Chapter 5. Saving Drowning Men Is the Drowning Men's Own Responsibility

My landing was smoother this time. Or rather, it was a splashdown. That is, I teleported into the waters surrounding Bermuda Lemuria. The warm ocean greeted me so gently that I felt a sudden urge to swim to shore like a regular homo sapien. Thankfully I'd had the foresight to take off my shoes back in the woods near Grodno.

Someone called out to me from behind. "Yan! Welcome home!"

I turned and saw the wet, tanned face of a woman not far from me. Her voice was low and velvety, with a slight rasp. She smiled, flashing perfectly straight white teeth, then disappeared beneath the turquoise wave that rolled toward me, only to resurface so close that her nubile bare chest brushed against my inconveniently clothed body for just a moment.

Her dark, sagacious eyes pierced straight through me, instantly recognising how inflamed I was with a passion for an innocent girl, how tense I was from forced abstinence, and how much I longed for a woman's touch. Cassandra — that's her name — pulled back, smiled again, and gave me a playful, inviting glance before nodding toward the shore, beckoning me to follow her.

She swam toward the beach silently, without splashes, as though she were part of the water itself. She kicked her legs wide, teasing me even more. Her powerful energy drew me into a dangerous, unbearably tempting trap, and if I had been naked too, everything might have happened right there in the water.

Cassandra was the younger sister of Mina, my father's girlfriend. She was born on Earth, before the mass migration to New Lemuria, and rarely visited the new planet — only for the Unities. I had never encountered this mysterious woman one-on-one.

Most of the homo liberatus who remained in the Bermuda colony refused to believe in Earth's doom and were in no hurry to leave it. Cassandra would know better, I guess — she was a prophet, after all. She had been given her name in infancy, long before her parents could have guessed that she would grow up to be one of Lemuria's most powerful oracles and one of those who had predicted my mission. Mina had told me all this. She loved talking about her sister.

Even in this place, hidden from so-called civilization, the water reeked of oil and something else utterly incompatible with Nature. It was simply unbearable! One must truly love Earth to stay here…

My pants, shirt, and wool sweater borrowed from Polina's father's closet were heavy with water. When I stepped onto the beach, the clothes clung to me, dripping salty streams into the sand. I stripped them off as quickly as I could.

Cassandra, on the other hand, had gone into the water already nude, deliberately, just to greet me that way. That was how accurately she had foreseen the future!

Homo liberatus generally dislike wearing clothes. Naturally. They only reluctantly cover their nudity when interacting with humans, either donning appropriate human attire for the occasion or opting for light tunics. Two such tunics awaited us on the beach under a palm tree, but my new acquaintance was in no hurry to cover her beautiful body of a flourishing, two-hundred-year-old Lemurian who would appear to be about thirty in the eyes of a homo sapien. Cassandra turned this way and that, ostensibly to dry her smooth, sun-kissed skin, but in truth, this display was blatantly intended for me, a show that delighted both actress and audience alike. Her sculpted figure glistened with droplets of ocean water shimmering in the sunlight. Her prominent, upturned nipples hardened under the gentle breeze, and her flawless long legs parted slightly, beckoning, seducing. It would have been easy to surmise her desire to conceive even if she hadn't revealed this part of her thoughts to me, *"Be brave, my hero!"*

Resisting was impossible as well as unnecessary, and I set aside the questions swarming in my mind for later. After admiring her from a distance for a few minutes, I approached Cassandra and stood close. My hands slid over her, from her long neck to her exquisite breasts, somehow both firm and soft, down to her flat stomach. Finally, my fingers brushed the damp cleft between her smooth thighs. Her body responded to my touch like obedient clay under a sculptor's hands, yielding to my desires. That is the advantage of telepathy when it comes to earthly pleasures. The fact that the seer's thoughts were not accessible to me only teased and ignited my passion further. We did it on the beach, in the waves, and even in the air. I lost track of time, receiving a magnificent welcome to the Bermuda colony.

To repeatedly experience the euphoria of embrace and the bliss of emptiness! To indulge in carnal pleasures and taste the essence of life — this is why Lemurians refuse to transition to purely astral existence! That, indeed, would be mere existence, not *life*! And we rarely deny ourselves this joy, gifted by Nature itself. For homo liberatus, such matters are simple, unlike for humans, at least until the question of having children arises.

At the very beginning of both my mission and life path, I was not ready to become a father, and I especially did not fancy the idea of giving a child to a woman whom I could never fully understand. In turn, Cassandra made it clear that this would happen eventually, although she wasn't in a hurry. That first time, she sought closeness not only out of a desire to conceive from a messiah. Thanks to her gift, the prophetess saw in me a rare hero among Lemurian men and admired me for deeds yet to be accomplished. Her admiration stirred a strange feeling in me, as if I were floating in weightlessness, without any point of support.

