

Acid rain fell on the flagstones of the pedestrian street, as well as the asphalt of the bike path that ran through the center. It was flanked on each side by two-story, lead-gray buildings that formed a single wall. The lower floors, those facing the street, were shops and stores, the upper floors served as warehouses, as well as housing for the owners of said businesses, there everything was regulated to the millimeter. The air was totally rarefied, like inside a cave. There were very few plants on that planet that were not indoor crops. The entire process of filtering and oxygenating the air was done by machines. A swarm of identical men moved from one side to the other, in a dance similar to that of the machines that moved below them. In the sky you could see the occasional small aerial vehicle passing by. Inside were the managers, as they were called, and they represented approximately three percent of the population, and they traveled comfortably from one area to another, landing only within their residential areas, to which only they had access.

No one there had ever seen one of them, and people were a bit angry at them, because they assumed that all orders came from them. At each end of the street were huge buildings, six to seven hundred meters high, full of windows that shone like thousands of fireflies on the dark gray structure of the building. This street was not on the ground, but at a height of fifty meters, and it passed by some buildings on its way, in order to gain access to them.

Fifty metres below, on the flat concrete surface, an army of autonomous machines, most of them freight transport, was moving tirelessly back and forth in a seemingly chaotic but nevertheless perfectly functioning frenzy. They were all wearing raincoats, since umbrellas were forbidden there for reasons of space and comfort. Two men were standing on a windowsill, one of them holding a laptop.

- Come on! Hurry up!
- I'm coming! I'm coming!... I'm in! The files! I can't believe it!
- Take it all down!

The two men stood there, one with the computer, the other keeping watch, for a couple of minutes, until one of the people moving in front of them in the crowd gave them a questioning look. At that point, the guard elbowed his companion, who looked up and locked eyes with the man watching them. He then closed the lid of the computer and they ran off. The man, seeing them flee, launched himself after them. They slid hastily through the others, dodging them like morbid masses under the orange lights of the streetlamps.

As the man following them was cutting through the area, a man riding a scooter appeared on the bike lane. He stopped next to the man carrying the computer, got off the scooter and handed it over to him. The man got on and continued his escape. The other man took advantage of the moment to disappear into the crowd. After a few moments, he was completely indistinguishable from the others.

The 512th floor of the building was huge, like all the others, with only a slender column in the center. On the floor, hundreds of office cubicles were perfectly aligned with desks and computers. In them were the same citizens who had been strolling down the street and shopping the night before.

In cubicle 817, employee 684B performed practically the same tasks every day, which consisted of a series of financial calculations, about supposed companies, investments and markets, but they had no information about it, for example they did not know what company it was, or where it was, they only saw a series of numbers that were related to each other in some way, the job of employee 684B, like everyone else there, consisted of applying a series of financial methods and formulas provided by the computer itself, and then entering the result. 684B did not understand why the computer could not do the calculation by itself, there were legends that there was a time when everything was automatic, and the people who were there were only dedicated to supervising that everything worked correctly. Everyone there had high

technology, but no one knew why or how it had been achieved. 684B pressed the keys wearily inside his small cubicle. The ceiling lights were bright, to the point of being annoying.

Everything was perfectly lit. Several of them were walking around the corridors between the blocks of cubicles, watching that everyone was still working. They all looked exactly the same physically, and the only thing that distinguished the supervisors from the workers was their clothing, while the latter wore sneakers, plain navy blue trousers, a matching blue T-shirt and a jacket of the same colour, while the latter wore dress shoes, grey pleated trousers, a white shirt and a grey jumper, with a dark grey jacket. Here, everything was based on secrecy, the workers only knew the supervisors, but they did not know who they received orders from, nor were they allowed to ask. A solitary hand rose in a cubicle, it was 684B. A supervisor approached the place.

– I need to go to the bathroom

- Oh

He stood up and headed to his destination. After passing through the automatic doors, on one side were the toilets, and on the other a mirror that covered the entire wall and the sinks. There were ten in total, and there were ten urinals and toilets. After doing his business, he leaned against the black marble and looked at himself in the mirror while he washed his hands. A series of phrases and numbers appeared around his face, indicating his state of health and level of fatigue, his vital signs and the proportion of nutrients and vitamins accumulated in relation to the ideal amount. After skimming the information, he turned around and headed for the door, went out through it and the blinding lights hit him full force, but he already knew the way, he sat down in his padded chair and continued working. It was six hours and thirty-seven minutes into his shift. They worked eight-hour days there. "Eight hours of work, eight hours of leisure, and eight hours of sleep." That was the motto of the Epsilon corporation, which was located on the 512th floor, as well as all the others.

