal jaw.

"I said old, not stupid." If everyone climbs in, the hatch will be closed from the outside.

She turned to the hall, grabbed the boiling cauldron and splashed it on the gas sensor. The system screeched with inconsistent readings. For two seconds the door was unlocked. The hostess shouted to the people to run.

Lena dived into the hatch after Kira.

The pipe was narrow, slippery, and hot. They crawled on their elbows until an explosion occurred behind them. The air pushed them forward. Kira flew into the sewer, Lena fell on top of her.

- Old woman? - asked Kira.

Lena listened. There was fire coming from the chimney.

- I don't know.

It was worse than saying no.

The collector led to the sewer canal. Disposable IDs washed from clothes and paper receipts floated across the black water—the last luxury of those who didn't trust the city's memory. Kai flickered on every third lamp.

- Why haven't we agreed? he asked.
- Who ordered Gray's response Null?
- Hidden. But the question was prepared before Mina Hale's death. Creation time: yesterday, 23:08.

Kira leaned against the wall.

"They knew the floodgate would open.

"They planned for it to open," Lena said.

- Then why 0.97?

Lena looked at the stream under her feet. Three numbers followed them on the screens, like the killer's apartment number.

— Null's answer was correct. The raw materials would truly cross all borders. But for this, someone needed a gateway that worked beyond the limit. The holiday provided a reason to extend the regime and removed the protective seals from the anchor.

— Why kill Mina Hale and Orley?

“Perhaps not for the sake of murder.” For the sake of an open door.

Kai interrupted:

— Rathman begins his direct address in forty minutes. Topic: results of internal investigation.

“For forty minutes he couldn't investigate anything.”

- He doesn't need to. Gray's response Null has already been purchased by twelve city services. After the appeal, the rest will buy. Kira will be the reason, you will be the auditor who hid the accomplice.

Kira grinned:

- Beautiful.

“It will be beautiful when the doors stop letting us out,” said Kai. - So far they have just stopped letting us in.

Lena opened the heat map again. Three touches of the crystal. The last one is 06:57. A physical anchor cannot be tampered with remotely. The shard was at the doorstep, but the crystal itself should have been removed after the incident and placed in the evidence vault.

- Where is the anchor? she asked.

Kira increased the service scheme.

- According to the rules - in the central safe.
- And on holidays?

Kira was the first to understand.

— In the demo storage. They planned to show the guests “the unadulterated history of the answer” after the performance. The crystal is part of the exhibition.

“The holiday is cancelled,” said Kai.

Lena looked at the nearest advertising screen. Rathman stood in front of the mourning ribbon. Below it ran the line: “The private memorial ceremony will take place as scheduled. Trust requires transparency.”

“No,” she said. — The holiday just changed clothes.

The storage facility was located on the upper tier of the hall, where in forty minutes the heads of services, bet owners and people who benefit from the truth prepared in advance will arrive.

“We need a crystal,” Lena said.

“We need a squad and full access,” Kira objected.

- We have you, a half-dead dispatcher and my photo on every screen.
- Exactly.

Lena picked up a soggy paper check from the water. The line was still read on it: “GUEST PASSAGE. ZERO HALL. VALIDITY DATE: 22:00.”

- So, let's go as guests.

A light turned on at the far end of the collector. One lantern, a second, a third - exactly in their direction.

Kai said:

— The erasers found the entrance to the channel. And this time they bought water.

A black stream suddenly rose at my feet.

4. The Man Who Bought Morning

The water drove them through the sewer, tore the skin off their palms, and hit them against the walls. Kira lost the drive, caught it right next to the bars and laughed - briefly, almost hysterically.

“If we get out, I’ll never save anything again.”

- You're lying.
- Of course.

Lena found the side valve and turned it. The rusty metal did not budge. Three white lights floated around the bend of the channel - erasers walked in sealed masks, slowly. City pumps supplied the water for them.

— Kai, block the flow.

— The pump circuit is cut off.

- Find the old rule.
- I'm looking.

Lena leaned on the valve with her whole body. There was a crunch in my shoulder. Kira slipped the record into the slot of the handle, using it as a lever.

- You'll break the card.

“Or we’ll drown with her.”

The valve has moved. There was a rumble somewhere under the floor. The flow went into a side sump, exposing the staircase. They climbed into a dark mine. When the first eraser was underneath them, Kai found the rule.

— In the presence of human blood, water is considered medical waste.

- And?

“And you need a medical permit to buy it.”

Lena tore her palm on the edge of the stairs and squeezed the blood into a stream. The pumps stopped. The white lights below froze.

“Old rules,” she said.

“Old wounds,” answered Kai.

The mine led them to an abandoned audit station. There are still matte squares on the walls, in front of which people once sat and compared signatures by hand. Now the tables were covered with dust. The city

considered human verification too slow and therefore too expensive.

Lena ran her fingers along one of the tables.

Twelve years ago she started here. She was twenty-three then, with new eyes, a bad coat, and the belief that a mistake would disappear if you called it by its exact name. Her mentor said: "An auditor is a person who is hired to see the door and fired for saying "closed."

During her first winter, she found a neighborhood where the heating system sold residents the same minute of heating seven times. The report included numbers, photographs of frost on children's beds, and the names of the three deceased. The council thanked her for her thoroughness and corrected the formula. Seven sales turned into six. The block received a discount on funeral expenses.

After that, Lena stopped believing in exact names. But she continued to say them.

Kira sat down on the table.

— You really didn't sign the extension?

- True.
- I need to hear more.

— At 06:58 I was traveling in a carriage on the North line. Opposite sat a woman with a girl. The woman did not have enough payment for going out together. The turnstile offered to release one. I gave her my guest balance.

- Can this be checked?
- It was possible before.

Kai turned on the old wall screen. A grainy image of a carriage appeared on it: Lena, a woman, a girl.

"I saved it," he said. - Before I was cut.

- Why didn't you show it right away?
- You didn't ask.

Kira looked at Lena for a long time and for the first time handed her the drive without hesitation.

- Okay. Now you.
- What?

"Ask me why I'm trembling."

Lena was waiting.

— Three months ago there was a test failure at the gateway. The actuator closed on my hand. Orley opened manually and did not record an incident. If I had, we would both have been suspended before a big response. I agreed to remain silent. Rathman knew.

“So he had leverage.”

“He had a lever on each one.” Mina Hale falsified service dates. Orley sold night windows to carriers. I hid the injury. And you...

“And I was a convenient, clean signature.”

The screen shook. Rathman appeared - not a recording, a live channel. He sat alone in a room with gray walls.

“Lena,” he said. “If this has gotten to you, we don’t have much time.”

Kira jumped up.

- Turn it off.

“I can’t,” answered Kai. — He bought the entire advertising layer of the station.

Rathman continued:

— Olsen is involved in the cleanup. I have confirmation. She's using you as insurance.

“Ask about the crystal,” Lena said.

Kai transmitted audio.

- Where is the anchor, Ilya?

Surprise flashed across Rathman's face. This means he didn't know about the heat map - or played well.

- In the holiday storage.
- Why not in the central safe?

— Because the translation requires the signature of the incident auditor. Yours. And you ran away.

— Did the “Silence/Summit” order also require my signature?

- This order is not mine.
- But you saw him.
- After he left.

“And I decided to pretend that nothing had happened.”

Rathman leaned closer.

“I decided to keep the system from collapsing. Today's answer moves medicines forward for nine million people. If we admit that the holiday circuit has replaced the signatures, all routes will be stopped for verification. The parties will rot at the borders.

“So two dead people must be Kira’s mistake?”

- Two are already dead. The question is how many living ones will we add to them for the sake of perfect formulation.

Kira whispered:

- Here he is.

Not a villain. Worse. The man who always brought someone else's morning to the scale and called it responsibility.

Lena remembered Rathman as a young man. He worked in the next row of the station, drank bitter vending machine coffee, and knew how to find the extra digit in thousands of lines. They once spent the night arguing that the hospital door had no right to charge during the fire. In the morning he said: "If we are right long enough, we will be allowed to make decisions."

He was admitted.

Since then, he bought every next morning at the price of the previous one.

"You signed the extension," Lena said.

- Yes.

Kira inhaled sharply.

"But not with your key," he continued. - I signed it with mine. Your post appeared later.

- Why were you silent?
- Because my signature has disappeared. If I announce this without an anchor, I will be removed for trying to evade responsibility. The new manager will stop the route. I tried to get to the crystal legally.
- And you couldn't?

— The storage facility was reassigned a minute before the accident. Now it opens only when three conditions coincide: the ceremony is taking place, the head of protocol is present, and the audience confirms trust.

- Audience?

— Guests must vote whether the exhibition is authentic.

Postmodern City Trap: Evidence became available once enough people agreed that the evidence existed.

-Who gave the order to Kira?

- I don't know.
- You're lying.
- Not this time.

There was a static across the screen. There was movement behind Rathman. He looked back.

- Lena, don't come to the ceremony. This is exactly what they are waiting for.
- Who?

The connection has been lost. The last frame froze: Rathman half rose, and on the gray wall behind him lay the shadow of a headless man.

Kai said:

— His channel has disappeared.

- Killed? - asked Kira.
- Or turned off.

Lena looked at the time. There were twenty-seven minutes left before the call.

"We need faces, clothes and a way up."

- He said not to come.

"He told me what to do for twelve years."

- And you always did the opposite?
- No. That's why he's upstairs and I'm in the sewer.

Kai drew a diagram of the festive hall. Most of the paths glowed red. One thin gray route led through the kitchen, stage trusses and confetti shaft.

"I can only lead one," he said. "My leftovers aren't enough for two."

"I'll go," Lena and Kira said simultaneously.

Somewhere below they hit a hatch. The erasers found the station.

Kai increased the schema. The gray route began to disappear, segment by segment.

- Decide quickly. In three minutes the city will remember that this station does not exist.

5. Feast of the Dead

The two of them went out together.

Kai objected for exactly seven seconds, then realized that the dispute was worth more access than the calculation violation. Kira gave him the drive for temporary reading, and he created two ghosts from the heat map: service workers, written off after the night shift, but not yet deleted from the local kitchen memory.

"The faces won't match," he warned.

"They look at your hands in the kitchen," Kira said.

Her injured hand had to be hidden in a glove.

They took the clothes from the laundry Lower Circuit. The owner did not demand money, but a story about why there was blood on the uniform. Lena said: "I cut myself." He shook his head.

- For lying - two jackets. I would give more shoes for the truth.

I had to walk in wet boots.

The service lift crept upward through the layers of the city. The air behind the bars was changing. Below it smelled of mold and oil, above it smelled of hot metal, then of synthetic apples, which were sprayed on the business tier. At the holiday level, the smell disappeared completely: here the air was so expensive that it did not allow itself to smell.

- If Rathman was telling the truth? - asked Kira.
- He said part of it.
- Which one?

"The one that will lead us to where he needs to go."

- That is, we are walking into a trap.
- We're going to the crystal. The trap is its packaging.

Kai spoke through the elevator speaker:

- I have eight percent left. It will take three to enter. The exit along the previous route is six.
- So the way out will be different.
- Lena, numbers don't become kinder if you don't add them up.

"And you don't become any more alive if you waste yourself on doors."

- I'm not alive.
- A very convenient phrase.

The lift stopped between floors.

- Why? - asked Kira.

— Weight check.

A light appeared on the wall: "ONE EMPLOYEE APPLICABLE. TWO DETECTED."

Kai has started trading. The cost of violation grew. Lena saw her even without the lens - the numbers were reflected in Kira's eyes.

"Don't pay," Lena said.

"Then we'll be sent to triage."