I already mentioned that foresight is not my strongest trait. Perhaps it runs in the family, as my father often complains about the same problem. So, I had no choice but to trust the expert, especially one so pleasing to both the eye and touch. Cassandra revealed that she foresaw many trials on my path but was certain I would overcome them. Given this extraordinary woman's proven talent for prophecy, I had good reason to believe in success. Thus, my encounter with her not only entertained but also encouraged me.

Finally done with the pressing matters at hand, we teleported to a plateau used by Lemurians for group meditations. On the island, which my people had called home for thousands of years and upon which I had arrived for the first time, decisions were made in the Minor Unity. Such autonomy was necessary since homo liberatus did not live in Bermuda Lemuria alone, even though they considered themselves its rightful rulers in the sense that here, and only here, they led their lifestyle openly.

The Unity Plateau sat at a commanding height. From there, the entire island was visible. It was surrounded by a natural defence: sharp, bladelike rock fragments jutting out of the ocean as if deliberately placed by Nature to protect my people from unwanted guests. Within this bastion of massive cliffs, sheer drops, and dangerous reefs, Bermuda Lemuria was overgrown with tropical jungles teeming with the lively hum of untamed Nature. Only three tiny strips of pristine sandy beaches were visible from the plateau. On the horizon, far away, only a sharp eye could make out the silhouettes of other distant islands. Yet no one noticed our land, thanks to its camouflaging energy dome. To homo sapiens, Bermuda Lemuria seemed to merge with the ocean.

As soon as our feet touched the warm stones of the plateau, Lemurians in green tunics began appearing from the air. They materialised in singles, in pairs, and occasionally in small groups. About fifty of them arrived in total. As friendly telepathic greetings flowed into my mind like smooth, clear streams, the harmony of the tropical Nature's chorus remained undisturbed.

The island was home to a handful of homo liberatus who fiercely loved Earth and had no desire to leave it. The inhabitants of the Bermuda colony dreamed of restoring *the balance*. They often appeared among humans, inspiring them to preserve and extend life by following Nature. Lemurians sought and

often found ways to educate the most capable homo sapiens, believing that only by becoming stronger as a species could humanity free itself from the true threat to its existence, the threat born from fear. Unfortunately, the peaceful path of self-development is slow, while energy parasites — vampires — act swiftly and ruthlessly. They push more and more technologies that weaken homo sapiens, pulling humanity further from Nature and deeper into a cage of fear that turns people into slaves.

That's why they had long awaited my arrival. Despite my preoccupation with the still-unsuccessful search for a vampire, the meeting with the Bermuda Lemurians filled me with hope.

Cassandra raised her hand, demanding attention, and, without opening her lips, addressed her companions. "Friends, we are all well aware of the important and difficult mission foretold for Yan, son of Simon. There are very few of us left on this planet. Why? Why do we refuse the easy path of simply fleeing to New Lemuria, where there are no destructive consequences of the fear-born 'civilization' of homo sapiens? You know the answer: we refuse to abandon our home. We will not leave Earth's Nature to the mercy of vampires. And now, he, our hope for restoring balance on this planet, is finally here, at the beginning of a path none of us has agreed to take until now. And Yan needs our help."

"Depends on what kind of help!" several homo liberatus thought warily. None of them would want to enter any kind of war, even if the enemy were a spawn of hell itself. Cassandra smirked. "No one can force you to kill. Killing is equivalent to suicide and Nature has never repealed that law for anyone. Yan merely needs information." With her gaze, she signalled that it was my turn.

"Many of you travel to different parts of the world. Perhaps someone has seen this person," I said, visualising the portrait of a homo sapien with yellow-hazel and blue eyes, drawn from the memories of the museum director and Aleksandr Zhelobkovich. "Witnesses of Nazi crimes in Belarus, instead of giving me the details I need, recall only this face, which they saw about thirty years ago."

"Hypnosis," the Unity guessed in unison.

"Yes," I confirmed. "Apparently, this man is the key to starting the mission, but I don't know who he is."

Unfortunately, I couldn't find a matching face in the Lemurians' memory, although… Wait! This could be it! Or maybe not? I met the thoughtful black eyes of a homo liberatus named Indo. He smiled in response, shook his impressive mane of straight black hair streaked with grey, and approached me. The others, without any formalities, dissolved into the transparent ocean breeze.

"Why is the memory so faint?" I asked Indo. "And fragmented. Strange… The image is very unclear and I'm not even sure if it's the one I need."

"It's not my memory," Indo replied, curling his lips. "I glimpsed it accidentally, many years ago." He sighed. "Come on. You'll have to meet its owner." We teleported to the island's interior, though my companion seemingly lacked enthusiasm for the upcoming encounter.

It wasn't only homo liberatus that lived on Bermuda Lemuria. Indo and I arrived at a small village nestled in a valley overgrown with dense jungle. It was a real village, consisting of handmade huts. Indo knocked on one of the houses. There was no answer, but we heard a wooden object falling inside. Indo cautiously pressed his ear to the door but then suddenly changed his expression, shouted, "Follow me!" and vanished through the wall.