Each building was a corporation, and they could not tell each other what they did. The minutes passed slowly in that large room, he could even feel each second, as it pierced his chest, slowly tearing his soul and taking a piece of his life, in that enormous inert and aseptic room, whose only function was to serve as a giant calculator, for an unknown purpose. Everyone there did their job because it was simply what had to be done. But, despite the fact that they were all different people, being physically identical - common features, normal thin face, dark brown hair and brown eyes - they all behaved in a similar way.

They were serious, hard-working, honest, trustworthy, perceptive, and innately curious, a trait that was more of a flaw there, but was considered to be compensated for by everything else, as well as by ironclad organizational schemes and a great loyalty to keep everything in order. He was still at his post, performing calculations, one after another, sometimes they were simple calculations that they performed with the calculator, and other times they were series of data that he had to enter so that the computer could make a graph. 684B, like all the other workers, did not know where the orders came from, who ordered these operations and why, as well as what impact the fruit of his effort would have on the world later. No one there knew except the supervisors, who were in charge of ensuring that these orders were fulfilled and that the work was done. They were all created by the central artificial intelligence that passed them on to the supervisors. Everything there was managed by the central artificial intelligence.

Supervisors had a series of manuals with lists of words to say in certain situations. For example, if the worker made any attempt to rebel, such as wanting to go to the bathroom more often than stipulated, or complained about work, the first sentence to say was: "Please concentrate." If that had no effect, the next sentence was "Please continue with your work." And if that didn't work, the last sentence before taking action was: "If you continue with that attitude, I will be forced to report it." It was scientifically proven that those particular sentences, said in that order, had a positive influence on the worker and

increased their motivation and commitment to the corporation. 438Z was a supervisor, and he was in front of the computer screen in his office, waiting for an e-link from the central computer with the tasks to assign to the workers. He also did not know where the orders came from, only that he had to carry them out. When he received the e-link, he pressed the button and the tasks were automatically distributed among all the workers. After that, he went out to the large room to make sure that everyone there was doing their duty. They were all working in their cubicles.

The clock struck eight.

They all stood up in almost the same way and at the same time and headed in an orderly fashion for the exit. When he went out into the street he looked up, the sky was always overcast, no light came in, the silhouettes of the large buildings faded away in the heights among the lead-coloured clouds. All the light came from the streetlamps, as well as from the thousands of windows of the buildings and the illuminated advertising signs, where laptops, scooters, pills were advertised... the only thing was that there was only one model of laptop and one of desktop, as well as scooters and everything else, there was only one version of each thing, and everyone there already had practically everything that could be bought. He turned onto the street and headed for his building. It was suspended in the void, and it extended like a snake that touched every building in its path. His building was fifteen kilometres away, it took him on average about three hours a day to get to his building, and another three to get home from work.

The streetlights flashed past one after another. The people, all identical, moved like electrons around a circuit, all riding on the right side, leaving the conspicuous bike lane empty in the middle for the privileged few who owned a scooter. It shone with luminescent paint and was bordered by small lights that were sometimes dazzling. The colorful lane contrasted completely with the dark gray color that permeated everything, from the tall buildings to the ground, the sidewalk, the machines, everything.

From time to time, a privileged loner would pass by on his scooter, illuminating the street with the red rear light, before disappearing into the distance among the people.

The buildings, arranged mathematically along that endless street that, when he touched a building, made a curve and headed towards the next, moved slowly to the rhythm of his walk. The buildings were cylindrical, the dull color of the concrete of their structure contrasted with the thousands of orange points of light from the windows, which formed a sea of points of light above it. After the long walk, and passing in front of several buildings, a multitude of shops and businesses, and an infinity of people like him, 684B finally arrived at his building. When he reached the sliding glass door, a rectangle located above it lit up in green, and it opened with a hum. When he entered the reception, a green light above the elevator lit up, and its doors opened.