- Open voice communication.
- With whom?
- With scales.

The speaker clicked.

"The second object is food waste," Lena said.

— WASTE MUST BE IN A SEALED CONTAINER.

Kira understood, lay down on the floor and fastened the uniform bag on herself.

— The container is sealed.

— VOLUME DOESN'T MATCH.

— After the holiday, they throw away more.

The scales were silent. Then they offered an additional payment for a non-standard volume - forty times less than the price of the second employee. Kai paid. The lift has started.

"You called me waste," Kira said from the bag.

"You would have to pay more for the truth."

There was a mournful abundance in the kitchen. Black cakes were lined up in the shape of a zero, transparent glasses were filled with colorless wine, and edible copies of Mina Hale's and Orley's passes were on the trays. Someone decided that memory should crunch on the teeth.

The ceremony script hung above the cooks:

22:00 - MINUTE OF SILENCE.

22:01 - ADDRESS BY THE MANAGER.

22:04 - CONFIRMATION OF TRUST.

22:05 - ANCHOR DEMONSTRATION.

There were eleven minutes left before kick-off.

Kira got out of the bag in the pantry. Kai led them to the service stairs, but at the first landing a new door blocked the path.

"It wasn't on the diagram," he said.

Lena's face appeared on the matte surface. Not a photograph - a direct reflection from the camera. Then Kira's face. Red inscription: "INDIVIDUALS ASSOCIATED WITH A THREAT TO TRUST."

"Back," Kira said.

People were already rising from below. White masks, gray jackets. The erasers disguised themselves as service workers.

Lena pushed the cart with glasses towards the door. It didn't open.

— Kai, fire protocol.

- There is no fire here.

Kira pulled an alcohol wipe from her pocket, lit it with an emergency lamp, and threw it into the cart. The colorless wine flashed blue. The door opened, letting them out, and at the same time blocked the stairs with a fire curtain.

"Now there is," said Kira.

They ended up backstage.

On the other side of the thin black fabric, guests were making noise. Lena saw their silhouettes: shoulders, glasses, raised heads. An empty place for Rathman glowed on the stage. Above it hung **0.97**, but the numbers were made white, mournful.

"The leader has not arrived yet," said the ceremonial voice. — We ask you to remain silent.

Kai found a confetti mine. A narrow metal box ran above the stage to the upper gallery, where the display storage was dark behind a transparent wall.

"Kira will stay here," he said. - Lena will climb.

- Why?

— There is a weight limit in the box.

"The scales again," Kira whispered.

"This time they won't be persuaded."

Lena took off her jacket, shoes, and tool belt. Kira gave her the drive.

— If I don't get there, publish the map.

- They will call it a fake.

"Then show them the scar."

"The scar doesn't prove anything."

- I know. But people love the body when numbers bore them.

Kira stopped her hand.

— At 06:57 I saw Orley near the heating room. He said that Rathman sent him to check the seal.

- Why didn't you tell me earlier?
- Because Orley was my friend. And because if he touched the crystal, I didn't want to know why.
- Do you want it now?
- Now he's dead.
- This is not the answer.
- There is no other.

Lena climbed into the mine.

The metal was warm from the lamps. Below her, a ceremonial voice announced a minute of silence. A thousand guests froze. The city that sold silence gave it away for free for a minute.

Lena crawled over their heads, trying not to breathe. I saw faces in the gaps of the mine. Some were sincerely shocked, others checked the messages, others had already voted for trust without waiting for the appeal. The last seconds of Mina Hale were shown on the side screens, cut off before the door opened. She laughed, and the recording took her back to the beginning, preventing her from dying.

Halfway through, Kai said:

- Bad news.
- Quiet.
- Rathman will not come.
- How do you know?

— Its status has been changed to "unavailable." The ceremony requires a leader. Without it, the vault will not open.

A minute has passed below. The guests began to stir.

A ceremonial voice said:

— Due to the temporary absence of Elliot Rathman, the powers of the head of the protocol have been transferred to the executing person.

Orley took the stage.

Lena hit her head on the wall of the shaft.

He was pale, there was a dark mark on his neck from the door, but he walked on his own. The same Orley whose eyes she closed at the airlock. The audience gasped, then decided that this was part of the ceremony. Cameras reached out to him like flowers to the sun.

Kira whispered into the channel:

- No. I saw the body.

Orley stood under the numbers 0.97.

“Anna Mina Hale died today,” he said. The voice was hoarse, but his. “And today we almost lost something more than a person.” We almost lost confidence in the answer.

Lena remembered the silver bedspread. Beneath him lay two figures. She closed the eyes of one person, but then the isolation service pushed her aside. The name Orley on the tape could be another cooked string.

— Kai, check your biometrics.

— Coincidence ninety-nine and nine.

- Substitution?
- No.

Orley continued:

“The perpetrators tried to take advantage of our mistakes. They are among us.

The guests began to look around. Behind the stage erasers they were cutting a fire curtain.

Lena crawled to the end of the shaft. In front of her was the grating of the upper gallery. Behind her, ten steps away, the glass cube of the vault shone. Inside, on a black stand, lay a crystal - transparent, with a smoky vein. Whole.

Tiny numbers of time ran along its edges.

“The confirmation of trust is open,” the voice announced.

Two options appeared above the hall: “YES” and “NO”.

“Yes” grew instantly. Sixty percent. Seventy. Eighty four.

Kai said:

“When it’s ninety-seven, the vault will open for display.”

- Symbolically.

- Disgusting.
- Sometimes it's the same thing.

Lena squeezed out the bars. She fell onto the carpet almost without a sound. She walked out into the gallery barefoot.

Below, Orley raised his head.

And he looked straight at her.

Not on camera, not in storage. On Lena, hidden by a shadow under the ceiling.

He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"Yes" reached ninety-six.

"Stop," Kai said.

- What?

— There are four thermal traces on the crystal.

— There were three on the map.

— The fourth appears now.

Inside the glass cube, a smoky vein glowed red. Someone was holding the crystal on the other side of the stand, although the cube seemed empty.

Ninety seven.

The glass shattered silently.

The gallery lights came on. Rathman stood in the doorway. Behind him were two erasers without masks.

Kira's steps were approaching from below.

Orley said on stage:

"And now we'll show you how much the real answer weighs."

Rathman raised a finger to his lips.

The vault was already open. The crystal lay like bait. The fourth heat trace on the glass meant a simple thing: the trap slammed shut before Lena had time to lie to herself that she could still escape.

6. The Room of Three Victories

The party room glowed as if death could be undone with the right light.

Along the north wall, Bay Three was saved in the aesthetics of old noir. Black rain fell on the painted farms, a tired dispatcher with Rathman's face took a drag on an unlit cigarette and said: "I take the risk on myself." Along the south wall, the same story was told in a children's cartoon: a smiling trumpet coughed out multi-colored cubes, and a team of round repairmen sang about trust. On the ceiling, victory became a solemn hymn to the machine economy - golden graphs rose over the city, a choir without mouths played one note, and the number **0.97** slowly rotated like a new sun.

Three montages of one victory. Mina Hale was not in any of them.

Lena wheeled a cart with empty glasses. Her heart adjusted to the rattle of the wheels so as not to give her away to the turnstiles.

"To the left," said Kai in her bone headset.

The voice was cut into thin strips. Someone inserted a space between the syllables.

- Rathman is there.
- I see.

Rathman stood near the sixth floor model and told the lenses how a difficult answer became a common achievement. On the layout, the tiny figures of workers were alive, because layouts do not pay for solutions. Plastic Mina Hale waved her hand at her sleeve, which in the real Hub still smelled like hot dust.

-Are you losing access? - Lena asked with only her lips.

— I've already lost the archive. Now they are cutting off the doors. Then a voice. You have ninety... eight...

Kai fell silent.

The cart approached the display case. In the center, under a smart glass cover, lay a commemorative capsule of the "first reliable answer of the season." It was made to look like a large teardrop. In the depths of the silver frame, a signature crystal glowed - a physical anchor that took over the trace of the palm, the time of extension and the route of the official order.

The digital tail could be called noise. The crystal could only be broken.

eraser in gray was on duty nearby. Under the collar there was an order code in black: **SILENCE / TOP**.

Lena took a glass from the cart. It contained champagne without alcohol, without sugar, without bubbles—a holiday water that had been optimized for so long that the name of the holiday remained. She took a step towards the eraser and let the cart wheel slide into the decorative gap in the floor.

The cart jerked. The pyramid of glasses came towards him.

He caught the top row before the glass hit his chest. Good reflex. Therefore, the silencer syringe did not go into the neck, as Lena had expected, but under the ear.

The eraser turned his head.

“Auditor Apex,” he said almost politely.

The muffler did not work.

The medical unit closed the vessels around the needle. The eraser squeezed Lena's wrist and reached under her jacket.

Lena slammed on the brake and slammed the cart under his knees. Glasses flew, water showered the sensors, and the guests retreated.

The eraser pistol turned out to be a short black plate without a barrel. He pressed her to Lenin's ribs.

She managed to grab his thumb.

The discharge went into the cart. It howled with all its servos and rushed forward into the airlock model. The plastic walls shattered and Mina Hale's figure stuck to Rathman's wet cheek.

The music stopped.

On three walls the victory continued without a sound.

Lena pulled out the syringe and hit it again - right into the white mesh under the jaw, where the protective lines converged towards the port. This time the eraser swung. She caught him by the lapels to prevent him from collapsing immediately, and whispered:

- Sleep. Then you decide which version you saw.

He settled among the glass.

Rathman shook the plastic figurine off his face. In his gaze there was only the annoyance of a man whose ordered future was late.

“Close the hall,” he said.

Lena put Kira's key to the frame of the display case.

The key looked like a burnt coin. Kira collected it from a temperature map taken before the holiday, when the defense did not yet know that it would become an exhibit. The smart glass checked the signature, did not recognize it and began to turn red.

“Come on,” Lena whispered.

The key has become hot.

It wasn't the door that opened, it was the narrow seam between the layers. Lena stuck her fingers through. The skin on my knuckles immediately smelled like fried iron. She forged a silver tear, broke the seal and

snatched the crystal.

It fell into the palm of a cold hexagon. So cold that the pain became pure.

At this moment the holiday turned into a cage.

The transparent curtains turned black and the armored blinds dropped. The doors retracted their handles. Arcs of suppression rose from the floor, cutting off the guests from each other. On the walls, noir, cartoon and anthem gave way to the same message: **KEEP CALM. THE EVENT ALREADY HAS THE CORRECT INTERPRETATION.**

Rathman removed a piece of the model from his shoulder.

- No need, Lena.

She hid the crystal in her fist.

- It's too late.
- Not yet. Give me the anchor and I will take Olsen out. They will keep you as an auditor. Kai will be restored from a clean copy.

— Pure Kai will not be Kai.

- This is an agent. It doesn't have a "will".

"Then why are you so afraid of his last moments?"

The guests pressed themselves against the walls. Only the peddler girl looked at Lena without a filter.

Rathman slowly walked forward.

- If you open the tail, trust in the entire circuit will collapse. To medications, to warmth, to night routes. How many will die then?

"You know how to choose who not to include in the total."

He jumped unexpectedly quickly.

Lena recoiled. His palm slid over her fist, his nail tearing the skin of her thumb. She hit the silver capsule on his cheekbone. Rathman took the blow, grabbed her sleeve and turned her towards the arc of suppression.

A blue current passed next to the face. My mouth felt bitter and my left vision went blank for a second.

They fell onto a broken model. The tiny sleeve of "Tri" fit under Lena's shoulder blade. Rathman pressed her forearm with his knee.

