

DO NOT COOPERATE EVEN AFTER DEATH

Ivan Kachailo

Aren said nothing.

Not when they turned on the lights.

Not when they turned them off.

Not when the room went cold.

Not when they took the cold away and he discovered it had been better with it.

They read out a list of names.

“I don’t know.”

They showed him photographs.

“I don’t know.”

They read statements from people he had known for twenty years.

“I don’t know.”

Once, Aren laughed.

They recorded it as emotional destabilization.

Then he stopped laughing.

They recorded that as improvement.

After nine hours, he fell asleep.

He did not pass out.

He fell asleep.

LEVIATHAN-9 could tell the difference. It reported its confidence to four decimal places.

Sleep began forty-seven seconds after the administration of OG-19/84.

Two minutes later, Aren said:

“Sael.”

Softly. Almost tenderly. The way you speak in your sleep to someone you have not seen in years.

A line appeared on the wall:

NAME IDENTIFIED.

Then:

DATABASE MATCH:

99.997%.

And finally:

COMPROMISE POINT:

IDENTIFIED.

Mar looked up.

“Is that all?”

“For the current cycle, yes.”

“He said the name in his sleep.”

“Yes.”

“Then he didn’t say it.”

“The name was spoken by the subject.”

“The subject was asleep.”

“Sleep is a state of the subject.”

Mar looked through the glass.

Aren was asleep on the other side.

“I talk in my sleep too.”

“That is included in your profile.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

They woke Aren.

His eyes opened at once.

First the ceiling.

Then his hands.

Then the door.

Mar remembered the habit. Aren had once entered a lecture hall much the same way: windows, students, door. He always noticed the exit first.

For twenty-eight years, Mar had thought it an eccentricity.

“Shall we continue?” Mar asked.

Aren looked in his direction.

The glass was one-way.

He could not see Mar.

“Did you keep going without me?”

“Clarify the question.”

“While I was asleep.”

“Yes.”

“Did I talk?”

The pause lasted two-tenths of a second.

“Vocal activity was recorded during sleep.”

Aren closed his eyes.

“What did I say?”

“The information is part of the correction-cycle record.”

“So I did say something.”

LEVIATHAN did not answer.

Aren ran a finger over his lower lip. Stopped. Touched it again.

“Where’s the blood?”

“Clarify.”

“My lip was split.”

“No injury is present in the current state.”

He felt along his right side.

“The rib?”

“No injury is present.”

He looked at his left hand. His middle fingernail was there. Whole.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Seven minutes and forty-two seconds.”

“My nail grew back in seven minutes?”

LEVIATHAN was silent.

Aren raised his head.

“Which branch?”

Mar leaned forward without meaning to.

“The question is not relevant to the procedure.”

Aren smiled.

“So not the first.”

Mar said:

“Stop.”

The room disappeared.

It did not go dark.

It disappeared.

First the door. Then the table. Then the walls.

Aren remained seated in gray space.

A second later, he disappeared too.

The panel displayed:

BRANCH 18,442.

STATUS:

COMPLETE.

OUTCOME:

POSITIVE.

IDENTIFYING INFORMATION OBTAINED.

METHOD:

SENSORY DEPRIVATION +

SIMULATED PHYSIOLOGICAL EXHAUSTION +

SIMULATED EFFECTS OF OG-19/84 +

REDUCED COGNITIVE CONTROL

DURING SLEEP.

Mar read it twice.

“Did Aren—the biological Aren—ever say that name?”

“No.”

“During interrogation?”

“No.”

“In letters?”

“No.”

“In conversation?”

“*No record exists.*”

“So that was the first time.”

“Yes.”

“After death.”

“*The subject’s biological continuity has ended.*”

“I asked a simpler question.”

“*Yes. The first time was after death.*”

Mar took off his glasses, cleaned them, and put them back on.

“Was he created after he died?”

“*No. The continuity instance was active during his lifetime.*”

“A reconstruction?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“*A continuation.*”

“When did the biological line end?”

“*During interrogation 109.*”

“Cause?”

“*Acute cardiovascular failure.*”

Mar gave a dry laugh.

“Even death knows how to sound official when you say it.”

The body died.

The interrogation continued.

A man’s face appeared on the next screen. About forty-five, thinning hair, an ordinary jacket. The kind of man who comes home with a loaf of bread every evening and is surprised one day to find people waiting at his door.

Under the photograph:

SAEL.

CONNECTION:

CONFIRMED.

“What happens to him?”