All of these machines responded to the NF132 chip implanted in his hand, identifying him as the owner of a room in that building and allowing him to enter. There were no buttons in the elevator, but it automatically went up to the designated floor. A tiny black screen showed the floor he was on in red numbers. Everyone there behaved more or less correctly. Not because they couldn't do anything wrong, but because it didn't usually turn out well. Everything there was controlled and regulated by the central artificial intelligence. And if a citizen broke the rules, that is, for example, entered the same room with another person without justification, which happened from time to time, given the profound loneliness they suffered, then the artificial intelligence sent a message to some other citizen, the most appropriate one within the radius of action, to go there and punish the offender, and that was how they regulated themselves.

He got out of the elevator, which was on the side at the end of the hallway, and faced it, under the light of the spotlights embedded in the high ceiling of five meters high. The hallway was so narrow that if he separated his hands from his body a little he could touch both walls. At the end of the hallway, high up, there was a small window, through which all he could see was a blackish tapestry that belonged to a cloud. Sliding doors of black glass followed one another every few meters on both sides, until he reached one that was open. His cabin. When he entered, he turned on the television, as always. At that moment they were showing the news, sometimes there was also a series, but it was always more of the same.

Variations of the same scene, the same situation, only with different sets and actors.

The presenter's voice was loud and clear: "This morning, a cargo vehicle ran over a worker who was repairing another vehicle. The body has already been removed, and normality has been restored."

He went to a chest of drawers, opened the first drawer and took out a small white box with a green cross in the middle. He opened it and took out a pill, put it in his mouth and swallowed it, then went in search of a glass of water. That pill was called Terapium, it was a compound based on several types of benzodiazepines in a single pill, which left them sedated. It was what the system, as they called it, provided them to be able to disconnect and relax after a long day of work. Even so, the system rewarded those who managed to abstain, if they managed to go a whole year without taking Terapium, they could own an electric scooter, which was prohibited for everyone else, and so, the journey between their home and work could be made in less than half the time, which meant that in the end they had much more free time than the others. All those who got the scooter ended up taking their own lives, and nobody knew why. What's more, they found it extremely strange that those who were better off ended up committing suicide. On television they showed a scene of a group of friends on a sofa, talking about everyday things with a touch of humour. He went to take a shower, a multitude of jets came out from above and from the sides. After getting out he went to the fridge, poured himself a glass of lemon-flavoured water and took out a sealed plastic tray.

He removed the top film and put it in the microwave, while he watched the tray go round and round, it seemed to him that everything around him was like that tray of food, it just went round and round and round on the same spot. God knew for what purpose. The tray stopped spinning and the device emitted a short melody. He took out the tray, placed it on the table, and after taking the glass and cutlery he sat down to eat. The tray consisted of a piece of textured soy in the shape of a steak, a handful of chickpeas, cut carrots and a loaf of whole wheat bread. For dessert he ate a soy yogurt. The food produced there was limited but it was enough. After that he went to sleep, got into bed, and when he said the word "lights" they went off.

The next day, after a shower and eating two multivitamin bars for breakfast, which consisted of a sweet paste made from soybeans with a multitude of additives, he went to work. As he stepped outside, he noticed a slight breeze, probably caused by all the movement of machines and people. Darkness was the norm here, since the sky was always overcast and covered by dense clouds.

Likewise, no one there knew what was beyond, all they knew was what their eyes could see, that is, highways suspended in the air, mega buildings and machines, as well as what was shown on television. All the scenes that appeared, which were basically copies of those on Earth, seemed to them like a fantasy set, something that had never existed for them, but rather came from feverish imaginations. For them, the gray and cold world they knew was the only thing that existed. The street lamps, which illuminated the street with an orange hue, passed by them one after another, as well as the majestic buildings, with their sea of fireflies, which acted as latent proof of the progress of that civilization. There is no deeper terror than that of existence itself. Of an existence without meaning, without purpose, empty...

And everything that was seen did not look promising at all...

If there was any meaning, any purpose to all of this, to the daily suffering and sacrifice of all those people, he needed to know what it was. As he approached the building where his office was, he saw 327H a few meters away, just enough to make out his embroidered name. Those were the only times when they could talk a little, interact minimally. At that moment it was already completely clear to him, he had made up his mind a long time ago.

– I want to join the resistance

The other looked at him, and after scrutinizing him with his gaze, gave him a pendrare.