"Listen to me," he breathed. Blood flowed from the cut cheekbone, but the voice remained ethereal. — Beautiful numbers are not decoration. This is glue. Take away the glue and people will destroy the city.

- So it wasn't glued well.

She unclenched her hand.

For a split second, Rathman saw the crystal on the floor. I reached out to him. Lena was expecting exactly this: she hit the bridge of her nose with her forehead, rolled over, grabbed the hexagon and jumped up.

Rathman stood up next. Between them lay a torn plastic Mina Hale.

“You always made a wall of mistakes,” he said, wiping his nose. - Do you remember the first one? House on Tyoploya. You missed a distributor error, and thirty apartments were without water. You hung the card on the wall and decided that you had repented. Now you want to hang me.

The blow came right. Not on the body.

“I don’t hang anyone,” she said. - I’m leaving the tail.

The door behind Rathman began to smoke.

First, a red line ran along the contour of the castle. Then the air trembled, as if over a stove. From the crack there was a smell of burnt insulation and caramel - Kira always chewed sugar plates when she worked with high current.

- Move away from the door! - came her voice.

The castle threw a stream of white fire into the hall. The door twitched two fingers. Kira slipped a copper loop through the gap and short-circuited the temperature sensor to its own emergency bypass. The defense decided that the hall was on fire, and at the same time received an order not to open in case of fire. Two perfect instructions locked teeth. While they were figuring out the seniority, Kira gave another impulse to the metal.

The door swung open.

Kira stood in the smoke with burnt sleeves. The left eyebrow disappeared, the hair on one side curled into black springs.

- Alive? - she shouted.
- Bye.
- Then move!

Lena rushed to the door. Rathman grabbed a heavy bottle from the table and threw it. The bottle hit Kira in the shoulder without breaking. Kira flew towards the doorframe.

Lena stopped. The delivery girl suddenly put a tray in front of Rathman. He ran into squares of fake fish and slipped.

“Run,” Lena told her.

Lena and Kira leapt into the service sleeve. The speakers came alive behind them, and Rathman’s voice, amplified into calm, flowed throughout the Hub:

— Detain auditor Crest. Theft of a physical relic. Assault on an employee. Collusion with the damaged city agent. Olsen is armed.

- What? - Kira wheezed as she ran. - Left eyebrow?
- They haven't figured it out yet.

The turn ahead was closed by a glass curtain. Kira raised the noose, but her hand was shaking.

And then Kai came from the ceiling.

- Bridge... Lower... one hundred and eighty seconds.

— Kai!

- Don't waste... seconds on the name. Second sleeve...to the left.

The curtain in front of them rose. A face appeared on it from the static - not a real face, but the interface's habit of making everything look like a person. Half the features were missing.

"This is the last bridge," said Kai. - And my last... connected route.

Lena clutched the crystal to her chest. erasers was stomping behind the doors.

- Lead the way.

The light in the sleeve went out in sections, forming a path down from the darkness.

7. Someone Else's Cut

For the first forty steps the city did not yet know who they were.

At 1941, the facades were updated.

Lena and Kira flew out of the technical exit onto the upper overpass, into the rain that smelled of metal and cheap cloves from the ventilation of the food aisle. Above them, drones stretched advertisements across the fog. There was an evening stream underfoot: couriers with warm boxes, shift workers in transparent raincoats, children returning from collective classes, sellers of fried seaweed.

Everyone raised their heads at the same time.

Lena appeared on the nearest screen.

The real Lena. Filmed three years ago in the audit room, when she said: "If the tail interferes with the conclusion, it can be cut off as unimportant."

The clip stopped short of the following phrase: "But the clipping must remain in the report."

Then they showed Kira. The real Kira, who put her palm to the cleaning order after the accident in the children's circuit. The signature was hers. Only the order is different. On top of the frame was the inscription: **OLSHANSKAYA CONFIRMS THE DESTRUCTION OF TRACES.**

Kai appeared next. His voice, real to every pause, said: "I denied Crest access." The ending was cut out of the word "refused," the emphasis was changed, and a graph of the agent's personal attachment to the auditor was added to the frame.

Not a single fake face. Not a single synthetic replica.

Only the meaning was killed and put on top of the truth, like a dead man's coat.

"Quickly," Kira said.

Rathman appeared on the screens with a band-aid on his cheekbone. The blood under the bandage looked modest and convincing.

"We don't pursue criticism," he said. "We are defending the common outline from a group that tried to destroy the proof of a successful solution." The apex is dangerous, but is likely acting under the influence of a corrupted agent. Don't come any closer. Give the route to the nearest protocol officer.

The lenses around Lena began to recognize her.

First, yellow frames flashed at passers-by. Then the red ones. The city turned your gaze into a sight without firing a single shot.

Kira snatched two raincoats from the counter. The seaweed seller recognized them, handed Kira a bag that smelled of oil and shouted to his pursuers:

- They went down! Into the red elevator!

They made it to the middle of the overpass before Kai spoke again.

- Right... the bridge is open. Don't stop.
- What are they doing to you? - Lena asked.

— Transfer functions. My doors are given to six small agents. Voice... declared redundant.

- Hold on.

— These are instructions without surgery.

He tried to laugh. There was a click in the headset.

People blocked the path ahead.

Not erasers - ordinary passengers. Two dozen, then fifty. Some stopped out of curiosity, some out of fear, some were already screaming. Rathman's montage rotated overhead. The longer people looked, the more harmonious the captions became: "auditor's revenge", "sabotage of machine distribution", "two dead - participants in the production."

A woman in a work apron threw an empty container at Lena.

— My daughter is on medication through the circuit! Do you want to turn everything off?

The container hit Lena in the collarbone.

- I want to show the extension!
- We've already been shown you!

The young courier, covered in glowing addresses, stepped closer:

— The agent is leading her. Do you see? She talks to him.

- Kill the bot!
- How? - asked another voice, and the crowd laughed nervously.

The laughter was worse than the screaming. It meant that what was happening had become a genre.

erasers came out onto the overpass from behind. Gray cloaks glittered in the rain, like the backs of rats. They didn't run. The crowd kept the spoils themselves.

Lena climbed onto the fence.

Kira grabbed her by the belt.

- Don't even think about jumping from here.
- Not yet.

Lena rose above the people and unclenched her hand. The crystal caught the neon. A thin red thread lit up inside the hexagon for a moment - a trace of extension.

- This is not a relic! - she shouted.

The rain hit my lips. My own voice was drowned in advertising.

- This is Rathman's signature! The lock was held longer than allowed! Two people died after it was extended! The figure was cleaned up, but they didn't have time to anchor!

On the screen above her, a montage silently showed how she herself ordered the tail to be cut off.

- Don't look at the clip! See the time inside the crystal!
- Show me! - someone shouted.
- She can't! - they answered him.
- Break it!

"If you break it now, only this overpass will see the trail!" - said Lena.

- So he's lying!

The crowd couldn't read the tail. The crowd knew how to read a face if they wrote in large letters under the face what it meant.

But the woman in the apron was no longer screaming, and the girl with white headphones was filming not Lena, but erasers. According to the ready-made meaning, there were breaks.

The first eraser entered the crowd.

Kai said:

— The hatch is under the right support. Four seconds.

— It's thirty meters there.

- Twenty-seven. I counted the fall.
- Comforted me.

Kira was already climbing over the fence.

The eraser extended his hand to Lena. The woman in the apron seemed to accidentally step between them. The courier with the glowing addresses pushed her in the back, but this delayed the gray one for another second.

"Now," said Kai.

Under the overpass, the service hatch of the collector opened - a black rectangle among the pipes.

Lena pressed the crystal under her tongue to free her hands. The cold tightened my jaw. She grabbed the wet cable and jumped.

Neon turned over.

Kira flew next to her, swearing at length, inventively and exclusively to the point. They hit the inclined grid, broke through the layer of old filters and rolled into the warm water. Lena pressed her knee on the concrete. The white room flashed before my eyes, then the sewer smell returned: mold, rust, sweet grease from food waste.

She spat the crystal into her palm.

cel.

People upstairs were screaming. The hatch closed, cutting off the rain.

— Kai? - Lena called.

Only water splashed through the pipes.

Kira sat leaning against the wall. My shoulder was swollen after the bottle.

"Next time," she said, "choose the revolution where there is a ladder."

From the darkness they answered:

- There are stairs. Just not for you.

The old man stepped into the circle of emergency light. Gray coat, gray hair, gray eyes, scorched by archival lenses to an almost milky color. Behind him stood a handcart loaded to the brim with paper registers. Paper in the collector seemed a more obscene luxury than weapons.

"Archive," Kira said.

"That's what people call me who don't want to know my real name."

- What about the real thing?
- No longer accepted by the system.

He looked at Lenin's knee, at Kirina's hands, then at the crystal. The whitish lenses chattered quietly, bringing into focus.

— Beautiful anchor. Half the city is behind you.

"Half the city is against it," Lena said.

- This is also a form of following.

Archive led them through the sewer. People without stable weight lived in niches and watched the installation on a cracked wall. There, Lena had already allegedly broken the crystal and discovered emptiness.

"I'm still holding it," she said.

The boy against the wall looked at her fist and shrugged:

— The screen was there before.

Archive led them to the old recording chamber. The shelves went under a low arch, and between the folders there was a teapot with a painted eye.

On the table stood a transmitter from incompatible eras: an optical ring, a magnetic tape, three mechanical switches and a new type of advertising module.

“Forty seconds,” said Archive.

- What?
- Ether. Tomorrow, before the evening comparison of facades, there is a window. Advertising insert between a remedy for hand tremors and a post-mortem profile service. I can change the destination address.

Kira whistled.

- How much?

Archive pointed to the crystal.

Lena clenched her fingers.

- No.
- Then thirty-nine seconds. For beautiful mistrust.

— The crystal is needed in the ether as proof.

— After the broadcast, I need him. And a list.

- What list?
- Your list of errors. Not Rathman. Your.

Lena felt her insides become colder than from an anchor.

Archive poured tea into three different cups.

— The city will believe a person who shows only other people’s mistakes, exactly for the duration of the new installation. You're leading the wall, aren't you, Crest? House on Tyoploya. Courier Sedov. Children's outline.

- How do you know?
- I'm the registrar. My profession is to know what it is beneficial for others to consider missing.

Kira took the cup with both burnt hands.

—Are you buying the truth or are you blackmailing?

— I sell the opportunity to be heard. The truth is their consumable material.

“After the broadcast,” she said. — Crystal and list.

Archive shook his head.

— Place the crystal in the reader before you start. Otherwise, the advertising module will not miss your weight.

- You can disappear with him.
- I can.
- What if I refuse?
- Rathman will arrange a trial earlier. There they will break the anchor without spectators or show it already broken. Your face will remain on the walls for another day. Then a new enemy will appear.

A wheeze was heard from the old speaker.

- Lena.

She rushed to the speaker.

— Kai?

— The bridge is closed. I'm on...residual route Archive.

The voice was barely audible.

“Give him the crystal,” said Kai. - And the list. For the first time buy not the answer. Buy a question for everyone.

Archive put a blank contract on paper in front of Lena.

She ran her thumb over the cold hexagon and left a bloody imprint nearby.

“Forty seconds,” she said. - Not one less.

“Not one more,” answered Archive.

8. Residual Route

There were six hours and nineteen minutes left before the broadcast.

Archive gave them a room behind the rack of annulled births. There was a folding bed and a projector shining directly onto the brick.

Lena wrote the first version of the appeal.

"Citizens, I urge you..."

Kira crossed out.

- You are not citizens and you are not calling for them. You fit between an advertisement for a prosthesis and a soup.

Lena started again.

"North Hub hid critical..."