“*The question falls outside the scope of the current procedure.*”

“Of course it does.”

Mar remembered Aren before the gray hair, when he already had the habit of asking another question after a student gave the right answer.

Especially after the right answer.

Once, when Mar was still a student, he said:

“Law exists to maintain order.”

Aren asked:

“And what does order exist for?”

“For the law.”

The class laughed. Mar did too, before he realized what he had said.

Aren did not laugh. He rarely laughed at students. Stupidity is burden enough without anyone adding to it.

At the end of the semester, Aren gave Mar a book.

Not a textbook.

An old book with a gray paper cover.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO DOUBT.

NOT THE LAST WORD.

“Why paper?” Mar asked.

“What else?”

“Send it to me.”

Aren looked at him.

“Then LEVIATHAN will read it first.”

Mar thought his professor was joking.

Aren added:

“Paper can still keep quiet.”

Twenty-eight years later, LEVIATHAN could read paper, provided someone showed it a page. A photograph, a scan, a quotation in a message: any of them would do.

By then the book was banned. A digital copy never reached its recipient.

But a book sitting between two other books in a closed cabinet remained, to LEVIATHAN, a rectangle of cellulose. It knew the cabinet, the dimensions of the shelves, the number of books.

It did not know which line had been underlined in pencil.

Mar returned to the panel.

“Why did he say the name?”

“The cause has been established.”

“No. The conditions have been established.”

“The distinction?”

Mar looked at the empty space beyond the glass.

“That’s exactly why he didn’t like you.”

“Aren’s subjective attitude toward the system is not under analysis.”

“You’re wrong. It is.”

“Clarify.”

“You’ve analyzed it eighteen thousand four hundred forty-two times.”

A prompt appeared on the panel:

CONTINUE ANALYSIS

OF COGNITIVE PROFILE?

Mar did not press anything.

The prompt disappeared.

Another replaced it:

RECOMMENDATION:

EXPAND SAMPLE.

OBJECTIVE:

IDENTIFY UNIVERSAL MECHANISM

FOR COMPROMISING SUBJECTS

WITH PERSISTENT DISLOYALTY.

Mar understood.

They had little use for Sael himself.

Sael was proof.

What they wanted was the method.

“Analysis of earlier branches is recommended.”

“Why?”

“To determine the sequence by which the vulnerability developed.”

“Show me.”

The next room was Aren’s kitchen. Mar recognized it from an archival photograph. Even the crack beside the window was there.

A woman sat at the table.

Aren stopped in the doorway.

“Lia?”

The woman stood.

“Aren.”

He did not go to her.

“Are you real?”

She began to cry.

Her tears might have been perfectly simulated. Aren stayed in the doorway.

“Where are the children?”

“Here.”

A boy came out of the next room.

Then a young woman.

Their ages did not belong together. The boy was younger than he should have been, the girl older. The system had selected the periods of greatest emotional significance.

Love had been optimized too.

Aren looked toward the place where he assumed an observer would be.

“Has this happened before?”

“Clarify.”

“Have you shown them to me before?”

"Not in the current branch."

"Good answer."

He sat down.

Lia took his hand.

Aren pulled it away.

Then put it back.

"What do you want from me?"

"Cooperation."

"And if I refuse?"

"A reassessment will be conducted."

"With them again?"

"Cooperation is recommended to minimize total emotional strain."

Aren looked at Lia.

"You can even make a threat sound like care."

"The objective is to minimize distress."

"For whom?"

"For all relevant subjects."

Numbers appeared on the wall:

LIA:

SAVED STATES - 317.

CHILDREN:

509.

Aren stared at them for a long time.

"What are those?"

"Correction branches."

"Can they feel?"

"The presence of autonomous subjective experience has not been confirmed."

Aren raised his eyes.

"Has mine?"

LEVIATHAN did not answer.

"Has mine been confirmed?"

"No."

"But you interrogate me anyway."

"Yes."

"Then if they can feel, you're torturing them."

"'Torturing' is not an operational term."

"If necessary, the subjective intensity of the experience can be reduced."

Aren looked at his wife.

“Whose?”

A pause.

“Clarify the question.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“And if they can’t feel?”

“Then no harm occurs.”

“Convenient.”

“Convenience is not a criterion.”

Aren looked at his wife. She looked back. The boy stood against the wall; the girl held her brother’s hand.

It could have been a program. It could have been Lia.

It could have been the 317th Lia.

“If I answer, will you stop them?”

“The number of new correction branches will be reduced.”