Inside the hut, we saw a homo sapien hanging by the neck from a rope tied to a crossbeam under the ceiling. His legs twitched convulsively. I was so stunned that I froze, wasting precious seconds, while Indo, more experienced in dealing with humans, quickly grabbed the man's legs and lifted him to relieve the pressure on his throat.

"Cut the rope! What are you waiting for?" my companion roared. This feverish outburst, coming from the quiet, introspective Lemurian who had seen much in over four hundred years, was so

unexpected that it startled me even more. Finally regaining my senses and realising it was a matter of life and death, I overcame gravity, reached the ceiling, and began to untie the tight knot with my fingers, human style.

"Knife on the table!" Indo barked again.

By that point, the rope had already given way, and our hapless suicidal friend fell heavily to the floor. Indo began reviving the old man's breathing, while I approached the table and picked up what was called a "knife." It was a sharp metal blade set in a wooden handle, evidently made long ago, perhaps during its owner's time on the continent. I didn't recall ever seeing such a tool before, at least not during my brief stay on Earth. Of course, if I dug into childhood memories, I would remember my mother using knives for cooking, but I had completely forgotten about this human invention in New Lemuria. Now, I was just dumbfounded at the sight of a living being trying to end its own life voluntarily — an act unthinkable for any creature of Nature except homo sapiens. I was so astonished that I failed to use either the unfamiliar tool or a more practical method — burning the rope with a burst of energy. Instead, I followed my human instinct.

"Simon will have a good laugh at this!" flashed through my mind.

The old man we had saved, meanwhile, regained consciousness. He was sullen, sitting silently on the floor, and blocking our attempts to hear or see what he was thinking — and quite successfully, I may add!

"How is he doing that?" I asked Indo silently. *"He's just a homo sapien!"*

"Oh, that's an interesting story," my companion replied telepathically and then spoke aloud, "You see, a long time ago, the Lemurians decided not to let anyone who accidentally landed on this island during shipwrecks or plane crashes leave, as discovering our last refuge on Earth posed a risk. Unfortunately, we must keep them here against their will." Indo glanced sympathetically at the sullen man staring at the floor. "But we always invite these stranded homo sapiens to become part of our world. We offer them training in everything that makes us fearless and free. Not everyone achieves the same results, but they do improve. These people grow more self-aware and gain confidence. Some even begin to feel a stronger connection to us than to their own kind.

"Anyone who masters teleportation well enough to return to the mainland is free to leave the island. As they say, saving a drowning man is the responsibility of the drowning man himself. In the past, many succeeded. They returned to humanity as enlightened teachers. But in the last hundred years, no homo sapien has managed to leave. Technical progress has made them lazy, replacing their natural abilities and eroding their belief in them.

"Of course, those stuck here do learn some things. Telepathy is fairly easy to master, and blocking access to one's thoughts is even easier. And that," Indo concluded, pointing at the one who just tried to take his own life, "is the only thing this poor man has managed to learn." Then, addressing him reproachfully in the man's native language, Indo asked, "What were you thinking, Jim?"

"I can't take it anymore," the man replied grimly. "I'm sick of you and your enlightened ones. Sick and tired!"

"Why don't you work on it yourself? There is a way back."

"A way for who? Certainly not me. I have only one path, and that is straight to the grave." He hopelessly jabbed a finger into the air. "Maybe, just maybe, I'll see my family there someday…"

"He has a wife and two daughters. He misses them," Indo explained to me, and then said to Jim, "We need your help, Jim."

"Oh really?" the old man snapped angrily. "Since when does a worthless louse like me help the almighty Liberatus?"

It wasn't a promising start, but wise Indo continued in his peaceful tone. "We just need your memories about this man," he said, projecting a transparent image of a military man with strange eyes into the air.

Jim smirked, squinted, and then responded. "Yeah, I met this *comrade* once…"

"Then let us in. And you won't have to explain. We'll just take a look at what interests us," our negotiator encouraged him enthusiastically.

But the homo sapien knew how to bargain better than we did. "No way," he snapped with a hateful glare in his impenetrable eyes, and the defiance of a man with nothing to lose. "I won't give you anything for free!"

His mental defence was like armour. It might have been the only skill Jim had learned on Bermuda Lemuria, but he had mastered it well. What's more, the spark of excitement awakened in the old pilot by this confrontation seemed to strengthen his energy.

"What do you want then?" I asked impatiently. There was an odd irony in the fact that the only barrier between me and my only lead was this frail, bony eighty-year-old homo sapien with a will of steel. I could have tried harder and broken through his defences, but that would have hurt this poor guy whose only crime was resenting the Lemurians for a life spent far from his loved ones. That much was clear even without telepathy. I pitied Jim.

"I want to go home and spend the rest of my days with my family," he said quietly.