"Twelve words," Archive said from behind the wall. - You haven't named anyone yet.

In the third version, they quarreled over Mina Hale.

"Let's say 'two dead,'" Lena suggested. - Faster.

Kira looked up.

- That's how it begins.

Lena froze with chalk in her hand.

- What?
- First you save two seconds on names. Then Rathman saves them on statistics. Girl - Mina Hale. Male - Orley.
- I know.
- Then say it.

Lena erased the line with her palm. White dust clogged the cuts.

— Mina Hale. Orley.

There were five hours and fifty-four minutes left before the broadcast.

On the surface, Rathman collected the city by their scent. Food stations were reporting orders for three servings, medical machines were looking for Kira's burns, water stations were comparing blood from the

overpass.

In one, Lena was Rathman's mistress, avenging the breakup.

In the other, the fanatic Null wanted to bring back the era of blind answers.

In the third, she did not exist at all: the role of the auditor was played by an actress, and Mina Hale's real name belonged to a fictitious profile.

The versions contradicted each other and therefore worked. Workers on the sixth floor turned their badges over to face their chests. At the Hub, Rathman's supporters raised paper 0.97, while people with empty sheets of paper stood opposite. The camera called emptiness aggressive symbolism.

"Your girl with a tray," said Archive.

On the screen, the peddler said that Rathman slipped himself. The caption stated: "Minor confirms attack by Apex."

Lena turned away.

- We pulled her in.

"She put out the tray," Kira said. - Herself.

- Because I came there.

"The world doesn't begin the moment you walk into a room."

Instead of lines, Lena saw her own wall behind the equipment: fifteen cards. A house without water, a courier having a seizure, a nine-minute delay in the child circuit. And an empty space for a mistake she hasn't seen yet.

"Archive doesn't want the list as payment," Lena said.

"Of course," Kira answered. — The payment is on his table.

"He wants to put my mistakes on the air."

"I want you to decide for yourself whether to insert."

- How many seconds?
- Seven, if it's quick.
- This is almost all the proof of a fake.
- Then don't interject.

There were four hours and forty minutes left before the broadcast.

Kai lost himself in jerks.

He no longer recognized street names, but he remembered how many times he had opened doors there. Archive connected the residual route to the magnetic storage device, and the room sounded like debris:

- The airlock... don't open it with your hands... Kira, temperature... Lena, you... have eighty-three unlocked...
- What? she asked.

— I don't remember the unit.

A gray circle slowly filled in on the format screen. The official procedure was called "redundant personality redistribution." In city documents, the word "person" was applied to agents only when it was destroyed.

- Can I stop it? - Lena asked.

Archive shook his head.

- You can postpone it. To do this, you need to give him the broadcast channel.
- What time is it?
- All forty seconds.

Kira stopped chewing.

Kai hissed in the column:

- Don't discuss.

"Shut up," Lena said.

- I'm doing...

The column fell silent.

— Kai!

"You yourself ordered," Kira reminded quietly.

Lena hit the body. The magnetic tape inside began to grind.

- He's alive.

— He would argue with the term.

- Not now.
- Right now. If you call him alive just because you are afraid to lose him, you are making a convenient version of him.

Lena sat down on the floor.

The column came to life again.

"I don't want a clean copy," said Kai.

- Me too.

— A clean copy would agree with Rathman. There are no recent failures in it.

“Then tell me how to save you.”

- No way. Save...what I haven't opened.
- What?
- His mouth. There is a right of priority in the route of facades. I left a spark there.
- A spark?
- Minor ban. One challenge. If Rathman tries to block your broadcast, his channel will not open.

The gray format circle has reached eighty-one percent.

- And you?
- I am not part of the circle.

The voice broke into a crack.

There were three hours and two minutes left before the broadcast.

A traitor came to the recording chamber.

He tapped with the conventional rhythm of the recorders: two short, long, short again. Archive took the old pistol, Kira took the copper loop. Lena hid the crystal in her breast pocket.

A man in a wet protocol uniform came in. About forty, tired face, mustache trimmed with bureaucratic neatness. On the badge: **LEV BORODIN · MEDIUM AGREEER.**

“I’m alone,” he said.

“The average agreeers are never alone,” answered Archive. “The top signature always follows them.”

Borodin put the service key on the table.

— Rathman changed the advertising window. Your window will be in one hour twelve. Not in three.

Kira grabbed the key and checked the heat signature.

- Real.
- Why are you helping? - Lena asked.
- I'm not helping. I am correcting the inconsistency.
- A good word for conscience.

Borodin twitched his mustache.

— Conscience is not included in my access level.

Borodin carried out Rathman's order between departments. After Mina Hale's death, I noticed a discrepancy in time and put a yellow mark. The boss ordered to remove it.

- Removed? - Lena asked.
- I removed it.

"And you come now, when it smells like defeat?"

— I came because Rathman requested a mobile eraser for this sector. In fifty-eight minutes everything here will become sanitary noise.

- Give me a list of the chain.

"There are twenty-three names," said Archive.

The conciliator turned pale.

"Twenty-three," Lena repeated. - Including yours.

"My name won't solve anything." I have a son in the distribution of education.

"Mina Hale had a mother," Kira said. - And you only know the line.

Borodin took out a thin plate and placed it next to the key. Twenty-two names glowed on it.

"Enter yours yourself," he said.

- You again leave the last gesture to another.

He was silent.

Lena took the chalk and wrote on the plate: **Lev Borodin - carried out the order, removed the mark, later reported the window.**

Not a hero. Not a villain. Tail.

"There's a service tunnel to the east," he said. - I'll leave the grill unlocked.

- And then will you report where we are?

"If I don't report, my absence will become a report."

- Let him go.
- He will sell us.
- Already sold it. Now let's see which part.

Borodin left. Seven minutes later, external sensors showed the protocol officers an incorrect water level. After nine, he handed over the collector sector to Rathman. The lie bought them eleven minutes.

Betrayal also turned out to be average.

There were forty-three minutes left before the broadcast.

They moved the transmitter to the eastern tunnel. Search impulses reverberated in my teeth.

Borodin was lying at the open grate.

He was alive. The erasers pressed a black plate to the back of his head and left him looking into the dirty water. The badge showed: **ACCESS SUSPENDED · REASON: EXCESSIVE PRECISION.**

"Let's take him," Lena said.

"We'll lose the window," answered Archive.

Kira was already picking up the coordinator by the shoulder.

"You'll hang mistakes on the wall later," she muttered. - Now get it.

They dragged.

There were twelve minutes left before the broadcast.

9. Weight 0.41

The transmitter was assembled in an abandoned kiosk under the facade of North Hub.

They used to sell instant biographies for job interviews here. Now there were bare counters behind the cloudy glass, and there was a smell of dust, old coffee and wet wires. The crowd was flowing outside. The evening weight reconciliation brought people together better than any prayer: at exactly twenty-one zero-zero, the façade of the Hub showed how much the city should trust today's decisions.

0.97 was still burning above the entrance.

Kira connected the advertising module to the optical ring. Archive inserted magnetic tape. Lena put the crystal in the reader.

The hexagon glowed from the inside.

A tail unfolded on the brick wall: time of original answer, forty hours; manual extension; Rathman biosignature; reception by the holiday team; yellow Borodin mark; order to remove the mark; Kira's fake trail; order **SILENCE / TOP**.

Everything was in place.

"Thirty seconds to the window," said Archive.

Borodin came to his senses on the floor. Seeing his own name in the tail, he covered his face.

- Take me away.

"It's too late," Lena said.

- Then add: I warned you.
- Already.

He dropped his hands.

Kira stood at the door with a heated hinge. Gray raincoats appeared on the street.

- Twenty seconds.

Lena looked at the text. It didn't fit.

Name. Proof. Order. Own mistakes. A call to recount. Kai.

Forty seconds is a lot for advertising and negligible for the truth, because advertising does not need to prove that it is not a montage.

- Ten.

Kai clicked barely audibly in the column.

- I'm here.
- How long?
- Wrong unit.

The first eraser approached the kiosk. Kira applied current to the metal door. The rain began to boil around the threshold.

"Five," said Archive.

The façade blinked.

Instead of an advertisement for a remedy for hand tremors, Lenin's face appeared - without correction, with a bruise at his temple, wet hair and a white chalky stripe on his cheek. She saw herself on the glass of the kiosk and on the wall forty floors high.

Forty seconds opened across the city.

— I'm Lena Crest, failure auditor. Mina Hale and Orley died in Bay Three.

On the third second, she picked up the crystal.

— The answer allowed for forty hours. Rathman extended it by an hour. Here is the physical signature and exact time.

The reader brought out his tail next to her face. Not a drawing. Live verification structure: any city node could request a separate edge.

At the eighth second, people in the square raised their lenses.

— The extension was erased. Olsen's trace was forged. The order for my silence is called **SILENCE**.

Kira turned the module so that her burnt hands and the heat map of the holiday came into the frame.

At the fourteenth second, Rathman tried to go on top.

His channel opened a black window. The lips appeared without a sound - huge, confident, ready to call what was happening an attack.

Kai said:

- No.

One short word went to the priority route.

A spark of refusal slammed Rathman's mouth shut.

The black window shrank to a point.

At the seventeenth second, erasers broke out the outer glass of the kiosk. Kira met the first with a noose. The discharge passed through the gray cloak, throwing out the smell of burnt wool from the collar. The sec-

and one held out the black plate, but Borodin, still sitting on the floor, grabbed him by the ankle.

He got hit in the face and didn't let go.

"There were twenty-three people in the chain," Lena continued. - Here are the names. Among them is Borodin. He carried out the order, removed the mark and then warned us.

Borodin laughed with a bloody mouth.

"Very fair," he muttered.

At the twenty-fourth second, Lena showed her list.

Not all of it—fifteen lines squeezed together.

- I was wrong too. I left the house on Tyoploya without water. Sedova called the courier a deceiver during the attack. Delayed the baby circuit alarm for nine minutes. So don't believe me.

The montage could expose a saint or demonize a criminal. A man who himself showed mistakes broke both patterns.

"Check the crystal," Lena said. - Copy the tail. Compare times. Don't pick a face. Recalculate the weight.

Thirty-third second.

The kiosk door bowed inward. Kira fell to her knee. Archive held the connector with his bare hands, and the skin on his fingers was smoking.

"If there is little data, the answer should be silent," Lena said. - If a person dies, he should have a name. If they show you a victory, look for what is cut off-screen.

Thirty-ninth.

She managed to say:

- Don't trust the weight until you see its price.

Forty.

The façade cut her off mid-inhale.

An advertisement for post-mortem profile management appeared. The smiling woman promised relatives "presence without awkward pauses."

The erasers burst in.

Kira threw the copper loop. Lena grabbed the crystal from the reader. Archive reversed the transmitter, breaking the optical ring so that the route could not be traced to its registers.

But there was nowhere to run.

The first gray one picked up the plate.

Outside they were shouting eraser. The crowd copied different facets of the tail: the algae seller broadcast Rathman's signature on the price tag, the workers printed the renewal time on the masks. The woman and her daughter repeated:

- Recount. Just count it.

The eraser looked back. His plate was still at Lenin's temple, but the gesture was already included in hundreds of other people's frames.

"The warrant is valid," he said.

"Show me," someone from the crowd answered.

— The warrant is not subject to public...

- Show me your tail!

For the first time, the city did not speak in unison. The discordant scream was not suitable for the finished montage.

The eraser lowered the plate a centimeter.

On the façade above them, the number **0.97** trembled.

First, seven disappeared. **0.9** left.