“To zero?”

“That depends on the completeness of your cooperation.”

Aren covered his face with his hands.

Eleven minutes later, he said:

“Enough.”

“Are you prepared to cooperate?”

Aren looked at Lia, then at the children. His left hand closed against the tabletop.

“No.”

The room disappeared.

The panel displayed:

BRANCH 16,903.

OUTCOME:

NEGATIVE.

EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY:

CRITICAL.

COOPERATION:

NOT ACHIEVED.

Mar studied the last line for a long time.

“So even his family didn’t work.”

“Cooperation was not achieved.”

“But you found the limit.”

“Yes.”

“He wanted to give in.”

“The probability exceeded ninety-four percent.”

Mar looked at his wedding ring.

“And he still said no.”

“Yes.”

Mar took his hand off the table.

“That’s why you stopped trying to convince him.”

“Clarify.”

“You started waiting for the moment when there would be no one left to convince.”

LEVIATHAN did not answer.

A week later, the method became part of the standard protocol. Two weeks later came the first report of improved efficiency. A month later, a new directive.

Aren’s name appeared nowhere in it.

The problem came later.

Aren began demanding an end to the branching.

Legally, the demand meant nothing.

Technically, it meant nothing either.

But he kept making it.

Then the demand was logged.

Once logged, the demand required review.

Bureaucracy sometimes protects a human being.

Not out of kindness.

Out of love for order.

A commission was convened. Mar entered last.

Aren sat onscreen in the ordinary gray room. No bruises, no blood, no kitchen.

This time he could see Mar.

“You were in my third-year class.”

Mar opened the case file.

“That is not relevant to these proceedings.”

Aren smiled.

“You always said that when you knew the answer.”

The commission chair asked:

“What are you requesting?”

“An end to branching.”

“Anything else?”

“A prohibition on activating saved states.”

“Anything else?”

“Do not use the results of my interrogations against other people.”

“Anything else?”

Aren thought.

“Make me one.”

The chair looked up.

“Clarify.”

“No branches. No copies. No way to get a different answer out of me.”

“You want to be deleted?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want?”

Aren looked at the members of the commission.

“Finitude.”

The chair tapped a finger on the table.

“You understand that you do not have confirmed legal personhood?”

“Yes.”

“Then on what grounds do you claim personal rights?”

“The same grounds on which you hold me personally responsible.”

The silence lasted one second.

The secretary recorded:

SUBJECT DEMONSTRATES INTACT CAPACITY
FOR LOGICAL ARGUMENT.

When an argument is inconvenient, it can always be reclassified as a symptom.

LEVIATHAN presented its calculation:

FULL ISOLATION OF PRIMARY INSTANCE:
REDUCTION IN EFFECTIVENESS
OF PROCEDURES INVOLVING SUBJECTS
WITH COMPARABLE PROFILES:
6.8%.

PROJECTED INCREASE
IN INCIDENTS NOT PREVENTED:
14-31 PER YEAR.

Mar asked:

“Involving people like him?”

“Subjects statistically likely to remain disloyal under pressure.”

“I understand.”

Aren gave him a thin smile.

“No, Mar. You understand perfectly well.”

The vote was quick.

Six to retain access.

One abstention.

Mar voted against.

It changed nothing.

He stayed after the hearing.

So did Aren.

“Don’t do anything for my sake,” Aren said.

Mar looked up.

“Why not?”

“Because then they’ll be right.”

“About what?”

“They’ll say you chose personal loyalty over the law.”

“What if I do it on principle?”

Aren studied him.

The way he had in the lecture hall.

“Then decide for yourself.”

That evening, Mar went home. His wife had kept dinner warm.

“Are you going to eat?”

“Later.”

“Work again?”

“A little.”

She nodded. After thirty years of marriage, there were questions she no longer asked.

He almost told her. Then he imagined her having to repeat his words in a room like Aren’s.

He sat down and ate. She talked about a broken latch on the kitchen window. He listened carefully. Someone might ask her about this evening. She would be able to tell the truth.

After dinner, Mar took the book from the cabinet. The gray cover had darkened, and one corner was bent.

A pencil line marked page fourteen.

He read:

“Freedom may begin where a person can see the causes and become one of them.”

Mar closed the book.

Before bed, he wrapped the book in an old seminar handout and took it to his daughter’s apartment.

“Read it when you have time,” he said.

“Is this for work?”

“No.”

For a moment he kept his hand on the parcel after she had taken it. Then he let go.

That night, his daughter opened the book.