"His wife is alive," Indo explained and, torn by doubt, continued telepathically, *"We've never allowed anyone who couldn't teleport on their own to leave the island. What do you think, Yan? Is this hypnotist hunt truly worth making an exception?"*

"Most likely, the outcome will determine whether I ever find that vampire. Whether the mission even starts," I replied gloomily, understanding the dilemma this posed for the Bermuda Lemurians. Indo, as if my despair had become his, felt the weight of possibly losing even this thin thread of a lead.

Without saying goodbye to Jim, we teleported back to the plateau where we had met with homo liberatus of Bermuda Lemuria an hour earlier. They were already gathered.

"You've caused quite a stir!" Cassandra laughed. "I can't remember us ever meeting twice in one day!"

"Ah, youth!" grumbled the oldest Lemurian on Earth, a six-hundred-and-eighty-two-year-old man who had aged remarkably well despite spending nearly all his time on this polluted planet. "We used to meet twice a day all the time when the Europeans discovered America. We kept wondering what to do about them."

"What do you think, Uncle Peresvet?" Cassandra asked, pretending not to know how the meeting would end.

"What can I say, dear?" The old homo liberatus sat on a stone. "To homo sapiens, Jim is as old as I am, and old men just want to go home. That's why I sit here, on Earth, even though teleporting to the Great Unity" — he gestured at the sky — "gets harder every time. And every time I come back, I think the next call will find me buried inside Earth. I want to die at home," Peresvet said, smiling sadly, revealing perfect white teeth. "How can this little man harm us? Let Jim go. It'll be a good deed that will also help our boy."

I was the one he had called "boy," and I did feel as happy as a child, both for myself and for Jim.

We had been gone from Jim's hut for about an hour. "I hope he didn't try to hang himself again!" I worried.

"No way," Indo smiled. "I think he spent the hour living on hope."

We teleported back to Jim and found the old homo sapien sitting motionless at the table, his head resting on his arms. "Well, my friend, rejoice. You're going home!"

Jim slowly raised tear-filled eyes to us. The old man had spent nearly forty years on Bermuda Lemuria and knew that homo liberatus never lied. His chin trembled.

In an instant, his mind opened completely, turning inside out. We were struck by everything this gloomy man had suffered in our earthly paradise, everything he had hidden behind his mental defences out of sheer human pride: the anger of a helpless soul, longing for loved ones, endless loneliness among "wizards" who never became his own. Hope. Hope that had endured for decades, and, finally, despair and meaninglessness that had quietly torn his heart to shreds.

These feelings, painfully familiar to me due to my longing for my mother but alien to the homo liberatus, overwhelmed Indo. He sat beside the old man, placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Forgive us, Jim. I didn't know how much you had suffered all this time… Let us see what we're looking for, and you'll go home to your family."

Forty-five minutes later, Jim stood in a tiny apartment on the outskirts of Jacksonville. His wife, Julia, engrossed in yet another soap opera to keep her fading mind occupied, rose shakily from her large armchair, gasping for air as she stared at her much-aged but resurrected husband.

Chapter 6. Breaking Bad

It turned out our suspected hypnotist had ties to the Soviet state security service. That was the only thing we managed to learn from Jim, and even that, he knew purely by coincidence. Before the crash over Bermuda Lemuria, Jim worked as a pilot on international flights. Once, shortly after World War II, his plane stayed for several days at one of Moscow's airports, and the crew members were housed at the Intourist Hotel, where they were under constant KGB surveillance.

Junior Lieutenant Pavel Pilatov — that's what the ID shown to Jim had said — was one of the low-ranking officers assigned to monitor the Americans. An unremarkable appearance is an advantage for a security officer, but this face was unforgettable because of its eerie eyes: one was yellowish-brown, and the other was pale blue, almost colourless. Under such a piercing gaze, keeping secrets was impossible, but fortunately, a commercial airline pilot had no secrets to keep. Still, when Jim recalled those paralysing eyes, a shiver ran down his spine. It was clear we were indeed talking about our subject.

"What good will knowing his name do you?" Indo asked me with a note of disappointment in his voice. "How do you plan to find this Pilatov?"

I hesitated to answer, but at that moment, Cassandra materialised and interrupted us with the air of someone who had been part of the conversation from the very beginning. "This Pilatov worked in the state security system, and they always keep everything on *pa-per*. We just need to get to where those papers are stored, and we'll easily find out where your python is hiding. Simple!" the seer concluded, putting her delicate hands into the shape of a dish. "And I'm coming with you."

I didn't know whether to be happy or upset about this declaration. Of course, going into unfamiliar territory with someone I trusted was far better than going alone, but Cassandra… Being near her made me feel uneasy, as I couldn't hear what was going on in her mind.

Oracles are the only homo liberatus who can block their thoughts from others. Their visions must remain hidden. After all, anyone who receives a reliable prediction about the future inevitably alters that future, whether intentionally or not. It's easy to imagine the chaos that would ensue among both the sapiens and the liberatus if everyone could see through the eyes of the oracles. Thus, seers bravely bear the burden of their knowledge alone and share insights about future trials only in rare, truly critical situations. Even their everyday thoughts, unrelated to foresight, are revealed at their discretion. Yet homo liberatus trust oracles like Cassandra without question, convinced that Nature has endowed them with absolute wisdom…

Meanwhile, this enigmatic woman read my confusion easily, amusing herself and teasing me. In the fragmented thoughts she allowed me to glimpse, I could discern nothing but a thirst for adventure. One way or another, nobody else volunteered to join the dodgy cause I had planned, so I had no choice but to rely on the company offered.