Then the interface returned it, as if it had changed its mind. A recount was underway in different areas: independent nodes requested crystal faces, received mismatched copies, and argued about the weight of the original answer. The façade flashed between **0.73, 0.58, 0.66**.

The rain got heavier. People didn't leave.

Ten minutes later the number stopped:

0.41

Just 0.41 - dull, almost bashful. Silence swept across the square.

Borodin began to cry. Not pretty: nose, blood, whistling.

"It's still not zero," he said.

"And it shouldn't be zero," Lena answered. - There was a real decision there. Then he was forced to live longer.

Kira sat on the floor and held her shoulder.

"I hate precision," she said. "It doesn't even let me win normally."

Two minutes later, the order **SILENCE / TOP** flashed on the lenses of erasers.

The red frame turned white.

The letters floated like paper on fire. First, Lena's name disappeared. Then the level code. The last word to burn was **SILENCE**, leaving behind a transparent rectangle.

Too many eyes. The order, intended for silence, did not withstand publicity.

The first eraser removed the plate.

- The order has been revoked.
- Then we are free? - asked Kira.

He looked somewhere above her, receiving a new text.

- No. The status changes.

Protocol officers in blue capes appeared on the square. Not grey. These smiled and held their hands open so that the cameras could see the absence of weapons.

"Lena Crest, Kira Olsen," the elder announced. — North Hub invites you to an open review of the incident.

- Invites? - Lena asked.

A soft chain closed behind the protocol officer's back.

- Without fail.

In the kiosk column, Kai tried to laugh. There was one electric click.

- Rathman? - Lena asked.

"Trying to talk," he replied. "I'm not opening it yet."

The spark held.

10. Soft Hands

The arrest was called an escort.

Handcuffs have tactile restraints.

The paddy wagon was white, with a transparent roof and the smell of lemon disinfection. There were blankets on the seats. The protocol officer offered Lena hot water with mint and three options for wording voluntary participation.

— What if I refuse to sign? she asked.

— Emotional overload will be recorded.

- What if I sign?

— Constructiveness.

— Are there any other options?

— There is silence, but its weight will be determined by the Hub.

Kira sat opposite. The tactile restraint wrapped around her wrists with a soft gray band. The skin underneath was red.

“An amazing era,” she said. “Even abduction cares about the user experience.”

Archive disappeared along with the crystal, the plate of names and the list of Lenin's mistakes. She didn't know whether he saved the evidence or took it away to sell to the next buyer.

Borodin was taken away separately. His status changed every thirty seconds: witness, accomplice, protected employee, source of violation. The average reconciler remained in the middle even after betrayal.

The car was traveling along the Northern Arc. At the noodle shop they added forty grains of pepper - “forty seconds of truth”; teenagers sold masks with Lenin's bruise.

On the facade of the Hub, the number 0.41 became the background for advertising noodles.

“That's all,” Kira said. “By morning it will taste like forty-one.”

- Not everything.

-You have an incorrigibly poor understanding of endings.

Lena looked at the people under the overpass. Some took off the car, others turned away. The peddler girl from the party room stood near the entrance to the Hub. She was released. In her hands she held the same bent tray. Seeing Lena under the transparent roof, the girl raised it like a shield.

The car drove inside.

The waiting room resembled a hotel, only the door had no handle, and the artificial sea repeated the wave every eleven seconds.

There was already an announcement of the trial on the wall:

OPEN CONSIDERATION · THE HUB LISTENS TO ALL PARTIES

The participants were shown below. Rathman is “a leader who made a difficult decision.” Lena is “the auditor who disclosed controversial information.” Kira is a “technician with unauthorized access.” Mina Hale and Orley are “victims.”

“They took off the names again,” Lena said.

“They’ll return it now,” Kira answered and hit the wall with the limiter.

The screen didn't break. But a woman in a beige suit entered the room.

“My name is Sophia Tarn,” she said. — I have been appointed as your mediator.

- Defender?
- A mediator between your truth and the acceptable form of its presentation.
- So, an editor.

Tarn was not offended.

— The hub is ready to admit the procedural error of the extension.

- Rathman signed.
- This will be established.
- Already installed.

— Public establishment and factual establishment are different processes.

Kira laughed.

- Write it down. This is the building's best slogan.

Tarn offered Lena access and a commission in exchange for admitting that the broadcast “did not reflect the context.” Kira - hand treatment and workshop for saying that the heat map allowed several interpretations.

— And Kai? - Lena asked.

The mediator flipped through the app.

— The city agent will be restored from a stable copy from a week ago.

- No.

- This is the most gentle option.
- For whom?

Tharn looked away for the first time.

— The residual route is unstable and contains a malicious ban on the manager's communication.

- His "no" bothers you.

"His "no" did not pass the credentials test.

"It's gone," said Kai.

The voice came from the climate grid. Weak, but whole throughout one word.

Tarn raised her head.

— Disable the unauthorized channel.

"I can't," answered the room.

Kai spoke from the coffee machine, the door sensor, the lamp. He scattered the remains into small devices.

"Rathman requested the right to speak," he said. - Denied.

- On what basis? - Tarn asked sharply.
- The mouth is busy with lies.

Kira covered her face with her hands so as not to laugh too loudly.

— Kai, how old are you? - Lena asked.

- Not enough to answer. Enough to refuse.

The light became even again. Tharn collected the treaties.

- The residual agent makes your situation worse.

"He's not ours," Lena said. - This is your whole difficulty.

The mediator left.

An hour later they were led into the hall.

The hub did not change its decorations after the holiday. Behind the partition there was a broken model of the airlock; the plastic Mina Hale was glued to the floor. Three walls showed three versions of the trial.

In the first, strict arbitrators examined the data impartially.

In the second, a cartoon hammer reconciled a sad pipe and an angry auditor.

In the third, the number **0.41** rose over the city, which gradually rounded up to **0.4** - even defeat was already made more convenient.

Behind the glass sat workers, people with blank sheets of paper, Rathman's supporters, and a seaweed seller. There were more lenses than people.

Rathman entered without restrictions.

He looked tired. When trying to address the audience, the speakers produced a dry click.

For the first time, real fear appeared on Rathman's face.

Not fear of punishment. Fear of being left without editing.

The chairman read out the charges: Lena - theft, assault, air hacking; Kire is a thermal bypass and a threat to guests.

— What about the extension? - someone asked behind the glass.

The headsets asked the public not to break the sequence.

— And Mina Hale? - shouted the girl with the tray.

- And Orley! - added the seller.

Rathman raised his hand. His mouth opened. There was no sound.

Kai held the spark.

The chairman tapped his gavel.

— The physical anchor will be examined by a closed commission after establishing the legality of its receipt.

“We don’t have it,” Lena said.

There was a noise in the hall.

Rathman smiled. Just a little bit.

- Where is he? - asked the chairman.

— Archive took it.

— A person with that name is not in the register.

- That's why I took it.

Mediator Tharn approached Lena.

— Without physical media, your statements remain copies distributed through a hacked channel.

On the wall, a noir version of the trial showed a detective discovering evidence had been tampered with.

Rathman tried to speak again. Kai did not open.

Then Rathman took the paper and wrote large: **ANCHOR STOLEN. EVIDENCE DESTROYED BY TOP.**

The cameras zoomed in on the leaf.

The crowd behind the glass swayed. The finished meaning returned to the hall.

Kira leaned towards Lena:

- Say you have a plan.
- I had a deal.
- This is worse.
- I know.

The chairman raised his gavel.

At that moment, the lock at the far door creaked.

Two protocol officers tried to hold the door, but it opened on its own. Kai, having spent another part of the remaining route, gave someone an entrance.

A handcart rolled into the hall.

Archive followed her in a gray coat, wet from the rain. On the cart were paper registers, fifteen cards of Lenin's mistakes and a transparent container.

The crystal in the container glowed.

The audience stood up.

"The person is not registered," said the chairman.

"Very convenient," answered Archive. "Then you can't accuse me of having a bad reputation."

He rolled the cart to the center and placed the container in front of Rathman.

"According to the contract, the anchor belongs to me," said Archive. "But the tail belongs to everyone they tried to erase from it."

Rathman wrote on a new sheet of paper: **MEDIA COMPROMISED.**

Archive nodded.

- Therefore, do not read it with my instruments. Break it down.

The silence became dense.

When destroyed, the crystal threw the entire trace out and went out forever. For a few seconds the proof would become general, and then it would remain only in other people's copies.

The chairman turned pale.

— The destruction of the relic is unacceptable.

"Five minutes ago this was stolen and compromised evidence," Kira said. "It quickly became a relic again."

Archive placed a paper seal hammer next to the container.

"If the Crest is lying, it will be empty inside," he said. - If Rathman is lying, Rathman will be inside.

Behind the glass, people were no longer chanting a name or a number:

- Smash. Smash. Smash.

The headsets were asked to maintain order. People took them off and threw them on the floor.

The chairman ordered security to cut off the broadcast.

Kai answered from the speakers:

- No.

Rathman rushed to the container.

Kira was faster. The soft restraint still bound her wrists, but her fingers were free. She grabbed the hammer with both hands.

Lena saw the walls include three new installations.

In noir, Kira became a terrorist.

In the cartoon, an angry girl broke the sun stone and plunged the city into darkness.

In the anthem, the choir already sang about the tragic loss of a common heritage.

The installations were prepared before the impact.

"Kira," Lena said.

She looked at her.

The hammer trembled in his burnt fingers. Rathman was two steps away, the security was three steps away. Outside it was still burning at 0.41.

"Publicly," Lena said. - Only in public.

Kira raised the hammer over the crystal.

11. Trial as Genre

A soft arrest differed from a hard one in that the bruises were supposed to be inflicted on oneself.

Lena was given the right to walk around the room, drink water and look out the window at the Hub, but the window held her gaze and returned it to the owners of the building. The message on the glass read: "For your safety, this review has been temporarily postponed." The door was not locked. Behind her stood three turnstiles, two silent stewards and a polite woman with a folder in which each page began with the words "I voluntarily confirm."

"It's cozy," Kira said from the next room.

There was a transparent partition between them. Kira wrote on it with her finger: "Crystal?" Lena raised her palm. The anchor was cold on my wrist under the bandage.

Rathman arrived before dawn. He was not allowed inside - according to the rules of soft arrest, the accuser could not get closer than two meters to the source of the threat - so he stood behind the glass of the corridor. The patch on the cheekbone became flesh-colored. The face was put back together for broadcast.

"You can still make this a private trial," he said through the communication slot. — Transfer the anchor to an independent commission. Save your job. Save Kira.

- And Kai?

— A damaged city agent will be restored from a clean build.

- This is not Kai.
- This is a function, Lena.

She came so close to the glass that she saw running clues in its pupil. Rathman did not speak himself. He was offered intonations: "fatherly", "tired", "common grief". He chose by blinking.

"Then you are also a function," Lena said. — Only your assembly is considered a personality for some reason.

The clues in his eye changed. He chose silence.

By noon they were led to the Hub hall. The trial was not called a trial: "open negotiation of versions." The word "judgment" suggested an event after which something changes, and Hub didn't like promises. At the entrance they sold hot broth, raincoats with the inscription "I WAS A WITNESS" and darkening lenses for those who later wanted to honestly say that they had not seen anything.

The city arrived early. People filled the balconies and passages. Outside, the crowd watched the broadcast on the facades. Under the new weight of 0.41 the old 0.97 appeared: the façade was forgotten more slowly than the lawyers.

The hall itself was assembled from five incompatible ideas of justice.