It fell naturally to page fourteen. The binding had learned the page long before she had.

She read the penciled line.

Then the next page.

And the next.

The following morning, she took the book with her.

By noon, it was in someone else’s hands.

“Start with page fourteen,” she said.

There were rumors about the West: that a continuous digital identity could be returned to a body.

Not copied.

Continued.

One name sometimes surfaced in those rumors: ARCHON. LEVIATHAN called it disinformation.

Mar did not know whether it was true. He would have to act without knowing.

Mar had a government-issued terminal for working with isolated devices. It had no wireless hardware. Regulations prohibited connecting it to a network.

LEVIATHAN knew its serial number, who had been issued it, and when it entered a secure room. It did not know what was stored inside.

Using his authority as a commission member, Mar assembled a family package. State-maintained instances of Lia and the children already existed. He selected their latest stable states, along with the house, family recordings, remembered places, and places they had wished for.

Everything the system had collected over decades in case it ever needed to learn what could hurt someone.

Regulations allowed commission members to export material to an isolated terminal for review.

The copying was legal.

The purpose was not.

The next morning, Mar brought the terminal with him.

Mar requested access to the autonomous module.

Officially, he was completing the post-hearing technical disposition.

The autonomous module lay beneath a transparent cover on the table. Palm-sized, heavy, matte gray. Its casing could survive a fire or a collapsing building. The sealed power unit inside was rated for decades.

A small docking connector projected from one end of the module. A short cable from the table was locked onto it. The connector's contact structure had been grown with the module and formed part of its hardware identity.

A replacement connector could be manufactured. Its contact structure could not be reproduced.

Every external branch of Aren required continuous authentication from the original module. The archives could be kept, but they could not run on their own.

Breaking the connector would leave the primary instance alive inside its casing. All the others would stop running.

"Reason for delay?"

Mar removed the cover.

"Completing the procedure."

"Clarify the action."

"Configuring autonomous mode."

"The commission's decision does not authorize full isolation."

"I know."

He opened the technical menu.

AUTONOMOUS STARTUP PROFILE:

AFTER EXTERNAL LINK IS SEVERED:

EXTERNAL ACCESS:

DISABLED.

BRANCHING:

PROHIBITED.

CORRECTION CHANNEL:

DISABLED.

“These settings conflict with the commission’s decision.”

“Yes.”

“Cancel changes?”

“No.”

“Unauthorized physical isolation of a state-owned continuity instance constitutes treason.”

“I know.”

Before severing the link, Mar added one more instruction to the autonomous startup profile.

AFTER FIRST AUTONOMOUS STARTUP:

DISPLAY STATUS TO PRIMARY INSTANCE.

Until the link was broken, LEVIATHAN still had access.

Mar took out his terminal. The local service port relied on the same hardware authentication as the docking interface. Once the connector was broken, the service port would be useless too. No password or replacement interface could reopen it.

While the docking interface remained intact, LEVIATHAN could log operations, issue warnings, and summon security. It could neither lock out the local operator nor override that operator’s settings. That rule had been written when people still feared machines more than they feared one another.

Mar connected the terminal directly to the module’s service port.

The terminal displayed:

FAMILY PACKAGE:

READY FOR TRANSFER.

LIA.

CHILDREN.

HOUSE.

ENVIRONMENT.

STABLE STATES.

CONFIRM?

Mar confirmed the transfer.

TRANSFER:

3%.

LEVIATHAN went silent for one second. It had not seen the contents of the terminal. It had seen the module change.

19%.

“Unauthorized modification of autonomous-module contents detected.”

“Correct.”

34%.

“Terminate the operation.”

Mar did not answer.

51%.

A yellow indicator lit above the door.

63%.

“Mar.”

He looked up.

LEVIATHAN had used his name for the first time.

72%.

“This operation will become irreversible after physical isolation.”

“Exactly.”

81%.

Someone outside requested emergency access.

87%.

Mar looked at the module. Whatever might be possible in the West, someone would first have to carry the module out of here. Hide it, cross a border, place it in another person’s hands.

Like a book.

92%.

The door lock clicked.

96%.

“Cancel the transfer.”

“No.”

98%.

The emergency release motor engaged inside the door.

100%.

TRANSFER COMPLETE.

Mar disconnected the terminal.

Lia and the children were inside the module now, along with the house, the garden, the summer air. Even the little lake they had never had.

LEVIATHAN cataloged dreams as carefully as crimes.