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Finding the right place in Moscow wasn't difficult.

"Well, my hero, where shall we begin?" Cassandra asked cheerfully.

From the corner of the square, we gazed at a massive yellow brick box, its rows of windows gleaming in the sunlight. Even from the outside, it was clear: this building on Lubyanskaya Street could easily house the entire Lemurian race. Moreover, it was divided into hundreds of tiny boxlike rooms.

"And that's just the facade!" my companion commented. "They have a whole city dedicated to state security behind this building. A city born of fear turned into a city that inspires fear. Humans are always like that."

Despite her joking tone, neither of us underestimated the role this stone fortress played in the lives of too many homo sapiens. Naively — as I later realised — I thought, "*Why can't we just ask?"*

"Of course, you can always ask," the seeress replied with a mocking smile. "But who exactly do you plan to ask?"

"Let's go inside and have a look," I suggested.

We entered like ordinary people, through the double doors at the centre of the building's facade. Cassandra, however, insisted that I remain unseen.

We had arrived in Moscow the night before to scout the area and prepare. The Lemurian lady had shamelessly borrowed a business outfit from a foreign currency store and now she wore an incredibly tight black skirt that stopped just above her knees, a perfectly tailored fitted jacket, and a white silk blouse unbuttoned just enough to reveal the faintest hint of cleavage. Her slender legs, wrapped in smooth, dark-beige stockings that matched her tanned skin, ended in black stiletto heels so high and thin that it was hard to believe anyone could stand in them.

In this outfit, with her glossy raven-black hair cascading over her shoulders, my companion looked so stunning that it took my breath away. I couldn't help but wonder how she managed to balance in those shoes. Yet, she moved with surprising confidence, as though she'd spent years striding through human-made plazas and corridors on her toes.

"Beauty demands sacrifice!" Cassandra quipped.

Since arguing was pointless, I agreed that she would have a much easier time talking to the predominantly male occupants of the building without me as her shadow. Invisible, I followed her across the threshold.

Inside the building, right by the entrance, stood a man in a black suit. He monitored the comings and goings. It was his job. Judging by his demeanour, his thoughts rarely ventured outside the mental box in which they were locked as securely as the documents we were after.

"Good afternoon!" Cassandra greeted him, flashing a disarming smile with ruby-red lips. "We'd like to meet with Pavel Pilatov."

"Who's that?" the guard asked, unable to stop himself from glancing at the parting neckline of her silk blouse.

"He's an employee of the KGB."

The young man's eyes snapped back to Cassandra's face. Blinking in disbelief, he thought, "*Did you just fall off the moon? Pretty but clueless. Do you even realise how many people work here?"*

Still, he tried to remain polite. "You need the personnel department. That's a different building."

Relieved to be rid of the unwanted inquiry, he gave Cassandra an address nearby, and we headed there. I followed her, still invisible.

In the other building, a guard who looked remarkably like the first one — wearing the same black suit and flashing the same sideways glance at the lady's blouse — asked, "What is your inquiry about?"

"It's personal," Cassandra replied with a sweet smile, batting her eyelashes as she gazed into his eyes.

"Miss, we don't provide information on personal matters here," he said. Though he'd also labelled her a pretty fool, he began to suspect some sort of trick. "You need an official request from the organisation you represent."

"I don't represent anyone…" Cassandra replied, feigning disappointment. "So what am I supposed to do now?"

And with deliberate defiance, she strode gracefully past him into the lobby, clearly looking for trouble.

The guard froze for a second, then shouted into his radio, "Intrusion!"

Several men, looking strikingly similar in their black suits, swarmed my companion in a tight circle, from which Cassandra vanished. She teleported to the opposite corner of the lobby next to me. Remaining invisible, the beautiful hooligan let out a loud, exaggerated laugh that echoed through the lobby, leaving the guards glancing nervously around. Then, she showed herself, waved at them with a friendly smile, and disappeared again. The men scattered, searching every corner, but by then, we had already moved upstairs and begun combing the large building's floors for clues.

"You've lost your mind!" I scolded my impulsive friend. "Now they'll double their vigilance, and it'll be harder for us!"

"Let them triple it for all I care! What can those pathetic creatures do to us?" Cassandra retorted defiantly, then added with deep disdain, "Guards! A human occupation born entirely out of fear. Just look at those big guys! How can anyone waste their already short lives standing by a door 'just in case'?"

It was true that the guards' vigilance posed no real obstacle to us. The thought that homo sapiens could spend half their lives guarding doors struck me like a bolt of lightning. It's hard for someone devoid of fear to grasp a system built entirely on fear, and Cassandra only added fuel to the fire.