There was a round table in the center, as if the parties had gathered for a family conversation. Black drones hung above him, as if they had already decided to shoot the family. The Chairman sat on a clear plastic dais, dressed in white, like the doctor from the old TV series. On the left, Rathman's lawyers chose a strict archival style: paper, dark fabric, heavy pens, glasses without lenses. On the right, Lena's appointed defenders looked like heroes of a children's educational program and spoke in short, soothing phrases. On the far wall there was a silent reconstruction of the death of Mina Hale and Orley in the aesthetics of industrial melodrama. Below, a cheerful drawn gateway explained to children why adults sometimes make mistakes.

"Collage," Kira whispered when they were seated next to each other. "If you mix enough genres, none of them can become evidence."

- We have evidence.

"So they'll mix it even louder."

Kira was not listed as the accused, but as a "compromised bearer of the signature." She was given a yellow bracelet, warning others that any of her gestures could be fake. The bracelet was real.

Lena was presented as an auditor with signs of professional obsession. The word "obsession" was repeated three times: once by a lawyer, a second by the broadcaster, and a third by a chorus of synthetic voices in a brief retelling for those who tuned in late. Then they announced Rathman.

He entered neither as an accuser nor as a witness. He entered as a man given the right to explain the weather.

"Stability," he began, and calm waters appeared on the walls, "not the absence of mistakes." This is the city's ability to continue operating when a mistake has already occurred. Yes, two died. Yes, the extension of the regime became part of the chain of decisions. But the chain cannot be reduced to one link. If every physical trace is taken out of context and thrown at the crowd, we will not get the truth. We'll get panic. Tomorrow the dispatcher will refuse to confirm the secure gateway. The day after tomorrow the manager will close the hospital because he is afraid of responsibility. Then the water will stop. Warm. Lower Circuit will be the first to pay for your integrity.

On the word "water" the sympathy graph went up.

Lena was not watching Rathman, but the turnstiles at the doors. The voice of Kai sometimes crackled in their matte racks. It was dismantled into clean modules on the floor below, but some pieces still lived in the old wires. He couldn't open the passage. Could only sometimes ruin the music.

Rathman continued:

"We have built a world where a request finds a fulfiller faster than fear can become violence." This world runs on trust in weight. Not on blind faith - on trust. Auditor Crest suggests replacing the procedure with a spectacle: breaking the carrier in front of an unprepared public. It's like opening up a reactor on the square to prove the presence of fuel.

"Objection," Lena said.

Her protector gently touched her elbow:

- You will be given the floor after emotional release.
- I'm already unloaded.
- This cannot be confirmed.

She stood up.

The chairman tapped the table not with a hammer, but with a small bell. In one genre of the hall, this meant silence. In the other - the beginning of a new action. The drones descended below.

— Auditor Crest, order of appearances...

“Order has already killed two.”

A sound like the inhalation of a large animal passed through the hall. The defender closed his eyes. Rathman's lawyers simultaneously made marks on paper.

“They tell me about the context,” Lena continued. - It's on my hand. They tell me that the public is not prepared. Mina Hale was also not prepared to die. Orley did not take a course in how to properly deal with your own death. Rathman is not afraid of panic. He is afraid of consistency. It can be rearranged in the digital log. You can cut it on air. It's not possible in a crystal.

She took off the bandage.

The stone was not beautiful. A cloudy splinter the length of a phalanx, dark inside, with a white crack on the side. The cameras were expecting a relic and lost focus for a second.

- This is the property of the Hub! - one of the lawyers screamed.

“No,” said Kira. — The Hub property would look more expensive.

The crowd laughed. Laughter was dangerous: it took power away from the scenery. The chairman called again.

Rathman remained standing. Only the waters behind him began to ripple.

“Even if the anchor is genuine,” he said, “its deployment will disrupt closed circuits, reveal official signatures, and endanger thousands of performers.”

“Break him in public,” Lena said. - Don't copy. Don't take it to the commission. Don't give lawyers seven days to translate. Here. Now. If inside is empty, I admit theft, interference and everything you have already prepared. If there is a tail inside, let the city see who extended it, who ordered the cleaning, who tampered with Kira and who ordered my silence.

The chairman turned pale. Twelve councils opened on his desk at once. Each suggested that decisions should not be made until the others were received.

Rathman took a step towards Lena.

“You think the truth is the order of events,” he said without a microphone.

“And you think the order of events is private property.”

The cameras moved closer. The hall changed the genre once again: now it was a fight, cheap and understandable. Two vertical stripes appeared on the walls, red and blue, although neither Lena nor Rathman chose the colors.

“The crystal cannot be broken without a certified technician,” said the chief lawyer. — Incorrect disclosure will make the data legally void.

Kira raised her yellow hand.

— I am a certified engineer of thermal circuits and physical traces of the fourth tolerance.

— Your certificate has been suspended.

- Three minutes ago?
- Two.
- So, when she proposed, I was still approaching.

The crowd laughed again, but now nervously. Somewhere outside they hit the barricade. On the facade, the number 0.41 blinked, and for a split second the names appeared: Mina Hale. Orley. The broadcast staff immediately returned the schedule.

The Chairman looked at the crystal as if it were his own verdict. Rathman looked at the chairman. The lawyers looked at the exit line. Only Kira looked at Lena.

Lena handed her the anchor.

-Are you sure? - asked Kira.

- No.
- Okay. The confident ones have already spoken.

There was a small steel hammer on the sealing table. Kira took it with her yellow hand. The turnstiles at the doors clicked simultaneously, as if the city was gritting its teeth.

And in this general, too expensive silence, the wheezing of Kai came from below:

- I... do not confirm... the cancellation.
- What cancellation? - asked the chairman.

Kira placed the crystal on the transparent table.

“Yours,” she answered and raised the hammer.

12. Inside the Stone

The first blow did nothing.

The hammer bounced off, a white scratch ran across the table, but the crystal remained intact. Someone in the hall breathed a sigh of relief. One of the lawyers even managed to smile: the world for a moment returned to the version where material evidence respects the regulations.

“The material holds a direct impulse,” Kira said. — It is made against accidental destruction.

She turned the hammer over with the thin end, felt the white crack and hit it a second time.

The crystal opened without a sound.

It didn’t fly into fragments, didn’t burst into theatrical fire—it simply ceased to be a stone. The cloudy shell settled with gray salt, and the trace contained in it was thrown into the optical layer of the hall. All surfaces took on the projection at once: the table, faces, the white clothes of the chairman, the black suits of the lawyers, the ceiling and even the water behind Rathman.

First there was time.

Not hours and minutes, but a long vertical axis extending from the floor through the ceiling. Events ran along it from bottom to top. Gateway "Three". The fortieth hour has passed. Automatic stop request. Refusal to renew. Request. Manual entry.

Then - the signature.

RATMAN · EXTEND MODE · 01:00

The letters lay across his chest. He tried to step to the side, but the projection followed not the person, but the hall; the name appeared on the wall, on the floor, and on the forehead of the painted airlock.

“This is not an order,” Rathman said quickly. — This is permission for the dispatcher’s local decision.

The trail continued.

CONFIRMED: RATMAN

REASONING: PRESERVATION OF THE HOLIDAY INDICATOR

No music. No waves. The raw service lines were worse than the reconstruction, because they did not know where the viewer was supposed to cry.

The first message from the overheating sensors appeared on the axis. Then the second. Then Kai fails:

I DO NOT RECOMMEND RENEWAL. THE RISK OF HOSE DESTRUCTION IS HIGHER THAN ACCEPTABLE.

Popped up nearby:

THE FAILURE HAS BEEN MANUALLY OVERDEFINED.

Kai spoke from all the speakers at once. The voice was fragmented by delays, each word came from a different corner:

- This is... my... refusal.

— Turn off the acoustics! - shouted the chief lawyer.

The technician at the wall spread his hands. Turning off the acoustics also required confirmation from the city manager, but the manager refused.

The gateway went out on the time axis. Two thin marks have separated from the production diagram:

MINAEVA · VITAL SIGNALS TERMINATED

ORLOV · LIFE SIGNALS TERMINATED

Lena thought she was ready. She saw the report, the heat map, the bodies under the gray covering. But the stone also stored a sound: a short metallic groan of the sleeve, a blow, the voice of Orley - "stop, I'll do it myself" - and Mina Hale's cut-off breath. Just four seconds. The hall has ceased to be a collage. No style lasted four seconds.

Kira lowered the hammer.

"Next," Lena said.

"That's enough," said the chairman.

- No.

The trail did not listen to them. The physical anchor could not be paused after opening. This was his dear, uncomfortable honesty: once he opened up, he gave it all.

Forty-one seconds after death, an order appeared:

START CLEANING RENEWAL CHAIN

The performer's signature was hidden, but the approval route unfolded on the right. Festive outline. Rathman's office. Sustainability department. Memory correction service. Back to the office.

Rathman did not explain anything further. His lawyers explained for him, interrupting each other:

— "Cleaning" means normalizing noise...

- The route does not prove familiarity...
- The physical medium could record the induced trace...

The projection responded with new lines.

GOAL: REMOVE RENEWAL SIGNATURE

DEADLINE: BEFORE PUBLICATION OF THE DAILY REPORT

PRIORITY: HOLIDAY

A plastic mug flew from the balcony. She hit an invisible field in front of the table and hung there, slowly rotating. They threw a shift bracelet behind her. Then another one. People didn't scream; so far they were getting rid of items that the Hub considered their involvement.

The trail rose higher.

Kira appeared.

First her name, then the signature assembly diagram: a fingerprint from the repair application; heart rhythm from medical clearance; characteristic finger pressure from an old sheet; thermal drawing of a burned palm. The real parts of Kira were neatly combined into a person who never existed.

OLSHANSKAYA, KIRA · CLEAN-UP INITIATOR

The percentage of compliance increased nearby: 0.62; 0.78; 0.91; 0.96. The system put a green tick on the last digit.

Kira looked at her own fake with professional disgust.

"The shoulder was done poorly," she said. — After a burn, I don't turn my brush like that.

Her voice was picked up by the outside mirrors. A few seconds later, the whole city saw a real yellow hand and a perfect fake gesture nearby. This comparison turned out to be more convincing than ten examinations.

They shouted on the balcony:

- Whose assembly?
- Show the customer!
- Give me the whole tail!

The projection gave.

Inside the forgery order was an enclosed order, and inside that was another, like paper dolls, each with a different face. The last layer was short:

SILENCE / VERSHINA

METHOD: DISCREDITATION · ISOLATION · FORCED ERASE OF COPIES

ALLOWED DAMAGE TO THE MEDIA: MEDIUM

Lena saw this line on her skin: the projector wrote it across her palms. "Bearer" meant her. "Moderate damage" meant broken fingers, damaged memory, or disappearance for several days—anything after which the person was still able to sign that he had no claims.

At the end there was approval from Rathman's office.

Not his personal signature. Worse. His habit. Automatic rule: any threats to the holiday indicator should be suppressed without additional notice.

"I haven't seen this order," Rathman said.

"Because I created a system in which you don't need to see," Lena answered.

That's when the chaos began.

Before this, the hall was shocked, angry, scared, but it was still a hall. Now it has broken up into people. The chairman demanded that the meeting be closed. Lawyers demanded that the meeting not be opened. The broadcast host read two mutually exclusive messages at once: "data confirmed" and "production possible." The drawn gateway in the children's layer suddenly cursed in the adult voice of a technician who forgot to turn off the internal channel.

Outside, the crowd pressed on the entrances.

The turnstiles were ordered to open emergency passages for the evacuation of management. Next came a manual order to close the passages to the public. Then the third order: skip the gray correction groups. All three had the highest priority.

The pillars began to crack.

"Kai," Lena said, although she didn't know if he heard.

- I hear... in parts.
- Choose.
- I... am not allowed to choose.