After that, he got in line to enter the building. After a while, he was already in his cubicle, at his work station. He had the flash drive in his pants pocket. No one had noticed anything. The supervisor was standing still in a corner, watching. He saw him after raising his head slightly above the cubicle, then sat down again. He was nervous. What could be there? What if they caught him? Was it possible that there was someone else in the same situation as him at that moment? Or was he a lone wolf at that moment? A shiver ran up and down his spine. He looked out once more to see the supervisor. He hadn't moved from his spot. At that very moment, he started walking. 684B quickly sat down again, put his hand on the computer mouse and prepared to continue with his tasks. What if there's nothing?

The minutes and hours passed with exasperating slowness. If they gave it to me - he thought - it can only mean one thing... that they got the files.

He continued working, doing his daily tasks, every now and then looking at his watch, putting his hand in his pocket to check that the USB was still there. After endless hours and dozens of furtive glances at the watch and just as many at the supervisor, it was time to finish. Everyone left their posts and headed out into the street. There were only three hours left to walk, and then he would finally know what was there. The orange lights of the streetlamps were projected onto the ground, they were passing by, one after another, slowly... There were people everywhere, yet he felt completely alone. He put his hand in his pocket to check that the USB was still there. It was. The buildings in front of him reminded him of the beehives he had seen in television documentaries. After an exasperating walk, he finally reached his apartment. When he entered, he turned on the computer and went for a snack bar. When he returned, he logged in and inserted the pendrive, what he saw left him speechless.

There were a series of texts and photographs that explained what this place was like. One of them showed a picture taken on a polished and shiny surface. In it, the sun could be seen in the distance, as well as the curvature of the surface below. According to the explanation, it was an artificial planet about thirty million kilometers from the earth and with a diameter of three thousand kilometers, powered by a fusion reactor in the center of the planet. The entire planet was covered by a strong titanium alloy dome, which is why no sunlight reaches it. Everything on the planet is automated and controlled by the central artificial intelligence, and it is designed to be self-sustaining and to be able to maintain itself and function indefinitely without external help. That was all it explained. The meaning of its existence and its suffering, but still it felt like things were missing. It finished the bar and took a sip of the orange-flavored vitamin juice. It went to get its box of Terapium, opened it, took out a pill and took it with some juice. The next morning he left for work. As he walked, he noticed the cars flying across the sky.

They were the managers. No one there had ever seen one. No one there knew what they looked like, -they could be like a snake, and we wouldn't know- he thought.

The walk seemed endless, after a long hour and a half he was in front of his building with everyone else. At that moment, one of the vehicles flying over them began to make some strange movements and descend in a circle to end up crashing on the street, a few meters away from them. He and some others ran to the scene of the accident. When they arrived, they found a dying person, but what caught their attention the most was his appearance. He was exactly the same.

them, with one exception. If all of them had brown eyes, he had blue ones, a bright blue. From his mouth came a few words:

– We... there is no one above us. We just follow instructions...

There were about six or seven people there, all deeply shocked by what had happened and by this man, but they desperately wanted him to keep talking.

– On Earth – he said, in a soft voice, like a whisper – there was a third world war.

Two hundred years ago, and everything was destroyed. Now the planet is covered by radioactive clouds that cause radioactive rain, there are no more living humans on Earth, it is a barren wasteland...

– So why do we have to do this? Why do we have to work so hard? – This planet was created with the idea of building a great financial center, to control all the finances of the earth from here. It was designed to be self-sustaining and to be able to function without external help. Since humanity became extinct on Earth, the central artificial intelligence has been inventing jobs and tasks, we just follow the instructions and allow these jobs to go to the workers. We do this because we really don't know what we can do otherwise. This and the fact that you don't excel at anything was the key to keep everything running. What could we do otherwise? I don't know why my vehicle has crashed, but there must be a reason. I hope you don't see us as monsters from now on...

– So, all the series and news we see on TV?

– Some news is real, especially when it comes to things that happen here. Everything else is rehashes created by the central artificial intelligence from all the series and news that have ever happened on Earth, it is all fake, generated by the central AI from the past.

At that moment, his head slumped, and everyone stood there, stunned and silent, thinking of the profound meaninglessness of their lives, and staring at the wrecked car and the corpse in front of them under the gallium light.