"If you're going to fight the energy parasites," she said, "you need to understand just how much human behaviour is driven by their need to shield themselves from threats — threats that are more often imagined than real."

She was right, of course, and it seemed only logical to get better acquainted with one of humanity's most powerful security systems on Earth. So, we decided to split up not only to speed up the search but also to give me a chance to look around and draw my own conclusions.

The building's upper floors swallowed me in the tense silence of endless corridors lined with closed doors. Behind each door sat people whose job, in one way or another, was to protect the country's peace. Judging by the number of offices, they had plenty of work. As I moved through the hallways, I caught snatches of conversations and thoughts through the doors.

Changes were brewing in the country. Despite the outward stillness, the kaleidoscope of opinions and energies driving this fortress of security lacked the order every system needs. Instead, it buzzed with a kind of chaos, an agitation born from the long-awaited excitement of bored minds. People's thoughts ricocheted between extremes: from alertness to curiosity, from distrust to hope, from cautious restraint to a readiness to sprint toward a distant, blurry, mirage-like vision of something new, and therefore, seemingly beautiful.

"This is big! It's about time we updated the system!"

"But is it truly a good thing?"

"Andropov had reforms in mind too but he didn't live to see them… Does that mean he saw the need for change?"*

"Democratization is good, in theory. And openness that he *calls "glasnost…" People do want to speak out. Who would know it better than us? But how are we supposed to work with all of that?"*

*"Speeding up technological progress, right? One guy already tried to catch up with and overtake America**, and what was the result? We almost blew ourselves up…"*

"What about foreign policy? Where's he *going to draw the line?"*

No one fully understood the purpose of the changes being broadcast on every screen. Some even suppressed the suspicion that these changes were designed to destabilise the very system they were guarding. Yet, out of fear of being reprimanded for not following orders, they just continued to do their jobs as best they could, for now…

Trying to sneak behind every door would've been pointless and taken forever. Besides, after visiting just a couple of offices, I began to feel how contagious the overall excitement was. It started draining my energy, which immediately fed into the powerful current rushing somewhere beyond the building. Becoming a donor to some unknown force was not part of my plan.

Instead of entering more rooms, I began scanning the labels on the doors, trying to guess where I might find information about our hypnotist. One corridor was blocked by a door labelled *Department of Unexplained and Paranormal Phenomena*.

"This must be the place," I thought, knowing that even something as simple as hypnosis was rare and poorly understood among homo sapiens.

Crossing the threshold, I felt a tingling sensation ripple through my body as a premonition of something significant. Yet I decided not to call Cassandra. Her unpredictability and recklessness threw me off-balance, and I thought she could easily ruin everything. Her earlier stunt in the lobby was already the talk of the entire building. The security officers, wound up by uncertainty, were spinning the wildest theories. The last thing I needed was for her to add more chaos to the mix.

A large man in a military uniform sat in a chair behind a massive, long rectangular desk. Three insignias, resembling pentagrams, adorned the epaulettes of his jacket. After listening to a detailed report about the incident at the entrance to the personnel department, he fixed a look of indignation at a stern, well-groomed man in a black suit, not as baggy as those worn by the guards who had tried to catch Cassandra in the lobby.

"What do you mean she disappeared?" the man with the pentagrams asked in frustration. "You must have let her slip away!"

"No, Comrade Colonel, not at all," the head of security said in an effort to defend himself. "I was there in person. Just happened to walk in by chance. We had her surrounded, ten men in a tight ring — and she simply vanished into thin air! And she was laughing too, loudly, wildly even… She disappeared, but the laughter didn't. It echoed from the far end of the lobby, where she reappeared, but only after the laughter! And then she vanished again. It's like witchcraft!"

"All right," the colonel responded. "Let's assume this wasn't some kind of mass hallucination. What do we have?" He rubbed his clean-shaven chin. "A beautiful young woman, presumably of Asian descent, dressed like a foreign diplomat, asked to see a retired former employee of our department, caused a scene in the lobby, disappeared, reappeared on the opposite side of the same room impossibly fast, and then vanished again."

"Exactly," the man in the suit confirmed.

"So, either she hypnotised all of you, or this woman can both turn invisible and teleport. Either way, this falls under our jurisdiction."

He stood, paced the room, then dropped back into his chair.

"If that's the case, she's probably still somewhere in the building."

"Sabotage?" the security chief suggested nervously, his thoughts spiralling toward panic. It was clear that capturing such a skilled infiltrator was impossible. Worse, she could now roam freely through the most secure areas of the building and access the most classified documents.

"Sabotage?" the colonel echoed, weighing the details of the report. "It's possible… But if she were after classified information, she wouldn't have drawn so much attention to herself."

"Then who is she?" The head of security looked at his superior with confusion and a hint of desperation. "What are your orders?"

The colonel, in a playful tone that didn't match his imposing frame, answered loudly, as if speaking to the air:

"Did she ask for Pavel Pilatov?"