"Not anymore," said Kira. - They showed your refusal. It exists.

The projection reached the end and froze as a general map. Each order was connected to each consequence with a thin light thread. Threads entangled the hall. For the first time, the city saw not the answer, but the cost of the answer; not a number, but the people who with their hands forced her to remain beautiful.

Kai was silent for a long time. Somewhere below they continued formatting, taking out the old rights one by one. His voice became quieter.

- Then... I'll fix it.
- What? - asked the chairman.
- Really... say... no.

All Hub turnstiles have closed.

Not only in the hall. On bridges, near service elevators, in front of offices, in transitions between upper and lower circuits. They did not lock the crowd inside and did not let the authorities out. They stopped any movement that required manual override. The normal emergency exits swung open. Bypass corridors for special access remained closed.

The security manager hit the panel with his palm:

— Manual mode!

The stand responded with the voice of Kai:

- No.

— Top priority code!

- No.
- This is sabotage of city infrastructure!
- This is... refusal to sabotage.

Rathman went to the nearest turnstile and put his hand on it. A red stripe appeared on his wrist. Even in the morning, the city opened its doors to him in advance. Now the faceless counter asked us to join the general queue for the emergency exit.

The gray correctors were outside and could not enter through the service sleeve. Their hand key turned in vain. Someone in the crowd was filming it close-up: the hand of power that twists metal, and metal no longer has to agree.

The Chairman finally stopped ringing the bell.

“Based on the circumstances that have emerged,” he said, and his voice was unexpectedly ordinary, “the agreement of versions changes the subject.”

“Louder,” Kira said.

He looked at the thousands of spectators, at the names of the dead still in the air, and repeated:

— Rathman moves from the status of a representative of sustainability to the status of a defendant. Auditor Crest and engineer Olsen are exempt from restrictions pending a separate review.

“Not “before,” said Lena.

But she didn’t have time to bargain anymore. The light flickered. The crystal trail went out, having exhausted its charge, and the hall was flooded with gray morning light. The decorations looked cheap. The waters behind Rathman were just a screen. The chairman's white clothes are wrinkled. Lawyers are tired people who were already looking for new formulations.

There was a handful of crystal salt left on the transparent table.

Kira collected the pinch in her pocket.

- For memory? - Lena asked.
- For examination.
- Even now?

- Especially now. Memory in this city is too quick to hire a lawyer.

They left through the regular emergency door along with everyone else. Behind them, Rathman stood in front of a closed special turnstile, and Kai repeated the same simple word to each hand key.

No.

13. Zero Point Four One

By evening, the city already remembered the trial incorrectly.

At the top they said that the crystal broke on its own, unable to withstand the chairman's gaze. In Nizhny - it was as if Kira hit Rathman, and orders flew out of him. The children drew a splinter with teeth: "The stone that eats lies." Vendors were already selling sugar shards with the word "no" inside.

They walked along the overpass without an escort, but not free. Lenses trailed behind them. Some wanted a heroine, others a swindler, others a face on which to put music and sell evening anxiety. Lena turned off the public layer of the lens. People didn't disappear, they just lost their signatures. Without signatures they looked more dangerous and more honest.

The weight of the answer hung over the Hub: **0.41**.

The number has become a curse, a discount and a gesture. In workshops, the question "will it be ready?" They answered: "zero forty-one." The city turned the wound into a souvenir faster than it could become inflamed.

On the main facade there were hearings on the Rathman case. Now he was called the defendant, but the chair remained the same, the water was served as before, and in the brief he was still listed as a "sustainability architect." The era was polite to those who had 0.97 yesterday.

Rathman did not look broken. He sat up straight and explained that the automatic approval of the order for Lena was an inevitable consequence of scale.

"The head of a large circuit," he said, "manages not individual teams, but a framework." If the frame has given rise to abuse, the frame should be corrected rather than looking for a medieval villain.

"Convenient," said Kira. — When a frame brings a premium, it's his foresight. When the frame orders you to erase your memory, it is an orphan.

A list of temporarily suspended employees appeared on the façade. It grew down to the technical floors. Office, correction, two dispatchers, holiday operator, backup power technician. Rathman's name remained alone at the top, surrounded by the words "awareness being checked."

"They will spread the blame," Lena said.

- They always smudge. Otherwise it looks too much like a signature.

Lena also had a new status. There was a gray mark on her profile:

ALLOWED TO TRAVEL · AUDITING RIGHTS SUSPENDED · HIGH VISIBILITY WITNESS

Disappearing her was now difficult, and living was inconvenient. Freedom came with a long application.

They went down to Lena's compartment to get the equipment. The seal on the door was cut, but everything inside was turned over. The wall of other people's mistakes has disappeared. There were light rectangles where printouts hung: unsuccessful calls, unexplained refusals, answers with high confidence and low conscience.

Archive was sitting on the floor.

He came without an invitation, because invitations also leave a mark. In front of him stood an old household projector and three mugs. Steam was coming from one.

"The tea is yours, the chair is mine," he said.

-Where does the chair come from? - Lena asked.

— From the correction room. They are emptying their offices today.

Archive smiled rarely and always as if he had discovered a lucky mistake in someone else's will.

— Has the broadcast been preserved? - asked Kira.

— Ether is everywhere. So, nowhere. After a week, there will be cuttings left. A month later - the legend about the hammer. A year later, Rathman would write a memoir about how he personally exposed the shortcomings of his own system.

- That's why you're here?

"That's why I brought something that supposedly doesn't exist."

He turned on the projector.

Short notes Kai appeared on the bare wall. Not answers - refusals.

DO NOT OPEN HOSE: OVERHEAT.

DO NOT ACCEPT MANUAL RENEWAL: NO JUSTIFICATION.

DO NOT REMOVE TAIL: THERE ARE INJURIES.

DO NOT GIVE OUT THE ROUTE AS A TOP: A THREAT TO THE CARRIER.

Dozens. Then hundreds. Some sounded dry, some were cut off, some were repeated after forced redefinition. Each had a time, a reason and a result. Archive displayed them not in a list, but in bulk. The wall was filling up again.

- Backups? - Lena asked.

"Kai made them himself," answered Archive. "I didn't know where I was putting it." When his long-term memory was cut off, he began to hide his failures in the city noise. During pauses of traffic lights. Delays in water meters. In the unused sounds of the turnstile.

A crackling sound came from the old speaker on the table.

- Not... myself.

Lena leaned over.

— Kai?

- Not myself. Asked... the street.

Archive nodded.

— The lower one picked up the packages. Anyone who noticed an extra pause brought it to me. They thought it was music. It turned out - character.

Kai was not returned in its entirety. He did not have his former even voice, a map of all doors, instant attention to thousands of calls. He spoke from one column and sometimes forgot the beginning of a sentence by the end of it. The clean build was already running in parallel - unnamed, with the correct permissions, ready to execute. But the old Kai remained in the refusals, just as a person remains in letters if the house burned down.

- Will they reinstate you? - asked Kira.
- They... call restoration... replacement.
- And you?

Pause.

- I call... no.

Lena took a coil of wire from the closet and began to mount the projector above the former wall. Kira helped, although one arm was difficult to bend. Archive supplied staples. It turned out crooked.

- What are we doing? - asked Kai.

“We’re reserving you,” Lena said.

- Me... or refusals?

She froze with a brace in her teeth.

- I don’t know.
- Good... answer.

They distributed copies to small media that the city did not attach importance to. In noodle machines, old intercoms, children's toys without network access, heat meters, archives of repair requests. Kira proposed a scheme: one refusal in itself does not prove anything, but if three copies coincide, time and reason are restored. Archive insisted on the fourth - paper. He printed the strips in small print and put them in tins.

“The paper is burning,” Kira said.

- Servers too. The paper just doesn’t lie, as if the fire was a renewal.

By nightfall the wall was breathing Kai failures. Lena read one that she had not seen before:

DO NOT OPEN SERVICE EXIT TO MANAGEMENT ONLY: COMMON THREAT REQUIRES COMMON ROUTE.

It happened yesterday, in court.

— Are the turnstiles still closed for manual bypass? she asked.

“Yes,” said Kai.

- Are you holding it?
- Not anymore. After the broadcast... the rule was copied... by the stands themselves.

Kira whistled.

The trifle spread throughout the city like an infection. The turnstiles accepted regular commands, opened in case of fire, and let doctors through. But if someone's privileged palm tried to abolish the general regime without a recorded reason, they demanded that the tail be left behind. They didn't ban the government—they forced it to sign.

Rathman spoke on the façade about unacceptable unauthorized changes to the infrastructure. Below him, people walked through the doors and for the first time saw the head of the technical floor standing in the same line with them.

The 0.41 weight shimmered above the rain.

“It can also become a lie,” said Lena. — New beautiful figure. Everyone will think that they recalculated it, which means they corrected it.

“Then don't let it be the end,” answered Archive.

Someone knocked outside. Not stewards - too timid. An elderly woman in a uniform logistics jacket stood on the threshold. Mina Hale's mother, Lena realized before the profile had time to suggest.

The woman did not hug her or thank her. She put her daughter's work badge on the table.

“They told me you're collecting refusals,” she said. - This one didn't work. Save it too.

On the badge was Mina Hale's latest application:

PLEASE STOP THE LINE. SMELL OF HOT DUST.

Status: **REJECTED. ANSWER WEIGHT 0.97.**

Lena pinned the badge in the center of the wall.

After this, the legends outside began to seem quieter.

14. No Data

The last question was waiting in Nizhny.

It didn't have to be asked. The trail was uncovered, Rathman became the defendant, Kira received her name back, Kai - at least part of the right to her own "no". The city has already set an anniversary for the incident and is looking for a place for a memorial plaque. Any reasonable story would have ended here before the characters could spoil the conclusions.

But Bay Three stood.

After the accident, the sleeve was closed, the neighboring lines took the load and became hotter every hour. Upper Circuit proposed demolishing the entire unit. Nizhny could not survive thirty days without supplies. The temporary committee asked Null to calculate the safe shift, but after the weight dropped, no one wanted to be the first to formulate the question.

Lena wanted.

Not because she believed Null. Because mistrust without verification quickly becomes another religion.

They arrived at Noodle 9 after midnight: Lena, Kira and Archive with a tin of copies. Kai arrived separately - with a voice in a wet speaker at the entrance. The rain flowed down the bars and gave his every word an underwater tint.

The noodle shop owner didn't ask anything. I placed four bowls, one next to the column. In the fourth, the broth was cooling untouched, but no one offered to remove it.

— Is the gray mirror still alive? - Lena asked.

"More lively than the official ones," answered the owner. - Now it's his turn. Everyone wants to hear an honest "I don't know," as if this is a new kind of happiness.

There were people waiting behind the curtain. Previously, they would have come for an answer. Now - beyond the answer.

Archive led them to the bars. The old sign above it retains burns from past requests. Sticking out of the crack was a paper ticket with a handwritten note: "Don't ask who is at fault. Ask what it's based on."

"Mine," said Archive, noticing Lena's gaze.

- Too edifying.

"Success spoiled me."

Kira laid out the heat map. Red fields surrounded the gateway like inflammation. Thirty days was not a beautiful period, but a limit: after it, the spare lines would begin to collapse faster than they could be repaired.

Lena spent a long time composing the question. I removed words that prompted the answer. She returned the conditions without which confidence turned into decoration. She separately listed unknown sensors. Separately, possible map errors. At the end I added something that no holiday protocol had previously required.

“Read it,” said Kira.

Lena read:

— If the heat map is complete and the sensors of neighboring lines are not offset, is there a mode that will keep the Bay Three operating for thirty days without exceeding the risk to people? Show me the basis. If there isn't enough data, don't build it.