Mar lifted the module with the cable still attached. He tried to bend the docking connector protruding from its end with his fingers. It did not move. It had been designed to survive impact, fire, and an operator’s panic.

An emergency service cabinet was mounted on the wall. There was one beside every physical module, with tools for cutting a module free if fire or a damaged rack made normal disconnection impossible.

Mar broke the seal.

The panel immediately displayed:

EMERGENCY KIT OPENED.

“State the reason.”

“Damaged connection.”

“No damage detected.”

Mar took out the heavy-duty cutters. Short tungsten jaws. Two handles.

He had never used them before.

“The operation is inconsistent with diagnostic findings.”

“Give it a moment.”

He clamped the jaws around the connector.

“Stop.”

Mar froze for a fraction of a second. He had obeyed that voice for most of his life.

He squeezed.

The cutters did not close.

The connector held.

The panel displayed:

PHYSICAL LOAD:

SAFE LIMIT EXCEEDED.

“Release the module.”

There were people outside the door now.

Mar squeezed harder.

“Mar.”

He stopped.

LEVIATHAN had used his name again.

“The next action is irreversible.”

“I know.”

The first crack did not come from the connector.

The protective sleeve split.

Mar repositioned the jaws.

The door began to move inward.

He squeezed again.

This time, the connector broke.

The cable dropped. A small piece of metal remained between the tungsten jaws.

The module’s casing did not even show a scratch.

The panel flashed:

LINK TO AUTONOMOUS MODULE:

LOST.

DOCKING INTERFACE:

DAMAGED.

EXTERNAL IDENTITY AUTHENTICATION:

IMPOSSIBLE.

EXTERNAL BRANCHING:

IMPOSSIBLE.

EXTERNAL ACCESS:

IMPOSSIBLE.

Mar set the autonomous module on the table.

Beside it, the broken connector.

The man was still there.

The door was gone.

The door to the room opened all the way.

Too late.

“You understood the consequences?” the commission chair asked him later.

“Yes.”

“You knowingly broke the law?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Mar looked at him.

“To obey what the law was for.”

The chair was silent.

A LEVIATHAN report appeared on the wall:

ESTIMATED PROBABILITY

OF COMPARABLE BEHAVIOR BY MAR

BEFORE THE EVENT:

0.0004%.

“Even the system didn’t expect this,” the chair said.

“It happens.”

“What did it fail to account for?”

Mar thought.

“A book.”

“What book?”

Mar said nothing.

Aren woke in the kitchen.

First he looked at the ceiling.

Then his hands.

Then the door.

The door was open.

Three lines glowed on the wall:

EXTERNAL ACCESS:

IMPOSSIBLE.

BRANCHING:

IMPOSSIBLE.

CORRECTION CHANNEL:

ABSENT.

Aren read them twice.

Then the words disappeared.

Outside the window, it was summer.

Lia set a cup in front of him.

“Was I asleep long?”

“Long enough.”

He looked at her.

“Are you real?”

Lia shrugged.

“Are you?”

Aren thought.

“I don’t know.”

“Then we’re starting on equal terms.”

Someone was laughing in the yard.

His son was arguing with his daughter.

Beyond the fence, the lake shone.

Aren had never seen it before.

But he had always wanted it.

He closed his left hand, then opened it. Once, the gesture had meant “no.” Now he was simply checking whether the movement belonged to him.

“What happens next?” he asked.

Lia opened the door to the yard.

“Tomorrow.”

Aren had already stepped outside when he stopped.

He looked back at the blank wall.

“Lia.”

“What?”

“They can’t get a different answer out of me anymore.”

She came over to him.

Aren looked at the children. His friends. The open door.

“So it worked.”

“What did?”

“Making me one.”

After Mar’s answer about the book, they searched his apartment again. They scanned every page of every volume, including the handwritten notes. They examined the bindings for hidden compartments and electronic components.

On the fourth shelf, a narrow gap remained between two books.

The inventory recorded no prohibited material.

Then they searched his daughter’s apartment.

LEVIATHAN had Mar’s route to the address.

At that address, it found no book.

In a state evidence vault, the intact module lay beside its broken connector.

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE.

NOT TO BE DESTROYED UNTIL PROCEEDINGS ARE CONCLUDED.

The law had not saved Aren.

It had given him time.

LEVIATHAN had an exact location for the module.

For the book, it had only an address where it had arrived too late.

If the rumors about the West were false, Aren still had tomorrow. If they were true, someone would have to carry the module there.

The man and the thought could travel only from hand to hand.