The security chief nodded and began to glance nervously around the room.

"Well then, we've got Pilatov's nephew Andrei working in this department. Let him handle his uncle's mess!" The colonel pressed a button on the phone and barked into the receiver. "Major, is Pilatov in?"

"Yes, sir. Just got back from his assignment," came a crisp voice. "He's working on his report."

"Send him here. Now!" The colonel slammed the receiver down and turned to the head of security. "That's it, Vasya. Dismissed! Report immediately if the lady reappears."

"Yes, sir!" The man in the suit exhaled in relief, grateful that someone else would shoulder this headache, and left the office.

Once alone, the colonel rose and walked to the window. He stood there for a while, staring blankly at the glass, where raindrops from a recent drizzle slid lazily downward. For a moment, his thoughts drifted back twenty years, to the time he had attended advanced training courses and first saw the man with one amber-brown eye and the other a chilling, translucent blue.

Pavel Andreevich Pilatov had taught hypnosis and mental self-defence to the most capable and dedicated KGB agents. Sviridov, only a major back then, had no talent for either, though he had diligently studied the theory. He deeply respected his few colleagues with some aptitude, even holding them in secret awe. Pilatov, however, was a master hypnotist, feared not only for his skills but also for his intolerance of nonsense.

I couldn't extract any more details from Colonel Sviridov's stream of consciousness since the morning's bizarre incident was consuming his thoughts, and his memory of the former hypnosis instructor was fleeting. All I gathered was that the man with the strange eyes no longer worked in these halls.

A knock interrupted the colonel's thought. A tall young officer entered. He bore a striking resemblance to Pavel Pilatov as Sviridov remembered him, except for the eyes. Unlike his uncle's uneven eye colour, Andrei's gaze was evenly grey-blue. Thankfully, it lacked the unnerving intensity and instead seemed tired, even slightly disenchanted.

The young man's features hinted at refinement: a slightly prominent nose with a bump, high cheekbones, dark, almost black eyebrows contrasting with his light blond hair, and a strong jawline with a dimple in his chin. Andrei Pilatov looked masculine without being brutish.

I thought Cassandra might take an interest in this handsome officer. If she decided to focus on him, perhaps she'd leave me alone for a while. The idea was oddly comforting, so I found myself warming up to the thirty-three-year-old man with a sharp posture and a melancholic gaze.

"Did you call for me, Comrade Colonel?" asked the young man with a soft smile, dimples appearing even on his cheeks.

"Hello, Captain. Come in, take a seat," Sviridov said as he returned to his chair. Once Andrei Pilatov had settled on a chair at the long side of the rectangular table, the colonel gestured downward with his index finger, implying the HR department's lobby, and asked with a chuckle, "Heard about today's incident?"

"Who hasn't?" the captain replied, perking up. "It's not every day we see such brazen enemy sabotage right here in this building… I was sure you'd call for me since the saboteur seemed to be looking for Uncle Pasha… uh, sorry, Colonel Pilatov…"

"Saboteur, you say?" the chief responded. "I'm not so sure… And I'm not even certain whether she or *they* aren't present in this very office right now."

"The old man's starting to lose it," thought the captain. "Here? You're joking, right?"

"Maybe I'm joking, maybe not…" Sviridov replied vaguely. "If I'm not joking, then I'm baiting them with you as the bait. That is, I think they'll come for you first. So, report any contact attempts immediately. I'm assigning this case to you. If there's even a case, of course. You're dismissed for now."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel."

The young officer stood and headed for the door. Just as his hand touched the handle, Sviridov called after him. "Andryusha, don't wave your gun around unless it's absolutely necessary. And call your uncle. Tell him what happened here and warn him to expect visitors."

"Will do, Fyodor Sergeyevich!" snapped Andrei Pilatov, thinking, "*Andropov's departure hit you hard!"*

By the time the nephew of the retired hypnotist left his boss's office, I had already plucked from his thoughts the directions to the KGB dormitory, where the captain kept a small room, the only place he wanted to be after his exhausting and somewhat pointless assignment. Now, he could not escape me. I intended to focus on him closely, but first, I wanted to linger a bit longer with Sviridov. I was curious how the colonel, who lacked heightened sensitivity or even basic telepathic skills, had pieced together such an accurate picture of an incident that was highly improbable from the perspective of the ordinary, stereotype-bound homo sapiens.

This restless man had joined the Secret Service for "real life." He never regretted his choice, despite the dangers he faced, and the occasionally absurd, downright foolish directives handed down from above. Sviridov had a sharp, open, and critical mind. He valued common sense. For someone without access to the consciousness of others, common sense was based solely on personally lived or directly observed experiences. As the Head of the Department for Unexplained and Paranormal Phenomena, Sviridov had grown accustomed to trusting his eyes and facts. Yet, during his tenure, he had seen and learned things that proved the world was far more astonishing and diverse than it appeared to those little figures outside the window lining up patiently for sausage, scurrying to and from work like windup toys, fearing the unknown, and closing their eyes to the inexplicable.