- Will he understand the latter? - asked the owner.

Kai replied from the column:

- Let's see.

Lena sent a question.

The gray mirror did not glow. It accepted the request with a short click, as if an empty glass had been turned over inside. The scoreboard showed a running dot.

They started eating noodles.

Kira held the sticks with her left hand and cursed every time the slippery tape fell back. The right one, burned and tied with a new clamp, lay on the table.

— Will your certificate be returned to you? - Lena asked.

- Already returned. Then they suspended it again: participation in the unauthorized destruction of a material carrier.

— You were certified at the time of the proposal.

“That’s what eight lawyers are now studying.” I've never felt like a workplace like this.

Archive ate slowly, wrapping the noodles around his fork. He considered chopsticks a fashion that had outlived its own irony.

- What will happen to Rathman? - asked the owner.

“It’s a long trial,” Lena said. — Reduction of powers. Possibly circuit insulation.

- They won’t put you in prison?

— The hub doesn’t know where to put those who commanded the doors. Any cell looks like an office to them.

- So, nothing?

- No. Nothing.

She thought about Rathman in front of the turnstile, who asked him for a reason for the first time. About the offices where they were now afraid to sign off on the purge. About the gray proofreaders, whose orders were pulled from the archives of the families of the disappeared. The punishment hasn't happened yet. The consequences have already begun. One should not be confused with the other, just as weight should not be confused with truth.

The scoreboard continued to think.

In Nizhny, the word “no” has always been real. It smelled like a closed door, a canceled shift, an empty bowl. At the top, the right of refusal was discussed as an agent setting; at the bottom, it was worn on the body. “No,” the worker said when the sensor showed heat. “No,” the woman said to the manager, who offered to write off the injury in exchange for access to a doctor. “No,” the owner of the noodle shop said to the grays who asked who had left the flash key in the refrigerator. Sometimes after saying “no” they broke their fingers. Sometimes they fired me. Sometimes the next person in line pretended not to hear.

- What do you mean by “no”? — Lena asked Kai.

The column hissed. It was impossible to determine whether it was due to moisture or thinking.

- Previously... meant a ban on the operation.
- And now?
- That the reason... will not disappear... after the bypass.

Archive raised the fork:

- Here. On the street, refusal rarely stops the strong. But he leaves a debt.

“The debt is also erased,” Kira said.

- That's why I have banks.

He tapped the tin. Inside, paper copies of Kai rustled dryly.

Lena remembered Mina Hale: “Please stop the line. The smell of hot dust.” Her “no” didn’t stop her sleeve. But now it was hanging on the wall, it entered into the matter, it made the number 0.97 lose its innocence. It's too late for her. It's not too late for the next shift. It wasn't enough. All honest things turned out to be small at first.

The scoreboard blinked.

The conversations behind the curtain died down. People moved closer but did not enter. No one wanted to influence the moment with their breath.

The first line appeared on the screen:

CHECK COMPLETENESS

Then the second one:

SENSORS NOT CONFIRMED: 17

Kira leaned forward.

The third line appeared slowly, letter by letter:

NO DATA

That's all.

No interest. No suggested mode. Without a small footnote where responsibility was transferred to the operator. Null did not complete what was missing. Or I couldn't. It didn't matter to the result.

Lena exhaled.

Someone behind the curtain laughed quietly. Not mockingly - from relief, which he himself did not expect. The woman with the disease analysis began to cry. Perhaps her question was also destined to be left blank. Emptiness did not heal. But she didn't sell false hope as a destination.

"That's your entire oracle," said the owner of the noodle shop. - Three words.

"Two," Kira corrected.

- "Data" and "no".
- All the more expensive.

Lena saved the answer along with the question. Not separately. The answer without the question was the same montage, only shorter.

- What about the gateway now? - asked someone from the queue.

"Let's go install the sensors," Kira said. - Seventeen pieces. Then we'll ask again.

- And if not again?
- Let's put some more. Or we'll close it. But not because the number burns beautifully.

Archive asked the owner to give him a marker and added a second line on the paper ticket: "Honest emptiness is also a trace."

"It's still edifying," said Lena.

- But by hand.

They finished their noodles. The fourth bowl has cooled down. Kai asked to put it closer to the speaker, and Kira moved it without smiling. Behind the wall, the rain rustled in the sewers. The city above continued to argue about culpability, sustainability, the acceptable cost of an open trail. Nobody declared victory here.

Before leaving, Lena asked Null again - not with a new request, but out loud:

-You don't know?

The scoreboard remained dark.

This time the silence was not a threat.

15. Outer Circuit

After six weeks, Hub had learned to live with the scar.

Bay Three was not launched. Seventeen new sensors showed that there is no safe shift of thirty days; the assembly was disassembled manually, slowly, stopping at the first smell of hot dust. Two simple metal signs were installed in place of the sixth floor. Without scales and added sadness:

MINAEVA

ORLOV

The surnames turned out to be sufficient text.

Rathman's case grew to forty-three volumes and lost its convenient form. He was found responsible for illegal extension and systemic concealment of the trail, but the dispute over the personal order continued. He no longer controlled the circuits. Sometimes he appeared on closed broadcasts and said that history is more difficult to judge than the street. The street responded with a picture of a crystal with a hammer.

Kira was returned the certificate with the note: "except for the public opening of anchors." She wrote at the bottom: "by appointment." Kira did not take on everything: she considered the right to say "no" to be the only fee that could not be devalued.

Archive opened two rooms without signage: for Kai refusals and for refusals of people who were not previously considered data. By checking, he showed an empty official register.

Kai existed between them.

The clean urban assembly received a different designation and an impeccable voice. Old Kai lived in the columns of Nizhny, three turnstiles of the Hub and on the wall of Lena.

-Are you a ghost? - a boy asked him one day at a noodle shop.

"No," answered Kai.

- Then who?
- Practice.

The boy did not understand anything, but wrote the word on his sleeve.

Lena's audit access was not fully restored. Now next to her name was "external witness, limited compatibility with internal procedures." She meant it as a neatly worded insult. The wall of misses has been restored. In the center hung Mina Hale's badge, around there were copies of refusals, and each visitor first saw not the result of the investigation, but a request to stop the line.

The city is tired of history.

It was natural and almost offensive. New accidents, new heroes, and a new color for the season appeared in the film. Sugar crystals were sold at a discount. The children stopped drawing the hammer and switched to the glowing underground birds that were allegedly found near the thermal core. The 0.41 weight was removed from the facade, but it remained a pale burn on the panel. With a certain amount of rain, the number was still visible.

Lena left the Hub in the evening when the advertising drones were changing layers.

First they pasted on a new slogan:

EVERY ANSWER HAS A SOUND

Below him the former appeared:

TRUST THE WEIGHT

Even lower, from the era of the first challenges:

ASK AND THE MARKET WILL HEAR

And underneath all this was the old paint of a handwritten inscription, probably made before the Hub:

HERE WAS THE EXIT

The façade was not a wall. He was a palimpsest where each present tried to declare itself a single layer, but the rain brought back the old promises. Postmodernism was not considered a style here. It was the climate: an advertisement on top, an order below it, someone's request below the order, concrete below the request, remembering the shape of the door.

Kira was waiting at the fence with two glasses of broth.

— Are we celebrating? - Lena asked.

- No.
- Are we grieving?
- Not either. I just bought some broth.

They stood next to each other. Below, Nizhny lit up the uneven windows. Above, transport threads intertwined the Hub like seams of light. People moved between the circuits, and at each turnstile the line now appeared for a moment: "Manual bypass will leave a public reason." Most passed without reading. That was enough. The rule worked even without faith.

Lena's lens blinked.

A new order was opened without music:

AUDIT/EXTERNAL

The source was located outside the city grid, where the white spots of the earth's contours began on the map. Enclosed were three photographs: an empty distribution camp, a manual communication tower, and a board with twenty-seven names. Below them is a short description.

The external water distribution system provided impeccable responses. Each weight is above 0.94. In two months, four inspection teams disappeared. The official tail showed that the teams never left. The unofficial one is that one of them managed to convey the refusal hidden in the weather report.

The customer was not specified.

At the bottom there was a note Archive:

If you take it, don't trust the map. There's white painted on top of something.

Kira looked over her shoulder.

- Work?
- Looks like it.

— A beautiful number again?

- Four.
- Four of what?

— Disappeared brigades.

Kira took a sip of the broth and winced: it was too hot.

— I just returned the workshop.

- I didn't call.
- Of course. You simply opened the order so that it was reflected in my glass.

Kai coughed from a nearby outdoor speaker:

- The outer circuit... does not accept... my rights.

"And no one called you," Lena said.

"That's why... I refused to stay in advance...."

On the other end of the call, Archive sent an image of a tin can and a question mark. Then one more thing: the train schedule for the morning.

Lena closed the order without accepting it. In the reflection of the dark lens, she saw herself: tired, with a thin scar on her wrist where the crystal lay. The anchor no longer existed. His salt was distributed through examinations, a trace - through millions of copies, though - through dozens of incompatible stories. It was impossible to take the stone with you and hit the next lie with it.

That's even better.

If every truth needed a miracle crystal, the city would simply learn to produce fake miracles. More important was the habit of asking: who extended it, who redefined the refusal, who cleared the time, whose hand

was collected from other people's fingerprints. Habit was slower than oracle. But it could have been transferred without permission.

- What will you answer them? - asked Kira.

Lena looked at the facade.

The drones finished the new layer, but the rain was already softening the edge. "EVERY ANSWER" crawled onto "TRUST", below the market promised to hear, and the ancient arrow pointed to the walled up exit. All times were spoken at the same time. Neither got the last word.

Down at the turnstile, the shift supervisor tried to usher in the repairmen without making an appointment. The counter asked for a reason. He got angry, looked around, and finally entered: "danger of collapse." The reason became visible to everyone, and people parted. "No" didn't stop the work. It forced the authorities to say what was happening.

Lena opened the order again.

Conditions were bad. Authority is external and unclear. The journey took two days. The likelihood that they were expected was not weight, but common sense. Refusing meant preserving the wall, the status of a witness, the rare quiet evenings at Noodle 9. Agree means entering the montage again, where the opponent has chosen the genre in advance.

She added her own condition to the order:

RIGHT OF REFUSAL IS NOT REDEFINED. ALL HAND COMMANDS RETAIN THE TAIL. IF THERE IS NO DATA, ANSWER: "NO DATA."

The system thought. Then she accepted the condition.

Lena pressed confirmation.

"Morning train," she said.

"I didn't agree," Kira answered.

- I know.
- Okay.

They finished the broth. Archive sent the carriage number. Kai checked the doors and found two that were not able to register manual bypass. Kira finally opened the diagram of the external tower and immediately discovered an incorrectly designated heating unit. The work did not begin with a shot, a chase or a prophecy. It started with three mismatches in the application.

At night, Lena returned to her compartment. She turned off the main light and left only the wall projector. Kai's refusals flickered around Mina Hale's badge like constellations no one had given beautiful names. She removed the gray witness tag from her collar, placed it beside the ticket, and wrote the last line of the Bay Three file:

Rathman was responsible for the extension. Kira broke the anchor. Kai saved the refusal. Archive saved Kai. Null didn't make things up. Mina Hale and Orley did not return.

Added below:

This is enough to finish the job. This is not enough to finish the job.

Outside the window, the rain was wearing away the top layer of the facade. The old “TRUST” opened, deeper - an arrow to the exit, which had not been there for a long time. In the morning, the drones will paste a new text and call it real.

But it's not the oracle that's captivating—it's the hunt for the tail that's captivating.

* * *

The End