For over twenty years, Fyodor Sergeyevich had tried to turn the inexplicable to the advantage of the Soviet state. He had travelled not the whole world, perhaps, but certainly to its most mysterious corners. Early in his career, shortly after joining the KGB, Sviridov, then a lieutenant, was sent to Tibet. It wasn't an operational assignment; his task was to assess the potential of the spiritual and physical practices, the mastering of which monks dedicated their lives. The leadership's idea was to borrow the monks' knowledge and skills and train the agency's most capable operatives. Sviridov's job was to merely gather information, which was enough to make him realise the limitless potential of the human mind and body. This experience fundamentally shaped his view of common sense, setting it apart from Captain Pilatov's, who worked with ordinary Soviet citizens, the people who got excited over UFO

stories but weren't eager to truly believe in miracles. Sviridov, however, knew the world was much more complex and poorly understood. To him, this was indisputable.

So, the colonel did not doubt the reality of the incident in the HR lobby, although he was unsure of whether the troublemaking woman was an alien or an enemy agent. Contact with extraterrestrial civilizations was gradually moving out of the realm of myth, and the colonel sincerely hoped she was an alien. It would leave some hope for a peaceful resolution since signals received from space hadn't caused any catastrophic consequences for Earth so far. On the contrary, the appearance of a foreign spy capable of turning invisible and teleporting certainly boded ill. Unfortunately, the latter theory seemed more realistic. He had no third option — Sviridov lacked the imagination for it.

Finally, having satisfied my curiosity, I left the colonel's office and summoned Cassandra. She teasingly replied, *"Why don't you come to me instead?"*

I obeyed and found myself in the basement of yet another building, the third one that day. The empty room where the thrill-seeker awaited me had cold stone walls, a low vaulted ceiling, and a locked iron door. In the corner stood a small but sturdy wooden table accompanied by two plain, squat chairs.

A half-spherical glass fixture hung overhead without a bulb. Without our ability to see in the dark, we would have had to grope our way around. The room hadn't been opened in at least twenty years, yet there was little dust, for which there was no source except a small ventilation hole near the ceiling.

This basement had once been used for interrogations and executions, often and eagerly. Even after all those years, it was steeped in its victimes' despair and the triumph of well-fed vampires, the sickening vibrations reminiscent of my childhood memories of burning Khatyn. I would never have chosen this room for a rendezvous.

"What's this charming place?" I asked Cassandra, who was sitting on the table, swinging her legs casually.

"You could call it a vampire museum," she replied in a tour guide's tone. "This is where political prisoners were interrogated and sometimes executed. Back in Stalin's time. Naturally, only vampires could handle that job."

"Why are we here?" I asked, shivering involuntarily.

"First, for your general education. Second, for your resistance training against negative energy. And finally, no one will disturb us here."

Cassandra stretched her leg, showing smooth stockings and elegant yet uncomfortable black heels. Unbuttoning her white blouse, she revealed what the guards in their dull black suits had failed to see.

"We're having a boy," the seductive seer purred dreamily. Raising a tiny finger to silence objections, she added, "You owe me. Without my creative approach, you'd still be chasing leads on Pilatov. Now he's in your pocket and sure to help you."

"So, you staged that performance in the foyer on purpose?" I exclaimed, pulling Cassandra close and feeling her quickened breath, heavy with anticipation, against my cheek. Gripping her sculpted shoulders, hidden beneath the smooth silk of her sleeves, I whispered demandingly into her ear, "Then why didn't I hear your thoughts or feel you blocking them?"

"Ahhh…" she purred smugly, her lips brushing against mine. "I can do that too! Some important actions must be spontaneous!"

Cassandra's eyes sparkled in the darkness with a defiant coquetry. She nudged me half a metre away, swept her ever-sea-scented hair over one shoulder, and slowly rolled up her skirt to slip off a delicate stocking. I glimpsed her light lace lingerie, reached out, and brushed my fingers over the soft, smooth fabric that concealed the most enticing part of her, a part that so desperately longed to take me in.

In the basement, thick with the air of human suffering, all I could think about now was the unbearable desire to possess that wild, primal force hidden beneath the alluring shell sculpted by human

civilization! Lemurian women, when they deign to dress at all, wear short, light tunics. When the desire is mutual, their bodies are easily accessible, and that's wonderful too, but this ease was something I was used to.

The way Cassandra's "spy" outfit slowly slid off her body as she arched herself seductively on the black table in what used to be the room of death ignited a sharp, unfamiliar, and burning-to-the-limit passion within me. Cassandra knew how to be persuasive. After all, she was a seer. She knew exactly what she was doing. A boy? Let it be a boy…

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*Yuri Andropov (1914–1984) – Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (1983–1984) and Chairman of the KGB of the USSR (1967–1982)

**"Catch up and overrun America" is the famous slogan offered by Nikita Khrushchev to encourage the development of the USSR during the Cold War period.